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Beyond the Autonomous Career Self: Relational and Structural Pathways of Career Identity among Indian Emerging Adults

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Abstract

Career identity theories developed largely in neoliberal Western contexts often privilege individual choice, self-determination, exploration, and rational career planning. Such assumptions may inadequately capture how young adults construct career identities within collectivist and economically unequal contexts. This study re-examines the career identity trajectories of urban emerging adults in Delhi-NCR through a post-neoliberal and relational-cultural lens, foregrounding familial, sociocultural, and economic conditions shaping career meaning-making. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten participants, including five students and five employed emerging adults. Inductive thematic analysis generated three overarching themes: (1) Motives Associated with Career Pursuits, (2) Navigating Career Choices and Self-Discovery, and (3) Influencing Factors Shaping Career Decisions. Findings showed that career motivations were rarely purely intrinsic. Financial security, social respectability, family stability, and familial expectations coexisted with personal interests and aspirations. Career exploration was nonlinear and relationally embedded, shaped by parents, educational environments, community norms, setbacks, and structural constraints. Periods of uncertainty and recommitment resembled Western dual-cycle models, yet were often driven by negotiations with family expectations, economic vulnerability, and moral responsibilities rather than autonomous self-exploration. Career certainty frequently reflected alignment between individual aspirations and collective expectations. Parents, teachers, friends, siblings, socioeconomic privilege, gender norms, and the COVID-19 pandemic further facilitated or constrained career possibilities. Overall, career identity among Indian emerging adults appears relationally constituted, culturally embedded, and structurally constrained. The study contributes to decolonising career psychology by questioning the universality of Western identity models and foregrounding interdependence, precarity, moral responsibility, and sociocultural embeddedness.

Keywords: identity; family; India; narrative; qualitative