

Circumscription and compromise

This theory, developed by **Linda Gottfredson** in 1981, attempts to describe how career choice develops in young people. Many developmental theories focus on how an individual's self concept develops with age. Circumscription and Compromise also focuses on the development of an individual's view of the occupational choices available.

The theory assumes that we build a cognitive map of occupations by picking up occupational stereotypes from those around us. Occupations are placed on this map using only a small number of dimensions: **sex-type, prestige level** and **field of work**. As young people build this map, they begin to decide which occupations are acceptable and which are unacceptable — those which fit with their own developing self concept and those which do not.

The first process is one of **Circumscription** — ruling out unacceptable options based on their perceived fit with ones developing self-concept. In the early stages this filtering process is quite crude and inaccurate, but it is lasting.

The proposed **stages of circumscription** are:

- **Orientation to size and power** (age 3–5). Children become aware that adults have roles in the world. They realise that they will eventually become adults and take on roles for themselves.
- **Orientation to sex roles** (age 6–8). Children begin to categorise the world around them with simple concrete distinctions. They become aware of the more recognisable job roles and begin to assign them to particular sexes. They will start to see jobs which do not match their gender identity as unacceptable.
- **Orientation to social values** (age 9–13). By now children have encountered a wider range of job roles and are capable of more abstract distinctions. They begin to classify jobs in terms of social status (income, education level, lifestyle, etc.) as well as sex-type. Based on the social environment in which they develop they will begin to designate some jobs as unacceptable because they fall below a minimum status level (*tolerable level boundary*) and some higher status jobs as unacceptable because they represent too much effort or risk of failure (*tolerable effort boundary*).
- **Orientation to internal, unique self** (age 14+). Until this point circumscription has been mainly an unconscious process. As entry into the adult world approaches young people engage in a conscious search of the roles still remaining in their social space. In this process they use increasingly complex concepts such as interests, abilities values, work-life balance and personality to exclude options which do not fit with their self image and identify an appropriate field of work. [Here more sophisticated matching theories such as Holland-RIASEC become relevant.]

After circumscription has excluded options outside a perceived social and personal space, the next process is one of **Compromise**. In this stage, individuals may be inclined to sacrifice roles they see as more **compatible** with their self-concept in favour of those that are perceived to be more easily **accessible**. In this they are often limited by their lack of knowledge about how to access certain roles because of lack of information, lack of know-how and appropriate tactics, and lack of helpful social connections.

Gottfredson proposes that when people are forced to compromise their career choices, they are more likely to compromise first on *field of work*, then on *social level* and lastly on *sex-type* as the amount of compromise increases. This prediction has been the most controversial with some research seeming to offer limited support (e.g. Blanchard & Lichtenberg, 2003) and some to challenge it (e.g. Hesketh *et al.*, 1990).

Basic reading

Gottfredson, L.S. (2002). Gottfredson's theory of circumscription, compromise, and self creation. In D. Brown (Ed.), *Career Choice and Development* (4th ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 85–148.

References

- Blanchard, C.A. & Lichtenberg, J.W. (2003) Compromise in career decision making: a test of Gottfredson's theory. *Journal of Vocational Behavior* **62**(2), 250–271.
- Hesketh, B., Elmslie, S. & Kaldor, W. (1990) Career compromise: an alternative account to Gottfredson's theory. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* **37**(1) 49–56.

Using Circumscription & Compromise

Questions (for use with individuals or as group discussion stimulators)

To explore circumscription

- Describe to me how you ended up with this range of choices.
- What options have you ruled out and why?
- Tell me how you decided that this option wasn't appropriate for you?
- When did you decide to rule this out as a possibility?
- What would make a job unacceptable to you?
- What influence do you think your family background has had on the range of options you are considering?
- What options have you labelled as 'beyond your reach' and why?
- What have you done to expand the range of options you are considering?

To explore compromise

- Are there more ideal options you have ruled out because you think they are too difficult to achieve?
- How do you know that it's too difficult?
- What could you do to increase your chances of getting into the more satisfying role?
- What have you done to explore how realistic this option would be for you?
- If you are giving away potential job satisfaction, what are you getting in return? Is it of equal value?

Techniques

Occupational categorising

- Present a list of job titles (could be as a card sort)
- Get clients to classify each job on the list as 'acceptable', 'unacceptable', 'don't know'
- Get them to explain their reasons for categorising the jobs in this way

Occupational mapping

- Position different occupations in relation to each other on a map
- Decide on two axes for the map (you could use Gottfredson's original of sex-type and social level or decide your own or let the clients decide based on their values or interests: creativity, worthwhile, challenging, etc.)
- Get the clients to draw boundaries enclosing an acceptable range of occupations (i.e. what is too creative and what is not creative enough?)