

# System-oriented (collective) career versus self-oriented career

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, it is almost an axiom that career development is determined by satisfying the need for self-fulfilment. However, this need is not biological but social and cultural. Thus, the determinants of choosing a career type result (among others) from the relationship between an individual and a social group, hence we can distinguish extreme models of career – collective-oriented *versus* individual-oriented. The career types proposed in this study were characterized using Parsons' base variables, which were applied to describe the differences between the collective and liberal systems and between the two types of career mentioned above.

The article aims to present arguments to illustrate how the need and the ability to free oneself from social anxiety through gaining recognition determines professional behaviour. The starting point for its formulation was the assumption that a commonly felt social anxiety causes a need to gain recognition of the collective. The individual's need to free themselves from social anxiety and the ability to do so leads to a self-centred career model that is increasingly common in the age of information civilization.

The article analyzes the socio-cultural factors determining collectivist and individualistic orientation and their psychological and social consequences.

**Keywords:** career, social system, collectivism, liberalism, self-actualization.

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## Introduction

Observation of the behaviour of professionally active people over the past decades leads to the verification of assumptions about the actual career goal. Since the mid-twentieth century, thanks to Abraham Maslow, the thesis about the need for self-realization at work has been propagated. However, a limited group of people manage to satisfy this need; many confuse the sense of professional fulfilment with the satisfaction of the achievements and the approval of others obtained through it.<sup>1</sup> However, the social recognition that a person strives for is not the final goal but a means of satisfying the need for security – freeing from the negative feelings that appear as a result of the evaluation of actions by other actors of the social system. On the other hand, coping with social anxiety largely depends on the type of system in which the individual functions – the system which allows or even promotes the autonomous development of participants or, conversely, expects a conformist attitude and the adjustment of individual goals to the goals of the group.

The adoption of such a line of reasoning leads to the conclusion that the stimulus encouraging professional activity is the broadly understood fear of disapproval by the actors of the system, which may be eliminated by gaining the achievements expected by them. Thus, only a few are capable of self-realization, whereas the rest pursue careers oriented to the system, to the equivalence of exchange, the conditions of which are dictated by the normative order obligatory in the system.

The purpose of this article was to present arguments to illustrate how the need or the ability to free oneself from social anxiety through gaining recognition determines professional behaviour. Thus, it is an attempt to persuade to verify the assumptions regarding career development, consolidated as a result of the development of the psychosocial trend in management sciences. The structure of the argument was based on five Parsons base variables (pattern variables)<sup>2</sup> used to describe the differences between the collective and liberal (modern) system and a system-oriented and self-oriented career.

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1 S. Denning, *What Maslow Missed*, “Forbes” 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2012/03/29/what-maslow-missed/?sh=5ae4a6ff661b> [accessed 15.04.2021].

2 T. Parsons, *The Social System*, Free Press of Glencoe, Collier-MacMillan Limited, London 1991, p. 67.

## The role of the social system in the development of an individual

As Leary and Kowalski noticed, modern man is a descendant of the most social representatives of our species who, thanks to entering into social relations with others, not only survived but could also develop.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, every person at birth becomes an element of the social system that provides the basis for his/her functioning, and at the same time, organizes internal relations. In this way, he becomes entangled in a network of dependencies limiting (to a greater or lesser extent) the possibility of making autonomous choices and determining the direction of an individual's development, including professional.<sup>4</sup> All spheres of human life are influenced by the social system in which he participates and with whose members he makes the exchange necessary to obtain the resources required to meet his needs.

The concept of system and system analysis was introduced to the science by von Bertalanffy (1993), who treated the research object as a system of interrelated elements, existing thanks to open relations with the environment based on mutual interaction. Although it is a theory in the field of biology, its idea has found application in many other research areas, including social ones: psychology, sociology, and economics. According to Parsons, the social system is a network of interactions between actors whose decisions and actions are dictated by values, norms and interests resulting from the social role played. Thus, their autonomy is limited by normative (cultural) and situational pressures. Participation in the system gives support but also places requirements that are considered to be met when the actors of the system reward the action taken with approval and recognition. In this way, there is a risk of becoming entangled in exchange relationships.

Social systems are made by groups that share a common goal, resources, and a normative order (values, norms, and patterns of behaviour) that regulate the way they function. They include family, school, enterprise or political party. Family systems – family, social class, nationality – have a decisive influence on the development of an individual. It is in them where the individual participates in the early stages of development; therefore, the normative order adopted by them is the most deeply rooted and expresses itself in individual structures of values, patterns and norms of behaviour.<sup>5</sup>

3 M. Leary, R. M. Kowalski, *Lęk społeczny*, Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2002, p. 23.

4 D. E. Super, *A Life-Span, Life-Space Approach to Career Development*, "Journal of Vocational Behavior" 1990, vol. 16, pp. 282–298.

