



Mentoring across cultures: The role of gender and marital status in Taiwan and the U.S.



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ABSTRACT

We examined the interaction of gender and marital status on attaining mentors among 405 managers and professionals in contrasting Taiwanese and U.S. cultures. In line with social role and signaling theories and the cultural concepts of gender-egalitarianism and individualism/collectivism, married U.S. women had a lower likelihood of having a mentor compared to single women or men. Being married disfavored U.S. women but did not disfavor Taiwanese women. Further analyses using only the U.S. protégé sample also revealed that being married was positively related to psychosocial mentoring received only among male protégés. We discuss results from a cross-cultural perspective.

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1. Introduction

Sex differences in the consequences of family status for one's career development and progress continue to receive attention from researchers (Hoobler, Wayne, & Lemmon, 2009) and the popular press (Rampell, 2010). Gender-based discrimination may also have additional layers of complexity due to the intersection of multiple group memberships based on marital status, race, religion, national origin, and/or disability (Levin, Sinclair, Viniegas, & Taylor, 2002) that influence women's power dynamics in organizations (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989). In this paper, we examine the intersection of gender with marital status, an important piece in the larger mosaic of social differentiators accounting for asymmetric work outcomes for men and women (Hoobler et al., 2009; Jordan & Zitek, 2012). Specifically, we are interested in better understanding for which gender being in a committed relationship is advantageous for attaining mentors, and whether the gender and marital status interaction differs between Taiwan and the U.S. Taiwan contrasts the U.S. (where the bulk of mentoring research has been done) in social traditions and institutions. Current research lacks empirical studies on mentoring that include non-work variables (e.g., marital status), especially in Asian cultures where family as an institution is very strong and female labor market participation is rising (Brinton, 2001). Given the increasing cross-border employee assignments between these

countries, comparing them would provide insights into cultural differences in the formation of mentoring and its implications for career management processes.

Having a mentor has implications for employees' career advancement (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004) and represents a class of dependent variables that can provide insights into factors that lead to the underutilization of high potential female talent. Gender, marital status, and culture represent vital sources of diversity at work (Mannix & Neale, 2005), and mentoring may be a mechanism to reduce gender inequality in career success (Ramaswami, Dreher, Bretz, & Wiethoff, 2010). While research suggests that gender and marital status have no significant direct associations with attaining mentors (Colarelli & Bishop, 1990; Judge & Bretz, 1994; Kirchmeyer, 1998; Laband & Lentz, 1993; O'Brien, Biga, Kessler, & Allen, 2010), their interaction on mentoring attainment has received little attention. Gender and marital status are important boundary conditions in the context of mentoring (Olian, Carroll, & Giannantonio, 1993). In an experiment among managers in the U.S. banking industry on protégé characteristics that influenced the amount of mentoring provided, Olian et al. (1993) found no main effects for protégé gender or marital status, but a significant *gender × marital status* interaction (albeit not hypothesized): managers perceived receiving the most benefits by mentoring, and were more inclined to mentor, married men and single women. Moreover, culture represents a salient boundary condition in mentoring (Mezias & Scandura, 2005). Gender and marital status are imbued with cultural stereotypes and normative expectations of men and women's social roles (Lobel, 1991) that could influence organizational dynamics with

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superiors. With this in mind, this study extends and contextualizes Olian et al.'s experiment, using a contemporary sample, a field research design, and a cross-cultural comparison. From a practical perspective, managers need to know whether mentoring phenomena are universal or culture-specific. Research on gender and cultural issues in developmental opportunity may be relevant to a range of gender issues in organizations. Our findings would be particularly applicable to organizations interested in tapping high potential female talent through culturally sensitive developmental initiatives (Giscombe, 2007).

2. Role of gender and marital status in mentoring attainment – The importance of context

Seldom are contextual factors accounted for in mentoring research (Mezias & Scandura, 2005). We found no research on the role of gender or marital status on attaining mentors among Taiwanese professionals or among Asians more generally. With increasing globalization and international business, Taiwan is becoming an interesting geographical area, earning the reputation of being the “hidden center of the global economy,” having risen to its current status through the confluence of Western technical education and Eastern values (BusinessWeek, 2005). Despite economic and cultural changes, Taiwan cherishes traditional values (Farh, Earley, & Lin, 1997) and is characterized as being higher on power-distance and lower on individualism and gender-egalitarianism compared with the U.S. (Hofstede, 2001; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). Being representative of Chinese cultures, Confucian values pervade the Taiwanese way of life. Taiwan also represents a unique population that while being traditional, collectivist, and highly power distant has a new generation of professionals influenced by globalization, modernization, and industrialization and thus assimilating Western culture and values (Yu & Miller, 2003). Such socio-economic forces change cultural values and practices, despite nationalistic cultural trends. This mix of traditionality and modernity makes Taiwan an interesting setting to explore the role of gender and marital status on mentoring, in contrast to the U.S. Eagly and Wood (1999) recommend that, “to be maximally informative about social structural factors, cross-cultural research should be systematically designed to represent cultures with differing forms of social organization and levels of gender equality” (p. 420). Gender-egalitarianism is the extent to which a culture minimizes gender role inequality and discrimination (House, Javidan, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2002). Despite intra-cultural variation (Tung & Verbeke, 2010), shared norms and practices at a societal level still influence one's interpretation of events in daily as well as organizational life (Farh et al., 1997; House et al., 2004), and may be pertinent to organizational relationships such as mentoring.

