# Self-expression helps reinforce occupational sex segregation

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(Phys.org) —Decades after the passage of equal rights legislation and an influx of women into the workforce, why does sex segregation by occupation persist? New research from a sociologist at Rice University finds that one factor that perpetuates this segregation is gendered patterns of self-expression –whereby efforts to express one's unique sense of individuality can often end up reinforcing collective societal gender differences.

"Recent research on sex segregation has looked to the ways women and men tend to make career decisions," said the study's author, Erin Cech,

assistant professor of sociology. "An important but understudied part of this decision-making process is the role of 'self-expression.' College students are often expected to choose careers that fit their conceptions of self. While these self-conceptions may seem unique to each individual, they tend to vary in predictable ways by gender."

As young men and women seek to express themselves in their choice of careers, this systematic gender variation in self-conception gets translated into gender variation in careers. "While self-expression may feel like an individualistic act, it serves to reinforce occupational sex segregation in the collective," Cech said.

The study, "The Self-Expressive Edge of Occupational Sex Segregation," examines this self-expressive career decision-making by examining how three particular self-conceptions influence college students' likelihood of choosing female-dominated or male-dominated careers. Cech found that regardless of their university, GPA, family background and race/ethnicity, men and women with more emotional, unsystematic and/or people-oriented self-conceptions (compared with their peers' self-conceptions) are likely to enter more female-dominated fields, such as teaching or nursing; this reinforces occupational sex segregation. For example, for every point more emotional that college students consider themselves to be on a seven-point scale, their career field after graduation will have a proportion of women that is approximately two percentage points higher. These results even hold for students with very progressive beliefs about men's and women's roles in society.

"In society in general, men and women typically occupy different types of jobs," Cech said. "This is something that is reflected all over the place—in popular media, and even in the types of toys that children play with (for example, doctors are portrayed as men and nurses portrayed as women). These are things that young people learn and identify with very early in life.

"A dominant cultural expectation in the U.S.—especially for people lucky enough to go to college—is that individuals choose careers that fit their conceptions of self, but what many people don't realize is that these conceptions are heavily influenced by how we are socialized and the way we are spoken to about what we should or should not like." As a result of socialization and day-to-day engagement with a gendered social world, men and women tend to have different self-conceptions. "As such, when men and women make self-expressive career choices, they often reproduce occupational sex segregation," she said.

Cech noted that young adults no longer say, "I am choosing this field because I am a man (or a woman)"; instead, they say, "I am choosing this field because it fits me." While this self-expression may seem purely individualistic, Cech argues that it is still deeply inflected by gender. She also noted that the findings suggest that women and men do not have to consciously adhere to traditional gender role beliefs for their career decisions to be subconsciously influenced by those beliefs through their development of gender-stereotypical self-conceptions.

The study included more than 700 students at four U.S. universities in the Northeast. Rice students were not included in the study. Cech followed respondents from their freshman year in college in 2003 through 18 months postgraduation in 2008 and asked them about their self-conceptions, their college major, career activities and their views about the role of men and women in society. Cech said that this stage in life is ideal for studying these processes because it is a time when self-expressive career decision-making is both most expected and most possible.

"The structural flexibility for self-expressive decision-making at career launch is unmatched at any other point in the labor force," she said.

Cech also argues that the power of this mechanism of segregation is that

self-expression is understood as a deeply individualistic experience in the U.S.—a view that cloaks the lifelong gendering processes that leads self-expression to vary between men and women. Finally, Cech said that because this self-expressive edge of sex segregation is a mechanism of inequality without a clear "oppressor," it might be difficult to undermine it through policy and social action.

"It is culturally untenable to either challenge people's conceptions of themselves or to reduce their self-expressive freedoms," Cech said.

Cech argues that the best approach to undermining this mechanism is to challenge the contexts that limit the particular characteristics that men and women are encouraged to adopt into their self-conceptions.

Provided by Rice University