

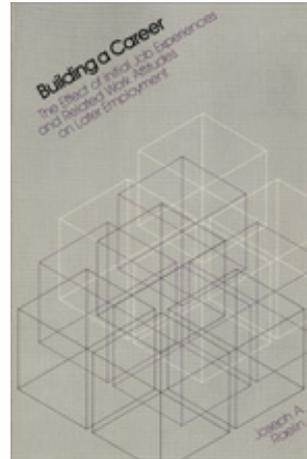
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## Introduction

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**Building a Career: The Effect of Initial Job Experiences and Related Work Attitudes on Later Employment**

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### Policy Problem

There are about 15 million American youth, between the ages of 16 and 24, no longer in school, who are employed in the labor force at the present time. Many of these youth are new entrants into the labor force, therein having an initial job experience. Some of these youth have been with their first job for awhile. Upwards of a million youth are also getting an initial job experience through government employment programs which provide a variety of work and training experiences, particularly for the disadvantaged. This latter number does not include the over one million short term jobs provided each year by the nation's Summer Youth Employment Program.

It has been this author's observation that the focus of public policy with respect to the alleviation of the problems of unemployment in this country from a countercyclical jobs perspective (apart from fiscal and monetary tools), whether it be for youth or the general population, has been on *speed* and *quantity*. In other words, and this can be demonstrated by reviewing any of the histories of federal manpower legislation, where money has been appropriated the message to employment and training administrators has been: "Get

as many jobs as you can fast!” This focus, although resolving a short term employment problem, may not have addressed, except perhaps adversely, the long term employability problem of youth. Indeed, whether initial youth employment experiences are organized through direct public policy vehicles or through the interplay of market forces in the private or public labor markets, human resource managers and policymakers have little information to ascertain the long term effects of such job experiences on the youth population as a whole or its subpopulations. Specifically, policymakers need to know more about whether the qualitative aspects of initial job opportunities, including their contribution to early and mid-term job satisfaction, have any effect on later work experience. They also need to know whether other career attitudes, such as aspirations or motivation, separately or in combination with the job, affect later work experience. Furthermore, can mid-term job changes disrupt successful or aggravate unsuccessful career paths? How rigid are initial job attitudes; do they become generalized or can subsequent work experience readily change them? Such concerns as these need to be addressed especially with regard to young people entering the labor force, since their initial experiences are likely to be most critical in shaping their future work dispositions and practices.

## **Core Model**

The premise of this study is that in the early career of a young person’s life, initial job experiences and attitudes are critical in shaping ultimate employment experience. The study is longitudinal in character, such that essentially snapshots are taken of a youth sample at three different times in their early careers. The interval separating the early and late periods, corresponding to data end-points, is nearly ten

years. The mid-point is around the fifth year. The study's design is a path model, referred to here as the "core model," which hypothesizes a set of multiple, recursive relationships among a set of time-specific, work-related variables which have been selected because of their expected contribution to a theory of initial job experiences and later employment. The core model calls for examination of early job characteristics, attitudes, and their interrelationship; intermediate work experiences and attitudes; and finally later job characteristics. More precise discussion of the core model follows.

### *Early Period*

Upon termination of formal schooling, whether the circumstances be favorable or unfavorable, most young people obtain employment at varying levels of occupational status and wage rates.<sup>1</sup> They will also remain with the initial employment for varying periods of time. The first job is likely to produce a variety of attitudinal reactions, many of which are likely to be dependent on the quality of that first job. For example, if the work is incidental or "secondary" in character, reactions are likely to be unfavorable. Other attitudes are formed prior to the work itself, although they certainly are affected by the first job. Whether the young person works out of an intrinsic or extrinsic motivation is an important concern, for example, but just as important might be whether that motivation finds a match in the character of the first job. A young person also brings career aspirations to an initial work experience and oftentimes these aspirations are determined relative to the status of that first job. Both initial job experiences and attitudes affect the level of satisfaction from that early employment experience. In particular, more favorable job characteristics in terms of higher occupational

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1. An increasingly attractive option for youth is to obtain their initial job experience while in school. This study, however, only considers postschool experience. For insight into in-school vocational experiences and their effects on later employment, readers might consult Grasso and Shea (1979).

status and wages and usually longer tenure positively affect intrinsic motivation, which in turn or separately or even in interaction positively relates to job satisfaction. As an initial job characteristic, tenure is more problematic than status and wages since its presence does not necessarily indicate positive attitudes but rather perhaps economic or psychological insecurity.

