
Lecture 9

Social Cognitive Environments and Career Beliefs

Intended Learning Outcome

At the end of this module, it is expected that the participant:

1. Will be able to describe how career beliefs affect career preparation.
2. Will be able to describe what career alternatives are.
3. Will have the knowledge to blend self-understand and world of work information to develop individual-specific career alternatives.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

1. Social cognitive-environments

As with other human activities work occurs within a *social context* – a context characterised by *patterns of beliefs and ways of thinking*. This influence of the mind on behaviour is particularly significant when entire societies think in a particular manner, internalise belief structures and demonstrate certain mindsets. Albert Bandura (1989) uses the term *social cognitions* to describe patterns of thinking that have become habitual across social groups. Social cognitions are patterns of beliefs that exist within a community and guide the behaviour of the individuals in that community. Beliefs held by the individuals of a community may cohere into a pattern of commonly held cognitions characterising an entire community or social group.

Social cognitions play a powerful and significant role in orientations to work as well. Mind-sets engendered by social and moral frames of reference give a *particular colouring and interpretation to the meaning and purpose of work*. Prevailing ideologies and the experiences of a community create *social-cognitive environments*. Within these environments, values (positive, neutral or negative) could be attributed to work in general as well as toward particular occupational clusters.

Social-cognitive environments can foster the evolution of a *work ethic*: a set of social norms that describe a particular approach and attitude to work. For example, a certain work ethic may place a positive moral value on hard work based on the belief that work has innate worth

and must be pursued for its own sake. Another social-cognitive environment may promote a work ethic wherein factors such as social class, religion or caste may engender the firm belief that certain kinds of occupations are ‘unworthy’ of being considered. A work ethic, is thus a collection of social cognitions about work, which guide and influence people’s work behaviour.

Many non-Western cultures are *collectivistic* in nature. Career planning in such cultures is not a purely individualistic effort and *beliefs and values held by the community can play a significant role in the career decision-making process*. Therefore, career development is *not merely* a function of the maturation and unfolding of personal interests and aptitudes or of the crystallisation of personal identities. Personal attributes unfold *within a certain social-cognitive environment*. The characteristics of this environment influence the manner in which personal attributes are linked to career development.

Understanding social-cognitive environments can go a long way to clarify the real meaning of career development in the developing-world context and can help us develop services that are better rooted in contextual realities.

2. Career Beliefs

Career beliefs are social cognitions associated with *work, job and career*. John Krumboltz, when he initially introduced this idea, pointed out that people make many assumptions and *generalisations* about themselves and the world of work based on their experiences. Beliefs can

become so deeply ingrained that they may not even be identified by their holders as beliefs - they are more like unquestioned, self-evident truths. Whether accurate or not, career beliefs exert facilitative or inhibitive influences on individuals' decisions and actions as they attempt to develop and implement career goals. These patterns of thinking may or may not be grounded in rationality. Yet *they predispose the individual to making career decisions in a certain manner.*

We have tried to explore career beliefs further. Our research has shown that a conglomerate of attitudes, opinions, convictions and notions seem to cohere together to create mind-sets and beliefs that underlie people's orientation to the idea of a career. It appeared from our field experiences that the impact of career beliefs on the career development process is marked and critical (Arulmani, 2000; Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004). Over the last few years we have attempted to study career beliefs more systematically, and have investigated the possibility that certain kinds of social-cognitive environments foster *certain kinds of career beliefs*. Our analysis has consistently thrown specific "types" of career beliefs (Arulmani, 2008) that seem to interlock with career development, which are described briefly in the sections below.

2.1. Proficiency Beliefs

A consistent career belief theme that influences the nature of career preparation is the *importance laid on acquiring qualifications, skills and personal proficiency for an occupation*. It may seem obvious to some that acquiring qualifications and developing proficiency for a specific range of work skills is necessary for career development. In reality however, there seems to be wide variability in the manner in which social-cognitive environments actually nurture this attitude. For example, in certain cultural contexts and economic conditions, a *lower* emphasis is laid on acquiring work-skills proficiencies. Our research has found this to be particularly true for socio-economically vulnerable groups (Arulmani, Van Laar & Easton, 2001). The lower emphasis on acquiring work-skills proficiencies could be the result of the high degree of pressure on the economically disadvantaged to have their children begin *earning for survival*. Conversely, the typical Indian middle-class family places an extraordinarily high value on *acquiring qualifications*. Great efforts and significant family resources are directed toward ensuring

that the children in the family are 'properly qualified' by middle class families.

