

Gender Stereotyped and Gender Neutral Career Information: A Theoretical Analysis of Career Choice Preferences, Occupational Aspirations, and Perceived Career Suitability among College Students

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ABSTRACT

Career decisions made during college are often described as expressions of personal interest, ability, and opportunity. Yet career preferences are also shaped by the social meanings attached to occupations and by the way career information is presented. Gender-stereotyped career information may signal that certain occupations are more appropriate, attainable, or socially acceptable for one gender than another, whereas gender-neutral information may present occupational roles in ways that reduce unnecessary gender cues and broaden perceived possibilities. The present theoretical paper examines how these two forms of information may influence career choice preferences, occupational aspirations, and perceived career suitability among college students. Drawing on social cognitive career theory, expectancy-value perspectives, circumscription and compromise theory, role congruity theory, stereotype-threat research, and work on belonging and gendered occupational cues, the paper argues that career information can influence career development through several interconnected pathways. These include self-efficacy, outcome expectations, subjective task value, perceived belonging, anticipated social acceptance, role congruity, and judgments about person–occupation fit. Gender-stereotyped information may narrow exploration by making some careers appear inconsistent with the self, while gender-neutral information may allow students to evaluate careers more directly in relation to competence, values, interests, and goals. However, gender-neutral wording alone is unlikely to remove structural inequalities or deeply internalized stereotypes. The paper therefore proposes an integrative framework in which career information operates as a contextual cue within a broader system of family socialization, educational experience, cultural expectations, labour-market representation, and personal agency. Implications for career counselling, higher education, career communication, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: gender stereotypes, gender-neutral information, career choice, occupational aspirations, career suitability, college students

INTRODUCTION

Choosing a career is one of the most consequential developmental tasks of emerging adulthood. During the college years, students are expected to translate broad interests and abilities into educational pathways, occupational goals, and decisions about future work. These decisions are rarely made on the basis of ability alone. Career development is shaped by self-beliefs, anticipated outcomes, social expectations, available role models, perceived barriers, economic realities, and the cultural meanings attached to particular occupations. In this sense, career choice is both personal and social.

Gender remains one of the social categories through which occupations are interpreted. Some fields continue to be culturally described as masculine, competitive, technical, leadership-oriented, or agentic, while others are associated with care, service, communication, emotional sensitivity, or other qualities historically coded as feminine. Such associations can influence the information students receive long before they formally enter the labour market. Career brochures, classroom examples, placement materials, job descriptions, family advice, media portrayals, counselling conversations, and peer discussions can all communicate explicit or implicit messages about who is expected to belong in a particular field.

The distinction between gender-stereotyped and gender-neutral career information is therefore theoretically important. Gender-stereotyped information highlights or reproduces associations between occupations and socially constructed gender roles. It may do so through wording, examples, images, assumptions about personality, or descriptions of the 'ideal' worker. Gender-neutral career information, by contrast, minimizes unnecessary gender coding and describes occupational demands, opportunities, competencies, and pathways without presenting the occupation as naturally suited to one gender.

This distinction does not imply that a single career message determines a student's future. Career development is cumulative and multidetermined. However, information can function as a cue that alters how students interpret their own fit with an occupation. A career that initially appears interesting may be rejected if the student perceives that people like them are unlikely to belong, succeed, or be accepted there. Conversely, information that emphasizes accessible pathways, diverse role models, multiple ways of succeeding, and task-relevant skills may encourage broader exploration.

The present paper offers a theoretical analysis of how gender-stereotyped and gender-neutral career information may shape three closely related outcomes among college students: career choice preferences, occupational aspirations, and perceived career suitability. The argument is that these outcomes are connected but not identical. Preference concerns the relative attractiveness of a career; aspiration concerns the level or direction of future occupational goals; and perceived suitability concerns the judgment that a particular occupation is appropriate, realistic, or fitting for oneself. Understanding how gendered information influences each of these processes requires an integration of career-development theory with social-psychological research on stereotypes, belonging, role expectations, and self-efficacy.

