

Chapter 4

Self, Career, and Gender Issues: A Complex Interplay of Internal/External Factors

ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to: demonstrate the role of individual differences; identify how issues of the self, such as self-efficacy and self-esteem, can influence women's career choice and career outcomes; discuss self-discrepancy theory in relation to gender role conflict in the workplace; evaluate if high self-esteem and self-efficacy can be advantageous to women working in male dominated occupations and industries; describe how internalised self-view, may contribute to gendered occupational segregation; and discuss the concept of the psychological contract and job satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

The term self-esteem is considered as originating in the work of the psychologist William James in his publication *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). James considered self-esteem to be an evaluative process, and defined it in terms of the ratio of successes to pretensions, or goals and aims, arguing that self-esteem may just as easily be enhanced by lowering aspirations as by increasing successes. Today, there are in existence numerous ways of conceptualizing or experiencing the 'self', and various definitions of self-esteem,

which while sometimes appearing to describe the same concept, or construct, often reflect diverse realities. For example, the term self-esteem is sometimes equated with merely feeling good about oneself. In this respect the most comprehensive and definition of self-esteem, particularly within contemporary psychology, is that of Rosenberg's (1965), which describes self-esteem as a personal sense of worthiness that is experienced as positive or negative attitudes directed toward the self, in particular beliefs about being valuable and capable. The most widely accepted definition of self-esteem is that of Nathaniel Branden (1969),

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who defined positive (or high) self-esteem as a relationship between the individuals' competencies in coping with the fundamental challenges of life and worthiness, in relation to happiness, and doing so consistently over time. In terms of positive (or high) self-esteem therefore, self-esteem is related to personal confidence in the potential to learn, make appropriate choices and decisions, and respond positively to change. It is also the experience that success, achievement, fulfillment and happiness, are right and natural for us. In this respect, self-esteem incorporates emotional, evaluative, and cognitive components. Mruk (2006) considers that Branden was the first to adopt a two-factor approach to self-esteem by combining the dimensions of self-efficacy (or self-competency) and self-respect (or self-worth) to define the construct of self-esteem, and producing a balanced definition.

In relation to self-esteem, self-efficacy is the individual's belief that they can be successful in their endeavors to accomplish things successfully, for example demonstrating specific competencies, social relationships, or effective coping. Fennell (2003) develops on this by stating that self-esteem may be viewed as a schema, or a generic cognitive representation of the self, which originates in particular experiences, and which directs later information processing and behaviors. Accordingly, self-esteem may be viewed as a learned, overall, or global, conclusion or attitude toward the self, which once formed, pervasively influences the individuals' cognitions, affect and behaviors, and which may be positive (or high) (e.g. "I am decent," "I am of value") or negative (or low) (e.g. "I am flawed," "I am of no worth"). Crocker and Park (2004) consider that humans appear to be motivated to experience positive (or high) self-esteem. Whilst most research has focused upon the beneficial aspects of positive (or high) self-esteem, in particular enhanced initiative and positive affect (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger and Vohs, 2003), others such as Baumeister, Smart

and Boden (1996) for example, have considered "the dark side of high self-esteem", which is equated with narcissism, arrogance, conceit and egotism. Katz (1993) however, maintains that there is an absolute distinction between authentic positive (or high) self-esteem and narcissistic qualities, as the former is devoid of an excessive or exclusive preoccupation with the self and self-gratification. Further, the notion that narcissistically positive (or high) self-esteem is detrimental is supported by the finding that narcissists' positive (or high) self-esteem tends to be unstable (Rhodewalt, Madrian, and Cheney, 1998) and self-defensive (Paulhus, 1998). In this respect, research (e.g. Jordan, Spencer and Zanna, 2003; Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne and Correll, 2003.) has distinguished between those individuals who have a *secure* positive (or high) self-esteem, and those who have a *defensive* positive (or high) self-esteem. The studies concluded that individuals in the former category, possess positive self-views that are confidently held, in that such individuals feel good about themselves without requiring continual affirming appraisals from others to maintain their positive (or high) self-esteem. Those in the latter category on the other hand, possess positive self-views that are tenuous and susceptible to threat. Such individuals are in possession of pre-conscious self-doubts and insecurities, and are prone to respond extremely negatively if criticized.

In this chapter, we will discuss individual differences, the working environment and career outcomes. We will look at personality, person-environment fit, self in the workplace, job satisfaction and psychological contract. These concepts are important issues when discussing careers, in particular women's careers. The chapter will also highlight how issues of the self, such as personality and self-efficacy interlink and relate to other issues such as stereotypes and career choice discussed in this book.

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