

# **Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice? A Sociological Analysis of Decision-Making in Tertiary Education**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

Dominant theories on choice of higher education, such as the rational action theory, view prospective students as rational consumers operating in an educational and vocational marketplace. This approach is founded on the assumption that young people are logical, self-interested and utility-maximising beings, and that choice of career or field of study is the outcome of a technically rational process. A growing number of studies are, however, challenging the central assumption of this approach. Recent studies on educational and vocational choice-making indicate that aspiring students may not be as calculating as the dominant research and policy discourse suggests. They emphasise that the decision-making process is, in fact, far more complex and unpredictable than traditionally assumed by the conventional models. As a result, there have been calls for the need to develop an alternative approach. The pragmatic rationality model by Hodkinson and Sparkes is one example.

This study employs an unconventional approach to the logic of choice-making. Instead of drawing up a quantitative assessment of a large sample of students – the most common method of inquiry in this field of research – it uses case study research to investigate, in depth, how students from two specific vocational disciplines made their choices. The research is based on qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 26 first-year students in the Civil Engineering and Social Care programmes at the Durban University of Technology and the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study explores the applicability of the pragmatic rationality framework in the South African context, and investigates its potential impact on higher education policy.

The analysis finds that there are general processes by which all the students had been affected, summed up in the framework of pragmatic rationality. The endorsement of this approach can be read as an implicit rejection of the rational action theory and the dominant assumption of aspiring students as rational agents. Although pragmatically rational decision-making was detected throughout the sample, the students were found to have made very different kinds of choices within very different types of circumstances. These differences were identified particularly in the levels of knowledge upon which the students had based their decisions. The observations made in this study are useful in terms of developing a more accurate understanding of educational and vocational choice-making in South Africa.

## **Preface**

The research described in this study was carried out in KwaZulu-Natal from February 2013 to April 2013, under the supervision of Professor Richard Ballard and Professor Bill Freund, both affiliated with the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All references, citations and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Development Studies, School of Built Environment and Development Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination at any other institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Gausdal', written in a cursive style.

Student signature

November 21, 2013

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## **Acronyms and Abbreviations**

CWCU	Centre for World-Class Universities
B-ED	Bachelor Degree of Education
B-TECH	Bachelor Degree of Technology
DOE	Department of Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DMI	Division of Management Information
DUT	Durban University of Technology
FMC	Former Model C
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PMB	Pietermaritzburg
SARUA	Southern African Regional Universities Association
UJ	University of Johannesburg
UKZN	University of KwaZulu-Natal

## Chapter One: Introduction

The notion of *choice*<sup>1</sup> holds a central position in the current discourse on higher education<sup>2</sup> in South Africa. The transition from secondary to tertiary education is a critical branching point (Boudon, 1974) as the choices made by young people at this stage will not only affect their own careers but equally determine the supply of skilled labour in the economy (Payne, 2003). In recent years, the field of student decision-making has received increased attention from researchers and policy-makers as a result of the rapidly changing educational landscape. While a number of studies on student choice have been conducted in South Africa, the vast majority of these have focused on *why* (i.e. motivations and barriers for entry) young people choose what they do, using quantitative factor analyses as their preferred method of inquiry (cf. Bonnema and Van der Waldt, 2008; Cosser and du Toit, 2002; Cosser, du Toit and Visser, 2004; Wiese, van Heerden and Jordaan, 2010). While they offer rigorous statistical assessments of learners' rationale for choice of programme or institution, the question of *how* young people make these choices, and the nature of the actual decision-making process, has largely been left unaddressed. Instead much of the current research and policy literature typically rests on the implicit assumption of young people as rational, self-interested and utility-maximising beings. Commonly associated with the rational action theory of Becker (1975) and Schultz (1961), this approach has nonetheless attracted criticism for its overly individualistic scope. Some scholars have started to question whether aspiring students truly are as calculating as the dominant discourse suggests (van der Merwe, 2010).

Herein, in this debate, lies this dissertation's *raison d'être*. The main objective of this study is to explore the different avenues of this debate in greater detail, leaning on the already established literature on student choice behaviour both within and outside of South Africa. It aims to construct a theoretically-grounded analysis of the cognitive processes of choice-making, employing the conceptual apparatus of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and specifically his oeuvre on the *logic of practice*. As far as the researcher is aware, this theoretical and methodological framework has never before been employed in this manner in this particular context and setting. The study has, in other words, the potential to shed light on previously neglected aspects of the debate. That having been said, there are certain dangers associated

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<sup>1</sup> The terms 'choice' and 'decision', and 'choice-making' and 'decision-making' will be used interchangeably in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The terms 'higher education' and 'tertiary education' refers to university-based education. The terms will be used interchangeably throughout this dissertation.



with transferring a foreign method of inquiry into the South African context. There is little doubt that Bourdieu's theories on stratification of French society in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are ill-suited for a rapidly changing 21<sup>th</sup> century South Africa. However, the work of Phil Hodgkinson and Andrew Sparkes (1997) has, in a compelling manner, demonstrated how Bourdieu's key concepts can be utilised to describe the general cognitive processes operating in the field of choice-making.

An assessment of how young South Africans make educational and vocational decision-making is important in many respects. Within much of the contemporary research and policy literature, there is a lack of attention to the way in which prospective students make choices and the basis upon they make them. Despite the growing interest in recent years, the field of student choice behaviour still remains fairly under-researched in South Africa (Cosser, du Toit and Visser, 2004:vii). Thus there is a need to strengthen the general understanding of the decision-making process itself. This will, in turn, have significant impacts on the future development of career guidance services and other support structures in the formal education sector. The motivation to conduct this study must be read in light of this context.

The study is founded on qualitative interviews with first-year students in the civil engineering and social care programmes at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The social care cohort is represented by students from the Bachelor Degree of Social Work at UKZN and the National Diploma in Child and Youth Development at DUT, while the civil engineering cohort consists of students from the Bachelor Degree of Civil Engineering at UKZN and the National Diploma in Civil Engineering at DUT. The study seeks to investigate the underlying logic behind choice of educational and vocational pathway. It intends to analyse how the students manoeuvred the actual decision-making *process*, placing particular emphasis on the kind of information these choices were based on, equally important, where the information originated from. This undertaking is guided by the following research questions:

- i) *How did students in the civil engineering and social care programmes at DUT and UKZN make their choices about tertiary education?*
- ii) *On what basis did they make these decisions?*
- iii) *What were their main sources of influence?*

This dissertation begins, in Chapter Two, by looking at the national and international literature on student decision-making. The chapter provides an overview of the present state

of knowledge on the subject of choice of higher education. In doing so, it establishes the contextual and conceptual platform from which the ensuing analysis will depart. Chapter Three offers a brief assessment of the methods and techniques employed in this study. It seeks to expound on the rationale behind choice of methodological framework, commenting on its strengths and weaknesses. Chapter Four will present the empirical findings of the study. These observations will be discussed in light of the relevant literature and the leading research questions. This dissertation will conclude, in Chapter Five, by taking a step back and deliberate on the potential implications of the study on South African education policy and future research.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The aim of this literature review is to provide an outline of the present state of knowledge on the subject of educational and vocational decision-making. Grounded in national and international literature, the purpose of this chapter is to establish a contextual and conceptual platform from which the subsequent analysis can depart. The literature review consists of four main sections. The first section introduces the contextual domain, namely choice of higher education in South Africa. It traces the roots of the growing interest in student choice behaviour among researchers and policy-makers. The second section looks at the dominant theories on decision-making in contemporary literature, while the third and fourth section offers a detailed examination of the theoretical and conceptual framework upon which this study is structured.

### **The Making of Choice in South Africa**

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in educational and vocational decision-making in South Africa. With separate agendas, researchers, policy-makers and university officials have started paying considerable attention to the choices made by prospective students. The origins of this burgeoning interest can partly be found in the changing educational landscape. The system of public higher education has gone through a process of unprecedented transformation in recent decades, including broadening access to higher education, changing student profile, increased marketisation of the education sector, and growing institutional competition (Akoojee and Nkomo, 2007; Fataar, 2003; Jansen, 2003; Ntshoe, 2004). The key developments herein merit some attention.

With the demise of the apartheid system and the transition to democratic rule in 1994, the sector of higher education was finally opened up to previously excluded groups. The removal of the discriminatory admission policies of the past regime was accompanied by a general expansion of the system. While the number of students enrolled in public tertiary education was just past half a million in 1994, the figure was nearly 900 000 in 2011 (DHET, 2012a:10; Subotzky, 2003:362). The transition from an 'elite' to a 'mass' system of higher education led

to an increased diversification of the student body, especially in terms of race<sup>3</sup>, class and gender. The presence of women in public higher education increased from 43 per cent in 1988 to 57 per cent in 2010 (DHET, 2012a:37; Subotzky, 2003:362, 365). Alongside the rapid growth of female entrants, the sector also witnessed a surge of students from previously disadvantaged racial groups. The proportion of black students in public higher education increased from 55 per cent in 1994 to 80 per cent in 2010 (DHET, 2012a:37). Despite these advances, inequalities can still be found in the patterns of enrolment. The government concedes that “the system [of higher education] continues to produce and reproduce gender, class, racial and other inequalities with regard to access to educational opportunities and success.” (DHET, 2012a:x). These inequalities play themselves out in different ways. Black and female students are, for instance, clearly underrepresented in disciplines such as science and technology, business and commerce (DHET, 2012a:8).<sup>4</sup> These new and fairly swift changes have made the government cognisant of the need to strengthen the research on vocational and educational choice-making (DHET, 2012a, 2012c).

In conjunction with the expansion of the education sector, the institutional landscape has also witnessed significant changes. Following international trends (Kwong, 2000; Espinoza, Bradshaw and Hausman, 2002), the system of higher education in South Africa has been subjected to processes of liberalisation and marketisation (Fataar, 2003; Jansen, 2003). Public institutions now face increased competition from both foreign and private service providers. The institutions have, as a result, been forced to become more ‘market-oriented’ in order to attract the best students, paying greater attention to branding and marketing issues (Ntshoe, 2004; Wiese et al., 2009). As part of this process, university officials have gradually recognised the importance of understanding the way in which young people make decisions about the future.

A number of studies on choice behaviour have been conducted in recent years (cf. Bonnema and Van der Walldt, 2008; Cosser and du Toit, 2002; Cosser, du Toit and Visser, 2004; Letseka et al., 2010; Wiese, van Heerden and Jordaan, 2010). Most of them use factor

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<sup>3</sup> Four racial categories were normally utilised in the apartheid era: ‘African’, ‘coloured’, ‘Indian’ and ‘white’ (Hunter, 2010:2640). This dissertation will employ a similar configuration. I have used the uppercase for African and Indian since the terms derive from geographical locations. The use of the term ‘black’ refers to the three disadvantaged racial groups African, coloured and Indian (Posel, 2001:110).

