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# INFLUENCE OF FAMILY AND ENVIRONMENT ON STUDENTS' OCCUPATIONAL CHOICES AND EXPECTATIONS OF THEIR PROSPECTIVE UNIVERSITIES

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This study was focused mainly on students' expectations of their prospective universities, and the question of whether or not family background or social status affect their career decisions was investigated. The sample consisted of 2,459 students in their final year at high school from 17 different provinces and 182 high schools all around Turkey. Results show that parents and environment had a great influence on students' occupational preferences. It was also found that students' expectations of universities varied greatly according to their social status and family income.

*Keywords:* career, occupation, higher education, university.

Career development and work issues and, more specifically, career indecision have garnered increased attention in high school settings over the past century. According to Super, Savickas, and Super (1996), career decision making is a developmental process that appears to be key at times of transition, such as the university years, when the individual appears to embark on a new career path. Ginzberg (1954) proposed that career choice is a process which extends from about age 10 to age 21, and that the most important factor determining career choice is "the series of interlocked decisions the adolescent makes over time" (p. 492).

Individuals' freedom to make decisions for their future lives serves as one of the main pillars of contemporary society. Understanding one's own potential,

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abilities and interests enables a person to follow the right career path (Kuzgun, 1986). This is mainly achieved not only by one's self-effort but also by support obtained from teachers, parents and friends. Research regarding career choices has revealed that a number of factors have been influential on adolescents' career aspirations including gender, parental influence, socioeconomic background and early school experiences (Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000). Holland's (1997) theory of vocational choices revealed how individuals continually seek ways to find congruence between themselves and their work. His theory includes the tenet, "People search for environments that will let them exercise their skills and abilities, express their attitudes and values, and take on agreeable problems and roles" (p. 4).

## METHOD

The purpose in this study was to investigate the decision-making process of high school students who have to make a career decision in their final years of secondary schooling and the factors influencing their decisions. The term *career decision-making process* refers to *the process people go through when they search for viable career alternatives, compare them, and then choose one* (Gati & Asher, 2001). In this context, career choice appears to be the main problem for both the providers and receivers of education. In this study the researcher tried to find answers to the following questions:

- What do students expect from their prospective universities?
- To what extent do family background and environment influence students' occupational preferences?

### PARTICIPANTS

The sample for this study consisted of 2,459 students from 17 different provinces and 182 high schools from all over Turkey. All students came from the final year in high school and had followed a general education. Fifty-five percent of the students (1,342) who received the questionnaire were female and 45% (1,117) were male. All students received the questionnaire in June 2005, just before they made their final decisions to indicate university and faculty preferences. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study and questions were read aloud to the students to ensure completion of the assessment materials in the 45-minute class period during their courses at private examination support institutions. These institutions give support courses and prepare students for university entrance examinations.

### INSTRUMENTS

Two evaluation modes are generally distinguished in the decision-making

literature. In joint evaluation, decision makers are asked to choose one of the simultaneously presented options. In separate evaluation, individuals are asked to evaluate each alternative separately, for example, by asking them to rate the alternatives successively on an absolute scale. Joint evaluation was preferable in this study, as it gave a set of choices for career options. Students were grouped according to their first career choice and their responses were evaluated accordingly.

***Demographic Information Sheet*** Students completed a 6-item demographic questionnaire that assessed their age, gender, socioeconomic status, the province in which they lived and educational background of their families.

***Family Background and Social Status*** Analysis regarding students' present accommodation status revealed that more than half of them were living in a metropolitan region, probably in the western part of Turkey, whereas fewer than 10% of the respondents were living in semiurban or rural areas.

This research was based on the hypothesis that family background and social status affected occupational choices. To test this hypothesis, perceptions of children coming from a family with a higher income or a higher educational level were compared to those of students coming from less well educated and poorer families.

***Influence of Provinces*** The questionnaires were answered by students from 17 provinces having diverse characteristics. Gross National Product (GNP) per person values (Statistics Institute of Turkey, 2001) were taken into consideration while interpreting the data. Decisions of students from high-income provinces (GNP > 2,500) and low-income provinces (GNP < 2,500) were compared. According to 2004 statistical data, per capita income for one year GNP is 4,172 USD in Turkey (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2005). Families whose income was above 4,000 USD per annum comprised the high income group in this study. Results showed that 837 respondents were from lower income provinces, and 1,622 were from higher income provinces.

## RESULTS

### Students' Expectations of Their Prospective Universities

Data regarding students' expectations of their future educational institutions are shown in Table 1.

