

# Career Aspirations: The Effect of Culture and Gender

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## Abstract

This study attempts to determine first, how culture affects individuals' perceptions of their possibilities for corporate ladder advancement and second, whether gender is an additional factor in the nature and expression of these career aspirations. Studies have found distinct differences between males and females, particularly in their attitudes regarding advancement in the workplace. More important than actual gender differences is the issue of gender stereotyping and the self-fulfilling prophecy effect. Some populations still believe that education and professional career are a greater necessity for men than for women. In the United States, it is a myth that women tend to have less human capital investment in education, training, and work experience than men. However, some studies have reported that women in general tend to have less work experience and employment continuity than men due to disproportionate responsibility for child rearing and domestic duties. It is important to determine if this is a culturally specific phenomenon or if it is more worldwide. A total of 240 participants representing Universities in the United States, Poland, Brazil, Greece and Turkey were part of the present study. Males and females, ranging in age from under 20 to 56 years of age reacted to a survey designed specifically for this study looking at both demographic information and participants' attitudes toward equality issues in the workplace. The findings, although supportive of only one of the five hypotheses were quite revealing of specific gender and cultural implications. There was not general support for either women being more interested in men's jobs or for men being interested in women's jobs, Polish, American, Brazilian and Turkish participants responded 'very often', 'often', or 'sometimes' more frequently than participants from Greece. Men were hypothesized to believe they were more likely to attain their desired position in the workplace, but women reported this more substantially than men. Women from individualistic cultures were more likely to match their desired career with the career they were actually pursuing than women from collectivist cultures. These findings need to be discussed in their broader context.

## Introduction

Jennifer Seymour Whitaker, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, stated: "National standards of living improve – family income, education, nutrition and life expectancy all rise, and birthrates fall – as women move toward equality" (as cited in Crossette, 2001, p. 1). Eleanor Roosevelt, first lady in 1940, stated: "In government, in business, and in the professions

there may be a day when women will be looked upon as persons. We are, however, far from that day as yet” (as cited in Clift & Brazaitis, 2000). These important, powerful statements, made decades apart, addressing the issue of women in the workforce emphasize the importance of improving our understanding of how gender and culture are influencing what women choose to do for careers.

It has long been thought that women have less human capital investment in education, training, and work experience than men. In reality, in the United States, women earn 58.8% of all Masters degrees, they earn 46.3% of all Doctorates, and they earn 47.3% of all Law Degrees (Eagly & Carli, 2004). There is a greater likelihood that a phenomenon known as the “glass ceiling” is responsible for stopping women in their pursuit of advancement. For instance, Heilman (1997) found the lack of reaching top positions is not due to enough time passing for natural career progress. Women in general do not self-select out of “career tracks” to pursue “mommy tracks” (Eagly & Carli). When women are promoted in the workplace, they are more likely than men to be placed on a “glass cliff.” They are given precarious leadership positions that are known to be more difficult than normal and where their chances to perform successfully are limited (Charles & Davies, 2000).

Some populations still believe that education and a professional career are more important for men than for women (Woycicka & Dominiczak, n.d.). Women with equal education and experience will likely earn less money and do less demanding jobs than men. Research has found that women have less work experience and employment continuity due to disproportionate responsibility for child rearing and domestic duties (Bowles & McGinn, 2005). This may or may not be by choice since in many cultures women are expected to be the main caregiver and work just to supplement the family income.

There is still a belief that men and women do different jobs and attain different positions, even if they have similar career aspirations. Some cultures believe that education and professional careers are more important for men than women (Woycicka & Dominiczak, n.d.). Women who work in a perceived man’s job are often discriminated against while men who work in a perceived woman’s job are not (Wildstein, 2005).

