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# Career Development For Women:

counteracting the mid-life crisis

Although much attention has been devoted to the stages of child and adolescent development, only in recent years have psychiatrists and psychologists conducted studies on the phases of adult development. David Gutmann, a University of Michigan psychologist, has suggested that there are three phases of adulthood: young adulthood, from 21 to 35; mature adulthood, from 35 to 60; and old age, from 60 until death. The transition from young adulthood to mature adulthood, the "mid-life crisis," may be as difficult a time as adolescence.<sup>1</sup> Similar findings come from Kenn Rogers, who discusses the "mid-career crisis":

... at some point between the ages of thirty and thirty-nine most people undergo a crisis in the course of which profound changes occur in the individual's relations to himself or herself and to his or her external environment.<sup>2</sup>

In her *New York Magazine* article, "Catch 30," Gail Sheehy maintains that between the ages of 29 and 32 most people, men and women, feel restricted and want to make some changes in their lives. Those in domestic roles want a career; those with careers want domestic life. People who are still in school want some work experience; people who have been working want to go back to school.<sup>3</sup>

## the mid-life crisis for homemakers

It is not hard to see why many women do experience a very real, often painful, crisis of identity in their thirties. The majority of women marry and have children during their young adulthood. In the early years of marriage and motherhood a woman's energy may well be absorbed in the domestic activities which she role-played as a child and dreamed of as an adolescent. The fulfillment that today's woman finds in the traditional role of homemaker is apt to diminish, however, with the passage of time. Once her last child has entered school, a woman may find that decreased demands on her time and energy leave her feeling useless and dissatisfied. Esther Westervelt has

documented the correlation between the rapid succession of role changes characteristic of maternal women and the decrease in self-esteem which seems to occur as women feel less needed by their maturing families.<sup>4</sup>

In her thirties, then, a woman who has devoted herself solely or primarily to homemaking and mothering has an identity problem for two reasons. The mothering skills which she has developed over the years are less and less necessary to her family; thus, she is increasingly deprived of the satisfaction afforded by her role as mother. At the same time, the ten or more years that she has spent in the home have caused a decline in her vocational skills and, usually, a loss of confidence in her ability to survive in the competitive world of work. Thus, the mid-life crisis for such a woman is usually characterized by feelings of worthlessness and incapability. Since, as career counselors today generally agree, career development involves both the formulation and the implementation of a self-concept, any such reduction in self-concept is detrimental to a woman's vocational development.

Donald Super, in his vocational development theory, states that satisfaction in life depends on a person's success in finding a work situation and way of life which allow him to play the kind of role which the exploratory experiences of his adolescence have led him to consider appropriate. The majority of women do fill the homemaker role which they have looked forward to throughout childhood and adolescence. However, Super also maintains that one's life satisfactions "depend upon the extent to which the individual finds adequate outlets for his abilities, interests, personality traits, and values."<sup>5</sup> These two dicta, for many women, seem to be in conflict. Playing the traditional feminine role is often the culmination of a woman's lifelong expectations and hopes, and yet the narrow confines of this one occupational role obviously do not allow adequate outlets for the variety of abilities, interests and personality traits that individual women possess. If men were channeled into the same occupational role, certainly many of them would feel dissatisfied because their own unique abilities and talents were not being used. It should not be surprising that the same principle holds true for women.

Many women, especially those who have devoted themselves almost exclusively to household chores and child rearing, have neglected many aspects of their intellectual and creative potential.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, as they pass from young adulthood to mature adulthood, many women are impelled to make up a deficit in their vocational development and to search for their own unique identities, based on their particular talents and capabilities rather than on the feminine role. What they are actually doing, according to Super's paradigm,

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is going through a delayed Exploratory Stage of vocational development, which most boys experience between the ages of 15 and 24.

### **counteracting the mid-life crisis**

Since the early 1960's there has been an expanding number of women's counseling centers and continuing education programs. These programs reflect the growing awareness of the particular problems that women face in coping with a mid-life identity crisis.

The women who come to a counseling center are from all classes and educational backgrounds, but the majority are middle-class housewives and mothers. Barbara Cook, counselor at the Claremont Center for Continuing Education, distinguishes two different ways that such women make use of counselors. Some women seek information about the world of jobs and education, and help in dealing with that world. Other women are basically seeking self-knowledge, asking for help in understanding themselves and their inner complexities.

A substantial number come for counseling because, due to recent divorce or separation, they expect to provide the chief financial support for their children. The others are looking forward to the next life-stage when children will no longer occupy the major portion of their time and energy.<sup>7</sup>

For many women, however, planning for the second half of their lives will involve both self-exploration and exploration of the external world of education and work. Educational institutions sponsor a variety of programs designed to help women with this exploratory process. The Continuing Education College of Syracuse University, for example, offers a program of noncredit Courses for Personal Development which includes two courses for women. Both "Who Am I? Where Am I Going?" and "Women in Transition: Life-Planning and Career Decisions" are self-development courses which help a woman to explore and appreciate her own unique identity and to come to some conclusions about what she wants to do with the rest of her life.<sup>8</sup>

