
| | |
|--------------|---|
| Title | Job preferences of secondary school pupils in Singapore |
| Author(s) | Tan, Esther |
| Source | <i>Teaching and Learning</i> , 9(1),86-99 |
| Published by | Institute of Education (Singapore) |

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

Job Preferences of Secondary School Pupils in Singapore

ESTHER TAN

Introduction

One important developmental task in the career development of adolescents is the crystallization of a career preference. The key word is **preference** rather than choice as it is not expected of adolescents to have definite career choices yet. Associated with this developmental task are five vocational behaviours:

- (a) awareness of the need to crystallize,
- (b) use of resources,
- (c) wisdom of vocational preference,
- (d) consistency of vocational preference, and
- (e) confidence in the vocational preference (Super 1963).

Crystallization of Career Preference

Relatively little has been reported concerning the time at which most adolescents state their vocational preferences. Gesell, Ilg, and Ames (1956) reported that the children in their sample reached firm choices between the ages of 13 and 16 with a period of indecision at age 14. Using more stringent criteria for vocational choice, Marr (1965) reported a longitudinal study in which 50% of the subjects did not make a definite career choice until about age 21. Crites (1969) reviewed a number of studies in which percentages of vocationally undecided adolescents during the high school and college years was approximately 30%.

Investigating the career development of adolescents, Madaus and O'Hara (1967) elicited occupational preferences from 979 high school boys and inferred that crystallization of vocational choice occurred in high school years. Observing a sample of 1,400 male high school students in grades 7 through 12, Kelso (1975) found that boys who expected to leave school before graduation were more realistic than boys staying in school, suggesting that the progress through stages reflected more than just age. Other studies showed that the range of alternative individual vocational choices diminished with the passage of time (Hershensen & Roth, 1966) and that vocational decisiveness increased with advancing age (Gesell et al. 1956).

It would seem, therefore, that majority of adolescents are able to formulate vocational plans and verbalize their career preferences sometime during the high school years.

The Situation in Singapore

In a survey conducted amongst 1380 secondary school and junior college pupils in 1987, the subjects were asked to indicate their job preferences if any. The results showed that 5.5% of the students had never thought about a job preference at all while 52% had done some thinking but were still unsure about what their career preferences were. More than one-third (42.5%) of the sample, however, were ready to indicate a career preference. The figure of 52.5% "indecisive" students was rather high compared to situations overseas. In Canada, for example, Breton (1972) found that 33.6% of 150,000 high school students surveyed had not formulated any career plans yet.

Taking the expression of a definite career preference as an indicator of career self-concept crystallization, Table 1 shows that for the 1380 pupils in the sample, readiness to formulate career plans peaked at Secondary Two and Secondary Four. This appeared to be a logical trend as these two periods coincided with the critical points in the pupils' school careers when they had to make educational plans that were closely linked to their career aspirations. Interestingly enough, by the time the students reached the end of junior college,

and they were confronted with the imminent task of having to choose between tertiary education, employment or vocational training, they seemed to drop in self-confidence and became hesitant again. When a chi-square test was used to determine the association between age and level of career preference crystallization, however, the resulting χ^2 value of 37.458, (df = 10), is significant beyond .001 level.

Table 1. Crystallization of Career Preference Comparison by Grade Level

| Grade Level | Level of Crystallization | | |
|-------------|--------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| | No Preference % | Some Idea % | Definite Preference % |
| Sec. 1 | 10.83 | 55.42 | 33.75 |
| Sec. 2 | 7.69 | 45.77 | 46.54 |
| Sec. 3 | 6.96 | 55.22 | 37.82 |
| Sec. 4 | 2.40 | 50.00 | 47.60 |
| J.C. 1 | 2.50 | 52.50 | 45.00 |
| J.C. 2 | 2.50 | 54.50 | 43.00 |

$$\chi^2 = 37.458$$

$$df = 10$$

$$p < .001$$

Although 43.26% of the male students vs. 41.50% of the female students were prepared to indicate a career preference, there did not seem to be any significant sex differences in the students' level of readiness to crystallize their career plans.

