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INTERNAL FACTORS INFLUENCING WOMEN'S CAREER CHOICE

by

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Unequal participation of the sexes in the domain of employment has become increasingly difficult to ignore. Although increasing numbers of women are working, these women are still concentrated in the lower levels of the professional hierarchy in spite of attempts in recent years to decrease discrimination in hiring and salaries of women. For example, the percentage of women in professional and technical occupations decreased from 42 percent in 1950 to 39 percent in 1968 while during the same time period the percentage of women clerical workers increased from 59 percent to 73 percent (U.S. Department of Labor, 1972). The underemployment of women implied by these figures is widespread:

> Although college-trained women are more likely than other
> women to become gainfully employed and although more women
> are college-trained now than in the past, they are taking
> positions lower than in the past and lower than their poten-
> tial, as measured in terms of education, would indicate.
> The problem is not, therefore, that the talented women are
> not in the labor force but rather that they are not contrib-
> uting at the level their talents would justify. (Bernard, 1971,
> p. 123)

Figure 1 presents a model, based on the work of M. Brewster Smith (1968), of how various factors may interact to maintain traditional behaviors. The top cluster of variables (A and D) operates at the societal level. Cultural norms (A) provide the background against which one's choices are evaluated. Each culture has its own prescriptions of sex-role appropriate behaviors. In the process of acculturation, we come to accept these prescriptions about the roles of men and women as fact; we evaluate ourselves and others in terms of these prescriptions; we raise our children to fit the designated patterns; and we punish deviations from the cultural norms. By providing the evaluative framework for oneself and others, these cultural stereotypes affect men's and women's judgments and beliefs regarding the appropriateness of various roles.
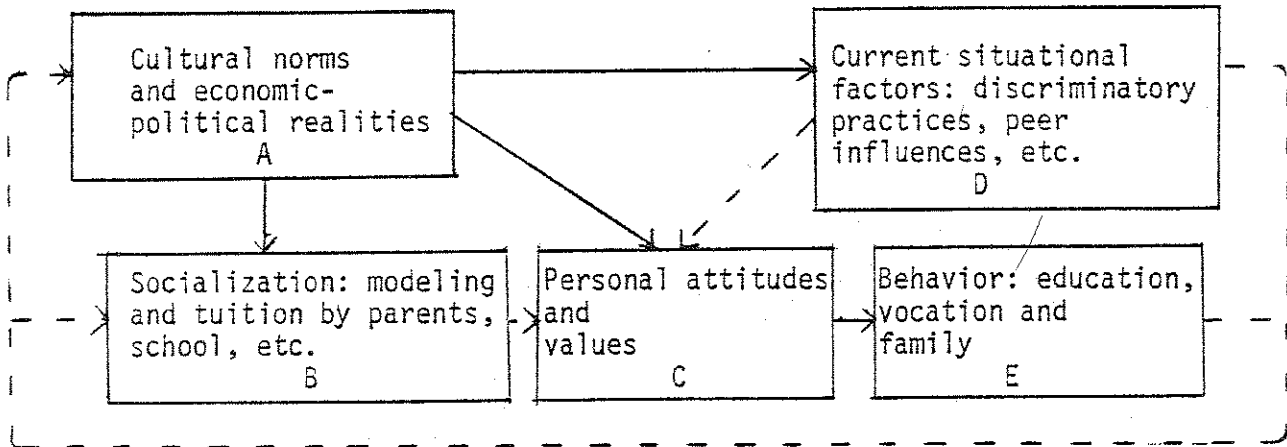

FIGURE 1

By influencing the political realities of one's society, the cultural standards affect situational factors (D), such as the existence of institutional prejudices which can either facilitate or inhibit various role choices. The existence of widespread discrimination against women has been amply documented. Women's entry into and advancement in professional careers are blocked at all levels and in a variety of ways, ranging from the blatant refusal to hire women to the more subtle "stag-turf" protection mechanisms enumerated by Bernard (1976).

Although highly important, these institutional and cultural barriers are not entirely responsible for the underemployment of women. There is evidence that other factors also contribute to women's underrepresentation in professional careers. Psychological investigations have highlighted several such factors which influence female professional accomplishments by influencing career aspirations in such a way as to predetermine the training young women seek and the skills they acquire. These factors are represented by the bottom cluster of the model.

The bottom cluster of variables in the model represents the processes involved in translating the cultural myths into personal attitudes and aspirations. Women acquire, through a process of socialization (B), a set of sex-role attitudes and beliefs (C) and choices and behaviors (E) which are consistent with the sex roles they are expected to play in society. Sex role socialization, then, is key to these processes.

