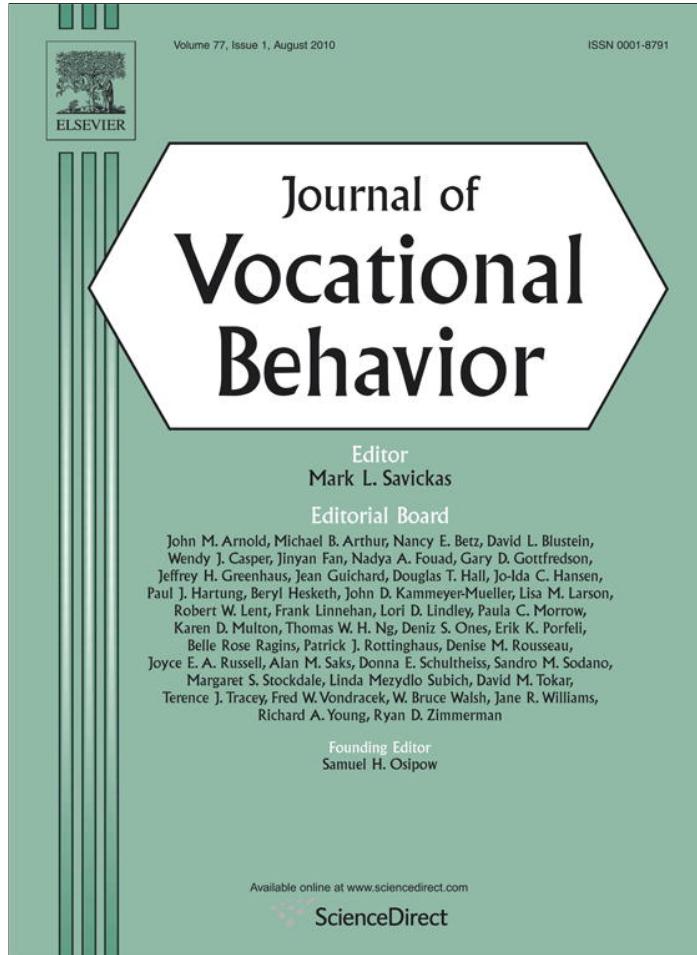


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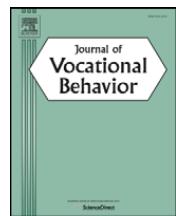


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## Image theory and career aspirations: Indirect and interactive effects of status-related variables

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### ABSTRACT

The present study applied Image Theory (Beach, 1990) to test how different components of a person's value image (i.e., perceived social status identity and conformity to masculine and feminine gender role norms) interact to influence trajectories toward high career aspirations (i.e., high value for status in one's work and aspirations for advancement and achievement in one's career). Results from 224 undergraduate students demonstrated that value for status in work mediated the relationship between perceived social status and career aspirations. Conformity to feminine, but not masculine, gender role norms moderated the relationship between perceived status and value for status in work. Conformity to feminine norms also moderated the indirect relationship between perceived status and aspirations via value for status in work, yielding a pattern of moderated mediation.

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### Introduction

Career goal-setting and decision-making has long been a focus of attention for vocational psychologists. Several dominant career theories explain various aspects of this decision process, including perceptions of fit between the person and environment (Holland, 1997); social cognitive mechanisms that contribute to interest formation (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994); the circumscription of acceptable career choices based on social class standing and gender role socialization experiences (Gottfredson, 1981); and interactions of work motivation, gender role socialization, and the structure of opportunities in the prediction of expectations of career choice and work behavior (Astin, 1984).

Researchers in other disciplines of psychology and in business frequently draw on different theoretical perspectives to explain how people make similar career-related decisions. In particular, Image Theory (Beach, 1990; Beach & Mitchell, 1987; 1990) has gained attention for its focus on the process by which an individual draws upon her or his standards to make decisions. In brief, Image Theory explains how the beliefs, values, and self-views of decision-makers are the basis for the goals they set and the goal-pursuit strategies that they adopt. The theory posits that people set goals that are consistent with the way they see themselves and the values that they hold, and that they pursue those goals using only strategies that do not threaten these self-views and values (e.g., Beach, 1990).

Image Theory, therefore, fits well within the existing body of vocational theory that emphasizes the importance of fit between the person and the vocational environment (see Swanson & Gore, 2000, for a review). Unlike other vocational theories, however, Image Theory emphasizes the importance of values and current and future self-views as critical antecedents of goal-setting and decision-making (Beach, 1990). Further, Image Theory specifies the mechanism through which people select some goals or decisions and discard others. We consequently see Image Theory as a valuable framework for vocational researchers to explore in greater detail because it introduces a novel perspective on how career decisions are made and, according to Stevens (1998), it is

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easily reconcilable with other vocational theories. To this end, we apply Image Theory to examine how two different types of self-views can interact to enhance or disrupt the formation of values associated with status and achievement in work.

