

Social Class and Undergraduates' Career Development: A Grounded Theory Study

Keaton Zucker, MS., Aaron Hudyma, MS., Patton Garriott, PhD.,
Dana Santiago, MA., & Jessica Morse, MA.

Abstract

This study examined the influence of social class on the career decision making of undergraduate college students using a grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Five focus groups were conducted with a total of 21 participants. The current analysis suggests an emerging core category of "maintaining balance" that denotes an ongoing process whereby individuals balance influences from society, proximal others, and the self with conceptions of career success and career choice. The resulting model provides a means for conceptualizing how multiple aspects of social class influence individuals as they consider career choices.

Introduction

Impact of Social Class: Prior research suggests the impact of social class on career development is profound (e.g., Thompson & Subich, 2011), though few studies have considered how aspirations of financial success, status, and power affect career decision-making.

Social Status and Occupational Prestige: Using a quantitative design, Thompson and Dahling (2010) found that among undergraduate students, perceived social status was related to value for occupational prestige.

Limited Career Options: In a qualitative study of privileged female adolescents, Lapour and Heppner (2009) found that social class privilege limited participants' perceived career options.

Gap in the Literature: No qualitative data is available to describe how social class may influence college students' career decision-making, nor are there any available theories to describe this intricate process. Additionally, the majority of research solely relies on socioeconomic status, occupation, and education as measures of class (Liu, Soleck, Hopps, Dunston, & Pickett, 2004).

Study Purpose: The purpose of this grounded theory qualitative study is to develop a theory that explains the process by which social class influences career development among undergraduate students.

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 21$) were recruited from undergraduate classes at a medium-sized private university in the Rocky Mountain region of the U.S. 66.7% of participants identified as female. By class rank, 3 were freshmen, 4 were sophomores, 7 were juniors, 7 were seniors, and 1 did not identify their class rank. Average age was 20.67 years. 3 participants did not report their age. In terms of race/ethnicity 66.7% identified as White, 14.3% Biracial/Multiracial, 9.5% Hispanic, and 9.5% Asian. In terms of social class 52.3% identified as "upper-middle class", 23.8% "middle class", 9.5% "lower-middle class", 4.8% lower class, 4.8% did not know their social class, and 4.8% did not identify their social class.

Procedure

Five focus groups were conducted by two Counseling Psychology doctoral students. Focus groups lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were audiotaped. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed and refined for interviews as data analysis progressed. Interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Researchers

The researchers included three Counseling Psychology doctoral students, one Counseling Psychology masters student, and one Assistant Professor of Counseling Psychology.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to analyze the data. During *open coding*, individual units of data were coded by all research team members. In the *axial* phase of coding, open codes were merged to generate higher order categories. During *selective coding*, axial codes were merged to generate a theory. The current theoretical model is depicted in Figure 1.

Results

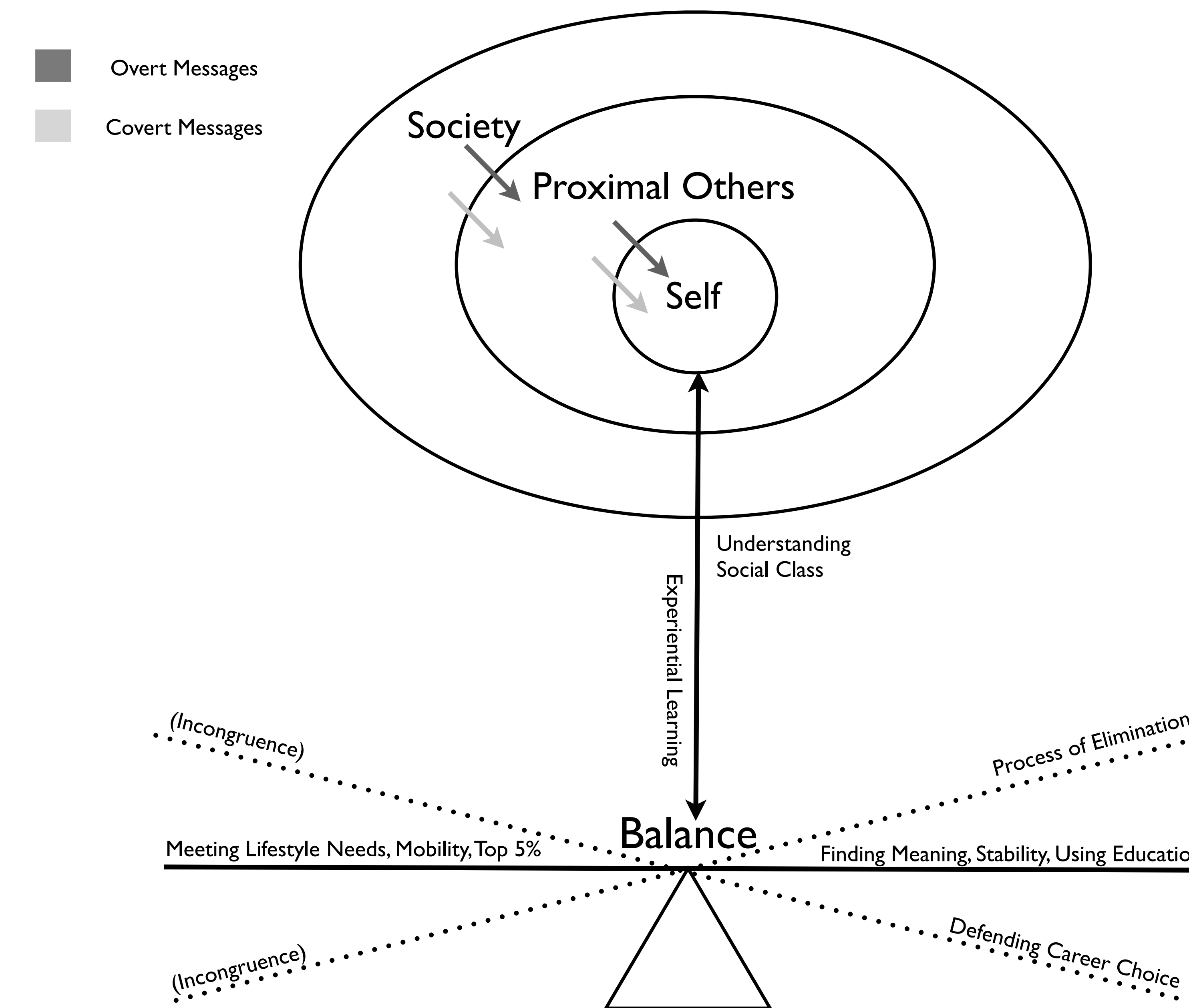


Figure 1. The dynamic process by which undergraduate students experience the impacts of social class on career decision making.

Discussion

Implications

- This model may enhance counseling professionals' awareness of the various levels at which social class (subconsciously) influences college students' career decision-making process
- Findings indicate that participants referenced class-related values and markers of success when considering viable options
- Counselors' inquiries about the messages students receive from society and proximal others and the way in which the individual interprets these messages about social class may encourage exploration of perceived career options and preferred values
- Experiential learning is a vital factor in early career decision-making and social class mediates the type and amount of exposure students obtain in fields of interest, thus opportunities for experiential learning should be highly encouraged and accessible to all

Future directions

- Develop and distribute a survey to quantitatively examine tenets of the proposed model
- Examine applicability of this model to a larger sample and expand generalizability by utilizing a sample of college students with wider social class disparity
- Investigate the relationship between perceived social class and career values

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