Sex role socialization operates in several ways to influence career decisions. On the one hand, it can foster a negative self concept. For example, both women and men have been shown to view women as inferior, passive, submissive, not skilled in business and excitable during minor crises (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Goldberg, 1968). Women who share this negative view of themselves must perceive fewer levels of the professional hierarchy as appropriate and should devalue whatever accomplishments they have made. Other such inhibitory attitudes include fear of success (Horner, 1971), fear of loss of femininity (Tangri, 1972), and fear of an inability to fulfill the "primary" role ascribed to women (Epstein, 1971). It should be noted that each of these mechanisms assumes that women avoid professional careers out of fear, anxiety, or lack of confidence.

Career aspirations can be seen, on the other hand, as life choices selected from a large array of alternatives. Viewed in this light, women's career aspirations can be seen as positively motivated and based on somewhat more rational criteria. Within this frame, sex-role socialization can have at least two effects. First given a thorough socialization experience, women may never consider roles other than the traditional ones of wife and mother. Typically, socializing agents do not present alternative attitudinal-behavioral models nor do they require children to question the validity of their beliefs. As a result, traditional ideology is internalized by women nonconsciously, as fact rather than opinion, and the restrictions it places upon self-development are accepted as "natural", (Bem and Bem, 1970). In support of this notion, investigations have demonstrated an inverse relationship between sex-role ideology and achievement aspiration. For example, Lipman-Blumen (1972) found that women who believed they should achieve success vicariously through their husbands have significantly lower educational objectives. Similarly, Parsons, Frieze, Ruble and Croke (1978) found that holding traditional sex-role values was significantly related to

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traditional career aspirations. These traditional values included a belief that women should not achieve greater recognition than their husbands and, among women who planned to marry, a belief that the emotional life of the family suffers when the wife works.

Sex role socialization can also influence women's value hierarchy. A woman might well desire both a professional career and a family. But if she sees these goals as conflicting then her choice should reflect her relative priorities. For example, Poloma and Garland's (1971) observations suggest that women's attitudes regarding the demands inherent in the wife/ mother role influence occupational aspirations. Professional career aspirations are more probable when career obligations are not perceived as interfering with the fulfillment of the wife/mother role. If women believe that facilitative institutions and spouse support are available which can lessen the burden of childcare without harming the child, they may choose a nontraditional life style. However, if these institutions and support are not available or if existing childcare facilities are believed to be inadequate in quality, selection of a professional career is unlikely. Additionally, if a woman feels it is important to be the major socializer of her children during the preschool period and is committed to being available to her children throughout their childhood years, then she is unlikely to select a professional career that allows for little flexibility in both career committment and time scheduling across those years.

The studies reported in this paper focus on this last set of intrapsychic variables and their influence on women's career aspirations. The studies were generated from a value expectancy choice model of career selection. We know from the achievement literature that values and expectancies of success influence persistence at a task, the quality of performance and the task choice itself (Crandall, 1969; Diggory, 1966; Feather, 1966; Kukla, 1972; Parsons, Ruble, Hodges, and Small, 1976; Parsons, Futterman, Heller and Karabenick, 1977; Parsons & Ruble, 1977; Parsons, Yulish-Muszynski, and Moses, 1977). In these studies, people select tasks and perform better on tasks they think are important and for which they have high initial expectancies for success. (Differential occupational choice may be influenced by these same variables.)

Study 1

People may select careers that are valuable to them and for which they have reasonable high expectations of success. To the degree that sex-role beliefs influence either expectancies for success or the value of various options, they should also influence the choices. Thus if women perceive male sterotyped or non-traditional occupations differently than female stereotyped or traditional occupations of comparable status and required training, then they may well respond differently to these career options. More specifically, if women think that male stereotyped occupations are more difficult and yet of no more importance to them than female stereotyped occupations, then they should be more likely to select the female sterotyped occupations. Similarly, if they feel some female roles are more important than male roles, they should be more likely to select the female role.

To test for differential perception of occupational difficulty and

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importance, we had 48 college women rate 10 occupations on (a) the diffi-
culty of the occupation, (b) the probability of success, (c) the importance
of success, (d) the amount of effort they would be willing to put out to
succeed, (e) how good they would feel if they succeeded and (f) how bad
they would feel if they failed.

Eight of the occupations represented four pairs of occupations matched
on status and required professional training but varying on sex-role ste-
reotyping: surgeon-pediatrician, trained artist - interior decorator,
high school teacher - elementary school teacher, mechanical engineer (B.A.
level) - nurse (B.A. level). Two other occupations were included because
of their importance to women: Psychologist because it was the single most
commonly selected occupations in another study and mother because it is the
occupation selected by most women in general.

