



Young people's career pathways are shaped by relationships

Dr Rosie Alexander, PhD, Aarhus University, Denmark

Young people are often encouraged to make career decisions independently, without influence from friends, families or partners. However, these relationships can offer critical forms of support, and career guidance can benefit from giving them more space.

Introduction

The relationships of young people are often spoken about as something that limits career decision making. Family influences are understood as narrowing young people's horizons and careers practitioners are typically focused on addressing these limitations and helping to broaden horizons. As well as family, friends and boyfriends or girlfriends are also often understood as limitations in decision making. It is assumed that the best career decisions should be made disregarding friendships and romantic relationships, especially as we

assume that for young people these are likely to be temporary attachments. Compared to young people, when thinking about adult career decisions, it is much more likely for relationships to be viewed as a valid part of decision making. Super's *Life Career Rainbow* for example recognises that the roles of spouse and parent are important parts of our lives that can shape our career decisions, especially over the age of 25. Schein's work on *Career Anchors* considers how we have different orientations to our careers, and one of his anchors is *lifestyle* which includes choosing to live in a certain location, often for family reasons, even if it means compromising on career outcomes. More recently Blustein has written extensively about the role of relationships and career development for adults.

In this article I want to suggest that it is strange for us to expect young people to make decisions independently of their relationships, when we do not expect the same of adults. I also want to look at how relationships for young people can be a source of strength, and value, supporting career development rather than just being a limitation.

How do relationships shape careers?

In my PhD research, I explored the career development of higher education students from two rural island communities in Scotland. I was especially interested in how decisions about mobility (whether to move from the islands, and where to move to) were interconnected with career decisions. My work was focused on issues of *geography*, however what I discovered in this research is how *relationships* were absolutely critical to decisions about career and mobility. The influences of relationships can be summarised into five areas, covered below.

- 1. Relationships shape career ideas.** Sociological career theory, for example Hodkinson and Sparkes' *Careership theory*, highlights how a young person's family background shapes their career ideas and their access to resources. The work experiences of parents, siblings and wider family members influence young people's exposure to different kinds of careers, and their understandings of work. This doesn't mean, of course, that young people *necessarily* follow the same career pathways as their parents – in fact many actively seek to do something different – but parents' experience does shape young people's knowledge of careers.
- 2. Relationships shape intangible career resources.** Parental resources including their knowledge and networks shape the kinds of resources young people have for their career development. In sociological approaches these kinds of resources are often discussed as *capital*, including *social capital*. Parental networks, for example, are often very important in helping young people to find their first jobs or work experience. In my research I also found cases of the networks of partners or partners' parents also being valuable to young people in finding their first jobs after university. This demonstrates the importance of thinking not just about a young person's immediate family, but also their wider relationships and networks as influences on career pathways.
- 3. Relationships shape tangible career resources.** The financial capital of parents can be very important in shaping career development. This includes the ability to pay for, or subsidise various forms of educational experience, or work experience. In my research, I also found that relationships are important as sources of low or reduced cost accommodation. This included young people living at parental homes after they graduated from university or living with partners or friends.

The phenomenon of graduates returning to parental homes, especially in cases where they struggle to find appropriate work, is well known. However, in my research I found that for those young people

with a partner, sharing accommodation with a partner brought similar benefits. For rural young people having a partner and the ability to share accommodation costs with them, offered significant career benefit as it enabled young people to remain in city regions, rather than feeling that they had to move back to family homes in the islands where there are fewer opportunities.

- 4. Relationships as a source of care and emotional support.** The working world, perhaps increasingly, can contain a great deal of stress. In my research young graduates described the stresses of moving to an unfamiliar working environment, often moving to a new town or city, and high-pressure work environments. For graduates experiencing the most stressful transitions, living with a partner could be a hugely valuable support: a familiar face who could offer comfort, reassurance and advice. To a certain extent the same is true for some young people going away to university, especially those who felt less confident about entering university, in these cases moving to a university where they had friends could hold a real value.

