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Gender, gender identity, and aspirations to top management
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Abstract:

Data gathered by the authors from undergraduate and part-time graduate business students in 1976-1977 suggested that men were more likely than women to aspire to top management and that, consistent with traditional stereotypes of males and managers, a gender identity consisting of high masculinity and low femininity was associated with aspirations to top management. As a result of gender-related social changes, it is expected that the gender difference in aspirations to top management but not the importance of gender identity to have decreased over time. Data was collected in 1999 from the same 2 populations to test these notions. In newly collected data, high masculinity (but not low femininity) was still associated with such aspirations, and men still aspired to top management positions more than women. However, the gender difference in aspirations to top management did not decrease over time.

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Keywords

Career planning, Top management, Management, Gender

Abstract

Data gathered by the authors from undergraduate and part-time graduate business students in 1976-1977 suggested that men were more likely than women to aspire to top management and that, consistent with traditional stereotypes of males and managers, a gender identity consisting of high masculinity and low femininity was associated with aspirations to top management. As a result of gender-related social changes, we expected the gender difference in aspirations to top management but not the importance of gender identity to have decreased over time. We collected data in 1999 from the same two populations to test these notions. In newly collected data, high masculinity (but not low femininity) was still associated with such aspirations, and men still aspired to top management positions more than women. However, the gender difference in aspirations to top management did not decrease over time.

Occupational or career aspirations refer to individuals' desires for future employment. They represent dreams that individuals have about what an ideal occupation would be for them (Farmer and Chung, 1995), i.e. "what they would like to be when they grow up". For example, the National Child Development Study (UK) measured adolescents' occupational aspirations by what they expected their first full-time job to be (Schoon and Parsons, 2002); the National Longitudinal Surveys of Labor Market Experience (USA) measured aspirations by the occupation the respondent wanted to have at age 35 (Shu and Marini, 1998). Farmer (1985, 1997) characterized career aspirations as one of three dimensions of:

- (1) career and achievement motivation;
- (2) mastery motivation; and
- (3) career commitment

that influence a person's achievement and persistence in a career. Occupational aspirations at an earlier age predict occupational attainment at a later age (Schoon, 2001). Thus, occupational aspirations exert a major influence on the development of individuals' careers (Schoon and Parsons, 2002).

Most theories of the formation of occupational aspirations are based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1978). For example, Farmer's (1985) theory characterized aspirations as representing learning from three types of interactive influences: background (e.g. gender, abilities), psychological or personal influences (e.g. attitudes, beliefs, earlier experiences), and environmental or cultural influences. Theories of the influence of gender focus on the effect of socially prescribed gender roles. According to social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly et al., 2000), cultures convey shared expectations for the appropriate conduct of males and females that foster gender differences in social behavior. As a result of gender role socialization processes, men aspire to enter male-dominated occupations seen as calling for "masculine" (i.e. agentic) personal qualities, whereas

women aspire to enter feminine occupations seen as calling for "feminine" (i.e. communal) personal qualities (Wigfield et al., 2000). Reflecting the differential status of women and men in Western societies, occupations seen as calling for masculine qualities are higher paying and more prestigious than those seen as calling for feminine qualities (Cejka and Eagly, 1999).

Prior research generally has found that males and females differ in occupational aspirations, with males tending to aspire to male-dominated occupations and females, to a lesser extent, tending to aspire to female-dominated occupations (Jacobs, 1989; Marini and Brinton, 1984; Wigfield et al., 2000). However, more recent studies have found that women's occupational aspirations have become more similar to those of men (Farmer and Chung, 1995; Leung and Harmon, 1990; McNulty and Borgen, 1988; Steel et al., 1987). The reduction of the gender difference in occupational aspirations may reflect societal change. For example, Shu and Marini (1998) found that between the late 1960s and late 1970s, a period of time during which a women's liberation movement flourished in the USA (Melton-Stanley and Howard, 2000), young women became more inclined to aspire to occupations that were high paying, prestigious, and male dominated, whereas young men's aspirations were relatively unchanged. As a result, the dissimilarity of young women's and young men's occupational aspirations declined. Since this gender-related change in occupational aspirations predated a decline in the sex segregation of the workforce caused by women's greater entry into male-dominated occupations (Jacobs, 1999), Shu and Marini (1998) concluded that it was a manifestation of cultural change. This study examines whether there has been a comparable gender-related change in aspirations to top management positions.

