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Navigating Career Identity Formation among Human Resource Development Undergraduates in Malaysia: Perspectives from the Literature

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Abstract

Career identity is defined as the complex process of integrating multiple facets of one's identity with evolving career roles, shaped by a combination of internal motivations and external influences. This study investigates the formation of career identity among undergraduate students pursuing Human Resource Development (HRD) careers at public universities in Malaysia, offering insights into how these students navigate career-related aspirations within the HRD field. Career identity formation is critical in professional development, especially in HRD, where a clear sense of self and purpose is essential to address dynamic organizational demands. The transition from secondary to tertiary education in Malaysia introduces unique challenges and opportunities, impacting how students conceptualize and solidify their career identities. This conceptual paper examines the breadth of existing literature, focusing on definitions, key theoretical frameworks, and diverse perspectives on career identity formation. By synthesizing relevant theories, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the forces shaping career identity in the Malaysian higher education context, underscoring the importance of targeted support to strengthen HRD students' professional self-concept and readiness for future roles.

Keywords: human resource development, career identity, career development, young adults

1.0 Introduction

The field of human resource development (HRD) expects individuals to possess a strong sense of self and a clear understanding of their career goals and aspirations. The process of establishing a career identity in this field requires more than just academic knowledge. It also involves enhancing interpersonal skills, self-awareness, and professional values. Studies have indicated that students with a clear sense of their career path tend to be more determined, involved, and accomplished in their studies and future professional works (Savickas, 2005). The intention of this paper is to discuss about the concept of career identity formation among human resource development (HRD) undergraduate students. The purpose of this paper is to provide the theoretical base for understanding how young adults develop their sense of identity as future human resource practitioners.

2.0 Conceptualizing Career Identity

Career identity denotes how a person sees themselves concerning their career aspirations, values, and roles. It encompasses their self-perception within their chosen career path, including motivations, goals, and their sense of belonging within that profession (Savickas, 2011). It is a structure of meaning that allows individuals to position themselves within roles that shape their self-esteem and personal growth (Byers & Meadows, 2021). The formation of career identity is considered a primary component of career development and a major developmental task during adolescence and young adulthood. This process is lifelong and central to major career development theories, shaping not only vocational behavior but also wider outcomes such as psychosocial functioning (Gruber, Crispeels, & D'Este, 2023). This concept is particularly significant during university years, marked by critical transitions and the exploration of career options (Arnett, 2000; Stringer & Kerpelman, 2010).

The process of developing the career identity is referred to as the career identity formation process. As stated by Savickas (2005), career identity is a continual process of building and improving one's understanding of their occupational self-image. This process incorporates personal characteristics, career aspirations, and values, influencing individuals' decisions and paths in their careers and is influenced by various factors, including personal experiences, learning opportunities, and the quality of career choices and planning. Most of the existing research on career identity formation has been conducted in Western countries, such as the United States, Europe, and Australia (Fouad & Bynner, 2008; Hirschi, 2012). These studies have identified various factors influencing career identity, including self-efficacy, social support, and the educational environment. For instance, Hirschi (2012) found that students' confidence in their abilities and the support they receive from peers and mentors are critical in shaping their career choices and identity.

However, there is a lack of research focusing on career identity formation among students in non-Western contexts, particularly in Malaysia. The socio-cultural, economic, and educational environments in Malaysia differ significantly from those in Western countries, suggesting that the factors influencing career identity formation may also differ. This cultural context can affect how students perceive their career options, the support they receive, and their overall career development process. For students pursuing careers in Human Resources Development (HRD), forming a coherent career identity that aligns with the demands and opportunities of the HRD field is even more crucial. Because HRD involves complex roles such as talent management, organizational development, and strategic planning, a well-developed professional identity ensures readiness of the students to embark on this dynamic career pathway (Trede et al., 2012). This study wishes to expand the understanding of how HRD students develop their career identity process during their undergraduate years at the university, as part of their career development as HR.

