
Women's Career Development and Relationships: A Qualitative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Through the use of grounded theory methodology, this study explored how relationships are involved in women's career development. Eighteen female students participated in an unstructured interview. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a constant comparative method of analysis. Generally, relationships were found to be important to the women's careers both in terms of how occupations were chosen and the influence people had on their developing self-knowledge and career decisions. Results suggest that relationships may be a central organizing factor in women's career development and that women's career development and psychosocial development are interwoven.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude, employant la méthodologie de la théorie reposant sur les faits, examine comment les relations des femmes influencent le déroulement de leur carrière. Dix-huit étudiantes ont participé à un entretien non structuré. Ces entretiens ont été transcrits et analysés grâce à une méthode constante d'analyse comparative. En général, on a pu conclure que pour les carrières des femmes, les relations jouaient un rôle important non seulement en ce qui concerne le choix de carrière mais aussi l'influence des autres sur la formation de leur connaissance d'elles-mêmes et sur leurs décisions professionnelles. Les conclusions suggèrent que les relations peuvent jouer un rôle organisateur central dans le déroulement des carrières des femmes et que celui-ci est intimement lié à leur développement psychosocial.

Research in the area of career development of women and girls has grown exponentially, especially over the last decade (Phillips & Imhoff, 1997), but with little focus on the underlying psychological processes that influence career decision making and career development. Much of women's career behaviour has previously been interpreted using a male perspective (Gallos, 1989), although some attempts have been made to develop models or concepts more descriptive of women's careers (Astin, 1985; Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). There has been increasing recognition of the relevance of relationships to women's career decisions and career identity development (Hackett, 1997).

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Research in this area has focused on the importance of women's participation in multiple life roles (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Powell & Mainiero, 1992; Richardson, 1993). Fitzgerald and Weitzman (1992) note the complexity of women's careers as they combine home and family with work, and deal with issues such as role conflict and management of multiple life roles. Adolescent females have been found to consider occupational choices, in terms of expectations of home and family requirements (Davey, 1998; Eccles, 1987) and increased preparation for assisting young women to anticipate and manage multiple life roles has been occurring (Phillips & Imhoff, 1997). Gender differences have consistently been found in how men and women think about and conduct work and family roles (Phillips & Imhoff, 1997).

Advancements in developmental psychology have not been adequately integrated into career development theory (Richardson, 1993). Theory and research on women's development, including a major focus on the relational dimension has been almost absent from the career literature (Forrest & Mikolaitis, 1986; Powell & Mainiero, 1992).

Self-in-relation theory (Jordan, 1997) emphasizes the importance of empathic relationships to women's development and decision making. Gilligan (1982) describes how women's development occurs in a process of intimacy and interconnection in relationships and identifies a three-stage process of moral development with periods of transition between each stage. The initial stage is characterized by self-care motivated by a need for survival. Transition from this stage is triggered by criticism of being selfish. The next stage is dominated by self-sacrifice and caring for the needs of others with movement from this stage involving individuation and a need for self-care. The final stage focuses on a new understanding of self that combines care of self and care of others. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) focused their research on understanding women's cognitive development, finding that women develop a "connected" way of knowing that is contextual, understands from another perspective, values experience, and connects concepts to personal events and knowledge.

These new theories, which regard development as a holistic process occurring in a relational context, have implications for understanding women's career development and decision making (Crozier, *in press*). Women may prefer occupations that allow for the expression of their relational identity (Forrest & Mikolaitis, 1986) explaining why women, especially young women who may be in the second stage of moral development, as defined by Gilligan (1982) would choose social, artistic, or even conventional occupations according to Holland's (1985) themes. The choice of such occupational fields would provide an opportunity for developing relationships and meeting the needs of others, value connected ways of knowing utilizing both subjective and intuitive decision making, satisfy the value of care, and probably utilize already developed interpersonal and communication skill sets. Choice of an occupation may be affected by the stage of development the woman is in, for example, women in the transition phase of separation and individuation may make independent occupational choices

focusing much more on their own personal needs as compared to younger women in the stage of self-sacrifice who may choose occupations that allow for the giving of self. Women's career decision-making process itself may be quite different from the rational models, such as the one hypothesized by Gelatt (1962). Their decisions may involve consideration of the needs, opinions, and feelings of others such as in the model developed by Janis and Mann (1977), and utilize both a logical, objective approach along with the intuitive, subjective dimension.

