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Peers in careers

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# **Chapter 1**

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## **General Introduction**



## 1.1 Introduction

Late adolescence and early adulthood is a developmental period that is characterized by transitions and changing social contexts (Arnett, 2000). Among these, the transition from school to work and the establishment of a successful career is one of the most important developmental tasks and accomplishments in this period of life (Erikson, 1959; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). The mastery or failure of a successful integration into the labor market has been associated with substantial long-term consequences for individuals' socio-economic standing and emotional well-being in adulthood (Ashby & Schoon, 2010; Erikson, 1959; Haase, Heckhausen, & Köller, 2008; Pinguart, Juang, & Silbereisen, 2003; Savickas, 1999; Schoon & Parsons, 2002).

Theories of career development have emphasized the relational aspects of young people's careers and have pointed towards the importance of social relationships with significant others in shaping career-related goals and career-directed behaviors (Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004; Felsman & Blustein, 1999; Jokisaari & Nurmi, 2005; Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Lent, Hackett, & Brown, 1999; Leung, 2008; Super, 1980). Whereas many researchers have acknowledged the importance of social relationships in career development, the role of peer relationships have only recently received greater attention in research on young people's career decisions. There is a growing stream of literature that points to the relevance of peer relationships in shaping career decisions and behaviors (Felsman & Blustein, 1999; Kiuru, Salmela-Aro, Nurmi, Zettergen, Andersson, & Bergman, 2012). Studies that have addressed the role of peers in young people's early career development at the transition from school to work have for instance shown that positive peer relationships can encourage career exploration and career commitment (Felsman & Blustein, 1999) and that best friends in adolescence resemble each other in their early career trajectories in young adulthood (Kiuru et al., 2012). Building on these recent developments, the current research will address how peer relationships affect young people's career decisions and their career-directed behavior at different stages of the transition from school to work. The central aim of the studies that comprise this book is therefore to shed light on the way in which relationships with peers affect this transition, answering the question: *How do peer relationships affect young people's decisions and behaviors at the transition from school to work?*

## 1.2. Research Questions

The first part of this book focuses on young people's career-related cognitions, particularly their work values, and their career-directed behaviors. Work values refer to individuals' conceptions of what rewards of their future jobs are desirable to them and serve as indicators of what motivates young people to work, how satisfied they are with their future jobs, and what kinds of work-related aspects are relevant to them when making career decisions (Dobson, Gardner, Metz, & Gore, 2014; Johnson, 2001; Porfeli & Mortimer, 2010; Sortheix, Dietrich, Chow, & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Young people's initial work values at the transition to work may hence guide their decisions for certain work context over others and thereby impact their early career trajectories. The first research question (RQ 1) investigates how personal and contextual factors of young people's peer relationships in the school context relate to young people's work values at the transition to work. Besides values that guide their decisions, young people also need to actively engage in career-directed activities to attain the employment that they value. Research has shown that social relationships can benefit adult job seekers through the provision of, for instance, information and practical resources (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1995; Lin, 1999; Van Hove, Van Hooft, & Lievens, 2009). However, peers might have limited opportunities to provide such instrumental resources as they may have little prior experience in the labor market. Instead, peers may be an asset in young people's job-search by acting as positive role models rather than through the provision of instrumental resources. This may especially be the case if peers themselves hold positive beliefs about their own capabilities to master the transition to work. The behavioral component of young people's job search is addressed in the second research question (RQ 2), which investigates whether an efficacious peer network stimulates greater engagement in career-directed activities and increases young people's odds of mastering the transition.

RQ1: How do interpersonal goals and relationship experiences with peers affect individuals' work values at the transition to work? (Chapter 2)

RQ2: Does an efficacious peer network contribute to individuals' engagement in career-directed behavior and the outcomes thereof during and after the transition period? (Chapter 3)

