Gendered Accounts: Undergraduates Explain Why They Seek Their Bachelor's Degree

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Data from a four-year longitudinal study of undergraduates were used to determine whether males and females give different explanations for their decisions to seek bachelor's degrees and whether these differences could be explained by three mediating variables: performance levels, expectations, and attainment values. Females were found to give more importance to internal reasons than males did, but males gave higher ratings to items measuring academic drift, including luck. Females had higher academic performance levels than males, but no gender differences were found for expectations and attainment values, and performance levels did not explain gender differences in reasons for seeking the degree. An historic shift in gender ideology is proposed as an explanation for the findings.

The many concerns that have been expressed about a gender gap in the achievements of males and females give the impression that females can best be regarded as an underachieving, disadvantaged, second sex. National data (National Center for Education Statistics, 1993) concerned with performance in colleges and universities of males and females offer some challenges to this impression. Unlike many other countries, the United States now has higher participation ratios for women than for men in higher edu-

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cation, and American women are more likely than American males to complete bachelor's degrees.

What happens to these women after they complete their undergraduate degrees? National data indicate that the subsequent educational and occupational achievements of women fall behind those of men. Although the gender gap in graduate and professional degrees is narrowing, men continue to earn more of the Ph.D. and high-level professional degrees than women (Kaufman, 1989). In addition, women hold jobs that are, on average, inferior in many respects to those held by men. Among full-time, year-round workers, women earn less than men, and this gender difference in earnings is found even between men and women who have the same amount of education and job experience (National Committee on Pay Equity, 1992). On average, women also have less job autonomy and fewer promotional opportunities than their male counterparts. They continue to be concentrated in clerical jobs and are underrepresented in top-level managerial and professional positions (Kaufman, 1989).

**Attribution Theory and Relevant Research**

Undoubtedly, there are many reasons why earning more bachelor's degrees than men fails to translate into higher subsequent achievements for women. Drawing on attribution theory, this paper uses data from a four-year longitudinal study of American undergraduates to investigate one of these possible reasons, namely, gender differences in the explanations undergraduates give for seeking their bachelor's degrees. Most attribution researchers would probably agree with Weiner (1986, p. 190) that “attributions are without doubt linked to achievement performance,” and most would argue that explanations for successful task performance based on internal reasons, such as ability and effort, are more likely to facilitate subsequent achievements than are explanations for successes based on external reasons, such as social influence or luck. If it were true, therefore, that compared to women, men give more emphasis to internal reasons and less emphasis to external reasons when explaining why they are attaining their bachelor's degree, attribution theory would predict that the subsequent achievements of men should be higher than those of women, a prediction that is supported by existing data. On the other hand, attribution theory would not predict existing outcomes if it were found that women gave more stress than men to internal reasons for attaining their bachelor's degrees and gave less stress than men to external reasons for this achievement. Such findings would suggest that gender differences in post-baccalaureate achievements are due to reasons other than the ways in which men and women account for their baccalaureate degrees.