From research and theory, one can surmise how relationships figure in women's career decisions and career development. What is required, however, is research to provide a deeper comprehension of women's career realities (Cook, 1993). The aim of this study was to contribute to an initial understanding of how relationships are involved in women's career development through hearing the voices of women describe their view of the intersection of relationships and career.

METHOD

Qualitative Research Design

A qualitative research methodology was well suited to this study as it allows for the hearing and understanding of the voices of women (Brown & Gilligan, 1992), and contributes to the goal of understanding a phenomenon, rather than prediction (Freeman, 1984).

Our research adapted grounded theory methodology (Strauss, 1987). In this method, each research participant is interviewed and the interviews are analyzed using a constant comparative method of analysis, allowing the researchers to develop categories, properties, hypotheses, and theory from the data. Research participants are usually selected to clarify or confirm emerging themes, and research is discontinued at a point of saturation, when disparate themes no longer emerge. As this research project was exploratory in nature, data collection did not proceed until saturation was reached or a theory was complete; however, the other procedures of grounded theory methodology were followed.

Participants. Research participants were recruited through the use of posters and by word of mouth, at two Canadian sites: ten participants at the University of Calgary in Calgary, Alberta and eight participants at the University College of Cape Breton in Sydney, Nova Scotia. The sites were chosen because the researchers worked and resided in the locations, however, the cities have different socio-demographics in that Calgary is a larger city with a low unemployment rate and higher than average incomes, while Sydney is a small city, with a high unemployment rate and lower than average incomes. A post-secondary population was utilized as it was expected that this would offer a range of women in terms of occupational interests, age, and stages of development.

Participants were selected by a process of theoretical sampling. In this process, participants are selected according to evolving research needs to examine variation in themes or categories. In this study, effort was made to include women

from a variety of educational programs, ages, and life circumstances. The researchers frequently communicated during the process of data collection and interpretation to discuss emerging themes and the socio-demographics of the research participants. Throughout the interviewing process, the researchers included questions during subsequent interviews to clarify themes arising from earlier interviews. There was no need to reject research volunteers in this study, as the participants who came forward represented a diverse student population.

A total of 18 students were interviewed over a four-month period, representing nine departments of study (fine arts, science, psychology, sociology, commerce, educational psychology, education, arts, and communication studies) and every year of study (first-year to post-graduate work). They ranged in age from 19 to 48 years; 7 women were married and 11 were single; 12 were childless and 6 had children. Ten participants resided in Alberta and eight participants resided in Nova Scotia.

Interview. Each woman was interviewed individually using an unstructured interview and all participants completed an information sheet regarding socio-demographic information. To allow the respondent to take over the pacing and development of the content of the interview, a two-part question was formulated following the recommendations of Mishler (1986). He suggests that interview questions be composed of a general overview of the research focus and a more specific open-ended question. After a general orientation to the research, the researcher invited each participant to respond to the following two-part interview question: (a) I am interested in understanding your experience of how relationships may have influenced your career path, and (b) tell me about your career path. The rest of the interview consisted of comments and questions by the researcher to clarify the meaning of the response, and to confirm themes identified in previous interviews. Each interview was audio-taped.

Data Analysis. After the interviews were transcribed and entered into a computer data management software program, the data was analyzed using the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis in that parts of the data are compared to other parts of the data, and similarities and differences are noted (Strauss, 1987). Each interview was reviewed and segments of the text were identified that represented one or more themes. Segments of text representing a theme were then compared with other segments of text representing themes from all of the interviews. This process allowed for the grouping of themes and the formation of major categories of themes, a process of interpretation described by Tesch (1990). Each researcher interpreted the interviews she conducted, and one researcher interpreted four interviews conducted by the other researchers to confirm that a similar method of coding was being used.

