

A Challenge to Vocational Psychology: How Important Are Aspirations in Determining Male Career Development?

LINDA S. GOTTFREDSON AND HENRY J. BECKER

The Johns Hopkins University

Nationally representative longitudinal data on 1394 employed white men aged 15 to 24 in 1966 were used to assess whether job opportunities or vocational aspirations are the more important determinants of later job held. Support was found for two hypotheses: (a) men more often achieve congruence between their aspiration and their field of employment by changing aspirations to match the job rather than vice versa; and (b) aspirations for field of work generally are not as useful as actual job field for predicting the field of jobs held 1 to 5 years later. Contrary to expectation, middle-class young men were no more able to attain their aspirations either for field of employment or for status level of occupation than were lower-class male youths. These results suggest that although aspirations have some predictive power, the opportunity structure—which both conditions aspirations to narrow ranges early in life and affects the direction of early career development—is too often neglected by vocational psychology. One suggestion for counseling practice is that interest and maturity assessments be used as sources of information to both client and counselor about past influences. Attempts to actually counteract those influences should be clearly specified as such and separated from the assessment process.

A widespread assumption in vocational psychology is that aspirations for particular types of work play a significant role in determining the kinds of jobs people eventually obtain. It may be, however, that vocational aspirations are largely *reflections* of the kinds of employment experiences and opportunities people have had, and they may not function as important *determinants* of future behavior (cf. Roberts, 1968). The jobs that many people enter may be determined in large measure by environmental contingencies such as the availability of particular jobs and training pro-

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grams in the local labor market, the information about job vacancies circulating in the social networks of which they are members, and the preferences of employers for hiring employees of a particular race, sex, social class, or personal appearance. At the very least, we would expect that the careers of people from some socioeconomic groups or particular geographic areas might be especially susceptible to direction or disruption by social conditions beyond their control.

Economic and sociological theories of career development stress the importance of such environmental contingencies and tend to dismiss as unrealistic psychological theories which appear to assume freedom of choice. Although ignoring the role of personal preferences and choices is as unrealistic and provincial as focusing exclusively on them, this challenge to vocational psychology should be taken more seriously than it is.

Probably few, if any, vocational theorists or researchers would maintain that people can train for and obtain any job they want—even if they have the ability for such jobs. The earliest theoretical statements are cognizant of limitations on choice. Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad, and Herma (1951) and Blau, Gustad, Jessor, Parnes and Wilcox (1956) explicitly describe vocational choices as compromises between desires and expectations based on reality. Super (1957) also discusses the role that economic and social environments play in restricting occupational choices. Recent statements by other theorists (e.g., Krumboltz, Mitchell, and Jones, 1978) continue to include economic and social factors as influences on job entry. And Osipow (1969) has also suggested that more attention be focused on situational determinants and how they can be controlled.

Nevertheless, if one examines the foci of recent developmental theories and the counseling tools developed from them, the implications of limitations on choice appear to be ignored. For example, although Krumboltz et al. (1978) clearly outline environmental factors that influence career aspirations throughout development, one gets no sense that they recognize the barriers people face in achieving their aspirations because their counseling recommendations focus entirely on the improvement of client decision-making skills (e.g., see Krumboltz et al., 1978, p. 127) and not on the environment. Also, development is conceptualized as the result of the interaction of person and environment in Super's influential work, but research in that tradition has usually focused on the assessment of vocational maturity, the readiness of individuals to make choices (e.g., see Super, 1974; Crites, 1961; Walsh, 1979), but not on vocational opportunities.

We might also wonder about the practical consequences of focusing too much on client characteristics such as vocational maturity and too little on vocational opportunities. As Harmon (1974, p. 83) notes, "... if the choices available to some individuals, i.e., minority group members,

women, and the poor, are largely limited by sociocultural factors which the individual cannot control no matter how mature he or she is vocationally, perhaps counselors would do well to avoid putting too many eggs in the vocational maturity basket and devote some of their efforts to changing the labor market rather than clients."