5 S. C. Whiston, B. K. Keller, *The Influences of the Family of Origin on Career Development: A Review and Analysis*, "The Counseling Psychologist" 2004, vol. 32, no 4, p. 524.

Parsons distinguished social systems by means of two interdependent dichotomous features: ascription – achievement and particularism – universalism. Their combination resulted in a list of four types of societies. Nowadays, the value of ascribed status has been significantly devalued. It is a common norm to expect people also from elite groups to have their achievements. Thus, this feature has been marginalized in favour of the achieved status. In addition to the above-mentioned second pair of features, Parsons mentions in his model of behavioural patterns collective orientation *versus* self-orientation, wholeness *versus* aspectivity and affective involvement *versus* affective neutrality. Which prompted, for the purposes of this study, transformation of the assumptions of the author of the theory of social systems regarding their typology in relation to two selected types: the collective system (particular-achievement) and liberal system (universalist-achievement). The former was assigned the following features: orientation towards the collective, wholeness and affective commitment, whereas the latter – self-orientation, aspectivity and affective neutrality. The collective system did not receive an adjective describing its character in the original version, but it is evident through the geographical indication by Parsons of its occurrence (Asian countries, e.g. Chinese). The universalist-achievement system was in turn called “modern”, which was replaced here with “liberal” in order to emphasize the freedom of choice of individuals as the basis for effective action.

Therefore, assuming that achievements are the dependent and dominant variable, the risk of entanglement in the system arises from the combination of collective orientation with particularism and wholeness, accompanied by affective involvement. And it is eliminated in liberal systems oriented towards universalism, individuality, aspect and affective neutrality.

## The need for security as the basis of development

An important role in the process of building social relations between system participants, which determines the strength of subordination, is played by fear – the primary emotion of a person – which is both a significant stimulus and a barrier to action. It is used as a tool of social influence. Depending on the type of a given system, the model of anxiety regulation may be constructive (liberal system) focused on reducing uncertainty or, on the contrary, destructive (traditional system) – when it leads to an increased sense of threat. The adoption of a polarized model of reaction to anxiety is based on the assumption that any neutral behaviour towards the state of anxiety, depending on the nature of the system, has constructive or destructive consequences. The type of applied regulations is a significant inhibitor of the development of the system and its units.

The need to free oneself from anxiety<sup>6</sup> is one of the fundamental human needs, apart from physiological instincts. Developed in the course of evolution, the ability to satisfy the need for security prompted people to build more and more sophisticated social systems, which caused the emergence of a new emotion – social anxiety, i.e. a negative reaction to interactions with other members of the system, dictated by the need to gain acceptance from the social environment. Thus, while the need for affiliation and recognition occupy higher places in Maslow's hierarchy, they are stimulated by fear of rejection. However, its intensity depends on the type of social relations in the system, which allow an individual to equip himself or not with internal mechanisms of coping with anxiety, including the social one. The system defines the nature of relationships that undergo negotiation and transformation during childhood and adolescence.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, a hierarchy of values is formulated and behaviour patterns are developed. The greater the dictate of subordination, the greater the fear; it decreases with an ability to maintain autonomy and distinctiveness.

The reactions to anxiety are characterized by a wide range: from running away (physically and mentally) to taking actions that effectively eliminate the threat. Therefore, for some individuals, anxiety is a tight barrier to development; for others, it is its stimulus. There are many reasons for this variation, and they may be of a medical nature. However, one of the important determinants of the ability to cope with anxiety is the social training that participation in the system provides. If anxiety is reduced by providing far-reaching help and care, the result is strengthening the need for affiliation and a conformist attitude, as well as the feeling of fear. On the other hand, keeping a distance and providing emergency aid prompts an independent search for remedial measures.

The factor that differentiates social systems and their ways of coping with anxiety is the conditions of the equivalence of internal exchange. Liberal systems, as opposed to collective systems, accept a varied range of equivalents in return for the care and education of the actor of the system. Its scope includes both recognition and a neutral attitude, or even distanced attitude, to the choices made and actions taken. As well as, they allow for the deliberate destabilization of the system caused by the pursuit of the autonomy of individuals. The freedom to build one's knowledge resources allows the actors of the system to equip themselves with rational defence mechanisms, also deconstructing fear. In turn, a characteristic feature of traditional systems is constant interaction with other actors and strengthening them by stimulating fear of the environment and disapproval of other actors of the system.

