

# The Influence of Family Background on Career Choice among Undergraduate Students in Tanzania

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## Abstract

Several factors influence career decision-making among young people in different contexts. This study qualitatively investigated how family background factors influence career decision-making by university students. The participants involved undergraduate students drawn from four universities enrolled in four degree programmes, leading to specific professions, namely, education, law, business and engineering. Eighty-eight students participated in a series of focus group discussions on how they came to choose the programmes they were studying and how their family background influenced their choice. Data were analysed using the thematic approach. The results show that the family played a significant role in undergraduate students' choice of careers. The influence was particularly significant in families with a higher level of education beginning at secondary school. Generally, students tend to choose professions similar to those of their parents. The results also show that the influence of biological parents on career decision-making was more pronounced than that of their relatives. Consistent with the findings of previous studies in different contexts, the study concludes that family background plays a major role in influencing young people to choose a certain career.

*Key terms:* Family background, Career choice, University students, Tanzania

## Introduction

Helping students choose a career has always been part of the provision of education at all levels. In Tanzania, preparing for a career begins at the secondary education level, and proceeds up to tertiary level. It is a process that starts early in childhood when one's aspirations and perceptions begin to be shaped. Several factors, such as family background, where a person grows up and the nature of occupational information one receives may influence an individual's career choice.

The family is life's first teacher, who help children learn to interpret reality and perhaps provide lessons that are never forgotten (Way & Rossman, 1996). Several theorists place the family at the centre of career decision making. Roe (1956), one of the earliest career theorists, for example, posited that early childhood experiences are strongly related to occupational choices. Roe further explains that children are likely to choose a job that reflects the psychological climate of the home in which they grew up. Furthermore, Super's (1957) developmental theory recognises that the family is the main source of self-concept and career maturity, while Eccles's expectancy-value model emphasises that parents act as role-models, are a source of reinforcement and provide career information, resources and opportunities for their children (Eccles, 1993 cited in Jodl, et al., 2001 ). Clearly therefore, there is close relationship between family background, one's upbringing and one's later occupation. This implies that individuals who grow up in a family where parents are following a certain career are more likely to be intrigued by their parents' profession and may be influenced to pursue a similar career in future.

A plethora of research in various contexts supports the notion that the family is one of the determinants of individuals' career choice (Anthony & Bimbo, 2012; Law & Arthur, 2003; Mhenga, 2011; Simon & Gloria, 2010; Shumba & Naong, 2012). For instance, in South Africa, a study by Shumbal and Naong (2012) on first- and second-year university students revealed that the family was among the significant predictors of career aspirations of undergraduate students. Another study in Nigeria by Anthony and Bimbo (2012) explored the influence of parental background variables on the career choice of students. The results revealed that variables such as parental occupations, level of education and attitudes influenced students' career choice. In China, similar results were obtained. For example, Simon and Gloria's (2010) study on the effect of perceived parental influence on career choice revealed that perceived parental support, perceived parental career concerns about welfare and prestige and perceived parental barriers to career choice were the most significant predictors of career choice. Again, a survey by Law and Arthur (2003) showed that students' decision to choose or not to choose nursing was significantly influenced by demographic factors including the mother's occupation. However, these findings contradict those of Agarwala (2008) in India and Lugumila (2010) in Tanzania, which established that the father and other male relatives had more influence on career choice than the mother. Likewise Fisher and Padmawidjaja (1999) did a study on parental influence on the career development of African-American college students. The study found that parents have the most influence in various career domains through encouragement, educational expectations and critical life events.

Other scholars (Tejas et al., 2012) linked career choice to the family's socio-economic background. This means that students with a good socio-economic background had a better chance of gaining admission to a professional course of their choice. Similarly, Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa (2006) indicated that the career choice of tertiary students with a poor socio-economic background is negatively affected by the lack of finance and career information, poor academic performance and unsatisfactory career counselling services. This implies that most students from disadvantaged families are prone to make uninformed career decisions.

In East Africa, similar experiences were observed. For example, Mwai (2011) assessed the factors influencing students' career choice in Kenya. The findings indicated that over 71% of career decisions made by students were based on their academic ability and family influence. In Tanzania, Mhenga (2011) found that parents' socio-economic background influences the career choice of secondary school students, with the implication that parents with a good income were able to enrol their children in high quality schools.

