

Exploring Critical Factors of Self Concept among High Income Community College Graduates

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Abstract

This study was undertaken to explore the critical factors influencing the self-concept of community college graduates in the development of their careers. Individuals with a positive self-concept are often associated with a good career choices and a well-panned career development path. Hence community college students should be girded with a positive self-concept to ensure success in their future careers. This qualitative research using multiple case study methods involved 15 community college graduates who have been relatively successful in their respective careers and were able to generate high incomes. Further data obtained were analysed using NVivo 8.0 to determine the relevant themes that emerged. The study observed the presence of five critical internal factors influencing self-concept: congruence, boldness in facing a challenge, vision, skills and experience.

Keywords: high income, critical success factors, self-concept, community college

1. Introduction

The rapidly evolving scenario of the Malaysian workforce to achieve the status of a developed nation by the year 2020 has prompted individuals and organisations to take action and assume responsible roles in the advancement and development of careers (Mahathir, 1993; Mohamed-Sherif, 1991, 2003; Rahim & Khadijah, 2007). This requires quality human capital in a workforce that does not marginalise any group of people, including those considered to be at risk of failing. In meeting this need, community colleges have been established as public institutions run by the Department of Community Colleges, under the purview of the Ministry of Education Malaysia. These learning institutions provide a platform for students at risk of failure or within average academic levels to continue their studies or become skilled workers. The mission here to create opportunities to develop their potential and skills of post-secondary students and the Malaysian community through education and training (JPPKK 2009).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Development of High-Income Human Capital

The development of human capital requires both an individualistic and organisational approach to career planning and development. Ishak and Zulkifly (2010) and Ahmad-Sarji (2003) postulated that Malaysia needs to produce a high quality workforce that owns and controls knowledge, skills, and attitudes consistent with the requirements of the labour market, present and future. Investment in education should serve not only to meet the academic needs of the nations' youth, but more importantly create a workforce that can generate a knowledge-based economy in the hope of establishing a high-income community that garners the status of a developed nation within stipulated time frame (Becker, 1964, 1994; Fitzimons, 1999). Since there exist many different notion on what constitutes a "high income", this study adhere to Reardon et al. (2006) who define high income as a specific amount which can be considered to be more than enough to live on. To help the country generate productive workers and visionaries fundamental to high-income communities Super (1952, 1984), Gottfredson (1981, 1996), Amla (2010), Brown (2012) and Zunker (2012), suggested that individuals be provided with career guidance from childhood itself to steer their career development till it reaches a point of maturity.

2.2 Developmental Theories and Self-Concepts

Career development is viewed as an inclusive lifelong process, the total constellation of economic, sociological, psychological, educational, and physical and chance factors that shape one's career (Sears, 1982). The significance of self-concept in the career development process has been on-going research effort by Donald E. Super and his colleagues over a span of 50 years. As a major concept in Super's Development Theory, self-concept is deemed a critical core element in career development the centrepiece of Super's approach to vocational behaviour. In establishing the development of self-concept as multi-dimensional process internal factors like aptitude, values and personality, and external situational conditions such as contextual interaction all play a vital role (Sharf, 2012). Individuals should project "self" into the work environments during the exploration stage and ideally, implement a realistic self-concept in the working world (Zunker, 2012). A positive self-concept is always associated with good career choices, appropriate career decisions and career maturity (Super 1996). In contrast individuals with a low self-concept have been associated with low academic achievements, poor and unstable career (Sidek, 2008). According to Super (1957), in expressing a career choices, individuals place much emphases on selecting career paths suited to the very nature they personify or perceive of themselves. Therefore, to achieve the objective of a self-concept that coincides with maturity in the selection of a career. Individuals should be exposed to a positive self-concept as early as possible to ensure a favourable eventuality.