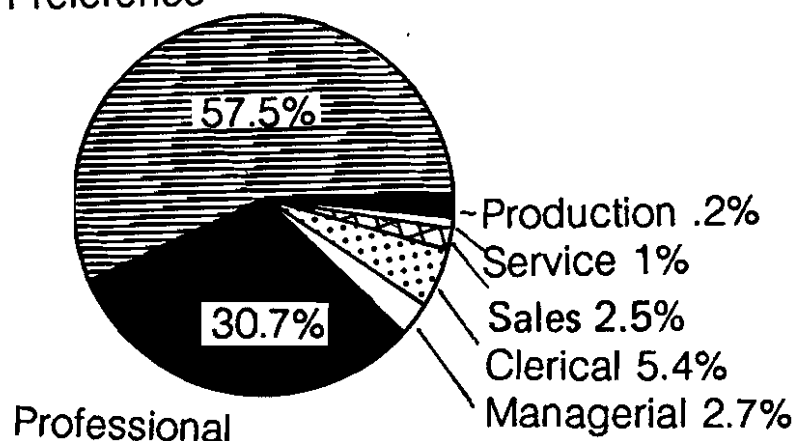
Career Aspirations of Singaporean Students

To probe further the career aspirations of Singaporean students, those who had indicated a readiness to crystallize their career plans were asked to list their most preferred job. Although 42.5% of the sample claimed to have some fairly definite career plans, only 510 students (36.9%) indicated a specific job preference when asked to do so. It is interesting to note that, regardless of age, sex, and curriculum, an overwhelming majority showed a strong preference for professional jobs. Amongst the 42.5% who had indicated a job preference, 30.7% choose professional jobs and 2.7% aspired to managerial positions. For those who were less academically inclined, 5.4% opted for clerical/technical jobs while 2.5% preferred jobs in sales. On the whole there seemed to be a general disdain for blue collar jobs in production, transport and service. This observation confirmed findings of an earlier survey amongst Secondary Four students (Sim, 1985).

Fig. 1

Job Preference of Singaporean Pupils

No Preference



Sex-Stereotyping in Vocational Preferences

Several researchers have theorized that sex differences do affect the way personal history factors impinge on one's vocational development. If students feel constricted by what they regard as sex-role appropriate behavior for their own sex, they may perceive limited options among alternative career choices. For instance, a teenaged girl who has high mathematical and science interests but traditional sex-role attitudes may believe that it is inappropriate for her to become an engineer.

In a separate study, Harren, Kass, Tinsley, and Moreland (1978) used path analysis to examine the relative influences of gender and sex-role attitude on career choice. They found that while gender influenced sex-role attitude, sex-role attitude and cognitive styles influenced progress in the decision-making which directly affected the choices made.

In recent years, Gottfredson (1981) traced the development of occupational stereotypes, the sex-role appropriateness of occupations, prestige strivings and vocational interests from ages 3 to adult. She placed the development of these dimensions in a time frame suggesting that occupational sex-typing develops between ages 9 to 13 and interests in a particular career field develops last after the age of 14. She also suggests that a person's view of occupations as sex-appropriate or inappropriate is more influential in their ultimate vocational choice than either prestige or field of interest.

In a study of college-bound students, Post-Kammer and Smith (1985) found that although sex differences emerged as early as junior high for many occupations, there was lack of sex differences for several traditionally male occupations such as accountant, lawyer and physician, indicating that both boys and girls in their sample had similar perceptions of their abilities to succeed in these fields. This led the researchers to conclude that interest plays a major role in the consideration of both traditionally male and female occupations and that interest is a function of sex differences.

To see if there were any sex-stereotyping in their job preferences, a comparison was made between the choices of the boys and girls in the sample for the top 20 most preferred jobs. The comparison in Table 2 shows an inconsistent trend in sex stereotyping in the students' job preferences. For instance, girls outnumbered boys in preferring jobs that traditionally have been dominated by males: doctors, lawyers, bankers, accountants, executives, and police officers. Such findings lend support to American studies which found a lack of sex differences for several traditionally male occupations (Beutell & Brenner, 1986; Kaufman & Feters, 1980; Post-Kammer & Smith, 1985; Walker, Tansky, & Oliver, 1982).

Table 2. The 20 Most Preferred Occupations

| Occupation | Boys | Girls | Total | % |
|-------------------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| Lawyer | 48 | 51 | 99 | 19.4 |
| Teacher | 6 | 47 | 53 | 10.4 |
| Doctor | 16 | 30 | 46 | 9.0 |
| Business/Sales | 28 | 9 | 37 | 7.2 |
| Engineer | 29 | 5 | 34 | 6.7 |
| Army Officer | 27 | 3 | 30 | 5.9 |
| Accountant | 7 | 21 | 28 | 5.5 |
| Managerial | 11 | 14 | 25 | 4.9 |
| Pilot | 25 | 0 | 25 | 4.9 |
| Designer | 5 | 16 | 21 | 4.1 |
| Police Officer | 9 | 12 | 21 | 4.1 |
| Secretary | 0 | 13 | 13 | 2.5 |
| Musician | 3 | 10 | 13 | 2.5 |
| Scientist | 10 | 1 | 11 | 2.2 |
| Steward (ess) | 1 | 10 | 11 | 2.2 |
| System Analyst | 8 | 2 | 10 | 1.9 |
| Journalist/writer | 2 | 7 | 9 | 1.8 |
| Banker | 2 | 7 | 9 | 1.8 |
| Architect | 7 | 1 | 8 | 1.6 |
| Actor/actress | 5 | 2 | 7 | 1.4 |
| Total | 249 | 261 | 510 | 100.0 |

On the other hand, however, there was also some evidence of sex-stereotyping in the choice of certain jobs. For example, aspiring to be a pilot or an engineer was still very much the career goal reserved for boys who viewed secretarial work as entirely feminine and kept clear of it. Contrary to expectations, more girls than boys wanted to be writers and more boys than girls aspired to an acting career on stage or on television.

The high ranking of teachers in the list of the 20 most preferred jobs came as a pleasant surprise. A break-down of the age groups, however, shows that teaching was still very much a career preferred by girls than boys and was a popular choice only amongst the lower secondary school pupils.

**Table 3. Teaching as a Preferred Job Amongst Adolescents
Comparison by Age and Gender**

| Grade | Boys | Girls | Total |
|--------|------|-------|-------|
| Sec. 1 | 1 | 10 | 11 |
| Sec. 2 | 3 | 10 | 13 |
| Sec. 3 | 0 | 7 | 7 |
| Sec. 4 | 0 | 5 | 5 |
| J.C. 1 | 1 | 8 | 9 |
| J.C. 2 | 1 | 7 | 8 |
| Total | 6 | 47 | 53 |

Parental Involvement in Career Planning

One indicator of parental involvement in the career development of the students is the extent to which they are consulted about their children's career plans. The results showed that 56.1% of the sample had discussed their career plans with their fathers and that 65.1% had consulted their mothers at one time or another. On the whole mothers were consulted more often than fathers, probably because majority of them were not working and were therefore more

readily available. Also the older they were, the more they were inclined to involve their parents in making career plans. Table 4 compares the sex differences in the ways these adolescents involved their parents in career planning. The results show that in almost all the age groups the pattern of greater involvement of mothers remained. Such findings are consistent with those of an earlier research study conducted in Singapore which showed that more mothers than fathers were consulted about career plans (Sim, 1985). Another interesting observation was that, across the sample, girls tended to consult their parents more frequently than boys.

**Table 4. Parental Involvement in Career Planning
Comparison by Grade and Sex**

| Grade Level | Discussion With | | | |
|-------------|-----------------|------------|-----------|------------|
| | Father | | Mother | |
| | Boys % | Girls % | Boys % | Girls % |
| Sec. 1 | 49.2 | 51.7 | 56.7 | 54.2 |
| Sec. 2 | 50.8 | 56.9 | 58.5 | 63.9 |
| Sec. 3 | 51.8 | 47.5 | 59.1 | 63.3 |
| Sec. 4 | 60.0 | 63.9 | 58.3 | 75.4 |
| J.C. 1 | 58.3 | 61.2 | 71.4 | 75.9 |
| J.C. 2 | 60.5 | 63.0 | 65.4 | 80.7 |

