

OPTIMISM, SELF-CONFIDENCE AND WORK ENGAGEMENT OF WORKERS IN ACCOUNTS AND NURSING PROFESSIONS - GENDER DIFFERENCES

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Abstract

Purpose - This exploratory study compares optimism, self-confidence and Work engagement of males and females workers in the field of Accounts and Nursing. The purpose is to see differences in optimism, self-confidence and work engagement patterns of males and females when they choose professions that are dominated by other genders. In Pakistan Accounting is primarily a male-dominated profession and Nursing is a female dominated profession.

Design/methodology/approach – A cross-sectional study design was employed for this study. The sample comprised 48 (60%) accountants, out of which 18 (37%) male chartered accountants and 30 (62.5 %) female chartered accountants. There were 32 (40%) nurses, out of which 21 (65%) female nurses and 11 (34%) male nurses. Age ranged from 22-41 years (M=30 yrs, SD= 5.01) Work experience range from 2-19 years. (M= 7 yrs, S.D. =5.3) 45 (56%) were single, 33 (41%) were married and 2(2%) were separated/divorced. To measure optimism Life Orientation Test Revised (LOT-R) was used. To measure self-confidence four items from State Sport-Confidence Inventory (SSCI) was used after some modifications. To assess work engagement Gallup Organisation's Q12 was used.

Results –The overall mean score of participants is 14 on optimism, 10 on self confidence and 8 on work engagement. The mean score of male and female participants indicate minor differences

on optimism and self-confidence, work engagement. Male participants had a slightly higher mean score on optimism, self-confidence and work-engagement. T-test values indicate the difference between male and female participants' scores on measures of optimism, self-confidence and work engagement are significant ($p < .001$). There is also a significant difference ($p < .001$) in optimism, self-confidence and work engagement patterns of nurses and accountants. Work engagement patterns of male and female accountants differ in some aspects. More number of female accountants had better social relations at the workplace as in comparison to males. The major difference in work engagement patterns of males and females nurses were the expectation about the work, where most of the male nurses were unclear about what is expected from them at work. Higher percentage of females reported dissatisfaction with their current work environment and appraisal of their work at the workplace than males.

Discussion: These findings suggest that males generally and specifically had slightly higher optimism and self-confidence as in comparison to females. These findings are understandable. The stereotypical upbringing of male and female child in our society has a very strong impact on the psyche of males and females as they grow and work in practical life. Although females are now choosing a variety of professions and showing their abilities in all fields but still in some situations, they are unable to display that level of confidence and optimism, which is generally expressed by our male members of society.

Conclusion: It is important to recognize and understand gender differences and use them to improve the workplace settings. There is a need to change societal attitudes in upbringing of children that might help improving self-confidence and optimism of female members of our society.

Originality/value – This research will facilitate in understanding how we can create a work environment where males and females are treated similarly.

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Introduction

Generally, work has always been found important to psychological functioning for both men and women. Kohn and Schooler (1983) indicated that work leads to improve mental flexibility and self-esteem. Work provides an 'optimal experience' or 'flow' to professionals. (Csikszentmihalyi & Le Fevre, 1989) Applebaum (1992) suggested that '*work is like the spine which structures the way people live, how they contact material and social reality, and how they achieve status and self-esteem. Work is basic to the human condition, to the creation of the human environment, and to the context of human relationships*'. Jahoda (1982) considered employment as a social institution and important for well-being. She identified that employment provides time structure, social contact, collective purpose, social status and regular activity. All these aspects are important for mental well-being of individuals. Allison and Duncan (1988) measured enjoyable flow among working women and found 'work' a primary source of flow for professional workers. Using a similar questionnaire, a study of male and female office workers also indicated that enjoyable flow is associated with well-being. (Bryce & Haworth, 2002)

Historically, many professions have been gender-stereotyped as suitable only for men or women. Gender stereotypes promote the idea that women should be orienting towards professions, which require nurturing or care taking activities, whereas men should choose professions, which are technology oriented. For instance, Accounting, business and technical fields have been traditionally male-dominated

professions where as medicine, particularly nursing and teaching or secretarial jobs have been conventionally female dominated professions. The nursing role has been seen as one of caring, empathy, and service-orientation qualities typically seen as more characteristic of women. Similarly, accounting, business and other technical field require technical competence and commitment which are seen as more characteristic of men.

