

## SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF CAREER ORIENTATION IN PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** The social dimensions of career choices represent a theme that is discussed internationally, having however only a few research in Romania. In the present article, I wish to examine to which degree social factors influence school and job-related decisions, on a sample consisting of last year's high school students from Hunedoara County. The present study is quantitative, not experimental, done by applying an online questionnaire and manipulating the results in SPSS. Association analyses and a univariate Chi-Square test have been used for testing the hypotheses. The results have indicated major differences between the level of satisfaction concerning career orientation counselling between boys and girls, 11th-grade students and 12th-grade students and the 3 high schools in which the questionnaire was done. Moreover, there is a significant statistical correlation between gender stereotypes regarding jobs and the educational path chosen by the students. An extra conclusion of the study is that career choices are not a result of an orientation process that is happening in schools, but significant influence upon such decisions belongs to the parents.

**Keywords:** career choices, career orientation, gender stereotypes regarding jobs.

**Résumé :** Les dimensions sociales des choix de carrière représentent un thème qui est discuté au niveau international, ayant cependant peu de recherches en Roumanie. Dans le présent article, je souhaite examiner dans quelle mesure les facteurs sociaux influencent les décisions relatives à l'école et à l'emploi, sur un échantillon composé d'élèves du secondaire de dernière année du Comté de Hunedoara. La présente étude est quantitative et non expérimentale, réalisée en appliquant un questionnaire en ligne et en manipulant les résultats dans SPSS. Des analyses d'association et un test Chi-Square univarié ont été utilisés pour tester les hypothèses. Les résultats ont indiqué des différences importantes entre le niveau de satisfaction concernant l'orientation professionnelle entre les garçons et les filles, entre les élèves de 11<sup>e</sup> et élèves de 12<sup>e</sup> et les 3 lycées dans lesquels le questionnaire a été réalisé. De plus, il existe une corrélation statistique significative entre les stéréotypes de genre concernant les emplois et le parcours scolaire choisi par les étudiants. Une conclusion supplémentaire de l'étude est que les choix de carrière ne sont pas le résultat d'un processus d'orientation qui se déroule dans les écoles, mais qu'une influence significative sur ces décisions appartient aux parents.

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**Mots-clés :** choix de carrière, orientation professionnelle, stéréotypes de genre concernant les emplois.

**Rezumat:** Dimensiunile sociale ale alegerii carierei reprezintă o temă discutată pe plan internațional, având însă puține cercetări dedicate în spațiul românesc. În prezentarea de față îmi propun să examinez în ce măsură factorii sociali ai alegerii de carieră amprentează alegerile școlare și profesionale, pe un eșantion constituit din elevi din anii terminali de liceu din județul Hunedoara. Studiul de față este unul cantitativ, non-experimental, realizat prin aplicarea online a unui chestionar și prelucrarea datelor în SPSS. Pentru testarea ipotezelor s-au folosit analize de asociere și un test Chi Square univariat. Rezultatele au indicat diferențe semnificative ale satisfacției legate de consilierea de carieră percepute, între fete și băieți, între elevii de clasa a XI-a și cei de a XII-a și între cele trei licee de proveniență. Totodată, există o corelație semnificativă statistic între nivelul stereotipurilor de gen ocupaționale și traseul educațional ales. O concluzie suplimentară a studiului este aceea că alegerea de carieră nu este rezultatul unui proces de orientare și consiliere de carieră derulat instituțional școlar, influența semnificativă în decizia cu privire la alegerile de carieră fiind cea a părinților.

**Cuvinte cheie:** alegere de carieră, orientare în carieră, stereotipuri de gen ocupaționale.

### 1. Short literature synthesis

The problem of student career orientation remains an incredibly complex social issue in which multiple variables intervene: the characteristics of the student's family, the competence of the school counsellors, gender distribution of teachers, fluid situations (hardly predictable) on the job market, informational flow mediated by the internet etc. In this context, good counselling of the students is a premise for professional success, especially if the recommendations are aligned with the student's talents. For Dumitru (2008, p. 204) the respective counselling starts with school and professional counselling, which is only then to be followed by career counselling. If on the first level, the identification of a possible profession is relatively static and directly related to the job market, on the second level the focus is on the path that will be chosen to fulfil legitimate aspirations. Paraphrasing the same author, we can conclude that professional and school orientation is a momentary one, while career orientation is looking at the entire life. Career orientation requires three action directions: knowledge about yourself; knowledge about the job market; the building and realisation of the career (Dumitru, 2008, p. 206). All of these are a decisional chain which belongs to the student, but in which the role of the school counsellor can be decisive (to find the balance between intentions, aspirations and possibilities). If we refer to the theories that lay the ground for career orientation, the aforementioned author splits them into two big categories: not psychological (with the indication of external factors which intervene in the decisions) and psychological (different questionnaires and tests about interests, value and abilities). In this article I will analyse the first category trying, from a sociological perspective, to analyse the factors that are truly relevant in career decisions.