Themes were identified that represent similarities in the experiences of these women's accounts. As the goal of this research was exploratory, themes were identified if they had a significant meaning to some of the other research participants who were in similar circumstances. Comparisons were not made between the results of sub-groups within the entire sample, because the number of research participants was small. Although one cannot make generalizations from the

themes identified from this limited number of interviews, the results provide an initial understanding of how relationships may figure into women's careers.

RESULTS

Interpretation of results reveals the importance of relationships in these women's career stories. The types of occupations and educational programs chosen were shaped by relational considerations represented by two major themes: (a) the women's relationships to the occupation or educational program, and (b) people who influence career decisions and self-development. These two major themes consist of a number of sub-themes as contained in the following explanations and quotes from the interviews.

The women's relationship to the occupations

The choice of educational programs and occupations were influenced by the woman's sense of relationship to or within the choice. The types of occupations chosen tended to be those where the woman could help others, advocate, and teach, such as working in ecology for future generations. This desire to help others is described in the following quote of a woman who eventually chose to be a psychiatric nurse: "It's always had to do with just standing up for others, helping people and trying to make life better for them in general. I always stood up for kids in high school who were being picked on and everything." Occupational decisions were influenced by the need for positive interpersonal interactions: "a personal, human touch." Across science, business, and art fields, the women spoke of a sense of "relationship to the earth" or the "desire to make people look better in their art."

Some women reflected an even deeper significance of the meaning of work in their lives. There was a need to be connected in a holistic or spiritual way to others by their work and to the broader universe. One young woman tried to describe this by saying,

I just believe so strongly about the whole natural aspect of the world. I read about the human level of destruction and it really bothers me. I just feel like I have to do something, no matter how small, anything I can do to counter that.

People who influence career decisions and self-knowledge

Many people with whom the women had relationships or anticipated relationships, influenced their career paths. Their husbands, boyfriends, mothers, and children had the most profound effect on their decisions. Other people who strongly influenced their careers include teachers, parents, friends, co-workers or bosses, mentors, and grandparents. People in relationship to these women tended to directly influence their occupational choices by providing advice and direction; most commonly, the advice came from parents, especially mothers. They greatly appreciated the physical and emotional support that influenced their decisions and enabled them to fulfil their career plans. One mother of two pre-school children on a study leave from her work noted "though emotionally I don't

think my husband has supported me, indirectly, he obviously has. He has stuck it out. I really feel you have to do something for that. You do have to have the support of your spouse, your extended family, and your job.”

Relationships with children (actual and planned) figured strongly in these women's career stories. Five women spoke about the importance of having a flexible job or occupation to allow them time to rear their children. Other important considerations mentioned were child-care options, the homemaker role, the influence of pregnancy and maternity leave on the career path, and guilt over not having time with children.

The needs and careers of husbands and boyfriends were considered in these women's current decisions and future plans. A couple of women indicated they felt shame because they had allowed relationships to figure so highly in their careers. They valued independence and financial self-reliance, yet also valued their relationships with boyfriends and husbands.

Three themes regarding career plans emerged from the data that seemed to form a continuum. One end of the continuum is represented by ‘my plans.. This theme refers to a sense of “free choice” or putting the woman's needs first, as one woman said “my whole focus has totally changed. I am doing things more for me now and more of what I really want to do. When I was 17, I would never have picked cultural anthropology to go into.” Some women who spoke of this also acknowledged a fear of losing their partners, such as one woman who said she “knew it could wreck my marriage” after deciding to go back to school.

At the other end of the continuum is “other's plans.” This theme refers to career plans that automatically include consideration of a joint future: what is “best for us.” These plans were often made without consultation with the partner and were really characterized by meeting the partner's needs, practical, financial needs, or anticipated family needs. As one woman reflected “I was looking more at our future together instead of what I really wanted to do, like, what would be best for us. It would be best if I took my courses at night. It would be best if I kept my full-time job so I could pay half the bills.”

