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## Original article

# Discourse and attitudes on occupational aspirations and the issue of gender equality: What are the effects of perceived gender asymmetry and prescribed gender role?

## *Discours et attitudes sur l'orientation et la question de l'égalité des sexes : quels effets de l'asymétrie perçue des sexes et des rôles de genre prescrits ?*

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction.** – Insofar as gender role stereotypes favour more men than women, the aim of this study was to examine the effects of these types of stereotypes on the attitudes and discourse of boys and girls in a vocational setting.

**Objective.** – In the framework of vocational and gender stereotype theories, the objective was to test the hypothesis according to which boys would be more benevolent toward sex-typed vocational choices than non sex-typed ones, whereas the attitude of girls toward both vocational choices would be less determined by stereotypical prescriptions.

**Method.** – In order to validate this prediction, 79 boys and 89 girls had to (a) assess more or less sex-typed occupational choices made by a fictitious boy or girl, (b) take a stand on the issue of gender equality, and (c) whatever their answer on the latter point, they had to justify their position in writing.

**Results.** – The results on evaluative scales and discursive markers validated the general expectations. Indeed, boys were normative and supportive of gender inequality as they valued more traditional occupational choices than non-traditional ones. On the contrary, girls seemed to be more egalitarian than their male counterparts since they tended to enhance non sex-typed occupational choices.

**Discussion.** – The discussion and the conclusion deal with gender role inequality, identity and identity-threat, as well as with reactance and risk-taking.

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### R É S U M É

**Introduction.** – Dans la mesure où les stéréotypes des rôles de genre sont plus favorables pour les hommes que pour les femmes, cette recherche avait pour but d'examiner les effets de ce type de stéréotypes sur les attitudes et le discours des garçons et des filles en situation d'orientation scolaire et professionnelle.

**Objectifs.** – Dans le cadre des théories de l'orientation et des stéréotypes de genre, il s'agissait de tester l'hypothèse selon laquelle les garçons seraient plus bienveillants à l'égard des choix d'orientation sexotypiques que non sexotypiques alors que l'attitude des filles à l'égard de ces choix d'orientation serait moins déterminée par les prescriptions stéréotypiques.

**Méthode.** – En vue de valider cette prédiction, 79 garçons et 89 filles devaient (a) évaluer des choix d'orientation professionnelle plus ou moins sexotypiques effectués par un pair fictif, (b) prendre position sur la question de l'égalité de genre, et (c) quelle que soit la prise de position, la justifier par écrit.

**Résultats.** – Les résultats constatés sur les échelles d'évaluations et sur les marqueurs discursifs ont généralement validé les attentes. En effet, les garçons étaient plus normatifs et avaient d'autant plus tendance à soutenir l'idée d'inégalité de genre qu'ils évaluaient les choix d'orientation sexotypiques que

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non sexotypiques. Au contraire, les filles semblaient plus égalitaristes que les garçons et avaient plus tendance à valoriser les choix d'orientation professionnelle non sexotypiques.

*Discussion.* – La discussion porte sur les questions d'inégalité des rôles de genre, d'identité et de menace identitaire, de réactance et de prise de risque.

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## 1. Introduction

Career orientation is a decisive step for K-12 students. To help them make their own choices, students can resort to guidance counseling which aims at making academic and professional aspirations come alive (Guichard & Huteau, 2001). Career orientation is also a personal life-project. In building their career project, adolescents are seeking a stable sense of sameness and continuity, characterized by greater delineation of personal values, beliefs, and goals. They want to make their decisions in autonomy and away from their parents (Young et al., 2001; Young & Valach, 2006).

Guidance counseling lies at the core of a very complex process involving various actors who are themselves driven by different motivations. In this process, the expertise of teachers is indeed undeniable but their attitude is not devoid of the influence of their own stereotypical beliefs on gender roles as well as on the family background of the students (Channouf, Mangard, Baudry & Perney, 2005; Mangard & Channouf, 2007, 2011).

Career orientation and vocational aspirations are also a family project (Turner & Lapan, 2002; Young et al., 2001; Young & Valach, 2006). Parents contribute to the process in various ways, particularly by influencing children's attitudes and beliefs, by supporting their academic aims and objectives, and by undertaking role-modelling actions (Rainey & Borders, 1997; Turner, Steward & Lapan, 2004). In general, children coming from more privileged families have more educational opportunities, greater access to financial resources when they are needed, more occupational knowledge, and more informal/kinship networks (Schoon, Martin & Ross, 2007). They thus build more varied and more ambitious occupational aspirations (Pearson & Bieschke, 2001; Rebelo Pinto & Soares, 2004; Schoon & Parsons, 2002; Schoon et al., 2007). Thus, even if we should not neglect the burden of the currently receding labor market and the subsequent changes in careers that precarious situations might entail (Christmas-Best & Schmitt-Rodermund, 2001; Schoon & Parsons, 2002), it still seems that children who benefit from an androgynous role-oriented mode of socialization are more likely to develop varied professional ambitions going beyond the scope of traditional careers (Pearson & Bieschke, 2001).