As can be seen in the table, analysis of students' perceptions of higher education and their expectations of their prospective career highlighted most students' expectations of high academic standards. Employment opportunities provided after graduation appeared to be the second highest alternative in the students' choices for expectations. Another item about expectation dealt with feeling a sense of disappointment in the prospective educational services. Students

were asked what would have been the level of disappointment for them if they were not satisfied with the university. Findings with regard to this are shown in Table 2.

**TABLE 1**
**STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS OF PROSPECTIVE UNIVERSITIES**

| | |
|---|---|
| High academic standards | 68.41% |
| Employment opportunities after graduation | 60.65% |
| Medium of instruction (English, French, etc.) | 37.51% |
| Social activities | 34.50% |
| Physical standards | 30.90% |
| Foreign language education | 25.15% |
| Others | 1.18% |

**TABLE 2**
**PROBABLE DISAPPOINTMENT FELT BY STUDENTS IF EXPECTATIONS NOT MET IN THEIR PROSPECTIVE UNIVERSITIES**

| | |
|---|---|
| Objectivity in evaluation of students | 67% |
| Social activities | 62% |
| Scholarship opportunities | 59% |
| International reputation | 53% |
| Research opportunities | 50% |
| Library facilities and services | 42% |
| Psychological guidance | 40% |
| Medical facilities | 23% |
| Others | 0.13% |

More than half of the students emphasized lack of objective assessment and evaluation procedure as the primary source of disappointment that could be experienced. Reflections of the centralized and examination-oriented system were observed in the responses. Another finding that conveys social integration expectancy in the students' beliefs was analyzed in relation to social activities, which were judged to be highly important among the students. Students appeared to be moving in two dimensions, the first being the academic and the second the social, indirectly indicating academic and social integration as the two pillars of a satisfactory university that meets students' expectations. From another perspective, scholarship opportunities were rated as another important feature that was expected to be found in the prospective faculty. Research and library facilities were mentioned by nearly half of the students as being important, which could be interpreted as indicative of the students' level of expectancy of academic quality as well as social opportunities.

**TABLE 3**

**DISTRIBUTION OF PERCENTAGE VALUES IN STUDENTS' OCCUPATIONAL CHOICE WITH REGARDS TO THEIR PARENTS' EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND**

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Computer Engineering** | | | | | | | |
| Father's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 26.32% | 14.91% | 28.07% | 1.75% | 13.16% | 12.28% | 0.88% | 2.63% |
| Mother's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 42.11% | 12.28% | 24.56% | 1.75% | 9.65% | 4.39% | 0.00% | 5.26% |
| **Electrical Engineering** | | | | | | | |
| Father's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 23.08% | 17.31% | 21.15% | 1.92% | 25% | 7.69% | 0.00% | 3.85% |
| Mother's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 38.46% | 15.38% | 17.31% | 3.85% | 17.3% | 3.85% | 0.00% | 3.85% |
| **Industrial Engineering** | | | | | | | |
| Father's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 39.02% | 8.54% | 20.73% | 1.22% | 20.73% | 6.10% | 1.22% | 2.44% |
| Mother's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 45.12% | 12.20% | 19.51% | 2.44% | 18.29% | 2.44% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| **Architecture** | | | | | | | |
| Father's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 26.19% | 14.29% | 23.81% | 2.38% | 21.37% | 9.52% | 0.00% | 2.38% |
| Mother's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 35.71% | 19.05% | 28.57% | 2.38% | 7.14% | 4.77% | 0.00% | 2.38% |

*Table 3 continued*

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Interior Decoration** | | | | | | | |
| Father's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 22.73% | 11.36% | 22.73% | 0.00% | 25.00% | 13.64% | 2.27% | 2.27% |
| Mother's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 38.64% | 13.64% | 25.00% | 4.55% | 18.29% | 2.27% | 2.27% | 0.00% |
| **Law** | | | | | | | |
| Father's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 17.07% | 12.44% | 34.15% | 3.90% | 19.02% | 10.73% | 0.49% | 1.46% |
| Mother's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 32.68% | 10.49% | 31.95% | 0.49% | 12.44% | 9.02% | 0.00% | 2.93% |
| **International Relations** | | | | | | | |
| Father's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 17.96% | 10.19% | 31.31% | 3.40% | 23.30% | 11.09% | 0.73% | 1.21% |
| Mother's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 27.67% | 11.89% | 39.32% | 2.43% | 10.19% | 6.08% | 0.24% | 1.46% |
| **European Union Relations** | | | | | | | |
| Father's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 10.53% | 31.58% | 21.05% | 0.00% | 31.58% | 5.26% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| Mother's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 26.32% | 26.32% | 36.84% | 0.00% | 10.52% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% |

