

Professional Women and Confidence: A New Understanding of the “Gap”

The enormous popularity of recent books like Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* (2013), and Katty Kay and Claire Shipman’s *The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance—What Women Should Know* (2014)¹ suggests that what has been termed the “confidence gap” between men and women has become an almost universally accepted explanation for the relative absence² of women in leadership positions. This theme reinforces the notion that women, not social norms and expectations (including definitions and perceptions of confidence), are to blame for the shortage. However resonant that theme might be, these popular approaches to women, careers, and confidence suffer from a number of shortcomings. For one, they tend to treat women as a monolithic body, ignoring differences of race, class, and sexuality, among others. In addition, they tend to espouse an understanding of confidence that is seldom defined and often borders on the mystical: Kay and Shipman, for example, refer to confidence as “an air of command”² and “the purity of action produced by a mind free of doubts.”³ Further, such approaches seem grounded in a deficiency model that suggests that women should learn to emulate male standards of confidence and behavior. In addition, research on confidence tends to treat confidence as “generic,” implying that being confident in one aspect of one’s life translates into confidence in every other aspect. Finally, these accounts tend to be largely anecdotal and personal in nature.

With these limitations in mind, a research team from Simmons College designed a survey to investigate what women professionals think about confidence in general, and their own confidence in particular. The attendees at the 2016 Simmons Leadership Conference were invited to take the survey, which was completed by a total of 562 people. The survey included 24 questions, some of which were open-ended, e.g., “Tell us about a life event that has had the greatest impact on building your confidence.” Others involved a forced choice. The survey also sought to improve on “generic” understandings of confidence to determine whether there were differences for women across various parts of the life span (college, early professional career, and later professional career) and in different aspects of their lives (profession-

al, community, and home). The respondents were ethnically diverse, with 31% identifying as people of color, and ages ranging from 20 to over 60. The next section summarizes data about income levels and types of employment.

FINDINGS

It is important at the outset to acknowledge that these professional women are not typical of the average American working woman. According to the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, in 2015 a woman’s median annual salary in the United States was \$40,742. Among the survey respondents, only 4.1% earned less than \$50,000 a year; in contrast, almost 20% earned between \$150,000 and \$199,000, and 13.5% earned more than \$200,000. That dramatic difference from the national average could be at least partly due to the fact that large numbers of the respondents worked in male-dominated fields—22% in finance and banking, and 42% in technical fields like IT and computer hardware and software. However, even though our sample findings may have limited applicability to broader categories of women and careers, such as women in hourly jobs, early career women, and so forth, these findings do align with the samples of the senior professional women used in the books and articles charging that women have a “confidence gap.”

Not surprisingly, given the nature of the Conference and its attendees, the confidence of the survey respondents is quite high. Nearly 94% indicate that they feel very confident or mostly confident overall, though there are differences between confidence at home and confidence at work (Chart 1), while 96% of the respondents felt confident at home, that number drops to just under 87% at work (Chart 1).

94% of respondents say they are very or mostly confident overall, and 87% say they are very or mostly confident at work.

Women’s overall confidence level, confidence at work, and

Confidence Level	Overall Confidence (N=538)	Confidence at Home (N=541)	Confidence at Work (N=542)
Very Confident	25.8%	54%	21.8%
Mostly Confident	67.8%	41%	64.9%
A Little Confident	6.1%	4.6%	13.1%
Not at all Confident	0.2%	0.4%	0.2%

