

Priscilla David-Kredl
Concordia University

Women's Higher Education: A dilemma of choices

Abstract

This article deals with a number of factors which pressure contemporary women into selecting academic programs traditionally dominated by males. Motivated by the goals of higher financial rewards, status, and power, women who prepare themselves for nontraditional occupations and lifestyles were found in this research to be more likely than women in traditional occupations to remain unmarried and/or childless. The findings also show that women who select the more traditional academic programs tend to accept the traditional roles and lifestyles supported by societal norms.

Résumé

Cet article traite d'un certain nombre de facteurs qui poussent les femmes d'aujourd'hui à choisir des programmes d'études traditionnellement réservés aux hommes. Motivées par l'appât de gains financiers et d'un statut social plus élevés et de pouvoirs accrus, les femmes qui se préparent à des professions et des modes de vie non traditionnels ont plus de chances de rester célibataires et (ou) sans enfant. L'auteur de cette étude conclut que les femmes qui optent pour des programmes universitaires classiques acceptent plus facilement les rôles et les modes de vie traditionnels reconnus par la société.

Between 1970 and 1980 there was an 88% increase in the number of women obtaining university degrees in law, medicine, business, and other traditionally male-typed fields, while, correspondingly, the number of women entering teaching, childcare, nursing, and other traditionally female-typed fields rose by only 1.4% (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989). This apparent trend by women to seek the higher salaried and more prestigious positions generally occupied by men was further substantiated by enrollment statistics from four Canadian universities having graduate programs in business administration. In 1967, of the universities surveyed, only Queen's University had a female Master's of Business Administration (MBA) graduate, while the three remaining business schools averaged about four women by 1973. Present graduate enrollment figures range from 31% – 38% reflecting a dramatic increase for women in these institutions (David-Kredl, personal communication).

There are a number of possible explanations as to why this phenomenon of women entering nontraditional male occupations is occurring throughout North America. Some studies have identified the high rate of divorce, economic necessity, and changing technology as prime factors (Eichler, 1983; Labour Canada, 1984; Phillips & Phillips, 1983). For example, a female graduate student who recently enrolled in a history program states that she is unable to see any employment opportunities following completion of a Master's degree in history, and is considering transferring into another program, such as business administration. She is also in the midst of a divorce.

After being a homemaker for 16 years, she is now expected to become the sole breadwinner for her two teenaged children despite the fact that her marketable skills have become obsolete. While she was married her career goals were focussed on those fields traditionally occupied by women as a means of supplementing the family income; but now this alternative is no longer viable. As a mother heading a single-parent family, she explains that her prime concern is economic survival: "I cannot manage on a salary of \$18,000–\$20,000."

It is a fact that female-typed occupations generally have had less pay, less power, and less prestige than male-typed occupations (Dexter, 1985; Kanter, 1977; Treiman & Hartman, 1981). But it is also a reality that the number of single-parent families in Canada has nearly doubled in the decade from 1971 to 1981, rising from 477,525 to 714,005, and that 85% of the single-parent families are headed by women (Abella, 1984). The increasing incidence of women selecting business options in education indicates that they are beginning to recognize the need for financial autonomy and are pursuing degrees, such as an MBA or other similar ones, in order to achieve it.

Rapid social changes since the rise of the Women's Movement have greatly increased the educational options and have, therefore, enhanced career opportunities available to women in general and university graduates in particular. In addition, there have been significant attitudinal and cultural value reversals regarding married women and mothers employed in the labour force. For example, in 1938, 75% of people surveyed in a public opinion poll reported that they were opposed to married women working outside the home. In 1978, however, half a century later, only 25% of the respondents surveyed held this opinion (Mencke & Hummel, 1984). Today, there are more career choices and more support for women trying various nontraditional careers than ever before.

In general, however, beginning at a very early age, girls are socialized quite differently from boys by parents, the media, society, and even schools (Healy, 1982). Whereas boys are encouraged to take mathematics and science courses, girls are frequently discouraged from taking sufficient numbers of these courses; this has serious consequences for women entering university. Three-quarters of the university majors require mathematics and science as prerequisite subjects, and, therefore, many programs are not open to large numbers of students who lack this academic profile. Hence, a surplus of females continues to be clustered in the traditional arts faculty, leading to overcrowding in teaching and other service occupations. The result is that women have excluded themselves from careers in science and management (Healy, 1982).

