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The dual impact of gender and the influence of timing of parenthood on men's and women's career development: Longitudinal findings

Andrea E. Abele¹ and Daniel Spurk¹

Abstract

This study investigated the impact of gender, the gender-related self-concept (agency and communion), and the timing of parenthood on objective career success of 1,015 highly educated professionals. Hypotheses derived from a dual-impact model of gender and career-related processes were tested in a 5-wave longitudinal study over a time span of 10 years starting with participants' career entry. In line with our hypotheses we found that the communal component of the gender self-concept had an impact on parenthood, and the agentic component influenced work hours and objective career success (salary, status) of both women and men. Parenthood had a negative direct influence on women's work hours and a negative indirect influence on women's objective career success. Women who had their first child around career entry were relatively least successful over the observation period. Men's career success was independent of parenthood. Sixty-five percent of variance in women's career success and 33% of variance in men's career success was explained by the factors analyzed here. Mothers with partners working full time reduced their work hours more than mothers with partners not working full time. A test for a possible reverse influence of career success on the decision to become a parent revealed no effect for men and equivocal effects for women. We conclude that the transition to parenthood still is a crucial factor for women's career development both from an external gender perspective (expectations, gender roles) and from an internal perspective (gender-related self-concept).

Keywords

agency, communion, gender, longitudinal study, objective career success, parenthood, self-concept, work hours

Women's human capital has changed dramatically during the last 100 years in Western societies. In several countries the percentage of women with college degrees has even surpassed men's percentage. Women's workforce participation has considerably increased and the higher women's education is, the higher is their workforce participation. This positive development towards more gender equality in the labor market, however, is troubled by the fact that women's occupational success in terms of money and hierarchical position is still lower than men's occupational success (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005). Women are highly qualified, but this is insufficiently reflected in their occupational outcomes.

Many scholars have already addressed this issue (Abele, 2000, 2003; Kirchmeyer, 1998; Lyness & Thompson, 1997; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Reitman & Schneer, 2003; Taniguchi, 1999; Watts & Eccles, 2008) and the present paper is also concerned with reasons for the discrepancies between women's and men's career success. We will here study women's and men's career *development* in a longitudinal perspective and will focus on two factors that seem particularly relevant for gender-specific trends. These are the amount and continuity of workload in individuals' occupational careers, and the gender-related self-concept. We posit that women's lower career success is to a considerable degree due to more interruptions and more discontinuity in career development which can be traced back to their higher involvement in child care responsibilities. Respective decisions are influenced

by the gender-related self-concept. *Career success* is both objective attainment like income or status, and subjective evaluation like career satisfaction. We will here, however, focus on objective attainments only because we are interested in factual outcomes of men's and women's careers.

Theoretical approaches to the role of gender in career development

Theoretical approaches to career development can be broadly distinguished into process accounts and structural approaches. *Process accounts* (e.g., Super, 1957) suggest that career development is characterized by different career patterns and that continuous career patterns usually lead to more career success than discontinuous ones. Women should be less successful in their occupational careers than men, because their career patterns are often discontinuous. *Structural approaches* distinguish between different sources of influence on career decisions and career outcomes (cf. Lent, Brown,

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& Hackett, 1994) and specifically stress the influence of expectations and goals. Men and women may have different expectations and goals and these may lead to different careers. *Gender approaches* address the complex influences that being female or male has on lifetime development. The distinction between “sex” and “gender” is crucial in respective theorizing. Whereas “sex” is related to mainly biological and sociodemographic aspects, gender is related to both psychological aspects (gender identity, gender-related self-concept) and to social aspects, for instance, the social construction of gender (such as gender roles, gender roles expectations; Deaux & LaFrance, 1998).

