

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF STUDENT AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING  
OF STRUCTURAL AND AGENTIC INFLUENCES ON CAREER CHOICE

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## **Abstract**

‘Career choice is the result of the interplay between individuals within organizational and social structures’ (Ozbilgin et al, 2004: 2). However, much of the career choice literature examines career choice from an agency or structure perspective. “This tendency to separate individual agency and social structure leads to reductionist understandings that fail to account for the complex interplay between these dimensions” (Duberley, 2006:282).

The transition from third level education to the graduate labour market can be a time of great uncertainty and stress. The decisions made at this time, the emergence of the “boundaryless” and “protean” career notwithstanding, can have ongoing and long term impact on individual careers. It is especially important therefore that those transitioning into the graduate labour market have an understanding of the context in which their careers develop including, and perhaps critically, an understanding of the agentic and structural barriers and enablers impacting on their career choice. It is likewise important that those actors in this field including career guidance professionals and educational providers are cognisant of these structural and agentic influences.

A qualitative focus group methodology is used. Focus group participants comprised final year students on an honours undergraduate business programme. This approach is considered appropriate given the exploratory nature of this research and its ability to capture the complexity of the structure agency duality in career choice.

The research confirms students’ ability to grasp the complexity of this duality. It also provides further evidence of the extent to which career choice is shaped by a complex interaction of social factors and individual attributes and that career choice is a continuous process which is constrained and enabled by individuals’ ongoing interaction with changing structural forces.

This research is based on a cohort of final year business programme students. Further and wider study is required in order to estimate the extent to which the opinions and experiences expressed reflect the opinions of the wider student population.

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# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

## **1.0 Introduction**

The complexity of contemporary career choice derives from a range of factors. These include the uncertainty and dynamism of modern work as manifest in re-organisation, downsizing, delaying, outsourcing, the obsolescence of certain skills and the re-evaluation of essential employee attributes, the changing nature of careers – from traditional, hierarchical, linear and organisationally bound to protean and boundaryless -, the changing life patterns, priorities and attitudes of young people and critically the myriad structural and agentic influences on young people's career choice including gender, family, socio-economic background, employment opportunities and individual cognitive abilities. Exploration of these structural and agentic influences is the focus of this research.

Recognition of this complexity and development of a concern to facilitate better career decisions has led to the emergence and sophistication of guidance counseling and growth of frameworks and metrics which aim to facilitate better career choice. However these developments and attendant metrics do not emphasise or encourage individual consideration, and from this individual awareness, of how structural and agentic factors combine to impact on career choice. This thesis explores this interaction first by a review of literature on careers and career attributes, structural and agentic influences on career choice and of two theories which highlight the interdependence or interacting duality of structure and agency and second via a series of focus group interventions with final year undergraduate students.

Thorngren and Feit (2001: 294) write: ‘the postmodern perspective advocated by Peavy (1997), Richardson (1993), Savickas (1993), Patton and McMahon (1999) and Young et al (1996) clearly elucidated the importance of clients gaining greater understanding of the context in which their careers develop ... as well as considering the implications that career choices may have on the rest of their lives’. Flores et al (2009) also suggest that vocational psychologists can better understand those factors that impact on career decision making through additional and more focused research.

The rationale for this research derives from these viewpoints and from a conviction that an exploration of third level students’ perceptions of agentic and structural influences on career goals and ultimately career choice can contribute to an addressing, from the student’s perspective, of possible misperceptions and from the educational provider’s perspective, of an improved understanding of the role they play and can play in the democratising of the labour market. If career choice is examined from such a multi-directional perspective, individuals can gain greater understanding of both themselves and of their family, social and economic environments and of how structure and agency combine to influence career choice.

‘Career choice is a subject which has attracted academic, professional as well as public attention due to its multifaceted nature ... [it] is a result of the interplay between individuals within organizational and social structures’ (Ozbilgin et al, 2004: 2). Career choice literature typically examines career choice from one of three perspectives: agency i.e. the expression of ‘independence through self-assertion and control over the environment’, structure i.e. ‘contextual affordance and opportunity structures ... or from

a mixed agency and structure framework where the contextual influences are viewed as antecedents or mediating factors of career choice' (Ozbilgin et al, 2004: 3).

The complexity of career choice is evidenced by the plethora of typologies within the pertinent literature. Ozbilgin et al (2005) for instance distinguish between three levels of influences on career choice i.e. **micro-individual, meso-institutional and macro-structural respectively**. Auyeng and Sands (1997) categorise career choice influences into an alternative tri-partite typology: **significant others** i.e. an individual's social environment 'in particular, with whom one interacts in various kinds of role relations' (Auyeng and Sands 1991: 15) and clearly includes parents, peers, teachers and contacts in the career field; **materials** i.e. that which pertains to the individual physical environment and includes employment opportunity, prestige and status, extrinsic reward, years of study and cost of education; and **beliefs** which includes job satisfaction, aptitude for discipline and previous work experience. Stewart (1998) identifies a different set of three factors: attitudes and value systems, motives and needs, and talents and abilities. Hall (1987) identified three 'general areas' around which career literature is structured i.e. individual processes, person – environment interaction processes and institutional processes. Roziah et al (2009) also utilise three 'conceptual approaches' i.e. **individual** which emphasises the role of individual attributes, **structural** which emphasises the role of organisational structures and **behavioural** which suggests that 'employees can exert some control over their advancement by engaging in career enhancing strategies'. Adya and Kaiser (2005) categorised career choice influences into **social factors** which encompassed in their research, family, peers and media, **structural factors** which

included teacher, career guidance and type of school attended and **individual factors** within which they included intellectual development, gender, individual perceptions of particular careers, personality and perceptions of general self-efficacy. And, Baker (2003) categorises theories relating to career choice into yet another alternative typology i.e. **non psychological theories** which emphasise the exclusive impact of environmental factors such as chance, serendipity, labour market profile and societal institutions including government, **psychological theories** which focus on the characteristics, attributes and behaviours of individuals and **developmental theories**, including perhaps most notably Holland (1973), which consider the joint and interdependent influence of non psychological and psychological influences.

What all of the above theorists have in common is their agreement that societal and personal contexts impact upon career choice. In other words, the career choice of third level graduates is influenced by a complex interplay of opportunity structures or contexts and individual attributes including ascribed, achieved and behavioural attributes. Bright and Prior (2005: 296) allude to the complexity of careers – ‘careers are influenced by parents, social and environmental context, gender, age, political and economic climate, interests, abilities, geography and many other events ... these factors and many more are inherently unpredictable and subject to change’. Thorngren and Feit (2001: 291) provide a very succinct summary of the complexity of career choice and in particular of the myriad and interdependent influences thereon and argue that there must be a ‘focus on the plethora of developmental, psychodynamic, interpersonal and sociological influences that affect individual career development. Inextricably combined with these influences

are individual personalities, skills, interests, values and knowledge of occupation. Developmental, interpersonal, social and intrapersonal influences all combine in career exploration and decision making’.

There is, of course, significant and ongoing debate on this interplay in psychology, sociology and education literature. According to Layder et al (1991: 447) for instance ‘there is a long history of debate between sociologists and psychologists concerning the extent to which young people exercise choice during their entry into the labour market’. There appears to be two main perspectives. Sociologists emphasise the continuing significance of macro-economic and structural constraints on employment opportunities – such ‘structuralist theories ... tend to negate the role of human agency in dealing with social exigencies’ (Gorton, 2000: 276). Neo-classical economists and agent-centred behaviouralist models in contrast, stress the significance of individual choice and preference ‘and tend to ignore social elements in the construction of individual motivation’ (Gorton, 2000: 276).

A more contemporary viewpoint, linked to the concept of individualisation, borrows from both perspectives and argues that employment structures are the outcome of both choice and constraint (Beck 1992; Crompton, 1998; Rudd and Evans, 1998) i.e. unconstrained occupational choice does not exist. Entry into and progression in one’s preferred sector,

occupation and/or job is constrained by both individual and structural factors <sup>1</sup>. Or in other words, career choice is a ‘socially embedded action’ (Duberley et al, 2006: 281). The contemporaneous nature of this perspective is further evidenced by the emergence of the ‘navigation’ metaphor. Evans and Furlong (1997: 18) explain that during the 1980s the popular viewpoint was that that labour market ‘destinations’ were predominantly influenced by ‘structural influences [such as] class, race, gender, educational attainment and labour market conditions’ and that transition from education to employment was outside the control of individuals. They argue that in the 1990s, the prevailing viewpoint began to change – manifest in the emergence of the term ‘navigation’ in place of ‘trajectory’. Navigation involved an awareness of individual skill and ability at assessing opportunity and risk contributed to successful transition. Effectively, this metaphor emerged as a result of and contributed to the belief that a degree of control over labour market entry could be exercised by individuals.

In order to understand the relative contributions of structural and agentic influences on career choice, it is essential to review the existing literature on the transition from education to the labour market generally and on career choice more specifically. Regarding the latter, the Webster Dictionary defines choice as ‘the voluntary act of selecting or separating from two or more things that which is preferred; and the determination of the mind in preferring one thing to another’. This definition clearly

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<sup>1</sup> Three articles contribute significantly to this thesis choice generally and to its research objectives specifically: Layder et al’s (1991) *The Empirical Correlates of Action and Structure: The Transition from School to Work*; Rudd and Evans’s (1998) *Structure and Agency in Youth Transitions: Student Experiences of Vocational Further Education and*; Ozbilgin, M, Kusku, F. and Erdgomus, N., (2004) ‘Explaining Influences on Career ‘Choice’ in Comparative Perspective’ Visiting Fellow Working Paper, Cornell University.

comprises two elements i.e. an objective reality (the availability of various options) - 'agency can only manifest itself through choice, and choice is possible only if there are alternatives' (Marshall, 2000: 7) and a subjective process (the act of preference). This implies that all choices, including career choice consist of both structural and agentic influences.

It is clear however that the dichotomous structure – agency distinction is both artificial and simplistic. Gorton (2000: 276) for instance is critical of 'the unhelpful and artificial oppositions between agent centred (behaviourist) models that ignore social formations and structuralist theories [that] negate the role of human agency in dealing with social exigencies'. Structure and agency are inter-dependent elements or in other words, 'a mutually interacting duality'. Giddens terms this a 'double hermeneutic' i.e. the double involvement of individuals and institutions. He explains the activity-dependent nature of structure in this way – 'we create society at the same time as we are created by it' (Giddens, 1984: 14). This complexity is further evidenced by the disagreement and therefore apparent uncertainty in the literature as to what distinguishes a structural from an agentic factor. Bourdieu's social theory also engages with this limiting and simplistic structure – agency dichotomy. His theory 'integrates the analysis of the experience of social agents and the analysis of the objective structures that make this experience possible' (Bourdieu 1988: 782). Giddens's and Bourdieu's theories are utilised below in an attempt to overcome the structure - agency dichotomy and hence to better understand the complexity of career choice.

Much of the research on career choice adopts a quantitative methodology and appears to have focused on the USA and Australia, on non-traditional applicants or on sources of information. A qualitative methodology that focuses on Irish students and explores understanding of the structural and agentic and the interpenetration of such structural and agentic influences contributes to the debate concerning structure and agency in career choice and provides new insights into the complexity of career choice. The qualitative approach derives in part from the argument that ‘quantitative methodologies limit respondents to identifying single cues or attributes [on student choice] without acknowledging full exploration of experiences ... such positivist approaches can lead to assumptions that student choice is rational’ (Haywood and Molesworth 2010: 834). The approach here is to use a phenomenological approach based on focus groups responses. The transcript analysis provides insights into how students perceive and react to the influences on career choice with a view to unpacking some of the issues that previous research into career choice literature have raised. As with Haywood and Molesworth’s (2010) research into students’ third level course choices the focus is on the lived experiences of choice. The focus group participants were throughout invited to recount their personal experiences and to discuss the factors that they felt exerted influence on their choice of career.

The following chapter reviews literature pertinent to antecedents of career choice with emphasis on those factors that impact on career choice. It begins by considering the term career. Agency and structure respectively are then considered. Giddens’s Structuration Theory, Bourdieu’s Social Theory, Lent et al’s Social Cognitive Career Theory and

Holland's Congruence Theory are then considered. Chapter 3 identifies and justifies the research question, specifies the research objectives, and explains the chosen methodology and the approach to data analysis. Chapter 4 presents the findings from the focus group discussions. The concern here is to demonstrate the lived experiences of the participants as they engage in career choice. Chapter 5 categorises and summarises the findings of the research and considers the analysed data in relation to the reviewed literature. The limitations of the research and recommendations for further research are also outlined here.

## **Chapter 2**

# **Literature Review**

## **2.0 Introduction**

The chapter commences with a consideration of the meaning of ‘career’. The ‘attributes’ of career and the antecedents of career choice are also considered. Definitions and explanations of agency and structure respectively and an analysis of two objective factors (categories) and three structural factors are provided in Section 2.2 and Section 2.3 respectively. However given the extent to which structuralist theories tend to over-emphasise the social elements that influence individual motivation and decision making including that relating to career choice and behaviourist or agentic theorists over-emphasise the role of human agency - in tandem with the very fundamental questions the structure - agency debate raises about the nature of social reality and the manner in which that ‘reality’ is conceptualised -, it is considered essential to consider the structure – agency dichotomy with a view to ascertaining the relative and interpenetrative impacts of structural and agentic influences. Two key contributions to the structure – agency debate are considered: Giddens’s structuration theory and Bourdieu’s social theory are explained in Section 2.4 in an effort to overcome the structure – agency divide in career choice research. Lent and Brown’s (1996) Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and of Holland’s (1973; 1985; 1997) Congruence Theory are considered in Section 2.5. The final section follows on from this and considers the interplay between structure, agency and habitus in the career choice process.

The overall objective of the chapter is to investigate the literature that either directly or indirectly considers the extent to which two broad agentic factors, perhaps more appropriately termed agentic categories i.e. first, the ‘three main social cognitive

variables' (Rogers and Creed, 2010: 2) of self-efficacy, outcome expectations / levels of optimism and personal goals, and second, individual behavior, and three structural factors i.e. social and family background, gender and labour market <sup>2</sup> profile impact upon career choice. <sup>3</sup> It is acknowledged that person inputs / personal dispositions most obviously those related to personality including the so-called 'big five' personality traits i.e. extroversion, openness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and agreeableness which undoubtedly do influence the career choice process (Tokar, Fischer and Subich, 1998; Savickas et al, 2002; Judge, 2002 ; Rogers et al, 2008; Reed et al, 2004) and four very common structural factors i.e. age, race and locality, and culture are not analysed here. It is felt however that omission of personality is justified given the specific research objectives here and the concern to provide a deeper rather than broader analysis of career choice antecedents. The omission of the additional structural factors is justified for the same reason and also appropriate given the age <sup>4</sup> and racial homogeneity, and geographic similarity of the sampling frame. <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Flores et al (2009) with specific regard to their research respondents i.e. Mexican American students argued for instance that orientation to Anglo culture afforded students a wide range of resources and role models that facilitated the development of self efficacy beliefs.

<sup>3</sup> Although, no distinction is made in this thesis between typical and gifted / multipotential students, the literature on multipotentiality and career choice is extensive and although focusing on agency, it also recognises structural influences on gifted student's career choice. This is briefly considered in Section 2.2.1 below.

<sup>4</sup> It is pertinent however to point out Low et al's (2005) finding that career intentions are formed from an early age and Furlong (1993) who argue that by the age of sixteen most young people have some idea of the sort of work they want to enter once they leave school. However, at this stage their ideas about future jobs are often tentative and as they make the transition from school to work they will tend to modify their ideas as certain jobs prove difficult to enter and as new opportunities arise.

<sup>5</sup> Chance and luck, two other quasi-structural factors are not considered. It is interesting to note however Pryor and Winkenfield's finding (cited in Bright and Prior 2005) that 70% of their large sample of university students identified unplanned events ranging from unplanned meetings to messages from God as influences on their career.

## 2.1 Careers and Career Attributes

Wilensky (1960: 554) defines career as ‘a succession of related jobs, arranged in a hierarchy of prestige through which persons move in ordered, predictable sequence’. The emphasis here appears to be on ‘jobs’ and therefore fits into the more traditional perspective of careers. Smith (1997: 229) defines career as ‘a longer term developmental occupation or profession, with a sequence of connections and networks over time, which may include lateral or downward moves or temporary withdrawals’. Arthur et al (1999) in a more contemporary explanation of career argue it is ‘the evolving sequence of a person’s work experiences over time’. They argue also, and central to the research focus in this thesis, that ‘careers reflect the relationships between people and the providers of official position, namely institutions or organisations, and how these relationships fluctuate over time’. Still and Timms (1998: 146-147) define career as ‘an ordered sequence of development extending over a period of years and introducing progressively more responsible roles within an occupation’ while O’Leary (1997: 95) cites Limerick’s (1995: 69) explanation of career i.e. as ‘lifestreams which are woven and crafted ... around life stages and take into account socio-historical contexts, geographical and economic factors, and organisational realities – often with a touch of luck thrown in’.

Choosing a career is a significant and difficult process. Perrone and Vickers (2003: 71) express this eloquently – ‘a time laden with stress, anxiety, shock, fear, uncertainty, loss, loneliness, depression and feelings of low self worth’. Likewise, Graham and McKenzie (1995) discovered that graduates’ experiences of starting work included culture shock, stress, inflated expectations, resentment and uncertainty. Including more information on

this is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, these contributions do perhaps help explain student uncertainty and procrastination prior to making the career choice.

One should acknowledge the viewpoint that 'career choice' may be in fact be a misnomer. Ozbilgin et al (2004: 3) for instance question the very term 'career choice' and argue 'given the rigidities of supply and demand in career markets, persistence of structural and institutionalised forms of discrimination in employment, as well as path dependence by education and experience, ... career 'choice' is a highly contestable phenomenon'. They add that 'pure' career choice i.e. 'a free and unconstrained career choice based on individual will' is a 'naïve expectation'.

Hall's (1976: 4) much cited definition of career emphasises the relevance of individual perception: 'the career is the individually perceived sequence of attitudes and behaviours associated with work related experiences and activities over the span of a person's life'.

Arnold (1997) and Adamson (1998) both appear to agree on the complexity of career definition. Stewart and Knowles (1999: 371) summarise this complexity thus: 'careers are defined in personal terms; have a subjective element; concern sequences of employment related experiences which are not necessarily confined to employment itself; can include employment in different occupations; do not necessarily involve high status occupations and do not necessarily involve promotion'. The complexity of the decision making process is also apparent in Stewart's contribution (1998: 73) where he identifies three career related decision styles i.e. logical where one assesses the advantages and disadvantages of one career over another; intuitive where one chooses the career that

‘feels right’ and dependent where a decision is influenced by the belief that other people or circumstances dictate decisions. The likelihood, if one accepts the joint and interdependent impact of structural and agentic factors, is that all three styles are utilised when it comes to making a career decision. This complexity is further evidenced by Arnold (1997) who argues that ‘career management is not solely within the control of the individual and that different stakeholders both internal and external to organisations exist e.g. bosses, human resource managers, professional associations, and life partners’. (Stewart and Knowles, 1999: 371). White et al (1992: 12), with reference to Hall’s life cycle theory, explain that career stages reflect and interact with an individual’s life, past, present and future.

In addition, and in line with Hall’s (1976) emphasis on individual perception, the attractiveness of any job, company or sector will be significantly influenced by an individual’s perceptions of and attitudes towards that job, company or sector. Holland’s (1985) argument that there is a match between career choice and personality and that a combination of six personality types i.e. realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising and conventional, are highly influential when it comes to career decisions provides even further evidence of the complexity of career choice.

Schein (1978) considers job attributes from the perspective of career ‘anchors’. These five anchors are depicted in the table below and defined by Stewart (1998: 74) as ‘basic orientation towards work and occupations which influence the career choices and

decisions of individuals ... these orientations, or preferences are the result of three factors: attitudes and value systems, motives and needs, and talents and abilities’.

**Table 1 Career Anchors (Schein 1978)**

<b>Career Anchor</b>	<b>Description</b>
Managerial	Concerned with the management of others. Individuals with this anchor want to generalise rather than specialise in a particular occupation or function
Technical	Those with this anchor are the polar opposite to those with the managerial anchor ... they wish to be expert in a specific function or field
Security / Stability	Here the preference is for a predictable and stable work environment. People with this anchor desire and follow an organisation defined career path
Autonomy / Independence	Such people are less concerned with attaining positions higher on the organisational hierarchy. Rather their concern is with ensuring as much control over one’s work environment as possible
Creativity / Entrepreneurial	Here the over riding concern is autonomy but in addition such people wish to create a produce or service and to have the opportunity to utilise their special abilities

Derr (1986) provides a five part career orientation typology: the traditional hierarchical concept of getting ahead; getting secure, getting high i.e. where one desires challenge, getting free i.e. where the key concern is to exert as much control as possible over one’s career; and getting balanced i.e. ensuring as best a balance as possible between work and self-development. O’ Connor and Kinnane (1961) identified six career attributes that will

impact on perceived attractiveness i.e. independence variety, work conditions and associates, social-atavistic opportunity, security and other material motivators, prestige, and heuristics and creativity. Paolillo and Estes (1982) provide a more detailed list of 12 factors i.e. parental influence, peer influence, teacher influence, association with others in the field, social status attainment, earning potential, years of formal education, cost of education, job satisfaction, aptitude for subject matter and previous work experience and availability of employment. Moy and Lee (2002: 340) argue that ‘job attributes are the most important factors that affect job choice decisions of job seekers’. Powell (1991) categorised a total of fifteen attributes into three groups as follows:

**Table 2 Job / Career Attributes (Powell 1991)**

<b>The Job Itself</b>	<b>Compensation or Security</b>	<b>Company or Work Environment</b>
The opportunity to learn	Salary	Competent or sociable co-workers
The opportunity to use one’s abilities	Fringe benefits	Type of work or service performed
The opportunity for rapid advancement	Job security	The location of work or company
Responsibility		The reputation of the company
The variety of activities		Company’s training programmes
Challenging and interesting work		
The opportunity to present one’s achievements to one’s supervisors		

Moy and Lee (2002) utilised in their own qualitative research nine such job attributes: managerial relationships, marketability, working conditions, pay, long term career prospects, job security, responsibility given, involvement in decision making and fringe benefits.

Germanou et al (2009: 138) in a very recent contribution to this literature utilised thirteen attributes broken into four categories as follows:

**Table 3 Job and Career Attributes (Germanou 2009)**

<b>Category→ Attribute↓</b>	<b><u>Extrinsic</u></b>	<b><u>Prestige</u></b>	<b><u>Intrinsic</u></b>	<b><u>Social</u></b>
Economic benefits	√			
Job security	√			
Work conditions	√			
Advancement / promotion		√		
Decision making		√		
Social status		√		
Interesting nature of job			√	
Personal growth			√	
Achievement			√	
Autonomy			√	
Self-esteem			√	
Contribution to society				√
Work with others				√

From a similar perspective, Roziyah et al (2009: 235) summarise succinctly the distinction between objective and subjective career success.

‘Objective career success refers to the external categories in a profession, which are defined by society, one’s peers or culture [and include measures such as] increased job security, longer vacations, and promotion. In contrast, subjective career success reflects an individual’s perception of career experience, which is influenced by a person’s own preferences for development, needs and values’.

There is a plethora of research into perceptual influences on career choice across a wide range of specific occupations. The choice of accounting for instance as a career has been the focus of much research. Hermanson and Hermanson (1995) discovered that the nature of accounting work and its attendant lack of creativity were important negative influences on choice of accounting as a career. Further, Pollock et al (2002) in their investigation of high school career counsellors’ perceptions of the profession that counsellors found it to be uninteresting, not especially financially rewarding, stressful and time consuming. Malthus and Fowler (2009: 27) in their research into student perceptions of accounting cited much literature that identified negative perceptions of accounting as a career due to the increased academic requirements, misunderstanding of what a career in accounting actually involves e.g. ‘boring, tedious and monotonous number crunching’ (Albrecht and Sack 2000: 28), lower prestige than other professions, compliance driven, and too narrow curricula at both secondary and tertiary levels. Sugahara et al (2009) focussed on five factors that influenced accounting students’ intention to become a certified public accountant (CPA): students’ work experience,

major at undergraduate level, gender, attitudes towards the opportunity costs of becoming a CPA and their perspectives of the CPA profession. In their review of extant literature relating to all five factors, they discovered differing findings. This inconsistency may be explained by a combination of different methodologies and differing national contexts e.g. with regard to opportunity cost. Allen (2004) for instance emphasised the negative impact of the 150 hour rule i.e. the requirement that students study an additional year in order to be entitled to sit the CPA examinations.

With regard to teaching as a career, Richardson et al (2005) in their research into motivations for career change (to that of teacher) identified several influences. These included dissatisfaction with previous career, better career opportunity, societal respect for particular roles, job location, stability, social contribution, family support relating to decision, and regularity and certainty of income.

Richardson (2008: 1) investigated undergraduates' perceptions of tourism and hospitality management as a career choice. He cited previous research findings including Andorka 1996, Powell 1999 and Hinkin and Tracey 2000 which indicates that perception of employment in this sector negatively impacts on the attraction and retention of staff in this sector. Perceptions included 'young transient workforce, low levels of pay and formal qualifications, high levels of female, student, casual and part time workers, a high proportion of low skilled jobs, a large proportion of jobs worked outside normal business hours, a negative industry image ... a large number of migrant staff, poor utilisation of student labour and high levels of staff turnover'.

Kyriacou and Coulthard (2000) used a list of twenty general job attributes in their research into teaching as a career choice.

**Table 4 Job Attributes (Kyriacou and Coulthard 2000)**

1. An enjoyable job
2. Colleagues one can get along with
3. Pleasant working environment
4. A secure job
5. A career that provides intellectual challenge
6. Good promotion prospects
7. A job that provides responsibility
8. High earnings over duration of career
9. A job through which one can contribute to society
10. A job in which one can use one's university degree
11. A job which provides transferable skills
12. A job that is respected
13. Reasonable workload
14. A job with high quality resources and equipment
15. The opportunity to travel abroad
16. Job mobility – easy to get a job anywhere
17. A job that can be easily combined with parenthood
18. A good starting salary
19. A job where one can care for others
20. A job that provides opportunities for further training

With regard to policing as a career, in an albeit rather dated contribution, Van Maanen (1973) identified the positive effect of perceived opportunity to act in the interests of the community, the perception – driven by the perceived rigour of the selection process – of the police as an elite organisation, and the perceived adventurous and out-doors type work involved. He neatly summarised his finding thus: ‘most policemen have not chosen their career casually. They enter the department with a high degree of normative

identification with what they perceive to be the goals and values [and attributes] of the organisation' (1973: 410).

With regard to self-employment as a career 'choice', Peel and Inkson (2004) identified five factors that influenced their self-employed respondents' career choices: increased autonomy including greater control and flexibility, earning maximisation, personal development, change and involvement. Among the significant quantity of literature relating to female entrepreneurship, Carter and Brush (2004) identify five factors that contribute to the lower incidence of female entrepreneurs: access to human and financial capital, risk propensity, family business background, and access to opportunity and social networks. Here we see once again, and very clearly, the interplay between structural and agentic factors.

Hernandez et al (2009: 1) in their research into the career decisions of medical students make the point that current medical students value 'a controllable lifestyle'. They also recognised the impact of 'mentorship, role modeling, and perceived prestige ... when deciding on a particular career path'.

And finally, Moy and Lee (2002: 339) in their investigation of MBA graduate career choice cited several studies including Binks (1996) and Ahmadi and Helms (1997) which found that most graduates prefer employment with multinational corporations rather than with small or medium size enterprises as they believe the former provide higher salaries and better career progression opportunities.

It appears then that intrinsic and extrinsic career related factors impact upon choice. The former relate to job satisfaction. Malthus and Fowler (2009) identify as sources of intrinsic satisfaction the encouragement of creativity and autonomy, intellectual challenge, interesting tasks, and dynamic work environment. The latter include job market, financial and career considerations including starting salary and long term earning potential, opportunity for promotion, social status, the cost of skilling and image portrayed in the media. However, the complexity is even greater when one considers Baruch's (2004) view as cited in Broadbridge and Parsons (2005: 82) that career choice may be 1) in fact be unintended and 2) that career aspirations can change during a person's life as their circumstances change. In addition, aspects of the career choice arena have changed. For instance the greater provision and sophistication of careers advice and guidance, the prevalence of media depictions of various occupations, the impact of the internet as a ready source of information and the decline in the tradition of father – son passing down of occupation are all new departures.

Many of those authors who have researched career choice make reference to structural and agentic factors. Peel and Inkson (2004: 547) for instance argue that 'one cannot consider the choices that individuals make in isolation from the context in which they choose them. Worker choices, are conditioned both by the ever-changing life circumstances and situational constraints faced by the individual and by internal processes through which he/she shapes his or her preferences'. Indeed this debate surrounding the relative influence of structure and agency in career choice is one of the most prevailing elements of career studies discourse. As mentioned in the introduction

above, and as considered in more detail below, those who emphasise the role of 'structure' argue that institutional structures e.g. class, ethnicity, gender and organisational forces constrain and indeed determine career choice while those that espouse agency believe that individuals can be empowered to overcome these structural constraints or forces and ultimately can become proactive agents in the construction of their careers. Prior to examining Giddens's and Bourdieu's theories on the interdependence of structure and agency and analysing the structure – agency overlap in the context of career choice below, the following two sections consider agency and structure in more general terms.

## **2.2 Agency**

Career choice coming as it does at the transition from education to employment is an appropriate context in which to consider agency. As worded by Elder and O'Rand (1995: 456):

'No idea better illustrates the contemporary link between social context and the agency of the individual than the concept of life transition, a turning point, which defines the problem as a change in states – social and psychological. Adults bring a history of life experiences to each transition, interpret new circumstances in terms of this legacy, and work out adaptations that can alter their life course. When transitions disrupt habitual patterns of behaviour, they provide options for new directions in life'.

Bandura (2001: 2) argues ‘to be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by one’s actions’ while Fedlar et al (2005: 42) define personal agency as ‘the degree to which one feels in control of one’s life course and believes that one is able to manage challenges in ways that will result in varied outcomes’. Very generally, agency is the production of a life – ‘the agent is the producer; human development, the lived life, the narrative, is produced by agency ... agency relates to environmental proactivity or adaptation ... [and] people not only react but act and, in acting, produce their biographical selves’ (Marshall, 2000: 10).

Rudd and Evans (1998: 39) define agency as ‘the input from young people themselves on an individual basis’ and ‘as those aspects of the decision making process ... which are predominately individual, creative, pro-active and involve resisting external pressures’. Giddens (1984:14) defines agency more briefly i.e. as ‘the capacity to make a difference’.

There appears to be no universal agreement in the literature on what constitutes an exhaustive list of agentic factors. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) emphasise three interdependent agentic variables i.e. self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations and personal goals. These do not fit neatly into Layder et al’s typology (below). However self-efficacy can perhaps be linked with the attitudinal variable, outcome expectations with the behavioural variable and personal goals with the achievement variable. Mayrhofer et al (2005) discuss such individual characteristics as adaptability, sociability, the need for achievement and accuracy, and also the power and politics motive pattern. Nasser and Abouchedid (2003) discuss the individual factor as a measure of achievement and effort.

