

# Shaping the Desire to Become an Entrepreneur: Parent and Gender Influences\*

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## ABSTRACT

*This study investigated the effects of one socialization factor, parent role model performance, and gender on a multidimensional measure of preference for entrepreneurship. Results confirmed the existence of gender differences in preference for an entrepreneurial career defined in terms of self-efficacy, career entry expectations, and education and training aspirations. However, when gender was held constant, parent role model performance also affected entrepreneurial preference. Individuals with a parent entrepreneur perceived to be a high performer were different from those individuals with a low performing parent and those without a parent entrepreneur. Two dimensions of entrepreneurial career preference were identified for the parent effect and labeled career entry expectations and career preparedness. For the gender effect, a general career preference dimension was present. A conclusion is drawn that both gender and parent role model performance are important factors in influencing the entrepreneurial career decision.*

Participation in the workforce by women has risen steadily since World War II. Bowen and Hisrich observed that women comprise over fifty percent of the workers in the United States (6). As this trend of increasing representation of women in the general workforce is expected to continue, it is important to note that there has been a sixty-nine percent increase in the number of women entrepreneurs during the 1980s (25). This figure is striking when compared to the thirteen percent increase in entrepreneurship for men during the same time period. While women appear to be making progress in successfully starting and managing new ventures, this employment track is still dominated by males. Currently only 29.6 percent of sole proprietorships in the United States are owned by women (29). Thus, entrepreneurship for women may still be labeled as a non-traditional career.

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Given that entrepreneurship accounts for much of the growth in the American economy, the importance of encouraging women to explore the possibilities for venture creation is problematic (24). Understanding how women and men decide to seek entrepreneurship as a viable career enables public policy makers to encourage women to pursue this option. The purpose of this research is to identify factors that account for differences in the numbers of men and women selecting an entrepreneurial career.

## SOCIAL LEARNING AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Generally, differences in male and female preferences for non-traditional careers have been attributed to early socialization and learning experiences (2, 8, 22). The underlying rationale for these differences is that women enter traditionally male dominated fields less often than men for such reasons as lack of appropriate role models among other environmental variables (11). Birley points out that cultural conditioning serves to channel womens' aspirations into traditional career fields (4). While there are economic barriers, such as acquiring new venture funding, the lack of a positive reference group has a primary impact in either encouraging or discouraging the consideration of an entrepreneurial career.

Recently, Scherer, Adams, and Weibe have proposed a social learning explanation for the decision to select an entrepreneurial career (27). Building on the work of Krumboltz, Mitchell, and Jones, it has been proposed that entrepreneurial parents have a vicarious effect on the child, shaping self-efficacy (feelings of task competency), education and training aspirations, and expectations of actually starting a business (19). These writers suggest that observation of a parent entrepreneur can lead to cognitive evaluations of the parent role model's performance which either enhance or decrease the likelihood that the observer offspring will decide to engage in entrepreneurship. Numerous descriptive studies aimed at explaining why some individuals choose to start their own business, rather than pursue careers with already established organizations, underscore the importance of having a parent entrepreneurial role model. For example, in a study aimed at capturing the demographic profile of the entrepreneur, Collins and Moore reported thirty-five percent of the business founders they interviewed had fathers who had founded an enterprise or were self-employed (12). Most of the businesses in this sample were manufacturing concerns, but there is similar evidence across business types to support the importance of a parent role model in stimulating the entrepreneurial career decision (21, 30). Shapero and Sokol (13), and Cooper and Dunkelberg (28) reported that fifty percent of their samples of U. S. company founders had parents who were self-employed during their working lives, while only twelve percent of the total U. S. workforce is self-employed.

Although the preceding studies focused almost exclusively on male entrepreneurs, similar conclusions can be drawn about the importance of a parent entrepreneurial model in the backgrounds of female entrepreneurs. Hisrich and Brush found that thirty-six percent of 468 female entrepreneurs had entrepreneurial fathers and eleven percent had entrepreneurial mothers (15). Waddell reported sixty-three percent of female entrepreneurs had fathers who had started their own businesses and thirty-one percent had self-employed mothers (31). These percentages were not as high for females working in already established organizations. In contrast, Ronstadt found people who decided against an entrepreneurial career were less likely to have had parents who themselves had created a business venture (26).

