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Millward, L.J. and Houston, Diane and Barrett, M. and Larkin, C. (2006) "Who am I in relation to work and the job that I do?" Gender stereotypes and occupational choice in 14-16's. In: Developmental Psychology BPS Conference, 7-9 Sep 2006, London, UK.

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“Who am I in relation to work and the job that I do?” Gender stereotypes and occupational choice in 14-16’s.

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Context

What we know?

•Jobs and occupations are strongly segregated by gender: males are more likely than females to populate ‘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-stereotype using masculine/feminine gender referents and match themselves to jobs/occupations (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 (Kessels, 2005; Miller & Budd, 1999; Miller, Neathley, Pollard, & 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 underwritten by masculine/femininity 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 jobs/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 Circumscription 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 against 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 CIRCUMSCRIPTION. 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 biological sciences aligns with a career in medicine). However, in reality, a COMPROMISE is likely to be required whereby the individual relinquishes his/her most preferred alternatives (based on ability levels, resource limitations) for more ‘accessible’ 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 nursing).

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 underwriting the view that young people circumscribe certain jobs as possible/not possible for self. Harnessing the self-to-prototype matching principle as a means of understanding the psychology behind the ‘circumscription’ process addresses this problem within a distinctively psychological framework.

Hypotheses

H1 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 stereotypes) 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 senior students (38 male and 36 female, mean age 16 yrs) from 6 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 a 4-item scale using Hesketh et al’s (1989) method referring to education, pay, status and power criteria.

The Card Sort

Invited participants to play out the circumscription and compromise process using an adapted version of Blanchard & Lichtenberg’s method (2003) using a 3x3x6 matrix pitting 54 occupations against sex ratio statistics (male, female, neutral), prestige using established status scales (high, mid, low) and interest type (data, people, enterprising, resources, ideas, artistic) using Holland’s job classifications.

Circumscription: participants sorted the cards according to occupations they would find it: *acceptable to do, would be uncertain about doing and find it unacceptable to do*. They were also 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 occupation they would be most likely 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

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

Repeated measures ANOVA 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. These absolute values were then transformed into z-scores, to allow comparison across the three scales (sex type of job, prestige, interest classifications).

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Results

H1: 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 the individual perceives the same stereotypic traits in incumbents of their preferred professions.

H2: When compared with concern for sex ratio of an occupation, it appears that maintaining self-consistency in sex type (self-to-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 the degree to which the incumbent seeks a match for their sextype or biological sex. However when restrictions are imposed, occupations consistent with sex type are chosen over occupations consistent with biological sex.

H3: 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, but equally 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 those 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 significant element in job preferences, whilst prestige varied widely in prominence as restrictions were enforced on the decision-maker.

Implications

Until now findings that gender stereotypes influence attitudes towards occupations, have not been extended to the level of young people’s career decision-making. Traditional career theories simply view occupations as categories of different activities and the decision-makers as actively seeking those activities which they prefer. However this study indicates that occupations have clear social meanings attached to them, which young people refer to when forming preferences. While young people may not always be conscious of the actual day-to-day tasks involved in an occupation (as was often displayed during the research process), they are very aware of the social positioning of the same job roles. Such social positioning is not just determined by job status or level of pay, but also by the kind of people who commonly do it. It is possible therefore that in an effort to maintain self-consistency and perhaps even self-protection, young people strive for occupations that reflect their own social identity.

The findings of this study give clear directions for tackling the gender divide in employment through the job perceptions and preferences of young people. Young people need to be made aware of how gender stereotypes can influence their decisions, and should be exposed to role models that defy such social norms, for example agentic male nurses or expressive female company directors. Likewise they could be taught that females may indeed aspire to being strong and daring, and males to being affectionate and thoughtful, without being punished socially. In doing so it is likely that boys and girls will more readily identify with gender ‘atypical’ traits, and as a result be more open to match themselves with a diverse range of occupations and roles.

Poster Presented at the Developmental Psychology BPS Conference, Royal Holloway, Sept 2006

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