Women in Male-Dominated Careers: Interactions Between Early Career Experiences of Tokenism and Future Career Trajectories

Laura Gerlach  
Kenan-Flagler Business School - BSBA 2020

Abstract

While the number of women in the workforce continues to increase, research suggests their mere presence does not necessarily equate to influence within organizations. Research also highlights a culture of psychological gender inequality which permeates many organizations. My research aims to build on this foundation of gender inequality research by linking early career ‘token’ status to future career decision making. To do so, I developed a survey targeting young professionals (3-10 years out of college), which assessed gender inequality measures (tokenism, ‘bro’ culture, acceptance, inclusion, etc.) in connection to future career trajectory decisions (planned pivots, gender consideration of new organizations, industry switches, etc.). The objective of my research is to identify linkages between these two areas that may increase our understanding of potential best practices for future development in inclusive organizational culture.

Methodology

I chose to take multiple steps to carry out my methodology by first conducting interviews and then developing and disseminating a survey which led to the creation of the variable framework found below.

I conducted a few pilot interviews of Kenan-Flagler MBA students to assess the importance of the topics of my research. I developed a survey to capture a broad variety of people’s thoughts on the issue.

Conclusion

I had a few key thoughts to share upon the conclusion of this project:

A strong need for positive, forward thinking mindsets for those across all stages of the career pipeline exists. Research provided an important foundation of knowledge which organizations can now use to implement effective programs and support their employees.

Topic Importance and Background

I wanted to give an overview of my personal interest in this topic as well as to give an overview of the findings of preexisting literature.

Hypotheses

I developed two hypotheses to inform my research which considered possible links between gender makeup in a first job and gender balance preferences in new jobs.

H1: Gender makeup predicts gender balance preferences

H2: Gender makeup predicts gender balance preferences through the experience of tokenism

Data Analysis

To complete my data analysis, I conducted a basic assessment of descriptive statistics of variables and then a one-way ANOVA which led to a mediation analysis to assess each variable independently.

• Assessed Descriptive Variables
  • Condition 1: Women in male dominated environments
  • Condition 2: Women in mixed environments
  • Condition 3: Men in male dominated environments

• Conducted a One-Way ANOVA,
  • n = 62, p < .01 when comparing Condition 1 and Condition 3
  • n = 62, p = not significant when comparing Condition 1 and Condition 2

• Conducted mediation analysis to assess independent variables
  • Found support for hypothesis 2 when comparing Condition 1 to both 2 and 3

Results

I found three key results from this research which I wanted to highlight.

1) Women in male dominated environments saw themselves more as tokens than the other two groups.

2) Women in male dominated environments were more likely to consider gender balance of new teams compared with the other two groups.

3) Differences between the two groups of females only occurred when women in male dominated environments characterized themselves as tokens.

Recommendations

I created a sample framework which I hope can serve as a guide for firms and organizations especially as they move forward with decision making in this space.

Steps for Organizational Success

1. Identify
   Create enhanced mentorship/sponsorship programs between people with similar paths and/or common interests across all levels of a firm.

2. Illuminate
   Create a best practices guide to set standards for performance – make it clear these are firm wide expectations and make inclusion a factor in performance.

3. Institute
   As a barometer to assess program efficacy, disseminate pre and post assessments to see if individuals/employees are receiving and retaining the desired information.

4. Illustrate
   Set higher level standards at an industry-wide level of treatment of all employees, including tokens, to contribute to elevated firm culture overall.

Acknowledgements

Shirin Melwani, Thesis Advisor
Patricia Harris, Thesi Class Professor
Owl Seizer Thesis Committee Reader
Elizabeth Dickinson, Thesis Committee Reader
My parents, other family, and friends who have supported me