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Career counseling for women: With emphasis on the reentry woman

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Abstract

Women are returning to college campuses throughout the country. These reentry women are single, married, or divorced, and are returning to higher education after an extended absence of five years or more (Weinstein, 1980). They are predominantly between the ages of 25 and 65, and come from a variety of backgrounds with a variety of educational goals. The majority of them are returning to colleges to develop necessary skills to acquire a job (Covity, 1980).

CAREER COUNSELING FOR WOMEN:
WITH EMPHASIS ON THE REENTRY WOMAN

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CAREER COUNSELING FOR WOMEN:
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Women are returning to college campuses throughout the country. These reentry women are single, married, or divorced, and are returning to higher education after an extended absence of five years or more (Weinstein, 1980). They are predominantly between the ages of 25 and 65, and come from a variety of backgrounds with a variety of educational goals. The majority of them are returning to colleges to develop necessary skills to acquire a job (Covity, 1980).

College Reentry:
Challenges and Concerns for Women

The life-style of the American woman is changing. The 1980 census reported that 52% of women ages 16 and over were working outside the home. Women are recognizing that an education may enable them to improve their job status and salary (Christian & Wilson, 1985).

Rogers (1980) contended that women today are a revolutionary force. They are discovering their self-worth and personal strengths. They are in a world of change, and they want to meet this challenge. This

challenge can be met through education, knowledge, and self-discovery.

Adults returning to formal education are easily overwhelmed by the demands of academic life. Academic reentry can be a harrowing experience. Adults tend to view college as an alien environment in which administrative policies, instructional practices, support services, language, and even attitudes are typically tailored to the needs of younger students (Di Silvestro, 1981).

Besides the academic process, other obstacles encountering the reentry women are situational and personal. They have concerns about family and financial constraints. Personal deterrents are a lack of confidence about skills and abilities, academic insecurity, and a feeling of guilt about the time spent away from home activities (Weinstein, 1980; Christian & Wilson, 1985).

Despite these concerns, reentry women are highly motivated and generally do well in their studies. In turn, the educational institutions welcome their presence. Weinstein (1980) stated that reentry women bring maturity and a wealth of experience to the campus and the classroom. They also are helping offset a

decline in enrollment of the traditional students.

Women returning to college have distinctive needs, both psychological and practical. They could profit from both academic and vocational counseling. Since most reentry women attend school with job preparation in mind, vocational counseling may be an extremely important counseling component. Three types of counseling programs--personal, vocational, and professional--have been identified to deal with problems of the reentry woman (Covity, 1980). This review will focus on the career concerns of returning college women.

The Changing Role of Women

Career development for women is not fundamentally different than that of men, but it is more complex. This is due to a combination of attitudes, role expectations, behaviors, and the socialization process. Theories of vocational psychology are inadequate to predict and explain women's career choices. Vocational interest inventories, by nature of their construction, have channeled women into traditional women's occupations (Fitzgerald & Crites, 1979). Women's past socialization affects the way they think about

themselves and their occupations, how they look for jobs, and how they advance in their careers (Reuben, 1985).

In our American society, distinct roles have been assigned to men and women. While these gender roles have changed in the course of our history, expected behaviors have remained the same. Women are viewed as emotional and nurturing; men as stoic and protective. The primary duty of the female was to bear and raise children. Few were educated or worked outside the home. By the 19th century, several female colleges were established. Toward the end of the century, academic courses as well as courses in the domestic arts were offered. But with this education, many women felt frustrated because of the lack of suitable employment. Their role remained unchanged. It was not until World War II that the doors were open. Employment areas that were previously closed now offered new options. However, when the men returned from the war, women once again resumed their old roles. What was needed was a type of behavior to reflect group self-awareness and a sense of group purpose. The Black movement in the 1950s and 1960s may have been the impetus for this behavior. Women felt committed to a

group cause when the Equal Pay Act was passed in 1963. Though the Equal Rights Amendment died on June 30, 1982, women have made a great number of changes in their expected roles in society (Moses, 1983).

In the past, women have not been expected to provide for themselves. Now they are very much in the labor market. These changes have brought about a complexity of needs for themselves and their families. Maslow's hierarchical order of needs is useful in understanding motivations for working. From low to high, Maslow's hierarchy is physiological, safety, belongingness and love, esteem, and self-actualization.

