



The role of friends in career compromise: Same-gender friendship intensifies gender differences in educational choice

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ABSTRACT

We propose a mechanism of how the desire to maintain friendships can intensify gender differences in educational choice. The required conditions for this mechanism would be that (1) adolescent males and females differ in their overall educational preferences, (2) wanting to stay close to friends motivates some adolescents to adjust their educational choice in line with their friends' choices, and (3) adolescents have a higher share of same-gender, than other-gender, friends. Study 1 confirmed that these criteria were met, and Study 2 found an association between friendship priority and gender typed field of study. In conclusion, adjusting educational choices in order to maintain friendships put adolescents at risk of compromising their true career interests, and also becomes an obstacle to a gender balanced labor market.

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1. Introduction

The answer to why men and women make different educational choices is likely to be multifaceted. For example, previous research suggests that gender atypical career paths may come to be avoided because of poor self-efficacy (Dickerson & Taylor, 2000), fears of being negatively stereotyped (Bergeron, Block, & Echtenkamp, 2006), conformity to gender role norms (Hackett & Betz, 1981; Tokar, Thompson, Plaufcan, & Williams, 2007); and that women avoid math intensive careers because they endorse communal goals (Diekmann, Clark, Johnston, Brown, & Steinberg, 2011). Although psychological aspects have often been highlighted in the literature, many theoreticians have claimed that the social forces that affect career choices should receive more attention (Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004; Gottfredson, 1981; Vilhjálmsdóttir & Arnelsson, 2013). In the present paper, we suggest that social networks are of importance for gender differences in field of study. We propose a mechanism rooted in the tendency for adolescents to form same-gender friendships. The required conditions for this mechanism to have an impact on gender segregation would be that (1) adolescent males and females differ in their overall educational preferences, (2) wanting to stay close to friends motivates some adolescents to adjust their educational choice in line with their friends' choices, and (3) adolescents have a higher share of same-gender, than other-gender, friends. If these three criteria are met, there will be an effect of increased gender segregation in the field of study due to friendships in adolescence. For example, if a young woman wants to stay close to her friends when making the transition from high school to college, she has a higher probability of adjusting her choice in line with the educational choices of female rather than male friends, simply because she has more of the former than the latter. Because there are gender differences in occupational interests to begin with (Su, Rounds, & Armstrong, 2009), young women who adjust their choice in line with friends will be more likely to choose a female-dominated (compared to male-dominated) field of study, whereas young men will be more likely to choose one that is male-dominated. Because gender segregation in school in the form of gender differences in course enrollment inevitably shapes the division of men and women into different occupations (Sikora & Pokropek, 2012; Smyth & Steinmetz, 2008), and adolescents' aspirations predict their future

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career development (Cochran, Wang, Stevenson, Johnson, & Crews, 2011; Schoon, 2001), this effect will in the long run serve to maintain and intensify gender segregation on the labor market. Although not all adolescents should be expected to adjust their educational choices in order to be with friends, those who have a high fear of isolation or consider themselves to be low-achievers at school may be likely to do so.

2. Friends as barriers to nontraditional choice

Several career development theories emphasize that career-related interests and choice behaviors are affected by contextual factors. For example, social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994, 2000) proposes that several cognitive-person variables (e.g., self-efficacy and goals) interact in reciprocal ways with other aspects of the person (e.g., gender, ethnicity) and with aspects of his or her environment (e.g., social supports, barriers), in shaping career development. Barriers are often defined as “events or conditions, either within the person or in his or her environment, that make career progress difficult” (Swanson & Woitke, 1997, p. 434). Qualitative work has indeed indicated that contextual supports and barriers are more frequently mentioned by adolescents as relevant to their career choice implementation compared to person factors (Lent et al., 2002). Similarly, according to Gottfredson's (1981, 2005) theory of circumscription and compromise, people's perceptions of opportunities and barriers to obtain a certain type of job will be weighted with their interests to form into aspirations. If perceptions of external barriers leave a certain career choice inaccessible, a career compromise occurs where individuals adjust their occupational aspirations (Tsaousides & Jome, 2008). Perceived opportunities and barriers could concern, for example, the perceived risk of unemployment or ease of obtaining training for the job within the surrounding geographic area, but may also consist of social factors.