A few studies have examined the validity of aspirations or measured interests for predicting jobs actually obtained (Dolliver, Irvin, & Bigley, 1972; Zytowski, 1974; Lucy, 1976; Worthington & Dolliver, 1977; Dolliver & Will, 1977). These have shown that predictive validities are high enough to be of practical importance. But we might ask how predictive these aspirations are *compared to other possible determinants* of future job, such as one's academic attainment, one's work history or current job setting, labor market conditions, and so on. Aspirations may be quite predictive of later job, but still be less predictive (and possibly less important causally) than other attributes of individuals or their environments.

This paper takes a first step in testing the importance of aspirations relative to opportunities in determining the course of career development. We do this by examining longitudinal data on aspirations and jobs for a large group of young white men. Aspirations and jobs held were classified both by field (Holland, 1973, category) and by level (occupational status). The general hypothesis being tested is that one's job is determined more by circumstances in the environment and one's opportunities than by one's aspirations. This "opportunities hypothesis" cannot be tested directly, because direct measures of what job opportunities and barriers the men actually faced are not available. The hypothesis can be tested indirectly, however. If the general hypothesis is true, we should expect to find the following.

Hypothesis 1. Incongruence between the field of job held and an occupational aspiration is resolved more often by changing aspirations than by changing work performed.

Hypothesis 2. One's current field of work rather than one's current aspiration is more predictive of the kind of work a person will be doing several years hence.

Hypothesis 3. Men with presumably fewer opportunities (i.e., lower-class men) are less likely than more advantaged men (i.e., middle-class men) to fulfill their aspirations for field of work.

Hypothesis 4. Men with presumably fewer opportunities (i.e., lower-class men) are less likely than more advantaged men (i.e., middle-class men) to fulfill their occupational status aspirations.

METHOD

Data on a nationally representative sample of 1394 young white men aged 15 to 24 in 1966 were obtained from the National Longitudinal Study

of the Labor Market Experience of Young Men (Parnes, Miljis, Spitz, & Associates, 1970). The men were interviewed every year from 1966 to 1971, and the surveys provide data on these young men's aspirations and employment experiences for each year. The men were not surveyed during the years they were in military service. Only men employed and expressing aspirations in both 1966 and 1971 are included in the analyses here.

Occupational aspirations were obtained by asking the men each year what job they would like to have at age 30. Aspirations and jobs were characterized in two ways. First, they were coded according to Holland's (1973) six-category typology of people and jobs: realistic (R), investigative (I), artistic (A), social (S), enterprising (E), and conventional (C). Holland codes for the detailed 1960 census occupational titles used are shown in Gottfredson and Brown (1978). Second, Duncan's (1961) socioeconomic index scores were used to measure status level of work; these scores had already been provided on the data tape for all aspirations and jobs held, so no recoding was necessary.

For the analysis of differential effects by socioeconomic background, men were divided into two groups according to the occupational status level of the respondent's father when the respondent was age 14. The men whose fathers held jobs with Duncan (1961) socioeconomic index (SEI) scores below 30 were classified as coming from lower-class backgrounds; those with fathers having SEI scores of 30 or above were classified as coming from middle-class backgrounds. This cutting point was chosen to produce two groups of approximately equal size. The group designated here as lower status includes most laborers, operatives, service workers, and some craftsmen. The middle-class group includes all other workers, including most of the professionals, salesmen, managers, clerical workers, and social service and protective service workers.

The tests of Hypotheses 2 and 3 involve longitudinal comparisons over the 5-year period for five different age cohorts: men aged 15–16, 17–18, 19–20, 21–22, and 23–24 in 1966. These men were 20–21, 22–23, 24–25, 26–27, and 28–29 in 1971 at the end of the 5-year period. Aspirations and jobs in 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, and 1970 were compared to the job held in 1971. If the Holland category of the 1971 job was the same as the category of the earlier job (or aspiration), the earlier job (or aspiration) was considered predictive of the field of the later job.

The jobs analyzed for 1967 through 1970 actually refer to the current job or to the last job if not currently employed. Additionally, because a smaller percentage of 15- to 16-year olds than of older men are employed, the younger groups include smaller percentages of the men from those age groups. The percentages of each age group included in the analyses are respectively 44, 61, 73, 86, and 92.

