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ABSTRACT

Women are key contributors to an organizational environment, though the stereotypic perceptions about powerful women are common and often negative. Factors such as wage gap differentials between men and women imply that women are not of the same value to an organization's success as men. Many empirical studies have examined perceptions about women in positions such as managers, CEOs, supervisors or directors. These studies have not, however, focused on how early life environments, and variables related to an individual's upbringing, might influence the self-perceptions of these women and the roles they play in the workplace. The purpose of this research is to identify 1) perceptions about women in today's workplace; 2) how individuals' early life experiences correlate with their later perceptions about women in the workplace, and 3) how early life influences affect women as organizational leaders in groups and dyads. As such, it is hypothesized that this correlational study will discover that early life conditions, such as the quality of education, household income, and demographic data from both male and female genders will influence common attitudes about women in the workplace. The present research also aims to help employees become more aware of company perceptions and to improve gender communication in the workplace. Examining the workplace perceptions of men and women formed by early

life influences, and specifically, researching how women work as leaders in an organizational setting can provide information that will be useful in corporate environments. Significant early life predictors can also be used as data for families and schools raising young women to become leaders in the corporate world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Influence of Early Life Conditions on Social Perceptions of Women in the Workplace

Women are born into a social system that is already in place for them at birth. Gender stereotypes not only characterize how women are expected to behave, but also offer a model of how women are to be treated in an organizational environment. In *Our Separate Ways*, Ella Bell and Stella M. Nkomo (2001) described how gender classification can oppress women in the workplace. The authors identified "gender" as an elemental term that serves as a role classification in society: "To be gendered…is to incorporate societal orientations about roles for men and women and the relationships between them" (p. 15). Gender identity and social constructs affect employees' perceptions about women in leadership positions in the corporate environment. The present research examines professional women's self-perceptions and how such perceptions are formed from their early life influences. This study focuses on 1) common perceptions about women in today's workplace; 2) how individuals' early life experiences correlate with their adult perceptions of women in the workplace, and 3) how early life influences affect women as organizational leaders in groups and dyads.

Perceptions about Women in Organizations

Perceptions about women in today's workplace have been examined by working women themselves. Clinite (2000) asked 28 women to define what "power" meant to them, and "how (power) shapes their work experiences." Clinite (2000) found that the respondents had different perceptions of their

own power, professionalism, and success in the workplace. The respondents formed personal definitions of success, professional behavior and what it meant to ultimately have power in the corporate environment (Clinite, 2000). The study suggested that although women had their own definitions of power and success, their perspectives/values did not impede their ability to fit into the organizational culture and to gain leadership roles. Clinite's (2000) research gives us insight on women's values, but it does not include a male perspective of women into the workplace, or how male definitions of power and success compare to those of their female counterparts.

In 2007 Grewal conducted a study that evaluated women's perceived opportunities in a corporate environment in five specific situations. Grewal (2007) found that women perceived more opportunities when favorable, egalitarian environments exist in the corporate setting, and that they were more likely to experience opportunities for success and promotion in democratic leadership settings. These situations were also seen as favorable when a balanced representation of both male and female professionals were present in the organizational environment. These findings also suggested that women are more likely to experience professional opportunities when they are part of the decision-making process, as opposed to environments with autocratic leadership or male dominant networks (2007). Grewal's study also offered data on men's perceptions of their opportunities in the work environment.

Men and women often have considerably different perceptions of a shared professional environment. In "Through a gendered lens? Male and female executives' representations of one another," Olsson and Walker (2003) described both men and women's views of one another in the work environment. Male leaders reported that they worked in an environment where gender was largely irrelevant, and they valued the idea of a meritocracy in which an individual's success is based solely on performance and achievement (Olsen & Walker, 2003). In the article "Why isn't better education giving women more power?" (Ruta, 2013) posited that while behaviors such as studying, careful preparation and receiving higher grades may seem to give women an academic

advantage, these behaviors may not be helpful in the workplace.

The suggestion that women have equal opportunity in a meritocracy may be unfounded. Olsson and Walker (2003) reported that women recognized meritocracies within their organizations, but felt they were forced to work harder than their male counterparts in order to succeed. Some women reported that they had to almost become "invaluable" to the corporation in order to attain success (2003).

Early Life Influences on Perceptions in the Workplace

Early life influences such as education and household income are central in creating perceptions about women in the organizational environment. Previous research by Hildenbrand (2006) has noted that perceptions of traditional gender roles begin in the home. Hildenbrand (2006) suggested that both men and women who learn traditional gender roles in childhood retain those beliefs in the workplace, and showed that people are resistant to changing such views (2006).

Hildebrand (2006) surveyed some 200 university students consisting of both male and female respondents. His research uncovered a significant difference between male and female responses to questions such as whether women are lacking the emotional stability to fulfill high positions within government (Hildenbrand, 2006). Men rated this as a 3.30, suggesting a *neutral* response to the question, as compared to women, whose responses averaged 1.78, or *strongly disagreeing* with the statement (2006). These data highlight the differences between men and women's attitudes about women in leadership positions.

