WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU GROW UP? A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF GENDER ON THE CAREER ASPIRATIONS OF MARKETING STUDENTS

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Recently there has been a great deal of press to about the career opportunities, or rather lack of them, for women at management and executive levels (Blakely, 2014; Serrels, 2013). Marketing has been mentioned as one area where women are not doing as well as one might expect in terms of securing the top jobs, and when they do secure an executive position it is frequently at a lower salary than their male counterparts (Castilla and Benard, 2010). Similar reports from the information technology (IT) industry have become a focus for public discussion as to the career trajectories of female graduates in general (Blakely, 2014; Williams, 2014). In a recent article in the London Times (Blakely, 2014) leading business executives expressed the views that women working in the 'Silicon Valley' were not motivated to pursue these jobs or that women are not interested in holding the top jobs in this sector (Blakely, 2014). In the same article others posited that women were interested in working IT especially given they represent 47% of online gamers'. However, the Boston Globe (31/11/2014) reported that a 'boys club' operates when it comes to giving women the opportunity for a career in the field, citing the statistic that fewer than 12% of gaming executives and developers are female. Interest in these issues is not limited to the USA and UK, for example reports from Australia and Finland have identified the same kind of issues in the mineral resources industries (Kuosa 2000; MCA Workforce 2013).

Women make up over 50% of the USA workforce but less than 8% of the highest paid executives within the companies forming the S&P top 500 firms are female (Bloomberg, 2014). In the UK, women account for 15% of board members in the FTSE top 250 companies (Vinnicombe, Dolder and Turner, 2014). When asked why women were rarely seen in top management roles, Vinniecoombe et al. (2003, p. 35) quote one CEO, male, as replying "I think generally men's potential is more obviously displayed than women's, unless you've got a woman that really pushes herself forward – and there's loads of research around this." Another leading company in the same report explained that male leaders "might not necessarily be as aware of the female talent as they would the male because, as we know from lots of research, men and women navigate their way through business differently". Finland is a country that prides its self on being gender neutral but past research has challenged this in relation to the IT industry (Kuosa, 2000, p.120.). Gender has been identified as also an issue in the career development of marketers (Ng and Pine, 2003; Piercy, Cravens and Lane, 2001). Recognizing where these gender perceptions develop and if the marketing curriculum is in part responsible for this is the focus of this research.

A brief review of the academic literature demonstrates the importance of confronting gender inequality amongst graduates across many disciplines, including marketing, covering a diverse spectrum of industries. Castilla and Benard (2010) found that, regardless of industry, in those organizations where promotion and other rewards are based only on merit the tendency is still to reward male executives above similarly performing females. Flexibility in career development is related positively to self-efficacy (Careless and Arnup, 2011), a trait more commonly associated with men in the workplace. The authors also found that young men were more likely than women to voluntarily change jobs if they felt it would advance their career.

Contemplating this state of affairs leads us to ask many questions. As marketing academics should we feel in any way responsible for the career aspirations of our graduates? It appears that perhaps the focus should be on preparing students to be "career ready" if they are to achieve their potential and not simply "work ready". Are there strategies that we could be employing within the curriculum to support the future careers of our female students or are we, inadvertently, reflecting that lower aspirations are appropriate for these students? And if we are reflecting lower aspirations, what are they? Can we even say that it is a case of self-efficacy? Do female students believe themselves to be less capable and this in turn leads them to aim lower in terms of career choices? As a starting point we need to identify if future graduates, regardless of gender, reflect similar career aspirations. This will tell us if the problem begins or is encouraged in our classrooms.

The results presented will be from a pilot study of the career aspirations of marketing majors attending colleges in three countries: Australia, USA and Finland. Students, male and female, will be asked where they see their career going, in terms of the industry and job title, at various stages; one year, five years and ten years after graduation and what career aspirations they have in terms of the highest level they expect to achieve.

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