

## The Roles of Self-Esteem and *n* Achievement in Aspiring to Prestigious Vocations

ARTHUR G. BEDEIAN

*Department of Management, Auburn University*

This study investigated several hypotheses relevant to the vocational aspiration process as it is related to self-esteem and *n* Achievement. One hundred and forty-four male college students completed the Attitudes Toward Occupation Questionnaire, Form B of the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, and the Adjective Check List. To investigate the differential relationships of self-esteem and *n* Achievement with vocational aspirations, each hypothesis was tested by computing partial correlations, controlling first for *n* Achievement and then for self-esteem. The data indicated a positive relationship between self-esteem and the tendency to aspire to vocations with high prestige. This finding was interpreted as providing an extension of Super's self-implementation theory. Additionally, the data revealed (a) the existence of a negative relationship between self-esteem and the tendency to strive for vocations with less prestige than one's perceived vocational upper limit, and (b) contrary to prediction, a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and the tendency to settle for vocations which have less satisfaction associated with them than with one's perceived vocational upper limit.

This study was concerned with the application of a theory regarding self-esteem and the need for achievement (*n* Achievement) to the problem of vocational choice. The fundamental construct underlying this theory is that occupational preferences represent a translation of a person's self into vocational terms. This "translation" is seen by Super (1972) to be central to an individual's vocational goal-setting and decision-making processes. He offers the following point of view:

In choosing an occupation one is, in effect, choosing a means of implementing a self-concept. . . . The choice of an occupation is one of the points in life at which a young person is called upon to state rather explicitly his concept of himself, to say definitely "I am this or that kind of person" (Super, 1951, pp. 81, 92).

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As seen by Super, it is with this self-understanding that a person seeks out and selects from various occupations the one role that is perceived to be most commensurate with his self-concept.

Support for Super's position has been offered by several studies (see, for example, Healy, 1968; Ziegler, 1970). More recently, interpreting self-esteem as an aspect of self-concept, Greenhaus (1971a, b), Korman (1976), and Resnick, Fauble, and Osipow (1970) have further explored Super's "self-implementation" theory. One of the theory's possible limitations has been its relative neglect of individual difference variables (Greenhaus, 1971b). It is possible, for example, that individual variations in *n* Achievement may relate to vocational choice in much the same way as does self-esteem. It is also possible that individual differences in *n* Achievement may interact with self-esteem in such a way as to affect the outcome of vocational "self-implementation."

As generally defined, self-esteem is an individual's evaluation of his overall worth as a person (Silber & Tippett, 1965). It is also used to refer to the feelings of satisfaction that a person has about himself.

Achievement motivation, as it is generally defined, is "the striving to increase, or keep as high as possible, one's own capability in all activities in which a standard of excellence is thought to apply and where the execution of such activities, can, therefore, either succeed or fail" (Heckhausen, 1967, pp. 4-5). As conceptualized by McClelland (1961), *n* Achievement is a "motivational force" which arouses the desire for achievement in situations involving "standards of excellence." Its arousal results in higher levels of aspiration leading to a desire to do increasingly well. A person high in *n* Achievement possesses an inner desire, has a feeling of challenge, and seeks accomplishment for its own sake.

The purpose of the present study was to test several predictions relevant to the vocational aspiration process as it is related to self-esteem and *n* Achievement, and to specifically examine the differential relationships of self-esteem and *n* Achievement with vocational aspirations. These hypotheses were derived from Super's (1972) theory of vocational choice, the work of Greenhaus (1971a, b), and McClelland's (1961) well-known research on the achievement motive.

Specifically, it was predicted that:

(1) The prestige of the vocation which a person intends to strive for as an adult will be positively correlated with the person's self-esteem and *n* Achievement.

(2A) Given an opportunity to avoid the challenge of vocational achievement, a person's willingness to settle for less prestigious vocations will be negatively correlated with the person's self-esteem and *n* Achievement.

(2B) Given an opportunity to avoid the challenge of vocational

achievement, a person's willingness to settle for less satisfying vocations will be negatively correlated with the person's self-esteem and  $n$  Achievement.

(3A) The tendency to strive for vocations with less prestige than one's perceived vocational upper limit will be negatively correlated with the person's self-esteem and  $n$  Achievement.

(3B) The tendency to settle for occupations which have less prestige than that of one's perceived vocational upper limit will be negatively correlated with the person's self-esteem and  $n$  Achievement.