Layder et al (1991) likewise consider achievement but also other personal influences such as motivation, ambition, self-confidence, interests, drive, aspirations and personality. Ozbilgin et al (2004: 3) list dispositions, human capital, attitudes and personality as the individual agency factors that act as ‘moderators of career choice’. Becker’s (1964) ‘human capital theory’ argues that human assets such as ability, education and training vary between individuals and these ‘assets’ influence labour market entry, career progression, work performance and organisational rewards. Rudd and Evans (1998) include human capital assets in their list of seven agentic influences on career choice i.e. individual effort, luck, qualifications, levels of optimism, self-confidence, independence and the taking on of responsibilities. Although Layder et al identify only one of these seven factors in their paper i.e. qualifications, the other six factors can be incorporated into their tri-partite categorisation of what they term ‘individual variables’ i.e. achievement, attitudinal and behavioural variables respectively. As mentioned above, two broad and very common agentic influences are analysed here i.e. cognitive attributes and individual behaviours. Cognitive attributes are considered first, in relation to career competences, multipotentiality, self-efficacy, outcome expectations and self and opportunity awareness.

### 2.2.1 Cognitive Attributes <sup>6</sup>

Bright and Prior (2005: 294) in their support for chaos theory as a descriptor of career behaviour, question the ‘boundless ability of humans to research, understand and control the world and the things in it.’ In other words the capacity of human understanding is limited. Individuals have limited cognitive and material resources when coming to make a decision. Be this as it may, cognitive abilities facilitate this understanding. Accurate or successful self-discovery is a function of cognitive ability. In this regard, Waddell and Bauer (2005) emphasise the dynamic nature of career planning and development and argue that central to the process of career planning and development is this journey of self-discovery i.e. where students consider their personal values in the context of education and work environments. Hall (1996: 10) in his thesis on the ‘protean career’ argues that such a career ‘requires a high level of self-awareness and personal responsibility’ while Schein (1978), Malkin (1997) and Holland (1985) all effectively argue that individuals need to be more fully self-aware in order to understand what factors impact on their career decisions. Brown (2002: 49) summarises the cognitive nature and effects of values thus: ‘values are beliefs that are experienced by the individual as standards that guide how he or she should function; they are cognitive structures’.

Defillippi and Arthur (1994) provide a useful typology of career competences – the extent to which these are possessed will vary from one individual to another. They are ‘know-how’ competences i.e. job related knowledge and skills and their impact on

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<sup>6</sup> Cognitive attributes specifically self-efficacy, outcomes expectations and personal goal setting are also considered in the context of Social Cognitive Career Theory in Section 2.5 below.

performance; ‘know-why’ competences i.e. where employees understand both their own motivations and identify with organisational goals; and ‘know-whom’ competences such as networking within and outside the employing organisation for both individual and organisational gain. Hackett et al (1985) as cited in Ball (1997: 75) in their study of the career behaviour of 50 female lecturers provided a taxonomy of career competences. These included: communication and organisational skills, career management and career advancement skills, political skills and ‘adaptive cognitive strategies’ which included ‘realistic self appraisal, self acceptance and the ability to cope with rejection’.

Multipotentiality is the term used to refer to the situation where many or all of these competences are possessed by an individual. The most widely cited definition of multipotentiality appears to be that of Fredrickson and Rothney (1972: vii) ‘the ability to select and develop any number of competencies to a high level’. In their research such multipotential individuals scored high in a range of aptitude and achievement tests, their record illustrated high achievement in class work and participated in a range of social, sporting and individual activities. Rysiew et al (1999) acknowledge that multipotentiality has not been fully or directly considered in the career development literature but they suggest that it can be associated with Holland’s (1985) ‘low differentiation type’. They describe multipotential individuals as those who have numerous and diverse abilities and interests. Such individuals are likely to be anxious over the abundant choices available to them during career planning. (Emmett and Minor 1993, Kerr, 1993). Rysiew e al (1994) argue that in the context of career choice, multipotentiality is a cause of ‘career indecision’ and such indecision is especially likely when four variables are present i.e.

abilities, motivation, interests and opportunity. They term this ‘overchoice syndrome’ (1994: 44). The pervasiveness of multipotentiality in the career choice literature justifies in Delisle and Squires’s (1989: 98) view a revision of how multipotentiality is actually defined so as to include explicit reference to its negative impact on career choice i.e. ‘the interest and ability to succeed in so many vocational areas that choosing one career path becomes problematic’. Rysiew et al (1999: 48) identify several possible outcomes of multipotentiality – choosing an occupation that allows them to utilise their many talents, or to express themselves – ‘[they] strive towards merging values of self-actualisation and self-expression’.

Career choice is by definition a narrowing down process (Fredrickson 1972). Multipotential individuals are less comfortable with this process because they know themselves to have many talents, they are highly motivated and they often wish to experience a range of opportunities. Rysiew et al (1999: 50) summarise the negatives of such multipotentiality succinctly: ‘the multipotentialed may vacillate among career options, and multipotentiality can be viewed as hindering successful decision making ... it may be confusing and anxiety-producing to be confronted with overchoice’.

It is not surprising then that some gifted individuals given these internal pressures may choose to ‘give in’ and to exercise the easier option e.g. make a pragmatic career decision based on earning potential or parent, teacher or peer expectations. (Sanborn, 1974; Astin, Green and Korne, 1987; Kerr, 1991, 1997). Here, once again we observe the interaction and duality of agency and structure.

The first of the typical constructs of cognition is self-efficacy which Bandura (1986: 391) describes as ‘peoples’ judgements of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance’. In other words it refers to an individual’s ‘sense of personal capability’. In the context of career choice, individuals ‘must adopt a personal conception of herself or himself as competent at the skills necessary for a given career’ (2001: 6). This personal conception of self or degree of self-efficacy relative to that career is influenced by a myriad of factors e.g. performance feedback in college or in placement and at macro level by cultural beliefs.

Lent and Brown (1996: 391) argue that levels of self-efficacy emerge from four ‘informational sources’ i.e. the accomplishment of personal goals, vicarious learning, social persuasion and physiological states and reactions. Self-efficacy appears to be cyclical in nature. On the one hand and as explained by Lent and Brown (1996) experience of success increases self-efficacy beliefs while on the other, as emphasised by Bandura (1989: 1175) ‘the stronger their perceived self-efficacy, the higher the goals people set for themselves and the firmer their commitment to them’ – and *ceterus paribus*, the greater is the likelihood of success. Cunnien et al (2009: 165) cite Bandura’s (1977) definition of self-efficacy as ‘referencing the belief in one’s ability to reach a goal’ and his view that it ‘is subject to influences from multiple sources of information [including] personal performances, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion and physiological responses’. Cunnien et al also cite Betz and Hackett’s (1981) contention that self-efficacy is a crucial element in success related behaviour. As emphasised by for instance Betz and Hackett (1986) and Lent and Hackett (1987) occupational and career

self-efficacy are central to career choice. Skinner et al (1998: 11) argue that youth who have a greater sense of self-efficacy are more likely to 'select challenging tasks, set high and concrete goals, and form well structured sequences of plans and actions'. Flores et al (2009) findings also found a link between self-efficacy and career interests. They recommended interventions to increase self-efficacy beliefs as a means to broadening career interests. High self-esteem is a related concept. It might be explained as a positive attitude toward and high respect for oneself, low feelings of personal failure and uselessness and generally a belief that one is a person of worth.

Outcome expectation is the second cognition construct. The research of Gore and Leurwerke (2000) and Lent et al (2003) indicate that outcome expectations are a stronger predictor of career goals than self-efficacy beliefs. Outcome expectations are defined by Lent and Brown (1996: 311) as 'beliefs about the consequences or the outcomes of performing particular behaviours' or in other words, refers to a person's beliefs regarding the consequences of performing that task successfully. Bandura argues that both self-efficacy and outcome expectations influence individual behaviour. This appears to be congruent with Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory of motivation which argues that motivation is a function of how much we want something and how likely we think we are to get it. Expectations are influenced by direct and indirect / vicarious learning experiences such as 'perceptions of the outcomes one has personally received in relevant past endeavours and the second hand information one acquires'. (Lent and Brown 1996: 311).

Bandura explains personal goals, the third construct of cognition, as one's intention to engage in a certain activity or to produce a particular outcome. Agency is exercised both when setting goals and subsequent to this when exerting behaviours designed to achieve those goals. Both of these processes are influenced by self-efficacy level and outcome expectations. This type of agentic influence derives from human capital theory (Becker 1964). Layder et al (1991: 450) describe an achievement variable as 'a personal achievement that enables the individual to pursue a certain line of activity in relation to his or her employability in the labour market'. They consider one such achievement variable i.e. educational achievement. The pursuit and attainment of one's personal goals is in significant part a function of one's individual behaviour.

Malkin et al (1997) and Stewart and Knowles (1999) emphasise the notions of 'self-awareness' and 'opportunity awareness'. They argue that individuals should reflect inwardly in order to determine what they have to offer to work and to identify what type of work would provide happiness and satisfaction. Linked to this, it is important for individuals to be able to match awareness of self with awareness of opportunities.

Lips-Wiersma (2002) cite Mirvis and Hall's (1996: 251) definition of psychological success: 'the experience of achieving goals that are personally meaningful to the individual rather than those set by parents, peers, an organisation or society'. Lips-Wiersma (2002: 500) also identified three 'core concepts' relating to meaning relative to career; purpose, sense-making and coherence respectively. The former refers to 'what goes on in the subject's thinking process with respect to reasons for which he works and

to what one intends to accomplish or reliance through work'. In explaining sense-making, they provide Morin's (1995: 44) definition i.e. 'the capacity to perceive, judge, and discover the intelligibility of beings, actions and things'. They themselves (2002: 500) consider sense-making to be 'a process in which individuals form cognitive maps of their environment, including standards and rules for perceiving, interpreting, believing and acting'. The final concept i.e. coherence, (alternatively termed harmony or wholeness) can be associated with the terms 'quality of working life' and 'work-life balance' and refers to the attempt to fit all the elements of one's life within work and outside work into a coherent whole.

Linked to this, Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000: 152) in their investigation of the relationship between interests and academic motivation, describe interest as 'an interactive relation between an individual and certain aspects of his or her environment (e.g. objects, events and ideas)'. They distinguish between individual or personal interest and situational interest. They define the former as a relatively stable motivational orientation or personal disposition that develops over time in relation to a particular topic or domain [e.g. occupation or career] and is associated with increased knowledge, value and positive feelings'. Situational interest, on the other hand, centres on responses to environmental factors, conditions or stimuli that promote interest in a particular context.

### 2.2.2 Individual Behaviours

‘Advocates of the behavioural approach ... suggest that employees can exert some control over their career progression and should therefore engage in voluntary or informal strategies that facilitate career success’ (Nabi, 1999: 214). This can be applied to students also i.e. on their university to work transition. Examples of such behaviours include moving in the right circles or what Nabi (1999) terms ‘networking with contacts’, (Keele 1986; Peluchette, 1993), seeking the advice of specialists e.g. career advisors (Kram, 1998) and selling oneself e.g. via carefully considered curriculum vitae and good interview preparation (Bahniuk et al, 1996).

Ball discusses career development ‘optimising behaviours’ which require a particular set of skills. These include: the ability to adopt a goal directed approach to personal career development, the ability to ‘promote’ one’s own career interests, and the ability to predict changes in business and life generally. Tofler (1970) as cited in Ball (1997: 77) emphasised the latter skill – ‘to have a finger on the pulse of change can help us predict its outcomes and the impact it might have on the demand for our services. In short, this particular competence involves the ability to envision future opportunities’.

Herriot and Pemberton (1995) similarly identify a list of behaviours that promote career development. Their list includes: the gathering of knowledge, external networking, and publicising one’s achievements. Granovetter (1995) discusses how job seekers will often utilise personal social networks in their pursuit of a particular career, and that quite often

unsolicited enquiries i.e. unofficial / not advertised positions will be attained via such networking.

Cunnie et al (2009: 166) in their research on adolescent work experience and self-efficacy suggest that work experience 'has the potential to influence anticipations about future involvements across various domains of adult life'. A key purpose of work placement is the provision of opportunity to students to enhance their knowledge and understanding of an occupation including 'the development of insight into the skills and attitudes required for an occupation and an awareness of career opportunities' (Neilson and McNally (2009: 1). Work experience therefore impacts upon the attractiveness of a particular career post graduation. The role that placement officers play in the management of internships / work placements also impacts upon career choice. Numerous researchers including Pumfey and Schofield (1982), Sukovieff (1991), Shah (2005), Park et al (2005) and Osgood et al (2006) have found that work experience is a significant influence on career choice. Kram (1985) emphasised the importance of mentoring while on work placement including one's awareness of the impact of engaging with senior colleagues or indeed with peers.

Finally and with regard to the impact of personality on career related behaviours including career choice, Lau and Shaffer (1999: 227-228) argue that 'several personality attributes i.e. locus of control, self-monitoring, self-esteem, optimism, and Machiavellianism are determinants of person-environment fit, job performance and career success'. Brockhaus (1982) and Feldman and Bolinio (2000) for instance, in their

studies of entrepreneurs focused on those psychological and personality factors that distinguish entrepreneurs from non entrepreneurs including need for greater control, a high need for achievement and a tolerance of uncertainty.

Vallacher and Wagner (1989) distinguish between high and low levels of personal agency. The former manifests itself in a tendency to understand one's actions while the latter involves seeing one's actions in terms of its details or mechanics. Low level agents are more impulsive, less self-motivated, less consistent in their behaviour over time and have external rather than internal locus of control than do high level agents. This research illustrates that some people (low level agents) are more likely to be influenced by and constrained by structural influences.

### **2.3 Structure**

Structural influences are associated with the niches, pathways and trajectories metaphors of youth transition. Bynner and Roberts (1991: xvi) as cited in Rudd and Evans (1998: 40) suggest a career trajectory is based on 'broadly similar' routes to employment and have their origins in education, family background, and 'the predictability of ultimate destinations in the labour market'.

Numerous authors have considered structural variables including Layder et al (1991), Rudd and Evans (1998) Lowe and Krahn (2000) Kaufman and Feldman (2004) and Mayrhofer et al (2005). Structure, or more precisely structural factors, are defined by Layder et al (1991: 449) as 'those over which a young person has no opportunity of

exercising any control, for example the social class of their parents, their sex, the local opportunity structure as measured by their place of residence and the level of unemployment when they entered the labour market'. Similarly Nasser (2003: 329) states that structural factors are those which 'go beyond the individual's control'. Athanasou (2001: 136) for instance explicitly categorised gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and geographic location as [factors] 'largely beyond the control of the individual'. Giddens (1984: 5) in a more complex definition defines it as 'rules and resources recursively implicated in social reproduction; institutionalized features of social systems have structural properties in the sense that relationships are stabilised across space and time'. Rudd and Evans (1998) classify structure as influences by local and national organisations, the consequences of changing jobs situations as well as general social impacts due to ethnic origin, social class and gender.

Mayrhofer et al (2005) identify three types of influencing structure variables namely personal demographic variables such as age and gender, economic background of family, and educational level in the family of origin including parents' educational level. One's race, class, physical and mental abilities, and the level of societal development for instance all have an impact on work and employment prospects. Furlong et al (2002) explicitly identify educational attainment, gender and class as structural influences and Goodwin and O' Connor (2005: 214-215) identify 'family', 'personal networks' and 'friends'. Rudd and Evans (1998: 60) consider the 'big four of social class [incorporating family background], gender, race and locality' and labour market profile while Layder et al (1991) also focus on four of these five factors i.e. class, gender ('sex'), locality and

unemployment level. Van Maanen (1973: 409) identifies the role of race, class, locality and degree of family orientation as influences on policing as a career choice. Interestingly, he also explicitly identifies the role of social networks in career choice. In their investigation into self-employed persons, both Katz (1992) and Dyer (1994) identify several influencing social and environmental factors including age, sex, level of education, family history (of self-employment), social support, role models and societal attitudes. Miller and Form (1951) emphasised the role of social class in explaining different career experiences. They also identified the impact of five specific factors on occupational attainment i.e. father's occupation, worker's intelligence, father's income and education, accessible financial aid and influential contacts and social and economic conditions in general society. Malthus and Fowler (2009: 32) cite research that considers the influence of 'referents' on career choice. They identify five such groups of referents – parents / caregivers, friends, business professionals, university instructors and school teachers / career advisors. With regard to teachers, Dick and Rallis (1991) found that they have a strong influence on girl's choice of career in mathematics while Gates (2002) found that teacher and counsellor advice reflected a gender bias i.e. girls were less likely than boys to be directed toward a non-traditional career. With regard to career guidance, and where it may not be at the appropriate standard, many (multipotentialed) students make misinformed, misguided, or just plain wrong career decisions' (Rysiew et al 1999: 428). Their key recommendation is that effective career education helps the reconciliation of diverse interests and abilities and the exploitation of talent for the student's sake and for the better of society generally. They concur with Silverman's (1993) view that career education and guidance should begin as early in life as possible to help students

‘recognise their capabilities and clarify their interests as well as to expose them to the range of possibilities that exist for them’ (Rysiew et al 1999: 429). Petridou et al (2006: 15) point out the impact ‘academics’ can have on building student ‘entrepreneurial mindset’. This is likely true of all ‘professions’ i.e. a committed, enthusiastic and informed teacher of any discipline will impact positively on a student’s career preferences, plans and ambitions. When one considers career choices, whether alone or in consultation with such referents, a critical consideration is the availability of jobs and the subsequent possibilities for career progression.

In the specific context of school to work transition, McCann et al (2009: 1) reference literature which suggests that ‘school leavers possess robust images of what to expect when they begin work’. They explicitly mention the media and personal experience as sources of such images. They go on however to argue that career choice (their research focussed on the career preferences of nursing students) is also influenced by aspects of their B.Sc. course e.g. student peers, academic staff and college placement.

To consider all the structural factors that impact on career choice is beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore those three most common structural variables are considered in detail here i.e. social class / family background, gender and labour market attributes.

### **2.3.1 Social Class / Family Background**

A myriad of authors including Hoffmann (1974), Jackson et al (1993), Banks et al (1995), Lent (1996), Evans and Furlong (1997), Dryler (1998), Gorton (2000), Smithy (2000), Maher and Kroska (2002), Liu et al (2004), Adya and Kaiser (2005) and Wong and Liu (2009) have focused on family as an influence on career choice. Their research carried out at different times and in different places, illustrates the extent and range of this research. Young et al (1997) reference several empirical studies in which family is found to impact upon vocational identity, career indecision and career search self-efficacy. Yang and Bu (2004: 650) also identify the extensive research findings - for instance Young and Friesen (1990), Lapan et al (1999), Ferry et al (2000) and Turner and Lapan (2002) - that emphasise the critical role of parental influence on career choice. Dryler (1998) argues that family is one of the most influential contexts of socialisation in childhood and adolescence. Parental influences span many types including involvement, encouragement, expectation, role modeling and parenting practice. Whiston and Keller (2004) found that children who perceive their parents to be supportive and ambitious (for their children) have higher ambitions themselves. Biggart et al (2004) discovered that 21% of Scottish school leavers said they made their career choice in collaboration with their parents and 2% responded that their parents were the main influence on their final decision. Danes and McVicar (2005: 19) also identified a 'clear pattern of significant relationships between parental characteristics and the career paths [of their respondents]'. Granovetter (1995) references family in the context of his distinction between strong and weak social networks. The former are those associated with family and close friends while the latter are associated with acquaintances. Interestingly, Granovetter argues that

strong ties limits social mobility because they ‘only expose individuals to opportunities that are at the same level of the labour market as their immediate social group’ while weak ties enhance social mobility as they expose individuals to opportunities ‘beyond their social class group’.

Wong and Liu (2009) in their study of parental influences on student career choice, measured the impact of six parental influential factors i.e. 1) perceived parental supports for a specific career (in this case in the hospitality and tourism sector), 2) perceived parental concerns about welfare and prestige, 3) perceived parental barriers to career choice, 4) perceived parental involvement in career preparation, 5) perceived parental encouragement to self-direction in career choice and 6) perceived transmission of parental views. They discovered that the first three above were ‘determined as being salient predictors for students’ (hospitality and tourism) career choice intentions’ (2009: 1).

Much of the research into the role of family as an influence on career choice focuses on four specific familial attributes: economic background, social background, educational background and influence of mothers and siblings.

With regard to economic background, Liu et al (2004) and Maher and Kroska (2002) emphasise the impact of parent’s socio economic status. Evans and Furlong (1997: 23) cite Hoffman (1974) who argued that parental pressures may also determine choice of career and that ‘choice of high status occupations is clearly associated with high socio-

economic status of the family'. Rojewski (1994) found adolescents from low-income backgrounds scored lower on career maturity i.e. the readiness to make appropriate career decisions (Lundberg et al 1997) and he attributed this 'to a lack of access to occupational information, role models and the perceived lack of employment opportunities'. (Kerka 1998: 3).

Social background, such as it can be distinguished from economic background has also been identified as a significant influence on career choice. Gorton for instance (2000: 279) discovered that 'graduates with family business backgrounds tended to be less disposed towards comfort and security in work, were less likely to favor working in the public sector, were more favourably disposed towards working in their own business, had more positive attitudes about entrepreneurs, and a greater internal locus of control'. He also cited research from Stanworth (1989) which showed that individuals who had a self-employed father were more disposed toward self-employment than those who did not.

The educational background of parents also appears to be a powerful mediator on career choice. Eccles for instance (1993) identified the significant impact of parents' education levels. Kim (2004) references that literature which indicates the impact of parental educational expectations on students' higher education aspirations. Nasser and Abouchdid (2003) research findings suggest for instance that a father's occupation appears to be the main predictor of the male's occupational attainment after graduation. Lowe and Krahn's (2000: 8) study showed that 'generally lower aspirations are evident among respondents from families in which parents have less than university education or

are in non – academic programmes’. McWhirter (1997: 125) references Russell and Rush (1987) who identified ‘family / social concerns, femininity concerns and limited education or experience’ as perceived barriers to a management career. And Jackson et al (1993) found that women who entered male dominated fields were typically daughters in a family where a) the mother worked, b) both parents were highly educated, c) and where self-actualisation was encouraged. Smith (2000) found that mothers with undergraduate degree qualifications were more likely to influence their children’s career choice than those mothers who did not. This leads on neatly to consideration of the final familial attribute mediator i.e. mother and siblings.

Furlong (1986: 66) illustrated the key role placed by mothers and female friends and relatives in girls’ career choice describing these contacts as the ‘single most important influence on occupational aspiration’. Fields (1981) found ‘the occupational aspirations of high socio-economic children were significantly influenced by their mother’s perception of their future occupational opportunity’ (1997: 127) and Gandara (1982) who found ‘mothers were equally if not more influential than their fathers in forming their sons’ / daughters educational aspirations and included family support as a critical contributor to their educational [and career] aspirations’ (1997: 127). Both these studies had a culture comparison perspective and are therefore less relevant to this research which has no such focus. Banks et al (1995) found with regard to the influence of siblings on career choice, that especially for girls, older brothers can influence sisters to enter ‘masculine careers’ and that in families consisting only of daughters, they are more likely to choose careers that are more traditionally ‘feminine’. And in the context of the

influence of parents in a changed and changing society, Strathdee (2001: 311) argue that ‘the decline in the value of social networks has contributed to the risk and uncertainty in education – work transitions. The primary reason for this is that parents’ abilities to advise their children have been reduced due to ‘globalisation, technological change, credential inflation, and de-industrialisation’. (Granovetter 2001: 319).

Ozake et al (2004), in their study of 386 undergraduate engineering students, notably provide evidence of even greater complexity i.e. where one structural factor i.e. family has a greater impact on females’ career choice than on males. Ozake et al (2004) also found evidence supporting Brainard and Carlin’s (1998) finding that male students were mostly influenced by female members of their family whereas female students were influenced by both male and female members of their family.

The extent which family exerts influence on career choice is again considered in Section 2.5 below i.e. Lent et al’s consideration that family can be both a distal and a proximal influence on career choice and specifically the view within Social Cognitive Career Theory that parental influences are ‘powerful contextual determinants that mediate the relationship between interests and goals, between goals and actions, and between actions and accomplishments’ (Wong and Liu, 2009: 5). Rudd and Evans’s (1998: 50) argument that the influence of family is indirect and that ‘this suits the young people at the time when they are trying to establish their own adult identity and commensurate levels of independence’ will also be considered in this regard. In the context of structure – agency

overlap, this is interesting as it suggests the structural influence of family can allow and actually support individual agency.

### 2.3.2 Gender

‘While we socialise our men to aspire to feats of mastery, we socialise our women to aspire to feats of submission. Men are hard; women are soft. Men are meant to conquer nature; women are meant to commune with it. Men are rational, women irrational; men are practical, women impractical. Boys play with blocks; girls play with dolls. Men build; women inhabit. Men are active; women are passive. Men are good at mathematics; women are good at literature. If something is broken, daddy will fix it. If feelings are hurt, mommy will salve them’. (Schwarz-Cowan, 1979: 2)

It is acknowledged that this comment is thirty years old. Neither should it be overlooked that this comment was made in relation to US society. Crompton and Sanderson (1990: 17-18) acknowledge that there is indeed a lack of uniformity in the content of the rules that govern relations between the sexes across the globe. Cockburn (1985: 168) concurs – ‘the character and behaviour that are considered to be masculine or feminine ... vary widely from one culture to another’. However both sources likewise agree that ‘all gender relations are universal’ (Crompton and Sanderson, 1990: 18) i.e. the constant is that there is inequality between men and women’ (Cockburn, 1985: 168). Tovey and Share (2000: 192) agree – ‘all known societies can be seen to be patriarchal to some extent ... are differentiated by gender and have been dominated in various ways by men’.

As mentioned above however, culture as a structural factor is outside the scope of this thesis.

The following quote relates to Ireland and is more recent. It too provides evidence of the persistence of 'gendered work and employment'.

'Concepts of womanhood continue to revolve around caring, familism, reproduction, love, sexual attraction and gendered paid employment, preferably in a 'little job' which is part-time, low paid and undertaken for the good of the family'. (O'Connor, 1998: 21)

The labour market is both at once a force acting on, and a product of, society. Clearly the labour market and its attendant sectors, occupations and job levels are also gendered. Work and employment is however more than a manifestation of gendered society. Work and employment is a gendering process. A vicious circle appears to exist i.e. people have a gender and that gender determines their 'chosen' occupation, and occupations have a gender character that confirm and strengthen the gender of those in those occupations. The assumption that different types of work are appropriate for each sex is communicated through the socialisation process. The literature provides significant evidence that occupational preferences continue to be sex stereotyped. Van Buren et al (1993: 2) state 'occupational choices are influenced by perceptions of gender appropriateness, pre-market education and training ... and ignorance of available options'. In a personal reflection on 'doing gender, Katila and Merilainen (1999) caution that 'we (women) should be careful not to see ourselves merely as victims of gendered organisational

cultures but as co-producers of it'. Here again one sees the interpenetration of structure and agency.

Persisting differences in the structure of men's and women's employment have been the subject of ongoing debate. Gender is however a significant influence on the decision to work generally, on the occupational choice specifically and on subsequent career progression. Gilligan (1982) argues that women are subject to numerous and diverse influences, factors and constraints in making decisions about their careers. This is clearly true also of men.

Men and women choose occupations that appear congruent with societal expectations.<sup>7</sup> The verb 'choose' is therefore perhaps misleading as such 'choice' is constrained by gender role expectations. Joy (2005) suggests that a key characteristic of the labour market is occupational difference by gender. O' Leary (1997: 95) also argues that 'women are subject to numerous and diverse influences, factors and constraints in making decisions about careers'. Adkins (1995) in an admittedly slightly dated contribution identifies disparities between men and women – women earn less than men, have less secure employment than men, do not have access to an unlimited set of occupations nor as easy access to a professional career. Despite many socio-economic and political changes in the recent past, gender remains a significant determinant of subject selection at school, course selection at university, profession entered, remuneration level, training opportunity and promotion prospects. Work and

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<sup>7</sup> Mavin (2001: 185) cites Marshall (1984) and Henning and Jardim (1977) who argued that women, historically, due to limited opportunities, were job rather than career oriented.

employment is gendered. Further, these choices are not mutually exclusive. For instance one's chosen profession is influenced by one's third level discipline which is often influenced by one's subject choices in school i.e. 'subject choices often act as pre-requisites and affect entrance to tertiary education and other career pathways' (Rogers and Creed 2010: 8).

Gender is defined by Ferber and Nelson (1993: 9-10) as 'the social meaning that is given to biological differences between the sexes, it refers to cultural constructs rather than to biological givens'. Tovey and Share (2000: 191) likewise distinguish between the physical and the social: 'gender refers to the meanings (social construction) that arise out of sexual classification (physical / biological); and to the socially constructed meanings and identities that arise from assumed sexual differences'. In other words, gendering is a compelling cultural process that begins at birth and continues until death – the socialisation process we experience including home life, school, recreation, and work ascribes expectations regarding how one should feel and act. Cockburn (1985: 168) puts it succinctly – 'people are born one sex or another and on this basis they are ascribed a gender and then brought up socially to live that gender: masculine or feminine'. West and Zimmerman (1987: 125) explain the traditional and typical distinction between sex and gender – the former is 'ascribed by biology: anatomy, hormones, and physiology; gender is an achieved status: that which is constructed through psychological, cultural and social means'. They themselves define gender as 'the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category' (1987: 126) and argue that 'gender itself is constituted through interaction'.

Bird and Brush (2002) define gender in the context of career choice as an unconscious, cognitive factor that shapes values and behaviours through an interaction of biology and social influence. Bruni et al (2004: 408) in their ethnographic study of gender and entrepreneurship, state 'the symbolic gender order is not immutable: it is not static but dynamic and therefore varies across time and space ... [and] contextualised, situated and historicised gender relationships attribute a circumscribed meaning to male and female in any culture and always do so in relation to the archetypes of maleness and femaleness which define difference'. In this regard, Bruni et al cite two classic gender studies i.e. Garfinkel's (1967) 'Agnes' and Goffman's (1976) 'Gender Display'. Both these studies have as their central tenet that gender 'is not a biological attribute but rather a social practice which should be sought and observed in typical daily interactions and in the context of wider cultural (and symbolic) domains'. Or in other words: gender is not merely nor simply a property of individuals but is an integral dynamic of broader society.

Gender segregation can be defined simply as 'the tendency for women and men to work in different occupations' (Blackburn et al, 2001: 513). Acker (1990, 1992) sees work as an arena within and through which invented and reproduced cultural images of gender are disseminated. She identifies four processes that occur within (and outside) of work and employment that facilitate the persistence of gender segregation. The structural process refers to the construction of gender divisions between men and women, with men almost always in the more senior organisational positions. The symbolic process refers to the establishment of symbols, artefacts and images such as language, dress and media image. What might be termed the interactional process refers to the nature of the interaction

between men and women. The individual process is described as ‘the internal mental work of individuals as they consciously construct their own conceptualisation of the organisation’s gendered structures, including persona, and the demands for gender appropriate behaviour and attitudes’ (Ledwith and Colgan, 1996: 14)

Cockburn (1985: 231-232) emphasises the gendered nature of occupations as well as of people – ‘by long association with the sex that is found in them and which has developed them, jobs are, with few exceptions, either masculine or feminine’. Gender impacts on all forms of segregation in work. Four forms of gender segregation have been identified. Sectoral segregation occurs where there is unequal distribution of men and women across sectors i.e. primary sector (agriculture), secondary sector (manufacturing) and tertiary sector (services). There is evidence that in Ireland, men are over represented for instance in agriculture, construction, manufacturing and financial services and women in healthcare and education. Hierarchical segregation refers to unequal distribution of men and women throughout the organisational hierarchy e.g. the predominance of men at more senior levels in organisations. Job-functional segregation refers to the division of tasks within the occupation. Occupational segregation refers to unequal distribution of men and women across occupations e.g. in industrialised societies, women dominate for instance in the nursing and secretarial professions and men in construction and engineering. In other words, ‘men are concentrated into men’s occupations’ and women into women’s’ (Crompton and Sanderson, 1990: 6). Hakim (1979) has an alternative typology that distinguishes between horizontal and vertical occupational segregation.