There seems to be cultural differences in how people perceive their potential for advancement. Some studies have found that American students value personal achievement more than students from other countries (Church & Katigbak, 1992). Positive value placed on assertiveness and self-confidence is greater in cultures that are comprised of members with more individualistic traits, such as the United States (Takata, 1987). The degree to which people express pride, loyalty, and cohesiveness in the group is one of the characteristics that define Individualism vs. Collectivism. Another is how devoted the people are to their organization or family (Hofstede, 2001; House, Javidan, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2004). The United States is low in collectivism, high in competitiveness, result-oriented, and less attached to family. Poland and Greece are high in social collectivism but low in institutional collectivism, strongly supportive of coworkers and tend to treat women more equally. Brazil is high in in-group collectivism, low in institutional collectivism and values autonomy. Turkey is high in in-group collectivism, low on gender egalitarianism, takes great pride in family and focuses on what is happening in the current environment, not on controlling the future.

### **Purpose of the study**

This research project is a collaborative work in progress. The study is based on previous research findings and the current evidence in specific contexts. An attempt is made to determine the impact of culture on both aspirations to advance on the corporate ladder and whether or not

gender is an additional factor in the expression of those aspirations, leading to an interaction effect.

## Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1. Women will be more interested in doing men's jobs than men will be interested in doing women's jobs. Although it is predicted that this will be the case across all cultures, it will be especially true in individualistic cultures.

Hypothesis 2. Men are more likely than women to *believe* they can attain a higher level position in the workplace.

Hypothesis 3. Younger women are more likely than older women to aspire to higher level positions in the workplace.

Hypothesis 4. Women from individualistic cultures are more likely than women from collectivist cultures to aspire to higher level positions in the workplace.

## Method

A total of 240 participants came from Universities in the United States (N=47, 19.6%), Poland (N=52, 21.7%), Brazil (N=59, 24.6%), Greece (N=22, 9.2%) and Turkey (N=60, 25%). They are both males (N=111, 46.3%) and females (N=129, 53.8%) ranging in age from under 20 (N=12, 5%) to 56 and over (N=3, 1.3%), the majority were in the age range of 21-26 years of age (N=134, 55.8%).

A survey was designed specifically for this study looking at both demographic information and participants' attitudes toward equality issues in the workplace, fairness of pay, perceptions of job gender and whether there was a match between the job they would like to have if there were no obstacles and the job they were actually pursuing.

The participants were asked to sign informed consents and to then fill out the surveys. Data was collected at each University by one of the researchers or someone trained by the researchers to do the data collection.

## Results and Conclusions

The findings for Hypothesis 1 were not significant. Although there was not general support for women being more interested in men's jobs than men being interested in women's jobs, there did seem to be a cultural difference. Polish, American, Brazilian and Turkish men responded 'very often', 'often', or 'sometimes' more frequently than men from Greece that women would be interested in men's jobs and that men would be interested in women's jobs. Hypothesis 2 suggested that men would be more likely to believe they could attain their desired position in the workplace but analysis of the data showed a significant finding for women being more likely to believe they can attain their desired position in the workplace ( $F=4.29$ ,  $p=.04$ ). Hypothesis 3 suggested younger women would be more likely than older women to aspire to higher levels in the workplace. The findings suggest age does not make a difference in one's belief, women of all ages were just as likely to believe they could attain the career they desire. Hypothesis 5 was supported in that women from individualistic cultures were more likely to say that their desired career was the career they were pursuing ( $t=.230$ ,  $p=.013$ ,  $N=115$ ).

The strength of this study appears to be the interesting finding that the data does not support the majority of the hypotheses. All of the hypotheses were based on information available from studies, articles or the popular press from many of the countries sampled in this

study. Since women in all the cultures sampled so far, on average, earn less than their male counterparts, it was rationale to hypothesize that men would be more likely than women to believe they could attain their desired position in the workplace. The findings showed just the opposite, an indication that women appear to be not accepting of the traditional stereotypes and are not willing to give up their preferred career choice or the possibility of advancement in the workplace.

If we are not to merely survive, but wish to prevail, an enhanced workforce that includes the attributes and skills of women is vital. The findings of this study suggest women are ready to be included as an integral part of today's workforce. Recognizing this fact, as presented through research, is a good place for a discussion to begin.

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