

Article

Career Choices, Representation of Work and Future Planning: A Qualitative Investigation with Italian University Students

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Abstract: Choosing a career is one of the most challenging for young adults, and the representations of work could influence how people make decisions and build their career paths. This qualitative study examined the career choices, representations of work and future plans of 58 Italian university students. Semi-structured interviews were analyzed using a consensual qualitative research procedure. The results emphasize the centrality of environmental conditions and internal factors such as vocation and internal resources in career choice processes. Also crucial is students' discussion of the meaning attributed to work as good for oneself and others. Finally, most students present in their narratives, clear future plans. Findings suggest themes to explore in career guidance interventions. Unpacking the influences of choices and working on the meaning attributed to work appears pivotal to career counseling interventions to orient young people toward powerfully pursuing their career choices.

Keywords: meaning of work; career choices; Italian context; qualitative approach; consensual qualitative research



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1. Introduction

The current unstable and uncertain world of work makes the university-to-work transition increasingly challenging for young people [1–3]. Contemporary career transitions are influenced by current job demands [2], the insecure integration into the world of work [4] and the new skills and competences needed to deal with the labor market [5]. Moreover, the idea that only one valid choice must be made for a lifetime is outdated. The ‘job of life’ no longer exists, and an individual is called upon several times in a lifespan to make career decisions [5]. The increase in the number of career transitions, intentional or unintentional, and the career choices that an individual has to make also increases the chance of facing difficulties related to career decision-making.

Faced with this instability and new scenarios, studying the potential factors that may influence career choices appears crucial. Following the Career Construction Theory (CCT; [6]), this study investigates young people’s career choices in the transition from university to the labor market by focusing on the representations of work and future plans.

2. Literature Review

Career choices are among the most important decisions individuals make in their lifetimes. According to Kulcsar and colleagues [7], career choices can be various and take place in different stages of life, for example, choosing educational training, then a job and then whether to stay at this job or switch to another one. According to the Developmental Perspective of Vocational Psychology [8,9], the longitudinal view of careers starts by considering the natural course of careers as revealed in individual biographies. In this

view, examining the process dimensions that form choices and then shape careers is crucial. Choice content deals with the particular career (“Which occupation are you interested in?”), while the career choice process answers the question, “Why are you interested in entering that occupation?”. The process seems like an “assembly line” [9] (p. 51) that leads to choice, and several factors can interplay during this process.

Several studies assessed the different sources that can influence individuals when they must make a choice, and the complexity of the process becomes greater with age [10]. Carpenter and Foster [11] stated that career choices are influenced by intrinsic, extrinsic, and interpersonal dimensions. The intrinsic dimension refers to the interests linked to the performance of a specific job. The extrinsic dimension refers to the desire to be socially recognized and to the sense of security. Finally, the interpersonal dimension is related to other people, such as family members, friends, or teachers. More recently, other authors have pointed out that intrinsic factors include personality traits, job satisfaction, desire for career advancement, and learning experiences [12,13]; the extrinsic factors would refer to the benefits linked to the performance of some professions [14] or aspects linked to remuneration [15,16]; and the interpersonal factors, confirming the study by Carpenter and Foster [11], refer to the presence of family, friends, or teachers [17,18].

Moreover, the representations of work can influence how people make decisions, characterizing their careers and lives [19]. Several authors have tried to give a definition of what work can be. For example, Drenth [20] defined this construct as an activity that enables cultural development, fulfillment, and satisfaction of personal needs; Richardson [21] further emphasized that individuals can achieve success and personal satisfaction through work. In addition, work allows individuals to feel connected to the society in which they live. Warr [22] also emphasized some of the disadvantages of work, e.g., stress and fatigue. Finally, according to Blustein [23], work allows one to achieve psychological well-being and develop social connections and self-determination.

Savickas stated that “examining concepts about work and love can help people increase their career success and life satisfaction” [24], (p. 315). Changes in careers, such as the structure of work and its social organization, have demanded a new paradigm. The CCT [6] embraces a constructivist view of the life course, moving beyond the paradigm of matching people to job positions and encouraging individuals to become managers of their working lives, drawing meaning from the role of work in their lives [25]. The emphasis is on personal meaning and becoming an agent in one’s life. This change moves from considering work as the central role in life to considering the role of work in everyone’s life. In other words, this assumption emphasizes drawing a whole life course [25]. According to CCT, individuals must construct a subjective career to impose meaning and direction on their behavior. The subjective career story steers and carries individuals across job changes and career transitions. In this framework, making decisions about career plans is linked to individual well-being and adjustment to social context [26,27].

