

Gender and the Career Choice Process: The Role of Biased Self-Assessments¹

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Abstract

This article develops a supply-side mechanism about how cultural beliefs about gender differentially influence the early career-relevant decisions of men and women. Cultural beliefs about gender are argued to bias individuals' perceptions of their competence at various career-relevant tasks, controlling for actual ability. To the extent that individuals then act on gender-differentiated perceptions when making career decisions, cultural beliefs about gender channel men and women in substantially different career directions. The hypotheses are evaluated by considering how gendered beliefs about mathematics impact individuals' assessments of their own mathematical competence, which, in turn, leads to gender differences in decisions to persist on a path toward a career in science, math, or engineering.

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Gender and Careers

Gender influences a wide range of career-related attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes. This includes career choice, career experiences, occupational health, work attitudes, other people's perceptions, and career outcomes. Therefore, to understand individuals' careers, it is important to consider gender.

Gender and Career Choice

Men and women differ considerably in their career choices, and many factors contribute to these differences. Socialization experiences, which refer to the lifelong social learning experiences that people have when interacting with others, play a major role here. Parents, siblings, teachers, school guidance counselors, other adult role models, peers, the media, and many other sources greatly influence how individuals view themselves based on their gender.

Materials used in primary educational settings also contribute to the socialization experience. For instance, textbooks often depict men and women in stereotypical occupations (e.g., men as doctors and women as nurses) and social roles (e.g., working fathers and stay-at-home mothers). Furthermore, children's stories are more likely to use men than women as story characters. The media plays a role in its portrayal of men and women in sex-typed occupational and societal roles, television shows, movies, and advertisements. Peers also exert considerable influence and contribute to the socialization process, particularly during adolescence.

Although such socialization experience influences both genders, it is presumed to have greater negative effects on girls because it tends to limit and restrict their options and achievements more so than boys'. For example, healthy adult men are expected to work, but the decision to enter the labor force is presented as a choice for girls. In this way, gender influences the initial decision of whether or not to pursue paid work outside the home. Likewise, socialization experiences strongly influence vocational interests and career choices. Both adolescent boys and adult men report greater interest in scientific, technical, and mechanical pursuits. Adolescent girls and adult women indicate greater interest in social and artistic endeavors. Thus, it is not surprising that men are generally encouraged to pursue careers in engineering, business, and science, whereas women are encouraged to pursue careers in social and helping occupations. It is also noteworthy that male-typed careers tend to offer higher status and pay than female-typed careers, contributing to the observed gender inequities in pay.

The availability of same-sex role models also influences vocational interests and subsequent career choice. Due to the differential representation of men and women in various occupations, girls are less likely to have female role models in male-dominated occupations, such as engineering, police and detective work, and construction trades. Girls are more likely to have role models in traditionally female occupations, such as education, nursing, and social work. The opposite is true for boys. Parental role modeling also influences occupational preference and career choice, since children tend to identify most with their same-sex parents and working adults are also segregated occupationally to some extent. Maternal employment also relates to career choice. In particular, working mothers can facilitate their daughters' career aspirations by providing female models of career pursuits and by demonstrating how women can successfully integrate work and family roles.

Another reason for male-female differences in career choice relates to career-related self-efficacy perceptions, or beliefs in one's ability to be successful in a wide range of career pursuits. Women have less access to the types of experience necessary for developing strong beliefs in their abilities to master career-related tasks, particularly tasks in male-dominated occupations and majors (e.g., math, science). Individuals develop career-related self-efficacy through vicarious experience (role models), verbal persuasion (encouragement from others), and actual experience (having opportunities to master tasks). Women tend to have less opportunity for these experiences and therefore tend to report lower career-related self-efficacy than men. These lower self-expectations can lead to further occupational sex segregation, as individuals are less likely to pursue certain jobs and/or careers if they believe that they will not be successful. Interestingly, there are few consistent differences in actual ability between men and women, and when differences are found, they tend to be small in magnitude. Moreover, there is greater within-gender than between-gender variability in abilities such as overall intelligence, verbal ability, mathematical ability, and visual-spatial ability.

