

II. Bridges from Self to Community

Family & Social

The Importance of Childhood Socialisation for the Career Progression of Disabled People

Sonali Shah and Cheryl Travers

Loughborough University, England, U.K.

The importance of childhood events in influencing adult behaviour has been the focal point of a large body of philosophical and psychological research since the time of Plato (428-348 BCE) who stated, in *The Republic*: "The first step, as you know, is always what matters most, particularly when we are dealing with those who are young and tender. That is the time when they are taking shape and when any impression we choose to make leaves a permanent mark."

This view recurs in the writings of many scientists who have argued that primary socialisation is of the utmost gravity for an individual's social, psychological, physical, and intellectual development. As observed by Sigmund Freud, in *An Outline of Psycho-analysis*: "analytical experience has convinced us of the complete truth of the assertion that the child is psychologically the father of the man and that the events of his first years are of paramount importance for his whole subsequent life." This infers that childhood socialisation may either constrain or permit the formation and progression of later career potential.

Attributes of Childhood Socialisation

An important attribute of childhood socialisation is social class. Children seem to assimilate social class distinctions from a very young age through concrete images or observable symbols that are part of a naturally learned process which spans several years. There is ample evidence to suggest that the family's socio-economic situation has a significant influence on their future achievement orientation and occupational preference of their children. This is supported by Pfeiffer (1991) who reports that disabled people from middle-class backgrounds have certain advantages over their working-class counterparts in their quality of life and diversity of opportunities. They are also more likely to be financially supported, a benefit that could facilitate the enjoyment of better health and provision of facilities to help create an accessible environment.

It can be confidently stated that the higher the social class from which an individual comes, regardless of his/her physicality, the greater the probability that he/she will aspire to those occupations that society has defined as the most socially prestigious and economically rewarding. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) suggest that middle-class culture stresses the importance of career accomplishment and doing well. Moreover, middle-class families are more likely to emphasise other values facilitating the development of achievement goals. However, although there is significant empirical evidence to correlate higher social class with career success, including the greater likelihood of children from a middle-class environment achieving more than their working-class counterparts, it is important to confine this theory to Britain. As Rosen (1962) argues, for instance, boys in Brazil from the bottom of the social hierarchy seem to have stronger achievement needs than boys from the highest stratum.

The Importance of Childhood Socialisation on the Career Progression of Disabled People

A further causal attribute of youngsters' differentiated futures is parental occupations. The vast discourse on the impact of fathers' occupational status on their sons' goals demonstrates that social origins do, undeniably, lay down the foundation for a child's life. A parent's occupational status not only influences a child's career achievements by affecting education choices and job experience, that occupational status also has a delayed effect on later achievements even when

differences in schooling and early career experience are statistically controlled (Blau & Duncan, p.25). Furthermore, high-achieving children are encountered more frequently in affluent families where parental occupations are of a significantly high status (Eysenck & Cookson, 1970).

The significance of parenting styles in the formation of children's self-concept, as well as occupational preferences, has received much attention in psychological theory. Wood (1973) asserts that where parents are warm, loving, and respectful to their child as a valued individual, and are able to enhance her/his self-esteem, the child has the best opportunity to develop her/his personality to the full. Furthermore, the provision of such a nourishing environment permits the cultivation of individual potential. This is consistent with White et. al.'s (1992) study, which reported a high proportion of successful women in their sample to having had supportive, autonomy-granting parents who had no rigid expectations of them other than to be happy. Such patterns of parental support will often result in the child's strong self-image, as he or she becomes increasingly aware of personal characteristics and position in the world.

In contrast to these theories, however, is the popular conception of the ambitious parent, moulding and encouraging the child to achieve. This phenomenon has been demonstrated by Cox & Cooper (1988) in their study of male "high-flyers." A significant number of respondents in their sample reported that their achievement-oriented parents were antecedent to their offsprings' future success orientations. Furthermore, parents who value achievement and who encourage their children's high-flying goals are more likely themselves to have high-status occupations and to practice the cultural norms of the middle-class which stress the importance of accomplishment and doing well. Moreover, as Katovsky, Crandall and Good (1967) concur, such parenting styles serve to instill in the child the belief that one's own behaviour, not external factors, will determine the rewards one receives. Therefore, parental encouragement is important to the enhancement of self-esteem and to the individual's anticipation of successful mastery of challenges.

Disabled Childhoods

Although all children are said to be dependent, with maturity the nondisabled child undergoes a transition to adulthood and independence. For the disabled individual, this transition is not always achieved as the typical connections used to facilitate development and attain such independence are severed by a disabling, body-fetishist society which continues to reinforce disabled people's powerlessness. As Priestley (1998) contends, many disabled children are deprived the opportunity of growing up and experiencing adult status in terms of gender, sexuality, culture and class. Furthermore, disabled people are often excluded from the important patterns of social processes and childhood socialisation by differential mechanisms of surveillance and segregation.

It can be argued that negative societal stereotypes of disabled people as being passive and dependent have had extensive influence on parental aspirations for their disabled child so that any goals for the child's futures tend to be measured according to the child's level of impairment. These goals are also influenced by the implications of bringing up a disabled child in a predominantly nondisabled world. As the structure of our society is based on the desires of the nondisabled majority, parents may be pessimistic about the achievement potential of their disabled child and therefore are unlikely to push the child in any particular career direction. This is evidenced in the findings of this writer's qualitative study which investigates the influences of childhood and family on the career success of individuals with physical disabilities. The study explores the different bridges, manufactured by and for this minority group, as paths to positive connections considered to be mandatory for the achievement of professional success in a highly competitive, economics-based society.

As a result of analysis of in-depth interviews for that study, this paper addresses the extent to which the different elements of childhood socialisation (i.e. social class, parental occupations, childhood experiences, and parental expectations for their child) served to influence

the career successes of 18 professionals with congenital physical disabilities. This paper endeavours to share some of the experiences of these high-flyers in their transitions from childhood to their lives as successful disabled adults.

Research Method

The research may be described as qualitative as it involves a naturalistic, interpretative approach to the phenomena under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In-depth interviewing is seen as the most useful means of investigation for this piece of social enquiry since, within a realist, epistemological stance, a certain objectivity can be achieved from the qualitative responses of the participants having been guided by a preconstructed framework of ideas and questions.

The study was based on the analysis of answers to the following three questions:

- * How was success defined to you as a child?
- * How has your family influenced your career development?
- * What childhood experiences have been significant to you and where you are now?

Our sample was initially identified via well-established disability organisations, registered charities, media channels, and disability networks in different regions of Great Britain on the basis of the criteria specified by the researcher. Due to the diversity of careers to be explored and represented, the organisations contacted were from different spheres of the professional sector, such as arts, business, politics, academia, and medicine.

In the first instance, the researcher approached the organisations via a letter containing a brief outline of the proposed research objectives, the means by which the researcher might meet the subject, and how the subject's participation in the study would be valuable. The letter was sent to established organisations and to several individuals whom the researcher had met on a social or professional level who were deemed qualified to participate in the research. Potential participants were selected on the basis of the following principles:

1. They are employed in a high-status profession with a significant degree of authority, autonomy, and/or power to make judgements.
2. They have reached personally desirable positions of power, wealth, and/or prestige in their professions.
3. They have a congenital or acquired physical disability which affects their mobility, dexterity, and/or speech. Typical disabilities included cerebral palsy, paraplegia, and conditions caused by the drug Thalidomide.

The Empathy Factor

To a certain extent, the above criteria were influenced by the researcher's personal experiences of disability and impairment, locating the researcher in a position which, according to Geertz (1973), would permit "access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them." This benefit of mutuality is supported by Sussman (1971) who points out that minority-group members usually have better insights, more commitment to solutions, and greater rapport with their peers than does the general population. Similarly, Barnes (1992) contends that a coincidence of disability in an inter-subjective world allows both the researcher and the researched the use of the same resources to understand meaning. Thus, in the interviews undertaken for the current study, both parties shared experiences of physical impairment.