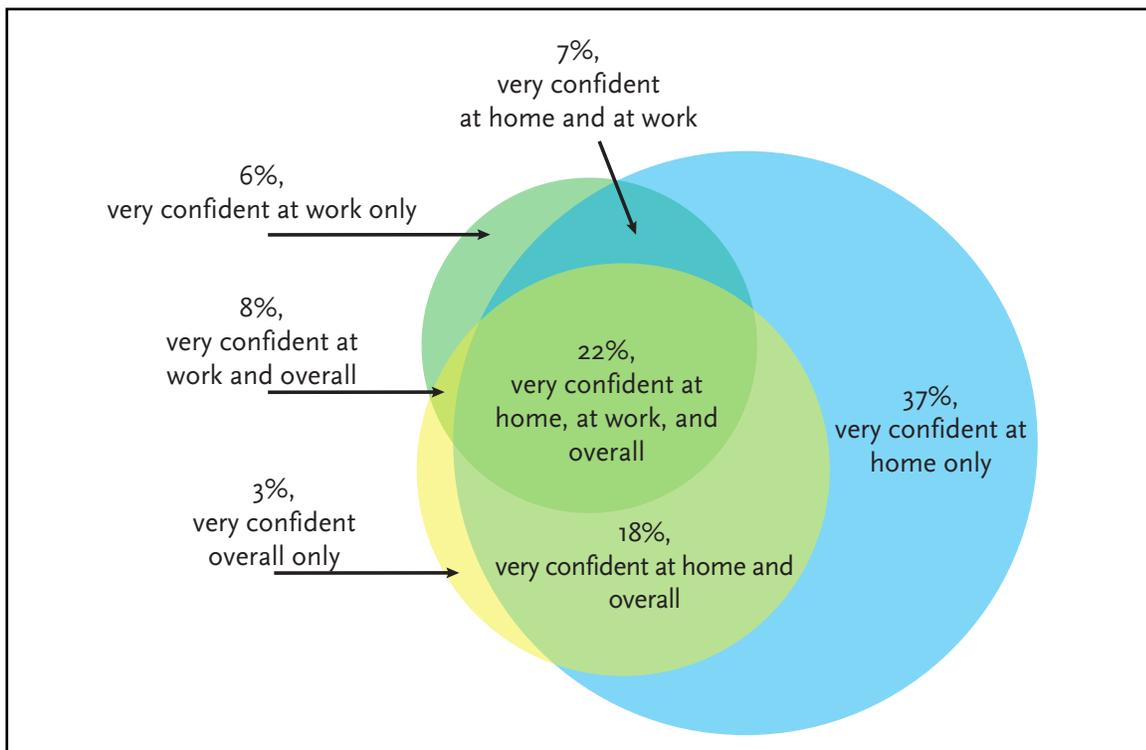
confidence at home are all highly correlated, as indicated in the Venn diagram below. However, among all 562 respondents, only 277 indicated that they were very confident either at work, at home, or overall. Among them, the largest group is women who felt very confident at home only, about 37%.

The research also reveals a racial difference, which future research may explore more fully: Asian women scored lower in each of the confidence categories, including confidence at home.⁴ Finally, perhaps not surprisingly, confi-

dence directly correlates with salary (see Chart 3); women with the highest salaries tend to score highest on levels of confidence.⁵ Women’s overall confidence level, confidence at work, and confidence at home are all highly correlated. However, the respondents indicate a lower level of confidence at work than at home or in general. Among those who felt very confident overall, only 60% felt the same at work, while 81% felt very confident at home. More interestingly, only 28% of those who indicated that they were very confident at home felt the same at work.

The following findings challenge or add nuance to earlier scholarly research and popular studies related to women, careers, and confidence. As most research suggests, this survey reveals that women are ambitious and aspire to high levels of leadership. 56.6% of the respondents answered that they aspired to “Senior” or “Top” levels in their organizations. However, unlike the findings from a research study commissioned by Bain in 2014, these data suggest that interest in moving up in the company does *not* seem to decline after several years in an organization.⁶ In addition, contrary to earlier research, this study reveals that there is no correlation between confidence and the gender of one’s immediate supervisor. In the open-ended question about what impacts confidence, none of the respondents mentioned the gender of their supervisor. Thus, it appears that, for these women,

Chart 2: Correlations of Women’s Highest Confidence Level



Legend: Blue = very confident at home, Yellow = very confident overall, Green = very confident at work

what matters is *how* they are treated by their supervisor.

The respondents to this survey are not only highly confident, as mentioned above, but their confidence, as they perceive

it, seems to increase with age. That correlation may have to do less with age, however, and more with how long these participants have held their jobs. The data show that the oldest respondents are the most confident: 56% of those over 60 felt very confident at work, double the number of women

in their fifties who felt very confident. Women in their 20s were the least confident in the group. Further, 70% note that they are more confident than they were in their first job, and 56% more confident than they were in college.

Perhaps the most noteworthy result relates to what women see as vital to their confidence on the job. Overwhelmingly, the top answer was, “Mentoring and Feedback,” with 112 responses (almost double the next ranked response). Sec-