3. Theory and hypotheses

3.1. Gender, marital status, and mentoring: Social role signals

Meta-analytic reviews largely based on data from the U.S. suggest no gender differences in work–family conflict (Byron, 2005), and that gender, marital status, and number of children are unrelated to organizational or occupational commitment (Lee, Carswell, & Allen, 2000). Stroh, Brett, and Reilly (1992) found in their study on 20 Fortune 500 companies that female managers were leaving organizations in higher proportions than males, but they were doing so for career-related and not family-related reasons. Similarly, using U.S. samples, Lyness and Judiesch (2001) did not find higher turnover among women compared to men whether or not they controlled for marital status; Graves, Ohlott, and Ruderman (2007) found that marital or family role commitment are unassociated with family-to-work interference.

Despite this evidence, bias against women's (married or not, with or without children) competence, fit, and commitment to work or career persists (Jordan & Zitek, 2012; Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989). In a field study conducted in a Midwestern-U.S. firm, Hoobler et al. (2009)

found that managers' perceptions of female subordinates' work–family conflict influenced the latter's chances for advancement, by mediating the relationship between subordinate gender and managers' perceptions of their person–organization fit, person–job fit, and performance. Jordan and Zitek's (2012) three experimental studies among U.S. undergraduates on the “marital status bias” – the effects of marital status on perceptions of employees or prospective employees – are also telling. Participants rated married female job applicants as less suitable for employment than their single counterparts, viewed married female applicants less favorably but viewed married male applicants more favorably, and predicted that job performance and dedication would decline for recently married women but increase for recently married men, making them more willing to lay off married women than married men. The authors conclude that, “to the extent that a woman's choice to be married is perceived as an indication of an intention to have children, some of the employment penalty applied to mothers may also attach to married women due merely to their marital status” (p. 475). The results from these studies did not differ by participant gender. Olian et al.'s (1993) results also suggest that marriage has neutral if not positive effects on men's careers but damaging effects on women's careers; moreover, 60% of managers in their sample were women. Thus, both men and women tend to negatively view female job applicants and employees. This study, therefore, assumes that the hypotheses would be robust to the mentor's gender.

While gender and family roles do not always represent valuable information, the above studies show that being female and married makes perceived negative qualities about women more accessible in people's minds that ultimately influence organizational decisions regarding women. This is in line with signaling theory (Spence, 1973), which posits that because organizational decision makers have incomplete information about an individual, they rely on signals – or an individuals' observable qualities such as demographic characteristics and social relations – to make judgments about them. Being female and married may signal negative attributes through their heightened association with gender stereotypes (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007; Hoobler et al., 2009; Jordan & Zitek, 2012) that influence superiors' organizational decisions regarding women.

Due to differential social role, social exchange, and human capital attributions for men and women, different types of information become accessible to superiors, resulting in their perceiving men and women differently. According to social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 1999), women are viewed as caregivers and so their non-work demands (real or imagined) are relevant for organization members (Hoobler et al., 2009). Men are attributed qualities of agency, achievement, and competence, while women are viewed as more communal, supportive, and nurturing. Women, being unassociated with managerial roles, may lose career opportunities, including mentoring, because success in such roles would require attributes stereotypically associated with men, such as being competent, aggressive, and decisive (Hoobler et al., 2009). Furthermore, Tharenou (1999) suggests, following distributive justice theory, that married men signal higher need of career support given their family duties, possibly due to the belief that even talented or high achieving women will ultimately opt out particularly if they are married to highly paid male partners (Stone, 2008). This is because in heterosexual dual-earner arrangements women are only likely to share but not have full financial responsibility given that more men than women have non-employed spouses, which makes women seem less needy for career growth (Stroh, Brett, & Reilly, 1996). Social expectations and socialization send decision makers positive signals such as commitment, stability, potential and advancement needs for men, but negative signals such as weak career commitment and potentially being a “quitter” for women (Kirchmeyer, 2006).

Superiors also use social role signals to predict how productive or worthy of investment a subordinate will be, that is, their potential social exchange. The initiation and sustenance of mentoring depends on its perceived benefits and costs to each party (Cook, 1987). Mentors expect

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