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Fragmented career orientation: the formation of career importance, decidedness and aspirations among students

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to examine the formation of and interrelationship between career importance, decisiveness, and aspirations among students. The data used in the study came from the ‘School experience, educational aspirations and scholastic achievement in Qatar’ survey 2018–2020 (SEEASAP). A sample of 841 students aged 12–14 was used for the analysis. The results of this study showed that the future career orientation among young people tends to be fragmented and incoherent. Believing in the centrality of work and employment in one’s life does not necessarily help young people become more certain about their future career or boost their career aspirations. The results also showed that career importance, decidedness and aspirations are shaped by different factors providing further evidence for the incoherence of young people’s future career orientation in times of greater insecurity and instability. The theoretical implications and limitations of this study are further discussed throughout.

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Future career orientation; educational aspirations; expectations; Qatar; gender differences

Introduction

Young people today face many career-choice dilemmas and challenges. In addition to persisting economic uncertainties, increasing competition and insecurity (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019), young people themselves are transforming the employment landscape. A transformation which some refer to as creating a ‘risk regime’ (Beck, 2000), where individuals seek more autonomy to carve out their own work patterns, and where they are no longer just looking for stable employment, but for careers which spark their passion and creativity (Beck, 2000; Forbes, 2020; Tewari & Bhattacharyya, 2017). With the rapid growth and lure of entrepreneurial, tech-intense, and social media careers (Bayern, 2019; Schroeder, 2020), the young cohorts, also known as the ‘digital natives’ (Tewari & Bhattacharyya, 2017), are faced with even more complex, and more diverse career choices to make. Under these conditions, envisioning a future career becomes harder, and given the negative impact of uncertainty in occupational aspirations on future earning (Staff et al., 2010), it is argued that students and young people are likely to develop a fragmented career orientation where career aspirations, importance and decidedness might not be connected. Thus, understanding how young students perceive their future in relation to employment, and examining how their decision-making and choices towards their career are shaped, are critical steps in helping students successfully transition into employment (Ginevra et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2016; Khampirat, 2020).

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Most studies on young people's employment and career plans and future choices face a similar challenge; they focus primarily on what job or occupation young people wish/hope or expect to achieve in the future, despite using different terms such as occupational aspirations/expectations (Gregor & O'Brien, 2016; Schmitt-Wilson & Faas, 2016; Staff et al., 2010), career aspirations/expectations (Abrahamsen & Drange, 2015; Gore et al., 2017; Khampirat, 2020; Mau, 2003) or job aspirations/expectations (Pitiyanuwat & Campbell, 1994; Schoon, 2001). Given the immense changes in the labour market in recent years and their consequences (e.g. job insecurity and job shifting, temporary and part-time jobs, self-employment; Beck, 2000; MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019), studying the future career choices of young people cannot be reduced to the study of a single dimension; i.e. the job or occupational aspirations. Surely, studying the job or occupation that a student hopes or expects to obtain in the future is important. However, other, equally if not more important, questions concerning how certain or dubious a student is about his or her future job (decidedness; Staff et al., 2010) and how central or important employment is in a student's future plans should also be considered when studying young people's future career plans. Research shows that not having clear career plans at age 16 is likely to result in future labour market difficulties as reported by Sikora (2018). However, not much is known about whether these constructs merge into one dimension or to what extent they are formed similarly. Because they have not been studied together in most previous research, the question about their interrelationship remains largely unanswered.

Moreover, what makes studying these issues in a country like Qatar extremely important is not only the lack of knowledge but also because of the specific conditions that Qatari and non-Qatari students face. For example, Qataris believe that their jobs and economic future is secured by the state, while immigrant non-Qatari students understand that their future employment and economic opportunities as immigrants, often coming from less developed countries, are highly contingent upon their educational success (these conditions are discussed further in the next section).

