Gender Differences in Job Challenge: A Matter of Task Allocation

Irene E. De Pater*, Annelies E. M. Van Vianen and Myriam N. Bechtoldt

Challenging job experiences are considered important prerequisites for management development and career success. Several researchers have suggested that women are given fewer challenging assignments than their male colleagues. To test this idea we performed two studies. The first examined possible gender differences in challenging job experiences at middle job levels. The results indicated that female employees had fewer challenging experiences in their jobs than their male counterparts. The second explored the proposition that differential assignment of challenging tasks to male and female subordinates underlies gender differences in job challenge. The results indeed suggest that supervisors’ task allocation decisions are not gender-blind and may result in women having fewer challenging job experiences than men.

Keywords: job challenge, gender, career, task allocation decisions, delegation

Promotions into higher organizational levels are important events in people’s work lives, and ‘going up in the world’ is more and more considered to be an absolute value in western society (Gattiker and Larwood, 1990). Individuals differ in their career attainments however, which renders career success a popular and important subject in management research and literature. One of the most striking examples of such differences is the disparity in career success between men and women, with women experiencing much less progression than men (Kirchmeyer, 2006).

Although many factors may influence individuals’ career success, the literature suggests that the extent to which individuals have challenging job experiences is one of the most important determinants of career development.
(Berlew and Hall, 1966; Woodall et al., 1997). Challenging experiences refer to situations in which existing tactics and routines are inadequate and new ways of dealing with the situation are required (Davies and Easterby-Smith, 1984). Both male and female managers consider challenging assignments pivotal for career advancement (Ragins et al., 1998; Van Velsor and Hughes, 1990). However, it is unclear whether men and women encounter the same amount of challenge, because few empirical studies have explored gender differences in challenging job experiences. Researchers who have addressed possible gender differences in challenging experiences have proposed that women would have fewer challenging job experiences due to the differential assignment of challenging tasks to male and female subordinates by their supervisors (Ohlott et al., 1994). To date, sparse research has actually examined the validity of this explanation. Thus, both the existence of gender differences in challenging job experiences and its origins have scarcely been explored empirically.

This is an unfortunate state of affairs. Firstly, to understand the persistence of gender inequality it is important to gain more insight in the latent processes in organizations that underlie the disadvantaged position of women on the labour market (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998). Secondly, an important reason for examining gendering practices is to seek opportunities to change them. The best way to deal with injustice in day-to-day practice is to make it visible (Poggio, 2006). Therefore, the aim of the current study was twofold. We examined whether gender differences in challenging job experiences exist at middle level jobs and we explored the differential assignment of challenging tasks to male and female middle level subordinates by their senior managers as a possible determinant of the proposed gender difference in job challenge.

Firstly, we briefly discuss the determinants of career success and the gender gap in career success. Thereafter, we describe research that stresses the importance of challenging experiences for individuals’ career success and factors that may influence the extent to which individuals have challenging experiences during their occupational years. These studies provide the rationale for the research described in this article.

**Determinants of career success and the gender gap in career success**

A central concern of career research is to identify factors that ‘lead some executives to be more successful in their careers than others’ (Judge et al., 1995, p. 485). A common observation is the underrepresentation of women in management positions. Overall, ‘the career experiences and advancement of women is different from those of men, with most studies finding that men advance faster, further, and with greater compensation’ (Phillips and Imhoff, 1997, p. 45). Researchers have used a wide range of variables to explain gender differences in career success. In general, two broad categories have been distinguished: organizational variables and individual variables.
The organizational variables that were consistently related to the gender gap in career success are, for instance, industry and occupation (Anker, 1998), the gender composition of an organization (Tharenou and Conroy, 1994) and informal social networks (Forret and Dougherty, 2004; Miller, 2004). Also, stereotypes and discrimination against women are commonly proposed explanations for women not advancing to senior level positions (Broadbridge, 1998; Gunkel et al., 2007; Martin, 2006; Newsome, 2003).

Individual variables that are proposed to impact the gender gap in career success can be grouped into three broad categories: traits, family status variables and human capital. Traits that are related to career success include, for instance, ambition (Judge et al., 1995), a proactive personality (Seibert et al., 1999) and emotional stability (Boudreau et al., 2001). However, women in managerial roles seem to have similar work goals (Gunkel et al., 2007), aspirations and other personality traits as their male counterparts (Morrison and Von Glinow, 1990) and women’s alleged lower skills, abilities and motivations have been ruled out as explanations for their slower career progression (Stroh et al., 1992). Although individuals’ family situation has also often been related to their career success, Tharenou (1997) concluded that family variables have no or little importance for predicting career success, as compared to human capital variables.