Sipe, Johnson, and Fisher (2009) examined university students' perceptions and found that students generally thought gender discrimination to be of little importance and believed that work environments were equal for both sexes (2009). This finding may be seen as both troubling and positive. Students may have a more modern, positive outlook on workforce culture, which can offer hope for the future, but their attitudes may also lead to a lack of interest in this issue because of limited knowledge or misinformation. Sipe, Johnson, and Fisher (2009) reported

that female participants were much more aware of and likely to anticipate gender discrimination in the work environment. Thirty-three percent (33%) of the women surveyed perceived pay inequality to be a discriminatory issue, whereas only twenty percent (20%) of males believed female compensation might be unfair; men and women also disagreed on the negative impact of gender discrimination. Sixty-five percent (65%) of male participants anticipated that gender bias or obstacles in the workplace *would not* be a problem, as opposed to fifty-two percent (52%) of female respondents (2009).

A notable difference of perceived pay equity was also shown in this research: eighty-one percent (81%) of males believed that there would not be a difference in women's pay, while sixty-seven percent (67%) of women thought there would be no difference between women and men's pay (2009). Sipe, Johnson, and Fisher's research (2009) did not offer explanations for *why* university students think this way (i.e. influences from home or schooling), or how these perceptions affect women in their professional environment.

Torres (2013) examined early life influences and how they affect social attitudes about women in the workforce. Torres (2013) suggested that female respondents who sought equality in the workplace were raised and supported by mothers who were highly educated. In addition, Torres (2013) also noted that:

> In terms of women's traditional attitudes towards family and occupational roles, respondents whose mothers were employed full-time during the respondents' first 16 years of life were significantly less likely to endorse a traditional orientation toward family and occupational roles, compared to daughters whose mothers were unemployed or employed part-time (2013, p. 39).

These data suggested that women who were brought up by mothers who work full time were more likely to value gender equality in the home and in the workplace. Still, this study did not seek participants from both genders or examine their perceptions about the opposite sex (2013).

Effects of Perceptions About Women's Success and Opportunities Within Organizations

Perceptions about women in today's workplace, and the role of early life experiences on those perceptions, significantly affect women in the workplace. It is crucial to understand how men and women's perceptions affect presumed workplace opportunities, including leadership roles and the creation of gender-blind environments in which women have equal opportunities for success.

In an effort to explain the effect that early life experiences have on men and women's views, Percupchick (2011) conducted a qualitative study that examined the perceptions of both female and male leaders in the workplace. His findings (2011) show that "the behavioral and cultural norms in organizational life are still hurdles and women are often less comfortable in male-dominated organizations where they are still subject to gender stereotyping, despite efforts to eliminate it" (p. 36). Percupchick (2011) also noted the differences between men and women's early experiences in terms of education. He reported that although female leaders obtained more graduate degrees than their male counterparts, women did not receive the same amount of training and mentoring as their male peers (2011). Percupchick's (2011) research did not examine the family variables that may have affected these outcomes.

Skinner (2006) questioned four hundred men and women who reported no perceptions of gender difference or qualification for the workplace. Skinner (2006) measured his respondents on their perceptions of workplace qualifications with a quantitative survey method and found that women perceived mentoring as positive at a variable of 3.27 average, while a slightly lower 3.07 average of males thought a "female friendly" climate had a positive impact on the workplace. "Valence," or the anticipated value of outcomes in relation to job performance, also showed a notable difference between both genders, with women having a slightly lower feeling of valence (Skinner, 2006). Women also consistently reported feeling less confident about their ability to gain leadership positions and promotional opportunities in their

respective working environments (Skinner, 2006). Although Skinner found that gendered climates had an important impact on elements such as "fit, motivation, and advancement, the main piece of this research that was not supported was the impact of gender" (Skinner, 2006, p. 187).

HYPOTHESES

Previous studies have explored perceptions held by both men and women about women in occupational environments. The studies discussed above also examined university students' attitudes about factors influencing employment success for women. There has yet to be a study of how early life experiences influence these perceptions and how these influences affect both men and women's perceptions of success and values in the workplace. It is expected that men and women will have different views about women in workplace environments. I hypothesize that the current research will show that women who have grown up in female single-parent homes will be more likely to seek managerial positions in the corporate environment.

Expected Results

The following hypotheses guided the research:

> *Hypothesis 1*. Women who grew up in traditional dual-parent (male/female) households will either hold, or be more determined to hold, managerial positions within an organization. This hypothesis stems from opposing views in Hildenbrand's (2006) study in which men and women who grew up in traditional homes were more likely to perceive or believe in more traditional roles in the workplace.
> *Hypothesis 2*. Women who grew up in single-parent (female) households will be more likely to aspire to managerial positions. It is expected that women who grew up with single mothers

will have the perception that they can succeed in the workplace, as shown by Torres (2013). ***Hypothesis 3.*** Men will perceive that they are better paid than women and as a result will be more satisfied with their pay. This stems from both men and women having little knowledge of the salaries of their peers or coworkers. This hypothesis is derived from research by Olsson and Walker (2003).

