



## Career Aspirations and Development of Moral Leadership from the Perspectives of Undergraduate Business School Students

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### Abstract

The main objectives of the study are to comprehend participants' career aspirations and how moral leadership can be inculcated in organizations from the perspectives of undergraduate business students. Forty-one participants took part in the study. They were asked to write their thoughts on their future careers 10 to 15 years in the future and second, as leaders, how they can inculcate moral leadership at their workplace. The 250 to 400 words essays were analyzed for similar themes and categories. Results from the study show the participants as ambitious, with females being more ambitious than males. The number of females who want to become entrepreneurs far outnumbered the males, 4 to 1. There are more males who want to become managers compared with females, 2 to 1. All of the participants agree that the development of moral leadership begins from very young age and permeate into their daily adults' lives, both personal and work life. The participants generally agree that to inculcate moral leadership in organizations start with the person, and then develop relationships with others, then focus on what is right for the organizations and the people involved. The fourth is to ensure that society at large exercise their rights and be courageous. Their line of thoughts is similar to Covey (2006), Kohlberg (1973), Super (1953) and Henderson (2000).

**Keywords:** Career aspirations, adult development, moral development, moral leadership.

### 1. Introduction

Scenario planning is used extensively in business. Its application is to stimulate creativity and critical thinking. In this study, undergraduate business school students were asked to imagine a scenario of themselves 10 to 15 years in the future, their careers and how they can inculcate moral leadership in the organizations they work for. The students were asked to write short essays between 250 to 400 words on the above. The objective of the study is, first, to comprehend undergraduate students' career aspirations and second, to seek their opinions on how moral leadership can be developed at their workplace.

The significant of the study is in human resource development area, in evaluation of programs to ensure graduating students have the necessary affective domain skills and for future programs development. These skills are leadership, teamwork, professional ethics, sustainable development and recognizing the need for lifelong learning. Knowing about undergraduate students future plans enable human resource developers, let them be from the field of adult and continuing education, workplaces, youth and community development and higher learning providers, anticipate and plan development programs to enable these young adults to achieve their dreams. This is in line with the definition of lifelong education given by Dave in 1976, as "a comprehensive concept which includes formal, non-formal and informal learning extended throughout the life-span of an individual to attain the fullest possible development in personal, social and professional life". Thus, review of literature in the following section is adult development, career aspirations, and moral leadership.

### 2. Literature Review

#### 2.1 Adult Development

There are many models on adult development. Merriam (1984), Imel (2001) and Merriam and Caffarella (199), identify different categories of models developed over the years. These models are sequential models, sequential models with special focus, personality development and integrated development. In this brief review only sequential models will be discussed. One of the earliest theories is by Jung who in 1930 differentiated 3 stages of life, childhood, youth and middle age. According to Jung, cited by Merriam (1984), youth is the period where anything is possible, just like when the sun rises and "looks upon the wide, bright world which lies before it in an expanse that steadily widens the higher it climbs." It starts at puberty until mid-life which begins between the ages of 35 and 40. Beginning middle age, according to Jung, is the setting of the sun, "the descent begins. And the descent means the reversal of all the ideals and values that were cherished in the morning". The sun falls into contradiction with itself. It is as though it should draw in rays instead of emitting them" (cited in Merriam, 1984).

The later sequential models which are tied to chronological age, developed by Havighurst (1953), Gould (1978), Levinson (1978, 1986) and Sheehy (1976, 1995) focus on tasks that adults must deal with at each phase of life. Both Gould (1978) and Levinson (1978) sequential models are similar, in which there are 6 distinct periods. Levinson's model is based on data obtained from interviews with 40 men between the ages of 35 and 45 while Gould's stages of development is based on his observation of adults in therapy and a survey of over 500 men and women not in therapy. In both models, early adult transition begins at the age of 16. This is the period when several important decisions are made, to leave home, getting a job immediately after leaving school or going for further study in either vocational or academic institution of higher learning. Between the ages of 24 to 28 is the "forming a life structure stage", making a commitment to adult roles. The "age 30 transition" starts at 28, this is a critical time for modifying the life structure. The "settling down, or becoming one's own man" period occurs between the ages of 35 to 39, the time for deeper commitments to

career and family. When men are in their early 40s, they are in “midlife transition”, in which they reassess their goals, values, and dreams and may make dramatic changes in the life structure. “Restabilization” occurs at 45 and above, is the time of new achievements, stability and productivity.

