# Career Paths and Socio-Economic Status

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### Abstract

Few of the sequential models of adult vocational development have undertaken a comparative identification of career paths according to the socio-economic status of workers. On the basis of interviews carried out with 786 adults, randomly assigned after stratifying according to three socio-economic classes, nine age strata, two genders and three working sectors, this article presents three vocational trajectories within the three social classes, each comprising nine phases of working life. The integrative model has been elaborated on the basis of these results. This article proposes two of its main principles: 1) equilibrated integration of adaptive and creative functions; 2) vocational continuity within time-spaces.

### Résumé

Peu de modèles séquentiels du développement vocationnel ont procédé à une identification comparative des cheminements de carrière en fonction du statut socio-économique des travailleurs. Nous avons donc tenté d'étudier ce point à partir d'entrevues réalisées auprès de 786 adultes désignés au hasard et ce, suite à une stratification effectuée selon trois classes socio-économiques, neuf strates d'âge, les deux sexes et trois domaines de travail. Cet article présente trois trajectoires vocationnelles suivant les trois classes sociales incluant chacune neuf étapes de la vie au travail. Le modèle intégrateur a été élaboré à partir de ces résultats. L'article propose deux de ses principaux principes: 1. l'intégration harmonieuse des fonctions adaptatives et créatives; 2. la continuité vocationnelle dans divers espaces-temps.

The majority of the principal models of adult sequential development which form the basis of certain theories of adult counselling emphasize the importance of social factors on the evolution of individuals over the years. Several studies (Cytrynbaum and Crites, 1989; Lawrence, 1987; Veiga 1983) confirm that not only individuals, but also, systems or social parameters should be taken into consideration in order to explain the significant aspects of the course of life and development of careers. Moreover, a review of pertinent writings led Gross (1964), Hotchkiss and Borow (1984), Dalton (1989) to conclude that institutions greatly influence workers; these institutions socialize adults and at the same time influence their career patterns and their mode of experiencing the stages of life. Kohn's (1981) studies, for example, led him to conclude that the degree of complexity of occupational tasks assigned to workers has a direct effect on the intellectual flexibility these adults manifest over the years.

Within the field of research interested in the relative contribution made by the social system or organizational parameters to vocational development, only a few studies focus on socio-economic status. According to Kohn (1981), for example, the degree of self-determination associated with occupational tasks plays a central role in explaining the psychological effects engendered by belonging to different social classes.

In addition, few have proceeded towards comparing different stages of adult vocational development according to the socio-economic status of workers. Nonetheless, the importance of such research has been emphasized on many occasions (Super, 1991). According to Thomas (1989, p. 354), "We should develop an inclusive perspective that transcends the colour of the collar and, in the process, seek similarities in work experience over time while helping to explain differences." In an effort to contribute to this field, including any implications to theories of counselling, this research is based on the need to identify the common and specific aspects of the career paths of different social classes. It should thus be noted that the usage of the term career is close to that of Arthur, Hall and Lawrence (1989, p. 81), and signifies "the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time." This conception would be clearly less restrictive, according to these authors, than that of certain researchers who opt for alternative expressions such as working lives (Shamir & Salomon, 1985) or work histories (Nicholson & West, 1985). This paper presents a model of integrative vocational development and questions certain aspects of the age-related sequential theories of adult vocational development.

## METHODS

In order to attempt to overcome the shortcomings or inadequacies of simple cross-sectional or longitudinal studies, an approach was employed for this research which combined two of the sequential methods proposed by Schaie (1965). With reference to the cross-sequential method, we composed a sample of nine different cohorts (23-27, 28-32, and so on, until 63-67); based on the time-sequential method, the cohorts are observed according to three different times of measurement (present, retrospective of five years, prospective of five years). The sample was composed of 786 adults from the Quebec metropolitan area who were working in 17 private firms, 11 public organizations and 15 agencies in the semi-private sector. The sample was composed according to a random sampling technique, after stratifying according to age, socio-economic status (Blishen, Carroll and Moore, 1987), gender and working sector. The distribution of the 786 participants in each of the age ranges are as follows: 72 (23-27), 89 (28-32), 73 (33-37), 112 (38-42), 91 (43-47), 91 (48-52), 101 (53-57), 92 (58-62), and 65 (63-67). There were 262 participants from the privileged class, 285 from the middle class, and 239 from the disadvantaged class; 375 women and 411 men; 252 from the private sector, 292 from the public sector and 242 from the semi-private sector. Data was gathered in a series of semi-structured interviews, each lasting, on average, one and a half hours; these interviews were conducted by trained graduate students in vocational counselling.