Human capital determinants refer to personal investments individuals make to enrich their value in the workplace. Human capital theory (Becker, 1975) posits that individuals’ investments in education, training and work experience will increase their value on the labour market and will lead to higher ascendancy rates and salaries for them. Research has consistently shown that education (Judge et al., 1995) and training (Tharenou and Conroy, 1994) are related to career progression, but that these factors cannot explain the differential career advancement of males and females (Tharenou, 1997).

The relationship between work experience and career success is more complicated. Most studies have operationalized work experience in terms of tenure, defined as years in a position, in an organization, or in an occupation (Tesluk and Jacobs, 1998). Time-based measures of experience, however, ignore the nature or quality of specific experiences and the opportunities to perform specific types of tasks or duties (Ford et al., 1992). Individuals with equal amounts of tenure in the same job can thus differ considerably with respect to the content, quality and breadth of their experiences (Benschop et al., 2001; Tolich and Briar, 1999).

**Challenging job experiences**

Several researchers have acknowledged the importance of the quality of work experiences for career development (Benschop et al., 2001; Tolich and Briar, 1999; Woodall et al., 1997). Challenging job experiences in particular
contribute to individuals’ managerial development (McCauley et al., 1994) and career advancement (Berlew and Hall, 1966). Job challenge has been conceptualized as the ‘level of difficulty and stimulation’ (Taylor, 1981, p. 255), as ‘being in dynamic settings with problems to solve and choices to make under conditions of risk and uncertainty’ (McCauley et al., 1999, p. 4), and as ‘having to meet performance expectations that are reasonably high’ (Berlew and Hall, 1966, p. 209).

Based on earlier research, McCauley and colleagues (1994, 1999) identified five clusters of aspects of challenging jobs: job transitions, which imply being confronted with new tasks and situations in which existing tactics and routines are inadequate; creating change, which involves the responsibility for taking decisions and actions related to steering the organization in new directions, carrying out a reorganization or solving problems; managing at high levels of responsibility, characterized by increased visibility and the opportunity to make a significant impact, by dealing with broader and more complex problems and by higher stakes; managing boundaries, where employees have to work with people over whom they have no direct authority and have to develop strategies for influencing them and gaining their co-operation; and dealing with diversity, by which employees are challenged to learn and understand business and workplace issues from other perspectives.

Berlew and Hall (1966) found that employees who had challenging job assignments early in their careers were more successful after several years than those who were given less demanding jobs. Likewise, Bray et al. (1974) showed that the job challenge individuals had in their first years on a job was related to their management level 8 years later. Van Velsor and Hughes (1990) and Lyness and Thompson (1997, 2000) furthermore showed that both male and female senior managers felt that challenging job experiences had had a significant impact on their career achievements.

**Gender differences in challenging job experiences**

The relationship between challenging experiences and career advancement is not only important to determine the factors that influence managers’ careers in general, but may also explain more specifically why some groups experience more difficulty in progressing with their careers than other groups. It has been suggested that one reason why so few women have been promoted to senior management positions is that, as compared to men, their succeeding jobs have encompassed fewer assignments that foster managerial development (Fagenson, 1990; Stroh et al., 1992). However, research that examined gender differences in challenging job experiences has rendered inconsistent results.

In a retrospective interview study, Van Velsor and Hughes (1990) asked senior managers to list the experiences they considered most influential for their development. The women in their sample indicated they had had fewer
developmental assignments and challenging job experiences than men. A comparative case study (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998) among employees of a large bank indicated that men performed more developmental tasks than women did. In line with this, Ohlott et al. (1994) showed that in a sample of professionals, supervisors, middle managers and upper level managers, women, compared to men, had fewer developmental opportunities related to having a high level of responsibility (that is, high stakes, managing diversity and external pressure). In contrast, in a matched sample of executive men and women, Lyness and Thompson (1997) found no gender differences in developmental opportunities. They suggested that this gender similarity might have resulted from the successful matching of male and female executives in their sample. Another explanation might be that the women in their sample had already passed through the glass ceiling and had achieved ‘parity with their male counterparts’ (Lyness and Thompson, 1997, p. 370).