### Image Theory

**Fig. 1** provides an overview of the decision-making process posited by Image Theory. As shown in this figure, three key types of information considerations, or images, are central to Image Theory (Beach, 1990). First, the *value image* consists of one's values, beliefs, and morals that guide expectations about how one should behave and one's place in the world. As Stevens (1998) noted, the value image construct is consistent with Super's (1953) notion of self-concept and is related to an individual's worldview as influenced by socialization experiences.

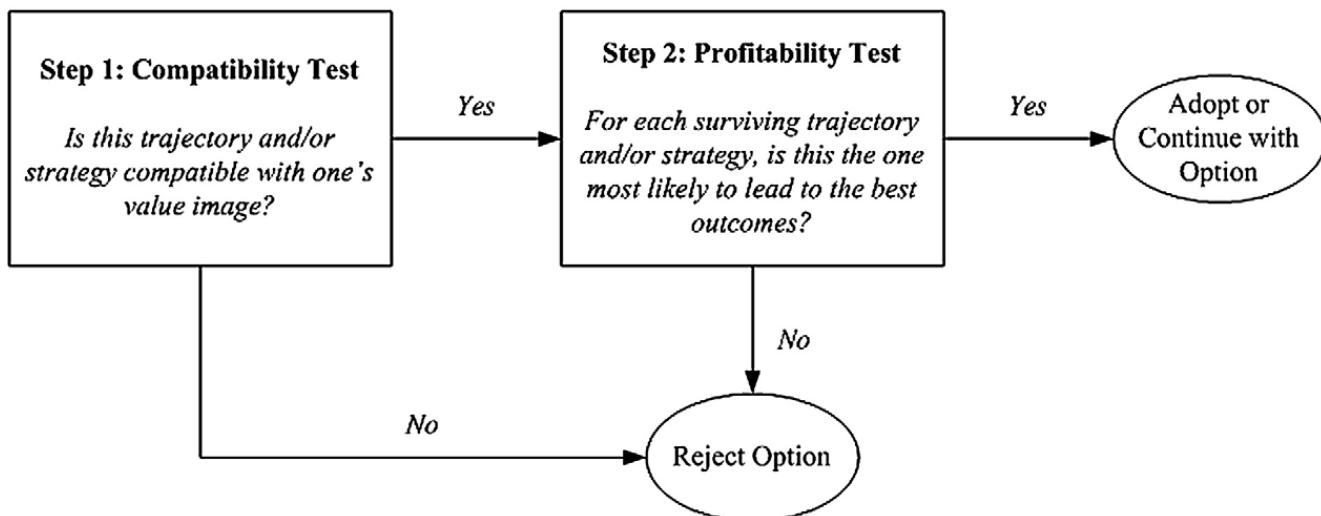
The second type of image is a *trajectory image*, which is a vision or goal that one wants to achieve in the future. People only set specific trajectory images if they are consistent with their value image and other existing trajectory images. For example, an undergraduate student would set a goal to go to graduate school only if this trajectory is compatible with her value image (e.g., she values education, she believes she is capable and deserving) and with other established goal trajectories (e.g., she wants to experience living in a city, she wants to have the opportunity to be financially independent).

The third type of image described by Image Theory is a *strategic image*, which is the set of plans or tactics that will be used to attain a goal. Continuing with our prior example, if this student has set a trajectory goal of going to graduate school, she could bring about this goal through a wide variety of strategic approaches (e.g., work hard and build an impressive application, ingratiate to influential people). Again, strategic images are only set if they are consistent with the value image; if the student valued her identity as moral and conscientious, ingratiation would be eliminated as a viable strategic approach to attaining her goal. Strategic images are also modified, adopted, or discarded over time as people evaluate their success in making progress toward the desired goal (Beach, 1990).

Consistent with this point, Image Theory also distinguishes between two general types of decisions (e.g., Beach, 1990). Adoption decisions involve adopting or rejecting goals as part of one's trajectory image, or plans as part of one's strategic images. In contrast, progress decisions occur later over the lifespan of a trajectory goal and consist of evaluations of the likely outcome of the goal relative to one's progress towards it. Different strategic images may be retained or rejected based on these progress decisions (Beach & Mitchell, 1987; 1990).

As shown in **Fig. 1**, evaluating possible trajectory and strategic images relative to one's value image yields a two-step decision-making process when multiple goals and/or strategies are available. This process is used to make both adoption and progress decisions. Beach and Mitchell (1987) referred to the first stage as the *compatibility test*. At this point, possible trajectory and strategy images are compared to the value image and established trajectory images to determine if they are compatible with the way the person sees him- or herself. Incompatible options are dropped at this stage. Extending our prior example, if the student is attempting to determine which graduate school programs to apply to, she will compare each option by determining the extent to which it allows her to meet her previously established trajectory, strategic, and value images. If her trajectory image includes a desire to live in a city, she is likely to discard those graduate school options that are located in rural areas. If more than one option survives the compatibility stage, the second stage is a *profitability test*. At this point, the surviving options are compared with each other to determine which will yield the most desirable outcomes.

