



## Career exploration via cooperative education and lifespan occupational choice

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### Abstract

Career exploration by Antioch College students who graduated between 1946 and 1955 ( $N = 73$ ) was studied to determine relationships between the occupational categories of cooperative education jobs taken in college (obtained from a campus archive) and subsequent work histories (obtained from surveying the graduates at about 70 years). Five hypotheses were tested. Results supported four of the hypotheses, with partial support for the fifth. Co-op jobs taken by the sample represented each of 23 occupational classifications, and most graduates took post-graduate jobs in occupational functions and contexts they had explored as co-op students. High levels of individuality in use of the co-op program and in career paths were found. Four co-op-to-career patterns were described, based on the degree to which functions and contexts were explored during college and career; a case study was included to exemplify each pattern. Gender differences were revealed in the patterns, but not the group data. Job context was particularly important in defining these patterns. Implications for research and practice were discussed

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tentatively, however given the lack of a control group, characteristics of the study sample, and particularities of the historical era studied, the ability to generalize beyond the study sample is limited.

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## 1. Introduction

Career exploration is an important kind of vocational behavior that includes learning about the self and from the environment to help decide about a career direction, to ease adjustment to work, and to enhance performance (Blustein, 1992; Jordaan, 1963; Strumpf, Colarelli, & Hartman, 1983). Two factors identified as important to career exploration include its *developmental timing* and the *quality of interventions* designed to enhance it. Although career exploration may occur throughout life (Super, 1990), adolescence is a particularly important stage for career exploration, because many individuals in the US are choosing vocations and making various levels of commitment to those choices at that time (Blustein, 1989; Jepsen & Dickson, 2003). In terms of interventions in support of career exploration, one important aspect is how comprehensive the intervention is. Phillips (1992) reviewed career counseling research and concluded that when career exploration interventions include self-assessment, feedback, specific and general information about work, and advice on career decision making, more significant gains are achieved than when interventions are more narrowly focused. Blustein (1997) advocated recently for even more comprehensive interventions. He encouraged counselors to help clients develop an exploratory attitude: “an open and nonrigid way of relating to the world such that one is able to approach the vast number of new situations and changes that individuals face in a manner that encourages growth and further self-definition” (p. 270).

Given the importance of career exploration to career decision making, and the interest in late adolescent timing and comprehensiveness of interventions, it is surprising that undergraduate *cooperative education* programs have not been studied by vocational psychologists as career exploration interventions. Colleges and universities that offer cooperative education programs allow or require students to work off-campus, either concurrently with their classes or in alternating terms. Late adolescence is the development period when many students enroll in post-secondary cooperative education programs.

In general, studies of the outcomes of career exploration have been disappointing, other than predictable increases in ego-identity development (Blustein, Devenis, & Kidney, 1989). In a recent review, Blustein (1997) implicated narrow definitions of both career exploration and relevant outcome variables in the lack of significant findings. Studying cooperative education could broaden our ideas about what career exploration means, because cooperative education programs are broadly comprehensive. They require multiple work terms with faculty and employer support to help the

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