

# Influence of culture and ethnicity on career choice



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## CHAPTER ONE

### 1. PURPOSE

The purpose of this research is to determine the influence of culture on career choice on youth unemployment in South Africa. It considers the growing body of knowledge on identity economics and uses it to find a link between the influence and the choice of career. The study will address questions such as whether the different race groups in South Africa have distinct cultural traits, whether these cultural traits influence career choice and if these career choices influence the unemployment rate. In the process it will also answer the question of whether career choices themselves influence unemployment.

### 1. 2 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Unemployment is one of South Africa's biggest constraints on economic growth. As of the second quarter of 2014, the unemployment rate was at a high of 25.5% (Stats SA, 2014). Koller (2005: 17) provided a number of reasons for this high unemployment rate including the high population growth, decline of the mining sector, low economic growth and structural unemployment.

There appears to be a general consensus that structural unemployment or the lack of skilled labour to take up available jobs is the major cause of the high unemployment rate in South Africa. Chandra, Moorty, Nganou, Rajaratnam and Schaefer (2001: 23), for instance, found that scarcity of skilled labour is the major constraint for large firms in South Africa. The Grant Thornton International Business Report (2009: 4) also highlighted the

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shortage of skilled labour as a major concern for privately held businesses in South Africa. Concern about the lack of skilled labour in South Africa was measured at 17%, much higher than it is globally at 5%. A reported 81% of companies have difficulty in finding satisfactory staff and 76% find problems in particular with finding employment equity candidates (Calldo, 2008: 2).

Du Toit (2003) suggests that the lack of skilled labour could be as a result of lack of education or possession of qualifications in the wrong fields; with people holding qualifications in humanities and art related fields having more difficulty finding employment than those with qualification in business, commerce and management. The same study also intimates that the African youths seemed to tend towards these humanities fields and that those that chose to study within the fields of business, commerce and management still opted for human resources related fields which provided less employment hence increasing the unemployment rate among African youths. This could partly account for the 53.4% unemployment rate among black youths (15-24 year olds) compared to the 14.5% unemployment rate among white youths (Smith, 2011: 7).

Part of the reason for this state of affairs is that the choice of field of study seems to influence the ease with which one acquires employment since certain fields have more opportunities for employment than others. Du Toit (2003) observed that certain races/ethnicities tended more towards humanities and arts-related fields for which there is less demand in the labour market. Du Toit's (2003) study seems to suggest that choice of study is influenced by ethnicity or culture. This may have major implications for how policy makers deal with youth unemployment.

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTION

If culture and ethnicity does influence career choice as proposed by researchers (Du Toit, 2003; Watson, Stead and De Jager, 1995; Chang, 2009), it would be beneficial, when formulating policies aimed at reducing the unemployment rate, for these policies to reflect the influence of ethnicity. The New Growth Path economic policy for instance aims to create five million jobs by the year 2020. If culture is a significant determinant for career choice and hence employment (since certain fields of study have more opportunities for employment than others), the inclusion of the cultural aspect in the implementation of the policy could improve the probability of reaching the goal of creating five million jobs in ten years. In addition, knowledge of culture's effect on career choice would enable education practitioners to plan accordingly and be able to provide the students with additional skills needed in the market so as to reduce the skills gap and reduce unemployment.

A number of international studies have shown that culture and ethnicity influence career choice. Drinkwater (1998) for example, found that ethnicity and culture influenced whether or not one chose to be self-employed in Britain and that even the type of business chosen, whether manufacturing, construction, mining or retail service, was influenced by ethnicity. The caste system in India (which like racial classifications tend to stratify society) also suggests that culture can influence career choice. Before the independence of India in 1947, the caste system determined one's role or choice of employment. The Sidras and Ati Sudras caste groups had to do the menial jobs and even today, a significant number of Indians from this background

still perform less economically than other Indians from the other caste backgrounds (Deshpande, 2000).