2.2. Control and self-direction beliefs

Situations and experiences influence the direction that one's life can take. This category of beliefs reflects the individual's *sense of control over the trajectory of his or her life*. Mind-sets in this category are linked to the career aspirant's belief that he or she could deal with the exigencies presented by life situations and the willingness to direct and take charge of the way in which his or her life progresses. Here again the influence of social-cognitive environments is significant. Young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds seem to demonstrate a lower orientation to exercising control over the trajectory of their lives. Their responses reflected *helplessness* in the face of barriers to career development, with a tendency to *view the future* in terms of the deprivations they were experiencing in their *present* situation. The higher-income groups, on the other hand, showed a stronger orientation to creating opportunities for themselves and high motivation to actively engage with career development tasks.

2.3. Persistence beliefs

Successful career development requires the individual to *face and attempt to overcome difficulties and hurdles* that punctuate progress toward a career goal. This category of mind-sets toward career development describes beliefs that foster persistence *in spite of* difficulties and barriers that could emerge during the process of career preparation. These beliefs reflect the resolve to persevere with determination toward career goals.

Once again, we have found that persistence amongst young people from disadvantaged homes was *lower* and *less consistent*. Their responses reflected a strong predisposition to *sacrificing long-term gains for more immediate benefits in the here and now*. If a career is to become a reality for young people from poor homes they would be required to make career plans, while simultaneously grappling with poverty, unstable family structures, inaccessible institutional support and financial constraints. Planning for what could come to fruition only *sometime in the future* may not be consistent with the reality perceptions of the young person from such a background. The middle-class groups, on the other hand, demonstrated a higher degree of persistence. Their responses reflected a *long-term*

orientation to the future, with evidence of planning, setting goals and preparing for their future.

2.4. Culture and Common Practice

Common practice and unwritten norms shape the career preparation behaviour of a community in a certain way. In middle class in many cultures, it is expected that a 'bright' student would take up either medicine or engineering as a career. Young people strive to fit into this expectation. As a 17 year old boy in Egypt said, "*I may be talented in something but my family and others may expect me to do something else. It will be difficult to go against society.*" Statements such as these reveal the strong influence of common practice on career choices.

2.5. Relevance to career counselling

Career beliefs by definition are unreasoned convictions. They may or may not be grounded in fact. They may or may not be helpful to the career development process. Career belief themes vary across age groups, socio-economic status and cultural environments. The foregoing discussion of career belief themes illustrates how attitudes of pride and prejudice could influence career development. Our experience has consistently demonstrated

that the outcomes of career counselling are often rendered meaningless when prevailing career beliefs were left unaddressed. The notion of social-cognitive environments and the career beliefs they engender have given us a useful framework within which to understand career development and to plan interventions that are contextually relevant.

Bringing career beliefs into the career counselling process could help the career chooser realise how effective career choices are sometimes *blocked* by belief structures that he or she is unaware of. A career counselling target would be to help the client consider career choices based on personal interests, preferences, talents and aptitudes, rather than being led by unhelpful career beliefs.

A further, critical, point to be considered is that career beliefs are not restricted to the client alone. The *counsellor too* operates from within a specific social-cognitive framework. It is quite possible that the counsellor's own ways of thinking could be imposed on the client and his or her family. When this happens career counselling merely perpetuates another set of career beliefs. The case study from India given below illustrates how important it is for the counsellor to be aware and sensitive to personal beliefs and attitudes.

Case Study: A counsellor and her career beliefs

Renuka is a mathematics teacher who recently joined a government high school for students from socio-economically disadvantaged homes. She found that her students' aspirations did not take them beyond accepting just any unskilled job that came their way. Their parents were mostly casual labourers and worked on construction sites on a daily wage. Being from a typical middle class Indian background, Renuka was brought up to believe that education is all important. Furthermore, her family and community believed that a good career is possible only through the Sciences. Renuka developed a deep concern for her students and wanted to help them become engineers and doctors. She took up a short course in career counselling. She then offered a five-session career counselling programme for her students. Renuka prepared wonderful charts, posters and worksheets. The programme was meticulously planned.