<sup>4</sup> According to the *National Plan for Higher Education* (DoE, 2001), the government seeks to alter the balance of enrolments from Humanities – the traditional catchment area for black and female students – towards Business and Commerce, and Science, Engineering and Technology. A similar intention signalled in the *Strategic Plan of 2012* (DHET, 2012c).

analyses in an attempt to identify young people's motivations or barriers for entry. Within the dominant discourse on choice behaviour, there seems to be a growing tendency of regarding aspiring students as autonomous consumers operating in an educational marketplace (van der Merwe, 2010). The view of *students as consumers* (Robertson, 2000) can and should be read as the direct result of the current trend of incorporating private sector logic into the public system of higher education (Ntshoe, 2004). Choice of career or field of study is thought to be guided by consumer behaviour principles (cf. Bonnema and Van der Waldt, 2008; Wiese et al., 2009). The discourse is underpinned by an implicit assumption of (young) people as rational, self-interested and utility-maximising beings (Chisholm, 2004; Hoadley, 1999; van der Merwe, 2010) who "assess their own abilities and interests, evaluate the range of opportunities which are available to them and then make a choice which matches ability to opportunity" (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997:31). This subtle sense of individual rationality seems to permeate much of the contemporary research and policy literature (van der Merwe, 2010).<sup>5</sup>

### **Models on Choice**

As with any aspect of human behaviour, choice of educational and vocational pathways is a highly complicated process. In an attempt to formalise the choices made by young people in the transition from secondary to tertiary education, scholars have turned to the creation of theoretical models (cf. Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997; Chapman, 1984; Hanson and Litten, 1982; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Morgan, 2005). The model by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) is worth highlighting in this regard. The theory sees choice of higher education as a developmental process which occurs in three stages, namely predisposition, search and choice. This theory argues that as young people progress through secondary school, they gradually move towards an increased understanding of themselves and the educational options available to them. A similar framework was employed by Cosser and du Toit (2002) and Cosser, du Toit and Visser (2004) in their longitudinal study of choice patterns among South African youth. In the predisposition stage, learners develop educational

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<sup>5</sup> The policies on career education are a good example. The government is currently in the process of reconfiguring the national system of career development services in South Africa (DHET, 2012b). This is part of a larger plan to align the career guidance edifice with the contemporary educational paradigm, epitomised by the National Qualifications Framework (Keevy, Steenekamp and West, 2012). The charter retains a subtle, yet omnipresent, assumption of decision-making as a process of logical and rational deliberations.

and vocational aspirations, and determine whether or not to continue studying beyond the secondary level (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000:6). In the second stage, information is accumulated and assimilated by the learners. On the basis of this information, they draw up a list of programmes and institutions to which they will potentially apply. The third and final stage involves the process in which they make a final decision about which programme and institution to attend (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). While the influence of external factors is fully acknowledged in this model, young people are still believed to act as rational agents in the production of their own careers.

A similar sense of individualistic rationality can also be found in much of the literature on career development. Research on vocational development in South African has traditionally been structured on classic theoretical models from the United States (Stead and Watson, 1998:290). Three models are worth mentioning in this regard. The first strand is the developmental model (Ginsberg et al., 1951; Super, 1953, 1974, 1980). The theory suggests that the decision-making process consists of different developmental stages. The notion of self-concept lies at the centre of this theory. Career development is understood as a process of developing a concept of the self. 'Appropriate' choices, it is argued, can only be made when individuals have adequately developed their abilities and maturity. The theory thus retains a psychological approach to the processes of choice-making.

The second model is known as the trait theory (Parsons, 1909 cited in Patton and McMahon, 2006:19-21). It understands choice-making as a process of matching person to profession or field of study. The process entails identifying traits required in certain occupations, and aligning these with the personal characteristics of the particular individual. In line with the developmental model, this approach is mainly individualistic in its focus, treating young people as separate entities largely unaffected by their surrounding milieu (Kidd, 1984; Law, 1981). The third and final model in this regard is the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). The concept of self-efficacy, or rather, the belief in one's capabilities to organise and execute a given course of action, is at the centre of Bandura's social cognitive theory. It posits that individuals exercise control over their thoughts, feelings and behaviour. In contrast to the two aforementioned models, this theory recognises the impact of contextual factors on the development of young people's identity. The social experiences of an individual are nonetheless regarded as external to the actual decision-making process (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997:32).

Common for these different types of models is the underlying assumption of choice-making as an individual process where decisions are made on a rational and calculated basis, at least in aggregate. Despite their prominence in the research and policy literature, the emphasis on individual rationality has been subject to wide criticism (cf. Baumgardner, 1977, 1982; Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Law, 1981; Miller, 1983). Writing on choice of higher education in South Africa, van der Merwe (2010) makes the point that,

“South African higher education policy evidently assumes a human capital interpretation of the value of higher education. However, not much local evidence has been provided to support the human capital view that individuals enroll in higher education primarily on the basis of future earnings they expect to flow from such investments” (van der Merwe, 2010:81).

He continues by noting that,

“[t]he literature abounds with studies that report a significant association between educational attainment and *ex post* (historical) earnings. These observations give credence to the human capital assumption that individuals pursue higher education with primarily economic intent. Significant correlations between *ex post* earnings and educational attainment do not, however, explain individuals’ higher education choices. In fact, only the perceptions, expectations and beliefs of individuals can give meaning to their decisions. Clearly, though, the variability and unpredictability of human behaviour cannot comfortably be reconciled with the perfect knowledge and rationality that economic agents are assumed to possess in a neoclassical economic world” (van der Merwe, 2010:81).

Taking into consideration the unique history and the cultural flora of this country, one could argue that models founded on individualistic rationality are ill-equipped to grasp the complexities of educational and vocational decision-making in the South African context (Naicker, 1994; Stead, 1996; Van Niekerk and Van Daalen, 1991; Watson and McMahon, 2005). Thus, scholars have highlighted the need to develop a theoretical approach that recognises the multidimensional nature of choice-making (Stead and Watson, 1994).

## **An Alternate Approach to Choice-Making**

One such approach is the *pragmatic rationality* model by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997). The concept of pragmatic rationality stems from their work on career decision-making among British youth. The study looked at participants of the Youth Credits scheme, a public initiative providing vocational training for youth who have left full-time education in search of work. On the basis of this study, Hodkinson and Sparkes developed a theoretical framework, dubbed *careership*. The approach draws on the theoretical oeuvre of Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1990), particularly his conceptualisations of *habitus*, *field* and *capital*. The main epistemological objective is to provide a framework that transcends the seeming antinomy between the structuralist and the constructivist approaches. It seeks, in other words, to overcome the dualities of structure and agency often found in the literature on choice behaviour. The approach is understood to be founded on the premise that “individuals are neither dopes nor pawns, yet the limitations on their decisions are realistically recognised” (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997:32). In contrast to the leading models on educational and vocational choice, the intention is not to draw up a meticulous method of inquiry. Rather, it seeks to provide an analytical lens that illuminates the broader processes upon which young people make decisions.

The pragmatic rationality approach constitutes the theoretical and methodological framework upon which this study will be structured. While a detailed examination of the framework will be provided further below, the ensuing section will first look at the theoretical strands of which the model is comprised, namely the structuralist and rational action approaches.

### *Structuralist Approach*

Emerging from the structuralist school of thought, this strand of literature postulates that the different aspects of human life must be understood in relation to a grander structure or system. Individual features of human behaviour are, in other words, not explanatory in and of themselves, but must be seen a part of a deeper structure (Rubel and Rosman, 1996:1263). As a theoretical framework, structuralism draws on the work by Saussure (1974) in the field of linguistics. Languages, Saussure noted, are made up by hidden rules that are understood by practitioners but which they cannot articulate. These rules are shaped by the structural forces of the particular cultural environment. Applying the Saussurean framework to the field of



anthropology, Levi-Strauss (1972) further developed these ideas. He noted that culture, like language, is constructed by implicit rules that regulate the actions of its practitioners. An analysis of any cultural phenomenon would thus require a thorough understanding of the ‘superstructure’ by which the phenomena is governed.

Following this method, a structuralist approach holds that decision-making is shaped by different forms of external constraints (e.g. economic, institutional or cultural) imposed on the individual (Gambetta, 1996). Choices are not regarded as the outcome of a rational decision-making process. Instead, they are considered part and parcel of the social and cultural setting in which the decisions are made. Structuralist analyses have traditionally been employed to explain participation and progression of students into tertiary education (Maringe, 2006:467). A three-year study by Ryrie (1981) of 1129 learners in eight comprehensive schools in Scotland, applies this approach. Based on qualitative interviews, the study sought to understand the logic behind young people’s decisions between post-school trajectories. Ryrie found that there were strong correlations between the learners’ intentions and aspirations at age thirteen and the choices taken by the time they reached sixteen. He claims that the consistency in responses indicates that the decisions were neither rational nor conscious. Instead, they were the product of established expectations and presumptions:

“During the long period of schooling teachers influence their students in various ways, intentional and unintentional. As a result, young people come to internalize certain expectations, and adopt certain taken-for-granted assumptions. Such mutually accepted assumptions may result in decisions being made about courses or paths to be followed without any conscious choice on the part of individuals [...] Such decisions apparently happen ‘naturally’, but they are the outcomes of a process which has been going on quietly in the minds of students during the earlier years, and which may have involved taking a series of small steps in a certain direction” (Ryrie, 1981:3-4 in Payne, 2003:11).

In a similar vein, Roberts (1968) employed the structuralist approach to examine career choices amongst young people in England. Departing from a sociological position, Roberts found that career decision-making is determined by a set of external constraints, or what he refers to as *opportunity structures*. The opportunity structure model was constructed on the basis of his study of young males in London. Roberts established that the “momentum and direction of school leavers’ careers are derived from the way in which their job opportunities

become cumulatively structured and young people are placed in varying degrees of social proximity, with different ease of access to different types of employment” (Roberts, 1968:179).

The studies of Ryrie and Roberts illustrate the extent to which external structures shape the cognitive processes of the individual. While the structuralist school of thought experienced a surge in popularity during the 1970s, its influence has faded considerably in recent decades. It has been criticised for being ahistorical and offering too deterministic an approach to human phenomena, leaving little room for individual agency (Payne, 2003:11). The demise of the structuralist position in the 1980s paved the way for a new generation of agency-oriented models, such as the rational action approach.

### *Rational Action Approach*

The theory of rational action (cf. Becker, 1964, 1975; Schultz, 1961) rests on the premise of rational calculation of self-interest. Choice is understood as the outcome of a rational cost-benefit analysis – a process in which expected benefits of the available options are measured against the potential costs. The approach has traditionally been employed to explain the premium of education and to predict how students respond to alterations in supply and demand variables, including financial support, tuition fees, family income and opportunity costs (DesJardins and Toutkoushian, 2005:193).

A number of scholars (e.g. Fuller, Manski and Wise, 1982; Goldthorpe, 1996, 1998; Manski and Wise, 1983; Schwartz, 1985) have utilised a similar analytical framework to describe the logic of practice. The process of decision-making is explained in individualistic terms and postulates a scenario in which choices are based exclusively on self-interest (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001:29). Decisions about higher education – whether in terms of initial entry, choice of institution or field of study – are therefore considered as “investment decisions in which subjects make a rational calculation of the relative returns to each of the different options open to them, the time taken to realise those returns, and risk of failure attached to each option” (Payne, 2003:12). This involves accounting for a wide range of external and internal determinants, including factors such as academic ability, personal preferences, financial resources and labour market opportunities, to mention a few. The notion of rational calculation is of significant importance in this approach. It is presumed that actors have near perfect information and that they will rationally maximise their utility on the

basis of this information. Goldthorpe (1998) notes that even in instances where the “limits on actors’ information are recognized, in situations of risk or uncertainty, it is still supposed that they have as much information and can calculate as accurately as such situations will allow in order to maximize their ‘expected’, or ‘subjectively expected’, utility” (Goldthorpe, 1998:170). According to Simon (1983), rational action theory assumes that an individual,

“contemplates, in one comprehensive view, everything that lies before him. He understands the range of alternative choices open to him, not only at the moment but over the whole panorama of the future. He understands the consequences of each of the available choice strategies, at least up to the point of being able to assign a joint probability distribution to future states of the world. He has reconciled all his conflicting partial values and synthesized them into a single utility function that orders, by his preference for them, all these future states of the world.” (Simon, 1983:13-4 cited in Goldthorpe, 1998:170)

A number of studies have, however, provided further complexity within this approach. Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001:29) understand the notion of perfect information as the outcome of a process of vigilant information collection. Their argument is that “complete vigilance is costly in time and effort, and most decisions are based on less than perfect information” (Payne, 2003:13). Moreover, as the returns of higher education only accrue over time, it is difficult, if not nearly impossible, to estimate accurately future returns to investments. Hence, in the absence of perfect information and complete vigilance, Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001:29) conclude that choices are in fact, never entirely rational. Similarly, Bowles and Gintis (1975, 1976) argue that the rational action theory fails to grasp the real nature of human behaviour. As humans are not rational self-interested actors operating in a universe of isolated individuals, their practice – and the cognitive processes upon which it is based – cannot be explained in isolation from the specific context.