These previous studies of male and female entrepreneurs suggest that the presence of a parent role model encourages prospective entrepreneurs to pursue a similar career at some time during their lives (7). Moreover, it appears that the gender of the parent role model is not as important as the presence of a role model that stimulates the preference for an entrepreneurial career. None of these studies, however, have focused on the actual effects of the role model on an individual's career preference. The process of observational learning, within the social learning paradigm, may help to explain the impact of a parent entrepreneurial role model on the child's entrepreneurial career preference and lead to clarification of the differences between male and female preference for entrepreneurship.

This study extends beyond career preference and entrepreneurship research by investigating the effects of gender and parent role model performance on the preference for entrepreneurship. The following hypotheses were tested against this backdrop:

H1: Gender and parent role model performance interactively affect preference for entrepreneurship.

H2: Men and women will differ in their preference for entrepreneurship.

H3: Individuals with a parent entrepreneurial role model perceived to be a high performer will differ from individuals with a parent entrepreneurial role model perceived to be a low performer and from individuals with no such role model in preference for entrepreneurship.

## METHOD

### Sample and Procedure

Subjects were 216 men and 155 women junior and senior business administration students at a southeastern university who, as a function of educational status and age, were involved in the process of career decision making. Over sixty percent of the subjects were declared management or marketing majors with the majority of the remaining subjects declared majors in the other functional areas of business (e.g., finance, accounting). The mean age of the subjects was twenty-one years.

### Entrepreneurial Career Preference Measures

*Entrepreneurial Education and Training Aspirations.* A set of three questions adapted from Canty was used to measure the degree to which an individual feels it is necessary to obtain training and education for a career field (9). Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which obtaining the necessary training and education for starting and managing a business was important to them. Items were rated using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = very unimportant to 7 = very important.

*Expectations for an Entrepreneurial Career.* Expectations concern the degree to which an individual feels it is likely that they will enter a career field. This three-item set contained questions adapted from Borland (5). These items asked the respondent to assess the likelihood that they would start their own businesses at various periods after leaving their current program of study at the university. Each item was rated using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = very unlikely to 7 = very likely.

*Entrepreneurial Career Self-Efficacy.* Career self-efficacy is the individual's perceived competency to perform a specific task and is generally measured using a set of items which cover the domain of activities involved in the career being studied (14). Subjects were asked to rate

their confidence in their ability to perform each of the five entrepreneurial competencies. The five entrepreneurial competencies were: accounting, production/operations, marketing, human resources, and general organizational skills. Each competency item was rated using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = no confidence to 6 = complete confidence in relation to owning and managing a business.

### Parent Entrepreneurial Role Model Performance Measure

To determine the effect of perceived role model performance on the individual's preference for an entrepreneurial career, subjects were grouped by two criteria. Participants were grouped according to the presence or absence of a parent entrepreneurial role model and then by perceived role model performance. In this study, the term entrepreneur refers to a person who started or purchased a business firm and is the primary individual responsible for its performance and growth (3, 10). Subjects rated the performance of the parent in the career role to determine perceived performance of the parent entrepreneurial role model. Questions addressed the subject's perception of the parent role model's performance in terms of making the business profitable, satisfaction with the work, and the ability of the parent to satisfy different internal and external constituencies of the business (e.g., customers, employees, creditors, community). They were asked to rate the parent based upon perceptions of current performance on each of the three items. Items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = very unsuccessful in performance to 7 = very successful in performance.

### Analysis of Instrumentation and Covariate

*Reliability.* In the current study it was necessary to determine the reliability of the measures for this sample. Using coefficient alpha to check internal consistency, moderately high to high reliability was achieved for education and training aspirations (.94), career entry expectations (.87) and self-efficacy (.82). For the parent role model performance measure, reliability was high (.86) for the three-item set. These reliability coefficients were of sufficient magnitude to justify summing items in each set to form scale scores.

*Analysis of the Covariate.* Direct and relatively recent exposure to formal business-related classroom experiences could have an impact on the career decision maker's education and training aspirations, career entry expectations, and more importantly, self-efficacy (23, 20). To test for this relationship a composite functional knowledge variable was created by summing the number of business courses completed, and then regressing each career preference variable on the composite functional knowledge set. As expected, there was a significant relationship between self-efficacy and functional knowledge ( $t = 2.91$ ;  $p < .01$ ;  $\beta = .15$ ). Even though this effect was weak, the mean values for self-efficacy were adjusted to remove the effect of functional knowledge on this entrepreneurial career preference variable. The regressions run for education and training aspirations and career entry expectations were not significant.

