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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

The Accounting Profession from the Collegiate Perspective:

An Analysis of Gender Equality Perceptions

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By

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Abstract

This study investigates whether incoming female accountants expect to have the same career opportunities within the accounting profession as do males. For purposes of this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 accounting students. These students were either undergraduate seniors majoring in accounting or graduate students enrolled in a Master of Accounting Science program. The results of the interviews were such that both male and female accounting students exhibited high expectations for their careers and their lives outside of it. Students recognized the impact of family and the difficulty of the profession on their career. They also noted that the recruitment role for accounting firms is generally performed by a female, whereas the decision-maker role is generally performed by a male. Although there were no major differences in perceptions between male and female students, gender was seen as an obstacle for females.

Introduction

In 2013, only one quarter of partners were female, whereas in 2020 almost forty percent of partners were female. It may therefore be argued that gender equity in public accounting has greatly improved over time. Although it has improved, there is still room for growth considering that females have comprised fifty percent of the new hires in public accounting for the last twenty years (AICPA, 2013; AICPA, 2021). Although gender equity in public accounting appears to be improving over time, it is uncertain the degree by which accounting students think they will be affected by it. Using a qualitative research approach, this study assesses how accounting majors perceive gender equity to be within the public accounting arena and how they think it will affect their career.

The results of this study would be of interest to accounting faculty, accounting students, and individuals involved in the recruitment of accounting students. This study’s findings would be of interest to those accounting faculty who mentor students because it will help them to better understand students’ perceptions and expectations of a career in the accounting profession.
Accounting students would also find the results interesting because they would likely see that many other students share their concerns regarding a career in accounting and with work-life balance. Individuals involved in recruitment would find these results interesting because they would provide these individuals with a better understanding of the mindset and values of upper-level accounting students.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: the next section discusses the prior literature related to gender and career success in accounting. It also discusses prior literature related to perceptions of the accounting profession and to perceptions of gender equity within the profession. In the third section, the method used for this study is presented. Results are provided in section four. Conclusions and suggestions for future research are presented in the final section of the paper.

**Literature Review**

The potential for good pay, high prestige, diverse job opportunities, and upward career mobility are all criteria which attract business students to the accounting profession (Ben-Caleb et al., 2021). It is of no surprise then that public accounting has captured the attention of both male and female students. However, one might reconsider entering the field if they perceive that they would be unfairly disadvantaged at some future point in their career.

For the last 30 years, males and females have been entering the profession in equal numbers. Prior literature also finds that gender has no effect on career aspirations, hours worked, compensation, and work experience for junior and senior staff (Whiting & Wright, 2001). Despite all of this, women appear to be underrepresented when considering the top levels of public accounting firms. In the Big Four public accounting firms for example, only 10-18% of
partners are female (Atena & Tiron-Tudor, 2019). The literature on the topic of gender in accounting describes numerous reasons as to why there is such a severe disparity in female partnerships. It also discusses students’ perception of the accounting profession and how those perceptions differ by gender.

**Reasons for Less Female Partners**

Prior literature provides evidence that male leaders may hold conscious or unconscious biases against the promotion of female employees. Cohen et al. (2020) for example, found that a significant percentage of female accountants in their study believed that male organizational leaders’ biases affected their promotion to top levels of the profession. Whiting and Wright (2001) noted that discrimination negatively impacts one’s attained job status level, and that more females reported discrimination in their workplace than did males. However, perceived discrimination and willingness to report said discrimination depends on an individual's situation (Faragalla et al., 2023).

These biases have the potential to affect how people think about the profession as a whole. Gender stratification is the unequal distribution of power and opportunity between males and females (Atena & Tiron-Tudor, 2019). Gendered organization theory refers to the norms and expectations of a workplace more geared towards males than females (Atena & Tiron-Tudor, 2019). This type of organization puts women at a disadvantage, because essentially they place value on attributes and skills that men possess while simultaneously disregarding or placing less value on those that women possess. The ideal qualities that give rise to a successful manager are thus found to be more associated with men (Faragalla et al., 2023). Masculinized imagery and concepts of competence and capability increase difficulty for women to identify in and embody
the accounting profession (Atena & Tiron-Tudor, 2023). Gendered organizations can thereby lead to social conformity. In other words, people tend to promote or advance those individuals who are like themselves. As a result, those women who do reach high levels within the organization are those who often share similar traits with the men in power (Whiting & Wright, 2001).