(4) The tendency to settle for vocations which have less satisfaction associated with them than that associated with one's perceived vocational upper limit will be negatively correlated with the person's self-esteem and  $n$  Achievement.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

The sample consisted of 144 male students enrolled in five sections of an upper-level spring quarter course in business law at a large, southeastern university. The subjects were distributed among three undergraduate classes, the distribution including 49 sophomores, 55 juniors and 40 seniors. Their ages ranged from 18 to 32, but there were only two subjects older than 27. The mean and median age of the sample was 21. The sample included students enrolled in over 30 curricula offered by the university.

As noted by Korman (1966), this type of sample is highly meaningful for studies involving the measurement of vocational choice in that it largely limits itself to subjects who have both the financial and intellectual resources to allow themselves entry into occupations of their choice and who have also experienced the career and "major sampling" activities of the first two years of college. (It should be noted that in the instance of the responding spring quarter sophomores, their second year of study was less than 3 weeks from being complete.) In addition, the influence of occupational role performance is largely absent within such a sample since the majority of the subjects are still only college students. Finally, evidence exists indicating that selection at this time is highly predictive of future occupational membership (Schletzer, 1963).

### *Instruments*

*Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory—Form B (SEI-B)*. Form B of the SEI consists of 25 items to which subjects respond as being "like me" or "unlike me." The SEI measures evaluative attitudes toward the self in academic, family, personal, and social areas of experience (Coopersmith, 1967). The validity and reliability of the SEI-B is supported by a variety of studies (see, for example, Bedeian, 1976; Self-Esteem Institute, 1974).

*Adjective Check List (ACL)—Need Achievement Scale*. Developed by

Gough and Heilbrun (1965), the ACL consists of 300 adjectives (measuring 24 experimental scales) representing a broad range of attributes commonly used to describe a person. Subjects are requested to check as many adjectives as they consider to be self-descriptive. Validity and reliability data on the ACL are available in Gough and Heilbrun (1965). Use of the ACL as a personality assessment research technique is presented in Gough (1960). To avoid questions of validity concerning the removal and use of only one scale of the instrument, the complete ACL was administered and machine interpreted before  $n$  Achievement scores were extracted for the purpose of the study.

*Attitudes Toward Occupations Questionnaire (ATO)*. Modeled closely after Clark, Teevan, and Ricciuti's (1956) Level of Aspiration Questionnaire, this scale was developed by Burnstein (1963) using prestige ratings from the well-known 1947 National Opinion Research Center (NORC, 1953) study of occupational prestige. For use in the present study, it was slightly modified (six additional occupations were added) and updated, using similar 1963 NORC prestige ratings (Hodge, Siegel, & Rossi, 1966).

As modified, the ATO consisted of two pages. The first page presented four questions. The second listed in alphabetical order 46 occupations from the 90 most recently evaluated by the National Opinion Research Center. Located next to each occupation and equally spaced across the page, were answer columns labeled "one," "two," and "three."

The occupations listed were as follows: accountant for a large business, airline pilot, architect, artist who paints pictures that are exhibited in galleries, author of novels, banker, chemist, civil engineer, clerk in a store, college professor, county judge, dentist, diplomat in the United States foreign service, economist, electrician, farmhand, farm owner and operator, filling station attendant, garage mechanic, insurance agent, lawyer, machine operator in a factory, mail carrier, manager of a small store in a city, member of the board of directors of a large corporation, minister, musician in a symphony orchestra, night watchman, newspaper columnist, nuclear physicist, owner of factory that employs about 100 people, owner-operator of a lunch stand, physician, policeman, psychologist, public school teacher, scientist, state governor, street sweeper, tenant farmer—one who owns livestock and machinery and manages the farm, taxi driver, traveling salesman for a wholesale concern, truck driver, undertaker, and United States Supreme Court Justice. The NORC prestige ratings of these occupations range from 96 (United States Supreme Court Justice) to 36 (street sweeper).

The questions on the first page of the questionnaire were as follows:  
 Question 1. In the first answer column on the following sheet, place a check mark next to those occupations which you are pretty sure you could attain *if you wanted to try for them*.

Question 2. In the second column on the following sheet, indicate how you would feel if you held *each* of the occupations listed. Do this by placing on the appropriate line in column two the number of the statement which best describes the way you would feel. Do this for *every* occupation and not just for those you checked in response to question one.

- +3 I would feel extremely good and very satisfied with my occupation.
- +2 I would feel quite good and quite satisfied about my occupation.
- +1 I would feel somewhat satisfied about my occupation.
- 0 I would feel neutral—neither good nor bad about my occupation.
- 1 I would feel somewhat disappointed about my occupation.
- 2 I would feel quite disappointed and dissatisfied about my occupation.
- 3 I would feel extremely bad, and very much dissatisfied with my occupation.