The second part of this book focuses on the developmental implications of the onset of employment and particularly the consequences for individuals' engagement in adverse and norm-breaking behaviors during the school years. Previous research has suggested that the maturity gap, the perceived discrepancy between biological maturity and social maturity that many young people experience throughout adolescence, may heighten their engagement in deviant and norm-breaking behaviors as these behaviors convey an image of maturity among their peers when formal markers of maturity are not yet available to them (Moffitt, 1993). In line with this, research on peer status in adolescence has shown that engagement in risky or norm-breaking behaviors may fulfill a status-enhancing function as these behaviors are admired within the peer group (e.g., Dijkstra, Lindenberg, Verhulst, Ormel, & Veenstra, 2009). It is this engagement in norm-breaking behaviors that has led some researchers to address the concern that certain forms of behavior and peer status that provide young people with status-benefits in an adolescent social context may lead to negative repercussions in a long-term perspective (e.g., Cillessen & Rose, 2005; Mayeux, Sandstrom, & Cillessen, 2008; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000). However, the extent to which these adverse or norm-breaking behaviors form a potential risk in a long-term perspective depends on young people's continued engagement in them. Often the approaching onset of employment can be a turning point in young people's life trajectories and engagement in adverse behaviors (Carlsson, 2012; Sampson & Laub, 2005). The third research question (RQ 3) focuses on the question of how employment at different ages throughout adolescence relates to individuals' engagement in delinquent behavior. The fourth research question (RQ 4) attempts to shed light on the mechanisms that may lead to a change in individuals' adverse and norm-breaking behaviors and focuses on the question whether the upcoming onset of employment and the gradual closing of the maturity gap initiate changes in the extent to which adverse and norm-breaking behaviors are appraised by the peer context.

RQ3: How does the onset of employment relate to individuals' engagement in delinquent behavior in different age groups throughout adolescence? (Chapter 4)

RQ4: What are the types and behavioral associations of peer status at the threshold of the transition from school to work? (Chapter 5)

### **1.3. A Relational Stance on Career Development**

Most theories of career development either directly acknowledge the importance of interpersonal factors and social relationships or contain aspects that can be related to interpersonal factors to some extent. Holland's Theory of Career Choice (Holland, 1997; Leung, 2008) is based on the assumption that vocational interest are a representation of a person's personality and that people can be grouped into different types of vocational personalities according to their vocational interests. Holland (1997) further acknowledges that vocational interests are shaped through social interactions and relationships. Other theories such as the Life-Span Theory of Career Development (Super, 1980) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Lent, Hackett, & Brown, 1999; Leung, 2008) have long recognized that career development is a an ongoing process throughout individuals lives that is affected by both personal and contextual factors. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) emphasizes the interaction between personal and environmental factors in the development of academic and vocational interests, educational and vocational choices, educational and vocational performance, and satisfaction or well-being. SCCT is closely related to Bandura's social cognitive theory and especially to the concepts of personal goals, outcome expectations, and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, Barbaranelli, & Caprara, 2001; Leung, 2008).

Recently, SCCT has been extended to include the content of career choice (e.g., the choice for a certain profession) but also the process of career choice independent of the content of the choice (e.g., job search behaviors) in varying occupational fields (Lent & Brown, 2013). This extension emphasizes the importance of engaging in adaptive career behaviors, which are defined as 'behaviors that people employ to help direct their own career and educational development, both under ordinary circumstances and when beset by stressful conditions' (Lent & Brown, 2013, p.3). In line with the broader framework of the SCCT, engagement in adaptive career behaviors is expected to be influenced by job seekers' self-efficacy but also by personality factors and the availability of social support. Chapter 2 draws on SCCT when investigating the link between young people's peer relationships in the school context and their work values at the transition to work. Chapter 3 draws on SCCT when investigating the role of an efficacious peer network in the classroom in young people's engagement in career-directed behavior and both the immediate outcomes of this behavior and young

people's odds of successfully completing the transition within a three-year time frame.

### **1.3.1. Peer Relationships in Career Development**

Recent research on phase-adequate engagement at the transition from school to work (Dietrich, Parker, & Salmela-Aro, 2012) emphasizes the role of interpersonal relationships and supportive social ties with peers in young people's career development. Comparable to SCCT, the concept of phase-adequate engagement aims to link interpersonal relationships with parents, peers, and others to young people's career-related behaviors. It further acknowledges that career-related behaviors at the transition from school to work or tertiary education are jointly developed in interactions with significant others and embedded in an individual's social context (Dietrich et al., 2012). In the light of these recent developments in research on career development in late adolescence and young adulthood, it is worthwhile to pay greater attention to the aspects of peer relationships and the dynamics in the peer group that may shape individuals' career decisions and career-directed behaviors. This dissertation aims to contribute to this stream of literature by investigating the role of peer relationships in different steps that together comprise the transition to work.

The studies reported in this dissertation address the role of peers in a number of outcomes in different phases of the transition process from cognitions (Chapter 2) to behaviors (Chapter 3, Study 1) and the successful completion of the transition (Chapter 3, Study 2) along with the behavioral implications of the onset of employment throughout adolescence (Chapter 4) and in young adulthood (Chapter 5). To better understand the aspects of peer relationships that might play a part in young people's transition to work, section 1.4 provides an overview of the nature of peer relationships through adolescence.