The above suggests that whether or not men and women differ in the quality of their work experiences may depend on their job level. Therefore our sample consisted of a matched sample of male and female employees working at a middle job level. The research literature suggests that although the number of women in middle management positions is growing rapidly, women are still underrepresented in senior management positions (Broadbridge, 1998; Hurley and Sonnenfeld, 1998). This might especially be a result of gender differences in challenging experiences at middle job levels. Thus, we expected:

**Hypothesis 1:** Women have fewer challenging job experiences than men have.

Researchers who report gender differences in challenging experiences tend to explain this by discriminatory structures and processes in organizations (Ohlott et al., 1994; Van Velsor and Hughes, 1990), stating that women ‘are denied access to some important developmental opportunities’ (Ohlott et al., 1994, p. 50). These authors assumed that gender differences in challenging experiences were a consequence of the differential assignment of tasks by supervisors, but did not address this proposition empirically. What actually underlies the gender differences in challenging experiences in their studies remains unclear. Therefore, we also investigated whether supervisors are less inclined to assign challenging tasks to their female subordinates than to their male subordinates.

**The assignment of challenging tasks**

Notwithstanding the recognition that delegation can be a useful tool for developing employees’ skills, knowledge and even careers, the allocation of challenging tasks among subordinates has hardly ever been addressed in the literature. One experimental study (Mai-Dalton and Sullivan, 1981) suggested
that supervisors assign more challenging tasks to same-sex subordinates as compared to opposite-sex subordinates. In contrast, a more recent field study by Cianni and Romberger (1997) showed that male and female employees perceived that similar amounts of challenging experiences had been assigned to them by their supervisors. Their results, however, reflected the employees’ perceptions of the developmental opportunities provided by their supervisors and did not examine whether men and women actually were assigned similar amounts of challenging experiences. Benschop and Doorewaard (1998) showed that even though men and women proclaim that there is no gender inequality in their organization, gender differences may prevail. Therefore, we believe it is important to examine supervisors’ assignment of challenging tasks in actual work settings.

Although the importance of providing employees with challenging assignments seems to be generally accepted, very little is known about the reasons why supervisors assign challenging tasks to some subordinates and not to others. More is known about the broader concept of delegation, which refers to the assignment of tasks and responsibilities to subordinates, including the authority to carry them out (Yukl and Fu, 1999). Although delegation may encompass both challenging and routine tasks, research on delegation processes may still provide useful information for our purposes. Therefore, we decided to lean on delegation research for developing our hypotheses.

Delegating assignments to subordinates involves risk (Van de Vliert and Smith, 2004), and managers try to reduce that risk by delegating assignments to those subordinates they trust to be both willing (Hersey and Blanchard, 1993) and able (Leana, 1986) to perform well. Research has particularly revealed positive relationships between subordinates’ job performance and supervisors’ delegation behaviour (Bauer and Green, 1996). Although research on delegation did not address the subordinates’ willingness as a determinant of the supervisors’ delegation behaviour, it could be expected that the supervisors’ perception of their subordinates’ ambition impacts upon the supervisors’ delegation decisions. We therefore proposed:

**Hypothesis 2**: Supervisors’ perceptions of subordinates’ job performance and ambition are positively related to the supervisors’ willingness to assign subordinates challenging tasks

Another factor that may be important in delegation processes is perceived similarity. Perceptions of similarity may influence initial interactions between managers and subordinates, and may support the development of leader–member exchange relationships. Also, subordinates who are perceived by their supervisors as being similar to themselves are seen as more trustworthy and capable, and may, therefore, be delegated more challenging assignments (Bauer and Green, 1996).

Leader–member exchange (LMX) theory may also be especially relevant for explaining the differential delegation behaviour of managers across
subordinates (Bauer and Green, 1996). According to LMX theory, leaders develop separate exchange relationships with each subordinate as a result of the process of role-making and social exchange between leader and subordinate. Exchange relationships can either be high or low, with high exchange relationships being characterized by strong mutual trust and loyalty (Yukl and Fu, 1999). High exchange relationships are related to both subordinate performance (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995) and the delegation of tasks and responsibilities (Bauer and Green, 1996). Based on the above, we expected:

**Hypothesis 3:** Supervisors’ perceptions of LMX and similarity are positively related to the supervisors’ willingness to assign subordinates challenging tasks.