Horizontal occupational segregation exists when men and women work in different types of occupations. It is a consequence of men and women being recruited into different jobs – men into masculine jobs and women into feminine jobs. This occupational order will range from ‘low level’ to high level’ occupations. Male jobs will usually be ranked higher than female jobs but female occupations such as nursing will be ranked higher than a male occupation such as labourer. In addition to the recruitment of men and women into ‘sex typed occupations’, horizontal segregation may also be a consequence of the crowding of women ... into low level occupations because they are cheap labour rather than because they are women.’ (Crompton and Sanderson, 1990: 33). Blackburn et al (2001: 521) argue that most of the difference in segregation is located in horizontal segregation. Vertical occupational segregation exists when men commonly work in higher grades and women in lower grades in the same occupation. An example of this is education where women predominate at primary level and men at tertiary level. However vertical segregation also describes the instance where men and women are recruited at the same level but only men progress their career upwards via promotion. This is maintained by confining women to lower grades within that internal labour market. This glass ceiling, alternatively termed ‘sticky floor’ (Berheide, 1992) or cement ceiling (Cockburn, 1985), is considered by Auster (1996) to be a manifestation of gender bias.

Supply side explanations for occupational segregation focus on the unique qualities of female labour. There appears to be two supply side theories i.e. normative theory that emphasises the socio-cultural features of female roles, and neo-classical economic theory that emphasises human capital and rational choice. Socio-cultural explanations have

been mentioned above i.e. women are ascribed a gender and then brought up socially to live that feminine gender and women's social respectability and sense of self-respect depends on behaving in a manner congruent with feminine stereotypes (Crompton and Sanderson, 1990). Crompton and Sanderson argue however that because socio-cultural theory does not explain why certain tasks are considered male or female, it is merely a description rather than an explanation of the gendered division of labour.

Neo-classical economic theory emphasises both the human capital elements of qualifications or 'the marketable skills that qualifications represent' and experiences, (Blackburn et al, 2001: 514) and rational choice respectively. Regarding the latter, a rational choice is made by the female partner to take responsibility for domestic tasks i.e. the decision is made on economic grounds – 'it is best for each individual to spend all or most of his or her time on one set of tasks, and for them to exchange their respective surplus output, rather than for each to divide their time between both tasks.' (Crompton and Sanderson, 1990: 28). Rational choice and human capital aspects of neo-classical economic theory are at once linked and separate. As identified by Blackburn et al (2001), rational choices do depend on what is attainable which in turn depends on the level of human capital and the nature of available jobs. Here again one can observe an explicit recognition of the interdependence of structure and agency. However, it is also true that men are usually paid more than women whatever the reasons for the difference in pay – 'the situation is self-reproducing; because men can earn more than their partners, their market employment is prioritised and so they continue to earn more' (Blackburn et al 2001: 517). And as women devote energies to domestic tasks, they enter either part time

employment or less taxing and hence less well paid employment. This facilitates the persistence of a segregated labour market. Blackburn et al (2001) are highly critical of human capital theory – ‘it is extremely problematic if not nonsensical’ (Blackburn et al 2001:518). Several legitimate criticisms are made. The conclusion reached is that segregation impacts on skills rather than skills impacting on segregation.

Demand side explanations focus on the preferences of employers and other stakeholders who favour occupational segregation because it is a source of stability and reinforces conventional gender identities. Patriarchy is closely linked here i.e. male power in and control of work and employment including exclusion of women from the best occupations. Blackburn (2001) et al in their critique of popular theories of gender segregation, argue that patriarchy is a poor explanation of gender segregation. As with neo-classical economic theory, they provide several reasons, including the extent to which it exaggerates the passivity of women, why patriarchy is an inadequate theoretical approach to understanding occupational gender segregation.

Helms and Piper (1994: 54) argue ‘differences in abilities, achievements, personality, interests and values between men and women do exist [but] they are often rather small’. Naidoo (1998) and Kerka (1998) reference Luzzo’s (1995) study that found that women were more likely to perceive role conflicts and barriers as obstacles to their career development and Farmer’s (1997) suggestion that ‘women may balance their career preferences with what seems possible, regardless of whether their career behaviour is appropriate for their career development’ (Kerka: 3). Larwood and Gutek (1987)

identified two issues that impacted on women more than on men when it comes to career decision and progression etc.: first, women ‘feel the tug of alternative possibilities’ i.e. that of being a mother and home keeper and second, women encounter greater discrimination in the labour market than do men – ‘when it comes to promotion and career development, women are judged not so much on their abilities and achievements, but on assumptions about their family life, responsibilities and future intentions. Men are treated as workers, not parents, but women are always seen as mothers’ (Flanders 1994, cited in Mavin 2001: 185). Polachek (1981) and Fuchs (1988) argue that marriage and family responsibilities may depress women’s desire for occupations with higher skills and more responsibility.

### **2.3.3 Changing Labour Market / Careers Profile**

The attributes of a national or local labour market e.g. the demand for and supply of labour, are outside the influence of individual job seekers. So too is the dynamic nature of contemporary careers and of the arena within which they exist. This suggests that labour market profile should be conceptualised as a structural phenomenon. This section considers the labour market itself as a structural mediator of career opportunity and choice.

#### **2.3.3.1 Supply Side**

On the supply side, changes in the nature of the family, in social attitudes, in educational participation, in legislation, in social infrastructure as well as ‘other developments from washing machines to fast food to disposable nappies’ (Blackburn et al, 2001: 529) have

helped to make more labour of particular types available. With specific regard to women in the Irish workforce, the increased supply of women into the labour market has been driven by several factors including the availability of higher wages i.e. their capacity to earn higher wages than before, improved qualification levels, declining fertility rates, and the removal of many social and legal barriers to women employment. In other words, the composition and power bases of the contemporary labour market are changing. The labour market is no longer 'male territory'. In many countries, as identified above, the participation rate of women is nearly equal to that of men. Although occupational segregation persists, vertical segregation in particular appears to be in decline. Ireland is a case in point. Changes in demand and supply side factors have impacted on the involvement of men and women in the Irish labour market. Barriers still persist however, including inadequate childcare provision, reticence on the part of employers to facilitate flexible working practices and to provide training and development opportunities for female staff, and low participation by men in household labour. Colgan and Ledwith (1996) identify three emergent elements that are playing a role in the de-gendering of work and employment. First, changing external conditions including new equal opportunities legislation, improved state provided child care, and maternity / paternity legislation. Second, changes to the organisation's internal patriarchal structure and culture. Third, and the agentic of these 'emergent elements', women's activism i.e. the level of consciousness, political skills and strategies women are beginning to use as employees and as 'customers of the organisation and as citizens of the society within which their employing organisation operates. They conclude (1999: 298) 'it is clear that women's increasing presence in the labour market, their growing consumer power, plus

their increased awareness of gender politics, combined with a willingness to challenge gendered organisational structures and cultures is producing change’.

### **2.3.3.2 Demand Side**

On the demand side, changes in the economy and in the productive sector most notably the significant increase in the relative importance of the tertiary sector relative to the agriculture and manufacturing industry have led to demands for new types of workers with different skills and attributes. Clearly, skill requirements are changing more rapidly than before necessitating the need for re-skilling and up-skilling and the consequent emergence into the HR lexicon of terms such as continuous professional development and life long learning. Firstly and clearly, the looseness / tightness of the labour market impacts upon graduate career choice. In a high unemployment economy, a graduate’s degree of choice is constrained. Peel and Inkson (2004) for instance argue that individuals encounter constantly changing circumstances e.g. an economic downturn which results in more constrained choice of employment and that these circumstances have a powerful effect on choices.

Betti et al (2005: 420) identified two types of labour market – ‘dual system’ and ‘open market’. In the former there is a strong link between the educational process and the labour market while the link is weaker in the latter type. Ireland (and the UK) are categorised ‘open labour markets’. Mayrhofer et al (2005: 38) appear to support the open labour market type or at least a general move in that direction – ‘since the 1980s, the career context has become more complex ... change drivers such as globalization,

virtualization and demographic developments have led to new forms of professional life concepts of individuals'. In addition, one should consider employer preferences for particular types of employees. For instance, Hesketh (1998) found that employers have a preference for graduates from particular universities and cite their research finding that 26% of employers always target high rank universities such as Durham and Oxbridge and that a further 41% indicated a preference for such universities as their graduands have likely attained high A level points. This clearly impacts on the employment opportunities for 'new' university' graduates.<sup>8</sup> Some employers have a preference for the 'old' compared to 'new' universities. Canny (2004: 510) cites Mizen's (1995) finding that 'employer's assumptions about the attributes of young males and females influences their recruitment decisions and this in turn influences young peoples' own occupational and educational aspirations'. It is likely that such employer assumptions are in some cases influenced by their perception of third level colleges relative to one another.

Canny (2004: 295) in her study of the youth labour market in Cumbria explored how employers' perceptions and behaviour can have a mediating effect on objective labour market structures on the one hand and on young peoples' choices and chances' on the other. She argued therefore that 'individual and structural considerations must be extended to incorporate employer behaviour and attitudes towards young men and women'. With regard to classification, Gabb (1997: 62) found that 'the class of degree is not that critical for the many employers who are looking for a well rounded candidate'. However, it may be that the requirement of a particular class of degree is utilised as an

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<sup>8</sup> This is pertinent in the context of the research respondents in this study i.e. Dublin Institute of Technology – how does employer perception of DIT brand and reputation impact on DIT graduates' career opportunities?

efficient (if not necessarily effective) shortlisting method. Finally and with regard to employee attributes and qualifications, Maguire and Maguire (1997) argue that the preferred and indeed required employee attributes in the eyes of employers have changed to include commitment to company values, problem solving skills and greater flexibility.

### **2.3.3.3 Government Policy**

With specific regard to government policy, the OECD (2002: 31) identifies several government initiatives which impact on both the demand and supply sides. These include:

‘early intervention policies for disadvantaged youths, diverse pathways in education and training, activation measures improving employability and mobilising labour supply, large scale job creation and promotion, dual systems providing a bridge between school and work, safety nets, ... hiring subsidies, relaxed conditions for temporary contacts, ... minimum wages, measures to reduce labour costs and employment protection ... tight(er) benefit eligibility conditions ... high quality education and training ... labour market information, [and] career guidance’.

Francis (2002) in a paper which outlined research findings relating to 14-16 year olds, suggests that there has been a positive change in the career ambitions of females which can be partially explained by government policies e.g. equal opportunities programmes which have a) led to girls becoming better informed about non traditional occupation opportunities, b) have discouraged employers from discriminating against girls and c)

have reduced the extent to which careers advisors divert young women from non traditional jobs.

Rubery et al (1999: 4) also refer to ‘progress in closing the gender gap’ in relation to ‘wage work, care work, welfare, segregation, pay and working time patterns’. They however are more cautious about the progress made to date – the reduction in employment gaps is more a result of lower male employment and by the opportunity to employ women in ‘more flexible and low paid jobs’ and although the national governments in the EU appear to be complying with EU equal opportunities legislation i.e. they do not appear to be committed to this legislation. They add that developments in the labour market such as the destabilisation of private and public sector employment, the individualisation of employment contracts, the move away from tenure based pay to performance related pay and more flexible job structures and arrangements might be expected to reduce labour market segregation generally and gender segregation specifically. However, these developments ‘while undermining traditional sources of insider power, also create opportunities for new and possibly more intense forms of both segmentation and segregation based around more individualised employment relationships that are difficult to monitor for gender equity’ (1998: 78-79).

#### **2.3.3.4 Careers in Flux**

Giddens (1991) observed that careers are rapidly changing, increasingly unpredictable and risky due to the impacts of post industrial society attributes including, de-skilling, commodification, rapidly changing market conditions and corporatism’. Adamson et al

(1998: 257) emphasise the changing nature of graduate careers and in particular ‘the construction and maintenance of a healthy self-concept congruent with individuals’ changing strengths and weaknesses, shifting beliefs and attitudes and future aspirations’. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (2002) individualisation thesis is a significant element in contemporary youth transitions. As traditional structures begin to disintegrate, the ‘inherited recipes for living and role stereotypes fail to function (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 26). The key features of such an ‘individualised’ society according to Wyn include uncertainty, growing awareness of the importance of autonomy and personal development, and personal responsibility for one’s success or failure.

‘The ubiquitous rule that, in order to survive the rat race, one has to become, active, inventive and resourceful, to develop ideas of one’s own, to be faster, nimbler, and more creative – not just on one occasion, but constantly, day after day. Individuals become actors, builders, jugglers, stage managers of their own biographies and identities and also of their social links and networks’ (2002: 23).

In other words, the emergent ‘rat race’ requires individuals to be more agentic.

With regard to the changing nature of careers and specifically the changing nature of career development in the contemporary workplace, Ball (1997: 74) predicts concerns for employees in the future: ‘how can they enhance their flexibility and value in the labour market at a time of rapid change?, is moving from one employer to another the only way to further their career?, what is the nature of the new psychological contract between them and their employer?’. The very fact that employees are asking these questions points to the fact that employees are exercising individual agency more than before i.e.

employees are exercising more control over their personal career development. Ball advocates a four part 'career planning cycle' i.e. 'review → explore → plan → act'. He provides explicit examples of such behaviours. For instance workers should consider to what extent their work allows them to use their skills and to satisfy their needs, they should identify their own personal development needs, they should consciously learn from co-workers and they should anticipate future changes in the work environment. He argues that the development and exercise of such competences should go some way to help individuals to take ownership and management of their own career development.

In her research for the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Wyn (2004: 7) discovered that for young people growing up in the 2002, new life patterns are being shaped as they engage with contemporary social and economic conditions. She concurs with the common viewpoint that the education to work transition process is different now than prior to 1970 i.e. the current generation experience is different.

'Young people's life patterns, priorities and attitudes are a response to the world in which they are living. It is important that the social conditions that young people are engaging with provide the context for understanding youth transitions. This is because as young people are inevitably experiencing transitions in their personal biographies, as they move through various forms of education (formal and informal) and occupation (paid and unpaid) so is our society changing'.

According to the Stewart and Knowles (1999: 4)

‘in the new world of work, careers are very different. Gone is the job for life with its planned career structure and company training scheme. Gone is the clear functional identity and the progressive rise in income and security. Instead there is a world of customers and clients, adding value, lifelong learning, portfolio careers, self-development and an overwhelming desire to stay employable’.

Stewart and Knowles (1999) also identified seven specific labour market trends. In line with opportunity awareness discussed above, they are illustrated in table 5 overleaf:

**Table 5 Labour Market Trends (Stewart and Knowles 1999)**

A smaller proportion of graduates in traditional graduate jobs
A vanishing career ladder
More graduates filling non graduate jobs within large organisations
More graduates becoming self-employed
Many graduates needing to cope with unemployment
Many graduates are unemployed
Growth in and increased professionalism of the voluntary and community based sector

With specific reference to opportunity awareness, Stewart and Knowles (1999) identify three areas of which an undergraduate / job seeker must be aware: 1) higher education entry trends as the more students who transition to a particular type programme, the subsequent increase in number of graduates with this specialism going forward, 2)

general labour market trends as this will help them understand real or actual rather than mere perceived opportunities, and 3) the recruitment and selection practices related to opportunities in particular sectors or within particular companies.

The OECD (2002: 20) also identify several changes to the labour market that impact on labour market entry:

**Table 6      Labour Market Changes (OECD: 2002)**

A more favourable economic situation
A maturing working population i.e. relatively less young people in the working age group
Increased time spent in education
Higher numbers of youths with formal qualifications
An increased demand for people with information, communication and technology skills
An increase in female participation in the labour market
The introduction of various policies designed to advantage disadvantaged youths

In addition and as worded by Peel and Inkson (2004: 543) ‘organisation structures are changing in the direction of providing greater flexibility ... downsizing, delayering, and reduction of organisational cores, less permanent full time employees in favor of larger peripheries of part time and temporary workers reduce opportunities for on-going employment’. Auer (2000) identified as additional elements of the contemporary career, sabbaticals, new forms of work –non work combinations [and] new forms of partnership with one’s spouse.

Not only are agentic influences becoming relatively stronger as the transition from education to work becomes more complex and youths look to bring their own influences to bear on the transition, the structural environment is also changing. Wyn (2004: 12) makes this point:

‘there are new structural conditions of young people’s lives these days – for example, an increasingly flexible labour market, dissolution of occupational boundaries, deregulation of labour, and increases in contract, part time employment, increasing diversity in family structures, ... and the increase in the privatization of education ...these conditions have a powerful impact on the experiences of young people. They are the realities with which young people must engage’.

Much of the literature relating to the move from the ‘traditional’ career to the ‘boundaryless’ and ‘protean’ careers suggests that the relationship between employer and employee is now more and more relational rather than transactional. Ackah and Heaton (2004: 142) utilise Rousseau’s (1998) contribution to make this distinction.

A transactional contract is one that is defined in terms of ‘a monetary exchange over specific period of time with the employer contracting for specific skills for specific tasks and then compensating the skill holder for satisfactory performance’. A relational contract, by comparison is not time bound, rather it establishes an on-going relationship between the person and the organisation and involves the exchange of both monetary and non-monetary benefits including mutual loyalty, support and career rewards.

Broadbridge and Parsons (2005: 81) argue in support of Arthur and Rousseau's (1996) view of the boundaryless career – 'the antithesis of the organisational career; it crosses internal and external organisational boundaries ... and is based on the accumulation of career-relevant competencies through multiple new jobs or projects' (Peel and Inkson, 2004: 544). They cite Schein's (1971) questioning of the 'notion of traditional lateral / vertical and uninterrupted career path ... which upholds male-based definitions of success [which they say] is no longer sufficient to accommodate the economic turbulence and changing structure of organisations in today's society'. Instead new career paths have emerged – spiral, diagonal, lateral, multi-directional and even downward. They also reference the protean career (Hall and Mirvis 1996) in which 'the individual takes charge of their own career, addresses whole life concerns [such as intrinsic satisfaction, autonomy and work life balance] and is not based solely on advancement'. (2005: 82).

Ackah and Heaton (2004: 143) identify as an additional feature of the boundaryless career the tendency for it to be 'owned and managed by the individual rather than by his employer'. It has also been argued that the emergence of the boundaryless career is advantageous to women. They argue (2004: 146) 'traits and competences needed in this more fluid context are not those culturally ascribed to men such as rationality, toughness, self-interest, domination, but rather those traditionally held to be feminine ... get[ting] things done by co-operation and a shared influence, by building relationships and connections with others'. They conclude (2004: 155) that the emergence of the boundaryless career has both positive and negative consequences. The positive impact is clear i.e. people have more control over their working lives facilitating a better work –life

balance. The negative consequences emerge in that scenario where ‘individuals are not prepared or developed sufficiently to accept empowerment and responsibility for their own careers and working lives’. (Ackah and Heaton, 2004: 155)

Kanter (1989: 85) also make the point that career paths are no longer ‘straightforward and predictable ... [but] idiosyncratic and confusing’. EGRIS (2001: 103-104) paint the picture quite well – ‘uncertainties, fluctuations, discontinuities, reversals, and seesaws mark young people’s lives’. Bright and Prior (2005: 292) also make reference to the ‘complexities, uncertainties and dynamic aspects of modern work’. With specific regard to career development, they argue that it ‘is subject to a wide range of different influences, many if not all of which are continually changing at different paces and in different degrees. In other words, career development and the influences upon it are highly complex’. And as worded by Ackah and Heaton (2003: 141) ‘the traditional understanding of career is a series of upward moves with increasing income status and security within a functional area and often within a single organisation is being challenged’. Watts (1996) concurs and suggests that an individual’s lifetime progression in learning and work within any function or functions and any organisation or organisations and in any direction i.e. not just upward is a better explanation of ‘career’.

Three final contributions (Skovholt and Morgan 1986; Brousseau et al 1996; and Hall 1996) succinctly outline the complexity and flux of the contemporary labour market and constitute an appropriate conclusion to this section.

Brousseau et al (1996: 52) describe the extent of change in careers as career ‘chaos’ and ‘career pandemonium’. They identify as instances and drivers of this chaos ‘frequent re-organising, downsizing, rightsizing, delayering, teaming and outsourcing’. They also comment on the changing nature of the new workforce i.e. Generation X ‘who do not appear to have any interest in climbing corporate ladders or in spending their careers in one type of work or job ... they don’t care about fancy titles, are unimpressed with the need to do specific tasks in specific ways merely because their boss wants them to and want their work to have meaning’ (1996: 54).<sup>9</sup> Skovholt and Morgan (1981: 231) make the point that ‘there are old options and new options, old limits and new limits. Interacting social forces in contemporary technological societies have opened new doors ... These new options have brought new hopes and new dilemmas. These same forces have closed doors. These lost options have brought new despair and new dilemmas.’

Finally, Hall (1996: 8) states

‘the business environment is highly turbulent and complex, resulting in terribly ambiguous and contradictory career signals. Individuals, perhaps in self-defense, are becoming correspondingly ambivalent about their desires and plans for career development. The traditional psychological contract in which an employee entered a firm, worked hard, performed well, was loyal and committed, and thus received ever greater rewards and job security has been replaced by a new contract based on continuous learning and identity change ... the career of the

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, in this regard, McCrindle Research, cited in Malthus and Fowler (2009: 27-28), Generation Y (those born between 1980 and 1994) are less motivated by money than by the opportunity to enjoy a “creative, innovative, fun, ... and sense of community career”. All of the respondents in this thesis were born within this timeframe.

21st century will be protean, a career that is driven by the person, not the organisation, and that will be reinvented by the person from time to time, as the person and the environment change.

All of this literature which emphasises the dynamism, complexity and challenge of the contemporary career notwithstanding, one must be careful to not assume that the dynamic and challenging nature of the contemporary labour market is a new phenomenon. Vickerstaff (2001: 3) for instance, in her critique of the prevalent assumption that school to work transition was linear - i.e. 'fairly smooth, straightforward transitions ... in which there are no major breaks, divergences or reversals' (Furlong et al 2002: 7) or 'straightforward, unproblematic or single step' (Goodwin and O' Connor, 2005: 2002) during the 'Golden Age' i.e. the 1960s and 1970s - argues that

'the range of choices may have been different, leading to a greater homogenisation of possible pathways and individuals may have had less expectation of being able to design their own trail but (this author's emphasis) the individual still had to negotiate and manage their own trajectory, whether it was of their own choosing or not. Indeed the absence of choice might be hypothesised to have brought its own risks and dilemmas'.

## 2.4 Giddens's Structuration Theory and Bourdieu's Social Theory <sup>10</sup>

Giddens's structuration theory is an attempt to resolve the issue: to what extent is individual behaviour a function of social structural forces as opposed to individual agency? It can be described as an attempt to resolve a fundamental divide in the philosophy of social science between those who emphasise the determining role of objective and exogenous social structures on human action and those who see social structures as products of subjective and interpretive human opinions and actions. Rudd and Evans (1998: 40) argue that 'the school to work phase is based on both individual choice / activity and structural influences' and that 'both types of influence are simultaneously present in their decision making process' (Rudd and Evans, 1998: 45). 'The central tenet of structuration theory is that the structure – agency dualism is too simplistic and hence unrealistic and that structure and behaviour are interdependent i.e. people through the socialisation process become dependent or are influenced by the existing social structures, while at the same time, via their activities / behaviours, alter those social structures. In other words, social structures are the medium of human activities as well as the result of those activities.

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<sup>10</sup> Although outside the scope of this thesis, it would be remiss to not acknowledge Beck's Risk Society explained by Evans and Furlong (1997: 33) as one in which the "traditional socialising agencies such as the extended and nuclear family, the church and the school are no longer effective agencies of social reproduction. They no longer channel individuals into pre-determined niches and levels of society ... an infinite range of courses of action have opened up for people. This results in an increased level of risk for all – the risk society" Giddens (1991: 109) too comments on the risk society – "to live in the universe of high modernity is to live in an environment of chance and risk, the inevitable concomitants of a system geared to the domination of nature and the reflexive making of history".

Giddens (1984: 16) explains that

‘the main preoccupation for many positivists is typically with the macro, broad structural level of society: a focus upon social reproduction - on patternings and formations, social objects beyond the level of individual actors that steer and influence the course of social life ... [whereas] the prime focus of relativists ... is the micro level of society: on individual interpretation and reflexivity; on how individuals produce the social world and are not simply driven by ‘external’ forces and structures; on agency, the capacity to act in ways other than those predetermined by social formations’.

Those who emphasise structure as a logical consequence de-emphasise or underplay the role of agency and vice versa. Cuff et al (1998: 317) explain the structure – agency dualism in a slightly different manner and use the terms ‘action theories’ and ‘structure theories’. The former ‘takes a bottom – up view of social life. They do not deny that it is structured but regard structures as products of action and interaction. Structural theories, on the other hand, take a top – down view ... they characterise society in terms of patterns and forms which (1) are independent of individual actors and their intentions and 2) constrain the possibilities of action’.

Giddens attempts to 'square this circle' by proposing that structure and agency be viewed, not as independent and conflicting elements, but as a mutually interacting duality. Mehan (2003) in his advocacy of constitutive ethnography supports the equal concern of this approach for both social structures and agent’s structuring activities or in other words, they do not consider structuring separately from structures. This approach neither denies the objective reality of the social world

nor focuses exclusively on the social process – ‘a world that is both of our making and beyond our making’ (Mehan, 2003: 61). Mignot (2000) appears to agree with Giddens where he argues that individuals are ‘active agents’ who are both constrained by and also construct their social world. Therefore, social structure should not be considered an entity that is external to the individual. Layder et al (1991: 448) describe the structuralist understanding of the agency structure relationship thus: ‘action and structure cease to be separate domains of social reality independently confronting each other, and become indissolubly fused aspects of a duality of structure whose existence is co-terminous with the continuity of social praxis’. In other words, ‘society is simultaneously a constantly evolving creation of its members and the medium through which the interaction and evolution is made possible’. (Jones and Karsten, 2003: 5-6). In other words, social structure influences human action and is constituted by human interaction i.e. those human actions in social contexts establish and re-establish the social structure and neither structure nor agency should be emphasised at the expense of the other. In the context of gender as a structural factor, Katila and Merilainen (1999) caution that women should be careful not to see themselves as victims of gendered organisational cultures but also as co-producers of it.

Yates and Orlikowski (1992: 299-300) explain the duality as the process where structure ‘shapes the actions taken by individuals ... as they reaffirm or modify [structure] in an on-going recursive interaction’. Layder et al (1991: 447) provide a very clear and succinct explanation of structuration theory:

‘... structure and agency are mutually constituted through the transformative and replicative effects of social activity. Structuration theory rejects both the reduction of structural phenomena to action predicates, and the reduction of

activity to structure'. Both structure and action are inextricably interwoven and should be given equal analytic weighting. For Giddens, action and structure are related through the 'duality of structure' wherein structures are viewed as both the medium and outcome of social activity'.

Giddens emphasises the enabling and constraining attributes of structures - structure is conceived as something that will limit action but social structures also create possibilities for human behavior.<sup>11</sup> Giddens therefore stresses the enabling characteristics of structure i.e. how structures can make certain kinds of activities and certain choices possible - 'structures must not be conceptualized as simply placing constraints on human agency, but as enabling' (Giddens, 1986: 3). Jones and Karsten, (2003: 6) explain this dual structure attributes - 'structure is thus not simply an exogenous restraining force, but is also a resource to be deployed by humans in their actions: it is enabling as well as disabling'.

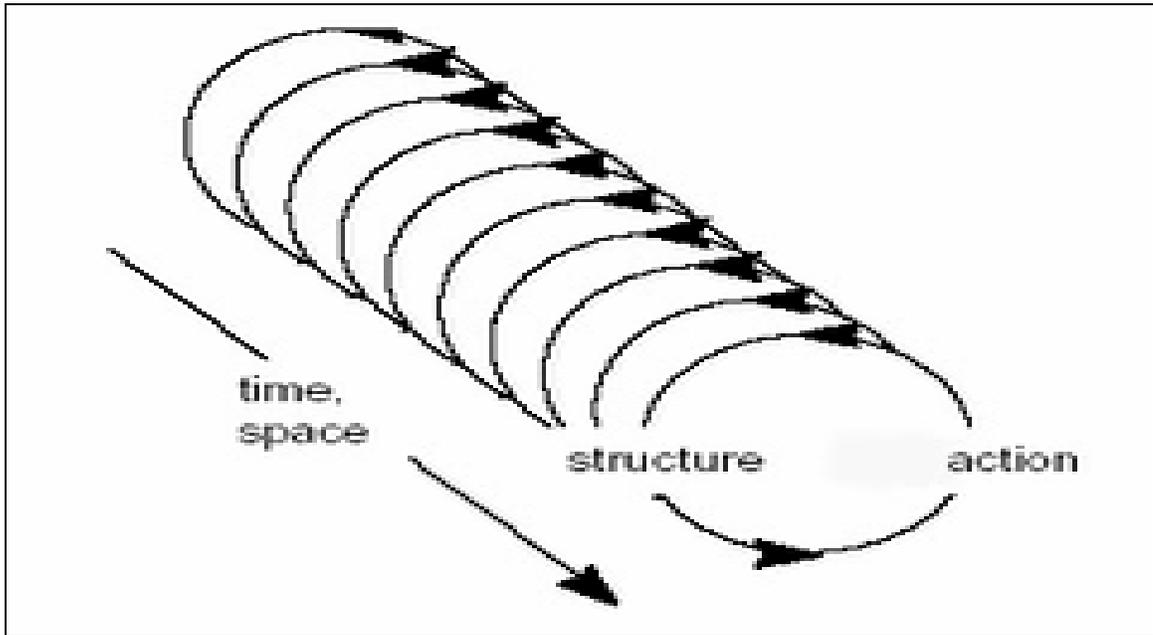
Rose (1998: 2) succinctly summarises structuration theory as that 'which seeks to show how the knowledgeable actions of human agents discursively and recursively forms the set of rules, practices and routines which, over time and space, constitutes their conception of structure'. The structural properties of social systems exist only in so far as forms of social conduct are reproduced chronically across time and space. He provides a

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<sup>11</sup> Marshall (2000: 14) argues that according to Giddens 'the era of late modernity is one in which agency makes possible the actions required to fashion together biographies with enough coherence to support feelings of ontological security for the individual and to support concerted social action among individuals'.

diagrammatic representation of the structuration process – where ‘social activities become ‘stretched’ across wide spans of time-space’.

**Figure 1      Structuration Theory: A Conceptual Model (Rose 1999)**



Social structures are for Giddens ‘memory traces’ which exist only as a result of human action. He elaborates on this and argues that human beings constantly monitor and reflect on their situation and on how they might act to change their circumstances – ‘they monitor the flow of human life’ (Giddens, 1984: 3). He emphasises that humans may or may not be consciously aware that they are engaging in these processes of monitoring, reflection and change. Related to this, he distinguishes between two forms of consciousness i.e. practical, which relates to our ability to act in a knowledgeable way and discursive, which refers to our incomplete understanding of the forces on our actions. In other words, human ‘knowledge’ is influenced by unconscious processes, by unknown conditions and ultimately by unanticipated consequences of our actions. Further, he

argues that individuals may not be aware that structural factors facilitate successful interaction nor that ‘those actions and interactions may have unintended and far-reaching consequences beyond the setting in which they are interacting’. Jones and Karsten (2003: 18) in a very helpful summary of structuration theory consider the implications of nine identified features of the theory.

