
Young People's Attitudes Toward the World of Work in Three Canadian Labour Markets

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to examine the attitudes of young people soon to enter the work force in three distinct Canadian labour markets. In addition, the relationship between gender and work related opinions was also investigated. The instrument consisted of four subscales taken from a questionnaire adapted and developed in the United Kingdom 16-19 Adolescent Identity Formation Initiative and two subscales taken from the Attitude Toward the World of Work Index. The instrument was administered to 923 senior high school students in Newfoundland, Ontario, and British Columbia. Significant differences were obtained for both group and gender on the variables attitude toward training for new technology, belief in work, and job security. For self-efficacy and locus of control significant gender differences were found.

Résumé

Le but de cette recherche était d'examiner les attitudes des jeunes qui entreront bientôt sur le marché du travail. Ces jeunes proviennent de trois régions différentes au Canada. La relation entre le sexe des jeunes et leurs opinions sur la question du travail est analysée. L'instrument de mesure est d'abord construit à partir d'un questionnaire adapté et développé en Grande-Bretagne sur la formation de l'identité des 16-19 ans. L'instrument de mesure est aussi construit à partir de l'index sur les attitudes envers le monde du travail. L'instrument fut administré à 923 étudiants de "Senior High School" à Terre-Neuve, en Ontario et en Colombie-Britannique. Des différences significatives sont apparues entre les groupes de jeunes et entre les garçons et les filles pour les variables qui illustrent les attitudes des jeunes envers une formation pour la nouvelle technologie, pour la croyance dans le travail et pour la sécurité d'emploi. En ce qui a trait aux variables qui illustrent les attitudes des jeunes envers la confiance en soi et les critères de référence, des différences significatives sont apparues entre les garçons et les filles seulement.

The period of transition from school to work is considered to be an important stage in the identity formation of adolescents as they approach adulthood. Research studies in the eighties have indicated that adolescents are indeed monitoring the adult world, developing work perspectives, and acting upon them. (Amundson & Borgen, 1982; Feather, 1985; Breakwell & Fife-Shaw, 1987; Santilli & Furth, 1987). With major transformations now occurring in the educational system and labour market, however, a limited understanding of how adolescents perceive these changes hinders educators in helping young people formulate effective

strategies for coping with the transition. Students preparing to leave high school today face a greater number of barriers to career establishment than they did even 5 years ago.

In addition, recent national reports also have suggested that there is room for improvement in the way young people are prepared for entry into the workforce (Department of Employment and Immigration, 1989; Canadian Labour Market and Productivity Centre, 1990; Government of Canada, 1991). These documents call for fresh policies and concrete initiatives that can help young people make better use of their educational opportunities as they prepare themselves for the workplace. In addition, these documents emphasize that more must be done to make the transition from school to work less problematic and more efficient.

As Lewko (1987, p. 1) purports, "We know very little about the views young people hold regarding the world of work and the way in which these views are shaped or how they influence behavior". Some researchers, however, have suggested that factors such as parental work, attitudes toward new technology, perceptions of unemployment, and, of interest in this study, community wide economic conditions, all play a role in the decision making process of adolescents as they move into the workforce.

For example, Macguire, Romaniuk, and MacRury (1982) examined the views of 1,035 ninth and twelfth grade students in eight locations in Alberta. The study was conducted during a time when the economic climate in the province was very positive. The instrument used in the investigation was the Attitude Toward the World of Work Index and consisted of 15 subscales of five items each designed to capture adolescent's perceptions about the world of work. Some of these subscales included job security, interest and variability in jobs, confidence in succeeding, locus of control, attitudes toward unemployment, and general attitudes toward earning a living. Results indicated that the students' opinions generally were supportive of a traditional prairie work ethic and views of the world of work appeared to become more realistic as students prepared to leave high school. Gender differences were also obvious on a number of work dimensions with females' opinions reflecting a male dominated and traditional view of the work environment. Overall, there was an air of optimism reflected in young people's expressed opinions, which was coupled with an apparent subscription to the notion that rewards are generally related to hard work.

