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THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

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# Gender Differences in the Career Development of Professionals in Hong Kong

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## Introduction

Women have been playing an increasingly important role in the workforce. It is projected that in the United States, for example, women will make up almost half of the labour force by 2005 (U. S. Department of Labor, 1992). Although the percentage in other countries may vary, the phenomenon of women in the workplace has in fact become "the norm" rather than the exception (Hyde, 1985). Despite the continual contributions made by women to human resources and to the economy, the majority of existing theories on career development are based on the experiences of middle-class Caucasian males. Researchers have questioned the relevance of these studies to other groups such as women, and individuals from different cultural, ethnic and/or socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g., Fitzgerald and Crites, 1980; Perun and Bielby, 1981; Betz and Fitzgerald, 1987; Fouad and Arbona, 1994; Okocha, 1994). One of the central problems of these theories on career development is the assumption that individuals are free to choose from among an array of alternatives that are available to all. Such an assumption ignores the social realities of special groups such as women and ethnic minorities (Smith, 1983; Okocha, 1994). The development of the careers of these individuals may be constrained by such factors as prejudice, discrimination and the limited opportunities imposed by society (Griffith, 1980; Smith, 1983).

Theories related to the career development of women began to emerge in the early 1980s (e.g., Gottfredson, 1981; Hackett

and Betz, 1981; Astin, 1984; Farmer, 1985). These "gendered" theories, a term suggested by Fitzgerald, Fassinger and Betz (1995), improved on earlier theories by taking into account variables that are useful to the examination of issues related to the career development of women. For example, Hackett and Betz (1981) adopted Bandura's (1977, 1986) concept of self-efficacy to explain vocational behaviour. Within the context of career development, beliefs on self-efficacy not only influence a person's decision to take up a specific occupation, but also his/her career goals and job performance. Gottfredson's (1981) theory of circumscription, on the other hand, suggested that individuals seek jobs that are compatible with their self-concept. She expanded on Super's idea by including variables such as gender, social class and intelligence in her conceptualization of self-concept. According to Gottfredson (1981), these variables play a significant role in predicting an individual's occupational aspirations and career choices. Astin's (1984) sociopsychological model further contended that men and women share a common set of work motivations. What differentiates their work expectations and career outcomes is the mediating effect of variables such as their differential socialization experience, as well as their perceptions of the structure of the opportunities open to them.

In short, these theories emphasize both individual and contextual influences in understanding career development in the twenty-first century. In light of the rapid changes in the world economy and trends such as globalization, it has become apparent that the study of career development can no longer be conducted within a vacuum, but must be carried out within a broader sociocultural context. It is interesting to note that with the possible exception of Hackett and Betz's (1981) theory, the other "gendered" theories have received scant research attention since their formulation in the 1980s. One explanation for this is that these theories/models lack operational definitions of the proposed constructs and specific hypotheses (Betz and Fitzgerald, 1987; Brooks, 1990; Hackett, Lent and Greenhaus, 1991; Hackett and Lent, 1992), which makes it difficult to test

them empirically. Another challenge to these theories is their eurocentricity (Pearson and Bieschke, 2001). In other words, similar to traditional career theories, these new theories are perceived as having been formulated to explain and describe the experiences of middle-class Caucasian women. Their applicability to women of other ethnic groups has yet to be determined.

With these challenges in mind, the aim of the present study was to examine the pertinence to a group of Hong Kong professionals of some of the constructs suggested in these "gendered" theories, such as self-perception and perceptions of the opportunity structure. Hong Kong presents a unique sociocultural context within which the career development of individuals, in particular those of women, can be examined. Hong Kong was under British rule for over a century. In spite of its status as one of the most westernized and modernized cities in Asia, its residents, predominantly Chinese, are still very much under the influence of Confucian teachings. For example, Cheung and her colleagues (1997) pointed out that the traditional notion of "the man's place is outside the home while the woman's place is in the home" still exists in Hong Kong. Such an emphasis on domestic responsibilities for women could create external as well as internal barriers to the career development of women.

Researchers have pointed out that although over half of all Hong Kong women over the age of 15 are in the workforce, they continue to be concentrated in occupations such as teaching, nursing and clerical work (Shaffer et al., 2000). The phenomenon of gender segregation may change gradually, with the establishment of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) in Hong Kong in 1996. Its campaign to promote equal opportunities has increased public awareness of the EOC from 35% in 1996 to 87% in 1998 (Cheung, 1999a). It is within this context of a gradual shift in traditional thinking towards the involvement of Hong Kong women in the workforce and a commitment to equal opportunities that the present study was carried out. This changing context thus presents a clear reason to

examine the relevance of the constructs of existing theories on career development.