In South Africa, studies done by Reid-Van Niekerk and Van Niekerk (1990) as well as by Watson, Stead and De Jager (1995) among university students found that there was a disparity between white, coloured and black ethnicities in terms of career maturity which then determined career choice. Prideaux and Creed (2001) define career maturity *as the extent to which individuals are able to make career-related choices independently*. It is thus used more commonly when conducting studies concerning career choice. The above studies, carried out five years apart, showed significant disparities between the different races. This points towards the idea that for some cultures, career choice may be influenced by the community. However there has been no recent study on the effect of ethnicity on career maturity and choice. The last study (Watson *et al*, 1995) was conducted just after the end of the apartheid regime. Since then, significant changes have taken place in South Africa; politically, economically and socially.

Politically, South Africa has changed from an apartheid form of government to a one of democracy where everyone regardless of race or gender can vote when they reach the age of maturity. Economically, South Africa has become a more globalized nation with trading partners all over the world. Its financial institutions are well developed and considered one of the best in world. The World Economic Forum (2011: 21) ranked South Africa 4<sup>th</sup> out of 142 economies in terms of development of the financial market. Socially, South Africa is a nation that emphasizes equality of its entire people regardless of race or gender. Laws such as the Bill of Rights, Employment Equity Act and <https://assignbuster.com/influence-of-culture-and-ethnicity-on-career-choice/>

Black Economic Empowerment Act have been implemented to protect the right to equality and to bring about restitution to people who were formerly disadvantaged during the apartheid era.

Furthermore, the studies done (Van Niekerk, 1990; Watson et al, 1995) have concentrated on showing the differences in career maturity rather than career choice and have not used these results to explore the effect on youth employment. Given the length of time since the last study on effects of cultural traits on career choice was done, the political, economic and social changes that have taken place, the lack of knowledge on whether the effect of cultural traits on career choice could consequently affect youth employment, this research proposal presents the following question: Do cultural traits influence youth employment in South Africa?

Cultural traits in this instance refer to “ the behaviours and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group” (Culture, *n. d.*) while career choice refers to the one’s choice of occupation or profession. It usually determines one’s field of employment throughout their life. Youth refers to the age group between 15 and 35 years of age. The next section will delve into the different theories on which this study is based.

In order to fulfil the purpose of this study three research questions will be addressed. They are as follows:

1. Do South Africans of different race groups have particular cultural traits?
2. Do these cultural traits influence choice and career choice in particular?

### 3. Does career choice influence youth unemployment?

#### 4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study has the potential to help influence a more targeted and effective means of combating youth unemployment in South Africa. By better understanding another possible cause for the high rate of unemployment, policy makers can develop a policy that will encompass the effect of culture. This could help reduce the level of youth unemployment in South Africa.

Secondly, this study, could help career counsellors in schools help students make better choices of study at the tertiary level. This information could be used in the tools used to help students what they are better suited to.

Understanding why they are making certain choices could help the students more informed study choices that influence future careers.

Lastly, the information gained from this study would add to the general body of knowledge. It would provide insight into other causes of youth unemployment; it would show the link between career choice and youth unemployment and continue to highlight the importance of identity economics in the world today. This information can also be used in future research. This study is very concentrated and is limited to the University of Johannesburg. It would be worthwhile to see if the effects are the same countrywide.

#### 5. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study will be constructed around three main theoretical foundations. The first is based on Hofstede's theory of nations' cultures (Hofstede, 2000). The theory was first developed for management but has grown and is now used <https://assignbuster.com/influence-of-culture-and-ethnicity-on-career-choice/>

in a number of fields. It advocates the view that different nations have particular cultural traits and that these traits influence the behaviour of employees. These cultural traits include: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity and long-term versus short-term orientation. Managers therefore have to take this into account when developing their style of management. This theory will be used to determine if the different races in South Africa possess particular traits which could influence their behaviour and choices.