The way in which people, more specifically males, think about the profession and what kind of person will be successful in it gives rise to a double standard that women must face. For instance, when a woman mimics the behavior of a successful male superior or role model, it is not accepted by coworkers or subordinates because the behavior comes from a woman and not from a man (Atena & Tiron-Tudor, 2023). However, the norm that has been established in organizations is centered around behaviors that are traditionally associated with males. Similarly, it is commonplace for professionals to put in long hours in order to be successful and to reach high ranks within the organization. Yet if a woman is dedicated to her career and is working long hours, she is seen as neglecting her family and is thereby considered to be a poor mother (Atena & Tiron-Tudor, 2023). Atena & Tiron-Tudor (2023) also explain that the literature describes the presence of a double standard for women versus men with regard to recruiting, career advancement, and pay.

Mentorship is an important part in any career, yet female accountants have many issues when it comes to equitable mentoring. Males are more likely to provide mentorship to other males than they are to females, thereby limiting females access to the benefits of mentorship (Whiting & Wright, 2001). If females choose to mentor other females, they usually do not have significant influence or power within the organization, thereby not allowing them the same
opportunities as those provided to males with higher status mentors (Atena & Tiron-Tudor, 2023). Females understand the importance of having a mentor and perceive this inability as gender discrimination that is at least in part responsible for the glass ceiling they encounter (Cohen et al., 2020; Faragalla et al., 2023). This also does not leave women with suitable female role models to mimic and to aspire to (Atena & Tiron-Tudor, 2023).

Networking and visibility also have a hand in the success of one’s career. However, some women have trouble making connections with their coworkers because of differences in interests and hobbies. Often referred to as “locker room” theory, these informal networks outside of work form alliances between men (Whiting & Wright, 2001). Women, even in top positions, can experience exclusion because of the boys’ club attitude which exists among male colleagues (Faragalla et al., 2023). Women also have the impression that working hard and being skilled is enough to earn praise and promotion. But being more discreet makes them less visible than their outgoing male counterparts, thus affecting their career advancement (Atena & Tiron-Tudor, 2023). Another hindrance to visibility is maternity leave and raising a family because of the interruption to the mother’s career (Atena & Tiron-Tudor, 2023).

Biases can also impact the clients that women are assigned. For instance, Almer et al. (2021) found that women in the Big 4, with the exception of Deloitte, are more likely to serve low prestige clients. While this could be in part because women self-select these clients for more flexibility, it can also be because of taste and/or discrimination on the part of the firm. Cohen et al. (2020) noted that males are frequently approached for high-profile assignments, while females need to seek them out. On the flip side, women are often assigned specific, newer clients
as a part of a tokenism approach that is not based on a woman’s merit but rather is done to fulfill gender equity initiatives within the company (Almer et al., 2021).

However, perhaps the most cited and consequential reasoning for the lack of female partners is the family factor. Anderson (1994) found that family issues negatively impact a female’s advancement to partner, even though it does not affect their performance in the short run. These family issues often center around issues associated with trying to balance their career with their family responsibilities (Whiting & Wright, 2001). While motherhood is not directly stated as a reason for a woman not being promoted, “lack of focus” or “not as much time spent on the job” are in direct relation to being a mother (Atena & Tiron-Tudor, 2019). Mothers are more likely to report gender discrimination and more likely to feel that they are subject to discrimination (Faragalla et al., 2023). As a result of gender discrimination, some women do not even consider having children until after they attain partnership status with the firm (Whiting & Wright, 2001). As a result, if women want to break the glass ceiling, they must often choose between their family and their career (Flynn et al., 2015).

The biggest impact on a woman’s accounting career are breaks in time for having children. Maternity leave introduces a broken career pattern and makes it hard to progress in one’s career (Flynn et al., 2015). After returning to work, many women take advantage of flexible or part-time arrangements to keep up with their home responsibilities. However, Cohen et al. (2020) explains that initiatives aimed at promoting work-life balance short-change women who aspire to progress in their career. Flexible work is gender-stereotyped as being only for women; those utilizing the program were seen as not being serious or committed to their career (Atena & Tiron-Tudor, 2019). Ultimately, women take advantage of work-life balance measures
under false pretenses and make it seemingly impossible for them to be promoted and/or to reach partner (Strom & Muhr, 2021).

**Perceptions of the Accounting Profession**

There has been extensive research regarding individual’s perceptions of the accounting profession, whether it be from students, current staff, or former professionals. Research has been undertaken to investigate overall perceptions of the profession as well as to investigate the profession in terms of gender equity.

Students tend to perceive accountants as being dull number-crunchers. High school students in Ireland, both accounting and non-accounting, were found to view the profession in concert with the traditional stereotype of an accountant as being boring and number driven (Byrne & Willis, 2007). The same was found for students in Spain and South Africa (Mellado et al., 2020; Wessels & Steenkamp, 2009). All seen as being boring, college students tend to perceive accountants as professional but not personable (Hunt et al., 2009). Hunt et al. (2009) further noted that these perceptions are mostly driven by accountants known and by classes taken, and not as much from movies, television, or the news. In terms of skills, undergraduate students do not see nontechnical skills as being very important in accounting (Usoff & Feldmann, 1998).