While the above model focus more on men, Sheehy (1976) differentiates both men and women in her 6 stages of adult development. Between the ages of 18 to 22, when men move out from the family to establish their identity, women choose either career or family. The “trying twenties” is when women may experience conflict between a family orientation and a need for success in the world. The 30 transition is when both men and women are restless, reflective and reevaluate earlier commitments. The fourth stage, rooting and extending, between the ages of 32 to 35, women either concentrate fully on family, to the “either-or” women who chooses between love and work, to the integration woman who tries to combine both family and work. Adults between the ages of 35 to 45 reexamine values and goals, while women experience this much earlier. When adults are between the ages of 45 and 50, if they achieved their goals and expectations set earlier, this period will be one of stability and satisfaction.

## 2.2 Career Aspirations

“Career” originates from the Latin word *vocare*, which mean “to call”, is the root of the word vocation (Imel, 2002). Vocation is a “calling”, something that will continue for many years, (Smith, 2014). Career aspirations or career goals provide a framework in which adults plan and motivate themselves, thus it is intertwined with adult development whether it is from the perspectives of sequential, chronological age, physiological development or integrated model. Merriam (1984) cites 2 sequential development theory, Havoghurst developmental tasks (1964a) and Super (1957). Havighurst three periods include becoming a productive person in young adulthood, maintaining a productive society and contemplating a productive and responsible life in old age. Super (1957, 1963) vocational development stage theory comprises of growth (4 -14 years), exploration (15 -24 years), establishment (25 -44 years), maintenance (45 -65 years) and disengagement (65+). Super contended that movement through the five stages could be a flexible process, referred to as mini-cycling, where people recycle through certain stages during various periods of life (Kosine and Lewis, 2008). Together with vocational development stage framework, Super also proposed 5 vocational development tasks. These tasks are crystallization (14-18 years), adolescents develop and plan a tentative vocational goal, specification (18-21 years) is when young adults firm the vocational goal, implementation (21-24 years), when young adults train for and obtain employment, stabilization (24-35 years) is when adults work and confirm career choice and consolidation (35+), when adults experience advancement in career. In addition Super described four different male and seven different female career patterns, linked self-concept to vocational satisfaction, and explored the concept of vocational maturity (Kernan, 1980; cited in Merriam, 1984).

Other career development theories are Holland (1959) personality orientation and Lent’s, Brown and Hackett Social Cognitive Career Theory (1987). Holland personality orientation is grounded on the premise that career choices and how an adult career develops are based on the interaction of a person’s personality and environment. Holland proposed 6 personality types, realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising and conventional together with their occupational environment. People search for environments that will let them exercise their skills and abilities, express their attitudes and values, and take on agreeable problems and roles (Savickas and Lent, 1994). The Social Cognitive Career Theory focuses on the connection of self-efficacy, outcome expectations and personal goals that influence an individual’s career choice. SCCT proposes that career choice is influenced by the beliefs the individual develops and refines through four major sources: a) personal performance accomplishments, b) vicarious learning, c) social persuasion and d) physiological states and reactions (Savickas & Lent, 1994).

In recent years, the shift in career development is inclining towards meaningful work (Imel, 2002) and career happiness (Henderson, 2000; cited in Imel, 2002) which are aligned to the concept of vocation as “calling”. Meaningful work involves listening for those internal signals that signify “deep interests” and then allowing the interests to lead to work that is aligned with a “core self”. Career happiness results when individuals find or develop careers that allow them to express their core identities and values (Imel, 2002). Bowie (1998), in a review of Kant’s definition of meaningful work, list six characteristics of meaningful work. These characteristics are, meaningful work is freely entered into, allow the worker to exercise her independence and autonomy, enable the worker to develop her rational capacities, provide a wage sufficient for physical welfare, supports the moral development of employees and last, is not paternalistic in the sense of interfering with the worker’s conception of how she wishes to obtain happiness.