Third, personal motivation (i.e., self-efficacy, perseverance and self-esteem) (Le Bastard-Landrier, 2005; Schoon et al., 2007) should also be taken into account. Indeed, career-related choices bear the imprint of personal identity and reveal gender role congruity. One can also add that gender norms or gender schema theories (Bem, 1983) do influence the structuration of one's self-concept and self-schema. Gender norms are asymmetrical and, in the workplace organization, they are rather assertive-oriented.

### 1.1. Gender role attitudes and stereotypes are influential in shaping career orientation

Gender role attitudes refer to beliefs and expectations about what is appropriate for males and females in terms of behavior and, in this case, career choice goals. Questions on gender role asymmetry and gender role stereotypes are an ongoing concern for both political institutions and researchers. For some of researchers, the gender asymmetry is a sign of the biological adaptation of the human species (Buss, 2005). However, according to the social role theory (Eagly, Wood & Diekmann, 2000; Wood & Eagly, 2002), this

inequality is considered to be the result of differential social roles inhabited by men and women. Based on this theory, gender stereotypes and gender role beliefs are admitted to be ingrained and socialized from an early age (Martin, Ruble & Szkrybalo, 2002). Furthermore, they are considered to be consensual and, therefore, to influence gender-based behavior as well as K-12 career-related choices. These stereotypes are prescriptive and their banalisation tends to strengthen beliefs in gender asymmetry.

It appears that gender role patterns are firmly anchored in culture. Indeed, researches on the sexual composition of workforce (Vouillot, Blanchard, Marro & Steinbruckner, 2004) or on job typology (Gottfredson & Lapan, 1997; Turner & Lapan, 2002) clearly underline the over-representation of women in communal-oriented jobs and, alternatively, the over-representation of men in assertive-oriented jobs. This distribution tends to legitimize the gender orientation of occupational skills (Eagly & Carli, 2003). The masculine gender role is associated with agentic characteristics and the feminine gender role with communal characteristics. Considering this dichotomy, it might be assumed that men and women tend to engage in gender-appropriate occupation and roles, which give them an increased opportunity to fulfill their skills.

Over the last decades, research has quite consistently demonstrated significant gender differences in the development and expression of young people's occupational interests (Helwig, 2008). For example, researchers have shown that children from an early age have strong sex-typed occupational preferences, with boys demonstrating more rigid sex typing than girls (Helwig, 2002; Turner & Lapan, 2005). Then, in researches on occupational status, it is assumed that boys, unlike girls, generally tend to choose well-paid and prestigious jobs and positions (Armstrong & Crombie, 2000). However, these attitudes are not contingent: they probably enact a masculine propensity to go after dominant roles and positions, as well as a feminine propensity towards altruistic occupations (Chazal & Guimond, 2003). As a matter of fact, pursuing a traditional career is often seen as sign of reliability, self-efficacy, commitment (Betz & Schifano, 2000; Chung, 2002) and stability.

All the same, common beliefs on gender-based skills and occupations are still raising questions. Indeed, the labor market is becoming more gender balanced, it also forces individuals to diversify their skills and increase their adaptability so as to be employable (Rudman & Glick, 1999). The desire to be free from gender constraints as well as to develop alternative values might drive individuals to cross gender boundaries and work in female-dominated jobs or male dominated jobs. For men, crossing segregated work boundaries is often facilitated by the feminization of the labor market and labor values as well as by their growing desire to articulate family-life to working-life (Bagilhole & Cross, 2006; Simpson, 2005). As for women, it seems that they often refer to status, salary and career evolution as a justification for their exercise of non-traditional occupations. All in all, individuals who have lower adherence to traditionally masculine or feminine gender norms are more likely to cross professional barriers (Dodson & Borders, 2006; Lease, 2003).

However, there is a price to pay for such transgression. Indeed, transgression implies a questioning of gender identity and an increase of potential role strain (Simpson, 2005). Thus, men who chose a non-traditional professional activity, sometimes as a mere solution from unemployment, would respond to workplace

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