

Impact of Family on Career Decision-Making Among High School Students in Lucknow's Various Educational Boards

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explores the influence of family on early career decision-making among adolescents in urban Indian schools. Grounded in social cognitive career theory and the collectivist cultural framework, the research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a structured multiple-choice questionnaire (N = 100) and in-depth interviews (n = 12) with students aged 15 to 18 from diverse educational boards in Lucknow. Quantitative data revealed that most students identified parents as the primary influence on career choices. Thematic analysis uncovered four key themes: parental aspirations and expectations, support versus pressure, sibling and extended family roles, and gendered perspectives. Students described both encouragement toward secure professions and autonomy-promoting guidance. These insights affirm the deep-rooted impact of familial structures on career development. The study offers implications for educators, counselors, and families to foster balanced, student-centered career guidance practices in culturally sensitive ways.

Keywords: Career Decision making, parental aspirations, Interests, Sibling influence, Career Development, Career choices, Family support, Family influence

Introduction

Choosing a career is a pivotal developmental milestone in adolescence, with long-term implications for personal identity, lifestyle, and psychological well-being. In the Indian urban context, career decision-making is rarely an isolated act of individual agency; rather, it unfolds within a dense network of familial, cultural, and societal expectations. Unlike Western societies that emphasize autonomy and self-direction, Indian culture is predominantly collectivist, prioritizing family cohesion, interdependence, and respect for parental authority. Within this framework, youth are often expected to consult and cooperate with family members—including extended kin—on major life decisions, particularly regarding education and career paths.

Empirical evidence supports this culturally embedded dynamic. Prior research consistently indicates that Indian adolescents perceive their parents as the most significant influence in career decision-making. Khatri and Perival (2020), for instance, found that family members exert a “positive and significant effect on career decisions,” underscoring the central role of familial input. However, the nature of this influence—whether supportive, directive, or constraining—remains underexplored, particularly in rapidly evolving urban settings.

Urban Indian families are undergoing notable shifts in structure and values. Studies on intergenerational dynamics reveal a gradual movement toward egalitarian relationships, with greater space for youth autonomy, especially in middle-class and cosmopolitan households. Despite this evolution, educational and career decisions often remain heavily family-involved. This tension between tradition and modernity raises important questions about how today's youth negotiate personal aspirations in light of familial expectations.

This study aims to examine these dynamics by exploring the lived experiences of high school students aged 15 to 18 across diverse educational boards (ISC, CBSE, Cambridge, and UP Board) in Lucknow. Using a phenomenological approach, the research investigates how students perceive and interpret the influence of parents, siblings, and extended family in shaping their early career decisions.

The inquiry is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do urban Indian youth perceive the role of their family in career decision-making?
2. What forms of support or conflict arise between personal interests and familial expectations?
3. How do these perceptions vary based on gender and cultural background?

Literature Review

Family and Career Decision-Making (General Perspectives): Career decision theory consistently identifies family as a crucial socializing agent. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) suggests that career choices are influenced by personal attributes and social contexts, especially family support. Positive familial support enhances career decision self-efficacy, while controlling or prohibitive behaviors can limit autonomy. For example, Xing and Rojewski (2018) found that parental psychosocial support accounted for 38.3% of variance in career decision self-efficacy among Chinese adolescents. In collectivist cultures like India, family obligation and loyalty intensify these dynamics. The Indian family system traditionally values interdependence and consensus; Avasthi (2010) highlights how cooperation with family members, including extended kin, guides decisions, particularly concerning careers. Thus, career decisions in India often require negotiation between individual aspirations and family expectations.

Family Influence in the Indian Context: Empirical studies corroborate the strong familial role in career decisions among Indian youth. Joshi and Audichya (2017) reported parents as the most influential figures for both male and female urban adolescents. Khatri and Periwal (2020) similarly found positive and significant family influence on Indian management students' career choices, without gender differences. Qualitative work from Kerala (Thomas & Joseph, 2024) illustrates pervasive parental involvement; one parent admitted, "Even though my child has the ability to make decisions, it's his father who does everything for him." Dutta et al. (2021, cited in Thomas & Joseph) characterize this as "informed parental influence," where autonomy is granted but supervised. This blend of encouragement and control reflects collectivist values and aligns with SCCT principles, where supportive family environments enhance confidence while shaping expectations.