**Table 7 Key Features and Implications of Structuration Theory (Jones and Karsten 2003)**

<b>Feature of Structuration Theory</b>	<b>Implication</b>
Duality of structure	Structure and action are inseparable and co-existent
Essential recursiveness of social life	Structure is produced and reproduced in every instance of action
Agents always have the possibility to do otherwise	Structural constraint simply places limits upon the feasible range of options open to an actor in a given circumstance
Agents are knowledgeable about their actions and continuously reflect on their conduct	Agents may not be discursively aware of their knowledge
Unacknowledged conditions and unintended consequences	Production and reproduction of society is not wholly intended or comprehended by social actors
Routine is integral to the continuity of the personality of the agent .. and to the institutions of society	Individual identity and social institutions are sustained through routine
Double hermeneutic	Concepts that sociological observers describe are already constituted as meaningful by social actors and can themselves become elements of the actor’s understanding of their own condition

Criticisms of structuration theory should be acknowledged. Elder and O’Rand (1995) and Marshall (2000) argue that the notion that agency exists only at ‘fateful moments’<sup>12</sup> (Giddens, 1991: 113) is incompatible with the notion that agency is a property of human nature. Sewell (1992) for instance argues that despite its promise, structuration theory suffers from serious gaps and logical deficiencies that have persisted through the theory’s all too frequent restatements and Orlikowski (2002) questions Giddens’s belief that individuals act knowledgeably and is uncomfortable with the argument that individuals are so purposive and reflexive, continually and routinely monitoring the on-going flow of actions, both their own and others, and the social and physical contexts in which their activities are constituted. Bourdieu’s social theory appears to overcome the latter criticism above in that he does not consider individuals to be so purposive or deliberate in their reflection and actions.

As mentioned in the introduction above, behaviourist explanations for individual choice do not adequately address the role of objective structures nor do the structuralist explanations deal with subjective factors. Gorton (2000: 80) argues that Bourdieu’s methodological approach and social theory overcomes this divide and recognises the interpenetration of both poles:

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<sup>12</sup> Smith (1997: 230) makes the point that ‘there is general agreement that career choices and decisions are part of a developmental process rather than specific and irrevocable events, and that career patterns exhibit many forms, with variations in continuity and discontinuity’.

‘Bourdieu’s dialectic is an attempt to transcend the structure-agency dichotomy and provide a framework for understanding the processes governing social reproduction. By pursuing such a course he seeks to avoid the limitations of mechanical structuralism or teleological individualism, which a mono-causal reading of each pole in the structure-agency dichotomy respectively produces’.

The central tenet of Bourdieu’s explanation of the social world is that it leads a ‘double life’ (Bourdieu 1977: 22) and social facts are objects which are also the object of knowledge within reality itself because ‘human beings make meaningful the world which makes them’ (Gorton 200: 281). Bourdieu explains this via five inter linked ‘processes’ i.e. practice, habitus, field and structure, capital and reproduction.

First and with regard to practice, one’s practices are embedded in processes of which we are not fully aware. These processes and practices contribute to our ‘understandings’ of our social environment. Our actions are therefore inevitably embedded within that social world.

Second, and central to this thesis, Bourdieu argues that all individuals possess a ‘habitus’. Habitus can be defined as ‘a set of manners and attitudes which amount to a disposition to act distinctively. Our tastes and interests – our choices of affinities, whether personal, aesthetic, or intellectual – are expressions of that disposition’ (Fowler 2000: 187) and as ‘a system of durable, transposable dispositions which function as the generative basis of

structured, objectively unified practices' (Bourdieu, 1979: vii). Perhaps the most famous explanation is:

'Systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them'. (Bourdieu, 2003:53).

Bourdieu cautions however that this is not a disposition in the sense of being fixed or intrinsic. Every individual inherits a disposition that conditions their social and moral choices. Individuals are however able to modify this conditioning by making constrained new choices.

Lahire (2000) believes that 'habitus' is an excellent tool to illustrate the impact of the social world on individuals. Meisenhelder (2006) suggest that the habitus portrays an individual to possess subjectivity that streams from, for instance, shared demographics. He sees habitus as a set of general dispositions that influence individuals to think, perceive and act in a particular way. Jenkins (2002) paraphrases Bourdieu's 'habitus' as an attempt to make a connection between the subjective outcomes people take from objective situations or settings derived from the predispositions they develop based on historical experiences while Tjernstrom (2002) describes it as a mediating concept which deals with the relationship between objective structures and the production of practice.

Mouzelis (1995: 101) defines habitus as:

‘a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the correctness of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than formal rules and explicit norms’.

Dixon-Woods et al (2006) further explain that habitus influences individual behaviours and attitudes in day to day situations, as they have a pre-determined expectation of the manner in which they should behave in a particular social situation. The limits imposed on actions in a given situation are the product of the social conditions that produced the habitus.

According to Iellatchitch et al (2003: 738) ‘the concept of habitus is Bourdieu’s theoretical proposal for the interpretation of regular action patterns over time which are the product of neither external structures nor of mere subjective intention’. Bourdieu describes it as embodied history – ‘the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product’ (Bourdieu, 1990). Habitus does evolve because it is constantly being modified (or reinforced) by further experiences. Iellatchitch et al further explain that habitus can be regarded as a durable but evolving system of potentially actualised dispositions. With specific regard to ‘career habitus’, they further explain that such a habitus is one that fits a particular career field and that there are certain ‘dispositions that are actualised automatically within that career field – this habitus ensures that that ‘the agent acts,

perceives and thinks according to the rules of the field. He/she acts intentionally but without intention' (Bourdieu, 1990: 12). Gorton (2000: 285) explains this point – 'Bourdieu's conceptualisation of strategies is unusual in that he sees them as intuitive, garnered from an understanding of the 'rules of the game' rather than as rational, calculating actions. Strategies are thus spatially and temporally specific'.

For Mouzelis, it is a predisposition of an individual to read a situation based on a number of factors, including for instance class, education, upbringing and religion that are unique to that individual. Mouzelis also emphasises Bourdieu's caution that habitus is an involuntary state of mind and which cannot be explained by individual idiosyncrasies. Webb et al (2002) emphasise 'cultural history' and explain that habitus can be understood as the values and dispositions, or social differences that are inherent to each individual. These social differences separate people into social groups and within these groups feelings of similarity and group membership develop. Social identity theory suggests that pressure to evaluate one's group favourably through group comparison leads social groups to distinguish themselves from each-other. Indeed, as explained by Richter (2002) class inequality was at the centre of Bourdieu's research.

Nord (2005) argues that the dynamic nature of society results in a power struggle or what Bourdieu terms a 'power game'. The metaphor of the game according to Zipin and Brennan (2003) is used to stake the terms of powers of position. This game differs between agents in society. Zipin and Brennan (2003) explain that in such games, the players are motivated by forces of the field in which individuals evolve, along with the

embodied social forces that operate from within them. Jenkins (1992) as cited in Nord (2005: 867) describes a field as

‘A structured system of social positions – occupied either by individuals or institution – the nature of which defines the situation for their occupants. It is also a system of forces, which exist between these positions; a field is structured internally in terms of power relations. Positions stand in relationship of domination, subordination and the equivalence to each other by virtue of the access they afford to the goods and resources’.

An individual’s position within a field is determined by the varying amounts of symbolic capital – social, authoritarian or monetary (Dixon-Woods 2006) - they possess that is recognised as valuable by other members of the social group. Iellatchitch et al (2003: 732) explain Bourdieu’s concept of social fields as ‘the social contexts within which a patterned set of practices take place ... they correspond to a network of positions, to a playground where agents realise individual strategies, play according to and thereby reproduce the rules of the game as defined by the specific set of capital most valuable for holding power within the field’. These fields can change over time but are often very inert. Habitus is the antecedent of this inertia.

With specific regard to ‘career fields’, Iellatchitch et al (2003: 732-733) describe same as

‘the social context within which individual members of the workforce, who are equipped with a specific portfolio of field relevant capitals try to maintain or improve their place in the given and unfolding network of work related positions

through a patterned set of practices which are enabled and constrained by the rules of the field and in turn contribute to the shaping of these rules’.

Broady (2002) stresses that students of habitus must understand the actual structure of the field and not the individual itself. This, in his view, will give sociological meaning to the trajectories and destiny of the individual. Iellatchitch et al (2003) insist that habitus relates to fields in many ways. They look at an agent’s logic and how it is shaped by both their habitus and by the requirement and the logic of the game as it unfolds. They argue that it is vital to comprehend that an agent’s habitus is what shapes their perception, motivation and actions in which they are disposed to recognise and play in the field in the first place.

Bourdieu identified three types of capital i.e. economic, social and cultural. All three ‘types’ can be applied to career capital specifically. In other words, career capital, which can be considered the different modes of support an individual can obtain and utilise as they pursue career success, comprises elements of each of Bourdieu’s three types. Economic wealth for instance can help meet the actual cost, and help overcome the opportunity cost, of continuing one’s education, social capital in the form of personal contacts and networks etc. can likewise facilitate career choice and development and ultimately career success while cultural or informational capital also impacts on career choice.

These fundamental social powers are ... firstly economic capital, in its various kinds; secondly cultural capital or better, informational capital, again in its different kinds; and thirdly two forms of capital that are very strongly correlated, social capital, which consists of resources based on connections and group membership, and symbolic capital, which is the form the different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognised as legitimate. (Bourdieu, 1987: 3-4).

Iellatchitch et al (2003: 734) further write:

‘Every agent within a specific career field has got a unique portfolio of capitals. The starting point is the genetic disposition that everyone gets when entering life. As personal life unfolds, a largely unknown interplay starts between this disposition and the social context the person is embedded in. During personal, educational, and professional development, this interplay leads to a constantly changing, nevertheless recognisable and partly stable of portfolio of capitals – economic, social and cultural’.

They (2003: 736) attempt to explain with the example of a recognition that an MBA qualification from a prestigious university is an important antecedent of career progression – ‘the individual needs access to this information, desire for a successful managerial career, the economic resources to attend a prestigious business school, and the abilities to pass the entry requirements of such schools – to what degree [all] this is possible obviously depends heavily of the social, cultural, and economic capital that is available for the individual’. They identify any legal regulation that a specific position in

the public sector for instance requires a university degree as an example of cultural capital.

In summary, the central tenet of habitus is that nothing can remain objective once human interaction is involved. Therefore, two people in the same situation will experience it differently and that experience is drawn from their predisposition to read the situation in a context that is relevant to their historical interactions and their resulting social understandings. Broady, as cited in Johannessen (1998: 367) adds that habitus represents a system of dispositions that allow individuals to 'think, act and orient themselves in the social world'. Habitus influences individuals' behaviours and attitudes in daily situations as they have a pre determined expectation of the manner in which they should behave in a particular situation. The limits imposed on actions in a given situation are the product of the social conditions that produced the habitus. Kriecken (1998: 49) argues that human beings are 'interdependent, forming figurations or networks with each other which connect the psychological with the social, or habitus with social relations'. Goodwin and O' Connor (2005: 204) further explain that 'habitus is not inherent but habituated and becomes a constituent part of the individual by learning through social experience'.

## **2.5 Social Cognitive Career Theory and Theory of Congruence**

Lent et al's (1994;1996) Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) which derives from Bandura's (1986,1997) more general social cognitive theory 'emphasizes the importance of personal agency in the career decision making process and attempts to explain the

manner in which both internal and external factors serve to enhance or constrain that agency' (Albert and Luzzo 1999: 431). Given career choice is affected by both internal and external factors, social cognitive career theory is therefore an appropriate theory to utilise in the attempt to better understand the impact of agentic and structural influences. Albert and Luzzo identify a similarity between social cognitive theory, social cognitive career theory and structuration theory where they argue that both SCT and by extension SCCT recognise 'the mutually interacting influences (author's emphasis) between people, their behaviour, and their environment' (1999: 432). Bandura (1986:25) terms this mutual interaction 'triadic reciprocity' where environmental, individual and behavioural factors 'all operate as interlocking mechanisms that affect one another bi-directionally' (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994: 82).

Social Cognitive Career Theory emphasises that learning occurs via interaction with others and one's environment, it acknowledges that individuals have varying capacities for self-regulation, self-directed learning and goal setting all of which will impact upon behaviour. Flores et al (2009:3) explain SCCT as a theory which 'explains the interaction among personal, contextual and behavioural variables in the process in which vocational interests and career choices develop.' Roziah et al (2009: 238) summarise thus: 'SCCT incorporates the influences of personal, environmental, learning experiences and reciprocal interactions of both person factors and environmental elements in shaping career behaviours'. In other words, a variety and combination of personal, environmental and behavioural variables influence the career choice process. Two agentic concepts are central to SCCT i.e. self-efficacy and outcome expectations. As considered in Section

2.2.1 above the former refers to a person's beliefs about their ability to be successful when acting in a particular role. The latter to the belief that such success in that role will bring about desired benefits. Rogers and Creed (2010:1) explain the relationship between these two concepts succinctly:

‘Self-efficacy (beliefs about capabilities to organize and execute courses of action) promotes favourable outcome expectations (expected consequences of actions) and career goals (intentions to engage in a certain activity). In turn, these social cognitive variables stimulate career choice actions, or career behaviours, such as career planning and career exploration, which are necessary for the young person to make progress toward identified career goals’.

Lent et al (1994) sub divides contextual cognitive influential factors (on career choice) into two groups which are based on their relative proximity or closeness to career choice stages. The first group comprises ‘the more distal background influences that precede and help shape interests and self-cognitions [and] the second group are the more proximal influences that come into play at critical choice junctures’ (Wong and Liu (2009: 5). Flores et al (2009: 4) distinguish between distal and proximal influences thus:

‘Distal contextual factors and person inputs ... shape opportunities for learning, which serve as an important source of self-efficacy beliefs. On the other hand, proximal contextual factors are believed to exert influence on career choice around the time when a choice is being made’.

Lent et al, as mentioned in Section 2.3.1 above consider family to be both a distal and a proximal influence on career choice.

The central tenets of SCCT can be summarised thus: learning occurs through interactions with others and with the environment; each person has the ability self-regulate, motivate themselves, self-direct their learning and set personal goals; personal, environmental and personal-environmental i.e. the reciprocity of person and environment on each-other shapes career behaviours. This theory focuses on the interaction of personal attributes, external environmental factors and behaviour in career decision making. 'It focuses on the influence of self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations on goals and behaviour [i.e.] if individuals believe in their ability to undertake an endeavour and have an expectation of the outcome of that behaviour, they will behave in a way that will help them achieve their goal' (Kerka, 1998: 2). Roziah et al (2009: 238) summarise the impact of this interaction on career decisions.

SCCT posits that person-environment interactions form learning experiences that, in turn, influence perceived confidence in one's abilities to perform career-related tasks and activities (i.e. career self-efficacy) and the types of outcomes that one expects as a consequence of given career pursuits (i.e. outcome expectations). SCCT postulates that career related interests, goals and choices develop from relevant self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations. SCCT asserts that self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations are determined and modified largely by four sources of information:

1. Personal success experiences;
2. Exposure to successful role models;
3. Social and verbal persuasive communications; and
4. Positive affective reactions (Lent et al, 1994).

RoZIAH et al (2009) identified factors that influence perceptions of career success. Individual related factors, organisation related factors, and (managerial) competency related factors can likewise be used to interpret career choice. First, regarding individual related factors, SCCT theorises that the joint influences of social cognitive variables i.e. self-efficacy, outcome expectations and personal goals, and of person 'inputs' such as work values and individual qualities determine career choice. RoZIAH et al (2009) emphasise an additional individual related factor i.e. self-esteem and posit that individuals with high self-esteem will seek out prestige and high status jobs whereas those with lower self-esteem will look for lower status jobs because of their lesser self-worth. They also reference Mannheim (1975) and Judge et al (1995) who focussed on work centrality (the relative importance of work in a person's life) as a predictor of career success. It is likely that individuals with higher levels of work centrality will devote more time to their work and to their careers. The second of RoZIAH et al's factors above i.e. organisational related factors may appear to be less relevant to a study of graduands than to that of actual employees (RoZIAH et al investigated public sector managers). However several such factors, if we consider the third level education institution i.e. the pre employment organisation, apply to or can impact upon graduand career choice including internship experience, third level course modular content, lecturers, and careers

advisory service. Roziah et al (2009) identify thirdly, three managerial competencies related factors i.e. career management, networking and computer skills. Career management, from the perspective of graduands can include career planning e.g. utilising the careers advisory service above and more careful consideration of module choices and their likely impact on labour market entry. Networking or alliance building and utilisation of any existing personal contacts also applies to graduands. For the purposes of this study, IT skills is less relevant.

It should be acknowledged that SCCT may not be able to explain specific career plans i.e. SCCT can help in the prediction, understanding and explanation of career consideration or when career goals are considered in a broad manner, but is less effective in the context of actual career choice. Flores et al (2009: 20) appear to concur. 'It is possible that SCCT's viability in explaining career goal selection at a specific level is limited and that prior tests of SCCT propositions related to career choice have produced inflated relations because career choice has been [too] broadly defined'.

Holland's Theory of Congruence is also instructive in the context of structural – agentic influences on career choice. Hall (1987) explains Holland's Theory (1973) thus: it is based on an assumption that there is an interaction between personality and environment, so that people tend to move into career environments that are congruent with their personal orientation. Thus, he argues that people tend to choose careers that fit or match their personal qualities. In other words, Holland considers congruence to be the match between an individual and his / her work environment. In this work he lists many

characteristics of the person and of the environment that influence career choice including ‘... age, gender, ethnicity, geography, social class, physical assets or liabilities, educational level attained, intelligence and influence’ (1997: 13). “Career choices are circumscribed and compromised by these factors’. (Athanasou, 2001: 132). Holland (1973) argued in this regard that ‘both vocational satisfaction and achievement depend on the fit between personality and environmental factors’ (Lau and Shaffer, 1999: 229).

As with structuraion theory (Giddens), habitus (Bourdieu) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al) above, congruence theory has also been criticised. Arnold (2004) for instance, identifies fourteen ‘problems’ with Holland’s theory of congruence. Several are pertinent to the consideration of career choice. For instance, Arnold suggests that Holland’s theory may omit several important constructs including those relating to typical and general personality traits and in particular self-efficacy and Arnold is also critical of Holland’s focus on occupation at the apparent expense of a more broader consideration of environment and asks in this regard by way of explanation ‘can we say that being a management accountant (occupation) in a third world country is equivalent to being a management accountant in a steel plant or in a fast food chain?’ or in other words ‘the values and activities of an organisation can affect a person’s working environment over and above the nature of the activities they pursue’. (Arnold 2004: 101). The following section references a myriad of research that explicitly or implicitly recognises the interplay of structure, agency and habitus.

## 2.6 The Interplay of Structure, Agency and Habitus in Career ‘Choice’

‘Careers are a central phenomenon of individual, organizational and societal reality ... careers are located at the intersection of societal history and individual biography and thus link micro and macro frames of reference ... In addition, careers are multi-level phenomena. Cutting across individual, group, organisational and societal levels, careers potentially influence all these levels and, in turn, are influenced by these levels’. (Iellatchitch et al, 2003: 728-729).

Iellatchitch et al (2003: 731) write ‘most of the current ‘grand’ social theories construe the structure - action interface in a reflexive, circular way (e.g. Bourdieu 1979; Giddens 1984; Luhmann 1984; Coleman (1990): structure both enables and restricts action, and action both follows and reproduces structure’. Marshall (2000: 12) emphasises the ‘co-constitution of self and society, through which action creates social structure just as social structure constrains or opens up possibilities for choice and, thereby, structures action’.<sup>13</sup>

There is much literature in the careers field that recognises the links between structural and agentic factors.

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<sup>13</sup> Although beyond the bounds of this investigation, which focusses on structural and agentic influences on career choice and NOT career choice as a reproducer of social structure, Iellatchitch (2003) also makes the point that ‘in terms of career, societal and organisational structure functions as an enabling frame for individual careers, and at the same time, each single career decision reproduces social structure since it either confirms or modifies structural frames’.

Vickerstaff (2003: 272) explains that terms such as ‘structured individualisation’ and ‘bounded agency’ have emerged as a consequence of this recognition of ‘the interplay of structural determinants and individual agency’. Hall (1987: 316) for instance, argues that ‘influences at institutional level have the potential for far more potent impacts on career outcomes than do those at the person-environment or individual levels. But precisely because they are so macro, so pervasive, they are much more difficult to control’. His findings support that occupational choice is related to the process of socialisation and expected roles in society for men and women and further supports the argument that occupational choice is not truly and exclusively agentic. Vickerstaff (2003: 273) also alludes to the interpenetration of structure – agency where she references Veness (1962) who identified three ‘possible sources of career choice ... tradition directed in which young people follow in their father’s or wider family’s footsteps; inner directed in which young people pursued a career in something they had always liked or been good at; and other directed where choice was made with reference to outside sources of help or information’. Stitt-Gohdes (1997) also in the specific context of career choice, points out that careers advice is both structural and agentic in character. Career guidance provision is clearly an institutional and hence structural ‘service’ but also has agentic attributes in that individuals have the option of availing of or avoiding such advice. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1993) likewise appear to recognise the duality of structure and agency where they argue career choice occurs in two main ways. The first is where students ‘appear to think that they make rational career decisions but these are rational in a restricted pragmatic way ... [because] the decisions tend to be based on partial information ... and on personal perceptions of what the actual nature of work is in that occupation ... and are

opportunistic , arising from fortuitous contacts and experiences'. (Neilson and McNally, 2009: 2). The second and superior way is 'through a process of technical rationality ... [where] career decisions are reached in a systematic way' via for instance access to and reflection on more comprehensive and precise information on the occupation.

Vickerstaff also (2003: 279) argues 'the structural determinants that configure paths should not be allowed to obscure the significance of individual agency and dispositions'. Vickerstaff concludes with this point (2003: 283) 'in research today young people .... perceive their paths to have been individualised, even if the common reality is of relatively circumscribed possibilities'.

Whereas proponents of the 'risk society' such as Giddens (1991), Becks (1992) and Du Bois-Reymond (1998) argue that young people are more proactive in shaping their destinies and by extension are less and less constrained by social structures, Furlong and Cartmel (1997) although conceding the changed and more dynamic environment within which young people transition to work, emphasise the continuing impact of social structures such as gender, social class and locality on one's opportunities.

In Social Cognitive Career Theory, one can also see the interaction of thought, external structural factors and behaviour i.e. structural barriers such as gender discrimination can determine outcomes independent of behaviour. McWhirter (1997: 137) refers Lent et al's social cognitive theory in her conclusion – 'according to this theory of career and

academic interests, choice and performance, perceived barriers are among the contextual factors that mediate the relationship between career interests and choices’.

With regard to the changing nature of careers and specifically the changing nature of career development in the contemporary workplace, Ball (1997: 74) predicts concerns for employees in the future: ‘how can they enhance their flexibility and value in the labour market at a time of rapid change?, Is moving from one employer to another the only way to further their career?, What is the nature of the new psychological contract between them and their employer?’. The very fact that employees are asking these questions points to the fact that employees are exercising individual agency more than before i.e. employees are exercising more control over their personal career development. Ball advocates a four part ‘career planning cycle’ i.e. ‘review → explore → plan → act’. He provides explicit examples of such behaviours. For instance workers should consider to what extent their work allows them to use their skills and to satisfy their needs, they should identify their own personal development needs, they should consciously learn from co-workers and they should anticipate future changes in the work environment. He argues that the development and exercise of such competences ‘should go some way to help individuals to take ownership and management of their own career development’. Hall (1996: 10) in his thesis on the ‘protean career’ argues that such a career requires a high level of self-awareness and personal responsibility while Schein (1978), Malkin (1997) and Holland (1985) all effectively argue that individuals need to be more fully self-aware in order to understand what factors impact on their career decisions.

With regard to career choice, Bourdieu would argue that because of or through their habitus, individuals are indeed constrained by those rules and norms that they have 'internalised' but that individuals can behave strategically and behave in a quite ingenious and creative manner. Similar in this respect to Giddens's structuration theory, field and habitus are linked in a circular and interdependent way i.e., as Crossley (2001) explains, involvement in a field shapes the habitus, which in turn shapes the actions that reproduces the field. This prompts the observation that actual participation in the employment recruitment and selection process also impacts on career choice i.e. the experience enjoyed or endured during this process may impact on an applicant's decision (or not) to accept an offer. This said, it is likely that the decision to apply for a position in a particular discipline or sector / with a particular company and the way it shapes perceptions, intentions, and actions influences the actor to participate in the field in the first place.

Heinz (1996: 56) links risk society and agency thus:

'The more the control over a status passage shifts to individuals the more they have the possibility for selecting pathways and for proceeding through transitions with adjusted speed ... In the process of societal modernisation completely scheduled status passages will decline in importance. They will become conditional and open to negotiations between biographical actors and institutional gatekeepers.'

It should be noted however that Rudd and Evans (1998: 39) discovered that ‘young people in a depressed labour market (structural factor) appear to be at least as optimistic (agentic factor) about finding employment, and also experience similar levels of independence and control, as a similar sample in a more buoyant labour market’.

Joy (2005: 1) points out that ‘occupational difference is attributed variously to supply-side differences in human capital, occupational preferences and family responsibilities, and demand-side constraints of internal labour markets, employer preferences, costs and discrimination’. Gatticker and Larwood (1988) explain, in the context of career success criteria that they derive from the interplay between individual preferences and societal values. Given this dimension of individual preference, the interpretation of career success will never be the same for everyone. And furthermore, as emphasised by Kim (2004) and Baruch (2004), it is influenced by the individual’s socialisation, life and work experiences. Gati and Asher (2001: 142) write of ‘career related aspects’ and describe same as ‘all the relevant variables and attributes that can be used to describe individuals’ preferences and resources or career alternative’s characteristics’. They provide as examples of same an individual’s work values e.g. income, status, helping others, his/her vocational interests, ones’ abilities, competencies, personality and attributes of the potential job e.g. income level, nature of work and required training period or probation period.

Evans and Furlong (1998: 20) argue ‘young adulthood may be seen as a time for striving for status in which the young person is trying to effect a compromise between two

desired goals – that of individuality, on the one hand, and that of social conformity, acceptance, and adult recognition on the other’.

Chester’s (1968) model identified four factors that impacted on entry into employment or further education namely: those socialising experiences of young people that are related to education and work e.g. the school or college attended, personal variables including one’s intelligence and ambition, the presence of those facilities or influences which can assist the making of a rational choice e.g. access to careers advice and finally the ‘formation of attitudes, expectations, and assumptions regarding educational and occupational future’ .

Kvasny et al (2009: 114) in their paper on the intersectionality of gender, race and class make explicit reference to the intersecting influence of individual characteristics (such as intellect), individual influences (such as family and educational background) and environmental influences (such as living a racially integrated community).

Low and MacMillan (1988) as cited in Gorton (2000: 279-280) write:

‘Opportunities do not drop from the sky. Opportunities are created within and among existing organisations as a product of ongoing networks of relationships and exchanges. Opportunities come most frequently to people located at advantageous positions within networks. Furthermore, exploiting an opportunity requires certain resources (human resources, capital, marketing and technical information, sales etc.). The same type of network relationships and contacts

needed to identify opportunities are also necessary to obtain the resources required to exploit opportunities’.

Stapleton and Wilson (2004: 45-46) argue that personal identity is achieved through agentic negotiation of the social structures and constraints within which the individuals are located.

Kerckhoff (1996: 37) states with regard to career transitions and specific ‘trajectories’ that they ‘are paths through sets of structural locations encountered at successive stages of the life course and which individuals follow which trajectories is determined by the intersection of individual and institutional actions’. (my emphasis). Kerckhoff identifies explicitly individual biography, interests and attributes, family relationships, educational settings, organisational settings, labour markets and national policies as factors that ‘that intersect to produce individual outcomes’.

Social capital can be simply described as relationships between people. Social networks can then be considered social capital – ‘a form of social capital that resides with families and the communities in which they live [that] facilitates productive activity’. (Strathdee (2001: 312). Social networks can be deemed to be productive ‘when they provide trustworthy advice to individuals about the quality and availability of particular forms of employment’ (2001: 612).

Mehan (1978: 33) in his paper 'Structuring School Structure' summarises various 'positions' in the literature on the relative impact of schooling on post school outcomes. He distinguishes in particular between the environmentalist position which holds that differences in scholastic and economic success (including therefore career choice and success) is the result of environmental influence including for instance the number of years spent in education rather than agentic endowment. In this regard, he cites Skinner's view that 'the influence of internal mechanisms is negligible compared to the influence of environmentally provided reinforcement'. Mehan (1978) also refers to that research which has challenged this environmentalist position e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) who contended that schooling (education) merely reproduces the existing system of class relationships and Herrnstein (1973) who emphasise the impact of heredity over environment as an influence on life chances (career opportunity).

With specific regard to enterprise as a career, Henderson and Robertson (2000) identified three broad approaches to the choice of enterprise as a career. All three are clearly relevant to the broader issue of career choice i.e. these approaches are not unique or particular to entrepreneurs. The trait theory approach emphasises attributes such as a high need for achievement, self-belief, risk propensity and independence. The social development approach emphasises the extent to which decision makers are prone to external influences and constraints. They utilise here Ritchie's (1982) factors i.e. risk, family influences, prior education and training and perceived job opportunities. Henderson and Robertson (2000) state that the third approach i.e. the structure opportunity model rejects the two other approaches for their insufficient emphasis on

social factors such as family, friends, neighbours, school, peer group and the general work situation. This would appear to be an unfair criticism as the social development approach also recognises the influence of these factors. Their own research findings included the dominant or primary influences of family and individual experiences with particular work environments e.g. via work placement.

Albert and Luzzo (1999) and other social cognitive career theorists insist that in order to understand career choice, one needs ‘a conception’ that explains how both internal and external factors combine to enhance and / or constrain career choice. There is much literature which identifies more specific links between particular structural and agentic factors. Gender is the common factor in much of this research.

Downing et al (2008: 11-12) in their study of gender difference in cognitive functioning emphasise the interaction not just between environment and cognitive development but also with gender i.e. ‘differential levels of social interaction resulting from gender-specific cultures [that] adolescents experience influence cognitive and metacognitive development’. In other words, in order to understand gender differences in cognition one must consider both biology and environment. Differing cognitive abilities is a function of biological, social and psychological factors.

O’Leary (1997) points out that whereas men tend to focus on objective measures of career success for instance rank, promotion, and most obviously salary, women place

greater importance on subjective measures such as perceived job quality, perceived degree of challenge and opportunity for personal growth and development.

Miller and Clark (2008) in their exploratory study of gender and the medical profession discovered that female respondents stated that hard work, determination and ability were factors that enabled their careers. Male respondents on the other hand emphasised their professional qualifications but also ‘factors ... related to family and collegial support and a professional work ethic’. (2008: 23). This said, later in that same article, Miller and Clark (2008: 24) stated that the responses from female medical practitioners ‘suggest that issues such as a lack of social capital [e.g. access to networks], (my emphasis) career structure and organisational culture are barriers to career progression within the medical profession’.