3.0 Theoretical Overview

As part of this research paper, a literature review has been conducted in order to seek relevant theories that may serve as underpinning theoretical framework for investigating career identity formation process. Four theories have been identified for this purpose, with overview discussion for each theory described below.

i. Chickering's Theory of Psychosocial Development (Seven Vectors)

Chickering's Theory of Psychosocial Development includes its seven vectors which are developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. Chickering specifically focused on college because students during this time explore different aspects of themselves (e.g., interests, autonomy, career decisions) while deciding the type of person they will eventually become. Chickering preferred the term "vectors" over "stages" because he argued that no definitively specified timeline existed for students to develop certain areas of their character and personality (Thomas & Chickering, 1984). Chickering (1969) suggested that movement along the vectors may vary in quantity and quality; thus, progression does not necessarily occur in a linear stage-like fashion. Instead, students' development across the seven vectors may appear sporadic as they can work on more than one area of their identity at any given time (Schuh, 1989). The sequence in which the vectors are typically presented suggests that some tasks are likely to be experienced in the earlier stages of higher education and are better served as building blocks for students' identity development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

ii. Astin's Theory of Student Involvement

Astin's Theory of Student's Involvement is a developmental theory that highlights the role of student's engagement in higher education. The theory can be used to investigate how student's engagement in academic and extracurricular activities impacting their development. Furthermore, this theory focuses on emphasizing the role of the surroundings of the students in higher education as well as the quantity and quality of student involvement. The theory asserts that students in higher education learn and grow

much more when they are actively joining in various forms of college experience, which includes academic and extracurricular activities such as joining associations, become a member committee of a program, directing a program and much more. Astin's Theory of Student's Involvement comprise of three key components which are (1) Inputs, (2) Environment, and (3) Outcomes. Inputs refers to the demographics, background and previous experiences of individuals. Environment comprises of the experiences during college or university life and outcomes refers to the characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and values that exist after the student has graduated. Astin (1999) discovered that stronger career identity and higher levels of satisfaction are associated to involvement in student organizations.

iii. Pascarella's Model for Assessing Student Change

Ernest T. Pascarella's General Model for Assessing Change highlights how various factors shape student learning and development in higher education. The model underscores the interplay between students' backgrounds, institutional characteristics, social interactions, and personal effort. Students' precollege traits—such as personal qualities, family history, and prior educational experiences—affect how they engage with the college environment. Institutional factors, including size, resources, and organizational practices, further shape the quality of their experiences. Regular, positive interactions with peers, instructors, and mentors foster learning and personal growth, while active effort in academic and extracurricular activities amplifies these outcomes. Together, these experiences influence cognitive development, including critical thinking, information literacy, and intellectual skills. This process connects directly to career identity formation, as students' interactions, efforts, and developmental gains shape their professional aspirations and sense of purpose.

iv. Super's Theory of Career Development Theory

Super's model of vocational development was first published in 1953. Super's main argument is that when people make important life decisions, like career choices, the choice is part of a process rather than just an event. Super's theory of career development is a well-known framework that describes career development as a dynamic process involving five stages: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and decline. Super's theory has been widely recognized and applied in various fields, including career counselling and vocational psychology. It has influenced research on career stages and has been instrumental in guiding individuals through their career development processes (Burns, 2008). Super's emphasis on the dynamic and longitudinal nature of career development, focusing on self-concept implementation, has been a cornerstone in understanding how individuals navigate their career paths (House, 2004). This perspective is especially relevant in guiding individuals through transitions, helping them align their self-perceptions with professional goals, as part of career identity formation process.

4.0 Conclusion

Career identity is not a static construct but a continuous process of self-discovery and adaptation, influenced by internal motivations and external demands. For HRD students, this process is particularly significant as it underpins their ability to address complex organizational challenges and align with the dynamic nature of the HRD profession in the near future of their career. The four theories discussed collectively emphasize the importance of holistic student development, active participation in academic and extracurricular activities, and the alignment of personal values with professional goals in fostering a robust career identity. This paper provide some basis for exploring the nuances of the career identity formation process through empirical study.

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