The gender of the subordinate, the focus of the present study, may also influence delegation processes (Ohlott et al., 1994; Van Velsor and Hughes, 1990) both indirectly and directly. Indirectly, for instance, because the supervisors’ gender and the gender of their subordinates may affect the supervisors’ perceptions of similarity, the development of LMX relationships and evaluations of subordinates’ job performance (Tsui and O’Reilly, 1989). At higher job levels most supervisors are men (United Nations Development Programme, 2004). They may, therefore, be inclined to assign challenging tasks to their male rather than to their female subordinates. Since little research has actually established the processes as proposed above, we explored, rather than hypothesized, the impact of subordinates’ gender on their supervisors’ willingness to assign them challenging tasks. Specifically, we examined whether the subordinates’ gender could affect their supervisors’ task assignment intentions above and beyond the supervisors’ perceptions of their subordinates’ job performance, ambition, similarity and quality of their LMX relationship. Thereby, we would also be able to detect a possible direct relationship between the subordinates’ gender and their supervisors’ willingness to assign them challenging tasks.

In order to examine the hypotheses above and explore the role of subordinates’ gender in supervisors’ task allocation decisions, we performed two related studies in a large pharmaceutical company. The first study examined possible gender differences in actually having challenging experiences among a sample of employees working at middle job levels. The second study examined differential task assignment to male and female subordinates working at middle job levels among a sample of senior level managers in the same organization. This way, we were able to examine the proposition that gender differences in challenging experiences of employees working at middle job levels can be conceived of as a consequence of gendered practices by their senior managers. Below, we first describe the research method and results of the first study. Subsequently, we report on the research method and results of the second study.
Method: Study 1

We invited 317 employees working at middle job levels in a pharmaceutical company to participate in a study on the experiences they had on their job. Overall 136 of them (of whom 68% were men) participated and filled out an online questionnaire (response rate = 43%). The respondents held a wide variety of jobs. Their mean age was 42.91 years (SD = 7.49), their mean job tenure was 4.26 years (SD = 3.06), and they had on average 17.06 years of work experience (SD = 8.38).

The participants provided demographic information and self-ratings on the extent to which they had challenging experiences in their jobs. Because several demographic variables might influence the extent to which employees have challenging job experiences (Ohlott et al., 1994), we asked them for their year of birth, the number of years they had been in their current job and the highest level of education they had completed (ranging from intermediate vocational training to master’s degree), and used these as control variables in our analyses. Additionally, participants were asked to provide self-ratings on two personality characteristics that were found to be relevant to career-related experiences in previous research: ambition and core self-evaluations. Howard and Bray (1988) found that ambition, or the desire to advance, was strongly related to managerial advancement (see also Judge et al., 1995). Core self-evaluations, a composite measure that includes self-esteem, self-efficacy, emotional stability and locus of control (Judge et al., 1998) were found to be related to perceptions of job challenge (Judge et al., 1998) and to the actual attainment of challenging jobs (Judge et al., 2000). Therefore, we explored the impact of gender on the extent to which employees actually have challenging experiences after controlling for employees’ ambition and core-self evaluations.

Measures

The scale measuring employees’ challenging job experiences was based on the job challenge profile (JCP, McCauley et al., 1999). Based on the clusters and items of the JCP, we developed ten descriptions of aspects of challenging jobs. The respondents indicated the extent to which they dealt with each challenging aspect in their current job on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). The internal consistency of this measure was 0.78. Descriptions of the items are provided in Appendix A.

Core self-evaluations were measured with the core self-evaluations scale (CSES) consisting of 12 items (Judge et al., 2003). The respondents indicated their agreement with the items on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). An example of the CSES is ‘I am confident I get the success I deserve in life’. The internal consistency of the CSES was 0.80.

Ambition was assessed with the ambition for a managerial position scale (Van Vianen, 1999) consisting of five items. The respondents indicated on a
scale ranging from 1 (not at all applicable) to 5 (fully applicable) the extent to which each statement was applicable to them. An item example is ‘I told my relatives I was hoping for promotion to a higher management position’. The internal consistency was 0.91.

