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GENDER AND THE MBA: Differences in Career Trajectories, Institutional Support, and Outcomes

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Abstract

This study asks how men's and women's careers diverge following MBA graduation from an elite university, using qualitative interview data from 74 respondents. We discover men and women follow three career pathways post-graduation: lockstep (stable employment), transitory (3 or more employers), and exit (left workforce). While similar proportions of men and women followed the lockstep pathways and launched accelerated careers, sizable gender differences emerged on the transitory pathway; men's careers soared as women's faltered on this path—the modal category for both. On the transitory path, men fared much better than women when moving to new organizations, suggesting that gender may become more salient when people have a shorter work history with a company. Our findings suggest that clear building blocks to promotions reduce gender bias and ambiguity in the promotion process, but multiple external moves hamper women, putting them at a clear disadvantage to men whose forward progress is less likely to be stalled by such moves.

Keywords

Gender; Work; MBA; Trajectories; Organizations

The most recent two decades saw a “significant slowing in progress toward gender equality” (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2012: 2), and this trend is particularly pronounced in the business world (Cohen, Huffman, and Knauer 2009). Today, women earn almost as many Masters of Business Administration (MBA) as do men—46.1 percent in 2012 (National Center for Education Statistics 2013b). Yet even among elite executives with similar backgrounds, women, on average, have fewer promotions and lower earnings than men (Lyness and Schrader 2006; Lyness and Thompson 2000; Roth 2006). Compared to women

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with other professional degrees, i.e., Doctor of Law (JDs), Doctor of Philosophy (PhDs), and Doctor of Medicine (MDs), women MBA alumni at Harvard had the lowest labor force participation at a fifteen-year follow up (Herr and Wolfram 2012).

Given recent calls for more research on gender and management careers (Broadbridge and Simpson 2011), as well as the structural and cultural influences on men and women's careers (Cohen 2013), this project uses qualitative interviews to examine men's and women's work trajectories after obtaining an MBA. To our knowledge, only one existing qualitative interview study has looked at women and men's MBA careers—Roth's (2006) study that demonstrated sizable gender discrimination in business. Roth focused on MBA career outcomes on Wall Street and found that gender bias in bonuses and client socialization, as well as gendered occupational segregation in different sectors on Wall Street, contributed to women's overall lower wages. We extend Roth's research by looking at MBAs across a wider range of business careers and by tracing work pathways in order to develop theoretical categories for these trajectories. In doing so, we examine whether there are pathways that might either reduce or exacerbate gender differences. Thus, our research allows us to examine gender differences in career pathways, the mechanisms that shape these pathways, and the differing pay-offs for following the pathways.

Structural theories of divergences in men's and women's career trajectories emphasize the institutional and organizational obstacles women face in the workforce and the structural advantages that men may receive. The ideal worker norm privileges men in the workplace, as men are expected to be less obligated to families and to be more committed to work, giving men greater opportunities (Acker 1990; Britton 2000; Schilt 2006). If organizations systematically structure opportunities in ways that advantage men (Lyness and Thompson 2000; Roth 2006) and these opportunities are necessary for the building of one's career (Roth 2006), then investigating work trajectories allows us to understand how these gendered disparities may cumulate over time (Moen and Roehling 2005). Cultural theories of gender differences have tended to focus, even in professional positions, on traditional gender norms that have deemed family caregiving as women's primary responsibility (Bass 2014; Blair-Loy 2003; Stone 2007), with breadwinning and the world of paid work as men's primary responsibility (Cooper 2000; Damaske et al. 2014; Townsend 2002). These theories argue that gender schemas shape women's and men's devotions to work and home in often oppositional ways (Blair-Loy 2003; Hays 1998).

We ask: Do women's and men's pathways diverge following completion of the MBA program? If so, how and why do they diverge? To address these questions, we examine qualitative interview data from a sample of 74 men and women with similar starting points – MBAs from the same prestigious business school in the Northeastern United States. Participants were interviewed in 2008, approximately 10 to 12 years after obtaining their degrees in 1996–1998, allowing for analysis of career histories of both men and women. By examining men's and women's work pathways and turning points, this paper offers unique empirical and theoretical insights into the divergent career trends of MBA graduates.

MBA CAREER TRAJECTORIES

Among professionals with the same MBA credentials and in the same organizations, women earn less than men and women are more likely to have downward trajectories in their work, either moving to lesser paying jobs or out of the industry (Roth 2006). Immediately after graduating, men and women from the same MBA cohorts have similar work hours and participation levels, but a gap emerges and widens between men and women over time (Bertrand, Goldin, and Katz 2010). Promotions and pay often influence future promotions (Cassirer and Reskin 2000), but if women are promoted less often, early milestones in promotion and pay may have lasting career implications. Given these findings, we expect that gendered processes will shape the work opportunities and work trajectories of our participants.