The time and place of the interviews were arranged according to the participants' convenience. Most of the meetings took place at the participants' home or workplace; although, on two instances, the most convenient setting was a public bar/cafe. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours, the average being one hour. A few of the participants had speech impediments, and in two cases, the researcher had difficulty understanding the spoken word when transcribing the interview, resulting in the collection of additional information through subsequent questionnaires or electronic mail.

As Van Maanen (1979) asserts, the prime analytic task in such research is to "uncover and explicate the ways in which people in particular (work) settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situation." In this case, the topic under scrutiny was childhood socialisation. Individuals' responses to the interview questions were content-analysed in order to extract the principal themes evident in their views of career success. Care was taken to ensure that the themes were specific enough to have a fairly precise meaning, whilst also being broad enough to group together responses with a similar theme.

Research Findings

The research findings suggest that, although the family was universally important in terms of providing the respondents with love and support, the subjects' parents had no prescribed expectations of their disabled children as they were unaware of what was physically possible for them to achieve. This was indicated by several of the disabled high-flyers, one of whom remarked, "If you are a disabled person, particularly born-disabled, parents, society, and the medical profession don't really expect you to achieve that much. They have pretty low expectations." Another respondent said, "My family had very little knowledge, at the time, of what it meant to have a kid with cerebral palsy. My sister is able-bodied, and I think because of that, she's expected to do far more than I was ever expected to do, even though I have more ability than she has."

Since the majority of the sample were born in an era where disability politics had not yet been established, disability was construed as a purely medical phenomena. Several of the respondents believed their parents conceptualised disability in terms of the medical model of disability. This model represents disabled people as "passive objects of intervention, treatment and rehabilitation" (Oliver, 1990).

A further hypothesis forwarded by some of the subjects was that the emergence of capitalism and the complicated socioeconomic environment we have today are responsible for preventing disabled people from participating in the workforce. Once production moved from the home to the inaccessible workplace, jobs necessitated traveling and transport until recently has not been accessible to people with mobility impairments. The lack of social interaction with disabled people in mainstream situations such as the workforce, ignited the presumption that members of this minority group were incapable of pursuing an independent autonomous lifestyle. Given the dearth of positive disabled role models, and the negative perspectives presented by the medical profession, it is likely that most parents had very low expectations for their disabled children.

While these subjects' parents may have had limited foresight for their disabled children, the research findings emphasise that they did provide encouragement and support which facilitated the generation of their children's full potential. This assessment was revealed by 13 respondents in the sample through comments such as this: "My parents were always trying to help us be successful at anything we chose to do". One respondent asserted that it was his parents who provided opportunities and encouraged him "to be more than something to be pitied."

Self-descriptions of the respondent's relationships with their parents denounced the notion that they received a lot of parental attention and affection. However, it might be the case that, because the children were congenitally disabled, they did receive differential treatment from their parents. Said one respondent, "I'm not sure whether my parents had high expectations for me or my sister. They did for the boys because they were 'normal.'"

Those respondents who identified their family as a causal attribute of their future career progress were nurtured within middle-class environments, which typically emphasise the value of accomplishment and the development of achievement needs. For example, one woman claimed that "It was never any good, in my family, to be as good as other people; we were supposed to be better."

Parental occupations were seen to have a significant influence on the respondents' career aspirations and achievement motivation. This was demonstrated by statements such as: "Both my

parents were actors so obviously that's what I really wanted to do all along" and "My parents were both teachers, they always supported me and encouraged me to aim high." One respondent, a university lecturer, believed that being brought up in a highly academic family, where both parents were teachers, has made her who she is now.

Other findings demonstrate that these respondents had been financially supported, which facilitated the enjoyment of better health and the means to create an accessible environment. Such a contention was evidenced by two sisters, both with progressively deteriorating conditions, who perceived growing up in a financially well-off family to have been important to their present life situations. As one sister asserted, "In the 60s, when we were little, we would have become socially isolated if we hadn't grown up in a fairly wealthy family."