6 A. Maslow, *Motywacja i osobowość*, Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, Warszawa 1990, pp. 76–82.

7 S. C. Whiston, B. K. Keller, *The Influences of the Family...*, p. 554.

Culture, in which the main role is played by symbols (physical, linguistic, behavioural and personal,<sup>8</sup> which are material carriers of ideas, has a fundamental influence on the process of satisfying needs and building social relations.<sup>9</sup> These symbols serve as communication tools enabling interaction between the actors of the system. Due to the fact that they are usually accompanied by a strong affective load, their task is to strengthen the appeal,<sup>10</sup> contained in the communication and/or simplify its form.

## System-oriented career

The pursuit of active, dynamic career development is not the result of evolutionary changes but the result of the information revolution. The development of science, innovation, globalization, socio-political changes have fundamentally changed the labour market. The demand for employees supporting the production process has increased: in the area of relations with customers and suppliers as well as human resources management. The value of an employee began to be determined not by the ascribed status but the obtained status – which was confirmed by the professional competencies held and their assessment. Thus, the employee's market value is determined by his broadly understood achievements, which is a reference to the assumptions of achievement motivation, serving, *inter alia*, to meet the expectations of the participants of the social system. It applies in particular to actors of collective systems, whose careers are oriented towards the goal of the system and the expectations of the relevant actors.

A system-oriented career means submission to the traditional social order, subjection to the expectations and interests of the community, thereby following the path of development set by the actors of the system.<sup>11</sup> This common model of action is in opposition to the original idea of the definition of the need for self-realization – performing work in accordance with one's predispositions. To make

8 C. Sikorski, *Kształtowanie kultury organizacyjnej. Filozofia, strategie, metody*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2009, p. 19.

9 J. F. Jacko, *Ewokatywna, sugestynna i perswazyjna funkcja symboli propagujących ideologię*, [in:] I. Mamińska-Szmaj, T. Piekot, M. Poprawa (eds), *Ideologie w słowach i obrazach*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2008, p. 253.

10 F. Schultz von Thun, das Kommunikationsquadrat, <https://www.schulz-von-thun.de/die-modelle/das-kommunikationsquadrat> [accessed 10.04.2021].

11 N. Sharif, N. Ahmed, S. Sarwar, *Factors Influencing Career Choices*, "IBT Journal of Business Studies" 2019, vol. 15 (1), p. 35.

it possible, one must be able to freely search for an area of interest and choose own, often non-standard path of development.

Motivating achievement in a collective is based on the use of symbolic violence. Such an assumption is allowed by the parallel of Bourdieu's theory (1990) – caregivers, superiors exert pressure by formulating appeals<sup>12</sup> regarding the need to educate, gaining membership in groups considered elite (e.g. graduates of a given university, employees of a well-known company), obtaining trophies (distinctions, awards) and finally power (taking a level in the hierarchy).<sup>13</sup> Seemingly non-aggressive forms of communication, justified by concern, the common good, and the desire to ensure protection, are, in fact, manifestations of control and exercise of power.<sup>14</sup> They are characterized by high affective commitment. As a result, the individual feels fear of the consequences of not meeting the expectations set for him. This is how the modern, universal neurosis described by Horney is born.<sup>15</sup> Individuals belonging to traditional systems, harassed by appeals (often veiled) for the return of expenditure on care and education, fall into a fear loop stimulated by total submission to the goals of the system. They care about the satisfaction of the actors of the system, so at the expense of their values and aspirations, they scrupulously fulfil the social role which boils down to compensation for the resources they receive. The belief in the rightness of the order adopted in collective systems means that both the perpetrators and the victims of symbolic violence are not aware of the situation, as in the case of patriarchy. As a result, actors of collective systems often pursue a career in the profession of their parents against their interests or tip the scales of their own choice of work in favour of that preferred by the immediate environment.<sup>16</sup>

A system-oriented career is, therefore, often a significant constraint of individual development when activities are focused on building the satisfaction of others. This is because it limits or eliminates the tendency to take risks, learn from mistakes, and develop speaking.

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12 F. Schultz von Thun, das Kommunikationsquadrat, <https://www.schulz-von-thun.de/die-modelle/das-kommunikationsquadrat> [accessed 10.04.2021].