Transitions are crucial for observing developmental processes. Important transitions with respect to career development are, for instance, job changes and relocation decisions of self or partner, promotions, times of unemployment, and becoming a parent. These transitions are important for both women and men, but their consequences on career development are different. When the careers of two people living together as a couple have to be coordinated, the man’s career has still priority over the woman’s career (Eby et al., 2005). And when the couple becomes a family, mothers reduce their workload more frequently than fathers (Gattiker & Larwood, 1990; Melamed, 1995; Tharenou, Latimer, & Conroy, 1994).

Present research

The dual-impact model on gender and career-related processes

Our present research theoretically relies on the *dual-impact model* on gender and career-related processes (Abele, 2000, 2003). This model considers the distinction between sex and gender and it distinguishes between an outside perspective and an inside perspective of gender.

The *outside perspective* refers to gender as a social category and to the expectations directed at people belonging to the category of “man” or “woman.” The outside perspective defines the areas in which men’s and women’s behaviors are differentially evaluated due to different expectations. We assume that people are influenced by these outside expectations when they make family and/or career-related decisions. Research has shown that behavior in favor of these expectations will be more positively sanctioned than behavior against these expectations (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eby, Allen, & Douthitt, 1999).

The *inside perspective* refers to how an individual conceives himself/herself as a man or a woman, that is, their gender-related self-concept (Bem, 1993; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1974). It is built upon both stereotypically masculine traits called *agency* (such as “decisive,” “active”) and stereotypically feminine traits called *communion* (such as “empathic,” “warm”). It has been shown that agency is especially important in predicting career-related behavior (Abele, 2003; Corrigan & Konrad, 2007; Kirchmeyer, 1998) whereas communion has an impact on social functioning (e.g., Feldman & Aschenbrenner, 1983; Kasen, Chen, Sneed, Crawford, & Cohen, 2006; Uchrowski, 2008).

The present research studied women’s and men’s career development specifically with respect to the transition from childlessness to parenthood. Data were gathered in a prospective longitudinal study with highly educated professionals (see Abele, 2000, 2003; Abele & Spurk, 2009). Hypotheses were derived from the dual-impact model of gender and career-related processes.

Regarding the outside perspective of gender there are strong societal expectations directed at women to reduce their workload when they become mothers. Fathers are expected to reliably perform the breadwinner function. Besides these different expectations directed at mothers’ and fathers’ roles, women may also be more prone to interrupt their career and/or reduce their workload after the birth of a child than men. Previous research has shown that mothers not only interrupt their careers more often than fathers (Eby et al., 2005; Kirchmeyer, 1998; Lyness & Thompson, 1997; Ng et al., 2005; Reitman & Schneer, 2003; Taniguchi, 1999), but that family roles generally become more “traditional” after the birth of a child (Lundberg & Frankenhaeuser, 1999). Hypothesis 1 states that mothers will reduce their work hours after the birth of a child, whereas fathers will not.

The number of contractual hours an individual works per week is a major determinant of objective career attainments like salary or promotions (Ng & Feldman, 2008). Hypothesis 2 states that work hours predict objective career success for both men and women, but due to the higher variability in women’s work hours their influence on career success will be stronger for women than for men. Because women’s reduced work hours are mainly due to motherhood, it follows that parenthood is an indirect predictor of women’s objective career success; parenthood should be no predictor of men’s objective career success (Hypothesis 3).

Hypotheses 4 to 6 concern the gender self-concept. Agency should have a positive influence on work hours (H4) and on career success (H5), and communion should have an influence on parenthood (H6). These six hypotheses are graphically depicted in Figure 1 (upper panel: women; lower panel: men).

According to human capital theory (Becker, 1964), occupational human capital like career networks or work and organizational experience is built up early after career entry, and the early-career phase is especially important. In light of this consideration, the continuously rising age at which women have their first child suggests that women deliberately plan their occupational and family development. They postpone their motherhood to a later stage of their career. Hypothesis 7 states mothers’ career success will be lower if the first child was born early in their professional life than if it was born at a later stage.

