

Youth Perceptions of Their Futures, Society, and the Work Landscape: A Psychology of Working Perspective

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Abstract

In recognition of growing economic inequality and rapid transformation in the world of work, we seek to understand how young people perceive their futures to develop career development education that supports both personal goals and promotes social and economic justice. Thirty-six students attending high-performing high schools in the United States ($n = 19$) and Israel ($n = 17$) were interviewed to assess their espoused future plans and conceptions of work and society. Consistent with the psychology of working theory, students' plans were reflective of the social, economic, national, and historical contexts in which they are embedded. US and Israeli students expressed optimism and anxieties about their futures, along with recognition of social and economic inequalities and limited motivation and awareness of how to effect social change. The findings are discussed with regard to implications for career development education and the promotion of social and economic justice.

Keywords

psychology of working theory, future plans, social inequality, career counseling

Young people today are growing up in a rapidly changing global context that impacts the world of work and future opportunities in the workplace and society more broadly (Kenny et al., 2019). Such rapid changes inevitably require a rethinking of the preparation young people need to engage optimally in their future roles as workers and citizens. In this study, we seek to understand how young people residing in affluent communities and attending high-performing schools in the

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United States (US) and Israel make sense of this changing social and vocational context and how these changes shape their future plans and perceptions of work, with consideration for the design of career development interventions and for promoting a more just society and workplace.

The Changing Context

Much has been written over the past several decades about changes in the world of work that have evolved due to increasing automation and globalization ([International Labor Organization \[ILO\], 2021](#)). As a result, opportunities for individuals without at least a college degree or other post-high school specialized training to earn good salaries and benefits have decreased, especially in Western industrialized economies ([Carnevale et al., 2019](#)). Growth in economic inequality and the erosion of social and legal protections in the workplace have been accompanied across many nations by political polarization where immigrants and those without work are blamed for their poverty ([Blustein, 2019](#); [ILO, 2021](#)). Despite growing inequality, the policies in many nations have not sought to rectify the structural factors that are at the root of inequities and that sustain social and economic injustice in school and work settings and society more broadly ([ILO, 2021](#)).

The above summary highlights a broad set of factors that now complicate processes of future planning for youth and for advancing social justice in society and the workplace. Adolescents must make sense of these social and economic complexities as they are forging their social and vocational identities and preparing for their future lives ([Vondracek et al., 1986](#)). They need, furthermore, to develop a critical understanding of current realities if they are to challenge injustice as adolescents and in their adult roles. Career development education represents one educational strategy with the potential for guiding adolescents in this meaning-making process ([Cinamon et al., 2019](#); [Kenny et al., 2019](#)). Traditional methods of career education and planning, however, typically focus on self-awareness and career decision-making through a neoliberalist lens that emphasizes individual success and responsibility and ignores the systemic inequities that limit work choice and advancement for many young people ([Hooley, 2021](#)). [Prilletsensky and Stead \(2012\)](#) maintain that career intervention should move beyond helping clients to adapt to current realities to challenging the factors that sustain the status quo. The goal of the current study is to understand how young people attending high-performing schools in the US and Israel understand their futures and current societal processes with consideration for the design of career development education that strives to promote economic and social justice.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by the premises of the psychology of working theory (PWT: [Duffy et al., 2016](#)), which has been identified as a vocational development model with implications for transformative career education ([Kenny et al., 2019](#)). Compared to traditional models of career development that emphasize the role of personal agency in career development ([Blustein et al., 2019](#)), PWT places contextual factors as related to vocational privilege at the forefront. Economic and sociological factors are viewed as strong influences on the work lives and well-being of individuals. The model also recognizes how psychological factors, such as social support, critical consciousness, and perceived agency in the context of barriers, can serve to mitigate economic and social constraints for those impacted by marginalization and poverty. PWT has implications for both person-centered career development and systemic intervention ([Blustein et al., 2019](#)). At the person level, for example, intervention may seek to foster personal assets such as social support, critical consciousness, and proactive personality; while at the systems level, intervention focuses on implementing structural change that will reduce marginalization and economic constraints ([Kenny & Tsai, 2020](#)).

Although PWT was envisioned as a theory that applies to all who want to work (Blustein, 2006), PWT-informed research has been carried out primarily with adults and college students, with a particular focus on those who are marginalized due to social class and societal biases. A growing body of PWT research with working adults and college students in the US and varied nations has provided support for many aspects of the model, including the role of economic constraints and social marginalization in limiting work volition work, career adaptability, and access to decent work (Duffy et al., 2018). The contribution of decent work in satisfying human needs for survival, social connectedness, and self-determination, work fulfillment, and well-being has also been documented (Duffy et al., 2020). Research assessing social support, critical consciousness, and personal agency in mitigating the negative effects of economic constraints and marginalization is more limited (e.g., Autin, Williams, Allan, & Herdt, 2022; Douglass et al., 2020; Kim & Allan, 2021). One of the few known studies with high school youth suggests that these psychological factors are generally promotive of work volition and career adaptability, but do not reduce the negative contribution of economic and social barriers (Kenny et al., 2022).

