

Women's perceptions of professional advancement may influence career outcomes

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(Phys.org)—The underrepresentation of women in positions of power in organizations is well documented, but addressing the causes and finding remedies is complicated by a number of factors. Most of the research into workplace gender disparities has fallen into two broad categories: demand-side factors and supply-side factors.

In sociology, researchers refer to demand-side factors as those that comprise the differences in perceptions and behavior exhibited by men and women that contribute to gendered outcomes. For instance, many

studies have documented the higher likelihood that men will engage in aggressive or competitive ventures that are likely to lead to professional advancement.

Supply-side factors are those pertaining to influences within the workplace environment, comprising institutional barriers for women based on the ways that men and women are treated. For example, studies have demonstrated that women are more likely to encounter challenges, skepticism, and criticism of their abilities than men. In a set of studies reported in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, a group of researchers at Harvard Business School explored a supply-side factor not previously examined: male vs. female preferences for achieving high-level positions in the workplace as represented by their stated life goals.

"The goals people set for themselves are a powerful motivator of their current behavior," the authors write. "In addition to being driven by their beliefs about what will make them happy in life, people's goals are determined by the way they imagine their future to be (e.g., having a certain job or a specific set of relationships)."

The authors hypothesized that women were likely to express a greater number of goals than men, and more diverse life goals than men. Additionally, they predicted that a smaller proportion of women's goals would be related to advancement at work.

They designed a set of studies with a large number of U.S. participants recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Participants across the studies were asked to list their life goals, to evaluate their current levels of advancement within the workplace and predict how far they could realistically climb; and asked to rate the likelihood of achieving both positive and negative outcomes as a result of professional advancement.

Across a total of nine studies and over 4,000 participants, the researchers

found that by comparison with the men, women had a higher number of life goals, as predicted. Additionally, women placed less importance on power-related goals and associated more negative outcomes with high-power positions. The women also expressed a reduced interest in taking advantage of professional advancement compared to men.

The researchers note that identification of the origins of these differences is beyond the scope of the current study, adding, "Our findings may be the result of biological gender differences, learned preferences that have developed in response to cultural norms and gender-based discrimination, or both." Additionally, they note that it is possible that the men and women in the study are correctly predicting the outcomes they would experience with the attainment of professional advancement, and equally possible that the [women](#) are overestimating negative consequences while the men are underestimating them.

The authors conclude, "Women may not assume high-level positions in organizations—at least in part—because they desire other things as well."

More information: "Compared to men, women view professional advancement as equally attainable, but less desirable." *PNAS* 2015; published ahead of print September 21, 2015, [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1502567112](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1502567112)

Abstract

Women are underrepresented in most high-level positions in organizations. Though a great deal of research has provided evidence that bias and discrimination give rise to and perpetuate this gender disparity, in the current research we explore another explanation: men and women view professional advancement differently, and their views affect their decisions to climb the corporate ladder (or not). In studies 1 and 2, when asked to list their core goals in life, women listed more life

goals overall than men, and a smaller proportion of their goals related to achieving power at work. In studies 3 and 4, compared to men, women viewed high-level positions as less desirable yet equally attainable. In studies 5–7, when faced with the possibility of receiving a promotion at their current place of employment or obtaining a high-power position after graduating from college, women and men anticipated similar levels of positive outcomes (e.g., prestige and money), but women anticipated more negative outcomes (e.g., conflict and tradeoffs). In these studies, women associated high-level positions with conflict, which explained the relationship between gender and the desirability of professional advancement. Finally, in studies 8 and 9, men and women alike rated power as one of the main consequences of professional advancement. Our findings reveal that men and women have different perceptions of what the experience of holding a high-level position will be like, with meaningful implications for the perpetuation of the gender disparity that exists at the top of organizational hierarchies

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