Rationale

A theoretical focus on career information is important because many interventions in higher education assume that better information automatically improves decision-making. Information is often treated as neutral content: students are given details about qualifications, salaries, job responsibilities, or employment prospects and are expected to choose rationally. Yet the framing of that information may also communicate social expectations. A description that repeatedly emphasizes dominance, toughness, independence, and competition may carry a different psychological meaning from one that emphasizes the same occupation in terms of problem solving, collaboration, innovation, and social contribution.

Research on gendered wording demonstrates that apparently minor linguistic cues can shape perceptions of belonging and occupational appeal. Gaucher et al. (2011) found that masculine-coded wording was more common in advertisements for male-dominated occupations and that such wording could reduce women's anticipated belonging and job appeal. This line of work is relevant to college students because occupational preferences are often formed before formal job application. If students encounter gender-coded descriptions at the stage of exploration, stereotypes may influence which possibilities they consider worthy of further investment.

Theoretical analysis is also necessary because gender effects in career choice are often mistakenly reduced to simple differences in interests. Interests themselves develop within social environments. Students learn which activities are praised, which role models are available, what competence is expected, and which ambitions are interpreted as realistic. Career information can reinforce these patterns or create opportunities to question them.

Objectives

The present paper has five objectives. First, it clarifies the concepts of gender-stereotyped and gender-neutral career information. Second, it examines the major psychological theories that can explain how gendered career cues influence career development. Third, it analyses the likely effects of such information on career choice preferences, occupational aspirations, and perceived career suitability. Fourth, it considers moderators that may strengthen, weaken, or reverse these effects. Finally, it develops an integrative theoretical model and identifies implications for career counselling, higher education, and future research.

Method

This paper adopts a narrative theoretical-review approach. It integrates established theories of career development and motivation with social-psychological research on gender stereotypes, role congruity, belonging, self-efficacy, and stereotype-related cues. The aim is conceptual synthesis rather than statistical meta-analysis. Accordingly, the discussion focuses on mechanisms that can explain why the same occupational information may be interpreted differently depending on how gender is represented and how students understand their own identities, abilities, goals, and social context.

Conceptualizing Gender-Stereotyped Career Information

Gender-stereotyped career information refers to occupational information that implicitly or explicitly links a career with traits, roles, behaviours, or identities culturally associated with men or women. Stereotyping can appear in direct statements, but it is more often subtle. It may be embedded in the choice of adjectives, photographs, examples of successful workers, assumptions about leadership style, descriptions of work–family demands, or the repeated association of particular fields with one gender.

The psychological significance of such information lies in its capacity to transform an occupation from a set of tasks into a social category. Once a career is represented as 'masculine' or 'feminine,' students may begin to ask not only, 'Can I do this work?' but also, 'Is this work meant for someone like me?' That second question shifts career evaluation from objective task requirements toward identity congruence and anticipated social acceptance.

Gender-stereotyped information may also operate by exaggerating apparent differences between occupations. Technical, scientific, and leadership careers may be described through agentic language, whereas teaching, counselling, nursing, or social-service careers may be presented through communal language. Such representations can obscure the fact that most occupations involve a mixture of analytical, interpersonal, creative, managerial, and cooperative tasks.

Conceptualizing Gender-Neutral Career Information

Gender-neutral career information does not deny that gender inequality exists, nor does it require removing all references to diversity. Rather, it avoids presenting occupational competence or suitability as gender-dependent when gender is irrelevant to the work itself. It describes the knowledge, skills, responsibilities, working conditions, pathways, and values associated with a career in ways that allow students to compare those features with their own interests and capacities.

A gender-neutral presentation may use balanced imagery, inclusive examples, non-gendered language, and descriptions of multiple forms of success within the same occupation. Importantly, neutrality should not be confused with blandness. Effective career information can be vivid, motivational, and realistic while still avoiding unnecessary gender coding.

Gender-neutral information may widen psychological access to careers because it reduces the salience of social-category membership during initial evaluation. Instead of asking whether they match the stereotype of the occupation, students may be more likely to consider whether they enjoy the work, value its goals, possess or can develop the relevant skills, and see a viable pathway into the field.

Theoretical Foundations

Social Cognitive Career Theory

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) provides one of the strongest frameworks for explaining how career information may influence choice. Lent et al. (1994) proposed that career interests, goals, choices, and persistence are shaped by self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goals, all of which develop within environmental contexts. From this perspective, career information is not merely descriptive; it can contribute to students' beliefs about what they are capable of doing and what is likely to happen if they pursue a particular path.