> Women can, and some do, take care of their own physiological needs but they are not expected to. Opportunities for them are limited, and they are taught to believe that they cannot take care of their own needs directly. When women do take care of the two lower level needs for themselves, the physiological and safety needs, they suffer emotionally from not meeting the needs of the top three levels. However, many dare not risk the security of safety in order to improve their position; thus they are fixed at a lower level. (Harmon, 1977, p. 194)

In order to achieve love and esteem from others, many women have to compromise self-esteem. Self-esteem must be achieved before self-actualization occurs. If behaviors leading to self-esteem cut a woman off from love and belongingness, a conflict arises. Career counseling usually focuses on meeting the two upper levels of the hierarchy. Women must first resolve the conflict between achievement/self-esteem and belonging/esteem from others before they can benefit from this kind of counseling (Harmon, 1977).

The National Council on the Future of Women in the Workplace (1985) recommended collective activities to help women increase their self-esteem and explore their occupational possibilities. Role models and group support are essential. An individual woman will believe she can be successful in a field if she believes that women as a group can be considered competent in that field. Another factor to consider is that women will have to change their own attitudes about employment. It will be necessary to consider working outside the home as a natural phenomenon. Second, they will need to consider the nature of their work. If they perceive themselves as casual, intermittent employees whose work is subservient, they

cannot expect to gain the same satisfaction from their careers as men. They will need to strive for equal employment opportunities in terms of occupational accessibility and pay (Osipow, 1975).

College Awareness of the Reentry Woman's Needs

Gittell (1986) stressed that both two-year and four-year colleges should address the particular needs of nontraditional students with special programs, services, sympathetic faculty, course scheduling, and counseling. Community colleges often do damage to women by emphasizing job-oriented vocational programs. These programs stress a realistic approach to needs and skills and deemphasize the broader educational experiences and opportunities of a four-year liberal arts program.

Returning to school indicates self-motivation and the desire to set goals. Reentry women want more from life than their present status; therefore, the college needs to be aware of the reentry woman's presence (Christian & Wilson, 1985).

Unfortunately, a great number of returning women feel a gap in services provided for them by the

colleges and universities, especially in the career counseling area. Weinstein (1980) offered several suggestions that institutions could follow in offering ongoing career counseling for reentry women.

1. Designate a specific location and specific individuals who will provide vocational/career counseling for reentry women.

2. Offer career planning/vocational counseling services to women in the earliest stages of their academic reentry.

3. Assess vocational and career materials for age bias as well as sex bias.

4. Assess vocational interest inventories for appropriateness with older students.

5. Plan a variety of seminars on career planning and vocational information, held at different times and locations for reentry women.

6. Bring in women who have been through the academic and job reentry process to talk about the job market, needed skills, career possibilities, and personal experiences.

7. Encourage reentry women to get internship experience for credit.

8. Keep a schedule of job recruiters coming to campus in the continuing education office and in other offices serving reentry women.

9. Gather and post information on possible employment opportunities.

10. Provide information about vocational training programs.

11. Hold workshops on resume writing, job applications and interviewing procedures.

College curricula could also offer topics or subjects that would improve career opportunities for women, such as awareness training in relation to sex roles and women's socialization, life/career planning courses, interviewing techniques, the acknowledgement of and how to handle stress, assertiveness training, translating volunteer skills for the job market, and de-mystification of certain areas such as legal rights, money, unions, and mathematics anxiety (Harnett, 1980).

It is difficult to assess the skills women will need to function effectively in a job and to design appropriate training to develop those skills. The task is compounded by gender roles and biases in our culture (Stokes, 1980).

Counselor Responsibilities

A career counselor must be adequately prepared and aware of the career concerns of his/her particular client. Career counseling is much the same as other kinds of counseling, except it focuses on planning and making decisions about occupations and education. The personal relationship between the counselor and counselee is important. Informational and factual data is gathered, but values and attitudes are also explored. It is not possible to help someone with a career problem without recognizing other aspects of a person's life (Tolbert, 1974).

Matthews (1969) stated that counselors should always be seeking new ways to help and understand women who are entering colleges or are returning to work. A strong commitment needs to be made by counselors to help adult women resynthesize their identity and help them to determine their values, interests, skills, aptitudes, and experiences.

In a study by the American Institute of Research, one fourth of women taking courses unusual to their sex said that the counselors and teachers had advised them against enrolling. Another 14% had considered nontraditional courses, but had been dissuaded by

counselors (Reuben, 1985).

Females continue to select majors in education and health professions. They select employment in traditional female fields and consequently are making lower salaries. However, this is beginning to change by evidence of a gradual movement of women entering typically male fields. Societal views will also need to change. Women must by convinced at an early age that there are many and varied career options opened to them (Moses, 1983).