Finally, several studies showed that individuals give a different meaning to work based on their social, economic, and cultural context [28–30]. Blustein et al. [28] highlighted how social class impacts how working-class young adults make meaning of their work, observing differences in their reasons and motivations for performing work that suggested that meaning in work may be a function of access to opportunities. Chaves et al. [29] reported that urban youths’ perceptions of work suggested that work does not represent a means of self-concept expression but is most related to external outcomes such as salary.

3. The Current Study

Comparing Italy with other European countries, the employment rate in 2022 was 65.2%, one of the lowest in Europe [31]. In Italy, therefore, unemployment represents a very strong concern, despite the statistics showing a decrease in the total unemployment rate [32]. At the end of 2022, the unemployment rate for young people aged between 18 and 29 was 18.3%. However, if we look only at the southern portion of Italy, the unemployment rate of the same age group rises to 31.1% [33]. Furthermore, employment trends have also

changed in the Italian context, highlighting the presence of low-quality and low-paid jobs, in contrast to the better trends observed in other EU countries [34].

In this context, narratives of young people might be embedded more in the economic and social context rather than in their job matching, aspirations, and capabilities [35]. The precarious economic conditions and scarce resources supporting established careers can influence the representation of work and inhibit career development in line with one vocation. A previous qualitative study by Magnano et al. [30] in the Italian context showed how the possibility of finding a job for socially vulnerable young people is strongly dependent on external factors, thus concluding that the surrounding context should be the first to put individuals in condition to find a job.

Despite the increasing difficulties faced by young adults in southern Italy, apart from the study by Magnano et al. [30], which, however, focused on the specific population of socially vulnerable people, there are no studies that have explored the intrinsic, extrinsic, and interpersonal influences on the career choices, work representation, and future career planning of young university students in this context. Career choice is, in fact, the result of a process in which several factors can play a role. Alongside this, the representations of work can influence how people make decisions, while future planning can constitute a fundamental dimension in career choice attitudes and competencies [9] and a boost for achieving career choice.

To achieve this goal, we conducted semi-structured interviews with university students followed by a qualitative analysis of narratives provided by them. The qualitative approach allowed us to grasp the career choice process and flesh out our understanding of the representation of work in this population. The study was not intended for generalization, but rather for description through an Italian case study.

4. Methods

4.1. Recruitment and Participants

Data were collected from 58 university students (20 males and 38 females) aged 18–25 ($M = 20.6$; $SD = 1.9$). A convenient sampling method was used. This method is based on the participants' availability and interest in participating in the study. The participants were recruited at the Social Sciences and Humanistic Faculty of the Universities held in the South of Italy through collaboration with their professors who enabled us to illustrate our research during their teaching hours, allowing us to gather students' willingness to participate in the study. Participation was voluntary, and no payment of other kinds of reward was provided.

4.2. Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face to explore the representation of work. The questions explored participants' representation of work, career choices, and future plans. The qualitative method was chosen because open-ended questions are ideal for exploring concepts rigorously and systematically in a small sample [36]. In addition, qualitative methods allow researchers to gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of individuals' career choices. Through interviews, participants can share their experiences, thoughts, and emotions, enabling researchers to uncover underlying themes, patterns, and individual perspectives, as well as explore the intricacies, motivations, and contextual factors that influence career decision-making. Along with individual choices, this approach enables capturing the contextual factors that shape career choices. It permits researchers to delve into social, cultural, familial, and environmental influences on individuals' decision-making processes.

The interview was divided into five sections and was conducted by a career counselor. Within the first section, sociodemographic information on the participant was collected. In the second section, respondents were asked to talk about aspects that influence their career choices (for example, "Can you tell me what factors you consider when making career choices?"). The third section focused on the representation of work (for example, "Each

of us has an idea of what work is. Could you tell me yours?”). The fourth section of the interview inquired about the participant’s future plans (for example, “Can you tell me about your plans for the future?”). Finally, the fifth section provided a final moment of personal feedback that the consultant gave the participant. All interviews were recorded with the permission of participants and then transcribed for analysis. Answers’ confidentiality and anonymity were assured to the participants involved in the study.