The focus of the present study is on Hong Kong professionals, because they have propelled Hong Kong's development into a cosmopolitan and economically vibrant society since the 1980s. Professionals such as managers and administrators are expected to continue holding the key to Hong Kong's stability and prosperity as Hong Kong confronts the current dual challenges of economic restructuring and political transition. What is particularly noteworthy is that despite the growth in the number of women in management, Westwood (1997) has pointed out that women continue to face barriers when they try to enter senior positions. In his summary of Hong Kong-based research on female managers, most of which involve attitudinal surveys, Westwood (1997) reported the persistence of sexual stereotypes of managerial attributes, and found that the careers of female managers are still plagued by conflicts with family obligations. It is evident that although informative, previous studies on Hong Kong professionals have been limited in scope and in terms of the occupational category of the participants. The present study is thus the first attempt to systematically examine the career development of Hong Kong professionals. The study focuses on five major professions in Hong Kong: accountancy, engineering, law, medicine and public administration.

In the following section, the discussion will focus on the constructs that are deemed to be relevant to the career development of Hong Kong professionals.

### ***Background Information***

A survey of recent research on career development and related issues indicated that certain demographic variables play a prominent role in the career development process. For example, gender and age were found to have a significant relation to the career maturity of a group of college students (Kornspan and Etzel, 2001), and to the career motivation of a group of high school students (Farmer, 1997). Other studies found that

variables related to the participants' family-of-origin also have a significant influence on their career aspirations and development. These variables include a family's socioeconomic status, parental involvement, emphasis on education and values towards work (Rojewski and Yang, 1997; Tang, Fouad and Smith, 1999; Gomez et al., 2001; Pearson and Bieschke, 2001). Maternal influences, likewise, were found to be of particular salience to their daughters' career aspirations and orientation (Rainey and Borders, 1997; Song, 2001). Given the Chinese emphasis on family, education and achievement, it is expected that these variables would contribute significantly to the understanding of the career development of Hong Kong professionals.

### ***Self-perception of Performance in Career-related Domains***

Another construct to be examined in the present study is the participants' perceptions of their personal performance in career-related domains. According to Bandura (1986), there are four sources of background or experiential information for a person's beliefs on his/her self-efficacy. They are personal performance accomplishments, vicarious (or observational) learning, social persuasion, and physiological states and reactions. Bandura (1977, 1986, 1997) has repeatedly argued that amongst the four sources, personal performance accomplishments constitute the most significant source of information on efficacy, because the individual has first-hand experience of mastering a certain task. Bandura's (1977, 1986, 1997) argument has been supported by research findings, which have demonstrated the effectiveness of personal performance accomplishments in enhancing the mathematical self-efficacy and career interests of college students (e.g., Campbell and Hackett, 1986; Luzzo et al., 1999).

The education system in Hong Kong is oriented towards examinations and achievement. To attain status in a profession such as law or medicine, individuals would not only have had to succeed in making their way through this rigid system, but also to have excelled in one examination after another. Hong Kong professionals who have survived these challenges will have

grown accustomed to various kinds of performance evaluations. Nevertheless, feedback based on an objective evaluation may or may not coincide with a professional's subjective evaluation of his/her own performance in career-related domains such as leadership skills and interpersonal competence. As mentioned before, Bandura's (1986) theory postulated that it is the individual's subjective experience with success and mastery that contributes to beliefs on efficacy.

In addition, due to the differential socialization of men and women, it is expected that male and female professionals in Hong Kong would perceive their performance in career-related domains rather differently. Likewise, their ratings of the importance of factors such as confidence, professional knowledge and familial support, which affect the development of their careers, are also expected to be different. Such information could provide insight into both the career development of Hong Kong professionals as well as the applicability of the self-efficacy theory to understanding the development of their careers.

### *Perceptions of the Opportunity Structure*

Researchers have repeatedly pointed out the implications of the changing context within which career development occurs (Hansen, 1993; Fouad and Arbona, 1994; Phillips and Blustein, 1994). For example, global trends such as the technological revolution, downsizing and deskilling have indeed changed the ways by which individuals define career and how they perceive the availability of opportunities. In her sociopsychological model, Astin (1984) defined the opportunity structure as the options available in the world of work. The inclusion of the construct is in fact a distinctive feature of Astin's model. From her perspective, the opportunity structure is not static, but changes over time. As society changes, men and women are faced with different environmental conditions, which in turn modify their career aspirations and work behaviour. To support this contention, Astin cited several examples of social change, such as advances in medical and reproductive technology, and

changes in economic trends and conditions. These larger social forces could help to explain the increasing participation of women as well as minorities in the labour force. Implied in the conceptualization of the opportunity structure is the significance of the individuals' perceptions and/or awareness of the availability of options in the world of work. As such, the opportunity structure could also help to explain the differential career expectations and choices of men and women.