Gender and Career Experiences

Gender also influences individuals' career experiences. Women face unique barriers in the workplace, which, in turn, shapes their work and organizational experiences. One barrier consists of practices that intentionally or unintentionally exclude women from jobs and developmental experiences based on gender. This includes overt sex discrimination in hiring, being overlooked for high-visibility or high-stakes job assignments, and not being targeted for domestic or international relocation opportunities. Gender differences are also found in developmental assignments after individuals are

hired by organizations. Women are more likely to be hired into staff positions and have less access to line experience, which is often a steppingstone to higher-level management positions. Women tend to report that their initial job assignments are less challenging than men's assignments. In addition, unlike jobs that tend to be held by women, jobs held by men tend to exist in job ladders that lead to positions of greater power and influence. Gender also influences access to information within organizations. Men tend to be more politically connected and have access to more powerful organizational members than do women. This is important since managers develop impressions about an individual's career potential through both formal and informal interactions. There is also some evidence that men receive more favorable performance feedback than do women and that the quality of such feedback provided varies by gender (e.g., more specific and developmental feedback tends to be provided to men). All of these factors can influence the availability and quality of career opportunities in an organization.

Another way in which men's and women's career experiences differ is that women are more likely to experience career interruptions, and gaps in employment can slow down their career progress. Men and women also tend to interrupt their careers for different reasons, with women being more likely to temporarily leave the workforce for family reasons and men being more likely to do so for job-related reasons (e.g., inability to find suitable employment). Interestingly, career interruptions for family-related reasons have less negative impact on one's career progress than interruptions that occur for other reasons, such as gaps in employment due to temporary unemployment. The explanation for this is that women are expected to leave the workforce temporarily after childbirth, and by doing so, they are actually conforming to gender-based societal norms. Compared with men, women are also more likely to go from school to a full-time family role, and then return to school or enter the workforce for the first time after starting a family. Therefore, some women get a later start in their careers than do men. There are also gender differences in full-time versus part-time work, with married women being more likely than men to opt for the flexibility afforded by part-time work. Unfortunately, part-time work provides individuals with less visibility and exposure in organizations, which has been offered as one reason that women's careers often do not progress as quickly as men's careers.

A more permanent career interruption is job loss, and gender differences exist here as well. Women are less likely to occupy jobs that are revenue generating, and this makes them somewhat more susceptible to job loss than are men. However, there are few gender differences in individuals' emotional reactions to job loss (e.g., depression, reduced self-esteem), even though women tend to fare less well than men upon reemployment in terms

of both extrinsic (e.g., pay) and intrinsic (e.g., quality of work life, job satisfaction) job characteristics. Women do respond to job loss with different behaviors. They are less likely to use problem-focused coping strategies (e.g., job search, relocation) and more likely to use symptom-focused coping strategies (e.g., talking to friends, getting involved in group activities). The opposite holds for men.

Gender and Work Attitudes

Gender differences in work attitudes are also important, since how satisfied, involved, committed, and motivated at work one is can influence a wide range of work behaviors, which, in turn, can impact career outcomes. For example, individuals who are more satisfied with their jobs and report greater attachment or loyalty to their organizations (i.e., have higher organizational commitment) are less likely to quit their jobs or be absent from work. Likewise, job involvement (the extent to which one identifies with his or her job) and work motivation are associated with career-related behaviors such as working longer hours and demonstrating stronger commitment to one's career, both of which can lead to greater career success. Interestingly, few differences have been found between men and women in job satisfaction and job involvement, although men may report higher organizational commitment than do women.

Gender differences in motivation have a long and controversial history. Initial conceptualization of motivation focused on achievement motivation, which is the desire to master tasks, excel and surpass others, and accomplish things as well as possible. Early studies of achievement motivation indicated that achievement motivation in women was distinct from that in men and, more important, that women's responses did not conform to the way scholars thought about achievement motivation. Thus, women were largely excluded from early research on achievement motivation, and assumptions were made that women do not desire achievement the same way men do. Later research dispelled this idea by finding that women actually have a stronger desire than men to work hard and do a good job, even when they are not likely to be recognized for their efforts, whereas men prefer challenging, competitive tasks that allow for individual recognition of task accomplishment. Although women are just as motivated as men to work hard (and perhaps more so), there are differences in what men and women find rewarding at work. Men value advancement, pay, and status and tend to judge their career success using these standards. In contrast, women have a broader conceptualization of career success by also considering factors such as personal growth, job accomplishments, challenge, and interpersonal relationships. Women are also more likely to define life success in terms of

both work and family achievements, whereas men tend to focus more on the work domain.