Historically women have attained financial security through marriage. Numerous women in all faculties continue to reveal ambivalent and inconsistent career decisions, which are manifested by avoiding the issue of which educational options will provide them with better employment skills (Abella, 1984; Sundal-Hansen, 1987). Generally speaking, women also tend to have lower confidence levels and career aspirations than do men (Frenza, 1982; Strober, 1982). The lack of preparation and indecision surrounding career planning by women frequently results in frustration, confusion, and anxiety. Since four out of every ten marriages in Canada end in divorce, and considering the rapid changes in technology, it becomes increasingly evident that women can no longer depend on permanence in either a marriage or a career.

Educators and counsellors must recognize, encourage, and support a woman's basic need for achievement, mastery, competence, and confidence which finds expression in a career. An equally vital but conflicting need is for a woman to fulfil her traditional role as wife and mother, as not all the needs that women have can be met in the work force. Therefore, a woman's career development, and life planning, although somewhat similar to a man's, is more complex.

Graduate women who have opted for business programs are reaping the benefits of the early success of the feminist movement whose lobbying members pressured governments to enact new labour laws. These women's groups succeeded in having women's rights incorporated within the Canadian Constitution in 1982 (Phillips & Phillips, 1983). Other advances have been made in expanded day-care facilities, approaching equal pay for equal work, and reformed family law (Abella, 1984; Phillips & Phillips, 1983). Women now have greater flexibility in sex roles; and there are, as well, many more female role models in the labour market.

However, there is also evidence that the ambitions of the business women in the eighties have caused them to reap a grim harvest. Their success in a career often means failure in interpersonal relationships. Disappointment and disillusionment are evidenced, creating stress and uncertainty for these women today (Bernard, 1985).

There must be certain factors in combination for graduate-level career women which contribute to the startling number of divorces occurring today. The literature reviewed in the following sections suggests that some of these factors include power, education, income, and occupational level.

Power

One way that the employment of women affects a family is by altering the economic balance. The career wife who earns as much money as her mate may thereby equalize the resources of the couple, thus altering the power structure. Blood and Wolfe (1960) suggest that when a woman's power increases, relatively speaking, the husband's decreases, causing ambivalence, anxiety, conflict, or all three. Because the contemporary work roles of men and women have changed so much, men and women are potential equals in terms of power. It is no longer possible to assume that just because someone is a male, he is the dominant spouse.

Sociologists claim that the modern husband and wife are so equal in power that marriage today can be termed "democratic," "equalitarian," or "egalitarian." However, there is good evidence to show that the balance of power is still, in reality, tipped the same way it has always been and that "the best man is seldom a woman" (Gillespie, 1972).

Income level

Other research studies (Hardesty & Betz, 1980) have indicated that the income level achieved is an important factor contributing to the correlation between work and marital satisfaction. Gillespie (1972) stated that traditionally real power has an economic base in marriage: The higher

the status, occupation, and income level, the greater the husband's voice in marital decisions.

Highly educated women who earn a higher income than their husbands and who are more committed than their husbands to their careers can, however, alter the balance of power in a marriage, especially if they control the couple's finances and make decisions on how money is handled. Financial security and increased earnings do have their risks as well as their benefits for women. For every \$1000 increase in a wife's income, the possibility of divorce increases by two percent (Parker, Peltier, & Wolleat, 1981). It is possible that greater financial independence leads to a greater willingness to terminate an unsatisfactory marriage (Glenn & Weaver, 1978; Larwood, Radford, & Berger, 1980; Moore & Rickel, 1980).

