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Journal of Adolescence

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

Links between gendered leisure time in childhood and adolescence and gendered occupational aspirations

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Adolescence
Leisure time use
Longitudinal
Middle childhood
Occupational aspirations
Gender

ABSTRACT

The world of work remains gender-segregated, and research is needed to identify factors that may give rise to women's and men's vocational choices. This study explored bidirectional relations between youth's gendered career aspirations and the proportions of youth's leisure time spent in stereotypically gendered activities and gendered social contexts. Participants were 203 youth (52% girls) from predominantly white, working and middle class families living in the US, who reported on their occupational aspirations and gendered interests in home interviews and on their daily activities in a series of 7 nightly phone interviews on two occasions, in middle childhood ($M_{\text{age}} = 10.9$) and in adolescence ($M_{\text{age}} = 17.3$). Path models revealed that aspirations predicted youth's time use more so than the reverse. Time in gendered social contexts, specifically time in female-only contexts, but not time in gender-typed activities, predicted career aspirations. Implications of these findings and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Why the world of work is gender-segregated remains an unanswered question. One way to address this question is to examine how youth's occupational aspirations develop during childhood and adolescence. Occupational aspirations—"an individual's desired goals given ideal circumstances" (Rojewski, 2007, p. 88)—play an important role in career development, including directing individuals to engage in behaviors that help them achieve their goals. Aspiring to a gender-typical occupation, therefore, may lead individuals to spend time in more gender-typical activities and contexts—which, in turn, provide socialization opportunities (Larson & Verma, 1999). In this way, youth's time spent in gender-typical activities and contexts can further shape their occupational aspirations. From an ecological perspective, however, youth's daily activities are a consequence as well as a cause of development: activities reflect youth's dispositions and competencies, and they also serve as a forum for learning and practicing skills as well as exposure to role models and sources of reinforcement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Indeed, developmental researchers, including those focused on career development (Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986), have highlighted the role of such bidirectional processes linking person and context. The present study is grounded in this line of thought and is aimed at illuminating the interplay between gendered occupational aspirations and gendered time use from middle childhood to adolescence toward identifying early and potentially malleable precursors of gender segregation in the workplace.

1. Gendered occupational aspirations

Occupational aspirations can be conceptualized as individuals' desired occupation under ideal circumstances (Rojewski, 2007). These begin to develop early in life, and are evident in the preschool years (Trice & King, 1991). Although relatively stable (Rojewski,

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2017.10.011>

Received 15 March 2017; Received in revised form 25 October 2017; Accepted 29 October 2017

Available online 22 November 2017

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2007; Trice & King, 1991), occupational aspirations may change over time, especially during adolescence when youth develop a clearer sense of self and experience more autonomy to learn about the many occupations available in the world of work that are compatible with their self-concepts (Gottfredson, 2004; Porfeli & Lee, 2012). The unique opportunities of adolescence led to our focus on this developmental period in the current study.

One factor that plays a critical role in the development of occupational aspirations is gender. In her Theory of Circumscription and Compromise (TCC), Gottfredson (2004) proposed that individuals' aspirations develop through a process of eliminating career options and modifying preferred options primarily as a function of gender-type and social class. Gottfredson argued that, when individuals perceive an occupation as inaccessible due to its "distance" in terms of gender-type or social class, they look for options that seem more accessible and compatible with their self-concepts. Grounded in this perspective, scholars have attended increasingly to the role of gender in the development of occupational aspirations, and findings that children as young as age 4 aspire to gender-typical occupations (Trice & Rush, 1995) support the contention that gender plays a significant role in career development beginning early in life.

One line of study is aimed at identifying predictors of gender-typed occupational aspirations. For our purposes here, the gender-typing of a given occupation refers to the degree to which it is held by members of one sex but not the other. In the US, for example, 32.2% of physicians/surgeons were female (US Census Bureau, 2010), making it a male-typed occupation; in contrast, 67.2% of physician assistants were female, making this profession relatively more female-typed.