The complexity of career orientation can also be seen in the analysis of OECD concerning „career guidance”<sup>2</sup>, OECD suggests some 11 important indicators, split into 3 thematical axes:

1. Exploring the future (conversations about careers, interactions with employees, visiting different jobs, practising the skills to apply for a job, short programmes based on occupation)
2. Experiencing the future (working part-time, volunteering)
3. Thinking about the future (career certainty, the ambition to follow a specific career, career alignment, the motivation to study).

About the role of career counselling, the specialists from OECD underline „The students find it easier to find a job in those education systems in which career orientation is present in schools”. The correlation is inverse: the more students participate in career orientation the lesser unemployed students are there („Career Readiness Study”<sup>3</sup>).

Without a doubt, career orientation brings individual benefits, but also social ones: it helps individuals progress in the process of studying and working, but it also contributes to the efficient functioning of the job market and social mobility (from geographic mobility to the phenomenon of „brain drain”). The more time students spend in education and the more the job market becomes more complex, the stronger become arguments for career orientation.

To position the role of career orientation more precisely we will agree, like Sultana (2017) that the respective orientation „supports individuals and groups to discover more about more, free time and studying, to take into consideration their place in the world and to plan their future. The key to this is the development of the individual and communal capacity of analysing and debate the hypotheses and the relations of power, creating networks, building solidarity and creating new and common opportunities. It empowers individuals and groups to fight in the world as it is and to imagine what it could be like. Career orientation can take various forms and is based on diverse theoretical traditions. But, in essence, it is an opportunity to study intentionally which supports individuals and groups to take into account and to reconsider work, free time and studying in the light of the new information and experiences and to act both individually and in groups as a consequence.”

Not a few are the studies that underline the persistence of gender differences concerning personal objectives and interests. For example, for the ones that are interested in STEM the gender differences are notable, although there are no (or minimal) differences based on gender concerning academic abilities. In this point we can exemplify the study coordinated by Petersen and Hyde (2014), in which it is noted that there is very little difference in academic abilities: in favour of males- some spatial abilities and qualities in leader roles; in favour of female’s verbal abilities; concerning mathematics, the respective differences were very

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<sup>2</sup> <https://oecdeditoday.com/preparing-youth-for-work-what-works-career-guidance/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://issuu.com/oecd.publishing/docs/how-youth-explore-experience-think-about-their-future>

small or non-existent. Other authors, such as Zell, Krizan and Teeter (2015) similarly describe small differences between academic abilities.

In an article, Su et al. (2009) analyse the gender differences related to professionals' interests. The authors conclude that men prefer to interact with *objects*, whereas women choose to work with people. Moreover, Hyde (2005) shows that socializing forces transmit to kindergartners ideas about the differences between boys and girls and the careers that fit both these genders. Bourdieu (1998/2017) underlines that schools, together with the church and the state, represent an agent of preserving structures that express male dominance.

Studies by OECD point out that these differences between boys and girls concerning their interests are big starting with the first years of school. The study „Drawing the Future” (2018) confirms the conclusion of Su et al.: boys prefer to work with objects and girls work with people. Another study by OECD (2019), which compares the results from PISA 2000 and PISA 2018, reveals big differences between boys and girls, aged 15, regarding the wanted professions.

The last EIGE report, from October 2020, points out some differences between genders even when discussing study areas at the university level. When we look at the adult population of Romania with finished studies, we notice an evident balance (13% females and 12.5% males), however, the differences occur when looking at the domains in which these studies were finished. Thus, our students in education, healthcare, humanities and arts are mainly female (26.8% compared to 14.8% for males). These differences are spread across the European Union as well (45% for females, compared to 22% for males). A part of these domains has low pay, a fact that is interpreted as gender segregation. On the other hand, the feminization of the education sector and the masculinization of some „peak” sectors is underlined in many studies (Nesse Network of Experts, 2009; EURYDICE, 2010; The European Commission, 2017; Han et al., 2020).