Although Astin's model has not received much research attention, her ideas have been supported by two studies. For example, Scott and Hatalla's (1990) data supported Astin's notion of the importance of the opportunity structure as a major determinant in the career choices of women. Poole, Langan-Fox, Ciavarella and Omodei's (1991) findings also confirmed Astin's ideas of the differential effects of socialization and the opportunity structure on the career choices of men and women. With continuing changes in the demographics and structure of the workforce, Astin's inclusion of cultural-environmental factors in her model would undoubtedly enhance the model's efficacy in explaining career choices and work behaviour in today's world.

Like their American counterparts, Hong Kong women have been contributing to the workforce for the past few decades. According to the figures presented by the Census and Statistics Department of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (2001:50), women made up 43.3% of the total workforce in 2001. This was a gain of 5.3 percentage points from the figure for 1991. With improved opportunities for secondary and tertiary education, Hong Kong women are now exposed to a wider range of career options than were available to women of previous generations. The number of women in managerial and professional occupations has been increasing (Westwood, 1997). Nonetheless, not unlike working women in other developed societies, the development of the careers of Hong Kong women has been constrained by such factors as a gender gap in pay and the "glass ceiling" (Cheung, 1999b). In the present study, we attempt to assess the level of satisfaction of Hong Kong

professionals with equal opportunities for women in the professions, their attitudes towards active measures to promote gender equality, and their definition of gender inequality. Since the opportunity structure has undoubtedly played a different role in the career development of male and female professionals, it is expected that their scores on these variables will also be different.

To summarize, the present study is the first attempt to systematically examine the career development of Hong Kong professionals. More specifically, the pertinence to this population of some of the constructs suggested in “gendered” theories will be examined. These constructs are self-perceptions of performance in career-related domains and perceptions of the opportunity structure. In addition to Astin’s (1984) original conceptualization, the evaluation of perceptions of the opportunity structure in the present study also includes the level of satisfaction of Hong Kong professionals with equal opportunities for women in the professions, their attitudes towards active measures to promote gender equality, and their definition of gender inequality. Gender differences in these variables are also examined.

The present study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods. In addition to a questionnaire survey, some participants were also interviewed. Since findings from the qualitative data have been published elsewhere (see Lee, 1997; Tam, 1998, 1999), they will only be used in the discussion section to corroborate the quantitative findings.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

A total of 521 professionals from five selected professions — accountancy, engineering, law, medicine and public administration — participated in the present study. These five professions were selected because they have traditionally been dominated by men.

The correspondence addresses of the professionals were obtained from the professional bodies and/or institutions to which they belong. A copy of the questionnaire, together with a stamped return envelope, was sent to each professional. The return rate was 13%. The number of participants across the five professions was as follows:

- Accountancy: a total of 106 accountants participated in the study, including 32 males (30.2%) and 74 females (69.8%).
- Engineering: a total of 195 engineers participated in the study, including 175 males (89.7%) and 19 females (9.7%), while one engineer did not indicate his/her gender.
- Law: a total of 44 lawyers participated in the study, including 19 males (43.2%) and 25 females (56.8%).
- Medicine: a total of 117 doctors participated in the study, including 89 males (76.1%) and 28 females (23.9%).
- Public administration: a total of 59 mid-level administrative officers in the civil service participated in the study, including 33 males (55.9%) and 26 females (44.1%).

These five professional groups have a similar social status. In analyzing the data in this study, all of the participants were grouped according to gender. There were a total of 348 male professionals (66.9%) and 172 female professionals (33.1%). The male participants ranged in age from 26 to 56, with a mean age of 38.9. The majority of these participants were married (81.7%). As for the female participants, they ranged in age from 23 to 58, with a mean age of 34.7. The majority of the female professionals were also married (64.2%), although the percentage was lower than that of their male counterparts.

### *Instrument*

A structured questionnaire was designed to collect information from the participants. The questionnaire consisted of three major sections:

1. Background information, which included age, gender, marital status, education level of the participants and their

- parents, working experience, and the number of hours spent on household chores per week.
2. Career-related influences and competencies: this section included two sub-scales:
    - (a) In the first sub-scale, Factors Important to Career Development, the participants were asked to rate, on a 5-point Likert scale, the extent to which they thought the 13 listed factors was important to their career development. These factors included confidence, professional knowledge and family support. The coefficient alpha for this sub-scale was .84.
    - (b) In the second sub-scale, Self-perception of Career-related Performance, the participants were asked to assess, on a 5-point Likert scale, their performance on 11 career-related aspects such as leadership skills, interpersonal competence and communication skills. The participants' scores on these 11 aspects were further added to obtain a composite score to indicate their overall evaluation of their career-related competencies. The coefficient alpha for this sub-scale was .89.
  3. Perception of the opportunity structure: this section included three sub-scales:
    - (a) The first sub-scale, Satisfaction with Equal Opportunities, assessed the participants' level of satisfaction with equal opportunities for women in the professions. There were a total of six statements. The participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with statements such as "In Hong Kong, male and female engineers have equal opportunities to develop their careers," and "In general, I am satisfied with the level of gender equality in Hong Kong." High scores on this sub-scale indicated a higher level of satisfaction with the equal opportunities for women in the professions. The coefficient alpha for this sub-scale was .68.

- (b) The second sub-scale, Promotion of Gender Equality, assessed the participants' attitudes towards active measures to promote gender equality. There were four statements, which included, for example, "Anti-discrimination laws must be legislated to promote equality between the two genders." High scores on this sub-scale indicated more acceptance of feminism or its advocacy. The coefficient alpha for this sub-scale was .56.
- (c) In the third sub-scale, Definition of Gender Inequality, the participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that certain situations constituted gender inequality. There were a total of nine situations. Some examples of these situations included "Male and female employees working in the same organization should be allocated different responsibilities," and "Male and female students are encouraged to study different subjects." High scores on this sub-scale reflected a relatively broader view of what constituted gender inequality. The coefficient alpha for this sub-scale was .66.

## Results

### *Background Information*

T-tests were conducted to examine gender differences relating to the participants' backgrounds. Significant gender differences were found in three variables: age ( $t = 6.67, p < .01$ ), father's education level ( $t = 1.98, p < .05$ ) and mother's education level ( $t = 3.42, p < .01$ ). A further examination of the data indicated that the mean scores of female professionals on these two variables were higher than those of male professionals. In other words, the level of education of both parents was significantly higher for female professionals than for male professionals. Male and female professionals did not differ significantly in their own level of education, working experience and the number of hours



(per week) spent on household chores. These results are summarized in Table 1.

### Career-related Influences and Competencies

In terms of the participants' ratings of the most and least important factors to their career development, the responses of male and female professionals were very similar. The top four factors rated by the majority of male professionals as "very important" and "important" to their career development were communication skills (95%), problem-solving ability (93.7%), relationship with colleagues (92.9%) and language skills (91.2%). The two factors rated as "very important" and "important" by the smallest percentage of male respondents were family support (51.7%) and support of organizational policy (49.6%). The rest of the factors were rated as "very important" and "important" by 71.8% to 89.9% of the male professionals.

As for female professionals, the top four factors rated as "very important" and "important" to their career development

were language skills (94.6%), problem-solving ability (93.3%), communication skills (93.2%) and confidence (91.8%). The two factors rated as "very important" and "important" by the smallest percentage of female professionals were also family support (63.5%) and support of organizational policy (55.4%). The rest of the factors were rated as "very important" and "important" by 68.9% to 86.5% of the female professionals.

*T*-tests were conducted to examine gender differences in the participants' perceptions of the importance of each of the 13 factors to their career development and their subjective evaluation of their competencies on career-related aspects. The results indicated that male and female professionals differed significantly in their perceptions of the importance of the following factors to their career development: ability to demonstrate one's competence ( $t = 2.35, p < .05$ ), ability to handle crises ( $t = 3.13, p < .01$ ) and problem-solving ability ( $t = 2.35, p < .01$ ). A further examination of the data indicated that the mean scores of the female professionals on these three variables were higher than those of the male professionals. In other words, female professionals perceived these factors as more important to their career development than did their male peers.

The results of the *t*-tests further indicated that male and female professionals differed significantly in their overall evaluation of their career-related competencies ( $t = 2.28, p < .05$ ). An examination of the mean scores indicated that male professionals rated their performance significantly higher than did their female peers. More specifically, the subjective evaluations of the two groups differed significantly in the following career-related aspects: ability to understand professional knowledge ( $t = 4.05, p < .01$ ), leadership skills ( $t = 4.06, p < .01$ ), ability to handle crises ( $t = 4.23, p < .01$ ), problem-solving ability ( $t = 4.33, p < .01$ ) and confidence ( $t = 2.16, p < .05$ ). An examination of the mean scores indicated that the male professionals evaluated their performance significantly higher on all of these aspects than the female professionals.

