The relationship between life goals and fields of study among young European graduates

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Abstract. This paper analyses the relationships among life goals, job prospects and fields of study for a sample of young European higher education graduates. The results show that there is a characteristic pattern for each field of study with regard to the variables used. Graduates in a given field have similar life goals and job prospects, as well as a similar educational and social background, irrespective of cultural and labour market differences associated with their country of residence.

Keywords: choice field of study, job prospects, life goals

Introduction

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, there has been an unprecedented increase in the number of people enrolling in higher education, a decision that is becoming increasingly common amongst young people throughout Europe. Recent studies on the demand for higher education, like those carried out by Menon (1998) or Jimenez and Salas-Velasco (2000), are examples of recent interest in this phenomenon. However, as well as making the decision to continue their education, students also have to decide which field to specialise in. Depending on what they choose to study, they will concentrate on a specific area for the following 3–5 (or possibly more) years as students, thus influencing their future career prospects.

Individuals have to consider various different factors when making the decision to further their education. Social, psychological, economic and educational factors all play a part in this decision-making process. Therefore, efforts have been made to understand the factors influencing the probabilities of graduating in different fields from psychological and
educational perspectives, as well as from an economic and a sociological point of view.

An important part of this research has focused on gender differences and choice of study, concerning gender-related patterns of selection based on cultural stereotypes and social representations. Whitehead (1996) found evidence to suggest that pupils associate certain fields of study with males (science) or females (languages and arts) at secondary level. Lightbody and Durndell (1996) confirm these results, pointing out that this gender-related bias was stronger on images of the jobs typically associated with the field of study chosen, rather than on the stereotype of the field of study itself. Hansen (1993) indicates that gender-related segregation decreases as educational level increases.

Attention to the issue of under-representation of women in “science” has been driven by several concerns: projected national scientific labour shortage, continued from earlier eras (Brush 1991); equity for women (Dix 1987); and a feminist critique of the history and epistemology of science (Noble 1992). The authors of these cited works, in offering hypotheses to explain why women are underrepresented in “science”, emphasise institutional and cultural factors. One relevant body of research stresses the importance of the intersection between psychological and social factors. Social–psychological issues such as self-confidence, perceived ability, and resilience have been linked to female persistence in “science” (Lipson and Tobias 1991; Long 1986). Other research indicates that women attribute their success to extrinsic factors such as luck, rather than intrinsic factors, such as ability (Sassen 1980). Self-efficacy theory is useful in describing the development of expectations about females’ abilities in fields such as Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Engineering. Bandura (1982) suggests that accomplishment may be the most important consideration in creating a sense of ability. Schoenfeld (1987) however, stresses that perceived efficacy is a better predictor of performance.

Status attainment models give some insight into the importance of family background or status origins for educational and occupational pathways (Blau and Duncan 1967; Duncan et al. 1972). Parents’ expectations reflect parental, occupational, educational and income status. In turn, parental expectations influence the educational and occupational aspirations of young adults (Haller 1982). As Moen (1989) notes, parents play a role both as definers of career expectations and as role models. Previous research on women’s participation in science has focused on the father’s occupation but little research has been done on the mother’s or on dual parental influence (Bailey et al. 1988).