Case Study: A counsellor and her career beliefs

Her class was full the first day. All her students came in. However, Renuka found that she could not hold their attention. The next session had only a few students and by the third session – no one came to her workshop any more. Distressed and discouraged, Renuka called us for advice. We used the cultural preparedness approach to help her understand the process of career counselling. Renuka quickly discovered that her conception of 'success' was entirely different from her students' understanding of 'getting ahead'. Renuka's culture believed that the pathway to success was through education. Her students' economic situation forced them to focus on the here and now and look for anything that would help them earn a living as quickly as possible. She realised that in the face of financial crisis, middle class families like hers would struggle hard not to sacrifice children's education. On the other hand, her students' families, being from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, held beliefs that pushed them to the opposite side. They would let go of education at the earliest and look for a means of income.

Renuka went away and re-planned her approach to career counselling for her students. She focused first of all on laying aside her own career beliefs and starting with the beliefs of her students. Her programme this time focused on the following key action points:

- Helping students understand the impact of their proficiency beliefs on their attitude to career preparation.
- Helping her students get a slow and small start, gaining a skill in an affordable manner and gradually building up their lives using available government schemes and scholarships.
- Interacting with parents to make them partners in the career development of their children.

This time around, it was much more difficult to start again, because her students viewed her with scepticism and labelled her as someone from the 'other side'. Initially she was able to attract only a handful for students. But gradually, as students began to realise that their counsellor understood their situation and was trying to help them build their lives from where they were, they started returning to her programmes. Renuka's final words to us illustrates the cultural preparedness approach to career counselling: 'I started with all my good intentions.' she said. 'But when I began interacting with my students, I realised that what I had to offer was not important to them at all. Instead, I had to learn to be a partner with my students. I had to learn not only to give, but also to receive from them. I had to learn from my students, before I could give.'

The next theme in the Career Discovery Path is to help the career chooser *integrate information about self and information about the world of work to develop career alternatives*. However as we have seen above, social cognitions and career beliefs can have a significant manner in which career alternatives are identified. Social cognitions are *thinking habits* that influence behaviour. Prestige, for example is a powerful influence on career choice. Certain occupations are believed to be 'prestigious', while others are not. In many Asian countries, young people and their families for example are quite sure that Medicine is the most prestigious of careers with Engineering coming next. Competition for these 'prestigious' careers is so intense, that selection criteria become unrealistic and often corrupt. This race toward a handful of careers, leaves in its wake a large number of young people who don't 'make it'. It also causes disinterest in the various other careers that are available and perhaps even more lucrative. As we have earlier discussed, beliefs about acquiring work skills proficiency, persisting toward career goals and taking personal responsibility are all underlying cognitions that affect career development. The effectiveness of career counselling can crumble if prevailing career beliefs are left unaddressed

SKILLS FOR PRACTICE

Activities to Address Career Beliefs

I BELIEVE

Note to Facilitator

Attitudes, opinions, convictions, and notions come together to create mindsets and beliefs that underlie peoples' orientation to the idea of career. These deeply held convictions about career development have been termed as Career beliefs. The impact of career beliefs on the career development process are marked and critical. This activity is designed to sharpen the student's awareness of career beliefs and how they can affect career decision making.

How to Use the Worksheet

This worksheet was developed for India and therefore its contents are drawn from the Indian context. Your task is to use this worksheet as an example to develop something similar for Lebanon. At the end of this activity we want students to be able to:

- Explain the way in which career beliefs can influence career development.
- Articulate at least one example of a career belief which could block and a career belief that could help the process of their career development

Preparation:

In order to execute this activity, you need to make a list of career beliefs that are common in Lebanon, amongst your target group. Listen to commonly used statements. Look for patterns in these statements. Look for 'threads' and commonalities. Select the most common beliefs about career development and include them in your worksheet.

Method:

The sample worksheet is a table. In the first column of the table, various opinions about careers common in India are listed. Replace these opinions with the typical Lebanese career beliefs you have identified. There are four possible options for each opinion: *Very True*, *True*, *Sometimes True* and *Not True*. Your target as the facilitator is to:

- sharpen students' sensitivity to negative career beliefs.
- get them see the impact of such beliefs on their career development.

Continue the activity as follows:

Read out the first opinion. Open a discussion with the whole group regarding this career belief. Allow students to express their views. After a few exchanges, take the first belief in the table and point out the consequences of holding such a belief. Give examples and illustrations from the group's lived experience.