*Table 3 continued*

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Psychology** | | | | | | | |
| Father's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 20.92% | 14.80% | 28.06% | 4.10% | 18.37% | 9.69% | 0.51% | 2.55% |
| Mother's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 30.61% | 13.27% | 30.61% | 4.08% | 12.76% | 2.55% | 0.51% | 5.61% |
| **Sociology** | | | | | | | |
| Father's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 33.33% | 11.11% | 11.11% | 5.56% | 27.78% | 11.11% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| Mother's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 27.78% | 11.11% | 27.78% | 5.56% | 11.11% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 16.67% |
| **Public Relations** | | | | | | | |
| Father's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 22.81% | 16.67% | 39.47% | 0.88% | 13.16% | 7.01% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| Mother's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 38.60% | 19.30% | 28.95% | 0.88% | 6.14% | 5.25% | 0.00% | 0.88% |
| **Visual Arts** | | | | | | | |
| Father's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 6.25% | 6.25% | 25.00% | 6.25% | 25.00% | 18.75% | 6.25% | 6.25% |
| Mother's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 12.50% | 37.50% | 18.75% | 6.25% | 6.25% | 6.25% | 6.25% | 6.25% |

*Table 3 continued*

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Advertising** | | | | | | | |
| Father's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 16.22% | 13.51% | 21.62% | 5.41% | 18.29% | 13.51% | 2.70% | 8.11% |
| Mother's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 24.32% | 13.51% | 48.65% | 2.70% | 0.00% | 8.11% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| **Radio Television and Cinema** | | | | | | | |
| Father's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 23.21% | 17.86% | 28.57% | 3.57% | 17.86% | 8.93% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| Mother's Educational Level | | | | | | | |
| 5 yrs | 8 yrs | High school | 2 yrs college | 4 yrs college | Masters | PhD | Other |
| 28.57% | 16.07% | 33.93% | 1.79% | 14.28% | 3.57% | 0.00% | 1.79% |

### Influence of Family Background and Environment on Students' Occupational Preferences

It was assumed that family background has a major effect on students' choices. In this case we explored the differences in family background of students who had opted for different career choices. Table 3 shows the distribution of percentage values in students' occupational choices with regard to their parents' educational background.

As mentioned before, the results of students from higher income provinces and lower income provinces were compared and these indicated that students from lower income regions had a tendency to choose an engineering career more often when compared to students from higher income regions ($F(1, 2458) = 1.19$, $p = 0.0017$). Students from higher income provinces, on the other hand, tended to choose arts careers more often ($F(1, 2458) = 1.11$, $p = 0.0401$).

Students from higher income provinces appeared to give more emphasis to social activities ($F(1, 2458) = 1.09$, $p = 0.0743$) and psychological guidance ($F(1, 2458) = 1.21$, $p = 0.0007$) in a university. As well, students from higher income provinces put more emphasis on physical standards at their prospective college.

## DISCUSSION

Gati, Krausz, and Osipow (1996) claimed that identifying the difficulties that prevent individuals from reaching a career decision is an essential step in providing the help they need. Results from our study revealed that students identify high academic standards as one of the prime preferences in higher education. Employment opportunities were mentioned as the second-ranked alternative when choosing a university. This finding appears to be in accord with the findings of another study carried out in Turkey (Esme, 2004). It was found in that study that out of 2,500 students, nearly all named employment opportunity as the main determinant for their career choice.

Campbell and Ungar (2004) emphasized children's capabilities and work roles. They found that the work role, although very important, could be perceived as one of the many roles played by an individual. Finding a balance and negotiating the demands of work and personal life may pose significant challenges. Roe (1986) mentions influence of internal stimulators (including physical needs, safety needs, social needs, self-respect and self-realization needs) as the factors affecting one's career choice. Junior and senior high school students reported a number of reasons behind their occupational choices, including interest, meaningfulness, financial competency and parental support (Bardick & Bernes, 2005).