We were further interested in partner’s workload as a factor possibly moderating the above relationships. Finally, we tested in an explorative manner the reverse relationship between career success and parenthood because it could be argued that persons—especially women—may be more prone to become a parent when they are less successful in their career.

Method

Overview

The sample covers professionals with university degrees from different fields of study. Participants completed the first questionnaire shortly after they had passed their final exams. They received the second questionnaire about 1 year later, the third one 3 years after graduation, the fourth one 7 years after graduation and the fifth one 10 years after graduation.

Participants and procedure

Our initial sample comprised 1,930 university graduates (825 women, 1,105 men; mean age: 27 years) who were representative of the

Figure 1. The theoretical model.

Note. +Positive influences predicted; -negative influences predicted.

respective year's graduate population with respect to study major, gender, and grade point average (GPA) at a large German university. Ninety-four percent of the respondents provided their address ($N = 1,819$). One thousand three hundred and ninety-seven participants responded to the second questionnaire (third: $N = 1,330$; fourth: $N = 1,265$; fifth: $N = 1,225$). Our drop-out analyses revealed that participants who completed all questionnaires did not differ from the initial sample (see Abele & Spurk, 2009). The following analyses were performed with 1,015 participants (428 women, 587 men; mean age $M = 37.08$, $SD = 2.23$) who had participated in all five waves. The sample comprised professionals with degrees in law (25 women, 27 men), medicine (73 women, 98 men), arts and humanities (81 women, 29 men), natural sciences (39 women, 94 men), economics (68 women, 104 men), engineering (17 women, 168 men), and teaching (125 women, 67 men).

Measures

Sociodemographic data. We assessed participants' gender, age, GPA, and study major at Time 1. Since GPA did not differ between men and women, $t < 1$, we will not consider it further. Throughout Times 1 to 5 we also assessed whether the participant lived with a partner (1 = yes; 0 = no), we assessed the partner's employment (profession and full time vs. part time vs. no employment) and we asked whether the participant was a parent (number of children, year of birth).

Work hours. Throughout Times 2 to 5 we asked our participants how many contractual hours they worked per week. We analyzed these five measures and we also computed a composite measure built from the average work hours throughout Times 2 to 5.

Gender self-concept. We assessed this at Time 1 by means of the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ; Spence et al., 1974; German version Runge, Frey, Gollwitzer, Helmreich, & Spence, 1981). The communion scale comprised eight items (sample items "empathic," "emotional," "understanding;" Cronbach's $\alpha = .75$) and the agency scale comprised seven items (sample items "decisive," "independent," "self-confident;" Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$). Participants responded on 5-point scales (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*).

Objective career success. We measured objective career success by monthly income before taxes (in 13 steps from "no income," coded as 0; "less than €500," coded as 0.5; "less than €1,000," coded as 1; and then in equal steps to "less than €10,000," coded as 10; and "more than €10,000," coded as 11) and by three variables assessing hierarchical status (permission to delegate work, 0 = no, 1 = yes; temporary project responsibility, 0 = no, 1 = yes; official leadership position 0 = no, 1 = yes). We created an objective career success index by adding the points for income and hierarchical status (values between 0 and 14). Objective success was assessed throughout Times 2 to 5. We also computed an average score for objective career across Times 2 to 5.

Results

Descriptive findings

Gender differences. Table 1 reports the gender comparison for the present variables. Agency was higher in men, and communion was higher in women. Both women and men, however, had higher values in communion than in agency, $t(1,014) = 14.51$, $p < .001$.