At the centre of the continuum is the theme of compromise. This theme involved compromising both the woman's needs/goals and the partner's needs/goals in the development of her career plans and still involved some uncertainty and risk of losing the partner. Two women who described this theme had come to a realization of personal development, after experiencing the end of a relationship or a personal crisis. Balancing others needs with her own needs and goals is described by one student who said, “it's hard . . . you really have to try to equal them out and balance the two of them and keep what's important to yourself in a relationship.”

Another theme represented the negative beliefs regarding women and work that women in this sample had experienced. Negative beliefs were explicitly stated by bosses, implied by regulations, or were conditions imposed by the workplace. Within the messages were real or potential barriers to their careers. One woman was told at her workplace “you need a degree to get a promotion if

you are a woman” and “if you have children it will ruin your career.” Another woman described hearing how scholarship conditions excluded married women and part-time students.

Shifting Focus from Others to Self

Some of the women described a sense of personal development as relationships influenced their careers. One sub-theme involved a change from assuming it was necessary to meet others' needs, to realizing their own occupational interests could be met.

I helped my children grow up and I helped my husband start two businesses. I helped my Dad get through a heart attack, and I've helped all of my brothers and sisters who had to come to live with us at times. It was just the way I worked; always considering other people before you considered yourself. When I thought of what I wanted to do, it was selfish.

Interestingly, some young women who wanted to settle into their occupations first, before marrying and having children, expressed some concern about being selfish. Some participants described having selfish feelings when they gave time, money, and energy to their career pursuits. These feelings led them to take on many roles and responsibilities, and contributed to a sense of “juggling” their obligations. This sub-theme is exemplified by one woman who talked about how she could only give to herself (take a class or choose a job based on her priorities) when she had given something in return to those important in her life (her children or husband). She interpreted “not giving” as being selfish. The support and approval of others allowed her to pursue her own interests and dreams, and eventually to contribute to a balancing of giving to others and giving to herself. She was able to take action to pursue her own occupational interests, basing her actions on an awareness of “who I am, what I like, what fits for me verses how others have created their environment with me living in it.”

Another developmental sub-theme that enabled these women to pursue their own interests is that of coming to a realization they could have a say or have a “voice” in planning their careers. Before this realization, there was “an assumption of not being able to even discuss my career plan.”

Life Goals

None of the women identified a specific long-term career/life goal. The goals described were more immediate in nature (complete degree, get a promotion, get an entry-level job, get a post graduate degree). Many women described how their goals involved compromise to meet other people's needs. One woman described how she would never become a manager because she did not want to work long hours when she has a husband and children. Another student said she did not know what kind of job she wanted when she graduated,

I feel quite confident I could probably get a job easier that maybe my husband could. So I'm feeling I'd like to let him explore a little bit. I'm hoping he is going to look for a job before me, just to get a feel about what is out there for him.

Unfolding. Listening to these women's stories, a theme emerged representing a similar process by which their career paths evolved. This process seems best characterized by one woman's description of her career as "unfolding." Others spoke of their careers in the following ways: "we'll see what happens," "play it by ear," "who knows what will happen." For these women, there was an element of uncertainty in their career plans. Definite, long-term occupational goals are not set and worked toward, as each woman needed to wait to see what would be available and how it would fit with the needs and plans of other important people in her life. One discussed how proximity to her aging mother was important in her selection of a job when she graduates. This process is captured by the following words of a woman reflecting back on her life:

I just think a real big theme is it's unfolded. It wasn't planned. It has been experiences and people that have influenced me a great deal. Experiences have been a main influence, but of course in those experiences there are relationships with people, even friends or non-friends. I am flexible, because I don't have a particular plan. If I had a plan, I probably would feel like I need to have particular steps and go with those.

As children grow and develop and partner's circumstances evolve, these women's priorities shift and decisions about occupational directions are made. Choices are influenced by "our plans," compromising personal goals, or balancing the need of self and others. This looked very much like a passivity about career plans, until further understanding of the relational emphasis became clear.