Generally, from the literature, it has been observed that there are varying views and findings as to how family background influences career aspirations. For example, there exists evidence regarding the influence of socio-economic variables (Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa, 2006; Mhenga, 2011; Tejas et al., 2012), whilst other studies concentrated on the role of parents' education and occupation in influencing students' career plans (Anthony & Bimbo, 2012). In particular, the father's occupation was found to correlate most with male students' career aspirations than the mother's occupation. Also, the aspect of family support and involvement in the career decision making of their children were revealed to have an impact on career decisions. Parental guidance and support in terms of providing the right career information are vital. This is reinforced by Kniveton (2004), who asserts that the family provides information and guidance, directly or indirectly, which in turn influences children's informed career choice. In sum, whether intentionally or unintentionally, parents are very influential in terms of making their children aware of and exposing them to various occupations.

Therefore, the reviewed studies have shown that students' career choices are to a great extent influenced by the background of the family to which they belong, which results in their career choice and planning. However, both the mother and father have a role to play in the successful outcome of their children's career choice. The way parents feel about certain careers and occupations and their dedicated support for a career shape their children's career plans and development. However, previous studies examining the influences of career choice (Mhenga, 2011; Lugumila, 2010; Hezron, 2008) mainly focused on students at lower levels of education, especially at secondary school, with less attention being paid to students in higher education. Thus, this study attempted to address this knowledge gap by exploring the influence of family background on the career aspirations of undergraduate students in Tanzania.

## **Methodology**

The study was designed to explore the influence of family background on the career choice of university students. The qualitative approach as a method of inquiry using focus group discussions was applied to collect the data. The qualitative design was chosen in order to gain an understanding of the feelings and experience of undergraduate students regarding the role of their family when choosing their career. Focus group discussion was chosen as a data collection tool because of its potential to bring together participants from diverse backgrounds to discuss an issue of common interest which they have all experienced. This approach also allowed participants to interrogate each other and debate issues before coming up with a conclusion in a way that cannot be obtained using other tools of data collection.

Data for the study were collected from the four regions of Dar es Salaam, Iringa, Dodoma and Morogoro. These regions were purposively selected because they have a good number of both private and public universities, which offer various degree programmes. The participants were drawn from four universities, namely; University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), University of Iringa (UI), University of Dodoma (UDOM) and Muslim University of Morogoro (MUM). The degree programmes selected were law, education, engineering and business. The programmes were also purposively selected as they lead to specific professions upon graduation.

A total of 14 focus groups were conducted in four universities with between six and eight participants. Two researchers participated in the management of the focus group discussions, one researcher operating the tape recorder and taking the notes while the other one guided the discussions. The discussions lasted for 45 to 90 minutes. All the proceedings were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were then analysed using the thematic approach, whereby appropriate themes were identified, described and illustrated by the quotes of participants. Furthermore, before embarking on data collection, the overall research permit was obtained from the University of Dar es Salaam. Thereafter, informed consent to conduct the study was also obtained from the respective universities. Confidentiality of the information gathered and anonymity of the respondents were ensured. Lastly, participants were informed of their right to refuse to participate or withdraw from the discussion whenever they wished and for whatever reason without penalty.

## **Results**

Several issues emerged from the focus group discussions on the role of the family in students' career decision-making. These are organised in the form of five themes. The first theme was labelled "pressure from parents to pursue a certain career" in which parents tended to push their children into pursuing a career of their liking. The second theme was the nature of the parents' occupation; the third was the poor economic status of families; the fourth was the lack of career information and guidance from parents; and the last was parents' expectations. These are highlighted and illustrated below.

### ***Pressure from parents to pursue a certain career of their interest***

Pressure from parents was the major factor that arose during the focus group discussions which influenced students' career choice. The majority of students found themselves in a degree programme which was not of their choosing but because they were forced into it by their parents, especially the father, as well as significant others. The students said the following about various programmes.

To the best of my knowledge I didn't choose Business... my father forced me into it. That force had a history. Since my O-levels, he wanted me to major in business but I knew that I had no ability for that, especially as regards mathematics. I am not good at mathematics, and it has not worked out. For my part I wanted to study education but my father refused to let me. So I had no option (Student, MUM)

My parents were the main influence. I remember my father told me that teaching is the best career because he believed that it is one of the respected professions and through it I will be able to find other careers and advance professionally (Student, UDOM)

Honestly this was not my choice (Bachelor of Law)... only that my parents especially my father wanted me to choose it. My father is very strict and if you are told to do something you must do it. I really regret what he has done to me. I think this is the time when parents should let their children follow their passion and not force them to follow what the parents like (Student, UDSM).