Gendered Organizations

Gendered organization theory argues that the general context at work is one of hegemonic masculinity, one that privileges white, middle class men (Britton 2000; Reskin 1993; Schilt 2006). Women are excluded and marginalized since they are assumed to be unable to conform to the job's demands (Acker 1990; Reskin, McBrier, and Kmec 1999; Reskin 1993). This structural lens pinpoints the ways in which men are advantaged at work and the way gender is maintained through expectations that tie mannerisms, behaviors, and even occupations to a particular gender and preferentially favor men (Schilt 2006). Organizations serve as both an actor in employment decisions, as well as a setting in which gender is enacted (Reskin, McBrier, and Kmec 1999; Reskin 1993).

Gendered organizations theory is a "demand" side explanation of gender differences; it explains differences in men's and women's work careers by pointing to the various ways in which organizations tend to favor and promote men over women. Prior research has identified a number of ways through which organizational bias leads to differing career outcomes for men and women. For example, women in business are more likely to be hired only in positions previously held by a woman, to be less likely to be hired externally than are men, and to be more likely to be promoted to non-authority positions (Lyness and Thompson 2000; Lyness and Schrader 2006). Cohen, Huffman, and Knauer (2009) find evidence that women managers are segregated into managerial positions with little power or opportunity for growth.

Moreover, Roth's (2006) research suggests that the sector of Wall Street in which men and women work helps to explain gender differences, with men being more likely than women to work in the higher paying corporate finance sectors. We expand on Roth's finding by examining gender differences in broader segments of the economy to better understand how career trajectories may differ by industry. Roth's research further finds that women fare better in positions that rely less on the subjective opinion of bosses and clients and more on clearer measures of productivity (2006). In sum, the prior research leads us to expect that structural factors may systematically favor men over women, as gender bias is institutionalized. It may also be that some structural processes mitigate gender differences in work trajectories, while processes that increase subjective evaluations exacerbate gender inequality.

Gendered Work-Family Schemas

Other research has suggested that divergent work trajectories may be explained by men's and women's adherence to cultural schemas about men's and women's differing work and family responsibilities. In other words, these "supply side" explanations focus on how men and women may learn and bring to work differing expectations about working and caring (Blair-Loy 2003). Men, particularly those in professional jobs, are expected to be devoted to work; high levels of labor force participation is how men are expected to do good fathering (Cooper 2000; Townsend 2002). Women, on the other hand, are expected to hold strong devotions to home (Blair-Loy 2003; Hays 1998), with some research finding that even women making upwards of \$200,000 annually attribute their workforce participation to their selfless devotion to their families instead of their own work commitments (Damaske 2011).

There is considerable evidence that women in professional positions—lawyers, doctors, professors, corporate managers—disproportionately bear the burden of childrearing obligations compared to their male peers (Blair-Loy 2003; Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden 2013; Stone 2007). While men have increased their household labor, Roth's study (2006) of Wall Street finds that among men, the traditional breadwinner/homemaker model continues to be the norm, while the vast majority of women have dual-earner households in which they rely on paid childcare. Recent research suggests that among dual-earner professionals, the gendered division of labor is maintained partly by how working mothers manage the paid labor of others (i.e. childcare, housework), by their greater responsibility for the remaining unpaid household and childcare tasks, and by their larger responsibility to take care of routine schedule interruptions (i.e., when a child is sick) (Gerstel and Clawson 2014; Maume 2008).

Among managers' careers, having children predicts employment disruption for women but not for men (Bertrand, Goldin, and Katz 2010), which has suggested to some that MBA women's overall devotion to work may be lower than men's. Yet, since mothers are judged as less competent and committed than non-mothers and men and receive lower salaries (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007), they may feel pushed out of work rather than pulled out by devotion to home (Stone 2007). Men do not face these cultural judgments, as their work devotions are not perceived to be incompatible with fatherhood (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007; Damaske et al. 2014). Despite speculation that women prioritize work less, women tend to be more committed to their organizations compared to men (Marsden, Kalleberg, and Cook 1993).

In our analysis of the career trajectories of men and women with MBAs, we consider both structural constraints and opportunities and gendered ideologies of work-family devotion. We build on previous research to further understand how transitions and career choices vary by gender and why, even with the same starting point, work pathways diverge. Given prior research, we anticipate that women will face greater gender bias at work than men, and this could limit women's opportunities to be promoted. Following Roth's findings about the importance of subjective decisions, we further expect that these biases could be mitigated by policies that reduce subjective management decisions. We also anticipate that differing gendered obligations at home may leave women with greater household responsibilities, limiting their ability to advance in a corporation.