Adya and Kaiser (2005) classify gender as a social variable but concede that gender stereotyping derives from both social and structural factors. Students’ teachers and counsellors interact socially with students but are structural actors as they are appointed by schools i.e. by a structure / institution.

Simpson et al (2004: 473) in their comparative study of the career progress of Canadian and UK women MBA graduates found that attaining an MBA can reduce but not eliminate gender disadvantage in the workplace. They argue ‘the main impact [of such a qualification] will be on people centred barriers at the micro level but that the effects can

be undermined or strengthened at the macro level by legislative frameworks and at the intermediate level by corporate attitudes and practices’.

Finally, outside of gender, and focusing on the link between cognition and environment, Vygotsky (1975) and Piaget (1977) observed and explained the interaction between environment and cognitive development and specifically that challenging environments appropriate to an individual’s stage of development can have a significant impact on one’s cognitive development and it is of course quite possible that some gifted individuals given these internal pressures may choose to ‘give in’ and to exercise the easier option e.g. make a pragmatic career decision based on earning potential or parent, teacher or peer expectations. Here, once again we observe the interaction and duality of agency and structure.

Clearly then there is literature which draws links between structural and agentic factors. However, it can be argued much of the extant literature on career choice does little more than pay lip service to the importance of considering the complexity of this interplay.

Finally, as further evidence of the complexity of structure, agency (and their duality), there are instances of contradiction within the literature also. For instance, Slater (1980) and Bourdieu (1998) label family an agentic factor while Rudd and Evans (1998) consider it a structural factor. Neither is there universal agreement in the literature as to the nature of ‘education’. Several authors (Rhodes and Doering, 1983; Hakim 1991, 1996; Bourdieu, 1998; Sturges et al, 2003) consider education to be agentic whereas

others including Rudd and Evans (1998) classify education as a structural factor. The latter view is perhaps partly explained by Bourdieu (1977) and Willis (1977) who both argue 'educational attainment is influenced by structural features such as the young person's class position' (Layder et al, 1991: 450). Further evidence of this disagreement is evidenced by Wiseman (2004) and Baruch (2004) labeling of luck as a 'structural condition' while it is considered an agentic factor by Rudd and Evans (1998). A final example of this uncertainty over structural and agentic influences is the categorising of 'travel to work area' a structural factor by Rudd and Evans (1998) but as an agentic factor by Layder et al (1991).

Career Choice is clearly complex. Kerka (1998: 4) summarise the complexity of career choice succinctly.

'Career choice is ... influenced by multiple factors: personality (including vocational interests); how individuals perceive themselves and the world (self-concept, racial/cultural identity, world view); socialization; resources (financial, information, role models, social supports), experiences of sexism, racism and classism; and the salience of various life roles and identity'.

And the various perspectives from which career choice can be examined provide further evidence of this complexity. The agency perspective emphasises individual influence on career choice where agency asserts itself in focused, direct action to alter or control the environment within which the career choice is made. The structural perspective is critical of the notion that career choice is unconstrained and emphasises factors such as labour

market profile, social class, and gender where structure asserts itself in the constraints and opportunity structures that make available and / or limit career choice. The third perspective, as espoused by for instance Slater (1980), Kyriacou and Coulthard (2000) and Mignot (2000) might be termed a combined agency and structure framework. This perspective considers ‘contextual influences ... as antecedents or mediating factors of career choice’.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

The plethora of typologies provide evidence of the complexity of career choice and also contributes to this complexity. Giddens’s view that we create society at the same as we are created by it can be applied to career choice. Berger and Luckman concur where they write ‘individuals are not only produced by, but also produce their world’ (Marshall, 200:4). Therefore, it appears the structure-agency dichotomy is too simplistic in the context of understanding societal dynamics generally and career choice specifically. Hence the utilisation in this chapter of two theories that may help explain the mutually interacting duality or the interpenetrative impact of structural and agentic influences on career choice.

Section 2.1 above provided definitions and attempted to explain ‘career’. There is broad consensus that career is a ‘lifestream’ and that the perception of career attributes (both intrinsic and extrinsic attributes) change over time and that the relative importance of these attributes – (both ostensible and actual) likewise change over time. A summary of pertinent research findings relating to the perceived attributes of specific careers was

provided. The ongoing debate surrounding the relative and interpenetrative influence of structural and agentic influences on career choice was conspicuous and indeed central to this literature.

Section 2.2 considered agency in the context of career choice ... or 'the input from young people themselves on an individual basis' (Rudd and Evans, 1998: 39). Cognitive attributes were considered first - interestingly, the research on multi-potential students suggested that high levels of cognitive ability can lead to greater career indecision i.e. can have a negative impact on career choice – and focussed on self-efficacy, outcome expectations (linked to Vroom's Expectancy Theory of Motivation) and personal goals. Here too, Lips-Wiersma (2002) thesis on those concepts that relate to career 'meaning' i.e. purpose, sense-making and coherence was referenced. Individual behaviours were then considered and several such 'optimising behaviours' (Ball, 1997) were identified – these included networking, self-promotion, work experience and the seeking of career counselling / advice.

Section 2.3 considered structural influences on career choice – those factors which are outside the individual's control or that 'are largely beyond the control of the individual' (Athanasou, 2001: 136). The extensive literature on structural influences on career choice was referenced. Although there is much overlap in this research, different authors focus on different structural factors. This author chose to focus first on social class and family background. This section then considered gender. The literature here emphasised the gendered nature of work and employment though interestingly and in line with much

of the extant literature, including Katila and Merilainen, (1999) points out that women co-produce gendered organisational [and labour market] structures. Linked to this, Bruni et al (2004) emphasised that gender is not merely a property of individuals but an integral dynamic of broader society. The final structural factor considered was the labour market itself – and how it is changing. Supply side influences including changes in the nature of the family, attitudes towards female participation in the labour market, legislation, improved qualification levels etc. and demand side influences included new skills requirements, changed relative importance of the services sector compared to manufacturing industry, and most notably in the current economic climate, the significant decline in demand for labour generally. This section also considered the extent to which careers within this labour market are in flux. For instance the increased degree of change in job descriptions, the increased focus on continuing professional development and life long learning and of course the move from the traditional to the boundaryless career. Reference was also made here to the viewpoint that the nature of the employment relationship is now more relational than transactional in character (Ackah and Heaton 2004; Rousseau 1998) and to new career ‘paths’ e.g. spiral, diagonal, multidirectional etc. and to the emergence of the so-called ‘protean career’ (Hall and Mirvis, 1996). This section illustrated the dynamism, challenge and complexity of the contemporary career. Section 2.4 considered those two theories that attempt to bring clarity to the structure-agency debate i.e. Giddens’s structuration theory and Bourdieu’s social theory. Giddens was considered first. His theory is concerned with resolving the divide between and opposition of structural forces and individual agency and posits that the structure – agency distinction is too simplistic and indeed unrealistic and that structure and

behaviour are an interdependent or mutually interacting duality. In the context of career choice, the implication is that structural factors impact upon personal agency and individuals simultaneously exert influence over the structural factors relevant to such choice. Bourdieu's social theory was then considered. The five processes central to his theory i.e. practice, habitus, field and structure, capital and reproduction were considered. The concept of habitus is especially applicable to career choice – the disposition that is habitus is inherited and conditions moral and social choices including career choice. However this disposition can be modified through the making of, albeit constrained, new choices. Interestingly in this regard, Elder and O'Rand (1995: 16) argued that 'transitions [such as transition from college to work] can disrupt habitual patterns of behaviour'. Limits on choice derive from the economic, social and cultural capital 'possessed' by the individual.

Section 2.5 considered two of the most well known theories in career literature i.e. Lent et al's Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and Holland's Theory of Congruence. SCCT was considered first. It posits that career behaviours including those related to career choice are shaped by the reciprocity of person and environment on each other. Here, one can clearly see the similarity between SCCT and both structuration theory and habitus – SCCT also focuses on the interaction between personal attributes, external environment factors and behaviour. More specifically, Roziah et al (2009) considered three factors that together influence career choice: 1) individual related factors e.g. self-efficacy, outcome expectations, personal inputs, self-esteem and individual qualities; 2) organisation related factors, which in the context of student career choice includes, but is

not confined to, the careers advisory service, course structure and content and minimum selection requirements; and 3) managerial competences which Roziyah et al in a perhaps limited typology confine to career management, networking and computer skills. A more inclusive typology might comprise technical, analytical, conceptual, interpersonal and intrapersonal competences. Holland's theory was considered next. It too assumes that there is an interaction between personality and environment i.e. people choose careers that fit or match their personal qualities. Holland explicitly identifies age, gender, ethnicity, geography, social class, physical assets/ liabilities, educational qualifications, intelligence and influence as antecedents of career choice. The degree of congruence and overlap in premise and vocabulary between Giddens, Bourdieu, Lent et al and Holland provides evidence of the interplay between structure, agency and habitus in career choice.

This review of the literature pertaining to career definition and career / job attributes, to structure and agency, including Giddens's structuration theory and Bourdieu's social theory, to those two key models career models i.e. Lent et al's social cognitive career theory and Holland's congruence theory and finally to that literature which has identified the extent of duality / inter-penetration of structural and agentic factors on career choice, has informed the research methodology and will facilitate the analysis of the primary data. The key objective is to gain a better understanding of student awareness and understanding of the extent to which cognition, individual behaviours, social and family background, gender and labour market attributes interact to impact upon career choice. It will be interesting to observe whether the findings that derive from the subsequent primary research support Lawton's (1984) theory of 'environmental proactivity' which

emphasises agency and specifically the person's competence as a determinant of the environment and / or Rudd and Evans's (1998) theory of 'structured individualisation' worded succinctly thus:

'all respondents attached considerable importance to individual effort and expressed a belief that if they worked hard and achieved suitable qualifications then they should [my emphasis] be able to follow their own independent pathway through further education and into appropriate employment. But, at the same time, responses seemed to contain an implicit understanding that when it comes to the "crunch", individuals are also dependent to an extent on either "luck" or on general external factors, including employer preferences and recruitment policies and the state of the job market in their particular locality and in their chosen sector of employment'.

The next chapter identifies and justifies the research question, the chosen methodology and the approach to data analysis.

## **Chapter 3**

# **Research Methodology**

### **3.0 Introduction**

The methodology used for any specific piece of research should aim to facilitate the purpose or objectives to be achieved in undertaking the research (Gill and Johnson 1991). In addition, as the type of methodology employed can significantly alter the findings of a study, it is imperative that the chosen methodology be appropriate to the research objectives. The primary aim of this chapter is to detail the research methodology employed. Remenyi et al (1998) define research methodology as ‘the procedural framework within which the research is conducted’ (Amaratunga et al 2002: 18). The research methodology according to Crotty (1998) is a plan of action, which shapes choice and use of particular methods and links them to desired outcomes.

The chapter begins by detailing my rationale for conducting this research and introduces the research objectives. There are a number of issues that all researchers must explore prior to conducting their research. They need to consider the research paradigm or philosophy, the research approach, the research strategy and the various data collection methods that may be utilised (Saunders et al 2003). This chapter will examine these issues and select the most suitable. Various sampling possibilities in addition to reliability, validity and ethical issues in qualitative research will also be addressed. The chapter concludes by examining how the data collected will subsequently be analysed.

### 3.1 Research Rationale

As mentioned in Chapter 1 above, exploring third level students' awareness and understanding of agentic and structural influences on career goals and subsequently on career choice can contribute to an addressing, from the student's perspective, of possible misunderstandings and / or misperceptions and from the educational provider's perspective - including national government, the myriad agencies operating within the education arena, the academic and administrative divisions of individual universities and the career guidance profession - an improved understanding of the role they play and can play in making the labour market more democratic and more effective.

If career choice is examined from such a multi-directional perspective i.e. by simultaneously considering structural and agentic influences on career choice and of the extent to which these factors are inter-dependent or mutually interact, all actors within the education and labour market arenas respectively including those listed above i.e. individual students, education providers and education regulators can better understand their behaviours, identify more appropriate behaviours and ultimately make better career related decisions.

There is significant support in the extant literature for such on-going and indeed more sophisticated research into career choice. Thorngren and Feit (2001: 294) write for instance that 'the postmodern perspective advocated by Peavy (1997), Richardson (1993), Savickas (1993), Patton and McMahon (1999) and Young et al (1996) clearly elucidates the importance of clients gaining greater understanding of the context in which their

careers develop ... as well as considering the implications that career choices may have on the rest of their lives'. Flores et al (2009) suggests that research that focuses on factors related to selection of careers allow vocational psychologists to gain a better understanding of the factors relevant to career decision making. And Rogers and Creed, (2010:4), argue 'further research examining the role ... variables [such as self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, supports, personality, contextual influences and biographical variables] play in career development is recommended so that an integrative theoretical [and practical] approach to career related processes continues to be refined'.

It should be acknowledged that the rationale also derived from a personal interest in and some experience of this subject area developed through the author's interaction with third level students and in particular final year undergraduate students over the past twenty years.

I believe the contribution of this research to the literature is the focus for the first time, in an Irish context on student awareness and understanding of influences on career choice and of the interplay / interconnectedness between these influences. A further contribution is that the significant majority of previous research on career choice had utilised a quantitative methodology. Here the qualitative approach allows for fuller exploration of viewpoints and understandings and can in turn lead to a fuller understanding of the complexity of career choice.

### 3.2 Research Question and Objectives

More specifically, this research is concerned with how final year undergraduate students understand and consider one aspect of their world i.e. their career. It looks at how they construct, interpret and make sense of their career choice. It provides accounts and analysis that are located within their own experiences and attempts to understand how career choices arise, are sustained and / or developed.

This research allows students to explain their career choices and is interested in uncovering the social structures and individual attitudes and dispositions that impact on career choice and whether students see career choice as agentic, structural or some combination of both.

The concern in this thesis then is to explore student awareness and understanding of those structural and agentic influences that impact on their career choice. The next stage in the research process is to decide on a more detailed approach to the research question i.e. the specific research objectives should be identified. Given the fact that the ability to draw clear and valid conclusions from the collected data is determined primarily by the appropriateness and clarity of these research objectives, significant time was devoted to careful consideration of same objectives. Three research objectives subsequently emerged.

### **Objective One**

To explore, from the student's perspective, their awareness and understanding of those structural influences that impact on career choice.

### **Objective Two**

To explore, from the student's perspective, their awareness and understanding of those agentic influences that impact on career choice.

### **Objective Three**

To explore student understanding of the inter-dependent nature of structural and agentic influences on career choice.

### **3.2.1 Research Themes**

In order to fulfil these three research objectives, the author developed research themes to be discussed during the focus groups. These themes emerged from and hence were developed from the literature review.

- Meaning of Career and the Career Choice Process
- Structural Influences and Career Choice
- Agentic Influences and Career Choice
- Structural and Agentic Factor Overlap / Interconnectedness

Each focus group was conducted around these themes i.e. there was a thematic based approach in each focus group. In line with this semi-structured approach, investigative

questions were established for each of the above themes.<sup>14</sup> As focus groups should facilitate, as far as is practicable, open, general and flexible discussion around the chosen themes, this structure was designed only to facilitate at most a very loose constraint on the discussion in the interests of assuring focus and relevance relative to the research objectives and in awareness of time constraints. The justification for the selection of focus groups as the data collection method, specific information on the collection and analysis of focus group data and the extent to which the author feels adherence to best practices was achieved is considered variously in Sections 3.9, 3.10 and 3.11 below.

Subsequent to identifying the research objectives, the researcher must decide on an appropriate research methodology which will achieve the research objectives.

### **3.3 The Research Methodology**

‘Research is a process of inquiry and investigation; it is systematic and methodical; and research increases knowledge’ (Amaratunga et al 2002: 17). Tull and Hawkins (1990: 44) see research design as the ‘specification of procedures for collecting and analysing the data necessary to help identify or react to a problem or opportunity, such that the difference between the cost of obtaining various levels of accuracy and the expected value of the information associated with each level of accuracy is maximised’. Malhotra (1999: 83) defines research design as ‘the framework or blueprint for conducting the research project. It specifies the details of the procedures necessary for obtaining the

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<sup>14</sup> The theme sheet and investigative questions are provided in Appendix A.

information needed to structure and or solve research problems'. Kerlinger (1986: 279) provides a particularly clear definition.

'A research design is a plan, structure and strategy of investigation so conceived as to obtain answers to research questions or problems. The plan is the complete scheme or program of the research. It includes an outline of what the investigator will do from writing the hypotheses [objectives] and their operational implications to the final analysis of the data'.

Oppenheim (1997: 35) outlines the critical significance of the research design process:

'It is the research design which holds all the parts and phases of the enquiry together. The design must aim at precision, logic-tightness and efficient uses of resources. A poorly designed survey will fail to provide accurate answers to the questions under investigation'.

Research design then is basically a framework for conducting research: it details the procedures necessary for obtaining the required information, which is based on a primary research problem and derivative objectives. It also has the purpose of designing a study to test the objectives created, to determine possible answers to research questions and provide information needed for decision making.

There are a number of decisions that researchers must make when deciding upon the most appropriate methodology through which their research objectives can be attained. The following sections examine several important issues in the selection of an appropriate

methodology and data collection methods and will ultimately highlight the approach chosen by the author.

### **3.4 Research Paradigm**

Research paradigms are defined as ‘the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways’ (Lincoln and Guba 1994: 105). Srivastava and Teo (2006: 197) define paradigms as ‘the philosophical and theoretical assumptions guiding research and differ in terms of their ontology and epistemology’. In other words, a paradigm is a perspective based on a set of assumptions, concepts, and values that are held by a researcher. In essence, research paradigms are concerned with how the research should ultimately be conducted.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) note that a researcher’s choice of paradigm represents simply the most informed and sophisticated view that the individual has been able to devise in response to the three defining questions of ontology, epistemology and methodology. Choice of paradigm is therefore an individual choice and cannot be said to be incorrect. Supporters of specific paradigms must argue the use of their preferred choice rather than attempt to prove that it is a superior paradigm.

As is evident from the literature, there are many instances where the terms paradigm and philosophy are used interchangeably. A research philosophy refers to the manner in which the researcher views knowledge. Collis and Hussey (2003) argue that there are two

primary philosophies or paradigms, namely positivism and phenomenology. There is also blurring in the literature with regards to both these paradigms with different terminology being utilised to refer to each term. Collis and Hussey (2003) highlight various examples; positivism may also be termed quantitative, objectivist, scientific, experimentalist, and traditionalist. Phenomenology on the other hand may be referred to as qualitative, subjectivist, humanistic, and interpretivist. For the purposes of this thesis, positivism and interpretivism as research paradigms will be compared.

Each research philosophy differs in terms of how they believe knowledge is developed and judged as being acceptable (Saunders et al 2003). It is vital to identify and adopt the most suitable research philosophy for the current study being undertaken. The philosophy will essentially guide the author's frame of thought throughout the entire research process.

### **3.4.1 Positivism**

A central tenet of positivism is that the world exists externally, and the properties of this world ought to be measured through objective methods, instead of being implied subjectively through 'sensation, reflection or intuition' (Easterby-Smith et al 2002: 28). Positivism uses both quantitative and experimentally-based methods in order to test 'hypothetical-deductive generalisations' (Amaratunga et al 2002: 18). Easterby-Smith (1991) points out that a positivistic approach searches for causal explanations in addition to fundamental laws and generally reduces the research to the simplest elements possible in order to assist in data analysis (as cited in Amaratunga et al 2002).

Researchers adopting a positivistic stance prefer to work with an ‘observable social reality’ (Saunders et al 2003: 83). A positivistic research will focus on a highly structured methodology and also on observations that are quantifiable and that will allow the researcher to conduct statistical analysis on them (Saunders et al (2003); experiments and surveys are generally utilised (Weber 2004).

### **3.4.2 Interpretivism**

Largely due to criticisms to the application of positivism to the area of the social sciences, a new paradigm was developed by philosophers during the latter half of the twentieth century (Saunders et al 2003). Interpretivists according to Bezera et al (1998) as cited in Micallef (2009: 126) ‘argue that ‘real’ progress in social science occurs through obtaining a more qualitative understanding of peoples’ subjective orientations and social experiences’. Easterby-Smith et al (2002: 29) hold that this new paradigm originates from the viewpoint that ‘reality is not objective and exterior, but is socially constructed and given meaning by people’. ‘Interpretive approaches offer a way of researching a given topic in depth and with sophistication without a statistically secure universalisation of findings’ (Hackley 2003: 8). With specific reference to the analysis process involved in qualitative research, it is important to point out that the interpretive process is of extreme importance in the data analysis process; ‘raw data have no inherent meaning; the interpretive act brings meaning to those data and displays that meaning to the reader through the written report’ (Marshall and Rossman 1999: 153). Hackley (2003)

notes that interpretive studies generally utilise interviews, observations and focus groups as the primary data collection methods.

Research studies that are classed as being interpretive in nature imply that insights gained are based on the ‘interpretation of qualitative data and are supported by reasoning, evidence and theory’ (Hackley 2003: 73). Critics of the positivist philosophy argue that ‘rich insights into this complex world are lost if such complexity is reduced to a series of law-like generalisations’ (Saunders et al 2003: 84). Interpretivists argue that in order to understand individuals’ actions, it is essential to investigate the subjective meanings that motivate these actions (Saunders et al 2003). Saunders et al (2003: 84) explain that social constructionism ‘views reality as being socially constructed’. Individuals can place different interpretations on their situations, and these interpretations are likely to affect their subsequent actions and the nature of their social interaction. Essentially, individuals construct their own social reality and the primary role of the interpretivist is to understand (author’s own emphasis) the subjective reality of research participants with a view to understanding their motives, actions and intentions.<sup>15</sup> This clearly fits with the research objectives above, as the primary aim is to identify and understand student awareness and understanding of inter-dependent career choice antecedents.

This thesis clearly aims to explore student awareness and understanding of how agentic and structural influences impact upon career choice ... in addition to aiming to add to the

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<sup>15</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1966) discuss how people construct social order and yet consider that the reality of everyday life exists independently of themselves. ‘Reality is socially created through the conversations that people have with one another and the agreed upon meanings that are determined through social interactions’ (Thorngren and Feit, 2001: 292).

current body of literature in this area. Therefore, an interpretive approach is deemed to be the most appropriate paradigm to adopt as it has the ability to understand individuals' meanings and it also has the ability to contribute to theory generation (Amaratunga et al 2002).

### **3.5 Research Approach**

Hyde (2000) highlights that there are two general approaches to reasoning, namely inductive and deductive reasoning, and both of these have the potential to result in the acquisition of new knowledge. Bryman (2001) makes a similar point i.e. researchers must decide whether the research undertaken will be deductive or inductive. A deductive approach involves the reading of literature in order to identify theories and hypotheses which are then tested through one's research. An inductive approach, on the other hand, is when you explore the data obtained through research and then develop theories from this data. This approach, according to Saunders et al (2003), requires the researcher to have an extensive existing knowledge of the area. The inductive researcher begins with research questions and objectives but without any predetermined theories or conceptual frameworks. Hammersley (1992) asserts that all research involves both deduction and induction as we move from ideas to data as well as from data to ideas.

#### **3.5.1 Deductive Reasoning**

Deductive reasoning 'represents the commonest view of the nature of the relationship between theory and social research' (Bryman 2001: 8). Deductive reasoning 'commences with generalisations, and seeks to see if these generalisations apply to specific instances'

(Hyde 2000: 82). Saunders et al (2003) posits that this approach first involves developing a theory and a research hypothesis or hypotheses and subsequently designing a research strategy to test the hypothesis / hypotheses. This approach is closely related to positivism and it is generally adopted in quantitative studies. (Hyde 2000).

### **3.5.2 Inductive Reasoning**

Inductive reasoning ‘commences with observation of specific instances, and seeks to establish generalisations’ (Hyde 2000: 82). In contrast to the deductive approach, an inductive approach first involves collecting data and then developing a theory as a result of the data analysis (Saunders et al 2003). This approach is closely related to interpretivism and it is suggested that it is generally adopted in qualitative studies (Hyde 2000). Patton (1980), when describing the inductive approach, stated that ‘the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis’ (as cited in Bowen 2005: 217).

This research study will adopt an inductive approach for a number of reasons. Deduction is more concerned with theory testing, and as this project is aiming to build theory and add to the existing body of literature, an inductive research approach is deemed to be more appropriate. Advocates of the inductive approach are critical of the deductive approach, as it tends to develop a rigid methodology that does not permit other explanations of what is occurring (Saunders et al 2003).

The two main research strategies of quantitative and qualitative have been referred to previously within this chapter. The next section will detail both approaches and ultimately highlight why a qualitative research methodology has been chosen for this particular research.<sup>16</sup>

### 3.6 Qualitative Versus Quantitative Strategies

Qualitative research is quite difficult to define clearly, and it has no paradigm or set theory that is ‘uniquely its own’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2000: 6). Denzin and Lincoln (2000: 3) define qualitative research as ‘a situated activity that locates the observer in the world’. They argue that ‘qualitative research... crosscuts disciplines, fields and subject matter ... a complex, interconnected family of terms, concepts and assumptions surround the term qualitative research’ (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, as cited in Marshall and Rossman 1999: 2). Marshall and Rossman (1999: 2) hold that qualitative research is ‘pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people’. Many traditions of qualitative research have been offered and Marshall and Rossman (1999) argue that they all can be categorised into the following: those that focus on individual lived experiences; those that focus on society and culture; and those that focus on language and communication and is essentially a strategy that focuses on words as opposed to quantification in the collection and analysis of data (Bryman 2001).

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<sup>16</sup> The original dissertation proposal was “Entry to Third Level Education in Ireland: An Investigative Study and Analysis of Influences in Course Choice”. However as a consequence of reading material relating to youth transitions from school to work and to gender, work and society respectively, the proposal changed to “Social Structure and Individual Agency in Career Choice: A Case Study of DIT Graduates”. However based on the extensive feedback on that proposal which advocated in part a more dynamic research instrument and on reading more on structuration theory, the decision was made to research the interaction between structural and agentic factors in the career choice process. As the focus of the research problem changed from decision making and antecedents of career choice to structure – agency interplay in career choice, so too did the theoretical framework i.e. from decision making theory to structuration theory. It is not uncommon for the focus of research to change in this manner i.e. post commencement and indeed after the fieldwork commences.

Labuschagne (2003: 100) explains that quantitative research facilitates both comparison and statistical aggregation of all data collected, and ultimately results in ‘a broad, generalisable set of findings ... in contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research generally produces a substantial amount of very detailed data about a much smaller number of cases and people. It provides ‘depth and detail through direct quotation and careful description of situations, events, interactions and observed behaviors [sic.]’. This research study is concerned with collecting in-depth, rich details from a small number of respondents as opposed to a large amount of information from a very large sample.

Essentially qualitative research places emphasis on the qualities of the entities and also on the processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured in terms of quality, amount or frequency (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Quantitative research on the other hand however, emphasises both the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, and not processes and qualitative researchers deploy a broad range of interconnected, interpretive practices, as they endeavour to achieve a better understanding of the subject matter (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Hyde (2000: 84) also compares both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. He argues that quantitative research aims to ‘describe the general characteristics of a population, and to ignore the details of each particular element studied’, while qualitative research methodologies seek to ‘explain the particular’. A qualitative research approach provides the researcher with the opportunity to study an area in-depth. Patton (1991) contends that qualitative data collection methods produce a wealth of thorough data on a small number of participants (as cited in Hyde 2000).

While both qualitative and quantitative researchers are concerned with unravelling the participant's point of view, arguably qualitative research can do this more successfully, more in-depth through both detailed in-depth interviewing and observation. As previously discussed, qualitative researchers consider rich descriptions of the world to be very valuable, whereas quantitative researchers are less concerned with this level of detail.

### **3.7 Chosen Strategy**

Subsequent to considering the ontological and epistemological viewpoints of both the positivist and interpretivist approaches, it is deemed most appropriate that the interpretive approach to qualitative research, which supports inductive reasoning, is adopted. The research objectives are exploratory in nature, primarily as the main aim of this study is to attain an understanding (author's emphasis) of student awareness of the complexity of the career choice process, and not to predict as such student behaviours and choices. If the primary aim of the study was to predict such behaviour, it would be more appropriate to adopt a positivist stance. In effect, an understanding of career choice and of the factors that influence same is incomplete if an attempt is not made to capture the subjective reality of individual career choice. Hence the qualitative method of data collection is used as it is sensitive to the unique personal experiences, perceptions, beliefs and meanings of respondents. It is of course true that there is much previous research and extant literature on youth transition. Similar to Turbin (1987: 30) 'the methodology was determined by the need to study social phenomena not reducible to quantitative data'. In other words, the aim of this research is to make sense of a complex process i.e. that of

career choice and the inter-dependent influences thereon and not to provide a mere aggregation of findings.

Bowen (2005) argues that the primary strength of qualitative research is that it produces data that provides significant depth and detail in order to create understanding of phenomena and lived experience. A significant feature of a qualitative research strategy is that it focuses on ‘naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings, so that there is a view on what “real life” is like’ (Amaratunga et al 2002: 21). Qualitative research ‘places a strong emphasis on an individual’s lived experience and it aims to locate the specific meanings that individuals place on various events, processes and structures’ (Amaratunga et al 2002: 22). Such strengths clearly indicate the relevance of this strategy to this thesis. Essentially, qualitative research methods will provide the researcher with the opportunity to ascertain the ‘perceptions, assumptions, prejudgements, presuppositions’ of individuals, and these meanings will be subsequently connected to the social world that exists around those individuals (Amaratunga et al 2002: 22).

Qualitative research can assist the researcher in gaining rich insights into the behaviour of research participants (Guba and Lincoln 1994). As this research project will focus on individual’s lived experience, arguably it is not possible to understand human actions without understanding the meaning that participants place on these actions (Marshall and Rossman 1999). These may include the participant’s thoughts, beliefs, feelings, values

for example. As a result, arguably, it is necessary to understand in-depth the deeper perspectives and this may be best achieved through face-to-face interaction.

In sociology, the types of method adopted often reflect the theoretical position of the researcher. Those who regard structural factors as paramount often use techniques of data collection measurement such as surveys and structured interviews which gather “hard” data. On the other hand, sociologists employing interpretive theoretical perspectives tend to rely more on methods such as participant observation and depth interviews. This is a key point, and indeed one pointed out during my viva voce. My personal theoretical position derives from an acknowledged emphasis on agency over structure as antecedent of feelings and subsequently behaviours. This is considered in Section 3.10 below.

### **3.8 Qualitative Data Collection Methods**

Qualitative research techniques have been defined as ‘an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world’ (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002: 85). Ultimately, the data collection techniques chosen must be appropriate for the selected theoretical stance (Hackley 2003).

Bryman (2001) highlights a number of collection methods that he deems to be the main methods associated with qualitative research:

- Ethnography / participant observation

- Language-based data collection approaches e.g. discourse analysis, conversation analysis
- Document analysis
- Interviewing
- Focus groups

As this research is qualitative in nature, a qualitative data collection method i.e. focus groups is used. This method is now considered.