In general, we found that male stereotyped occupations were seen as
relatively more difficult than comparable female stereotyped occupations
but were not seen as of any more importance to the women themselves. Further,
success at mothering was rated as more important than success at any of the
other occupations. In line with this finding, the women reported that
they would be willing to exert the most effort to be "successful" mothers,
would feel the best about this success, and the worst about failing to meet
this goal. Finally, being a "successful" mother was seen as difficult but
highly probable. It seems likely, given this pattern, that any occupation
that seriously threatened these women's ability to become "successful"
mothers would not be seen as very appealing. Data gathered by Parsons,
Frieze, Ruble and Croke (1978) provide additional support for this con-
clusion. In this study of college women's career aspirations, women with
non-traditional professional career goals were more likely to either believe
that a career and family could be successfully combined or to plan to delay
or avoid marriage and children if they believed that a career and family
could not be combined.

Study 2

In an attempt to explore this issue of the integration of family and
career further, we interviewed 15 male undergraduates and 15 female under-
graduates. The open-ended interior schedule focused on the following
topics: a) marriage plans, b) career plans, c) plans to have children, and
d) plans for child-rearing. Given the data reported above, we felt it was
especially important to assess career oriented college women's attitudes
toward child bearing and rearing. We felt that high level professional
commitment was dependent on either endorsement of and faith in daycare
arrangements or expectation of major involvement of the father in child-
rearing. Further, we felt that future societal change would be reflected
in these students' current plans. To our surprise, these college students
did not endorse either of these alternatives. All 30 students planned to
have a career after college. All of the men and 13 out of the 15 women
planned both to marry and to have children. Of these, 11 of the females
and 8 of the males did not want their children in daycare centers. Females
cited the desire to raise their own children as the primary reason for
their reluctance to use daycare. Males also stressed the importance of
the family in raising the children. In response to the question "If both

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you and your mate have full time careers and you both want to have children, how would you handle this situation?" only 2 males and 6 females expected the father to share the child rearing role. Nine of the females and 11 of the males expected the mother to assume the bulk of the child rearing responsibilities. Taken together, these results suggest that college students today expect that either they (if female) or their spouse (if male) will take time out of a career to raise the family. Further, given today's job market, this goal, in essence, precludes a high level professional career commitment during the early family years. Those women who desire a professional career will be forced either to (1) lower these aspirations, or (2) opt for a non-traditional (non-male) career path entering into the profession late or establishing themselves in their career early and then taking time out for a family. Both of these options will structure the career choices available to these women.

Study 3

Attributional patterns are another set of variables that have been related both theoretically and empirically to expectancies and values. Individuals attribute their success and failure to a variety of causes, the most common being ability, task difficulty, effort, luck, external help and interests. They also assess the importance of each of these causes for success or failure on future tasks. Based on their perceptions of the causes of success on a particular task, they deduce an expectation of the likelihood of their succeeding in that task. Low expectations are associated with attribution of success to task ease, luck, and help from others, and failure to lack of ability and insufficient help from others. High expectations are associated with attribution of success to ability and effort and failure to lack of effort and task difficulty (Jackaway, 1975; Kukla, 1972). As discussed earlier, task choice is influenced by expectancies. Thus it seems likely that attributions should also affect task choice. Parsons (1977) demonstrated that this was true.

Since sex-roles influence both career choice and expectancies, it seemed reasonable that sex-roles might also influence attributions. If sex-roles affect career choice through differential attributional patterns, the high expectancy attributional pattern (attributing success to ability and effort and failure to task difficulty or lack of effort) ought to be more characteristic of female stereotyped occupations while the low expectancy attributional pattern (attributing success to task ease and luck and failure to lack of ability) ought to be more characteristic of the male stereotyped occupations.

To investigate these predictions, we had 78 undergraduate women rate the importance of the following six causes on a 10 point scale for success and failure in either the four female stereotyped or the four male stereotyped occupations from the four paired occupations used in Study 1. The causes were effort, ability, specific help from others, stable help from others, task ease, and interest.

Success in female occupations relative to male occupations was more likely to be attributed to ability and effort while failure in female careers was more likely to be attributed to task difficulty, and lack of effort. Failure at male occupations was more likely to be attributed to lack

of ability. Thus there is support for the prediction that women's attributions for success at female stereotyped occupations are more characteristic of the high expectancy pattern than are their attributions for success in male stereotyped occupations. But a low expectancy attribution-pattern is not characteristic of these women's attributions for either success or failure in any of the occupations sampled.