We used content analysis to examine our results; and consequently, according to guidelines established by L'Ecuyer (1987), only some of the categories were pre-determined. The first categories refer to nine phases of working life identified in previous research (1991); the second, to a typology of six types that are a combination of two main functions (adaptative and creative) and three referential time-spaces (personal, collective and cosmic life histories). These themes were retained when more than fifty percent of the subjects referred to them.

Adults who exercise mainly adaptive functions seem to 1) define themselves as having an almost ineffectual role in the orientation of their occupational life history; or 2) believe they have been subjects and not participants in this collective (working organization or enlarged society) history; or 3) view their development over the years as subject to cosmic history, that is, to the same laws as every other living being belonging to the universe, or to the laws of a managerial god. According to this typology, the adaptive functions thus refer to a complex concept (Whitbourne, 1985) that assumes different names: eco-action (Capra, 1986); palliative reaction (Lazarus, 1981); Yin; or, conformity, (Kohn, 1981). These functions are those aimed at the operation as a part of a whole and at submission in order to be in harmony with the established order of systems.

On the other hand, adults who exercise mainly creative functions seem to 1) believe, despite the presence of numerous factors outside of their control, that they are the principal actors in their own occupational history; or 2) view their development as that of actors playing a part, however small, in the course of the collective working history; or 3) view the course of the cosmic history as partially caused, provoked and generated by their own initiatives or interventions. According to this typology, the *creative functions* thus refer to a concept that is complex (Simonton, 1990). This concept has been given diverse names: ego-action (Capra, 1986); contributive reaction (Lazarus, 1981); Yang; self-direction (Kohn, 1981). These functions are those aimed at confirming individual autonomy either by moving ahead of, or running counter to, the natural course of systems. Four graduate students were trained for content analysis. In a pre-experiment, a Kendall's coefficient of concordance was computed and a correlation of .72 was calculated by the judges.

RESULTS

Accepting the risk of oversimplification, the results published in our 1991 book can be summarized by three trajectories corresponding to each of the three social classes, each comprising nine stages of working life. These careers are distinguished globally by the particularity of the alternation over the years between the exercising of diverse functions as well as the singularity of the movement between different referential

time-spaces. In a more precise fashion, the results indicate that the exercising of primarily creative functions is observed among the privileged class, while the exercising of mainly adaptive functions is prevalent among the middle or disadvantaged classes. These results seem to confirm the conclusions of diverse works; it is generally accepted, according to Lalive d'Epinay (1989), that the dividing line between dominant and dominated is drawn primarily by the distinction of being the actor or the subject of history. This is a classic distinction between the historic and the daily that is found in the works of many philosophers and historians, from Plato to our contemporaries such as Bourdieu (1979), Certeau (1980), and Hoggart (1970). Nonetheless, this distinction blurs during the two final strata of working life when concern about death seems to play an integral part in the vocational discourse of the adult. There is at this time, in all social classes, a priority given to the exercising of primarily adaptive functions. These results seem to correspond to the studies that observe, over time, a certain diminishing of creative aspirations in favour of a movement towards a more adaptive style (Mumford, 1984; Mumford and Gutafson, 1988; Simonton, 1990).

The results also indicate an increasingly clear divergence between referential time-spaces during the second half of working life. Each group refers primarily to a particular history, either personal (privileged class), collective (middle class) or cosmic (disadvantaged class). According to Kohn (1981), a privileged individual's working conditions create and maintain a perception of self and society that leads to a belief in the possibility of pursuing personal goals and the promotion of personal history. Inversely, according to Kohn (1981), the conditions of the middle and disadvantaged classes encourage a limited perception of self and society that leads to conformity to authority, and thus, to prescriptions of social (bosses, organizations) or cosmic (laws of living beings or obligations towards managerial gods) histories.