### Study Design and Analytic Approach

Two grouping factors were used in this study. First, subjects were grouped by gender. Next, subjects were grouped according to the presence or absence of a parent entrepreneurial role model and on the perceived parent entrepreneurial role model's performance score when a model was present. A decision was made to define the cut point between high and low parent entrepreneur performance groups at the median score of eighteen. Subjects at or below

the parent role model performance median were classified into the low role model performance group and subjects above the median were classified into the high role model performance group. Subjects without a parent entrepreneurial role model were assigned to the third group.

To investigate the hypotheses, multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was used. The technique was selected since entrepreneurial career preference, composed of education and training aspirations, career entry expectations, and self-efficacy, is a multidimensional construct and because exposure to formal academic training in business administration was determined to be a significant covariate of one component of the entrepreneurial career preference set, self-efficacy. Given a significant role model or interaction effect, *post hoc* comparisons between groups on the combined set of career preference variables were performed, followed by review of the underlying structure of career preference. Finally, analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the individual career preference components and *post hoc* mean comparisons were performed when significant effects were identified.

## RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for entrepreneurial career preference variables by group are detailed in Table 1. For each of the three hypotheses, a MANCOVA analysis was conducted to determine effects of the set of entrepreneurial career preference variables. The gender  $\times$  role model performance interaction was not significant; hypothesis one was not supported. There were significant main effects for both gender ( $p < .01$ ) and role model performance ( $p < .01$ ) on the set of three career preference measures. These results provide support for hypotheses two and three and confirm the existence of gender and parent role model performance differences in preference for an entrepreneurial career. Additionally, several *post hoc* analyses were conducted to identify the exact nature of these main effects.

At the gender level, the canonical discriminant correlation analysis derived one significant ( $p < .01$ ) underlying dimension (see Table 2). Entrepreneurial career entry expectations loaded highest with self-efficacy, making a moderate contribution to the set. Given this structure, the dimension was interpreted as a general composite of entrepreneurial career preference. A plot of the centroids for each group (see Figure 1) showed males to be higher on the composite entrepreneurial career preference variable than females. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the composite entrepreneurial career preference variable. Only the ANOVAs for the gender effect on self-efficacy and career entry expectations were significant (see Table 3). Males had a significantly higher adjusted mean score ( $p < .05$ ) on self-efficacy than females. On career entry expectations the mean for males was significantly higher ( $p < .01$ ) than for females.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Entrepreneurial Career Preference Variables**

| Variable                          | Effect | Group <sup>b</sup> | N   | Mean <sup>a</sup> | s.d. | Range |      |
|-----------------------------------|--------|--------------------|-----|-------------------|------|-------|------|
|                                   |        |                    |     |                   |      | Min   | Max  |
| Self-efficacy                     | Model  | Hmod               | 71  | 22.67             | 4.96 | 10    | 30   |
|                                   |        | Lmod               | 110 | 20.73             | 5.15 | 0     | 30   |
|                                   |        | Nmod               | 190 | 20.09             | 5.09 | 5     | 30   |
|                                   | Gender | Male               | 216 | 21.21             | 4.98 | 0     | 30   |
|                                   |        | Female             | 155 | 20.09             | 5.32 | 3     | 30   |
| Aspirations                       | Model  | Hmod               | 71  | 19.33             | 3.02 | 3     | 21   |
|                                   |        | Lmod               | 110 | 17.50             | 4.59 | 3     | 21   |
|                                   |        | Nmod               | 190 | 17.81             | 4.35 | 3     | 21   |
|                                   | Gender | Male               | 216 | 17.80             | 4.10 | 3     | 21   |
|                                   |        | Female             | 155 | 18.31             | 4.44 | 3     | 21   |
| Expectations                      | Model  | Hmod               | 71  | 13.24             | 5.08 | 3     | 21   |
|                                   |        | Lmod               | 110 | 13.16             | 4.31 | 3     | 21   |
|                                   |        | Nmod               | 190 | 10.86             | 5.11 | 3     | 21   |
|                                   | Gender | Male               | 216 | 12.89             | 5.12 | 3     | 21   |
|                                   |        | Female             | 155 | 10.75             | 4.57 | 3     | 21   |
| Career Expectancy                 | Model  | Hmod               | 71  | .27               | 1.10 | -2.08 | 2.93 |
|                                   |        | Lmod               | 110 | .18               | .88  | -1.71 | 2.14 |
|                                   |        | Nmod               | 190 | -.22              | 1.02 | -2.12 | 2.50 |
| Career Preparedness               | Model  | Hmod               | 71  | .41               | .75  | -2.43 | 1.61 |
|                                   |        | Lmod               | 110 | -.10              | 1.12 | -4.89 | 1.51 |
|                                   |        | Nmod               | 190 | -.09              | 1.01 | -4.04 | 1.49 |
| Entrepreneurial Career Preference | Gender | Male               | 216 | .22               | 1.04 | -2.28 | 3.78 |
|                                   |        | Female             | 155 | -.30              | .95  | -2.54 | 2.02 |

