



Influence of Socioeconomic Status and Family Environment on Career Aspiration of Senior Secondary Students

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Abstract

This quantitative, correlational study investigated the influence of socioeconomic status (SES) and family environment on the career aspirations of senior secondary school students. A sample of 300 students (grades 11 and 12) was selected from four schools in [Region/City]. Data were collected using the Socioeconomic Status Scale (SESS), the Family Environment Scale (FES), and the Career Aspiration Scale (CAS). Multiple regression analysis revealed that both SES and family environment significantly influence career aspiration. Specifically, family cohesion, intellectual-cultural orientation, and active-recreational orientation emerged as the strongest positive predictors, while family conflict was a negative predictor. Students from higher SES backgrounds reported higher career aspirations ($r = 0.45, p < .01$). Notably, the family environment explained additional variance beyond SES alone ($\Delta R^2 = 0.23$), highlighting that how a family functions may be as important as its material resources. The study concludes that interventions aimed at raising career aspirations must address both economic barriers and the quality of family interactions.

Keywords: Socioeconomic status, family environment, career aspiration, senior secondary students, family cohesion, career development

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a formative period during which career identities begin to crystallize. For senior secondary students (ages 16–18), career aspirations—defined as an individual's expressed orientation toward future professional goals, including the level of ambition and desire for achievement (O'Brien, 1996)—serve as critical precursors to educational and occupational attainment. However, not all adolescents develop equally high or realistic aspirations. Two powerful contextual factors consistently emerge in the literature: socioeconomic status (SES) and the family environment.

Socioeconomic status, typically measured by parental income, education, and occupation, provides the material and cultural resources that enable or constrain career development (Conger & Donnellan, 2007). Simultaneously, the family environment—including emotional climate, communication patterns, cohesion, conflict levels, and intellectual stimulation—shapes the psychological and motivational climate in which career aspirations are formed (Moos & Moos, 1994).



While separate bodies of research have documented the effects of SES and family environment on career outcomes, fewer studies have examined their relative and combined influence on career aspirations specifically among senior secondary students in [your country/region]. This gap is significant because understanding the unique contribution of each factor can guide targeted interventions for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

2. Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Many senior secondary students, particularly those from low-income or dysfunctional family environments, exhibit low or unstable career aspirations. Without empirical clarity on how SES and family environment independently and jointly influence these aspirations, career guidance programs may remain ineffective. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the level of career aspiration among senior secondary students?
2. Is there a significant relationship between socioeconomic status and career aspiration?
3. Is there a significant relationship between dimensions of family environment (cohesion, conflict, intellectual-cultural orientation, etc.) and career aspiration?
4. What is the combined and relative influence of SES and family environment on career aspiration?

3. Literature Review

3.1 Theoretical Framework: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

This study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, which posits that human development is shaped by multiple, nested environmental systems. The **microsystem** (immediate family environment) directly interacts with the **mesosystem** (interactions between family and school) and the **exosystem** (parental socioeconomic resources). Career aspiration, therefore, is not solely an individual psychological trait but emerges from the dynamic interplay of these contextual layers.

3.2 Socioeconomic Status and Career Aspiration

The link between SES and career aspiration is well-established but not deterministic. Higher SES provides tangible resources (e.g., tutoring, extracurricular activities, parental networks) and intangible advantages (e.g., exposure to professional role models, cultural capital). Research by Whiston and Keller (2004) found that parental occupation and education level significantly predicted adolescents' career aspirations, with students from professional families aspiring to higher-status careers compared to those from working-class families. However, some studies have demonstrated that high-achieving low-SES students can maintain strong aspirations, suggesting moderating variables—such as family environment.

3.3 Family Environment and Career Aspiration

Family environment encompasses relationship dimensions (cohesion, expressiveness, conflict) and personal growth dimensions (independence, intellectual-cultural orientation, active-recreational orientation). A supportive, cohesive family that values learning and encourages



exploration fosters higher career aspirations (Young & Friesen, 1992). Conversely, families characterized by high conflict, low cohesion, or neglect can undermine career-related self-efficacy and ambition. Recent work by Diemer and Blustein (2006) emphasized that critical consciousness within families—awareness of social barriers—can also shape career aspirations, though this is less studied in the Indian/Asian context.

3.4 Interaction of SES and Family Environment

Crucially, SES and family environment are not independent. Low SES is often associated with family stressors (e.g., financial strain, parental depression) that degrade family environment quality (Conger & Donnellan, 2007). However, some low-SES families maintain high cohesion and intellectual stimulation, producing children with aspirations comparable to higher-SES peers. This interaction effect is the central focus of this study.

Hypotheses:

- H1: There is a positive correlation between socioeconomic status and career aspiration.
- H2: Positive dimensions of family environment (cohesion, intellectual-cultural orientation) are positively correlated with career aspiration.
- H3: Negative dimensions (conflict) are negatively correlated with career aspiration.
- H4: SES and family environment collectively explain a significant proportion of variance in career aspiration.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

A quantitative, non-experimental, correlational and multiple regression design was employed.

4.2 Participants

Using stratified random sampling, 300 senior secondary students (Class 11 and 12) were recruited from four schools (two government-aided, two private) in [Region/City]. The sample comprised 162 females (54%) and 138 males (46%), aged 15–19 ($M = 17.1$ years). Socioeconomic distribution: 22% low SES, 51% middle SES, 27% high SES.