The second theoretical foundation is based on the fact that culture influences career choice. Academic literature (Meir & Tziner, 2001; Hill *et al* 2003; Coates, Skrbis and Western, 2008 and Trauth, Quesenberry and Huang, 2008) has shown that culture and cultural traits have influenced decisions people make and influence the economy of a country. Career psychologists (Marsella and Leong, 1995; Leong and Hartung, 2001; Watson, Duarte and Glavin, 2005) have also agreed that when developing career assessment tests culture has to be considered as this has the ability to influence the choices people make. This research will then seek to determine whether culture does in fact influence career choice among university students.

Lastly, the third theoretical foundation is based on the fact that choice of study is one of the causes of unemployment in South Africa, as derived from the literature (Du Toit, 2003; Banerjee *et al*, 2007; ILO, 2012; Guliwe n. d) on the causes of unemployment especially youth unemployment. The literature review will present evidence that choice of study may be one of the causes of youth unemployment in South Africa. These three theories form the



framework that will be used to answer the research question; do cultural traits influence youth unemployment.

## 6. SUMMARY OF METHODOLOGY

The methodology will involve three main steps. The first step makes use of the first theory, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, and consists of using a questionnaire to determine whether South African students from different racial and cultural groups have distinct cultural traits. The questionnaire will for instance, help establish whether white South Africans have high power distance, low uncertainty avoidance and are more individualistic than collective in culture compared to black South Africans, who on the basis of their descent, would be expected to have high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance or be more collective than individualistic in character.

The second step makes use of the second theory that culture has an effect on career choice. Establishing that South Africans have distinct cultural traits is only the beginning. It must now be determined whether these traits significantly impact one's choice of study. It will make use of econometric analysis to determine whether these cultural traits significantly influence choices of study. Choice of study will be used as a proxy for the career choice. Cultural traits will be analysed alongside choice of study to establish a relationship. Control variables such as academic proficiency, age and gender will be used to reduce the likelihood of biased results.

The purpose of the econometric analysis is to determine whether the hypothesis (if confirmed) that black South Africans possess the traits of high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance and collectivism significantly

influence the career chosen. The results would be consistent with the hypothesis if black South Africans mainly choose study areas/careers such as those in education, nursing, human resources or social work (humanities fields) where they can work in communion with others, face little risk and understand hierarchy in the workplace is valid. It would also be consistent if in contrast, white South Africans (hypothesised to have less uncertainty avoidance and are more individualistic in character) predominantly choose study area/careers such as those in finance, science and entrepreneurship that allow for risk and are largely individualistic in nature.

The third step will consist of comparing unemployment rates across different fields amongst the different race groups. The intention is to determine whether certain fields of work/ careers have higher levels of unemployment and whether these fields tend to be over-represented by certain raced groups. An analysis of data available from Statistics South Africa will show which of these choices of study or field have highest rates of unemployment. The expectation is that fields with the highest rates of unemployment are the ones that certain race groups such as black South Africans tend to choose to study due to their possession of particular traits thus contributing to the high unemployment rate.

## 7. LIMITATIONS

While the study has the potential to give valuable information especially regarding ways to reduce youth unemployment in South Africa, it also has two main limitations.

1. The sample of students used may not be representative of the diversity in South Africa

The sample of students used was not balanced in terms of the different population groups which could bias the results received. The study is also very preliminary and would serve to test the theories to determining if it is worthwhile to carry out the research at a large scale level.

2. Due to the sample size and geographical location, the population groups may not have significantly different cultural traits.

A sample size of students from different parts of the country with very different background could have provided a much richer basis for analysis and show statistically unique cultural traits for each population group. However, the University of Johannesburg does have students from different province and this could provide some depth to the research.

## 8. DEFINITION OF TERMS

*Culture*: The behaviours and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group (Culture, *n. d.*).

*Career choice* : One's choice of occupation or profession.