Analysis of parents' educational background in our study revealed that parents who have a Bachelor's degree tend to guide their children towards more social

professions such as visual arts, sociology and European relations. This finding might be interpreted as resulting from the level of anxiety among the parents. Parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds perceive occupations related to science, medicine and engineering as being more secure when compared to jobs requiring artistic skills. The reasons for this could be explained with sociological paradigms and could be examined in further studies. Mullis, Mullis, and Gerweld (1998) suggested that students whose parents work in unskilled professions tend to be more interested in such practical and technical occupations, whereas students whose parents work in skilled professions have a tendency to study towards occupations requiring artistic ability and creativity. Therefore, parental influence was found to be less significant with regard to different cultures. However, longitudinal studies could be implemented to assess the influence of culture, parents and career choice triangulation. It should be noted in this circumstance that relationships where family members are encouraged to express feelings played a small, yet significant, role in predicting the career choices of students.

Results of our study revealed that parents have a great influence on students' work preference. Dusek (1996) found that the most influential roles in vocational choice are taken by parents, peers, siblings, and school influences. It has been found in studies that parents often do not give sound advice regarding vocational choice, and therefore they need to be aware of their child's personality and characteristics before directing career choice. Further studies on parental influence and gender could be conducted to give more insights into the subject of career choice.

Socioeconomic status appeared to be influential in pupils' career choice in our study. Students coming from lower income provinces showed a preference for engineering fields, whereas students from higher income provinces showed a preference for social sciences and art-oriented fields. This finding was confirmed in a study by Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli (2001), who found that socioeconomic status might also affect parents' perceived efficiency and academic aspiration, which then could affect their children's engagement in occupational activities. Hargrove, Creagh, and Burgess (2002) found, in a study of 210 college students, that a significant relationship exists between career decision making, self-efficacy and the three family-supported goals of achievement, intellectual-cultural, and expressiveness.

Our study examined the influence of parents in their children's vocational decisions, which directly charts their career paths in their future lives. Parents' influence on their children could turn into a hidden oppression of those children both socially and psychologically. The finding in our study is quite similar to that of Eigen, Hartman, and Hartman (1987) who found that chronically career undecided students were more likely to come either from firmly structured and

emotionally connected families or from vaguely structured and emotionally separated families (Hartung, Lewis, May, & Niles, 2002).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Since career choice has a fundamental influence on an individual's personal and professional life, professional career counseling and guidance should be given to all children. Guidance should be given starting from grades 5 to 11 in such a way that the student becomes aware of his/her capabilities, strengths and weaknesses so that s/he can follow the right career track. In such guidance students need to be informed about their prospective jobs, such as employment opportunities, income, working hours, working environment, number of people working in the related field, and advantages and disadvantages of the job.

Various assessment techniques and tools should be used to determine students' talents and interests such as personality tests, autobiography, observations, case report, and problem scanning lists. Universities, schools, ministries and councils need to work collaboratively so that students can be prepared for their future careers in a more academic and professional way. Students should be informed about various jobs by academics in the related field. Career guidance could be undertaken by dedicated associations and students could be given the chance to talk to people about a range of professions and the characteristics of those jobs. Career days, articles and interviews published in the newspapers, and special youth programs on television and radio could serve as the main vehicles to help students discover their potential interest areas. It should be remembered that a wrong job selection could destroy not only an individual's professional competency and success but also his/her social integration. Group and team work activities could be used as a vehicle for self-realization for the students.

Professional development activities, which would serve as stepping stones for students' careers, could be integrated into the curriculum beginning during primary education. In this way students could be guided towards the most suitable career path from the very beginning. In order to realize these objectives, career guidance departments could be established within education faculties.

Parents should be trained about career guidance, children's personal characteristics, talents and capabilities. They should be made aware of the importance of psychological counseling services so that they could work collaboratively with the professionals. In this context, the career phases of school principals could be adapted for students. Students' occupational decisions could change over time due to the changes in expectations at various career phases. Previous studies analyzed career phases from principals' and teachers' experiences. A study on principals revealed that principals experienced different developmental phases from taking up the post to their retirement and that has had distinguishable characteristics,

which could be classified as "initiation", "development", "autonomy", and "disenchantment". A content analysis of the interviews revealed that categories within each of these phases illustrated the complexities of, and variables within, individual development. For all but the heads in the fourth phase these categories were confidence, effectiveness, ambition, enthusiasm, management style, reaction to external demands and development of professional expertise (Bakioglu, 1993; Day & Bakioglu, 1996). These phases could be examined from students' experiences and adopted for the students in further studies. Future studies which will focus on pupils' career phases will give new insights into the field of career guidance and counseling.

Family, student and school collaboration should be given priority when student success is to be achieved. Gumuseli (2004) noted that students become both unhappy and unsuccessful in their careers because of family pressure. It is for this reason that family partnership schemes should be examined and maintained in a systematic and planned manner.

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