This study adds to existing PWT research by focusing on high school-age youth, by studying those who benefit from privilege associated with residence in an affluent community or attendance at a high achieving school, and by comparing high school youth in the United States and Israel. Research examining the applicability of PWT in the adolescent years is important as this developmental period is central for identity construction and the exploration and crystallization of career aspirations, goals, and expectations (Vondracek et al., 1986). Adolescents make important decisions about their career plans and future educational and career paths, which motivate them toward their goals and vocational identity (Lapan, 2004). We suggest that listening to the voices of more privileged adolescents attending high achieving schools is warranted as social class privilege is integrally related to identity and career development, perceptions of future opportunities, and ideas about social fairness and what people deserve (Howard, 2010; Lapour & Heppner, 2009; McWhirter & McWha-Hermann, 2021).

In addition and in relation to our concern for promoting social and economic justice, we recognize, as noted by Freire (1970) and Watts et al. (1999), that all people, including those who are privileged by current systems, must be able to recognize unjust social processes and possess skills for social change to be advanced. Dynamics of privilege and power shape the education and work experiences for all, with group biases serving to maintain the status quo and perpetuate systems of oppression (McWhirter & McWha-Hermann, 2021). While structural change is imperative, dismantling group biases for all youth is integral for creating and mobilizing a broader social and political will for structural change (Howard, 2010).

Finally, in recognition that PWT places dimensions of the social context in the foreground, we talked with young people from different, but specific ecological niches, with awareness, that they may hold varied conceptions of the current societies, work, and their futures goals. Although studies of the US and Israeli youth are few in number, this study complements prior research comparing the future perspectives of university students in the U.S. and Israel (Bellare et al., 2019; Michael et al., 2017). We believed that these two national samples are pertinent for the current study as both societies have benefitted in recent years from strong economies, low unemployment, and growing work opportunities in the technology sector and other fields requiring education beyond high school (OECD, 2022b). Rates of high school completion and college attendance are also high in both nations, although access to quality education and decent work lag among marginalized social groups (OECD, 2022b). Additionally, both countries rank high in socio-economic disparities and low in social cohesion in comparison with other Western countries (Machlica, 2020; OECD, 2022b). The transformation of Israel from a mixed market to a liberal market economy has resulted in gross inequalities in earnings, as seen in other neoliberal economic systems (Kristal, 2018).

We explore adolescents' perceptions of several core assumptions of the PWT model (Blustein et al., 2019), including their understanding of the role of work in their future lives, the changing nature of work and growing economic inequality, and the contextual factors that shape access to education and work. We expected that core assumptions of PWT would be generally relevant across countries, including the US and Israel, that have unequal societies, stratified by race, culture, or other social identities (Duffy et al., 2016), while we also expected variations related to nation, culture, social class, and other contextual determinants.

Method

Participants, Procedure, and Context

This study includes participants from two vastly different national and cultural contexts, the Northeastern US and the central area of Israel. The students were not intended to be representative of all young people in their countries or regions but rather to reflect the perceptions of youth from specific backgrounds.

United States Sample. Participants in the US sample were recruited from a summer internship program sponsored by a generally affluent suburban city in the northeast section of the country with public high schools that are highly ranked in the state. Students attending this program are part of a larger research study assessing PWT among youth (Kenny et al., 2019; 2022). The summer internship program recruits students from a variety of economic and racial/ethnic backgrounds, including students of color, first-generation college students, and those from low-income families. The 19 students included in these interviews were selected at random from 78 internship participants. The interviews were completed during the first week of the program so that responses would not be affected by program participation. Ten of the interviewed students self-identified as female, seven as male, and two as gender non-binary, ranging in age from 14 to 19 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 17.68$). Two of the students had just graduated from high school, seven were entering grade 12, eight were entering grade 11, and one each was entering grades 9 and 10. With regard to race/ethnicity, 10 self-identified as White, four as Asian/Asian American, four as Latinx, and one as Black/Caribbean. Four students reported that they were born outside of the US, and seven reported that their primary caretaker was born outside the US. With regard to the highest level of education, eight students reported that their primary caregiver had a graduate or professional degree, with three reporting a 4-year college degree, five reporting some college, and four reporting high school graduation as the highest level of educational attainment.

Israeli Sample. Participants in the Israeli sample were recruited through a snowball method after receiving the required approval from the university ethics committee and parental approval. The 17 Israeli adolescents included 9 females and eight males, aged 15–17.5 ($M_{\text{age}} = 16.3$), who are all Israeli secular Jewish and born in Israel. All participants attended prestigious high schools (ranking by the Israeli ministry of education higher in terms of the percent of students who successfully finished the matriculation exams). Four were in 10th grade, 10 in the 11th grade, and three in the 12th grade. Fourteen of the students came from high SES families, with the other three raised in lower middle SES families. With regard to the highest level of parental education, four students reported high school graduation as the highest level of educational attainment for their primary caretaker, and the remaining 13 reported university degrees or higher. The parents of two participants hold PhDs, and the fathers of five participants own successful businesses.

Protocol Development

We developed a semi-structured interview to elicit student perceptions related to core assumptions of the PWT model including student's plans for the future, views on the purpose and importance of work, understanding of factors that impact work choice and economic inequality, and perceptions of generational changes in the work and educational landscape. We adapted questions about work goals, obstacles in the realization of one's hopes and dreams, and the meaning and centrality of work in one's life from an interview developed by [Blustein \(2019\)](#) for use with working adults. Instead of asking about past experiences, we modified the questions to inquire about future goals, anticipated obstacles, and the expected importance and meaning of work and other life roles in their futures. As in [Blustein \(2019\)](#), we also asked about participants' belief in the American Dream and the messages they have received about work, with a focus in our study on messages from family of origin. Whereas [Blustein \(2019\)](#) asked participants about the effects of the recession on their work lives and proposed solutions, we chose to ask participants about their views on economic inequality as we considered this a salient current issue. From an interview developed by [Autin et al. \(2018\)](#) in a study of immigrant young adults, we used questions that inquired about participants' sense of freedom in work choice and what motivates them to keep working towards their goals in the face of barriers. For the current study, we added two questions that focused on participants' attitudes towards the future, including sources of excitement and worry, and their perceptions of competition for school and work in comparison to their parents' generation. We solicited and incorporated feedback in the development of the interview from the research team that developed the [Blustein \(2019\)](#) interview.

