Career Aspiration and Gender Role Development in Young Girls

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Career aspirations of 66 middle-class girls (aged 8 to 13) were examined in terms of the dichotomy between a pioneering career choice (a career in a currently male-dominated field) and a traditional choice (a career in a currently female-dominated field). Of the girls, 32 had been exposed in utero to various amounts of exogenous estrogens/progesterone and/or thyroid hormones administered to their mothers for minor pregnancy complications; the remaining subjects were controls. While the treatment group did not differ significantly from the control group in type of career choice, prenatal hormone administration was associated with less persistent tomboyism in childhood. Therefore, results are presented for the two groups separately and combined. We assessed career aspiration as it may relate to age, IQ, other aspects of gender role development, and various family characteristics. We found that pioneers differed from traditionals in several ways: (1) Pioneers tended to have higher IQ scores than traditionals; (2) pioneers more often were persistent tomboys throughout childhood; (3) pioneers were several months older than traditionals; (4) parents of pioneers were more highly educated than parents of traditionals. While pioneers were more often persistent tomboys, they did not differ in other aspects of gender role development, as in the sex of their friends or anticipation of marriage and motherhood. Since prenatal hormone treatment was associated with a lower incidence of persistent tomboyism and tomboyism was related to pioneering career choice, an indirect effect of estrogen/progesterone treatment during pregnancy on career choice is suggested. How-

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ever, since the relationships between individual or family characteristics and career choice were the same within both the treatment and control groups, we feel confident that we have identified replicable factors that facilitate nontraditional career choices in young girls of middle-class background.

KEY WORDS: career aspiration; female gender role behavior; tomboyism; prenatal hormone treatment; sex differences.

INTRODUCTION

Gender role behavior in childhood is behavior which differentiates normal boys and girls consistently over a wide age range. It includes aspects of play behavior and rehearsal of adult roles. One aspect of adult role rehearsal is career aspiration in young children. The career choices of girls are of particular interest at a time when societal norms regarding women’s roles have changed significantly in the United States. Female participation in the labor force has steadily risen since 1960 and exceeded 50% of the female population for the first time in the fall of 1978 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1978, Table A-1). Until 1970, the increase was mainly in clerical and service jobs rather than in higher paying professions and in other male-dominated fields. Only in the 1970s do we have an indication that more young women are planning careers in currently male-dominated areas. In 1975, 17% of female college freshmen prepared for a career in business, medicine, law, and engineering, versus 6% a decade earlier (Astin et al., 1975; Bielby, 1978).

Over the last 15 years, researchers have shown an interest in the relationship of individual or family characteristics and career choices in young women. In 1965, Rossi introduced the concept of traditional versus pioneering career choices for women. The label “pioneer” was suggested for a woman who wants to have a job in a male-dominated field. Those women aspiring to traditionally female careers, such as teacher, secretary, and nurse, were labelled “traditionals.” Rossi suggested that women who make a traditional career choice might differ from pioneers in many aspects of personality, attitude, and background variables. Subsequently, several studies have examined such differences between traditionals and pioneers among high school and college females.

At college age, pioneers were found to have a less stereotyped view of female and male roles (Tangri, 1972; Crawford, 1978). In comparison to traditionals, pioneers more frequently came from families with a mother who was working and/or well educated. More pioneers could name a role model who had influenced their career choice, and more of them also felt that faculty members considered them bright (Crawford, 1978; Tangri, 1972; Almquist, 1974). In peer relationships, pioneers