METHODS

Qualitative life history interviews depend on participants being similarly situated in a particular historical moment; all 74 participants were sampled from one MBA program's alumni lists and from cohorts that graduated between 1996 and 1998. The interviews were conducted in 2008. While not generalizable to the broader population, the strength of this strategy is that, much like Roth (2006), sampling from a limited population increases the likelihood that graduates will share many human capital characteristics. Men, women, parents and non-parents were included in the sample. Participants were contacted by phone or e-mail and were included no matter where they were currently geographically located. Local participants were interviewed in person at a location convenient to the participant; participants outside of the area were interviewed by phone. Interviews lasted one to two hours. Life-history interviews invite interview subjects to tell us which events they perceive to be important in their lives (Mills 1959). A detailed semi-structured interview schedule was developed based on existing work-family research. The interview schedule included questions on biographical and demographic data, college and early work trajectories, MBA experience, work and family experiences post MBA, current work, and future expectations.

Twenty-eight interview participants were women and 45 were men.¹ At the time of the interviews, the majority of participants held over ten years of post-MBA business experience. The interviews were independently transcribed, edited, and systematically coded by a team of researchers. The research team began by coding the interviews according to categories identified from the literature, including workforce participation level, wages, marital status, presence of children, and gender ideology. As unexpected patterns emerged, we developed new coding schemas, guided by grounded methods theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). At our team meetings, we discussed new patterns, compared notes to create new codes, and then systematically re-coded data.

Scholars have called for more research on women's career development in management, especially regarding their trajectories (O'Neil, Hopkins, and Bilimoria 2013). Since we were interested in the intersection of work and gender, particularly the diverging pathways for men and women with MBAs who have similar starting points, identifying different patterns in work trajectories was key to our analysis. Following Damaske (2011), we traced the worker's employment over the decade, charting their workforce exits and entrances. This led us to identify three primary trajectories of *Lockstep*, *Transitory*, and *Exit* (described in detail below).

Finally, Roth (2006) notes that understanding differences in "outcomes" is a crucial component to measuring gender disparities. Following her lead, we constructed an outcome measurement that was related to participants' work trajectory and focused on the conditions of participants' current positions. The terminology emerged from the data in which participants repeatedly spoke about having "accelerated" or "stalled" careers. We defined careers as accelerated if the workers were currently employed in a permanent position and

¹The university alumni office contacted participants and then interested participants contacted the PI; the PI did not have the original list from which to calculate a response rate.

reported continued salary growth. Accelerated trajectories most often were characterized by frequent increases in pay, title promotion, or company recognition that led to reported feelings of opportunity and growth. Andrea (40, white, married, two children) reflects this: “At [my first company] I was promoted, at [the next company] I was promoted ... For me [at my current company], I’m like a VP level here. The next jump up is like a Senior VP level and ... I hope to get there within three to five years.”

We considered careers stalled if they fit one of the following criteria: current unemployment or non-employment, not in a permanent position (which we saw as a measure of the precarity of their work (Kalleberg 2009)), or a reported decrease in most recent salary (not including yearly fluctuations in bonuses). These careers were often characterized by a lack of power or the inability to move up via promotion or pay. Kristen (43, white, divorced, two children) had little authority: “I’m not their supervisor, but I manage the work that they do for me... I would say I have a lot of respect ... I don’t have any power over them, specifically.”

WORK PATHWAYS AFTER THE MBA

Demographics

The average age of our respondents was 41, ranging in age from 36 to 55. A majority of the sample (81 percent) was married, 5.5 percent partnered, 11 percent single, and 4 percent divorced. Two participants (3 percent) identified as gay or lesbian; both were partnered without children. A quarter (26 percent) of the sample did not have children and the remaining three-quarters averaged two children per respondent, with a range of 1 to 4 children. Three-quarters of the sample (76 percent) identified as white, with the remaining respondents identifying as Asian (8 percent), Hispanic (5.5 percent), Black (4 percent), Biracial (4 percent), and Middle Eastern (1 percent). One respondent declined to report race. Individuals held positions in a wide range of industries, including, but not limited to, finance, consulting, banking, and manufacturing. To illustrate these differences while preserving confidentiality, we categorized these industries into three main groups: Wall Street, Private Companies, and Non-Profit/Government. While a large majority of our respondents worked in private companies, more men than women worked on Wall Street.

