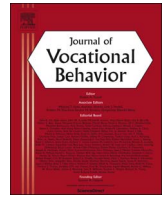


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The role of ability beliefs and agentic vs. communal career goals in adolescents' first educational choice. What explains the degree of gender-balance?



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ABSTRACT

To reduce the horizontal gender segregation in the labor market, we need to understand gender differences in career choice. The current study followed a large group of Swedish adolescents as they made their first educational choice, and tested for mediation of gender differences using measures of ability beliefs and career goals, which were collected shortly prior to the choice. Findings revealed strong gender differences in high-tech ability beliefs (e.g. computers), which combined with social ability beliefs (e.g. listening skills) and, to a lesser degree, communal career goals (e.g. helping) explained gender differences in educational choice. A new measure of career goal choice revealed that a majority of the adolescents prefer agentic (e.g. status) over communal goal fulfilment if made to choose, although this preference was stronger amongst the boys. Our results support social cognitive career theory, expectancy-value theory and the goal congruity perspective as they demonstrate how gender differences in educational choice can be understood in terms of differences in competence beliefs and career goals. Furthermore, the results suggest that one reason why gender balanced programs appeal to adolescents is their perceived ability to fulfill both agentic and communal career goals.

1. Introduction

The horizontal gender segregation in the labor market, where men tend to work with “things” (e.g. technology) and women with “people” (e.g. health care), creates a number of societal problems, such as contributing to the preservation of the gender salary gap and the coexistence of unemployment with labor shortages in gender skewed sectors (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; European Commission (EC), 2014, Su, Rounds, & Armstrong, 2009).¹ To reach the goal of a more gender balanced labor market, we need to better understand why men and women tend to choose different career paths. In many countries, this gender difference can be traced back to adolescents' first educational choices, where gender differences closely mirrors the patterns in the labor market. For example, in Sweden, where the data for the present study is collected, very few girls choose a program with a “things”-focus for high school and fewer boys than girls choose a program with a “people”-focus (Skolverket, 2016b; Statistics Sweden, 2010). What do boys and girls think and feel when they face their first educational choice? How do they perceive their abilities and how do they value different

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¹ The acronyms STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) and HEED (Health care, Elementary Education, the Domestic sphere) are often contrasted as male- versus female-dominated career domains in the literature (Croft, Schmader, & Block, 2015). However, STEM-careers can be distinguished into male-dominated MPECS (Mathematics, Physical, Engineering, Computer Science) and female-dominated HBMS (Health, Biological, Medical Science, Eccles & Wang, 2016). MPECS and HEED correspond to the concepts “things” and “people”, which we will use for reasons of simplicity in the current article.

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career goals? Can gender differences in these early career considerations explain gender differences in adolescents' educational choice? In the current study we aim to answer these questions by capturing the ability beliefs and career goals of a large group of randomly selected Swedish adolescents at the time when they ponder which high-school program to choose. We will test for explanations of gender differences in their subsequent educational choice with measures of their prior career considerations.

Although much prior research has tested for explanations of gender differences in career *interest* or *intentions* to make a career choice (see Wang & Degol, 2017; Watt, 2010 for reviews), very little research has related actual career choice to previously measured factors. Explaining choice is important, since according to social cognitive career theory, predictors of career-related choice may partly differ from predictors of career-related interest or intentions (Lent & Brown, 2006; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Two recent studies have employed a longitudinal design to test predictions of gender differences in career choice with previously measured factors. The studies found that SAT-scores measured in the 12th grade predicted who had a things-occupation (in STEM) in their thirties (Wang, Eccles, & Kenny, 2013) and that gender differences in math ability beliefs and occupational values, also measured in the 12th grade, explained why more men than women had a things-occupation ten years later (Eccles & Wang, 2016). Our study expands these interesting studies firstly by capturing adolescents' thoughts and feelings while in the process of making their very first educational choice, and also by relating their career-considerations to their first career-related choice which follows shortly thereafter (ca. two months as compared to 10–15 years in the prior studies). This way we aim to increase the understanding of what shapes gender differences in adolescents' very first career-related step, which marks the onset of the gender-segregated labor market. Collecting this kind of data is important, as it is critical to model the psychological processes that affect individuals' career decisions during secondary school (Wang & Degol, 2013).

