

# Women's Career Decisions in Different Developmental Stages

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Many early career development theories were created before 1960, with the research being based solely on middle-class or upper-middle-class white men. Though most of these theories have since been modified to try to incorporate the experiences of women and minority groups, criticism still exists for the neglect of these groups in career development research. Since women represent over half the population of the United States, and the role of women in the workplace has changed significantly since the 1960's;

these earlier “male models” of career paths do not seem to fit what we are learning about career decision-making in women and in minority groups (Sharf, 2002).

However, bias against seeing women’s issues as significant to career theory still exists. In November of 2005 the Bureau of Labor Statistics announced plans to discontinue its nationwide data collection on women workers in the United States. Instead, other data, such as total monthly earnings and the wages and hours of supervisors, would be continued while unemployment statistics and the tracking of job gains and losses for women would be dropped. Critics noted that there would then be no other source of that information, as data on employment statistics by gender was not kept through census data nor was it maintained by employers on payroll records (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2005).

Career development research has long acknowledged that the career path of women is “different” from that of men, and that life stage literature grounded in the male experience is not adequate to explain women’s experiences (Parsons, 1909; Super, 1957; Holland, 1966). More of the information about women’s career paths has come from life-span theories than from trait-factor theories of career choice. Life span theory draws more attention to gender-role issues in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood while trait-factor theory offers minimal information about gender differences (Sharf, 2002). More recently, attention has been paid to such career issues as ethnic women in the workplace (Richie, Fassinger, Linn, & Johnson, 1997), the social class of working women (Meara, Davis, & Robinson, 1997), sexual orientation (Morgan & Brown, 1998), and personality and life factors that enhance or detract from career success for women (Bimrose, 2001).

The nature of women’s roles in the workforce has changed drastically since World War II. We were first introduced to the idea of women working outside that home with the image of “Rosie the Riveter” in the 1940s, although many women returned to the role of the homemaker after the war was over and returning soldiers needed to be employed, many remained in the workplace. Later, the label and image was that of the woman on the “mommy track” where she was expected to leave the workforce when she had children. A woman might also hold a “pink collar” job, in a low paying profession such as secretarial work or waitressing. Some of these images coincide with Super’s (1957) “Seven Career Patterns for Women”, which included such patterns as the homemaker who never held employment outside of the home, the woman who entered the workforce but quit after she married, the woman who had the “interrupted” pattern of being in the workforce, leaving the workforce to have children, then returning to

the workforce when the children were grown, or the woman who had the pattern of repeated entrances and departures from the workforce, but never established a “career”.

One area of agreement in most of the literature on women’s career paths is that not only are women’s paths “different” than men’s, but that they are more complex. Major influences on women’s career decisions appear to come from what is referred to as “care responsibilities”, such as childbirth and child care, being a single mother, sharing roles and responsibilities with a partner in a “dual-earner” family, or caring for aging parents. Despite some gains in representation in educational and employment settings, women still remain the primary caregivers, responsible for both homemaking and childrearing responsibilities.

Newer career theories have been developed since the beginnings of the feminist movement in the 1960’s that are more pertinent to women’s experiences. Gottfredson (1996) proposed a life stage theory that emphasizes the importance that gender roles and prestige play in making career choices. Models using cognitive information processing theory and social-cognitive theory have been applied to women’s career development. Crozier (1999) offers a “relational model” of women’s career development that suggests an integration of work and family roles rather than a choice between them.

This study chooses to look at the career decisions of women in higher education and particularly in counselor education. The authors wanted to ascertain how these women actually made their career decisions over time as well as to examine the effect of the “chilly climate” recognized for women in higher education (Freyd & Johnson, 1998). These decisions were then compared with the various theoretical models. Implications for career counseling are discussed as well as the continued need for awareness and research of women’s issues in higher education employment.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were female educators whose email addresses were originally taken from a list of attendees at the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Women’s retreat. These 50 women were sent an email asking for their participation in the completion of an open-ended survey developed by the authors and delivered via an internet program that maintained their anonymity. They were encouraged to

forward the email and website to other women in higher education. Originally, the study was designed to examine mid-life women and how they had made their decisions throughout their work lives. However, the idea of the study was presented at the ACES Women's Interest Group meeting and many of the younger women who were just beginning their academic careers indicated a strong interest in participating. Therefore the study was expanded to include women from the ages of 20 years to over 60 years of age. The number of usable instruments was 29 with 6 partially completed surveys. The sample included 22 educators, 1 administrator, and 6 women who categorized themselves as "other" Seven of the participants had 1-5 years in higher education, 7 had 6-10 years, 5 had 11-20 years, and 10 had 21 or more years. They included 13 professors, 1 dean, 1 director, 4 counselors, 2 doctoral students, and 4 who categorized themselves as "other". Five of the women were between 20 and 38 years, 5 between 39-50, 12 between 51-19, and 7 over 60 years of age. 27 of the women identified a Caucasian, 1 Asian American, and 1 "other".

### **Instruments**

The participants were contacted by email and asked to access a website that contained the anonymous survey. The survey consisted of demographic questions as well as eight open-ended questions asking participants to describe the path that led them to their career choice, their goals at different stages of their careers, any conflicts between professional and personal life as well as when it occurred and how it was resolved, how the choices had impacted their career path, and whether they believed their choices to be life and career stage appropriate.

### **Coding**

The authors used the constant comparative method to code and analyze the data. First, the responses were separated into four categories (>60, 50, 39-49, <31). Then the response sets were reviewed and phrases that were representative of each set were determined. This was repeated for each question. Then each question was categorized and a code was assigned for each category. All codes are indicated in the table below.

Place table about here

### **Results**

All groups had intrinsic career goals at the beginning of their careers but that later in life those intrinsic goals focused more on personal and less on professional goals. As for conflicts between personal and professional goals, all except the under 31 age group indicated current conflicts and the over 50 and over 60 groups indicated conflict *within* their professional lives as well as between professional and personal demands. All groups except the over 60 group felt that while their career choices felt positive to them, that in reality, they were older when they reached rank and tenure due to choosing family before work. Responses from the over 60 group tended to show a less creative, more “burned out” attitude. Interestingly, all groups believed their life stage and career stage to be congruent. This finding appears to be in contrast to other statements made in the survey.

### **Discussion**

In general, this survey supports the theoretical literature and research that women’s career paths are different than men’s career paths. Further, it supports the fact that women may be “punished” for making choices that do not follow a non-traditional academic career path. The women in our study spoke eloquently of the conflicts they experience between their personal and professional lives. While our respondents only alluded to the problem, students and tenure committees often continue to see women as less competent, less dependable, and rated lower on the same skills as their male counterparts (Freyd & Jordan, 1998). These women, however, continue to have a vision and a passion for their profession that allows them to succeed in spite of the bias that they encounter as they endeavor to train students (who are overwhelmingly female). Further, they have learned to create a network for themselves that assists in their success as defined in the male dominated academic settings in which they work.

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**Table 1**

Conflicts

|                                                                     |                                                                 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| <u>≥60</u><br>Profession v. Home<br>– previously<br>– not currently | <u>≥50</u><br>Profession v. Home<br>- previously<br>- currently |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|

|                                                   |                                                                                      |
|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Within profession<br>Supportive spouse            | within profession                                                                    |
| Profession v. Home<br>- previously<br>- currently | Profession v. Home<br>- none currently<br>Education v. Personal<br>Within profession |

### Impact of Choices

|                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <u>≥60</u><br>Positive career outcomes<br>Positive personal outcomes<br>Negative attitude (related to spouse/family commitments) | <u>≥50</u><br>Positive career outcomes<br>Positive personal outcomes<br>Negative attitude<br>Negative outcome    |
| <u>39-49</u><br>Positive career outcomes<br>Positive personal outcomes<br>Negative attitude (less creative)                      | <u>≤31</u><br>Positive career outcomes<br>Negative attitude<br>Negative outcome<br>Other (dependent on children) |

### Life Stage Appropriate and Congruent

|                                                                                                                           |                                         |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <u>&gt;60</u><br>Appropriate and Congruent<br>Yes – career related/goal achievement<br>Personal (inner peace, retirement) | <u>≥50</u><br>Appropriate and Congruent |
| <u>39-49</u><br>Appropriate and Congruent                                                                                 | <u>≤31</u><br>Appropriate and Congruent |

### Goals

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><u>≥60</u></p> <p>Intrinsic Career ( teach, work w/students, professional engagement)</p> <p>Extrinsic Career (extra income, flexibility, safe job)</p> <p>Intrinsic Personal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- family</li> <li>- altruistic</li> <li>- life enjoyment</li> </ul> | <p><u>≥50</u></p> <p>Intrinsic Career (work with profession, “have” a career, economic survival)</p>                                                     |
| <p><u>39-49</u></p> <p>Intrinsic Career</p> <p>Intrinsic Personal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- family</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                | <p><u>≤31</u></p> <p>Intrinsic Career</p> <p>Intrinsic Personal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- family</li> <li>- life enjoyment</li> </ul> |