Question 3. Suppose it were possible for you to avoid the stressful and uncertain competition for occupational success and achievement that goes on during much of a person's life. In that case, what occupation would you be willing to settle for? Indicate the occupations you would be willing to settle for by marking a Y (for "yes") in column three next to those occupations. Mark an N (for "no") in column three next to those occupations you would not be willing to settle for even under the above conditions.

Question 4. Which of the occupations listed is closest to that which you really expect to try? \_\_\_\_\_ (specify occupation).

As designed, Question 1 asks for a realistic judgment on the part of the student regarding his vocational limits. Question 2 asks for the satisfaction that the student would experience in holding each of the occupations listed. Question 3 asks for the vocations that the student would be willing to "settle for" if it were possible to avoid vocational competition. Question 4 is a common question in level of aspiration studies. It simply calls for the vocation that the student "really expects to try for."

### *Procedure*

The Attitudes Toward Occupation Questionnaire, the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, and the Adjective Check List were administered to the subjects in groups ranging from 25 to 30 in size. All subjects remained completely anonymous having been randomly assigned numbers. All subjects received the instruments in the same order. The ATO was administered first, followed by the SEI-B, with the ACL adminis-

tered last. Before completion of the instruments, the general nature of the study was explained to each test group, although the hypotheses of the research and the dependent variables to be analyzed were not mentioned.

### *Analyses*

In order to investigate the differential relationships of self-esteem and *n* Achievement with vocational aspirations, each hypothesis was tested by computing partial correlations, controlling first for *n* Achievement and then for self-esteem. Initially, simple correlations were computed; however, given the study's purpose and the high correlation between self-esteem and *n* Achievement ( $r = .46, p < .001$ ), partial correlations were deemed more appropriate for the intended analyses. Scores on the SEI-B ranged from 28 to 96, with the mean of the distribution equal to 74.33 and a standard deviation of 14.22. Scores on the *n* Achievement scale of the ACL ranged from 29 to 78, with the mean of the distribution equal to 52.84 and a standard deviation of 9.63.

## RESULTS

The first hypothesis predicted a positive relationship between self-esteem and *n* Achievement and the prestige of the vocation for which a person intends to aspire. Table 1, line 1 presents the partial correlations between both self-esteem and *n* Achievement and the prestige of the occupations that the subjects selected as most like that for which they intended to aspire (Question 4, ATO). As indicated, a significant positive ( $r = .19, p < .05$ ) relationship existed between self-esteem and the prestige of aspire-for occupations, but not for *n* Achievement.

Taken together, hypotheses 2A and 2B predicted the existence of a negative relationship between both self-esteem and *n* Achievement and a person's willingness, given an opportunity to avoid the challenge of vocational achievement, to settle for less prestigious and satisfying vocations. As Table 1, lines 2 and 3 indicate, the partial correlation between neither self-esteem nor *n* Achievement and the prestige or satisfaction rating of the subject's "settle-for" occupations (from Questions 2 and 3, ATO) was significant.

Hypotheses 3A and 3B jointly predicted a negative relationship between both self-esteem and *n* Achievement and the tendencies to *strive* and *settle* for vocations with less prestige than that of one's perceived vocational upper limit. "Perceived vocational upper limit" was defined as the most prestigious occupation chosen by each subject in response to the first question of the ATO—i.e., what occupations do you feel pretty sure you could attain *if you wanted to try for them?* The differences in prestige between the subjects' perceived upper limit vocations and the mean prestige of both their aspire-for (Question 1, ATO) and "settle-for" (Question 3, ATO) vocations (in both instances the former minus the

TABLE 1  
 Partial Correlations between Self-Esteem and Need Achievement and Selected Measures of Vocational Aspiration

Line	Hypothesis measure	Self-esteem <sup>a</sup>	Need achievement <sup>b</sup>
1	1. Prestige of aspire-for occupations	.19*	.05
2	2A. Prestige of settle-for occupations	.06	-.02
3	2B. Satisfaction associated with settle-for occupations	-.06	.03
4	3A. Tendency to strive for vocations with less prestige than one's perceived vocational upper limit	-.13	-.02
5	3B. Tendency to settle for vocations with less prestige than one's perceived vocational upper limit	.05	.05
6	4. Tendency to settle for vocations with less satisfaction than one's perceived vocational upper limit	.20**	.08

Note.  $N = 144$ .

