Girls’ Perceptions about what is Required to Have Success in Male Dominated Professional Areas: Gender Stereotypes under Vocational Choices*

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Abstract

Gender continues to be a key organizer of social order and gender stereotypes tend to distort girls’ self-perceptions of competencies to have success in traditional male dominated professional areas, like Science and Engineering. Experts from education and vocational psychology have been concerned with the low representation of girls and women in these domains, since the 1980’s. Among other reasons that highlight this fact as a form of gender discrimination, it is possible to refer that these fields generally include more well-paid jobs, these professional activities tend to have better social status and professionals have more opportunities to contribute to scientific and hi-tech development of the countries. This study is based on 40 semi-structured interviews to 9th and 12th grade female students, who were undecided to choose engineering and science educational paths. Results evidenced a frequent and spontaneous vocational discourse, as well as a discourse on gender, which is “hidden” behind the first. Social representations made by these girls about women in Science and Engineering include some “special” characteristics of “these not common” women as courageous, strong-minded, tenacious, with high self-esteem and with “good capacity of communication” with men. Although the importance of gender stereotypes has already been highlighted in vocational development theories as a barrier to girls’ vocational choice, this study may help to understand how this influence operates and how a different perspective on the same “reality” can simultaneously function as a facilitator or as a barrier, structuring “identities” which may be oppressing to girls and women. Results discussion will question girls’ difficulties to foresee themselves in some fields of occupational world predominantly occupied by men, without having as a reference and model the men’s world. New methodologies of teaching, curricula changes and training of professionals are needed in order to promote vocational choices free of gender bias.

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