Research on Image Theory has demonstrated support for this model, particularly as it applies to applicants' choices between different job offers and organizational decision-makers' choices among applicants (e.g., Beach, 1993; Beach & Strom, 1998; Seidl & Traub, 1998). Stevens (1998) provided an overview of this research as it might apply to career decisions, but to date, we know of no empirical research in vocational psychology that has applied Image Theory to this process. The purpose of the present study,



**Fig. 1.** Image theory overview.

therefore, is to provide an initial examination of the extension of Image Theory to vocational development by examining the relationship between value images (i.e., conformity to traditional gender role norms and perceived social status) and a narrow scope of trajectory images (i.e., value for status in one's work and career aspirations). We expect that the adoption or rejection of trajectory images is dependent on the interaction between aspects of the value image during the compatibility test process.

### *Perceived Social Status, Work Values, and Career Aspirations*

Rossides (1997) recommended that researchers attend to social status as reflecting racial/ethnic, social class, and gender differences in U.S. society. Fouad and Brown (2000) extended this work in their conceptualization of differential status identity (DSI), where they posited that one's cultural context shapes socialization experiences, which in turn contribute to identity development. An individual's social status identity (DSI) includes his or her perceived access to economic resources, social prestige, and social power.

The small, but growing, body of literature related to DSI has demonstrated its relevance to career development. For example, undergraduate college students with higher DSI reported greater career-decision self efficacy and career choice certainty (Thompson & Subich, 2006). In another investigation of factors impacting the discrepancy between college students' career aspirations and expectations, DSI was significantly and negatively related to the discrepancy (Metz, Fouad, & Ihle-Helldy, 2009). Specifically, when assessed via complexity (i.e., level of cognitive skill and ability required of a specific occupation), individuals who perceived themselves to have higher DSI reported less differences between their career aspirations and expectations than did those who perceived themselves to have lower DSI. Metz and colleagues concluded that "students who perceive fewer differences between themselves and the norm also perceive fewer barriers and, therefore, expect to fulfill their dreams" (p. 168). Perceived status, thus, appears to influence individuals' perceptions of available career trajectories.

Consistent with findings related to DSI, others (e.g. Ponterotto & Casas, 1991; Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000) have documented ways in which demographic characteristics (e.g., social class, ethnicity, gender) differentially relate to individual's career expectations and aspirations. Career aspirations have been demonstrated to be related to important career decision-making processes such as career decision self-efficacy, occupational self-efficacy, and instrumentality (e.g., Gray & O'Brien, 2007) and include prestigiousness ascribed to occupational attainment as well as leadership and achievement within one's occupation (e.g., O'Brien, 1996). According to Image Theory, career aspirations represent the top of the goal hierarchy and are posited to lead to an individual's selection of occupations (Stevens, 1998). Although seemingly related to career and leadership aspirations, valuing status in one's occupation has been examined to a lesser extent. Previous research has, however, demonstrated work values to be critical components of one's career development (e.g., Super & Sverko, 1995). Indeed, Brown (2002) proposed that values are instrumental in the formation of goals and outcomes, are shaped by an individual's context and socialization experiences, and "are core beliefs that individuals experience as standards that guide how they 'should' function" (p. 168). Brown, therefore, posited that values shape goals for specific career-related outcomes.

When integrated with Image Theory, existing research (i.e., Metz et al., 2009; Thompson & Subich, 2006) on DSI suggests that internalized status becomes a part of a person's value image; individuals develop beliefs about their social status that exert an influence on career decision making processes. Thus, we expect that individuals who perceive themselves to be high in social status will have high status-related work values, which will in turn contribute to high career and leadership aspirations. On the basis of Image Theory, we further expect that value for status in work (trajectory image) will mediate the relation between DSI (value image) and aspirations. Specifically, an individual who perceives her- or himself to have high DSI (value image) and a high value for status in work (trajectory image) will aspire to career goals that are consistent with these images (i.e., careers that are characterized by status, advancement, and personal development opportunities).

**Hypothesis 1.** Value for status in work mediates the relationship between DSI and career and leadership aspirations.

### *Conformity to Gender Role Norms*

Theorists have proposed that socialization experiences related to gender also shape considerations of occupations. Specifically, Gottfredson (1981) posited that women and men progressively narrow their career choices based on society's expectations of what is considered to be appropriate and Holland (1997) suggested that women and men's socialization experiences facilitate their interest in some career choices and dissuade them from others. A central component of several career development theories is the recognition that men and women have different gender role socialization experiences (Mahalik, Perry, Coonerty-Femiano, Catraio, & Land, 2006). These differing experiences shape their perceived gender role norms and attitudes (Mahalik et al., 2006), or the beliefs and expectations about what is socially appropriate for women and men (Mahalik et al., 2005). Feminine gender role norms encompass activities such as caring for children and being nice in relationships; masculine gender role norms include winning, achievement and emotional control (Mahalik et al., 2003, 2005).

