



# Links between family gender socialization experiences in childhood and gendered occupational attainment in young adulthood



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## ABSTRACT

Gendered occupational segregation remains prevalent across the world. Although research has examined factors contributing to the low number of women in male-typed occupations – namely science, technology, engineering, and math – little longitudinal research has examined the role of childhood experiences in both young women's and men's later gendered occupational attainment. This study addressed this gap in the literature by examining family gender socialization experiences in middle childhood – namely parents' attitudes and work and family life – as contributors to the gender typicality of occupational attainment in young adulthood. Using data collected from mothers, fathers, and children over approximately 15 years, the results revealed that the associations between childhood socialization experiences (~10 years old) and occupational attainment (~26 years old) depended on the sex of the child. For sons but not daughters, mothers' more traditional attitudes toward women's roles predicted attaining more gender-typed occupations. In addition, spending more time with fathers in childhood predicted daughters attaining *less* and sons acquiring *more* gender-typed occupations in young adulthood. Overall, evidence supports the idea that childhood socialization experiences help to shape individuals' career attainment and thus contribute to gender segregation in the labor market.

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## 1. Introduction

Gendered occupational segregation remains prevalent across the world (Charles, 2011): Women are more likely to hold occupations related to education, health, and clerical work, whereas men are found more often in managerial, science, engineering, and physically demanding jobs such as construction (Steinmetz, 2012). Gendered occupational attainment has corresponding social problems. First, it can prevent workers from choosing occupations in which they could perform well, which in turn deprives society and employers of skill and talent and is economically inefficient. Second, it contributes to the gender wage gap by excluding women from occupations that are better-paid than female-dominated occupations (Hegewisch, Liepmann, Hayes & Hartmann, 2010). Third, women are less likely than men to hold high prestige positions – 77.8% of chief executives and legislators are male, for example (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) – which contributes to gender differences in power and influence within a society. Fourth, the availability of many blue-collar male-typed jobs (e.g., manufacturing) in the U.S. has dropped due to economic restructuring – leaving fewer available positions for men.

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Research on gender segregation in the labor market has focused on why women are not pursuing STEM careers. This is important given that the nation's ability to be competitive in the global economy is dependent on STEM achievements. This focus, however, ignores another important question — why aren't men pursuing female-typed occupations? The limited research may be because male-typed occupations have been more prestigious and/or higher paid. Economic restructuring, however, has led to declines in wages and job growth among many blue-collar, male-typed occupations (Shen-Miller & Smiler, 2015), and male-typed occupations tend to be more dangerous than female-typed occupations (Stier & Yaish, 2014). Thus, it also is important to understand contributors to men's gender atypical occupational choices. This study used longitudinal data to examine early roots of gendered occupational attainment, namely parents' gender attitudes and work and family life when their children were about 10 years old.

## 2. Theoretical underpinnings: the role of parents

Gender socialization refers to the transmission of norms, behaviors, values, and skills necessary to be a “successful” woman or man. Parents socialize gender in many ways: they are models, reinforce/punish children's behaviors, select children's environments and shape opportunities within those environments, and scaffold children's skill development (Bornstein, Mortimer, Lutfey & Bradley, 2011). For example, parents' work and family experiences, such as the time each parent spends in housework and paid employment, are observed and may be models for children's later choices (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Parents' gender role attitudes also influence the ways they socialize their children. Bornstein et al. (2011) argue that parents with traditional gender role attitudes encourage and set expectations that their sons behave in stereotypically masculine ways, which may lead to children's internalization of these attitudes and expectations.

Parents' socialization practices, in turn, may influence their children's beliefs about their future work success and whether or not they value gender atypical work. According to the expectancy-value theory of achievement (EVT), individuals who believe that they can be successful in and value the tasks associated with gender atypical occupations are the most likely to pursue them (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). This theory posits that parents' beliefs and behaviors influence children's values, expectations, and interpretations of achievement-related experiences, which contribute to children's goals and self-schemas, and ultimately play a role in occupational attainment. Thus, we examined parents' attitudes, work, and family roles as contributors to children's gendered occupational attainments.

## 3. Parental influences on children's vocational development

Over 25 years ago, Corcoran and Courant (1987) recommended that researchers use longitudinal data to illuminate the role of early socialization experiences in adults' gendered occupational attainment. Yet, longitudinal data remain limited. Instead, most studies assess *concurrent* associations between parents' characteristics and their children's occupational aspirations. Below we summarize findings on associations between parents' gender role attitudes and work and family life with children's occupational aspirations and then consider the limited longitudinal data on parents' influences on their children's occupational attainment.

### 3.1. Parental gender role attitudes

Mothers' traditional gender role attitudes have been linked to the gender typicality of adolescent daughters' desired careers (Fiebig & Beauregard, 2011). Less attention has been given to fathers' gender role attitudes, although some early evidence suggests that these may not be related to daughters' gender typicality (Steele & Barling, 1996). We also know little about the role of parents' gender role attitudes and sons' occupational aspirations. Research has, however, supported the role of parents' attitudes posited by the EVT: More traditional mothers overestimated their children's skills in gender-typed domains, which, in turn, were associated with children's perceptions of their abilities. These perceptions have implications for youths' occupational aspirations and attainment (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

### 3.2. Work life

Research suggests that parents' occupations influence socialization practices, indirectly influencing children's occupational aspirations through their interests and skills (Ryu & Mortimer, 1996). Further, more gender-typed occupations of mothers (but not fathers) were linked to daughters' gender-typed occupational aspirations (Barak, Feldman & Noy, 1991), a pattern not apparent for sons. In contrast, studying an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse sample, Schuette, Ponton, and Charlton (2012) found that the gender typicality of mother figures' occupations was unrelated to girls' desired occupations, but that boys' occupational aspirations were linked to the gender typicality of father figures' occupations.

### 3.3. Family life

Mothers typically spend more time in housework than fathers (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer & Robinson, 2000). A less traditional division of household work by parents, however, is associated with less gender-typed role preferences (including occupational preferences), interests, and less knowledge of and adherence to gender stereotypes in childhood (McHale, Crouter & Tucker, 1999; Serbin, Powlishta, Gulko, Martin & Lockheed, 1993).

Parent–child time together may also have implications for occupational aspirations — and that association may depend on the sex composition of the parent–child dyad. On average, mothers spend more time with their children than fathers (Craig, 2006), and

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