2.3 Community College Abroad

Community colleges abroad play an important role in producing successful graduates who earn high salaries. In their study on the importance and benefits of community colleges in America shows community college graduates in America, Belfield and Bailey (2011) highlighted that community college graduates generated a higher income than high school graduates. This income would increase manifold, should these community college graduates proceed to complete a first degree in university. It appears that vocational subjects taught in community college have been clearly beneficial in producing a skilful workers and successful entrepreneurs. In tandem with the results from several other studies. (See Attewell & Lawin, 2007; Belfield & Lawin, 2007). Belfield and Bailey not only demonstrated that community colleges in America were able to churn out graduates who earned well, but were also the choice of many school leavers with poor academic backgrounds, serving as a launching pad for a systematic career development via a vocational self-concept. Some of these include Washington State's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) (Wachen et al., 2011; Zeidenberg et al., 2010), College and Career Transitions Initiative (CCTI) (Watford 2006) and Career Pathway Certificate for Lane Community College. The success of these programmes abroad should inspire community college in Malaysia and to press forward and garner the similar should inspire community colleges in Malaysia to achieve the same success abroad. Community college students need to sharpen and polished their self-concept in order to succeed in their future career.

3. Problem Statement

In a tracer study conducted by Malaysia's Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) spanning a time frame between 2004 and 2010 it was estimated for Community College since 2004 until the year 2010 showed an average of 84.5% college graduates who not continue their studies to a higher level. Subsequently in 2011, from a total of 3116 graduates surveyed, 0.2% comprised graduates who were in a position earning over MYR 5,000, while 75.3% earned below MYR 1000 (JPKK, 2012). This scenario does not fulfil the vision of community colleges intending that to be the best platform for knowledgeable and skilful human capital aspiring towards high-income status in a developed country (KPT 2007; Amir, 2011). The key factors in archiving this vital goal for the nation lie in producing knowledgeable and skilful graduates, irrespective of their moderate levels in the academic arena (Rahmah et al., 2011; Rahmah, 2012). However, the dismall percentage of community college graduates earning monthly salary in excess of MYR5,000, an amount considered as "high income" according to the Reports of Financial Stability and Payment Systems (BNM, 2014), raises some question the critical factors that determine a successful career.

In essence, the critical factors influencing success comprise a limited number of areas in which satisfactory results will ensure successful, competitive performance for the individual, department or organisation. It is the few key areas where "things must go right" for the business to flourish and for the manager's goals to be attained (Bullen & Rockart, 1981). According to Super (as cited in Zunker, 2012), the career development process becomes really significant when self-concept is implemented at the stage of vocational education. Although self-concept is only one among many contributors in the success of an individual's career, it is the driving force that establishes career patterns that one will follow throughout life. Hence, there is a need to explore the critical

factors influencing the self-concept of community college graduates who have succeeded in generating a high income. This can be used as a guide for current students, in addition to being a spiritual injector, and encourage the effectiveness of community colleges in producing a high-income community in line with Vision 2020.4.

Objective of the Study

This study aims to explore the critical factors influencing the self-concept of successful community college graduates who have reached high income levels in their chosen career.

5. Significance of the Study

Factors influencing the self-concept of successful graduates of community colleges play a relatively small part among the number of important matters on which these students should focus their attention, in terms of career development. They represent the few “factors” which are “critical” to the “success” of the community college concerned. There are, in every student's life, an incredible number of things to which his or her attention can be diverted. The key to success for most successful community college graduates pertaining to personality and aptitude, are congruence, skills and experience. Focusing on these factors will really make a difference between the success and failure of a community college, and can serve as a guide for current students in the various community colleges nationwide. It is hoped that this study will help community colleges to develop relevant programmes which aim at producing a successful alumni.

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Research Design

This research, which is a qualitative case study, focuses on the critical internal factors influencing the self-concept of thriving graduates from community colleges. It was conducted to obtain a richer, subjective perspective of the role of a person's self-concept during his or her career development. In conducting this study, the researcher served as the research instrument himself by meeting up and dealing personally with the subjects of the research via in-depth interviews. Results were reported transcriptions of the interviews conducted. A total of 15 participants from 189 successful alumni listed by the Division of Industrial Relations, and Alumni Tracer, Department of Community Colleges (JPKK, 2011) were selected, having met the following criteria:

- Students at community college between 2002 and 2011;
- Earned a minimum monthly salary of MYR5000;
- Listed and recognised by the Division of Industrial Relations, and Alumni Tracer, Department of Community Colleges as a successful alumni.

