

Stereotypes and female careers

It remains a mystery why so few women reach senior management positions or become managers in large firms in spite of the fact that, in many countries, women have overtaken men in terms of educational qualifications and been full-time labor force participants for decades. This is also true in the ‘female-friendly’ Nordic countries (Albrecht et al., 2015). The economic literature indicates that the glass ceiling effect is at least as strong or even stronger in the Scandinavian countries than anywhere else in Europe.

Several explanations have been suggested for the observed gender gap, ranging from pure discrimination among employers to differences in human capital and ability, lack of role models and working time flexibility, and work-life balance problems. In recent years, a growing body of literature focusing on how female employees’ preferences differ from those of their male colleagues has suggested that part of the gender gap could be explained by women’s unwillingness to compete for higher positions, their stronger risk aversion, and weaker taste for competition. Thus, the research in this area (see the survey by Bertrand (2011)) indicates that men and women exhibit distinct preferences and behaviors, and this may provide some explanation for their differing career paths.

However, most of these studies are based on data from lab experiments that typically use university students as subjects. One of the strengths of lab experiments is that they are able to uncover individuals’ behaviors with regard to interpersonal relations (such as unconscious discrimination) which are otherwise difficult to observe. The extent to which the results of these studies hold outside the lab may, however, be weakened by the fact that individuals in managerial positions are likely to constitute a highly selected group. Consequently, their behaviors are not easily mimicked in a laboratory setting with students as subjects. Indeed, based on a survey of Swedish managers and a representative sample of the Swedish population, Adams and Funk (2012) demonstrated that there are significant differences between executives and the general population with respect to risk attitudes and other behavioral characteristics. For instance, they found that female executives are less risk-averse than their male peers, which stands in stark contrast to the results found for the general Swedish population and in several lab experiments where men have been observed to be less risk-averse.

In our recent paper (Eriksson, Smith & Smith, 2017), we study to what extent gender stereotyping and self-stereotyping can explain the gender gap in careers. We do this by using a survey of around 3,000 managers in Danish private-sector companies. The managers range from lower-level managers to CEOs, all members of a central organization for managers called “Ledernes Hovedorganisation”. The respondents’ gender stereotypes are measured from their answers to survey questions. The questions aim at obtaining information about what the respondents think characterizes a successful manager. These data are supplemented with measures of the same respondents’ beliefs about their own managerial ability. We use them to describe the prevalence of gender stereotypes in the sample of managerial employees and how they vary with characteristics of the respondents and the firms they are employed in.

In order to obtain a measure of stereotyping, we asked the respondents: “*To which extent do you consider the following traits to be important for a successful manager?*” The respondents were asked to assign points to 11 traits on a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being very important. The 11 traits have been used in international studies of stereotyping and are classified as either mainly masculine (determined, in control, willing to take risks, competitive, self-confident),

feminine (socially competent, dialogue-oriented, helpful), or gender-neutral (result-oriented, visionary, innovative). Based on these measures, we condensed the information into a stereotyping index ranging from -1 (perfectly female gender stereotyping) to +1 (perfectly masculine stereotyping). Perfectly masculine stereotyping (i.e., an index value of +1) means that the respondent assigned 5 points to all masculine traits and 1 to all other traits.

We find significant differences between male and female managers with respect to gender stereotyping. Male managers tend to confirm the hypothesis ‘think manager – think male’, i.e., a successful manager is a man/has masculine traits. However, for the CEOs, the picture is different. Female CEOs tend to rate “determined”, “competitive”, “self-confident” and “in control” higher than their male peers. A common assumption is that younger cohorts have less gender stereotyping attitudes compared to older cohorts, but this is not the case. For women, it is somewhat the opposite. Young and older cohorts have more gender stereotyping attitudes than middle-aged female managers, while for men there are no significant age patterns. Thus, gender stereotypes will not disappear as time goes by and young cohorts enter the labor market!

Do company policies related to gender make a difference? Our results indicate that in firms where the managers respond that the firm actively strives to have a good work-life balance, there is less masculine gender stereotyping. This may reflect that these firms actively strive to mitigate stereotyping behaviors. It could also be that managerial employees with less stereotyping attitudes choose to work in these firms. With the data available to us, we cannot tell which mechanism is more important.

As for beliefs about own managerial abilities, male and female managers have ‘traditional’ self-stereotyping attitudes; women rate themselves higher on feminine traits, such as social competencies, dialog orientation, and helpfulness, and lower on masculine traits, while the opposite pattern is observed for male managers. Again, female CEOs are different: They tend to rate themselves significantly higher on masculine items and lower on female traits.

So, do gender stereotyping attitudes or self-stereotyping attitudes matter for female careers, and are these attitudes a main explanation for the observed gender gap in top executive as well as board of director positions? Our study cannot provide the final answer, since it is based on a cross-section, i.e., a survey conducted at a given point in time (May 2014). However, more research is clearly needed in this area, and a repetition of the survey will show the way forward, as it will allow us to study career development and how it relates to stereotyping.

Furthermore, if gender stereotyping and biased ‘beliefs’ about female productivity are widespread among decision-makers responsible for recruitment, promotion decisions, and subjective performance evaluations of subordinates, it may explain, in part, why women are less likely to be promoted, although female managers tend to have better or at least as good observable competencies as their male peers (see, for instance, Smith, Smith & Verner (2013)). This effect is intensified if female managers on the bottom rung of the career ladder are self-stereotyping and lack self-confidence. In fact, a recent survey performed by Eurobarometer (the EU Commission, 2012) shows that the Danish population, men as well as women, have the most skeptical view among all EU countries with respect to women’s career ambitions and willingness to take on the same job responsibilities as their male peers. Thus, more research on the determinants of gender stereotyping behavior and the consequences for careers should be high on the agenda – in particular in Denmark.

Literature

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About the Brief

This CCP research brief is written by Nina Smith (Aarhus University) and Tor Eriksson (Aarhus University) and is based on a presentation at the CCP fall meeting 2017. For further information, please do not hesitate to contact the author on nsmith@econ.au.dk.