Analysis

We utilized Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; [Hill, 2012](#)), which involves a team approach to generating consensus about the meaning of the research data. The CQR analysis involves three steps including coding of domains, creating core ideas, and completing a cross-analysis. At each stage of the analysis, coding was completed independently by several coding team members, discussed within coding teams, exchanged among coding teams to resolve discrepancies, and reviewed by an auditor to minimize the effects of groupthink.

Research Teams. The interview team for the US sample consisted of three doctoral students in counseling psychology and three master's students in mental health counseling. The data analysis team consisted of 9 coders and two auditors, including two undergraduate students, four master's and three doctoral-level graduate students in counseling psychology, and two faculty members. The interview team, which also served as the data analysis team for the Israeli sample, consisted of two doctoral students in career counseling and two PhD career researchers.

All team members received training in CQR by reading [Hill \(2012\)](#) and by attending meetings where the PIs explained the process, and reviewed examples of CQR coding. Before coding the interview data, each team member provided the PIs with a written reflection statement regarding how their identities could potentially impact the research process as well as any study-related biases, expectations, and assumptions that were held. Overall, the Israeli team was more homogeneous, such that all four members of the team were women of older age (relative to the US members), married, and mothers. They were all born in Israel and raised in traditional Jewish families. The US team was more heterogeneous with regard to culture and gender, and the average age of the US team was relatively younger. US team members self-identified as seven women and four men, with five White, four Asian, one South Asian, and one African American. The social class origins of the US team were working through middle class, with county of origin including

the US and east and south Asian nations. Only two of the researchers, the university faculty, were parents. The social class of the Israeli team was middle high. US and Israel teams' members acknowledged how their identities, their training in mental health and counseling and their familiarity with the core tenets of PWT may influence their expectations. The Israeli team also noted also how their research on family-work relationships could contribute to greater sensitivity to family issues. These biases were discussed explicitly across both research teams before coding and on an ongoing basis in discussing and resolving coding differences. Coders discussed the importance of adhering to CQR procedures and avoiding interpretations based on biases.

Coding. The US and Israeli research teams analyzed their data separately using similar coding and auditing procedures in alignment with CQR. The analyses began with an independent reading of the interview transcripts by each team member to develop a list of broad themes or domains derived from the interview structure and participant responses. Each research team met and discussed the domains that were generated until consensus was reached on which domains to include. Domains were defined and examples from the text that exemplified each domain were developed. The domain coding was then completed by the smaller coding teams who followed the process of discussing their coding within their team and then with other coding teams until consensus was reached, with the auditors then providing feedback. The next step of the analysis involved summarizing the major themes that emerged from the domains into core ideas. Members of each coding team were responsible for producing core ideas for the transcripts that they coded and exchanged transcripts for review as in the previous step. In the final cross-analysis step, common themes, called categories, were abstracted in each domain across the set of interviews. The categories were identified, discarded, and refined within and across teams through a process of constant comparison, discussion, and agreement through consensual decision-making among team members and final review by the auditors.

Communication Between Teams. The Israeli and US teams met twice through Skype and zoom, once after auditing the domains and once after auditing the categories, to share and clarify findings and note areas of similarity and distinction. The first two authors communicated through zoom and email additionally to clarify procedures, emerging issues in the data analysis, and discussion of themes across the data.

Results

The separate analyses resulted in six domains for each sample, four that were common, and two that were unique for each sample. The categories within the common domains also revealed similarities and differences. Consistent with the approach of Hill (2012), domains and categories that were expressed by all, or all but one of the participants (18 or 19 for the US sample and 16 or 17 for the Israeli sample), were labeled as general. Those mentioned by at least half of the sample, but fewer than the criteria for general, were labeled as typical (10–17 for the US sample and 9–15 for Israeli). Variant categories in this study are those mentioned by 3–9 US participants and 3–8 Israeli participants, with rare categories mentioned by one or two participants. Hill (2012) recommend the use of these frequency labels as a way to meaningfully communicate and make comparisons across samples without implying more precision than is warranted for qualitative studies. In comparing studies and samples, differences of at least two frequency labels are recommended to conclude meaningful differences. We first present the four domains that were common across both samples and then present the two domains that were unique for each sample. The common domains are presented in Table 1, with the unique domains for the US sample in Table 2 and for the Israeli sample in Table 3.

Table 1. Common Domains: US and Israeli Samples.

Domain	Category	US Frequency	Israel Frequency
Future plans		General	General
	College	General	General
	Career	Typical	General
	Family	Variant	General ^a
	Army	None	General ^a
View of future		General	General
	Excitement and optimism Apprehensions	Typical Typical	General Typical
View of work		General	General
	Financial	Typical	General
	Psychological	Typical	Typical
	Dignity and honor	Rare	Typical ^a
	Social Working conditions	Typical None	None ^a Typical ^a
View of society		General	General
	Awareness of inequality	General	General
	Societal and economic resources	Typical	Variant
	Individual responsibility	Variant	Typical
	Commitment to change	Variant	None

^aUS and Israeli samples differ by two or more frequency labels.