The level of income selected as the indicator of a high-income community was based on the Household Income Survey (HIS), source of income classification by the Department of Statistics, Malaysia (UPEN, 2013) and Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM, 2014). The majority of them were of Malay descent, with the exception of one Chinese respondent, and consisted of males (9) and females (6). They served in various fields of engineering, hospitality and services, specifically fashion design (3), automotive (2), hotel and catering (2), landscape (2), manufacturing (1), electrical (2), business accounting (1) and ICT (2). Most of them earned salaries between MYR6001 and MYR10000 (7); MYR10000 and above (6); and between MYR5000 and MYR6000 (2). The respondents' average age was 28.8 years with the oldest being 30 and the youngest, 26. All completed their studies in a community college between 2002 and 2011. Many of them worked elsewhere before establishing themselves in their current positions.

a. Data Collection and Analysis

In line with a qualitative research methodology, data analyses were undertaken simultaneously during the data collection process. In adhering to the Qualitative Case Study Research (Merriam, 2009), a case study is defined as an intensive analysis of an individual unit (as a person or community stressing developmental factors in relation to the environment. To begin the most intensive phase of data analysis in a case study, all relevant information on the case was brought together by the researcher, and included interview logs or transcripts, field notes, reports, records, the investigator's own documents, physical and reflective memos. These materials were organised in a manner to ensure that data were easily retrievable. Since this research involved a large number of community college graduates, specifically to meet the aim of this study, a multiple case study design was chosen to guide the whole research process (Merriam, 2009), and involved data collection and analyses of various respondents. This differs from a single case study involving only one respondent. Data gathered from numerous subjects were constantly compared to gain insights into the investigated issue. Such a cross-case analysis not only allows a deeper interpretation of the respondents' feelings and opinions in relation to the critical factors

influencing self-concept, but also strengthens and stabilises the validity and results of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Hence, a multi-site case study was found to be the most suitable research design for this study.

As mentioned earlier, purposive sampling was used to determine suitable subjects for this study. The sample comprised respondents who met all of the aforementioned criteria, were available to provide the information relevant to the investigated issue (Merriam 2009; Patton 1990). Encompassing several internal factors influencing self-concept, namely aptitude, values and personality, in line with the specific domains postulated from Super's Theory, a set of interview questions was prepared and validated by three experts from a local university and a community college. Subsequently, interviews were conducted at participants' respective places of work at the time of their convenience, mainly to ensure a comfortable and conducive environment where truthful and accurate responses can be obtained.

Focusing on the three important aspects that have a strong bearing on self-concept as mentioned earlier—personality, aptitude and values—in-depth interviews or “purposeful conversations” (Dexter, 1970; Morgan, 1998) were used to collect subjective data via a protocol validated by experts. Responses in the forms of verbal statements were recorded during fieldwork, transcribed and finally reaffirmed by all the respondents. The entire data collection process took place from October, 2013 to February, 2014.

Being a stranger to the respondents, the researcher resorted to using several measures aimed at building rapport between both parties, to ensure their trust and whole-hearted participation in the study. First, calls were made to potential subjects to introduce the researcher and the study's objectives and importance. Those that agreed to participate were then asked to commit to a date for an in-depth interview. Following this, calls were made for the second time to confirm interview dates. This proved to be rather challenging as repeated follow-up calls were necessary for some of the potential subjects, while for others, interviews had to be frequently rescheduled due to their commitments at the work place. Those from the business sector had many time constraints in terms of managing their clients, contracts and other reasons, while potential subjects from non-business disciplines were tied up with various administrative responsibilities. Repetitive phone conversations between the researcher and those who finally became the respondents in this study, however, aided in narrowing most gaps between both parties and enabled the interviews to be conducted.

Throughout the in-depth interviews, prior to which signed permission was obtained from each respondent, a recorder-cum-transcriber was utilised to facilitate the data collection process which resulted in a set of interview transcripts. As suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1992), a transcriber is a helpful device in this long, continuous process, where each interview lasted between forty minutes and one hour.

The data collection reached its saturation point with the fifteen respondents, labelled PK01 to PK15, who participated in the study. Transcripts were examined and read not less than twice for each respondent's feedback. To avoid confusion in the retrieval of data, each transcript was labelled using the respondent's initials, the date of the interview, and the interview location. Different categories were formed after the researcher identified recurring patterns related to the research problem in the verbatim transcripts. Discrete codes were then designated to different categories (Saldana 2013). While initial categories were established from continuous scrutiny and comparison of data in the first two transcripts, the researcher continued to strengthen the list of categories through scrutiny of subsequent transcripts. This prevented the researcher from jumping into premature conclusions and helped in the management of voluminous data using systematically coded short forms. The themes and sub-themes were identified based on the analysis of themes derived from the interviews. The themes most frequently recurring were selected as major factors, while less frequent themes were waived. These major themes were consequently confirmed using the inter-rater via which these constructs were evaluated by three experts in the field of counselling, based on Cohen's Kappa index. These constructs subsequently become the decisive factors behind the success of community college graduates, where, “C”, for example, was used to represent the category of congruence. This method of creating codes stems from the creation of a provisional “starter list” of codes prior to fieldwork, which comprises the key variables that the researcher brings into the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2013). The coding process was conducted at two levels – the elementary level where the theme or a major code such as “C” was generated, and the second coding level where sub-themes or sub-codes were constructed. Examples of sub-themes or sub-codes are ‘congruence in personality’ (CIP) and ‘congruence in interest’ (CII). All the themes and sub-themes from the verbatim transcripts listed were labelled with numbers. For example, the theme of “C” was labelled as 100, and its sub-theme ‘congruence in character’ labelled as 100a. Finally, all the recurring phrases or sentences that indicated the identified themes and sub-themes from the verbatim transcripts were underlined and marked with stickers labelled with these theme and sub-theme numbers. All data were organised and managed using Nvivo 8.0.

7. Validity and Reliability

Validity is recognised as “trustworthiness” and embodies four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. The elements deemed vital in a qualitative study such as the current one, are internal validity, external validity and reliability (Janesick, 2000; Merriam, 2009). When a study is conducted in a valid and reliable manner, it does not only assess a phenomenon accurately, but also assists in devising appropriate improvements upon ascertainment of the loopholes responsible for any underlying problems. Additionally, a valid and reliable study also leads to the construction of a concept which can be utilised by other researchers delving into similar or related issues. Within this research, validity and reliability were ensured via utilisation of an inter-rater with a Kapp Value of 0.89 (high validity value), audit trails, member checks, peer examination and the position of the researcher as the instrument of the study, as advocated by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

An audit trail refers to the process of scrutinising every step undertaken in a study, from the initial stage of proposal writing, construction of interview guidelines, literature review, data collection, theme and sub-theme coding, right up to the process of data analysis. Between the stages of data collection and data analyses, the steps involved in this essential process have to be adopted by the researcher to ensure the study’s reliability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Member checks refer to the researcher’s efforts to contact respondents repeatedly for data verification. In the process of data collection, important notes are entered into a log book and come in handy when respondents need to be contacted again for clarification of any doubts. As for peer examination, the researcher sought feedback and consultation from his supervisors. Being the research instrument for the study, the researcher practiced tolerance, alertness, empathy and good communication skills throughout the entire research process.

8. Results and Discussion

Critical Factors Influencing Self-Concept

This study is based on Super’s Career Development Theories (1957; 1960; 1963; 1996), which emphasised self-concept as a factor influencing the development of an individual’s career. Self-concept is an evaluation of the individual against himself. Individuals will evaluate themselves by examining their strengths and weaknesses in the hope of improving their careers. Bullen and Rockart (1981) posited that the critical factors influencing self-concept encompass a limited number of areas, within which, satisfactory results will ensure a successful and competitive performance for the individual, department or organisation. It can be viewed as key areas where “things must go right” to achieve particular target. In this study, the critical internal factors influencing self-concept were narrowed down to personality, aptitude and values. These three factors served as the command factors in establishing self-concept, and have a great influence in career planning and choice (Carless et al., 1999; Darcy & Tracey, 2003; Prediger, 2002; Sagiv, 2002). Based on a thematic analysis, various themes and sub-themes emerged based on the feedback provided by respondents.

1) Personality

Personality is seen as a combination of interests, values, needs, beliefs, attitudes and learning styles (Reardon et al., 2006). In undertaking a thematic analysis in this study, congruence and personal strength were found to be emerging themes in the personality factor.