*Middle Class*

The career of this social group, while very specific, is similar to each of the two other classes. These results corroborate the conclusions of earlier work. Wright (1988), for example, points out that because of its position, the middle class must simultaneously associate itself with the dominant and disadvantaged class. According to Meiksins (1988), the middle class must, simultaneously, maintain a solidarity with the anti-proletarian and anti-capitalistic ideologies. The middle class adults' occupational trajectory generally begins with an attentive entrance into the labour market. These adults seem to believe that the most essential part of their occupational role is adaptation and support of those responsible for the socio-economic life. At 28-32, they appear to be orienting themselves towards a facultative search for a promising path. Nonetheless, they believe that

they must adopt a prudent attitude and probably return to their initial role of support. At 33-37, they feel that they have developed skills for supporting the career paths of their superiors, yet they have also neglected to develop skills to help themselves identify and pursue their own unique career path. At 38-42, the perspective of a painful integration into a new working environment often proves to be a handicap to occupational mobility and a convincing argument to keep on fulfilling adaptative functions. At 43-47, these adults seem to proceed with an analysis of their occupational experience. They are now more aware that they have been constantly preoccupied by the adaptation to their environment. At 48-52, their actions are aimed at directing themselves towards a balanced change of trajectory. These adults seem better able to discern the difficulties of harmonizing the evolution of their identity with that of the working world. They consider using this data to slightly alter their trajectory while conserving the principle of compromise. At 53-57, their actions are characterized by an orientation towards an exemplary exit as a supporter. They seem to attempt to show the collectivity, by the end of their career, that they were able to fulfill the social role of support to which they feel they were assigned. At 58-62, they have the impression that they should follow a path suitable to all individuals who, at a given stage, must follow social prescriptions and accept a modification of their role. At 63-67, their actions consist of grappling with imminent retirement and death. These adults seem to believe that they must direct themselves towards a collective destiny which corresponds to the communal demands to which they must resign themselves.

*Disadvantaged Class*

Globally, the results indicate a mode of vocational development that is achieved in the face of major constraints. According to Argyris (1964), Brenner (1988) and Duberman (1976), blue collar workers desire jobs based on the intrinsic value of work. Nonetheless, for the sake of survival, they must opt for tasks of an instrumental value (Knight, 1981; Rinehart, 1984; Wright, 1988). From the beginning, occupational projects of the disadvantaged class are centered on guiding themselves towards a discrete entry into the job market. They seem to define their socio-occupational role by identifying it with that of all living beings in the cosmos that are born to work and sweat. At 28-32, they seem to want to immerse themselves in a search for a promising path that would allow them to identify the jobs offering them the best conditions necessary for their subsistence. At 33-37, they feel obliged to improve rapidly and noticeably; they nonetheless seem aware that they have a lot of lost time to recover in order to assure their immediate future within the constraints of the job market. At 38-42, their actions are expressed by a testing of unidirectional guidelines that are restricted to those imposed

by the environment. At 43-47, these adults have an increasing awareness
of the fact that all of their working life has been marked by a guiding
thread characterized by alienation. At 48-52, they tend to direct them-
selves towards a change. Besides survival, their second objective seems to
be the protection of their status as a human being. It is not a meticulous
job that they find most difficult to endure since they have experienced
many others; rather, it is being treated like a robot or a machine. At 53-57,
it seems to be part of their plan to emphasize that their particular manner
of fulfilling their duties of servant has always been exemplary, loyal,
peaceful and very obliging. At 58-62, doing their job sometimes seems to
be a type of hell. Faced with aging and the imminence of the biological
end of life, constituting, according to them, supreme forces common to
all human beings, they primarily display an attitude of tolerance. At
63-67, these adults consider orienting their actions towards a universal
destiny. In an even more intense fashion, they seem to define their social
group as a community that is more encompassing than just the socio-
economic hierarchy.

