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Relations and Structures in Developmental, Educational and Social Psychology

- Gestalt Theory's Impact on Methods and Content of Current Developmental Psychology Research
- Gestalt Theory in Educational Psychology: Formative Process, Teaching and Learning and "Peer Group" Culture
- Action-Research in Social Psychology
- Lewin's Field Theory and its Development in Current Social Psychology

Contributions from the 15th Scientific GTA Convention in Macerata by

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“TO CHOOSE OR NOT TO CHOOSE?” AN EXPERIENCE OF ACTION-RESEARCH WITH ADOLESCENTS

Elisabetta Crocetti, Alessandra Fermani & Barbara Pojaghi

Introduction

The concept of *action-research* was initially developed by Kurt Lewin (1952) as a comparative research method on the conditions and effects of the several forms of social action, and it was aimed at promoting social action itself. The principles proposed by Lewin were applied in an action-research project carried out with students of a secondary school in the context of the broader EQUAL project “*The value of the difference*”, aimed at promoting and supporting women entrepreneurs. The relevance of this action-research arose from the awareness that, among the several developmental tasks adolescents have to deal with, the formation of the educational/vocational identity is the most important. Consequently, this implies that adolescents should be capable of making a reasoned choice that originates from the analysis of their personal characteristics as well as from the evaluation of the opportunities offered by the context where they live. Therefore, it is particularly important that adolescents can choose their future goals without being influenced by stereotypes, such as gender stereotypes, that can draw them into predefined routes, subsequently experienced as suffocating prisons. Specifically, the purpose of this action-research was to investigate the adolescents’ future plans and to understand if they could be affected by gender stereotypes. The action-phase was based on the results of the research and was aimed at helping these pupils to make their own choices, without being influenced by gender stereotypes.

The Research

The aim of the research was to examine gender differences in factors relevant to the vocational plans of adolescents. Specifically we focused on three structured groups of variables. The first group concerns *individual characteristics* that can affect vocational choices. In choosing their future, adolescents take into consideration their interests and their scale of individualistic and relational values, as well as their abilities and skills. Furthermore, for adolescents to strive for their goals, they need self-determination and the ability to manage active coping strategies to face the difficulties and obstacles they may encounter (Marco Depolo & Dina Guglielmi 2000). The second set of factors concerns the *school experience*. Indeed it is reasonable that the transition to work or to university is strongly influenced by the scholastic experience at the time of making the choice. If adolescents see school as a prison where they cannot develop their own abilities, they tend to decide to leave the school system in order to enter the labor market. Thus, the components of the school experience that can affect the adolescents’ vocational plans are related to their current educational identity (Elisabetta Crocetti, Monica Rubini & Wim Meeus 2008) and to the importance assigned to school functions. Furthermore, adolescents have to compare their aspirations with their actual performances. Additionally,

vocational plans are affected by the values adolescents look for at university and/or in a job. Finally, adolescents' vocational choices are influenced by their *future attitudes*, that is by the perception that in the future they could reach their professional and relational goals and, consequently they might manage the discrepancy (i.e., the mental incongruity, Jurien Iedema & Meeus, 1998) between how they think their social and relational situation should be (their standards) and how they experience their actual situation or their own behaviour (their cognitions).

A total of 301 Italian adolescents participated in this research-phase. They filled out a questionnaire consisting of various measures aimed at assessing individual characteristics, school experience and future attitudes. The main findings revealed a structured picture of differences between boys and girls, which we will present in the following.

In particular, regarding *individual characteristics*, evidence collected indicated that boys reported higher self-determination in expressing abilities and choices, in choosing how to spend free time, and also in expressing their own feelings. With concern to coping styles, participants reported using active coping strategies (i.e., control and seeking social support) more often than negative strategies (such as, denial and withdrawal) in dealing with difficulties. Specific gender differences emerged on the use of the active strategies: boys used control more often than girls, who in turn, were more active in looking for social support. Switching to values, data showed the values adolescents judged to be more important were the private ones: friendship, family and love, followed by amusement. Girls assigned more weight to study and social commitment; whereas boys gave more importance to success, sport, and political involvement.