## 2.3 Moral Leadership

There is a need for moral leaders (Nair, 1994; Roepke, 1995, Maldonado & Lacey 2001), they are the fabric of society. Many authors claim that it is a leader’s ethical conduct guided by moral principles and integrity that gives legitimacy and credibility to the vision of the organizations, without ethical leadership, the organization is a structure without a soul (Kanungo and Mendoca, 1998; Ciulla, 1995 cited in Maldonado & Lacey, 2001). The development of moral principles starts from childhood and it shapes how you think, live, develop relationships and play. Early sequential models of adult development from the perspectives of moral values are Kohlberg’s moral development stages and Fowler’s stages of faith development. Kohlberg’s (1973) stages of moral development which is linked to intellectual development, consists of 3 stages, preconventional, conventional and autonomous or principled level. At the preconventional level, from childhood to reaching puberty, a person is able to distinguish what is considered as moral and immoral behavior, for fear of punishment imposed by parents and society. From puberty to early thirties, at conventional level, moral and immoral behavior is practiced based on the need to conform and be accepted by the society, law and authority. The third stage which is called autonomous and principled level, from the age of early thirties onwards, adults are autonomous and principled to what they believed in, and adhere to those principles in work and personal life.

Everyone is a leader and principled leaders inspire trust. (Covey, 2006) provides definition of leadership as “leadership is getting results in a way that inspires trust”. To illustrate his point, Covey developed a model of leadership

based on '5 waves' of trust. It starts with the person establishing self-trust. To ensure that the leader is credible he or she should have integrity, intent, capabilities and results. The second wave is relationship trust comprising of thirteen consistent behaviors of trustworthy moral leaders. These behaviors are talk straight, demonstrate respect, create transparency, rights and wrongs, show loyalty, deliver results, get better, confront reality, clarify expectations, practice accountability, listen first, keep commitments and extend trusts. The third wave is developing organizational trust, the fourth wave of trust is establishing market trust and the last is societal trust. To become moral leaders and to inculcate moral leadership throughout organizations and society at large requires courage. Daft (2008) outlines the behaviors of courageous leaders as accepting responsibility, nonconformity, pushing beyond comfort zone, asking for what you want and saying what you think and fighting for what you believe in. Daft further adds that to act as moral leaders requires personal courage and this is harnessed by believing in higher purpose, drawing strength from others, harness frustration and anger and develop skills.

Moral leadership in work organizations and our society is a necessity. The fall of giant organizations such as Enron is due to the unethical conduct of the organization leaders. According to Johnson (2003), leaders put their own interests above those of their employees and the public, and failed to exercise proper oversight or shoulder responsibility for ethical failings and the failure of the followers to exercise their ability to think between rights and wrongs. Results from an empirical study confirm that ethical leaders not only influence employees' ethical behavior but also generate employees' trust. In fact the leaders provide a social exchange relationship with their subordinates (Hansen, S. D., 2011 cited in Khademfar and Amiri, 2013).

### 3. Problem Statement

The development of moral leadership starts prior to a person becoming a leader or a follower in the working environment. Students must be aware of the necessity of upholding ethical values, the ability not just to distinguish rights from wrongs but to live the principles in all aspects of their lives. Thus the development of moral leadership, career aspirations and adult development are irrevocably chained to each other. However, to date, very few literatures are found linking these three concepts together. In a review of literature by Imel (2001) on adult development, the author grouped adult development theories into four, biological, physiological, sociocultural and integrative. Both Imel (2001) and Merriam and Caffarella (1999) agree that integrative model hold the most promise in viewing adult development but models that consider all three perspectives, biological, physiological and sociocultural are rare. When reviewing the literature for this study, we found studies on career aspirations in emerging adulthood (Negru, Subtjira and Opre, 2010), gender differences in career aspirations (Smith, 2014), career aspirations from the perspectives of career counselling (Yarrow et. al., 1995; Hwang et al., 2006). Previous studies on moral leadership focus on business environment (Johnson, 2003) but not from adult development perspective. Thus, the main objective of this paper is to explore undergraduates' students thinking how they can inculcate moral development in organizations which they will be working for 10 to 15 years in the future.

