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Work as a Central Life Interest in Male and Female Senior and Staff Accountants in Large CPA Firms

By Marc Levine

The field of accounting is gaining popularity among all students, both male and female. In 1972, 23,800 individuals graduated with a bachelor's or master's degree in accounting. Twelve years later, in 1984, it is projected that 61,910 persons will graduate with comparable accounting degrees (American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, 1983). This represents a projected increase of 260 percent. Women are currently graduating with accounting degrees and are entering the accounting profession in ever-increasing numbers.¹ In 1972, the percentage of females graduating with an accounting degree was approximately 10 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 1980).² In 1984, it is projected that 46 percent of all accounting degrees will be awarded to females (American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, 1983). In addition, large accounting firms have indicated that females represent from 30 percent to one third of their entry level professionals.³ The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (1983) projects that the demand for female accountants with bachelor's or master's degrees will increase to 39 percent of all recruits in 1984.

These data suggest that things have been improving; however, women are still struggling for advancement in the accounting profession. For example, the largest national public accounting firms, known as the "Big Eight" have hundreds of male partners each, but women partners are virtually non-existent in these organizations. In December, 1977, the "Big Eight" had a total of 4,918 partners. Of this number only 18 were females, constituting approximately .4 percent of the total.⁴ Although there are no published data on the number of women actually working for the "Big Eight" then, the .4 percent representing 18 partners is conspicuously low.

A recent article in *Forbes Magazine*, "Ms. CPA," indicated that in 1981 things had only slightly improved. In that year, Peat, Marwick, Mitchel and Company elected 125 new partners, of whom one was a woman. Arthur Andersen picked 168 partners of whom all but three were men. Arthur Young elected 57 partners including three women. Price Waterhouse's 36 partners had none. Deloitte Haskins & Sells included three women among its 64 new partners. Coopers & Lybrand had one out of 70 new partners.

Touche Ross added two women out of 58 new partners, and Ernst & Whinney elected one woman out of 75 new partners. In summary, of the 653 new partners chosen by the "Big Eight" in 1981 only 14, or approximately 2 percent were female. Public accounting seems to be communicating to women a message that was initially expressed by Richardson in a 1923 article in the *Journal of Accountancy* which read: "The prospects for women in the field of accounting are not brilliant... In public accounting it must be admitted with regret that the woman who succeeds is the rare exception."⁵

What perception on the part of the management of these large public accounting firms has contributed to the obvious discrimination against women? A part of this discrimination may be based on the belief that female accountants place less of an emphasis on their work and careers than their male counterparts. For example, do female accountants who are currently in the process of advancing up the public accounting hierarchy have a significantly different attitude toward their work than their male counterparts? It is important that objective, empirical data be derived to either support or refute this belief.

The purpose of this study is to make such an empirical determination using a social psychological construct known as "work as a central life interest." Specifically the study will seek to ascertain whether female senior and staff accountants working in large CPA firms are as likely to indicate a central life interest in their work as comparable male accountants of the same rank.

Work as a central life interest is defined as the importance individuals place on their jobs; i.e., it is a mental association that one develops toward work. Dubin (1956) further defines this concept as the focal arena of individual preferences for behaving when given a choice of behavioral settings.⁶ An individual may be said to have a central life interest in work when he chooses the work setting as the preferred locale for behaviors that might otherwise be carried out in nonwork settings.⁷ Hence, work occupies a focal part in the person's life such that he prefers participation in work and work-related activities over participation in nonwork activities. Central life interest in work is also significant for work institutions because the strongest effective self-

TABLE I
Gender of the Senior and Staff Accountants
Responding to the Study Questionnaire

Gender	Absolute Frequency		Relative Frequency (%)	
	Senior	Staff	Senior	Staff
Male	254	369	72	61
Female	101	240	28	39
Totals	<u>355</u>	<u>609</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>

TABLE 2
Comparison of Gender with
Central Life Interest Classification for
The Senior Accountants Responding to the
Study Questionnaire

	Absolute Frequency		Relative Frequency (%)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Indicating a Central Life Interest in Work	74	24	29	24
Not Indicating A Central Life Interest in Work	180	77	71	76
Totals	<u>254</u>	<u>101</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>

TABLE 3
Comparison of Gender with
Central Life Interest Classification for
The Staff Accountants Responding to the
Study Questionnaire

	Absolute Frequency		Relative Frequency (%)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Indicating a Central Life Interest in Work	91	49	25	20
Not Indicating A Central Life Interest in Work	278	191	75	80
Totals	<u>369</u>	<u>240</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>

investment of an individual is made in the institutional setting that is his or her central life interest.⁸ Individuals who indicate a work orientation (a central life interest in work) have been evaluated independently as being upwardly striving,⁹ more committed to their organization,¹⁰ less alienated and indifferent¹¹ and more satisfied with their jobs¹² than the nonjob oriented.