Future Plans

Future Plans was a common general domain that captured students' thinking about their future goals related to education, work, or life in general. Some aspects of future plans were common across the two samples, with others being context-specific. The general category of college enrollment was expressed by all the Israeli participants and all but one of the US participants. Although students expressed an interest in a range of fields of study, the most frequently mentioned areas were related to STEM (science, technology, engineering, or math). The following quote from a 17-year-old US female illustrates the central role of college in her future plans:

I really want to go to college. I really want to get a good scholarship. I want to be able to say I finished college and I'm able to do maybe even more years to be able to get higher up. I want to be a child psychologist, if not that, a social worker...and then I just want tobe able to say I'm financially stable.

College was described as central to work and life success among most US students and all Israeli students, as emphasized by this 16-year-old Israeli male, "Some people do well without a college education but they are few and, in my opinion, I also cannot succeed without it. It builds life."

Career was a general domain among the Israeli participants and typical among US participants. US students mentioned a range of potential professional careers, all requiring a college degree or higher. All Israeli students also perceived themselves as working full-time in professional roles, sometimes in conjunction with family responsibilities. While most of the Israeli students mentioned a specific career option, half also spoke of the importance of pursuing a prestigious and well-paid career. Only one of the US students specifically mentioned the importance of prestige in their future, and only one mentioned success or influence. This 16.5-year-old Israeli male

Table 2. Unique Domains: US Sample.

Domain	Category	Frequency
Family of origin	Value message	Typical
	Support and pressure	Typical
Comparison of generations	College competition	General
	Jobs	Typical Variant

Table 3. Unique Domains: Israeli Sample.

Domain	Category	Frequency
Values	Achievement	General
	Money	General
	Prestige	Typical
	Independence	Typical
	Pleasure	Typical
	Balance	Variant
Role blending	Stress	Typical
	Strategies	Typical Variant

expressed the goal of becoming “a CEO of a very successful technology company,” while noting that he would not choose to become a “musician, an athlete or something like that” because “it is not something safe.”

Family was a general category for the Israeli students. All of the Israeli participants spoke about establishing their own families as part of their future plans, with three female participants mentioning the specific role of motherhood. Remaining close to their families of origin was also expressed by more than half of the Israeli participants. This Israeli 17-year-old male describes the importance of future and current family, “It is important for me to start my own family, and not forget my family of now, my parents and brother and sisters, to be with them.” Family relationships were a variant category among US students, with only two students mentioning the importance of staying close to family and only one talking about having children. With regard to sample variations, army service was mentioned by all of the Israeli participants, who spoke about this as a meaningful and desired requirement. Many also mentioned specific units they hope to join and demonstrated a solid knowledge of the process, as explained by this 17-year-old Israeli female:

After I graduate from high school, I’ll be drafted to the army...now is their recruiting process. I will be interviewed by an intelligence unit next week...I am also thinking about paths different from intelligence, such as the army radio station and military band...I would like to keep my options open.

View of Future

Beyond their specific plans for the future, students in both samples described positive feelings and apprehensions towards the future. Positive feelings included general optimism and excitement in anticipation of their emerging independence. All Israeli and many US students mentioned excitement about being independent, as exemplified by the remarks of this 17-year-old Israeli male, “When I think about the future, it excites me to think that I will no longer live with my parents, that I will be alone, and in my own right.”

For both samples, feelings of excitement were also typically interspersed with varied apprehensions. The Israeli students expressed feelings of sadness, fear, and concern for separation from friends and family during their time in the army or college and some concern about failing to reach their career goals. This 17.5-year-old Israeli female expressed sadness about leaving friends behind when finishing school:

I’m sad to finish these 12 years in school, I do not know anything else beside that and on the one hand I really want to finish but when I think what is going to happen with my friends and the scouts it makes me feel sad and worried but there is nothing I can do.

For the US participants, apprehensions focused mostly on concerns about access to competitive colleges and preparation for college and career. This 15-year-old US female worries about competition for college and deciding on her future career:

Sometimes I worry about all the competition, like about getting into a school, or I won’t find my true passion, cause I want to do something that I’m really passionate about, I don’t want to be just stuck in a job that I don’t really like. But I don’t even know what I want to do yet, so that’s something I worry about. I just won’t find my thing.

View of Work

View of work was a common domain that reflected students’ perspectives on the benefits of work. All US and Israeli participants identified a variety of work benefits, encompassing five categories. Among those categories, financial support was mentioned typically by the US participants and by all of the Israeli participants, with many students describing the importance of earning a lot of money to have a “good life” and opportunities for travel. This 16.5-year-old Israeli female emphasizes the financial benefits of work, “Work is an essential source for livelihood and money... Money doesn’t come easily. Money is something significant. Working for money is not easy.”

When asked whether they would work if they didn’t have to, participants across both samples typically recognized the psychological benefits of work. This 17-year-old Israeli male typifies Israeli participants who described work as a source of interest, enjoyment, and accomplishment:

A good job is a job that...that gives you a good feeling for yourself. At the end of the day you come home and feel good. Even if it’s hard. Something stable that you enjoy and it interests you. You are good at it and can move forward. Develop your skills.