There has been virtually no prior research on aspirations to top management. In an exception, Powell and Butterfield (1981) examined the effect of gender on aspirations to top management held by part-time (evening) US MBA students and undergraduate business students. Females, especially undergraduates, exhibited lower aspirations to top management than males did. In addition, individuals' gender identity (also known as "sex-role identity") [1], defined as their self-concept of possessing masculine and/or feminine characteristics (Bem, 1974), predicted their aspirations. Individuals who described themselves as possessing a greater amount of masculine characteristics and a lesser amount of feminine characteristics - a gender identity consistently reflected in stereotypes of males (Deaux and Kite, 1993; Deaux and LaFrance, 1998) and managers (Powell and Butterfield, 1979; Powell et al., 2002), were more likely to aspire to top management. Gender identity was likely to have been influenced by socially determined gender roles (Eagly, 1987; Eagly et al., 2000) and thus could have accounted for effects that otherwise would be attributable to gender. However, gender predicted aspirations to top management after controlling for gender identity, suggested that gender identity did not fully account for the influence of social roles on aspirations (Powell and Butterfield, 1981).

There have been considerable gender-related social changes since Powell and Butterfield (1981) that may have influenced aspirations to top management. The proportion of women in the managerial ranks has increased in almost all countries (Powell and Graves, 2003). For example, the proportion of women managers increased between 1980 and 2000 from 14 percent to 26 percent in Australia, 25 percent to 35 percent in Canada, 16 percent to 29 percent in Sweden, and 26 percent to 45 percent in the USA (International Labor Office, 2002). In addition, a gradual increase in attainment of top management

positions by women in recent years (Catalyst, 2000) has been highly publicized (e.g. Sellers, 1999). Replications of Schein's (1973, 1975) classic studies suggest that whereas US men still perceive that men are more likely than women to possess characteristics necessary for managerial success, US women now see women and men as equally likely to possess such characteristics (Schein, 2001). Further, there has been an increased call for "feminine leadership" that takes advantage of the personal characteristics associated with women (e.g. Helgesen, 1995; Rosener, 1995). Recent research on gender differences in leadership style suggests that such a call is appropriate (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

These social trends may have had a positive effect on women's aspirations to top management relative to those of men over time. In-career women as well as younger women may feel more empowered to attain the ranks of top management than before. As a result, perceived barriers to women's entry into top management may be having less of a dampening effect on their aspirations to do so. Since men have not been the beneficiaries of the same social trends, there seems less reason to believe that their aspirations to top management have changed over time.

However, the ranks of top management remain heavily male dominated; the proportion of women officers in Fortune 500 corporations is only 13 percent (Catalyst, 2000). A "glass ceiling" still keeps women as a group from attaining top management positions (Davidson and Cooper, 1992; Powell, 1999; Powell and Graves, 2003). In addition, the personal attributes seen as most characteristic of successful executives are predominantly masculine and associated more with women middle managers than male middle managers (Martell et al., 1998). As a result, top management still may be regarded as a masculine occupation, which might lead women to continue to aspire to it less than men.

The present study was designed to explore these speculations further by replicating Powell and Butterfield (1981). It analyzed newly collected data as well as the data we collected earlier. Based on the above considerations, it was hypothesized that:

H1. In newly collected data:

(a) individuals with a gender identity of higher masculinity would be more likely to aspire to top management;

(b) individuals with a gender identity of lower femininity would be more likely to aspire to top management; and

(c) men would be more likely to aspire to top management than women.

H2. The gender difference in aspirations to top management would be smaller in newly collected data than in data collected earlier (Powell and Butterfield, 1981).

Method

Data were collected in 1999 at two US universities from two populations that differed considerably in age, education, and work experience. One group of respondents consisted of 141 part-time graduate students enrolled in part-time (evening) MBA courses, nearly all of whom held full-time jobs. Their mean age was 31.6 years, and they were 44 percent female. The second

group of respondents consisted of 206 undergraduate students enrolled in introductory business courses, with a mean age of 21.2 years and 43 percent female. The present study used these data in addition to data collected in 1976-1977 from the same two populations at the same two universities by Powell and Butterfield (1981). The 1976-1977 sample consisted of 109 part-time graduate business students with a mean age of 28.0 and 17 percent female, and 570 undergraduate business students with a mean age of 20.7 years and 30 percent female. Respondents in the 1999 and 1976-1977 samples from both populations were approximately 90 percent Caucasian.