### 4. Methodology

Scenarios are stories that can help us visualize certain situations. A scenario usually consists of two parts, the definite and the imagined future. Ogilvy (2006) describes three ways how scenarios can assist educators in the information age. First, by using scenarios as tools to provoke strategic thinking, second to stimulate, new, visionary thinking and third, as a motivator for getting unstuck. Using scenarios to stimulate new, visionary critical thinking, the author equate scenarios as stories which can provide a format for critical thinking and reflections. In this study, the scenario provided to the participants is of them holding significant posts in organizations of their choices. The participants were provoked to imagine themselves 10 to 15 years in the future. Specifically, the students were asked to write freely on what life will be for them in 10 to 15 years' time. The task they were asked to write is "*Imagine you 10 to 15 years from now. You are holding an important post and you would like to instill the values of moral leadership throughout the organization. Discuss how this can be achieved.*" Each participant was given 30 to 40 minutes to write his or her personal thoughts on A4 size paper.

The participants were fifth and sixth semesters undergraduate students studying at University Kuala Lumpur. Forty-one participants participated in this study. Data was collected during Leadership class, taught by one of the researchers, in September 2014. There were 17 males and 24 females in the class, aged between 21 to 25 years old. All of them participated in the study and wrote in English. The handwritten essays were then word-processed using Words and exported to Nnivo (free trial) and Excel. By utilizing the columns, rows and different worksheets, the researchers find that Excel serves the same purpose as Nnivo. Different worksheets were used to denote different themes, while the columns in each worksheet were used as sub-themes. During data analysis, it was found that participants interpreted the given scenarios in different ways. The differences in interpretation can be attributed to Gadamer's concept of horizon, which explain how comprehension takes place (Dilys, 2003). To put simply, there are multiple perspectives about the same event. These perspectives need to be analyzed and interpreted by the researchers and categorized into different categories and themes. The themes and categories were then compared with the literature. The results show that themes are intertwined with adult development, the first from the perspective of sequential, life events model which is categorized as career aspirations and the second from the perspectives of moral development.

### 5. Results

#### 5.1 Career Aspirations and Adult Development

Table 1 shows the career aspirations of the participants. The participants are generally very ambitious. Sixteen of the participants aspire to become entrepreneurs while 13 participants aspire to become managers in 10-15 years' time. Two of the participants want to be general managers, chief executive officers of major organizations (2 participants), work with foreign embassy (1 participant), lecturers (3 participants), Prime Minister of Malaysia (1 participant), chief

operating officer (1), writer (1) and high ranking police officer (1 participant). The number of females who wish to become entrepreneurs far outnumbered the males, 14 females and only 2 males. The types of businesses vary, from furniture business, boutiques, nursery to bakery. The number of males who want to pursue managerial work with major companies in Malaysia outnumbered the females, 9 males against 4 females. A possible explanation for this, is, the male participants want to have stable careers which give them fix incomes, possibly to enable them to support growing families. However, none of the male participants write about being husbands or fathers.

The females in this study appear to be more ambitious and industrious than their male counterparts. They are willing to take more risks, wish to have multiple careers and aware of the multiple roles of being career women, wives and mothers. This is similar to conclusion by Weathersby and Tulle (1980), that women may be faced with special developmental task of “balance and integration” of career (Merriam, 1984). The results from this study support and at the same time oppose findings from a quantitative study conducted by Danzinger and Eden (2007). One conclusion drawn from their study is that female students reduced their career aspirations and revealed a stronger preference for a convenient balance between work and other facets of life while in this study the females do not reduce their career aspirations but enlarge it. The following statement written by Farhana, reflects many of the female participants aspirations,

“.....I am a lecturer at a university and have my own business empire of wedding planner services for Malay wedding.....I have a few branches of wedding planner boutique throughout the country.....”, (quoted verbatim)

Typical statements from the male participants are:

- “I will be a manager at.....”, written by Muzammil, Syafiq, Asraf, Ashraf, and Irwan,
- “I will be an entrepreneur that manage the security in this country...”, by Farhan,
- “I will hold a very significant post at an embassy in Ottawa, Canada”, written by Amer,

Table 1: Career Aspirations 10-15 years' time

Career	Male (n=17)	Female (n=24)
Own business (entrepreneur)	2 (11.8%)	14 (58.3%)
Manager	9 (52.9%)	4 (16.7%)
Lecturer	-	3 (12.5%)
Chief Executive Officer (CEO)	2 (11.8%)	-
General manager	1 (5.9%)	1 (4.2%)
Writer		1 (4.2%)
Chief Operating Officer (COO)		1 (4.2%)
Prime Minister	1 (5.9%)	
Embassy	1 (5.9%)	
Police officer	1 (5.9%)	