(a) Congruence

The term congruence refers to the relationship between a particular type of personality and the environment. The more similar a personality is to the environment, the more congruent is the relationship. Holland (1973, 1997), made this the basis of a theory that emphasizes the selection of a career based on congruence tendency, which incidentally, is the most widely researched theme in career development (see Sharf, 2013), evidenced by extant studies either in Malaysia or overseas (see Ahmad-Rosli & Roslee, 2010; Eells & Romans, 1994; Jasmi, 2013; Syed-Mohamad, 2010). Two sub-themes emerged within this theme: (i) congruence in personality; and (ii) congruence in interest.

i. Congruence in Personality (CIP)

This refers to the relationship between personality and the career environment. The more suited a personality is to the environment, the more congruent the relationship (Sharf, 2013). Personality develops as a result of the interaction of inherited characteristics, the activities which an individual is exposed to, and the interest and competencies that blossom from engaging in a particular set of activities (Holland, 1997). Emphasis on CIP needs to be addressed to ensure that the personality formed is in line with the actual personality of the individual to avoid any conflict within an individual. Thirteen out of the 15 respondents sampled perceived the importance

of congruence between their career and personality as the main factor in their success, which has been proven to influence the course of their career. PK01 highlighted the importance of choosing a career that suited an individual's personality and interest.

“...Your career must suit your personality... we want to venture into this business in the right manner...” (PK01).

Congruence in personality helps maximise an individual's potential and allows full concentration on the task at hand (Amla et al 2008). This was supported by PK02 and PK15 who acknowledged that CIP played a key role in their success. Most of the other subjects expressed similar sentiments, highlighting that they had chosen their respective programmes at their alma mater based on their personality.

“One must have a keen personality...if there's interest in what you do, it will be done properly...not just a case of following others, you must have your own stand...you can succeed...” (PK02).

ii. Congruence in Interest (CII)

Interest is perceived by Dawis and Lofquist (1984) as a derivation from values and abilities; in other words, in that they are an expression of the relationship between an individual's inclination towards a particular field and his ability to perform in this chosen area. More than half of the study's respondents emphasised that CII was a key factor in their career, and became the basis of their desire to succeed. In his research, Holland (1973; 1996) propounded that career choices must be consistent with the interests and desires of the individual. Problems arise when an individual feels that his career is not in tandem with his interest and personality. This ultimately gives rise to boredom and frustration, which in turn, lead to a decline in motivation, and eventually a lack of focus and full involvement in the given task. This is consistent with the opinion of Parsons (1909, as cited in Reardon, 2006), who stated that interest is a major factor in career choice.

“To be successful... of vital importance is interest...” (PK03)

“Personally... when I'm interested, I will try... when I start to try, I begin to think... it's not only related to a career... for me, it applies even in the area of my hobby....now I think I have a great career...” (PK15).

(b) Inner strength

The thematic analysis based on respondents' feedback also found inner strength as an emerging theme in this study. Many felt that a certain level of inner strength had to be developed before they could cope with the various challenges strewn along their career paths – an arduous task for certain, but one most necessary to propel them higher, a step at a time. Within this factor, two sub-themes presented themselves, which were: (i) boldness in facing a challenge; and (ii) mindfulness.

i. Boldness in Facing Challenges (BFC)

Being daring enough to face a host of challenges should be incorporated into each individual to ensure their success. Courage is an essential factor for students because they have to compete with graduates of other institutions that are far superior to community colleges, and boasting different expertise. PK01 vehemently opined that that being bold in facing challenges and daring enough to take on new endeavours were key factors in the success of community college graduates in their chosen field of work.

“If not us, who else is going to do things?... be brave...” (PK01)

This was supported by other respondents who described this factor as a major advantage in anticipating the challenges ahead of them and providing courage in the face of adversities as they pushed forward.

“Strength comes from yourself alone, you have to be strong...” (PK06)

“Actually... I have nothing else... just courage... being daring enough to face any challenge...” (PK02).