When they join the job market, women are met by the phenomenon of occupational segregation, horizontally but also vertically. Some sectors are still considered „masculine”, having higher pay compared to those considered „feminine” (OECD, 2019). The same study concludes that all these domains where women are found in a vast majority have a low economic status, which „undermines their trust and self-confidence”. Even though in many European countries career orientation already has a gender dimension, this is limited to special programmes for girls, which encourage them to follow STEM careers, with a lack of similar initiatives for boys, which would guide them toward feminized domains (education, healthcare, humanities) (EURYDICE, 2010).

An extra incentive to tackle this subject is the fact that there are relatively few studies on this theme in Romania (if we exclude the already published university courses). We can point out a study by the Institute for the Sciences of Education (2004), which underlines that the educational process (through curriculum, didactic strategies, and ways of interaction between certain agents) creates and preserves, directly and indirectly, occupational gender stereotypes. Another study (A.L.E.G, 2018) had as its purpose the identification of attitudes and

behaviours from the educational system which preserves gender stereotypes, between four European countries: Italy, Romania, Lithuania and Cyprus. The qualitative research focused on the role of schools, teachers and the curriculum in the preservation of stereotypical behaviours of students. The same study has explored the impact of gender stereotypes when making career decisions. The last gender barometer, published in 2018, proves the coexistence of four viewpoints on the gender problem, basically „four segments of the population”: „the segment of gender modernity”, „the segment of compliant traditionalism related to gender equality”, „the segment of classic traditionalism” and „the segment of parochial behaviour” (p. 16). Bucur and Miroiu express that: „women have started to challenge inequalities between genders way more in the political sphere but rarely explicitly in the family” (2018, p.169), according to the hypothesis of the „cultural gap” (Ridgeway, 2011): frequently, the economic level of a society is in no relation to perceptions about gender, these being present inside family life, where a strong resistance against the equality of the genders is manifested.

In Romania „counselling and career orientation” has a well-defined institutional in the respective legislative documentation. Thus in Annexe 2 of „The common order” M.E.C.T.S-M.M.F.P.S nr.4469/12.06.2012/ nr.1804/03.07.2012, it is specified that counselling and orientation services in the pre-university education are guaranteed by „a) School or interschool offices for psychological and pedagogical assistance, school centres for inclusive education, coordinated by County Centres for Resources and Educational Assistance (CJRAE) [see order 5555/2011]; b) school programmes specifically to the curriculum „Counselling and orientation”; c) special programmes for counselling and career orientation organized by the school institutions partnered by other state or non-state institutions”.

About these counselling offices, we must note that they have a limit of 800 students or 400 kindergartners per office. We remind however that starting with the 2021-2022 school year the number of students per counsellor was supposed to be limited to 600, respectively 300 kindergartners, but these changes were never applied (probably for financial reasons).

What are the roles of these counsellors? They must do psychological and pedagogical counselling, but also career counselling. They have to cover a complex problem, starting from the self-development domain (knowing yourself, harmony in relationships, stress control, techniques for efficient learning etc.), to promoting health and healthy life, to preventing risk behaviours (from dropping out to bullying to substance abuse), to career orientation, parent counselling, but also the counselling of other teachers.

In practice, the number of students and kindergartners assigned to such a counsellor is way above what the law specifies. At this point I wish to add that career orientation in Romania is not practised at a satisfactory level. Such activities are supposed to be part of the norm that class teachers and the school counsellor have, thus career orientation is fragmented and random.

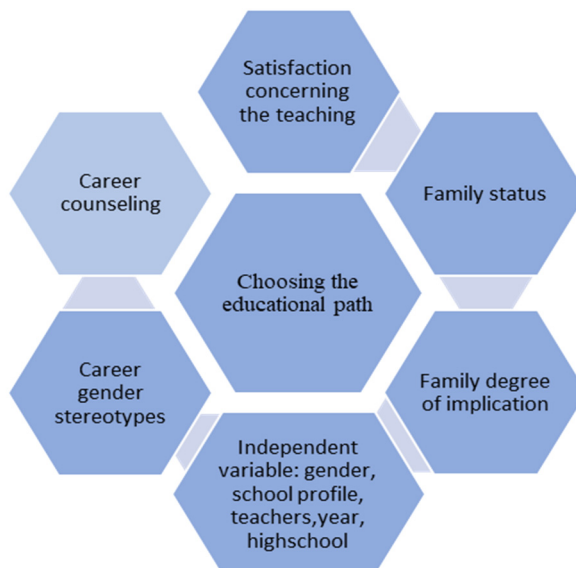
## 2. Methods, participants and instruments

The questionnaire was fulfilled with the help of the Google Docs platform with juniors and seniors (11th and 12th year) from 3 high schools in Hunedoara County (to be seen in the next table). The data collection took place in February and March of 2021. The final volume of the sample was 245 students distributed as follows:

**Table 1.** The structure of the sample split into high schools

Highschool	Gender	Answers	Percentage
National Collegium „Iancu de Hunedoara”	Male	60	52.6
	Female	54	47.4
	Total	114	100
Pedagogical National Collegium „Regina Maria” Deva	Male	18	23.4
	Female	59	76.6
	Total	77	100
Theoretical Lyceum „Avram Iancu” Brad	Male	38	70.4
	Female	16	29.6
	Total	54	100

A part of the result of this research has been used in a research programme, that happened during the master's programme *Educational Counselling and Integration*, at the Western University from Timisoara. The objectives of the aforementioned project were much broader, in this case, we will limit ourselves to the problem of starting a career. For the present research, the following main concepts have been used:



**Figure 1.** Choosing the educational path

From the graph, we conclude that the process of choosing a career is complex, which starts with choosing an educational path. This path must correspond to a future career, which the student represents based on direct influences (a proposed/discussed model in the family, a model proposed by the school counsellor, the model for parental control through direct implication and the family status). On the other hand, the student faces gender stereotypes in the educational environment, firstly in school path choices and later in career choices: aware or not, he will take into account these norms of social control (boys and girls have a higher probability of dedicating themselves to a traditional educational trajectory). The satisfaction concerning the teaching act is also a factor that intervenes subjectively (a significant incentive related to the reasoning of a career choice).

#### 4. Results

For this analysis, I defined a series of variables as follows:

a. *The variable „Certain educational path” (Educsigfin) or „chosen career path”* is a variable which rises from the item through which we wanted to find out whether the students know for certain the educational path they want to follow. This variable can be defined as dichotomous or trichotomic, starting from the answers to this question which differentiates the ones that know precisely what they want to study, from the ones that are not sure yet. For the statistical analysis, we preferred a split into 3 categories (3. Yes, I know what I want to study; 2. Yes, I know the path, but I am not sure (multiple paths can be chosen); 1. I do not know the path). We point out that 8 students refused to answer this question. A positive is that 65.4% of students declared that they know precisely what they want to study, and the rest had partial or total hesitations regarding their educational path.

b. Independent variables as follows:

*Level of satisfaction concerning the education they received (satisfice)* – is a variable that unifies questions related to the level of education on Likert-type scales with values in the interval [1-4]: the lower the value, the greater the level of satisfaction. The following things have been put under evaluation: the teacher's work, the communication between teachers and students, features of the school, extracurricular activities, the relationship between the school and the parents, and the grading system.

*The level of career stereotypes based on gender-* is a statistical variable that grades the ability of boys and girls of pursuing certain educational paths. The questions addressed, for example, the increased probability of boys following technical/technological fields, same as girls supposedly have a higher probability to enter the humanities or have difficulties in entering the job market. The statistical variable has values in the interval [6,30]: the higher the value, the more pronounced the gender stereotypes (in other words there is a perception of a difference between genders regarding possible careers). For different statistical analyses, the variable has been modified (0. Low gender stereotypes, 1. High gender stereotypes).

*Degree of family involvement*- is a Count type variable which adds up the different types of involvements of the family regarding career orientation. The students have evaluated to what degree the family support or even controls the school activities, invest financially in extra tutoring or plays an active role in the communication with the school or with other parents. The variable takes values in the interval [1,5], where a value close to 5 signifies a strong involvement of the family. The variable can be used as a numeric continuous statistical index modified into 3 categories (1. Weak involvement, 2. Medium involvement, 3. Strong involvement).

*Satisfaction concerning the effect of career counsellors* is a variable with 3 possible answers (Positive effect, No effect, I don't know).

Based on the constructed variables I hypothesized and tested those hypotheses:

*H1. The students have consciously chosen their career paths.*

To test this hypothesis, I have applied a univariate Chi-Square test, and the results can be seen in the following table:

**Table 2.** Univariate Chi-Square test of choosing the educational path

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual		
Yes, I know the way forward for future studies	155	79	76	Chi-Square	111.291
I know the way to go but I'm not sure	49	79	-30	df	2
I don't know the way to go	33	79	-46	Asymp. Sig.	0.000
Total	237				

As one can notice, our data are significantly different from the theoretical ones (Chi Square=111.29, df=2, p=0.00). In other words, the respondents have chosen the answers consciously (not randomly). From the residual column, we observe that the highest value matches the first option, through which the students declare that they know with certainty what path they want to follow. As we have already mentioned, more than 65% are in this situation. The hypothesis is confirmed.