The two samples revealed some differences in how they prioritized other work benefits. Honor and dignity were a typical theme among Israeli students, as expressed by this 16.5-year-old male, “I want a job where you are treated with respect, that you trust. For example, if you need to leave early, your superiors will not think you are lying or trying to evade.” US students typically

mentioned the social benefits of work. This 16-year-old US female describes how the social benefits of work complement the financial and psychological:

I think honestly the number one reason is just to be able to support yourself... I also think it gives them something to work for, like it gives them something interesting in life and you're not just sitting on your couch doing nothing. It allows you to set goals for yourself and grow and meet people and make relationships and all those things. I guess in some way too, it gives people a purpose in life. They feel like they're doing something, they're bettering the world somehow.

Working conditions, including work hours, physical conditions, and access to health insurance, were typical among Israeli students. Work hours were often mentioned in relation to family and work-life balance concerns as expressed by this 15.5-year-old Israeli female:

Work for a number of hours that make sense. If a person starts his day at 8 a.m, even at 7 a.m, so that he does not finish it at 12 p.m, but finish it at normal time ... for example, not work 14 hours, because people do have to go home and be with family, go out for a night, and sleep. That is, there will be a maximum of working hours.

View of Society

In response to specific questions about economic inequality and the belief that working hard leads to prosperity (American/Israeli dream), students spoke about the presence and sources of inequality at the societal level. We labeled this common theme as View of Society, which includes four categories: awareness of social and economic inequalities, awareness of the role of societal processes and resources in shaping inequities, knowledge and commitment for addressing inequalities, and focus on hard work and individual responsibility.

With regard to awareness of economic and social inequality, all students across both samples acknowledged the existence of economic inequality and social marginalization. This 16.5-year-old Israeli male acknowledges how he benefits from financial advantage:

...if I will need to compete and succeed against a kid from a less well-off neighborhood or family, then I will be far ahead of him. For example, I'm a kid from a well-off family who lives in Ramat Aviv and there's another boy who is poor from a less good area, and he needs to help his family so he will have to give up on things and may not have the same advantages...

Among Israeli adolescents, the awareness of how societal processes and resources shape inequality was a variant category that included reference to educational opportunities and racial and religious discrimination. This Israeli 15-year-old female offered insight on how the need to care for siblings can limit educational advancement, "So kids our age in poor neighborhoods are leaving school early because they have to help their family and their little brothers. So I don't think it is always right to say that if you work hard then you will succeed."

A 16.5 year-old Israeli female whose family immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia spoke of the role of racial discrimination, "In light of what I see, I'm really scared that I don't know if they...want to get me into workplaces ... on racial background. Sometimes I think about it. I see it in my surroundings with my cousins." The student explained further that a cousin who studied to be a lawyer was not able to achieve his goal, "He had no way to move forward ... but maybe it's because he came from Ethiopia and that's why they said he was less fit and didn't have the skills."

With regard to societal processes and resources, US students typically described socio-economic and political conditions that characterize US society, including immigration and

ethnic, racial, and religious discrimination, and varied systemic issues, such as changes in the job market and the high cost of higher education. Some who self-identified as marginalized related to their gender identity or ethnic/racial background spoke about the role of societal biases and discrimination as factors that might limit advancement in education and career pursuits. This 17-year-old US male, a recent immigrant to the US, describes the obstacles encountered by undocumented students in the US, “if I don’t get my legal papers or something like that my green card, I cannot apply to a ... bank to loan money either to go to college because colleges are too expensive.”

This 18-year-old US male explains how the cost of higher education perpetuates inequality:

To be honest, I just think the whole higher education system, because we’re in a capitalist country, is just screwed, because you’re literally making people in debt for 20-plus years so they can get a decent job and a livable wage basically, which is just screwed. What can I do? I can’t change the country.

A commitment to systemic change was, however, variant in the US sample and not expressed among the Israeli students. One of the few US participants, a 16-year-old non-binary student, who expressed specific ideas on the types of changes that might help to decrease inequality, spoke about the importance of college access, “Making education more accessible to people I think will help with that, and making people more aware of their society, and what happened to make it this way, and could possibly lead to some answers.” A 17-year-old US male also spoke of being “supportive of policies where the federal government would pay for people to go to college.”

In conjunction with a limited commitment to systemic change, students across both groups expressed resignation with the status quo, as voiced by this 15-year-old US female:

So I think you are definitely limited if you don’t have as many resources or as many opportunities if we’re all unequal. There’s gonna be inequality, no matter what we do, but I think there should be something to bridge the gap between the rates of success and the rates of people ... I don’t know, like overcoming.

As with the US students, many Israeli students were resigned to the status quo. A 16.5-year-old Israeli male put it this way, “There is inequality in the world and it is a pity but there is not much to do about it ... I personally did not encounter this difficulty, fortunately.”

US and Israeli students typically endorsed assumptions about individual responsibility and the value of hard work, which were often offered in response to the question about their belief in the American/Israeli Dream. This 16.5-year-old Israeli male emphasizes the role of effort and hard work:

Even if there are financial problems then work has to be done. Easiest to say ‘I don’t have’, ‘I can’t’ and ‘I have financial problems.’ Some families have real financial problems, but if a person doesn’t try to do something about it, he won’t get anything and it’s not about the environment.