Results: Study 1

The means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of Study 1 variables are shown in Table 1. We performed a hierarchical regression analysis predicting job challenge to examine the impact of gender (Hypothesis 1) after controlling for the possible influence of demographic variables, ambition and core self-evaluations. Unstandardized regression coefficients, standard errors and standardized coefficients are presented in Table 2. Demographic variables, ambition and core self-evaluations were entered in the first step of the regression analysis. Together these variables explained 13 per cent of the variance in challenging job experiences, with only ambition being positively ($\beta = .25, p < 0.01$) related to job challenge. The addition of gender in the regression equation in the second step of the regression analysis led to a significant improvement in model fit, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F_{\text{change}} (1, 126) = 3.87, p < 0.05$. Thus, even when socio-demographic data, ambition and core self-evaluations were taken into account, female employees had fewer challenging job experiences than their male colleagues ($\beta = .17, p < 0.05$). This supported Hypothesis 1.

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations of Study 1 variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender$^1$</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational level</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>–12</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>42.91</td>
<td>7.49</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job tenure</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>–11</td>
<td>.30*</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambition</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
<td>-.17*</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core self-evaluations</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.35*</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging job experiences</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.52*</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.01, **p < 0.05.

$^1$For gender, 1 = male, 0 = female.
Method: Study 2

We asked 140 senior level employees in supervisory positions in the pharmaceutical company to participate in a study on task allocation behaviour. In the questionnaire we asked them about their intentions to assign challenging tasks to their subordinates and their perceptions of subordinates’ characteristics. A total of 39 supervisors returned their completed questionnaire (response rate 29%). On average, the respondents were 48.42 years of age (SD = 6.25), and their mean tenure was 10.61 years (SD = 6.23).

The managers who participated in our study were deemed to be senior figures occupying strategic supervisory positions in their organization. Largely because of the absence of female senior managers in our sample (merely 13% of the managers were women), our data mainly represent the task allocation intentions of male managers.

Together, the supervisors provided information regarding 205 subordinates, with a mean of 5.26 subordinates (SD = 1.46) per supervisor. The mean age of the supervisors’ subordinates (49% of whom were men) was 44.61 years (SD = 8.57). On average, they had worked 3.51 years under the supervision of their current manager (SD = 2.40) and had a mean organizational tenure of 6.31 years (SD = 9.89).

Table 2: Regression analysis predicting challenging work experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE (B)</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational level</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job tenure</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambition</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.25*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core self-evaluations</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational level</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job tenure</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambition</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.21**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core self-evaluations</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.17***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender1</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.17**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.10. B is the unstandardized regression coefficient. SE (B) is the standard error of B. β is the standardized regression coefficient. R² = .13, F (5, 127) = 3.70, p < .01 for Step 1; R² = .15, F (6, 126) = 3.80, p < .01 for Step 2; ΔR² = .03, Fchange (1, 126) = 3.87, p = .05.

1For gender, 1 = male, 0 = female.
Measures

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. In the first part we asked the respondents to provide the initials of a maximum of six of their subordinates and to indicate each subordinate’s age, gender and the length that he or she had been under the respondent’s supervision. We subsequently asked the respondents to what extent they would be willing to assign each subordinate a set of challenging tasks that we described for them. In the second part of the questionnaire we asked the respondents to provide information regarding their subordinates’ ambition and job performance and their perceptions of similarity and their LMX relationship with each of their subordinates. The third part of the questionnaire contained questions regarding supervisors’ own age, gender and occupational tenure.

Subordinates. The respondents listed up to six of their non-secretarial subordinates all of whom were at a middle job level and to whom they assigned tasks on a regularly basis. For each of the subordinates listed the respondents reported their age and years of supervision. As age and years under supervision of the superior are found to influence task assignment decisions (Yukl and Fu, 1999), we used these variables as control variables in our analyses.

Willingness to assign challenging tasks. To measure supervisors’ willingness to assign challenging tasks to their subordinates we provided them with five descriptions of challenging tasks. These tasks were selected from the tasks that were used in Study 1, adapted to measure task allocation decisions (see Appendix B). After reading each task description, respondents indicated to what extent they would be willing to assign that task to each of their subordinates on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). The internal consistency of this measure was 0.89.

After the supervisors had provided their task assignment intentions they were asked to describe each of their subordinates’ characteristics separately.

Subordinates’ characteristics. We measured the supervisors’ perceptions of their subordinates’ ambition and job performance and the supervisors’ perceptions of similarity and their LMX relationships with their subordinates. The respondents indicated on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all applicable) to 5 (fully applicable) the extent to which the statements were applicable to each of the rated subordinates.