13 S. Conway, *The Reproduction of Exclusion and Disadvantage: Symbolic Violence and Social Class Inequalities in “Parental Choice” of Secondary Education*, “Sociological Research Online” 1997, vol. 2, no 4, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.5153/sro.129> [accessed 10.04.2021].

14 M. Bourgeois, K. L. Sommer, S. Bruno, *What Do We Get Out of Influencing Others?*, “Social Influence” 2009, vol. 4 (2), p. 96.

15 K. Horney, *Neurotyczna osobowość naszych czasów*, Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, Warszawa 1999, pp. 140–141.

16 Y. Liu, Y. Mao, Ch. C. Wong, *Theorizing Parental Intervention and Young Adults’ Career Development: A Social Influence Perspective*, “Career Development International” 2020, vol. 25, issue 4, p. 416.

## Self-oriented career

Maslow emphasized that individuals capable of self-realization are characterized by a limited susceptibility to social influence. Pursuing a career focused on oneself requires an appropriate attitude – non-conformist. Thus, the potential of an autonomous career without entanglement in the system of equivalent exchange is built by liberal social systems. Their main pillars, which are universalism, self-orientation and achievements, lead to making autonomous choices dictated by a broad-context perception of the world, experiencing and breaking existing patterns in order to look for alternatives. It is accompanied by aspectivity and affective neutrality. The goal is to search for one's own element (object of work) and one's own tribe<sup>17</sup> – a group separate and/or different from the family system. This allows for rejection of the previously known normative order, its verification and building own worldview.<sup>18</sup>

Rick Jarrow, in his book *Creating the Work You Love*, asked: do you have to lose the world to win your soul?<sup>19</sup> A self-oriented career means independence to a large extent from the system (never completely possible), but it bears risks of weakening or even breaking relationships as a result of allowing oneself to object. In liberal systems, such behaviour will be accepted because one of the basic norms of behaviour is learning from one's own mistakes (in a collective system, it may be associated with an increase in symbolic violence or even with exclusion). Thanks to it, the intellectual, professional and social development of an individual is possible because returning to actions after failure requires mastering the fear of disapproval of an earlier stumble or fall.

A self-oriented career is based on a sense of autonomy. Individuals who pursue it are not threatened by a sense of contradiction between their predispositions and their profession. It is the embodiment of the famous sentence of Confucius: "choose a job you love, and you will not have to work a single day in your life". In liberal systems, a professional career serves to build equity capital,<sup>20</sup> which is allowed by the aspectivity of relations, followed by transactionality, and task-orientation not burdened with emotional attachment of the parties.

A self-oriented career is about creating a use value, not gaining symbols of achievement (titles, distinctions). It does not matter whether one gains popularity, but how useful one's work will be for others. Both the process and the result are

17 K. Robinson, *Uchwycić żywioł. O tym, jak znalezienie pasji zmienia wszystko*, Wydawnictwo Element, Karków 2012, pp. 95–96.

18 W. R. Sterner, *Integrating Existentialism and Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Approach*, "Career Development Quarterly" 2012, vol. 60, issue 2, p. 156.

19 R. Jarrow, *Antykariera. W poszukiwaniu pracy życia* (org. *Creatind the Work You Love*), Wydawnictwo Ravi, Łódź 1999, p. 22.

20 D. E. Super, *A Life-Span, Life-Space Approach...*, p. 221.

important. This approach requires the ability to force ideas, dealing with a negative attitude not only to the subject of the project but also to the originator.

The assumptions of a self-oriented career realized thanks to participation in liberal systems can be assessed not only as attractive but also as idealistic. The counterargument to the idyllic vision is the problem raised by Maslow – the fear of using knowledge caused by taking responsibility for making decisions and acting.<sup>21</sup> Collective work allows it to be dispersed.

## Conclusions

The aim of the article was to present the factors determining two types of career: system-oriented (collective) and self-oriented, based on the ability to cope with the social fear of disapproval of other actors of the system. The first type gives a sense of emotional security thanks to the satisfaction of the actors of the system with the achievements that fit in with the goals of the community. A self-oriented career is recognition of one's achievements, competition with oneself, self-fulfilment, free choice, responsibility for the decisions made. However, it often entails resigning from care and a sense of belonging.

The described types of career can be treated as the extreme points of the scale presenting a range of mixed types. Cases of full subordination to the mechanism of social anxiety and the influence of the actors of the system are in the minority. Completely autonomous individuals are also rare. Liberal systems also set certain expectations and create certain pressures. An important issue is, therefore, the awareness of the laws governing the systems and tipping the scales to the side of unfettered choices – the pillar of creativity and innovation.<sup>22</sup>

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