While I'd like to conclude that both perceived causes of success and failure and perceived importance influence, in part, one's career choice, the causal direction of this relationship cannot be specified from these data. It is possible that career choice determined attributions and importance or that career choice, attributional patterns and perceived importance are influenced by some third variable like sex-role stereotyping. However, past research indicates that attributional and valuing patterns do effect behavioral choices (see Weiner, 1974 for review of this literature). Thus, it seems reasonable that once established, the attributional and valuing patterns demonstrated in these studies can influence one's consideration of various occupations. And, as a result, some occupations may not be considered as possible career alternatives. In turn, without serious consideration and subsequent input of new information, it is unlikely that either the attributional patterns or the perceived importance of various occupations will change or that new options will be investigated.

The implications of these results for an understanding of women's career choices are clear. If we assume that females acquire differential attributional patterns for success and different values for success at various occupations, and that these differential patterns are associated with the sex-role appropriateness of the career, then attributional and valuing patterns may help explain preference for sex-appropriate careers.

Perhaps, more importantly, this approach provides a mechanism for increasing women's perceived career options. If one's approach-avoidance patterns can be changed by altering the attributional and valuing patterns one has, then women's (and men's) perceived career options can be increased by value and attributional resocialization, i.e., by training them to associate different attributions with success and failure at and different importance and value-ratings for various occupations and by training them to reconsider child rearing alternatives, stressing the potential benefits of daycare and paternal involvement and demystifying maternal care during the preschool years. Dweck, 1975, and Dweck & Repucci, 1973, have demonstrated that attributional retraining can be successful with chronic underachievers; Erickson, 1975, has demonstrated that value retraining can also be accomplished. Both should be successful with career counseling as well.

Institutional change is also essential. These data clearly point up the importance of high quality day care and flexible career structures. Future fathers seem reluctant to get involved in child care to any substantial degree. Consequently, increased participation of women in the professions is dependent on society's provision of excellent day care, on the profession's redefining career commitment to allow enough flexibility for both maternal and paternal involvement in child care, and on a cultural redefinition of good parenting.

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Sex Bias in the Attributions of Observers/Employers

Having delineated a set of intrapsychic variables that indicate career choice and having outlined direction for social change, it is now important to focus back on related discriminatory forces that inhibit women's career advancement. Several studies have documented the low expectancies for success people in general have for women (e.g., see Frieze et al for review). Further, Feather and Simon (1975) demonstrated that ability is used by college students to explain male occupational success to a greater degree than female occupational success while lack of ability is used to explain female occupational failure to a greater extent than male occupational failure. In a similar study using college students (Heim, 1975), males' achievement successes were attributed more to ability than were females' while females' achievement failures were attributed more to lack of ability than were males'. Thus a female's success was seen as unstably caused, leaving the observer in doubt as to whether her performance will continue. In contrast a male's success was seen as stably caused, allowing the observer to conclude that the man will continue to succeed. Further, when failing, women were seen as both less capable and less diligent than their male counterparts. Given the importance of both ability and effort in this culture, this discrepancy puts women at a distinct disadvantage. Their successes do not necessarily lead to increased estimations of their ability while their failures do lead to decreased estimations of both their ability and their willingness to try.

In a major literature review, O'Leary (1974) concluded that employers in major career fields also exhibit this low expectancy pattern. In one of the few studies of attributional processes in simulated employment setting, Valle (reported in Frieze, et al, 1975) demonstrated the effect of low initial expectancies on employer's attributions of workers' success and failures. She found that simulated employers make attributions which coincide with their initial expectancies such that unexpected success and unexpected failure are attributed to unstable factors. What this means for women is that, to the extent that employers have lower initial expectancies for them, these employers will discount the women's successes and overweight their failures in making evaluative judgments of their performance.

Women need to be aware of this bias for at least two reasons. First, and most importantly, they need to know that the employers' attributions reflect a bias and not an accurate assessment of the situation. Because women have lower expectancies for themselves, they are in need of social support for newly emerging self images and attributional patterns. If they are confronted with disconfirming social feedback, their own self concepts may suffer. But if a woman is aware of the bias that may be operative in her employment setting, she can muster supports elsewhere to bolster her aspirations and self concept. Second, she can work in the setting to change the employer's bias. Unfortunately, this means that she may have to work harder than her male peers to gain recognition. But at least being forewarned, she can plan and anticipate what she'll have to do to overcome the potential biases that may be operating against her.

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