

Leadership Excellence and Gender in Organizations

Early priorities and adult employment outcomes

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Early Career Priorities and Adult Employment Outcomes

Abstract: Using the *Youth Development Study* survey data, this study investigates a sample graduating from high school in 1988, a time period characterized by increasing gender parity in academic and career goals. This study examines the influence of three priorities in the transition to adulthood: career, marriage, and parenthood on middle age adult employment outcomes. Do these priorities have an impact on employment outcomes, does the timing of these priorities matter, and does gender play a role? Consistent with human capital theory that an individual's early investment priorities are based on expected future labor market participation, findings indicate that, on average, early career priorities are more predictive than later priorities of adult employment. Human capital theorists also suggest that specialization in domestic or labor market work is necessary to attain the most efficient division of labor in families. When household specialization is gendered, early career priorities may not translate into employment for women as women may choose career paths influenced by non-work priorities that can accommodate family responsibilities. Household specialization would therefore suggest differential outcomes for men and women, yet the results of this study find that early career priorities are not significantly more predictive for men relative to women.

In addition, this study introduces a life course perspective and examines priorities over time and in relation to each other. Previous research has found that career orientations are related to career outcomes, and family orientations are related to family outcomes, yet few studies look at the interrelation of career and family orientations on employment outcomes. Employment and family roles for women were traditionally considered tradeoffs and negatively related to each other. More recent studies have found that women are now seeking status attainment in both work and family. This study seeks to extend evidence of the relationship between career, marriage, and parent priorities by examining if gender plays a role in how the timing of these priorities impact employment outcomes. Consistent with social role theory, this study finds that men with a proximal parent priority are more likely than women to be employed as adults. While the effect of parent priority on employment was not negative for women, the gender differential suggests that although men and women's career priorities may be converging, the timing of marriage and parenthood priorities might function differently for women in conjunction with career priorities.

Keywords: career development; gender; human capital theory; social role theory