### **3.9 Focus Groups**

Sim (1998: 346) defines a focus group as ‘a group interview – centred on a specific topic (‘focus’) and facilitated and co-ordinated by a moderator or facilitator – which seeks to generate primarily qualitative data, by capitalising on the interaction that occurs within the group setting’. Kitzinger (1995: 299) also alludes to the element of interaction where she writes ‘the idea behind the focus group method is that group processes can help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one to one interview ... when group dynamics work well, the participants work alongside the researcher, taking the research in new and often unexpected directions’. ‘Qualitative research in the form of focus groups is a highly suitable research method for exploratory investigation, especially when little is known about a somewhat subjective phenomenon’ (Rao and Perry 2003 as cited in Herington, Scott and Johnson 2005: 262). Focus groups are a form of interviewing that involves more than one and usually four or more participants (Bryman 2001). Tonkiss (2006) argues that the typical and suggested ideal

number of participants is five to ten people. I followed this advice and organised each focus group to comprise six students.

Fontana and Frey (2000) comment that focus groups were first described by Bogardus in 1926. Kendall (1956) 'coined the term *focus group* (original emphasis) to apply to a situation in which the researcher/interviewer asks very specific questions about a topic having already completed considerable research' (as cited in Fontana and Frey 2000: 651). The interviewer must direct the inquiry and the level of interaction among all participants either in a structured or unstructured fashion, depending on the purpose of the interview. Boddy (2005: 251) on the other hand define focus groups interviews as 'a group of people brought together to participate in a group interview concerning an area of interest', while Powell (1996) defines a focus group as 'a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment upon, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research' (Gibbs 1997: 2). Tonkiss (2006) points out that underlying focus groups is an assumption that opinions, attitudes and participants' accounts are shaped by interactions with other participants, in contrast to these attitudes and opinions being constructed at the level of the individual. The focus of a group discussion may have a certain level of structure and may take on a variety of different forms. Tonkiss (2006) records that to focus the interaction between the researcher and the group members the researcher may utilise some of the following:

- A fixed schedule of questions to ask the group.
- A topic guide that is compiled of themes to be discussed among the group.
- A group exercise to be completed.

- Visual cues e.g. video clips, advertisements, press reports, photographs, etc.

As mentioned above, explained below and as provided in Appendix A, the second strategy above i.e. the topic guide / theme sheet was utilised in this research.

Focus groups combine both elements of observation and interviewing (Mahoney 1997). They utilise group interaction in order to generate both data and insights that would be unlikely to emerge without group interaction. Mahoney (1997: 9) argues that the primary objective of focus groups is to attain 'high quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others, and where new ideas and perspectives can be introduced'. It is acknowledged that participation in group discussion facilitates emergent understanding i.e. understanding (the concept that is being explored in this research) can emerge during the group discussions. It was felt however that the benefits of utilising focus groups as the data collection method outweighed this concern.

### **3.9.1 Advantages**

Focus groups allow the researcher to explore participants' opinions and experiences. As a result of this, focus groups are an appropriate data collection method for this thesis.

Focus group interviews have numerous advantages for research, in terms of attaining a multiple range of viewpoints in comparison to one-to-one interviews (Byrne 2006). Additionally, they are relatively inexpensive to conduct, they have the potential to produce rich data sets and the format of such interviews is very flexible (Fontana and

Frey 2000). Sim (1998: 346) collates five specific advantages of focus groups: they are economical as respondents are interviewed in groups rather than on an individual basis (Krueger, 1994); in the context of the group interaction, as emphasised above, they can provide information on the dynamics of attitudes and opinions (Morgan, 1988); as argued by Butler (1996) ‘they may encourage a greater degree of spontaneity in the expression of views than would alternative methods of data collection’ (Sim, 1998: 346); individuals do not feel under any pressure to answer every question as other members of the focus group can do so (Vaughan et al, 1996)<sup>17</sup>; and as suggested by for instance Goldman (1962) and Peters (1993) participants may feel supported and empowered by a sense of group membership (Sim, 1998: 346). Another key advantage as identified by Kitzinger (1995: 299) is that that focus groups ‘can encourage participation from people reluctant to be interviewed on their own or who feel they have nothing to say’.

### **3.9.2 Disadvantages**

While there are multiple advantages of focus groups, their limitations must be acknowledged. The interaction between participants in focus groups can result in a consensus view among participants with the findings that emerge from focus groups therefore potentially having limited validity. Stokes and Bergin (2006) suggest that this can be a significant drawback to focus groups, as consensus implies that none of the participants disagree with a particular viewpoint, but equally none of them fully support it either. Bryman (2001) also point out a number of limitations of focus groups. He argues that the researcher has less control over the discussion within a focus group than within

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<sup>17</sup> Indeed this point was explicitly communicated to the focus group participants by the moderator at the commencement of each focus group.

an individual interview. Focus groups can also be difficult to co-ordinate and organise and the data collected can prove difficult to analyse. In addition, the culture of the group being interviewed may affect individual participant expression and some participants may dominate the group (Fontana and Frey 2000). Tonkiss (2006) also argues that the researcher has a lower level of control over the data that emerges as they have with face-to-face interviews or surveys. Moreover, it is argued that focus groups are not mutually occurring interactions and they offer no guarantee as to how people operate, interact or what they say outside of the research context (Tonkiss 2006). One final issue that the researcher / moderator must be aware of is that ‘the process of data collection, [including the method of recording the data] should not interfere with or detract from the co-ordination [and internal dynamic] of the group’ (Sim 1998: 347). The manner in which these potential disadvantages were avoided is considered in Section 3.11 below.

### **3.10 Ethics**

A problematic issue that applies to all research is researcher – respondent interaction bias. Such researcher interaction bias can affect results whatever the data collection method. For instance, such bias has been acknowledged by Bailer et al (1977) in their in dept personal interview research, by Cotter et al (1982) in their telephone survey research, by Hornik and Ellis (1988) in their mall intercept approach, by Evans et al’s (2003) face to face questionnaire, Alabaum’s (1987) mail survey and by Evans et al’s (2003) on line survey.

Miyazaki and Taylor (2007) classify researcher interaction biases into three categories i.e. psychological characteristics, physical characteristics and background characteristics. Psychological and background characteristics are perhaps especially relevant to this research.

Psychological characteristics pertain to the personality of the researcher. Miyazaki and Taylor (2007: 781) reference research by McAdams (1984) and Rogers (1976) which reported that data collectors who are ‘person oriented and friendly ... [and] personable will tend to elicit a greater amount of, and better quality, information from respondents’. This researcher believes he conducted the focus groups (as discussed in Section 3.11 below in a friendly way and as a consequence the interaction was open, forthright and in no way reticent. I believe I came across as genuinely interested in and enthusiastic about the research and that I interacted in a friendly and low power distant manner throughout each focus group. I further believe that my behaviours and indeed reputation relating to my interaction with students outside of and prior to this research facilitated the participants’ sense of comfort during the focus groups.

Background characteristics of the researcher (perceived or actual) include social class, level of education, ethnic identification, sexual orientation, and perhaps of most relevance (and concern) in this research, work status / employment position of the researcher relative to the focus group participants. This problem can be of particular significance where the researcher enjoys “privileged access”. The researcher given his role as Director of the course from which the focus group participants were selected considered

carefully firstly whether the students felt they could freely decline to participate and secondly to what extent the participants may have been concerned that their responses could have had possible negative consequences for them in terms of their studies or in their relationship with the researcher. It is essential to actively and critically reflect on this issue.

With regard first to agreement to participate, an open invitation was sent to all the final year students on the B.Sc. Business and Management programme. The wording of that invitation put students under no pressure whatever to oblige. Indeed if anything the wording of that invitation provided an “easy get out” as it acknowledged how busy the students were and emphasised that no-one should feel obliged to participate.

Regarding the second potential cause for concern i.e. that responses or comments made during the actual focus group might lead to potential negative consequences, it is true that there is potential for biased responses when researchers engage with their respondents. This is a cause of concern for practitioners e.g. industry researchers and for academics. With regard to researcher characteristics / attributes and specifically to the “authority or power relationship” between researcher and respondent, such characteristics ‘may influence the response of the participants ... to the extent that the participants both perceive particular characteristic(s) and either consciously or subconsciously deem these characteristics to be relevant to the questions being asked’ (Miyazaki and Taylor 2007: 780). However, and once again, I went to great lengths to assure the participants that nothing they said would or could in any way damage their reputation in my eyes. On

reflection, and knowing the students as I did, I do not feel this was ever a concern. Neither the subject matter of the focus group discussion nor the personal characteristics of the participants were antecedents of such concerns as might for instance have been the case if the research focussed on the participants views of the B.Sc. Business and Management course or their study habits etc. Further, and as identified by Kitzinger (1995: 299) ‘group discussions can generate more critical comments than interviews’. In other words the focus group dynamic facilitates not just ‘synergism’ but critical comment and reflection also i.e. ‘the expression of ideas and experiences that might be left underdeveloped in an interview’ [and can] illuminate the research participant’s perspectives (and draw out cognitive structures) through the debate within the group’. (Kitzinger, 1995: 299). Further, there was I feel a greater willingness to be forthright and “upfront” due to the greater comfort level deriving from group response compared to individual interviews.

Informed consent is another pillar of ethical research. The research agenda should be disclosed and this is perhaps especially important where a power distance exists between the researcher and the respondents. Therefore I was careful, as already explained, to inform the participants about the nature and purposes of the research. This said, I have reflected further on this issue of informed consent and I feel that fully informed consent is perhaps problematic as neither the precise direction of the research nor the ultimate conclusions are known prior to carrying out the primary research.

With regard to participant anonymity, the original intention (and indeed the actual approach taken in the previous draft of this dissertation) was to name the participants. However from feedback and subsequent reflection on same, I felt it best to pseudonym the participants.<sup>18</sup> On further reading, it became clear that the anonymity is a common practice and best practice in research. Clark (2006: 4) defines anonymity as ‘the process of not disclosing the identity of the research participant or the author of a particular view or opinion’. Clark (2006:4) cites Singleton and Straits (1999) and their view that ‘complete anonymity in most social research is almost impossible to achieve’. This was my experience. Although I have changed the names of all focus group participants, some of the comments made during the focus groups could lead one to identify the particular respondent. However, I felt that the point made merited direct quotation and to paraphrase same or disguise same would either be impossible and / or would detract from the substantive point. For instance, some references to the impact of the work placement officer on career choice should not be ignored. However there is only one work placement officer in the College of Business and therefore, through this ‘contextual reference’ (Morse, 1998: 79) it is possible to identify her.

This concern for anonymity acknowledged, it is also true, and in the context, of Clark’s (2006) three identified reasons for anonymity i.e. to protect respondents where information provided is sensitive, illegal or confidential, to disguise the identification of research locations ‘in order to avoid the stigmatisation of particular people in particular

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<sup>18</sup> My approach to anonymity was straightforward. I renamed all of the first focus group participants with names commencing with the letter “A”, the second focus group participants with names commencing with the letter “B” etc.

places' (2006:4) and to ensure the protection of personal information under data protection legislation, that the nature of this research was not relatively speaking sensitive nor did it endanger the stigmatisation of the participants etc. Further, an element of the informed consent process was to explain to the participants that the research findings would appear in a thesis that would likely be shelved in the University of Leicester library and may appear in a research paper(s) subsequently. None of the participants expressed any concern with the disclosure of the research findings to other parties.

Another key recommendation was that I acknowledge my own perspective as researcher – in relation to structure and agency – ‘all behaviour observed in fieldwork is interpreted through [a] biographical lens, what [sic.] leads one to “see” things about others (Halasa, 2005: 4). My personal starting point was and is that students can impact on their career choice i.e. that structural constraints can be overcome through personal / individual agency. When I revisited the interview transcripts when rewriting the analysis and conclusions chapter, I ensured to remind myself of this bias constantly.

Finally, and in response to another invaluable input from my examiners, when re-visiting the transcripts and re-writing the following chapter, I was careful to analyse and not to pass judgement. Below I provide direct quotations, I make links between the responses and I reference participant interactions. In Chapter 5 I make links between the responses and my analysis of same and previous research findings. I have avoided inappropriate judgement on specific responses.

To conclude, it is clear that the key concern in any research and specifically with regard to the relationship between the researcher and his / her respondents is that there should be trust. As outlined above I feel the focus group participants, the fact they are my students notwithstanding, found me personable and approachable, they had no concerns in relation to any perceived obligation that they must participate, or with regard to any potential hidden agendas or to potential damage to our pre-existing relationship as a result of any responses they might make. I was conscious of my own predilections when reporting and analysing the responses and I endeavoured to not pass judgement on any of the responses.

### **3.11 Focus Group in Action**

It was explained to each respondent that the focus groups would last approximately one hour and that the conversation would be recorded. None of the participants voiced any concern about this method.

Pilot testing of various potential themes and prompts was considered but not carried out. The focus groups were carried out in a semi-structured manner and as such were left open to explore issues as they arose in a non-predetermined manner. Such an approach facilitated the exploration of the individual experiences of career and career choice. The general themes were considered broad enough in nature to allow for expansion by the participants and deeper enquiry by the researcher where necessary.

The six focus groups were carried out over a six month period with each focus group lasting between seventy and ninety minutes. A private room free of interruption was

booked for each focus group. Each focus group was recorded, as mentioned above, with the prior knowledge and consent of the participants and as such the researcher was in a position to actively listen and explore points. This allowed for more in-depth discussion. In line with the “informed consent” issue considered above, each focus group commenced with a concise description of the nature and purpose of the study, acknowledgement of the co-operation of the participants and assurance of confidentiality. The initial question asked at each interview was of a very general nature and designed to put participants at ease. The opening question was simply ‘what is your career choice going forward?’ The order of the questions varied slightly in each focus group and depended on the response to this first and other early questions and the developing dynamic within the focus group.

The focus group guide document contained bullet points in relation to each of the three general themes. These bullet points were used to focus the discussion and enabled the participants to elaborate on the more general themes. Follow up questions were used to obtain clarification where required. Broader points that encompassed several areas were clarified by the researcher asking the respondent for clarification in the form of a question such as ‘in order to clarify this point, are you saying that...?’ This enabled the researcher to ensure that there were no misunderstandings and that points stated could be, as far as was practicable, clearly linked to the literature reviewed.

Therefore, a degree of structure was imposed on the focus groups in the form of the general themes which the participants were requested to address. It is of course important

that the participants be allowed to talk widely in relation to the themes i.e. to tell their story but it is also important I felt that I retain a degree of control so that the inquiry did not become unfocussed or in any way shapeless. Further, the open ended nature of the discussions allowed flexibility and development of experiences and views. The focus groups were highly interactive and all of the participants displayed a strong sense of involvement and commitment during the interviews, which led to full and open dialogue on the issues raised.

Two final aspects of the focus group process are pertinent here i.e. moderation and data recording. With regard to the former, 'the role of the researcher [perhaps more so than in many other methods of research] within the focus group is pivotal to the nature and quality of the data collected' (Sim, 1998: 347). Vaughan et al (1996) also emphasise this and reference the personality traits, the position of the moderator in the eyes of the participants relative to themselves and the interpersonal skills of the moderator as critical. Linked to this, it is essential that the moderator is not perceived to be expert by the participants. Millward (1995) suggests for instance that the moderator should make clear that he / she is there to learn and not to inform. Hague (1993) proposes a specific guideline i.e. that the moderator's contribution in terms of words spoken during the focus group should be no more than 10% of the total.<sup>19</sup> One point to note here was the decision of the moderator to deal with questions relating to structure first in the first, third and fifth focus groups and with the questions relating to agency first in the second and fourth and sixth focus groups. With regard to the recording of data, there is much advice

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<sup>19</sup> Both these points were actually communicated to the participants at the beginning of each focus group i.e. that the researcher was there "to learn" and that he should not contribute more than 10% of the subsequent transcription – which would be difficult given his talkative nature!

within the research methods literature. The general consensus appears to be that focus group discussion should be recorded. However moderators should be aware of potential discomfort of participants with this approach. Krueger (1994) suggests that written notes should complement the recording: doing so guards against / alleviates the problems which would emerge if it transpired the recording equipment did not work for instance and of greater import, such note taking facilitates reflection post focus group on the non verbal interaction that occurred. Two other interesting suggestions were considered i.e. that someone other than the researcher could take such written notes and that the focus group be video recorded. Both possibilities were rejected: the former because it was felt that given this research is for the purposes of completing a doctoral thesis and not for instance for purposes of market research, it was more appropriate that the doctoral candidate take full responsibility for the collection of data; the latter because the typical reason for videoing a focus group i.e. the difficulty with attributing quotations accurately to participants did not apply in the context of this research. Given my close familiarity with all the participants – I was able to identify all respondents through voice recognition.

### **3.12 Sampling**

There are a number of different sampling options open to researchers. It is important that the researcher chooses the most appropriate sampling option for the specific research study being undertaken. The research sample should be chosen taking three areas into consideration (Hackley 2003):

- Pragmatism – for example the sampling decision may be as a result of pragmatic considerations such as convenience or suitability for the particular research issue

being investigated. Generally, the data sample should aim to be both manageable and useful for the researcher. I encountered no difficulties` whatever in this regard as I had ready access to a sufficient number of students.

- Representativeness – generally, in qualitative research, it is deemed much more important for the respondent sample to be representative of a larger group than for it to be random. The thirty-six students who participated in the focus groups were representative of the final year cohort.
- Quality of insights generated – this can also be significantly influenced by the relationship that the researcher establishes with the interviewee. In this regard, and as explained above, I feel I had (and have) a very good relationship with all of the focus group participants. This is also clearly influenced by the experience of the respondents. All the respondents were at the same stage in their professional development, were approximately the same age and were all “living” the experience that is the transition from education to graduate employment.

Finally, unlike for instance in Pole’s research (1989: 107) there was no need in this research to ‘collect data from areas which incorporated different levels of unemployment, different kinds of industries and different industrial and economic histories’. Given the three research objectives, it was considered entirely appropriate to source respondents from one distinct student cohort. All members of that cohort were approached. The only purposive element of the process was the concern to ensure a gender balance among the participants. In fact no-one was excluded per se. Once the judgment was made that

saturation point had been reached, it was explained to those students who had volunteered but who had not as yet participated in a focus group that their input would not in fact be required.

### **3.13 Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research**

Bryman (2001) contends that the issues of reliability and validity are central for establishing and assessing the quality of the research in quantitative studies. However, he notes that there is much debate regarding the relevance of reliability and validity issues in qualitative research.

Reliability refers to the extent to which the data collection or analysis methods yield constant findings (Saunders et al 2007: 149-50). Robson (2002) as cited in Saunders et al (2007) highlights four potential threats to the reliability of the research:

- Subject or participant error – the focus group participants were ‘living’ the career choice process. They were therefore appropriate respondents. In addition, they had the opportunity to seek clarification at any stage. And also in this regard, the researcher looked to identify instances of uncertainty or confusion at all times and to respond proactively to same.
- Subject or participant bias – it is possible that participants may say what they felt the researcher would want them to say. This was avoided by stating clearly at the commencement of each focus group that there was no hidden agenda and that the desire was that the participants be as open and frank as possible. And as mentioned above, in the

context of my status as Head of Course, it was made clear to all the participants at the outset that their responses would in no way disadvantage or harm them.

- Observer error – the focus group schedule was drawn up in order to provide some structure and thus reduce the risk of this error. And as mentioned above, clarification of comments made was sought during each focus group. Being aware of this potential error in and of itself reduced the risk of same.
- Observer bias – this relates to the fact that there is more than one way to interpret the respondents' replies. However, again this bias is more relevant if there are a number of researchers involved. As there is only one involved in this research, this bias was not deemed to be of concern. Critically, the researcher sought to be open-minded and objective at all times. This was facilitated by a prior awareness of the risk of 'such information seeking bias'. The researcher, genuinely, had no preference whatever as to what information emerged. However, and as also mentioned above, I was aware of my personal disposition to weigh agency above structure and guarded against this in the focus group sessions and in my analysis of the responses. The viewpoint that utilising multiple interpreters can positively impact on reliability and validity is acknowledged. However, given the nature of this research i.e. that which is carried out for the purpose of an individual academic award, I felt it would be inappropriate to utilise other interpreters.

Validity refers to the degree to which the research findings accurately represent what is essentially occurring in the situation (Collis and Hussey 2003; Saunders et al 2007). Janesick (2000) on the other hand explain that validity in relation to qualitative research

in concerned with both description and explanation and whether or not the explanation is credible. The qualitative paradigm holds that there is no one 'correct interpretation' of the qualitative data (Janesick 2000: 393).

Generalisability, or external validity as it is sometimes termed, refers to whether the results of the study undertaken are equally applicable to other organisations (Saunders et al 2007). This particular research is concerned with one organisation operating within the third level education arena i.e. DIT and indeed a group of participants from one class cohort i.e. the final year of the B.Sc. Business and Management programme. Therefore it is not an objective that the research findings be generalisable. The findings however can instruct the content and structure of a questionnaire in the future as explained in the recommendations for further research in Section 5.5 below.

### **3.14 Organisational Access**

Saunders et al (2007: 167) highlights a number of strategies that researchers should utilise in order to secure access:

- Allow sufficient time
- Use existing contacts and develop new contacts
- Provide a clear account of the purpose and the type of access required
- Overcome organisational concerns
- Highlight possible benefits to the organisation
- Use suitable language
- Facilitate replies

- Develop access incrementally
- Establish credibility

A vital aspect of the research stage of a project is gaining access to the chosen organisation. Access refers to both the process of gaining physical access to the chosen organisation and sample, and also to the situation where the participants are willing to share information with the researcher (Saunders et al 2003). The author had no difficulty whatever in finding students to participate. Indeed, if anything, students were disappointed to not have the opportunity to participate i.e. several students who had volunteered to participate appeared genuinely disappointed when informed ‘saturation point’ had been reached ... and that their input would not in fact be required.

### **3.15 Analysing Focus Group Generated Data**

There are problems associated with analysis of data irrespective of how it is gathered and indeed irrespective of whether it is primary data or secondary data. Analysis of focus group generated data is no exception. The concern in this section is to focus on the challenges that apply to analysis of focus group generated data in particular and to outline the data analysis system used.

The first issue which must be considered is the possibility, indeed the likelihood, some participants are more opinionated, more assertive and more articulate than other participants. The downside of same is that those other members of the focus group may feel uncomfortable expressing their views ... especially where those views may be

contrary. It is essential therefore that the moderator not interpret silence as agreement or even as mere acquiescence and that he / she utilise strategies which encourage participation by all member of the group e.g. encouragement via direct questioning and body language. I believe I did this effectively. My success in adhering to this best practice was facilitated by the nature of the participants i.e. they were confident, extrovert, vociferous and comfortable in each others' (and my) company.

The second issue to be considered is that of group composition. McElroy et al (1995: 95) as cited in Sim (1998: 348) argues that 'the rule for selecting focus group participants should be commonality not diversity' because the more homogenous the social background, knowledge and experience of participants, the more confident and hence vocal and strident they will be. As mentioned above, the only purposive element of the sampling was to ensure a gender balance. Apart from this gender divide, the participants were all of similar age, intellectual ability, educational experience and ethnicity. There may have been some difference in social background and family wealth.

The final issue to bear in mind is the number of focus groups to convene. Many commentators on focus group best practices, including those already cited here e.g. Krueger (1994), Kitzinger (1995) and Vaughan et al (1996) advocate that more than one focus group should be conducted. The rationale of same is to increase the reliability of the data generated i.e. 'if one group is in some way aberrant – in terms of its composition, the interaction that occurs etc. its effect may be countered, or at least diluted, by other groups' (Sim, 1998: 348). Two associated issues apply here. First, once saturation point

has been reached i.e. when no new issues emerge in a subsequent focus group, it is legitimate to conclude there. I made the determination that saturation point had been reached after completion of the sixth focus group i.e. after engaging with thirty six students. Second, and this point is quite important – the moderator should not use issues that emerge in one group as topics for discussion in subsequent groups as to do so could lead to the creation rather than the discovery of issues. There was a temptation to do exactly this in this research. However, I did feel that unanticipated issues merited discussion in subsequent focus groups. The task then was to exploit such ideas in the fullest way possible but without manipulating the responses. This was achieved by probing answers and comments in subsequent focus groups.

My overall approach was to bring together and compare the responses to the questions asked / themes discussed across the focus group. I was careful to record minority opinions or ‘deviant cases’ (Kitzinger, 1995: 299). And I attempted to show interactions between the participants and not just specific or isolated quotations.

The analysis and presentation or reporting of data is not mutually exclusive i.e. the process of analysis facilitates the subsequent presentation of findings and the arrangement of findings into a coherent pattern in turn aids in the analytical process.

I did consider using qualitative data analytical tools such as Nud\*st and Atlas. However, ultimately the decision was made to analyse the data – or at least to commence this process - via identification of key words and points of view via the, less technological

though quite effective, use of coloured markers. In other words, the focus group transcriptions were read carefully for commonality and key words were colour coded. This is in effect the first and second of the four stages in the analysis of qualitative research generated data proposed by Taylor and Bogdan (1998: 80). The third step is the classification of responses under these main themes; and the final step is the integration of themes and responses into a coherent wording.

The theme sheet which had been used to maintain some degree of order during the focus groups was enormously helpful to the subsequent analysis of the responses. These themes had derived from the literature review and indeed followed, in the focus group discussions, the same order more or less in which they had been considered in Chapter 1.

The content and structure of the following chapter i.e. the Analysis and Conclusions chapter derives then quite closely from the content and order of the theme sheet. Direct quotations are presented in bold font. In the interests of confidentiality and especially give both the personal nature of many of the comments and the extent to which issues were discussed frankly, the actual / real names of the participants were not used. Instead pseudonyms were used for all participants. Precise details of the focus group dates, durations and locations is provided in Appendix B below.

Unanticipated issues also emerged during the focus groups. The emergence of same was not surprising as this was an exploratory study. In other words, the inductive nature of the research made the emergence of new ideas almost inevitable. It might be argued that

“surprising data” is a negative reflection on the literature review i.e. if a thorough literature review is conducted no unexpected data should emerge. It is contended here that the fact that such data did emerge is a consequence not of incomplete literature search and review but rather of the incomplete and deficient extant literature. One can perhaps go one step further and argue that the emergence of such data provides evidence in support of the choice of the qualitative paradigm for this research. Such unanticipated issues for instance the influence of grandparents and of university lecturers, of study abroad opportunities, and of the media are also considered below.

### **3.16 Conclusion**

The research approach adopted for this study can best be described as qualitative in nature. There are three main research objectives as discussed in this chapter and they essentially aim to explore with a view to arriving at a tentative understanding of student awareness of the complexity of the career choice process and of the myriad interdependent / interpenetrating influences on career choice. In order to achieve the objectives, the research is exploratory and interpretive in nature, it is qualitative and it adopts an inductive reasoning approach.

In order to support this methodology and ultimately fulfil the research objectives, the data collection technique utilised is student focus groups.

It is important that the most appropriate sampling option for the research is chosen. In this research natural sampling was selected for the student focus groups. In addition to

sampling issues, it was imperative that I consider ethics, validity and reliability and focus group convening best practices.

Subsequent to collecting the data, the researcher must report the data. This is the concern of the next chapter.

## **Chapter 4**

# **Presentation of Findings**

## 4.0 Introduction

As mentioned above, this chapter is concerned with presenting the findings and is structured around the themes as identified prior to the convening of the focus groups i.e. after reviewing literature and research findings relating to career choice generally and influences thereon more specifically. The following section considers responses relating to participants' understanding of careers and career change and is followed in turn by sections dealing with career option, structure / structural influences, agency / agentic influences and structure - agency interconnectedness respectively. The selected quotes from each focus group all link with the research objectives and the five themes. There is some reference to the literature in this section as doing so facilitates the linking of the comments with each-other and positively effects the coherence of the chapter. The substantive findings and conclusions, which derive from these quotes, are more thoroughly linked to the literature in Chapter 5.

### 4.1 Understanding of 'Career' and "Career Change"

Fay suggested that **"a career is a job ... no, an occupation that you have for life"**. Eamon said **"it refers to the type of job you work at, you know the sector you work in"**. Of the provided definitions of career in Section 2.1 above, only that of Still and Sims (1998: 146-147) i.e. "an ordered sequence of development extending over a period of years and introducing progressively more responsible roles within an occupation" in any way tallied with the responses in the focus groups. Delia for instance stated **"my career commenced once I selected the Accounting Major at beginning of third year ... then I did my placement in KPMG ... got a graduate place in KPMG ... I will get**

**my exemptions, do the CAP II exams and be made full time ... I want to make partner by the time I'm thirty".**

There was broad agreement that one could change careers but only to a limited extent. Fergal for instance made the point – **"yeah, I can see myself moving from let's say accounting to finance, but I will stay in the FS (Financial Services) sector"**. Fay agreed – **"I won't spend the guts of six years getting my accounting qualifications and then move to work in Marketing or something"**. Cian however explained – **"not only will I probably change my career in the future, I've already done so. I wanted to work in the ambulance service but couldn't get in until I was 21 so I decided to do nursing in Trinity, then realised it wasn't for me so I switched to business and management. Then about a month into third year I switched my major to Accounting – thanks a million for letting me do this by the way"**. Cian subsequently explained that his interest in the ambulance service developed because of his experience **"living in a rural area over an hour from the nearest hospital"**. The comment relating to my (Cian's Course Director) decision to allow him to switch major is considered in Section 5.3 below. Ben along similar lines, maintained **"of course, we will change careers ... though I guess it depends on what you mean by career. Maybe job is a better word. If our job becomes, you know out of date, we have no option but to change"**. Ben subsequently clarified that by out of date he meant **"obsolete"**. Barbara agreed and added **"it's not just if the job becomes obsolete but we can change too and if we grow to dislike the job even if it stays pretty much the same, we might leave"**.

This was touched on also by Debra – **“my boss was moved to another store and the new one is a bitch. I’m seriously looking to get a different job because of her”**.

Aine made a point in relation to the nature of job contracts – **“didn’t you mention in HR class that new employees in DIT are getting max five year contracts ... so although you mightn’t want to change jobs, once your contract is up”**.

Several other participants touched on the temporality of careers. Anne in response suggested –**“maybe it is good to have contracts like that ‘cos it might force you to look for other work, you know, do something different”**. Edward for instance said **“my career will be my career until I’m 65 or is it 68 – haven’t they changed the retirement age?”**. Fiachra immediately made the point in response to Edward - **I’ll be retired before 68, no way am I working till then**". There were several nods in agreement to this – indeed Edward subsequently also agreed with this ambition.<sup>20</sup>

With regard to changing career of one’s own volition, Catherine was adamant that she would only change job if there was better pay and conditions in the alternative position – **“I wouldn’t move career unless the pay and everything else was better. Even if it was the same I wouldn’t move. It wouldn’t be worth the hassle”**.

Finally, and in the context of the emergent protean and boundaryless career, and linked to Aine’s point above on short term contracts, Cian made the point that **“we need to be**

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<sup>20</sup> Here one can see the advantage of taking notes in addition to recording the focus group discussion. Clearly a dictaphone could not observe nor record such body language.

**multi-skilled because this is what employers want and anyway more and more of us are going to be working on a contract basis, you know short term work on a consultancy basis. Look at the number of companies that have let full time staff go only to hire them back as consultants”.** Charlie agreed and suggested that this system **“will lead to more of us working for ourselves”**. Fionn also made a point related to this – **“people start work and get comfortable. They have no incentive to upskill or pressure to look at other options, especially in the public sector”**. Fiachra, said in response, **“yeah, we’re creatures of habit”**. This links also with Caoimhe’s comment – **“most of us are afraid of change”**.