4.3. Coding and Analysis

A consensual qualitative research procedure (CQR; [37]) was used to analyze the responses of interviews. This method seems suited to the descriptive and explorative scopes of this study. It is designed to explore and understand subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals or groups through a collaborative and iterative process. CQR reduces the probability that a perspective influences the data analysis process [37] through a consensual agreement between the research team. The analysis team comprised five members (first and second authors and three trained undergraduate research assistants). Firstly, coding entailed a vertical analysis, i.e., coding of domains and core ideas, and then a horizontal analysis, i.e., cross-analysis. In the coding of domains phase, the team member independently identifies the domains targeted by the participants. This step helps in identifying patterns, themes, and relationships in the data. The team shares and organizes the data according to these domains by grouping similar codes into domains or categories that reflect broader themes or concepts. This process involves organizing the codes into hierarchical structures and refining the categories. Coding core ideas refers to identifying core ideas within each domain. The research team shares the core idea and finds consensus. Finally, the cross-analysis involves the development of categories to describe consistencies across the core ideas within domains. This phase requires three steps: (a) team members derive categories by identifying common themes across responses; (b) team members again independently review the core areas identified within each domain and suggest potential categories; (c) team members subsequently meet to compare categories and determine the best fits of data. To ensure trustworthiness, the inter-coder consensus through the Cohen’s Kappa index [38] was achieved ($k = 0.93$). Any disagreements and coding discrepancies were discussed. Finally, one coder computed the frequency of each category (commonality). The frequencies are not numerically representative of the responses but are informative. Furthermore, the sum of the percentages of the frequencies can be more than 100% because the categories used are not mutually exclusive. Each excerpt was coded for one or more categories.

5. Results

The results regarding the main theme of work representation concern exclusively young university students belonging to the same academic area. In addition, all participants were attending a bachelor’s degree course. Considering that a bachelor course in Italy lasts three years, the research students were at that moment in the second or third year of academic course, so they were having a similar experience. For this reason, in the data analysis, socio-demographic information was not considered such as age, scientific field or employment status, except for gender.

Table 1 shows domains, subdomains, categories, and commonalities. The analyses pointed out three domains, i.e., themes: *Influences in career choices*, *Representation of work and Future Plans*. Influences in career choices and Representation of work reflect the determinants in choosing a career. At the same time, the Future Plans describe the participants’ confidence in their future life and career plans.

Table 1. Domains, sub-domains, categories and commonality.

Domains	Sub-Domains	Categories	Commonality
Influences on career choices	External factors	Family expectations	(1)
		Environmental conditions	(10)
	Internal factors	Vocation	(10)
		Resources	(15)
Representation of work	Meaning of work	Personal development	(3)
		Social role	(27)
	Working condition	Salary	(5)
Future Plans	Ways of career plans	Enjoyable work	(2)
		Clear career plans	(24)
	Future life plans	Confused career plans	(12)
		Family	(5)

The first theme, *Influences in career choices*, captures best the feeling of being driven or pushed by force in career choices. The nature of this force can be internal, external, or a combination of internal and external. Sub-domain External factors refer to Family expectations and Environmental conditions. Family Expectations refers to the influence of parents in career-related choices. This influence is not considered support but as expectations and/or arrangements. Consistent with the adult age of the interviewees, this category emerged in the narrative of only one student:

“I would like to become a director, but due to family pressures, I felt compelled to make a different decision”. (Participant 19, male)

Environmental conditions are related to the current work conditions that could change the pursuit of calling in favor of a career easier to achieve. This category of content has been referred to most often, as have the next two included in the Internal factors sub-domain. For example:

“I would like to become a photographer, but mainly for economic constraints and for work difficulties in these areas, I am following a different path”. (Participant 52, male)

Internal factors include Vocation and Resources. Vocation refers to an innate drive from within, a mission to which they respond. Participants often refer to a “blessing” that accompanies them and pushes them to pursue that career. For example:

“I believe I am inclined to communicate with others, to understand their perplexities and to be able to direct them towards the right path”. (Participant 1, female)

Vocation is also often defined as a passion. For example:

“My secret wish is to be able to turn my passion into a job or an actor”. (Participant 56, male)

Instead, Resources refer to personal resources that students have such as interests and skills that drive for a specific job. For example:

“I will see myself in a work environment where I can make the most of the skills that distinguish me, such as creativity, ingenuity and interpersonal skills”. (Participant 14, female)

The second theme is specific to the *Representation of work*. The representation of work is central to the choice of work and goes through the meaning attributed to it and the characteristics of the work. Specifically, the sub-domain Meaning of Work refers to Personal development and Social role. The first one, Personal development, refers to work

as the individual's personal growth and was the less frequently cited category in this sub-dimension:

"The job has to do with my identity". (Participant 2, female)

The second one, Social Role, to which a large portion of quotations relates to, refers to the meaning attributed to work as good for oneself and others. For example:

"I have a job that meets my needs, expectations and desires, as well as useful for the betterment of society". (Participant 36)

The second sub-domain, Working condition, refers to the desired working conditions that have a role in the job choice. In particular, a small group of participants mention adequate Salary and Enjoyable work as necessary. Salary refers to a work salary that guarantees long-term material well-being. For example:

"I aim to get a steady and well-paid job that can thus gratify me". (Participant 29, male)

Enjoyable work refers to the imagined benefits of a specific job:

"I have always thought that the digital sector could be the future, I believe it can offer a greater job placement". (Participant 28, male)

The third theme concerns *Future Plans*, i.e., life and work plans. The sub-domain Ways of career plans refer to Clear career plans and a sense of productivity in their construction. For example:

"My goal is to become a web designer. I have already started my online shop, and I would like to expand it". (Participant 39, female)

While a good portion of respondents have clear plans for the future, a portion do not yet have them or have only a vague idea of them:

"For the moment I am studying social sciences, I am sure of the academic path I have taken but I am not yet clear about the specific job I am going to do". (Participant 3, female)

Finally, the last sub-domain, that includes citations of narratives of only a small group of students, refers to life plans intertwined with work plans. For example:

"Finding a job will allow me to start a family". (Participant 21, female)

Finally, related to gender differences, the results should be viewed considering the unbalanced numbers of male ($n = 20$) and female ($n = 38$) participants. Despite this, the results show a major tendency in females to remark on the internal resources that make them more inclined to a particular career than males. Concerning the representation of work, more females reported that work has to do with their vocational and global identity, while almost all males reported the importance of working conditions (such as salary and working hours). On future plans, no relevant difference emerges between males and females. This result might explain how gender does not account for being confused or resolute about future choices, but that career construction belongs to the individual's trajectory.

6. Discussions

The study explores influences on career choices, representation of work, and career plans among undergraduates who live in Southern Italy. The qualitative analysis of interviews provides emergent themes tied to the three domains explored: *Influences on career choices, Meaning of work and Future Plans*. The analysis of the narratives reveals that the choice of a career path for university students is driven, on the one hand, by internal/external factors and, on the other, by the meaning they attach to the job itself. External influences include the role of the family and the context. Most participants mentioned the role of contextual factors whereas only one of the family expectations: cultural expectations, the influence of friends and peers and parental guidance, can shape an individual's

perception of different careers and impact their decision-making process. This result is in line with other quantitative studies illustrating that the role of the family has an influence, especially in adolescence, on career choices [39]. Instead, career choices are forced by contextual factors, especially environmental conditions that orient the career choices. Individuals take into account the opportunities and obstacles faced with the job market's entry. In addition, economic conditions and the demand for certain skills in the job market can influence career choices. This is not surprising given the relevance of the precarious economic conditions and scarce resources supporting established careers in the South of Italy. Such conditions that may influence or inhibit career development align with the vocation. Internal influences include vocation on the one hand and resources on the other. Related to their vocation, some students state that an internal force pushes them towards that specific career path as if the job were "tailored to them". In other terms, they seem to pursue fields that align with their hobbies, talents, and areas of expertise, as they derive satisfaction from doing what they like. Several studies have found that people are strongly motivated to pursue careers that align with their passions [40] or vocation [41]. According to the narratives, participants seem to prioritize their vocations over potential salary. While acknowledging the challenges of the labor market, the narratives emphasize choosing an occupation in line with one's passions, probably because the participants are in the early years of their university careers. In a recent study, O'Keefe and colleagues [42] shed light on the cultural difference between Western and Eastern cultures showing that passion is culturally constructed. Although both cultures were more favorable toward a career that reflected one's passion, Western countries evaluated them significantly more favorably. In Italy, this result seems to reflect the disposition of the current younger generation, the so-called YOLO (an acronym for "You Only Live Once") that it is associated with a carefree and adventurous attitude, emphasizing the idea of embracing new experiences and seizing opportunities, but also pursuing personal passions. This attitude is applied in the context of career choices where students assign a central role to their passions and interests in their career development. Alongside this, resources also play a role in career choices. This aspect is important because several resources are considered adaptive in career choices. People tend to choose careers that make use of their strengths and allow them to excel. They may consider their skills or natural talents when selecting a career path. Hence, career adaptabilities, such as creativity and curiosity, could enhance career decision-making [39,43] and promote career success [44,45].

The second domain emerged from those interviews that cited the *Meaning of the work*. According to our participants, career choices are strongly associated with the type of work in terms of a "good job". The meaning of work and the working conditions are central to the choice: consideration of trends in the job market can influence career choices and make students opt for fields with growth potential, or those that are in high demand. Personal development, Social role, Salary, and Enjoyable work are the characteristics attributed to work. Thus, work should contribute to developing one's identity and the well-being of oneself and others. This facet relates to meaningful and decent work [46,47].