The importance of hard work in overcoming economic disadvantage was a typical theme among US students. A 14-year-old US male states,

You know, a steel miner in Pennsylvania, their kids go to school, they work hard. Maybe they can pay, maybe they can’t pay, but they go to a college wherever that is, and you know, they can get anywhere and if they want to, they can get a high paying job.

While the value of hard work was typically emphasized across participants, other students, as evident in some previous quotes, also recognized the limitations of hard work. Among US participants, just half expressed confidence in the power of hard work, with the remainder acknowledging limitations or the belief that the American Dream was no longer true in US society.

Family of Origin

The influence of family of origin in shaping educational and career plans was a unique and typical theme for the US sample. Although family of origin was mentioned by Israeli students, it was not sufficiently prevalent for the research team to identify this as a distinct domain. For US students, family influence included two categories: family messages and students' experiences of support and pressure surrounding school and career attainments. With regard to the typical category of family messages, students described their families as emphasizing hard work, striving for success, and attending college. A 16-year-old US female describes her parents' emphasis on college as stressful, "One thing that my parents will talk to me about nearly every single day is college...For them, it's a very big deal. It really stresses me out sometimes."

With regard to the typical category of family support and pressure, 9 US students described emotional and financial support, with five describing feelings of pressure for success in the absence of support, and two describing both support and pressure. This US 17-year-old male described feelings of pressure to meet expectations that are associated with parent financial support:

I'd probably get a lot of backlash from my family if I was going towards a career path that was what they viewed as less financially secure... I probably wouldn't because my parents in the end are going to be the ones who foot the bill for college or university or something like that.

Comparison of Generations

Among US students, a comparison of current and past generations was a unique general domain, with college competition being a typical category and changes in jobs as variant. Generational changes focused on increased competition for college acceptance and access to jobs offering good salaries. Only three US students, who were children of recent immigrants to the US, thought that life was easier for members of their generation, with the remainder describing the challenges of their generation as harder. With regard to college, students described competition as related to the increasing numbers of students seeking entry into highly selective and top-ranked colleges and universities, rising admissions standards and costs, and a recognition of their stress and college-related mental health issues. This 17-year-old US male describes competition in college applications, "It's definitely more competitive. There are more people applying to college because again, there are more jobs that require college education... I definitely think it's more difficult to get into college now." This 15-year-old US female expressed concerns about the rising cost of living and education: "Colleges are way more expensive now than they probably were when my parents were going to college, and I just feel like kids are so much more competitive now than they were before."

Access to jobs was a typical category, with students describing increased work requirements, the impact of technology on available work, and the stress created by a rising cost of living in relation to wages. This 17-year-old US male student described raising job requirements and salaries:

It is harder in the sense that more education is required to get jobs. There are fewer of these jobs where you can get them with a high school ... Even some of these same jobs, they now want people to have college degrees. I feel like there are fewer. It's harder to get those jobs where you don't need a college degree and you can still earn a pretty good salary.

Values

Values that shaped their future plans, their perceptions about work, and future lifestyle concerns emerged as a distinct domain for the Israel participants. Six categories were identified: achievement, money, prestige, independence, pleasant lifestyle, and balance. While these values were apparent in the narratives of the US sample, some were attributed to their family of origin or mentioned briefly. All Israeli participants talked about the importance they placed on high academic achievement. To study at a prestigious university and to have a prestigious occupation was a typical category, as exemplified by this 17-year-old Israeli male: "...every type of work is respectable but, in my opinion, those types of occupations are not the most respectable jobs or most innovative works and I prefer to take my life in a better direction."

The importance of money was mentioned typically, as illustrated in the comments of this 16.5-year-old Israeli male, "If you say that you have money, that you are from a recognized family, say, everyone will want to connect with you. That's what attracts people. Appreciation. Recognition." The desire for independence was another typical category, described by this 16-year-old Israeli female, "Doing real things on my own... to make money yourself, travel around the world, meet new people." Enjoying a pleasant lifestyle with hobbies and leisure activities was also typical and life balance was variant.

Role blending

Role blending, including concerns regarding current and future challenges in managing multiple demanding and important life roles, was a typical domain among Israeli participants. Role blending encompassed two categories: tension and stress that accompany participation in multiple roles; and strategies for managing multiple roles, including time management, prioritizing roles, and narrowing responsibilities. This 17-year-old female exemplifies the stress associated with a demanding schedule:

I'm in 12th grade now. I study Physics and French at high school in Tel Aviv. I'm a chief counselor in the Scouts this year, which is a responsible for both the counselors and the children of the 4th grade group... I sing in the school choir. I used to dance for many years, but I stopped dancing because I was very busy with school and with the scouts' activities. I was also in a program called Computational Science in HEMDA (science education center in Tel Aviv), but I also stopped this because I was very busy, and it was too much stress to manage...I also like Sports. I'm running twice a week.

Strategies to manage multiple roles was a variant category. This 16-year-old female describes the use of time management:

I have to know how to manage my time, and I'll do it well because even now I have a lot of things that I manage to combine and do it all together and we still have time, so I think there's no reason why I won't keep it this way...I will not have a job that is too hard and so I can invest in everything without pressure.

Discussion

The current study focuses on adolescents' conceptions of their futures, work, and society using the theoretical lens of PWT and highlighting the role of social context, especially social class and nation. Analysis of 36 semi-structured interviews with students attending high-performing high schools in affluent communities in the US and Israel identify some developmental experiences that are relatively common in Western industrialized societies and reveal variations shaped by their respective schools, families, social class, broader culture, and national policies. We begin with a discussion of common themes across the two samples, then discuss differences.

