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A Study of the Career Pathways of Canadian Young Adults During the Decade After Secondary School Graduation

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Abstract

This study examined the career pathways taken by 47 young adults in Canada after they graduated from secondary school. Based on a grounded theory analysis, this thesis explored the way young adults made career decisions and how their resources (individual, family, social and environmental) and the messages that they heard from significant others influenced their career pathways.

The majority of the young people in this study either did not know what they wanted to do when they graduated from secondary school or subsequently changed their minds. Most engaged in a process of identity exploration through experimentation with tertiary programmes and different types of work as they tried to ascertain what constituted satisfying work. As participants experimented with different career pathways, they obtained a better sense of who they were and what types of work they found satisfying. Findings indicated that participants engaged in a process of finding a career-related place, an activity that superficially involved selecting a career pathway but more substantively meant a search for identity and life purpose. Finding a career-related place was achieved through the interchangeable use of five strategies: navigating, exploring, drifting, settling, and committing. These strategies emerged as a host of internal and external factors impinged on a young person's simultaneous search for a career and the identity that could potentially come with it.

This contingent nature of finding a career-related place stood in sharp contrast to the discourse of what is referred to in this thesis as the "career myth". This discourse related to the belief that young people should follow a linear, predictable route from secondary school to tertiary training, and then on to a permanent, full-time job. Based on these findings, an argument is made that developmental and chaos-oriented approaches to career development should be moved into the foreground when professionals assist young people in the immediate years after secondary school graduation. Accordingly, the trait and factor ethos, which continues to dominate the career counselling field, should be deemphasised. Six career design principles are identified that provide guidelines for how young people can engage in the process of finding a career-related place in a way that is

proactive while at the same time accepting that career pathways and the identities that follow may be uncertain.

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