A vast number of community college students hail from poor or disadvantaged families and have moderate academic qualifications after completing secondary school (Collins, 2010; Jasmi, 2013; Kamarudin et al., 2009). Upon graduation, they are inundated with many challenges, not merely due to external factors, but from within themselves as a result of low self-esteem and average academic qualifications. It is, therefore, highly imperative that they be girded with boldness and courage to face a myriad of challenges, more so than their counterparts of other tertiary backgrounds. It is this “boldness” factor that will uplift their self-concept and enable them to succeed in a highly competitive environment.

ii. Mindfulness (M)

Mindfulness refers to a non-judgmental state of awareness in which individuals attend to and focus on the experiences of the moment (Brown & Ryan, 2003). It involves the recognition of inner experiences, including thoughts, intentions and emotions, as well as external events. According to Andrews et al. (2014), mindfulness plays a pivotal role in predicting promotion and focus, which are two important components of the Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT). Ten of the respondents surveyed strongly felt that certain elements of positive mindfulness in their personalities, such as inner strength and the ability to increase self-confidence, encouraged them to be more ambitious in their career. This is backed by Mohd-Safarin et al. (2008), who iterated that community colleges should strive to increase the level of self-awareness among students to equip them with the courage needed to compete in the job market. One participant responded as follows:

“If you’re unaware of what’s happening within yourself or outside, how can you grow up? ...the moment the feeling of consciousness or awareness arises, it will serve as a motivation in our career...” (PK05)

Mindfulness is also linked to job satisfaction (Andrews et al., 2014). Since awareness is the driving factor for enthusiasm, motivation and an innate desire to succeed, it is very much needed to maintain excellence in one’s profession. PK13 expressed his concerns about mindfulness and the importance of its existence in an individual to motivate him on the job:

“In terms of competition, it is very tough out there. For those of us who want to perform well, we need to have a high-level of self-awareness to succeed...” (PK13)

One participant expressed his hope that community colleges would launch various programmes to help students gird themselves with internal courage.

“Community colleges should help their students to instil in themselves the internal courage necessary to face the working world, while they are still studying in their respective colleges ...” (PK03).

In America, this proved to be an effective method in community colleges that churned out graduates who were able to generate high salaries (Attewell & Lawin, 2007; Belfield & Lawin, 2007). Clearly, individuals with their own sense of inner strength are capable of moving faster than their counterparts. This is a critical aspect of community college graduates, whose previous track records in school indicated a high risk of failure. With other critical factors being present as well, mindfulness will certainly help them to recover from previous failures and help launch them into successful careers.

2) Aptitude

Aptitude refers to an inherited capacity or an untapped capability to learn or develop skills (Reardon et al., 2006). This is another important aspect of self-concept. It is of particular interest to employers and boils down to the question of “what can you do”. The thematic analysis undertaken in this study identified “ability” or “skills” as an emerging theme in the element of aptitude. It is important to note that this study did not distinguish between the terms “ability” and “skills”. For this research purpose, they refer to the same thing and are interchangeable.

Ability/Skills

Ability involves knowledge and physical behaviour that are both developed and learned (Reardon et al.; 2006). Darcy and Tracey (2003) opined that the domains of ability and interest overlapped one another in various aspects, and can be usefully integrated to examine career development and the process of making career choices, as well as extended into allied research. The thematic analysis within this study uncovered two sub-themes within this domain: (i) congruence in ability; and (ii) ability to use an experience.

(i) Congruence in Ability (CIA)

Dawis and Lofquist (1984) defined ability as a “reference dimensions for skills”. The result of the analysis revealed that 10 respondents noted the influence of CIA on job satisfaction. Employees who perceived themselves as suitable to their existing jobs reflected higher job satisfaction and commitment, were happier in the work place, and more persistent in continuing with their jobs. Conversely, those who believed that they did not fit into certain job aspects were less committed and less absorbed in performing those tasks.

“I know my own potential and that's why I'm confident that I will be successful in my career...” (PK06)

Difficulty in meeting job requirements was admittedly one of the reasons that stressed respondents in their jobs. Unlike individuals who were able to face uncertainties and create opportunities within their own jobs, those with a perception of a lower CIA tended to feel more worked up trying to meet their job functions (Schuler, 1980).

This was indicated by the following statements:

“My field of study was electricity, but I think my ability does not suit this area... I wasn’t enjoying my job... that’s why I switched to cleaning services” (PK14)

On the other hand, individuals who perceived themselves as being able to fit well into their job requirements were highly likely to experience a successful career cycle. Generally, those who think that they are doing well in their jobs, are usually more open to opportunities, challenges and advancements available in their careers (Saks, 2003). This is evident in the following response by a respondent indicating a high CIA:

“I always knew my capabilities in the area of graphics, so I find myself successful in this field...” (PK03)

One respondent indicated that he was able to forge ahead with full use of the ability and skills he had learned.

