Journal of Adolescence 36 (2013) 465–474

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Journal of Adolescence

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jado

What will I be when I grow up? The impact of gender identity threat on adolescents' occupational preferences

Samantha Sinclair*, Rickard Carlsson

Dept. of Psychology, Lund University, Box 213, SE-22100, Sweden

Keywords:
Gender identity threat
Gender identity concerns
Occupational preferences
Adolescents

A B S T R A C T

The present study examined the impact of gender identity threat on adolescents' occupational preferences. Two hundred and ninety-seven adolescents (45% girls, M age = 14.4, SD = .54) participated in the experiment. There were substantial differences between boys' and girls' occupational preferences. Importantly, adolescents who received a threat to their gender identity became more stereotypical in job preferences, suggesting a causal link between threatened gender identity and stereotypical preferences. A comparison threat to one's capability did not have this effect, indicating a unique effect of gender identity threat. Further, individual differences in gender identity concerns predicted gender stereotypical preferences, and this finding was replicated with an independent sample (N = 242). In conclusion, the results suggest that threats to adolescents' gender identity may contribute to the large gender segregation on the labor market.
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The labor market continues to be gender segregated with men and women working in different occupations. For example, construction work and engineering are typical male jobs whereas "nurturing" fields such as health care are female dominated (Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg, 2004; Statistics Sweden, 2007a; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). One possible explanation for gender segregation in the labor market is that of gender discrimination. As intuitively appealing as this explanation may sound, it is unlikely to explain the large bulk of gender segregation. For example, in Sweden gender discrimination in formal recruitment appears to be a thing of the past, as clearly demonstrated by extensive field experiments (Carlsson, 2011). Still, the Swedish labor market continues to be one of the most highly gender segregated in the world.[1] Of course, discrimination is still likely to occur to some extent in other phases of employment (e.g., sexual harassment in the workplace) but even so it is unlikely that this would explain the entire gender gap. Indeed, gender segregation is also evident in higher education.[2] Research indicates that the general level of segregation in education has stabilized in recent decades, and that it has a similar qualitative pattern in several countries (Barone, 2011).

The focus then has to turn to why men and women choose different career paths. In order to answer this question we need to consider the occupational preferences among adolescents, because early career perceptions have a considerable impact on later career outcomes. If we continue our example of highly gender segregated Sweden, adolescents make important choices at the age of 15. They then have to decide whether their subsequent three years of education will prepare them for university

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +46 462228716; fax: +46 462224209.
E-mail address: Samantha.Sinclair@psy.lu.se (S. Sinclair).

[1] In part, the reason for Sweden having such high sex segregation is due to the large share of women established in the labor market (i.e., few homemakers; Löfström, 2005).

[2] Although segregation in education tends to predict segregation in employment, the strength of this relationship varies somewhat between countries (Smyth & Steinmetz, 2008).

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2013.02.001

studies, and if so, whether those studies will be in arts or science, or if they will move directly to learning a specific profession (e.g., hairdresser, electrician). Considering that the initial education choices of boys and girls put restrictions on their future career attainment, and that adolescents' occupational preferences tend to be gender stereotypical (Miller & Budd, 1999; Sikora & Pokropek, 2012), the choices being made at this age have significant consequences for the future gender segregation on the labor market. Indeed, adolescents tend to have quite detailed knowledge about different occupations even before entering high school (Nurmi, 1991; Vondracek, Silbereisen, Reitzle, & Weiser, 1999), and occupational aspirations in adolescence predict later career achievement (Cochran, Wang, Stevenson, Johnson, & Crews, 2011; Schoon, 2001; Trice & McClellan, 1993). Qualitative research also indicates that when thinking about their identity, the aspect most frequently mentioned by adolescents is the importance of school and their (future) occupation (Bosma, 1992).

