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Young Career Decision-Making in Modern America

Most young American’s face the same struggle at adolescence - figuring out what to do with their lives. The process of deciding on a lifetime career places an incredible amount of pressure on young people, particularly at a point where they don’t know who they are as a person yet. Societal standards force American youth to decide on a career very early and their decision will be subjected to constant criticism by older, “wiser” American workers. This causes more discomfort for already overwhelmed adolescents which contributes to the cycle of apprehensive, occasionally regretful, and hasty settlement on an occupation. Confident career decision making seems to depend on three key details, parental support, self-efficacy, and educational access. All three of these points provide the skills needed to feel assured enough to explore one’s interests without fearing failure.

It is evident that in modern society much of American childhoods are spent wondering what they want to do when they grow up, with play career kits, and pretend career-themed costumes. Of course, that is just seen as simple fun, and the pressure doesn’t truly begin until late middle school into high school. The once broad life-path choices are narrowed down to the “successful” ones by parents and educators, to careers in accounting, government, medicine, and other STEM-related fields. Creative or artistic fields are compared to being a waste of time by many adults just because they don’t immediately contribute to the technical foundations of society.

Support from adults makes a huge impact on a child’s ability to be confident and level-minded contributors to society. An intriguing study by Patrick Garcia focuses on parental involvement’s effect on student self-efficacy and career decision based on learned goal
orientation. Garcia’s study collected data from 141 college undergraduates and discovered that if a student is influenced by their parents to work hard and achieve more, they too will go into life with that mindset and may find it easier to decide on a good path for them. Garcia’s participants also stated that excessive parental involvement simultaneously complicates the process, as many found it even harder to have a career that their parents approved of and that the students themselves were interested in. Having someone there to shape imagination, rather than tear them down or over-inflate the egos/abilities of a child is necessary for them to be able to guide themselves in the future.

In Peter Creed’s “Causal Relationship Between Career Indecision and Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy: A Longitudinal Cross-Lagged Analysis,” he assesses the constant change in interests of eighth-graders to high school sophomores to provide an analysis of how needs, values, and goals intersect with the number of career and education options available, leading to the eventual job decision made by some students. The troubles of deciding on a life-long career are difficult to handle, especially if something you want is seemingly impossible to achieve based on what you are given. The participants studied tended to lack self-efficacy, a belief that one can succeed at something, the longer they were indecisive about a career choice. The fact that adolescents are already being expected to achieve greatness, and are measured based on their ability to choose a life-path quickly is unfair. Our society upholds a mindset that has literal children reconsidering their own abilities due to their reasonable indecisiveness on a superficial standard.

It’s a cruel reality to be expected to contribute to our forefather’s systematic society based on old individualist values. Sociology’s conflict theory is a societal phenomenon that explains the separation between class systems, and how in turn the expectations for each class
are so different. The conflict theory is technically defined as “looking at society as a competition for limited resources.” *(Intro to Sociology* 21) For example, lower-class young adults may yearn to become a surgeon but were not born with the assets or support to fulfill that dream. High-class young adults generally find success in whatever they are interested in without struggle due to the assistance of their family and education. This flawed system favors few and troubles many. The morals of young adults as studied in Bryan Dik’s “Career Development Strivings: Assessing Goals and Motivation in Career-Decision-Making and Planning,” are studied to analyze how different people formulate life goals, many variables of which surround the importance of delayed gratification, even though our society values immediate success at a young age.

Dik’s study found that people may create their idea of success based on location, education, and upbringing. He had participants gauge their feelings on variables such as self-efficacy, expectations, sense of calling, and materialism to gauge the variables’ importance in a person’s decision-making process. This rating system shows how members of society have vastly different definitions of success, based on their backgrounds, and provides insight into how personal goals are formulated in different mindsets. Delay of gratification is a large aspect of setting goals, and many people do not want to wait to see results, which shifts the order of that person’s goal strategy to achieve results quicker. Dik’s evidence concluded that many students don’t have the means to delay financial benefits or success, like attending school for a certification or degree, as they don’t have a safety to rely on in the meantime.

Parental support, educational access, and self-efficacy are crucial in having the confidence to make life decisions, and many students don’t have responsible support to turn to for advice. Even students that take it upon themselves to attend a college, “their families cannot
provide them with realistic role models because they are reaching beyond the typical mode in their family background.” (Nieva 2)

In Veronica Nieva’s “Career Decisionmaking: Youth Futures In Context,” she expands upon the situations of many students and how it relates to their decision to join the military. Nieva held open-ended interviews to attempt to explain why students decide to attend the military specifically, but this type of decision is still a part of the wider realm of career-indecision and pressure. Many young people are forced into a career from family ties or societal tendencies, and this article opened the discussion on why people make these choices. Race, gender, and societal standing refer greatly to what decisions people make, and the expectations they are made to uphold. This study is set between different class groups, finding that underprivileged students in general “lack the economic security” to pursue a career without a stable net to fall back on. The choice to enlist is sometimes the only choice for many Americans who see the military as an opportunity to do something with their lives, to not be seen as useless in society, and to possibly reap the benefits of tuition forgiveness after returning from overseas. This study proves the idea that career decisions go beyond the interests of a young person.

Career-defining decisions are more than just finding what you like to do and sticking with it until you succeed. Having the ability to stick to something after failures depends majorly on socio-economic backgrounds, as well as financial stability. Deciding on a career is more complicated than common understandings explain. As the saying goes, the “American Dream” comes with hard work and perseverance, yet no one considers that this dream might never go as planned, and the optimistic view of “try, try, again” simply isn’t a realistic option for everyone. Unfortunately, those who never find the idyllic American view of success are looked down upon, even though very few do succeed in America’s eyes. Our “modern” society seems entirely
dependent on ideals that no longer represent what America is. Maybe, it’s time to reconsider the way we function in society and separate unrealistic, outdated career standards from true advice that exceeds general abilities and socio-economics.