Education and occupation level

Numerous studies conducted about graduate women and the occupational level they achieved revealed several negative consequences. A study by Houseknecht and Macke (1981) cautioned women, especially those who had completed five years of university or more, that they might experience higher separation and divorce rates than even those women who had completed a bachelor's degree should they marry, while studies by Parsons (1943), Pearlin (1975), and Schwartz (1987) focussed on the disruptiveness to the marriage if the wife's occupational role equaled or exceeded that of the husband. According to Schwartz (1987), "it is a blow to a man's masculine pride, sense of self-esteem and is gender threatening." Little, however, is written about the amount of threat experienced by a male's dependency or the degree of a female's discomfort about her economic dominance. Rossi (1977) claimed that if a husband found it difficult to adjust to the fact that his wife was no longer financially dependent on him, it would be even more difficult for him to accept her success at work if it threatened his own position of prestige and power as provider. The second threat to a husband's self-esteem would then come if the wife achieved a higher status occupational level than he did.

Traditional and nontraditional work

Philliber and Hiller (1983), in a U.S. National Longitudinal Survey, found that women engaged in work that was sex-stereotyped male are more likely to get divorced, to leave the labour market, or to move to a lower status position than those engaged in female sex-stereotyped work. They concluded that a woman's employment in a nontraditional occupation was the greatest predictor of change in marital status, and that it was of much greater significance than status inconsistency in the marriage. Other studies (Hennig & Jardim, 1977; Keown & Keown, 1982) also found that women

in powerful positions in organizations tended to be disproportionately divorced, single, and childless. It has been well established that traditional work fields for women are saturated and have substantially fewer opportunities for advancement (Hill, 1980; McLaughlin, 1978). It is therefore understandable why more women are entering occupations traditionally stereotyped as male and are using the MBA and other professional degrees as a vehicle in order to attain this goal. Hellmich (1987) summarized why 83% of those women who work in male-dominated fields are happy and have no regrets about their career choice. The reason they gave was: more "bucks," more respect.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was two-fold: 1) to determine why some university women graduates chose to pursue a career in the business world while others abandoned their career goals for marriage and homemaking, and 2) how satisfied each group reported they felt with their respective lifestyles.

Subjects

The random sample consisted of a total of 58 English-speaking subjects between the ages of 28 and 60, and included a number of different ethnic groups. Twenty-eight MBA graduate women comprised the nontraditional career-pathed women's group.

The criteria for their selection included (a) completion of a minimum of five years of business training, such as an MBA, (b) full-time employment in a traditionally male-typed occupation at a managerial level, (c) earning a minimum salary of \$30,000, (d) married or having been married, and (e) living with a significant other, or having a relationship with another person.

The criteria for the random selection of the 30 traditional or homemaker's group were (a) attendance at a university for at least one year and/or the acquisition of some additional training, such as teaching or nursing beyond secondary school, (b) employment in a salaried position for a maximum of 20 hours weekly, and (c) marriage to a spouse earning at least \$35,000 annually. The data for this study were obtained through the use of an information sheet, two instruments, and interviews.

Instruments

The *FIRO Marital Attitude Evaluation* (MATE) inventory, developed by Schutz in 1976 (see Schutz, 1958), was administered to each subject as well as a 9-page questionnaire. Interviews were conducted with three women from each sample who represented diverse points of view.

The FIRO MATE consists of separate assessments of a couple's inclusion feelings and behaviour, control feelings and behaviour, and affection. This instrument was primarily used to explore the relationships between two people who have close contact with each other.

The 9-page questionnaire was constructed and tested for use in compiling data for this study. It contained direct and open-ended questions, the ranking of factors, and also the personal opinions and advice that the respondents would give to their daughters when they achieve 25 years of age. (Only a portion of the material is reported in this article.)

The interviews were arranged when 75% of the questionnaires had been returned and evaluated. Semi-structured hour-long interviews were conducted with a total of six of the respondents – three traditional and three nontraditional women. The data were taped with permission and the tapes were then transcribed.

Description of the Sample

Tables 1 through 3 describe the distribution of the sample by education, marital status, and the number of children each group had. The 28 women who have graduated with an MBA are the nontraditional women in this sample. They are depicted as nontraditional because they are all presently employed in a full-time traditionally male-dominated occupation.

The second sample of women is a group of 30 housewives who have chosen to make homemaking their full-time career. None of these university educated women is presently employed outside the home for more than 20 hours; this group is called the traditional women in the sample.

