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AN INSIDE JOB: TO GET ON THE RIGHT CAREER TRACK, LOOK WITHIN

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Many people may dream about becoming a doctor, but only a few can join the profession. Candidates to the job must not only possess exceptional academic ability, but also, the physical and psychological stamina for typically long, intense shifts that involve giving comfort to the unwell.

Next, consider the profession of a nurse. In many ways, nurses share and perform many of the tasks performed by doctors. While entry requirements to the vocation may not be as academically gruelling, the job is no less noble. Yet, for some reason, the nursing profession is seldom seen to be a viable alternative to that of a doctor – despite the fact that the job offers pretty much the same intrinsic rewards of working within healthcare environments.

Perceived differences between the two professions may not be quite so easy to articulate because they speak to a highly complex part of our being: our identities, said [Serena Wee](#), an assistant professor of psychology at SMU's [School of Social Sciences](#).

Speaking at a [Behavioural Sciences Institute](#) seminar, Wee added that people tend to choose jobs that minimise threats to self-concept. However, popularly desired jobs, such as that of doctors, lawyers, actors and athletes, are seldom available to most people, and so compromises must be made between ambitions, capabilities and the positions that are available.

What do we compromise?

In trying to understand the considerations that occur when people choose one job over another, it is important to first appreciate the idea that jobs are often rather central to personal identity.

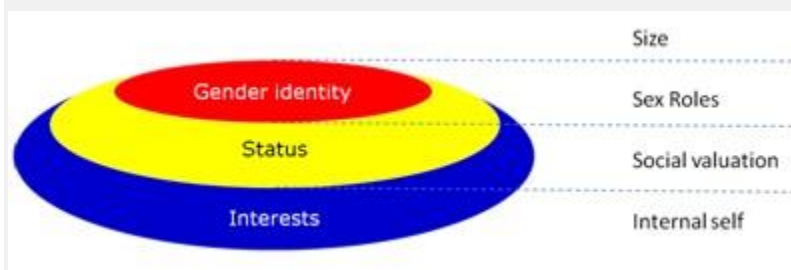
"Think about a conversation with a stranger. If you're the sort of person who likes to go out and meet new people, the first question that you ask after 'What's your name?' is likely to be 'What do you do?'... and these small pieces of information are what we use to anchor our perceptions of each other," Wee explained.

'Identity' is also, of course, multifaceted due to individual experiences and the influences of significant others – family members, friends, partners, and peers – over long periods of time. Some theorists believe that impressions and associations made at the earlier life stages tend to be more ingrained and thus harder to undo at the adult stage.

Taking a developmental perspective (see: Figure 1), Wee explained that 'size' is often the first characteristic that children pay attention to, followed by 'sex roles', where children pick up that fathers and mothers tend to do different things, or that boys and girls tend to dress differently and play with different toys. "They may not talk about it that way, but these ideas form in their heads," Wee emphasised.

As children grow older and socialise at schools, they will come to see differences in social valuations – for example: who lives in the bigger house, owns better toys, etc. In adolescence, people pay more attention to their likes, dislikes, and the meanings behind those inclinations. Subsequently, when looking for a job, most people tend to give greater focus on the outermost interests while downplaying the deeper intrinsic influences that affect decision processes.

Figure 1: *Developmental progression and evaluation*



An example might include associations formed between the job and one's gender. Nursing, for instance, is often associated with females, and so most men may choose to avoid the profession because they perceive it to be too feminine. Nannies, secretaries, fashion editors, builders and plumbers are other examples of stereotypically gendered vocations, each with different degrees of perceived 'status' in society.