**Table 1** Gender Differences in Background Information

	Male		Female		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Age	38.86	6.38	34.70	7.02	6.67	.01
Years of education	18.46	1.24	18.38	1.29	.68	.50
Father's years of education	11.39	5.85	12.52	5.13	1.98	.05
Mother's years of education	7.84	6.20	9.90	6.10	3.42	.01
Hours spent on housework <sup>1</sup>	6.47	7.07	7.65	8.49	1.62	.11
Number of working hours <sup>1</sup>	50.52	12.31	49.54	9.56	.90	.37
Number of socializing hours <sup>1</sup>	1.91	4.25	1.25	2.77	1.80	.07

Note: 1. Hours per week.

## ***Perception of the Opportunity Structure***

### **Satisfaction with Equal Opportunities**

The majority of the male professionals either strongly agreed or agreed with five of the six statements in this sub-scale. The percentages ranged from 68.9% to 88.2%, indicating general satisfaction with the overall situation of equal opportunities at work. However, the majority of the male professionals (75.6%) either strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement "In your department, the career development of female colleagues exceeds that of male colleagues."

A similar pattern was observed for female professionals. With the exception of the above statement, the majority of them either strongly agreed or agreed with the rest of the five statements. The percentages ranged from 73% to 86.5%. Seventy-three per cent of female professionals either strongly disagreed or disagreed with the above statement.

### **Promotion of Gender Equality**

The majority of male professionals either strongly disagreed or disagreed with all of the four statements in this sub-scale. The percentages ranged from 55% to 84%. A slightly different pattern was observed for the responses of female professionals in this sub-scale. The majority of them (ranged from 56.8% to 93.3%) either strongly disagreed or disagreed with three of the four statements. However, the female respondents were divided in their views of the statement "The criticisms on sexist attitudes raised by feminist groups on television advertisements are ludicrous," with 52.9% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.

### **Definition of Gender Inequality**

Over half of the male professionals either strongly agreed or agreed that seven of the nine situations constituted gender inequality. The two situations that they did not think constitute gender inequality were "Within an organization, male and female employees are allocated different types of work," and "In

the Legislative Council, the majority of council members are male." The opinions of the male respondents were split, with 50.9% either agreeing or strongly agreeing that gender inequality is demonstrated when "Teachers encourage male and female students to study different subjects." Likewise, the majority of female professionals also either strongly disagreed or disagreed that the abovementioned situations constitute gender inequality. The majority of them either strongly agreed or agreed that the other seven situations constitute gender inequality.

The results of the *t*-test indicated that male and female professionals differed significantly in their definition of gender inequality ( $t = 2.39, p < .05$ ). An examination of the mean scores suggested that female professionals scored significantly higher than male professionals on this sub-scale. High scores on this sub-scale indicated a relatively broader view of what constituted gender inequality.

## ***Correlates of Self-perception of Career-related Competencies***

As reported earlier, male and female professionals differed significantly in their overall evaluation of their career-related competencies. It is thus conceivable that the correlates of this dimension might be different for the two groups. To address this possibility, the pattern of Pearson product-moment correlations among the variables was examined.

For female professionals, their subjective evaluation of their own career-related competencies was significantly and positively correlated with their ratings on 3 out of the 13 factors that they were asked to rate in accordance with their importance to their career development. The three factors were: maintaining harmonious relationships with colleagues ( $r = .26, p < .05$ ), understanding organizational policies ( $r = .25, p < .05$ ) and supporting organizational policies ( $r = .32, p < .01$ ).

For male professionals, their subjective evaluation of career-related competencies was significantly and positively correlated with age ( $r = .23, p < .01$ ), and with their ratings on 9 out of the

13 factors that they were asked to rate in accordance with their importance to their career development. These nine factors were: ability to understand professional knowledge ( $r = .22, p < .001$ ), leadership skills ( $r = .24, p < .001$ ), cooperation with colleagues ( $r = .16, p < .05$ ), diligence ( $r = .23, p < .001$ ), ability to show outstanding performance when assigned an important task ( $r = .14, p < .05$ ), problem-solving ability ( $r = .20, p < .01$ ), understanding organizational policies ( $r = .16, p < .05$ ), supporting organizational policies ( $r = .23, p < .001$ ) and confidence ( $r = .20, p < .01$ ). These results are summarized in Table 2.

### *Correlates of Perception of the Opportunity Structure*

In light of the differential socialization of male and female professionals, it is speculated that the correlates of the perception of the opportunity structure might be different for the two groups. In the present study, the evaluation of perception of the opportunity structure also included the level of satisfaction of Hong Kong professionals with equal opportunities for women in the professions, their attitudes towards active measures to promote gender equality, and their definition of gender inequality. Pearson product-moment correlations were conducted to address the question.

For the Satisfaction with Equal Opportunities sub-scale, it was found that the level of satisfaction of male professionals was significantly and positively correlated with their age ( $r = .22, p < .01$ ), and negatively correlated with their mother's level of education ( $r = -.22, p < .01$ ). For female professionals, no significant relationship was found between their level of satisfaction with the equal opportunities for women in the professions and the major variables examined in the present study.