While the two classical approaches outlined above have strengthened the general understanding of decision-making, there are those who argue that a complete assessment of decision-making must encompass both a structuralist and a constructivist dimension. As a result, a number of so-called ‘combined’ approaches have been developed over the years. One of these is the aforementioned pragmatic rationality model by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997).

### *Pragmatic Rationality Approach*

Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) explain decision-making in terms of three integrated dimensions. The first is that of pragmatically rational decision-making, where decisions are understood to be situated in the habitus of the person who makes it. Choices are regarded as the product of both subjective perceptions and objective predispositions. The second dimension is concerned with the power relations existing in the field. The field demarcates the spatial frame where players (with different sets of capital) interact with each other. The third and final dimension encapsulates the notion of *turning-points*. The inclusion of turning-points in the analysis indicates that decision-making is viewed as being located within a partly unpredictable pattern of discontinuity (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997:29). As this approach constitutes the theoretical and methodological framework upon which this dissertation is structured, the following section will explore its key components in further detail.

#### i) Pragmatically Rational Decision-Making

The concept of *pragmatically rational decision-making* is the focal point of the careership model. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) discovered that the young people in their study were rational when making career decisions. They were rational in the sense that their decisions were logical and determined by their own personal experiences or advice from people acquainted with the system. The decisions were at the same time pragmatic as they were only based on the information that was available or obtainable at the time. In other words, while a decision involves some degree of rational calculation, it cannot be divorced from the life history of the person making it. The notion of *pragmatic rationality* therefore lies in sharp contrast to the systematic or technical rationality favoured by rational action theorists, and to the social determinism of the structuralists. The choices made were in many cases opportunistic and unpredictable. The authors detected a pattern of non-planned decision-making in which the youth responded to serendipitous opportunities or *happenstance*, as described by Miller (1983). For most of the respondents, the decision-making process did not entail choosing from a range of alternatives. Rather, it was a matter of accepting one of the few options available to them. The choices, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997:33) conclude, were therefore “neither technically rational nor irrational”. They were instead pragmatically rational.

The theoretical framework offered by careership stipulates that choices can only be comprehended in relation to the life history of those who make them. In this context, life

history refers to the sum of social networks and cultural traditions in which the subject is, and has been, submerged. While the significance of social networks will be dealt with in greater detail below, the notion of *culture* will be elaborated upon here. Culture can be defined as the knowledge, norms and values shared by a particular group (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997:33). Clark et al. (1981) expand upon this, noting that “a culture includes the *maps of meanings* which makes things intelligible to its members [...] Culture is the way the social relations of a group are structured and shaped; but it is also the way those shapes are experienced, understood and interpreted” (Clarke et al. 1981:52-53 in Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997:33). In summary, culture allows people to make sense of the world in which they live.

The emphasis on culture and life histories brings us to Bourdieu and his conceptual opus. Central to Bourdieu’s theoretical framework is the idea that we are all born into and are a product of a particular social context (Bourdieu, 1977). Individual thoughts and practices are implicitly socially and culturally bound. Bourdieu expounds his argument by introducing the concept of *habitus*. Habitus is understood as a socially constituted system of dispositions that shapes the belief and actions of the individual (Bourdieu, 1990:55). It encapsulates the way in which cognitive processes of individuals are simultaneously subjectively and objectively predisposed (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997:33). The concept can best be described as the strategy-generating principle which enables individual agents to manage unexpected and perpetually-changing scenarios or, as Bourdieu notes, a “system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks” (Bourdieu, 1977:95).

The concept of habitus has often been criticised for being structurally deterministic and for placing too much importance on the objective predispositions of the individual. Jenkins (1992) argues that Bourdieu’s conceptual toolbox fails to encompass a theory of learning and mobility. He claims that it leaves Bourdieu with a rigid theoretical apparatus which leaves little if any room for change and individual agency. A similar critique can be found in Brown (1987). In an attempt to circumvent the alleged structural determinism of habitus, Brown proposes the concept *frame of reference*. Decisions are understood to be made within a frame of familiar reference points, which have been shaped by the symbiotic relationship between culture and identity. Instead of regarding Brown’s concept as an alternative to habitus, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997:34) suggest that frame of reference is rather a mechanism

within its development. They, like Okano (1995), claim that far from being a deterministic device, habitus encompasses the dynamic nature described in Brown's own concept. In a similar vein, Wacquant (2006) stress that habitus is,

“a principle of *both social continuity and discontinuity*: continuity because it stores social forces into the individual organism and transports them across time and space; discontinuity because it can be modified through the acquisition of new dispositions and because it can trigger innovation whenever it encounters a social setting discrepant with the setting from which it issues” (Wacquant, 2006:268, italics original).

From an early age, we start accumulating schemata, or conceptual structures, which help us to comprehend our experiences. These structures regulate our understanding of the world and allow us to make sense of it based upon the information available. The sum of schemata adds to the dispositions that shape habitus: “As new experiences are gained schemata are modified and as they change so does what is recognised in the surrounding world. In this dialectical way, the life history of the individual shapes and is shaped by his/her practice” (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997:34). Thus, as it is impossible to step outside habitus, decision-making can never be context-free.

Based on these concepts, Hodkinson and Sparkes suggest that the young people in their own study made rational choices within *horizons for action*. It refers to the bounds within which decisions are made and actions are taken. As information is filtered by schemata, horizons for action regulate our perceptions of the world and the choices available to us. Giddens (1984) refers to this cognitive process as the dialectic of constraint, while Bourdieu (1977) talks of sense of limits or sense of reality. Horvat (1997) documented how social and psychological experiences of American high school students influenced choice of tertiary education institution. She found that most students were likely to apply to institutions that were in accordance with their own beliefs and values. This can be understood in light of what Bourdieu (1984) calls *a sense of one's place*, or more specifically, *knowing one's academic place* (Reay et al., 2001:864). Bourdieu shows how objective restrictions become transformed into practical perceptions of objective restrictions, where “a sense of one's place [...] leads one to exclude oneself from places from which one is excluded” (Reay et al, 2001:864). The phenomenon of self-exclusion from options falling outside our horizons fits what Bachrach and Baratz (1963) call a *non-decision*. In sum, what we observe and therefore select, ultimately depends on our horizons for action.

## ii) Power Relations in the Field

The second dimension of the theoretical framework encompasses the concept of *field* (Bourdieu, 1984, 1993). The concept posits that the different spheres of life form separate microcosms endowed with distinct rules and authorities. On the one hand, a field is a structured space of positions. On the other, it is a site of struggle through which participants compete for the distribution of resources. Bourdieu explains the concept using the analogy of a game: “We can indeed, with caution, compare a field to a game (*jai*) although, unlike the latter, a field is not the product of a deliberate act of creation, and it follows rules or, better, regularities, that are not explicit and codified” (Bourdieu in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:98). In contrast to the modus operandi of a normal game, the players in a field of career decision-making (for example young people, parents, teachers and career guidance counsellors) seek to achieve different goals. The structure of the field is defined by the relations of force between the different players (Bourdieu in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:99). The relations of force are, in turn, governed by the degree of power (or *capital*) held by the different players. Each player brings different sets of capital to the game. Capital presents itself primarily in three forms or guises. Cultural capital refers to the sum of symbolic elements that are acquired by belonging to a specific social class. Economic capital encompasses assets which are immediately convertible into monetary units. Social capital is the aggregate of resources (actual or potential) that are affiliated with membership in a group or social network. The composition of the different capitals determines the players’ ability to position themselves in the game, and consequently influence the rules by which the field is governed (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997:36).

In their study on English youth, Hodkinson and Sparkes found that career choice was determined by a complex pattern of social interactions in the field (Hodkinson, 1998:558). The field of social interactions was not external to them, but rather an integral part of their being. The structure of the field was, as noted above, determined by the amount of capital obtained by the participants involved. The use of capital in this regard resembles Okano’s (1993) concept of *resources*. She claims that the value of a particular resource hinges on the very context in which it is applied. For instance, while certain characteristics may hold merit in a particular field, the same features may be deemed neutral or even negative in a different context.

### iii) Transformation and Turning-Points

The third and final dimension of careership is concerned with the transformative nature of educational and vocational decision-making, framed by Hodkinson and Sparkes as “the location of decisions within the partly unpredictable pattern of turning-points and routines that make up the life course” (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997:38). They understand the process of career choice as a series of life-changing moments. Collectively, these moments constitute the unpredictable pattern of discontinuity that characterises our lives. The endorsement of turning-points as an analytical instrument is an implicit rejection of the deterministic view on career development. Together with the concepts of habitus and field, it seeks to ensure that the method of inquiry maintains the balance between constructivism and structuralism.

The concept of turning-points is borrowed from Strauss (1962), who claimed that these moments can be observed in every aspect of our lives, including the process of career choice. A turning-point, Strauss notes (1962:71), takes place when an individual reconsiders or questions the status quo. As a result, it can cause a significant transformation of identity. Similar notions can be found in the more recent literature on cognitive development, including *epiphanies* (Denzin, 1989) and *biographical discontinuity* (Alheit, 1994). The process of choosing career should therefore be read as an irregular pattern of experiences dispersed with turning-points. Within each of these points, decision-making is pragmatically rational and governed by the relational power dynamics of the particular field.

The pragmatic rationality framework provides the foundation for a holistic analysis of educational and vocational choice-making. Such an analysis requires an assessment of the different sources of influence in the choice-making process. Grounded in national and international literature, the ensuing section will provide an overview of the most important influences.

#### **Sources of Influence**

The field of student decision-making is made up by a complex web of social interactions. Young people are influenced by a myriad of forces, sources, actors and factors. The following section traces the most influential sources within and outside the familial sphere.



### *Influences Within the Family*

The broad consensus within the literature on choice-making is that family, and then especially parents, is the most important source of influence in the decision-making process (Kotrlik and Harrison, 1989; Vondracek, Lerner, and Schulenberg, 1986). The influence of parents on career choice stems from the continuous interaction between them and the child. Early experiences in the life of a child serve as a foundation for developing its identity and cognitive ability (Zunker, 1990). Parents are, in other words, crucial interpreters of information about the workings of the world. The nature of this influence can, however, take many forms, including implicit inculcation of values and explicit transmission of knowledge.

Studies of career choice in Britain have shown that while parents seldom force their child down a particular path, young people will often make decisions in line with the preferences and expectations of their parents (Payne, 2003:2-3). Choices are, in other words, made within their parents' framed field of reference (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000:144). This observation has been made at different levels of the education ladder. Foskett and Hesketh claim that decisions are "made within frames of reference defined by their parents. Some options, whether of institution, course or career aspiration, will be excluded as possibilities by parents, but pupils will be able to make relatively unconstrained choice within non-excluded options" (Foskett and Hesketh, 1997:308). In a study of British sixteen-year-olds, Furlong (1993) found that parental involvement and interest in school matters had a positive effect on their children's attitudes towards education. Similar observations were made by Keys and Fernandes (1993) in their extensive study of factors associated with school learners' attitudes towards education.

The influence of parents extends beyond the process of implicit inculcation of attitudes. Parents are also influential as an explicit source of information and advice. Studies have suggested that parental encouragement is far more important than any other forms of external support, not excluding peers, teachers or career guidance counsellors (Furlong, 1993; Witherspoon, 1995; Maychell et al., 1998). The importance of the family in shaping educational and occupational choices was also observed by Taylor (1992) in his study on school children in Surrey, England. He concluded that "[t]he family was the key, and often the single most important informal source of guidance, information and influence [...]. Mothers played an especially instrumental information-seeking role" (Taylor, 1992:319 in Payne, 2003:31).