<sup>a</sup>Adjusted means are reported for Self-efficacy.

<sup>b</sup>Hmod = High performance role model; Lmod = Low performance role model; Nmod = No role model.

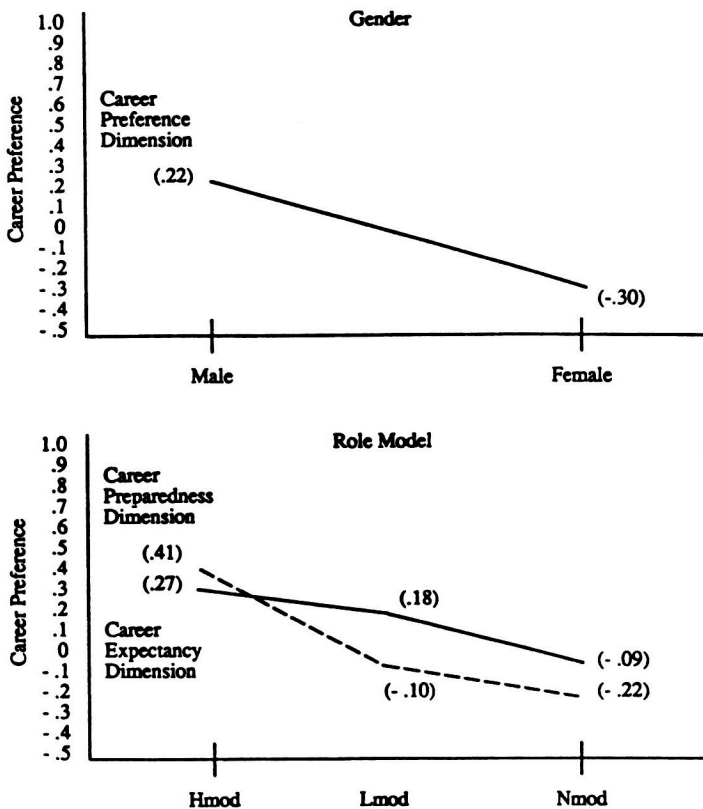
**Table 2. Discriminant Correlations (Loadings) Between Canonical and Entrepreneurial Career Preference Variables for Gender Effect**

| Variable      |  | Loadings |  |
|---------------|--|----------|--|
| Self-Efficacy |  | .51      |  |
| Aspirations   |  | -.23     |  |
| Expectations  |  | .84      |  |

| Function | Wilk's Lambda | Chi Square | df | p    | % Explained Variance |
|----------|---------------|------------|----|------|----------------------|
| 1        | .94           | 23.29      | 3  | .001 | 100.00               |

**Figure 1. Relationship Between Entrepreneurial Career Preference Centroids and Effects**



**Table 3. Univariate F-test Results (ANOVAs) for Entrepreneurial Career Preference Variables<sup>a</sup>**

| Variable                 | Hypoth<br>SS | Error<br>SS | Hypoth<br>MS | Error<br>MS | F <sup>b,c</sup> | p    |
|--------------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|------------------|------|
| <u>Role Model Effect</u> |              |             |              |             |                  |      |
| Self-Efficacy            | 336.51       | 9,505.62    | 181.75       | 25.83       | 7.01             | .001 |
| Aspirations              | 160.99       | 6,509.94    | 80.50        | 17.69       | 4.55             | .011 |
| Expectations             | 505.85       | 8,779.15    | 252.92       | 23.86       | 10.60            | .001 |
| <u>Gender</u>            |              |             |              |             |                  |      |
| Self-Efficacy            | 168.29       | 9,700.84    | 168.29       | 26.29       | 6.40             | .011 |
| Aspirations              | 23.36        | 6,647.57    | 23.36        | 18.01       | 1.30             | .256 |
| Expectations             | 410.98       | 8,874.02    | 410.98       | 24.05       | 17.09            | .001 |

<sup>a</sup>Ancova used with Self-Efficacy to account for the effect of the number of business courses completed.