Research on psychological sources of gendered occupational aspirations and choices reveals that, along with self-esteem (Hughes, Martinek, & Fitzgerald, 1985), biological sex, gender-typed skills, and gender role attitudes are related to gender-typical occupation aspirations (Helwig, 2008; Trice & Rush, 1995; Lee, Lawson, & McHale, 2015). Other studies emphasize the social context and focus on the role of parents. For example, parents' occupational expectations for their children (Fulcher, 2011; Jacobs, Chhin, & Bleeker, 2006), parents' gender-role attitudes (Fiebig & Beauregard, 2011), and parents' time with their children (Lawson, Crouter, & McHale, 2015) are related to youth's endorsement of gender-typical occupational aspirations (i.e., aspirations that are consistent with the representation of one's gender) in adolescence and choices in young adulthood. Such findings are not surprising given that youth describe parents as a primary source of their aspirations (Archer, DeWitt, & Wong, 2014).

Grounded in the TCC and prior studies on the role of the contextual influences on youth's occupational aspirations, the present study focused on youth's time spent in *gendered leisure activities*, including the *kinds of activities* youth engaged in (e.g., the arts, sports) and the *social contexts* of their activities (i.e., with only female and only male companions). Specifically, we examined the longitudinal links between these two dimensions of leisure time use and gendered career aspirations in childhood and adolescence, and we tested whether youth (biological) sex moderated these associations.

2. Gendered leisure time use and gendered occupational aspirations

Our focus on the links between gendered leisure and occupational aspirations is grounded in the argument that the domains of work and play are connected, if not indistinguishable, especially in childhood and adolescence (Bordin, 1979; Hartung, 2002). What youth consider play or leisure can serve as opportunities for development, learning and skill-building, including learning teamwork and content knowledge and building physical strength and coordination. Indeed, what were once hobbies become jobs for some individuals (McDaniels, 1984). For others, daily work activities may engender pleasure in the same way as play and leisure activities. Although leisure time may be linked to career development in these several ways, we know almost nothing about such associations. This study was designed to address this knowledge gap.

Although not focused on leisure *time use*, studies of youth's *expressed leisure preferences and interests* are suggestive of links between actual leisure activity involvement and career development. For example, one cross-sectional study reported that junior and senior high school students' activity *preferences* in vocational and leisure domains were highly correlated (Vondracek & Skorikov, 1997). Other studies documented significant relations between leisure and vocational interests, especially in the Realistic (working with hands, working outdoors), Artistic (working on self-expressive creations), and Social (working with people) domains (Armstrong & Rounds, 2008; Gaudron & Vautier, 2007; Leuty, Hansen, & Speaks, 2016). An 18-year longitudinal study that included global reports of activity involvement showed that about 35% of the sample ended up in occupational domains that fit their adolescent leisure activities; further, adults in occupations that matched their earlier leisure activity reports felt more accomplished at work (Hong, Milgram, & Whiston, 1993).

We built on this small body of research to measure the time youth spend in gendered leisure activities using a daily diary data approach. Our approach adds to the current literature in two ways. First, we highlight the distinction between *expressed interests*, which are most often measured using global, self-rating scales versus active participation, namely *manifest interests*, which are far less frequently assessed in career development research (Crites, 1999). Second, we also highlight the distinction between global self-reports of active participation and cued recall measurement of daily time use. This distinction is important because, unlike global self-reports that can reflect aspirations or imagined experience, daily time use is subject to proximal opportunities and constraints in everyday life, ranging from community resources to family and school schedules. To address such distinctions, we control for expressed interests, and then examine whether time spent in gendered leisure activities is linked with gendered career aspirations. In addition, using longitudinal data across about six years, we also seek to advance understanding of the links between gendered leisure time use by addressing not only the typically asked question of whether gendered leisure time explains career aspirations, but, drawing on our developmental perspective, whether there are *bidirectional linkages* between gendered leisure and gendered career aspirations across development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vondracek et al., 1986).

Prior research documents gender differences across development in both leisure and work participation. In childhood, for example, girls and boys prefer playing with gender-stereotypical toys (Cherney & London, 2006; Martin, Eisenbud, & Rose, 1995). In

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