Aspirations to top management were measured in both samples by the item: "If you had to choose, which of the following levels in an organization would you most like to work in?" The possible responses were top management, middle management, lower management, and rank and file. A three-month test-retest reliability check of this measure on a subsample of 299 yielded $r = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$ (Powell and Butterfield, 1981).

Gender identity was measured by the Short Bem Sex-Role Inventory (short BSRI, Bem, 1981) in 1999 and the longer, original version of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI, Bem, 1974) in 1976-1977. The Short BSRI contains ten stereotypically masculine characteristics (e.g. defend my own beliefs, independent, assertive), ten stereotypically feminine characteristics (e.g. sympathetic, understanding, warm), and ten neutral characteristics (e.g. conceited, conscientious, tactful). Responses were self-ratings on these items using seven-point scales (1 = never or almost never true, 7 = always or almost always true). The original BSRI contained all of the items in the Short BSRI but contained twice as many items in each category. Only those items appearing in the Short BSRI were used in analyses of 1976-1977 data and 1999 data in the present study. Masculinity and femininity gender identity scores were calculated as the average of scores on the masculine and feminine items in the Short BSRI. The coefficient alpha was 0.82 in the 1999 sample (0.85 in the 1976-1977 sample) for the masculinity score and 0.088 in the 1999 sample (0.87 in the 1976-1977 sample) for the femininity score. The Pearson correlation between masculinity and femininity was $r = 0.03$, n.s. in the 1999 sample ($r = 0.06$, n.s. in the 1976-1977 sample).

Results

Only 4 percent of respondents in the combined samples chose the lower management or rank and file responses to the aspirations to top management measure, whereas 65 percent chose top management and 31 percent chose middle management. Due to their relatively small numbers, respondents who chose lower management or rank and file were not included in the final analyses. Accordingly, the aspirations to top management measure was recoded to indicate whether the remaining 986 respondents aspired to top management (coded 1) or not (coded 0). Table I summarizes responses to the recoded aspirations measure and masculinity and femininity scores for the 986 respondents included in further analyses.

To test H1, we performed hierarchical logistic regression analysis to determine the influence of predictor variables on the recoded dichotomous aspirations to top management measure for data collected in 1999. We first regressed aspirations to top management on the main effects variables of masculinity, femininity, gender (1 = male, 2 = female), and population (1 = undergraduate business student, 2 = parttime graduate business student). Next, we entered the two-way interaction between gender and population into the regression

equation. We calculated the change in pseudo R² as each group of variables was entered into the regression model and pseudo R² for the full model using the formula recommended by Aldrich and Nelson (1984). For comparison purposes, the same analysis was performed on data collected in 1976-1977.

Table II presents results of separate logistic regression analyses for the 1999 and 1976-1977 samples. Main effects variables explained a significant amount of variance in aspirations to top management in the 1999 sample ($\Delta R^2 = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$). In support of H1a, masculinity had a significantly positive effect on aspirations ($p < 0.001$). However, contrary to H1b, femininity did not influence aspirations. In support of H1c, gender had a significant effect on aspirations to top management ($p < 0.05$); male respondents (81 percent) were more likely to aspire to top management than female respondents

[IMAGE TABLE] Captioned as: Table I

(67 percent). The interaction term did not explain a significant amount of additional variance in aspirations. Results for the 1999 sample were similar to those for the 1976-1977 sample, except that femininity had a significantly negative effect on aspirations to top management in the 1976-1977 sample.

To test H2, we performed hierarchical logistic regression analysis on data from the combined samples. We first regressed aspirations to top management on masculinity, femininity, gender, population, and date of data collection (1 = 1976-1977, 2 = 1999). Next, we computed a model that included the two-way interactions and three-way interactions between gender, population, and date of data collection and examined whether the interaction terms made a significant contribution to the regression model.