*Privileged Class*

The results of our study indicate a trajectory that has several elements
that are similar to those in pertinent writings: a fusion between personal
and occupational identities (Gagliani, 1981), and an evident taste for
challenge, self-management and creation (Kohn and Schooler, 1983).
The initial actions of the privileged class are to direct themselves towards
an entrance into the job market. They seem to want to be noticed as
apprentice-leaders or new ambitious specialists. At 28-32, these adults'
actions are to orient themselves towards the search for a network of
promising paths. At 33-37, they seem to feel that it is necessary to
intensify, within the same actual direction, their investment in their
career in order to achieve a certain form of specialization and power. At
38-42, they seem to now proceed towards the testing of new guidelines
that are selected, in a hasty and radical way, to lead them towards success
and away from failure. At 43-47, they perceive the necessity of more
profoundly analyzing the body of the past, present and future moments.
They are mainly concerned with understanding their vocational selves.
At 48-52, they now seem even more clearly convinced that their personal
characteristics constitute their main wealth. They want to choose the
modes of practice that are the most respectful of the elements of their
personality. At 53-57, these adults consider guiding their working life
actions towards an exemplary exit as a leader. They now seem to value
attempting to demonstrate that they have succeeded in making an
original and specialized contribution to the community over the years. At
58-62, they wish profoundly to be viewed as indispensable beings rather
than as people heading towards retirement. At 63-67, while they are

anguished at the imminence of their death and at the idea of no longer playing their occupational role, they seem to perceive this destiny as unique; they believe that they can only manage it by themselves as they managed their lives in the past. The exceptional subjects (11 to 15% in each stratum, in each of the three social classes), characterized by an intense vocational development, seem to exercise, throughout the diverse stages of working life, creative as much as adaptive functions. Moreover, in the second half of their working life, the latter seem to gradually and increasingly refer to the three time-spaces, including allusions to after-life.

## DISCUSSION

The integrative model has been formulated on the basis of these very briefly summarized results; it conceives adult vocational development as a complex and constant re-adjustment in an always changing perception of occupational or personal time-space. The integrative model is detailed in Riverin-Simard (1991); in this paper we present two of its main principles which seem the most divergent in light of current vocational theories. A model which attempts to integrate the realities of all of the categories of workers is inevitably found in critical career theory (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989). This theory proposes that conceptions of vocational development are situated beyond existing cultural values, and are influenced by the ideology of a single social group, that of the dominant class (Bertaux, 1977; Wright, 1988).

### Equilibrated Integration of Adaptive and Creative Functions

The integrative model postulates that intense vocational development is characterized by a harmonious and equilibrated integration of the exercising of these two functions at each stage of working life. Even if vocational development of the three social classes does not always seem to reflect this reality, the classes seemingly better characterized by the exercising of functions either creative (privileged class) or adaptive (middle or disadvantaged classes; the privileged class during its last stages), it must be emphasized that the integrative model bases its postulate on the case of exceptional subjects. According to Kastenbaum "one of the most interesting research challenges is to discover how some people [exceptional subjects] do manage to spin-out a continuing sense of identity across the life-span" (1985, p. 623). This first postulate, indicating the importance of an equilibrated integration and complimentarity of the two main functions for the assurance of a healthy equilibrium, is similar to Capra's holistic perspective (1986), itself dating back to very ancient philosophies (e.g. the I-Ching). Above all, this postulate responds to the necessity of developing, as Thomas suggests (1989), an encompassing perspective that aims to transcend the diverse

