Do men get better jobs because they take more risks?

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As the professions experience increased sexual diversity, comparisons of workplace outcomes of men and women often result in indictments of the professions and the society in which they operate.

For example, most comparisons reveal that women do not attain the highest professional positions in proportion to their numbers and that they earn substantially less than men. In turn, these shortfalls are commonly attributed to discrimination, inadequate state support of child rearing, and other constraints imposed upon women from without.

Although these explanations sometimes have merit, they often overlook other important causes of sex differences in outcomes, such as sex differences in status-seeking and risk-taking. Any theory of the workplace that does not account for these sex differences will necessarily fall short.

Evolutionary psychologists tell us that sex differences in status-seeking and risk-taking are ultimately traceable to the asymmetric nature of mammalian reproduction. Because men, unlike women, can increase their reproductive success by mating with multiple mates, natural selection has resulted in a male tendency toward behaviors that promoted acquisition of mates, especially the assertive, if not aggressive, risk-taking behaviors often necessary to acquire resources and reach the top of hierarchies.

One obvious workplace effect of differences in risk-preference is the tendency of men to predominate in physically risky jobs. In both the United Kingdom and the United States, men constitute well over 90 percent of workplace deaths each year.

All else being equal, risky jobs will carry a higher rate of pay, as a wage premium is necessary to induce employees to take on the added risk. Risk preference has effects well beyond physical risk, however, as it influences a host of other workplace behaviors.

In the professions, risk preference has substantial effects on choice of practice type. In the United States, female doctors, dentists, and veterinarians are more likely than their male counterparts to work as employees rather than operating their own practices.

Part of that tendency is due to the regular hours and opportunity for part-time work that comes with employment, but part of it derives from sex differences in risk preference. Practice ownership is associated with greater uncertainty and potential variation in income, in addition to being associated with higher income. High risk takers are more willing to accept compensation arrangements tinged with
uncertainty, such as business ownership and commission-sales jobs.

Changes in the economics of a profession can influence its sex composition in part because of the aforementioned sex differences. In the United States, for example, pharmacy is on its way to becoming an overwhelmingly female profession.

In 1990, only 32 percent of pharmacists were women, while today approximately two-thirds of pharmacy students are women. The increasing market share of large chain drugstores and the corresponding decline in the small-business model of pharmacy make pharmacy a less attractive profession for the men (and the somewhat fewer women) who would formerly have been drawn to the profession by the entrepreneurial prospects of business ownership.

Pharmacy will no doubt be invoked as an occupation that decreased in both status and pay with increasing participation of women. It would be incorrect to infer, however, that men are leaving the field because women are moving in and that income is going down because women’s labor is undervalued.

Rather, the increase in female pharmacists and the ascendency of large chain stores are working in tandem to change the way pharmacists work. The increasing number of female pharmacists has created a pool of pharmacists eager to work as employees, and it is the increasing proportion of employees, rather than of women per se, that threatens a decline in the profession’s pay and status.

If job security and regular hours are valued by female physicians, dentists, veterinarians, and pharmacists, why are they not also valued by their male counterparts? Often they are, but the question is not whether men value job security and regular hours but whether they value them as much as the things they must give up to obtain them.

The security of employment is typically accompanied by a loss of income, status, and professional autonomy. A person who is risk averse may gladly trade these benefits for security, while a risk-taker is more likely to take the gamble. Even if there were no sex difference in risk preference, the greater subjective value that men place on high status and autonomy would make them more inclined to take risks to obtain them.

Men’s willingness to trade good things off for status is not limited to security. Men are also more willing than women to trade family life off for money and status. Again, there are at least two reasons for this.

First, although men are usually quite devoted to their families, they tend not to desire the same level of day-to-day involvement with the lives of their children that many women desire and for which mothers often leave the work force altogether.

Second, men value high earnings and workplace status more than women do. Thus, when men and women make different work/family tradeoffs, it is often because they value the components of the trade differently.

One of the relatively novel features of modern life is that men and women work side by side, doing the same work and competing for status in the same hierarchies. The fact that the sexes exhibit different values and perspectives – as the proponents of diversity are eager to remind us – suggests that they might also make different workplace choices.

The freedom to choose means nothing if it does not mean the freedom to choose differently.

References