These findings imply that parents exert a great deal of influence on the choice of career and academic majors of their children. They tend to convince students to study what they want them to with the result that most students are forced to comply with their parents' interests and aspirations.

### ***Nature of parents' occupation***

The second theme which appeared to have influenced students' career choice was the nature of parents' occupation. Most students were of the view that their parents' occupation had also motivated their choice of career. Students born into a family where parents are working in a certain occupation, such as teaching, were greatly influenced to follow the same career path. The following quotations demonstrate this.

Both my mother and father are teachers and so is my sister. So together they influenced my career decision. In short, I can say we are a family of teachers (Student, UDSM).

For me, the main influence was my parents' occupations. My mother is a district magistrate and my father is an advocate. Our standard of living is good and so I had no reason to dislike the profession (Student, UDOM).

My father is an engineer and most of my family (uncle and brother) have become one. He has a garage where I have helped him with some small stuff associated with his job since I was in form III. As time went on I found myself loving the field. He (father) then advised me that if I chose engineering, especially mechanical, we would be working together and advancing the garage as we apply the knowledge I gained. I finally followed the same career path (Student, MUM).

### ***Families' poor economic status***

Families' poor economic status was the third theme that emerged during discussions. Most students explained that their career choice was greatly affected by the poor circumstances of their family. It was revealed that students with a low socio-economic status failed to finance their education and so were forced to choose one of the national priority programmes so that they could secure a loan from the government. As a matter of fact, this is the largest group constituting the population in higher learning institutions in Tanzania. It is thus apparent that poverty, by implication, has become the prime factor affecting students' career choice. Further illustrations are provided below.

For me poverty has been the major influence. I never liked teaching. I don't even have that personality but what else could I have chosen? Other programmes I was interested in had to be self-sponsored. You know the way our education system is operating right now, I would say there is no career choice for students who come from poor families - we are just driven by the system. If today the policy added say political science (PS) to be among the priority programmes, many students would be politicians, not because they would like to be politicians but because they are poor. This has really restricted our career aspirations and killed our profession. Some people could be very successful engineers, entrepreneurs or lawyers but you will find them in education out of economic necessity. (Student, UDOM).

Education was my 7<sup>th</sup> choice...I remember, initially I chose Bachelor of Law but I came to realise that Law was not one of the priority programmes and so I changed to education to secure a loan from the government. I come from a very poor family that could not finance my education and so I thought studying education will help me obtain a degree but honestly I don't like it (Student, UI).

### ***Lack of career information and guidance from parents***

Career information is vital for students to make informed career decisions. The study revealed that the lack of proper career information, especially from the family, affects most university students' career choice. The majority of parents do not provide their children with career information due to their low level of education. One of the students claimed that:

Honestly, my family has not informed me about anything concerning career choice. You know if you have grown up in a family where they do not even bother to find out what you have learned in school it is very difficult for them to help you make career plans. I was very unlucky as it was only through using my initiative that I came to know about different careers and how to choose the best one for me (Student, MUM).

However, some respondents acknowledged that parents were of great help to them in making their career decisions. They provided enough information at the right time to enable their children to choose a programme. For example, some students had this to say:

I was very lucky in that my parents played their role of guiding and informing me about all important issues regarding career choice. I grew up with an idea of the different careers available in the world of work, and how much effort I would need to put in to become, say, a doctor or pilot, etc. They were of great help regarding my career plan and I thank them a lot (Student, UDSM).

Yes my parents were crucial to my career plans. They gave directions when I was about to miss the correct path. Supportive statements, such as “you can make it”, were very common in my family (Student, UI).

### ***Parental expectations***

Family expectations emerged as another reason that motivated students to choose their careers. The majority of the students stated that their parents convinced them to choose a career that would make more of a difference in their life than that of their parents. This shows that parents’ aspirations informed their children’s occupational knowledge, which ultimately informed their career decisions. One of the students studying law had this to say:

I believe that all parents want the best for their children; this applies when it comes to career choice. My father had many dreams and expectations of me which made him consider many things when I came to choose my career. Although I was interested in becoming a teacher he had a different opinion, in that with teaching I would be very poor.... and for sure there is no parent who would want his or her child to have a poor life....; most dream of success. After a long discussion, I agreed with him. Now I am doing a law degree which I hope will meet our expectations (Law student)

It is evident that parents have various dreams and expectations of their children. These expectations are openly communicated in the sense that they become powerful in shaping the career aspirations of their children. Thus, they provide the context in which the reality of the world of work can be interpreted.