DISCUSSION

Although the sample size was small and selective, the results provide further insight into how relationships may figure in women's careers. The responses of the participants indicate that relationships were highly relevant to their career decisions and suggests that relationships may be a central organizing factor in women's career development. Many of these women resolved possible competition between work and family roles by putting family needs first and trying to fit their occupational demands around family commitments. Models, such as Astin's model of career choice and work behaviour (1985), identify a complexity of factors involved in women's careers. Certainly, Richardson's call for an increased focus on "work in people's lives" rather than work in occupational structures is particularly relevant for women (p. 427, 1993). A future challenge will be to integrate the relationship variable into these models, in order to better represent women's realities.

There is support for the relational models of women's psychosocial development. Women who viewed their occupational choices as selfish may be experiencing a tension between Gilligan's (1982) second and third stages of development; they may be in transition between the orientation of caring for others and the orientation of balancing care for others with care for self. Some women also described increasing assertiveness about career goals, the ability to identify and speak of occupational aspirations and interests. This seems to support the findings of Belenky et al. (1986) regarding women's epistemological development

and the development of "voice." The shared experience of becoming increasingly able to be assertive about one's career goals, while developing the ability to compromise to meet others' needs, in a relational context, suggests that women's career development and psychosocial development can be very interwoven.

A consistent finding in previous research is the tendency for women to enter occupations defined as social or conventional, according to Holland's (1985) classification scheme. Such occupations typically involve the development of relationships and meeting the needs of others. Similarly, many of the women in the present study indicated a desire to enter occupations where they would be able to help others or to otherwise feel connected. This, as well as the emphasis on caring for others in home and family roles, may represent a kind of relational achievement (Lipman-Bluman, Handley-Isaken, & Leavitt, 1983). This finding also demonstrates another critical difference between the career issues of women and men and underscores the need for a separate model of women's career development. For example, Holland's (1985) model views career decision making primarily in terms of finding a match between one's personal interests and the tasks of an occupation. In contrast, a model for women would recognize the importance of relationships.

The process of women's career decision-making may be quite different from that of men. Choices are influenced by "other's plans," compromising personal goals, or balancing the needs of self and others, contributing to uncertainty in long-term goals. In comparison to the traditional career-planning models, this can sound like a passivity about career plans or career immaturity. Further understanding of the relational emphasis in women's career decision-making process is indicated.

The results of this research have implications for counsellors in a number of ways. This research confirms Farber's (1996) argument that women's career planning involves consideration of home and family. Many women may benefit from involving the partner and family in career counselling. Interventions such as those suggested by Weitzman (1994) could help young women to realistically consider relationship and family plans along with occupational plans.

Depending on where a woman is in the process of self-development, this research suggests she may have difficulty integrating self-care (following her dreams) with care of others. The implications of how women come to think and learn are important when offering career development psychoeducational groups. Women's career groups should facilitate the development of voice through the use of a connected teaching style (Clinchy, Belenky, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1985). Women in both individual and group career counselling may benefit when the importance of empathic, supportive relationships to their career development is affirmed.

This research also suggests women may have a different process of career decision making. Many described the importance of keeping flexibility in their career plans allowing women to keep their options open and to compromise according to the current or anticipated needs of others in their lives. The strategies offered

by the conflict model of decision making (Janis & Mann, 1977), the conceptual model of career compromise (Gati, Houminer, & Fassa, 1997), and the recent discussion of the role of serendipity in career plans (Krumboltz, 1998) may have value for women who are making occupational choices.

Further research is required with women of different ages and different life roles/occupations to confirm these preliminary results and increase our understanding of how relationships figure in women's career development. Similar research with men is called for, considering their changing role in the family and adjusting to multiple career paths, to understand if some of these new conceptualizations regarding career development are relevant. Although it is difficult to generalize from the findings of this research due to the preliminary nature of the study, the results do provide further understanding and additional support for women's career development and psychosocial development theory, and lends credence to the value of particular career counselling interventions for women.

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