With respect to the *school experience*, both boys and girls reported a quite stable educational identity. Considering school functions, the adolescents believed the most important functions are passing on professional competence and promoting socialization, followed by passing on knowledge, whereas passing on social values is judged as the least important function. Gender differences indicated that girls considered the socialization function very important. The analysis of competences showed that participants mainly scored their ability between 6 and 7, so they considered their competences acceptable but not excellent. Gender differences revealed that girls reported higher willingness to compare themselves with the ideas of others, while boys reported higher scores on perception of being agile and athletic. Regarding job and educational values, surprising findings were obtained. Both boys and girls underlined that their future college studies and jobs should fit their tastes and abilities. The least important values concerned the correspondence between college and job on the one hand and gender characteristics on the other. However, in this context boys' and girls' scores were significantly different: indeed for the boys this aspect was much more important than for the girls. Therefore, gender stereotypes seem to be more consistent among male adolescents. Furthermore, girls gave greater importance to the facts that the job they would like to do should be compatible with their future family commitments, and that it should give the opportunity to help others.

Finally, we examined *future attitudes*. The findings revealed that both boys and girls were fairly optimistic about the possibility that in the future they could reach their vocational and, especially, their relational goals. If we shift to the mental incongruity, we found that participants reported similar high scores on relational cognition and standard whereas striking differences emerged on social status judgments. Indeed, boys reported higher scores on both the social status standard and cognition than girls. In other words, girls perceived their current social condition as lower and they had also developed lower standards.

The Action

The findings of the research were the basis for the activation of the action-phase in which focus groups were organised with pupils to deepen their awareness of gender differences and to co-construct a new form of social knowledge, by means of a process of de-categorisation. Group dynamics were considered the best means for the encounter between application and theory. The results can be read in the light of the Lewin's (1952) three variables: degree of involvement; decision as a moment of social comparison; group situation. The aim of this second phase was to examine students' social representations and gender stereotypes about work. Two hypotheses were set out for verification: if student discourse included topics that carried gender stereotypes and were also indicative of a sense of belonging and involvement that leads to change; if the adolescents matured their abilities with reference to their experience and became aware of gender stereotypes. The process of de-categorisation started in this way and the adolescents become promoters of change. The participants were 28 Italian students divided into 2 groups, during a series of 3 meetings. The material for discussion consisted in part of the elements contained in the quantitative analysis above: students' social representations about work. The asymmetry between men's and women's professional profiles were discussed as a result of the method used in the focus group and following an analysis of discursive expression and conversation strategies regarding ingroup vs outgroup bias (Teun Van Dijk 2004). In this action research the adolescents matured their abilities with reference to their own experience and became aware of gender stereotypes. Everything the participants said about their working choices for the future was strongly characterised by stereotypes and social ideologies according to the "male" model. Their capacity to use topics was acquired from social experience and was probably unconscious. The fact of belonging to a dominated group (e.g. females) or a dominant group (e.g. males) is substantially social and is manifested in the intergroup bias (Henri Tajfel & John Turner 1979). Van Dijk's (2003) "Ideological Square" is a good model for all the levels of speech structures: express/emphasise information that is positive about Us; express/emphasise information that is negative about Them; suppress/de-emphasise information that is positive about Them; suppress/de-emphasise information that is negative about Us. In the following we will consider some examples taken from the various focus groups: *I don't care if girls are discriminated. I just think about us boys. Boys think about boys (Male); Working is easier for a man. Men can do more things (Male); It's not that men can do more, it's that they're not discriminated against. Women have to deal with a lot of limitations in their lives. Like having children (Female).*

The solidarity and the consensus of opinion within the male ingroup was particularly strong. The participants often used typical rhetorical topics to express intergroup bias: the “comparison” was between the members of the ingroup and those of the outgroup. The female participants sometimes clearly manifested examples of self-limitation; latent obstacles that continue to maintain women at the lower levels of the social hierarchy in their analysis, a phenomenon which has been represented using the “glass ceiling” metaphor. Women, in line with traditional stereotypes of this kind, aspire to conserve a positive personal and social identity that acts as guarantor of their own self-esteem. Thus they make choices that are compatible with what is socially desirable: to take care of their families. The limitation that girls signal in expressing their chances of being able to perform certain types of work seems to be linked both to a different biological constitution and to a correctly founded historical and social tradition. From the rhetorical point of view the conversations introduced topics such as “evidence”, “authority” and “the lessons of history”, as we can see in the following examples: *As far as I'm concerned I don't feel discriminated. It's just natural: men manage to do it and women just can't. That's the way they're made. It's natural!* (Female); *That's not true. What about in politics? In politics you don't need physical strength!* (Female); *In politics that's the way it's always been and we can't do anything about a tradition like that* (Male); *Our Italian teacher showed us an article that said that parts of our brains developed in different ways: men are better at logic and women are better at language. It's a newspaper article* (Female).

