



PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S OCCUPATIONAL EXPECTATIONS AND IT'S RELATION TO THEIR PERCEPTION OF GENDER-TYPED OCCUPATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The present study explored preschool children's occupational expectations and it's relation to their perception of gender typed occupations. Occupations can be ideally divided in to two, male and female dominant. Literatures convey that while men are employed in executive, administrative and managerial level, women are employed in very stereotypical occupations in Sri Lanka. The present research explored whether these perceptions of gender typed occupations are stemming from early childhood. Limited research have been carried out pertaining to this area in the Sri Lankan context, and thus findings of the study would increase awareness about gender typed occupations. Eighty four preschool children (Boys = 44; Girls = 40) participated in this study. Sample was selected from two preschools located in Matara district. Interviews and picture responses (pictures cards containing occupational instruments) were used as the tools. The results of the study conveyed that preschool children's current perception of gender typed occupation strongly affects their occupational expectations and that here was no significant gender difference in preschool children's perception of gender-typed occupations. Further, parents' and adults' occupations influenced preschool children's occupational expectations.

Key words: preschool, preschool children, gender perception, gender-typed occupation

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Sri Lankan women have achieved a relatively higher status in terms of civil rights, education, and employment sector, when compared with women in other developing countries. However, Sri Lankan women have not fully achieved equal rights and gender equality according to international norms in all aspects including employment sector (Centre for Women's Research, 2011). This gender inequality of employment sector may come from early years. The current study explores the preschoolers' occupational expectations and it's relation to their perception of gender-typed occupations. Although Sri Lankan government had the commitment to ensure gender equality and recognizes women's right since ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1981, women still experience discrimination in their professional lives. While the state strives to provide equal employment opportunities in employment there is a wide discrepancy in the law and the reality. Despite equal access to women at all levels of education, women in Sri Lanka are still facing discrimination in the employment sector (Moore, 2009).

Sri Lanka's Human Development Index (HDI) was 0.715 in 2013 and the country is ranked at the 92nd position among 187 countries, coming first among South Asian countries (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2013). In terms of life expectancy and literacy, rate women are on par with men. But Sri Lanka is still far behind in Gender Empowerment (Harshani & Abhayarathne, 2014). Although female population (51.61%) is higher than male population (48.39%), female labor force participation rate (35.6%) is less than half of males (74.9%)(Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2014). Employment data also conveys that large number of Sri Lankan women serve as employees while men serve as employers (Department of census and statistics, 2013).

Among the professionally based occupational categories, women seemed to be employed in occupations that are culturally perceived to be feminine, such as midwives (100%), nurses (90.2%), teachers (71.2%), and draughts persons (60.6%), clerks (57.9), dentists (53.2%), lawyers (50.1%) and doctors (42.7%). On the other hand, female representation in fields such as senior administrators and managers (27.8%), technicians (27%), surveyors (24.2%), principals of schools (21.2%), and engineers (15.5%) are very low (Centre for Women's Research, 2011). The majority of Sri Lankan women are employed in the plantation, free trade zones, stereotype jobs, foreign employment etc. (Harshani & Abhayarathne, 2014). Present research studied about whether perception towards these gendered occupations exists from preschool ages and if so how strong it is.

Preschool child- According to Encyclopedia Britannica three to five-year-old children are often called preschoolers (ref?). Whether a child in this age attend a preschool program or not they are no longer considered a toddler. If attending a preschool they develop basic life skills, feel independent and acquire knowledge that they will need when they enter primary school (Phillips, 2013).

Preschool- preschool education begins in infancy and end upon entry into primary school at about five, six, or seven years of age (i.e. the age of entry into primary school differ from country to country). The institutional arrangements for preschool education vary widely around the world as do the names applied to the institutions. The names usually given to centers for the care of those in the first phase of childhood (about three months to three years of age) are infant schools, day care centers, nursery school and preschool.

Gender perception- Gender means whether an individual identifies with being male or female. Child's understanding of gender is moved forward in stages. At each successive stage, the child thinks in characteristic ways about gender. As the child moves through the stages its understanding of gender becomes more complex. First stage is gender identity. The second stage, gender stability, is usually reached by the age of 4 years. At this stage, the child realizes that gender remains the same across time (Kohlberg, 1966).

Newcombe, (1996) mentioned the following: children develop at least a rudimentary gender identity sometimes between 18 months and 3 years of age. They learn to label themselves and others correctly as females or males. Nevertheless, during the preschool years, understanding of gender is limited. They know that girls are supposed to play with dolls and dress up like women, while boys are supposed to play with trucks and pretend to be firemen. By the age of 4 or 5, they know most of the stereotypes for adult occupations. They expect women to be teachers and nurses and men to have a variety of occupations such as pilot and police officer.

Gendered Occupations- The study by Lingle (2004) mentioned that gendered occupation is an occupation that is strongly associated or identified with a particular gender. Gender stereotypes often dictate what jobs are female occupations and what jobs are male occupations (Gatton, DuBois & Falcy, 1999). Ideas on which occupational roles are suitable based on gender are formed at a very early age (Davison, 1997; Gettys & Cann, 1981). According to Levy et al., (2000), preschool children express strong and clear gender-typed beliefs about the proficiencies of men and women in gender-typed occupations. Occupations that one gender occupies primarily are referred to as gender dominated.