We argue that when thinking about students' orientations towards their future employment under conditions of greater risks (uncertainties, insecurity, unpredictable labour market; Beck, 2000), three questions need to be answered: firstly, to what extent is being employed in the future important for a student; secondly, is a student able to make decisions about their future employment; and lastly, what are those specific career paths which a student hopes to follow in the future? The construct, 'future career orientation' seeks to answer these questions by focusing on three sub-concepts: the importance of employment in a student's future, their ability to make career decisions, and their specific career choices or aspirations.

Determinants of future career orientation

The term we use here 'future career orientation' is a broad construct which encompasses an individual's career interests, attitudes towards work, and perceived abilities and skills (Coetzee & De Villiers, 2010). Scholars have noted the dearth of research exploring various aspects of career orientation (Chui et al., 2020). The few studies which are there, have focused on students' specific career interests, such as having a science-related career orientation (Nugent et al., 2015), or on their attitudes towards career exploration, such as having a versatile or more flexible career attitude (Chui et al., 2020). Chui et al. (2020) found that having a flexible career orientation is positively linked to career decidedness and self-efficacy. One other recent study, utilizing a 40-item scale on career orientation from the 1990s, found that students' perceived parental support can also shape their career orientation (Suryadi et al., 2020). Clearly more research is needed on students' career orientations.

In this study we focus on three dimensions or components of future career orientation: career importance, career decidedness and career aspirations. We refer to career importance refers as 'the extent to which one's career provides a sense of meaning and purpose to life and constitutes an important aspect of one's identity' (Sweet et al., 2016, p. 482). Career decidedness is defined as 'the

level of confidence or certainty about a particular career-related decision' (Restubog et al., 2010, p. 188). Career aspirations is defined as the individual's intention to reach or to obtain a certain occupation (Mayrhofer et al., 2005).

In examining the factors shaping the sub-categories under future career orientation, we draw on social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent et al., 1994). It has long been understood that students' career development processes are shaped by the interdependent relationship between students' cognitive factors and contextual determinants such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic variables, parent-child relationship, and educational factors (Rojewski & Kim, 2003; Tang et al., 2008). These contextual factors determine the access to resources and constraints in the learning experience which interact with students' cognitive processes and individual-level factors to influence students' career decisions and pathways (Howard et al., 2011; Lent et al., 1994; Schoon & Parsons, 2002).

There are mixed findings on the impact of gender, ethnicity and family economic status on career indecision and specific career choices or aspirations. While Creed et al. (2005) found that in Australia indecision was more common among girls, Sikora (2018) found that 16 year old female students were more certain than male students their age. Dietrich and Kracke (2009) report almost insignificant gender differences in career indecision and career exploration of male and female 15–18-year-old students in Germany. Likewise, mixed findings emerged in relation to the career centrality among women and men. While Khattab and Fenton (2009) reported significant difference between young women and men in relation to the centrality (importance) of work and employment (career) in their lives, Sweet et al. (2016) found modest to minor gender differences in the centrality of career among men and women. They have attributed the minor gender differences found in their study to traditional gender beliefs (cultural explanations). Another study (Howard et al., 2011) found significant gender differences in the career choices of boys and girls: girls were aiming for occupations that require higher levels of education, suggesting higher career aspirations among girls. This study also reported significant main and interaction effects for ethnicity and socioeconomic status while examining the career choices of grade 8 and grade 10 students in the US. However, recent research in the UK saw that across all socioeconomic and racial groups in the UK, students were aiming for high occupational aspirations (Archer et al., 2020). Similarly, longitudinal research on the career aspirations of Year 3 to Year 10 students in Australia saw that SES and ethnicity or migration status had little impact (Gore et al., 2017). With regards career indecision, research suggests that lower parental socioeconomic status is associated with higher levels of indecision among students (Gutman & Schoon, 2012; Sikora, 2018)