Gender-stereotyped information may weaken self-efficacy indirectly by suggesting that success in a field depends on characteristics culturally associated with another gender. This is especially relevant when students have limited direct experience in the field. If they lack strong personal evidence about their competence, they may rely more heavily on social cues. Hackett and Betz (1981) argued that gendered socialization can contribute to differences in career-related self-efficacy, thereby restricting the range of occupations individuals seriously consider.

Gender-neutral information may support a more task-focused appraisal. When the occupation is described in terms of learnable competencies, educational preparation, and realistic performance demands, students may be more able to judge efficacy on the basis of experience and skill rather than stereotype. Neutral information may also improve outcome expectations by reducing assumptions that entering a gender-atypical field will necessarily involve exclusion, social disapproval, or poor fit.

Expectancy-Value Perspective

Expectancy-value theory offers a complementary explanation. Eccles and Wigfield (2002) emphasized that achievement-related choices depend on expectations for success and the subjective value attached to an activity. A career can be attractive because it is interesting, useful, important to identity, or consistent with long-term goals; it can also be avoided because its perceived costs are too high.

Gender stereotypes can influence both sides of this equation. They may lower expected success by communicating that members of one gender are less naturally suited to a field. They may also alter subjective value by framing some occupations as inconsistent with desired identities or life roles. A student can therefore be academically capable of pursuing a career while still judging it as 'not for me.'

Gender-neutral information may help separate task value from gender-role expectations. By presenting multiple reasons for entering a field and multiple ways of enacting the occupational role, neutral information may allow students to connect careers with personally meaningful values that stereotypes had previously obscured.

Circumscription and Compromise Theory

Gottfredson's (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise is particularly relevant to the early narrowing of occupational options. The theory proposes that individuals progressively eliminate occupations they perceive as incompatible with their developing self-concepts and social identities. Gender typing is one of the dimensions through which careers may be circumscribed before more detailed consideration of interests or abilities occurs.

In this framework, gender-stereotyped information can reinforce circumscription by confirming that certain occupations lie outside the student's perceived zone of acceptable alternatives. The effect may occur even when the student has the ability to succeed. Gender-neutral information may not completely undo earlier circumscription, but it can challenge the assumption that occupational roles are inherently gendered and thereby reopen options for consideration.

Role Congruity and Person–Occupation Fit

Role congruity theory explains how social roles are evaluated in relation to gender expectations. Eagly and Karau (2002) argued that prejudice can arise when the qualities culturally associated with a social group appear inconsistent with the qualities expected in a role. Although originally developed to explain attitudes toward female leaders, the principle is broader: perceived mismatch between gender stereotypes and occupational roles can influence expectations of competence, acceptance, and fit.

Students may internalize this logic when evaluating careers. A woman considering a highly agentic occupation, or a man considering a strongly communal occupation, may anticipate greater social incongruity even when personal interest is high. Perceived suitability therefore becomes partly relational: it reflects not only one's abilities but also the expected reaction of others and the cultural image of the role.

Stereotype Threat and Identity-Based Performance Concerns

Stereotype-threat research demonstrates that awareness of a negative stereotype can influence psychological functioning in achievement settings. Spencer et al. (1999) showed that gender stereotypes about mathematical ability can affect women's performance under conditions in which the stereotype is relevant. Career decisions occur over a longer timescale than laboratory performance, but the mechanism is theoretically informative. Students may avoid careers in which they anticipate repeatedly having to disprove a stereotype about their competence.

Thus, gender-stereotyped career information may increase anticipated identity burden. A student may not consciously believe the stereotype, yet still expect that others will evaluate them through it. This anticipated social cost can lower the attractiveness of a career even when academic self-efficacy remains intact.

Belonging and Environmental Cues

Career suitability is also influenced by cues about belonging. Cheryan et al. (2009) demonstrated that stereotypical environmental cues associated with computer science could influence women's interest and sense of belonging in the field. The broader implication is that people use social and symbolic cues to infer whether they will fit within a setting.