To further understand how prevailing economic uncertainty affects adolescent perceptions, Pautler and Lewko (1987) investigated the views of the work world held by young people who had experienced different types of adverse economic conditions. One condition was the direct exposure to an unemployed father in the home. The other condition was the indirect exposure to the generally negative economic conditions of

the entire community. The study was conducted in the northern Ontario regional municipality of Sudbury following the end of a nationwide recession in 1985. The researchers surveyed 1,106 students from Grades 6, 9, and 12 using the Attitudes Toward the World of Work Index and a parent information form devised to obtain employment history and occupation of the parent or parents. In comparing findings to those of the Alberta study what emerged was the pervasive effect of negative economic conditions on attitudes toward work. Contrary to the results of Macguire et al. (1982) in which adolescents were supportive of a traditional work ethic, subjects exposed to negative economic conditions in their community held a despairing view of the work. They had little confidence in influencing the job process, holding on to a job, or in their ability to be successful. In addition, grade 12 females departed from their male counterparts in placing less emphasis on the preservation of their autonomy.

In an attempt to determine variables which related to the transition of youth from school to work, Taylor, Boss, Bédard, Thibault, and Evans (1990) examined the relationship between educational settings and beliefs and attitudes of 255 Ontario students soon to enter the work force. The 35 items in the measuring instrument were taken from a questionnaire adapted and developed in the United Kingdom 16-19 Adolescent Identity Formation Initiative. The four subscales consisted of attitudes toward training for new technology, economic locus of control, self-efficacy, and self-estrangement. They were administered to students in a variety of educational settings in the national capital region of Eastern Ontario: senior high school groups in the advanced, general, and co-operative education programs and urban and rural community college trainees. The study was conducted during a period of economic growth in an area with a low unemployment rate and a high literacy rate. Results indicated that there were significant differences for educational settings on the variable of attitudes toward training for new technology with males having significantly more positive attitudes than females. It may have been that adolescents, socialized over a span of 10 years in the educational system amidst the rapid local expansion of the computer technology industry, perceived that computer operators, computer analysts, and computer technicians were male-dominated professions.

Together these studies seem to suggest that during the eighties community wide economic conditions, whether adverse or favorable, did have an influence on adolescents' views of the world of work. In some cases, for provinces in which unemployment is low and career opportunities plentiful, it is not surprising to find an air of optimism. However, as Feather and O'Brien (1986) state, in order to help young people prepare for job entry challenges, there is an increased need to better

understand this transitional period as it is experienced by different individuals and different cultures.

Since the eighties, we have experienced the impact of the Canada–U.S. Trade Agreement, a nationwide recession, rising unemployment rates and provincial deficits, a move toward privatization, increased plant closures, and changes in the global economy. How these events have influenced the attitudes of young people in different regions and labour markets in Canada has not yet been determined. Additional research is required to generate new information which will enhance career education so that young people may become better equipped to face the current challenges of the nineties for successful entry into a more highly skilled and unpredictable workforce. As well, it seems clear from the results of previous research, that in spite of the general movement to encourage adolescent females into non-traditional occupations, this does not seem to be occurring. More information is needed to understand the relationship between gender and work related opinions.

METHODOLOGY

The major purpose of this study was to compare high school students' attitudes toward work in three very distinct labour markets. Additionally, gender differences were identified.

Measuring Instrument

The measuring instrument consisted of 36 items. Twenty-six items (four subscales) were taken from a questionnaire developed in the United Kingdom 16-19 Adolescent Identity Formation Initiative. The additional 10 items (two subscales) were taken from the Attitudes Toward the World of Work Index which was used in Canadian transitional research. A Likert-type scale with five options per item ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree was used. In order to break response sets, certain items were stated negatively.

The four subscales taken from the United Kingdom study included Attitude Toward Training for New Technology (TECH), Economic Locus of Control (ECON), Belief in Work (BWORK) and Self-Efficacy (SELF-EFF). TECH consists of four items and describes the importance that young people place on training for new technologies. A high score on the subscale indicates a belief in the value of training for new technology. ECON is comprised of nine items and measures a belief in control over one's reinforcements in obtaining financial independence. A high score indicates internality. The subscale BWORK describes how individuals view the importance of work and consists of four items. A high score indicates a belief that being employed is important. The variable SELF-EFF, which measures how young people assess their own traits and

competencies in a social context, is made up of nine items. A high score indicates that an individual is satisfied with him or herself.