These results are also consistent with other qualitative studies on the concept of work with different age groups. For example, adolescents describe work above all for the economic aspect and the satisfaction of personal values (starting a family, improving one's well-being and that of society) [48]. In a study with adults [49], a view of work emerged as a source that ensures a link with economic and social activities.

The third domain is Future plans. Future planning plays a significant role in shaping one's career choices. It involves setting long-term goals, creating a roadmap, and making decisions based on the desired outcomes. This domain refers to all types of commitment of university students. Almost half of the participants have clear career-related future plans, while a small proportion is still confused or have no idea. The condition of the labor market did not seem to inhibit the future planning of university students. Previous studies have also found a contrast between clear and confused career plans [47]. This result is explained by considering the different developmental trajectories of young adults [50]. Nowadays,

developmental trajectories are individualized and heterogeneous [51], demanding from young people an active role in constructing transition paths [52] and coping strategies that can support these transitions [53–55]. In light of this, a group of young adults seem to be able to preserve agency in the context of career obstacles or barriers [56,57], while another group is less proactive in making plans. Krahn et al. [1] describe this contrast as opposing the exploring and floundering dynamics.

Finally, five students mentioned life plans and how job insecurity could delay them. This observation could illustrate the centrality of work as a key factor in assuming the social roles typical of adulthood, such as starting a new family. Finding a job and becoming economically independent are critical tasks in the development of emerging adults [58,59]. The transition from school to work is a crucial task when individuals move towards adulthood. In fact, assuming adulthood often involves making decisions about one's career path and actively working toward professional development. This may include choosing an educational or vocational path, acquiring necessary skills and qualifications, and seeking opportunities for advancement and growth. In a recent article, Parola and colleagues [60] showed that in the Italian context, the barriers and obstacles related to the economic environments that lead to the school-to-work transition have a crucial role in the self-perception of the transition to adulthood. For instance, achieving economic independence is essential for young people to attain complete autonomy and move out of their family homes.

7. Limitations, Implications and Future Directions

Some limitations of our study must be acknowledged. Firstly, participants were beginning university and relatively far from the school-to-work transition. Future research should examine career choices throughout a university with longitudinal studies. Second, participants were undergraduates in humanistic and social science courses. Future research should extend the participants outside humanistic and social science courses. Third, the study needs to be replicated in other geographical areas with different neighborhood characteristics. Moreover, future studies could also consider other variables within the same sample, as people attribute different meanings to work based on their social, economic, and cultural characteristics [28,29,61,62].

Despite these limitations, this study opens an important avenue for future implications. Our qualitative study contributes to the already available literature on the influences on career choices, representation of work, and future plans of university students. These findings can be useful in the field of career counselling. For example, counsellors can help their clients reflect on influences on careers in terms of barriers and support; in the first case, students should be helped to think about how they can overcome the barriers they might encounter [63]. Similarly, students stated that external factors can influence their choices. From a sustainability perspective, students can think about how they, with their careers, can positively impact the external environment [64]. Studying the representation of work can be an important starting point for reflections on this topic. Students, who are future entrepreneurs, should seek decent work, but they should also strive to disseminate and create decent work [48]. Consistent with Masdonati and colleagues [47], it appears necessary to work from a preventive perspective, which not only means helping university students look for jobs but instead helps them unpack the job opportunities and the extent to which they match the characteristics of decent work. Finally, students with confused career plans should be helped during career counselling to clarify their doubts.

8. Conclusions

Following the CCT [6], this study contributed to the debate on young people's career choices in transitioning from university to the labor market. Specifically, the study has the strength of focusing on the voices of those involved in the transition by understanding their experiences, representations at work, and future career plans. Moreover, the study focuses on a specific context, such as Southern Italy, a context with a dilated transition to

the world of work [64], capturing the difficulties faced by young people in constructing future plans. As mentioned, on the one hand, it is important to study career transitions while considering their context. On the other, using a qualitative methodology makes it possible to capture nuances that can only be deduced by listening to the voices of young people in transition. Work representation could affect choices and mobilization of personal resources to pursue their goals.

The findings emphasize the importance of considering the context when modeling career interventions to support the transitions of adolescents and young people. For example, Life design intervention [65] promotes the individual's freedom to choose their career and position in the world. In this sense, the individual can match their vision of the world by integrating it with a pre-existing sense of identity. This process allows individuals to develop their planning [66] in line with what is relevant to them. In line with LD intervention [65] and Fusco and colleagues [63], one possible solution to support young people in designing their future amid the challenges of labor market transitions is to provide career guidance actions. These actions can stimulate creative thinking related to the creation of a 'decent environment' in which individuals would like to live.

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