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THE INFLUENCE OF SEX-TYPING AND SOCIAL STATUS ON
CHILDREN'S OCCUPATIONAL PREFERENCES AND OCCUPATIONAL STEREOTYPES:
AN EXAMINATION OF GOTTFREDSON'S THEORY OF OCCUPATIONAL CHOICE

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined Gottfredson's theory (1981) of vocational development, which suggests that occupational preferences and occupational stereotypes are influenced firstly by sex-typing, between the ages of six and eight, and secondly by social background, between the ages of nine and thirteen. A large, heterogenous sample (396) of New Zealand school pupils, aged between five and fourteen were asked about the occupations they would like to do, using free and forced choice formats, and these responses were then tested for their relationship with gender, age, parental socio-economic status and ability. A forced choice Occupational Card Sort, comprising 15 occupations, was used to measure sex-type and status dimensions of occupational stereotypes and effects for age and gender were investigated. Data were analysed using discriminant analysis and contingency analysis. Results indicated that gender was a strong influence on the sex-typing of occupational preferences and occupational stereotypes from the age of five (younger than the age suggested by Gottfredson), with males demonstrating more rigid sex-typing than females. Consistent with Gottfredson's theory, socio-economic background and ability were significant influences on status level of occupational preferences for respondents aged over nine years, with results suggesting that ability had a more direct influence on the status level of occupational preferences than did parental socio-economic status. The developmental pattern for the formation of occupational stereotypes was not as predicted by Gottfredson's theory, as both the sex-type and status level elements of occupational stereotypes were evident from the age of five. Results further

suggested a weakening of sex-typing of occupational stereotypes with increasing age. The inconsistencies of present findings with Gottfredson's theory were discussed in the context of previous research and the developmental literature, and the usefulness of the theory in relation to occupational choice was evaluated. Implications of the present findings for careers awareness and education programmes were considered. It was concluded that Gottfredson's theory provides a useful framework for examining early vocational development, but that the failure of the theory to explain deviant developmental patterns limits the theory's explanatory power. It was suggested that the theory's usefulness would be enhanced by recognising the impact of environmental influences such as campaigns to encourage women into non-traditional careers and by incorporating more psychological influences such as self-cognitions.