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Author

Creed, Peter, O'Callaghan, Frances, Doherty, Fiona

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Job-seeking and job acquisition in early adolescence

Authors:

Peter Creed^{1,2}, Frances O'Callaghan^{1,3} and Fiona Doherty¹

¹School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University – Gold Coast

²Griffith University, Service Industry Research Centre

³Griffith University, Psychological Health Research Centre

Contact:

Associate Professor Peter Creed
School of Applied Psychology
Griffith University
PMB 50
Gold Coast Mail Centre
Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia 9726

Email: p.creed@griffith.edu.au

Tel.: +61 7 5552 8810

Fax.: +61 7 5552 8291

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Abstract

In Australia, 42% of full-time students work in part-time jobs, and recent research indicates that a substantial majority of these want to increase their hours of employment. Although research has identified a range of positive and negative outcomes for students, almost all of the studies have been cross-sectional, thereby limiting the conclusions that can be drawn. Further, there have been no studies that have investigated the predictors of job-seeking among school-aged adolescents. We propose the Theory of Planned Behaviour as a possible model for examining the experiences of paid employment for adolescents at school and consider questions that remain to be answered before interventions may be implemented to advantage students at the interface between school and work.

It is increasingly common for young people to be working in casual or part-time paid jobs while still at school. These jobs are either in term-time or vacations, and are typically low wage and in the service sector (Reiter, 1996). In Australia, the proportion of 17-year-olds who were employed part-time rose from 21% to 30% between 1982 and 1992 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998; Robinson, 1996). In 1990, 34% of full-time students were working part-time. This proportion increased marginally to 35% in 1995, and jumped substantially to 42% in 2000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). This 42% of full-time students equated to some 543,000 young Australians engaged part-time in the labour market while studying full-time. Of these, 42% were full-time students at school, 11% attended TAFE, 40% were in higher education institutions, and 3% were in other educational institutions. Overall, females (58%) were more likely to be in paid part-time work than males. In 1995, full-time students worked an average of 10 hours per week, while in 2000 this was 11 hours per week (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). Similar trends are observed overseas (see Loughlin & Barline, 2001; Labour Market Trends, 1998).

School-aged adolescents who work in part-time or casual employment are motivated by a number of factors. Financial need can be an important consideration (Curtis & Lewis, 2001), even though adolescents from higher income families are more likely to work than adolescents from poorer families (Wright & Carr, 1995). From the student's perspective, financial need appears to be associated with having disposable income, for example, to buy clothes and consumerables (Bedenbough & Garvey, 1993), or even to buy things they do not need (Waldman & Springen, 1992). Employment is also seen by the student and others to bestow a number of benefits, such as "real world" experience, and facilitating the transition from school-to-work. Students are seen to benefit from accepting the

responsibilities associated with work (Bachman & Schulenberg, 1993), by gaining generic and specific occupational skills (Lucas & Lammont, 1998), gaining interpersonal and social skills, especially for students who lack family and/or school support (Chaplin & Hannaway, 1996), and being educated about business, economics and consumer affairs (Curtis & Lewis, 2001). Academic motivation and performance are thought to improve from working, as are career development and later employment prospects (McKechnie, Hobbs, & Lindsay, 1999).

In contrast to these benefits to working, other research suggests that part-time employment during high school places adolescents at risk, particularly when students work more than 20 hours per week. Longer working hours have been associated with poorer school performance, increased drug and alcohol use, increased delinquency, poorer relationships with family and friends, and higher levels of depression (e.g., Mortimer, Finch, Ryu, Shanahan, & Call, 1996). These differing outcomes have led researchers to hypothesize that it is not just employment status (i.e., employed versus not employed) or work intensity (i.e., number of hours work) that is important for adolescents, but rather it is the quality of work that is important. Greenberger, Steinberg, and Ruggiero (1982) have suggested that the quality of adolescent jobs could be compared along three dimensions, being opportunities for learning or skill use, social interaction, and exercising initiative or autonomy. Of these, skill use has received the most research attention, with studies showing greater psychological benefit when adolescents use or enhance their skills. For example, skill use in the workplace was found to be associated with a stronger work ethic (Mortimer, Pimentel, Ryu, Nash, & Lee, 1996). Moreover, for males, the acquisition of useful skills on the job has been found to be associated with decreased depressive affect

(Shanahan, Finch, Mortimer, & Ryu, 1991) and improved family relationships (Mortimer & Shanahan, 1994).

Although this focus on the relationship between the workplace and adolescent development has been useful, the conclusions that can be drawn from such research remain limited. This is primarily because almost all of the studies conducted to date were cross-sectional in nature. Consequently, it remains unclear whether the differences identified between employed and unemployed youths are outcomes of employment or whether they reflect pre-existing characteristics and experiences. Where longitudinal designs have been utilized, results suggest that adolescents with poorer adjustment may select jobs of a poorer quality (Mortimer, Harley, & Staff, 2002). What is clear is that the vast majority of school aged adolescents want to work as soon as they are old enough, and of those working part-time, a substantial majority want to increase their hours of employment (Creed, O'Callaghan, & Doherty, 2004).

Benefits also accrue to the employers of adolescent students. Students tend to work in retailing, tourism, hotel and catering industries, where part-time and casual work is considered to be structural. These industries are characterized by long opening hours, competitive markets and intensive labour practices (Curtis & Lewis, 2001). Employers benefit as they are able to pay students lower rates, and part-time workers are less likely to receive work-related training (Arulampalam & Booth, 1998). Students are considered to be more flexible, with employers able to increase/decrease hours or hire/fire at short notice (Lucas & Ralston, 1996). Students are more functionally flexible, that is, they are more responsive to undertaking a wider range of tasks than other employees (Lucas, 1997). They are also perceived as more motivated, responsible, reliable and to have higher inherent ability (Lammont & Lucas, 1999). This means they are perceived to have better social and

communication skills, to be more likely to follow instructions, and to be faster learners. Students often take the initiative to find work and are therefore easier and cheaper to recruit (Lucas & Ralston, 1996). A young workforce is also popular with those employers who are attempting to attract young customers (Lucas, 1995). Seventy-one percent of the McDonald's workforce, for example, is under the age of 21 years (Royle, 1999).