Families often prioritize economic security and prestige. For example, Thomas and Joseph (2024) found parents in Tamil Nadu commonly preferred science streams like engineering or medicine, reflecting societal emphasis on stable, respected careers. Socioeconomic status also influences vocational aspirations globally. However, urbanization has fostered evolving family dynamics; Megha et al. (2024) report generational shifts favoring personal choice and more egalitarian family relations. How these shifts translate into career decisions remains an open question.

Theoretical Considerations: The interplay between family and career decisions can be understood through SCCT, which emphasizes role modeling and feedback affecting self-efficacy and outcome expectations. Family Systems Theory also highlights family roles and communication patterns shaping individual development. In collectivist cultures, familism—prioritizing family goals over individual ones—is a key concept. Traditional Indian gender norms (patriarchy, patrilineal inheritance) intersect with family guidance, potentially resulting in differing career paths for sons and daughters. Research is mixed: some find gender does not alter family influence, while others note girls face distinct expectations (e.g., early marriage vs. career pursuit). These complexities underscore the need for qualitative exploration of individual perspectives.

In summary, literature confirms deep Indian family involvement in career decisions. Parental aspirations, cultural values, and socioeconomic factors shape youth career trajectories, but these influences are evolving in urban areas. This study builds on existing knowledge using phenomenology to capture nuanced experiences of urban Indian youth.

Methodology

A phenomenological qualitative design was chosen to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences regarding family influence on career decisions. This approach aligns with Creswell's (2013) recommendation to seek the meanings of experiences among multiple individuals around a phenomenon. To complement qualitative insights, a structured MCQ-based questionnaire provided broader contextual data.

Participants and Sampling: A purposive sample of urban youth was recruited from local schools in Lucknow, representing various educational boards including ISC, CBSE, Cambridge, and UP Board. Inclusion criteria were:

- aged 15–18 years,
- currently enrolled in Grades 9 to 12, and
- actively engaged in or approaching decisions regarding career or higher education pathways.

The study collected 100 valid questionnaire responses and conducted follow-up semi-structured interviews with 12 participants, selected to ensure diversity in gender, academic stream, curriculum type, and family background. Participants were balanced across males and females and included students from science, commerce, and humanities streams, representing both nuclear and joint family structures.

Data Collection: The study proceeded in two phases. First, an online MCQ questionnaire assessed general trends on career influence, parental expectations, and decision autonomy. It employed multiple-choice and Likert-scale items (e.g., “My parents actively help me explore career options,” rated Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was pilot-tested for clarity by career counselors.

Second, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 volunteers, lasting 30–45 minutes each, face-to-face or via video calls. Open-ended questions explored familial involvement in career decisions and pressures experienced, e.g., “Describe how your family influences your career planning” and “Have you felt pressured by family expectations?”

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized using pseudonyms. Ethical approval and informed consent were secured.

Data Analysis

Quantitative questionnaire data were summarized using descriptive statistics to contextualize qualitative

findings (e.g., percentages endorsing each influence type). Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically through a phenomenological lens. The researcher immersed in transcripts, identified significant statements, and performed open coding to cluster data into broad categories. These categories were refined into key themes reflecting shared participant experiences. The process prioritized participants' meanings over preconceived ideas. Themes were cross-checked against quantitative trends for consistency. Representative quotes illustrate core findings.

Findings and Themes

Participant Profile: The questionnaire sample (N = 100) consisted of students aged 15 to 18 years, enrolled in Grades 9 to 12 across various schools in Lucknow. The gender distribution included 52% male and 48% female respondents. Family backgrounds included 76% from nuclear families and 24% from joint or extended families. Participants represented diverse academic streams: science (38%), commerce (34%), and humanities (28%), drawn from multiple educational boards including ISC, CBSE, Cambridge, and UP Board. A significant majority (81%) identified “parents” as the primary influence on their career choices, while 9% cited teachers or peers, and 10% selected self or others. Additionally, 67% agreed or strongly agreed that their parents had high expectations regarding their career decisions.