Further, even though men and women often choose different types of careers, some career-paths have recently transformed from being male-dominated to currently being *gender balanced*, which is officially defined as 60/40% males versus females (EC, 2014; National Science Foundation, 2017; Statistics Sweden, 2016). Both in the USA and in Sweden, this concerns careers such as Medicine and Business (National Science Foundation, 2017; Skolverket, 2016b; Statistics Sweden, 2010). Very little is known about why some types of career paths attract both genders, and learning also about gender *similarity* in career choice, might provide clues as to how to increase the gender balance in other, currently gender skewed sectors (Cheryan, Ziegler, Montoya, & Jiang, 2017). Therefore, in the current study we expand previous research by also investigating differences in the career considerations of adolescents who choose a gender balanced high school program as compared to those who choose a program which is dominated by same-gender peers.

We lastly expand previous research by testing two novel hypotheses of mediators of gender differences in career choice. We first propose that gender differences in high tech ability beliefs (i.e. computerized technology) may currently be a more important factor for explaining gender differences in educational choice, as compared to gender differences in investigative ability (e.g. math), which has previously been described as the critical filter keeping women from approaching the things-sectors (see Watt, 2010 for a review). Second, we propose that a gender difference in prioritizing between either fulfilling communal goals (e.g. helping others) or agentic goals (e.g. status) in one's future career, may matter for explaining gender differences in career choice, in addition to the relevance of communal goals, which previous research has demonstrated (see Diekman, Steinberg, Brown, Belanger, & Clark, 2016 for a review). We also test the novel hypothesis that gender *similarity* in agentic goals, may be relevant for explaining gender similarity in adolescent's educational choice (i.e. a gender balanced choice). We will next describe the rationale behind these hypotheses.

1.1. Career choice theory

We derive our proposed mediating factors of gender differences in educational choice from three leading career choice theories; social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2006), Eccles' expectancy value theory (EEVT; Eccles, 1987, 1994) and the goal congruity perspective (GCP; Diekman et al., 2016). We perceive a partial correspondence between these theories, which inspired our choice of factors. Simplified, these theories state that career choice is related to perceptions of competence, *what I can do*, and perceived career goal fulfilment, *what I can get*, in relation to different career paths. In more detail, SCCT states that career choice is related to self-efficacy, which Bandura (1977) defined as the individual's perceived capability to succeed in a domain, and to outcome expectations, which is the perceived goal fulfilments of different career options, for example in terms of salary (see Lent & Brown, 2006 for a description of the full model). Similarly EEVT states that career choice is influenced by the individual's expectations of success and by the subjective task value, which the individual associates with different career options (Eccles, 1987, 1994). The theory relates expectations of success to the individuals' perceived ability to fulfill different demands, which in part depends upon intellectual ability but is also influenced by for example stereotypes (Eccles, 1987, 1994). Subjective task value concerns goal fulfilments, which includes enjoyment as well as long-term goals such as wanting to help others (see Eccles, 1994 for a description of the full model).

These two theories, EEVT and SCCT, have laid ground for much important research aiming to explain the gender segregation in the labor market. The majority of previous research has focused on explaining women's lower interest in things-careers with women's lower competence beliefs for male-stereotyped domains. Recently, also the role of perceived goal-fulfilment has received growing attention in the field, after Diekman, Brown, Johnston, and Clark (2010) and Diekman, Clark, Johnston, Brown, and Steinberg (2011) showed that women have higher communal career goals than men (e.g. wanting to help), and that it partially explains women's lower interest in things-careers, which are perceived as generally low in communal goal fulfilment. This interesting finding has been replicated and followed up by theoretical development within the GCP, which states that the perceived goal affordances of different career roles, attracts or deters people's career interest for these careers (Diekman et al., 2016). Drawing on these three theories, we will measure the ability beliefs and career goals of adolescent boys' and girls' at the time when they stand before their first career-related choice. We will next describe social psychological theory of how gender differences in ability beliefs and career goals develop and expand upon the study's hypotheses.

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