categories of workers. Nonetheless, in according an equal importance to adaptive and creative functions, the integrative model rejects a principle generally accepted by western civilization. The model presumes that creative functions are an example of ideal behaviours (Capra, 1986). This principle is also found in career theories where the exercising of primarily creative functions is generally associated with intense vocational development. Super (1980), for example, perceives career development as a process of the actualization of self-concept. Even if this eminent leader identifies this development with a process of synthesis and compromise with the factors of reality, the ultimate goal of the actualization of self-concept seems to be, like that of the creative functions, to try to confirm individual autonomy either by moving ahead of, or running counter to, the natural course of systems. Unlike the inadequacies linked to the almost exclusive exercising of adaptive functions (alienation of self and the society), the anomalies of vocational development associated with the almost unique exercising of creative functions are quite unknown. The results of our research pinpoint several of them; for example, during the last stages of working life, there is for the privileged class, a confrontation with personal and vocational finitude that clearly seems more difficult, compared with the other two classes. Finally, this postulate of a harmonious and equilibrated integration of the exercising of functions that are as much adaptive as creative is the result of an effort to conceive human vocational phenomenon beyond the modes or "epiteme" of historical eras; this could also permit the generation of other explicative hypotheses of career development that are more general or generalizable (a wish formulated by Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989).

### Vocational Continuity Within Time-Spaces

The integrative model postulates that a harmonious integration of the three types of time-spaces is a necessary condition of intense vocational development, especially in the second half of working life (the moment generally judged to be critical for self-integrity according to Erikson, 1958; George, 1990). Even if, at this time, the vocational development of the three social classes does not seem to reflect this reality, since each refers to a single time-space, the integrative model is based, here again, on the case of exceptional subjects. This postulate is similar to the conceptions of environmental psychology (Altman and Rogoff, 1987), ecological psychology (Lewin, 1964) and the systemic approach (Bertalanffy, 1973). Ignoring the contexts in which the individual evolves, is to not understand what nourishes it, nor with what or whom it is interacting and confronting. Moreover, according to this postulate, in order to pursue continuous vocational development, adults, situated in the second half of their working life and thinking about their own

occupational and biological end must maintain vocational actions which will have an impact after their death. This could be one way, according to the integrative model, to positively integrate the finitude of occupational and biological life, and thus assure the continuity rather than the decline or ceasing of vocational development; this is indirectly suggested by exceptional subjects. The integrative model is thus, in a certain way, similar to that presented by Erikson and Kastenbaum (researchers focusing on the impact of existential questions regarding career are almost non-existent): "How unconvincing a sense of integrity can be if it does not remain answerable to some existential despair" (Erikson, 1979, p. 59); "If the individual cannot find a way to cross the barrier of decline, loss and death, then it will be difficult to develop a sense of selfhood over the entire life-span" (Kastenbaum, 1985, p. 623). According to the integrative model, intense vocational development would thus be associated, for adults situated in the second half of their working life, with the anticipation of a certain type of vocational continuity during their after-life within the time-spaces tied to collective and cosmic histories. This conception is, in a way, similar to Lifton's (1976); the latter classified himself within materialistic existential psychology and affirms the necessity, for positive personal development, of maintaining images of our after-life. The types of vocational continuity can be envisaged according to the integrative model, by symbolic or real modes. With regard to collective history, and more particularly, occupational acts, there would be, for example, as Lifton (1976) indicates, the mode of creative continuity (scientific discoveries, artistic productions or institution of civil laws that leave traces beyond the life of the individual). With regards to cosmic history, these continuities can be according to a materialistic ideology, of a biochemical order (to hope that one's body is transformed into mineral salts in order to participate in the pursuit of life on the planet); according to an idealistic ideology, continuity can be real, (immortality in a resurrectionist or reincarnationist perspective). Relative to this last possibility, the integrative model is partially similar to the ancient modes of adult development, such as that expressed by Hall, who conceives death as a self-developmental event. "The wish for and belief in immortality is at bottom the very best of all possible augeries and pledges that man as he exists today is only the beginning of what he is to be and do" (1922, p. 515). For the majority of scientists, such conceptions, postulating, among other things, the possibility of a real continuity, are based on ancient myths that are perpetuated (Birren and Birren, 1990, p. 5). For other thinkers, the idea of a true continuity risks being given greater recognition in current societies where, according to Capra (1986), Fergusson (1981) and Sorokin (1966), numerous aspects of materialistic and idealistic ideologies would be at the point of fusioning. Thus, with regards to the postulate of vocational continuity, including

not only the symbolic but equally the real mode, the integrative model could be qualified as ancient or avant-garde.