One apparent conclusion which can be drawn from the participants' essays is how the participants develop and view themselves. At this stage of their lives, between 21 and 27 years old, this is the stage of their lives where anything is possible, “the rising of the sun” as Carl Jung coined it. The participants are ambitious and a few wish for comfortable lives. However financial gain is not the main reason mentioned in their essays, as the motivating factor for them to pursue their careers. Razif wrote “to lead Malaysia to success and peaceful in all aspects”, as his reason to be the prime minister of Malaysia in 10 to 15 years in the future. Kim, a young man of 25 years old who is an exchange student from Korea and also a football team captain, wants to be a Chief Executive Officer of Fried Chicken with special Korean sauce. He wrote poetically, “...all of the world and children to grandmother also love this chicken” (quoted verbatim). Farhan wishes to become an entrepreneur who manages the security of his country. To reduce crime and for the country to be peaceful, he wants to replace the police department with a better department from outside the country.

The female participants who want to become entrepreneurs, wives and mothers generally wish to help people as the main aim of their businesses ventures. Faten, an ambitious young lady who dreams of being a motivated lecturer, with a top university in Malaysia, wrote “always helping my students to be successful in their study” and “will grab the chance to work overseas”, as the reasons for wanting to become a lecturer. Nur, who also wants to be a lecturer and at the same time own a Muslimah salon, a wife and mother, is motivated by the thoughts of knowledge sharing and helping skilled people who are trained by vocational institutes to get jobs. Analyzing their personal thoughts, it is obvious that these young adults are motivated by the promise of much more than the promise of wealth. This is similar to Cabrera and Albrecht (1972)' s opinion , cited in Hoff (1997) “they don't interpret their careers as something distinct from or tacked onto the rest of their lives. Instead they have aligned their careers with their lives, so that they what they do on the job is both consistent with and support what they do outside of work. Their career reflects and reinforces important goals, needs and values that extend far beyond the workplace, entering into all corners of their lives”. Perhaps this is best summarized by Soong, a 22 year old female exchange student from Korea who wrote,

“Important thing in my life is experience, people and happiness doing what I want to do. I would like to write travel prose book after 10-15 years in the future because I want many young people to know that travel attracts not only excellent experience but also solution of their life and future” (quoted verbatim)

## 5.2 Moral Leadership

Participants' definitions of moral leadership can be categorized into two. The first in terms of leaders characteristics and the second in terms of what they do, leadership behaviors. The most cited definition of moral leadership by the participants is the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, seeking the just, honest and good in the practice of leadership. Other attributes cited by the participants are integrity, forward thinking, responsible, has the highest ethical values, visionary and brave. Raizaliza provides definition of moral leadership from the Islamic perspective when she wrote about four ethical values of moral leaders. These are telling, sharing, trustworthiness, truthful, and clever. According to her, “these are the characteristics of our prophet, Muhammad SAW, which in Arabic are Tabligh,

*Fathanah, Amanah and Siddiq*". From the perspectives of what moral leaders do, according to the participants, moral leaders are someone who guide, show the way by example, walk their talk, respect others, *temper their ego* and act with nobility and rectitude. Faten says it simply as, "*In my opinion, moral leadership, based on my understanding, is a person or leader who guides other people and has particular skills and capabilities.*" Faten's opinion is expanded further by Suri when she wrote, "*The leader is pursuing, aim to serve to develop skills and capacities of others, (usually subordinates). It also involves leading others with manners, respects the others' rights and dignity*". According to Iqbal, moral leaders serve others rather than show their skills and capabilities and Hidayah wrote that "it is about how we behave in our daily lives". This is clearly illustrated by Bellerina who wishes to become fulltime housewife, when she wrote,

*"Become a housewife I need to know how to become a moral leader for my family, so, it will help me how to manage my family without trying to control what their activity but try to discuss what they need and try to understand their problem, because with this ethical I'm the person who must takes responsibility, full fills commitments with my family and try to encourage and develops with my family activity, idea and problem"* (all the quotes shown are written verbatim)