If male senior and staff public accountants are more likely to indicate a central life interest in their work than their female counterparts, then this study might help explain why women are not reaching the upper echelons of the public accounting profession. However, if a difference is not found, then an important reason which may be used to explain what is blocking women from these positions would be eliminated.

The Study

Data on senior and staff accountants of large CPA firms were accumulated to derive support for the conjecture that female senior and staff accountants are as likely to be classified work-oriented as measured by their responses on the Central Life Interest Inventory (CLI) as their male counterparts.

The target population of the study included the audit senior and staff accountants of the New York City offices of large CPA firms. These firms consisted of "Big Eight" and other national CPA firms whose gross revenues for 1980 were in excess of \$20 million each. Eleven firms agreed to participate in the study. About 2100 questionnaires were sent to 100 percent of the senior and staff accountants of these firms. Of the potential respondents, about 32 percent were females.

To insure representativeness, a second request follow-up mailing was also generated. Since all initially returned questionnaires were anonymous, second requests were mailed to all of the individuals of the firms in the target population that agreed to participate in a second request mailing.

Instrumentation

Dubin's (1956) "Central Life Interest Inventory" (CLI), a highly reliable, validated instrument, was used to measure the expressed work orientation of senior and staff accountants working in large CPA firms.¹³

The Central Life Interest Inventory comprises 32 items¹⁴ dealing with membership in formal organizations, technological aspects of the environment, informal personal relations, and general everyday experiences. These categories were selected by Dubin and his colleagues because the questionnaire was designed to determine whether the workplace is the central life interest of individuals or whether other areas of their social experience are important to them. Using the questionnaire individuals of the study were classified as either having or not having a central life interest in their work.

Findings

Questionnaires were received from a total of 965 senior and staff accountants. This represents a return rate of 46 percent of the 2100 questionnaires that were mailed out by the participating CPA firms. Thirty-seven percent of the total respondents represented senior accountants and 63 percent represented staff accountants.

Of the 355 senior accountants that responded, 254 (72 percent) were male and 101 (28 percent) were female. Of the 609 staff accountants that responded, 369 (61 percent) represented males and 240 (39 percent) represented females. These data are summarized in Table 1.

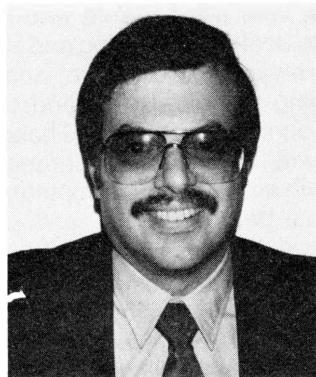
The results of the questionnaires were analyzed separately for senior and staff categories. The results are shown in Tables 2 and 3 which compare gender with central life interest classification. Table 2 analyzes the outcome of responses of the senior accountants of the study. As shown, 29 percent of all male senior accountants were classified as having a central life interest in work while 24 percent of female senior accountants were so classified. Statistically this gender difference was found to be insignificant.¹⁵ Table 3 analyzes the outcome of responses of the staff accountants of the study. As shown, 25 percent of all male staff accountants were classified as having a central life interest in work while 20 percent of the female staff ac-

countants were so classified. This gender difference was also found to be insignificant.

A separate analysis of individuals who responded only after a follow-up letter was also performed. The result indicated the same non-significant outcome regarding gender differences.

Conclusion

As was indicated, there has been a conspicuously low number of women in the upper echelons of the hierarchy of large public accounting firms. If, for example, male accountants were more likely to indicate a central life interest in work than women, then this study might have helped explain why women have not been reaching the upper levels of large public accounting firms. However, the results of the tests performed indicated that there was no significant difference between males and females regarding the likelihood of being classified work oriented. Therefore, this finding lends no support to a conventional explanation of why women have been blocked from upper levels of the public accounting hierarchy. It does provide a further argument for the elimination of barriers against women. Ω



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NOTES

- ¹Ms. CPA. *Forbes*, August 17, 1981, p. 8.
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- ⁶Dubin, R. Industrial workers world: A Study of the "central life interests" of industrial workers. *Social Problems*, 1956, 3, 131-142.
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- ⁸Faunce, W.A. & Dubin R. Individual investment in working and living. In L. Daves and A. Cherns & Associates (EDs), *The quality of working life*, New York: The Free Press, 1975.
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- ¹¹Brown, L. *Alienation from work*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon, 1968.
- ¹²Dubin, R., & Champoux, J.E. Central life interests and job satisfaction. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 1977, 18, 366-377.
- ¹³An in depth review of the many studies establishing the reliability and validity of the Central Life Interest Inventory may be found in an unpublished doctoral dissertation by Dalton, D.R., *Orientation to Work and Grievance Behavior*, University of California, Irvine, 1979.
- ¹⁴The CLI may be obtained from the author upon request.
- ¹⁵The statistical tests of significance performed on the data in Tables 2 and 3 and on the central life interest classification between first and second request respondents were made using a chi-square distribution. Two by two contingency tables were derived in each situation with $df=1$. In each case, the results were not determined to be significant at the .05 level.

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