However, this trend is changing in many societies. Both men and women are now choosing variety of professions. More women are working as managers, accountants, business administrators and engineers. Similarly, men are also taking nursing and other female dominated job like cooking and teaching as their career choices. Although, the obvious gender-stereotyping fence has been lowered, however, men and women who chose to take up profession dominated by the opposite sex still encounter numerous subtle barriers to success and advancement in the field. For instance, male nurses face greater psycho-social pressures at work. It is generally perceived that a stereotypical man suppresses his emotions more often than woman, and employment in a female-dominated profession places greater pressure on male nurses to exhibit their masculinity. (Blizzard, 2003) Similarly, women who work in fields dominated by men face extra pressure to prove themselves able to do that work as efficiently as men.

Very little research has investigated the role of optimism related to self-confidence and work engagement particularly in context of gender differences. This research is aimed at exploring optimism, self-confidence and work engagement of male and female nurses and accountants.

Optimism, Self-Confidence, Work Engagement and Gender

Optimism has been described as a generalized tendency to expect positive outcomes. (Scheier & Carver, 1993) It is a belief that “*good rather than bad things will happen in a person’s life*” (Scheier & Carver, 1993; p. 26) Optimism primarily functions as a self-regulatory mechanism. According to control theory optimistic individuals likely to remain engaged in efforts to reach desired

goals, despite of the harsh conditions as long as an individual's expectancies of ultimate success are sufficiently encouraging. (Carver & Scheier, 1981). In this framework, optimism is referred to as an evaluation style as this predisposition also influences the way an individual thinks, feels and acts in a particular situation. For example, an individual with a tendency to expect that positive outcomes is likely to participate in career related activities, set vocationally oriented goals, and respond with positive affect.

Creed, Patton and Bartrum (2002) examined the relationship of optimism and pessimism independently with variables including career maturity, career decision making and goals in students of high school. The findings suggested that optimism and pessimism do perform a functionary role in the development of high school students' career maturity and decision-making. Students with high levels of optimism showed higher levels of career planning and career exploration, were more decided about their career decision and had more career goals. On the other hand, those high in pessimism were found to have lower levels of career and decision making knowledge, were more indecisive and reported lower levels of school achievement.

Petrone (2000) explored the relationship between career maturity with vocational identity and optimism for the future in a sample of male and female high school students. Females were found to have high scores on measures of competency for career decision-making than males, whereas males scored higher on measures of vocational identity states and possessed a greater sense of optimism for the future. This study, therefore, demonstrated that males are more likely to develop vocational identity and higher optimism for the future, whereas females seemed better prepared to make a career choice. These findings are important as they suggest that there may be different trajectories or paths in the career development of females and males.

In socio-psychological concept, self-confidence associate with self-assuredness in one's personal judgment, ability, power, etc. (The Macquarie Dictionary) Perception of

oneself has an enormous impact on success in professional life. Perception is reality and the more self confidence one has the more chances is that one succeed in his or her field of work. Chusmir et al, (1992) examined gender differences in self-confidence among working managers in two situations (work and social/family) as well as relationships between self-confidence, personal adjustment, and gender identity. Results showed that contrary to commonly held beliefs, the women and men managers were not significantly different in self-confidence in either situation, but both were higher in self-confidence at work than the same gender was in the social/family environment. Strong gender identity, either masculine or feminine, was associated with self-confidence at work for both genders. Rosenthal, (1995) studied self-confidence among women managers and the psychological processes which may constrain it. One potentially relevant process is how we perceive the causes of our success and failure. The findings of study demonstrated significant differences between women's and men's attributions for their own success. Women managers more likely to attribute their achievement of work goals to hard work and were more "generous" in attributing ability as the cause of success of their subordinates as compared to men.

In this study, it is explored whether male and female display different work engagement patterns, self-confidence and optimism levels.

