

Exploring the Gender-Salary-Expectations Gap: Back to the Drawing Board

The gender gap in salary expectations is well documented. Past research has investigated theoretical reasons for the salary expectations gap, though only a small amount of variance has been explained. This study seeks to understand how both men and women determine their salary expectations and explores differences in their rationale. We take a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews of undergraduate students who are soon to embark on their careers. The results reveal that the basis for the salary expectations gap may not be rooted in conscious evaluations or psychological factors as previously studied, but rather in gendered differences in self-assessments, experiences with their parents' careers, differences in perceptions of whether potential will be rewarded before or after it is realized, and the effect of subjective vs. objective self-information. This research also highlights the limitations of employing surveys or asking participants direct questions with respect to salary expectations, without taking care to understand a more holistic perspective. That said, the study participants seemed much better informed about their initial careers than their future advancement and likely career trajectories. This provides an opportunity for educators and employers to manage expectations by providing realistic advancement and career trajectory information. This study provides novel insights into the gender-expectations gap, allowing us to identify new factors that may contribute to the gender gap in salary expectations.