Assumptions should be made by both counselor and counselee about results and expectations of the career counseling session. The client should bring to the interview realistic occupational expectations. Causes of unrealistic career aspirations might be: limited exposure to the working world, limited awareness of abilities, levels of motivation, perceptions of socioeconomic status, economic needs, familial pressures, and lack of flexibility. In turn, the counselor needs to be aware of his/her own involvement in promoting unrealistic vocational occupations. Other factors that could deter counseling effectiveness are institutional pressures, counselor inexperience, becoming an unintentional role model, and the

counselor's need for the client's acceptance. Career counselors will need to be knowledgeable and patient in helping clients develop a balanced perception of themselves and their occupational goals (Dolliver & Nelson, 1975; Solomone & McKenna, 1982).

Weinstein (1980) reported that some of the most frequent problems reentry women encounter with respect to career counseling are a lack of information on career choices and options, feelings of insecurity and self-doubt about procuring employment, and overall unfamiliarity with the process of seeking and applying for a job.

Christian and Wilson (1985) identified certain counselor responsibilities that are inherent to the delivery of effective career counseling services to reentry women.

1. Counselors should be informed about statistics and research concerning reentry women.

2. Counselors must be aware of employment trends.

3. Counselors need to be aware of sexism in career information.

4. Counselors must continually evaluate their own beliefs and attitudes about women's roles.

5. Counselors should have knowledge in the area of the psychology of women.

6. Counselors must be aware of the development of decision-making skills and how to facilitate their clients with decision making.

7. Counselors should develop an extensive referral network to help the reentry woman.

8. Counselors need to be aware that they serve as role models for their clients.

9. Counselors should recognize the importance of contributing to empirical research.

10. Counselors must be aware of effective dissemination of evaluative data concerning reentry women.

Conclusions have been drawn that counselors are not adequately prepared to provide career counseling services for women. With the continuing importance that out of the home work plays in women's lives, a need for new standards should be defined so as to ensure adequate preparation of professional career counselors (Fitzgerald & Crites, 1979).

Career Counseling Strategies

Several strategies have been used in career exploration. The most common is the administration of interest inventory tests such as the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory, the Tyler Vocational Card Sort, Holland's Self-directed Search and the computerized SIGI.

Counselors can work with clients individually or in groups. They can identify and discuss where the client is classified in Holland's six occupational types--realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, or conventional. After the client has gathered the information and the counselor has interpreted the information with the client, they may assess the current situation, evaluate interests and goals, and explore possible alternatives. The supply of occupational material is abundant, and it should be stressed that the client read as much self-guidance material as possible, such as the Occupational Outlook Handbook (Waters & Goodman, 1977).

Weissman and Krebs (1976) emphasized that career selection begins with self-knowledge. In our highly technical society, we are constantly bombarded with choices. Consequently, it is often difficult to make

the right decisions for future careers. Weissman and Krebs suggest using an organizational development model called Image Potentiality. It emphasizes the effective use of human resources by creating personal awareness, openness, and potential for change. The process of this model is done in groups and should be directed by a well-trained leader. This allows members to share their goals, dreams and actions with others. One session of three hours is suggested. The group starts with a short introduction about imagery potential. Next, brainstorming and how it relates to imaging and creativity is explained. A warm-up exercise is given for brainstorming the solution to a problem. The group is then asked to pretend that it is a year from now, and you are in a helicopter looking down on yourself and the possible occupations you might be interested in. Ideas are jotted down on paper. The group looks over the list and chooses one idea they might want to work on. The step by step process then consists of translating the idea into goal language, brainstorming all the blocks and strengths that would hinder or help your goal attainment, plot a field analysis of these strengths and blocks, select the strongest block and brainstorm all the ways to reduce the strength of the

block, and, last, create an action plan. Discuss possible answers to the following questions: Where do I begin? Whom do I need to see? When do I begin? How do I begin? This group approach can be modified and adapted to an individual approach. The model helps organize thoughts and consider completely new alternatives.

The world of fantasy and dreams is a rich source for a career counseling intervention. Research has cited support for its usefulness in career planning. Daydreaming and fantasy have sometimes been viewed in the past as a suspect human activity and only intended for the young. Often it is equated with idleness and neurotic behavior. However, fantasy and daydreaming can play an important role in problem solving and decision making. Occupational daydreams are used in Holland's Self-Directed Search. It was found that occupational daydreams were more predictive of people's occupational choice than the Self-Directed Search Code. This code tells which occupational type you are. Counselors should be alert to and can use the data to guide their clients in making decisions. Both spontaneous and guided fantasy can provide valuable information in career counseling. Learning the use of

guided fantasy comes from the areas of psychotherapy and personal counseling. In working with spontaneous fantasy, the following questions can be asked: What occupations do you fantasize or dream about now? What occupational daydreams did you have as a child? What kind of work is not included in your fantasies? Guided fantasy consists of using relaxation techniques, discussing the fantasy, and processing the fantasy experience. Many benefits can be derived from guided fantasy. It is considered fun and novel in comparison with traditional career counseling methods, it is a private experience that can be shared with one or many, it allows contact with one's self that usually is ignored, and it provides information that otherwise might not have been known. Problems that may be encountered in using this intervention include the difficulty of getting into it and trying hard to make everything mean something. The counselor may also find the technique difficult and should be prepared to deal with participants' intense emotions (Morgan & Skovholt, 1977).