Work engagement is an energetic, deep involvement with work and includes energy, involvement, and professional efficacy. Engagement confirms to an individual that they are good at doing important work. Warr (1987) identified nine 'situational factors', or 'principal environmental influences' important for wellbeing. These factors are: opportunity for control, environmental clarity, opportunity for skill use, externally generated goals, variety, opportunity for interpersonal contact, valued social position, availability of money, and physical security. Warr (1987) indicated that some 'enduring' personal characteristics like baseline mental health and demographic factors such as age, gender, values, and abilities interact with situational factors and determine general well-being of individuals. Baseline mental health includes

neuroticism, self- confidence, hardiness, and locus of control. These features of the environment interrelate with characteristics of the person to facilitate or constrain psychological wellbeing or mental health.

In a recent study, Koyuncu et al, (2006) examined potential antecedents and consequences of work engagement in a sample of women managers and professionals employed by a large Turkish bank. Control, rewards and recognition and value at workplace were found to predict all three engagement measures. Dedication at work predicted job satisfaction and work engagement, particularly vigor, predicted various psychological well-being outcomes.

The associations of work stress, types of work and gender-role orientation with psychological well-being and sickness absence were investigated by Evans and Steptoe (2002). 588 male and female nurses and 387 male and female accountants were interviewed. Female accountants were more likely than other groups to have high anxiety scores on the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scales, while male nurses had the highest rates of sickness absence. Male nurses and female accountants also reported more work-related hassles than did female nurses and male accountants. The results suggested that when men and women occupy jobs in which they are in the cultural and numerical minority, there may be adverse health effects that are gender-specific. Psychological traits related to socially constructed gender roles may also be relevant, and mediate in part the differences in psychological well-being between men and women.

Current Study

Based on this review of the literature the current study aims to examine the relationships between dispositional optimism, self-confidence and work engagement and the pattern of relationship between these three variables in both genders when they are employed in male or female dominated jobs. Specifically, it is predicted that the person's self-confidence and optimism will directly be associated with work engagement. Professionals who foresee favourable outcomes and have a high self-

confidence will be more likely to have established interests and positive work engagement. It is further predicted that those individuals who view themselves as active agents in their work organizations will be more optimistic and high in self-confidence. It is expected that there will be different pathways for females and males concerning the optimism, self-confidence and work engagement when they are employed in job perceived as dominated by other sex. It is also hypothesised that optimism, self-confidence and work engagement might be lowered among women working in the male-dominated occupation (accountancy), and men in the female-dominated occupation (nursing).

Method

Participants:

Participants were 80 male and female professionals (Nurses and Chartered Accountants). Professionals working in different hospitals and private organizations of Karachi and Islamabad participated in this survey. Sample for study was recruited through snowball sampling technique. There were 51 (63%) females and 29 (37%) males. Age ranged from 22-41 years ($M=30$ yrs, $SD=5.01$). There were 48 (60%) accountants. Out of this 18 (37%) male chartered accountants and 30 (62.5%) female chartered accountants. Overall 32 (40%) nurses, out of which there were 21 (65%) female nurses and 11 (34%) male nurses. Work experience range from 2-19 years. ($M=7$ yrs, $S.D.=5.3$) 45 (56%) were single, 33 (41%) were married and 2(2%) were separated/divorced.

Measures:

Life Orientation Test Revised (LOT-R): The Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R) is a 10-item measure developed by Scheier et al (1994). Lee, (2005) demonstrated that LOT-R has adequate internal consistency, reliability and validity. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagrees to strongly agree. Out of total 10 items, four items (item # 2, 5, 6, 8) are filler items in revised scale and are not scored. Three items (item # 1, 4 and 10) are positively worded statements which are

scored on 0-4 scale and three items (item # 3, 7 and 9) are negatively worded statements which are reverse scored from 4-0. The minimum score is 0 and the maximum score is 24 because filler items are not scored. Higher scores on LOT-R indicate respondent's optimistic attitude towards life whereas lower scores indicate pessimism. (Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 1994)

State Sport-Confidence Inventory (SSCI): Four items from the State Sport-Confidence Inventory (SSCI; Vealy, 1986) with some modifications in wording of sentences was used to assess the participants' level of certainty that they have at one particular situation related to their ability to be successful in their professional lives. The items of SSCI measures are rated on 9 - point Likert scale from 1=low to 9=high. It is important to note that the individuals were asked to compare their confidence to the "most self-confident person they know." The SSCI has an alpha reliability coefficient of .95. SSCI is a more direct measure of specific confidence as it can assess the confidence levels for upcoming tasks.