### **1.4. Peer Relationships throughout Adolescence**

Late adolescence is a developmental period in which young people's primary developmental context shifts from parents to the peer group. Previous research has pointed out that positive social relationships with peers and being accepted by one's peers provide adolescents with a sense of relatedness in the peer group (e.g., Parker & Asher, 1987, 1993) and fulfill their need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In late adolescence and young adulthood, relationships with parents and peers are the

most important sources to fulfill young people's need to belong, with peers being important socialization agents and providers of guidance and social support (e.g., Cheng & Chan, 2004; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006).

#### **1.4.1. Status in the Peer Group**

Throughout adolescence, a salient feature of the peer culture is individuals' social standing or status in the peer group (Dijkstra, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2008; Mayeux, Houser, & Dyches, 2011; Parker & Asher, 1987, 1993; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998). Other than early researchers on peer status who have defined an individual's standing in the peer group primarily at the hand of affective measures and the question of who is well-liked by their peers (e.g., Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982; Newcomb & Bukowski, 1983), this definition of peer status has been extended to make a distinction between affective and reputational measures of status. A common distinction that is made is that between *peer acceptance* and *peer popularity* as two types of status or social standing in the peer group with distinct behavioral and developmental implications (e.g., Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998).

*Peer acceptance* is an affective measure of peer status or relatedness in the peer group that reflects the extent to which individuals are well-liked by their peers. As such, peer acceptance has been linked to positive developmental and behavioral outcomes with well-accepted peers showing favorable academic performance and high levels of prosocial behavior (e.g., Lubbers, Van der Werf, Snijders, Creemers, & Kuyper, 2006; Ojanen, Grönroos, & Salmivalli, 2005; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998). Conversely, failure to achieve this relatedness in the peer group has been linked to negative and potentially harmful emotional and behavioral consequences. Rejected members of the peer group have been shown to exhibit elevated externalizing and internalizing problems, engage in disruptive behavior, and show an increased long-term risk for behavioral maladjustment and mental health problems in adulthood (e.g., DeRosier, Kupersmidt, & Patterson, 1994; Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993; Parker & Asher, 1987).

*Peer popularity* is a reputational measure of status which reflects the extent to which an individual is a salient and influential member of the peer group. Peer popularity serves as an indicator of social dominance, power and prestige in the peer

group (Mayeux et al., 2011; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006). Peer popularity shows close links with disruptive and norm-breaking behaviors such as alcohol and substance use (Dijkstra et al., 2009; Lansford, Killeya-Jones, Miller, & Costanzo, 2009; Mayeux et al., 2011; Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2006) and popular members of the peer group often show a combination of strategic engagement in prosocial but also aggressive behaviors to attain and maintain their status position (e.g., De Bruyn & Cillessen, 2006; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998). Due to the potentially negative repercussions of these behaviors, some researchers have raised the concern that peer popularity may bear a risk in a long-term developmental perspective if these behaviors persist into adulthood (e.g., Cillessen & Rose, 2005; Mayeux et al., 2008; Rodkin et al., 2000). Chapter 5 aims to shed more light on this issue by investigating the types of peer status that can be identified among young adults and particularly the investigation of the positive and negative behavioral associations of peer status in this age group.

## **1.5. The Data**

### **1.5.1. The School to Employment Project<sup>1</sup>**

The data that have been used in Chapters 2,3, and 5 stem from the School to Employment Project (StEP, see Figure 1.1. for the StEP logo), a four wave study on the transition from school to work or follow-up education that I initiated and coordinated during my PhD research. The aim of this study was to monitor the transition from school to work with a special focus on respondents' peer relationships. The research design of StEP makes it possible to link respondents' career decisions and career-directed behaviors at the transition from school to work to characteristics of their peer relationships in the classroom.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Juliette Bos and Loes van Rijsewijk for their help with the data collection and Ralph Mennes for his help with the preparation of the data.



*Figure 1.1. StEP logo*

At the time of the first assessment, all respondents were in their final year of education and had spent the past 3 to 4 years (depending on their educational level) in a fixed classroom structure. This allowed me to investigate respondents' career-related preferences and career-directed behaviors at the transition to work while drawing on their stable peer networks in the classroom. All data have been collected in the North of the Netherlands at a large educational institute providing vocational education (for an overview of the educational system in the Netherlands see section 1.6. of this chapter).