“Use your skills... explore your potential... you can succeed...” (PK07).

Also in agreement with his statement were another five who described ability as a distinct asset. This is because a higher level of skills is synonymous with higher wages, as compounded by Ishak and Zulkifly (2010), who found that a high quality workforce that owns and controls knowledge, skills and attitudes, is consistent with the requirements of a high-income labour market of the future. Supporting research by Tan and Gill (2000), Zuniga (2004) and Ramachandran (2005) further emphasised a positive relationship between wages and the skill levels of employees. It came as no surprise then that many respondents agreed on the dire need to be equipped with ample skills to succeed in their career.

The aforementioned statements have demonstrated the strong influence of CIA in enabling individuals to fulfil job demands and requirements, and contribute towards career success. Job and life satisfaction depend very much on the extent to which an individual can channel his personality, interests, values and ability into an appropriate and rewarding career. Individuals with a positive CIA would perform better than those with less congruent personalities. Hence, this factor should be considered in the selection of courses at community colleges to help students excel in their chosen fields.

(ii) Ability to Use an Experience

Experience is another vital factor behind the success of many community colleges graduates. It is important to understand that one’s storehouse of knowledge is built upon a host of experiences and events that can be recollected and have occurred in a person’s life. Nine out of 15 respondents indicated that they performed various jobs to gain work experience. They highlighted the need for accumulating experience to strengthen and nurture their career. Experience can be obtained in various ways, they believed, such as working with others after graduating, running a small business or working part-time while studying, hitching up to a mentor, and other means. Sharf (2013) found part-time jobs and summer jobs to be among some of the experience-building activities that pave the way for career planning in adolescent career development. This entails the acquisition of knowledge on working conditions, the required education levels, job outlook, a distinctive approach to job entry and chances of advancements (Super, 1996). This was widely agreed upon by 11 respondents who indicated that they had engaged in various odd-jobs to gain experience and increase their confidence level.

“After graduating, I worked with an engineering company, specialising in the field of mechanical engineering.. the second year, I moved to another company specialising in designing, and finally, in the third year, I switched to another company, also engaged in CNC programming...Three years of accumulating job experience... now I'm doing my own business...” (PK01).

Respondents also felt that individuals must obtain as much experience as possible by working in various sectors, mainly because every place offers a unique experience that helps in increasing their maturity before they settle down in their careers.

“Upon graduation, I worked with multiple employers in multiple sectors... I was able to gain much experience... from that, I could find a suitable location find the method of running my own business...” (PK02)

Community college students tend to benefit from their programmes which actually enable them to glean many different experiences while studying, including working part-time, engaging in in-house training, practical training and on-the-job training. A culmination of experiences from a wide array of work engagements enable graduates to rely on their acquired skills and strategies to quickly adjust themselves in the work environment and overcome challenges that follow. Studies on career development in America (see Mincer, 1974) found

experience to be an influential factor in a worker's income. These were supported by other research (see Trostel et al., 2002; Webbink & Herthog, 2004), which highlighted experience as highly relevant in the supply of wages to workers, and also in helping people reach a level of maturity to adequately face numerous challenges in life. The current study bears evidence of this and substantiates Nor-Wahiza's (2007) postulation that work experience plays a pivotal role in shaping graduates' skills and the ability to fulfil their job requirements. From the 15 respondents surveyed, 12 had acquired some work experience before venturing into business or becoming skilled workers earning a high income.

"We should gain more experience... only then we can run our own business..." (PK01).

"For me, before we start our own business... we should have some experience in the area..." (PK08).

Another respondent also gave credit to his previous work experience in easing the adjustment to his current job requirements as a mechanic, and regarded his current job as a continuation of the previous one. He strongly felt that the previous job provided self-confidence in his field and enabled him to strategise his position as a successful entrepreneur.

"After completing secondary school, I worked as a mechanic, and then I continued my studies. I worked with for someone for a year, and then, felt confident enough to set up my own workshop... that helped in making me successful..." (PK04)

Those who worked for others after graduating said that they had done it to gain some work experience before venturing out on their own.

