

Parents and Peers: the cost of gender stereotypes

Abstract:

We study the role of gender stereotypical influences of parents and peers on students' choice among a female-typed (literature) and male-typed task (math). In a lab-in-the-field experiment with around 3000 middle school students in Italy, we ask students to select the task where they expect to have higher performance between multiple-choices questions in math and literature. Before taking this decision, students are randomly exposed to a different set of information. To study the role of parental influence, we induce some students to think about what would their mother or father recommend them to choose among math or literature. To investigate the role of peers, we randomly informed some students that their choice will be observed by their peers and other students that they would also have to collaborate in an additional task with the classmates that choose their same subject. We find that, on average, students are strongly affected by the stereotypes of same-gender parents, with the effect being almost completely driven by students who believe their parents would recommend a gender-stereotypical choice. Girls decrease their probability of choosing math by 52% if they believe the mum would recommend literature and boys increase their probability of choosing math by 16% if they believe the dad would recommend math. Our experiments sheds light also on the role of peers: we do not find evidence that informing peers about the choice affects neither boys nor girls' decision. However, girls are less likely to choose math if they know they will have to interact more with students who selected the same choice. This experiment highlights the important role of parents' stereotypes and interaction with peers in adolescents' decision making regarding the choice of field.

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