Bellerina's line of thoughts is echoed by all the participants in explaining how moral leadership can be inculcated in their working lives. To them, moral leadership begins with the leaders themselves, they must be honest with themselves and with others. FarhanChe wrote it as "*the leader must have personal integrity, if the person cannot be trusted, the leader cannot lead*". The second consistent theme found from the participants' essays in how to inculcate moral leadership in organizations is to develop relationships with people who work with them and around them. Moral leaders have to earn trust from others in order to develop these relationships. They have to treat others with dignity, understand them, show their concern about others, show their commitments to ethical principles, take risks, eliminate fears and align their personal values to that of the organizations in order to motivate them. The third theme is to focus on what is right for the organizations and the people involved. All the participants agree that to be able to do what is right, they have to be able to stand up for what they believe in, they have to be brave.

## 6. Conclusion, Discussion and Recommendations

In conclusions, the participants in this study are very ambitious with the female participants being more ambitious than the males. The male participants are very straightforward in their essays when they wrote about what they want to be 10 to 15 years in the future. All of them wish for successful careers but they did not mention about having families, being fathers or husbands. The female participants on the other hand, wish to have it all, successful careers, being wives and mothers. Several of them even visualize themselves of having dual careers, being successful professional women and being entrepreneurs. The percentage of females who wish to become entrepreneurs far outnumbered the males, 4 to 1, while the percentage of males who want to have conventional careers as managers outnumbered that of females, 3 to 1. The findings from this study also show that the participants wish for their careers to be meaningful, not confined merely to accumulate wealth. To inculcate moral leadership in organizations, all the participants agree that it begins with the leaders themselves, then to establish relationships with others, and thirdly by focusing on what is right for the organizations and the people involved. Fourth, is by ensuring society at large is aware of their rights and not afraid to exercise that rights.

In general the young adults in this study adhere to most adult development theories, where at this stage, they set goals and enter adult world. Where moral leadership in working environment is concerned, the young participants' opinions reflect that of Covey's (2006). Similar to Covey, they wrote about having personal integrity, being honest with themselves and with others and earn respect from others. Moral leaders need to be persuasive; they need to develop trust from others in order to lead and to be followed. To do the right things for the organizations and for people involved, they need to be brave. To ensure organizations do what is right, the participants wrote about the importance of the society and government to ensure that this happen. Several differences are noted between male and female participants. First is, as mentioned by Gilligan in 1978, where at the conventional stage, women demonstrate their caring nature, and moving towards ignoring their own personal needs. This is demonstrated by the female participants who wrote about their intention to have dual careers, on top of being mothers and wives. In terms of moral leadership, both males and females agree that it starts from young. However, the females wrote that it is their duties to instill moral values at home with their children and at the same time ensuring the same for their husbands.

Literature review shows lack of study in this area, where the development of moral leadership is integrated with career aspirations and adult development. Firstly, the importance of this type of study is found in terms of evaluation of students recognizing the importance of ethical principles in their daily lives, be it personal working lives and with society at large. As the famous old adage of Mahatma Gandhi's, "the end of education is the beginning of character", thus, where higher education ends, the start of lifelong learning begins. For human resource developers in continuing professional education, they need to ensure that the young adults' needs are catered for by ensuring development of relevant programs and policies by relevant authorities. This is to ensure that these young adults do not lose sight of their aspirations and moral values, which can make or break any organization and society, thus ensuring sustainability, of what we value most.

It is suggested that future research should focus on students from other programs, either employing qualitative or quantitative studies. Experience from this study show that by asking the students to write their thoughts freely, they are free from inhibition typical of Asian culture, shy and afraid to say what they think for fear of being ridiculed. Another approach in qualitative study is by using focus group interviews. The advantage is where small group discussion consisting of 8 to 10 people per group, with a facilitator to probe the participants opinions on pertinent issues, data obtained will be comprehensive and in-depth. The participants will be able to voice out their opinions in a friendly environment, where when common issues are discussed, when one participant speaks, the others will start thinking about the issues and volunteering their opinions, thus ensuring continuity and provides depth during the discussion. Thus, relevant data which may not be discovered by other methods can be found.

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