Interestingly, a childhood experience such as separation from parents was also identified as being significant to the career success of some respondents. A few of the respondents were sent to boarding school, as children, which caused them to develop a general feeling of independence and self-reliance from a young age. Other respondents who experienced the death of a parent during childhood claimed that they were taught to be responsible for themselves and their siblings. Such early experiences of independence, it could be argued, helped to propagate an internal locus of control, that is, a belief that the rewards one receives are a consequence of one's hard work and ability, rather than luck or fate. However, in all cases the individuals' identity appeared to be a synthesis of his or her childhood as it was partially shaped by parents and class-status, rather than being constructed through chance.

Conclusion

The findings discussed in the preceding review demonstrate that early childhood socialisation does have a significant influence on one's transition to adult success. Although parents may not have directly predetermine their children's future achievement orientation, they appear to have been supportive of the children's achievements and to have encouraged them to pursue their desired goals. Such support represents the classic pattern of parent-child relations which is said to promote achievement striving and independence (Stein and Bailey, 1973). Indeed, as John Milton wrote, "The childhood shows the man as morning shows the day."

This study also confirms the notion that the social class of the families of disabled children has a significant part to play in the derivation of childhood aspirations. This is consistent with Jahoda et. al. (1988), who argue that disabled children's aspirations about future employment seem to reflect those of nondisabled children. In youth, children do not perceive their disability status as highly significant to their future selves.

A possible explanation for this can be taken from Ginzberg's general theory of occupational choice which suggests that during the childhood period one may aspire widely and impulsively with the only principal constraints being the father's occupation and parental suggestions. Furthermore, children's choices are based on interests alone with little attention due their abilities or any other realistic constraints.

A point to remember, however, when interpreting research such as this, is that childhood socialisation alone does not determine an individual's future achievements. Additional dimensions, such as education, luck, societal influence, and attitudes, are also possible determinants of achievement and career progression. These issues will be raised in the Ph.D. research that will follow this study.

References

- Barnes, C. (1992). "Qualitative Research: Valuable or Irrelevant?" *Disability, Handicap & Society* 7:2.
- Blau and Duncan. *The American Occupational Structure*; p. 25.
- Cox and Cooper (1988). *High Flyers*; Basil Blackwell.
- Denzin, K.N. and Y.S. Lincoln. (1994). *Handbook of Qualitative Research*; London:

Sage Publications.

- Eysenck, H.J. and D. Cookson. (1970). "Personality in Primary School Children; #3 - Family Background." *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 40: pp. 117-31.
- Freud, S. (1949). *An Outline of Psycho-analysis*; London: Hogworth Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Ginzberg, E. (1952). "Towards a Theory of Occupational Choice." *Occupations* 30. pp. 491-94.
- Jahoda, A., I. Markova and Cattermole. (1988). "Stigma and Self-Concept of People with a Mild Mental Handicap." *Journal of Mental Deficiency Research* 32:1. pp. 103-15.
- Katovsky, W., V.C. Crandall and S. Good. (1967). "Parental Antecedents of Children's Belief in Internal-External Control of Reinforcements in Intellectual Achievement Situations." *Child Development* 28. pp. 765-76.
- Kluckhohn, F.R. and F.L. Strodtbeck. (1961). *Variations in Value Orientations*. Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson.
- Oliver, M. (1990). "Disability and the Rise of Capitalism." In Oliver, M. *The Politics of Disablement*. London: Macmillan Education Ltd.
- Pfeiffer, D. (1991). "The Influence of Socio-Economic Characteristics of Disabled People on Their Employment Status and Income." *Disability, Handicap and Society* 6:2. pp.103-12.
- Priestley, M. (1998). "Childhood Disability and Disabled Childhoods." *Childhood: A Global Journal of Child Research* 5:2. pp. 207-23.
- Sussman, A. E. (1971). *Counseling with Deaf People*. New York: New York University, School of Education.
- Rosen, B. C. (1962). Socialisation and Achievement Motivation in Brazil. *American Sociological Review* 27. pp. 612-24.
- Stein, A. H. and M. M. Bailey. (1973). "The Socialisation of Achievement Orientation in Females." *Psychological Bulletin* 80. pp. 345-66.
- Wood, M. (1973). *Children: the Development of Personality and Behaviour*. London: Harrap.