#### **4.2 Consideration of Career Options**

Stewart’s (1998) typology of career related decision styles was outlined in Section 2.1. The participants did not appear to utilise one style i.e. logical, intuitive and dependent more than another. Further, some in fact found it somewhat difficult to relate their personal experiences to any of the styles. Regarding the logical style, Alice explained **“I don’t think I ever really stopped to think carefully about the pros and cons of one career over another”** and Aidan agreed – **“I still amn’t sure why I’m doing business and management ... maybe I did subconsciously weigh up the benefits of doing a business course and then working in business, definitely not consciously”**. There appeared to be some support for the intuitive style. Alan for instance said **“I just felt that I could get a job with a business qualification”** ... and from the perspective of the logical style, he added **“I don’t remember sitting down and thinking about alternatives at all”**. Cian for instance said **“sure if I listen to my parent’s advice and**

follow it, that's logical and dependent isn't it?" and Fergal said **"I'm doing business 'cos the tests I did in school said I should be an accountant"**.

Some students including Debra, Aaron and Andrew (who were all incidentally taking the Entrepreneurship major) focused on creativity / entrepreneurial "anchor" in their response. Debra said **"I want to run my own business"**. When questioned further as to why, she explained **"it's in my family, my Dad has had several businesses, my uncles too and my Mom has her own hairdressing salon"**. Here the impact of family background on preferred career choice is apparent. Related to the autonomy / independence Andrew emphasised his personal preference to **"be his own boss"** where he said **"I've been following rules and taking orders all my life, now it's time I run my own life"**. When pressed on this, Andrew acknowledged **"there are loads of barriers to setting up my own business like getting the money to be able to do it and gaining the confidence of people, like getting them to buy from me – new and young on the scene"**. The "managerial" anchor was alluded to by several participants via their explanation as to why they had chosen to undertake the B.Sc. in Business and Management. Frances said **"the great thing about this degree is you can work in any area of management with it, a general degree like this gives you lots of options"**. Ben agreed with this - **"I don't want to necessarily be stuck in a particular area forever, DT365 [the course code for B.Sc. Business and Management] gives you choice"**. Cian reminded the group of something they had been told in class – **"that skills can become obsolete and that we're supposed to commit to life long learning, I mean what do they call it, yeah, CPD – continuing professional development"**. Finally, and

with regard to the security / stability anchor, no student appeared concerned with same. Though several students mentioned their parents' concerns – interestingly that of their mothers more so than their fathers - regarding this. Dorothy said, **“my Mom wants me to have a permanent pensionable job”** and Eoin said **“my mother said I should go into teaching or get a job in the Civil Service because she said there is always need for teachers and civil servants. I got around her by saying that there is always a need for accountants too”**.

Germanou et al in a very recent contribution (2009) as discussed in Section 2.1. above considers career attributes from four perspectives i.e. extrinsic, prestige, intrinsic and social. The moderator was careful to avoid using these terms. Instead he posed the general question “what is important for you in a career?” Some comments relating to each of these are provided here. First and with regard to economic benefits, Fiona said **“I went to college so that I could get a higher paying job”** and Barbara emphasised **“the need to repay my student loans”**. Eileen made the point forcefully – **“once May comes [final examinations], I am on my own, I can’t keep relying on my parents for money”**. Catherine was aware that high salary jobs may not be attained rightaway but said, like Fiona, **“sure my ambition is to find a job that pays lots of money”**. Regarding advancement and promotion, Eamon said **“big money depends on promotion, we’ll start on 28 grand if we’re lucky”** and several students said they were concerned to progress vertically as quickly as possible – Anne said for instance **“having a degree will help us get a foot higher up on the ladder starting off”** and Aidan agreed and added **“with a degree we’ll have an advantage when it comes to promotion opportunities**

over guys who do not have a degree”. Delia however was of the view that **“the degree is only important at the beginning of your career and it’s what you do in work once you get a job that decides your promotion chances”**. There was some comment on the nature of the job e.g. as mentioned above the Entrepreneurship majors e.g. Andrew and Debra expressed concern for the degree of power and control they would have in their jobs. Some students, perhaps notably those majoring in Marketing and HR respectively e.g. Clare, Caoimhe and Danielle, commented on the importance to them of working with other people. Caoimhe said **“I like working with people and this is why I chose HR”**. When quizzed on this she said – **it’s in my nature to get along with people and this is the type of person that is needed in HR**”. And Fergal and Aidan both emphasised, in line with Moy and Lee’s (2002) contribution that they would like to work with a multinational corporation as this would allow them to travel.

In the context of Perrone and Vickers’s (2003) view that choosing a career is stressful, Eamon for instance made the point – **“yeah, it’s tough to get a job right now but it’s the same for everyone ... so what’s the point getting stressed over it?”** Clare said **“sure our parents and friends know how bad things are and they understand that we’re not going to walk into jobs”**. Neither did any student feel the process was frightening or lonely – Frances said **“we’ll get something to tide us over until things pick up”** and indeed the majority of the participants appeared quite stoical regarding career options and Eileen said **“it’s no way lonely, we’re getting emails from the Careers Service and Stacy (the placement officer) re. company visits and job applications non stop”** and Dorothy said **“a lot of our time is spent talking to each-**

**other about jobs and interviews like when we're having coffee".** There did appear to be some support however for Perrone and Vicker's (2003) view that the job application process can be depressing. Fiona complained in this regard – **"it takes ages to complete job application forms ... one I completed was fifteen pages long, I posted it and two days later got a PFO letter. I don't think they even had time to read it"**. Charlie also commented on the fact that rejection letters can be depressing – **"I don't know about the rest of you but I get p\*\*\*ed off when I get them"**.

### 4.3 Structure

It is appropriate to recall here the explanation of structure as considered in Section 2.3. Layder et al (1991: 449) defined structural factors as 'those over which a young person has no opportunity of exercising any control, for example the social class of their parents, their sex, the local opportunity structure as measured by their place of residence and the level of unemployment when they entered the labour market' and Nasser (2003: 329) as those which 'go beyond the individual's control'. Several contributions which identified a range of structural factors were considered in Section 2.3 including Mayrhofer et al (2005), Furlong et al (2002), Goodwin and O' Connor (2005), Rudd and Evans (1998) and Layder et al (1991). As explained and justified in 1.0 and again in Section 2.3, this research chose to focus on three such structural factors i.e. family and social background, gender and labour market.

### 4.3.1 Family and Social Background as Influence on Career Choice

As discussed in Section 2.3.1 above, many commentators including Evans and Furlong 1997; Hoffmann 1974, Gorton 2000; Lent 1996; Wong and Liu 2009; Dryler 1998; Adya and Kaiser 2005; Smithy 2000; Jackson et al 1993; Banks et al 1995; Liu et al 2004; and Maher and Kroska 2002 have focused on family as an influence on career choice. Dryler (1998) suggests parental influences span many types including involvement, encouragement, expectation, role modeling and parenting practice. Many responses in the focus group discussions confirmed these types of influence and the pervasive influence of family generally.

Regarding encouragement, Fionn made the point **“my parents have always told me I am capable of achieving anything I want and I guess when you are hearing it all your life it probably has an effect”**. Fergal also made this point – **“yeah, my old man is a real up and at them type ... he’s successful and he sees no reason why I shouldn’t be too”**. Eoin however made the point that his mother was **“very practical ... she always said I should do what I’m good at”**. Fionn, Fergal and Eoin’s comments are all examples of what Cunnien et al (2009) termed “verbal persuasion”.

There was some evidence also of a more pragmatic parent. Dorothy for instance said **“I wanted to do music, I want to perform in the West End ... but my parents were adamant that I should do a real degree”**. Dorothy also made the point that **“by the time I was completing the CAO, my brother had his own PR firm and I think my parents felt we could end up working together”**. This is interesting as it broadens the

impact of family beyond parents to siblings. This links with Banks et al (1995) finding with regard to the influence of siblings on career choice, that especially for girls, older brothers can influence sisters to enter “masculine careers”. Clare explained that she was the first in her family to go to college and will be the first to work in business. She says this was influenced very much by her mother. Indeed Cora said **“when I filled out the CAO form, my mom was beside me in the kitchen, my dad was out working”**. Fiona’s experience was similar – **“it’s not that my Dad wasn’t interested, it was just that he was busy”**. Dolores added **“my Dad didn’t have the time, and he didn’t seem to understand the application system either, so he was happy for me and my Mom to work it out”**. Fergal’s experience was different – **“my Dad did take an interest, but only to the extent that he wanted me to go to UCD ‘cos he’s a graduate of there”**. Caoimhe, in typically down-to-earth fashion, said **“my Mammy didn’t care what career I went for, she just wanted me to be happy. It was my Auntie who was at me all the time to go to college to study business – I don’t know why because she doesn’t have a clue about business ... she did go to college though.”** Here again we see the influence of family extending beyond the immediate family. Indeed some students identified their grandparents as influences. Fergal for instance said, **“my Grandad really wanted me to do law like he did and I actually felt a bit guilty when I had to tell him I went for business”**. Caoimhe, made the point **“my nana wanted me to be a nun”**.

An issue which emerged during the discussion of CAO was the impact of career guidance counselors. Cian suggested – **“career guidance teachers are crap ... all mine did was**

get us to a test designed to tell us what career might suit us”. Charlie added – **“my guidance teacher told us when college open days were on and arranged for some speakers to come in”**. Cora said in this regard – **“yeah, we had speakers too but they were from the colleges trying to get us to put their courses on our CAO, they weren’t talking about particular careers”**. Detta suggested in the subsequent focus group that career guidance **“should be more about careers and less about courses”**. She went on to say, notably, **“my godfather is one of those career coaches and my Mom made me meet with him. We talked about all the options ... he said it was best to do a general business course and that way give me more time to work out what I liked best”**.

Two other issues related to family background emerged in the discussions. First, and with regard to occupational background of parents, those participants who expressed a strong desire to set up their own businesses including Debra, Elizabeth, Andrew and Aaron all came from families who had their own businesses. This is in line with Gorton (2000) who discovered that graduates with family business backgrounds expressed a preference to work in their own business. It was also notable that participants whose parents worked in the public service made the point that they were encouraged to work in the public sector – again Eoin is a case in point – **“you can’t beat a permanent pensionable, secure job was the message in my family”**.

### 4.3.2 Gender as Influence on Career Choice

As in with the previous sections in this chapter, it is appropriate to recall the precise meanings of the focus of this section. Gender was defined by Ferber and Nelson (1993: 9-10) in Section 2.3.2 above as ‘the social meaning that is given to biological differences between the sexes, it refers to cultural constructs rather than to biological givens’. Tovey and Share (2000: 191) defined it as ‘the meanings (social construction) that arise out of sexual classification (physical / biological); and to the socially constructed meanings and identities that arise from assumed sexual differences’.

Delia contended **“my gender is irrelevant to the choices I make”**. Fiachra went even further, **“it might be beneficial for a man to go for a job in an area that’s mainly women, look at teaching – most teachers in primary school are female but the principal teachers are male”**. Cian made the point that **“there is high demand for men in nursing, because they are the minority, they can stand out more”**.

This links with one of the demand side explanations for the gendered nature of careers and occupational segregation i.e. employer preference for one gender over another. However, on balance, there was little support for this. Eoin for instance said – **“there is so much legislation now protecting against discrimination that you can’t be caught favouring men over women ... or vice versa”**. Ben agreed and said **“it’s about positive discrimination now – you’ve got to give women jobs”**. Fiachra did make reference to the part of the entry requirement for the fire service – **“you’ve got to be able to carry 80 kilos up and down a ladder, I don’t know many women that can do**

**that**". Finally, one of the supply side explanations for occupational segregation specifically and gender influenced career choice more generally was that marriage and family responsibilities (in the future) may depress women's desire for occupations with higher skills, more responsibility, longer working hours, travel etc. None of the female participants made this point. Indeed some appeared quite insulted that this should even be considered. Delia was particularly strident in her rejection of such a suggestion – **"why should I sacrifice my career just 'cos I have a husband and kids. He can stay at home"**. Detta made the point also in this regard that **"the culture that says a woman's place is in the home is gone"**. Cian said given **"economic changes like huge mortgages, wives have to work – it's not even a matter of choice"**. And finally on this point, Eamon in a rather astute observation said **"supports for women working outside the home have increased with crèches and company childcare"**. Emma added **"grandparents living longer"** to this list and Danielle mentioned, perhaps from her experience of living in Germany, the emergence of flexitime.

Finally, and from a different perspective, Detta made a link between availability of subjects in secondary school and gender – **"not all the subjects are taught in all schools, like my boyfriend got to study economics for the Leaving, I had the option of doing home economics ... if you go to a girl's school there's less science subjects"**. Edward agreed, **"I don't think you can do woodwork or technical drawing, stuff like that in girls' schools"**.

### 4.3.3 Labour Market Attributes as Influence on Career Choice

Section 2.3.3 above considered the labour market itself as a structural mediator of career opportunity and choice. The rationale was explained thus: the demand for and supply of labour and the dynamic nature of contemporary careers and of the arena within which they exist are outside the influence of individual job seekers

First and as emphasised by Peel and Inskon (2004) with regard to a tightening labour market, in a high unemployment economy, graduates' choice is constrained. Cora for instance said **“a job is a job – any job will do for now”**. Fergal concurred **“look, yeah, maybe we're unlucky that we're graduating in 2010 – like we were born three years too late”** and Ben said **“times are tough – I know guys who graduated two years ago and they were being snapped up, no really absolutely spoilt for choice”**. Fiona said a friend of hers had **“changed jobs – of her own choice - three times in a month and they were all good jobs”**. Alan pointed out that **“recruitment consultancies were contributing to the high turnover of staff by contacting ex clients again after six months or so on the pretence of following up on the original job but really to ask would you be interested in applying to Company X”**. Clearly the labour market has changed hugely since then. In August 2008, the national unemployment rate was 4.3%; in March 2010 it is 12.5%. However, this severe downturn in the labour market does not appear to have deflated graduands as much as might have been anticipated. Indeed, a great degree of stoicism was detected. Examples of same include Eoin saying **“things will turn around”**, Cora saying **“I'll probably do a post grad because there are no jobs and that will stand to me in the future ... I wouldn't do a postgrad if I could get**

a job”; and Delia made the point **“there are jobs out there if you’re a good student and if you work hard, get a 1.1 and prepare well for interviews”**. Debra agreed and said **“we just need to try harder, you know up our game”**.

The next aspect of the labour market considered was employer preference for graduates of certain universities as identified by Hesketh (1998). Here there was unanimous agreement that this is the case. Several students pursuing the accounting major including Charlie made reference to the rumour **that “KPMG put applications into two piles – one for UCD students and one for everyone else ... and they make offers first to the UCD applicants”**. Fiachra suggested that this may down to **“the old school tie thing , the people doing the shortlisting and making the offers may be mostly graduates of UCD”**.

With regard to a related issue i.e. grades, Eileen said she had heard that **“some employers equate a 1.1. grade in DIT with a 2.1. grade from Trinity or UCD”**. If this is indeed the case, it contradicts Gabb (1997: 62) finding that **“the class of degree isn’t that critical for the many employers who are looking for a well rounded candidate”**. Eoin was very critical of this – **“all the fuss in the media regarding grade inflation is about grade inflation in the university sector not in DIT”**. Alan argued that the class of degree was important and Bill made the point **“the grade is probably not so important later in your career but it is when you first start working”** and Dorothy said it does impact directly on postgraduate applications – **“I am pretty sure I need a 1.1. to make**

**the interviews for the MA in Public Relations**". Several students referred to the fact that many postgraduate courses explicitly require a particular grade.

One other comment made pertinent to the influence of the labour market situation came from Danielle – **"I agree there are jobs out there but if I don't think I have a chance of getting a particular job, I probably won't bother even applying ... some jobs, you know from the ad that you have little chance. Like when it says you need five years experience"**. Debra, agreed – **"yeah, the way some job advertisements are written discourage you from applying ... you know you won't even make the shortlist"**.

The next aspect of the labour market considered was its dynamism i.e. that it is in a state of flux. This was prompted by Giddens (1991) contention that careers are rapidly changing, increasingly unpredictable and risky due to the impacts of post industrial society attributes including, de-skilling, commodification, rapidly changing market conditions and corporatism. The concern was to ascertain student awareness of same and if this affected their agency e.g. sense of self-efficacy and actual behaviours. Participants agreed in line with the AGR (1995) observation that careers are changing. Debra for instance said **"jobs are changing and I suppose changing faster than before but we live with that and just accept that"**. Cian said there is a requirement now to continually learn, to upskill and re-skill as certain skills become obsolete. Interestingly, Fiona suggested this is a good thing – **"it's good that workers have to learn new things and if some workers want to stay with the same skills, well it's their own fault if they're let go or not promoted"**. This is interesting because it shows individuals have a choice

as to how to respond to new work requirements. Bill said it's good for the economy that new skills and processes are required. Notably, he made reference to the on-going reforms in the public sector **“performance related pay in the public sector ... and pay increases only when new systems are accepted by Unions and introduced has got to be a good thing”**.

One final structural issue emerged when Fergal made the point in relation to the third level entry system – **“we [applicants] can't control what will be the entry points level for courses, that depends on the college but maybe that's good 'cos because at least there is a level playing field”**. When asked to clarify what he meant Fergal did so – **“it doesn't matter where you're from or who you know, the system is based on points. If you get enough points you get in”**. Fiachra further clarified this point – **“yes, the system is fair and transparent”**. Delia, however in a contribution also linked to third level entry said – **“if your parents can afford to send you to the Institute <sup>21</sup> or for grinds you will do better and you will get the high points courses”**. This is a notable contribution and does link to career choice as courses that link with many specific occupations e.g. medicine, pharmacy, physiotherapy, optometry and law have very high entry points.

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<sup>21</sup> The Institute of Education, Leeson Street, a private fee paying school that has a reputation for excellent Leaving Certificate results.

## 4.4 Agency

Prior to reporting comments made relating to agency, it is helpful to briefly re-explain agency here. Fedlar et al (2005: 42) defined agency succinctly – ‘as the degree to which one feels in control of one’s life course and believes that one is able to manage challenges in ways that will result in varied outcomes’. Rudd and Evans (1998: 39) described it as ‘input from [young] people themselves ...and as those aspects of the decision making process which are predominately individual, creative, pro-active and involve resisting external pressures’ and Giddens ((1984: 14) defined it as ‘the capacity to make a difference’. Rudd and Evans’s use of the qualifying word “predominately” is instructive as it implies the existence of other phenomena that impact upon individual decision making. Giddens’s use of the word “capacity” is also interesting as it pertains to ability to act but not necessarily to the act itself. The following sub sections consider personal attributes and individual behaviours as influences on career choice.

### 4.4.1 Personal Attributes as Influence on Career Choice

Waddell and Bauer (2005) as considered in Section 2.2.1 above suggest that career planning is a journey of self-discovery ... where ‘students consider their personal values and capabilities / competences in the context of education and work environments’. This sense of capability is self-efficacy. In response to the question “have your views of your own capability impacted on your career choice? Fergal said **“I was good at Maths and Accounting in school, so I reckoned I would be well able for a business degree, and for a career with numbers”**. Cora concurred – **“I found Maths easy and I think it was because I found it easy that I studied it most – doesn’t make sense does it? –**

**and I thought it would be handy in college**". These comments pertain to Bandura's (1977) description as cited in Cunnien et al (2009: 165) of self-efficacy as 'the belief in one's ability to achieve a goal'. Caoimhe however pointed out that she studied no business subjects at all for the Leaving Certificate Examinations i.e. in her final two years of secondary school. The other participants in that focus group (Cian, Charlie, Clare, Catherine and Cora) reacted with great surprise to this. Charlie took over the questioning here when he asked "**so why did you choose to do business in college**" to which Caoimhe replied "**well I didn't do science subjects either and I didn't really see the point in doing geography or history in UCD ... and remember this degree is very general with communications, politics, marketing, HR not just accounting and quants**". It is correct to say Caoimhe was an exception in this regard i.e. all other students degree choice was influenced by performance in secondary school.

Relating to Skinner et al's (1998) contention that students with high self-efficacy are more likely to set themselves challenging goals and Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory of motivation, Fiona said "**I'm not especially confident, and especially not compared to my younger brother and I guess this does effect the choices I make**". The moderator was concerned to probe this a little and asked why Fiona felt she had low self-efficacy? At first Fiona said she didn't know but then suggested that she was never the best in school in class or in extra-curricular activities and this may have affected her confidence levels. This ties in with Cunnien et al's (2009) identification of "personal performances" as a driver of self-efficacy. Frances however then pointed out that she had been in school with Fiona and "**you are being a bit hard on yourself, there were some major over-**

**achievers in our school’**. Fergal also made reference to the impact of his school on his confidence level relating to the Leaving Certificate examinations – **“I went to Blackrock – rugby is the number one thing there, I was a pretty good player and played senior cup two years running – that took up loads of my time. It was end of March before I really could start studying for the Leaving so I knew I wasn’t going to do really well in the Leaving.** (Leaving Certificate examinations take place in June), **so I put down DT365 instead of Commerce’**. When asked to clarify this point, Fergal said the fact he went to Blackrock and played rugby meant he studied less and didn’t expect to do very well in the Leaving Certificate examinations. This influenced his course preferences on the application form. This and other contributions above identified college admission requirements as influences on their course and subsequently on career choice. For instance, Eileen said **“I knew I wouldn’t get the points for medicine so it was ruled out as an option’**. This lead neatly to a question regarding personal goals i.e. did Eileen set herself a CAO points target? Those students that did set themselves such a target but set it at the level of points entry for their preferred course. This applies also to goal setting relating to college graduation grade ambitions. Alan said for **instance “you (the moderator as Course Director) have been telling us since first year that about ten per cent of us will graduate with first class honours, so if we got just a pass, or even a 2.1. in first, second or third year, there’s no point setting ourselves the ambition to graduate with a 1.1’**. The moderator was pleased when both Aaron and Anne intervened to say **“Eoghan also has always said if we all deserve high marks we will get high marks’** (Aaron) ... and that **“there is no quota system’** (Anne).

Finally, Edward in a very refreshing because honest and forthright admission said **‘I’m a bit of a lazy b\*\*\*tard! ... being honest, I don’t work as hard as other guys and I probably try to get away with doing as little as possible.** When questioned further on this, he explained, **“I think life is too short to spend my whole time studying or worrying about studying. And anyway, studying and good marks will only get you so far ... it’s better to focus on extra-curricular stuff – this is what can give you an edge when you’re looking for a job”**. This point regarding volitional extra-curricular activity is considered in the following section.

#### **4.4.2 Individual Behaviours as Impact on Career Choice**

Section 2.2.2 considered literature on the second major dimension of agency i.e. individual behaviours. Such was defined as ‘voluntary or informal strategies’ and included networking (Keele, 1986; Peluchette, 1993, Granovetter, 1995 and Nabi, 1999), seeking the advice of specialists for example career advisors (Kram, 1998) and selling oneself as best one can for example via interview preparation (Bahniuk et al, 1996). Herriott and Pemberton (1995) listed all three of the activities i.e. external networking, the gathering of knowledge and the publicising of one’s achievements.

Regarding networking as considered by for instance Nabi (1999), several students including for instance Dolores made the point **“it’s who you know not what you know”**. This was the common viewpoint. Indeed Eamon went further and said **“it is stupid to not exploit any contacts you have especially when jobs are so tough to get”**. This is another interesting and unanticipated contribution. This was probed further and Elizabeth,

Edward, Eoin and Eileen all agreed with Eamon. Eoin said for instance **“it’s a dog eat dog situation out there at the moment”** and Edward described the current labour market as a **“rat race”**. However, although the common viewpoint, there was some disagreement – Delia for instance was adamant that networking only works in tandem with actual ability and qualifications i.e. **“look it’s not like Ireland is a guanxi society, it’s not you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours to that extent, you have to be competent ... and qualifications are a minimum requirement now more than ever”**. Charlie agreed to a point but added, **“if two job applicants are equal in every way except one has good contacts, the one with good contacts will get the job”**.

Behaviour while on placement, or more precisely taking the opportunity to impress was mentioned by several participants. Delia made the point – **“I saw placement as a great opportunity to learn but more to get stuff for my CV going forward. But I really liked KPMG, saw the opportunity there for graduate placement and tried to impress”**. The moderator probed this by asking if Delia only decided definitely on a career in accounting as a result of her placement experience? Delia said she had previously decided on accounting **“but had the intention of working in a smaller local (close to her home in County Meath) accountancy practice”**. This was interesting because it suggests that placement or internship experience can impact not only on preferred career / sector but also on preferred type of employer within that sector. No participant made the point that their placement experience turned them off employment in the sector. This may at first glance appear surprising but can be perhaps be explained by the effort and success of the placement officer in finding placements in students’

preferred sectors. Alice made the point – **“Stacy (placement officer) was great, she did her best to find us jobs in our preferred companies”**. Andrew added **“even more than that, she actually tried to find us jobs close to where we lived or at least in places we could get to via public transport”**. This interaction is more complex as identified by Fiachra’s comment **“Stacy was great but you had to meet her halfway, if you messed her around by not attending placement class or giving her a crap CV, she helped you less”**. Charlie also made a very interesting point when he pointed out that he had repeated Year 2 as an external repeat student having failed two Year 2 modules. **“I was disgusted with myself for failing – it was totally my own fault - and I made sure I got as much out of that year as I could, so I got a full time job with EBS. Working there absolutely confirmed for me that a job on the selling side of Financial Services suited me”**. Again here one can see how behaviour and rules and behaviour interact in a cyclical manner – Charlie by his own admission did not work hard enough in Year 2, was not allowed to progress to Year 3 because of the DT365 rule that students be not allowed carry modules from one year to the next (incidentally a rule that is imposed by the Course Director (the researcher), learnt his lesson and worked very hard in the EBS. The point that the Course Director applies this rule is significant in the context of this research also – the DIT rules permit Course Directors to exercise their discretion relating to permitting students to carry modules. However the DT365 Course Director does not exercise such discretion.

Another aspect of individual behavior impacting upon career choice was identified by Caoimhe’s comment above regarding the ideal type of person to work in HR. Caoimhe

had chosen HR as she felt her personal attributes matched the roles involved in a HR position. The moderator probed this when he asked what exactly did Caoimhe mean by this? **“I like working with people, I trust people, I get along with people”**.

Related to this, the moderator asked to what extent did students try to inform themselves about the pros and cons of particular jobs, as also considered in Section 2.1 above, of particular companies and indeed sectors in line with Bahniuk et al’s (1996) emphasis on the importance of good interview preparation. Fionn said **“it would be stupid to not research a company before you go for interview there but I wouldn’t research the position or the company before applying for the job”**. Frances agreed – **“I’m too busy with assignments, and don’t have the time to do all this research”**. Barbara said regarding this, **“you’re never sure what exactly you need to know and even if you did it can be hard to get that information”**. Catherine said in this regard, **“you can find information on the company alright but it takes time”**. Fiachra made the point that **“once you know what type of job you want ... obviously I want to do chartered accountancy ... and all the companies and types of grad placements are all the same”**. Cora said, **“as I said before a job is a job – any job will do for now, and I’m pretty sure that whatever job I get first will only be short term”**.

However, there were instances of where participants seemed to take a degree of control over the job / course application process. Dorothy for instance said, **“I remember you telling us we should have something on our CV that gives us an edge, when I decided to compete in the Rose of Tralee competition, I knew that if I made the final it would**

**definitely, I hope in a good way, distinguish me**". Edward said also in this respect, **"I participated in Newstalk (National Student Enterprise Case Study Competition) so that I could put it in my CV"** and Caoimhe said **"having JMUCC (John Molson Undergraduate Case Study Competition, Concordia University, Montreal) with a 2.2. is better than having just a 2.1 on your CV – definitely"**. Some very interesting comments were made also relating to strategies employed by students as they look to influence their grades. Fergal made the point **"I know for a fact that there are students who chose options in Years 3 and 4 because those options are seen as easy, you know you can pick up high grades in them'**. Delia made a similar point relating to what might be termed Machiavellian behavior – **"some students seriously exploit the personal circumstances forms"** and Detta added **"... and the medical certificates ... if you're late submitting work, and DT365's rule is 25% off for one day late, you go to the doctor and get a medical cert"**.<sup>22</sup> These are clear examples of students engaging in activities in a strategic way to increase their chances of getting higher marks. The following section analyses responses primarily relating to structural influences on career choice.

#### **4.5 Structure and Agency Duality**

As explained in Section 2.4 above, structuration theory posits that the structure – agency dualism is too simplistic and hence unrealistic and that structure and behaviour are interdependent i.e. people through the socialisation process become dependent or are influenced by the existing social structures, while at the same time, via their activities /

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<sup>22</sup> This and similar comments during all focus groups provide evidence in support of the contention mentioned in Section 3.10 above that the responses were forthright despite my position relative to the respondents.

behaviours, alter those social structures or in other words, social structures are the medium of human activities as well as the result of those activities. Structure and agency are not independent and conflicting elements, but are a mutually interacting duality. Mignot (2000) words this relationship succinctly - individuals are 'active agents' who are both constrained by and also construct their social world. Bourdieu's concept of habitus is also relevant here. It was defined in Section 2.4 above as a set of manners and attitudes which amount to a disposition to act distinctively. One's career choice and the process one goes through prior to making that choice is an expression of this disposition.

The final and key objective of this research, and indeed that which contributes the originality to this research, was to explore student awareness and understanding of how agency and structure including one's disposition and ability to modify same overlap and mutually interact. This was a difficult task. It was important that the moderator not lead the focus groups to certain views or conclusions. For this reason, all focus groups commenced with agency specific and structure specific questions. Answers to the former i.e. agency related questions often touched on the latter i.e. structural factors and vice versa. The final part of the focus group dealt specifically and explicitly with structure – agency overlap. The questions here derived in large part from the comments made earlier in the focus groups. In this way, the moderator overcame the challenge of dealing with structure – agency overlap without informing students of possible overlaps and interdependence via the questions asked i.e. through the focus group discussion.

It is important to emphasise this point. Many of the links between structure and agency emerged during the first two stages of the focus group interactions i.e. in the separated discussions on structure and agency. The final stage of each focus group explicitly asked students to consciously consider how agency and structure might interact.

This stage of each focus group began by asking **“given all we have discussed thus far i.e. family, class, gender, teachers., peers, societal expectations and labour market on the structural hand and cognition (self-efficacy, optimism and personal goals) and individual behaviours on the agentic hand, can you identify any overlaps between structure and agency?”** This question did require in all focus groups some clarification. Once the participants understood clearly the question, some such overlaps / connections were identified.

Dorothy immediately responded – **“it’s difficult to separate structure and agency, isn’t it?”** I asked her to expand. **“Well we were talking about entry points for courses like medicine. I can’t decide what the points will be but I can choose to work hard to get those points”**. Eileen made a similar observation – **“so the points level is structural which means we can’t control it but the effort we choose to put in is our own choice”**. Edward agreed – **“exactly, points might be 450 for commerce [in UCD] but we can work hard to get those points”**. Eoin then pointed out that points levels are also influenced by students themselves – **“the popular courses have higher points”**. Delia made a similar point but in this case relating to grade quotas – **“we talked about grade quotas and employers looking for a particular grade. We can’t**

**influence the quota, we don't even know what it is, but we can work hard to get the 2.1.**" Also with regard to course choice (as antecedent of career options) Cian said – **"we have to believe we can control what happens to an extent. If a particular course is high points, we can get grinds"**. Charlie pointed out in response – **"not everyone can afford grinds"**. Caoimhe said **"there is no way my mammy could have afforded grinds or sending me to the Institute"**. Fiachra identified private colleges as an alternative route to a third level qualification – **"you can do degrees in private colleges without getting high points – just pay the money and you're in"**. Fionn added – **"and it's easier to get a 1.1. in those colleges"**. I asked him to explain why he felt this was the case? – **"because there for profit and they have to keep the customer happy"**. This was the only group in which private colleges were mentioned. However Charlie made a point related to this as mentioned above – **"KPMG put applications into two piles – one for UCD students and one for everyone else ... and they make offers first to the UCD applicants"**. The implication here is that employers look not just at the grade attained but at the college attended.

Although not one of the structural factors analysed in the literature review, it is appropriate, given the extent to which this was commented on, to consider teachers and lecturers. Some overlaps or connections between structure and agency emerged in this context also. Edward and Eoin for instance both said they made the decision to pursue a career in accounting primarily because of the quality of the Accounting 1 and Accounting 2 lecturers – **"their way of teaching made it interesting"** (Eoin) and Bill said **"I was never interested in economics but Tom is a brilliant teacher and for the first time I**

knew what economists actually do – and it is interesting and important”. Another really interesting issue to emerge relating to teachers as worded by Clare was – **“there are some teachers that you just want to work hard for, I don’t know but it’s like you feel you would be letting them down if you handed up bad work or did a bad exam”**. Caoimhe agreed, **“and it’s because they care about their subjects and your learning that you care. There are other lecturers who just teach ‘cos they’re paid to teach – it’s like just a job for them ”**. This shows a link between the structural factor that are lecturers and the individual effort made by students. Further this suggests that lecturers might in fact be more proximal (Wong and Liu 2009) influence on career choice than suggested elsewhere. Anne also mentioned lecturers but suggested – **“some lecturers are only interested in working with the good students”**. Her group appeared surprised at this comment but Anne went on **“no really, if you’re not good at accounting the lecturer will not slow down to help you catch up. And, I know some lecturers give more feedback to good students than to others. This puts me off their subject”**. This is similar to a point made Fiachra already mentioned - **“Stacy was great but you had to meet her halfway, if you messed her around by not attending placement class or giving her a crap CV, she helped you less”**. One final reference to teachers was made by Aaron – **“I think good teachers are those who give you confidence, who make you believe you can do really well in their subject. And the opposite is true too, the lecturer who makes out their subject is really tough and loads of students will fail unless they study all the time puts me right off subjects like that”**. Anne agreed – **“yes, if I don’t think I can pass a module, I’ll probably work less at it. I know it’s not logical when I put it like that but ...”**.

In addition to the points above regarding family's ability to pay for grinds and linked to the son or daughter's willingness to avail of this facility and the opportunity to get advice from one's godfather, another family related connection between structure and agency also emerged when Cian for observed that asking for, listening to and / or acting upon parent's advice is at the discretion of the son or daughter – **“you can listen to your parent's advice but this doesn't mean you have to follow that advice”**. Andrew's viewpoint that he has the ambition to set up his own business but **“this will depend on the state of the economy. And on bank lending policies. If I can't get the start up capital, I can forget it”**.

Linked to the point on availing of advice from the placement officer above, Fiachra made a point that availing of student services such as the careers advisory service – whose existence and operation is outside the control of the individual students and therefore structural – is likewise **“a choice to be made by the student ... we are not forced to go to the career talks or to the CV sessions”**.

With regard to gender as a structural factor, as mentioned by both Cian and Fiachra in Section 4.3.2 job seekers can exploit occupational segregation to their advantage. This shows a deliberate behavior i.e. individuals exercising agency to exploit what is traditionally considered a structural barrier to career choice – **“it might be beneficial for a man to go for a job in an area that's mainly women, look at teaching – most teachers in primary school are female but the principal teachers are male”**. This was not the only reference to how a structural attribute i.e. gender profile of the teaching

profession can be exploited by men. In other words, how a structural factor can actually encourage and enable agency. As mentioned in Section 4.3.2 above, Eoin remarked - **“there is so much legislation now protecting against discrimination that you can’t be caught favouring men over women ... or vice versa”**.

One particularly interesting overlap between structure and identified related to “discretion”. It emerged in the two contexts. First in that of the Course Director exercising his discretion to allow Cian to change major in Year 3 as mentioned in Section 4.1 above- **“about a month into third year I switched my major to Accounting – thanks a million for letting me do this by the way”**. Cian explicitly identified this as a in this third stage of the focus group – **“you are structure but you can make decisions one way or the other. And we can influence those decisions”**. When asked to clarify this, Cian added **“I can try to get you to make decisions that benefit me, you can say yes or no. Or I can choose to not bother trying to influence you. This is an example of the overlap we’re talking about, yes?”**. And second, when Charlie explained, as mentioned in Section 4.1 above how the DT365 rule that students cannot carry modules into final year is rigorously enforced by the Course Director – **“you don’t have to have that rule sure you don’t? You could allow us to carry modules if you wanted to”**.

The final set of “overlaps” identified explicitly in the third stage of the focus group related to individual behaviours. Fionn referred to a point made previously by Fergal i.e. to the practice of deliberately selecting modules which are perceived to be easier. And Delia repeated her clear example of such individual and Machiavellian behaviour

interacting with a structural artifact i.e. students exploit Personal Circumstances forms. Detta worded this clearly – **“some students will play the system”**. By this she meant students submit such forms knowing they will have the support of the structural institutions that are DIT – its general assessment regulations – and the DIT Student Union. Edward referred once again the contemporary work environment as **“a rat race”** and he said that students **“have to be more proactive because there are so few jobs”**. Debra made the same link between the structural feature that is the high unemployment rate and individual behavior – **“you have to up your game”**. Anne also suggested that **“the limited availability of jobs forces us to be more proactive and clever”**.

The final chapter below links my interpretation of the data outlined above to the literature i.e. to previous research findings as considered in Chapter 2 above.

## **Chapter 5**

# **Conclusions and Recommendations**

## **5.0 Introduction**

As mentioned above, this chapter summarises my findings and interpretation of same. It is also concerned with identifying the contribution of this research while also acknowledging the limitations of this research. It concludes with some recommendations for future research.

Conclusion drawing involves the researcher considering what the analysed data essentially means and what the implications are for the stated research objectives (Berkowitz 1997: 7). Subsequent to drawing conclusions on the analysed data, the researcher must continually refer back to the collected data in order to verify the conclusions drawn.

The responses outlined above support the viewpoint that the structure agency duality is complex. Further, the interacting reciprocity of structure and agency duality in the specific context of this research i.e. career choice is therefore, and indeed especially, complex. That complexity manifested itself in several ways. As mentioned for instance in Section 2.6 above, the actual disagreement among the commentators / academics / researchers as to how to categorise certain influences e.g. Slater (1980) and Bourdieu (1998) label family an agentic factor while Rudd and Evans (1998) consider it a structural factor and Rhodes and Doering (1983), Hakim (1991 and 1996), Bourdieu (1998) and Sturges et al (2003) consider education to be agentic whereas Rudd and Evans (1998) classify it as a structural factor. Having carried out this research, this researcher can sympathise with this disagreement, uncertainty and hence confusion. An attempt had to

be made, as justified in Chapter 1 above, to put some structure on the literature review chapter, and in Chapter 3 on the focus group discussions and subsequently on the presentation and analysis of findings in Chapter 4. However, the structure of chapter 1 broken as it is into six main sections, the focus group theme sheet which derives from that structure and the telling of the personal experiences that emerged via those focus groups simply does not do justice to the complexity. The literature review structure, the theme sheet and the presentation and analysis of findings structure are only as good as the complexity of the research objectives allow them to be.

In one respect the degree of overlap between structural and agentic influences on career choice manifest in the responses is heartbreaking as it makes the provision of clarity and the reaching of conclusions so difficult. However, on the other hand, this overlap is gratifying as this in itself illustrates the complexity and interdependence of agency and structure ... and further justifies the identification of the research objectives.

The objective here is to try to reach some conclusion relating to Objectives 1, 2 and 3 as outlined in Section 3.2 above.

However prior to focussing on the three explicit objectives, it is important to consider the contextual issues that are understanding of “career”, of career change and career options as considered in Sections 2.1 above.

The responses did not connect with the formal and academic definitions of career. Whereas the definitions (Wilensky 1960; Hall, 1976, Limerick 1995, Smith 1997) are complex i.e. they identify multiple attributes of careers, the focus group responses focused primarily on “sector” and “job”. The participants appeared to regard career in a similar way to Wilensky (1960: 554) i.e. as “a succession of related jobs (this author’s emphasis), arranged in a hierarchy of prestige through which people move in ordered, predictable sequence”. There were a small number of participants who appeared somewhat familiar with the changing nature of careers e.g. the impact of technology and the requirement to engage in continuous professional development / lifelong learning. Neither was there any evidence at first of understanding of the multiple benefits careers can offer e.g. promotion, security, challenge, autonomy and balance as outlined by Derr (1986) nor of Powell’s (1991) tri-partite classification of career attributes into the job itself, compensation and security and company work environment respectively.

Schein’s (1978) “career anchors’ also informed questions relating to consideration of career options. There appeared to be even less conscious awareness of these anchors. Indeed it proved almost impossible to prompt responses relating to personal preferences without making explicit reference to each “anchor”. Unsurprisingly given the polarity of the managerial and technical anchors and the support for the former, students appeared less concerned with being expert in a specific function or field. Even those majoring in Accounting appeared to value the opportunity to change careers, albeit within the general business arena, in the future.

Of Germanou's thirteen attributes, only five i.e. economic benefits (extrinsic), advancement / promotion (prestige), interesting nature of the job and autonomy (both intrinsic) and work with others (social) were indicated by the participants.

Perrone and Vickers (2003) as considered in Section 2.1 argue that career choice is stressful, frightening, uncertain, lonely, depressing and that failure to attain a job in one's chosen field can have a negative effect on self-confidence and lead to feelings of low self-worth. This viewpoint was not strongly supported by the responses during the focus groups.

In conclusion, the apparent lack of any real understanding of "career" relates to a stated objective of this research i.e. vocational psychologists and education providers (and indeed students themselves) may benefit from better understanding the career concept as understood by students. Certainly the author as Course Director with discretion to amend the B.Sc programme structure is, as a result of observing a low level of awareness of issues, considering the introduction of a core module in "Careers and Career Development" to the programme.

## 5.1 Awareness and Understanding of Structure / Structural Influences on Career Choice

Students appeared more comfortable talking about structural factors. This in itself suggests a greater degree of awareness of how structure impacts on career choice. However, not necessarily of real understanding.

There was a confidence to the extent they could ignore or overcome family background and actual family pressures – certainly the responses put far less weighting on family as an influence on career choice than that suggested by previous research. This said, the relative influence of mothers over fathers particularly for the female participants was quite noteworthy. This finding contradicts those of Ozake et al (2004) and Brainard and Carlin's (1998) that male students are mostly influenced by female members of their family but supports Gandara (1982) who found mothers were equally if not more influential than their fathers in forming their sons' / daughters' educational aspirations. One other interesting finding was that those five students – all males (Alan, Fionn, Edward, Brian and Bill) - who expressed a preference to work for a multinational company all had fathers who worked in positions that involved a lot of travel. Secondly, the educational background of parents did appear to impact on the extent of their involvement and encouragement i.e. parents with third level qualifications appeared to be more actively involved in discussion about career options. Caoimhe above is a case in point – it was her Aunt who attended college, and not her Mother who did not, who engaged with her more on the issue of career choice. Fionn and Fergal both said they felt that their parent's character and the way their parents interacted with them gave them

confidence and higher internal locus of control. Further, Fergal's experience of being encouraged to study at third level and Eoin and Caoimhe's experience of not being so encouraged – Fergal's parents were university educated whereas Eoin and Caoimhe's were not - is in line with Lowe and Krahn's (2000) study that showed that 'generally lower aspirations are evident among participants from families in which parents have less than university education or are in non – academic programmes'.

Likewise relating to gender, the responses, even in the face of probing from the moderator, under-play, relative to other research findings, the impact of gender as a determinant of career choice. This is contrary to much of the extant research findings including for instance Van Buren et al (1993: 2) who argued that occupational choices are influenced by amongst other factors, perceptions of gender appropriateness. However, a word of caution should be made here. First it is conceivable that the female participants were anxious to not acknowledge any inferiority in the presence of male classmates – though the focus group that was comprised exclusively of girls (Debra, Delia, Dorothy, Danielle, Detta and Dolores) was equally adamant regarding this. Further, the male participants may not have wished to be politically incorrect in respect of this issue. Indeed, it may be that some female participants by being so emphatic regarding this i.e. that their gender did not constrain their career choice in any way, were aware that by conceding same, they in fact facilitate the persistence of same – in line with Katila and Merilainen (1999) caution that women should be careful not to see themselves as victims of gendered organisational cultures but also as potential co-producers of it.

The sociological debate relating to how gender relates to sex as briefly considered in Section 2.3.2 was not dealt with in detail in the focus groups. However Delia for instance did allude to masculine behaviours in the pursuit of career process. In other words she felt gender was not a significant influence on career and that sex should not impact on career choice. The consensus was that our gender should not and increasingly does not impact on or constrain our behaviours or choices as members of society.

A final and particularly interesting finding was that some students believed one's gender could be exploited as a means to a successful career. Responses suggest gender as a barrier to career progression has been turned on its head – job seekers are looking to exploit occupational segregation to their advantage. This view in tandem with the opinion that structure supports such as government legislation on workforce diversity including positive discrimination have perhaps diluted the negative impact of gender as a structural impact on career choice and suggest that in some respects gender is perceived as an enabler rather than an obstacle to career choice.

Relating to the final structural factor i.e. labour market and contemporary career attributes, there is student awareness of the “tightness” and of the contemporary labour market in Ireland but this does not appear to have impacted on their career choice ... bar a concession that in the short term, they may have to take a job rather than the ideal job. The perceived lack of concern, or at least stoicism, relating to the impact of the recession on their careers was certainly a surprising finding. This stoicism about the impact of the tightening labour market and indeed of other aspects of the labour market including new

working practices and employer preferences etc. may be partially explained by the fact that control of such structural factors is considered by individuals to be difficult or outside the control of individuals (Hall 1987). And with specific regard to the changing nature of careers, there appears to be some awareness of same though the participants were not familiar with the specific terms “boundaryless” and “protean” or with the sub constructs of such careers. Neither was there an awareness of the preference of employers for individuals who are ‘dynamic, flexible, innovative, creative ... [and] capable of taking risks and distinguishing themselves in a competitive environment’ (Papaconstantinou et al, 2010: 321). In general there does not appear to be a great deal of student awareness of, or indeed, interest in the ways in which careers are changing nor of how they might best prepare themselves for employment for such career “chaos and pandemonium” (Brousseau (1996: 52). Time constraints, opportunity, valence and opportunity cost, personal principles and personal circumstances all contribute to the variety and diversity of responses relating to the extent participants feel they can impose a degree of control over their career choice and success.

## **5.2 Awareness and Understanding of Agency / Agentic Influences on Career Choice**

In the context of career choice, several contributions on the role of agency in career choice were considered in Section 2.2 above. These included Layder et al (1991), Lent et al (1994; 1996), Evans (1998), Ozbilgin et al (2004) and Mayrhofer et al (2005). There was overlap or similarity between these contributions. All either explicitly or implicitly recognised self-efficacy, outcome expectations and personal goal setting as sub constructs of the cognitive dimension of agency.

The first observation having completed the primary research i.e. the convening of the focus groups and the analysis of the responses relative to the literature is that there is a lack of awareness and conscious understanding of agentic influences on career choice. Fedlar et al (2005: 42) as stated above defined agency 'as the degree to which one feels in control of one's life course and believes that one is able to manage challenges in ways that will result in varied outcomes'. It is clear from analysis of the responses that there is a wide range and variety across the responses. Some students are self-efficacious, others less so, some set goals, others do not, for some, though not all, the perceived likelihood of success impacts significantly on their behaviours and choices, some engage in activities – sensible, strategic, in some cases Machiavellian – others less so.

Taking each of them in turn, no participant appeared especially knowledgeable about the cognitive influences on career choice i.e. self-efficacy, outcome expectations and personal goals. When it emerged through the discussions that confidence levels are according to previous research a significant antecedent of career choice, there was general acceptance that this made sense. Likewise students conceded that the likelihood of success impacted on what careers path they chose. But again, they did not appear to be aware of this at an informed level. And bar setting tentative goals relating to their graduating grade, students did not appear to set goals. Indeed they appear to have no awareness of the positive correlation between goal setting and goal attainment. There was more awareness and understanding of the second broad agentic factor considered here i.e. individual behaviours. Not all students approved from an equity perspective of networking, and the practice of Machiavellian strategies, but they did acknowledge that it

and they occur and that they can choose to act in such a manner if they wish. The view that given the challenge of finding employment, “you have to up your game” links with Wyn’s (2002) view as considered in Section 2.3.4.4, that the changes in the labour market require students and employees to be more agentic.

Students certainly were aware of the impact of gathering information, impressing when the opportunity presents itself and publicising oneself as aids to attainment of career objectives. Finally, there was certainly significant variation in the responses relating to goal setting and individual behaviours generally as influences on career choice. This tallies with a central tent of Social Cognitive Career Theory as considered in Section 2.5 above.

A link between self-efficacy and outcome expectations was observed i.e. confidence levels attributable to success in school prompted an assumption that they would have little difficulty with such subjects in college.

### **5.3 Awareness and Understanding of Agency - Structure Interconnectedness on Career Choice**

As mentioned in Section 4.5 above, despite structuring the focus group discussion into three distinct themes i.e. structure, agency and structure-agency duality, the links were made throughout the focus group discussions and not exclusively in the final part. This was not entirely unexpected - if one’s starting point is an assumption that structure and agency mutually interact then it is likely and indeed gratifying that such links are observed throughout the focus group discussion.

With regard to the interdependence or inter-relationship between structure and agency, many links were observed by students. This evidence supports a central tenet of Social Cognitive Career Theory i.e. the ‘the mutually interacting influences between people, their behaviour, and their environment’ or what Bandura (1986:25) termed the mutual interaction ‘triadic reciprocity’ (where environmental, individual and behavioural factors ‘all operate as interlocking mechanisms that affect one another bi-directionally’ as considered in Section 2.5 above.

The respondents did have the capacity to observe the interconnectedness of structure and agency. However this understanding appeared to emerge during the focus groups. It appears none of the participants had previously considered the factors – either structural or agentic – that impact on their career choice.

Many of the responses in relation to the interconnectedness of structure and agency in the context of career choice were noteworthy. These include Cian’s observation that accepting or rejecting familial advice is at the discretion of the son / daughter, Andrew’s contention that self-employment is a personal choice though constrained by structural barriers such as financial institution lending policies, Delia’s suggestion that a degree qualification only partially impacts on career success i.e. a far more influential antecedent of career success is behavior and performance in the workplace, Alan’s suggestion that advice from lecturers can impact on goal setting behaviours and on outcome expectations and vice versa, Fiachra’s comment that student behavior and performance impacts on lecturer (work placement officer) commitment levels and Caoimhe’s belief that her career

choice was influenced by the joint impact of perceived traits necessary for a career in HR and her own personal traits.

The participants had a clear conviction that their career choice was primarily agentic i.e. that they could overcome structural constraints e.g. rapid changes in the required skills of the contemporary worker, family background or family pressures, gender, and high unemployment rate by engaging in a different i.e. more proactive and strategic way with the challenge of choosing, and succeeding in, a career. An example of such conviction was the common view that although entry level requirements for third level courses (where completion of such courses are pre-requisites for careers in certain fields) is set at an institutional level, one can choose how hard one works in pursuit of these points levels. In addition, one can avail of student services such as careers advice and engage in networking activity in response to the increased challenge of transitioning into the labour market. Indeed it appears in some cases, that the greater is the structure the greater is the agency e.g. as the unemployment rate - which is a structural factor given it is something 'over which a young person has no opportunity of exercising any control' (Layder et al 1991: 449) – increases, students see the need to “up their game” and to be more strategic and proactive in their pursuit of employment. Another interesting and linked finding is that structure can actually be perceived as being enabling. This emerged in discussion of gender as a structural constraint when it was suggested that men can exploit the fact that certain profession are female dominated by pursuing a career in same and progressing more rapidly upward than they might in a male dominated profession.

The finding in relation to the discretion that can be exercised by structural actors is especially interesting. This finding illustrates the fact that structures often comprise individuals and / or comprise rules and regulations that are constructed by individuals. Two contributions in particular recognised this and both related to my discretion as the participants' Course Director i.e. exercising discretion to allow Cian to change his major and exercising my discretion to not allow Charlie to progress to Year 3 carrying a Year 2 module. I can exercise agency to maintain or to amend the structural factor that are course related rules and regulations. Further, the participants, my students, can engage in lobbying activity to try to bring about such amendments.

In conclusion the key findings in relation to the perceived relative impact of structure and agency on career choice are:

- Students have the capacity to grasp the complexity of the structure agency duality;
- Students feel they are agentic but in a restricted way;
- Students believe they can behave strategically within, despite and because of, these constraints;
- Factors influencing career choice are perceived primarily as preferences rather than as a reflection of opportunities linked to structural factors such as family background, gender, and labour market profile.
- Career choice is a process in which individual agency and structural constraints and possibilities are inextricably linked.

- Career choice is a continuous process which is constrained and enabled by individuals' ongoing interaction with changing structural forces.

'The tendency to separate agency and social structure [in career research] leads to reductionist understandings that fail to account for the complex interplay between these dimensions' (Duberley et al, 2006:282). In addition and as argued by many authors including for instance Papaconstantinou et al (2010: 322-323) 'so far, too little attention has been paid by researchers to the interplay between social structure and agency ... explanations have often been weak, offering little insight into the complexity of the [career] decision making process'. This research has attempted to avoid such a reductionist understanding through its concern to consider and utilise the structure agency duality and through this to contribute to a fuller and better understanding of this interplay in the career choice process.

#### **5.4 Limitations of Research**

As explained in section 3.13 above, in all research and perhaps particularly in qualitative research there can be subject or participant bias i.e. it is possible that participants may say what they felt the researcher would want them to say. This possibility is even more likely where there is a power distance i.e. where the researcher is in a privileged position relative to his / her respondents. I feel this potential problem did not apply given the nature of my relationship (as distinct from my position) relative to the students and my concern to encourage the participants to be as frank and open as possible. However I appreciate that my position / status may have impacted to an extent on the replies.

Another potential limitation is observer error. I conducted this research alone. Had a second or greater number of researchers acted as convenors of the focus group this potential error would have been reduced. However as explained previously, I did not see this as an option given the purpose of this research was in part to illustrate individual competence in pursuit of an academic award. Any subsequent research I carry out into influences on career choice can utilise more than one researcher.

Thirty six students participated in this research. Clearly therefore any intent to “generalise out” the findings to the wider population should be avoided. Further these students all were business students and had a very similar biographical and socio-economic profile. As identified below, the findings can however instruct subsequent quantitative research in which a much greater and wider population could participate. This limitation is common to all most qualitative research and certainly in a context where the particular population (in this case anyone engaged in career choice) is so great. Therefore this research cannot be subjected to statistical analysis to estimate to what extent opinions expressed by participants reflect the opinions of the population studied.

The research considered a limited number of structural and agentic influences on career choice. Given the significant number of other potential influences e.g. age, race, ethnicity, luck / serendipity, duration and cost of pursuing qualifications and the associated opportunity cost, media, friends, perceptions of particular career attributes, and personal values, it is acknowledged that clearly not all influences have been considered here.

Finally the focus of this research i.e. an exploration of the structure agency duality in the context of career choice is quite complex and there was a great challenge in identifying the interconnectedness without leading the focus group participants. I still believe the qualitative approach was appropriate given its ability to capture such complexity. However a quantitative research instrument should be constructed in order to continue the research as an aid to extending understanding of student awareness and understanding of structural and agentic influences.

### **5.5 Recommendations for Further Research**

As explained in Section 2.3, the decision was made to focus on the three most common structural influences on career choice i.e. family, gender and labour market “attributes”. In Section 2.3 reference was made to several other structural factors. These should be researched. And in particular, those influences or “referents” as termed by Malthus and Fowler (2009) emphasised during the focus group discussions including the impact of teachers (secondary level) and lecturers (third level) as identified previously by Petridou et al (2006), of media e.g. broadcast media advertising and TV shows such as for instance ‘The Apprentice’ and “Dragon’s Den”, and of peers, especially student peers as considered by McCann et al (2009).

More generally, further research into the distinct/ individual, and in particular the interdependent influence of all variables – both structural and agentic – on career choice is required so that an integrated theoretical and in-practice approach to career exploration, career planning and career decision be further developed and refined.

Much of the extant literature on influences on career choice is culture specific. Given globalisation and the consequent greater movement of people – students and employees alike – cross cultural comparative studies should be carried out. Indeed this researcher given his close direct involvement with students in Canada, the US, India, Egypt, The Oman, Germany and the Czech Republic is ideally placed to undertake such research. An alternative is to involve academic colleagues from universities in these and other countries to partner him in this research.

A quantitative research instrument should be developed which can measure the interdependence of structural and agentic variables. There are several existing inventories and scales. However these tools all focus on specific variables. A merging of metrics from tools such as Lokan's Career Development Inventory (1984), Betz et al's Career Decision Making Self-Efficacy Scale (1996), Betz and Voyten's Outcomes Expectations Scale (1997), Mu's Career Goals Scale (1998) and Costa and McCrea's NEO Five-Factor Inventory (1989) could serve as a starting point. The qualitative data gathered in this research could also contribute to the development of such an instrument.

This research uses structure and agency in particular Giddens's structuration theory to better understand career choice, it may be, as suggested by Duberley et al (2004: 292), that the reverse can also apply i.e. 'research on career provides an ideal context' for researching structuration theory as career 'sits at the nexus between structure and agency'. Duberley et al 'urge further exploration of the potential role of career as a way of understanding socially embedded action and its capacity for change'. (2004: 293).

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# **Appendices**

**Appendix A**     **Focus Group Theme Sheet**

How carefully / purposively did you consider your career options?

How would you describe career?

When did you make up your mind re this as the path for you?

Would you describe your career choice and the process prior to same as logical, intuitive or dependent?

Are you following in your father's footsteps, what you are interested in or good at, or following advice / messages from someone else e.g. guidance counsellors or media?

From where did this career choice derive / What were the factors that you feel may have influenced your decision?

Once the choice is made, do you feel that you are then confined to that career?

**General Structure**

To what extent did the following impact on your choice?

Family

School teachers / Career Guidance Teachers/Lecturers ... did the latter influence your choice of major? Did your subject choice in secondary school impact on career choice?

Peers

Societal Expectations (e.g. relating to Gender and do you think stigma attached to going to college in places?)

Labour Market opportunities

**General Agency**

Have you been proactive in the making of your choice? If so, how? (e.g. finding out information). If no, why not?

Do you see a link between the type of person you are and the choice you have made?

Do you feel your actions / behaviours can impact on successful attainment of preferred career? If so how (e.g. interview preparation)

**Focussed Structure:**

How did family influence your choice – qualifications and work area of parents and siblings or broader family? Did your family favour a particular career for you?; are they concerned about welfare and prestige dimensions of careers? To what extent did they get involved in your Are you concerned with working close to home? Was family supportive of your choice?; Mother or father more involved in any discussions re your career choice?;

Re teachers – did quality of teacher impact on your choice? Did results impact on your choice; Did they advise broad programme to keep options open?

Re peers – were you influenced by CAO choices of your friends?

Re gender – do you feel there are expectations on you as a female or as a male?, Do you think some occupations are more male than female? Do you think gender is less of an issue now?

Societal expectations – is there a stigma attached to unemployment so that “any career is better than no career” attitude prevails?; are there stigmas attached to certain type careers e.g. nursing, theatre, music etc?; do some careers have more prestige than others?;

Re labour market – do you feel tight labour market constrains choice / lessens ambitions (beggars cannot be choosers?, did you / do you consider where the opportunities lie prior to selecting your career?; would you choose a different third level course if applying to CAO this year?, do you anticipate changing career throughout your working life?, how much control do you feel you can bring to bare on your job once there e.g. learn, get promoted, take on extra challenges, have adverse job, behave in a CSR way?; do you feel multinational corporations are more attractive employers?; do you feel employers have preferences for different graduate schools?

Do you think you can exert control over some structural factors more than others?

**Focussed Agency**

Re self efficacy – how did self confidence / degree of personal capacity impact on career choice e.g. are there careers you rejected because you felt they were out of reach?; do you believe you can make things happen?

Re level of optimism – do you feel perceived likelihood of success can impact on “career application”? Are younger people more optimistic than older people

Re. personal goals – do you set yourselves goals as a matter of course?; do you feel setting goals increases likelihood of success?; do you appraise yourself relative to those goals?; If not, why not?

Re. individual behaviours – do you see benefit in studying hard to get the desired grade?; do you feel careful interview preparation etc. enhances chance of success?; do you look for advice e.g. from careers service?; do you exploit personal contacts? Do you reflect on your behaviours and on broader issues e.g. exam performance?

Do you reflect on your own strengths when selecting a career and / or did you / do you consider where the opportunities lie prior to selecting your career? i.e. do you try to match awareness of self and awareness of opportunity? (Stewart & Knowles 1999)

Do you think agency varies from person to person and if so, why?

Do you think structure lessens and agency increases as you progress a career?

### **Structure - Agency Overlap**

Given all we have discussed thus far i.e. family, class, gender, teachers., peers, societal expectations and labour market on the structural hand and cognition (self-efficacy, optimism and personal goals) and individual behaviours on the agentic hand, can you identify any overlaps between structure and agency?; do you feel that some students are spoilt for choice due to grades, contacts, university etc ... and that this can lead to overchoice syndrome!; do you reflect on your own strengths when selecting a career and if you do is it conscious or unconscious?

Family and optimism; wealth and grinds; intelligence and study; teacher and effort; sex and gender (behaviour); age and self confidence; opportunity and optimism; opportunity / luck and individual behaviour; access / new era and decision to apply; age/ experience and reflection and confidence; points entry and study; choosing a career in which you have contacts; secondary school subject choice and constraints e.g. timetable clashes on same?

Was your decision influenced by your attitudes and values e.g. fun (Malthus & Fowler), by your motives and needs e.g. money, or by your talents and abilities (Stewart, 1998)?

Can you exploit structural factors? e.g. personal circumstances forms?

Can you separate structure from agency? What weighting do you attribute to structure and agency respectively as antecedents of career choice? Would your answer to this be different if asked during Celtic Tiger years?

**Appendix B Focus Group Details**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Participants</b>
26 June 2009	Room 3-070, DIT  Aungier Street	80 minutes	Aaron, Aidan, Aine, Alan, Alice, and Anne,
31 August 2009	Room 3-073, DIT  Aungier Street	75 minutes	Barbara, Barry, Ben, Bill, Brian and Brigid
28 September 2009	Room 3-070, DIT  Aungier Street	70 minutes	Caoimhe, Catherine, Cian, Charlie, Clare, and Cora
23 October 2009	Room 3-081, DIT  Aungier Street	90 minutes	Danielle, Debra, Delia, Detta, Dolores and Dorothy
12 November 2009	Room 3-073, DIT  Aungier Street	75 minutes	Eamon, Edward, Eileen, Elizabeth, Emma and Eoin
3 December 2009	Room 3-073, DIT  Aungier Street	70 minutes	Fay, Fergal, Fiachra, Fiona, Fionn, and Frances,