Getting and having paid part-time or casual work, then, can be important activities in a student's life, and adolescent employment constitutes a significant component in a country's labour market. In this process, job-seeking identifies the potential number of jobs from which the student may choose, or be chosen (Barber, Daly, Giannantonio, & Phillips, 1994). It has an important influence on whether the student becomes employed, and influences the quality of that employment (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001). Job-seeking includes activities such as preparing a resume, reading job advertisements, contacting employers, and going to job interviews.

Considerable research effort has been expended on identifying the antecedent predictors of job-seeking behaviours in adults. These include personality (e.g., personality will determine the type of job-seeking strategy to be used; Kanfer et al., 2001), generalized expectancies (e.g., individuals with an internal locus of control will see getting a job as being under their control), self-evaluation (e.g., individuals with high job-seeking self-efficacy will engage in more job-seeking and be more likely to persist in the face of setbacks; Kanfer, 1990), motives (e.g., individuals with financial obligations have a greater need for employment), social support (e.g., this is likely to help with the negative aspects of job-seeking; Gowan, Riordan, & Gatewood, 1999), life history variables (e.g., previous job-seeking/work experience [Kanfer et al., 2001], work qualifications [Marshall, 1985], and job search barriers, such as disability [Wanberg, Kanfer, & Rotundo, 1999]).

Despite this considerable body of research examining the predictors and outcomes of adult job-seeking, there have been no studies that have investigated the predictors of job-seeking for school-aged adolescents. The main groups examined to date have been new-entrant college graduates, the unemployed, and job-to-job seekers (Kanfer et al., 2001). Research in this area has also largely been atheoretical, although studies have utilised expectancy-valence models (e.g., see Feather, 1989) and social-cognitive theories, most recently the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB; Ajzen, 1991), which incorporates expectancy-valence components. According to this theory, the immediate determinant of a behaviour is the person's intention to perform that behaviour. Intention, in turn, is determined by the attitudes held about the behaviour, the subjective norms regarding performance of the behaviour, and the perceived control the person has in carrying out the behaviour. Control influences behaviour both directly and indirectly, via intentions. See Figure 1.

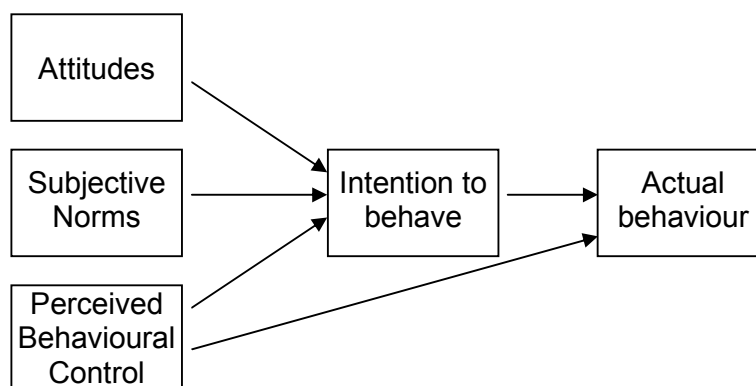


Figure 1: The Theory of Planned Behaviour

Underlying attitudes are beliefs about the likely outcomes of engaging in the behaviour weighted by the importance of such beliefs. Underlying subjective norms are beliefs about the normative expectations of significant others weighted by the individual's motivation to

comply with these individuals. A belief-based measure of control consists of beliefs about the presence of factors that may encourage or hinder performance of the behaviour together with self-efficacy beliefs about carrying out the behaviour. Thus, applied to adolescent job-seeking, the TPB would predict that job-seeking is determined by the student's intention. Job-seeking intention, in turn, is predicted by the extent to which the student believes there will be positive outcomes from job-seeking and the importance of these outcomes, the student's perception of social pressure and their willingness to respond to this pressure, the level of confidence the student has to engage in job-seeking, and their perceived control in the situation.

The TPB has demonstrated its usefulness in predicting a range of behaviours, most notably health and risk related behaviours (for reviews, see Ajzen, 1991; Armitage & Conner, 2001; Sutton, 1998). A small number of studies has also applied the theory to the prediction of job-seeking behaviour in unemployed individuals (e.g., van Ryn & Vinokur, 1992) and graduating students (Caska, 1998), and it is put forward here as a possible model with which to examine the experiences of paid employment for adolescents at school.

Given the potential importance of having labour market experiences while at school, and the crucial role of job-seeking in gaining these experiences, more research focus needs to be applied to this area. The predictors of job-seeking in school-aged adolescents are still to be identified, and the consequences of engaging in paid work while at school remain to be clarified. Few studies have tracked students longitudinally in an attempt to tease out the causal effects of working while at school. For example, is it that students benefit from working or is there a selection effect for students who get a job? What role do significant others play in students gaining and maintaining their jobs? What is the relative importance

of the quality and quantity of social interaction and the ability to exercise initiative or autonomy? What is the relationship between the quality and quantity of student work and positive versus negative outcomes for the employer? Further, no studies have examined the developmental effects associated with not getting work when work is wanted (i.e., the effects of being an unemployed student), or not getting more work when more work is wanted (i.e., being an underemployed student). Only when answers to these questions are provided will policy makers be able to determine the need for practical interventions to advantage students at this interface between school and employment.

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