METHOD

Participants

Thirty-five businessmen and women who were currently employed in an organizational setting were recruited for the purposes of this study. Corporate employees were recruited because they hold diverse levels of rank and position within the company, ranging from entry-level positions to higher leadership roles. Gaining data from the male population was vital; including males in the sample offered the opportunity to obtain valuable data on their perceptions on women in the workplace environment. Data from this population were compared across sex and age groups.

Measures

A qualitative survey was distributed to participants. Participants were asked to answer questions seeking (1) demographic information (e.g., age, current position within an organization, level of education, job history); (2) early life variables (e.g., income and economic background, the frequency of conversations about gender roles in the home, and what participants' academic majors and future plans were while in early educational settings; (3) perceptions about what roles are appropriate for women in the workplace; (4) work/family conflict; and (5) thoughts about women in positions of superiority within an organization. Although the survey contained multiple questions and scenarios in relation to women in the workplace, the target was to collect data on demographic information, early life variables, and perceptual feelings about women in the workplace.

Procedure

The survey was administered and completed using online resources such as Sona, Linkedin.com and Surveymonkey.com. Participants were sent a Survey Monkey link that directed them to the survey. Participants were informed that the study was voluntary, and a consent form appeared as the first page. A Likert scale ranging from *highly agree* to *highly disagree* was employed. Completed surveys were saved by Survey Monkey and sequentially entered into an Excel file, where statistical data were measured through a linear regression method. Institutional Review Board permission to carry out the procedure was granted by Eastern Michigan University.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1.

Women who grew up in dual-parent households will either hold, or be more determined to hold, managerial positions within an organization. This hypothesis stems from opposing views in Hildenbrand's (2006) study in which men and women who grew up in traditional homes were more likely to perceive or believe in more traditional roles in the workplace.

Survey data indicate that forty-three percent (43%) of women who grew up in a dual-parent household aspired to be in a leadership role within the next 10 years. More than twenty-eight percent (28.5%) of women who grew up in a dual-parent household did not want to be in a leadership position within the next 10 years. The chi-square analysis indicated that these are not significantly different proportions.

Hypothesis 2.

Women who grew up in single-parent households will be more likely to aspire to hold managerial positions. It is expected that women who grew up with single mothers will have the perception that they can succeed in the workplace, as shown by

Torres (2013).

Nineteen percent (19%) of women who grew up in a single-parent household aspired to be in a leadership position within the next 10 years. More than nine percent (9.5%) of women who were raised in a single-parent household did not aspire to be in a leadership position within the next 10 years. The chi-square analysis indicates that these are not significantly different proportions. Chi square (1) = .081, p = .776.

Hypothesis 3.

Men will perceive that they are better paid than women and as a result will be more satisfied with their pay. This stems from both men and women having little knowledge of the salaries of their peers or coworkers. This hypothesis is derived from research by Olsson and Walker (2003).

Men reported that they were better paid than women (Means = 3.36 VS. 2.86 respectively; t (33) = 1.432, p = .161). Women said they were more satisfied with their compensation than men (Means = 3.35 VS. 2.77 respectively; t (31) = -1.690, p = .101).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to examine how early life conditions and upbringing correlate with perceptions about women's overall satisfaction and desire for leadership in the workplace. The effects of household demographics and conversations in the home about corporate leadership were researched in this study.

Results indicate that women who grew up in a dual-parent household were more likely to aspire to leadership positions in the workplace (43%), compared to the percentage of women who grew up in a single-parent household and aspired to be in a leadership position within their organization (19%). Men reported that they were better paid than women, although women reported that they were more satisfied with their pay.

Understanding early life conditions and how these variables affect a woman's role in the workplace continues to

address matters of gender equality in the corporate environment. By looking at earlier life indicators, families and organizations can begin to recognize factors that lead to higher job satisfaction and overall professional success.

Limitations of this current research included of the small pool of respondents (35), limited data and population demographics. A survey was used in order to gather qualitative data. Limitations to conducting a survey consisted of not knowing whether all questions were answered truthfully. Also, the survey was administered to a wide range of business professionals, as opposed to a more specific pool composed of professionals in a certain industry. The differences in possible respondent pools could have produced different results.

Aspects within organizational culture, including the factors that influence women's opportunities for promotion and success workplace, were not addressed in the survey. Such data may produce an unknown variable within the results. More specifically, some organizations in which participants work may offer women greater opportunities for leadership and advancement than others. These limitations may lead to future research that will produce different or supporting results.

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