Predictive validity was summarized using Cohen's (1960) kappa. Kappa

is the ratio of (a) the proportion of observed agreement *beyond the agreement expected by chance* to (b) perfect agreement minus chance agreement. It ranges from 0 (agreement expected by chance) to a potential maximum of 1 (perfect agreement). No significance levels are shown. The stratified sampling design used in the survey makes the usual formulas for the standard errors of kappa inappropriate. The issues investigated all involve trends in the magnitude of kappa across ages. The regularity in progressions is believed to be more important than statistical significance with these samples.

Hypothesis 4 was tested using the same five age groupings as for Hypotheses 2 and 3. Mean occupational status for each age group was determined for both aspirations and jobs in each of the six interview years.

Hypothesis 1 was tested by examining changes in aspirations and jobs among men whose Holland category of job and aspiration were different (incongruent) in one year but the same (congruent) the next. Men were then classified according to whether job–aspiration congruence was achieved because they changed the field of their aspiration, the field of their actual job, or both. Age groups were constructed somewhat differently for this analysis than for the others. To increase the sample size for this analysis, data from all pairs of successive interviewing years were combined and grouped by age without regard to cohort—that is, without regard to which year it was men were a particular age. For example, the job changing of men aged 17 in *any* initial year was compared to that for men aged 19 in any initial year regardless of the survey year during which this information was obtained. This means that each man could be classified into as many as, but not more than, six age groups. Half of the age groups are used in the analysis (age being measured at the beginning of the 1-year period): 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 25, and 27. Only men employed and expressing an aspiration in the two consecutive years were included.

RESULTS

1. *How Is Incongruence Resolved—By a Change of Aspirations or a Change of Job?*

Figure 1 shows several types of information about the development of congruence with increasing age. The upper line shows the proportion of men whose aspiration and job are incongruent in one year but who become congruent the next year. The proportion increases from about .3 in the teens to .5 by the late twenties. (This represents from 17 to 9% of all employed men in those age groups.)

The more basic question—is congruence achieved more often by changing aspirations to match jobs or vice versa?—is answered by the lower two lines. These lines separate the men into three groups according to

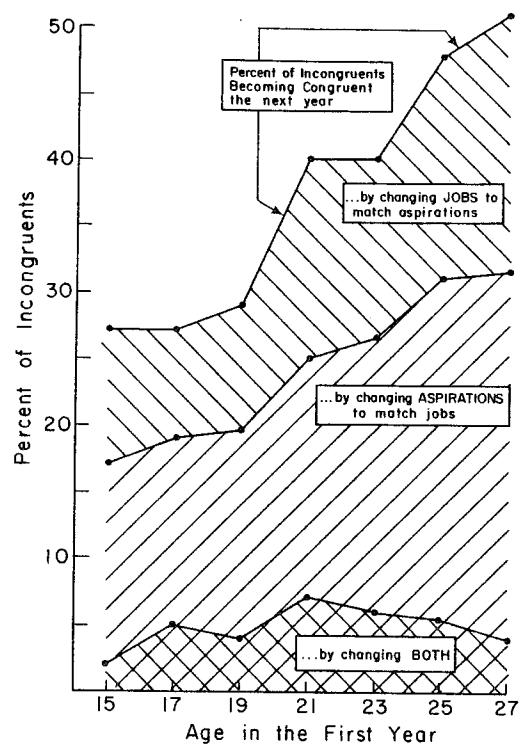


FIG. 1. Changes from incongruence to congruence over a 1-year interval and mode by which congruence is achieved. Note: *N*'s (of incongruents) for the seven age groups are, respectively, 101, 239, 277, 275, 233, 192, and 72. The total number of employed men in each of the age groups is, respectively, 160, 454, 601, 646, 741, 676, and 395.

how aspiration-job congruence in field of work was achieved: by changing jobs to match aspirations (the group shown between the upper two lines), by changing aspirations to match jobs (the middle group), and by changing both aspirations and jobs (the lowermost group). These results indicate that changing aspirations to match previous job category is the most common mode of achieving congruence, that the reverse (changing job to match aspiration) is less common, and that changing both jobs and aspirations is the least common mode of resolution. This is true for all age groups. If we average across all age groups (from data not shown here), we find that 52% of the men achieved congruence by changing aspiration category, 35% by changing job field, and 13% by changing both.

The results are consistent with Hypothesis 1.

2. Which Predicts Field of Later Job Better—Early Aspiration or Early Job?

Table 1 presents results on the relative ability of aspirations and jobs at each of five annual interviews (1966–1970) to predict the category of the

TABLE 1
The Validity of Current Job^a and of Current Aspiration for Predicting Field of Later Job^b over 1- to 5-Year Intervals (Kappas)

Age in 1966	Year in which job or aspiration was measured to predict 1971 job									
	1966		1967		1968		1969		1970	
	κ	(<i>N</i>)	κ	(<i>N</i>)	κ	(<i>N</i>)	κ	(<i>N</i>)	κ	(<i>N</i>)
Job										
15–16	.10	(180)	.04	(171)	.14	(166)	.36	(155)	.40	(164)
17–18	.22	(279)	.27	(237)	.35	(212)	.41	(208)	.54	(253)
19–20	.33	(236)	.41	(208)	.51	(204)	.63	(210)	.71	(224)
21–22	.43	(296)	.48	(283)	.56	(284)	.72	(286)	.73	(286)
23–24	.49	(393)	.59	(377)	.64	(387)	.67	(384)	.72	(391)
Aspiration										
15–16	.13	(181)	.14	(154)	.23	(149)	.36	(139)	.32	(144)
17–18	.28	(281)	.34	(214)	.39	(194)	.41	(194)	.35	(230)
19–20	.37	(238)	.49	(190)	.46	(187)	.46	(191)	.47	(195)
21–22	.34	(298)	.41	(257)	.42	(264)	.48	(259)	.51	(260)
23–24	.48	(396)	.51	(339)	.53	(369)	.59	(364)	.63	(358)

^a Current job refers in 1967, 1968, 1969, and 1970 to current job or to last job if not currently employed. The table includes only men who were employed in both 1966 and 1971. *N*'s are lower in intervening years because some men were not located or were in the military during those years.

^b The job predicted was the job held in 1971.

job held at the sixth interview (1971). These results extend findings of other studies (McLaughlin & Tiedeman, 1974; Worthington & Dolliver, 1977); the predictive validities of aspirations and of current (or last) job increase with age and decrease with the length of the interval over which the prediction is made. Aspirations predict 1971 jobs better than do jobs only when men are very young and when the interval is 3 years or longer. Note, however, that under this condition the predictability is low for both jobs and aspirations (cf. Gottfredson, Note 1). For the other groups of men, one's current (or last) job—not one's current aspiration—is the better predictor of later job category. The differences in predictive validities for jobs versus aspirations are greatest when the interval is short.

Figure 2 summarizes the trend in predictive validity more clearly. This figure is produced by averaging the kappas for the five different 2-year age cohorts in Table 1, ignoring differences in the interval over which predictions are made. For example, the average job kappa shown for the 19- to 20-year-old group was obtained by averaging three kappas: the 1970 job kappa for men aged 15–16 in 1966, the 1968 job kappa for men aged 17–18 in 1966, and the 1966 job kappa for men aged 19–20 in 1966. The average interval over which predictions are made is 3 years, except for the three

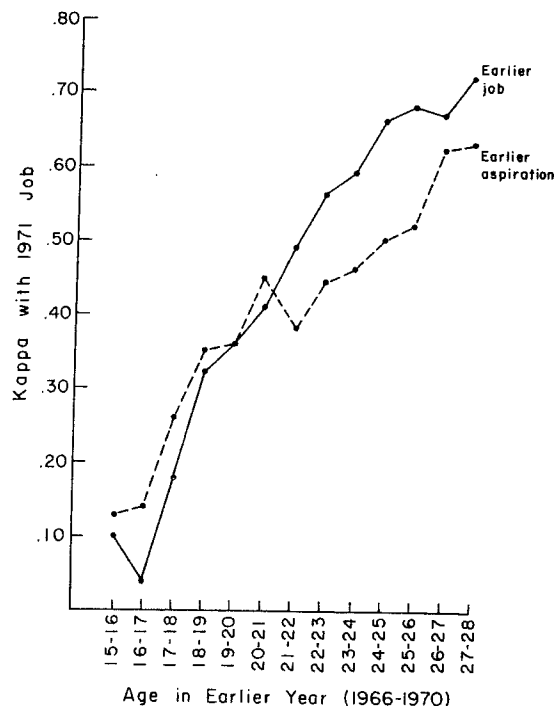


FIG. 2. The validity of earlier aspirations and jobs for predicting field of later job. Note: Figure constructed from data in Table 1 as described in the text.

youngest groups where it is larger and the three oldest groups where it is smaller. This figure is admittedly a rough portrayal of the trend, but it does neatly summarize the results. Figure 2 shows that although predictive validities are low among the youngest men, they are nevertheless somewhat higher for current aspiration than for current (or last) job. Predictive validities rise with age, but more so for job than for aspiration during the midtwenties. As predictive validities for jobs become quite high, that is, as men enter their late twenties, aspirations appear to "catch up" again in predictive validity as they begin to fall in line more closely with the actual job.

The results for men in their twenties are consistent with Hypothesis 2. The results for men in their teens are not consistent with the hypothesis, but at these younger ages predictive validities are low for both jobs and aspirations.

3. Are Aspirations Less Predictive of Field of Later Job among Lower-Class Men?

Predictive validities were also calculated separately for men from lower-class and those from middle-class backgrounds. Results are not

shown because the patterns of kappas were similar in the two groups. The hypothesis had been that aspirations would predict later job better among the higher-status men because they would face fewer obstacles in implementing their aspirations. The results were not as predicted by Hypothesis 3.

4. Are Lower-Class Men Less Able to Fulfill Their Status Aspirations than are Middle-Class Men?

Figure 3 shows the mean status level of jobs aspired to and of jobs held by men of different ages and in the two social classes. This figure was constructed in the same way that Fig. 2 was (from averages of men at the same ages but born in different years) and it includes the same men.

Before discussing the test of Hypothesis 4, it is interesting to note that some results differ considerably when status level rather than field of work is considered.

For example, Fig. 3 indicates that the mean aspiration levels of both lower-class and middle-class men are extremely stable over almost the full age range. This stability in mean aspirations for *level* of work contrasts with the much larger change shown by Gottfredson (1979) in the net redistribution of *fields* of jobs aspired to by these same young men. In addition, the gap between status of aspirations and of actual jobs narrows with age because job level is higher with age. By the late twenties the gap is small for both lower- and middle-class men. Whereas the gap between aspiration for field of work and actual job is most often closed by men

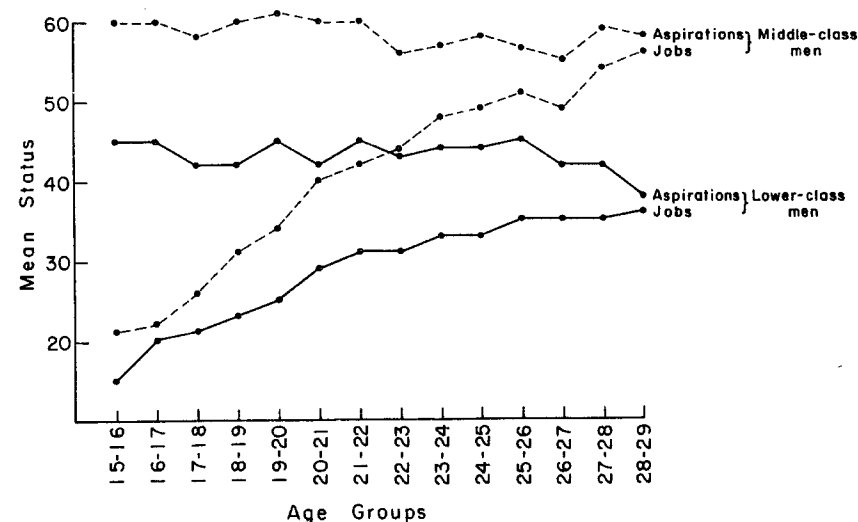


FIG. 3. Mean status of aspirations and of jobs for men of different ages and social-class backgrounds.

changing their aspirations, nearly all of the net adjustment between aspiration and job *levels* is because mean job levels increase during the early years of working life.

The data in Fig. 3 do not clearly support Hypothesis 4—that lack of opportunities restricts the ability of lower-class men to attain their aspirational levels more than it restricts middle-class men. It does appear at first glance that the teenage aspirations of middle-class men are more nearly met by their late twenties than is the case for lower-class men. For example, the mean level of aspiration for middle-class men aged 16–17 in Fig. 3 is only 4 points higher than the mean job level actually attained by middle-class men aged 28–29 (60 vs 56) while the comparable difference for lower-class men is 9 points (45 vs 36).

The various age groups in Fig. 3 do not represent the same birth cohorts, however, and they include different fractions of the cohorts they do represent. Table 2 provides a more careful test of this hypothesis, because it shows the results for each of five birth cohorts separately.

Hypothesis 4 is not supported by the results in Table 2. Table 2 shows the mean level of occupational aspirations in 1966 and the mean level of actual job status in 1971 for each cohort (defined by age in 1966) and the two social classes. For only the oldest cohort, men aged 23–24 in 1966, is the match between earlier aspirational level and later level of job attainment better for middle-class men than for lower-class men. For the younger cohorts, the mean differences are larger for the middle-class men than for the lower-class men.

One conclusion from these results might be that the job opportunity differential between lower-class men and middle-class men is not great because both appear to equally fulfill their initial status aspirations. But

TABLE 2
Mean Status of Aspirations Held in 1966 and of Jobs Held in 1971: By Social Class
Background and Age Cohort

Age in 1966	Aspiration in 1966	Job in 1971	Mean Difference	(N)
Lower-class men				
15–16	45	29	16	(89)
17–18	41	29	12	(133)
19–20	43	33	10	(121)
21–22	47	36	11	(142)
23–24	44	36	8	(202)
Middle-class men				
15–16	60	36	24	(82)
17–18	57	43	14	(135)
19–20	63	50	13	(101)
21–22	58	46	12	(134)
23–24	59	56	3	(171)

the fact is, of course, that throughout the developmental period covered here, the aspirations of the two social-class groups are very different. The mean aspirations of the lower-class men are considerably lower than the mean aspirations of the middle-class men. In fact, by the midtwenties, middle-class men hold higher-level jobs on the average than lower-class men even aspire to.

DISCUSSION

The major limitation of this study is that it includes only white males. Also, direct evidence on barriers and opportunities was missing and longer time intervals would have been useful. Nevertheless, these longitudinal data on a large nationally representative sample of young men provide insights into changes occurring during the critical exploratory and settling-in phases of career development. In addition, the results provide hints about the answer to the much more complex question of the relative importance of aspirations as determinants—rather than mere reflections—of previous career development.

The original “opportunities hypothesis” posed here was that opportunities are more important than aspirations in determining actual jobs obtained. The results supported two of the specific hypotheses tested—that people more often change their aspirations than their jobs to produce aspiration–job congruence in field of work and that early jobs are more predictive of later field of work than are early aspirations. The results did not support the other two specific hypotheses, however. Lower-class men were shown to be as likely to fulfill their early status and field aspirations as were middle-class men. Because men from different social classes are unlikely to experience the same opportunities, this pattern of results is at first puzzling.

The “opportunities hypothesis” is clearly not accurate, but the findings suggest that a more complex “anticipated opportunities hypothesis” is promising. The findings suggest, first of all, that aspirations for occupational status must be distinguished from aspirations for field of work. Second, opportunities influence aspirations and jobs obtained not only by being experienced firsthand but also by being anticipated. Two speculations, based on these distinctions and on the results presented above, are discussed below and are offered for testing in future research.

