

PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS TO THE OCCUPATIONAL SUCCESS OF MATURE WOMEN

SHARON E. KAHN

University of British Columbia

Abstract

This paper presents a description of the barriers to successful achievement outside the home faced by many women in mid-life. Cultural myths about women and the nature of work may prevent mature women from fully participating in self-development other than as wives and mothers. Counselling theory has been effected by these myths. Counsellors are encouraged to facilitate self-exploration and conflict resolution with mature women who may be experiencing the mid-life crisis of changing roles from full-time mother to paid worker.

Résumé

Cet article décrit les obstacles que les femmes d'âge moyen doivent surmonter pour connaître le succès à l'extérieur du foyer. Certains mythes culturels au sujet de la femme et du travail empêchent plusieurs femmes de s'épanouir en dehors des rôles de mère et d'épouse. Ces mythes ont également influencé la théorie de la consultation. On exhorte les conseillers à encourager chez ces femmes l'exploration de soi et la solution de conflits qui peuvent surgir à ce temps de leur vie où elles font la transition de mère à employée.

The question of how to motivate mature women is central to the counsellor who wants to comply with current legislative efforts to equalize the political and organizational hierarchy in Canadian society and also wishes to aid female clients in adjusting to new life styles. Barriers to career opportunities and vocational advancement are being eroded by equal opportunity legislation, enforcement procedures, and social pressures; yet women suffer psychological barriers to full participation in the world outside the home. As the opportunities for women to participate fully in the world of work expand, so too, the cultural assumptions about the nature of work and the nature of women and our counselling theories and practices must change. Counsellors must learn to facilitate career planning with re-entry women who have experienced the psychological inhibition of their talents and aspirations.

The mid-life crisis has been described as the middle phase of adulthood, the years from 35-60, the transition from young adulthood to old age (Sheehy, 1976). The average Canadian woman has her last child in school by the time she is 37 years old (Statistics Canada, 1975). This period of middle motherhood may be characterized by reduced demands on her time and energy and the pressures of advancing age. A woman who until her mid-thirties has subverted her own needs and interests to those of other family members may

experience feelings of worthlessness and incapability when she considers the remaining 37 years of her life stretching before her. After spending several years tending to family needs, a woman may not be aware of or ready to take advantage of opportunities which exist to achieve success outside the homemaker role.

CULTURAL MYTHS

Recently I attended a conference where several colleagues and I were asked to address issues on career counselling to an audience of employers, counsellors, and other interested persons who involve themselves in the vocational lives of Canadian youth. Present in one of the small group activities I chaired was an elderly school trustee who supposedly had the wisdom of many years experience in the community, with children, and in the work force. This gentleman related to the group his distress about how contemporary values were changing. He told us of a young couple he knew with one small child. The husband was enjoying an important position for which he earned \$40,000 a year. The wife also worked and we were told was earning around \$20,000 a year. "Why", asked the school trustee, "should this woman take a job away from a man when she could be amply provided for by her husband?" Implied in the man's tone of voice also was the judgment that a woman should stay home with her child. What I heard in this older

man's questioning were our cultural sex-role stereotypes: work is male, masculine, for men, and when women work, it is supplementary, secondary and marginal. Indeed, when women desire to achieve self-identity, success, and satisfaction in the world of work they often meet discrimination. Women may be considered unmotivated and poorly equipped because the energy they have devoted in the past to their families is not valued; they may be offered only low-paying, low-status jobs; and they may be blamed for national unemployment.

A recent representative sample survey of nearly 1,000 Canadian university students (Sutherland, 1978) documented the nonsupportive work environment many women face. A central question of the survey asked whether men and women are potentially equally able to make important decisions in business, politics, and the professions. Forty percent of the men and 26 percent of the women said that men are more able, that to be female is to be inferior. The question was straightforward and one might assume that social pressure would favor an egalitarian reply. Yet almost half of the group of educated men believed that women are not even potentially equally talented working mates. One of four female university students accepts the idea that neither she nor her peers are potential equals of men.

COUNSELLING THEORY

An assumption underlying the major theories of personal and career development is that there is an order and system to people's lives. However, the vocational lives of women often are discontinuous and do not fit neatly into existing theories. A critique of two well-accepted developmental theories, those of Donald Super and Abraham Maslow, illustrates how the experience of a mature woman may differ with standard counselling theory.

Donald Super's (1957) theory of vocational development rests on the formulation and implementation of one's self-concept. According to Super's ideas, life satisfaction results from experiencing the role in life which evolves from adolescent expectations and hopes as well as expressing one's unique talents, traits and values. For women the development and actualization of a self-concept may be in conflict with traditional feminine socialization. Although the homemaker role may allow women to play out what they learned was appropriate for women, this singular occupational role cannot encompass the variety of abilities and interests which women possess. If men were confined to one occupational role, many of them might feel frustrated because their unique selves were not being challenged, stimulated and developed.

In a society where the major goal for women has been marriage, concepts in the field of career development have had little to say about the female. Although the quantity of research on women's occupational lives is sparse, it can be assumed that the female reaction to job dissatisfaction parallels the reaction of the more-investigated male. That is, underemployed women experience fatigue, monotony, and emotional stress (Crites, 1969). In their middle years when their children are more independent, women look to develop new commitments to establish a self-identity or to maintain a positive self-concept.