While the impact of parents cannot be underestimated, it is necessary to differentiate between parental pressure and parental influence. Vincent and Dean (1977) observed that less than two per cent of the students in their sample stated 'parental pressure' as the key reason for entering higher education. Similar findings came out of Foskett and Hesketh's (1997) study on British secondary school learners. The authors found that while only two per cent of the learners cited their parents as having made the decision, more than seventy-five per cent claimed the decision was their own. The literature seems to suggest that the role of the parents in the decision-making process is that of an active partner (Mangan, Adnett and Davies, 2000:23), or as Macrae, Maguire and Ball (1996) conclude: "Most parents appear simply to oversee their 16 year olds' decisions. Many students talked of being 'trusted' by their parents to make sensible choices" (Macrae, Maguire and Ball, 1996:39).

It is equally important not to treat parents as a uniform category. In her seminal study of parental impact on young people's educational choices, Lareau (2003) illustrates the existence of specific class-cultural orientations to child upbringing. She argues that parents of different social backgrounds employ very different approaches to childrearing. Based on interviews and observations of a multi-ethnic family sample in the United States, the study makes the claim that parents' socio-economic class determines how children cultivate their skills, irrespective of race. In this regard, Lareau differentiates between two modes of childrearing (Lareau, 2003:1-4). Poor working-class parents, she argues, employ a parenting style based on restricted participation towards their children's education. It reflects an orientation to the idea of *accomplishment of natural growth* – that is, "the proposition that children must be cared for and protected, but that they will then develop and thrive spontaneously" (Lareau and Conley, 2008:120). Middle-class parents, on the other hand, are heavily involved in the lives of their children. These parents are engaged in a process of *concerted cultivation*, understood as the active nurturing of children's skills and faculties (Lareau, 2003:5). These findings resonate with the outcome of earlier studies conducted in Britain (cf. Reay, 1998; Ball et al., 2002) which found that middle-class parents take a more interventionist approach to their children's education than working-class parents. Studying parental involvement in secondary school, Reay observed that "[w]hile all the mothers helped children with schoolwork and talked to teachers, it was only the middle class mothers who had the power and resources to act effectively to shape the curriculum offered to their children" (Reay, 1998:195).

More recently, Lareau and Conley (2008) conducted follow-up interviews with the families studied in Lareau (2003). The aim of the study was to analyse the transition process from

secondary to tertiary education. This allowed them to examine whether attitudes and behaviour of the families had changed over time. The authors placed great emphasis on two aspects of this process, notably i) *how* the decisions were made, and ii) *who* made them. The findings echoed the observations in Lareau (2003) and suggested that,

“[t]here are considerable social class differences in the direct involvement of ‘significant others’ in the process of identifying and selecting different future paths. In the course of developing their educational plans and making educational decisions, working-class and, especially, poor students tend to rely on assistance from teachers and guidance counselors; their parents view this as an aspect of ‘the school’s’ responsibilities. By contrast, for middle-class students, the process is typically a familial one: it is the student and parents together who map alternative courses of action and then select among them. Although counselors and teachers—along with tutors, and other professionals—also play a part, the role of parents, and especially mothers, is substantial” (Lareau and Weininger, 2006:3).

Similar patterns were found by Ball, Reay and David (2002) in their study on minority ethnic students in England. The authors differentiated between *contingent* and *embedded* choosers. Contingent choosers are largely left to themselves to gather information and make the decisions. As a result, they often act on the basis of very little information and knowledge. Ball, Reay and David found that there is “a high reliance on a few ‘significant others’ for ‘hot knowledge’—that is, first- or second-hand recommendations or warnings” (Ball, Reay and David 2002:337-8). Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) suggest that this type of chooser can best be described as “working on the surface structure of choice, because their programmes of perception rest upon a basic unfamiliarity with particular aspects” (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995:47) of tertiary education. Embedded choosers, on the other hand, are individuals whose parents have typically attended higher education. To continue studying beyond secondary school is regarded as an integral part of the embedded choosers’ *normal biography* (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998). The choice of institution and field of study are often based on extensive research and multiple sources of information. Parents provide their children with different forms of information and support, as well as being directly involved in the decision-making process (Ball, Reay and David, 2002:342).

While parents are arguably the single most important influence in decision-making process, there are other sources of considerable significance within the realm of the family. Keys and

Fernandes (1993) reported that a substantial proportion (two-fifths) of their respondents had consulted their siblings about these choices. Older siblings with current or recent experience of post-school choices can prove particularly useful in this regard (Taylor, 1992:319; Mangan, Adnett and Davies, 2000). Cosser and du Toit (2002:4) found that learners with siblings who have attended higher education were nearly twice as likely to state that they intend to enrol in tertiary education compared to learners with siblings who have not attended. The value of siblings' recent experiences was also documented by Macrae, Maguire and Ball (1996) who claimed that "[t]here is a very strong polarisation between 'cold', abstract, formal information and 'hot', experiential, direct knowledge [...] Students are sceptical about 'cold' information [as] it cannot tell them what it is like to 'be there'" (Macrae, Maguire and Ball, 1996 in Payne, 2003:47). The sphere of influence, however, goes far beyond the immediate structures of the family. The next segment looks at the main non-familial sources of influence.

### *Influences Outside of the Family*

Guidance from sources outside of the family appears to be as heterogeneous and ample as that from within the family. Foskett and Hesketh (1997) make a distinction between 'formal' and 'informal' sources of information to differentiate between guidance provided within and outside the formal career counselling systems.

While there seems to be a consensus in the literature that formal career education in schools is less significant than the family (cf. Macrae, Maguire and Ball, 1996; Connor et al., 1999), it still holds an important position within the decision-making process (Whiston, Sexton and Lasoff, 1998). A study of young adults in England and Wales showed that formal career guidance increased the probability of students to enrol in higher education (Witherspoon, 1995). Appropriate counselling has the potential of preparing young people for the post-school transition process, particularly by improving their confidence, opportunity awareness and decision-making skills (Morris, Lines and Golden, 1998; Kidd and Wardman, 1999). Macrae, Maguire and Ball also acknowledge the significance of guidance counsellors, but emphasise that their main function is that of a catalyst: "It is often not what they say, not any specific advice or information they give, but the sense of urgency or necessity that they instil into the students" (Macrae, Maguire and Ball, 1996:39).

The actual impact of formal career guidance, however, varies considerably. The empirical evidence seems to suggest that the effect of guidance counsellors depends on a variety of factors. For instance, White et al. (1996) claim that career education has a considerable effect on the choice of discipline or field of study. Brown and Krane (2000) found that guidance was most effective in cases where it included particular components (e.g. individual consultation; information about relevant professions; homework exercises). Others have argued that formal career guidance has less of an impact on high-performing students than on low-performing student (Stuart, Tyers and Crowder, 2000). Nonetheless, career guidance in school can only be understood in terms of the quantity and quality of its provision. The extent to which career education is offered – and the quality of this guidance – differs considerably between secondary schools (Taylor, 1992). The skewed provision tends to follow a pattern of institutional socio-economic divergence. In schools where career guidance is either partially or completely unobtainable, learners are often left to themselves. As a result, they are forced to rely on ‘informal’ guidance outside of the formal education system (Maychell et al., 1998).

The category of informal career guidance comprises the many different types of support provided by ‘significant others’ outside of the formal system. One example is peer influence. Studies have shown that learners are more likely to enrol in higher education if their friends are doing so also (Cheng, 1995; Thomas, Webber and Walton, 2002). Together with parents and siblings, friends play a key role in determining the outcome of the decision-making process. Other scholars have focused more on the qualitative characteristics of peer influence, especially its function to instil certain attitudes and as a source of information. Keys and Fernandes (1993) and Maychell et al. (1998) found that youth tend to discuss their decisions with friends. Ryrie (1981) observed that the pivotal effect of peer networks is its influence on the development of attitudes over time. He noted that “the influence of friends took place, not so much in a direct way as by making a contribution to the students’ sense of what it would be natural or appropriate for them to do” (Ryrie, 1981:62). Informal guidance can also take place outside of the circle of friends. Although there is less substantial research on this area – largely due to its casual and haphazard nature – guidance and support are often provided by dedicated teachers, neighbours and other acquaintances in the community.

## **Summary**

This chapter has provided an overview of the relevant literature on educational and vocational choice-making. The intention has been to establish a contextual and conceptual platform from which an empirical analysis could depart. It started out by exploring recent South African literature on student decision-making, and the theoretical models upon which these studies were based. The implicit sense of individual rationality found in much of the contemporary research and policy literature has, however, attracted criticism from various scholarly circles. Following this critique, the latter sections of the chapter explore the components of an alternate approach to the field of student decision-making. This approach provides the theoretical and conceptual framework upon which the ensuing analysis is structured. This dissertation continues, in Chapter Three, by looking at the study's methodological considerations.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a methodological assessment of the study herein. It seeks to shed light on the nature of the research project, focusing on how the study was conducted, the techniques and methods employed and, finally, the rationale behind these choices. The chapter concludes by presenting the study's epistemological grounding and the limitations of the methods chosen.

### **Research Methods**

The study was conducted using qualitative research methods in the form of in-depth, semi-structured interviews.<sup>6</sup> The rationale for employing this particular method of inquiry can be traced to the scope of the research project. As stipulated in the leading research question, the study seeks to investigate the nature of decision-making among students in the field of South African tertiary education. The main emphasis lies with the qualitative nature of decision-making. Whilst quantitative studies on student choice behaviour usually employ factor analysis to single out key variables, a qualitative study is rather interested in the contextual, descriptive and exploratory nature of decision-making (White, 2007). Qualitative research methods allow the researcher to comprehend social phenomena in their uniqueness as part of a specific setting and the interactions thereof (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, Merriam, 1998). The use of semi-structured interviews opens up the possibility for participants to express themselves in ways that are less controlled and predetermined by the researcher (Marks and Yardley, 2004).

Case study research was selected as the method of investigation. As case studies are grounded in 'lived reality', they facilitate the exploration of the unusual and the unexpected. Multiple case studies allow the researcher to focus on the idiosyncratic as well as the shared experiences. Using this method can also help the researcher illustrate the processes involved in causal relationships (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001).

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<sup>6</sup> For interview guide see Appendix A.

## Sample

A dissertation of this format is accompanied by a set of restrictions, especially with regards to length of study. Thus, a decision was made to focus on a small number of disciplines at a small number of institutions. In coordination with my supervisors and officials from the respective institutions, it was decided to settle on two different sets of disciplines from two different types of institutions (a traditional university and a university of technology).

The ‘traditional’ university in this study is UKZN. Formed in 2004 as a result of the merger between the University of Durban-Westville – initially intended for Indian students – and the University of Natal – initially set up for white students – the institution is spread across five campuses in Durban and Pietermaritzburg. The institution is regarded as one of the leading universities in South Africa and was recently rated amongst the top 500 universities in the world by the Academic Rankings of World Universities (CWCU, 2013). The university of technology in this study is DUT. Located in Durban and Pietermaritzburg, the institutions was founded in 2002 as a result of the merger of the two *technikons*, or technical colleges, the ML Sultan College – originally for Indian students – and the Natal Technikon College – initially established for white students only (SARUA, 2012).

Across these institutions the study focuses on two types of disciplines, namely social care (represented by the Bachelor Degree of Social Work at UKZN and the National Diploma in Child and Youth Development at DUT) and civil engineering (the Bachelor Degree of Civil Engineering at UKZN and the National Diploma in Civil Engineering at DUT). One of the main reasons for selecting these disciplines was their vocational nature. The students in these programmes had made a particular *career* choice. As the study is founded on a conceptual analysis of young people’s choice of educational and vocational pathways, it was vital to locate a set of disciplines that would comply with this criterion.