Mapping out inner wants

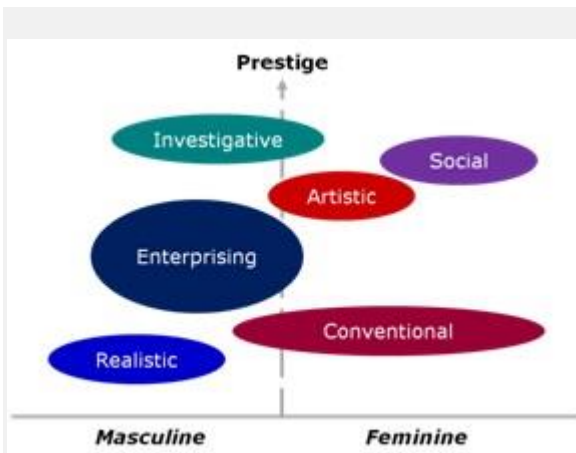
Drawing upon Gottfredson's *Theory of Circumscription and Compromise*, Wee explained that because different thresholds exist across the inner dimensions, people tend to rule out occupational possibilities where jobs are perceived to fall outside of what is seen as acceptable.

A tolerable 'sex-type' boundary, for instance, refers to limits on the masculine-feminine characteristics of the job, where vocations that appear "too girly" or "too manly" may be ruled out by some. 'Prestige' boundaries will refer to limits on whether positions are perceived to be "too high class" or "too low class" for comfort.

To help people find the most suitable jobs, Wee argued that it may be useful to avoid stereotypical occupational images, and instead, focus on the innate aspects. "Compromise is about trying to fit what you want with what you think you can get, or what is available to you... It occurs when a person relinquishes a preferred state – a particular position, in terms of how prestigious an occupation is; or in terms of the sex-type – in order to achieve a valued outcome," she said.

Jobs that are feasible may not always be within our line of sight because people are generally not aware of their tolerable boundaries. Wee used Figure 2 to highlight the relationships between 'sex-type', 'prestige', and different kinds of work activities.

Figure 2: *Occupational themes by gender and prestige*



Source: Gottfredson (1981)

Using the three development levels as shown in Figure 1, Wee posited that compromises are 'minimal' where work interests may be maintained; 'moderate' where job prestige may be maintained; and 'severe' where the choice ultimately boils down to the preservation of one's gender self-concept. She then proceeded to recruit 194 subjects from 12 different colleges in the US – senior students who were about to graduate and look for jobs.

The participants were tasked to choose between groups of occupations, categorised by 'interests', 'prestige' and 'sex-type', so as to elicit these self-concepts that they might not otherwise think about. Using hierarchical linear modelling techniques, Wee plotted the results onto a graph to visualise the patterns.

Indeed, the analysis revealed that women tended to prefer jobs that were more feminine, less masculine; and the same pattern was observed amongst men, albeit to less effect. Subjects, regardless of their gender, also tended to choose occupations that were more consistent with interests. While findings from the tests on compromises revealed no significant differences, female subjects were found to be likelier to choose 'feminine' jobs where 'severe' compromise was required.

"Prestige, sex-type and interests do matter and that they seem to play out when people make occupational choices... For some people, when they do have to compromise, it changes what they focus on when making choices. One argument is that the criterion becomes different when choosing amongst positive outcomes versus choosing among negative outcomes," said Wee.

Less stereotypes, greater choices

Different occupational factors may surface when choosing between jobs. Yet, because people are seldom systematic about their job considerations, they miss out on many other options.

Wee observed from conversations with her students that many seem to fixate on factors such as 'make more money' or 'free time'. "They focus on three to four things and it *has* to be those things... It's difficult to move them away, and onto thinking about alternatives."

How can career counsellors or consultants match people to jobs more effectively? One way, Wee believes, is to move people away from stereotypes and occupational images; to provide more information, so as to flesh out what a particular job or career path really entails. To do this, university students can, for instance, stand to expose themselves, first-hand, to a wider range of career options. Recruiters can also stand to provide more realistic information at interviews, job fairs and in employer marketing collaterals, rather than to brandish false impressions.

“Obviously, people cannot be exposed to every kind of work. Your experiences through life will allow you to see some more than others. Take for example, your parents’ occupations... You might not really know what your dad does, but you might know things like how he never has enough time to stay at home, etc. And through that, you form stereotypes about certain jobs,” Wee said.

The reality is that people will circumscribe large swathes of work because of deeply held conceptions. What they end up with is a lot less opportunities in life. Those looking to work in healthcare might not consider a career in nursing as an option, for instance, because of misguided impressions, she said. “It might be that they are good at it; that they have an interest in it, but they might just not consider it.”