Gallup Organisation's Q12: The Gallup Q12 is a survey designed to measure employee engagement. The instrument was the result of hundreds of focus groups and interviews. Researchers found that there were 12 key expectations, that when satisfied, form the foundation of strong feelings of engagement. Comparisons of engagement scores reveal that those with high Q12 scores exhibit lower turnover, higher sales growth, better productivity, better customer loyalty and other manifestations of superior performance.

Procedure:**RESULTS****I. Overall Optimism, Self-Confidence and Work Engagement of Participants:**

Table I: Mean score and S.D. values of male and female participants on LOT(R), SSCI and Gallup Organization Q12(n=80)

	Optimism Scores (max score=24) M (S.D.)	Self-confidence Scores (max score=12) M (S.D.)	Work Engagement Scores (max score = 12) M (S.D.)
All participants	14.4(2.5)	10.1(1.3)	8.9(2.3)
Male (n=29)	15.1(2.2)	9.96(1.2)	8.7(2.1)
Female (n=51)	14.0(2.6)	10.1(1.4)	8.9(2.5)

Table I illustrates that overall mean score of participants is 14 on optimism, 10 on self confidence and 8 on work engagement. There are minor differences in the mean score of male and female participants on optimism and self-confidence and work engagement measures.

Table II: Mean score and S.D. values of accountants and nurses on LOT(R), SSCI and Gallup Organization Q12(n=80)

	Optimism Scores (max score=24) M(S.D.)	Self-confidence Scores (max score=12) M (S.D.)	Work Engagement Scores (max score = 12) M (S.D.)
Nurses (n=32)	15(2.5)	9.5(1.5)	9.4(2.5)
Accountants (n=48)	14(2.4)	10.5(1.0)	8.5(2.2)

Table II illustrates that mean score of nurses (including male and female nurses) is slightly high on optimism and work engagement as compared to accountants. However, mean score of nurses on self-confidence is slightly lower than accountants.

Table III: Professional Status and score of accountants on LOT(R), SSCI and Work engagement

	Paired Differences				t	Df	Sig.	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower				Upper
LOT(R)	-13.062	2.497	.2792	-13.6182	-12.50675	-46.784	79	.000
SSCI	-8.7125	1.600	.1789	-9.06869	-8.35631	-48.687	79	.000
Work Eng	-7.5000	2.3600	.2638	-8.02519	-6.97481	-28.425	79	.000

Table III illustrates that there is a significant difference ($p < .001$) in optimism, self-confidence and work engagement of nurses and accountants.

Table IV: Mean score and S.D. values of male and female accountants on LOT(R), SSCI and Gallup Organization Q12 (n=48)

	Optimism Scores (max score=24) M (S.D.)	Self-confidence Scores (max score=12) M (S.D.)	Work Engagement Scores (max score = 12) M (S.D.)
Male Accountants (n=18)	14.7(2.4)	11.3(.97)	8.0(2.2)
Female Accountants (n=30)	13.0(2.4)	10.0(1.0)	9.0(2.2)

Table IV illustrates that mean score of male accountant are slightly high on Optimism and Self-confidence as compared to female accountants where as the mean score of females on work engagement is slightly higher than males.

Table V: Gender and score of accountants on LOT(R), SSCI, Work engagement

Gender	Paired Differences				t	Df	Sig.	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower				Upper
LOT(R)	12.45833	2.61711	.3777	-13.2182	11.69840	-32.981	47	.000
SSCI	-8.87500	1.10367	.1593	-9.19547	-8.55453	-55.712	47	.000
Work Eng	-6.93750	2.20643	.3184	-7.57818	-6.29682	-21.784	47	.000

Table V illustrates that there is a significant difference ($p < .001$) in optimism, self-confidence and work engagement of male and female accountants.