The first of the two social care programmes, the Bachelor Degree in Social Work at UKZN, is a four-year course. The student body of the first-year programme, of which this study is partly founded, is overwhelmingly female (over two-thirds), and exclusively African (DMI, 2012). The admission requirement was 30 matriculation points for the academic year of 2013 (UKZN, 2012). Applicants were in addition required to submit an essay upon which their application is assessed. In 2012, social work was one of the programmes that received the highest number of applications at the university (DMI, 2012). The other social care programme, the National Diploma in Child and Youth Development at DUT, is a three-year



course. Whilst the diploma is not equivalent of a degree, the students may opt to do a so-called B-Tech (Bachelor Degree of Technology) after completing the first three years of study. The demographics of the study body resemble that of social work at UKZN with a high proportion of female African students. In 2013, the entry requirements were 20 matriculation points.

A degree or diploma in a social care discipline prepares individuals to work within the field of child and family welfare, either as private practitioners, in governmental or non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Since the early 2000s there has been a change in patterns of employment. A growing number of social workers are now entering the public sector as the salaries herein are significantly higher than in the NGO sector (Breier, 2009:1). However, despite the high demand for social workers in South Africa, studies have found that the profession has become increasingly marginalised in recent decades. Earle (2008:2) describes a profession characterised by low salaries, poor working conditions, lack of resources, and high workloads.

Looking at the civil engineering programmes, the first cohort – the Bachelor Degree in Civil Engineering at UKZN – is a four-year course. The National Diploma in Civil Engineering at DUT, on the other hand, is a three-year programme. In contrast to the social care student body, students in the civil engineering cohorts were predominantly male and Indian. The entry requirements in 2013 were minimum 35 matriculation points at both DUT and UKZN, including specialisation in Mathematics, Physical Science and English. Civil engineering graduates are employed across most sectors of the economy and work with design, construction and maintenance of the built environment. The general shortage of engineers and other built environment professionals in South Africa has increased the salaries for this group in recent years (du Toit and Roodt, 2009).

### **Sampling Methods**

Once the disciplines and institutions had been selected, the process of locating students ensued. Different methods were employed in this regard. An introductory email was initially sent out to the students of the respective programmes informing them about the nature of the research project. The written invitation was accompanied by class visits where the study was briefly presented to the students. Interested students would either enlist themselves by signing

up immediately or by contacting the researcher subsequently. Once a satisfactory number of students had been obtained, the researcher commenced on the process of selecting participants using purposeful sampling methods. Purposeful selection involves non-probability sampling, and permits the researcher to draw up a sample from which the most can be learnt (Merriam, 1998:61). It also allows the researcher to create a student sample which is representative of the research population (Babbie, 2007:184). The sample was structured in accordance to the race and gender distribution across the four cohorts. It included i) seven first-year students in the Bachelor Degree programme of Social Work at UKZN; ii) five first-year students in the Bachelor Degree programme of Civil Engineering at UKZN; iii) seven first-year students in the National Diploma programme of Child and Youth Development at DUT; and iv) seven first-year students in the National Diploma programme of Civil Engineering at DUT<sup>7</sup>. The four cohorts were made up by 14 female and 12 male students, of which 19 were Africans, five were Indians and two were whites.

The data collection took place between February 2013 and April 2013. The interviews were conducted in seminar rooms at the four respective departments. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to an hour depending on the students' needs and wishes. The actual interviewing process was a very positive experience. Considerable efforts were made to create a comfortable atmosphere in the seminar rooms. Generally speaking, the students were forthcoming and seemed to enjoy sharing their stories. As first-year students in tertiary education, many of them found themselves in a new and unfamiliar setting. Most of them had never been asked these questions before and displayed satisfaction over the fact that someone was interested to hear their story. This was especially evident among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. They were clearly proud of the achievement to have made it into higher education.

## **Data Analysis**

The interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed to ensure the accuracy of the data. The content obtained from the 26 interviews was systematically coded and analysed using content analysis (Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit, 2004). Content analysis entails

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<sup>7</sup> The overall number of interviews was initially set at 28 (seven from each cohort), but due to the last-minute withdrawal of two civil engineering students from UKZN the researcher was forced to conclude the study with a sample of only 26 interviews. Attempts were made to find two new students were unsuccessful, largely due to an upcoming exam period for the students.

coding of raw data into relevant categories or nodes. This method is commonly used to detect recurring patterns of meaning or themes across the sample (Kumar, 2005). This procedure was conducted using the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo.<sup>8</sup>

## **Epistemology**

As described in greater detail in the preceding literature review, the approach employed in this study posits that human behaviour can only be comprehended by making an epistemological break with the dominant dichotomy (structuralism-constructivism) of the social sciences. It promotes an amalgamation of the two approaches as its point of departure. It is structuralist in that it seeks out relational patterns operating behind the backs of agents, and constructivist as it probes the ordinary perceptions and actions of the individual. The type of research methods described above facilitates this dual approach.

A section on epistemology should also pay attention to epistemic reflexivity. The purpose of scientific reflexivity is to unveil the potential biases of the researcher (Bourdieu, 2003:284). It is important to acknowledge that all research is, ultimately, motivated by practical or intrinsic interests of some kind. Researchers must therefore be aware of personal biases that may blur the sociological gaze and recognise that these will shape the direction of the research. In conducting such an assessment of the *Self*, the study leans on the notion of *participant objectivation* (Bourdieu, 2003). Participant objectivation posits that research is never value neutral. It resembles Gadamerian *hermeneutics* and the idea that all knowledge is, inevitably, interpretation (Gadamer, 1979). As a result, the researcher must understand and deconstruct his or her own position in the field of research. Bourdieu writes that participant objectivation is “the *objectivation of the subject of objectivation*, of the analysing subject – in short, of the researcher herself” (Bourdieu, 2003:282, italics original). Objectivation facilitates, in other words, methodological reflexivity by forcing researchers to turn their scientific instruments back on themselves (Wacquant, 1993).

On the subject of my own personal biases, a few points may be worth mentioning. The choice of theoretical framework is arguably one of the most important aspects in this regard. The decision to structure the analysis on concepts developed by Bourdieu was not made haphazardly. Rather, it was a deliberate choice – made within my own horizons for action and

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix B for coding tree.

bound up in my own habitus as a white male of Norwegian middle-class background. I have been acutely aware of the danger of transferring a 'European' method of inquiry into the South African context. To do so would inevitably expose the analysis to criticism and reproach from certain corners. In that regard, I feel the need to clarify the intentions behind the choice of framework. The decision to employ this approach was driven by a strong conviction that Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus could help shed some light on the logic of student decision-making in contemporary South Africa. There is little doubt that some of his theories on segmentation of French society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are ill-suited to explain a rapidly changing 21<sup>th</sup> century South Africa. It was, however, the article of Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) that showed me how Bourdieu's concepts could be employed to describe the cognitive processes operating in the field of career decision-making. To assess whether these same devices can enhance the understanding of choice patterns in South Africa was part of the motive behind this study.

### **Limitations**

Multiple methodological limitations can be found in this study. For instance, the use of case study research is affiliated with certain reservations. The complexity of the experiences examined can be very difficult to present in a simple manner. Moreover, case studies do not lend themselves to numerical representation in the same way that quantitative methods do. However, the most important reservation is that case studies are not a universal panacea. It is, in other words, impossible to establish whether the findings are representative of a larger population (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001). Hence, there are no claims for generalisability of the findings presented in the analysis below.

Another potential limitation has to do with the authenticity of the responses. The study would have been difficult to conduct without the support from the different departments. The staff at UKZN and DUT provided crucial support and helped facilitate introductory visits and interview venues. There are, however, reasons to believe that this 'affiliation' between researcher and university staff may have influenced the students' responses. Despite giving assurances that the study was conducted independently of the institutions and that their confidentiality was guaranteed, some of the students seemed apprehensive to speak about their institution and degree programme.

A final limitation is related to the medium of communication employed during the interviews. As the medium of instruction at UKZN and DUT is English, it was decided that the interviews could be conducted in English. This meant, however, that the majority of the participants - whose mother tongue was not English – were forced to communicate in their second language. While it is difficult to assess the extent to which this may have influenced their responses, some of the participants displayed some difficulties expressing themselves clearly in English. This is an interesting point located in the midst of the current policy debate on medium of communication in tertiary education.

## **Chapter Four: Research Findings and Discussion**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to present, interpret and discuss the research findings of the study. The chapter is made up of three sections. The first section presents the main sources of influence in the decision-making process, examining the quantitative and qualitative differences between the various forms of guidance and support. The second section traces these differences and investigates how they translate into practice. The analysis focuses on four key areas within the decision-making process, such as the decision to enrol in higher education, choice of field of study, choice of institution, and finally, constraints on choice. The third and final section of this chapter concludes the analysis by discussing the key findings in light of the research questions.

### **Sources of Influence within the Decision-Making Process**

At the heart of an analysis of educational and vocational decision-making lies the issue of influence and information. The study discovered that the students had been influenced by a range of sources. The form – as well as the actual impact – of these influences seemed, however, to vary considerably. The ensuing section will shed some light on the most significant sources within and outside the family.

#### *Sources of influence within the family*

The majority of the literature on student choice behaviour has been written from a North American or European perspective. As a result, their analysis tends to be based on family structures and child rearing patterns that are distinctly different from the South African context. In contemporary South Africa, a large number of children are brought up by people other than their biological parents. The 2010 General Household Survey found that 24 per cent of children in South Africa do not live with either of their biological parents. The highest incidence of children living with neither mother nor father is found in the poorest households (Meintjes and Hall, 2012). The literature seems to suggest that the HIV/AIDS epidemic

(Madhavan, 2004; Madhavan and Schatz, 2007) and the labour migration system (Ramphele, 1993; Ross, 1996; Spiegel, 1987) are the main causes for this child rearing pattern. The use of the term *parents* – referring to the biological parents of the child – is therefore less suited for the South African context. As a result, the ensuing analysis will employ the term *caregivers*, whether biological parents or not, to describe the persons who occupy the parental role.

Over one third (38%) of the students in this sample indicated that they had been brought up by someone (kin or non-kin) other than their biological parents. The figure was significantly lower among civil engineering students at DUT (29%) and UKZN (0%) than among social work and child and youth development students (both 57%). Discrepancies were also found with regards to levels of education within the family. Nearly half of the student body (43%) stated that at least one of their caregivers had attended or is currently attending tertiary education. While 75 per cent of the civil engineering students indicated this, the figure was only 14 per cent for the social care (social work and child and youth development) cohort. By expanding the scope to include all members of the immediate family (i.e. biological parents, caregivers and siblings) who attended or are attending tertiary education, the ratio for the entire student sample reached over two-thirds. This means, therefore, that close to one third of the students were the first in their immediate family to attend an institution of higher education.