Maslow (1970) outlined a hierarchy of personal needs from physiological to self-actualization through which he believed an individual progressed. As Harmon (1977) pointed out, this hierarchy of human needs may not work for women in our contemporary society. For example, women often have their needs for food, shelter and safety provided by a man. Since women have not been expected to meet these needs, many women (and men) do not believe that women are capable of caring for themselves. Maslow's need hierarchy continues through the desire for belongingness and love to self-actualization. For women the needs to belong and feel loved may often be opposed to needs for self-esteem and actualization. Although men are often loved and esteemed for their work, women find that in a society where work is viewed as male, their interest in careers may conflict with their desire to be liked and approved. "Be smart, but not too smart" is an early learning for some bright girls. These girls are encouraged in their intellectual pursuits to a point and then admonished not to let on concerning their abilities lest they jeopardize their chances for male support and approval. After all, men traditionally do not marry women who are superior to them. In later years bright women may compromise self-identity and esteem in order to achieve esteem from others.

What is crucial to the psychological development of women and the continued evolution of counselling theory is the belief and promotion in a new cultural assumption that women have the right to achieve success outside the home, and indeed, are to be esteemed and rewarded for doing so. Only then will women formulate career plans which fulfill their needs for self-actualization and not interfere with the personal growth of men who may find having to support others a debilitating or inhibiting strain.

COUNSELLING PRACTICE

Traditionally counsellors have taken a prescriptive attitude toward the mature, re-entry

woman who comes to counselling without a strong sense of identity. Acceptance of women's lack of identity as "natural" has led counsellors to continue the streaming of females into sex-typed, low-paying jobs (Bingham & House, 1973); Schlossberg & Pietrofesa, 1973; Thomas & Stewart, 1971). As current developmental and counselling theories reflect current career development, so too, future theories may reflect social change. Present theories emphasize homemaking for women and single track careers for men. Counsellors may want to consider life-span job market participation for women and interrupted or double track careers for men. Few young Canadian women realize that over half of them will work full-time for up to thirty years (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1976) and that their experience and energies spent in the roles of wife and mother may not be valued by employers.

Effective planning to meet individual career and personal goals begins with self-exploration. Women who have not been encouraged to explore beyond the homemaker role must be facilitated to increase their personal awareness and discover their unique interests and values. They need information about work and education to develop their own goals. For too long, women (and men) have been encouraged to fulfill goals appropriate to their sex rather than discover their own wants and potentials. Through this search for self may come the strength to esteem oneself rather than seek others' approval.

One of the most potent counselling interventions in career counselling for women is role reversal fantasy where the home-career conflict and the influence of significant men is decreased. "What would you do if you were a man? Where would you want or expect to be?" These questions as well as directed fantasies which eliminate sex-role restrictions and encourage expanded exploration have empirical support in the counselling literature (Farmer & Bohn, 1970; Hawley, 1971). The mature woman may re-enter the developmental stage which Super has called the exploration stage to explore, first in fantasy and then in reality, a newly-found self-identity.

Women can be encouraged to meet their own physiological and safety needs through job training and skill training in areas such as assertion and self-defense. But training is not enough. Attention must be paid to women's internalized doubts and fears. Counsellors who understand the contemporary cultural myths concerning male and female roles recognize that the labour force has been organized primarily for men with women taking a supportive, secondary position. When women present themselves to the counsellor as frustrated, angry or confused, they are expressing feelings associated with playing

passive and marginal roles (Chesler, 1972). Counsellors who expect and accept these feelings in female clients can help to begin the necessary process of exploration.

Consciousness raising is a beneficial method which can raise women's esteem and provide support for individual and group change (Brodsky, 1977). The promotion of an understanding of women's economic, political, and historical position in society encourages an understanding of the individual's past and current psychological situation. A counsellor who values the richness of women's talents and perspectives will help clients examine their concerns and express their desires.

Career counselling is not satisfied when a woman's subsistence needs are met. A job with which to support oneself need not stop a woman from continuing to work toward future goals of self-actualization. Another step in women's career development is the resolution of personal conflicts between female achievement and cultural beliefs in women's rights and capacity to full participation in the world of work. The awareness and discovery of conflicts involved in meeting needs for love and success can help a woman separate short- and long-term goals. It is not important that all women choose to work; many may not. But all women deserve the opportunity for self-exploration and conflict resolution which build self-acceptance and self-support (Kahn & Greenberg, in press).

Counsellors have a central role in developing and releasing women's untapped resources and potentials through direct contact with female clients and intervention for social change with educators and employers. Counsellors who recognize the societal and environmental determinants of women's feelings of powerlessness have a great deal to offer the mature woman who wants the chance to achieve success and contribute to Canadian society. Mature women need to explore the world of work, to resolve conflicts about achievement, to develop self-identities, and to implement their individual dreams. The transition from full-time mother to successful achiever outside the home can be facilitated by the counsellor who is aware of the psychological barriers facing mature women.

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