The conflicts and the necessary negotiations between the various points of view stimulated the members of the focus groups to coordinate their opinions in a new supra-individual system. As suggested by Gabriel Mugny and Felice Carugati (1987) the participants are induced into a cognitive reorganisation to find new solutions that become an asset to all the members. Over the course of the various encounters we observed a gradual increase in speech fluency. The participants lost their stereotyped visions in favour of a greater awareness of gender differences. Complexity takes the place of homogeneity and critical realism replaces ingenuous realism in a way where the group openly faces conflict thus finding better solutions. Group conflict allows new knowledge to be acquired that individuals did not previously possess. The dynamics are as follows: argumentation; decision as a moment of social comparison; agreement on the decision. These steps are a co-construction of knowledge culminating in the final proposition, a gestalt totality: *I think it depends on individual characteristics, it depends on how much a person wants to do something. Woman can do a job better than a man* (Female).

The social identity that originally dominated the first conflict and polarised communications disappears. The intergroup bias is attenuated and people's conscience turns to *intra*-category and not *inter*-category differences. The feeling of belonging no longer corresponds to “we males vs you females” but we witness an ability to cooperate that previously was not possible in the discussion. At the start of the discussion the participants considered an effective change from the past, because men and women are now on the same level. The students then, using an intergroup viewpoint, identified divisions in the workplace both on a horizontal and

a vertical axis. Finally, they cooperated with each other to reach a co-construction of knowledge which was more critical and less stereotyped and generalised.

Conclusion

To conclude, the action-research was found to be a very useful theoretical and methodological tool in dealing with complex phenomena such as gender differences and stereotypes that can affect adolescents' choices. The evidence collected in the study reveals structured differences between boys and girls. We can synthesize the findings by underlining three aspects. First of all, a leitmotiv that emerges from the data is the girls' pro-social attitudes and behaviours: the girls proved to be different from the boys by being more active in seeking social support to cope with problems, by assigning more importance to social commitment and to the socialization function of the school, by perceiving themselves as more willing to consider other people's ideas, by affirming that the job they would like to do should be compatible with their future family commitments and it should give them the chance to help others. On the other hand, the boys were found to be more self-determined, more likely to use control in dealing with difficulties and more orientated toward success. Secondly, gender stereotypes, both in the choice of university and job, were found to be more consistent among male adolescents who stress they wish to choose a solution that corresponds with their gender characteristics. Finally, girls were found to have lower cognition of their social status and also lower future social standards. The findings of the research were the basis for the execution of the action-phase, in which focus groups were organised as small groups of students in order to deepen an awareness of gender differences and to co-construct a new form of social knowledge, by means of a process of de-categorisation.

Summary

In this contribution we present an action-research project carried out with adolescents. The aim was to investigate students' future plans and to understand if they were affected by gender stereotypes. 301 adolescents participated in the research phase. The evidence collected revealed structured differences between boys and girls (i.e., girls displayed higher pro-social attitudes and behaviours and lower social standards than boys; moreover stereotypes in vocational choices were found to be more frequent among boys). 28 students participated in the action phase. This was based on the results of the research and was aimed at helping these pupils to make their own choices, without being influenced by gender stereotypes.

Keywords: Action-Research; Adolescence; Vocational Choices; Gender Stereotypes.

Zusammenfassung

Wir präsentieren in diesem Beitrag ein Aktions-Forschungsprojekt mit Jugendlichen mit dem Ziel, die Zukunftspläne der Schüler zu untersuchen und zu verstehen, ob sie von Geschlechterstereotypen beeinflusst wurden. 301 Jugendliche nahmen an der Versuchsphase teil. Die Daten zeigten strukturierte Unterschiede zwischen Jungen und Mädchen (d.h. Mädchen entwickelten größere pro-soziale Einstellungen und Verhaltensweisen und hatten einen niedrigeren sozialen Standard als die Jungen; darüber hinaus wurden bei den Jungen häufiger Stereotypen in Bezug auf die Berufswahl gefunden). 28 Schüler nahmen an der Aktionsphase teil. Diese beruhte auf den Resultaten der Untersuchung und hatte zum

Ziel, diesen Schülern zu helfen ihre eigenen Entscheidungen zu treffen, ohne dabei von Geschlechterstereotypen beeinflusst zu werden.

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Hellmuth Metz-Göckel (Hrsg.)

Gestalttheorie aktuell

Handbuch der Gestalttheorie, Band 1

ca. 314 Seiten, ca. € 29,80

ISBN 3 901 811 36 2

erscheint Dezember 2008

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