<sup>a</sup> Controlling for  $n$  Achievement.

<sup>b</sup> Controlling for self-esteem.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

latter) were computed and separately correlated with the subject's self-esteem (controlling for *n* Achievement) and *n* Achievement (controlling for self-esteem) scores. Although the correlations for both self-esteem and *n* Achievement and the tendency to *strive* for vocations with less prestige than that of one's perceived vocational upper limit were in the predicted direction (Table 1, line 4), only the self-esteem relationship approached significance ( $r = -.13, p < .11$ ). The correlations between the tendency to *settle* for vocations with less prestige than that of one's perceived vocational upper limit and self-esteem and *n* Achievement are presented in Table 1, line 5. Both correlations were low and nonsignificant.

Hypothesis 4 predicted the existence of a negative relationship between both self-esteem and *n* Achievement and the tendency to settle for vocations which have less satisfaction associated with them than that associated with one's perceived vocational upper limit. The difference between the satisfaction rating given by each subject to his perceived vocational upper limit and the mean satisfaction rating given to the occupations he indicated a willingness to settle for was computed. This value was partially correlated with self-esteem and then *n* Achievement. As can be seen from line 6, Table 1, the tendency to settle for vocations which have less satisfaction associated with them than that associated with one's perceived vocational upper-limit was significantly ( $r = .20, p < .01$ ) related to self-esteem, but not to *n* Achievement. However, contrary to the relationship hypothesized, neither correlation was in the direction predicted.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study extend Super's (1972) "self-implementation" theory, while at the same time suggesting the absence of a significant relationship between *n* Achievement and each of the selected measures of vocational aspiration investigated. Specifically, data relevant to hypothesis 1 indicated a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and the tendency to aspire to vocations with high prestige.

With regard to hypotheses 2A and 2B, however, there was no evidence that a relationship existed between either self-esteem or *n* Achievement and the tendency, given the opportunity to avoid the challenge of vocational achievement, to settle for less prestigious and less satisfying vocations. It should be noted, however, that interpretation of these types of hypotheses is particularly difficult using data drawn from college populations where high levels of future desired accomplishment are considered normative (Burnstein, 1963).

Regarding hypotheses 3A and 3B, the data revealed that self-esteem was negatively associated with the tendency to strive for vocations with

less prestige than one's perceived vocational upper limit. With regard to this result as it concerns *n* Achievement, it should be noted that extensive research exists showing that persons with higher negative than positive *n* Achievement are as likely to overaspire to a vocation which they consider very difficult to attain as they are to underaspire to a vocation which they feel certain of attaining (see, for example, Atkinson, Bastain, Earl, & Litwin, 1960; Mahone, 1960). Both overaspiring and underaspiring are interpreted as allowing individuals low in *n* Achievement the means by which to avoid true tests of competence. In the instance of overaspiring, success is not anticipated and, thus, failure is easily acceptable. In the instance of underaspiring, the likelihood of success is correspondingly increased.

The formulation and prediction of hypothesis 4 was perhaps the least obvious of the hypotheses advanced. Contrary to prediction, the data revealed that the tendency to settle for vocations which have less satisfaction associated with them than one's perceived vocational upper limit was significantly and positively correlated with self-esteem. Interestingly, this finding is inconsistent with prior research indicating that individuals high in self-esteem are more likely to experience job satisfaction (Brophy, 1959) and to seek self-fulfillment in their work (Korman, 1976).

These findings indicate that the relationship between self-esteem, *n* Achievement, and vocational aspiration is in need of further investigation. An extension of the present research is suggested by Rosen's (1959) well-known work which indicates that high vocational aspirations and high *n* Achievement are often not sufficient to channel a person's behavior in the direction of high vocational goals. Rosen contends that a value orientation conducive to achievement-motivated and occupationally related behavior is additionally required. Thus, an extension of the present research to include a measure of value orientation would theoretically seem desirable.

An additional extension of the present research relates to the vocational choice-making procedure. Several experiments have been performed that view the vocational choice-making process as a risk-calculating selection task (see, for example, Davidshofer, 1976; Morris, 1966). Certain vocational choices can be considered more risky (carrying greater possibility of loss) than others and are more likely to be chosen by individuals who are risk takers. To this end, Williams (1965) has argued that to record a subject's vocational choice satisfactorily, a risk-taking measure that provides for personal gain or loss should be employed. Thus, it might be argued that the vocational selection process used in the present study recorded vocational preferences rather than true vocational selections. Investigations of students in advance career fields or in professional study would serve to answer this issue.

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