Speculations for Future Research

Speculation 1. Aspirations for level of work are more important to men and thus are more tenaciously sought than are aspirations for field of work.

This inference is based on two pieces of data. First, Gottfredson (1979) showed that (among the same men studied here) there are large *net* changes in the Holland fields of work aspired to with increasing age. For

example, the proportion of men desiring enterprising work almost triples from the late teens to the late twenties. In contrast, Fig. 3 showed that mean status aspirations change extremely little over the same age range among the very same men. Second, although by age 28–29 men appear *on the average* to obtain both the field (see Gottfredson, 1979) and the level of work (see Fig. 3) they concurrently say they would like to have, the way they obtained it differs. Figure 1 showed that most often they move into the field of work they prefer by changing their aspirations to match their jobs rather than vice versa. Although the data refer only to averages for groups of men, Fig. 3 suggested that men achieve the level they prefer by changing the jobs they have because status aspirations do not change much on the average but job levels do.

One qualification should be noted before going on. The fields of work men both aspire to and actually obtain can be characterized as primarily “men’s work”—realistic, investigative, and enterprising work (see Gottfredson, 1978, 1979; Gottfredson, Holland, & Gottfredson, 1975). Thus, a more accurate conclusion for most men might be that status aspirations are more important than field aspirations *as long as the field is a masculine one*.

Finding work in a field congruent with one’s interests may provide strong intrinsic rewards, but extrinsic rewards such as prestige and pay are associated primarily with level of work. Indeed, economic and sociological theories of occupational attainment often implicitly assume that socioeconomic rewards are the only occupational rewards that individuals seek. Although this position is too extreme, it is possible that many men place higher priority on finding a job that provides a given level of socioeconomic rewards than one which meets a person’s vocational interests. It must be noted that research on what makes a job good or bad does not seem to support this hypothesis. For example, Jurgensen (1978) found that among job applicants to a public utility company over the last 30 years, type of work has always been specified as more important than pay and has surpassed advancement and security to become the most highly sought job factor. If we consider, however, that men often determine the standard of living of their families and are evaluated by their families partly on that basis, we might expect that many men are compelled to strive for a given socioeconomic level to meet social expectations. Although men might *personally* prefer intrinsic rewards, these rewards are entirely personal and might be more easily sacrificed than the extrinsic rewards important to family members. So if a trade-off between aspirations for type and aspirations for level of work is necessary, men may opt for the latter.

Elsewhere (Gottfredson, 1979) we have suggested that the large net change in aspirations for field of work that occurs among men in their late teens and early twenties is an adjustment to reality as men begin to face

the labor market (cf. Kelso, 1975). It is possible that the adjustment to reality for *status* aspirations simply occurs earlier than for field aspirations, at ages earlier than those examined here. This possibility is discussed below under Speculation 2.

Speculation 2. People begin circumscribing their occupational aspirations early in childhood as they develop conceptions of themselves and of the opportunities which people like themselves can anticipate in life.

As discussed earlier, large net changes in aspirations for *field* of work occur among men between ages 15 and 29, the ages examined here. This is consistent with developmental notions that exploration and crystallization occur over a long period of development which extends into early adulthood. The picture is different, however, if we examine aspirations for *level* of work.

Figure 3 showed that lower-class men differ considerably from middle-class men in the job levels they aspire to on the average, and these differences are stable from ages 15 through 29. This early differentiation and stability of status-level aspirations is consistent with considerable evidence in vocational psychology (see Osipow, 1973, for a review) that values and preferences develop earlier than expected according to the stages outlined by Super (1957) and Ginzberg et al. (1951). The results are also consistent with much sociological research in the last three decades on social class differences in values, expectations, and aspirations (e.g., Kahl, 1953; Wilson, 1959; Gottlieb, 1964; Antonovsky, 1967; Sewell, Haller, & Straus, 1957; Sewell & Haller, 1965; Sewell & Shah, 1968a, b). That research has shown that lower-class youngsters have lower occupational and educational aspirations even early in life. Some evidence (Stephenson, 1957; Han, 1969; Rodman & Voydanoff, 1978) also suggests that people of different social classes do not differ much in the level of work they wish they could do if they faced no constraints (fantasy occupations), but they do differ in the opportunities they perceive and in their expectations of what they will actually be able to do (possible or probable occupations).