Common themes

Students across both samples describe future plans focused on college enrollment and the eventual attainment of professional employment. Consistent with the foundational role of social context in PWT and prior theory and research on adolescent career development (Lapan, 2004; Lapour & Heppner, 2009; Vondracek et al., 1986), their goals and future perspectives reflect their privilege and the multiple contexts in which they are embedded.

The importance placed on college across both samples is reflective of their position as high school students in high-performing schools and the broader socio-economic context. The emphasis on college as a prerequisite for success in the labor market is grounded in current market realities and the messages young people receive about the need for post-secondary education in building their human and economic capital (Hooley, 2021; Sultana, 2021). Students' attention to the benefits of college graduation, especially from a prestigious university, reflect a goal orientation that is driven by the desire for economically advantageous outcomes, rather than intrinsic benefits. This socialization is consistent with higher SES families, high-performing schools, and the communities in which they reside, while also reflecting contemporary trends towards the commodification and marketization of higher education (e.g., Brown & Carasso, 2013).

In relation to the core tenets of PWT (Blustein 2006; 2019), the adolescents in our study described work as central to meeting financial and psychological needs. While some US students recognized work as a source of social relationships, none of the US or Israeli students articulated a hoped-for societal benefit from their future work. Related to their social position and the value placed on economic success, income was an important consideration for participants in planning for their futures. Students across both samples described their career options as limited by their own or their families' concerns about high salary or prestige. These types of restrictions on career choice have been identified in prior research of students from high social class groups (Lapour & Heppner, 2009). Consistent with PWT, the students from well-resourced communities nevertheless expressed a sense of volition or agency in shaping their futures, while also voicing concerns about competition for the best jobs and entry into the most prestigious colleges. Students across both groups expressed optimism toward the future, derived in part from their advantaged social positions. Although some variation in the source of anxieties was noted across the two samples, stress related to social and academic competition and striving for college and career success was prevalent and has been documented in prior research among affluent youth in the US. (Lapour & Heppner, 2009; Luthar, 2003).

Despite significant political, social, religious and ethnic differences across the two national contexts, students from both samples expressed awareness of social and economic inequality in their countries and endorsed the importance of hard work. The Western neoliberal ideology that emphasizes personal success, hard work and opportunities for all is common in the US (Ali et al., 2022; Howard, 2010) and was previously documented among Israeli adolescents (Cinamon & Hason, 2009). While some students in our study recognized the limitations of hard work, others

felt that those who do not succeed have not worked hard enough. Only a few students across both samples expressed specific ideas about how inequality could be addressed beyond hard work by motivated individuals, and none discussed their potential roles as agents of social change. When students did identify a potential focus for social change, they largely discussed access to education. While this might be related to the messages they have received about the importance of education, students did not recognize other long-standing economic and social structures that sustain systemic racism and economic injustice. PWT specifies critical consciousness as an individual resource in mitigating the negative impact of social and economic conditions for marginalized individuals. The students in these affluent communities demonstrated critical reflection in terms of an awareness of inequality but many lacked commitment to a fair society or the intention to engage in social action, which are hallmarks of more developed stages of critical consciousness (Diemer et al., 2016). Although research focusing on critical consciousness among privileged groups is limited, economically and socially privileged students in the US have expressed firm beliefs in meritocracy and a resignation with the status quo (Howard, 2010; Lapour & Heppner, 2009).

Unique Themes

Several salient differences stand out in comparing the US and Israeli samples, including the role of military service in the post-high school future plans of the Israeli youth, the focus of Israeli youth on future family roles, work-life balance, and future working conditions, and the attention of US youth on family of origin and growing competition in school and work access. Some of these differences may relate to national policies and cultural values. Consistent with PWT, the unique themes reflect varied ways in which the social context influences views of the future, work and society.

With regard to national policies, the post-high school military service requirement determines the next step in the future plans for Israeli students. This may contribute to feelings of anticipated sadness around separation from friends and perhaps less reliance on family of origin for financial support in the next phase of their lives. The Israeli students anticipated their futures beyond the military and college to also consider future family and working conditions. A comparative study of US and Israeli college women (Michael et al., 2017) found similarly that Israeli college women talked more about the importance of leisure, balancing multiple roles, and parenthood than US college women. In discussing these differences, Michael et al. (2017) noted that the Israeli college women were older because of military service, but also noted the role of cultural factors, including traditional family values, where the vast majority of young people in Israel aim to marry, have children and develop a career, with women continuing to carry the major responsibility for family tasks. The challenges of managing work and family roles and the quest for work-life balance has also been noted in research among Israeli high school students (Cinamon & Rich, 2014). In contrast and consistent with the US students we interviewed, other US research has found privileged high school women to prioritize work roles and to be less concerned with how to combine work and family (Lapour & Heppner, 2009). With regard to the Israeli students' concern for leisure and work-life balance in the current study, we note that Israel has a higher than average rate of educational attainment, employment, and working hours in comparison with other OECD nations, but lower than average pay and time for personal care (OECD, 2022a). The value placed on work benefits and work-life balance may stem from an awareness of those disparities.

