The Path of Least Resistance? Gendered Work Role Perceptions and Career Patterns among Engineers

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ABSTRACT

Engineering has been identified as the most male-dominated profession in the United States, with women representing roughly 13% of the engineering workforce. While much research has been devoted to discovering the barriers to entry and retention among women in engineering, comparatively little is known about the specific nature of career development among professional female engineers. I will present results from two studies examining the career patterns engineers. Study 1 is a qualitative study of 61 industry engineers. The findings from study 1 inform the development of a theoretical model that explains how and why gendered work role perceptions, combined with organizational reinforcement, contribute to female engineers’ taking “the path of least resistance” (managerial versus technical positions) in engineering firms. Study 2 is a survey of industry engineers that provides additional support for the career patterns established in study 1, and examines the implications for professional retention. These studies make theoretical contributions to several literatures pertaining to the experience of women in male-dominated work contexts.