In sum, to use Arthur, Hall and Lawrence's terminology (1989), the integrative model, inspired by the exceptional subjects of the three social classes, incorporates the interconnected properties of emergence and relativity in career theory. Yet the integrative model gives, in a sense, an enlarged meaning to these concepts. It makes some attempt to explain how people experience not only social but also cosmic space (relativity) in both living and after-life time dimensions (emergence).

### PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

In a society that is increasingly characterized by economic disparities (Capra, 1986; Thomas, 1989) and aging of the active population (Hagestad, 1990; Redmond, 1986), the increasing knowledge of career paths of different occupational sub-groups according to socio-economic status seems to be one promising means of allowing vocational counsellors to more effectively help their adult clients. Moreover, the knowledge of these diverse trajectories could become one of the bases for adult vocational counsellors in their efforts to develop interventions (psychological and vocational programs, occupational training and re-training) that could be inspired by, among other things, environmental approaches or therapy (Raskin, 1976) and based on group dynamics or development of supportive social structures (Smyer et al. 1990). If, as the integrative model presumes, equilibrated and harmonious integration of the two creative and adaptive functions proves to be a necessary condition of adult vocational development, counsellors must be prudent, when dealing with adults of the privileged class, during interventions (psycho-analytical, cognitive-behavioural) aimed exclusively at the exercising of creative functions; according to the integrative model, this practice could risk limiting vocational development. Moreover, vocational counsellors must pay very special attention to the fact that, especially in the second half of working life, death plays an integral part in the occupational discourse; the occupational situation, perhaps more than any other, thus seems to confront adults with existential questions. In this regard, the anticipation of retirement (even if, according to Hayward, 1986, O'Rand, 1990 and Palmore et al. 1985, retirement timing is associated with socio-occupational class) appears to be one of the most important activating elements. The integrative model, while taking into account the different realities of social class, suggests, at this period of life, a greater attention to be given to personal and vocational finitude in an adult's daily occupational preoccupations. According to Keith (1982), Marshall and Levy (1990), an increase in awareness of finitude is associated with more favourable attitudes towards death and an intense planning for the future.

   If, as the integrative model indicates, the anticipation of a certain type of vocational continuity within the time-spaces is revealed as a necessary condition of intense development during the second half of working life, counsellors should perhaps invest their efforts in order to stimulate the definition of a certain type of (symbolic or real) continuity among adults beyond forty or fifty years old. Even if the majority of interventions primarily involve physical and social losses (Nemiroff and Colarusso, 1985; Smyer et al., 1990), it is no less true, according to Gutman (1980), that development of adults of this age must equally include the emergence of new capabilities; according to the integrative model, the fabrication of vocational continuity within the time-spaces would in fact be one of these new capabilities to stimulate. But the counsellors should, here again, be aware of the disparity according to social class at this point. Because of the mainly entropic nature of occupational acts of the middle and disadvantaged classes, the privileged class seems practically unique in its ability to envisage a vocational continuity tied to collective history; the other two classes appear constrained to continuities tied to cosmic history. While having been traditionally exploited by different religions (Eliade, 1978), these differences of accessibility of occupational continuity according to social class could perhaps uncover certain elements which reveal, with a greater intensity, the complexity and subtlety of the vocational human phenomenon in the second half of working life; a contribution that is central to the work of vocational counsellors.

   In brief, the results of this research bring the reality of social class to the attention of counsellors. Counselling theory, because of its dependence philosophy of personal independence and achievement, largely ignores the reality of the constraints and privileges allocated to individuals by their social class origins; consequently, we hear a lot about such things as self-actualization. The results of this research indicate that, for a large proportion of the population, it is unrealistic to expect clients to be self-directed and self-managing if their vocational tasks involve adjustment and accommodation to situations. Counsellors thus find themselves at the heart of a classic debate between two great schools of sociology: nominalist-Weberian and realist-Marxist conceptions of social class (Bidou, 1986).

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