In another attempt to investigate parental involvement in career planning, the students were asked to list their parents' career expectations for them if any. About half of the sample indicated that both of their parents had never suggested any career preferences for them (49.1% of the fathers and 44.3% of the mothers). Some parents had shared their views with their children but left the decision-making to the latter (42.0% of the fathers and 44.6% of the mothers). Only a handful of parents had expressed definite preferences for the kinds of careers they would like their children to pursue (8.9% of the fathers and 11.1% of the mothers). It is interesting to note that almost without

exception, all the parents who had indicated some job preferences aspired to professional jobs for their children such as lawyer, doctor, engineer and accountant (8.3% of the fathers and 10.5% of the mothers) regardless of the kind of jobs they themselves were holding. In fact, one gets the impression that the less educated parents holding jobs in sales, services, production, and transport fields were more vocal and adamant about their children becoming professionals. The last thing they wanted to see was for their children to follow their own foot steps except for a few cases where the fathers were running a business of some sort and expected their children to take over at a later stage.

Nevertheless, the students themselves did not seem to pay much attention to their parents' aspirations for their future careers as most of them appeared to have a mind of their own. When asked whose expectations they would like to meet in implementing their career plans, only 2.2% of the students would strive to please their fathers and 1.7% would follow their mothers' wishes. Less than one-fifth (17.8%) thought it important to please both parents while the majority (72.5%) chose the response "My own choice". A small percentage of the students, however, were completely confused (I don't know) while a handful wished to consider the wishes of significant adults other than their own parents such as an aunt or uncle (2.0%).