Table VI: Mean score and S.D. male and female nurses on LOT®, SSCI and Gallup Organization Q12 (n=32)

	Optimism Scores (max score= 24) M (S.D.)	Self-confidence Scores (max score=12) M (S.D.)	Work Engagement Scores (max score = 12) M (S.D.)
Male Nurses (n=11)	15.7(1.7)	9.6(1.4)	10(1.3)
Female Nurses (n=21)	14.0(2.8)	9.6(1.6)	9.0(2.9)

Table VI illustrates that mean score of male nurses are slightly higher on optimism, self-confidence and work engagement as compared to female nurses.

Table VII: Gender and score of nurses on LOT(R), SSCI, Work engagement

Gender	Paired Differences				t	Df	Sig.	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower				Upper
LOT(R)	-13.3750	2.70901	.4788	-14.3517	-12.3983	-27.929	31	.000
SSCI	-7.87500	1.60141	.2830	-8.45237	-7.29763	-27.818	31	.000
Work Eng	-7.75000	2.67606	.4730	-8.71482	-6.78518	-16.383	31	.000

Table VII illustrates that there is a difference ($p < .001$) in optimism, self-confidence and work engagement of male and female nurses. II: Work Engagement Patterns of male and female accountants and nurses

Table VIII: Work Engagement Patterns of male and female accountants

Statements	Male Accountants (n=18)		Female Accountants (n=30)	
	Yes(%)	No(%)	Yes(%)	No(%)
1 Know what is expected at work	100%		100%	
2 Provided with necessary things at work	88.9%	2%	93%	6.7%
3 Have opportunity to do the best	66.7%	33.3%	53.3%	46.7%
4 Receive appraisal for good work	11.1%	88.9%	60%	40%
5 Boss care about you as a person	77.8%	22%	86.7%	13%
6 Someone at work encourages your development	44%	55%	73%	26.7%
7 Your opinion is important at work	55.6%	44.4%	66%	33%
8 Company make you feel your job is important	55.5%	44.4%	73%	26%
9 Associates committed to do quality work	100%		73%	26.7%
10 Have best friends at work	44%	55.6%	73%	26%
11 In last six someone talk about your progress	55.6%	44.4%	66.7%	33%
12 Had opportunities at work to learn and grow	88.9%	11.1%	86%	13.3%

Table IX: Work Engagement Patterns of male and female nurses

Statements	Male Nurses (n=11)		Female Nurses (n=21)	
	Yes(%)	No(%)	Yes(%)	No(%)
1 Know what is expected at work	72%	27%	90%	9.5%
2 Provided with necessary things at work	81%	18%	66%	33%
3 Have opportunity to do the best	81%	18%	76%	23%
4 Receive appraisal for good work	81%	18%	66%	33%
5 Boss care about you as a person	27%	72%	57%	42%
6 Someone at work encourages your development	100%	0	76%	23%
7 Your opinion is important at work	63%	36%	71%	28%
8 Company make you feel your job is important	81%	18%	85%	14%
9 Associates committed to do quality work	63%	36%	71%	28%
10 Have best friends at work	100%	0	8%	19%
11 In last six someone talk about your progress	81%	18%	81%	18%
12 Had opportunities at work to learn and grow	90%	10%	95%	4.8%

Table IX illustrates there are differences in work engagement patterns of males and females nurses. The major difference was in the expectation about the work, where most of the male nurses were unclear about what is expected from them at work. Higher percentage of females were dissatisfied with the current work environment and appraisal of their work at workplace as indicated by their negative responses on item # 2, 3, 4 and 6. The positive thing is that both male and female nurses appreciate the opportunities to learn and grow at work which is likely to be associated with positive psychological functioning.

Discussion

The study is aimed at investigating optimism, self-confidence and work engagement patterns of male and female employees working in professions dominated by the opposite sex.

Previous investigators have suggested that women generally display lower self-confidence than men. And many times these sex differences are moderated by social comparison

variables. Lenney, Gold & Browning, 1983) Findings of this study demonstrated that females had slightly lower mean score on self-confidence scale than males. This difference was also more obvious in case of male and female accountants and less obvious in case of male and female nurses.