Table III presents results of logistic regression analysis for the combined 1999 and 1976-1977 samples. Main effects variables explained a significant amount of variance in aspirations to top management ($\Delta R^2 = 0.10$, $p < 0.001$). Masculinity had a significantly positive effect on aspirations ($p < 0.001$), whereas femininity did not influence aspirations. Gender had a significant effect on aspirations ($p < 0.01$); male respondents (73 percent) were more likely to aspire to top management than female respondents (58 percent). Further, the date of data collection had a significant effect on aspirations ($p < 0.01$); respondents in the 1999 sample (75 percent) were more likely to aspire to top management than those in the 1976-1977 sample (64 percent). However, the two-way and three-way interactions did not explain a significant amount of additional variance in aspirations beyond that explained by the main effects variables. In particular, contrary to H2, the interaction between gender and date of data collection did not affect aspirations, indicating that the gender difference in aspirations to top management did not decrease over time.

[IMAGE TABLE] Captioned as: Table II

[IMAGE TABLE] Captioned as: Table III

Separate logistic regression analyses were performed for female and male respondents to explore whether their aspirations to top management were subject to different influences (Table IV). The interaction between population

and date of data collection was the only interaction term included in these analyses. For female respondents, main effects variables explained a significant amount of variance in aspirations to top management ($\Delta R^2 = 0.10$, $p < 0.001$). Masculinity had a significantly positive effect on aspirations to top management ($p < 0.001$), whereas femininity did not affect aspirations. Women's aspirations to top management did not differ according to the nature of the population or the date of data collection. Instead, the interaction between population and date of data collection explained a significant amount of additional variance in women's aspirations to top management beyond that explained by other variables ($\Delta R^2 = 0.01$, $p < 0.05$). The proportion of female undergraduate business students who aspired to top management significantly increased from 49 percent in 1976-1977 to 73 percent in 1999 ($X^2 = 12.84$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, the proportion of female part-time graduate business students who aspired to top management decreased from 72 percent in 1976-1977 to 59 percent in 1999, although not significantly so ($X^2 = 0.98$, n.s.).

For male respondents, the main effects variables explained a significant amount of variance in aspirations to top management ($\Delta R^2 = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$). Masculinity had a significantly positive effect on aspirations ($p < 0.001$), whereas femininity did not influence aspirations. Men's aspirations did not differ according to the nature of the population. However, the date of data collection had a significant effect on aspirations ($p < 0.01$); the proportion of men who aspired to top management increased from 69 percent in 1976-1977 to 81 percent in 1999. The interaction between population and date of data collection did not explain a significant amount of additional variance in men's aspirations.

Discussion

According to analysis of the two sets of data collected over 20 years apart from two populations that differed in age, education, and work experience, gender identity predicted aspirations to top management. As hypothesized, both women and men who described themselves as possessing a greater amount of masculine characteristics were more likely to aspire to top management. Also as hypothesized, women were less likely to aspire to top management than men. However, contrary to our hypothesis, femininity did not predict aspirations to top management in newly collected data. Also contrary to our hypothesis, the gender difference in aspirations to top management was not smaller in data collected for this study than in data we collected earlier (Powell and Butterfield, 1981).

[IMAGE TABLE] Captioned as: Table IV

These findings indicate that a self-concept that incorporates an abundance of masculine characteristics - exhibited in stereotypes of both males (Deaux and Kite, 1993; Deaux and LaFrance, 1998) and managers (Powell et al., 2002) - was associated with aspirations to top management. Such stereotypes put women who are interested in managerial careers at a distinct disadvantage by forcing them to deal with the perceived incongruity between the managerial role and their gender role. If women conform to the female gender role by displaying predominantly feminine characteristics, they fail to meet the perceived requirements of the managerial role, which calls for mostly masculine characteristics. However, if they compete with men for managerial positions and conform to the managerial role by displaying predominantly masculine characteristics, they fail to meet the requirements of the female

gender role, which calls for deference to the authority of men (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Rudman and Glick, 2001). The mismatch between the managerial role and the female gender role ultimately may lead to discrimination against women when decisions are made about top management positions (Heilman, 2001), contributing to the existence of a glass ceiling (Davidson and Cooper, 1992; Powell, 1999; Powell and Graves, 2003).