While the role of parental socioeconomic status may be unclear, the impact of parent-related behaviours in supporting children's career development is quite clear and strong. Studies have shown that parental career expectations for their children and perceived parent-child agreement on career issues are significant in predicting high career aspirations (inclination towards managerial and professional occupations; Sawitri & Creed, 2015; Sawitri et al., 2015). Other research has found that parental support (measured in terms of showing interest in child's aspirations and offering career advice) positively predicted career certainty (Fernandes & Bance, 2015; Marcionetti & Rossier, 2017), while the lack of engagement in career matters from parents increased career indecision among children (Dietrich & Kracke, 2009). Ginevra et al. (2015) found that perceived parental support increases a student's self-confidence which in turn increases clarity in career- and future-related thoughts. Similarly, research shows that teacher support also enhances students' confidence levels and hence increases positivity in career thoughts (Garcia et al., 2015). Finally, academic achievement can predict student career aspirations (Gore et al., 2017), and better grades are associated with lower levels of career indecision (Gutman & Schoon, 2012). Research also shows that students educational aspirations and expectations are related to career and occupational expectations and goals (Beal & Crockett, 2013), and also related to certain career choices such as interest in academic tracks over vocational training (Lazarides et al., 2016) and interest in science-related careers (Mau & Li, 2018).

Background on Qatar

There are a number of factors particular to Qatar which can potentially shape, even complicate, students' career choices. At the middle-school level, there are about 65% non-Qatari, migrant students, and 35% Qatari students (PSA, 2019b). Migrants in Qatar come mostly from Arab and South Asian countries such as Egypt, Jordan, India and Pakistan (Snoj, 2019). Labour policies in Qatar restrict low-income and low-skilled workers from bringing in dependents, such as children, into the country (Zahra, 2018). Consequently, migrant children in Qatar are more likely to belong to families where at least one parent is in a skilled profession. Research shows that most migrant students come from favourable socioeconomic conditions with regards family income, and parental education and occupation (PISA, 2018). In like manner, many local students tend to come from affluent families. Qatar is considered as one of the world's richest economies by GDP per capita, and provides its citizens with lucrative salaries through public-sector employment (Stasz et al., 2007). In our sample, about 93% of all students have parents whose occupations are in the managerial, professional, or intermediate-skilled categories.

Furthermore, with the aim to diversify Qatari economy (to move away from oil-dependency), the Qatari government heavily promotes and supports entrepreneurship, growth in tech-industries, and the skill-development of young local talent (Alagos, 2019). There is also growing support in Qatar for women's education and employment with female students outnumbering male students in higher educational institutes (Young, 2016). Migrant students also have their own resources and strengths to draw upon. They have their parents as role models who are well-educated, have successfully migrated to a rapidly growing and prosperous country, and have probably set expectations for a higher socioeconomic trajectory for their children. Research shows that migrant parents and students tend to hold high educational aspirations (Friberg, 2019; Gil-Hernández & Gracia, 2018), and in Qatar, migrant students are outperforming local students in terms of educational achievement (PISA, 2018).

Owing to the above factors, it is perhaps safe to say that many students in Qatar (locals and migrants), have access to educational, financial, and familial resources which can potentially expand their choices for future employment. That is to say, with the likelihood of parental and financial support available, students' career choices are not severely limited by economic constraints. Students can perhaps imagine or choose from a variety of possible careers, or even consider non-traditional, exploratory, risky career paths. This may especially be true for our sample which comprises of very young students (12- to 14-year-olds). These students will be coming of age in a very different and evolving work-career scenario, and have grown up watching young people build fortunes out of creative, entrepreneurial, and risky ventures. Research suggests that students' career orientations and career-decision making processes start developing in early adolescence (Gore et al., 2017; Rojewski & Kim, 2003), and remain relatively stable as they grow older (Archer et al., 2020). Hence, it is important to investigate how the future career orientation of young students in Qatar is shaped by factors related to ethnicity, gender, educational processes, and other factors.

Aims and hypotheses

The main aim of the study is to explain how young students perceive their future in relation to employment and examining how their career decision-making and choices are formed. The study examines how career importance, decidedness and aspirations relate to each other and to uncover whether they are formed by the same factors. It also analyses differences between Qatari students and non-Qatari students in addition to the impact of gender, students' educational aspirations and performance and family occupational background. Lastly, the study assesses the role of school-based factors in affecting the formation of career importance, decidedness, and aspirations among students.

