

PA or MD: Career Choice as a Function of Professional Identification, Affective Attitude and Moral Obligation

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Abstract

Context and Objective Many applicants to physician assistant programs have considered becoming medical doctors. In this study, the relative importance of several factors suggested by psychological research that may influence preference for one career over the other was assessed.

Participants Seventy applicants to the physician assistant program at Le Moyne College, Syracuse, NY.

Study Design and Outcome Measures At the conclusion of admissions interviews held in January 2007, participants anonymously completed a questionnaire that assessed various psychosocial aspects of career decision making. Participants rated their strength of intention to become physician assistants and their strength of intention to become medical doctors. Participants then rated the extent to which the pursuit of each career would arouse within them feelings of love or hate, excitement or boredom, and delight or sadness (affective attitude); would be useful or useless, valuable or worthless, and beneficial or harmful (cognitive attitude); and would receive the support of significant others (social support). In addition, for each of the 2 professions, participants indicated the extent to which they had been pressured by important others to pursue it (social pressure); had access to resources, such as time, money and academic ability, that would enable them to pursue it (control); had a sense of calling to the profession and believed themselves to be the type that would want to pursue it (professional identification); and had a duty to pursue the career and would feel guilty if they did not (moral obligation).

Results and Conclusions Although most applicants more strongly intended to become physician assistants than to become medical doctors, variation in the magnitude of the difference in strength of intention to pursue each career was observed across applicants. Multiple regression analyses suggested that professional identification, affective attitude and moral obligation were primarily responsible for the degree to which applicants preferred to become physician assistants rather than medical doctors.