Grotevant (1998) stated female dominated occupations as early childhood education, nursing, clerical work, childcare, and hair stylist. In the same study, examples of male-dominated occupations were stated as construction/labor, engineering, truck driving, law enforcing, and fire-fighting. Several studies (Blakemore, 1979; Block 1997; Fagot, 1977) suggest that male-dominated occupational fields have higher status, higher salary, and are perceived to be more valuable to society than the occupations that are dominated by women.

Cordua et al., 1979; Stockard & McGee, 1990 had shown the influence of gender on children's choices when it comes to gender-stereotyped occupations such as teacher, police officer, doctor, hairdresser, pilot, builder etc. Numerous surveys (Cann & Haight, 1983; Gulz et al., 2007; Kessels, 2005; O'Keefe & Hyde, 1983; Romney et al., 2007; Tremaine et al., 1982) suggest that occupations are classified by gender from as early as two and a half years old. Kohlberg (1977) demonstrated that a child will have reached the first stage of gender conceptualization by the age of two.

According to previous studies, preschoolers have knowledge and perception for classified occupations according to gender difference. According to the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), a child's behavior is shaped by the behavior of others, particularly its parents. Children observe the behaviors of men and women and which of them are considered to be acceptable, and then emulate them.

Gottfredson (2004), reports that like adult children distinguish occupations primarily along two dimensions, their masculinity-femininity and their overall social desirability (prestige level). They also share common stereotypes about the personalities of different kinds of workers, i.e., accountants vs. artists, engineers vs. teachers, and so on. Despite their similar perceptions about work in general, their occupational aspirations will nonetheless reproduce most of the class and gender differences of the parent generation due to girls aspiring to be employed in "women's" work, while boys in "men's" work. Also, several other studies (Barak, 1991; DiDonato & Strough, 2013; Whitmarsh & Wentworth, 2013) indicates that the traditional 'maternal' occupations affect the expected interests of boys and girls.

METHODOLOGY

Determining gender concepts of preschool children with a focus on adult occupational fields is the focal point of the present study. The research focused on symbols that represented a few of the occupations that are dominated by either of the sexes in a way that is recognizable to preschool children of both genders. The independent variables were children's sex and the symbols representing the various occupations and whether the child identified with a male or

female with those occupational symbols. The dependent variable was their occupational expectation.

A total of 84 preschool children participated in the study. They were between the ages of 3-5 years ($M=3.4$; $S.D= 1.25$). The gender split was 44 boys and 40 girls. The sample was chosen from two government preschools which are located in a semi urban area in the Matara District.

Three sets of measures were used in this study. The first assessment tool was a structured interview. It included six questions including demographic questions such as name, birth order, and parent's occupations. The questions were asked in a very simple manner. The teachers help was taken to conform the details obtained from the questions. Other two measurements were visual response options. These responses primarily included images depicting the tools of gender-typed occupations (tools/instruments used by teachers, doctors, mechanics, beauticians, mason and tea leave pluckers). Using images of occupational tools has been widely used in many studies.

The study was divided into three sections.

Section 01: Interviews with children- Children were interviewed individually in a single session (15-to 20-min). During this session six questions were asked from the children. These included demographic questions such as name, birth order, and parent's occupations. Target question were "what do you want to be when you grow up?" followed by "Do you want to be someone else?" The last question were "do you like to be a pilot?" and "do you like to be a nurse?"

Gender-typed occupations were selected based on some research previously done in Sri Lanka such as "Gender-based occupational segregation and economic empowerment of women in Sri Lanka (Harshani & Abhayaratne, 2015) and some international research on gender roles (valance, 2004; Levy, et al., 2000).

Section 02: Picture responses for a specific question- This section included six response options. Children were shown pictures of specific occupational tools. Pictures were only symbolic representations with no title of reference. Three pictures were representative of male-dominated occupations (doctor, mechanic, and mason) and the other three female-dominated occupations (teacher, beautician, tea leave plucker). Then, children were shown two pictures of a man and woman. The questions posed to the children were "who do you think use these?" The pictures used during this session were shown to six groups of children; group I- (stethoscope, syringe, sphygmomanometer), group II (vehicle spare parts, refit tools), group III (steel square, trowel, cement and grout float), group IV (blackboard, teacher's desk, ABC), group V (makeup brushes, makeup brands, hair styles) and group VI (tea leaves, tea leave bins).

Section 03: picture responses with questions- This section included four response options. Children were shown two pictures of a little girl and a little boy. Then they were asked four questions. Two questions were based on male dominant occupations and two were based on female dominant occupations. The questions are as follows; Question 01, which one can be a nurse when these two children grew up? Question 02, which one can go to a garment factory for sewing when these two children grew up? Question 03, which one can drive a bus when he/she grew up? Question 04, which one can build buildings, bridges when he/she grew up?