Table 2 shows that 52% of the nontraditional group are presently married compared to 97% of the traditional group. Of the MBA graduates, 48% are in committed relationships. For the purposes of this study, no distinction is made between being married and being in a committed relationship. Hence the number of subjects in both groups considered "married" are nearly equal.

In Table 3, 75% of the career women have no children, and even 40% of the married women in this nontraditional sample are childless. There was a total of 14 children in the MBA sample with an average of .5 per woman, compared to 77 children among the homemakers who averaged 2.6 children per woman.

Table 1
Educational Level

Nontraditional	Degree	Traditional
	Bachelor's	17
	Diploma	6
28	Master's	7

Table 2
Marital Status

Nontraditional		Traditional
14	Married Once	25
1	Married Twice	4
6	Divorced	4
7	Significant Other	1

Table 3
Number of Children

Nontraditional		Traditional
19	None	1
6	One	2
2	Two	13
0	Three	10
1	Four	2
0	Five	1
0	Six	1

Results

Career women

Based on the data received from the questionnaires and interviews, career women generally had greater assertiveness, confidence, decision-making skills, and financial autonomy than did the homemakers. In addition, since 48% of these respondents were not legally married, they also had greater control and negotiating power over many facets of their financial lives. What became increasingly obvious was that attitudes are not keeping pace with the reality of lifestyles in the 1980s. Although these women had gained a modicum of approval from their mates/spouses, they were still in need of acceptance from a society that provides few role models, guidelines, or support structures for their emerging lifestyles.

Homemakers

This study indicated that the housewives felt the new social pressure to pursue a career, but, for many of them, this meant defying their husbands and losing status if they decided to enter the labour force. Their traditionally female-typed jobs would be regarded as an inappropriate activity and detract from the status of their husbands. It would also appear that these are more accommodating women who had been willing to give up power because they wanted to please their dominant husbands who had provided extremely well for them. Wives in these marriages had little to gain and much to lose by opposing their high-achieving spouses. Furthermore, these wives were professionally important to promoting and supporting the careers of their husbands by entertaining clients and by accompanying their spouses to company functions.

Conclusions

The basic conclusion reached in this study, based on all the data compiled from the 9-page questionnaire and interviews was that business training, such as that at the MBA level, can be a definite factor in leading females into nontraditional occupations and lifestyles. These female business executives tend to adopt masculine career paths and cultural values. They frequently view domestic roles as less important than do housewives, are more achievement oriented, and are more likely to remain childless. These career women are seen as defying gender role socialization which places them at variance with existing cultural norms. The traditional sample of women, who graduated with liberal arts degrees, or female-typed training, have fewer and lower career aspirations, are more responsive to external pressures, and tend to select temporary female-typed occupations, such as teaching or nursing, until they marry and/or have children – at which point

they abandon their careers. This study supports the findings of research studies conducted by Moore and Rickel (1980) and Ragins and Sundstrom (1989) who found that women in female-typed occupations tend to enact traditional female roles. They have more children and consider domestic roles as more important than do women in male-typed occupations.

This study also illustrated that it is not the level or number of years of education that a female has but the content or the specific training she selected which can contribute to career committedness and to marriage breakdown. This conclusion may be drawn from examining the content of the education of the two groups of women studied in Table 1.

There was a price to be paid by the career women both for breaking the barriers to domains reserved for the privileged males, and also for putting in jeopardy societal norms which do not reward women for resisting the traditional female patterns of early marriage and childbearing. Despite the youth of many of the career committed women in this sample, 21% had already been divorced – even prior to having had children – reflecting a very new trend which is beginning to occur among such women with highly specialized training (Halpern, 1987).

When asked about their respective lifestyles in the questionnaire and interviews, both samples felt they had sacrificed something: the traditional wives gave up their career goals for marriage and family; the nontraditional women gave up their homemaking goals of husband and/or children. This premature relinquishing of both kinds of goals created potential difficulties for both groups of women: 27% were coerced into abandoning important goals either through circumstances, or were persuaded by their higher educated or better established husbands to give them up; 17% of the homemakers had regrets that they had not pursued or fought for their career goals earlier; and another 17% even tried to enter the job market once their children had grown up – only to discover that their skills were obsolete, oversupplied, and unrewarded. If these women were to retrain they would still lag ten years behind men their own age in a career field. Fifteen percent of the homemaking wives reported that over the years they had eventually adjusted by developing other interests, such as serving on committees, doing volunteer work, or playing sports; but 77% focussed their attention primarily on educating their children and maintaining their marriages and homes in the best possible manner.

