

Vocational identity in adolescence according to family*

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Resumo. O objectivo do presente estudo é a análise da relação entre os estatutos da identidade vocacional e variáveis do âmbito familiar, ao longo da adolescência. Como variáveis ligadas ao contexto familiar, foram consideradas as seguintes: percepção de apoio dos pais, habilitações escolares dos pais, autoconceito familiar, amizade dos irmãos, divórcio versus não divórcio dos pais, e ainda visualização televisiva de programas agressivos. A amostra foi constituída por 547 alunos do 7º, 9º e 11º anos de escolaridade, de ambos os sexos. Como instrumento de avaliação, utilizou-se o “*Occupational Identity Scale*”, de Melgosa (1987) e já objecto de adaptação para Portugal (Veiga & Moura, 1999; 2005), com os seguintes factores: *diffusion*, *foreclosure*, *moratorium*, *achievement*. A análise dos resultados permitiu observar, na generalidade das situações, diferenças significativas nas dimensões da identidade vocacional, em função de cada uma das variáveis independentes, apresentando-se tais diferenças favoráveis aos grupos de pertença a melhores contextos familiares. Observou-se, ainda, o efeito da interacção da variável ano de escolaridade com as variáveis ligadas ao contexto familiar, em variadas situações consideradas. O estudo inclui a discussão dos resultados e sua comparação com investigações algo similares, remetendo para a necessidade de novas pesquisas, em função de variáveis escolares e pessoais.

Palavras-chave. Identidade vocacional, Adolescência, Clima familiar.

Abstract. The present study aims to analyze the relation between the *statutes of vocational identity* and family variables, throughout adolescence. The variables related to the family context that were taken into account were the following: parental authority, perception of parents’ support, parents’ qualifications, family self-concept, sibling friendship, divorce *versus* non divorce of parents, and television viewing of aggressive programs. The sample consisted of 357 students of different school years (7th, 9th and 11th grades) and of both sexes. Melgosa’s (1987) *Occupational Identity Scale*, already adapted to Portugal, was used as the evaluation instrument, with the following factors: *diffusion*, *foreclosure*, *moratorium*, *achievement*. Analyses of the results showed significant differences in most situations as regards the dimensions of vocational identity, according to each of the independent variables; these differences favored the groups belonging to better family contexts. In several of the situations the effect of the interaction of the variable *school year* with the variables related to the family context was also found. This study includes the discussion of the results and their comparison to somewhat similar investigations, suggesting the need for further research associated to school and personal variables.

Keywords. Vocational identity, Adolescence, Family, Teenagers’ work.

Despite general acknowledgement of the importance of family interactions in the development of vocational identity, only recently has vocational behaviour related to family been investigated. In the last few years, some authors (Super, 1990; Vondracek *et al.*, 1999; Hartung, 2005) have argued that the development of vocational identity should be studied by resorting to the contexts in which it occurs, including factors deriving from family and school contexts, and the influence of elements related to social, economic, political or technological fields. Besides the historical factors, the

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present-day contexts and intra-personal factors affect the development of vocational identity throughout the life span and may trigger fluctuations in the vocational process (Grotevant & Cooper, 1988; Vondracek *et al.*, 1999).

The research presented in this paper aimed to study the relation between family variables and dimensions of vocational identity. Vocational development was conceptualized as the result of dynamic interactions between the subject and his/her contexts that are in constant transformation (Hartung *et al.*, 2005; Gonçalves, 1997; Taveira, 2000; Vondracek *et al.*, 1999; Young *et al.*, 1994). Following are elements of the investigation about the relation between variables associated with the family atmosphere and the process of vocational development.

Perception of parents' support. Interpersonal relations within the family have been studied empirically as regards vocational identity (Lopez, 1989; Blustein *et al.*, 1991). The process of individuation-separation and the emotional tie to the family have been identified as predictors of the exploratory process of identity (Grotevant & Cooper, 1988; Rice, 1990). A positive relation between separation and self-efficacy in vocational exploration was observed (Silbereisen, Vondracek & Berg, 1997). Children's competencies for exploring the world and making choices in general seem to depend on the security of family relations.

Parents' communicational competencies and patterns towards their children, where encouragement and affective support are felt, produce a strong impact on behaviour of exploration and investment, and correlate negatively to behaviour of foreclosure (Blustein *et al.*, 1991; Grotevant & Cooper, 1988). Silbereisen, Vondracek, and Berg (1997) argue that parent and family support are directly related to the time when one begins to develop professional preferences. Children of parents who offer high levels of support make their choices earlier.

Friendship among brethren. Although research has shown the influence of the family on the development of vocational identity, there are few studies demonstrating how these influences are perceived. The investigation (Hartung *et al.*, 2005) suggests that, in the families with low support, adolescents have no perception of their parents' influence on their professional planning and, on the contrary, it stresses the valued perception of the influence of their peer group. As for the specific matter of friendship among brothers and sisters, the lack of research is obvious.

Parental authority. The way parental authority is exercised influences the development of vocational identity (Palmer & Cochran, 1988). Various studies (Gonçalves, 1997; Young *et al.*, 1994) found that families headed by very controlling, rigid parents block opportunities to explore, while family atmospheres with well-balanced levels of control and moments of confrontation between different points of view promote experiences of vocational exploration and investment. Other authors found that the impact of the parents on the development of their children's vocational identity had to do with the use of communicational competencies such as orientation, support, encouragement and autonomy (Young, Friesen & Boricki, 1994).