For the Promotion of Gender Equality sub-scale, it was found that the attitude of male professionals was significantly correlated with their scores on the Satisfaction with Equal Opportunities sub-scale ( $r = .19, p < .05$ ), and negatively

**Table 2** Correlates of Hong Kong Professionals' Overall Evaluation of Their Career-related Competencies

Career-related aspects	Professionals	
	Male	Female
Ability to understand professional knowledge	.22***	.01
Leadership skills	.24***	.05
Maintaining harmonious relationships with colleagues	.05	.26*
Cooperation with colleagues	.16*	.23
Diligence	.23***	.15
Ability to show outstanding performance	.14*	.05
Problem-solving ability	.20**	.18
Understanding organizational policies	.16*	.25*
Supporting organizational policies	.23***	.32**
Confidence	.20**	.15

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Note: The scores of Hong Kong professionals on their overall evaluation of their career-related competencies were correlated with all of the variables in the questionnaire. However, only significant relationships are reported here.

correlated with age ( $r = -.14, p < .05$ ). The attitude of female professionals, on the other hand, was significantly and positively correlated with their father's level of education ( $r = .27, p < .05$ ).

For the Definition of Gender Inequality sub-scale, the male professionals' score was significantly and positively correlated with the number of hours (per week) they spent on household chores ( $r = .18, p < .01$ ), their mother's level of education ( $r = .16, p < .05$ ) and their attitudes towards active measures to promote gender equality ( $r = .36, p < .001$ ). The score of female professionals on this variable was significantly and positively

correlated with their attitudes towards active measures to promote gender equality ( $r = .32, p < .01$ ). These findings are presented in Table 3.

## Discussion

### *Career-related Influences and Competencies*

While male and female professionals in the present study rated similar factors as important to their career development, they differed significantly in their overall evaluation of their career-related competencies. More specifically, compared to their female peers, male professionals rated themselves as more competent overall, as well as in the following aspects: ability to understand professional knowledge, leadership skills, ability to handle crises, problem-solving ability and confidence. The current finding is similar to that of Eccles' (1987) study, which found that female university students, despite having higher GPAs than male students, perceived themselves as less able than their male peers. Eccles attributed the gender differences in self-perception to the differential socialization of men and women in general. She further suggested that women were likely to be socialized to devalue their achievements, whereas men were more likely to overestimate their abilities.

It would appear that in Hong Kong, which is still very much a patriarchal society, this phenomenon is even more prominent. Hong Kong men, for example, are socialized to be independent, aggressive, ambitious and the provider of the family. Hong Kong women, on the other hand, are expected to be gentle, considerate, and concerned with household chores and child rearing (Cheung et al., 1997). In an analysis of Hong Kong primary school textbooks, Au (1993) concluded that male occupations were depicted as wider in range and higher in rank, whereas female occupations were depicted as narrower in scope and of lower rank. Similar findings were obtained in an analysis of junior secondary school textbooks (Yau Lai and Luk, 1988). Having been socialized to accept their lower status, female

**Table 3** Correlates of Perception of the Opportunity Structure

Variables	SEO		PGE		DGI	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Age	.22**	—	-.14*	—	—	—
Father's years of education	—	—	—	.27*	—	—
Mother's years of education	-.22**	—	—	—	.16*	—
Hours spent on housework (per week)	—	—	—	—	.18**	—
SEO	—	—	.19*	—	—	—
PGE	—	—	—	—	.36***	.32**

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Note: SEO stands for the Satisfaction with Equal Opportunities sub-scale, PGE stands for the Promotion of Gender Equality sub-scale, and DGI stands for the Definition of Gender Inequality sub-scale.

professionals may have problems acknowledging themselves as competent, despite their apparent achievements.

Similarly, socialization could explain the finding that the significant correlates of the career-related competencies of male and female professionals are somewhat different. For female professionals, the correlates of their subjective evaluation of career-related competencies were their ratings on maintaining harmonious relationships with colleagues, understanding of organizational policies and support for organizational policies. These factors are either relational or collectivistic in nature, and are consistent with what most Hong Kong women are expected to be. For male professionals, the correlates of their subjective evaluation of career-related competencies consisted of not only relational and collectivistic factors, but also individualistic factors. In fact, their career-related competencies were related to more personal attributes such as their ability to understand

professional knowledge, leadership skills and diligence than to the other two groups of factors. Given that Hong Kong men are expected to be successful and to provide for their families, these personal attributes may even be more prominent to the career development as well as the career advancement of male professionals.