"Finding a Focus" is the title of a group counseling program which the Counseling Center at Hartford College for Women sponsors for interested alumnae. Groups of seven to fourteen women meet for four two-hour sessions, usually once a week, and are actively involved in self-assessment, the setting of long- and short-term goals, and decision-making techniques. In the informal group sessions, women gain confidence from each other and are reassured to learn that there are others who are not sure of their directions in life. In addition, they are taught to investigate career fields by using the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* and the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* and by doing individual research on job opportunities in the

area. Ideally, by the last session each woman has set a tentative goal for herself and has developed an action plan to achieve that goal. At the end of six months the groups may reassemble to review each member's progress.<sup>9</sup>

The special problem that counselors need to be aware of with middle-aged women is succinctly noted by Nancy K. Schlossberg:

Women, like all groups whose vocational development has been arrested, need special help in stretching, in raising their aspiration level . . . women should be helped to free themselves to dream. The goal is to develop human beings who are free to act in ways that are appropriate to their interests and their values — not their sex.<sup>10</sup>

## **recommendations**

It is not enough for counselors of women simply to do career counseling, to help women raise their aspirations and find their own unique identities. If women are to have equal opportunity to implement their self-concepts, they must not be discriminated against in the educational and vocational worlds, as they now are. Counselors need to work actively for social and institutional changes which will make it feasible for women who are homemakers to have satisfying careers outside the home. The following changes would facilitate this goal.

### *(1) Changes in Higher Education*

- (a) Universities need to allow women to pursue part-time graduate or undergraduate work, and to support them both financially and with student personnel services designed to meet the special needs of mature women.
- (b) The university should hire both married and unmarried women as part of its professional staff and actively work to eliminate the discrimination against women in academia which has been so widely documented in recent years — so that women will no longer be concentrated in the lower ranks of the teaching and administrative staff.
- (c) The hiring of wives and husbands together should be encouraged, rather than restricted.
- (d) All members of the university community should be offered the option of part-time work; in this way the university could serve as a model for business and industry. The advantages to the academic community would be greater diversity of courses and instructors, more time available for research and writing, less staleness, fatigue, and boredom.
- (e) Cooperative day care for children of all ages, from all segments of the university community, should be provided. Ideally, men and women of all ages and vocational roles should share in the care of the community children.

(f) An adequate and formal program of continuing education for women should be instituted. Departments should be urged to hold classes in the late afternoons, evenings, and on Saturday mornings. Courses in Women's Studies should be encouraged in all departments, and an interdepartmental major in Women's Studies should be established.

(g) New guidelines need to be accepted for transfer credits, course prerequisites, credit for off-campus study and work experience.

(b) External degree programs, such as New York's Empire State College, need to be developed throughout the country. Such programs meet the needs of young mothers by utilizing television instruction, correspondence courses, video cassettes, apprenticeships, independent study, and qualifying examinations.

(i) The university needs actively to recruit women for the traditionally masculine fields, such as medicine, dentistry, law, business administration, engineering, mathematics, and science.

### (2) *Changes in Industry*

(a) The traditional nine-to-five working day is a hardship for working mothers; industry needs to experiment with more flexible working hours for both men and women.

(b) More part-time work needs to be available, especially in the professions, so that the professional woman can advance in her career while she is raising her children. A pilot program in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare successfully developed a number of high-level part-time jobs for mathematicians, economists, and statisticians. Recently France and Sweden have passed legislation enabling men and women to work part-time for up to ten years without loss of status, seniority, or fringe benefits. This option would allow women to keep their skills updated and would facilitate re-entry into the labor market on a full-time basis.

(c) Day-care, recreational, and residential centers need to be located near places of work. (As Betty Friedan pointed out in 1963, bowling alleys and supermarkets have nursery facilities, while schools and colleges, scientific laboratories, and government offices do not.)

(d) Jobs and professions not traditionally considered "feminine" need to be open to women. Industry needs to take "affirmative action" on this area of sexual discrimination, as the United States law now requires.

(e) Paid maternity leave should be available for working women.

### (3) *Changes in Social Attitudes*

Although changing social attitudes is a long-term project, counselors need to work toward this goal and can do so in a number of ways:

(a) Sex-role stereotypes and myths about women can be counteracted with facts. Continued research needs to be done on many

questions involving women and work, stereotypical attitudes, how successful women manage to combine work with motherhood, and career patterns for women.

(b) Counselors need to examine their own attitudes closely to see what residual sexist assumptions they may find in themselves. Studies have shown that both male and female counselors unwittingly harbor discriminatory beliefs about women.

(c) Group counseling sessions, for women's groups, men's groups, or mixed groups, can focus on the issue of changing sex roles.

(d) Counselors can publicize the facts about current employment patterns of women and the changing role of women today by speaking and writing on the subject.

(e) Counselors can conduct conferences, workshops, seminars, and adult education courses on such topics as "Career Development in a Changing Society"; "Eliminating Sex Bias in Schools"; "Women and Work"; and "Sex Roles in a Changing Society."

In sum, counselors can help women to counteract the mid-life crisis in a number of ways: by supplying them with educational and occupational information, by aiding them in the development of their own identities and self-concepts, by helping them to expand their horizons, and by working for social changes which will eliminate all forms of discrimination on the basis of sex, and thus allow women to implement their dreams.

## references

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