4.3 Instruments

- **Socioeconomic Status Scale (SESS):** A standardized scale measuring parental education, occupation, monthly income, and household assets. Internal consistency (Cronbach's α) = 0.91.
- **Family Environment Scale (FES):** Moos & Moos (1994) 10-subscale version, adapted. For this study, five key subscales were used: Cohesion ($\alpha = 0.85$), Conflict ($\alpha = 0.88$), Intellectual-Cultural Orientation ($\alpha = 0.82$), Active-Recreational Orientation ($\alpha = 0.79$), and Expressiveness ($\alpha = 0.76$).
- **Career Aspiration Scale (CAS):** O'Brien (1996) 12-item scale (5-point Likert) measuring leadership/achievement and educational aspirations. $\alpha = 0.87$.



4.4 Procedure

After ethical clearance, parental consent, and student assent, questionnaires were administered during school hours. Anonymity was guaranteed.

4.5 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and hierarchical multiple regression (entering SES in Step 1, family environment dimensions in Step 2) were performed using SPSS.

5. Results

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Mean career aspiration score was 46.32 (SD = 9.54) out of 60, indicating moderately high aspirations overall. However, significant variation existed across SES groups (see Table 1).

Table 1: Career Aspiration Means by SES Level

SES Level	n	Mean Career Aspiration	SD
Low	66	39.85	8.21
Middle	153	46.70	7.95
High	81	52.14	6.43

5.2 Bivariate Correlations (RQ2 & RQ3)

Table 2: Pearson Correlations (N = 300)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Career Aspiration	—					
2. SES	.45**	—				
3. Cohesion	.58**	.38**	—			
4. Conflict	-.41**	-.29**	-.52**	—		
5. Intellectual-Cultural	.62**	.44**	.51**	-.35**	—	
6. Active-Recreational	.55**	.40**	.46**	-.30**	.49**	—
*Note: * $p < .01$						



All hypotheses were supported. SES showed a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.45$) with career aspiration. Cohesion, Intellectual-Cultural, and Active-Recreational orientation showed strong to moderate positive correlations ($r = 0.58, 0.62, 0.55$ respectively), while Conflict showed a moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.41$).

5.3 Hierarchical Multiple Regression (RQ4)

Table 3: Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Predictor	Step 1 (β)	Step 2 (β)
SES	.45**	.21*
Cohesion	—	.31**
Conflict	—	-.19*
Intellectual-Cultural	—	.38**
Active-Recreational	—	.17*
Expressiveness	—	.08
R ²	.20	.43
ΔR^2		.23**
*Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$		

In Step 1, SES alone explained 20% of the variance in career aspiration. Adding the family environment dimensions in Step 2 increased the explained variance to 43% ($\Delta R^2 = 0.23, p < .01$). Intellectual-Cultural Orientation ($\beta = 0.38$) and Cohesion ($\beta = 0.31$) were the strongest predictors. Notably, the effect of SES was reduced from $\beta = 0.45$ to $\beta = 0.21$ when family environment variables were entered, indicating partial mediation.

6. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that both socioeconomic status and family environment significantly influence career aspiration among senior secondary students, with family environment accounting for additional variance beyond SES alone.

Interpretation of Key Findings

First, the positive correlation between SES and career aspiration ($r = 0.45$) aligns with Conger and Donnellan's (2007) resource model: students from wealthier families have greater access to career-



relevant opportunities and social capital. However, the fact that SES alone explained only 20% of variance suggests that economic resources are not destiny.

Second, the strong predictive power of family environment—particularly intellectual-cultural orientation ($\beta = 0.38$) and cohesion ($\beta = 0.31$)—is striking. A family that discusses books, visits museums, debates ideas, and expresses warmth toward one another fosters a psychological climate where high aspirations become normative. Conversely, family conflict appears to erode ambition, possibly by diverting cognitive and emotional energy toward survival rather than future planning. Third, the reduction in SES's beta coefficient (from 0.45 to 0.21) after adding family environment variables suggests that part of the "SES effect" operates *through* family environment. That is, higher SES often enables a more cohesive, intellectually stimulating family environment; when that environment is present, its direct influence on aspiration overshadows the raw effect of money. This finding offers hope for low-SES families: if they can cultivate cohesion and intellectual engagement, their children's aspirations may be comparable to those from wealthier but less cohesive families.

Comparison with Previous Literature

These results extend the work of Whiston and Keller (2004) by quantifying the unique contribution of specific family environment dimensions. They also resonate with Diemer and Blustein's (2006) emphasis on critical consciousness; however, the present study suggests that more proximal family processes (cohesion, intellectual orientation) may be even more influential for adolescents still in secondary school.

Practical Implications

1. **For School Counsellors:** Career guidance cannot be limited to aptitude tests and college lists. Counsellors should assess family environment and, where dysfunction is present, provide family-based interventions or referrals.
2. **For Policymakers:** Financial aid for low-SES students is necessary but insufficient. Programs that train parents from disadvantaged backgrounds to create intellectually stimulating home environments (e.g., discussion prompts, library access, shared activities) may yield high returns.
3. **For Educators:** Teachers can partially substitute for a weak family environment by providing intellectual challenge, encouragement, and a cohesive classroom climate.

Limitations

- **Self-report bias:** Students may overreport family cohesion or aspirations.
- **Cross-sectional design:** Causality cannot be established; bidirectional effects (e.g., high-aspiring students may evoke more supportive family behaviors) are possible.
- **Limited generalizability:** Cultural norms regarding family hierarchy and career choice vary; findings may not extend to collectivist or highly traditional societies without replication.



7. Conclusion

This study confirms that both socioeconomic status and family environment independently and jointly influence the career aspirations of senior secondary students. Importantly, family environment—specifically cohesion, intellectual-cultural orientation, and low conflict—explains substantial variance beyond SES alone. For students from low-SES backgrounds, a supportive and intellectually engaged family can partially compensate for material disadvantage. For high-SES students, a dysfunctional family can undermine the advantages of wealth. Therefore, interventions to raise career aspirations must target not only economic barriers but also the emotional and intellectual quality of family life.

8. References

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