The first two waves of this study have been collected in the school context in the school term of 2011/2012 during respondents' primary year in vocational education, once in the beginning of the school term (T1, November 2011) and again six months later at the end of the school term shortly before respondents' graduation (T2, May/June 2012). Respondents were approached during regular class hours. All students of a classroom who had agreed to participate in the study received a link to an online version of the questionnaire along with a personal identification code and were asked to complete a self-report survey and a sociometric survey assessing their peer relationships in the classroom. Waves 3 and 4 have been collected once shortly after respondents had graduated from vocational education (T3, November 2012) and once again six months later approximately one year after graduation (T4, May/June 2013). In both waves only those respondents have been approached who had taken part in at least one of the first two waves and who had provided their contact information. For a graphic overview of the StEP timeline see Figure 1.2.

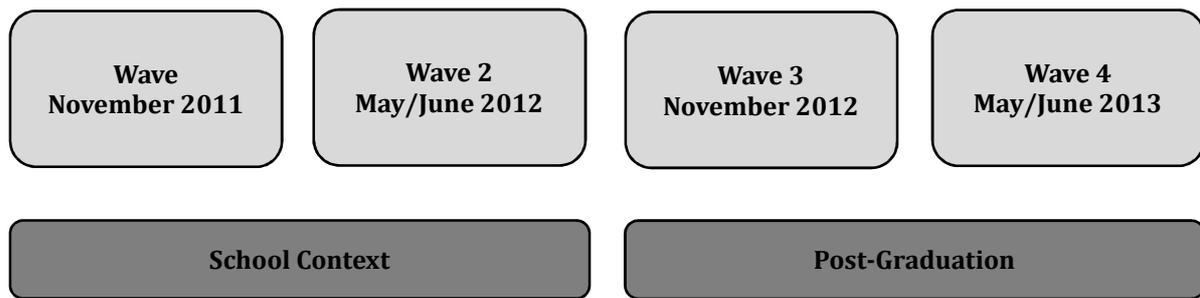


Figure 1.2. StEP Timeline

### 1.5.2. Additional Data

Alongside the StEP data, the chapters that comprise this book draw on additional datasets. Next to the StEP data, Chapter 3 also draws on data stemming from the Finnish Educational Transitions (FinEdu) Studies, a longitudinal research project aimed at monitoring the transition from school to post-secondary education or work. Chapter 4 draws on data stemming from the Dutch TRacking Adolescents' Individual Lives Survey (TRAILS; De Winter, Oldehinkel, Veenstra, Brunnekreef, Verhulst, & Ormel, 2005; Oldehinkel et al., 2014), a prospective cohort study conducted in the North of the Netherlands following respondents from pre-adolescence into early adulthood. Data collection started in the years 2001/2002 on the birth cohorts of 1990/1991 when respondents were approximately eleven years old. The data used in Chapter 4 have been collected on the second through fourth wave of the study when respondents were 13 years old (T2), 16 years old (T3), and 19 years old (T4).

### 1.6. The Educational System in the Netherlands

The transition to work takes place in a specific cultural and educational context. To provide a better understanding of this context, it is necessary to understand the structure of the educational system in the Netherlands. From secondary education onwards, the Dutch educational system is broadly stratified into vocation-oriented tracks and academic tracks. Typically around the age 16 to 18 and depending on their previous secondary education, students transition to post-secondary schools for Vocational Education and Training (VET, Dutch MBO) which provides intermediate secondary vocational education, or to vocational colleges (HBO) which provide higher secondary vocational education, or to universities.

The students making part of the StEP data are enrolled in a school of vocational education and training and hence follow intermediate secondary vocational education. In the school-based intermediate vocational education trajectory (Dutch: beroepsopleidend, BOL) students attend regular classes as well as practical training classes in which they acquire vocation-specific knowledge and skills under the supervision of a teacher. Besides school-based education, students gain practical experience in the course of internships lasting several weeks to several months each. The school-based educational track consists of minimal 20% and maximal 60% of practical work in the course of internships. Intermediate secondary vocational education typically lasts one to four years and is obtainable for a variety of professions. It is further offered at four different skill levels (MBO-1 to MBO-4). Level 1 provides vocational education for simple practical work. Education at level 1 usually lasts one year and provides students with basic vocational skills in a certain profession. A completed education at level 1 does not qualify students for the labor market but allows them to enroll in a level 2 education. Education on levels 2-4 typically lasts two to four years. Upon completion of a level 2-4 education, students can decide to enter the labor market or follow an education at the next higher level. Students who graduate at level 4 can enroll in higher vocational education (Dutch HBO, comparable to a college education in the United States). Students making part of the StEP data stem from level 2-4 and hence only include students from those levels that result in a labor market qualification upon graduation.