The following hypotheses will be examined:

- (1) Career importance is not significantly related to career aspirations and/or career indecision.
- (2) Career importance among girls is significantly lower than boys.
- (3) Career aspirations among girls are significantly higher than boys.
- (4) Qatari students have significantly lower level of career importance and aspirations than non-Qatari students.
- (5) Educational aspirations and expectations are significantly related to career orientation.

Materials and methods

Data and procedures

Data is drawn from the 'School experience, educational aspirations and scholastic achievement' survey (SEEASAP), which was conducted in Qatar from October 2018 to April 2020. The project consisted of student and parent surveys. Informed consent was obtained from parents and their children. Surveys were distributed in class to students by the research team. Students took on average about 50 minutes to complete the questionnaire, while supervised by the research team and a representative from the school. The parent's questionnaires were delivered to parents by the students and were collected from them once these questionnaires have been completed by parents. While survey questions draw mostly from UK's Longitudinal Study of Young People in Education (LSYPE), parts of the survey had to be modified to be culturally appropriate and to suit the local educational context. Instrument and translation validity were verified through a pilot study conducted in early 2017.

The research team arrange the school visits in advance with the contact person at each school.

Sampling method

The sample consists of 841 middle-school students in Qatar studying in the 7th and 8th grades, with ages approximately between 12 to 14 years old. A stratified two-stage sampling design was used. As a first stage, A list of 24 schools was sampled from the full list of all schools that contain students within the age range of 12–14 years old, while preserving the adequate representation of schools by type (public schools, community-based schools; private schools offering the national curricula of specific countries, and private-international schools), region and gender. Out of the initial selected 24 schools, 18 agreed to participate. In the second stage, questionnaires were distributed to students in the 7th and 8th grades in each of the 18 schools that they and their parents agreed to participate in the study.

Descriptive statistics for the sample are provided in [Table 1](#), showing that 56.8% of students are female and 43.2% are male. Students' ethnicity was divided into 3 groups: Qatari students (32.6%), 'Other Arab' (53.8%; Arab students who are not Qataris), and 'Other' (13.7%; students of other ethnicities who are neither Arab nor Qatari). Of the schools that agreed to participate, 64% were public schools, 28% were community-based schools, and 9% were international-private schools offering the British curriculum. Community-based schools in Qatar are those private schools which offer the local curriculum from other Arab, Asian or European countries.

Ethical approval

The initial approval for this study and the instruments was received by Qatar University Institutional Review Board on 28 August 2016 (Research Ethics Approval No. QU-IRB 630 EA/16). The IRB approval was renewed for one year on 11 September 2017. A new IRB approval was granted by Doha Institute for Graduate Studies Institutional Review Board on 8 November 2018 (DI-IRB-2018-F14). A final renewal was received on 24 November 2019.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for all variables.

	Percentage	Mean	Std Deviation	Min	Max	N
Dependent Variables						
Career importance		12.8	2.7	3	15	745
Career decisional status						
Decided	62.5					462
Undecided	37.5					277
High career aspirations						
Managerial and Professional	41.8					300
Others and don't know	58.2					417
Independent Variables						
Sex						
Female	56.8					436
Male	43.2					332
Ethnicity						
Qatari	32.6					272
Other Arab	53.8					449
Other	13.7					114
Type of School						
Public	65.4					548
International-private	8.7					73
Community-based	25.9					217
Highest Parental Occupation						
Managers & professionals	57.2					424
Intermediate class	35.5					263
Economically inactive	7.3					54
Average Grade Point		80.5	14.0	36.8	100.0	836
Student educational aspirations						
Low	21.5					160
High	78.5					585
Student educational expectations						
Low	53.1					393
High	46.9					347
Perception of parent career expectations						
Yes	41.9					307
No	58.1					426
Teacher support		26.2	6.1	2	35	727
Talks with more people about aspirations		2.8	0.8	1	5	720

