Perception of Supports and Barriers: Career Decision-Making for Sikh Indo-Canadian Young Women Entering the Social Sciences

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research study was to examine the supports and barriers that Sikh Indo-Canadian young women perceive in their career decision-making process to enter the applied social sciences at the university level. A qualitative descriptive case study approach (Yin, 2003) was used. Analyses indicated self-efficacy appraisals played an important role in moderating the participants' views of supports and barriers in their career decision-making processes. Implications for career counsellors are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

L'objet de cette étude de recherche était d'examiner les soutiens et obstacles perçus par les jeunes canadiennes d'origine indo-sikh quant à leur choix d'études universitaires en sciences sociales appliquées. On s'est servi d'une méthodologie descriptive et qualitative d'étude de cas (Yin, 2003). Les analyses ont indiqué que des évaluations de l'auto-efficacité ont joué un rôle important pour tempérer les opinions des participantes au sujet des soutiens et des obstacles dans leur processus de choix de carrière. Les répercussions sur les orienteurs professionnels sont discutées.

One of the major transitions that young adults face is making career plans. Preparing for a career is a developmental task for all adolescents (Erikson, 1968; Nurmi, 1998). Research regarding ethnic minorities and career decision-making has focused predominantly on the immigrant process of adaptation to a new country (Hedge, 1998; Ogbu, 1991). Presently, most of the research literature from the United States and Canada that explores the South Asian and Asian educational experience of children of immigrants has grouped them together. For this reason, the research might refer to Asians, but it also encompasses South Asians in the sample. Toohey, Kishor, and Beynon (1998) remarked on the need for more studies that separate Asian and South Asian students, as their concerns appear to be different. For the purpose of consistency, studies that include South Asian children of immigrants within the research sample will be used throughout this article. The term South Asian will be used to describe the sample of participants. South Asian refers to the Statistics Canada classification to include students who identify themselves as being of Sikh, Hindu, or Muslim cultural background (Statistics Canada, 1996). In Canadian studies, the term Indo-Canadian is used to refer to South Asian children of immigrants.

Many Sikh South Asian families from India have settled in Canada (O'Connell, 2000). The conflicts that arise due to raising their children in a culture that does not represent their own experience is described as intergenerational conflict (O'Connell). The socialization process of children of immigrants is conflictual due to their having to contend with two different value systems (Ghuman, 1997; Segal, 1991; Wakil, Siddique, & Wakil, 1981). For example, a clash of tradition occurs when parents with a collectivist orientation attempt to raise children in a society with an individualistic orientation (Ghuman, 1997). Many changes in the family have emerged which have contributed to the value conflicts experienced between Sikh South Asian parents and their children (Ghuman, 1994; Patal, Power, & Bhavnagri, 1996; Sheth, 1997). First, a growing number of Sikh Indo-Canadian women are working in professional fields and are seeking more equal status within the family (O'Connell). Second, Sikh Indo-Canadian children are placed in a position of authority within the family, as they know more about Canadian society than their parents (Foner, 1997). A role reversal in which children socialize their parents within Canadian society can cause intergenerational conflict (Ghuman, 1994; Patal et al.). Typically, research on parent-child relations in South Asian families in Canada deals with only one aspect, such as intergenerational conflict of values, and is thus conceptually restrictive.

The literature on career counselling has explored the role that South Asian parents in Canada play in the educational lives of their children (Ghuman, 1997; Gibson, 1988). Research has indicated that South Asian women considered education and careers within the family context and that a negotiation process occurred in selecting a career choice as opposed to perceiving it as an individual choice (Basit, 1996; Gibson; Siann & Knox, 1992). Segal's (1991) study also demonstrated that for South Asian youth, career choices reflected their parents' cultural model of success, internalized as part of their own career identity (Schneider & Lee, 1990). In effect, youth internalized their parents' belief that education was the main mechanism by which advancement could be sought in society and that success or failure rested primarily on individual effort. Consequently, youth often felt pressure to do well academically and to fulfill their parents' dreams. The cultural model of success was described as a psychological burden characterized by guilt and frustration if youth were not able to meet parental expectations (Saran, 1985). Kar, Campbell, Jimenez, and Gupta (1996) noted that Indo-American youth experiencing family conflict regarding career choice and educational achievement also experienced extreme psychological distress such as suicidal and depressive states.

The researcher used a descriptive case study (Yin, 2003) to examine the career decision-making process for Sikh Indo-Canadian young women. Lent's Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000) was used to ascertain the extent to which self-efficacy mediates the perception of supports and barriers for Sikh Indo-Canadian young women in their career decision-making process.

<div align="center">METHOD</div>

Assumptions Made by the Researcher Prior to Engaging in the Research Process

The researcher conducted this study with a set of assumptions about the Sikh Indo-Canadian young women choosing to enter the applied social sciences.

1. The perception of self-efficacy would be an important mediating factor in determining career choice. Self-efficacy is defined as "people's judgement about their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 1986, p. 391).
2. The selection of a descriptive case study would be suitable to describe to the participants' how their subjective experiences would be analyzed to ensure their privacy.
3. The researcher assumed the young women would be engaged in a career choice that did not represent the norm of their ethnic community. The norm of the ethnic community would be to encourage women to enter male-dominated fields such as engineering, technology, or the sciences (Toohey et al., 1998).