The supervisors’ perceptions of their subordinates’ ambition was measured using four items derived from the ambition for a managerial position scale (Van Vianen, 1999). An item example is ‘This employee pursues a managerial position’. The internal consistency of this scale was 0.95.
Job performance was measured with three items of Van Dyne and Lepine’s (1998) performance rating scale. An item example is ‘I am satisfied with the performance of this employee’. The internal consistency of this scale was 0.89.

Similar-to-me-perception was measured with three perceived fit items (Cable and DeRue, 2002). The original items were adapted to measure person–person fit. An item example is ‘The things that I value in life are very similar to the things this employee values’. The internal consistency of this scale was 0.78.

LMX was measured with three items derived from the LMX measure of Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995). An example is ‘This employee will characterize our working relationship as good’. The internal consistency of this scale was 0.70.

Results: Study 2

The means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of Study 2 variables are shown in Table 3. We expected that the subordinates’ ambition and job performance (Hypothesis 2), and the supervisors’ perceptions of LMX and similarity with their subordinates (Hypothesis 3) would be positively related to the supervisors’ willingness to assign them challenging tasks. We further explored whether the subordinate’s gender would impact on the supervisors’ assignment intentions above and beyond the control variables and subordinates’ characteristics.

As several subordinates were rated by the same supervisor (our respondents) we first assessed whether some supervisors had a stronger tendency to assign challenging tasks than others, irrespective of their subordinates’ characteristics. We examined this possible supervisor effect using a mixed model of analysis. This is a regression model for hierarchically structured data that takes into account within-group variability as well as between-group variability, in this case within-supervisor variability and between-supervisor variability. We estimated a null model in order to test for possible variance in intercepts (supervisors varying regarding their general willingness to assign challenging tasks). A fixed intercept model was tested against a random intercept model. The random intercept model did not fit the data better than the fixed intercept model (Akaike’s Information Criterion = 601.18 and 601.38, respectively, with $df = 1$ and $p = \text{ns}$). Moreover, the results showed an intra-class correlation of 0.06 only. Thus, there were no differences between supervisors regarding their general willingness to assign challenging tasks to their subordinates. Therefore, we performed our further analyses at the individual (that is, the subordinate) level.

Table 3 shows that the extent to which the supervisors were willing to assign challenging tasks to their subordinates was related to the subordinates’
Table 3: Means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations of Study 2 variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subordinates’ gender¹</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subordinates’ age</td>
<td>44.38</td>
<td>8.67</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years under supervision</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>–.10</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambition</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>–.40*</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>–.15***</td>
<td>–.15**</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity perceptions</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>–.07</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.42*</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader–member exchange</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>–.14***</td>
<td>–.19**</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.12***</td>
<td>.60*</td>
<td>.40*</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignment of challenging</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>.12***</td>
<td>–.19**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.61*</td>
<td>.50*</td>
<td>.46*</td>
<td>.37*</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.10.

¹For gender, 1 = male, 0 = female.
age \( (r = -0.19, p < 0.01) \) and the supervisors’ perceptions of their subordinates’ job performance \( (r = 0.50, p < 0.001) \), similarity \( (r = 0.46, p < 0.001) \), and LMX \( (r = 0.37, p < 0.001) \), thereby confirming Hypotheses 2 and 3.

We subsequently performed a multivariate regression analysis to examine whether the subordinates’ gender could explain additional variance in the supervisors’ willingness to assign them challenging tasks above and beyond the subordinates’ years under their supervision, the subordinates’ age, ambition, job performance, similarity and LMX. Unstandardized regression coefficients, standard errors and standardized coefficients are presented in Table 4. We entered this latter group of variables in the first step of the regression equation. Together, they explained 58 per cent of the variance in willingness to assign challenging tasks, with the subordinates’ perceived ambition \((\beta = 0.51, p < 0.001)\), job performance \((\beta = 0.28, p < 0.001)\), and similarity \((\beta = 0.18, p < 0.01)\) being positively related to the supervisors’ willingness to assign them challenging tasks. Gender was entered in the second step of the regression equation. This led to a significant improvement of the model fit, \(\Delta R^2 = 0.02, F (1, 146) = 6.43, p < 0.01\). The supervisors were less willing to assign challenging tasks to their female than to their male subordinates \((\beta = 0.14, p < 0.01)\).