Based on earlier research of Macguire et al. (1982), two subscales from the Attitudes Toward the World of Work Index were also used in the study: Job Security (SEC) and Modified Locus of Control (MLOC). SEC consists of five items and describes individuals who value job security over other characteristics of a job. A high score on the subscale indicates that an individual values job security. MLOC measures how students view getting and holding a job as being largely a matter within or outside their control. A high score on the five-item subscale indicates an internal locus of control.

For TECH Bynner (1986) reported an alpha of .66 while Taylor et al. (1990) reported .51. For ECON Bynner (1986) reported .48 and Taylor et al. (1990) reported .54. These ECON values were consistently much larger than those found in the three samples within this study. Macguire et al. (1982, 1983) reported alphas of .61 and .34 for SEC and .64 and .57 for MLOC. In each case the values span those reported for these two subscales in Table 1. Roberts, Parsell, and Siwek (1989) reported the reliability of BWORK to be .63. Evans and Heinz (1990) reported a value of .79 for SELF-EFF.

Research Subjects

Research subjects were grade 12 students from three economic settings. Newfoundland students (N = 481) were from seven high schools scattered throughout the province. The schools varied in size from 150 to 800; the students were felt to be representative of Newfoundland students. The data were collected in November, 1990. Newfoundland has had a long period of high unemployment. During this investigation the unemployment rate reached 21 per cent. Students are aware that they may have a great difficulty in finding work.

A second sample of students was obtained from an Ontario city of approximately 50,000 population which borders the United States (N = 194). Data were collected in May, 1991 from students in seven high schools from the public school board. During the past year a number of employers had closed their businesses and subsequently the unemployment rate rose to 17 per cent. Generally, two noteworthy events are felt to have caused this problem. The Canada-U.S. Trade Agreement and the introduction of a federal goods and services tax of seven per cent. Pressures had been put on a number of employers because of the increase of cross-border shopping. In certain instances United States-owned manufacturing companies had chosen to move their operations back to the United States.

The third sample was from a relatively affluent community in southern British Columbia (N = 248). These students were from two public schools

and three private high schools. Private schools are a common occurrence in this region. Data were collected in March, 1991. With a provincial unemployment rate of nine per cent, student concerns about employment after graduation were not as great as in other labour markets across the country. For all three samples, data collection procedures were supervised by the co-ordinating team at the University of Ottawa.

RESULTS

As a preliminary data analysis, a MANOVA was conducted using the six dependent variables. Both sex and group effects were highly significant (zeros to three decimal places). Because the variables were not highly correlated, a two-way analysis of variance (regression approach) was carried out on each of the six variables. To minimize Type I error level of significance was set at .008 (.05 divided by 6). For TECH, BWORK and SEC significant differences were found for both group and gender. For SELF-EFF and MLOC significant gender differences were found. In no case was there any interaction effect. Means and standard deviations for each of the variables by group and sex are reported in Table 1.

The post hoc Scheffe results show that, for TECH, Newfoundland students scored significantly higher than British Columbia students. No significant differences were found when Ontario students were compared to the other two groups. For SEC and BWORK, significant differences were found between British Columbia and each of the other two groups. For each variable, Ontario and Newfoundland students scored significantly higher than British Columbia students.

For TECH, SEC, BWORK, and SELF-EFF males scored significantly higher than females. For MLOC females scored significantly higher than males.

DISCUSSION

Because the world of work seems to be a major preoccupation in the lives of young people in their senior year of high school, their attitudes are an important reality. In fact, young people are very much in tune with the implications of having a job, keeping it, and making a living from work. It follows then that this major preoccupation should be an essential part of a larger world, that is, the social world. As Santilli and Furth (1987) point out "this social knowledge, then, is actively pursued within the context of mutual social interaction . . ." (p. 34). This is the reason why, whatever their social and economic environment, young people should be encouraged to develop positive attitudes toward the world of work. It seems apparent that, whatever their social orientation or economic background, one day they will have to cope with the realities of work. It is in this perspective then that results on the subscales will be discussed.