Conformity to gender role norms has been demonstrated to moderate the relations between gender and several career constructs. For example, women with nontraditional gender role attitudes have reported higher levels of career orientation, aspirations, and expectations than their more traditional gender role peers (e.g., Fassinger, 1990; McWhirter, Hackett, & Bandalos, 1998; O'Brien & Fassinger, 1993). Similarly, research has documented that men's conformity to gender role norms impacts their interest, achievement, and academic choices (Jome, Surething, & Taylor, 2005; Jome & Tokar, 1998). In particular, men who were classified as career-traditional (i.e., identifying a career path in a male-dominated occupation) endorsed masculinity ideology,

masculine gender role conflict, and homophobia at higher rates than those classified as career-nontraditional (Jome & Tokar). Women who strive for traditionally male-dominated occupations are perceived as having potential to improve their opportunities for advancement and subsequent access to status whereas men who choose to pursue nontraditional career paths are perceived as decreasing their status and advancement opportunities (Chusmir, 1983).

Applied to Image Theory, these findings suggest that gender role conformity is another important component of one's value image that may moderate the relationship between DS1 and value for status in work. Specifically, conformity to traditional masculine gender norms should strengthen this relationship due to its emphasis on winning and achievement, whereas conformity to traditional feminine norms should weaken this relationship due to its emphasis on caring for and placing others first. Thus, individuals who perceive that they have high DS1 and endorse traditional masculine norms have a consistent value image that should guide them toward status-related goals. On the other hand, individuals who perceive that they have high DS1 and endorse traditional feminine norms have an inconsistent value image; the endorsement of feminine gender norms in the compatibility test process should lead to greater rejection of status-related goals. Consequently, we pose the following moderator hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 2.** Conformity to traditional masculine gender norms moderates the relationship between DS1 and value for status in work. Specifically, the relationship between DS1 and value for status in work is stronger for people with high conformity to traditionally masculine norms.

**Hypothesis 3.** Conformity to traditional feminine gender norms moderates the relationship between DS1 and value for status in work. Specifically, the relationship between DS1 and value for status in work is weaker for people with high conformity to traditionally feminine norms.

Further, our proposed model includes two instances of moderated mediation (Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Muller, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2005). Examining moderated mediation allows one to explore conditional influences of the indirect effects based on the moderator. As applied to this study, if conformity to masculine norms influences the direct effect from DS1 to value for status in work (Hypothesis 2), then conformity to masculine norms should also conditionally influence the indirect effect from DS1 to career and leadership aspirations. Because DS1 and conformity to traditional masculine norms should yield a consistent value image, we expect that the indirect effect of DS1 to aspirations will be significant when conformity to traditional masculine norms is high and insignificant when conformity to traditional masculine norms is low. We expect an opposite pattern of moderated mediation to emerge for conformity to traditional feminine norms. Because DS1 and conformity to traditional feminine norms should result in a contradictory value image (Hypothesis 3), we expect that the indirect effect of DS1 to aspirations will be insignificant when conformity to traditional feminine norms is high and significant when conformity to traditional feminine norms is low. Taken in sum, we propose the following moderated mediation hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 4.** Conformity to traditional masculine gender norms moderates the positive, indirect relationship between DS1 and career and leadership aspirations (through work status values). Specifically, value for status in work mediates the indirect effect when conformity to traditional masculine gender norms is high, but not when it is low.

**Hypothesis 5.** Conformity to traditional feminine gender norms moderates the positive, indirect relationship between DS1 and career and leadership aspirations (through work status values). Specifically, value for status in work mediates the indirect effect when conformity to traditional feminine gender norms is low, but not when it is high.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 224 undergraduate students (154 women, 69 men, one person who did not identify) at a large Midwestern University ( $n=90$ ) and a Mid-Atlantic liberal arts college ( $n=134$ ). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 36 ( $M=20.58$ ,  $SD=2.27$ ). As a group, students from each institution did not differ on scores on the endogenous variables in the model with the exception of value for status in work; students from the large Midwestern university reported slightly higher values for status ( $M=3.85$ ,  $SD=0.56$ ) than those from the Mid-Atlantic liberal arts college ( $M=3.61$ ,  $SD=0.66$ ). However, sample source did not have a significant effect on value for status in work when included as a control variable in preliminary tests of our model and was consequently dropped from subsequent analyses because it did not influence the results.

Students self-identified as belonging to the following racial/ethnic groups: European American (161), African American/Black (14), Asian/Asian American (19), Latino/Hispanic (20), Biracial/Multiracial (5), Native American (2), and Other (3). With regard to sexual orientation, 210 students identified as heterosexual. Forty-one, 42, 61, 65, and 14 students identified as being in their first, second, third, fourth, and fifth years, respectively. Participants reported belonging to the following social class categories: lower class (13), lower-middle class (21), middle class (82), upper-middle class (94), and upper class (13).

### Measures

*Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory (CFNI; Mahalik et al., 2005).* The CFNI is a self-report measure of conformity to feminine gender role norms in U.S. society. Participants rate their responses to the 84 items on a 4 point Likert-type scale ranging from 0

(Strongly Disagree) to 3 (Strongly Agree). Exploratory Factor Analysis of the CFNI has revealed eight factors. Validity evidence has been demonstrated in the predicted relations of CFNI to measures of femininity, eating disorder symptomology, and feminist identity development (Mahalik et al.). Previous research has also demonstrated acceptable internal consistency reliability estimates for the total score (.88) and a coefficient of stability estimate of .94 (Mahalik et al.). For this study, total CFNI scores were used and internal consistency reliability was .91.

*Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI; Mahalik et al., 2003).* The CMNI is a self-report measure of conformity to masculine gender role norms in U.S. society. Participants rate their responses to 94 items on a 4 point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (Strongly Disagree) to 3 (Strongly Agree). Exploratory Factor Analysis of the CMNI has revealed 11 factors. Concurrent validity has been demonstrated by the CMNI's relation to measures of masculinity, gender role conflict, social dominance, aggression, and muscularity (Mahalik et al., 2003). Reliability has been demonstrated by its high coefficient alpha (.94) and 2-3 week test-retest reliability estimate of .95 for the total CMNI score. Total CMNI score was used for the present study and coefficient alpha was .94.

*Career Aspirations Scale (CAS; O'Brien, 1996).* The CAS is a ten-item self-report scale designed to tap aspiration toward leadership positions (including promotions), desire to train and manage others, and pursuit of further education (Gray & O'Brien, 2007). Participants rate their responses to the items using a 5 point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (Not at all True of Me) to 4 (Very True of Me). Convergent validity has been demonstrated by its relationship to attitudes toward women's roles, self-efficacy for a variety of career-related activities, and instrumentality (see Gray & O'Brien, for a review). Exploratory Factor Analysis has revealed a two-factor solution consisting of (a) leadership and achievement aspirations and (b) educational aspirations. Across three studies, Gray and O'Brien (2007) demonstrated internal consistency reliability estimates to be .72-.77 for the total score and .72-.82 for the Leadership and Achievement Aspirations subscale. Gray and O'Brien cautioned against the use of the full scale and the Educational Aspirations scale scores; therefore, for the present study, the six-item Leadership and Achievement Aspirations subscale was used. The coefficient alpha for our sample was .62.

*Differential Status Identity Scale (DSIS; Brown et al., 2002).* Participants' perceptions of their level of four dimensions of social status were measured using the 60-item DSIS. Item responses are obtained using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from -2 (very much below average for the Economic Resources and Social Power subscales or much less for the Social Prestige subscale) to + 2 (very much above average or much more). For analysis purposes, scores are transformed to a 1–5 scale and items are summed. Exploratory Factor Analysis has demonstrated four factors: Economic Resources-Amenities, Economic Resources-Basic Needs, Social Prestige, and Social Power (Thompson & Subich, 2007). Previous research established convergent and criterion validity of the DSIS (Thompson & Subich) and has demonstrated high internal consistency reliability for the total score (.97) across three studies (Metz et al., 2009; Thompson & Subich, 2006; 2007). For the current study, internal consistency reliability was .97.

*Work Values Inventory (WVI; Manhardt, 1972).* The WVI is a self-report measure designed to assess the perceived importance of 21 job characteristics to an individual. Participants rate the extent to which each of 21 job characteristics are important to them on a 5 point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Unimportant) to 5 (Very Important). Exploratory Factor Analysis has demonstrated three factors: Comfort, Competence, and Status. Only the seven-item Status subscale was used for the purposes of the present study. Criterion-related validity evidence for the scale has been demonstrated in organizational settings (e.g., Konrad, Ritchie, Lieb, & Corrigall, 2000) and across cultures (e.g., Takase, Oba, & Yamashita, 2009). The WVI has been demonstrated to be useful in a number of recent investigations (e.g., Meyer, Irving, & Allen, 1998; Konrad et al., 2000; Takase et al., 2009), despite its age. The items of the status subscale in particular (e.g., "Provides the opportunity to earn a high income" and "Is respected by other people") represent constructs that appear to be relevant to the world of work today. Coefficient alpha for the overall scale was reported as .92 (Takase et al., 2009); for the present study, coefficient alpha for the status subscale alone was .78.

### Procedure

After providing consent, all participants completed an online survey containing the instruments described above and basic demographic information (i.e., gender, social class, student standing, and race/ethnicity). Because we were interested in student's subjective assessment of their social class, specific definitions were not provided and participants were simply asked to identify their social class category. Extra credit was offered as an incentive; non-participation options for receiving credit were also provided by course instructors.