When women are dissatisfied with the opportunities for advancement available to them in male-dominated hierarchies, they may start their own businesses. They choose such a role because they desire to work in a context in which they have control over expectations for managerial behavior set at the "top". The proportion of privately-held firms owned by women has increased considerably in recent years (Allen and Truman, 1993; Moore, 1999). Women who run their own businesses do not show up in published statistics about the proportion of women in top management, because such statistics typically focus on large publicly-held firms. However, women business owners are in effect the top management of their own firms.

When such women are still in corporate hierarchies, they may express lower aspirations to top management than women who have less personal experience with bumping their heads against a glass ceiling. This difference in perspective may account for the difference between results for female undergraduate business students and female part-time MBAs. The younger, less experienced population of female undergraduate students who were preparing for their future careers may have been more influenced by social trends such as the increased proportion of women in the managerial ranks, especially in top management positions (Catalyst, 2000), and the US women's movement (Melton-Stanley and Howard, 2000), as were the young women in Shu and Marini's (1998) study, and raised their aspirations accordingly. In comparison, the older, more experienced population of female part-time graduate business students who were further along in their careers may have become disillusioned over time by the barriers to women's advancement to top management positions that remain in place. They were better situated, more seasoned, and thereby more likely to understand what it takes to attain top management ranks and what top management jobs entail than female undergraduate business students. Perhaps their greater awareness of, and proximity to a glass ceiling offset the influence of social trends that appeared to favor women in their aspirations to top management.

In addition, top management jobs, especially those in large organizations, are generally unappealing to individuals who seek to balance their work and family lives despite the enhanced compensation and status. Women and men tend to use different kinds of measures in assessing their own career success. Men rely more on objective measures such as managerial level and salary that emphasize "getting ahead" in organizations, which could account for their higher aspirations to top management in this study. Women rely more on subjective measures that reflect their own satisfaction with various aspects of their work and non-work lives, including opportunities for advancement as well as work-family balance (Powell and Mainiero, 1992; Sturges, 1999). Female part-time graduate business students may have been particularly conscious of their desire to strike such a balance. In contrast, female undergraduate business students may not have anticipated that balancing work and family would become an issue in their lives if they were to attain top management positions.

Whatever the reason, any decline in the interest of women who are on managerial

career tracks in holding top management jobs will act as a constraint on future growth in the proportion of women in top management, which in turn may suppress women's aspirations to top management in the future. Organizations need to work harder to address barriers to in-career women's advancement to top management. Also, the providing of family supports by organizations (e.g. flexible scheduling, child and elder care assistance) that make it easier for women with family responsibilities to hold managerial positions may increase the proportion of in-career women who are interested in holding top management positions (Powell, 1999).

This study was subject to several limitations. First, although it used the same measure of aspirations to top management as Powell and Butterfield (1981), this single-item measure was rather unsophisticated for studying such a complex issue. Second, respondents' definitions of what constitutes "top management" may have varied, making it difficult to surmise exactly what those who said they would most like to work in top management had in mind. Indeed, definitions of top management vary from company to company and may have expanded over time to include positions at lower levels where there tend to be more women (Powell, 1999). Third, the proportions of women in the samples from the two populations in the earlier data set were smaller than the equivalent proportions in the later data set, which may have led to distorted comparisons between the two data sets. However, these differences in proportions mirrored reality, as the proportion of US women earning both undergraduate and graduate business degrees increased considerably between collection of the two data sets (US Department of Education, 2002). Fourth, although we speculate about the cognitive processes by which individuals develop aspirations to top management, we did not directly examine such processes.

In conclusion, regardless of social trends regarding the career preparation and workforce utilization of women relative to men, both women and men in our samples who saw themselves as possessing an abundance of masculine characteristics were more likely to aspire to top management. If high masculinity is associated with high aspirations to top management (as the present study suggests) and individuals with high aspirations to top management are most likely to attain top management positions (a worthy topic for future research), masculinity will continue to prevail in the executive suite, no matter whether it is occupied by women or men.

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Note

1 Bern (1974) used the term sex-role identity. However, given the evolution in usage of the terms "sex" and "gender" since then (Caplan and Caplan, 1994; Korabik, 1999; Unger, 2001), the term "gender identity" was used in this study.

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