Career information performs a similar signalling function. Images, language, role models, and examples can imply who typically belongs in an occupation. Gender-neutral information may broaden anticipated belonging by portraying the field as socially heterogeneous and by emphasizing that competence can be expressed through more than one personality style.

Gender-Stereotyped Information and Career Choice Preferences

Career choice preferences refer to the relative attractiveness of different occupational options. Preferences are often treated as expressions of stable interests, but they can also be responsive to framing. Gender-stereotyped information may reduce preference for a career when it activates concerns about fit, acceptance, or identity consistency.

Gaucher et al. (2011) showed that gendered wording in job advertisements can influence perceived belonging and job appeal. Although their work concerned employment advertising, the same principle is relevant to earlier stages of career development. When students encounter occupational descriptions that repeatedly use masculine-coded or feminine-coded traits, they may infer that the occupation has an established social identity and that deviation from that identity will be noticeable.

The effect is unlikely to be uniform. Some students may reject stereotyped messages, and others may be motivated to challenge them. Nevertheless, stereotype-consistent information can make career evaluation psychologically more complex by adding a social-identity question to what might otherwise be an interest-and-skill decision.

Gender-neutral information may increase openness to non-traditional careers by reducing stereotype-based filtering. It does not necessarily create interest where none exists, but it can allow existing interest to be evaluated without being prematurely dismissed because of gendered assumptions.

Gendered Information and Occupational Aspirations

Occupational aspirations refer to desired future positions, levels of responsibility, status, specialization, or achievement. They are broader than immediate preferences because they involve a projected future self. Aspirations are shaped by what students imagine is possible, worthwhile, and socially sustainable.

Gender-stereotyped information may influence aspirations by narrowing the imagined future. If leadership is repeatedly represented as masculine, women may be more likely to view high-level leadership roles as socially incongruent even when they are interested in the field. Similarly, men may perceive some caregiving or helping professions as inconsistent with masculine expectations despite strong interpersonal interests.

Goal-congruity research offers an additional explanation. Diekman et al. (2010) found that STEM careers were often perceived as less supportive of communal goals, which could reduce interest among individuals who strongly valued helping and working with others. This finding illustrates how occupational stereotypes can hide dimensions of a career that might otherwise support aspiration. Many technical fields involve teamwork, social contribution, mentoring, and public benefit, but stereotyped descriptions may foreground competition and individual achievement.

Gender-neutral information can broaden aspirations by presenting a more complete picture of occupational goals and pathways. When students see that the same field can support leadership, creativity, service, collaboration, financial security, intellectual challenge, or social impact, they may find more points of connection between the occupation and their desired future selves.

Perceived Career Suitability

Perceived career suitability is the judgment that an occupation is appropriate or fitting for oneself. This judgment combines beliefs about competence, identity, values, lifestyle, social acceptance, and realistic opportunity. It therefore sits at the intersection of individual self-concept and occupational representation.

Gender stereotypes can influence suitability judgments even in the absence of explicit discrimination. A student may say, 'I could probably do that job, but I do not see myself there.' Such a statement reflects a perceived fit problem rather than a simple competence problem. The source of the mismatch may be occupational imagery, role expectations, anticipated peer culture, or the belief that one's personality does not match the stereotype of successful workers in the field.

Gender-neutral information can reduce this symbolic mismatch by distinguishing core job requirements from culturally exaggerated role images. A career in engineering, for example, requires technical competence, problem solving, persistence, and collaboration; it does not require conformity to a narrow masculine personality stereotype. Likewise, success in counselling or nursing requires professional knowledge, emotional skill, judgment, and responsibility; it is not inherently dependent on feminine identity.

The Difference between Neutrality and Counter-Stereotypic Information

It is useful to distinguish gender-neutral information from counter-stereotypic information. Neutral information removes unnecessary gender coding, whereas counter-stereotypic information actively challenges existing stereotypes by presenting examples that contradict them. Both approaches may broaden career exploration, but they operate differently.

Neutral information reduces stereotype salience. Counter-stereotypic information directly questions the stereotype. For students with strongly internalized beliefs, neutral wording alone may be insufficient because the stereotype may already be cognitively available. In such cases, exposure to diverse role models, narratives of non-traditional career success, and accurate information about the diversity of people working in the field may be more powerful.

Moderating Factors

The effects of gendered career information are likely to depend on several moderating variables. Gender identity and the strength of identification with traditional gender roles may influence how strongly stereotyped messages are accepted. Students with more flexible gender-role beliefs may show less stereotype-consistent narrowing.

Prior experience is another important moderator. Direct success in mathematics, leadership, caregiving, writing, technology, or other relevant domains can provide personal evidence that weakens the influence of stereotyped information. Conversely, students with limited exposure to an occupation may depend more heavily on cultural representations.

Self-efficacy can also buffer or amplify informational effects. Strong efficacy beliefs may protect career interest when stereotyped cues are encountered, whereas uncertainty about competence may make such cues more influential. Family expectations, peer norms, socioeconomic conditions, institutional climate, availability of mentors, and labour-market realities may further shape how career information is interpreted.

Intersectionality must also be considered. Gender does not operate independently of social class, caste, race, ethnicity, disability, region, or family background. The meaning of a 'suitable' career may vary across social contexts, and gender-neutral messaging cannot be assumed to have the same effect for all students.

An Integrative Theoretical Model

The theoretical perspectives reviewed above can be integrated into a sequential model. Career information first provides descriptive content about an occupation, but it also carries symbolic cues about the kind of person who belongs there. Students interpret these cues through existing self-concepts, gender-role beliefs, prior experiences, and social expectations.

These interpretations influence several proximal psychological processes: perceived self-efficacy, expected outcomes, subjective task value, anticipated belonging, perceived role congruity, and anticipated social costs. Together, these processes shape judgments of career suitability. Perceived suitability then affects willingness to explore the occupation further, strength of career preference, and the level or direction of occupational aspiration.

The process is recursive rather than one-directional. Choosing a course, meeting a mentor, completing an internship, or succeeding in a related task can generate new experiences that alter self-efficacy and weaken stereotypes. Conversely, avoiding a field because of perceived mismatch reduces opportunities to acquire corrective experience. In this way, early informational cues can contribute to self-reinforcing career pathways.

Table 1

Theoretical Pathways Linking Career Information with Career Outcomes

Theoretical Perspective	Primary Mechanism	Possible Effect of Gender-Stereotyped Information	Possible Role of Gender-Neutral Information
Social cognitive career theory	Self-efficacy and outcome expectations	May lower expected competence or increase anticipated barriers in gender-atypical fields	May shift attention toward skills, learning pathways, and realistic outcomes
Expectancy-value theory	Expected success and subjective task value	May make a career seem inconsistent with identity or valued life roles	May reveal a broader range of personally meaningful occupational values
Circumscription and compromise	Elimination of options inconsistent with self-concept	May cause early rejection of gender-atypical occupations	May keep more options psychologically available for exploration
Role congruity	Perceived match between social identity and occupational role	May increase perceived mismatch and anticipated disapproval	May reduce unnecessary gender-role assumptions
Stereotype threat	Concern about being judged through a negative stereotype	May increase anticipated identity burden	May reduce stereotype salience when information is framed inclusively
Belonging perspective	Perception that people like oneself fit in the field	May signal restricted membership	May broaden the perceived range of legitimate occupational identities

Implications

Career counselling should distinguish between authentic preference and stereotype-based exclusion. When students say that a career is 'not suitable,' counsellors can explore what that judgment means. Is the concern about ability, interest, values, financial feasibility, family expectations, lifestyle, social belonging, or gender-role fit? Clarifying the source of perceived mismatch can prevent counselling from unintentionally reinforcing stereotypes.

Counsellors can also present occupational information in a way that separates essential competencies from cultural imagery. Rather than persuading students to enter particular fields, the goal should be to ensure that students reject or select careers for reasons that are personally and occupationally relevant.

Exposure to diverse role models can complement neutral information. Students may benefit from seeing women and men occupying both traditional and non-traditional roles, especially when role models describe realistic pathways, challenges, and forms of competence rather than being presented as exceptional cases.

Colleges and universities play an important role in the construction of occupational expectations. Departmental websites, placement materials, career fairs, internships, promotional videos, alumni stories, and classroom examples can either reproduce narrow occupational identities or communicate a broader picture of who can participate.

Career materials should therefore be reviewed not only for factual accuracy but also for unnecessary gender coding. Balanced representation should extend beyond photographs to the language used to describe competence, leadership, teamwork, ambition, care, creativity, and technical expertise.

Importantly, inclusive communication should not be used as a substitute for structural change. If students encounter neutral recruitment messages but experience exclusionary classroom climates, discriminatory evaluation, lack of mentorship, or unequal opportunities, the credibility of the message will quickly collapse.

Critical Analysis

A theoretical account of gender-neutral career information must avoid assuming that language alone can solve occupational segregation. Gender stereotypes are embedded in families, educational systems, peer cultures, media representations, workplace structures, and historical patterns of participation. Information is one component of this wider environment.

A second concern is that neutrality can sometimes conceal inequality. If a field contains significant gender barriers, presenting it as completely neutral may fail to prepare students for real challenges. The more defensible approach is gender-fair rather than gender-blind: career information should avoid stereotyping while acknowledging relevant structural realities.

A third issue concerns individual variation. Some students may respond positively to counter-stereotypic information, whereas others may perceive it as artificial or overly targeted. Effective communication should therefore preserve autonomy. The purpose is not to direct students toward predetermined choices but to widen the range of options they can evaluate on meaningful grounds.

LIMITATIONS

The present paper is conceptual and does not report original empirical data. The theories integrated here were developed across different research traditions, and not all of their propositions have been tested specifically with college students exposed to experimentally manipulated career information. In addition, many influential studies of gendered occupational cues have been conducted in Western settings. Cultural expectations surrounding gender, family responsibility, occupational prestige, and acceptable career pathways differ across societies. The psychological meaning of gender-neutral information may therefore vary by cultural context.

A further limitation is that the categories 'male' and 'female' do not capture the full complexity of gender identity. Future theoretical and empirical work should consider how career cues are experienced by transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse students as well as by individuals who differ in conformity to conventional gender roles.

Directions for Future Research

Future research should directly compare gender-stereotyped, gender-neutral, and counter-stereotypic career information using experimental designs. Outcomes should include not only immediate ratings of interest but also perceived suitability, self-efficacy, anticipated belonging, willingness to seek additional information, application intentions, and later behavioural

choices. Longitudinal research is equally important. A short-term increase in career interest does not necessarily translate into course selection, persistence, internships, or employment. Following students across key educational transitions would clarify whether informational framing produces durable changes in aspiration. Future studies should also examine moderators such as prior achievement, gender-role orientation, socioeconomic background, family expectations, mentoring experience, and direct exposure to the occupation. Such work could identify when neutral information is sufficient and when stronger counter-stereotypic or structural interventions are needed. Cross-cultural research is essential. In societies where family approval and collective expectations strongly influence career choice, the effect of neutral occupational information may depend on whether broader family and community narratives also change. Research should therefore move beyond individual preference to examine the social ecology of career decision-making.

CONCLUSION

Career information does more than describe occupations. It also communicates assumptions about identity, competence, belonging, and social fit. When occupational information is strongly gender-stereotyped, students may evaluate careers through a narrowed lens in which certain roles appear naturally aligned with men or women. This can influence preferences, aspirations, and perceived suitability even when actual ability is unrelated to gender.

Gender-neutral career information offers a potentially useful corrective because it reduces unnecessary gender cues and allows occupational evaluation to focus more directly on interests, competencies, values, goals, and realistic pathways. Its influence can be understood through social cognitive career theory, expectancy-value models, circumscription and compromise, role congruity, stereotype-threat research, and belonging-based perspectives. At the same time, neutral wording should not be treated as a complete solution. Career choices develop within a wider system of socialization, representation, opportunity, and institutional structure. The most effective approach is therefore not merely to remove gendered words but to create career environments in which students encounter accurate information, diverse role models, equitable opportunities, and credible evidence that occupational competence is not determined by gender. From a psychological perspective, the central issue is not whether every student should choose a non-traditional career. The more important goal is that students are able to consider careers without unnecessary stereotype-based restrictions. A career decision is more genuinely self-directed when the student can distinguish personal preference from socially inherited assumptions about who is expected to belong.

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