### **1.7. Outline of this Book**

The following chapters provide an overview of the role of peers in the transition from school to work from different perspectives and at different stages of the transition process. This book consists of two parts. Part I comprises Chapters 2 and 3 and is concerned with the role of peer relationships in the development of individuals' preferences for certain work context over others, their career-directed behaviors, and their successful mastery of the transition. Part I therefore describes the role of peers in the decision and acquisition process of employment, seeking to answer the question of how peer relationships link to the types of work contexts that young people are looking for and whether peers can be an asset in the attainment of the desired employment. However, the transition from school to work is more than the mere acquisition of

employment. The transition period goes along with many social-, contextual-, and behavioral changes that may affect the successful mastery of the transition. Part II of this book comprises Chapters 4 and 5 and is concerned with these developmental implications of the onset of employment and particularly the behavioral consequences in terms of the changes in individuals' engagement in adverse and norm-breaking behaviors. An overview of the topics of the different chapters, the constructs and theories that have been applied in each chapter and the data that has been used can be found in Table 1.1.

Chapter 2 investigates the link between individual and contextual aspects of peer relationships in young people's social and status-related work values at the verge of the transition from school to work. This study addresses the question whether and how relationship aspects at the individual level (i.e., agentic and interpersonal goals in relationships with peers) and at the contextual level (i.e., peer popularity and peer acceptance in the peer group) relate to the relative value that young people attach to social and status-related rewards of their future work contexts.

Chapter 3 investigates the question whether peers can contribute to individuals' successful mastery of the transition from school to work by acting as positive role models, and whether peers' capacity to act as role models is contingent on their own efficacy beliefs. In a cross-cultural approach using data from the Netherlands (Study 1) and Finland (Study 2) chapter 3 investigates whether a larger peer network in the school context and greater overall efficacy beliefs across this network contribute to young people's engagement in career-directed behavior (i.e., the number of job applications they completed; Study 1), the outcomes of this behavior (i.e., the number of job offers they received; Study 1), and the their successful completion of the transition within a three year time frame (Study 2).

Chapter 4 investigates the developmental implications of employment for individuals' engagement in delinquent behavior. In early adolescence, engagement in delinquent behavior may bear little social or legal consequences and even fulfill a purpose in the attainment of a favorable status position among one's peers by conveying an image of maturity (Dijkstra et al., 2009; Moffitt, 1993). At older ages, the potential legal consequences of delinquent behavior increase whereas the perceived necessity to convey an image of maturity through the engagement in adverse behavior decreases. This chapter investigates how the onset of employment relates to

individuals' engagement in delinquent behavior at different ages throughout adolescence, and whether the association between employment and delinquency varies by demographic characteristics.

Chapter 5 investigates peers' appraisal of aggressive and norm-breaking behavior and particularly the extent to which these behaviors are rewarded with a higher status position in the peer group at the threshold of the transition to work. Whereas at younger ages adverse and norm-breaking behaviors may serve a status-enhancing purpose in the peer (Dijkstra et al., 2009; Moffitt, 1993), this may not be the case at older ages. Chapter 5 investigates the proposition that as individuals approach the transition from school to work and gradually get access to formal markers of adult social status, aggressive and norm-breaking behaviors are no longer rewarded with a higher status position in the peer group.

Chapter 6 discusses scientific and practical implications of the studies presented in this book and elaborates on possible extensions and improvements that may be addressed in future research on the role of peers in careers.

*Table 1.1.*  
*Overview of the empirical Chapters*

	<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Outcome Measures</b>	<b>Concepts and Theories</b>	<b>Data</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Country</b>
Part I.	2	Social work values Status work values	Social cognitive career theory; Peer status; Interpersonal goals	StEP	N = 216	The Netherlands
	3	Job applications and job offers; Successful completion of the transition	Social cognitive career theory; Self-efficacy; Peer networks	StEP FinEdu	N = 109 N = 415	The Netherlands; Finland
Part II.	4	Delinquent behavior	Maturity gap; Desistance from delinquency; Demographic differences	TRAILS	N = 1881 - 2230	The Netherlands
	5	Peer status; Classroom behavior; Norm-breaking behavior	Maturity gap; Peer status	StEP	N = 603	The Netherlands



# **Part I**

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## **Work-Related Cognitions and Behaviors at the Transition to Work**