MBA Career Pathways

First, we provide a brief overview of the three trajectories identified through our analysis of men’s and women’s workforce exits and entrances. Moen and Roehling (2005) note that in the middle of the twentieth century “lockstep lives” defined men’s participation in paid work—men graduated from school (either high school or college), went to work for a company, and often worked there through retirement. We use their terminology to name one of the trajectories we identify, the *lockstep* trajectory. This MBA career pathway included all participants who had worked for one or, at the most two, companies in the first ten to twelve years after the completion of their MBA. The lockstep career trajectory appears less common among today’s MBA graduates than for the men described by Moen and Roehling (2005). Only 26 percent of MBA men and 32 percent of MBA women in our sample followed the lockstep trajectory. The second work trajectory that emerged from the data—

the modal career trajectory in our sample—is the *transitory* career trajectory, in which workers worked for a minimum of three different employers over 10–12 years, averaging slightly over 4 companies. Women were underrepresented in this category (50 percent of women compared to 70 percent of men). Our third category, *exit*, was comprised of a small group who had left the workforce entirely before the time of the interview—this group is mirrored in existing literature (e.g., Stone 2007). Gender differences were also prominent in the exit group (18 percent of women compared to only 4 percent of men). Although workforce exits are often thought to be the key difference in men’s and women’s MBA outcomes, our study finds that the exit category is the smallest group for both men and women and thus explains only a portion of the differing experiences between genders.

Structural Opportunities and Support

Structural opportunities and support differed across trajectories. We found two structural mechanisms that sorted our respondents into one pathway or another: (1) clear promotion pathways that provided the ability to move up and receive positions “at the top” of organizations; and (2) formal and informal institutional support, such as positive working relationships with bosses, and formal and informal work-life policies.

Lockstep Lives

The lockstep workers were career oriented and expected to move up the ranks and retire with one or two firms; this expectation of steady and stable employment has grown increasingly rare (see Pugh 2015). A similar percentage of men (26 percent) and women (32 percent) followed this path and most worked 50 to 60 hours per week. The majority of both men and women in this category graduated with their MBAs, went to work for a large employer (over 100 employees), received multiple promotions within the organization, and remained with the organization at the time of the interview. A smaller group worked for one company for a number of years after graduation but then were recruited away by a competing firm. Among lockstep workers industry mattered: all lockstep workers worked either on Wall Street or in private companies; none worked in government or non-profits. Among lockstep men, 42 percent worked on Wall Street, compared to only 22 percent of the lockstep women. Lockstep women were concentrated (78 percent) in the private sector.

Among lockstep workers, promotions appeared to be seamless and attainable in the organizations for which they worked. In fact, many noted that clear lines for promotions were built into the organizational structure. Tracy (39, Asian, married, two children), who had been with her company her whole career, noted: “There were only four MBA graduates they recruit from the top MBA schools—and the expectation coming in is this was going to be a fast track at a management level, to more senior management.” Melissa (36, white, married, no children) pointed out, “It was a great opportunity. I thought the group was great, the leader was great ... [S]o I got promoted to a different band level—VP—and the pay went up.” Lockstep workers, the women in particular, emphasized the importance of clear promotion opportunities in their organizations.

Positive relationships with the supervisor or organizational leadership were another important aspect of lockstep work environments. Often, workers felt that these relationships

reflected the worker's autonomy or open communication within the organization. For instance, Dawn, (41, white, married, two children) noted:

What I'm looking for is [a] relationship where my boss can give me kind of a balance between autonomy and guidance. And I think that that's basically what I've had all during the career.

Dawn also felt that her supportive relationship with her boss, as well as his trust in her, helped her flourish: "He trusted me that I would do my job and deliver what I needed to deliver." Tracy noted that she had always had "bosses that were focused on results," and a focus on results over relationships or face time has been shown to benefit women in the workplace (Roth 2006). Satisfaction with leadership and with the overall work environment translated to longer tenure within an organization. For instance, George (36, white, married, two children) turned down an opportunity to earn more money at another company in order to keep his supportive work environment:

And I had an opportunity to leave, which oddly enough was brought to me by my boss. I mean that's the kind of relationship. He said, "Look, somebody approached about this position, it's not really for me but if you guys want it, go for it, go right ahead." And it was before Enzo my eldest was born and it was one of those things where I'm like, "All right, now you've got to provide..." And [the other company] actually offered more money but then I said, "You know what, you can't put a price on what I have here."

Workplace environment also mattered in terms of workplace flexibility, which workers primarily described in terms of informal arrangements made with bosses, although some described it in terms of access to formal policies. Tracy (39, Asian, married, two children) emphasized the importance of formal flexibility policies in allowing her career to progress while having a family: "You know, during the first five years, I became pregnant with my daughter right at the point that I was up for a new job [at my organization], which allowed me to work from home." Dawn (41, white, married, two children) noted the importance of informal policies, "If I need to come late because I have to take my kids to the doctor, or if I need to leave early, or if I need to work from home once in a while, [my boss has] been very, very accommodating." Both formal and informal flexibility helped women move up the ladder. Sometimes men benefited from informal arrangements, too, even creating flexibility for themselves (and themselves alone). Charles (40, white, married, two children) remarked: "The great thing about being senior is everything has to be done on my schedule." Sometimes flexibility was less important than steady 9-5 hours; Donald (39, white, married, two children) reported that "our client, you know, they don't work weekends and they're done at 5:00-5:30... My wife says I'm home more." In sum, the lockstep workers highlight both clear lines of promotions and institutional support, characterized by positive leadership and the availability of formal and informal policies, as being key to their continued longevity with their employers.