The other important aim of study was to explore the presence of optimism among male and female nurses and accountants. The findings indicated that male accountants had slightly higher mean score on Life Orientation Test (LOT) which measures dispositional optimism. Similarly, male nurse also displayed slightly higher mean score on optimism than females. The difference was also significant ($p < .001$). These findings suggest that males generally and specifically had slightly higher optimism and self-confidence as compared to females. These findings are understandable. The stereotypical upbringing of male and female child in our society has very strong impact on psyche of males and females as they grow and work in practical life. Although females are now choosing a variety of professions and showing their abilities in all fields but still sometimes they are unable to display that level of confidence and optimism which is generally expressed by our male members of society. It has been generally observed that females have to play multiple roles in our society. They are going through a period where they have to prove themselves as able to work as full-time professionals at the same time can manage household and look after children. As a result, most of the professional women are overburdened and overstressed which likely to impact their optimism and self-confidence. Another likely explanation for this difference is also the society's general attitude of maintaining confidence on competence of men and encouraging male dominance in professional fields. Therefore, even when men are employed in female dominated fields like nursing, the general impressions are that male nurses are able to handle difficult and critical cases more appropriately than females.

The higher level of optimism in both male nurses and accountants than females is their secure career lives. Most of the participants in this study are young male and female accountants and nurses with average seven years of work

experience. The female optimism might be influenced by issues related to flourishing as career women.

A difference in the work engagement patterns of male and female accountants and nurses was also observed. The responses of male nurses displayed that they did not know exactly what is expected from them however, on other items like provided with opportunities to do the best, appraisal at work, having best friends at work, most of the male nurses had positive responses. The only major difference was in the expectation about the work, where most of the male nurses were unclear about what is expected from them at work. Contradictory to this in a study by Blizzard (2002) which also used a Gallup's employee engagements scale, identified that the single, largest engagement differentiator between male and female nurses was having a best friend at work. Male nurses and female nurses exhibit similar responses to items relating to the day-to-day aspects of the job, such as having the opportunity to do what they do best every day, knowing what is expected of them at work, and having the materials and equipment to do their jobs right.

The work engagement patterns of male and female accountants displayed that both male and female accountants had positive work engagement patterns expect that more females reported they get proper appraisal and recognition for their work as compared to males. The findings of this study are somewhat supported by another study which explored gender differences in the work and career experiences of female and male managers and supervisors in the hospitality and tourism sector in Turkey. Both female and male managers displayed stable personality traits, work experiences, job satisfaction and levels of psychological well-being. (Koyuncu, Burke & Fiksenbaum, 2008).

The findings of present study showed that women accountants knew very clearly that what is expected from them. Also these women were satisfied with the opportunities provided to them at work for their growth and development as well they get appraisal for their work and able to develop positive social relationship at work. These women are also committed to do quality work. The findings of study are supported by a study

conducted about two decades ago on 86 California women entering “nontraditional” (i.e., male-dominated) skilled and semiskilled occupations in 1975. The findings of that study indicated that the challenge of surviving and succeeding in a nontraditional job was dependent on factor like mastering skills, increasing self-confidence, and getting along with male coworkers and supervisors—was the predominant concern of the respondents in the first year, and was their primary source of both satisfaction and dissatisfaction in their work. In contrast, those women who remained in a nontraditional job one year later had become less concerned with these aspects of the job, and more concerned with the traditional sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction common to blue-collar workers, e.g., the nature of the work itself, working conditions, and relations with management. (McIlwee, 1982)

The findings of present study educate us about gender difference in level of optimism, self-confidence and work engagement patterns. However, these findings cannot be generalized as the sample size was very small also, there is need for more investigations to indicate and understand the causes of gender differences in this regard.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that both males and females do display slight difference in their optimism, self-confidence and the key is to recognize and understand gender differences — and use them to improve the workplace settings and change societal attitudes to help women gain more confidence and optimism. The high score on work engagement scale clearly demonstrate their dedication and involvement with their jobs.

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