While family of origin shapes the career development of students in the US and Israel (Cinamon & Rich, 2014; Whiston & Keller, 2004), the attention given to family of origin in the US sample in the current study may be understood, in part, by the role of private higher education in the US. This includes the cost and selectivity of highly ranked private colleges, which hold high

prestige in the region of the US sample. These students remain thus highly dependent on their families for college financial support and pressures for college and career choice. Consistent with the core premises of PWT, US students also expressed awareness of generational changes in competition for college and career. Recent literature has amplified the voices of adults who are experiencing anxiety in the context of an uncertain and changing work environment (Blustein, 2019). Our interview findings document the presence of uncertainty and anxiety among youth in the US, who espouse concerns that are influenced by global trends as well as by their local culture and economy.

Practice Implications

The findings of this study reveal some common themes and varied perceptions of the future plans, work, and society related to global trends and national differences. Within both national samples, additional variations reflect intersecting identities encompassing gender, parental education, immigrant status, ethnicity, religion, and other factors, all of which would need to be considered when designing career development interventions. While the narratives of our study participants suggest many ways in which career education can address future planning and work-family issues, we highlight two directions with the potential to address social and economic justice.

The US and Israeli students attending high-performing high schools interviewed for this study reflect the ideologies of the neoliberal economic systems in which they are embedded. Vocational psychologists (Ali et al., 2022) are challenging the field to move away from career development practices that perpetuate neoliberal assumptions that focus on personal success and strive instead to promote the collective good and economic justice. While this challenge entails the need for engagement in systemic community change, a critical lens can also be brought to vocational intervention at the person and group levels. With regard to a critical approach to career education, Sultana (2021) suggests that career intervention should go beyond enabling people's pursuit of the most lucrative career choice and guide them to consider the social and ethical underpinnings of the economic system. Cinamon et al. (2019) assert the need for career education to address issues of social responsibility, active citizenship, and the power of social change, and Hooley (2021) advocates for a broad consideration of ways to engage in education and the world beyond vocational success.

Consistent with the above perspective, Kenny et al. (2019) proposed a transformative model of career development education with a focus on youth purpose and critical consciousness. The young people in this study expressed stress about the pressures and demands of their lives and for success in college and career, often without a sense of the broader purpose for their education. Youth purpose has been proposed as a strategy to guide youth in moving beyond the mindless and stressful pursuit of achievement to develop future plans that are both personally meaningful and contribute to others (Liang & Klein, 2022). Critical consciousness can be integrated with purpose so that youth come to understand their own positionality and their potential social contributions through a frame of systemic injustice (Liang & Klein, 2022). Vocational psychologists (Cadenas & McWhirter, 2022; McWhirter & McWha-Hermann, 2021) are advocating for increased attention to critical consciousness in vocational research and practice, including the need to advance understanding of the benefits and development of critical consciousness across levels of oppression and privilege.

While research is needed to guide the infusion of critical consciousness in career education, the 5-stage model of sociopolitical development described by Watts et al. (1999) suggests the need for activities that move students from an acceptance of the status quo to an awareness and questioning of injustice, and finally to motivation and action for social change. Hooley (2021) proposes a model of emancipatory career guidance that includes naming oppression or learning about the

systems that marginalize people, problematizing or questioning what is normal, and encouraging people to work together for collective action. Critical analysis might be promoted through discussion of diverse economic policies, such as the debate regarding Universal Basic Income (UBI) or consideration of Ali et al.'s (2022) assertion that prosperity and justice should be aligned for everyone to have a chance at a good life. Adolescents might also be asked to critically consider how their privilege and their efforts to sustain privilege are shaping their lives and career choices (Lapour & Heppner, 2009). Lessons on advocacy skills and community action projects have been incorporated into career interventions with Latinx youth to foster critical agency and action with promising results (McWhirter et al., 2019; 2021), but need to be designed and evaluated with varied populations. Social justice pedagogies developed in K-12 and higher education offer additional examples of methods to foster critical consciousness across social class (Howard, 2010; Seider & Graves, 2020), but also reveal the complexity and resistance encountered when disrupting beliefs that are shaped by students' families, communities, and the broader culture (Howard, 2010).

Limitations and Future Directions

Our findings need to be considered in light of study limitations. Our data is based on a qualitative approach that focuses on the perspectives of specific and unique samples of adolescents. Our descriptive approach does not establish causality. While we were specifically interested in learning about adolescents' perspectives, their views may, however, differ from those of adults in their lives. The current sample is inclusive of students with varying intersectional identities as related to gender, race, immigrant status, religion, social class, and nationhood, among others. Given the relatively small samples, these intersections were not explored in depth in this study, which limits our understanding of the findings as they relate to these intersecting identities. Qualitative and quantitative research with larger samples could seek to better understand the intersections of privilege and oppression that shape adolescents' careers and their responsibilities to others. Although we recommend an expanded model of career development education that promotes purpose and critical consciousness, knowledge on how to design and implement these effectively is nascent and represents an important direction for further research. Research and evaluation of career development education that infuses critical consciousness is needed with students representing varying and intersecting levels of oppression and privilege and to fostering antiracist allyship as an intervention outcome (Cadenas & McWhirter, 2022; Heberle et al., 2020).

In sum, this study represents an initial attempt to understand adolescents' conceptions of their future plans, work, and the broader social context. Consistent with the premises of PWT, our findings speak to the importance of considering adolescents' privilege and the multiple contexts in which they are embedded in the design of career interventions. As an initial study, it points to the need for further theorizing and research on how to enhance adolescent career progress that will promote access to prosperity, justice, and economic and work justice for all.

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