Although 79-86% of all the women researched ranked their lifestyle as very good or excellent, each mode had decided disadvantages. The career women experienced a lack of spousal support and complained of continuing tension and stress, while the homemakers suffered bouts of loneliness and experienced social isolation.

Both of the groups studied felt that they had to make very difficult decisions and sacrifices throughout their lives. The homemakers stated that they had lost a portion of their freedom when they gave up their careers for their husbands and/or children; the career women claimed that they had sacrificed either their relationship and/or chance of having children for a career.

More attention needs to be given to external structural and situational problems which affect career committed women today. There are few cultural models or normative guidelines for resolving the special problems that more and more highly educated women are facing. Traditional attitudes and cultural values are slow to change.

The difficulty is how to achieve a workable balance between these two opposing drives. If a female marries too early – before she has the opportunity to establish herself in a career or even to develop clear-cut goals – she attempts to resolve her other needs for achievement by living vicariously through her husband or sons.

Should a woman become a high achiever with substantial responsibility in a career without forming a relationship, she may pay a high price for her success. Sheehy (1974) describes a well-adjusted woman as an "integrator." This is a female who has been able to achieve a satisfactory balance between career and family. Numerous recent studies have confirmed that dual track lifestyles for women can work and be tremendously rewarding.

Therefore, women are capable of wearing different hats at different times with varying degrees of satisfaction, but this would not necessarily be the choice of all women. Most of the sample in this study felt that combining career and family would require a delicate and difficult balancing act. The homemakers, in particular, stated that they would be unable to handle both roles effectively without considerable stress. The analysis of the results of this study have clearly shown one common characteristic to have emerged, a characteristic which would point to a further need for comprehensive career counseling and the preparation of graduating students at all levels. Both samples of women studied wanted the freedom to choose a lifestyle which encompassed some balance of all three components – career, relationship, and children – in order to feel truly self-fulfilled. Considering the importance of educational options which determine a possible career path, with its implications, it is imperative that career planning becomes an integral part of every university student's program, in order to avoid the sadness and regret of a choice whose consequences may be difficult to change, or may even be irreversible.

REFERENCES

- Abella, R.S. (1984). *Equality in employment* (A Royal Commission Report). Ottawa: Canadian Government Publishing Centre.
- Bernard, J. (1982). *The future of marriage*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Bernard, J. (1985). College women in a changing society. In N.J. Evans, *Facilitating the development of women* (pp. 5-8). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Blood, R.O., & Wolfe, D.M. (1960). *Husbands and wives: The dynamics of married lives*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- David-Kredl, P. (1988). *Quality of life and contemporary women*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Walden University, Minneapolis.
- David-Kredl, P. (1989, February). Personal communication. (Enrollment figures in MBA programs: Concordia, Dalhousie, McGill, and Queen's.)
- Dexter, C.R. (1985). Women and the exercise of power in organizations: From ascribed to achieved status. In L. Larwood, A.H. Stromberg, & B.A. Gutek (Editors), *Women and work. Vol. 1: An annual review* (pp. 239-258). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Eichler, M. (1983). *Families in Canada today: Recent changes in their policy consequences*. Toronto: Gage.
- Frenza, Mary. (1982). *Counseling women for life decisions*. Ann Arbor, MI: ERIC Counseling and Personnel Services Clearinghouse.
- Gillespie, D.L. (1976). Who has the power?: The marital struggle (pp. 192-211). In S. Cox, *Female psychology*. Chicago: Science Research Associates.
- Glenn, N.D., & Weaver, C.N. (1978). A multivariate, multisurvey study of marital happiness. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 40, 269-282.
- Halpern, H. (1987, November 9). If he loves her, why won't he agree to a baby? *Montreal Gazette*, p. B-10.
- Hardesty, S.A., & Betz, N.E. (1980). The relationships of career salience, attitudes towards women, and demographic and family characteristics to marital adjustment in dual-career families. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, 17(2), 242-250.
- Healy, C.C. (1982). *Career development*. New York: Allyn & Bacon.
- Hellmich, N. (1987, September 22). *U.S.A. Today*.
- Hennig, M., & Jardim, A. (1977). *The managerial woman*. New York: Pocket Books.
- Hill, M.S. (1980). Authority at work: How men and women differ. In G.J. Duncan & J.N. Morgan (Editors), *Five thousand American families: Patterns of economic progress*. Vol. 7. (pp. 107-146). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research.
- Houseknecht, S.K., & Macke, A.S. (1981). Combining marriage and career: The marital adjustment of professional women. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 43(3), 651-661.
- Kanter, R.M. (1977). *Men and women of the corporation*. New York: Basic Books.