However, students in Nigeria were found to have chosen the accounting profession based on perceptions of job opportunities, pay, and professional prestige (Ben-Caleb et al., 2021). Students who are attracted to the accounting profession are often those that embody the typical characteristics of accountants (Tan and Laswad, 2007). Graduate and undergraduate accounting
students in Ghana were found to have much more positive perceptions of the profession than the public (Mbawuni, 2015).

In addition, perceptions of gender equality in the profession can be seen as poor. Cohen et al., (2020) found that glass ceiling perceptions are influenced by bias-driven effects, structural effects, and cultural effects, as well as by several demographic factors. Not only this, but masculine pronouns in auditing standards reduce the perception of equity and inclusion of women and members of the LGBTQ+ community in the audit profession (Peytcheva, 2023).

**Male vs. Female Perceptions of Accounting**

The literature also investigates how perceptions of accounting differ between males and females. Male graduate students in Ghana, for instance, tend to have more positive perceptions of the profession than do female graduate students (Mbawuni, 2015). Male undergraduates have also been found to regard leadership skills more importantly than do females (Usoff & Feldmann, 1998). However, there is not a significant difference between males and females in the interrelationships of performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intention (Fogarty, 1996).

Similarly, the literature explores how the accounting profession perceives males versus females. Peers described as female, married with children, and poor in physical appearance were generally perceived as less likely to succeed in accounting (Anderson et al., 1994). This impacts how women are treated in the accounting profession, and the impression that it leaves on them. When asking alumni of Big 4 accounting firms, women gave lower ratings to their firm’s ability
to develop personal skills, training, personnel evaluation, counseling programs, and were less likely to recommend the firm than men (Iyer et al., 2005).

Method

Study Overview

To examine whether perceptions of soon-to-be professional accountants vary by gender, I used a qualitative research approach. More specifically, I conducted in-depth interviews with 20 accounting students.

Participants

The individuals interviewed were all either undergraduate seniors majoring in accounting or graduate students in a Master of Accounting Science program. These individuals were all students at a midsized university located in the Midwest region of the United States. Of the 20 individuals interviewed, 10 were male and 10 were female.

Interview Script

The script followed when conducting the interviews can be seen in Appendix 1. As shown in Appendix 1, participants were asked to respond to eight questions in total. The first three questions were asked to obtain demographic-type information. The remaining five questions were asked to obtain information about each individual’s career aspirations and perceptions of a career in accounting. Each individual was also asked about their overall life goals and if those goals have an impact on their career aspirations. They also provided information about each individual’s experience with the public accounting recruitment process.

Interview Analysis Process
The process followed with respect to each interview was identical. Firstly, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Secondly, the transcripts were reviewed for accuracy. Thirdly, the transcripts were loaded into NVivo, a qualitative research software. Fourthly, the transcripts were coded independently by two researchers. Lastly, the two researchers came to agreement as to themes arising from the interviews.

Results

After analyzing all 20 interviews, there were three major themes that developed. The three themes were pursuing the CPA, obstacles, and recruiter gender.

Pursuing the CPA

Most accounting students intend on pursuing the CPA. Of the 20 interviewees, 18 plan to take the CPA exam following graduation. The majority see the CPA and working in public accounting as a stepping stone to going into private accounting or to owning their own firm. Few students have definite aspirations of achieving very high rankings in organizations, whether in public or private accounting, as most students hold a flexible mindset in regards to their long-term career path.

Obstacles

The major obstacles to achieving career goals as seen by the students were the difficulty of the profession and family. This was consistent across both genders. There also were other obstacles mentioned by students that were secondary to those, one of which was noted by
primarily women.

*Difficulty of Profession*

Multiple students noted their classwork as a possible obstacle to their career aspirations. Both undergraduate and graduate coursework were mentioned as concerns for students. In addition, many students noted the difficulty of the CPA exam as a worry for them.

Students also mentioned the competitiveness, stress, and time-commitment of public accounting, and were concerned about burnout. In response to Question 5 (see Appendix 1), one student mentioned “I don’t want to be a partner. I feel like that’s a lot of stress. I don’t want to be the one signing that paper.” These concerns were consistently mentioned by both males and females.

*Family*

Having a family is important to students, as the majority of interviewees mentioned a desire to have a significant other, children, and even pets. A number of students also value owning their own home for a family. Where students wanted to live had a wide variety of answers, as some students want to stay in the Midwest while others want to move to much different parts of the country.