Finally, a negative relationship is hypothesized between job characteristics and aspirations as those youth with low status jobs seek to escape from such a work environment by envisioning future enriched opportunities. Moreover, those youth with higher aspirations are less likely to be satisfied with their current job.

### *Middle Period*

The experiences and attitudes from the early period carry over into the middle period. An important concern at this point is whether the youngster has stayed with the initial job or changed jobs. Further, has the level of satisfaction relative to the job changed and how has it been affected by job retention or job mobility? Certainly these considerations are largely affected by the nature of the initial job experience and the attitudes connected with it. Another concern in the middle period is whether the specific job attitudes from the early period get transformed into generalized dispositions toward work, expressed as a commitment to the work ethic. It is hypothesized that high quality first jobs with correspondent intrinsic motivation and positive satisfaction lead to job stability and mid-term satisfaction and commitment. Overly high aspirations, however, are proposed to lead to job mobility and dissatisfaction and lack of commitment.

### *Late Period*

The late period contains the principal dependent variables of the study as the youth sample, now in its twenties or thir-

ties, enters a more stable and hopefully more productive stage of its career. There are of course exceptions, for example as new entrants, particularly married women, come into the labor market or as people change jobs and careers. During this period, the analysis focuses on occupational level and wages at this career stage.

It is naturally expected that the first job itself directly affects later employment. Further, the attitudes produced by the first job are expected to have a combined or even separate effect on later work. The exception here is career aspirations which are thought at very high levels to be unrealistic, leading to frustrated opportunities. Medium, and therefore more realistic, career aspirations are hypothesized to lead to an optimal work situation in the late period.

The middle period, although affected by first job experiences and attitudes, has direct effects on later employment as well. Job stability and satisfaction are positively related to work experience. Moreover, it is hypothesized that the generalized work attitudes of the middle period, which were generated over time from the more specific job attitudes of the early period, are critical in explaining later employment. In order to prosper in ultimate worklife, one must have a commitment to the work ethic as opposed to a feeling that one gets ahead solely through luck or coincidence.

## **Full Model**

The core model specifies a set of longitudinal interrelationships among work-related variables which, in and of themselves, contribute to a theory of initial job experiences and later employment. However, they are not expected to account for most of the variance in later work conditions since

there are obviously a variety of demographic, educational, and labor market factors which affect career development apart from work experiences. Since the core model essentially represents an average of career developments of various subgroups of the youth population, as represented by these exogenous factors, its analysis can change for any subgroup chosen. Naturally, variation from the average pattern will not be uniform; rather, some subgroup categories will show marked between-group and within-group differences in their early career experience. It is expected, for example, that large differences will be found for both sex and race categories. Other demographic factors to be considered are age, socioeconomic status, and marital status, in addition to educational and intelligence categories. The economic environment of work, for example, the period in the business cycle and the place and region of employment, will also be more closely examined.

These exogenous factors obviously affect more than simply the end-points of the analysis—the later work characteristics; they indeed can affect conditions at every stage of career development. For example, the first job takes place in a particular economic environment and its quality is largely affected by family and educational background. Initial attitudes and aspirations are also affected by background, as are mid-term experiences and attitudes. For instance, a young married woman earning a second family income or a worker in a tight labor market with many vacancies might be more prone to change jobs in the middle period than other types of workers. Or, a youngster with a good world of work knowledge is likely to have reasonable career aspirations and, if he or she can locate a relatively responsible and promising first job, is also likely to be more satisfied with that job than someone lacking such knowledge. At this point, the model can become very complex as the number of interrelationships becomes a multiplicative function of the

number of newly introduced exogenous variables. However, by superimposing these variables on the core model through separate subgroup analyses or through general multiple regression analysis, the significant antecedents of the core model can be isolated and incorporated. A full model explaining the relative role of initial job experiences in conjunction with environmental preconditions in accounting for later employment can then be revealed.

Complete detail on the core model, including description of the sample, the variables, and the analysis used, is provided in chapter 3. Theoretical background for the model incorporating a review of three literatures—that of sociology, economics, and psychology—is furnished in chapter 2. The results of the analysis of the core model, which are discussed on the basis of path analysis and separate subgroup analyses, are provided in chapter 4, which concludes with the presentation of the full model of initial job experiences. Finally, in chapter 5, the results are summarized and implications are drawn for public policy on youth employment.