Gender and Perceptions

As mentioned previously, men and women have different socialization experiences. Based on gender, they are treated differently and held to different standards by teachers, guidance counselors, parents, and others in their social environments. This, in turn, influences both career decisions and career opportunities. Of particular relevance here is the finding that people often view men and women in stereotypical ways. Generally speaking, women are believed to be more nurturing and sensitive, whereas men are viewed as more assertive and directive. These perceptions can influence perceptions of person-job "fit" in the job selection and promotion process (e.g., women may be viewed as less appropriate choices for male-typed jobs, and vice versa). Moreover, while general attitudes toward women have become more favorable over the years, sexist attitudes persist. Some individuals hold stereotyped attitudes about women's "place" in society in general or, more specifically, hold negative attitudes toward women in management positions. As an example, women are typically viewed as being less similar than men to the prototype of a successful manager. Women are also viewed as less appropriate candidates for jobs requiring heavy travel or relocation. These perceptions can influence women's career opportunities for being selected for transfers and relocation assignments, placement in high-risk internal job assignments, and receiving promotions. Others' perceptions can also undermine the self-confidence of women in pursuing nontraditional jobs and careers.

Women report greater barriers in how they are viewed and treated by others in organizations. Women are more likely to report being excluded from informal organizational networks, which can restrict career opportunities. They are more likely to feel as though they do not "fit in" with the organization culture, which may lead some women to self-select out of high-level jobs or leave their organizations and pursue work elsewhere. Greater perceived barriers to developing mentoring relationships are also reported by women, as well as less contact and support from managers and peers. Finally, women in nontraditional jobs and occupations often experience tokenism at work, and the salience of their gender can encourage sex-based attributions for their behavior and result in higher performance expectations from managers. In addition, women in various family arrangements may face unique barriers resulting from the perceptions of others. For example, managers may believe that women in dual-earner marriages (i.e., where both partners work outside the home) are more likely to subordinate their own careers to their

husbands' careers. This may lead managers not to consider women when making high-level promotion or relocation decisions. Likewise, working mothers may be viewed as less committed to their careers by virtue of their parental status.

Gender and Career Outcomes

A substantial body of literature exists on the role of gender in understanding career outcomes such as pay, promotions, and career satisfaction. As a group, women earn less money than men. This gender gap in earning persists even after considering a wide range of factors that might explain the disparity, such as sex segregation by industry (i.e., men tend to work in higher-paying industries than women); variation in educational experiences; differences in the type and quality of job experiences; unequal family power between the genders (i.e., women tend to contribute less to the family's income than men, which typically means less decision-making influence within the family); differences in family structure (e.g., married women are more likely to be married to a working spouse than vice versa); and self-selection (e.g., women may be more likely to withdraw from relocation offers or promotions). This discrepancy in earnings is often attributed to the presence of a "glass ceiling" for women, which prevents them from attaining high-level, high-paying positions within organizations. Gender differences in earnings exist, but there is conflicting evidence as to whether or not there are gender differences in promotion rates. Some research suggests that women managers are promoted more swiftly than men, whereas other studies find no difference or faster promotion rates for men.

Notwithstanding these discrepant findings, men and women appear to take different paths to achieving career success. Men tend to progress within their careers in a traditional, hierarchical manner, whereby they have few gaps in employment and move into positions of increasing authority and status. In contrast, women are more likely to follow a sequential career path, whereby they experience a series of promotions, followed by career interruptions or a reduction in workforce participation, followed by a resumption of their careers. Furthermore, although there are probably more similarities than differences in terms of what predicts career success for men and women, some distinctions exist. Engaging in more training and development, working longer hours, minimizing employment gaps, remaining employed at the same organization, having greater home and family commitments, and displaying independence are more highly related to career success for men than for women. In contrast, obtaining a higher level of education, displaying more masculine personality characteristics, and having fewer home and family commitments appear more important to career success for women.

Self-reported satisfaction with one's career represents another career outcome of interest. Interestingly, despite differences in objective indicators of career success, such as pay and job stature, men and women do not differ significantly in their self-perceptions of career success. Some argue that this is because women hold lower expectations for success than do men or that women compare themselves to other women when judging career success, rather than making comparisons to their male counterparts.

<http://career.iresearchnet.com/career-development/gender-and-careers/>

What is wage determination?

A "wage determination" is the listing of wage rates and fringe benefit rates for each classification of laborers and mechanics which the Administrator of the Wage and Hour Division of the U.S. Department of Labor has determined to be prevailing in a given area for a particular type of construction.

Factors influence the determination of wage rate:

- Ability to Pay:
- Demand and Supply:
- Prevailing Market Rates:
- Cost of Living:
- Bargaining of Trade Unions:
- Productivity:
- Government Regulations:
- Cost of Training: