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Gender stereotypes and occupational choice in 14-16's.

Context

What we know?

'Male jobs' (e.g., plumbing, construction, engineering) whilst females are more likely than males to populate 'female jobs' (e.g., child-care, hairdressing, nursing).

Male jobs are stereotyped using conventionally 'masculine' traits like strong, assertive, task-oriented whilst female jobs are stereotyped using conventionally 'feminine' traits like nurturing, people-oriented, passive.

Young people self-prototype using masculine/feminine gender referents and match themselves to (occupational) prototypes (e.g., in situations, academic subjects etc.) accordingly. Individual's job preferences are largely restricted to those jobs that are viewed in keeping with stereotypes about jobs appropriate for their own sex (Boxer, 2005; Miller & Budd, 1999; Miller, Neathey, Peltan, & Hill, 2004). Self-to-prototype matching theory explains this as an effort to maintain self-consistency (Niedenthal, Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1985).

Occupational segregation by gender is perpetuated through young people's job/occupational perceptions and choices underpinned by masculine/feminine criteria.

What we don't know?

We know very little about young people's decision making. In the context in question, we are unclear of the extent to which sex type (masculine/feminine identification) impacts on job/occupational choice relative to biological sex (statistical predominance of males/females in particular job/occupations) or relative to job prestige (normatively speaking or as perceived by young people) or personal interests.

Aims

The purpose of this study explores further the role of gender stereotypes in job/occupational preferences (relative to biological sex) of young school-aged people and evaluates Gottfredson's theory of job sex type and job prestige as fundamental choice constraints over personal interests.

Gottfredson's Theory of Vocational Choice

Gottfredson's Theory of Circumcision and Compromise (1980; 1996; 2005) maintains that children begin by considering jobs firstly in terms of their masculinity/femininity characteristics (sextype) followed closely by their social desirability (prestige). It is only later in their development that children start to differentiate jobs according to their personal interests. This developmental progression is, according to the theory, played out in vocational choice. Using sextype and prestige criteria first, and then personal interests, individuals are said to rule out successively more sectors of work as unacceptable for someone like themselves, a process called CIRCUMSCRIPTOR. Those occupations that are left constitute a 'Zone of Acceptable Alternatives' from which the individual will ideally choose a job or career. For example, a young boy will circumscribe 'masculine' jobs with high prestige value (e.g., lawyer, doctor, engineer, entrepreneur) as potential jobs/careers before selecting a job against personal interests (e.g., interest in biology). Conversely, a young girl may circumscribe 'feminine' jobs with high prestige value (e.g., care work, nursing) as potential jobs/careers before selecting a job against personal interests (e.g., interest in biology). However, both compromise and self-to-prototype matching theory is likely to be required whereby the individual relinquishes his/her most preferred alternatives (based on ability levels, resource limitations) for more 'acceptible' jobs/careers. In doing so, it is predicted that individual's will opt for work in a different field of personal interests (e.g., engineering) within their social space rather than compromise on either prestige or sextype (e.g. an interest in biological sciences might otherwise imply a career in the medical profession).

Critical Reflection

One of the problems with Gottfredson's theory is the 'objective' way in which jobs are described as masculine/feminine in their sex-type (i.e., in terms of preponderance) or as high or low in prestige outside of individual's job perceptions. Moreover, there is a black box assumption underpinning the view that the young people cognize their social space well enough to make possible for self. Hardly is it likely to be prototype matching principle as a means of understanding the psychology behind the 'circumcision' process that will adequately address this problem within a distinctively psychological framework.

Hypotheses

H3: There is a relationship between the degree to which an individual self-identifies with a male/female stereotype (masculinity/femininity assumptions) and their tendency to choose occupations for which they perceive incumbents to possess such stereotypic traits.

H2: Sex-type (as defined by identification with male and female stereotype) will play a more important role in vocational choice than the perceived sex ratio of the occupation.

H3: Gender stereotypes will play a more important role in occupational choice than either interests or prestige.

Sample

10 young people participated in a pilot study. After methodological refinement, 74 students of 15-16 years and 67 students of 16-year-olds (age 16 yrs) from 8 different secondary schools (2 co-ed, 2 male only and 2 female only), participated in an interview study on school premises with both head teacher and parental consent.

Procedure

Group administered written tasks and one-to-one card sort task (full details available from the first author).

Written Tasks

Measured personal sex type preferences and job perceptions, occupational interests using the Career Pathfinder (based on Holland's 6 interest types), and perceived prestige of jobs using an 4-item scale using Hesketh et al.'s (1989) method referring to education, pay, status and gender power.

The Card Sort

Invited participants to play out the circumscript and compromise process using an adapted version of (Blanchard & Lichtenberg, 2003) procedure. Participants were asked to choose three occupations against sex ratio statistics (male, female, neutral), prestige using established status scales (high, mid, low) and interest type (data, people, enterprise, resources, ideas, art) using an interest type scale (Holland) and to state which job they would aspire to. Participants were then asked: 'If you could have any occupation there is, what would it be?' This stage furnished the 'Zone of Acceptable Alternatives'.

Compromise

Participants chose the occupations they would most like to do from each of the three categories, creating 3 conditions of compromise: no compromise (unrestricted), low compromise (acceptable but not personal favourite) and high compromise (unacceptable).

Analytic Strategy

Comparative analysis (personal sex type with sex type of job/occupation across three conditions of compromise (no, low, high)).

Repeated measures ANOVAs and t-tests (with Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons) across three conditions of compromise (no, low, high) with self-to-prototype match scores as dependent variables. The absolute difference between self-ratings and their ratings of jobs was calculated. The optimum score was zero, indicating a perfect match. Absolute values were then transformed into t-scores, to allow comparisons across the three conditions (self-to-prototype match scores as task type, prestige, interest classifications).

Results

The higher the participant scores on Feminine Type, the higher they rated the incumbent of their chosen profession on Feminine-Type, and likewise for Masculine-Type. As predicted there was a clear relationship between the level of identification with a male or female stereotype and the extent to which an individual perceives the same stereotypic traits in incumbents of their preferred professions.

When compared with concern for sex ratio of an occupation, it appears that maintaining self- consistency in sex type (self-type/prototype matching) is more important than maintaining consistency with the perceived 'dominating' biological sex of the occupation, but only when restrictions are imposed on the choice situation. Specifically, when choice of occupation is unrestricted, there is no difference in choice scores to the level of perceived prestige of jobs using the 4-item scale using Hesketh et al.'s (1989) method referring to education, pay, status and gender power. However when restrictions are imposed, occupations consistent with sex type are chosen over occupations consistent with biological sex.

The relative importance of sex type, prestige and personal interests appears to shift somewhat depending on the level of compromise imposed on the individuals career decision-making process. Sextype was found to be more important than both prestige and interests in conditions of compromise, and consistently as important as prestige when the choice of occupation was unrestricted. Interests were found to be the least preserved element of the self-concept all round but are better matched when no restriction is imposed on career decision-making compared to when slight or severe restrictions are imposed.

Conclusions

While it is possible that young people project their own self-concept onto the incumbent of a job/occupation they aspire to, it is believed that the process at play is one of young people choosing professions which they perceive as being consistent with their gender identification. The latter interpretation is supported by results showing higher preference ratings for actual female-dominated jobs by those who identify with the female stereotype, and higher preference for male-dominated jobs by males who identify with the male stereotype.

The results have interesting implications for Gottfredson's Theory of Circumscription and Compromise (1981; 1996; 2005). Findings show that prestige and interests vary in importance to the decision maker across different conditions of compromise, but sex type is consistently preserved. Interests appear to be the least preserved element of the self-concept all round but are better matched when no restriction is imposed on career decision-making compared to when slight or severe restrictions are imposed.

References


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