Women Returning to College: Occupation at Enrollment, Career Aspirations, and Job Attained, Coded by Holland's Occupational Categories

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This paper reports two major findings from a survey of over 700 women who returned to college after being out of school for several years. The first finding concerns the types of occupations in which these women were employed at the time of enrollment, the types of occupations they aspired to, and the types of jobs they found after attending college. The second finding concerns differences in job satisfaction, counseling received, and other variables for women employed in the different types of occupations.

One widely-used system for classifying jobs into categories is John Holland's RIASEC model. This model is presented in his book, Making Vocational Choices: A Theory of Careers (Prentice-Hall, 1973). Briefly, Holland's system groups occupations into six categories, based on psychological similarities (attitudes, values, personality) of the people working in these occupations. The six categories of persons/occupations are: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional.

The realistic person prefers activities that entail the explicit, ordered manipulation of objects, tools, machines, and animals, and has an aversion to educational or therapeutic activities. In the present study, women employed in engineering, technical, or skilled work (or who aspired to these occupations) fall into the realistic category.

The investigative person enjoys the systematic and creative investigation of physical, biological, and cultural phenomena, and dislikes persuasive, social, and repetitive activities. Women employed or interested in any of the sciences fall into this category.

The artistic person prefers ambiguous, free, unsystematized activities that
lead to the creation of art forms, and avoids conventional, systematic, and ordered activities. Occupations in the performing arts, media, writing, and design fall into this category.

The social person likes to inform, train, develop, cure, or enlighten other people, and dislikes activities involving materials, tools, or machines. Social occupations include social work, nursing, teaching, police work, and any of the educational and medical specialties, such as counseling exceptional children or occupational therapy.

The enterprising person prefers activities that entail the manipulation of others for organizational goals or economic gain, and dislikes the observational, symbolic, and systematic activities involved in science. Some enterprising occupations include business, accounting, law, management, and real estate.

The conventional person prefers activities that entail the explicit, ordered, systematic manipulation of data, such as keeping records, filing materials, planning, and organizing, and has an aversion to ambiguous, free, exploratory, or unsystematic activities. Secretarial, clerical, and data processing occupations are all classified as conventional.

Empirical studies have shown that more women are employed in and seem to prefer the Social, Artistic, and Conventional occupations, whereas men typically are employed in or prefer Realistic, Investigative, or Enterprising occupations. The personality characteristics found to correspond to these two larger clusters of occupations closely resemble some masculine and feminine stereotypes. People in the Social, Artistic, and Conventional occupations (both men and women) are described with such adjectives as emotional, feminine, helpful, kind, obedient, and prudish, while people in the other cluster are described as asocial, masculine, independent, critical, ambitious, and domineering.
This paper is not the place to discuss the origin or persistence of occupational stereotypes, but rather to discuss their role in the present sample of women returning to college. Thus, the paper provides answers to questions such as: Do the career aspirations of women returning to college follow traditional definitions of masculine and feminine work? Does counseling affect the traditionality of career choice? And, are women who find employment in traditional careers more, or less satisfied than women in nontraditional careers?

Let us begin by examining the proportion of women employed in each of the Holland categories at the time of enrollment. The largest group of women (37%) consists of women who are unemployed or in unskilled jobs. Discounting this group, the largest group is the Social group, which includes teaching, social service, and nursing (35%). This is followed by women in Conventional (clerical) jobs (20%). The other categories together are less than 8%. Looking at traditionality, 90% of the employed women were in traditional occupations (Social, Conventional, Artistic), and 10% in nontraditional occupations (Realistic, Investigative, Enterprising).

The career aspirations of this group are slightly different. The most-preferred group is still the Social group (70%), but now the Enterprising occupations appear as the second most-preferred choice (20%). Now, overall, 78% of the group reports aspiring to traditional careers, and 22%, non-traditional.

In terms of actual jobs attained after returning to college, the results are fairly encouraging. First, a full 71% of the reporting sample said they found a job in their general area of preference, while 29% did not. About 48% found employment in a Social occupation, 20% in a Conventional occupation, 15% in an Enterprising occupation, 2% in the Arts, 1% in the Sciences, 1% in
Engineering, and about 13% were unemployed. The ratio of 80%-traditional to 20%-nontraditional closely mirrors the aspirations at enrollment, and shows a shift of about 10% toward the nontraditional careers between employment before college and employment after college.

The possible effects of receiving counseling on career choice were examined by dividing the group into those who received counseling and those who did not. These analyses showed that there was no significant relationship between receiving counseling and finding a job that matched one's aspirations, and that there was no relationship between receiving counseling and whether the woman's career choice was traditional or nontraditional. However, when women were asked to rate how much their school influenced a change in career goals, the women in nontraditional careers gave a slightly higher average rating, though the difference did not quite reach statistical significance.

Finally, women were asked to rate how satisfied they were with their current occupational status. Surprisingly, the women who were not employed gave the highest ratings, for whatever reason. In terms of the Holland categories, women in Enterprising, Social, Artistic, and Investigative occupations gave the highest ratings of job satisfaction (about 3.25 on a four-point scale). They were followed by women in Conventional occupations (2.95); and the four women in Realistic jobs (all engineering) gave the lowest ratings (2.25). Grouped by traditionality, there was no difference in job satisfaction between women in traditional and nontraditional jobs.

Conclusion

Sex stereotyping in the world of work is an issue of pressing political, legal, and psychosocial concern. One thrust of many political reformers is an effort to get both men and women to consider nontraditional careers.
Given that going to college is supposed to be a broadening and enlightening experience, one might expect to find that the college experience reduces stereotypic notions of the kind of work that is satisfying for each sex. In the present study, such a shift is observed: 20% of the group are employed in nontraditional areas, compared to 10% of the group before they returned to college.

An unanswered question is how far we can expect this shift to go, how far we want it to go, and whether or not it is indeed a good thing. For the present sample, a full 80% said they preferred one of the traditional areas, and that counseling did not appear to affect this preference. And, there was no difference in job satisfaction between women employed in traditional and nontraditional occupations. These observations suggest to me that before counselors and legislators intervene on women's career choices, more psychological research is needed on the individual and social origins of career preference, and on the effect of counseling on career choice.
Dear Conference Attendee:

We are delighted that you have accepted our invitation to attend the Title IA "Statewide Research Conference on the Continuing Education of Women" on September 26.

For your convenience, I have enclosed a Map of The Johns Hopkins Campus. Parking area R has been reserved for our Conference. As indicated on the map, it is a short walk from the parking area to The Glass Pavilion, Levering Hall, where registration, Conference sessions, and lunch will be held. It would be advisable to leave a note on the inside of your windshield indicating that you are "Attending Title IA Statewide Research Conference, The Glass Pavilion, Levering Hall, September 26".

If you have any further questions regarding the Conference, please feel free to call me. I am looking forward to seeing you.

Sincerely,

Mary K. Martin
Project Coordinator

MKM:mt
Attachment

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Directions:
From Parking Lot R *
1. Cross Wyman Park Drive
2. Take unmarked terraced walkway to the left of Bowman Drive
3. Walkway leads into Bowman Drive to Levering Hall,
The Glass Pavilion