However, family is also seen as an obstacle for students achieving their goals. When asked Question 6-A, a student responded, “If I had a child, yes, I feel like that would cut down my ability to commit to long term stuff.” Another student commented “I think getting pregnant will probably hold me back a little bit, you know, having to take time off work…I feel that there might be like some sort of criticism for women who are pregnant in the accounting profession,
because obviously we want to prioritize our children before a career.” A third student claimed, “So at the end of the day, if it comes down to choosing a career over choosing a family, I’m going to choose a family every single time.” Both males and females commented on how dedicating time to family will take time away from work and will impact their accounting career.

*Other Obstacles*

Multiple interviewees highlighted a need or desire for flexibility and concern for work-life balance. Time management was also mentioned by multiple students as a possible hindrance to their career objectives.

Diversity issues were also noted, mostly by women. When asked Question 5-A, one student responded “I am a female and I think working in a male dominated world not just in accounting, but in business in general, is kind of the biggest thing. I am also a woman of color so there is that kind of double minority against me.” In response to Question 6-A, another student noted “Specifically for women who want to be a mom or not, just being a female is a little bit of a boundary at certain times.”

*Recruiter Gender*

The main theme that developed across 16 out of the 20 interviews was the imbalance between male and female higher-level positions in public accounting. Both male and female students noticed predominantly female recruiters and male partners and senior managers at recruiting events and in the field as a whole. In discussion of Question 7-ii, one student highlighted “I think recruiters are usually female, and everyone in the accounting field is men when I talk to them. And I feel like that I can adamantly say that is accurate.” Both male and
female students commented on seeing more and more females professionals in accounting, but still not as many as male professionals. Interestingly, this observation did not make students less confident that they would be able to achieve their career aspirations.

**Conclusion**

Overall, there are no major differences in perceptions between male and female accounting students in regard to their prospective careers in the accounting profession. Both male and female students have high ambitions and are willing to be flexible as to where their career path might take them. The majority of students intend to pursue the CPA, and see themselves using their experience to move out of public accounting and into other areas of business.

When asked to consider possible obstacles that might hinder career objectives, both male and female students commented on the time commitment associated with raising a family. Consistent with prior literature, females in particular mentioned the impact that being pregnant might have on their career progression. Both male and female students were also concerned about the difficulty of their academic requirements, the CPA exam, and the profession overall.

Both genders also acknowledged the disproportionate spread of male to female partners, noting that females are more likely to hold recruiter positions. It is valuable that both male and female students observe the gendered nature of the accounting profession, and not just women, as awareness is the first step in trying to identify and move forward with initiatives.

However, one obstacle that was identified only by females relates to diversity. Simply being a woman was seen as a possible obstacle to career advancement in a perceived male dominated profession.
The results of this study would prove useful to accountancy faculty who mentor students to prepare them for the workforce. To see how other students perceive the field and their potential obstacles gives insight to faculty that they can use to better advise and teach students who might share similar points of view.

In addition, accounting students might find the results of this study valuable in order to see how their perceptions of the accounting profession are shared by other students with similar experience levels. There is comfort in knowing that you are not the only person worried about the CPA exam or work-life balance, for instance.

Finally, recruitment efforts by public accounting firms would benefit from the results of this study because of the perspective that it gives on upper-level accounting students’ ambitions and concerns. For example, knowing that students notice the imbalance in male to female partnerships can influence which staff members should attend a recruitment event so as to show that the firm is truly providing a fair opportunity for both male and female applicants.

A limitation of this study was that it was carried out with students at one university. It may be beneficial to perform a similar qualitative study with students from other universities to see if their perceptions and expectations are consistent to the students examined in this study. It may also be useful to reinterview the same students examined in this study at some point in the future to determine how their perceptions change over time. Future research could also examine the effects and value of recruitment efforts by public accounting firms, as many students interviewed mentioned the opportunities and confidence they gained from such events.
References


Appendix 1
Script Followed When Conducting In-Depth Interviews

Hello and thank you for agreeing to be part of my study looking at the lived experience of students pursuing the accounting profession. I am a senior at NIU pursuing an honors degree. This study is part of my honors requirement and I appreciate you taking the time to answer my questions. This should take no more than 20 minutes.

Are you ready to begin?

1. What is your Major? What year are you in?
2. If you don’t mind me asking, what is your gender identity?
3. Do you plan to pursue the CPA?
4. What are your career aspirations for the next year/two years after graduation?
5. Where do you see your career in 7-10 years?
   a. Do you perceive there to be any obstacles to fulfilling this?
6. Outside of your career, where do you see your life 7-10 years from now?
   a. Do you think any of these aspirations will impact your career objectives?
7. Have you participated in accountancy recruitment events?
   a. What was your experience?
      i. Who from the firm did you meet?
      ii. Who else from the firm was present that you may not have had a chance to meet individually?
8. Did attending the event make you more or less confident that you would be able to achieve your career aspirations?