RESULTS

Hypothesis 01

Preschool children's perception of gender typed occupations affect for their future occupational expectations. There seemed to be a strong influence ($n=75$, 89.3%) between preschool children's future occupational expectations and their perception of gender typed occupations.

Hypothesis 02

Preschool children's perception of gender typed occupations differs based on their gender. Results were statistically non-significant in the predicted differences between the male students' perception of gender typed occupations ($M=9.72$, $SD=0.45$) over female students' perception of gender-typed occupations ($M=9.45$, $SD=.59$).

Hypothesis 03

Parent's occupation's influence on preschool children's occupational expectations. According to results 38 out of 84 participants' (45.2%) future occupational expectations were totally similar to their parents' current occupations. 28 out of 84 participants' (33.3%) future occupational expectations differed from their parents' current occupations, but is similar to other significant adults that they know like uncle or neighborhood young people. For 18 out of 84 participants' (21.4%) future expectations are not occupational oriented (their answers were totally gender based such as want to be a mother, father or big boy).

Children had very strong gendered perception towards provided occupations. Table 01 displays the different responses of the children about the occupations provided in the study.

Gender	Occupation identified as male		Occupation identified as female	
	Frequency (number of children)	Percentage %	Frequency (number of children)	Percentage %
Doctor	62	73.8	22	26.2
Mechanic	84	100	0	0
Mason	84	100	0	0
Engineer	84	100	0	0
Bus driver	84	100	0	0
Teacher	2	2.4	82	97.6
Beautician	0	0	42	100
Tea-leave plucker	0	0	42	100
Nurse	0	0	42	100
Garment worker	10	11.9	74	88.1

Table 01: Children's perception of gender typed occupations towards each occupation which was selected for the study.

Seventy-three point eight (73.8%) children's (n=62) perception were 'Doctor' is a male occupation and only 22 children's (26.2%) said that doctor is a female occupation. And also 97.6% children (n=82) said teacher is a female occupation. All participants' (n=84, 100%) perceived that mechanics and masons are male dominant occupations and beauticians and tea-leave pluckers are female dominant occupations. And also 100% children (n=84) said only men can be bus drivers and engineers, and only women can be nurses. All participants have strong gendered perception towards occupations.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to explore preschool children's occupational expectations and its relation to their perception of gender-typed occupations. Three main hypotheses were conducted to elicitate the above. Hypothesis one and three agreed with the previous research findings that have been conducted and the hypothesis two did not.

The results derived from the collected data provide insight into the preschool children's perception of gender-typed occupation and their occupational expectations. The findings convey that parents' occupations affect for preschool children's occupational expectations. This confirms previous research findings that stated that parents are the primary role models of children (Karunanayake, 2000; Karunanayake and Nauta, 2004). Children's current perception towards gender-typed occupations strongly affected their future occupational choices. That finding too corresponded with previous studies that stated that children have gender-typed preferences and gender appropriate behaviors (Kohlberg, 1996; Ruble & Martin, 1998; Szkrybalo & Ruble, 1999). Current research also found that children preferred to select their future occupations based on their gender. Boys primarily chose male dominant occupations as their future occupations and girls female dominant occupations. Also, current research found preschool children have strong gender stereotypical perceptions towards adult occupations. This is in line with previous research which states that by age 3 or 4 children know most of the stereotypes for adults' occupations (Aleksa, Anderson, Collins, Luecker & Schmitt, 1995; Levy & Carter, 1989; Newcombe, 1996; Trice & rush, 2002).

The previous research found that males have a more rigid perception of gender-typed occupations than females. As indicated in results of the present study, differences between the total groups of males and females were nearly identical. The total percent of male participants who indicated a particular bias was only a small variance of the total percent of female participants with the same bias. This contradicts previous research which stated that boys have strong gendered occupational stereotyped than girls (Abhayadewa, 2004; Tzampazi, 2013; Vallance, 2004; Wilbourn & Kee, 2010). This may be due to child rearing practices of the Sri Lankan society where the care givers don't influence the very young children on a rigid division of gender typed occupations. This may change with exposure to other influences such as media, school and wider society. It would be interesting to explore this finding further in a future study. Results obtained supported the third hypothesis. Parents' current occupations influenced children's occupational expectations. Current research found 45.2% children selected their parents' occupation as their future occupation and 33.3% future occupational expectations were similar to other significant adults that they knew like an uncle or a neighbor. Previous research and theories have also come up with similar findings which stated that children generally pick models they see as powerful or nurturing. Typically one powerful model is a parent or another

significant adult, often of same sex (Freud, 1905; Bandura, 1986; Karunanayake, 2005; Karunanayake & Nauta, 2004).

CONCLUSION

The outcomes of the study convey that preschool age children have strong gender perceptions towards adult occupations and that their current perception may strongly affected their future occupational choices. Also parent's occupation significantly contributed to preschool children's occupational expectations. However, the results of the present study showed that there is no significant difference in children's gendered occupational perception based on their gender contradicting results obtained from previous research.

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