The sample includes eight students of so-called *middle-class* background. Following the definitions provided by Lareau (2003, 2011), middle-class refers to a household in which at least one caregiver is “employed in a position that either entails substantial managerial authority or which centrally draws upon highly complex, educationally certified skills” (Lareau, 2011:365). In this study, the middle-class category is predominantly made up by civil engineering students.<sup>9</sup> The remaining 18 students fall under the *working-class* category. The notion of working-class refers to a household where neither caregiver is “employed in a middle-class position and at least one [caregiver] is employed in a position with little or no managerial authority and which does not draw on highly complex, educationally certified skills” (Lareau, 2011:365). In other words, the levels of education and type of occupation of

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<sup>9</sup> Distribution of students of middle-class background after disciplines (total number of students in parenthesis). Child and Youth Development: 1 (7); Civil Engineering DUT: 4 (7); Civil Engineering UKZN: 3 (5); Social Work: 0 (7).

caregivers are central in determining the social class background of the students in this study.<sup>10</sup>

The literature review established that family background does play an important role in shaping the outcome of the choice-making process. The nature of this influence can, however, take multiple forms (Vondracek, Lerner, and Schulenberg, 1986). One example is the transmission of knowledge and information (*cultural capital*) from caregiver to child. In their studies on parental childrearing approaches in the United States, Lareau (2003) and Lareau and Conley (2008) identified distinct class-cultural disparities. As previously mentioned, the authors distinguished between two separate modes of parental engagement: *accomplishment of natural growth* and *concerted cultivation*. A similar pattern of differentiation was identified in this study. The mode of concerted cultivation had been experienced by all of the students of middle-class origins. Their caregivers had taken an active role in educational matters, particularly with regards to homework assistance and career guidance. Middle-class caregivers appeared to be familiar with the system of tertiary education and could therefore help their children prepare for higher education. «Lungelo», an African civil engineering student at UKZN, described the engagement of his caregivers in the following way:

“My parents were always concerned. They were always on my case, even when I was on holiday last year during matric: ‘Why are you sitting there? Matric students never relax. Go to your books and study!’ My mother would also drive me to the library and would pick me up whenever I needed it.”

A similar pattern of caregiver engagement had been experienced by «Siya», one of the African civil engineering students at DUT:

“Dad used to be a principal at a school but now he is retired. He’s now into business. And my mum is a nurse. Dad did his B-Ed [Bachelors of Education] at UJ [University of Johannesburg] and mum got her degree from UKZN but at PMB [Pietermaritzburg] campus. They know how learning systems operate and all that. If I phone them to tell them about my problems they can recall having similar problems when they were studying. That helps and it motivates me. ‘If we managed to cope, then then you can too. Look at us now, we have coped with all these situations and we have succeeded.’”

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<sup>10</sup> There is always a danger operating with class categories of this kind. While some scholars have stressed the need to develop more subtle analyses which recognise the differences within the class categories (Savage et al. 1992), the definitions by Lareau (2003, 2011) were regarded appropriate in this particular context as they relate specifically to caregivers’ knowledge of and familiarity with the tertiary education system.



The support they gave me was the most important thing because they would understand. If my parents had not been exposed to higher education, they would not have been able to help me in the way they did. They just wouldn't understand. But since they have been in the same situations themselves they can understand.”

Involvement of middle-class caregivers manifested itself in different ways, including assisting their children in selecting subjects, or majors, for secondary school. Leaning on Boudon (1974), Cosser and du Toit (2002:22) emphasise how subject selection in secondary school constitutes a crucial *branching point* in the decision-making process. «Gareth», a white civil engineering student at UKZN, noted:

“My mum chose my subjects as well. I did accounting and physics. She was like: ‘Do those majors so that you will be able to choose later.’ You know parents, they always know better. They want to see you excel.”

In the few cases where the middle-class caregivers themselves were unable to assist their child (either due to lack of time or knowledge) they would facilitate for their child to receive extra lessons from a private tutor. «Xholani», an African civil engineering student from UKZN, recalled that

“[m]y mum was especially concerned about us. If I had a problem with my homework and my parents couldn't help me then my mum would call some of her friends. She has friends who are teachers and during my holidays she used to take me to her friends. They would teach us and help us out with our problems.”

The working-class students in the sample, on the other hand, largely spoke of a childrearing pattern that resembled the mode accomplishment of natural growth. While their caregivers did provide some form of support the nature of this involvement differed considerably from that of their middle-class counterparts. Encouragement appeared to be transmitted in a ‘passive’ manner and often ‘from a distance’, as the caregivers rarely had the time or know-how to assist their children with school work or career guidance. They tended to lack the social networks of the middle-class caregivers and the financial means to provide their children with private tutoring. «Mfanafuthi», an African student in the child and youth development programme at DUT, described his experience in secondary school:

“With my homework, I was all alone. I didn't have anyone to help me along. I had to do it all by myself. [...] At home, my grandmother [i.e. the caregiver] would ask me

whether I had homework. But she couldn't help me with because she didn't understand it. She didn't go to school herself. But she would always make sure that I finished my work.”

This mode of childrearing was found in all four student cohorts, although it was far more prevalent among the social care students. Their caregivers' lack of familiarity with tertiary education meant that they were reliant on others for information about the system. In line with the literature (cf. Keys and Fernandes, 1993; Macrae, Maguire and Ball, 1996), the study observed that other familial figures had a significant impact on the decision-making process. This was particularly the case with older siblings or other family members who themselves had attended tertiary education and could transmit valuable first-hand information. For students whose caregivers had not studied at a higher education institution, the support and encouragement from university-educated siblings, cousins, aunts or uncles were crucial in shaping the decision-making process.

While familial support (or the lack of such) was decisive for the outcome of the students' choice processes, the study also detected important sources of influence outside the family sphere.

#### *Sources of influence outside the family*

The main non-familial sources of influence detected in the study can be subdivided into two categories: formal and informal guidance. While the former refers to career education provided within the formal structures of the education system, the latter includes any source outside of the formal guidance regime.

Substantial research has documented the important effects of career guidance in secondary school on the decision-making process (cf. Cosser, du Toit and Visser, 2004; Toepfer, 1994; Vondracek, Lerner, and Schulenberg, 1986). The analysis found that the students had all been subject to some form of formal career guidance prior to enrolment in higher education. The quality and quantity of this guidance, however, varied significantly. The students in the sample had attended three different types of secondary schools: ordinary public schools; so-

called *former Model C* (FMC) schools; and private schools.<sup>11</sup> The categories displayed clear differences with regards to guidance provision. Students who had attended either a private or a FMC school spoke of comprehensive systems of career guidance (e.g. designated career counsellor, multiple visits to and from tertiary institutions, information about disciplines, institutions, subject requirements, and funding opportunities). The encouragement and support provided by these institutions also extended beyond conventional career guidance. The students talked about the deep-seated expectations found in these institutions, and how it had influenced them to go into higher education. «Dumisile», an African student in the child and youth development programme, expressed how implicit transmission of attitudes was prominent at her FMC school. She recalled how she and her peers had internalised the idea that there was no other alternative than to enrol in tertiary education after matriculation:

“It’s kinda what everyone does, so you do it yourself and then only afterwards do you discover why you do it. In some way, it was the thing to do.”

The eight students of middle-class background had attended either FMC or private secondary schools with comprehensive guidance systems. While the middle-class students conceded that formal career guidance had affected their choices, they still held that the family was the most important source of influence. For the working-class students from similar types of schools, these services had a much greater impact. In fact, for this group of students, formal career education was the most significant source of influence. This must be seen in relation to the general lack of information about the higher education system within their own families.<sup>12</sup>

The data on ordinary public secondary schools revealed a different picture. Limited career guidance and support appeared to be the norm at these institutions. The little guidance the students had received came mainly in the form of compulsory life orientation classes. A small number of students recalled a visit to or from tertiary education institutions in grade 11 or grade 12. This was the reality for the vast majority of the working-class students in the sample. With little guidance from family and school, these students were forced to rely on encouragement and advice from other people in their communities. Many of the working-class students noted that this sense of ‘informal’ guidance had been their main source of

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<sup>11</sup> There are obviously differences within each category and this taxonomy should not be read as an essentialist interpretation of a continually changing educational landscape. The categories and their respectively ascribed physiognomies are purely founded on the responses from the participants in this sample.

<sup>12</sup> Attending the ‘right’ kind of school can in other words be a way for learners to circumvent the traditional class pattern. This observation falls in line with recent research on school choice in South Africa. Hunter (2010) found that children of relatively poor township dwellers in Durban often commute long distances in order to attend the more prestigious schools in the city.

information.<sup>13</sup> While this form of support may have been instrumental in shaping their choice-making process, it was nonetheless rather haphazard and inconsistent. As these interactions were sporadic in their very nature, the learners only seemed to develop a fragmented and fairly rudimentary understanding of the matter at hand. Succeeding sections will explore this guidance form in greater detail.

The participants in this sample had, in other words, been exposed to very different forms of career education and support. The pertinent question is how these quantitative and qualitative differences translated into practice. The ensuing section will probe further into this matter by looking at four key areas within the decision-making process.

### **Key Aspects of the Decision-Making Process**

For the purpose of this analysis, the subject of student decision-making has been divided into four areas of attention, including the decision to enrol in higher education, choice of field of study, choice of institution, and finally, constraints on choice. The four domains provide the contextual landscape for the main analysis on how students make educational and vocational decisions.

#### *Decision to enrol in tertiary education*

The students were asked to elaborate on how they came to enrol in tertiary education in the first place. Across the sample, the study found a shared understanding of education – and specifically higher education – as a means of improving one’s livelihood. They regarded a tertiary education qualification as the minimal requirement for acquiring permanent and well-paid employment. Conversely, they equated lack of such credentials with unemployment or low-wage occupations. Across all cohorts, this awareness was upheld as the main reason for their decision to enrol in higher education. It confirms the observations in Cosser and du Toit (2002) and Letseka et al. (2010) where the key motives for enrolling in higher education among South African youth were enhancing employability and securing high-income employment.

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<sup>13</sup> This pattern is markedly different from the observations in Lareau (2003) and Lareau and Conley (2008). As described in the literature review, the authors found that learners of working-class background are mainly shaped by formal counselling services in schools. There are reasons to believe that the limited provision of these services in ordinary public schools in South Africa forces learners to seek support outside of the formal system.

As the majority of the students had never been formally employed, and thus had no first-hand experience with the workings of the labour market, it was pertinent to ask where this awareness came from. The students claimed that it originated from observing people in their immediate social environment. This awareness had, however, come about in different ways. Students of working-class background typically argued that the low socio-economic status of their own family had taught them the importance of tertiary education. As noted by «Khewsi», one of the African students in the child and youth development programme:

“I looked at my mum. Although she’s a hard worker the only job she could get was as a domestic worker. [...] Why? Because she didn’t have the required qualification backing her up. So I learned [the importance of education] from looking at her.”

Middle-class students, on the other hand, claimed that the professional achievement of their caregivers had been their main source of inspiration. Observing the financial rewards of obtaining a formal qualification had taught them the significance of attending tertiary education. As a result, it was never an option for them not to enrol in post-school education. This decision did not even have to be articulated (Allatt, 1996) as it was too true to warrant discussion (Douglas, 1975:3-4). Diverging patterns of choice-making could also be found with regards to choice of discipline or field of study.

### *Choice of field of study*

The students offered a variety of motives for their choice of field of study. The most explicit rationale across the four cohorts was a genuine interest in their respective field. This reaffirms the findings in Cosser, du Toit and Visser (2004:xv) where the most important factor affecting young people’s choice of programme was ‘interest in the field’. Nonetheless, the ensuing in-depth analysis revealed marked differences between and within the different student cohorts. A common feature among the social care cohorts was a sense of responsibility to their community. By means of choosing a care-based profession, students would be able to support people in their own environment. Studies on career choice in South Africa have suggested that this sense of commitment is stronger among certain racial groups (Stead, 1996:272). Out of the 14 students in the two social care cohorts 13 were Africans. Mjoli (1987) and Smith (1992) have argued that African students tend to be more community-oriented in their career choices than other racial groups. Whether this is truly the case for the students in this sample remains uncertain. There are reasons to believe that this is more related to the type of students

attracted to the particular profession. A similar sense of duty to the larger community was not found among the civil engineering students despite a high incidence of Africans. Their main driving force seemed rather to be financial incentives and employment prospects.

Discussions about the rationale behind choice of field must take into account the extent to which students were allowed to enrol in their programme of preference. Of the 26 students interviewed, only 12 had been awarded the programme and institution of first choice. The figure was lowest among child and youth development students, where only one in seven had been accepted for their first option. The number was also relatively low among civil engineering students at DUT, where only three out of seven students had civil engineering at DUT as their first choice. The rest had put civil engineering at UKZN on the top of their list but had not been accepted.

The situation was markedly different among the UKZN students. Here, about two-thirds of the civil engineering and social work students had been awarded their first choice. The latter cohort is particularly interesting. Together with teaching, social work was the programme that received the most applications of all the programmes at UKZN in 2012 (DMI, 2012). The interviews did not offer a clear explanation for the large numbers of applicants but there seemed to be a perception among the students that a qualification in social work could fast-track them into the labour market.

An important part of this analysis is problematizing the notion of *choice* or *decision-making*. This includes questioning how the students made decisions about their future and on what grounds these were based. The students were therefore asked how much they knew about their respective field of study prior to enrolment. Once again, the analysis revealed interdisciplinary differences. The child and youth development students admitted to have known little about the profession and programme prior to enrolment. Their knowledge about the labour market and the possibilities of getting a job with this qualification had been also very limited. A similar pattern of awareness was detected among social work students. They appeared only to have had a basic understanding of the actual programme and prospective profession before enrolling. Information had mainly been acquired through personal interaction with social workers in their respective communities. The students highlighted these individuals as their most important source of influence. The heavy reliance on significant others outside of the family must be seen in relation to their life histories. Firstly, all of the social work students were of working-class background. Secondly, only one of the

seven students stated that their caregiver had attended a higher education institution. Finally, the social work students had all attended ordinary public schools with few career education services.

If the two social care cohorts had based their decisions on limited information, the situation was somewhat different among the civil engineering students. The students appeared to have had a better sense of the particular career and the degree programme. Both cohorts displayed awareness about the workings of the labour market and the possibilities after graduating. «Priya», one of the Indian engineering students at DUT, described her preparations before entering university in the following manner:

“I knew the entry requirements for this programme, and which subjects that would be important for this course. I knew the subjects that I was going to be studying once accepted. I basically knew the work that a civil engineer is required to do. Because if you are going into a career field you need to know where you are heading, what you will be doing. You cannot just go into something without knowing these things. You have to find out beforehand.”

The body of civil engineering students might appear cohesive at first glance but the analysis revealed striking intradisciplinary discrepancies. Middle-class students had, by and large, a good understanding of the profession and course prior to enrolment. In line with the middle-class logic described above, students had mainly acquired information through significant others within their family. The engineering students of working-class origins, on the other hand, seemed less cognisant of the path they had chosen. The choice of subject combinations in secondary school is one example. Although a number of university programmes, including civil engineering, require entrants to have majored in certain subjects, many of the students conceded that they had been unaware of this at the time. «Keegan», one of the Indian civil engineering students at UKZN, had never been informed about the course requirements despite his intentions to study engineering:

“To tell you the truth, I only got to know the subject requirements for university after I had chosen my high school subjects. I chose my high school subjects on the basis of my interest. And luckily, it was the perfect match.”

He and the other working-class students from ordinary public high schools had largely been forced to rely on themselves. Many of these students came from rural villages with restricted

access to information resources (e.g. library, internet). They conceded that limited knowledge of the workings of the higher education system had made this preparatory phase particularly challenging. As the ensuing segment will illustrate, interesting patterns of differentiation were also detected within the domain of institutional choice.

### *Choice of institution*

A number of academic studies have conducted research on institutional choices among South African university students (Bonnema and Van der Walldt, 2008; De Jager and Du Plooy, 2006; Jordaan and Wiese, 2010; Wiese, van Heerden and Jordaan, 2010). A longitudinal study by Cosser and du Toit (2002) and Cosser, du Toit and Visser (2004:xii) found that young South Africans tend to base their choice on the reputation of the institution or of the particular department. While institutional reputation also seemed to have influenced the students at DUT and UKZN, the most commonly cited motive for choice of institution across the four cohorts was geographic location and proximity to the family. As most of the students came from KwaZulu-Natal – and particularly in and around Durban – it seemed to be an obvious choice to enrol at a Durban-based institution. The significance of localism was documented by the fact that only a handful of the 26 students had considered studying outside the province. Even the students who had contemplated leaving the province eventually decided against it due to familial obligations and financial constraints. Interestingly, this pattern was observed irrespective of race, class, gender and discipline. The students appeared to be driven by a strong sense of pragmatism. As «Fatima», an Indian student in the civil engineering programme at DUT, conceded:

“I did consider applying to UKZN, but since my father works [at DUT] it wouldn’t be convenient, particularly in terms of transport. Coming from Chatsworth, my father would have to drive me all the way up there. It just wouldn’t have been convenient.”

For the majority of the students, moving out of the province (or the country for that matter) to study at a prestigious tertiary education institution seemed to lie outside of their *horizons for action* (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). «Thandeka», one of the civil engineering students at DUT, explained that it was never an option for her to leave Durban:

“I never did [consider leaving Durban to study]. At one point we were told that if they didn’t have space for us at DUT we might get a place at a technikon in Western Cape.



But I told myself I would never go to Cape Town. Personally, looking at my family, my mum worked so hard to raise us. For me to move away from my family now is not a good option for me. So I needed to be closer to my mum.”

While many of them had the grades required for studies at some of the most prestigious universities in Johannesburg and Cape Town, the idea of actually studying there had rarely been a matter of discussion. The sense of one’s place (Bourdieu, 1984) – both in the geographical and academic sense – seemed to have guided their decisions in a certain direction.

One of the main purposes of selecting two relatively similar student cohorts from two different types of institutions was to facilitate a comparative analysis. The assessment revealed some interesting differences between the students at the two universities. Irrespective of programme, the UKZN students appeared to be much more satisfied with their choice of institution. After all, nearly all of them had been granted their first choice. They claimed to have chosen a traditional university over a university of technology based on the type of qualification offered. The preference of a degree over a diploma seemed to have steered them towards UKZN. Students at DUT, on the other hand, underlined the practical component and the applied learning model as the main rationale for their choice. While this may be true, it is interesting to note that many of the same students had UKZN and not DUT as their first option.

While the responses may suggest a hierarchy of institutions, it is interesting to note that only a very small number of the students claimed that institutional ranking lists had actually influenced their decision. In fact, the majority of the students stated that they had not been aware of any ranking systems or the particular ranking of their respective institution prior to enrolment. The notion of *institutional rankings*, and its alleged importance, had only come to their attention after enrolling in higher education. Rather, the students appeared to have been guided by fairly ‘superficial’ preconceptions about the two universities. UKZN was widely perceived as a renowned institution of high academic quality and order. Conversely, the students had mainly associated DUT with strikes and student protests, an institution with a greater focus on the social rather than the academic aspects of higher education.<sup>14</sup> An

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<sup>14</sup> Unsurprisingly, the students moderated these characteristics when they were asked about their *current* perceptions of the two institutions.

illustrative response was provided by «Mfanafuthi». He admitted that prior to his enrolment at DUT,

“[a]ll I knew was that they had a lot of strikes. I didn’t know much about the institution itself. But I knew a few people attending this institution. The perception we got of DUT in high school was that the students didn’t emphasise too much on education. Some of the DUT students we knew focused more on the other things, such as entertainment, fashion and the social part of university. So we got the perception that DUT does not care about education. And all we could think about was UKZN. All the students we knew at UKZN were praising the education there. So therefore we wanted to go to UKZN. ”

The contrasting views of the two universities prior to enrolment might explain why a large majority of the students had UKZN on the top of their list. An assessment of the logic of decision-making must also take into account the conditions and circumstances in which the decisions were made. The students were therefore asked to outline the key challenges and constraints faced in the process of getting into tertiary education.

### *Constraints on choice*

The main concern across the four student cohorts was the ability to cover the costs of higher education (e.g. tuition fees, accommodation, transport, other living costs). These observations echo the findings in a study by Cosser and du Toit (2004:69). The authors found that financial incapacity was the most important factor preventing learners from entering higher education after academic ill-preparedness. Financial constraints were, however, almost exclusively a working-class phenomenon. The precarious nature of their financial situation meant that they were forced to look for alternative means of funding. Out of the 26 students in the sample, only a small number had been granted NSFAS funding.<sup>15</sup> Eight of the 13 students who funded their own studies had initially applied for NSFAS bursary, only for it to be rejected. Many of them had appealed the decision as they were concerned about having to withdraw from the programme if their appeal did not go through.

A distinct funding pattern was observed among the civil engineering cohorts. Half of the civil engineering students had been awarded private bursaries by companies or agencies. These

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<sup>15</sup> Five students (predominantly from the social work programme at UKZN) had been awarded NSFAS funding.

bursaries had been the salvation for many of the working-class students who would otherwise not have been able to enrol. Nonetheless, the bursary schemes were often field-specific and some of the students were therefore forced to change their career path in order to be eligible. «James», a white civil engineering student at UKZN, recalled how he had always dreamed about becoming a mechanical engineer. As the family did not have the money to pay for his fees and he was unable to get NSFAS funding, he was forced to look for external sponsors. When he ultimately found a bursary scheme it proved only to apply for civil engineering courses:

“I then realized that this is the path I will have to go. I had no choice because I didn’t have funding, I didn’t have a sponsor. That made me change from mechanical to civil engineering.”

Financial constraints were far from the only challenge facing working-class students. The lack of knowledge about the university system and the application process translated into low self-confidence. This was even more acute for students who were the first in their family to attend higher education. «Thandi», a working-class student in the child and youth development programmes explained that

“[f]inance is always number one. Putting that aside, it was self-confidence. Like, in primary I had the idea that I would be this high school drop-out. Seeing my family, most of them are high school drop-out. So I always thought that I would be one too.”

With regards to constraints on choice, the literature also tends to focus on the issue of occupational gender stereotyping (cf. Stead, Els and Fouad, 2004; Watson and McMahon, 2005). As already mentioned, the gender distribution of the social care and civil engineering disciplines is overwhelmingly dominated by females and males respectively. The students were all cognisant of the occupational gender stereotypes, and this awareness was most explicit among the female civil engineering students. Several of them even admitted that they had been discouraged by people in their immediate environment from choosing a male dominated discipline and profession. «Vanessa», an Indian civil engineering student at DUT, noted:

“I think a lot of us thought about it. When I spoke to my cousin she said that we would be mixing cement and stuff. Many people told me that the course may not be something for a woman, since it entailed wearing gumboots, hardhats, being outside.”

However, none of the students argued that these stereotypes had not affected their final decision. While this may be true, the clear gender imbalances existing between these disciplines in South Africa seem to suggest that many young men and women make decisions in line with what is deemed appropriate for people 'like us' (DiMaggio, 1994:458).

The objective of this section has been to examine central aspects of the decision-making process. It has displayed how and why the participants ended up choosing what they did. The final section of this chapter will conclude the analysis by discussing the key findings in light of the research questions.

### **The Logic of Decision-Making: Pragmatic Rationality?**

The overarching aim of this dissertation has been to investigate decision-making among students in the civil engineering and social care programmes at DUT and UKZN. It sought to examine the underlying nature of the cognitive processes related to choice of higher education. The leading research question asked *how the students had made their educational and vocational decisions*. While the preceding sections offered many interesting observations with regards to student behaviour, the scope of the research questions signals that the final analysis will merely focus on the issues associated with the actual choice-making process.

The responses in this study outline three main qualities characterising the decision-making process. Firstly, the participants described a process in which they themselves were instrumental in making the decisions. Secondly, the students had largely rational reasons for making these decisions as they were based on evidence from lived experiences, either from first- or second-hand sources. Many of the students had been influenced by relatives or neighbours who worked in the same fields. This influence included both implicit inculcation of attitudes and values, and explicit transmission of information and knowledge. Thirdly, these rational choices were pragmatic in the way that they were based on partial and highly localised information. The students had made use of the information and guidance that were available at that particular time. The reliance on fragmented information was perhaps most explicit among the working-class students who had attended ordinary public schools. The stories of «Mfanafuthi» and «Keegan» are good examples of this. Decisions were, in other words, shaped by the students' own personal dispositions, or *habitus*. These dispositions had been moulded by their life histories and were situated in the context in which they, their

families and friends lived. Within these horizons for action, the students made logical and rational choices. Hence, one could argue that they made *pragmatically rational* choices.

These findings largely support the observations made by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) about the nature of decision-making. The pattern of pragmatically rational decision-making was found in all of the 26 interviews, *irrespective of race, social class, gender and discipline*. This does not, however, imply that the students experienced the decision-making process in the similar way, or even that they entered the process on equal terms. On the contrary, the preceding sections have clearly illustrated how the participants were engaged in highly differentiated choice-making processes, largely due to their social and educational background. While these observations are important in and of themselves, their value *in this study* amounts solely to their role in distinguishing a general pattern of choice.

The interviews showed how educational and vocational decisions were shaped by interactions with others in the field of higher education. A key objective of the analysis was to understand the nature of this field, its boundaries and players, as well as the composition of resources (capital) of the different players. Within the field, students came in contact with, and were subsequently influenced by, a large number of other actors. This included caregivers, siblings, peers, teachers and career guidance counsellors. The hierarchical positioning in the field was, in turn, determined by the resources possessed by the different participants. The social work cohort from UKZN provided an interesting case in this regard. All of the students came from relatively poor backgrounds, which meant, in other words, that they possessed low economic capital. They had largely been raised by individuals with low levels of formal education, and had all attended secondary schools with only a minimum of career guidance provision, resulting in low cultural capital. Consequently, the students had few people to consult about the system of higher education, which, in turn, led to low social capital. They were, in effect, forced to rely on themselves or on ‘informal’ guidance from people in their community. A similar pattern was detected among the vast majority of the working-class students in the sample. The fact that over two-thirds of the sample was made up by students of working-class background explains the prevalence of this pattern. While this cohort may have made decisions upon the same logic as the rest of the student body, their hierarchical position in the field was significantly different.

The study also documented that career decision-making was shaped by a series of turning-points (Strauss, 1962). At each turning-point the habitus is modified and adjusted. Over the

course of a lifetime, people experience a number of these moments, some more transformative than others. The emphasis on turning-points underlines the dynamic nature of individual habitus. The changes are, nonetheless, grounded in previous turning-points and routines which constitute the life history of a person. The analysis showed how patterns of biographical discontinuity (Alheit, 1994) had affected choice of career paths. Some of the students had changed the course of their career after an encounter with an inspiring individual. Others admitted to have been forced to change their plans due to external constraints. The story of «James» depicted above is a good example of the latter. «Faith», one of the African social work students at UKZN, explained how her turning-point came as a result of a previous experience. Like many young South Africans, she had tried out different pathways since leaving school:

“In 2010, I went to college to do IT [Information Technology]. It was a private college here in Durban. But I got bored of IT after one year and I decided to come here and do social work. [...] Why I choose IT? Because all my friends were doing IT and I thought I must do it too. Maybe I would enjoy it. I didn’t know what IT was all about so I chose it. And then I got bored. I lasted only one year. [...] But I realized an important thing – that I like working with people. Helping people. That is why I decided to become a social worker. I wouldn’t want to sit in an office all day working on a computer.”

«Mandla», another African student in the social work programme at UKZN, described how a seemingly difficult episode at the end of secondary school changed his trajectory:

“In high school, I had a lot of bad friends. We were always drinking, smoking, skipping classes [...]. I ended up failing grade 12 and was forced to repeat it. This was in 2009. Failing taught me an important lesson. I left my friends, many of them ended up dropping out of school. I’m not drinking alcohol anymore. I failed matric and that taught me a lesson that I needed to stop doing all of that, to get away from my old friends. I chose this course because I want to help people in a similar situation. I need to do something that can change people, people who find themselves in the same situation as I was.”

The responses from the students in the sample reveal the complexities of the decision-making process. In contrast to the more dominant theoretical models on choice behaviour (cf. Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Chapman, 1984; Hanson and Litten, 1982; Hossler and Gallagher,

1987), the pragmatic rationality approach acknowledges the unpredictable nature of educational and vocational choices. Following van der Merwe (2010), the observations made in this study suggest that “the variability and unpredictability of human behaviour cannot comfortably be reconciled with the perfect knowledge and rationality that economic agents are assumed to possess in a neoclassical economic world” (van der Merwe, 2010:81). The ensuing chapter will explore how the endorsement of the pragmatic rationality framework affects the way in which decision-making can and should be approached.

## **Summary**

The aim of this chapter was to present and discuss the findings of this study. The first section displayed the different sources of influence within the decision-making process. It discovered considerable differences across the student sample in terms of guidance and support. The second section looked at key areas within the field of higher education choice-making, providing the contextual bodice for the final assessment. The third, and final, section summed up the analysis by discussing the findings in light of the research questions. In contrast to the dominant perception in the literature of young people as rational actors, the study found that the participants had been making pragmatically rational decisions. The following chapter of this dissertation reflects on the potential implications of these findings on education policy and future research.

## Chapter Five: Concluding Remarks

The main objective of this dissertation has been to investigate the nature of decision-making in the field of tertiary education. The study sought to identify how students in the civil engineering and social care programmes at DUT and UKZN made educational and vocational decisions. This assessment also included exploring the basis upon which the students made these decisions, as well as their main sources of influence. In order to accomplish this task, semi-structured interviews were employed as the main method of inquiry. This approach facilitated a qualitative, in-depth assessment of the students' individual experiences of the choice-making processes.

The vast majority of the literature on student choice-making in South Africa has, as previously mentioned, focused primarily on self-perceived constraints and motivations for choice of higher education. The strong emphasis on why aspiring students act the way they do has left little scope for understanding how these decisions are actually made. The intention behind drawing up this dissertation was therefore to explore the different aspects of the decision-making process itself, investigating the potential of employing a holistic approach to this field of research.

The analysis found that all 26 participants in the study had made decisions upon a similar kind of 'logic'. There were, in other words, general processes by which all the students had been affected, summed up in the framework of *pragmatic rationality*. The endorsement of this approach can and should be seen as an implicit rejection of the rational action theory and the dominant assumption of aspiring students as rational agents. The choices made by the participants were neither rational in the technical sense nor were they the outcome of a planned, linear process. The title of this dissertation, 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?', refers to the classic dichotomy of the social sciences concerning structure and agency. The application of the pragmatic rationality framework was an attempt to circumvent this epistemological straightjacket – moving beyond the traditional narratives on the logic of practice. The observations suggest that the decision-making process is far more complex and unpredictable than typically assumed by the leading theoretical models. The deliberately vague nature of the pragmatic rationality framework, seeking out the broader cognitive processes of practice, acknowledges that human behaviour cannot be fully comprehended



through the lens of a *one-size-fits-all* approach.<sup>16</sup> It illustrates the futility of models that oversimplify or ignore the contextual complexities at which they are directed.

While pragmatically rational decision-making was detected throughout the sample, the participants were found to have made very different types of decisions within a variety of conditions. Due to the social and educational inequalities found in South African society, young people enter the application process to higher education on widely disparate terms. These inequalities play themselves out in various ways and translate into very different processes of decision-making. Prospective students face an increasingly complex set of choices in order to get into tertiary education. In making these choices, applicants must negotiate multiple educational fields in which they have unequal access to the relevant resources or capital. Disparities could particularly be found in the levels of knowledge and information upon which the students based their decisions.

The decision-making process had been influenced by a wide range of sources. The main differences appeared to follow along the students' social and educational background. For instance, the middle-class students in the sample highlighted their own families as the most important source of influence. Their working-class counterparts, on the other hand, primarily relied on support from so-called 'informal' guidance provided by significant others in their community or, for those who had attended either a well-resourced secondary school, from career education services in the formal school system.

The research presented in this study has offered insights into the ways in which young people make choices about their future, and the main factors therein. The findings should be of interest to university and government officials working within education and career guidance policy. It is vital that the individuals who shape the public discourse on tertiary education are cognisant of the multifaceted and highly complex nature of the choice-making process. The review of the research and policy literature in South Africa revealed an under-researched and largely neglected area of study. Further examinations and investigations must therefore be performed to strengthen and expand the general understanding in this particular field. The actual impact of this study, however, remains uncertain. It is important to remember that these investigations are merely preliminary and that the methodological setup of this study thwarts

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<sup>16</sup> The pragmatic rationality approach equally fails to grasp the full nature of choice-making. Its endorsement in this particular study should not be read as a universal validation of the framework. Instead, by challenging the hegemonic position of the rational action theory in the current discourse in South Africa, the study has demonstrated the need for further research into the field of human behaviour.

any attempts to generalise on the basis of these findings. To establish whether these patterns can be found across a larger population will require more rigorous assessments, both in scope and size. One would nevertheless hope that future policies and research projects will recognise the value of employing an alternative approach to the field of educational and vocational choice-making. That would be an important step towards nuancing the discourse on the logic of practice in South Africa.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interview guide

*(The bullet points/sub-nodes are only meant as guiding tools)*

1. Could you please tell me about yourself and where you come from?
2. Please tell me about your family background and the household that you grew up in.
3. Could you please elaborate on your caregivers/parents' educational background?
4. What is the current occupation of your parents/main caregivers?
5. I would like to know a little bit about the high school (HS) that you went to and how that experience was for you.
  - Reasons behind choice – why did you choose that particular HS?
  - How was your academic performance in HS? The Senior Certificate point score?
  - To what extent did your parents/caregivers involve themselves in your education?
  - In terms of support, who was the most important person during your high school period?
  - In what way do you feel that your high school prepared you for higher education?
6. Before we talk about your experiences in higher education (HE), I would like you to tell me about the transition process from high school to university.
  - 6.1.1. Did you receive any encouragement or support from school, family or otherwise when preparing for higher education?
  - 6.1.2. Did you encounter any discouragement or concerns regarding higher education from the people around you?
  - 6.2. Any form of career guidance?
7. Take me through how you came to study this degree subject at this institution.
  - 7.1. What influenced your decision to (i) enter higher education in the first place?
  - 7.2. Did you at some point consider other options than entering higher education?

- 7.3. In which (ii) field of study are you enrolled?
- 7.3.1. What did you know about this before applying? (*knowledge about study*)
- 7.3.2. How did you learn about this field of study? (*main sources of information*)
- 7.3.3. When did you decide that you wanted to go into this particular field/pursue this particular profession?
- 7.3.4. What is it about this field of study or career that attracted you?
- 7.3.5. What were the main reasons for this decision?
- 7.3.5.1. Of all the courses you could have chosen at the university, why did you select this particular one?
- 7.3.6. What do you know about the labour market and the possibility of getting a job within this field?
- 7.3.7. Did you at some point consider other options?
- 7.3.8. Was this your first choice?
- 7.3.9. If no, what was your first choice?

7.4. Now, let us talk about (iii) the institution at which you study.

- 7.4.1. What is the name of the institution?
- 7.4.2. What did you know about this institution before applying? (*knowledge about study*)
- 7.4.3. How did you learn about the institution? (*main sources of information*)
- 7.4.4. What made you choose this particular institution?
- 7.4.5. Did the ranking of the institution affect you choice?
- 7.4.6. What is your perception about this institution?
- 7.4.7. Did you at some point consider other options?
- 7.4.8. If no, why was that?
- 7.4.9. Was it your first choice?
- 7.4.10. If no, what was your first choice?
- 7.4.11. Did you ever consider moving out of the province to study?

**8.** What were the main challenges and constraints that you faced getting into higher education?

8.1. In what way did these constraints affect your final decision?

**9.** Do you intend to study for a further degree?

**10.** Which profession are you planning to enter once you have completed your studies?

**Appendix B: Coding Tree**

*(Including key nodes only)*