- Keown, C.F., Jr., & Keown, A.L. (1982). Success factors for corporate woman executives. *Group and Organization Studies*, 7(4), 445-456.
- Labour Canada. (1984). L-24-1248/84B. Ottawa: Canadian Government Publishing House.
- Larwood, L., Radford, L.M., & Berger, D. (1980). Do job tactics predict success? A comparison of female with male executives in 14 corporations. *Academy of Management Proceedings* (pp. 386-390). Detroit, MI: Academy of Management.
- McLaughlin, S.D. (1978). Occupational sex identification and the assessment of male and female earnings inequality. *American Sociological Review*, 43, 909-921.
- Mencke, R., & Hummel, R. (1984). *Career planning for the 80's*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Moore, L.M., & Rickel, A.U. (1980). Characteristics of women in traditional and nontraditional roles. *Personnel Psychology*, 33, 317-333.
- Parker, M., Peltier, S., & Wolleat, P. (1981). Understanding dual career couples. *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 60, 14-18.
- Parsons, T. (1943). Status inequality and stress in marriage. *American Anthropologist*, 45, 22-38.
- Pearlin, T. (1975). Status inequality and stress in marriage. *American Sociological Review*, 40, 344-357.
- Philliber, W.W., & Hiller, D.V. (1983). Relative occupational attainments of spouses and later changes in marriage and wife's work experience. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 45(1), 161-169.
- Phillips, P., & Phillips, E. (1983). *Women and work: Inequality in the labour market*. Toronto: Lorimer.
- Ragins, B.R., & Sundstrom, E. (1989). *Psychological Bulletin*, 105(1), 51-88.
- Rapoport, R., & Rapoport, R.N. (1971). *Dual career families*. Markham, Ont: Penguin.
- Rapoport, R., & Rapoport, R.N. (1982). The next generation in dual earner families research. In J. Aldous, *Two paychecks: Life in dual earner families* (pp. 229-244). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Rossi, A. (1977). A biosocial perspective on parenting. *Daedalus*, 106, 1-31.
- Schutz, W.C. (1958). *FIRO: A three dimensional theory of interpersonal behaviour*. New York: Rinehart.
- Schwartz, J.D. (1987, July-August). *Business Week* (Special Women's Issue), p. 25.
- Sheehy, G. (1974). *Passages*. Toronto: Bantam.
- Strober, M.H. (1982). The MBA: Same passport to success for women and men? In P.A. Wallace (Editor), *Women in the workplace* (pp. 25-39). Boston: Auburn House.
- Sundal-Hansen, L.S. (1987). The life career journey for men and women: Traditions, transitions, transformations. *Guidance and Counseling*, 3(2), 36-54.
- Treiman, D.J., & Hartman, H.I. (Editors). (1981). *Women and wages: Equal pay for jobs of equal value*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Priscilla David-Kredl, who has been a counsellor at Concordia Guidance Services since 1969, completed her master's degree in counsellor education at McGill University and received her doctorate in human services from Walden University. Her research interests include career and life planning, women and higher education, and creative job searching.

Priscilla David-Kredl, qui est conseillère au Concordia Guidance Services depuis 1969, a fait ses études de deuxième et troisième cycles à l'université McGill et à l'université Walden. Ses recherches portent sur les plans de carrière et de vie, les femmes et l'enseignement supérieur et la quête d'un emploi créatif.