*H2. The satisfaction regarding teaching, the level of career stereotypes and the satisfaction regarding counselling are associated with the chosen educational path.*

The crosstabulations analysis gave the results in the following table:



**Table 3.** The analysis of the association between the chosen educational path and satisfaction regarding teaching, career stereotypes and satisfaction regarding the school counselling

Association of the variable „Certain educational path” (Educsigfin) with the variables	$\chi^2$	df	p
1. Satisfaction regarding the teaching	4.61	2	0.09
2. The level of career stereotypes	5.37	2	0.05
3. Satisfaction regarding school counselling	6.52	4	0.16

As one can notice from the first and last case the p limits pass the 0.05 limit, thus the hypothesis is not confirmed. For the second case, the limit  $p=0.05$  is acceptable. Nonetheless, the table of frequencies is important, that is where we observe that the students with a certain educational path (even in the case of choosing multiple paths) are associated with a lower level of gender stereotypes. In other words, the ones with a known career path do not take into account gender differences when choosing a career.

The conclusion of the H2 hypothesis is only partially confirmed because *the satisfaction regarding teaching or the satisfaction regarding career counselling* does not match with choosing a future educational path: happy or not with the teaching or the counselling, the students decide their priorities alone or influenced by other sources.

*H3. The degree of involvement of the family is associated with the level of career stereotypes (declared by the respondents).*

The involvement of the family in the future career of the student, while very diverse (from imposing a model to follow to strict control of the educational evolution or high payments for extra tutoring), is correlated to career stereotypes (the family can impose some careers which are traditionally addressing boys or girls).

From the association analysis, we cannot conclude that the involvement of the family correlates with the perception of career stereotypes based on gender (Chi Square=5.00,  $p=0.08$ ). However, we notice the fact that the intensity of familial control is directly proportional to the intensity of gender stereotypes (a sign that gender stereotypes concerning careers are transmitted between generations). The fact that the hypothesis is not confirmed is strictly tied to the type of sample that was researched (on other samples this hypothesis could be confirmed).

*H4. The school profile, the classroom and the gender of the students are associated with satisfaction regarding school counselling*

The crosstabulation analysis gave the results in the following table:

**Table 4.** Analysis of association between the satisfaction concerning the career and the high school, year and gender of students

Association of the variable regarding the 'satisfaction concerning counselling' with the variables...	$\chi^2$	df	p
1. Profile of the high school	20.41	4	0.00
2. The year	10.52	2	0.00
3. The gender	19.31	2	0.00

We notice that the hypothesis is confirmed in all three cases, with the following observations:

- there are significant differences in perception regarding the competence of career counsellors (the first position is held by National Pedagogic College „Regina Maria”)
- the 11th grade students are the ones perceiving the career counsellor rather positively, which is a surprise (the career counsellor should rather be more present in the last year of high school)
- the positive effect of career counsellors is clearer in the answers of the girls rather than the boys.

#### 4. Conclusions and discussion

The theme of this article is complex, suggesting new directions for research. In another research (still happening), I wish to intersect the gender dimension with the issue of social-cultural reproduction upon career choices.

Moreover, an objective is to extend the research to new target groups, a group of school counsellors, one of the class teachers and another one of parents. The analysis done from three perspectives (students, teachers, parents) would offer a broader picture concerning career orientation.

The empiric research underlines the fact that choosing a career is not an exclusive result of a process of orientation and counselling but is influenced by other social factors. The school counsellor has a small influence, almost useless, being last in the list of agents of influence, with a percentage of just 2% of all answers. With a percentage of 98%, the parents are indicated as main career counsellors.

Last but not least, this is another argument for changing the role of school counsellors, or even the coexistence of career counsellors inside educational pre-university institutions, as it happens in many European countries. According to an OECD study (2021), a mandatory condition for career counselling at the pre-university level is „the career guidance must be done by impartial and well-trained professionals”.

The rethinking of career orientation in Romanian schools could, by taking an example from other countries, offer the students more support in career counselling, but would also give career counselling from a new dimension (gender dimension). We could hope that educational choices, practically career choices,

would not be done anymore based on family influence or according to some social trends, but based on the interests, values, abilities, and personality of the student and also on the development of the job market. Moreover, we can hope that career choices would no longer reflect gender bias so much. This fact is explained by the fact that when children evolve, they already internalize gender stereotypes, including occupational ones, and start to exclude from their ideas the occupations considered incompatible and, most of the time, they only consider such occupations if they are encouraged to do so (Oliveira et al., 2020). The same authors consider that school counsellors should be the people that oppose such limitations.

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