TABLE I
Mean and Standard Deviations of Six Dependent Variables

Variable	Sex	Newfoundland		Group Ontario		British Columbia		Total	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
TECH		4.14	.60	4.02	.62	3.85	.70	4.02	.65
ECON	M	3.60	.37	3.58	.39	3.54	.47	3.58	.41
SEC	A	3.67	.49	3.71	.57	3.55	.51	3.64	.52
BWORK	L	3.18	.69	3.35	.67	2.85	.83	3.11	.75
SELF-EFF	E	3.72	.35	3.71	.40	3.78	.47	3.74	.40
MLOC		3.07	.70	3.02	.59	3.04	.70	3.05	.68
TECH	F	3.96	.55	3.86	.54	3.89	.57	3.92	.55
ECON	E	3.63	.40	3.65	.41	3.58	.37	3.62	.39
SEC	M	3.54	.52	3.57	.49	3.39	.58	3.51	.53
BWORK	A	3.15	.64	3.04	.67	2.77	.70	3.04	.67
SELF-EFF	L	3.63	.40	3.63	.40	3.66	.44	3.64	.41
MLOC	E	3.22	.66	3.36	.64	3.33	.63	3.27	.65
TECH		4.03	.57	3.94	.59	3.87	.64	3.97	.60
ECON	T	3.62	.39	3.61	.40	3.56	.43	3.60	.40
SEC	O	3.60	.51	3.64	.53	3.48	.54	3.57	.53
BWORK	T	3.16	.66	3.20	.68	2.81	.77	3.07	.71
SELF-EFF	A	3.67	.38	3.67	.40	3.73	.46	3.68	.41
MLOC	L	3.16	.68	3.19	.64	3.17	.68	3.17	.67

* For each individual a mean score was calculated over the items measuring each variable. Thus, each mean may be directly compared over all variables.

Training for new technology

On the variable, attitude toward training for new technology, the results indicate that high school students in Newfoundland place a higher value on training for new technology than students in British Columbia. A possible explanation for this might be that Newfoundland's students realize a greater urgency to open up to the new realities in regard to future jobs. This becomes critical if they are to break away from the dependency on traditional employment opportunities which are primarily in the fisheries. These young people who are exposed continually to the difficulties and limits their parents face in trying to maintain a minimum level of economic well-being may be looking for something different for themselves.

In general, males valued technological training more than females. This is consistent with findings from Taylor et al. (1990) and Macguire et al. (1982). Perhaps males expect to get involved in jobs that will require more technological training than females. Furthermore, and apart from the perception that the non-traditional work environment is male dominated, it could be that technology is still frightening to females. In this case, it might be important to look at the school curriculum and actual exposure females have to technology in the classroom. As well, over the years, females have been receiving messages that traditional secretarial jobs are often low paying and low skilled positions. Interestingly, the training for these types of jobs is likely part of the high school business curriculum, where one would expect to find some of the newer technology.

Belief in work

The results show there were differences among the three groups of students on the importance of being employed. Young people from Ontario and Newfoundland scored significantly higher than their counterparts from British Columbia. This suggests that the economic environment impacts on young people's attitudes about the importance of being employed. It seems that young people are influenced and their own attitudes are somehow determined by what they witness daily. The fact that both Newfoundland and Ontario are experiencing high unemployment rates may have had an influence on the importance they now place on being employed. In addition, one could project that low scores on belief in work by young people from the west coast are a reflection of parental lifestyle priorities and the better economic conditions.

Across the three labour markets, males scored significantly higher than females again on the importance of being employed. This is very surprising in a society where for over 25 years feminism has encouraged young women to take responsibility for their own social and financial well-being. On the other hand, these results confirm what many studies, and especially the report "What will tomorrow bring?" (Baker, 1985) have shown; many young women may still be dreaming about "Prince Charming" and are not worried as one might expect about their financial and social autonomy.