**Table 1**

Means, standard deviations, and correlations between study variables.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
(1) Differential Status identity	211.35	33.11	–				
(2) Conformity to feminine norms	231.57	22.03	.15*	–			
(3) Conformity to masculine norms	216.22	26.76	−.04	−.26**	–		
(4) Value for status in work	25.97	4.44	.27**	.04	.16*	–	
(5) Career and leadership aspirations	47.37	4.27	.04	.11	.08	.47**	–

Note:

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

## Results

**Table 1** reports the means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables. As anticipated, conformity to feminine norms related negatively to conformity to masculine norms ( $r = -.26, p < .01$ ) and value for status in work related positively to conformity to masculine norms ( $r = .16, p < .05$ ), career and leadership aspirations ( $r = .47, p < .01$ ), and DS1 ( $r = .27, p = .01$ ). Unexpectedly, Conformity to feminine norms (CFN) was positively related to DS1 ( $r = .15, p < .05$ ) whereas conformity to masculine norms (CMN) was negatively (but not significantly) related to DS1 ( $r = -.04, ns$ ).

Two covariates, gender and self-identified social class, were included in the hypothesis testing. We included these controls in our analyses because DS1 may be confounded with social class category, and conformity to gender norms may be confounded with actual gender. Hypothesis 1 stated that value for status would mediate the relationship between DS1 and aspirations. **Table 2** reports the results of this analysis; note that the statistics reported in the table are unstandardized  $b$ -weights. We followed the recommendation of Shrout and Bolger (2002) to test the indirect effect using a bootstrapping approach with the aid of a SPSS macro developed by Preacher and Hayes (2008). Bootstrapping involves a process of taking repeated, random sampling of observations with replacement from the data and calculating the indirect effect for each re-sample. Over a large body of re-samples, the sampling distribution of the indirect effect can be approximated and used to test hypotheses. This approach is superior to a traditional Sobel test (e.g., Baron & Kenny, 1986) because it makes no assumptions about the normality of the sampling distribution, which is typically violated in the case of indirect effects. As shown in **Table 2**, the indirect effect of DS1 on aspirations via value for status was positive as expected (.02) and statistically significant at  $\alpha = .05$ ; the 95% confidence interval around the bootstrapped indirect effect does not contain zero (.01–.03). Although the indirect effect is small, the results indicate that people who perceive themselves to be of high social status report higher values for status in work, and these values contribute to higher career and leadership aspirations.

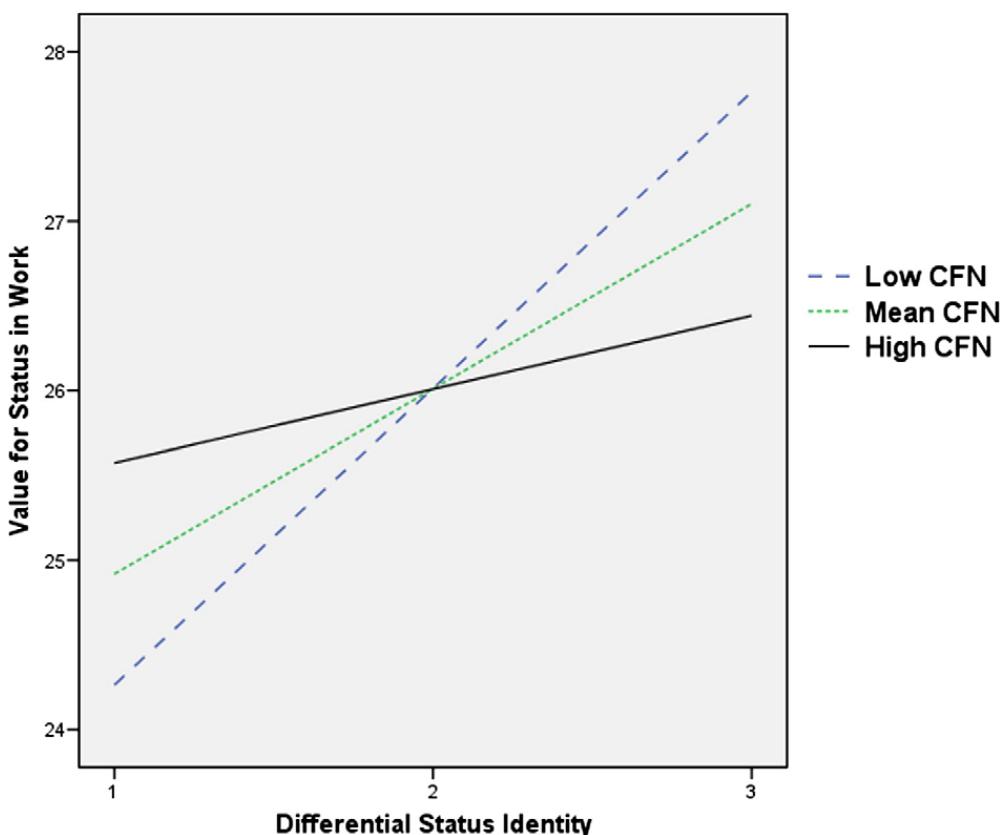
Hypotheses 2 and 3 concerned the moderating role of conformity to gender norms. We followed procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991) to center all predictors and create the interaction terms. The results indicated that Hypothesis 2 was unsupported; conformity to masculine norms was not a significant moderator, although the relationship did trend in the expected positive direction ( $\beta = .04, p = .52$ ). However, we did find support for Hypothesis 3. Conformity to feminine gender norms (CFN) moderated the relationship between DS1 and value for status ( $\beta = -.16, p < .05$ ). **Fig. 2** shows a plot of this interaction with regression lines plotted for low (one standard deviation below the mean), mean, and high (one standard deviation above the mean) levels of CFN. Consistent with Image Theory and our expectations, a t-test for the slope of the regression line when conformity to feminine norms is high indicates that the slope is not significantly different from zero ( $t = 1.07, ns$ ). In other words, when conformity to feminine norms is high, one's level of DS1 has no effect on values for status in work. For those people who have internalized traditional feminine norms as part of their value image, high-status work goals are deemed incompatible with the value image, even if those people otherwise perceive themselves as high in social status. In contrast, as shown in the figure, the highest levels of values for status in work were reported by those people with high DS1 and low conformity to feminine gender norms. This pattern yields a consistent set of values for which setting goals to attain high-status work fits well with the value image.