Transitory Careers

The vast majority of men (70 percent) and half of women (50 percent) fell into the transitory career category. These MBAs did not stay with any one company for a particularly long

time. Their careers were defined by movement; they worked for at least 3 companies in 10 years, and most had 4–6 different employers. As with lockstep workers, the majority worked over 50 hours a week. While a majority of both men and women in the transitory category worked in the private sector (66 percent of transitory men and 71 percent of transitory women), a stark gender contrast emerged between Wall Street and the Non-Profit/Government sectors. Twenty-two percent of transitory men work on Wall Street, compared to only 7 percent of transitory women. In contrast, 21 percent of transitory women work in Non-Profit/Government compared to 12 percent of transitory men. The type of industry directly related to pay, as Kristen (43, white, divorced, two children), who worked in a non-profit noted: “I think I started there at 65 and now I make about 91. I know that I could probably be making about 130 if I was [*sic*] in the corporate world.”

Unlike Lockstep workers, transitory workers were likely to report obstacles to promotions at work that led them to seek out new opportunities in new organizations. James (38, white, single, no children) remarked:

[A]fter a while I wanted to move on. It was like, “All right, I’ve been doing the same stuff for nine years. I want to advance to the director level and take the next step in my career.” I needed someone in my group to leave to do that and they just were just settled in for the next 20 years at those positions... So it became “Well if I want to move on I’ve got to look elsewhere.”

Transitory workers explained that even when they did, at first, experience promotions at work, this progress was stalled when they were moved into the wrong department or position. Nicole (40, white, single, no children) explained that she “loved that job, but then they pushed me into another—literally pushed me into another job that I knew wasn’t right for me ... And I was like, ‘This isn’t the right job for me, this doesn’t leverage any of my skill sets or anything that I’m good at and if you want me to take this job this is what I want to happen. I want to be promoted.’” But, despite her protests, her bosses moved her into the position without the requested promotion; she left six months afterwards, because she felt unable to advance or succeed in the new position.

Leaving jobs for new opportunities was often the result of these blocked promotion lines, but we found large gender variation in transitions made for upward career mobility. Men were almost twice as likely as women (43 percent vs. 18 percent) to leave jobs in search of better career opportunities. This is partly because men were much more likely to be recruited by external companies. Justin (44, white, divorced, two children) explained:

[An external company] pursued me. [O]ne of my classmates had taken a job with [this company]. While he is at the company the internal recruiter that had handled his move from [our school] , came in and said, “Hey, we need somebody with oil and gas experience. Do you know anybody?” ... So [the company] called me and then pursued me and then I took the job and came down [here].

This sort of “pursuit” was fairly typical for men, but women had to expend more effort to transition externally and, often, did not benefit as much from the move. Andrea (40, white, married, two children) explained, “I kind of did my own networking to find a recruiter that worked – that did jobs for [that company]. So I did my own research to get to the interview

and then I got the job.” While Andrea did get the job she wanted, she did so without internal knowledge of the company, and once she arrived at the company she found the division was unstable and lost her job within a year.

Company lay-offs or closings sometimes forced workers to move. The transitory group was the most likely of all groups to experience job loss, and some workers reported multiple unemployment experiences. Eleven percent of transitory men and four percent of transitory women reported the loss of two or more jobs as the motivating factor behind their transitory work trajectory. Matthew (41, white, married, two children) explained, “I was very unlucky in terms of career stuff. ...I always had to hustle for jobs and I’ve been laid off several times.”

Unlike lockstep workers, transitory workers were also more likely to report working in a challenging work environment. Difficulty with bosses was often a motivation to leave. Mark (41, white, married, two children) notes that his relationship with his boss motivated him to eventually move:

My boss was ... not who I would have picked as a boss. He made it clear to me on my second day of work that he did not select me, that I was given to him, which definitely made me feel unwanted. So it wasn’t a good relationship.