Table 1. Gender differences ($N = 1,015$)

	Women M, SD	Men M, SD	$t(1,013)$
Agency T1 ¹⁾	3.44 (0.63)	3.60 (0.58)	4.25, $p < .001$
Communion T1 ¹⁾	4.06 (0.48)	3.81 (0.52)	7.70, $p < .001$
Work hours T2 ²⁾	34.16 (12.65)	37.19 (9.61)	5.04, $p < .001$
Work hours T3 ²⁾	30.77 (13.72)	36.27 (9.24)	7.50, $p < .001$
Work hours T4 ²⁾	25.10 (17.09)	38.60 (7.01)	17.24, $p < .001$
Work hours T5 ²⁾	24.71 (16.18)	39.19 (7.48)	19.08, $p < .001$
Objective success T2 ³⁾	2.06 (1.38)	2.79 (1.52)	7.90, $p < .001$
Objective success T3 ³⁾	3.23 (1.86)	4.44 (1.85)	10.31, $p < .001$
Objective success T4 ³⁾	3.71 (2.95)	6.72 (2.63)	17.08, $p < .001$
Objective success T5 ³⁾	3.93 (3.03)	7.54 (3.03)	18.78, $p < .001$
Percentage of parents T1	8%	6%	$\chi^2(1) = 1.83$, ns
Percentage of parents T2	10%	11%	$\chi^2 < 1$
Percentage of parents T3	17%	21%	$\chi^2(1) = 2.32$, ns
Percentage of parents T4	46%	45%	$\chi^2 < 1$
Percentage of parents T5	59%	61%	$\chi^2 < 1$

Note. ¹⁾Scale from 1 to 5; ²⁾contractual hours worked per week; ³⁾scale from 0 to 14.

Work hours were always lower for women than for men. Similarly, objective career success was always lower for women than for men. There were no gender differences in parenthood.

Objective career success

Gender self-concept, parenthood, work hours, and objective career success. We conducted a multiple group path analysis in order to test Hypotheses 1 to 6 (cf. Kline, 2005). We first estimated a model with paths in line with Hypotheses 1 to 6. The model fit, however, was substantially enhanced by allowing an additional path from agency to parenthood. The resulting model revealed good fit indices ($\chi^2 = 10.94$, $df = 6$, $p = .09$, comparative fit index [CFI] = .99, Tucker-Lewis index [TLI] = .98, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .040). In a second step we tested whether the paths were the same for women and men. In accord with Hypotheses 4 to 6 the paths from communion to parenthood and from agency to work hours and objective career success did not differ between men and women (χ^2 -difference tests ranged from $p = .26$ to $p = .42$). The additional path, however, differed between men and women ($\Delta\chi^2[1] = 5.96$, $p < .05$) and was only significant for men. Then we tested Hypotheses 1 and 2 by constraining the paths from parenthood to average work hours and from average work hours to average objective career success as equal between men and women. Since both χ^2 -difference tests were highly significant ($\Delta\chi^2[1] = 156.76$, $p < .001$; and $\Delta\chi^2[1] = 12.45$, $p < .001$), the effects for men and women were different. Accordingly, we dropped the two equality constraints from the final model. The final model with three equality constraints did not differ from the model without equality constraints ($\Delta\chi^2[3] = 3.26$, $p = .35$; final model: $\chi^2 = 14.20$, $df = 9$, $p = .09$, CFI = .99, TLI = .99, RMSEA = .034). The model is graphically depicted in Figure 2. Paths that do not differ between men and women are presented as solid lines, and paths that differ between men and women are presented in dotted lines.

Supporting Hypothesis 1, parenthood exerted a negative effect on women's average work hours ($\beta = -.78$, $p < .001$) and no effect on men's average work hours ($\beta = .03$, ns). The stronger influence of average work hours on women's objective career success

($\beta = .79$, $p < .001$) than on men's objective career success ($\beta = .55$, $p < .001$) is in line with Hypothesis 2 and reflects the larger variance in women's than in men's work hours. Supporting Hypotheses 4 and 5, agency had a positive influence on average work hours (women: $\beta = .10$, $p < .001$; men: $\beta = .18$, $p < .001$) as well as on average objective career success (women: $\beta = .10$, $p < .001$; men: $\beta = .09$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, agency significantly predicted parenthood among men ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$) but not among women ($\beta = -.02$, ns). Supporting Hypothesis 6, communion had a positive influence on parenthood (women: $\beta = .18$, $p < .001$; men: $\beta = .17$, $p < .001$). Overall, more variance in average objective career success was explained for women (65%) than for men (33%). This is due to the stronger influence of work hours on career success among women than among men.