Lastly, Hypotheses 4 and 5 concerned tests of moderated mediation. Because conformity to masculine gender norms did not moderate the direct relationship between DS1 and value for status in work (Hypothesis 2), Hypothesis 4 is automatically not supported. However, Hypothesis 5, which concerned conformity to feminine gender norms as a moderator of the indirect effect from DS1 to aspirations, remained a testable hypothesis. We tested this pattern of moderated mediation using a SPSS macro developed by Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007) using a bootstrap sample size of 3000. The results of this analysis demonstrated support for Hypothesis 5. Specifically, when CFN is low [i.e., at the mean (−.025) or one standard deviation below the mean (−22.16)], the bootstrapped indirect effect from DS1 to aspirations is statistically significant (at low CFN, the bootstrapped indirect effect is .02,  $SE = .01, z = 3.15, p < .01$ ; and at mean CFN, the bootstrapped indirect effect is .02,  $SE = .01, z = 3.40, p < .01$ ). However, when CFN is high [i.e., one standard deviation above the mean (21.65)], the indirect effect from DS1 to aspirations becomes insignificant (.01, Boot  $SE = .01$ , Boot  $z = 1.14$ , Boot  $p = .25$ ). Consistent with Image Theory, these results demonstrate that strongly internalizing feminine gender norms into the value image leads to the rejection of high-status work goals, which consequently disrupts the formation of more distal career aspirations.

**Table 2**  
Regression tests of mediation.

Variables		<i>b</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Career and leadership aspirations regressed on differential status identity		.00	.01	−.22	.83
Value for work status regressed on differential status identity		.04	.01	4.14	<.01
Career and leadership aspirations regressed on value for work status		.45	.06	7.15	<.01
Indirect effect and significance using normal distribution					
Sobel test (Hypothesis 1)	.02 <i>M</i>	.01 <i>SE</i>	3.46 LL 95% CI	< .01 UL 95% CI	
Bootstrap results for significance of indirect effect					
Effect (Hypothesis 1)	.02	.01	.01	.03	

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients reported. Bootstrap sample size = 5000.  
LL = lower limit; CI = confidence interval; UL = upper limit.



**Fig. 2.** Interaction of DSI and Conformity to feminine gender norms on value for status in work. Note: low and high conformity to feminine norms (CFN) are one standard deviation below and above the mean, respectively.

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to apply Image Theory (Beach, 1990) to the examination of the relation of different types of self-views (i.e., perceived social status and conformity to gender role norms), value for status in one's work, and career aspirations. Results were consistent with Image Theory's proposed relations of value images (in this case, perceived social status and conformity to feminine, but not masculine, gender role norms) and trajectory images (values for status in work and career and leadership aspirations).

### Examination of Hypothesized Relationships

Consistent with Image Theory, our expectations that people who perceive themselves as high in social status would value status in their work was supported. Perceived social status was significantly and positively related to value for status in work. Support was also demonstrated for Hypothesis 1; value for status was demonstrated to mediate the relation between perceived social status (DSI) and aspirations for advancement and leadership in one's career (it is important to note that the unstandardized regression coefficient for this indirect effect (.02) was statistically significant, but small). This finding fits within the growing body of literature examining the impacts that DSI may have on an individual's career aspirations and expectations (e.g., Metz et al., 2009) and with previous work highlighting the importance of values in the career decision-making process for individuals (Brown, 2002; Super & Sverko, 1995).

Conformity to masculine and feminine gender role norms were proposed as another type of value image that, according to Image Theory (Beach & Mitchell, 1987), will interact with trajectory images to influence compatible career options for an individual. Consistent with this conceptualization, and based on previous research demonstrating the relation of conformity to gender role norms to career aspirations and expectations (e.g., Jome & Tokar, 1998; McWhirter et al., 1998), conformity to masculine and feminine gender role norms were proposed to moderate the relationship between perceived status and value for status in work.