Moreover, the career-related aspects in which male professionals rated themselves significantly higher than did female professionals were their ability to understand professional knowledge, leadership skills, ability to handle crises, problem-solving ability and confidence. Despite their lower self-ratings on these aspects, female professionals rated the ability to demonstrate one's competence, ability to handle crises and problem-solving ability as significantly more important to their career development than their male peers. It appears that female professionals were caught in a dilemma. The aforementioned areas could well be considered as "masculine" domains that are essential to success in these male-dominated professions. However, the process of internalizing gender-role stereotypes and expectations (Bartholomew and Schnorr, 1994) may have prevented female professionals from acknowledging their achievement. Furthermore, to "boast" of one's achievements may be regarded as "non-feminine."

### *Perception of the Opportunity Structure*

Another construct believed to be of pertinence to the career development of Hong Kong professionals is their perception of the opportunity structure. In addition to Astin's (1984) original conceptualization, the evaluation of perceptions of the opportunity structure in the present study also includes the level of satisfaction of Hong Kong professionals with equal opportunities for women in the professions, their attitudes towards active measures to promote gender equality, and their definition of gender inequality.

The data of the present study indicate that male and female professionals demonstrate a similar level of satisfaction with the

equal opportunities for women in the professions as well as similar attitudes towards active measures to promote gender equality. However, compared to male professionals, female professionals had a broader definition of what constituted gender inequality. In other words, female professionals seemed more sensitive to gender-related issues. Since the five professions examined in the present study are still male-dominated, male professionals are likely to enjoy the status and prestige of their membership. They are also not likely to have experienced any gender discrimination. With the number of female professionals entering these professions increasing, male professionals may have formed a false impression of the reality. Yet from the qualitative interviews of the participants, one female professional commented that "vertical and horizontal gender segregation still exists in my profession, with men occupying the higher positions and women generally being confined to lower rungs and less favoured sections of the profession." It is probable that the relative "inexperience" of male professionals with gender-related issues, compared to female professionals, may have somehow influenced their perceptions.

A more detailed examination of the data suggests that although male and female professionals differed significantly in their overall score on the definition of gender inequality, both groups demonstrated rather similar responses. The majority of male and female professionals considered that seven out of the nine situations listed in the questionnaire constituted gender inequality. The two situations that both groups did not consider instances of gender inequality were "Within an organization, male and female employees are allocated different types of work," and "In the Legislative Council, the majority of council members are male." It is not known exactly why the two groups did not think the two situations constituted gender inequality. One possibility is that they had been immersed in the male-dominated system for so long that they regarded those situations as the norm. In fact, based on surveys on the experience of discrimination among people in Hong Kong,

Westwood (1997:107) concluded that "the low perception of discrimination may reflect a certain degree of apathy or ignorance about discrimination and a level of acceptance, even legitimization, of inequalities." What is encouraging is that male professionals in the present study appeared to be more enlightened in their awareness of gender-related issues than their peers were about a decade ago (e.g., Ng, 1983; Dolecheck and Dolecheck, 1988).

### ***Background Variables***

The findings of the present study suggested that family background, in particular the level of education of parents, was found to significantly relate to the professionals' perceptions of the opportunity structure. More specifically, the level of education of the mothers of the male professionals was found to positively relate to their scores on the definition of gender inequality and negatively relate to their level of satisfaction with equal opportunities for women in the professions. This seems to suggest that the more educated mothers may have instilled in their sons a more sensitive attitude towards gender-related issues; thus, the latter's broader definition of what constitutes gender inequality. This sensitivity was also reflected in these male professionals' relatively lower level of satisfaction with equal opportunities for women. Male involvement in household chores was further suggested to be evidence of their relaxed attitudes towards the equality of the genders (Shaffer et al., 2000).

Parental influence was similarly observed in female professionals whose father's level of education was positively related to their attitudes towards active measures to promote gender equality. Since parents are the most important agents of socialization when children are growing up, it is possible that parents whose level of education is relatively high embrace a more liberal attitude towards gender equality. Such attitude could also have influenced their children's attitude towards gender-related issues. These more educated parents might also

have served as role models and impressed upon their children the importance of education and hard work, both of which essential qualities to becoming professionals. In fact, a positive relationship between family involvement and career choice has also been reported in a recent study of the career development of Asian Americans (Tang et al., 1999).

Furthermore, age was found to positively relate to the subjective evaluation of career-related competencies of male professionals and their level of satisfaction with equal opportunities for women in the professions. A possible explanation of the significance of age is that the Chinese culture is oriented towards the past. Chinese children are taught to respect tradition and to follow without question the instructions of authority figures (Li and Yang, 1984). In this case, age is also synonymous with experience and seniority. The relationship between tenure of employment and job satisfaction and job commitment has indeed been supported by other studies on Chinese employees (Huang, 1986; Su and Huang, 1992).