Table 4: Regression analysis predicting the willingness to assign challenging tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE (B)</th>
<th>( \beta )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years under supervision</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambition</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.51*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity perceptions</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader–member exchange relationship</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.12***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years under supervision</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambition</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.47*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.31*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity perceptions</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader–member exchange relationship</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.13***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender(^1)</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.14**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^* p < 0.01, \quad ** p < 0.05, \quad *** p < 0.10. \quad R^2 = .58, F (6, 147) = 34.09, p < .001 \) for Step 1; \( R^2 = .60, F (7, 146) = 31.21, p < .001 \) for Step 2; \( \Delta R^2 = .02, F (1, 146) = 6.43, p = .01 \).

\(^{1}\)For gender, 1 = male, 0 = female.
Conclusions and discussion

The aim of the studies presented in this article was twofold. We examined gender differences in the job challenge of employees working at a middle job level, and we examined the proposition that supervisors’ task allocation decisions underlie gender differences in job challenge. We have built our studies and propositions on earlier research that focused on gender differences in developmental opportunities and on research regarding task delegation.

Our results suggest that at middle job levels, women have fewer challenging experiences in their jobs than their male colleagues, even when the data are controlled for their ambition, core-self evaluations and relevant socio-demographic variables. This implies that men and women differ ‘in terms of the criticality, visibility, and breadth of their responsibilities and in the degree to which they interact externally’ (Ohlott et al., 1994, p. 62), which may result in women having fewer promotion opportunities than men (Benschop et al., 2001). Since this study focused on employees working at a middle job level, it provides an insight in a proximate factor that may constrain women in reaching senior level positions.

The results of our second study revealed that one of the factors underlying gender differences in job challenge is that senior managers were more inclined to assign challenging tasks to the male, as opposed to the female subordinates they supervise, even when controlled for subordinates’ socio-demographic variables, ambition and job performance, and the supervisors’ perceptions of the LMX relationship and similarity. This supports the proposition that women are denied important developmental opportunities by their superiors (Ohlott et al., 1994). Also, this finding corroborates Benschop and Doorewaard’s (1998) notion that concealed power-based processes often (re)produce gender dissimilarities in social practices through organizational and individual arrangements. This can be qualified as a subtle form of gender discrimination. This is especially bothersome since challenging experiences are of paramount importance for the employees’ learning (McCauley et al., 1994), development (Davies and Easterby-Smith, 1984) and career success (Berlew and Hall, 1966). If women are offered fewer opportunities to develop themselves than their male counterparts, the result may be that women have fewer promotion opportunities and advance less in their careers than men. This is an undesirable situation. In order to stay competitive with global rivals, organizations must take advantage of all valuable resources, including talented male and female employees. Failure to advance women is a costly and shortsighted strategy, not only in terms of dissipating highly valuable resources but also in terms of lost productivity and high turnover rates (Ragins et al., 1998) among workers who feel blocked in their careers.

Our results have several theoretical and practical implications. Literature on delegation deals with the delegation of tasks and responsibilities in
general. Literature on work experience argues that besides the quantity of work experience it is especially important to consider the quality of work experiences (Ford et al., 1992). We combined these literatures, and looked at assigning challenging tasks. In contrast to research on delegating (Bauer and Green, 1996), we found subordinate gender to be a significant predictor of task assignment decisions. This suggests that distinguishing between task types may be a fruitful approach to further research on delegation processes.

Our results further show that people in powerful positions may (unintentionally) practice gender (Martin, 2006) by differentially assigning challenging tasks to their male and female subordinates. This illuminates the need to overcome supervisory gender biases. Supervisors should be encouraged to assign challenging work equally to their male and female subordinates. From a practical perspective, this would not only provide women with equal opportunities for development and career advancement as men, but might also increase their job-satisfaction and organizational commitment and prevent them from leaving their careers prematurely.

Several limitations of the studies should be noted. As in most field studies, our respondents provided both the independent and dependent variables. We therefore took some steps to reduce the possibility of common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Firstly, we tried to reduce evaluation apprehension by assuring respondents that their answers would be anonymous and that there were no right or wrong answers. Secondly, we used simple, unambiguous and concise items. Thirdly, we avoided bipolar numerical scales and provided verbal labels for all scale points. Despite these measures we cannot completely rule out the possibility that part of the variance is due to the research method applied. This may indicate that our findings are based on a conservative estimate of gender bias in task assignment.