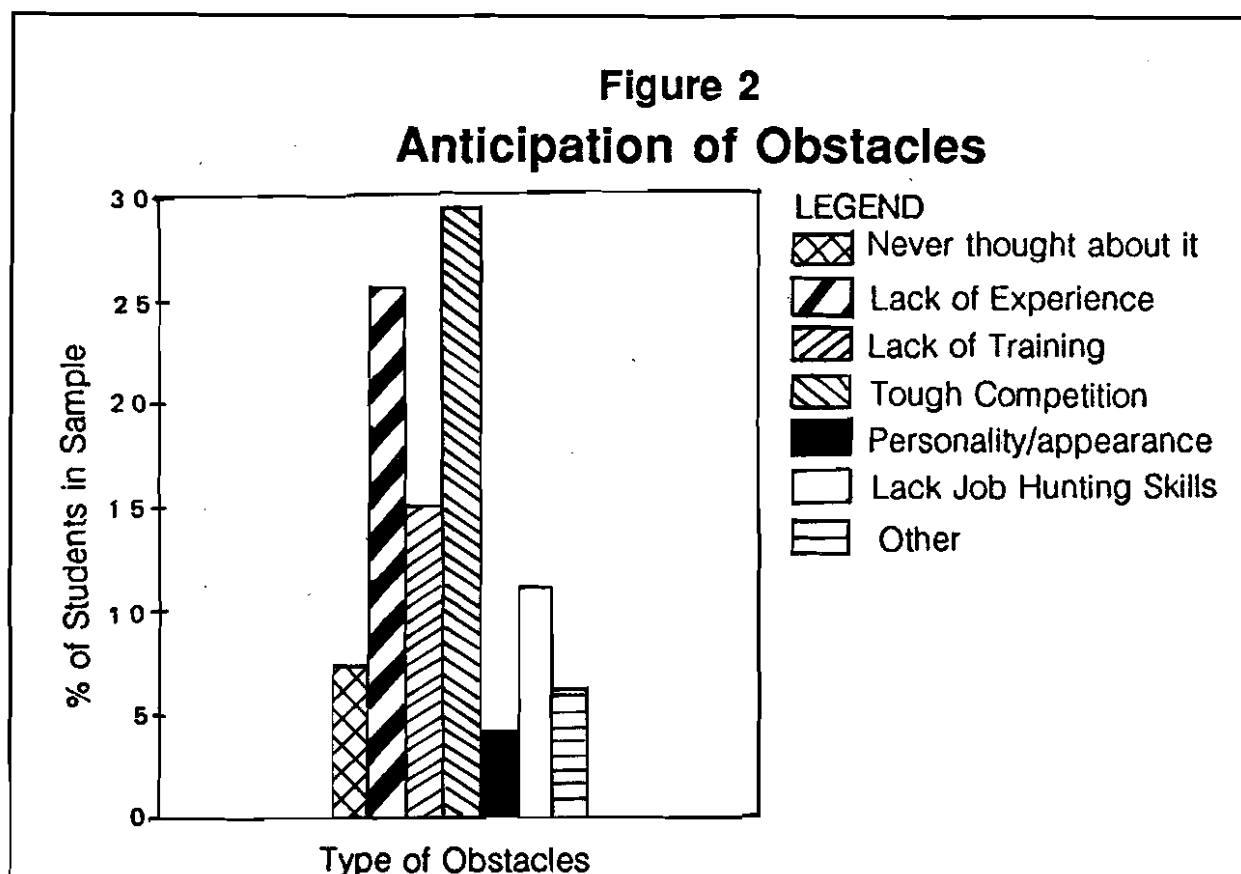
Availability of Role Models at Home

Availability of role models is another important factor affecting the career development of adolescents. There is much research evidence to show that significant adults, especially parents, are likely models in the acquisition of sex-typed behaviour which in turn influences the career choice of children and youth (Baruch, 1974; Holland, 1985; Super, 1957, 1960). For the 1380 adolescents in the sample, however, role models in career planning were not easily available. Data analysis showed that only 4.2% of the students identified with their fathers in their career goals and 0.9% took after their mothers. Considering that only 16.7% of the fathers and 10.9% of the mothers in the sample were professional, this lack of role models in the home was understandable. Nonetheless, the majority of students wanted to be professionals. This also explains why a greater number looked for role models out of the home.

About 10% of the students modelled their future careers after significant others, in most cases a famous man or woman in the preferred occupation, for example, a well-known athlete or musician, a much talked about fashion designer or a well-respected doctor. It is noteworthy that a favourite teacher was often cited as a desirable role model for those interested in pursuing a career in teaching.

Employment Outlook of the Pupils

To ascertain to what extent the students were aware of contingencies which might affect their vocational goals and their awareness of present-future relationships, the students were asked if they anticipated any obstacles in fulfilling their career goals. Their responses showed that they anticipated "tough competition from others" as their greatest obstacle (29.6%) followed by "lack of experience" (15.1%) and "lack of appropriate training" (11.2%). These seemed fairly realistic and practical thoughts and interestingly enough, both boys and girls shared similar views.



Comparing across the age groups, table 5 shows that while the younger students were worried about their lack of experience, the older ones were more concerned about having to face tough competition from others when they enter the world of work. Lack of appropriate training became less an issue as the students advanced in age and level of education. As they grew older, however, they were progressively more concerned about their lack of job hunting skills and whether they had the right kind of personality/appearance for the job they desired.

**Table 5. Anticipated Obstacles in Fulfilling Career Goals
Comparison by Grade Level**

| Anticipated Obstacles | Grade Level | | | | | |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | Sec. 1 % | Sec. 2 % | Sec. 3 % | Sec. 4 % | J.C. 1 % | J.C. 2 % |
| Competition | 17.6 | 26.9 | 30.0 | 37.2 | 36.0 | 31.0 |
| Experience | 37.5 | 29.6 | 25.7 | 18.8 | 19.5 | 21.5 |
| Training | 20.0 | 16.2 | 18.3 | 13.6 | 9.5 | 11.5 |
| Job Hunting Skills | 10.4 | 10.4 | 10.4 | 12.0 | 11.5 | 13.0 |
| Personality | 4.6 | 2.7 | 0.9 | 6.4 | 7.0 | 4.5 |

In the "Other" category, obstacles cited by the students included

- (a) objection from parents,
- (b) poor examination results,
- (c) lack of confidence in their ability to enter and excel in their ideal occupation, and
- (d) lack of financial support for further education/training.

Implications for Career Guidance

Given such survey findings, what would be the implications for the planning and implementation of career guidance in the schools?

Firstly, there is much evidence to show that our secondary school pupils have neither the inclination nor the motivation to engage in career exploration. The result is lack of career self-awareness and an inability to crystallize career preferences. Thus there is an urgent need to plan career guidance programmes that aim at enhancing the career self-awareness of our pupils. Such programmes should be given to the lower secondary classes for a start to help them build a strong foundation for further career exploration.