Unlike their lockstep peers, transitory workers reported receiving little informal support from bosses for workplace flexibility. While a greater percentage of women than men moved for work-life balance (25 percent of women vs. 15 percent of men), both men and women provided similar explanations for such moves. They reported changing companies in search of one or all of the following: flexible schedule, reduced work hours, shorter commute time, reduced travel, and, generally, increased time with their families. Leslie (55, Asian, married, two children) explained: “They were going to move 75 miles from my house. And I was not going to commute 75 miles.” At her new job, she had set hours, “9 to 5. On very busy days 9 to 6.” Scott (42, Hispanic, married, one child) reported, “Actually after my son was born, I still worked for [my old company] for two years— I saw that with the same kind of workload I would be away all the time, kind-of like my father. So I decided to get another job and we moved from Rio to San Paulo, so I could stay more at home.”

Workforce Exits

Women were almost five times more likely to leave the workforce than men, although both exiting women (18 percent) and men (4 percent) were in the minority. These MBAs did not anticipate returning to work in the near future and were not actively searching for work, usually taking the opportunity to focus on family. Jennifer (39, white, married, two children) explained that she “just always felt I’d be home raising my kids. Just ‘cause I just loved having my mom at home, and so like to me that’s the way to do it.” Jennifer never anticipated working while raising children and planned that after marriage she would become pregnant and leave the workforce. This singular expectation made her somewhat unusual compared to the rest of her cohort, most of whom described either a process by which they felt pushed out by work or unexpectedly pulled by home (Stone 2007). For women on the exit pathway, workplaces rarely supported a balance between family and work. Heather (39, white, married, two children) explained that at her Fortune 500 company

the work hours were exceptionally long (well over 50 hours per week). After having children, she switched to a part-time schedule, but she found that her hours did not reduce substantially although her pay did (see Roth 2006 for similar examples).

Being laid off can be challenging, but women often frame unemployment as a chance to be home with their children (Damaske 2011); two of the men in our study did so, as well. Michael (41, white, married, three children) had experienced multiple lay-offs and did not expect to find a new job “for a long while.” But after losing his job, he was able to “work on the house and spend time with the kids.” The need to care for an elderly parent combined with a poor work environment pushed Aaron (46, white, divorced, no children) to exit the workforce:

The more time I spent there the less I saw myself as a long term partner, because I don't want to live my life doing that, as baseline, plus knocking yourself out to service clients and working non-stop. So after a year, I mean, I'm happy to be gone.

Overall, both work constraints and family obligations appeared to push and pull the workers who exited out of the MBA career trajectory.

Families Across all Pathways

We found that the majority of women across all career paths either anticipated needing to balance work and family or decided not to have children to avoid the balance. In contrast, men most often reported that they had not thought about whether their work might conflict with having children (for a similar finding, see Bass 2014). We further found gender differences in expectations about primary caregiving between the lockstep men and women—the majority of mothers reported that they were the primary caregiver for their family, while the vast majority of fathers did not. This same gender gap existed across all three pathways, although it should be noted that for the lockstep and many of the transitory working women, primary caregiving was defined by their greater responsibility to manage paid childcare and household labor, as well as greater responsibilities for the remaining tasks at home not done by paid workers. The women who exited the workforce had greater childrearing commitments and household chores.

Although the majority of lockstep women had children, there were more child-free women in this category than in the other two. Additionally, fewer lockstep women had children (67 percent) than did lockstep men (75 percent). Explaining how she managed to be both primary caregiver and a lockstep worker, Dawn (41, white, married, two children) said, “So not having to give up anything in terms of income or career progression or any of those things, I was able to do it simultaneously and make it work.” But, not all lockstep women expected to balance work and family. For instance, Melissa (36, white, married, no children) commented on the potential impact of family on women's careers “[I]t's either work full time or you don't work here, so there's not really options, especially at my level.”

Lockstep men, on the other hand, reported the main childrearing obligations rarely fell to them. Chad (47, white, married, three children) explained that his career with a large Fortune 500 company led him to make multiple continental moves with his family, which made it hard for his wife to keep her job: “It's hard for her. Um, she feels like she gave up her

career.” Chad further notes that the long hours and travel keep him away from home often, which leaves him heavily reliant on his wife for childcare. While the lockstep women without children (33 percent) and the vast majority of lockstep men avoided primary caregiving responsibilities, this was not the case for the mothers in this group, none of whom had stay-at-home partners or husbands who took the lead in primary caregiving.

Women in the transitory group had similar experiences, even though more women had children (79 percent) than men (72 percent). As with the lockstep careers, women in the transitory group reported greater caregiving responsibilities, but they, too, reported that they tried to find ways to make sure that they could continue working. Leslie (55, Asian, married, two children) noted that she tried not to let having children affect her career path: “No, I worked till the last minute for both my children. I mean, I think, and I was back at work within eight weeks.” Men continued to report reliance on wives for caregiving, even if their wives worked. Shawn (42, white, married, two children) notes:

I can't say there's an equal division of labor... My wife prepares meals every day, lunches for the kids, dinner for all of us, breakfast for the kids and then does all the laundry and food shopping, running errands.

