

# The Role of Socioeconomic Status in the Relationship Between Career Aspirations and Engagement in Career Exploration

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# The Role of Socioeconomic Status in the Relationship Between Career Aspirations and Engagement in Career Exploration

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## Abstract

Career exploration captures the gathering of information relevant to career progress. Career explorations in adolescents are crucial to examine, as they are essential actions required to realise one's career aspirations. Career aspirations are important to study, as they are forerunners to future career choices and attainment. However, little is known about how socio-economic status influences the relationship between career aspirations and career exploration. This study aimed to investigate the moderating role of socio-economic status in the relationship between career aspirations and career exploration. We collected data from 589 students from two state high schools in Semarang, Indonesia,  $M$  age = 15.93 years,  $SD$  age = .53, 52.6% female. We used the Career Aspirations Scale ( $\alpha = .70$ ), Career Exploration Scale ( $\alpha = .82$ ), and demographic questions. Hierarchical regression analyses demonstrated that as career aspirations increased, career exploration increased for high and low socio-economic status groups, but increased more noticeably for the high socio-economic status group. Our results highlight the important role of socio-economic status in the way career aspirations lead to engagement in exploration of self and the world of work. Recommendations for students, policy maker, and practitioners are discussed.

**Keywords:** career aspirations, career explorations, socioeconomic status

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Career exploration is defined as activities of collecting information related to the individual's career progress (Blustein, 1997; Stumpf, Colarelli, & Hartman, 1983). Career exploration activities consist of self- and environmental explorations (Zikic & Klehe, 2006). Self exploration includes the individuals' exploration of their own interests, values, and experiences in order to reflect on their career decision and to have a clearer understanding of themselves, whereas environmental exploration refers to individuals' investigation of various career choices and involves collecting information on jobs, organisations, occupations or industries that leads to more well-informed career decisions (Zikic & Klehe, 2006). During the process of career exploration, an increased self-understanding and knowledge about the world of work enables individuals to formulate their career goals and wishes. This process can lead individuals to have a focus on a specific domain for exploration (Zikic & Hall, 2009). In addition, individuals who carefully search for, analyse, and examine career information relevant to them tend to demonstrate

higher level of adaptation within rapidly changing modern working world (Flum & Blustein, 2000).

Individuals' engagement in career exploration is usually driven by their career aspirations (Sawitri, Creed, & Zimmer-Gembek, 2014; Sawitri, Creed, & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2015). Career aspirations are an individual' expressed career-related goals towards leadership positions, ambition to train and to manage others, and interest in continuing education (O'Brien, 1996). Career goal setting is important to study during adolescence because it is a crucial development task in career preparation and the development of individual vocational identity (Erikson, 1968). It guides the actual career choice actions and function as forerunners to adult career choices and success by enhancing the opportunities an individual has to acquire an advanced education, which in turn, allows for greater career possibilities in adulthood (Schoon & Polek, 2011).

Social cognitive career theory-based studies have career goals - choice action link (e.g., Lent et al., 2003; Sawitri et al., 2014; Sawitri et al., 2015). According to social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), person factors (e.g., personality, intelligence) and background contextual variables (environmental variables that occur

before an active period of career decision making; e.g., socio-economic status) shape learning experiences. In turn, individual interpretations of these experiences shape the development of self-efficacy (beliefs about one's ability to successfully organise and perform courses of action) and outcome expectations (beliefs about the consequences of given actions). Further, self-efficacy fosters favourable outcome expectations, and both self-efficacy and outcome expectations, independently and jointly, lead to career interests (activity liking) and career goals (intentions to engage in a particular activity).

Under beneficial proximal contextual influences (environmental variables that are available during an active period of career choice making), interests are translated into goals, and goals, in turn, motivate career choice actions to accomplish goals. Particular success or failures that follow the choice actions encourage learning experiences, which lead individuals to modify their self-efficacy and outcome expectations. This in turn, leads to a change in interests and goals that tend to become more definite and crystallised over time (Lent et al., 1994).

Goal-setting and goal-pursuit are intimately tangled with, and affected by, the individual's contextual supports and barriers (Lent et al., 1994). Arguably the most important contextual influence is socio-economic status (SES), which formulates a critical component of identity, influences individual's perceptions of the future, and circumscribes the means-end processes available to achieving desired goals (Flores, Navarro, & Rashed-Ali, 2017).

Different behavioral responses occur between high and low SES individuals as they are conditioned by experience to generate different adaptive responses to cope with resource scarcity, and these adaptive responses generalize to somewhat different approaches to life. High SES young people are advantaged developmentally (Hackman & Farah, 2009), achieve higher educational achievement (Carnevale & Rose, 2003), and are healthier (Matthews & Gallo, 2011). They develop a greater sense of control, are more self-focused and independently-minded, perceive they have more power to exercise, give preference to their own goals and needs, and do not prioritize short-term goals over long-term benefits (Destin, Rheinschmidt-Same, & Richeson, 2017). They also see themselves as having the ability to meet their educational and career goals, and they exhibit more motivation for school and for achieving later occupational success (Schoon, 2008). We hypothesized that socio-economic status would moderate the association between career aspirations and career exploration.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1 Participants

We collected data from 589 students from two state high schools in Semarang, Indonesia, M age = 15.93 years, SD age = 0.53, 52.6% female. Participants were obtained using convenience sampling.

### 2.2 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using 6-point Likert like scale from (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree). Higher scores are reflective of higher degrees of each variable.

### 2.3 Materials

**Career Aspirations.** The 10-item Career Aspirations Scale (O'Brien, 1996) was used to assess individual's career-goals in the domains of leadership, ambition to train and manage others, and interest in continuing further education. Sample item: "When I am established in my career, I would like to train others" on a 6-point scale (1 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree). Internal consistencies have been reported as .77 and .72 (Sawitri & Creed, 2015; Sawitri & Creed, 2017). Evidence for validity has been supported by positive correlations with perceived career congruence with parents, mastery-approach, and performance-approach goal orientations (Sawitri & Creed).

**Career Exploration.** We used two subscales from Stumpf et al.'s (1983) Career Exploration Survey to examine an individual's level of self and career exploration behaviour over the previous three months. A sample item from the 5-item self-exploration subscale is: "In the last three months, I have been contemplating my past life and experiences in relation to my career". A sample item from the 6-item career-exploration subscale is: "I have obtained information on specific jobs or companies." Internal consistencies for the full scale have been reported as .83 and .85 (Sawitri, et al., 2015). Construct validity of the Career Exploration Scale was verified by positive relationships with perceived career congruence with parents, parental expectations, and career aspirations (Werbelt, 2000).

**Subjective SES.** We used a single-item from Quon and McGrath (2014) to assess participants' current level of subjective socio-economic status (i.e., "When you compare yourself to your classmates, how would you describe your current financial situation?" 5-point scale: 1 Much worse off than others to 5 Much better off than others). This measure was used in the Biannual European Social Survey (<http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>). Support of validity for this measure is shown by its relationship with family income (Plantinga, Krijnen, Zeelenberg, & Breugelmans, 2018).

### 2.4 Instruments Translation Procedures

We used the translation-back-translation procedure to convert the scale items from English to Bahasa Indonesia (Brislin, 1986). First of all, two bilingual speakers translated the items into Bahasa Indonesia, and subsequently, two Indonesian native speakers examined whether the translation versions were easy to understand. Then, two bilingual speakers back-translated the scale items into English, without knowing the original English version of the items. The back-translation version was compared with the original version to make sure the accuracies of meaning of the items, and errors

were modified, and finally, four Indonesian students try out the final items to check their readability.

### 2.5 Data Collection Procedure

Ethics approval from the first author’s university ethics committee to conduct this study was obtained. Written permission was obtained from the participating schools, all students, and their parents. The survey packages, which consisted of the scales and demographic questions, were administered to students in the classrooms during school time.

### 2.6 Data Analysis Technique

We used hierarchical regression analyses to examine whether SES served as a moderator in the link from career aspirations to career explorations. Career aspirations were included at Step 1, SES at Step 2, and the interaction term (i.e., career aspirations x SES; Jose, 2013) at Step 3.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Summary Data and Bivariate Correlations; N = 589

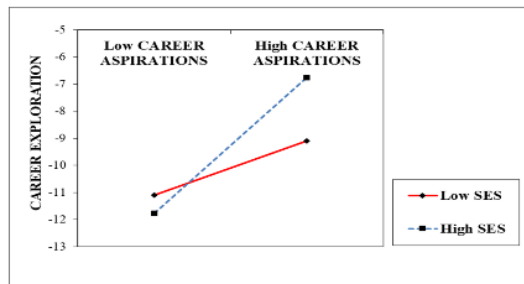
Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Career aspirations	46.98	5.40	-	.43*	.54*
2. Socio-economic status	3.27	.72		-	.53*
3. Career exploration	42.80	7.63			-

\*significant

We conducted hierarchical regression analyses to conclude the moderated effects. Career aspirations was entered at Step 1, and accounted for 5.3% of the variance in career exploration,  $F(1, 587) = 32.98, p < .001$ . Socio-economic status at Step 2 accounted for a further .4%,  $F(1, 586) = 2.50, p = .12$ . At Step 3, the interaction term was significant,  $F(1, 585) = 5.60, p < .05$ , and 6.6% of the variance in career exploration was accounted for.

Results demonstrated that discrepancies were associated positively with individual career distress, however the association was stronger for those who have low individual goal clarity. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. The moderator role of socio-economic status in the association between career aspirations and engagement in career exploration



The study was aimed to examine the role of socio-economic status as a moderator in the relationship between career aspirations and career exploration. We hypothesized that socio-economic status served as a moderator in the relationships between career aspirations and career exploration.

We found significant positive association career aspirations between discrepancies and individual career distress, and found that the relationship was stronger when individual socio-economic status was higher. These findings suggest that, those who have higher career aspirations are more likely to engage in career exploration activities, especially for those whose socio-economic status are high.

The positive relationship between career aspirations and career explorations is consistent with previous findings (e.g., Sawitri et al., 2014). The moderator role of socio-economic status is also in line with previous findings. For example, previous studies showed that high SES individuals express more interest in work (Blustein et al., 2002). High SES individuals are also clearer regarding their future (Guttman & Schoon, 2012), and involve in more career goal-pursuit activities, such as career exploration and planning (Blustein et al., 2002).

Our findings have several implications. Interventions aimed at assisting students to enhance involvement in career explorations might include exposing students with role models who have rich career success stories, enabling them to have broader opportunity to test their dreams, facilitation the with resources of career-related information, especially for those in low socio-economic status group, as these resources are not easy to access. These kinds of interventions will allow students to formulate higher career aspirations, explore more career-related information, and be aware of whether their career aspirations are realistic.

Our study was conducted using a sample of students from two schools Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia; therefore, conclusions of this study need to be examined on other student populations. In addition, the data were collected at one point in time; thus, future studies could focus on testing across time associations among variables to obtain more robust causal conclusions.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Results from our study showed that as career aspirations increased career exploration increased for high and low socio-economic status groups, however, increased more noticeably for the high socio-economic status group. Findings from this study underline the vital role of socio-economic status in the way individuals actualize their career aspirations in career exploration activities.

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