Emergent Themes:

- 1. Parental Aspirations and Preferred Careers:** Nearly all participants reported parental expectations favoring stable, prestigious professions—engineering, medicine, and government jobs. Participant A (M, 19, Engineering) shared, “My parents always told me to become an engineer. They believe engineering means a safe job and respect.” Participant D (F, 21, Science) described family pressures: “My relatives ask when I’ll become a doctor; my mom worries if I mention art or media.” Economic security was frequently emphasized.
- 2. Supportive Guidance vs. Controlling Pressure:** Students described a spectrum from moral support to coercion. Participant C (F, 22, Arts) noted her mother’s encouragement and research help. Conversely, Participant B (M) felt dismissed: “I told my dad I wanted graphic design; he said it’s not a real job and insisted on commerce.” Participant F (M, 20) recalled financial threats for deviating from engineering, illustrating parental control masked as care.
- 3. Sibling and Extended Family Roles:** Several mentioned siblings or relatives as advisors. Participant H (M, 18) valued elder sister’s IT guidance. Cousins and grandparents also influenced choices, often reinforcing parental views but sometimes offering additional perspectives.
- 4. Gendered Expectations and Autonomy:** Gender influenced experiences subtly. Female participants reported more constraints about field and location choices; one said, “They want me to stay close to home.” Males faced encouragement toward lucrative careers. Yet, both genders encountered high parental expectations and expressed desires for independence.

Across themes, family was described as a cultural safety net shaping career paths. The MCQ data confirmed 80% felt family approval was important.

Discussion

The findings align with previous research confirming parents as primary career influencers in India (Joshi & Audichya, 2017; Khatri & Periwal, 2020). The preference for secure, prestigious fields reflects broader societal norms. The dual role of families as both supporters and controllers echoes Dutta et al.’s (2021) “informed parental influence.” Thomas and Joseph’s (2024) observations of parental involvement resonate with participant narratives.

Collectivist values—family cooperation and consensus—remain strong (Avasthi, 2010; Hui & Triandis, 1986). However, signs of generational change and urbanization suggest increased youth autonomy and egalitarian family roles (Megha et al., 2024). The role of siblings and extended family as secondary support adds nuance to career guidance as a collective endeavor.

Gender norms subtly influence career choices, with women facing more traditional constraints despite equal parental involvement. Future research should explore gender-specific career trajectories in Indian families.

Overall, this study highlights a complex negotiation between tradition and personal ambition among urban Indian youth, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive career counseling.

Limitations

This study focused on school students aged 15–18 from urban schools in Lucknow, which, while representative of a growing Tier-2 city, may not fully capture the diversity of experiences in rural areas or other regions of India. As such, findings may not generalize to students in distinctly rural settings or in metropolitan cities with different socio-cultural dynamics. The relatively small interview sample ($n = 12$) limits the breadth of qualitative insight, although it is suitable for a phenomenological design. Additionally, as the data relied on self-reports, responses may be influenced by social desirability bias, particularly regarding sensitive issues like parental pressure. The school-based or virtual interview environment may have also influenced the level of openness. Future research should consider including larger and more demographically varied samples, possibly through multi-city studies or longitudinal designs, to examine evolving family influences over time and across contexts.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

For students in Lucknow, where traditional family values often coexist with increasing exposure to global career opportunities, career counselors and educators should design school-based programs that actively involve parents in the guidance process. Facilitated parent–student sessions can help build mutual understanding and support students in making informed choices. Teaching students communication and decision-making skills can empower them to express their interests while respecting family input. Additionally, parent orientation programs can sensitize families to emerging career options beyond conventional streams, reducing pressure and encouraging informed encouragement.

Future research should investigate intra-city variations, including differences between students from government and private schools, and across educational boards (CBSE, ISC, Cambridge, UP Board). Exploring how socio-economic background influences family expectations in a Tier-2 city like Lucknow can offer deeper insights. Longitudinal studies tracking students' career paths and the sustained impact of familial influence over time would also be valuable. Furthermore, understanding how digital exposure and career trends affect aspirations in such urbanizing contexts remains an important area for further exploration.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant and nuanced role of family in shaping early career decision-making among high school students in Lucknow. Parental influence remains strong, often steering students toward traditionally secure and prestigious careers. At the same time, students increasingly seek autonomy and alignment with their personal interests and aspirations. These findings underscore that career choices in

this context are not made in isolation but are shaped through ongoing negotiation within the family unit. Effective career guidance in Lucknow's schools must therefore adopt a culturally responsive approach—engaging both students and families—to support balanced decision-making. By recognizing the influence of family and fostering open dialogue, educators and counselors can help students chart career paths that honor both familial values and individual goals.

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