This neo-traditional sentiment (Damaske et al. 2014; Gerson 2010), in which men expected working wives to remain primarily responsible for the household, was common among both transitory and lockstep men. Thus differing family responsibilities likely shaped some of the differences across groups; as we saw in the exit category above, women were more likely than men to be pulled out of working by children or to choose to not have children. Finally, men continue to hold a sizable advantage over women at work through their lower responsibilities at home; across work pathways men reported that they were much less likely to hold primary caregiving responsibilities and were much more likely to have a partner who stays at home.

Career Pathways: Accelerated or Stalled?

Following Roth (2006), we next examine gender differences in the outcomes of these career pathways. As discussed above, accelerated careers are those in which respondents were currently employed in a permanent position and reported continued salary growth. Careers were defined as stalled when workers fit one of the following criteria: current unemployed or not employed; not in a permanent position; or reported a decrease in most recent salary (not including yearly fluctuations in bonuses). The lockstep workers, both men and women, overwhelmingly (100 percent) reported accelerated career paths. It appears that the same factors that encourage longer work tenure—clear promotion pathways, supportive bosses, and supportive workplace atmosphere—also lead to forward progressing careers. For instance, Patricia (38, Asian, married, no children) explained: “I think every position there were increases... my salary is now close to \$250,000 to \$300,000 a year.” Similarly, Melissa (36, white, married, no children) reported steady raises tied to her promotions:

When I went from manager to director [my pay went up.] I think I was making \$85,000 that year which I was really pleased with. I worked really hard and over the course of those two years, I think I went up to 110 ... As a VP, I was making about \$140,000-\$150,000 maybe. And then the next promotion I was making

maybe 160.... [and] the variable compensation [meaning bonuses] does make a difference.

Importantly, we find no gender difference in the acceleration of Lockstep careers. Women and men appear to equally benefit from following this path, but women were more likely to find this type of path in the private industry compared to men who were more likely to find it on Wall Street and private industry. While our salary information is limited, both men and women in the lockstep path have the highest earnings of all respondents. Among those who reported salary, all lockstep workers reported earning over \$100,000 and one worker reported a salary of close to one million dollars.

Within the transitory group, we see large gender differences emerge. The majority of men experienced accelerated careers (66 percent), while the majority of women experienced career stalls (57 percent). Within the transitory group, we found that while private industry was the modal category of industry for both men and women in the group, of the remaining workers women were more likely to work in government, non-profit, or other industries, compared to men who were more likely to be on Wall Street. From the information available, a majority (but not all) of the transitory workers were earning between \$100,000 and \$250,000 per year. Men's greater likelihood to be recruited externally appeared to lead to accelerated careers. About his external moves, Jack (43, white, partnered, no children) remarked, "Yes. There's been an upward progression in everything, in terms of responsibility, in terms of compensation." Women were less likely to find accelerated careers through such moves. Kristen (43, white, divorced, two children) explained, "My position was looking pretty bad and I didn't have the support that I needed. It would have been impossible to be successful....They sort of let me go." Workplace transitions appear to be at the heart of the gender differences within the transitory group.

The exit group suffered from stalled careers even before they left work. A hundred percent of the men and the women in the exit group experienced career stalls and were not employed at the time of the interview. Heather (39, white, married, two children) was offered what the company considered a fair part-time schedule, but her hours crept back up despite her reduced pay. Other accounts emphasized poor job fit. Shannon (43, white, married, two children) spoke about one job in which she was unexpectedly moved to a marketing group: "[I]t was just all about posturing in that group, I think it's different elsewhere. I think I would do just fine in another company in marketing. It was just that particular leader's group, I couldn't find my way, I guess." Workforce exits often came at the end of a slow career stall.

CONCLUSION

Although women's MBA graduation rates increased tenfold from 1970 to 2006, research consistently demonstrates that women MBAs lag behind their male counterparts in almost every area, from pay to long term advancement (Herr and Wolfram 2012; Bertrand, Goldin, and Katz 2010; Roth 2006). We make several contributions to understanding this gender gap. First, we identify the importance and prominence of the transitory career trajectory, finding that for both men and women, this pathway of jumping from job to job is the most

common. Second, we find evidence that gender disparities are less evident among those who follow the lockstep pathway and that structural factors, including clear pathways for promotion as well as structural supports like good leadership or flexibility at work, appeared critical to the lockstep trajectory. Third, we find that among those following a transitory pathway, women's careers most often stalled, while men's most often accelerated. It was within this group that the largest gender differences emerged, and this finding is of particular importance given recent research that suggests more and more careers are taking on a transitory nature (Kalleberg 2009; Pugh 2015).