"I used to work at various places... to gain as much experience as possible..." (PK06).

These statements highlight aptitude as one of the critical factors that shapes and creates skills within individuals to help them meet their job demands and requirements, and face all sorts of challenges. Therefore, it is important for community college graduates to acquire their own skills or abilities, not only to enhance knowledge, but also to shine in a high-income career.

3) Values

"Value" is the worth attached to something that is important or desirable to an individual. There may even be an element of 'should' associated with a value, as in 'something you should do' (Reardon et al., 2006). Since the 1950s, Super began studying how work values might be crucial in career decisions, with results proving that values are indeed an important factor in career choices. The thematic analysis in this study revealed three critical values considered by community college graduates as vital to their success: a) high income; (b) working in the field of interest; and (c) helping others.

(a) High Income

Needless to say, most individuals desire a high income, although each may have a different opinion on what constitutes a high income. In this study, as mentioned earlier, a high income is defined as a specific amount of monthly income which can be considered to be more than enough to live off. Most respondents admitted that a high income was crucial because of the current economic situation. This meant money to use as they pleased after fulfilling all their basic living expenses. Some of their comments include:

"I need a career that provides high returns... nowadays, everything is expensive..." (PK10)

"I chose the field of pest control and cleaning because of its low cost and high profit... the profit margin can reach up to 50% or 60%.... so I can spend as I please..." (PK14).

This indicates the high value placed on salary, supported by existing research (see Rahmah et al., 2012), and forms the necessity to create a high-income community in line with Vision 2020. The success of community college students in gaining a high income is a key indicator of the success of community colleges in providing quality human capital for the nation.

(b) Working in the Field of Interest

This value was highly emphasised by a majority of the respondents surveyed. While some indicated only one main field of interest such as entrepreneurship or technology or administration, others expressed interest in two or more fields. One respondent vehemently insisted that her career should be in one of the fields of her interest:

"My interest in college is in the field of designing... so I'm working really hard towards achieving this goal..." (PK03).

For many, this element is touted to be the key to success, and is consistent with the thoughts of career

development experts from earlier days, such as Frank Parsons, who factored in “interest” as an important part of one’s occupational path (see Reardon, 2006). Career counsellors have often seen the identification of a person’s interest as a method of identifying his potential career. Most respondents iterated that their enjoyment and satisfaction in working in their main fields of interest were crucial to their success. Some even went on to say that as an employer, they would only hire a person who expressed a keen interest in a desired job.

“I said before... interest... if I want to hire someone, the first thing I will determine is their interest in this field... if there is no interest, it’s difficult for him to do the job... even though he may be brilliant and is able to produce a product, without interest, it’s difficult to produce a better product... I think he might not be able to...” (PK09)

Several other studies concurred with this theme, such as Carles (1999), and Prediger (2002), who recognised that work-relevant abilities, interests and values were primary considerations when helping people with career exploration and planning. These critical factors should be a priority for community college students about to venture into the working world.

(c) Helping Others

Many respondents expressed a willingness to help others use their abilities in various field of work, and demonstrated this on a daily basis outside of their work place. Some have engaged in charitable works, run favours for others and so forth, despite this not being a requirement of their main jobs, mainly to play a part in giving back to their race and nation.

“What I hope to do is develop the economy of the Muslims... I hope I can help through my career...” (PK01)

“I want to be a mechanic who not only works for the money, but also to help those in need in difficult times...” (PK15)

These are the sort of human beings that the nation strives for. This quality can certainly help promote harmony, and shape and mould a balanced nation both in the physical and spiritual realms, based on family and community values, ethnics and cultural traditions, education, and religious experiences and beliefs.

9. Conclusion

Overall, this qualitative study has achieved its objective to explore the critical success factors that spur community college graduates to succeed in their careers. Examining in detail the internal factors influencing self-concept, three were found, namely personality, aptitude and values, through which six themes and six sub-themes were found. These critical factors should be considered in career development programmes in community colleges which are striving to develop a high-income community in line with Vision 2020. Results from this study can be extended further to develop a career development path for community college students based on feedback from graduates of high income. Additionally, studies looking at how community college graduates plan their careers can be conducted to ascertain their career path to success.

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