Measures (dependent variables)

The analysis used three dependent variables:

Career importance

This is a latent variable derived by computing the sum of three items in order to understand the centrality of employment in a student's future plans. Students were asked to state their level of agreement (strongly agree, agree a little, disagree a little, strongly disagree, don't know) for the following items: 1. Having any kind of job is better than being unemployed. 2. Having a job that leads somewhere is important. 3. Having a job or career in the future is important to me. Higher scores indicate that students give more importance to having a career or job in their future. The Cronbach's alpha for this variable is 0.68.

Career decidedness

Students were asked to answer with a yes, no, or don't know, the following question – 'Do you have any idea about what sort of job you want to do after you've finished full-time education altogether?' Students who said yes were coded as 'decided' and students who said no or don't know were coded as 'undecided'.

High career aspirations

This is a binary variable derived from the same question above which asks students whether they have an idea about the sort of job students want to do. Those who said 'yes' were further asked to specify the job type through an open-ended sub-question. Student responses were then coded using the International Labour Organization's International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO). Although this classification consists of 13 categories, responses from our sample fit into 7 of the categories which are, managers, professionals, technicians and associate professionals, clerical support workers, service and sales workers, armed forces, and unclassified responses. Students who chose managerial and professional jobs were coded as having 'high career aspirations'. All other cases, including those who had earlier said no or don't know, together with students who said yes but did not specify a job, were coded as having 'low career aspirations'. Hence, while 'career decisional status' only measures students who said yes or no to having a specific career choice, 'high career aspirations' measures students who said yes, but also specified managerial and professional jobs as their preferred choice.

The following independent variables were used:

Highest parental occupation

This variable was used as a measure of parental socioeconomic status and to understand the relationship between parent occupation and student career orientation. Participating parents were asked to state their current job and that of their spouse. The higher job category was selected. Responses were coded using the same ISCO classification, which were then regrouped into only 3 main categories because of low number of cases in others. Armed forces (19 cases) were treated as missing, and 11 parents in the skilled/unskilled manual worker category were classified with those in the intermediate professions. 57.2% of parents were in managerial or professional jobs, 35.5% were in the intermediate class, and 7.3% were economically inactive (also includes students).

Average grade point

Schools provided information on student grades for the survey year. Grades for all students were converted into a percentage scale.

Student educational aspirations

Students were asked to select the highest level of qualification they would like to achieve out of 6 options. Those who selected bachelor's degree and master's degree or above were coded as having high educational aspirations. The remaining lower levels were coded as low educational aspirations.

Student educational expectations

This is a composite binary variable combining answers from two questions. Students were asked how likely is it that they will apply to university and how likely is it that they will get admission. Those who said very likely for both questions were coded as 'high educational expectations', and the remaining responses (fairly likely, not likely, and not at all likely) were coded as 'low educational expectations'.

Perception of parent career expectations

This variable measures whether or not students have an idea about the kind of job their parents would like them to do when they finish compulsory education. Those who said yes were coded as '1' and those who said no or don't know were coded as '0'.

Teacher support

This is a continuous variable indicating the sum of 7 items such as: 'My teachers make sure we do any homework that is set', and 'My teachers praise me when I do my school work well'. Response options were: all of my teachers, most of my teachers, some of my teachers, hardly any of my teachers, none of my teachers, don't know. Higher scores mean more support from teachers. Cronbach's alpha is 0.78.

Talks with more people about aspirations

Students were asked about how often (not at all, not very often, a little, quite a lot, don't know) do they speak to teachers, members of the family, friends, and others such as university representatives about what they might do in the future. This is also a continuous variable with higher scores indicating that student talks to more people about aspirations.

Analytical Strategy

Our analysis follows a two-step process. In the first step, through a discussion of correlations, internal reliability tests and factor analysis, we consider the relationship between the three dependent variables. The purpose of this analysis is to establish whether the three variables (constructs) of career importance, decidedness and aspirations form one factor – future career orientation (hence the factor analysis). In the second step, we discuss correlations and regression models to examine and compare the formation of each one of these dependent variables.

Results

Table 1 shows that most students highly value having a career in their future (a mean of 12.8 out of 15). It also shows that a bigger majority of the students, 62.5% have already decided about the type of job they would like to do. Almost 42% of all students would like to pursue managerial or professional occupations, while the rest 58% are not aspiring towards high-professional occupations or are undecided about their future job.

Table 2 presents inter-item correlations for the first dependent outcome (career importance) and correlations between the three dependent variables. The table shows that the three items are positively and significantly correlated with one another. A smaller correlation coefficient also indicates that there is no problem of multicollinearity. Under the dependent variables we see that career importance is significantly and positively correlated with career decisional status and high career aspirations, however, the association is quite weak. As expected, career decisional status and

Table 2. Inter-item correlations and correlations between dependent variables.

Items for career importance ^a	2	3
1. Having any kind of job is better than being unemployed	0.34**	0.31**
2. Having a job that leads somewhere is important		0.33**
3. Having a job or career in the future is important to me		
Dependent variables ^b	2	3
1. Career importance	0.26**	0.21**
2. Career indecision		0.67**
3. High career aspirations		

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

^aSpearman Rho test was used as these are ordinal variables.

^bPhi and Cramer's V value from the Chi-square test used as correlations involve nominal variables.

high career aspirations show a strong and positive association of 0.67. This is because, as explained earlier, both these variables are derived from a similar set of questions, but they still do measure distinct concepts.

A Cronbach's alpha for the three sub-items under career importance together with career decisional status and high career aspirations showed a value of 0.64 which is a moderate score, suggesting a moderate level of internal consistency. This further suggested that perhaps the three dependent variables can be empirically combined to form an overall score for future career orientation.

We now move to discussing the factors associated with the formation of the three dependent variables. Table 3 presents correlations between the dependent variables and key independent predictors.

Overall, Table 3 shows that students' educational aspirations and expectations, and perception of parent career expectations are all positively and significantly correlated with career importance, decisional status and high career aspirations. AGP and teacher support however are only significantly associated with career importance, and a student talking with more people about aspirations has a significant association only with career decisional status and high career aspirations. These results suggest that there are some differences in the factors shaping the three main outcomes.

Table 4 displays a linear regression model for career importance and two logistic regression models for career decisional status and high career aspirations. In Model 1 we see that female students allot lesser importance to having a career/job in the future than male students. Migrant origin students (Arabs and other ethnicities) give more importance to having a career/job in the future than do Qatari students. As expected, high educational aspirations and expectations positively predict career importance. Teacher support is also positively associated with career importance. Note that parental occupational status, AGP, perception of parent career expectations and talking about aspirations are not significant predictors of career importance.

In Model 2, which predicts the likelihood of students making a career choice decision, gender, ethnicity, parental occupation, and AGP are all insignificant in predicting students' career decisional status. Instead, perception of parent career expectations and talking with more people about aspirations are strong predictors of students' ability to make a career decision. Decided students are also more likely to hold high educational aspirations and expectations. Unlike Model 1, teacher support is insignificant in career decision-making. An important observation here is that career importance is also insignificant in predicting career decision, although the coefficient does show a positive influence.

Table 3. Correlation coefficients for dependent variables by independent variables.

Variables	Average Grade Point (AGP)	Student educational aspirations	Student educational expectations	Perception of parent career expectations	Teacher support	Talks with more people about aspirations
Career importance ^a	0.13**	0.31**	0.23**	0.20**	0.31**	0.02
Career decisional status ^b	0.88	0.24**	0.19**	0.31**	0.23	0.29**
High career aspirations ^b	0.87	0.25**	0.23**	0.22**	0.19	0.28*

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

^aCoefficients for student educational aspirations, expectations, and perception of parent career expectations are the Phi and Cramer's V as these are nominal variables. For AGP, teacher support and last variable the Pearson correlation is shown as all variables are continuous, including career importance.

^bAs career decisional status and high career aspirations are nominal variables, the Phi and Cramer's V coefficient is shown here.

Table 4. Linear and logistic regression for dependent variables.

	Model 1 (linear) Career Importance		Model 2 (logistic) Career Decisional Status	Model 3 (logistic) High Career Aspirations
	B	S. E	Exp(B)	Exp(B)
Female (ref: male)	-0.57**	0.18	1.31	2.27***
Ethnicity student (ref: Qatari)				
Other Arab	0.48*	0.23	1.22	1.71*
Other	0.66*	0.30	1.18	1.50
Type of school (ref: Public)				
International-Private	0.13	0.31	0.95	1.54
Community-based	-0.18	0.23	1.19	0.99
Highest parent occupation (ref: Managers/Professional)				
Economically Inactive	0.14	0.38	1.16	0.48
Intermediate class	-0.03	0.20	0.95	0.82
Average Grade Point	0.003	0.18	1.003	1.007
High educational aspirations (ref: low)	0.87***	0.23	2.11**	2.52**
High educational expectations (ref: low)	0.66***	0.18	1.83**	2.29***
Perception of parent career expectations-Yes (ref: No)	0.33	0.18	3.62***	1.82**
Teacher support	0.06***	0.01	0.98	0.99
Talks with more people about aspirations	0.10	0.11	1.37**	1.22
Career importance			1.07	1.01
Constant	9.59	0.74	0.06	0.02
N	583		583	570
R square	0.14			
Chi-square			p < 0.001, df = 14	p < 0.001, df = 14
Cox and Snell R square			0.16	0.17

Note: * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

Model 3 predicts high career aspirations, that is, the likelihood of students choosing managerial or professional occupations over other jobs or being undecided. Gender is a significant category here with the odds of a female student choosing high career aspirations being 2.3 times greater than that of a male student. Being an 'other Arab' student is also significant in predicting high career aspirations. Students who choose high-aspiring careers are also more likely to know what kind of job their parents want them to do. Teacher support, talking with more people about aspirations and career importance are insignificant in shaping high career aspirations. Note that, in order to avoid the issue of multicollinearity, in Model 3 we do not use career decisional status as a predictor variable for high career aspirations. In all the three models, type of school, AGP and parental occupation are insignificant, while high educational aspirations and expectations are significant.

Discussion

In this study we attempted to understand the formation of a) career importance – the importance or centrality of employment in a students' future, b) career decision status – whether a student is able to decide or choose a career for themselves, and c) specific career aspirations – the specific career interests and choices reflected in a students' career aspirations among a sample of students in Qatar. We also aimed to examine whether these dimensions relate to each other in a way that make them converge into one factor, which we referred to as 'future career orientation'.

The results in relation to the second point, i.e. the convergence of the three constructs we examined here into one factor, are mixed, making it difficult to draw a clear conclusion. On the one hand, the evidence presented in Table 2 and the Cronbach's alpha result suggest that there is a moderate internal consistency, which might lead us to believe that the three constructs belong to the same factor. On the other hand, and as it has been demonstrated in the regression analysis,

career importance lacks any independent significant prediction or explanatory power of the other two constructs; career decidedness and career aspirations suggesting that its initial association has been fully accounted for by the other variables in the analysis. Moreover, each of these constructs is formed by different set of factors, in that various factors in the models affect each construct differently.

Taken together, these results lead us to conclude that the future career orientation among young people tends to be fragmented and incoherent. Believing in the centrality of work and employment in one's life does not necessary help young people become more certain about their future career or boost their career aspirations. It is possible that the dramatic transformations in the labour market in recent years and their consequences (e.g. job insecurity and job shifting, temporary and part-time jobs, self-employment; Beck, 2000; MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019) do not support the formation of a coherent future career orientation. It is also likely that under certain conditions, where, on the one hand, students have access to educational, financial, and familial resources, with the likelihood of parental and financial support available, and on the other hand a sense of entitlement regarding future jobs (as in the case of Qatari students), that students can be uncertain about their occupational and career aspirations, while at the same time considering employment to be very important. Moreover, the availability of family economic resources, students can perhaps imagine or choose from a variety of possible careers, or even consider non-traditional, exploratory, risky career paths.