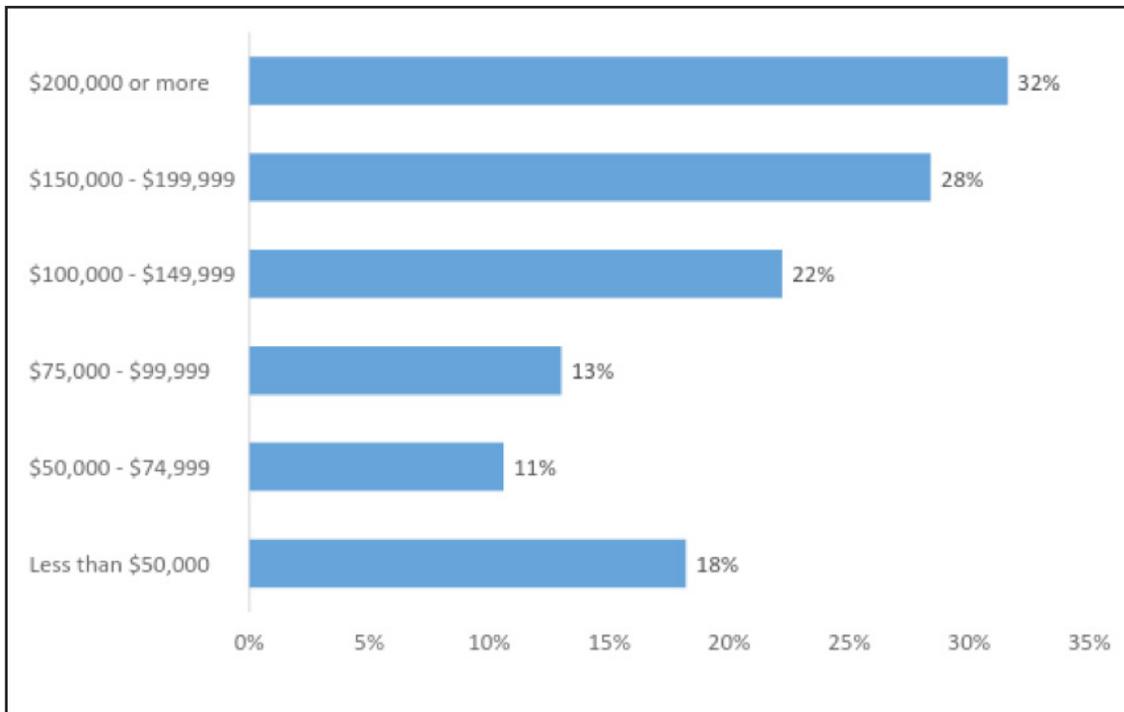
Women say “Mentoring and Feedback” and “Inclusion” are the most critical factors in giving them confidence on the job.

ond on the list is “Inclusion,” and these top two answers taken together constitute 48% of the total responses. Thus, it seems clear that professional women value *relationships*—whether that involves feedback from a direct supervisor or being included in decision-making. To elicit their perceptions, respondents were asked to pick from a list of 16 possibilities, e.g., “Female role models” *and* were also invited to write in their own answers. The team used factor analysis to cluster the answers into eight general categories. It is noteworthy that a significant number of women, in response to the open-ended question, “What experience has been most instrumental in helping you to gain confidence?” gave family-centric answers. These included not only maternal role models like aunts and mothers, but also their own experiences of having children.

IMPLICATIONS

These findings shed light on popular discourse that assumes that women lack confidence, and that one or more deficits have hobbled their progress into top leadership positions. We have found that women *are* confident, and that they can even identify different degrees of confidence—from one sphere of life to another, and from one part of the life span to another. Yet others may not perceive them as confident. Professor of Leadership and Organization Behavior

Chart 3: Percentage of Participants “Very Confident” at Work by Personal Income Level



Margarita Mayo found that managers see competence (for both men and women) as inextricably connected to confidence, but when they assess *women's* confidence, they look not only for competence, but also for “warmth.”⁷ Likewise, we speculate that much research has questioned women's confidence because women may project confidence differently, and because cultural norms for confidence contain deeply embedded gendered preconceptions. When one considers the array of sports metaphors, for example, used to explain and/or motivate confidence, e.g., “that was a slam dunk!”, it seems likely that explicit or implicit biases influence our expectations and norms for expressing confidence.

These results have important implications both for employers and for working women. For one, employers shouldn't assume that women professionals lack ambition; on the contrary, this research reveals that professional women are ambitious and want opportunities. Employers, perhaps unconsciously acting on masculinist expressions of confidence, need to broaden the inventory of behaviors that signal confidence so that alternative behaviors are included. Conversations about who should be promoted or assigned new opportunities need to be monitored for statements such as “she doesn't seem ready,” which may indicate narrow, and masculinist, interpretations of how confidence is expressed.

In addition, because of the strong correlation between higher wages and higher confidence, the survey data suggest that addressing the wage gap is important for reasons beyond the financial. Further, although talk of work/life balance is commonplace these days, we may want to reconsider the importance of non-work components of women's lives, given that so many women connect their confidence either to familial role models, e.g., a grandmother, or to personal challenges that they were able to meet, such as caring for a child with disabilities.

Finally, as this and other research suggests, workplaces need to develop strong mentoring programs and build inclusive teams that can value and promote women's strengths and help to build even greater confidence. It might seem obvious that women who need support should ask for a mentor, and that more seasoned professionals should seek out other women to mentor. However, according to research done by KPMG, though 75% of entry-level women professionals expressed a need for more support to build their confidence, 79% of the more than 3,000 women surveyed do not feel confident enough to ask for a mentor.⁸ This finding suggests that workplaces that create strong mentoring programs are more likely to be effective than those that place the responsibility on junior employees to ask for a mentor,

or on more senior employees to volunteer to be a mentor.