For male professionals, age was negatively related to their attitude towards active measures to promote gender equality. The finding seems to suggest that the younger male professionals maybe more receptive and less resistant to measures to promote gender equality. To the "older" generation of male professionals however, such measures maybe redundant or even threatening to the status quo.

### ***Implications and Limitations***

The present study has several theoretical implications. The data supported Astin's (1984) contention that an awareness of opportunities in the job market and in society in general is indeed important to the development of an individual's career. Despite an increase in the participation of women in the labour force, their opportunities are still limited by vertical and horizontal gender segregation, a discriminatory institutional environment and cultural expectations of motherhood. With rapid changes in the world economy and in the world of work

(e.g., Borgen, 1991; London and Greller, 1991; Hansen, 1993; Venne, 1996), it is likely that an awareness of the opportunity structure will play an increasingly significant role not only in the career development of women, but also of men. On a theoretical level, it would make sense to incorporate this construct into career development models, particularly in those that claim to explain the career development of women. Future research could start with Astin's (1984) model, which has yet to be validated empirically. The inclusion of cultural-environmental factors in her model enhances its efficacy in understanding career choices and work behaviour in today's ever-changing world.

In addition, the data of the present study indicate the pertinence of self-perceptions of performance in career-related aspects to the career development of Hong Kong professionals. The finding that female professionals rated their competence relatively lower than their male peers in areas such as the ability to handle crises and problem-solving ability presents a rather interesting, yet disquieting picture. On the one hand, they have to be competent, if not in these areas then in other areas, in order to survive in these competitive professions. However, they did not seem to perceive or believe in their competence. The incongruence between the actual and perceived ability of female professionals confirms Hackett and Betz's (1981) earlier contention that women in general lack strong expectations of their efficacy in relation to career-related behaviour. According to the authors, women are also less likely than men to be encouraged to develop their own careers and have fewer female models who are successful, both of which are very important sources of information on efficacy. It would appear that Hackett and Betz's theory on career self-efficacy could be applied to help explain the career development of Hong Kong professionals.

Owing to the exploratory nature of the present study, its findings could provide valuable insights on the relationships between variables for this unique group of participants. Future studies could focus on variables that have been found to be related to each other in significant ways. The observed

relationships between variables in the present study were also rather small. Since the survey instrument was specifically designed for the present study, its construct validity and reliability have yet to be determined. In the future, the use of standardized tests could yield findings that could be compared with established norms. A larger and more diverse sample could also provide more reliable data for understanding the career development of Hong Kong professionals.

To conclude, the findings of the present study indicate that the variables suggested in some of the "gendered" theories are relevant to a sample of Hong Kong professionals. In particular, Bandura's (1977, 1986, 1997) idea of self-perception of performance as well as Astin's (1984) proposal of one's perceptions of the opportunity structure seem especially useful in explaining career development in the twenty-first century, where globalization and deskilling are the trends. It is apparent that women will continue to contribute their talents and training to the workforce worldwide. Further studies of the process of their career development have become a necessity rather than a luxury. More theory-driven research is thus called for (Betz, 1991) to further explain the unique and diverse patterns of the career development of women.

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## Gender Differences in the Career Development of Professionals in Hong Kong

### Abstract

The present study examines the cultural relevance of constructs such as self-perception of performance and perception of the opportunity structure to a group of Hong Kong professionals. A total of 521 professionals from five traditionally male-dominated professions participated in the present study. The results of *t*-tests indicated that male professionals rated their overall career-related competencies significantly higher than did their female peers. Demographic variables also related differently to the development of the careers of male and female professionals. The findings further indicate that male and female professionals have a similar level of satisfaction with the equal opportunities open to women in the professions and with active measures to promote gender equality. However, compared to male professionals, female professionals have adopted a broader definition of what constitutes gender inequality. The significance and implications of these findings are discussed.

## 香港專才在事業發展中的性別差異

許敏娜

張妙清

譚少薇

(中文摘要)

本研究探討「性別」理論提出的各種建構，例如自我認知和對機會體系的理解，於解釋香港專才事業發展的文化意義。參與是次研究的專才包括 521 位來自五個傳統上由男性主導的職業。T 測試的結果顯示，男性專才對自己整體職業才能的評分，顯著比其女性同儕為高。人口變項與男性和女性專才的事業發展也呈現不同的關係。分析結果亦顯示，對於女性在專業上是否享有平等的機會，以及對推廣性別平等積極措施的觀感，兩性的滿意程度不分軒輊。然而，對於性別不平等的界定，女性則比男性採取較寬闊的定義。本文繼而討論這些結果的重要性和涵意。