In order to test Hypothesis 3 we conducted subsequent χ^2 -difference tests with alternative models in which the corresponding mediation paths (from parenthood to average work hours to average objective career success) were fixed to zero, and the direct effect (path from parenthood to average objective career success) could be freely estimated (cf. Kline, 2005). The model fit did not change significantly when the direct effect could be estimated without constraints ($\Delta\chi^2[2] = 3.54$, ns). This means that there were no significant direct effects from parenthood to objective career success when the mediation paths were considered simultaneously. Then we analyzed women and men separately. In accord with Hypothesis 3, average work hours were no mediator of men's career success, because fixing the path from parenthood to average work hours to zero did not result in a changed model fit ($\Delta\chi^2[1] = .33$, ns). Again supporting Hypothesis 3, women's work hours, however, were a mediator of the influence of parenthood on career success because fixing the direct path from parenthood to average work hours or the path from average work hours to average objective career success to zero resulted in a substantially impaired model fit ($\Delta\chi^2[1] = 275.47$, $p < .001$ and $\Delta\chi^2[1] = 182.80$, $p < .001$, respectively).

Gender, time of parenthood, work hours, and objective career success. The ANOVA with gender and time of first parenthood as factors and average work hours across Times 2 to 5 as the criterion revealed that both factors and their interaction were highly significant: gender, $F(1, 1003) = 726.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .42$; parenthood, $F(5, 1003) = 60.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .23$; gender by parenthood, $F(1, 1003) = 75.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .27$. Figure 3 shows that in accord with Hypothesis 7, men's average work hours were independent of parenthood whereas women's average work hours were the lower the earlier they had been mothers.

The ANOVA with gender and time of birth of the first child as between-participants factors, and objective career success averaged across Times 2 to 5 as dependent measure, revealed a significant gender effect, $F(1, 1003) = 377.91$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .27$, and a significant gender-by-time-of-parenthood interaction, $F(5, 1003) = 25.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .11$ (see Figure 4). Supporting Hypothesis 7, childless women were most successful and women who had their first child soon after graduation were least successful. Men's average career success was independent of time of parenthood. However, childless men ($M = 5.16$) were significantly less successful than fathers ($M = 5.50$), $t(585) = 2.08$, $p < .05$.

We also computed repeated measure analyses of variance with the same factors as above as predictors, and work hours from Time 2 to Time 5 or objective career success from Time 2 to 5 as

Figure 2. Empirical path models regarding the influences of the gender self-concept, parenthood, and average work hours on average objective career success for men and women.

Note. $\chi^2 = 14.20$, $df = 9$, CFI = .99, RMSEA = 0.34. Explained variance in average objective career success: $R^2 = .65$ for women and $R^2 = .33$ for men. Path coefficients for women are displayed outside parentheses and path coefficients for men are displayed in parentheses; dotted lines signify gender differences in the path coefficients, solid lines indicate no gender differences in the path coefficients; $^{***}p < .001$.

Figure 3. Women's and men's T2 to T5 averaged work hours in dependence on parenthood and time of first parenthood.

Figure 4. Women's and men's T2 to T5 averaged objective career success in dependence on parenthood and time of first parenthood.

the repeated measure. These analyses revealed that the strongest difference in work hours and in objective career success of fathers and mothers was always found at the time of birth of the first child (exact data may be received from the authors).