Example from the sample worksheet: The first opinion listed is "*Only science leads to good careers*". This is a strong career belief in India. The common response to this statement in India would be *Very True*. After stimulating a discussion with students and getting them to express their views and ideas, the facilitator would analyse this opinion as follows:

- The facilitator would list out careers that don't require a degree in science (e.g., accountant, banker, psychologist, stock broker, copy writer, graphic artist) and point out that these are lucrative, well paid professions for which a science education is not required.

- The facilitator would then use the diagram on the top of the worksheet to remind students of what potential means (interest + aptitude). The facilitator would point out that if a student who did not have a high potential for science, was forced to take up science because of prevailing career beliefs, he/she would most likely do badly, get low marks and ultimately miss out on any kind of career.
- The facilitator would also make the point that such career beliefs maybe common, but need not be true.
- The facilitator would conclude by asking students what is more important: following common career beliefs or finding a career that matches the person's potential.

In this way list out and discuss common Lebanese career beliefs and discuss their impact on career development.

Ask everyone to fill the bubbles in the worksheet giving one example of a career belief which could block and another that would help the process of their career development. Ask at least two volunteers to share what they have written.

Keep in mind: Your objective is *not* to change career beliefs. This takes time and may not happen through a few minutes of discussion. Your target is to *stimulate a debate and a discussion*. Work at making students aware that beliefs affect actions and *plant the seed* of more positive career beliefs.

Worksheet:
A template for
adaptation

I Believe...



Opinions, attitudes and beliefs



What do people believe about careers and subjects?

Career Belief	Very True	True	Sometimes	Not True
Only science leads to good careers.				
Nursing is a good career for boys.				
If I like it, then it means I am good at it.				
If it comes to choosing between a career and family responsibilities, then girls must choose family first.				
Luck is all that matters.				
If I get bad marks, I should study Arts.				
The religion or caste that I belong to will have a strong influence on my career development.				

Think Point!



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MY FUTURE...MY BELIEFS

Note to Facilitator

This is another idea for an activity on career beliefs. This activity follows the well known “snakes and ladders” game. It is designed to sharpen student’s awareness of career beliefs and how they can affect future career development.

This worksheet was developed for India and therefore its contents are drawn from the Indian context. Your task is to use this worksheet as an example to develop something similar for Lebanon.

The overarching objective for this activity is that students understand that *our beliefs affect our future*.

How to Use the Worksheet

Method:

This game is to be played between pairs of students or even between the counsellor and the student. More than two participants can also play.

- Each player should have a counter to play with. It could be small stone or lump of paper.
- A dice with 6 numbers is required.
- The dice is tossed and the player moves his/her counter forward as many boxes as indicated.
- In case a dice is not available, write the numbers 1 to 6 on small chits of paper. The one who is not playing should hold the chits. The player should pick one chit. The player should move his/her stone on the chart according to the number he/she gets. After that the next player should play.

The grid has boxes and upward going arrows and downward going arrows. Some of the boxes are “hot spots”. Whichever box has the beginning of an arrow is a hotspot. Each hot spot is loaded with a negative or positive career belief. A negative belief takes the player down in the grid and a positive belief takes the player higher up in the grid. The meaning of each hot spot is given in the matrix below the grid. For example, box 6 carries the belief: *“I can start working without studying”*. This is a negative career belief. Therefore if the player’s counter lands in box 6, he/she is pulled downwards to box 1. Box 10 carries the belief: *“If I work hard I can achieve what I want”*. This is a positive career belief. If the player’s counter lands in box 10, he/she goes upwards to box 17. Whoever reaches the top most box in the grid, is the winner.

The instructions to be given to students are as follows:

“This is a Career Beliefs Game. Our beliefs affect our future. They can take us up or down. Play this game with your friend to know more. As you play, you might land on a square that takes you up or another square that takes you down. Why is this happening? See below the chart to know why you are going up or down.”

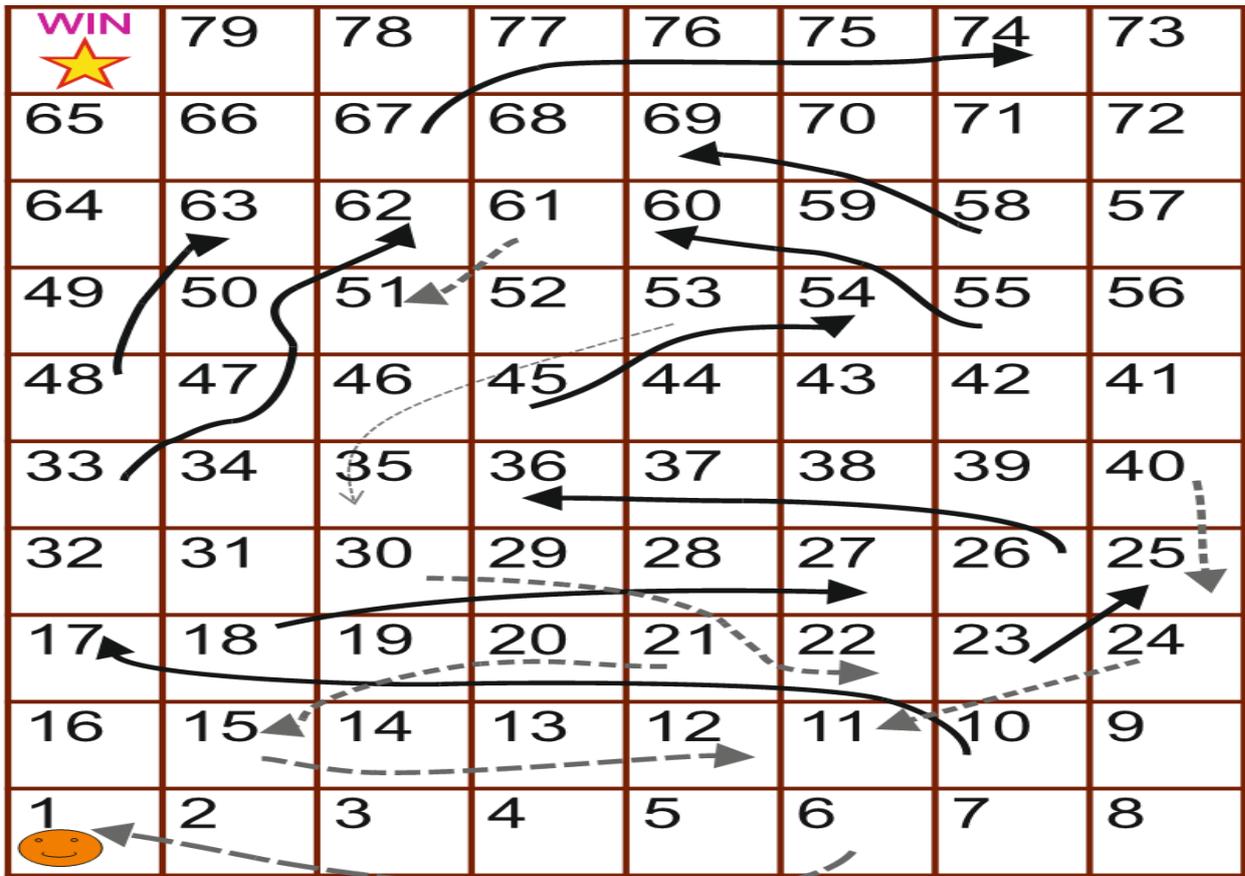
If you have time, you can play the full game. Or else, after students have played the game for about 10 minutes, tell them they can complete the game in their spare time and continue the activity as follows:

Take up the explanation for message loaded into each hotspot. Discuss the explanations in each of the boxes with the class. Ask for students’ opinions. Show how career beliefs can affect career development. Point out how negative career beliefs can take us down while positive beliefs can take us upward toward success.

Conclude the activity by letting students know they can complete the game in their spare time. Point out that winners have positive career beliefs. Losers have negative career beliefs.

Click here for a video demonstration of the activity:
<https://youtu.be/dFAj8GfNnol>

My Future My Beliefs



Box	Career Belief
6	I can start working without studying
10	If I work hard I can achieve what I want
15	Girls must stay at home and boys must work
18	Studying what I am suited for will give me success
21	Luck is all that matters for success
23	I must overcome barriers in my path
24	Everyone is doing it, I must do it also
26	If I match my potentials to my career I can have better success
30	Science is the only subject that gives good jobs
40	Vocational courses have less scope
45	My success depends on how well I do in my subjects
48	If I fail, I will try again
53	My teacher is not good. So I cannot study
54	Even if some subjects are difficult, I am ready to work hard
58	If I find something difficult, I will ask for help
61	My father has good influence, so I need not study so hard
67	After 10 th grade, I must think and choose the subject best for me