Socio-economic level (SEL). Research has shown that students with a low socio-economic level (SEL) undergo more confined vocational moratoria, due to economic privations that also diminish levels of professional aspiration (Hartung *et al.*, 2005). Children from low SEL identify fewer opportunities in their professional futures

and are more conservative regarding occupations that men and women should have (Hageman, & Gladding, 1983). The students of the average SEL may reveal higher expectations and better vocational exploration and investment behaviour (Gonçalves, 1997; Hartung *et al.*, 2005).

Parents` nationality. One cross-cultural study (Super, 1990) showed that English and American 12th grade students were more informed and had better knowledge of their professional preferences than 9th grade students; the sample of vocational identity Canadian and Brazilian students showed no significant differences in terms of students' exploration in those same school years. Research by Clark and Misa (1967) and later developed by Cook (1996) reveal that children from minority ethnic groups aspired to occupations that were socially less prestigious.

Methodology

Subjects and procedure

The sample consisted of 547 7th (34%), 9th (30,9%) and 11th (35,1%) grade students, of both sexes (male 41,4% female 58,6%). Students' completion of the questionnaires was supervised by the teachers of the classes involved. This task took place during regular class hours and all students collaborated voluntarily, being given as much time as necessary to complete the questionnaires appropriately.

Instrument and variables

The instrument in use — *Occupational Identity Scale* — consisted of 4 statutes of vocational identity: achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion. This scale has already been adapted to Portugal (Veiga & Moura, 1999; 2005).

Besides the vocational identity variables (diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium or achievement), the following variables related to the family context were considered: perception of parental support, level of family instruction (LFI), family self-concept, friendship among brethren, parents divorce versus non-divorce, and watching aggressive programs on television and parent's nationality.

Results

In the remaining statutes (achievement, moratorium, foreclosure), no differences were recorded. Family self-concept (Table 1) differentiated the foreclosure results ($T=2,98$; $GL=493$; $p<0,001$), which were higher in the group with less self-concept, and the moratorium results ($T=-2,51$; $GL=491$; $p<0,001$), which were higher in the group with better self-concept. The statistical analysis of the results according to the level of family instruction (LFI) showed that with respect to diffusion the results were significantly higher in students with a lower LFI ($T=3,72$; $GL=439$; $p<0,001$).

As regards perception of parental support, the results revealed significant differences in the foreclosure statute ($T=-4,62$; $GL=514$; $p<0,001$), in that students with a greater perception of support had higher levels of foreclosure. The results according to parents' nationality were very similar: students with immigrant parents revealed more foreclosure than students with Portuguese parents ($T=-2,63$; $p<0,01$). Friendship among brethren differentiated the results as regards achievement, with higher results in the group expressing more friendship ($T=-2,61$; $GL=478$; $p<0,001$); the same applies to moratorium ($T=-3,01$; $GL=491$; $p<0,001$). The variable "liking to watch aggressive

programs” differentiated the diffusion results: those who say they like watching aggressive programs present more diffusion (T=2,98; GL=478; p<0,001). The results according to parents’ “separation/divorce” were very similar: students with non-separated/divorced parents were more diffused than their corresponding group of contrast, though already on the verge of statistical significance (T=1,95; GL=517; p<0,05).

Table 1. Differences in vocational identity (OIS) according to the family self-concept (FSC)

Dimensions of OIS	FSC	N	Mean	Standard-deviation	T	Sig
Achievement	Low	190	23,3316	5,76255	1,080	ns
	High	283	22,7456	5,80403		
Moratorium	Low	204	21,9951	4,97828	-2,579	**
	High	289	23,3426	6,18103		
Foreclosure	Low	204	18,8039	4,51170	2,984	***
	High	291	17,4674	5,16368		
Diffusion	Low	203	17,3645	5,33762	1,338	ns
	High	287	16,7456	4,82289		

* p< 0.05; ** p< 0.01; *** p< 0.001; ns = no significant

Discussion and conclusions

The revised studied and results achieved suggest that the implementation of some form of intervention in the vocational path, traditionally more centered round the personal system, should focus more on the family as a micro-system and core of the development of vocational identity. The analysis of the results according to the *level of family instruction* and to the *family self-concept* corroborates results from studies previously carried out (Blustein, 1997; Gonçalves, 1997; Grotevant & Cooper, 1988; Hartung *et al.*, 2005). As for *perception of parental support*, the fact that students with a greater perception of support present greater foreclosure may be explained by the adolescents’ understanding of the content of the variable “perception of support” as having more and more to do with an interpersonal relationship, often charged with communicational orientation categories sometimes viewed as useless and untimely, than with encouragement and action-stimulating. Perhaps future studies could analyze this explanatory hypothesis further.

With respect to *parents’ nationality*, students with immigrant parents showed more foreclosure than students with Portuguese parents. Despite the scarcity of immigrant students considered here, and therefore a possible statistical bias, it is likely that a greater foreclosure has to do with a minor aspiration to occupations that are socially more acknowledged within immigrant groups, and also with the adoption of professional activities that are similar to those of their parents. *Friendship among brethren* differentiated the achievement results, with better results in the group with the best friendship, the same happening with the moratorium statute; these results are as expected and reveal friendship among brothers and sisters as a decisive structure for the emergence of vocational exploration and investment behaviour. With respect to “*watching television*” it is likely that the greater amount of time spent in front of the television, without a specific purpose, may constitute a distraction from concerns with vocational exploration. In the analysis of the results according to parents’

“separation/divorce”, it is likely that less indifference to a possible professional path may be related to desires of parental involvement and ideas of self-determination. In short, the present study corroborates results from previous studies (Blustein, 1997; Gonçalves, 1997; Grotevant & Cooper, 1988; Hartung *et al.*, 2005), confirms that the development of vocational identity is facilitated by encouraging family contexts that are perceived as sources of support and autonomy, thus constituting a recommendation in the implementation of vocational intervention projects involving adolescents’ families.

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