Job Security

Young people from Ontario and Newfoundland attach more importance to keeping a job than young people in British Columbia. This seems reasonable when one considers that many adolescents from Ontario and Newfoundland have likely experienced greater hardships associated with unemployment and dependency on the welfare system. Young people from Newfoundland, in particular, are repeatedly exposed to the

insecurity of seasonal employment in the fishing industry even when the national economy is strong.

Young people from British Columbia, who do not value the idea of keeping a job as much as their counterparts in Newfoundland and Ontario, may be taking for granted the importance of keeping a job, and perhaps one day they may find themselves ill-prepared to earn a living. As well, Willment and McCardell (1984) in a study of unemployed youth, suggested that the inability to keep a job may impact on the ability of young people to maintain satisfying relationships. From another perspective, however, young people from British Columbia may be reflecting different attitudes as a result of career education, which emphasizes that students should seek out work that is interesting, challenging, and maximizing of their skills and abilities.

Across the three labour markets, males in general value job security more than females. This may come as a surprise, but it tends to reflect a position in society which has considered a man's economic contribution as more essential in maintaining the family. Perhaps the late entry of women into the labour market and the inevitable consequences for job security have delayed the development of more positive attitudes among adolescent females. This is somewhat alarming given the efforts of the women's movement towards affirmative action and employment equity policies.

Self-efficacy

Across the three economic regions, males scored higher than females on self-efficacy. One possible explanation may be that young females are not sufficiently exposed to role models within the school system and in society in general, who reflect the new kind of thinking about employment equity and non-traditional careers.

Modified Locus of Control and Economic Locus of Control

Unexpectedly, no differences were found in attitudes of young people on this variable among the three labour markets. However, females scored higher than males on the belief that getting and holding a job is a matter within their control. This could mean that in periods of job scarcity and economic difficulty, males will be less equipped than females to cope with the necessity of getting and keeping a job. One possible explanation could be that males, more often females, witness situations where personal contacts and social relationships are important factors in securing and maintaining a job and fail to see that these factors could be within a person's control.

This appears to contradict the results of self-efficacy for young males. One might question why males, who scored lower than females on modified locus of control, indicated a stronger confidence in their

competencies and abilities. It may be that the connection between a positive perception of oneself and the internal reliance on finding and keeping a job has not yet solidified due to a lack of life experience.

SUMMARY

Some attitudes young people have in regard to the world of work appear to be influenced by the economic environment in which they live. In this study, significant differences were noted among the three labour markets on the variables: attitude toward training for new technology, belief in work and job security.

On these variables, young people from Newfoundland and Ontario scored higher than young people from British Columbia. The similarity of attitudes among young people from eastern Canada suggests a connection which transcends the miles that separate these two provinces. There is a sense here that despite the bleak economic outlook in the east, young people there are more optimistic in their attitudes towards work than young people from the west coast. In a recent study on Canadian concerns during the recession, Laver (1992) pointed out that, "British Columbians stood out as being the most contented Canadians" (p. 61). The laid-back attitudes of the young people in British Columbia in regard to work, combined with their high level of self-efficacy, might be a reflection of Laver's finding.

Gender differences on all variables in this study suggest that more information is needed on why males and females have different views on the world of work. Given the obvious need for males and females alike to make an economic contribution to society, it might be interesting to explore whether the different employment patterns of young people throughout their school days influence their attitudes about work.

Since adolescents have given a clear message about the importance they place on technological training, it might also be worthwhile to investigate the actual exposure males and females have to new technology. A study of career education practises in the school might reveal whether the curriculum choices of males and females have changed to accommodate the realities of today's labour market in Canada or whether they reinforce traditional and stereotypic views of the labour market.

Little has been said about students' attitudes toward starting their own businesses. The workforce of tomorrow will depend on the creative and innovative thinking of young people. It might be very interesting to investigate whether young people are learning skills in school or at the workplace which promote a spirit for entrepreneurship.

This study reached samples from coast to coast and, in general, young people reflected positive attitudes toward work. However, differences in attitudes among adolescents cannot be fully explained by

economics alone. Perhaps the vastness of our country and geographical isolation of the regions involved shelters our young people from the national perspective.

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