These first four areas of influence are quite instrumental. Relationships are understood as providing information or other resources that are useful (or not) in career development. However, relationships are also important simply in and of themselves as a key motivator in one's life, and this is where love comes in.

- 5. Love and emotional connections as primary motivators.** In my research young people described significant relationships with partners, parents, siblings and friends. Wishing to spend time with, and be close to, or live with, significant others was a key motivator in the life choices (including career choices) of young people. How close people felt they needed to be depended on the relationship. Relationships with parents, siblings and friends could often be maintained at a distance, and through regular visits.

Romantic relationships were understood as less possible to maintain at a distance, unless it was on the short term. Relationships with very elderly relatives or very young (especially nephews and nieces) were also understood as being less possible to maintain at a distance. These relationships often included elements of physical care and were less possible to maintain via technology. Time was also important: being with people when they were very elderly or very young. In the case of illness of a family member, moving to be near them was often described as essential.

Belonging in relationships and career pathways

The five areas outlined above demonstrate how relationships are important to young people in their career trajectories – both in terms of resources, and in and of themselves as sources of love, care, support and belonging. In theorising the role of relationships and career in young people's career development, I have proposed that young people manage their decisions about careers and relationships in tandem, and across time. In practice, young people aspire to futures which are «settled» and comprise three dimensions:

- *Career*: having a « good enough» job that provides sufficient personal and financial reward to enable a good life.
- *Relationships*: living with others who are important, specifically normally cohabiting with a partner and often having children
- *Place*: being able to live in a place that is suitable, often this was imagined as the islands or a community like the islands, but not always.

I have theorised these three dimensions in terms of belonging: young people seek to develop futures where they have the capacity to «belong» to a career, a place and in a relationship or relationships.

This leads to a way of thinking about career development as a process that is very much managed in relation to other aspects of life. The challenge for many young people, especially those from small rural communities is how to manage their career trajectories alongside their relationships and their mobilities. Sometimes, the place that someone wants to live, is also a place where their partner (or family) is based *and* is a place where there is a suitable career opportunity. At other times this will not be the case, and a person will experience tensions and dilemmas in their choices, and wonder which part of their lives they should prioritise.

Conclusions: what does this mean for guidance?

In this short article I have explored the different ways that relationships are important in the career development of young people. I have argued that relationships should be considered within guidance not just for adults but also for young people, and not just as limiting factors but also as supports, and as a valid source of meaning and purpose in themselves. For career guidance practitioners, there are a number of implications:

- **Consider the life goals of a young person beyond career**, including their relationship and spatial aspirations, as these will have implications for their career choices. This might involve life-mapping or visualisation exercises.
- **Explore or map a client's existing significant relationships**, to identify the career development resources that they can offer including networks and knowledge, but also for their emotional component. This might involve asking young people directly about their relationships, and how they impact on their career decisions, including who provides them with emotional support and how.
- **Understand that prioritising a relationship over a career can be a valid choice**, and advisers should be open to working with this, rather than suggesting a young person should make a different choice. This might include openly discussing client dilemmas around managing their relationships alongside their career.

Relationships in career guidance

In the «Relationships in Career Guidance» series, we explore contemporary research into the ways in which relationships influence career development, and the implications for career guidance practice. Guest editor Rosie Alexander, postdoctoral researcher at Aarhus University, has edited and prepared the texts in this series.

References

Alexander, R. (2024). *Higher education, place and career development: Learning from rural and island students*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Blustein, D. L. (2011). A relational theory of working. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 79(1), 1–17.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2010.10.004>

Hodkinson, P., & Sparkes, A. (1997). Careership: A sociological theory of career decision making. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 18(1), 29–44.

Kenny, M., & Medvide, M. B. (2013). Relational influences on career development. *Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work*, 329-356.

Schein, E. H. (1990). *Career anchors: Discovering your real values*. Jossey-Bass / Pfeiffer.

Super, D. E. (1980). A life-span, life-space approach to career development. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 16(3), 282–298. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791\(80\)90056-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791(80)90056-1)