Given that traditional masculine gender norms are compatible with the pursuit of high status and power, but traditional feminine gender norms emphasize submissiveness and sacrifice of one's own interests for those of close others (e.g., Mahalik et al., 2006), we hypothesized that people who conform to traditional masculine norms would view high-status work goals as consistent with their self-image, whereas those who conform to traditional feminine norms would not. Findings were consistent with the hypothesized moderation for feminine, but not for masculine, gender role norms. Specifically, conformity

to masculine norms was not a significant moderator of the relationship between DS1 and value for status in work; thus, Hypothesis 2 was unsupported. This relationship did, however, trend in the anticipated positive direction suggesting that the relationship between perceived social status and value for status in work would be stronger for people with higher conformity to masculine gender role norms. Although some women may report high conformity to masculine gender role norms, it is possible that the present findings were impacted by the relatively small sample size of men in the present study ( $n = 69$ ). It is also interesting to note that in the present study, the mean for CFNI was higher (231.57) than the mean for CMNI (216.22) even though the possible total score for the CMNI (376) is higher than the possible total score for the CFNI (336). Taken together, this may indicate that the present study was limited by a restricted range of scores for the CMNI.

As hypothesized, conformity to feminine norms significantly and negatively moderated the relationship between DS1 and value for status in work. In other words, when conformity to feminine norms is high, one's level of DS1 has no effect on values for status. For those people who have internalized traditional feminine norms as part of their value image, high-status work goals are deemed incompatible with the value image even if those people otherwise perceive themselves as high in social status. On the other hand, those who have not internalized traditional feminine norms as part of their value image reported higher values for status in work. This is consistent with the prediction, based on Image Theory, that conformity to feminine norms weakens the relationship between DS1 and work aspirations because these two self-views introduce contradictory beliefs that lead to the reduction of value for status in work.

The lack of evidence for masculine gender roles as a moderator of the relationship between DS1 and value for status in work automatically precluded support for Hypothesis 4. Findings did, however, demonstrate support for Hypothesis 5. Specifically, conformity to feminine gender norms moderated the indirect effect from DS1 to career and leadership aspirations through value for status in work. Specifically, the indirect relationship between DS1 and aspirations is significant when conformity to feminine gender roles is low but is insignificant when conformity to feminine gender roles is high.

#### *Implications, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research*

Taken together, these findings demonstrated support for Image Theory's proposed relations of value and trajectory images in contributing to reported career and leadership aspirations. Indeed, it appears that attending to Image Theory's concepts of value and trajectory images may be useful in future vocational research and practice. Specifically, individuals appear to hold value images that impact their career expectations, aspirations, and perceptions of available career options during an initial compatibility test. Decision makers are likely to rule out options that seem incompatible with their value images. These results point to the potential usefulness of intervention efforts targeted toward assisting individuals in their exploration and clarification of their value images (Stevens, 1998). For example, when working with clients, career counselors might spend some time assessing an individual's value images and explore with him or her the extent to which these value images are related to decisions to pursue or to reject career options. Such an assessment may facilitate the client's awareness of ways in which past and future decisions may be related to these value images. Stevens (1998) argued that this exploration may be particularly relevant when working with college students who are confused about their career interests or choice of major and with adults who have recently experienced life transitions (e.g., divorce, job loss) and are feeling increased distress related to the perceived uncertainty of the future. Assisting these clients in the clarification of their value images may facilitate their exploration of potential career options and ultimately impact their goal-setting and decision-making.

Because value images represent internalized beliefs, not objective reality, Image Theory is also important in terms of understanding why clients may avoid particular career options. In some cases, constructively challenging these beliefs may encourage clients to explore careers that they had previously deemed incompatible with their self-view. For example, if a young woman has internalized the belief that pursuing a professional career in science will conflict with her desire to have a family, Image Theory suggests that she would be likely to rule out careers in science. However, if this value image is challenged and modified with examples of women who are both mothers and successful scientists, she may realign her value image so that a trajectory in science is no longer perceived to be incompatible with her self-views.

The findings from the present study are, however, limited in their ability to explain the relation of the value and trajectory images included in the present investigation to actual occupational decision-making and selection given the reliance upon participants' self-reported future aspirations. To the extent that career and leadership aspirations as measured in this study can be assumed to be reflective of an individual's decisions regarding acceptable versus unacceptable career choices, the present findings suggest that value and trajectory images play an important role in determining the compatibility of various career choices. These results are also potentially limited by the low internal consistency reliability of the CAS. Longitudinal and cross-sectional research using non-college student samples that investigates individuals' *actual* career choices is therefore needed in order to more fully understand the extent to which value, trajectory, and strategic images interact with one another and contribute to subsequent choice.

The present investigation is also limited in scope as it focused exclusively on value and trajectory images related to status (i.e., perceived social status identity, conformity to gender role norms, value for status in one's work, and aspirations for achievement and advancement in one's career). Future research could use Image Theory to examine the relation of other types of value images to individuals' career decision-making processes. For example, using Image Theory as a framework, research could investigate the impacts of images related to desire to please family members, pursue work that is consistent with familial and/or cultural expectations, contribute or give back to others, and achieve stability in one's life.

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