Why, then, do boys and girls differ in their occupational preferences? Clearly, several factors come into play. For example, parents' gender role attitudes can be of importance (Peterson, Rollins, Thomas, & Heaps, 1982). Boys and girls also tend to differ in their participation in math and English courses and related career aspirations, which can be explained by motivation over and above their achievement levels (Watt, 2008). Additionally, several social psychological explanations have been suggested. One of them is stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995), meaning that concerns of confirming a negative stereotype can result in impaired performance and avoidance of the stereotyped domain (Bergeron, Block, & Echtenkamp, 2006). Other proposed explanations have been a general lack of fit between the perceived occupational role and gender stereotypes (Heilman, 1983) and self-efficacy, such as women's poor self-efficacy for leadership tasks (Dickerson & Taylor, 2000) and for entrepreneurial careers (BarNir, Watchon, & Hutchins, 2011).

A social threat that has yet to be suggested within this line of research as a contributor to the gender segregation is gender identity threat (Rudman, Dohn, & Fairchild, 2007). The theory of gender identity threat holds that when a person's status as a "real" man (woman) is questioned, he (she) will experience a threat and try to restore the threatened gender status. Such questioning of gender status may occur when the target violates prescriptive gender norms (Heilman & Wallen, 2010). For example, it is easy to imagine gender identity being threatened when a boy (girl) is ridiculed by his peers for expressing interest in being a hairdresser (truck driver). Increasing one's preference for gender stereotypical occupations may then serve to compensate for threats to gender identity.

In the present study, we propose that adolescents may come to avoid occupations that do not fit gender stereotypes because considering such occupations would threaten their gender identity. We investigate this by experimentally manipulating threats to gender identity, predicting that such contextually induced threats lead to increased stereotypical occupational preferences. Furthermore, some adolescents may place a higher importance on their gender identity than others. As emphasized by several authors (e.g., Egan & Perry, 2001; Perry & Pauletti, 2011) there are several aspects of gender identity. The most common way to measure and label gender identity has been to focus on the degree of expressive vs. instrumental traits perceived in the self (e.g., Bem, 1981). This approach has been criticized for a number of reasons; one of them being that the construct of attribute self-perceptions is distinct from gender identity (see Perry & Pauletti, 2011; Tobin et al., 2010). We agree with the view of Tobin et al. (2010) that the term gender identity rather refers to assessments that capture people's thoughts and feelings about their membership in a gender category. In the present research we are interested in gender identity concerns, which we define as the overall importance placed on feeling masculine (boys) or feminine (girls), and on being viewed by others as such. We predict that adolescents with strong gender identity concerns will be especially likely to have developed stereotype consistent occupational preferences. In the remainder of this introduction we first briefly review previous research on gender identity threat. We then further explain the importance of studying gender identity threat and concerns in an adolescent population. A detailed description of this study's aims and predictions concludes the introduction.

Previous research on gender identity threat

Previous research on gender identity threat has focused on adults in general, and on men in particular (e.g., Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001). The threat is thought to stem from a concern about being deviant from one's gender group. The idea of experiencing threat when one's position within the group is questioned is consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that people are motivated to view their social group(s) as positively distinct from other groups. It also corresponds to self categorization theory (Turner, 1985), which holds that "the attractiveness of specific individual persons (including one's personal self) depends on their perceived prototypicality in comparison with other ingroup members" (Turner, Hogg, Oaks, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987, p. 60).

In previous research on gender identity threat, men have often been thought to be more susceptible compared to women, and the terms "masculinity threat" (Glick, Gangl, Gibb, Klumpner, & Weinberg, 2007) and "precarious manhood" (Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008) have thus been used. Men who received a threat to their masculinity have been found to, for example, behave more aggressively toward a gay work partner (Talley & Bettencourt, 2008), display more negative affect toward effeminate, but not masculine, gay men (Glick et al., 2007), and to take more financial risks (Weaver, Bosson, & Vandello, 2012).

A suggested explanation for manhood as precarious has been evolved dispositions that have their origin in men's competitive acquisition of social status and resources. Another explanation offered lies in stereotypes that are based on the social roles that men and women have occupied throughout history (Vandello et al., 2008). In either case, it seems that an underlying assumption behind expecting only men to be affected by these threats is that the gender status as woman/girl is not considered quite as desirable or worthy of defending as that of that of man/boy, and consequently females should

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