From a gender perspective, this study provides evidence that gender is not consistent in its impact on the three constructs. Having future career/employment is more important for male students than for female students, which is in line with the study of Khattab and Fenton (2009). This is likely to reflect gender-based preferences, choices, and cultural/societal expectations (Sweet et al., 2016). The dominant Muslim and Arab culture in Qatar do not encourage women to work outside of the home, especially in jobs where mixing with men is likely or required (Salem & Yount, 2019). Male students are likely to see themselves as the prime future 'breadwinners' in the family, and therefore having an employment in the future becomes more important for them than for women. However, no significant gender differences in career indecision were found here, reinforcing the findings of Dietrich and Kracke (2009) who reported insignificant gender differences in among a sample of German boys and girls. The lack of decidedness among both male and female students might not be resulting from the same reasons. The undecidedness among female students might indicate a level of uncertainty that stems from not knowing whether they will be able or allowed to get into the labour market, whereas the undecidedness among male students might be associated with the availability of various opportunities and choices from which they can choose.

As in other previous studies, significant gender differences were found in relation to career aspirations (Howard et al., 2011). Girls were more likely than boys to opt for high occupational aspirations. High career aspirations are likely to help them overcome future cultural obstacles and better negotiate their family and work roles.

One of the important and interesting results in this study is the consistent significant impact of educational aspirations and expectations on the importance or centrality of employment in a students' future, career decidedness and specific career aspirations (Beal & Crockett, 2013). Both factors (aspirations and expectations) play a central role in predicting each of three constructs suggesting that high educational aspirations and expectations are central in supporting the formation of future career orientation. It is fairly possible though, that many students tend to decide upon their career and the kind of jobs or occupations they would like to obtain in the future, and then they align their educational aspirations accordingly. The evidence here suggests that educational aspirations and expectations on the one hand, and the three career related constructs on the other hand are highly linked to each other. Students who hold high educational aspirations and expectations also place high importance on having a future employment and are more certain about their career and hold a higher level of career aspirations.

One of the most surprising results of this study was the lack of any significant impact of parental socio-economic status and academic achievement on students' future career orientation. Contrary to previous studies (Gore et al., 2017), student's academic achievement was found to be irrelevant in predicting career importance, decidedness and aspirations. It is not entirely clear to us why this is the case. However, one possible explanation lies within the specific context of Qatar, which is related to the fact that for many Qatari students, their future employment is guaranteed by the state. Under these circumstances, many students do not necessarily link between academic achievement and future employment and career (Lee, 2016; Stasz et al., 2007). However, this explanation does not apply to non-Qatari students who understand that their future economic success is highly contingent upon their educational success.

Limitations and future research

The current study does not allow us to separate the impact of academic achievement among Qatari students from the same impact among non-Qatari, therefore future studies will be able to help us understand this issue further and examine the viability of our explanation by investigating the impact of academic achievement for both groups separately.

Furthermore, because this study utilizes cross-sectional data, a causal inference is not possible, which is another limitation of this study. Longitudinal data could have helped uncovering whether for instance, educational aspirations and expectations are predictors of career orientation or an outcome of it.

Conclusion

In this study we examined whether career importance, career decidedness and career aspirations converge into one coherent construct, and whether they are formatted through the same process and factors. It seems that under conditions of dramatic transformations in the labour market, and due to various challenges facing young people nowadays (e.g. job insecurity and job shifting, temporary and part-time jobs, self-employment) and many new opportunities (new jobs and new ways and forms of building careers), that many young people are likely to end up having a fragmented and incoherent future career orientation, and in some cases are even unrelated to their actual academic achievement.

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