Influence of partner's employment. Our female participants' partners predominantly worked full time (between 79% at Time 2,

and 89% at Time 5). We compared Time 2 to Time 5 work hours of women with full-time-employed partners versus not full-time-employed partners and with and without children. Besides the already known effects of parenthood, $F_s > 57.26$, $p_s < .001$, we found effects of partner employment, $F_s > 3.45$ and < 20.35 , $p_s < .05$, and we found highly significant interactions, $F_s > 3.95$ and < 44.96 , $p_s < .02$. Childless women's work hours were independent

of their partner's employment. Mothers, however, reduced their work hours more when their partner was full-time employed than part-time employed. Single mothers always worked more than mothers living with a partner. However, due to very small numbers of single mothers in our sample (between minimally 3 at Time 3 and maximally 10 at Time 5) these differences in work hours were not significant.

We tested these relationships for men as well. Both at Times 3 and 5 (but not at Times 2 and 4) fathers reported less work hours when their partner was full-time employed than when this was not the case (Time 3 $M = 28.01$ vs. $M = 37.38$, $F[1, 437] = 13.83$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .31$; Time 5 $M = 34.02$ vs. $M = 39.93$, $F[1, 500] = 18.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .35$).

Influence of objective success on parenthood. We finally tested whether parents differed in their prior objective success compared to participants who did not become parents yet. We only analyzed Time 4 and Time 5 parenthood because there were only a few parents at Time 2 or Time 3. Most of our participants became parents at Time 4 (26% of the sample) and another 15% became parents at Time 5. Regarding participants who became parents at Time 4 there was no difference in prior success (first parents at Time 4 and participants without children, both $M = 3.27$, $F < 1$). There was also no interaction with gender, $F(1, 814) = 1.58$, *ns*. Regarding participants who first became parents at Time 5, men did not differ in prior success, $F < 1$; women, however, differed: mothers $M = 3.28$, childless women $M = 3.86$, $F(1, 230) = 9.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .04$.

Discussion

The present study addressed the discrepancy in women's and men's career development from the perspective of the dual-impact model of gender on career-related processes (Abele, 2000). We studied a large sample of professionals in a longitudinal research covering 10 years.

Gender self-concept

The differences in our female and male participants' gender self-concept were weak but in accord with stereotypical expectations. Men described themselves as more agentic and women described themselves as more communal than men, but both described themselves as more communal than agentic. Supporting our Hypotheses 4 to 6, communion at age 27 influenced whether a person was a parent 10 years later; and agency at age 27 predicted work hours and objective career over the 10-year period. We also found that agency predicted men's parenthood. As a post hoc interpretation, this finding makes sense when we assume that the expectations directed at fathers are related to their stable breadwinner function. Men with high agency might feel better suited to fulfill these expectations than men with lower agency.

These results on the gender inside perspective are interesting in at least two respects. First, they replicate previous findings that agency is the part of the self-concept that has to do with performance and goal striving, whereas communion is the part of the self-concept that has to do with relatedness and social sharing (Abele, 2003; Kirchmeyer, 1998; Uchrowski, 2008). Second, although there are still gender differences in the self-concept in accord with stereotypical expectations, the predicted influence patterns of both self-concept dimensions are the same for men and women.

Gender, parenthood, work hours, and career success

Hypotheses 1 to 3 were also supported. Parenthood is a highly significant predictor of women's work hours, and as work hours significantly predict objective success, parenthood is also a significant indirect predictor of women's objective success. Parenthood is no predictor for men's work hours, and the impact of men's work hours on objective success is weaker because variance is lower for men than for women. In accord with previous studies we found that discontinuous career patterns are a main reason for women's lower career success (Abele, 2005; Gattiker & Larwood, 1990; Melamed, 1995; Tharenou et al., 1994).