Demand side explanations of gender differences play a key role. Prior research on MBAs has suggested that gender bias is more common when markers for promotion and pay are subjective (Roth 2006). Our research builds on this and suggests that, when there are clear building block steps to promotion that are straightforward and accessible to entry level employees, women make forward progress more easily. Industry also played a role; lockstep and transitory men had greater success on Wall Street, while lockstep women were primarily in the private sector. Transitory women were overrepresented in non-profits or government. While non-profit/government positions may be friendlier to women, they also offered lower pay and more limited opportunities for advancement.

One way women may fall behind men in management is by moving into segregated feminized niches within the management framework (Cohen, Huffman, and Knauer 2009), but the process through which women may be left behind is unclear. Our transitory findings point towards a possible explanation. Men who followed the transitory category reported a much greater likelihood to have an accelerated career, while women in the transitory category reported a greater likelihood to stall. While women are less likely to be hired externally than men (Lyness and Schrader 2006), our findings suggest that women hired by external organizations are more likely to make lateral moves than men and to find themselves at a disadvantage in moving up the corporate ladder at these new organizations. This may be because gender and parental status (see Correll et al. 2007) come into play when workers have less history with an organization. Our findings point to a possible process by which women end up sidelined in "low-status managerial ghettos" (Cohen et al. 2009, 336), but further research is necessary to explore this finding.

Research continues to find that women bear the greatest family responsibilities (Bianchi and Milkie 2010), even amongst the highly educated (Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden 2013; Stone 2007). We saw some evidence of this: across all trajectories, when women were mothers they reported greater childrearing responsibilities at home than did their male peers (although these responsibilities varied greatly depending on the hours worked). But unlike the professionals who left work due to family devotion in Mary Blair-Loy's qualitative research (2003), the majority of the women (as well as the men) who followed the exit trajectory felt that they had been sidelined at work long before they left, which supports Stone's more recent findings (2007).

There are some limitations to this study. Recent data shows only 62 percent of MBA graduates are white (National Center for Education Statistics 2013a), compared to 76 percent of our sample, which did not allow for a more careful consideration of

intersectionality. The intersection of race, gender, and the cultural and structural nature of work may help explain varying career trajectories and deserves more research in the future. Our sample was interviewed during the Great Recession but respondents were not followed afterwards, so we do not know how this macro level change may have altered careers; we expect lockstep pathways may be even less likely in the wake of the recession. Our data is also limited by a lack of salary and company information; only half of respondents volunteered their salary information, which is common in income research (Moore, Stinson, and Welniak 2000) and we do not have detailed company information. Future research might contribute by investigating the formal and informal policies as well as the cultures of these organizations. Finally, we only capture about 10–12 years of work career following the MBA, and gender differences may continue to accrue or may plateau after this period; more research is needed to find out.

Future research should expand on our findings, by examining the processes by which external movement across organizations may deepen gender inequalities in men and women's career pathways. As the transitory pathway is the most common trajectory, the relationship between external moves and increased gender inequality deserves further scrutiny. In particular, our findings hint that gender may become more meaningful when workers have a shorter work history with an organization; this deserves further exploration. Future work should investigate how early career pathways translate to later life work outcomes and whether the “stalled” careers are truly stalled or are experiencing a temporary “course correction” in a new working environment from which their careers can recover. While men were likely to find accelerated careers on both lockstep and transitory pathways, women on lockstep pathways reported much more success than those on the transitory path. Given the growing evidence that job instability is rising even among professional workers, the finding that lockstep pathways provide the greatest chance for gender equity is deeply troubling.

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		Lockstep	Transitory	Exit	Total (n=74)
Men	<i>Distribution</i>	12 (26%)	32 (70%)	2 (4%)	46
	<i>Industry</i>	<i>WS</i>	7 (22%)	NA	12 (26%)
		<i>P</i>	21 (66%)	NA	28 (61%)
		<i>NP/GT</i>	4 (12%)	NA	4 (9%)
	<i>Married</i>	11 (92%)	25 (78%)	1 (50%)	37 (80%)
	<i>Has Children</i>	9 (75%)	23 (72%)	1 (50%)	32 (70%)
Women	<i>Distribution</i>	9 (32%)	14 (50%)	5 (18%)	28
	<i>Industry</i>	<i>WS</i>	1 (7%)	NA	3 (11%)
		<i>P</i>	10 (71%)	NA	17 (61%)
		<i>NP/GT</i>	3 (21%)	NA	3 (11%)
	<i>Married</i>	8 (89%)	10 (71%)	5 (100%)	23 (82%)
	<i>Has Children</i>	6 (67%)	11 (79%)	5 (100%)	22 (79%)