



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Educational Research

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



The conception of work and higher education among Israeli Arab women

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 January 2015

Accepted 10 April 2015

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Higher education

Women's career development

Future perception

ABSTRACT

The current study focuses on the conception of work and higher education among ten Israeli Arab women, enrolled in an undergraduate program of early childhood education. This qualitative study aims to explore the gap between women's career development in under-investigated cultures and career development assumptions traditionally reported in the literature. We explored the contextual aspects within Arab society that shape women's career development, as well as their own candid conceptions of their development. The content analysis of the interviews revealed various aspects of a long and arduous journey to the desired goal of becoming an educated working mother. Six domains were identified: studies, interpersonal relations, conflicts and difficulties, resources, decision-making processes, and future perceptions. Implications for practice and further research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, many countries have made significant progress toward gender equality in education (see for example, OECD, 2013). Unfortunately, gender equality in the labor market is much less advanced. Women continue to earn less than men, are less likely to hold managerial positions, and are more likely to end their lives in poverty (Abele & Spurk, 2011; see, OECD, 2012). These discrepancies in the evolution of equality are especially glaring among minorities (Leslie & Water, 1999). In Israel, for example, there has been a huge leap forward in the level of education attained by Israeli Arab women, but their rate of participation in the labor market is still relatively low compared to that of Israeli Arab males and Israeli Jewish females and males (Arar & Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2011; Cinamon, 2009).

Narrowing the gender gap is an important factor, from moral as well as from economic and health perspectives. Investing in women's human capital is one of the keys to economic growth and social cohesion (Schultz, 2002). Gender equality is also a key driver for the degree of self-reported well-being and happiness throughout the world, and it is a well-known fact that life satisfaction is enhanced over time as gender equality increases (Veenhoven, 2011, 2012). Therefore, it is essential to understand the factors that are related to women's career development.

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1.1. Women's career development

An understanding of the career development of women and minorities should incorporate the multiple influences that shape their values, experiences, aspirations, and needs. In addition to family and cultural pressure regarding women's education and work, other factors, such as availability of education and work opportunities, and civil rights legislation should be considered. These manifold influences shape their choices and behaviors. Therefore, the attempt to understand women's career development should incorporate a wider perspective, combining environmental, contextual, and personal factors.

One of the accepted and common theoretical frameworks that affect many of the studies on career development of women and minorities, and which relates to multiple influences, is that of the social cognitive career theory (SCCT, [Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994, 2000](#)). This theory extended both [Bandura's \(1986\)](#) social cognitive theory and [Hackett and Betz's \(1981\)](#) career self-efficacy theory, leading to the development of a theory that hypothesized the influence of individual and contextual factors upon the socio-cognitive mechanisms of self-efficacy (the individual's perception of his or her own confidence to perform within a given academic and/or work domain); the outcomes of expectations and goals and their effects upon academic and work interests, actions, and performance. The theory maintains that academic and career goals are also affected by contextual factors such as social and material values, support and barriers, as well as by the individual's interpretation of these contextual factors.

Gender and ethnic differences in self-efficacy beliefs have been documented in many SCCT studies. In general, women and minorities tend to have lower self-efficacy than men when making career-related decisions (e.g., [Blustein, 1989](#); [Taylor & Betz, 1983](#)). Furthermore, under-represented minority women are likely to face more educational and career-related barriers than men and white women as a result of low perceived abilities to cope with these barriers ([Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001](#)). Women have cited the lack of role models or poor career guidance as being key factors in their altering their career goals more frequently than do men ([Watt, 2005](#)).

The work-family interface is a major aspect in women's career development and can explain part of their inferior position in the world of work ([Betz, 2005](#); [Cinamon, 2009](#); [O'Brien, Friedman, Tipton, & Linn, 2000](#)). Many studies have stressed the importance ascribed by women to their family roles (e.g., [Cinamon & Rich, 2002](#)), and to the centrality of their maternal role in their future orientation ([Seginer, 2009](#)) and career plans ([Cinamon & Close, 2011](#)). Family responsibilities continue to be placed mainly on women, even when earning more than their spouses ([Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010](#)), and when one of the children in the family has special needs, it is usually the mother who must leave her job and invest all her time and effort to care for the child's needs ([Alyagon & Cinamon, 2008](#); [Scott, 2010](#)). This interface between work and family is especially important and complex for women from collectivistic and traditional cultures that emphasize women's responsibility to satisfy family-anchored roles ([Cinamon, 2009](#)).

Most of the studies employing the SCCT framework have investigated the concept of self-efficacy as a way to explain academic and career choices. The personal and subjective meanings of education and work for women, especially minority women, are much less frequently investigated. Although SCCT emphasizes the importance of subjective perceptions of contextual factors in seeking to understand the individual's career development, relatively less focus has been placed upon these aspects. Understanding subjective perceptions of contextual factors is congruent with [Savickas' \(2005\)](#) career-construction theory that highlights personal life narratives when attempting to understand people's career choices and behaviors. Therefore, it is crucial to explore women's perceptions and their authentic perspectives regarding their work and learning choices and behaviors when endeavoring to understand their career development. This claim is especially important regarding women from minority groups that do not necessarily subscribe the basic assumptions of many of the career development theories (e.g., free choice, access to opportunity and options) that were established primarily for the Western white male ([Blustein, 2006](#)). These women are on the vanguard of social change and, as such, their experiences are an important element in understanding the course of this movement. The current study tries to narrow this gap and focuses upon the meaning of study and work among a unique and relatively under-investigated group—that of Israeli Arab women. More specifically, this study focuses on Israeli Arab women enrolled in an undergraduate program for early childhood education.

1.2. Israeli Arab women

Arabs in Israel comprise a minority population, consisting of 20.7% of the general population ([Central Bureau of Statistics, 2008](#)). The majority of Arab society (83%) is Moslem and 39% live in Arab villages or cities in Israel's northern region. They have an independent educational system, and Arabic is their official language ([Golan-Agnon, 2006](#)). This sector of the Israeli population is usually less educated than the Jewish population (median years of study of 12 versus 12.9) and earns only 61% of the average salary of Jewish employees ([Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2008](#)). As with U.S. minorities, Israeli Arabs have higher rates of unemployment lower attendance in institutions of higher education (a Jewish majority comprises 88% of Israeli university students) and lower academic achievements in high school when compared to the Jewish majority ([Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2008](#)).

The Arab culture is considered traditional, homogenous, patriarchal-hierarchical and collective-oriented ([Barakat, 1985](#); [Hassan, 1999](#)). The Arab collectivistic culture is associated with an emphasis on interdependence, family security, social hierarchy, and a low level of competition. The Arab society's collectivism focuses mostly upon ethnic-religious elements ([Oyserman, 1993](#)). The male's primary role in this society is that of breadwinner, while the women's role is to care of her family (as spouse, mother, and daughter). Collectivism underscores the roles of its members in maintaining social norms and

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