Reuben (1980) opined that women need encouragement to dream and fantasize before they choose an occupation. They should learn more about themselves

and explore many options before they make their career decisions.

Activities or programs intended to assist career development can be as brief as administering interest inventory tests or as extensive as a full year's study in career development.

Christian and Wilson (1985) stated that just encouraging adult women to return to school may be thought of as a broad-based intervention strategy in itself. Research is still needed on the issue of reentry women, as well as empirical evaluations of intervention strategies.

People at all ages and stages may sometimes need new direction in selecting careers. "The bromide, 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks,' is often used as an excuse for inaction of the part of adults. The response is, 'nonsense, it depends on the dog, the tricks, and the teaching or counseling strategy.'" (Waters & Goodman, 1977, p. 342)

Effectiveness of Career Counseling

How effective is career counseling for the reentry woman? Does it have an impact on her career choices?

Increased interest in career counseling has led to the need for measuring its effectiveness (Oliver, 1979). While there are many appropriate models for counseling women for a career, a model for effective career counseling has not been found (Reuben, 1985).

Counselors need to evaluate career counseling by means of immediate outcomes that reflect the clients' growth in information and decision-making. Counselors will also want to predict their clients' subsequent career achievements. Two types of outcome criteria are needed: finding an occupational choice congruent with one's interests and an assurance that one knows and is satisfied with one's talents. It has been found that the measure of vocational identity relates to age. Adults feel less need for occupational information and are less obstructed by career barriers. They are usually better organized and are more apt to be competent in handling life because of their past experiences (Healy & Mourton, 1985).

One question asked is whether the interventions used for traditional college age women are as useful and relevant for reentry women. The Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory is a good instrument to include in a study of career exploration with both traditional and

reentry women. Another promising alternative is the Non-Sexist Vocational Card Sort. This utilizes expressed vocational interests instead of inventoried interests. Research has found that both the LVCS and the SCII are effective and relevant for reentry women, as well as for all students in general (Slaney & Lewis, 1986).

Oliver (1979) and Covity (1980) found that the longer the time since concluding the counseling, the greater the probability that other factors influenced the outcome rather than the counseling. Career development has been conceptualized as a series of choice points with each choice influencing the one that comes after it. Consequently, short-term career counseling may not have much measurable long-term effect.

Many investigators consider changes in career choices as an outcome measure of career counseling. But change is not necessarily a desirable outcome. The client in changing could end up with a less realistic career. Some clients benefit from career counseling, while others become confused (Oliver, 1979).

Another study found that Holland's investigative types tended to stay in career counseling longer than

other types. People in this category include those with a strong scientific orientation. They are usually task-oriented, introspective, and asocial.

Differences in clients' satisfaction from counseling seemed to be more related to experience than any particular intervention. In several studies, clients preferred those methods that involved the presence of a counselor, despite the fact that it had no great impact on their career outcomes. Traditional counseling seemed to be better for discussion of qualifications needed for a job and for educational planning. However, computer-assisted programs presented more information than could be given by a counselor (Fretz, 1981).

If women do not go through a formalized counseling program, they may fulfill their needs from non-academic sources such as family, friends, and clergy. Another point is that women who receive career counseling acquire goal direction, increased self-concept, and decision-making skills. This increases their job expectations. They demand more from a job situation than a non-counseled person and may be less satisfied (Covity, 1980).

Career exploration for reentry women should be emphasized. Although reentry women differ on many issues, concerns about their career development are of central importance. Many reported that career exploration led them to examine their wants and desires. It was common for them to be afraid of failure, inexperience, and age. Undecided women are especially expressing a real need for additional counseling services that actuate career choices. Career indecision is a real issue for college reentry women (Slaney & Dickson, 1985).

Conclusion

Reentry college women, as a group, are highly motivated and dedicated learners. They are in college for either a new or expanded direction in their lives. The stereotype of the wife at home full-time with children is no longer accurate. In reality, the average woman will be in the paid labor force anywhere from 20 to 40 years. Therefore, there is a need for conscious career planning and counseling for these women. Old role models still exist, however. Women are still concentrated in traditional fields, and generally their salaries are less than a man's. There

needs to be a continued commitment to women's equity.

Career counseling services, training programs, workshops, and seminars can help women toward their career goal and can support them as they explore their options. But it is essential that women first value themselves and their rights in the labor force.

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