How can we explain the fact that women reduce their work hours after the birth of a child and men do not? Above we have argued that this behavior reflects different role expectations directed at men and women, that is, external influences, but that quite a few women and men may also want to have a division of labor that assigns—at least for the time when the child is very young—the homemaker and caregiver role to the mother and the breadwinner role to the father, that is, internal influences. The present data do not allow for clearly distinguishing between these two sources of influence and both seem to be important. However, our findings suggest that external expectations should not be underestimated. First, we found that mothers reduced their work hours less when their partner worked part time or when they were single mothers. One interpretation could be that economic considerations but not individual preferences influence whether a mother reduces her work hours. Another interpretation could be that due to insufficient child-care facilities women have to reduce their workload more when their partner is less available (full-time employed).

Second, in a previous analysis we found that even though quite a few women wanted to reduce their workload after the birth of a child, the percentage of women who actually did so was much higher. In a parallel fashion, even though there were some men who wanted to reduce their workload after the birth of a child, the percentage of men who actually did so was negligible (Abele, 2003). The present study revealed that fathers also tended to reduce their workload more when they lived with a full-time employed partner. This could mean that if conditions allow (better income if partner works full time) or child-care responsibilities necessitate (partner has less time to take over child-care responsibilities if working full time) then fathers also are more prone to reduce their workload.

Timing of parenthood

Timing of parenthood is important. Having already achieved a certain position makes it less "detrimental" for mothers to reduce their workload for a while. Having the first child rather early, that is, during the time at university, is also less "detrimental" for a woman's career than when the first child is born relatively soon after leaving university. The present data suggest that women who postpone their first motherhood to their mid-thirties act in a rational way with respect to their careers. They first accumulate human capital (Becker, 1964) and then they take maternal leave. It remains to be tested whether these "late moms" will later on also be as successful as men.

It might be reasoned that there is also a reverse influence and the probability of having a child is higher when a person is not particularly successful in his/her job. Regarding men, we found no evidence at all for such reasoning. Regarding women, evidence was equivocal (i.e., only women who became mothers at Time 5

[age about 37] were somewhat less successful before than women who were not mothers yet). We conclude that there is only little evidence for “strategic” motherhood in the sense of having a reason for leaving an unsuccessful career path.

Limitations

Our participants are all highly educated professionals and it may be asked whether the findings can be generalized towards less educated samples. We assume that most of the results could also be found in other samples. The influences of agency, communion, and parenthood found here should be replicable in other samples. The impact of parenthood and especially very early parenthood on women's career development may even be higher in less educated samples. Another limitation refers to legal regulations regarding parental leave that are different across countries. However, the negative influence on career development of women's career interruptions due to child-care obligations has also been demonstrated in several countries (Gattiker & Larwood, 1990; Melamed, 1995; Tharenou et al., 1994; see also Eby et al., 2005).

Implications

The findings add to our understanding of career development in general as they show that a person's self-concept measured at career entry influences career success up to 10 years later. They add to the understanding of gender-specific career development by demonstrating the dual impact of gender as a social category and of gender as the psychological gender-related self-concept. Several lines of future research are conceivable. One is a more detailed analysis of the relative impact external expectations and internal motivations have on parents' decisions to reduce their work load after the birth of a child. Second, it seems fruitful to study the influence of the timing of parenthood transitions in more detail. Our present analyses showed that early parenthood is even more detrimental to women's careers than later parenthood. It also showed that—at least for women becoming mothers until the age of about 33—a relatively less “successful” career was no reason for having a child. However, possible bidirectional influences from parenthood to career success and from career success to parenthood should be more carefully studied. Finally, we were concerned here with “objective” success only and we did not consider our participants' subjective success evaluations. Subjective evaluations, however, are also important for understanding women's and men's career paths.

Conclusions

The present study showed that the gender-related self-concept is a predictor both of becoming a parent and of the degree of involvement and of success in a person's professional life. External expectations directed at female and male roles as well as more or less deliberate decisions on the part of the parents still lead to traditional family structures in the transition from childlessness to parenthood. Consequently, discontinuity in mothers' careers is still a major determinant of their lower objective career success compared to men.

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