The development of the concepts of one’s own social position, race, sex, abilities, values, and interests may proceed at different rates, the first three probably developing very early in life and before the latter three. Children may be aware of the jobs “people like them” usually hold and so circumscribe their aspirations to conform to their social class, race, and sex self-concepts long before they explore the suitability of their abilities, interests, and values to their remaining options. Thus men may get the level of work they seek on the average, but it is because they have learned early in life what level is probably feasible for someone of their social position. Indeed, they may not even really consider jobs not often held by people familiar to them. Because field aspirations are secondary to level aspirations, and because the knowledge of one’s more specific vocational

interests and values develop later than do perceptions of one's overall place in society, the final circumscription of field aspirations occurs after that of level aspirations. Vocational theorists attend primarily to the development of interests and values, and so may be overlooking more primary elements of self-concept that influence vocational aspirations.

Implications for Counseling Practice

One implication of the foregoing is that counselors may really be dealing with the vestiges of vocational choice. Not only do people face limited opportunities from which to choose when they enter the labor market, but they also limit the scope of their exploration partly in anticipation of barriers and opportunities they think they will face. Some individuals may aspire to a wider range of jobs than they may realistically have possibilities for entering; in contrast, others may unnecessarily restrict their exploration and pass up opportunities which they could have taken advantage of. The challenge to counselors is how to deal with this circumscription of opportunities and aspirations. Attempts to grapple with the issue are evident in debates about the role of counselors and the construction and use of assessment devices.

A major goal of vocational counseling has been to help individuals make wise choices, and numerous devices have been developed to assess vocational interests, values, and maturity. However, some writers have suggested that the field should focus less on assessing and changing the client and more on assessing and changing the environment of the client. Counselors may legitimately disagree about their proper role and their ability to change the opportunities clients have. But they should be ready to respond to Gordon (1968, p. 166) who says that if a vocational counselor "sees his job as primarily working with the individual, so that he is presumably better able to take advantage of the limited opportunities that are available, he will be doing only half his job, and the easier half. . . ." And if vocational theorists and researchers are to provide more guidance to counselors, they must balance the weight of their concern over clients' vocational interests and decision-making abilities with a greater weight on investigating how the environment structures both the opportunities available to different groups of individuals and the choices individuals seriously consider.

The middle ground between focusing primarily on client characteristics and trying to change the client's environment is to develop a better knowledge of the client's environment, of how it may have shaped the client's aspirations, and of the opportunities which can be hunted down within the environment. For example, more attention might be profitably spent on teaching clients job search skills (e.g., see Wegmann, 1979) and how to make the most of their opportunities for securing a job and adjusting successfully to it.

Debates about the construction and interpretation of vocational interest and maturity assessments also reflect an attempt to grapple with the problem of how to interpret assessed aspirations and attitudes and how to ensure the greatest opportunities for clients. If we accept the hypothesis that people develop aspirations that conform both to their images of themselves and their anticipated opportunities, it is no surprise that women, for example, score very differently on the average than do men on various vocational interest assessments. And if one examines the items in the Career Maturity Inventory (Crites, 1973; see Gottfredson & Becker, Note 2, for such an examination), one can easily see how the lower vocational maturity scores of minority and lower-class people might be partly accounted for by their realistically lower expectations of vocational opportunities. Some people have suggested that both vocational interest and maturity inventories be normed so that these group differences disappear, the objective being to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Even if one assumes that the early circumscription of aspirations or attitudes on the basis of race, sex, social class, or other social attributes is "unfair," it is not clear that adjusting the assessments so that we cannot see these differences will do much to counteract the conditions that created these differences and which may continue to operate regardless of what the assessments reveal. If one were to attempt to change the aspirations of various social groups, which is an ethical as well as a practical problem, it might be more effective to acknowledge that assessment devices are reflections of past development and environmental influences, to learn from them, and to take a more direct, concerted, and open approach to encouraging broader exploration by clients.

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