In the present paper, we focus on the possibility that the fear of losing friends can motivate some adolescents to make a career compromise. The need to belong hypothesis (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) states that people are strongly motivated by a) the need for frequent personal interactions with another person, and b) the need to perceive that the relationship is marked by stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future. When a valued relationship is threatened, the individual should experience negative affect and strive to secure the safety of the relationship (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). For example, an adolescent whose best friend is in his class may experience concern or even anxiety when he realizes that he could end up in a different school, separated from his friend. We propose that when this situation creates a threat of separation, it may be perceived as an external barrier to obtain a certain career, resulting in a compromise with interests (Gottfredson, 1981). In other words, the adolescent adjusts his educational choice as a means of remaining close to his friend.

Among vocational scholars there has recently been an upswing in the emphasis on relational aspects of career development (Blustein, 2011; Blustein, Prezioso, & Schultheiss, 1995; Blustein et al., 2004; Flum, 2001; Phillips, Christopher-Sisk, & Gravino, 2001; Schultheiss, 2003, among others). In contrast to the more classical approach to career development where the individual is sometimes viewed as reaching career related decisions in an autonomous manner, this relational approach is based on assumptions of human beings as motivated by striving to develop and maintain close interpersonal relationships throughout the lifespan. These studies thus tend to focus on the quality dimension of close relationships and how these relationships can provide a secure base for exploration of career alternatives. Indeed, empirical findings suggest that attachment to peers can be of importance for adolescent career development (Kracke, 2002; Schultheiss, Kress, Manzi, & Glasscock, 2001), even above and beyond parental attachment (Felsman & Blustein, 1999).

It is well established that we tend to befriend people who are similar to us (Hafen, Laursen, Burk, Kerr, & Stattin, 2011). One aspect of similarity is that of gender. Indeed, people tend to have more same- compared to other-gender friends across the lifespan (Mehta & Strough, 2009), and adolescence is no exception. Although children tend to prefer same-gender friends from an early age, this tendency typically peaks between middle childhood and early adolescence (Maccoby, 1990), and the proportion of same-gender friends tends to be at least 70% during adolescence (Mehta & Strough, 2010; Poulin & Pedersen, 2007). Furthermore, even when adolescents form other-gender friendships, they are often in the form of secondary as opposed to best friends (Poulin & Pedersen, 2007).

This coincides with the time of entry into upper secondary education (the final stage of secondary education) in most OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries which typically occurs around the age of 15 or 16 (OECD, 2013). Even though the duration of upper secondary education differs between countries, a common feature is that some programs are “terminal” in the sense of preparing the students for entry directly into working life, while others are “preparatory”; i.e., preparing students for tertiary education. In Sweden where the present research was conducted, 15 year olds have a choice of 16 national programs to apply to, that specialize in for example social or natural sciences (preparatory), or construction or restaurant work (terminal). The Swedish system is thus similar to many European countries (e.g., Denmark, Germany, Belgium, Czech Republic, Italy, and Spain), and there is also resemblance to the U.S. high school system in that some courses are mandatory while others allow for specialization. In Sweden, the choice of high school program in part determines future access to higher education. The more opportunity for choice on behalf of the student in the education system, the larger the effect of prioritizing friends should be for gender segregation on the labor market.

In adolescence, best friends often go to the same school (Calvó-Armengol, Patacchini, & Zenou, 2009), and individuals continuously obtain academic as well as social attitudes and behaviors from their friends (Ryan, 2000). As Jones, Audley-Piotrowski, and Kiefer (2012) note, the transmission of such attitudes and beliefs may be especially important in adolescence, which is a period when spending time with friends and valuing friendships increase (Larson & Richards, 1991). However, a distinction should be made between general peer socialization and the mechanism proposed in the present study. First, having mostly same-gender friends may over time result in an increase in gender typical behaviors and attitudes through reinforcement processes in interaction, (i.e., peer socialization). For example, biological sex differences or tendencies for adults to encourage gender stereotyped behavior may be

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