### **Discussion**

This study found that family, as the main social agent, played a significant role in students’ career choice. Specifically, it revealed that parents’ occupations acted as a catalyst for most undergraduate students’ career choice. For example, students who came from a teaching-oriented family were more likely to follow this occupation. Parents, especially fathers, were found to have more influence on students’ career choice than other close relatives. These findings concur with Mkumbo’s (2012) study that the main motive of in-service teachers’ decision to join the teaching profession was to follow in the family’s footsteps. The fact that most members of a family, including the father, were teachers made them want to enter the profession. Other studies such as that of Leppel, Williams and Waldauer (2001) established that having a father in an executive occupation has a greater effect on female students than it does having a mother in a similar occupation. Again, female students from families with a high socio-economic status were less likely to major in business studies than male students. However, this was not the case in the field of engineering, as both male and female students whose fathers were working in a high-profile profession were more likely to choose

engineering. Therefore, female students were more likely to choose male-dominated careers if their fathers had a high-profile occupation.

Also a study by Love (2009) found that parents were highly involved in their children's career awareness and planning. Love further asserts that parents have a strong influence on how their children perceive themselves and construct their identity. Lappel, Williams and Waldauer (2001) add that a student having both a mother and father in the same occupation was the main factor affecting their career choice. This means that parents act as a role model for their children as they influence their thinking and outlook on life and what they would want to be when they grow up.

With regard to the provision of career information and guidance, the results showed that the majority of students did not receive adequate career information and guidance from their parents. Similar findings are reported by Palos and Drobot (2010) that parents' support as regards career-related decisions, such as providing information about jobs, was less common than the other types of support studied. This implies that parents were rarely involved in providing career-related information.

Furthermore, the findings of this study revealed that parents' socio-economic status and level of education have a significant effect on career choice. It is evident that in order for students to finance their higher education they need to be economically stable at the family level. If the family's economic status does not accord with the choice of career, there will possibly be a mismatch between what students are interested in and what the family is capable of. These findings are also supported by previous studies in different contexts. For example, in Tanzania, Mhenga (2011) found that parents' socio-economic background influenced the career choice of secondary school students. Parents with a good income were able to enrol their children in high quality schools. Similarly, educated parents were able to lead their children and monitor their progress, and because they had enough career knowledge they were in a good position to guide their children in choosing an appropriate career. Again, Tejas et al. (2012) established that students whose parents were well educated and in a good socio-economic position had a better chance of being admitted into a professional course of their choice. In addition, parents' expectations as to whether a job is suitable for their children play a crucial role in shaping career choices. Parents often expect more for their children than they had themselves. This indicates that they are likely to convince their children to choose a career that will provide a better lifestyle than theirs (Saral & Elley, 2013). Thus, parents' social class and lifestyle shape their expectations as regards their children's future career. Indeed, the findings of this study are in line with Roe's theory of needs, which states that families are at the centre of children's career planning and decision making.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

- Generally, parents serve as significant interpreters of information on the world of work and children's abilities. They are also viewed as farmers who grow their children since every child is unique and needs different environmental conditions to realise his or her potential. In this context, the parents' role is to provide a variety of career information and let their children discover their talents, taking into account their needs, personality and interests. However, their supportive role in determining and directing their children's future should be carried out with great care so that they do not dictate the career decisions of their children. Although parents usually want the best for their children, they should not shatter their children's dreams.

Arguably, their aspirations should be geared to making children aware of the various occupations and roles in different lines of work, and not force them to take the career path of their choice.

- The government through the Higher Education Students Loan Board should treat all fields equally so as to restore the growth of professionalism. Apparently, the circular on national priority and non-priority programmes has greatly affected the career choice of most people in Tanzania. This is due to the fact that the majority of students are forcing themselves to apply for national priority programmes so that they can a secure loan for their studies. There should be fair treatment of all courses, since each field makes a unique contribution to national development. This will enable students to choose the courses they are interested in, thereby making them love their profession, join it and stay in it.

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