Further research should explore the racial and ethnic differences pointed to by these survey results. In addition, future research might seek to explore whether women in more male-dominated fields tend to be more confident than their counterparts in other professions. In addition, though we don't find any correlation between confidence and the gender of one's immediate supervisor, further research might examine what *other* attributes of leadership tend to foster confidence. Finally, other organizational factors and varying organizational cultures might play a role in women's confidence; for example, do women in smaller firms have more confidence?

CONCLUSION

Popular notions that women lack confidence or that women don't aspire to top levels of leadership are not borne out by this research. Though, as pointed out, the pool of survey respondents is not typical of the average American woman, these results suggest that we should be cautious about overgeneralizing claims about gender and confidence. As we see here, confidence doesn't seem to decline by age or by years in a job, as popular stereotypes suggest. While women's inadequate representation in higher levels of leadership and in certain professions has been attributed to decreased levels of confidence, the “leaky pipeline”⁹ may be more accurately explained by organizational cultures that normalize, albeit often unintentionally, gendered practices that advantage men.

In addition, women perceive differences in their levels of confidence based on context; perhaps not surprisingly, women—across races and income levels—are more confident at home than at work, for example. Furthermore, confidence doesn't seem to be a mysterious, all-or-nothing phenomenon. Instead, we see that women are able to rank themselves in terms of their confidence; that they are able to compare their own levels of confidence against their peers and through various life stages; and that confidence is measurable to some extent.

The voices of these successful professional women provide us with a new, more complex understanding not only of the relationship between gender and confidence, but also of the on-going importance of organizational strategies that support women's aspirations for professional development and for leadership.

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ENDNOTES

1 Kay, Katty and Claire Shipman (2014). *The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance: What Women Should Know*. Harper Business. Sandberg, Sheryl (2013). *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*. New York: Knopf. Other recent works include Dee Dee Myers, *Why Women Should Rule the World*. Harper, 2009, and Lois P. Frankel, *Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office: Unconscious Mistakes Women Make to Sabotage their Careers*. Business Plus, 2014. A recent google search for "women and confidence" elicits 189,000,000 hits.

2 For statistics on the participation of women in leadership positions, see Center for American Progress. 2014, March 7. The women's leadership gap. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/report/2014/03/07/85457/factsheet-the-womens-leadership-gap/>; Di Mento, M. 2014, April 28. Lack of women in top roles hinders nonprofits, female nonprofit workers say. *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. Retrieved from <http://philanthropy.com/article/Lack-of-Women-in-Top-Roles/146237/>; Lennon, T. 2013. Benchmarking women's leadership positions in the U.S. Denver, CO: Colorado Women's College, University of Denver. Retrieved from http://www.womenscollege.du.edu/media/documents/Benchmarking_WomensLeadershipintheUS.pdf

3 Here we are reminded of one view of courage that it is not the *absence* of fear but rather the ability to act in the face of fear. To suggest that confidence is the "absence of doubt" is to set an unrealistic bar for its role in human activity, independent of gender.

4 The numbers of other racial and ethnic minorities were too small to be able to draw any reliable conclusions about possible differences.

5 Of course, another factor at play might be that the highest earners have also been in their position *longer*, so it may be that years of experience also correlate with confidence.

6 Bain found that half of the entry-level women surveyed aspired

to top management positions; that number drops to 16% after five years in the workforce. Coffman, Julie and Bill Neuenfeld (2014). "Everyday Moments of Truth: Frontline Managers are Key to Women's Career Aspirations." Research sponsored by Bain Associates. Retrieved from <http://www.bain.com/publications/articles/everyday-moments-of-truth.aspx>

7 Margarita Mayo. "To Be Seen as Confident, Women Have to Be Seen as Warm." *Harvard Business Review*. July 8, 2016. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2016/07/to-seem-confident-women-have-to-be-seen-as-warm>

8 John Veihmeyer and Lynne Doughtie, KPMG Leadership Study: "Moving Women Forward into Leadership Positions" (2015). Retrieved from <https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/pdf/2015/09/womens-leadership-study.pdf>.

9 The term "leaky pipeline" has been used at least since 2007, when Peggy Kolm used the phrase in her blog to refer to the declining numbers of women in academic science. Retrieved from <http://blog.sciencewomen.com/2007/03/leaky-pipeline.html>

For use of the term "leaky pipeline," see, for example, Mary Shapiro, Diane Grossman, Suzanne Carter, Karyn Martin, Patricia Deyton, and Diane Hammer, "Middle school girls and the 'leaky pipeline.'" *Journal of the AMLE*, August 26, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00940771.2015.11461919> Melissa Dubois, on the STEM Oregon website (June 12, 2014), refers to the "leaking STEM pipeline," charting the decline in women's participation in STEM fields from early education to the professions. See <http://stemoregon.org/stem-leaky-pipeline/>

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