In the area of career aspiration, it seems that parents and children alike aspire to professional jobs and show a general disdain for blue-collar jobs in production, transport and services etc. As not all the pupils have the ability and opportunities to achieve professional status in employment, there is a need to help pupils set realistic career goals that are congruent with their academic performance and educational attainments. There is also a need to bring about a change of attitude towards blue-collar jobs amongst pupils as well as their parents. Such jobs are just as important as professional jobs in building up the economy of our nation.

The lack of sex-stereotyping among the pupils is a good sign as this means that the boys and girls in our schools are not bound by sex-role beliefs in their choice of career preferences. In fact, changes in sex-role attitudes and behaviours seem to have brought about a trend toward more enlightened, egalitarian attitudes toward occupation. Such a trend should be encouraged.

With regard to the issue of role model, the survey findings show that as most students cannot find role models at home, they tend to look for models out of their homes in the form of successful men and women in their preferred occupations. These are mostly public figures whose names have become household words because of their outstanding performance in their respective field, be it law, medicine or fashion design. If our young students look up to only

outstanding performers as role models, they may be misled into holding unrealistic expectations for themselves and experience bitter disappointment if they fail to achieve similar standards of performance. After all, one does not have to be a national swimmer to be a successful athlete or win a Nobel prize to be a good scientist. It may be better for our students to look up to ordinary men and women who contribute to their own fields in an ordinary way and yet achieve job satisfaction through their contribution. Many of the parents of our students are in this category. In fact, every school has its pool of career role models in the form of the many parents from all walks of life. In implementing career guidance programmes, teachers should tap this resource by identifying role models among the parents and encourage the students to interview them or invite them to come to the school to give career talks to the students. In fact, this can be a good way to bring about parental involvement.

References

- Baruch, G.K. (1974). Maternal career orientation as related to parental identification in college women. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, 4, 173-180.
- Beutell, N.J. & Brenner, O.C. (1986). Sex differences in work values. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, 28, 29-41.
- Breton, R. (1972). *Social and Academic Factors in the Career Decisions of Canadian Youth*, Ottawa: Manpower & Immigration.
- Crites, J.O. (1969). *Vocational Psychology*, New York: McGraw Hill.
- Gasell, A., Ilg, F.L., & Ames, L.B. (1959). *Youth: The Years From Ten to Sixteen*, New York: Harper & Row.
- Harren, V.A., Kass, R.A., Tinsley, H.E., & Moreland, R.J. (1978). Influence of sex role attitudes and cognitive styles of career decision-making. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 25, 290-397.
- Hershenson, D.B., & Roth, R.M. (1966). A decisional process model of vocational development. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 13, 368-370.

- Holland, J.L. (1985). *Making Vocational Choices: A Theory of Vocational Personalities and Work Environment*. (2nd. edition). New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Gottfredson, L., (1981) Circumscription and compromise: A developmental theory of occupational aspiration. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 28, 545-579.
- Kaufman, D. & Feters, M.L. (1980). work motivation and job values among professional men and women: A New Accounting. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, 17, 251-262.
- Kelso, G.I. (1975). The influences of stage of leaving school on vocational maturity and realism of vocational choice. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, 7, 29-39.
- Madaus G.F., & O'Hara, R.P. (1967). Vocational interest patterns of high school boys: a multivariate approach. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 14, 106-112.
- Marr, E. (1985). Some behaviours and attitudes relating to vocational choice. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 12, 404-408.
- Post-Kammer, P., & Smith, P.L. (1985). Sex differences in career – efficacy, consideration and interests of eighth and ninth graders. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 32, 551-559.
- Sim, W.K. (1985), *Report of the National Productivity Council Task Force on Career Guidance in Schools*, Singapore: Institute of Education.
- Super, D.E. (1957). *The Psychology of Careers*, New York: Harper & Row.
- Super, D.E. & Overstreet, P.L. (1960). *The Vocational Maturity of Ninth Grade Boys*, New York: Teachers College, Bureau of Publications.
- Super, D.E., Stariskevesky, R., Matlin, N. & Jordaan, J.P. (1963). *Career Development: Self Concept Theory*, New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Walker, J.E., Tansky, C., & Oliver, D. (1982). Men and women at work: work values within occupational groups. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, 21, 17-36.