<sup>b</sup>df = 2; 368 for Role Model effect

<sup>c</sup>df = 1; 369 for Gender effect

The other significant main effect on the career preference set was perceived parent role model performance. The perceived high parent entrepreneurial role model performance group was significantly different ( $p < .01$ ) from both the low parent role model performance and no parent role model groups on the composite entrepreneurial career preference set. A second group comparison on the composite career preference set revealed the low parent entrepreneurial role model performance group to be significantly different ( $p < .01$ ) from the group without a parent entrepreneurial role model.

Two significant ( $p < .01$ ) underlying dimensions of entrepreneurial career preference were identified in the canonical discriminant correlation analysis for the parent role model effect (see Table 4). Contributing exclusively to the first dimension with a high loading was career entry expectations. The second dimension was composed almost equally of self-efficacy and education and training aspirations. The former dimension was labeled entrepreneurial career expectancy because of the dominance of the career entry expectation variable. The latter dimension was labeled entrepreneurial career preparedness. Both variables relate to preparation for entrepreneurship. Self-efficacy deals with confidence in performing tasks related to entrepreneurship. Education and training aspirations concern the individual's aspirations for obtaining training and education for an entrepreneurial career.



**Table 4. Discriminant Correlations (Loadings) Between Canonical and Entrepreneurial Career Preference Variables for Role Model Effect (Varimax Rotation)**

| Variable      | Dimension 1<br>Loadings <sup>a</sup> | Dimension 2<br>Loadings <sup>b</sup> |
|---------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Self-efficacy | .29                                  | .80                                  |
| Aspirations   | -.13                                 | .82                                  |
| Expectations  | .96                                  | .20                                  |

| Function | Wilk's<br>Lambda | Chi<br>Square | df | <i>p</i> | % Explained<br>Variance |
|----------|------------------|---------------|----|----------|-------------------------|
| 1        | .91              | 33.81         | 6  | .001     | 68.86                   |
| 2        | .97              | 10.65         | 2  | .004     | 31.14                   |

<sup>a</sup>Entrepreneurial Career Expectancy

<sup>b</sup>Entrepreneurial Career Preparedness

Centroids for each role model performance group and dimension are shown in Figure 1 (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). On the entrepreneurial career expectancy dimension, the high parent role model performance group had the highest centroid overall followed by the low parent role model performance and no role model groups. Centroids for both role model groups were positive and the no role model group centroid was on the negative side of the zero point. This indicates a strong expectancy for an entrepreneurial career for individuals with a parent entrepreneurial role model, regardless of perceived performance level. For the entrepreneurial career preparedness dimension, the high performance entrepreneurial parent role model group had the highest centroid followed by the low performance parent model group and the group without a parent entrepreneurial role model.

All three ANOVAs (see Table 3) of role model performance effects on the three individual variables were significant ( $p < .05$ ). Individuals with a high performance role model scored significantly higher ( $p < .05$ ) on self-efficacy followed by the low performance role model group and no role model group who were not significantly different from each other on this variable. On education and training aspirations the high performance role model group again had a higher mean score and was significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) from the other two groups. There were no significant differences between the low performance role model and no role model groups. Finally, the high and low performance parent entrepreneurial role model groups were both significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) from, and had higher mean scores than, the no role model group on career entry expectations, but were not significantly different from each other.

## DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to determine the effects of gender and perceived parent role model performance on the preference for entrepreneurship. Propositions from the social learning theory of career decision making were tested (18, 19, 23).