A second limitation is that we measured the supervisors’ willingness to assign challenging tasks to their subordinates as a proxy for their actual assignment of challenging tasks. Since we asked them to indicate their willingness to assign tasks to their own subordinates, we believe these measures may be accurate predictors of their actual assignment behaviour. However, actual behaviour may be influenced by other factors as well and future research should preferably aim at examining actual task allocation decisions in work situations. Additional research, thus, should focus on actual task assignment to male and female subordinates.

A third limitation relates to the sample we used in our second study. Most of the supervisors who participated in this study were men. Although the literature has hardly addressed gender differences in task assignment behaviour, one laboratory study (Mai-Dalton and Sullivan, 1981) revealed that the gender of supervisors influenced their task assignment decisions, and that male supervisors assigned more challenging tasks to male as opposed to female subordinates. We believe, however, that the small proportion of female supervisors in our sample adequately reflects the scarcity of women in
senior management positions, and thus the types of task allocation decisions that are made at senior job levels. Furthermore, analysing the effect sizes of the relationship between the subordinates’ gender and the supervisors’ willingness to assign them challenging tasks revealed that both male (r = .12) and female supervisors (r = .11) are more inclined to assign challenging tasks to male subordinates. We suggest, however, that further research should examine whether the supervisors’ gender is related to their task assignment behaviour.

With our studies, we provide only a first examination of the factors that may underlie gender differences in a job challenge, namely the supervisors’ differential assignment of challenging tasks to male and female subordinates. It has been acknowledged, however, that job incumbents themselves also play an important role in determining their job content (Bell and Staw, 1989). Indeed, Benschop et al. (2001) observed that in practice, male employees interpret their tasks more broadly and take more initiative to expand them to a higher level than their female colleagues. Future research thus should explore other possible sources of gender inequality in job challenge, such as individuals’ task preferences and task choices.

Also, future research is needed to further examine the developmental consequences of the assignment of challenging tasks (Lyness and Thompson, 2000; Ohlott et al., 1994). Are the consequences of performing challenging work equally beneficial for male and female employees? And what are the consequences of the differential assignment of challenging tasks to male and female subordinates for women’s perceptions of justice and job attitudes? And last, but not least, research should examine why supervisors are less inclined to assign challenging tasks to their female subordinates than to their male subordinates. More research on these issues may increase our knowledge on how delegation processes can be used to provide men and women with equal opportunities for positive work outcomes and career progression.

Acknowledgement

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2007 Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology Annual Meeting.

References


Appendix A

Descriptions of challenging job experiences used in Study 1

In my job I have to deal with tasks that are relatively new to me and that, strictly speaking, are not directly linked to my education and experience. It is my responsibility to start up or try out something new or to initiate strategic changes in my division. It is my responsibility to perform activities that are highly visible for others in my organization, for instance for (top) management. As a consequence, my successes and failures are easily observable to others. I am responsible for a diverse range of job responsibilities. For instance, I am responsible for several projects, services, workgroups, technologies, etcetera. It is my responsibility to manage relationships with important external contacts and organizations, such as clients, commissioners and specific occupational groups.
To function effectively, I have to use my influence with others, who formally are not subjected to my authority, such as (top) management and important individuals working for other divisions. It is my responsibility to co-operate with individuals originating from diverse cultures or organizations or with organizations in other countries. It is a part of my job to regularly make my appearance in public, for instance, to present my work at conferences or represent my organization. It is my responsibility to carry out tasks that my colleagues consider risky. For others, mainly the management, I identify a specific project within my organization.

Appendix B

Descriptions of challenging tasks used in Study 2

Tasks that comprise dealing with responsibilities that are relatively new to the subordinate and that, strictly speaking, are not directly linked to his/her education and experience.

Tasks related to starting up or trying out something new, or initiate strategic changes in his/her division.

Tasks that require taking important and risky decisions that have far-reaching consequences that are highly visible to others in the organization. As a consequence, his/her successes and failures are easily observable to others.

Tasks that involve approaching and directing important stakeholders outside the organization, such as clients and governmental agencies. This requires that he/she has to use his/her influence with others, who formally are not subjected to his/her authority.

Tasks that require him/her to regularly present new projects to top management or to make an appearance in public, for instance for presenting his/her work at conferences or representing the organization.