As hypothesized, gender and role model performance individually affected a multidimensional measure of entrepreneurial career preference. However, parent role model and gender did not interactively effect entrepreneurial career preference. Men had a greater preference for entrepreneurship than women. Specifically, men had the highest feelings of self-efficacy and career entry expectations, but did not differ from women on education and training aspirations. Individuals with a parent role model perceived to be a high performer were significantly different in preference for an entrepreneurial career than individuals with a parent perceived to be a low performer and individuals without a role model. Thus, this study adds to our knowledge of the entrepreneurial career decision by demonstrating some effects of observing a parent entrepreneurial role model in close proximity to the career decision maker. Observing a parent role model's performance seems to affect the preference for entrepreneurship through self-efficacy, education and training aspirations, and career entry expectations.

The results also revealed the importance of studying entrepreneurial career preference as a multidimensional, rather than a unidimensional, construct in which individual variables are isolated from each other and dependencies among them are not considered. At the gender level, a general entrepreneurial career preference dimension was identified as being a composite of self-efficacy and career entry expectations. For the role model effect two dimensions, career entry expectations and career preparedness, formed complementary aspects of entrepreneurial career preference. These two dimensions are useful in helping to explain how individual parts of the entrepreneurial preference construct are connected in relation to the presence or absence of a parent role model. Future research of other non-traditional careers should seek to determine the stability of these dimensions.

Individuals with a high performing model had higher feelings of career preparedness than individuals in the other two groups. This was reinforced by the univariate finding of observers of high performing models having the greatest self-efficacy and education and training aspirations for an entrepreneurial career. However, it was surprising that there was no difference on expectations of career entry between the high and low performing model observers.

Several explanations are possible. First, it is possible that given the geographic area from which the sample was drawn, a predominately rural area, the environment may have limited career entry options. Creating one's own business venture may appear to the career decision maker as quite attractive, given the limited set of opportunities. Second, choosing a career one has observed may appear to be less risky than one in which the observer has not had such close first-hand experience to observe (16). Finally, by observing a role model who is perceived not to be successful, the individual may gain information about how not to organize and run a business by avoiding errors made by the parent role model.

## CONCLUSIONS

Results of the current research provide one explanation for why individuals may select a career as an entrepreneur. Men appear to have a stronger propensity to select an

entrepreneurial career than women. This observed effect could be attributed to cultural conditioning or occupational stereotyping in that entrepreneurship has typically been considered a non-traditional career path for women.

However, when gender is held constant and a parent entrepreneurial role model is present, the gender effect is mitigated. Specifically, women and men have the same propensity to select a career as an entrepreneur after observing a parent whom they perceive to be successful at entrepreneurship. As the perception of parental success diminishes so does the desire to become an entrepreneur, although these individuals still have a strong expectancy that they will pursue an entrepreneurial career at some time. In the absence of a parent entrepreneurial role model the individual's desire to become an entrepreneur is the weakest. Perhaps these individuals will still choose entrepreneurship, but via a different set of learning experiences.

This research would tend to lend credence to the contention that such interventions as mentoring would mediate the gender effect and overcome the potential effects of cultural conditioning which may steer women away from deciding on an entrepreneurial career (4, 17). It would appear that a woman's cultural conditioning suppresses the type of autonomy and independence necessary to be a successful entrepreneur. In situations where succession in a family business is desired, parents need to actively involve female offspring in the business to generate interest and increase self-efficacy for an entrepreneurial career.

Furthermore, while the current study provided no data to directly support the importance of role models other than parents, it may be speculated that as an increasing number of women enter the entrepreneurial field, the gender effect will be automatically mediated. As more examples of successful women entrepreneurs become evident to young women, they will be able to model their behavior and build self-efficacy and career expectations of an entrepreneurial nature. Therefore, it is necessary for our educational systems, as well as parents and other family contacts, to identify and encourage individuals who have been successful in entrepreneurial activities. Elementary and secondary school career fairs, Junior Achievement programs, and guest lecturers are among the many methods available to introduce high achieving entrepreneurial role models to women.

Results from this investigation should be considered tentative for several reasons. Although support for role model and gender effects on entrepreneurial career preference were demonstrated, the current results need to be replicated on a variety of other samples. In addition, the preponderance of subjects in this study were management and marketing majors. Tests of the parent role model hypotheses should be performed with a more heterogeneous sample including both business and non-business majors. Second, while the effects of the parent role model were investigated, other studies should explore the effects of role models, other than parents, on the decision maker's preferences. Third, this study cannot predict actual entrepreneurial career selection. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine the ability of entrepreneurial career preference to predict career selection.

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