The qualitative descriptive case study approach represents a bounded system. Yin (2003) defined a bounded system as establishing boundaries within the study. Setting boundaries includes deciding on research questions, establishing a theoretical framework, determining sampling criteria, formulating validity and reliability procedures, and creating consistent data analysis procedures.

Step 1. Establishing Research Questions

The research questions used to structure the inquiry and guide the research were:

1. What are the opportunity structures and support systems perceived by Indo-Canadian young women?
2. What are the barriers that Indo-Canadian young women perceive in their career decision-making processes and how do they manage barriers?
3. What are the outcome expectations that Indo-Canadian young women have of engaging in their career choice?

Step 2. Selecting a Theoretical Framework and Identifying Propositions of the Theory

A deductive descriptive case study was selected and is based on applying a general theoretical framework to a particular case to see if that framework will hold (Patton & McMahon, 1999). The use of a deductive approach is more concerned with finding patterns and relationships among the data in relation to a pre-established theory and allows for more objectivity in the analysis of the data (Merriam, 2001). It also aids in the informed consent process as it allows the researcher to answer questions posed by participants regarding how the interview data would be perceived and analyzed.

A descriptive case study requires the researcher to begin with a theory stipulated from the literature (Yin, 2003). From the theory, one can illustrate a set of

propositions that covers the depth and scope of the case under study. Lent et al.'s (2000) social cognitive career theory explored how self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals help to regulate individual career behaviour. Five propositions based on Lent et al.'s model were explored for the purpose of this article and will be discussed in depth in the results section.

Step 3. Selection of Participants

Seven participants were selected for the research based on a criterion case selection strategy. A criterion case selection strategy refers to choosing cases because of their similarity to central characteristics of interest to the researcher (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). The selection of participants included the following criteria to create a relatively homogeneous sample:

1. Each Indo-Canadian young woman completed her kindergarten to grade 12 schooling in Canada, which would identify the individual as being a second-generation Indo-Canadian (Zhou, 1997).
2. Both parents of each participant were born and raised in India.
3. Each participant was enrolled in her third or fourth year of an academic program and was between the ages of 20 and 25, which is considered young adulthood (Arnett, 2000).
4. Each participant was enrolled in undergraduate programs focused in the social sciences which included Social Work and Child and Youth Care programs. These programs focused on preparing students for assuming a particular career role by incorporating various practicum experiences into their program of studies.

The researcher approached 87 individuals at random, out of which 15 individuals expressed interest in participating. Out of the 15 individuals, 7 people completed both sets of interviews and the questionnaires. The researcher also asked the participants to refer peers to participate in the study, which elicited one participant (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

Step 4. Instrumentation—Linking Data to Propositions

An important strength of the case study research method involves using multiple sources in the data-gathering process (Yin, 2003). The first instrument used was a two-part qualitative questionnaire created by the researcher, which all the participants completed. The first part, called Factors That Influence Career Decision Making Questionnaire, was a modified version of Julien's questionnaire (1997) entitled The Search for Career-Related Information by Adolescents. The second part of the questionnaire, called Functions of Coping Efficacy Questionnaire, was based on the tenets of the social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 2000) and the work of Hackett and Betz (1981). The second instrument consisted of presenting a copy of the public pamphlets produced by the university counselling centre that documented various supports offered to help students make career decisions. The researcher presented the pamphlets to the Indo-Canadian women, and they reflected on internal or external barriers that could

influence their career decision-making process. The researcher tape-recorded and transcribed their responses. The third instrument used was a semi-structured interview. The interview took one-and-a-half hours to complete and consisted of 12 questions. All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed within three days after the initial interview. The transcription of the first interview ranged from 16 to 26 pages in length. One week after the first interview, the researcher scheduled a second interview with the participant, which was expected to last up to one hour. The second transcription of the interview ranged from 9 to 14 pages in length. After the second interview, the researcher transcribed it, e-mailed it to the participant, and asked for any changes that she wanted made. Only one of the seven participants wanted to make a few minor changes to her transcript.

Step 5. Formulating Validity and Reliability Procedures

According to Yin (2003), the proof of internal validity requires that the researcher corroborate interview data with information from other sources. Hence, the researcher used the three instruments for each participant as a form of triangulating the data. Second, the selection of a homogeneous sample facilitates internal validity as it increases the ability to represent a phenomenon. Third, asking participants to check the veracity of their interview statements helped to enhance internal validity.

External validity reflects the generalizability of findings beyond the immediate cases to an established theory (Yin, 2003). In the study, maximum variation was not the primary focus for selection of the sample. However, Yin stated that one makes generalization of results from a multiple case study to theory rather than to populations. If the propositions of the theory hold for each case, then external validity has been established through analytical generalization (Yin).

Reliability refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated. The case study design ensures that procedures are well documented and can be repeated by another researcher provided with the same data for analysis (Merriam, 2001; Yin, 2003). Two Sikh graduate students who were familiar with working with qualitative data were asked to serve as inter-reliability checkers. They were provided with 25% of each interview transcript along with all the statements which the researcher had grouped into pre-defined domains. They were asked to look at each statement within each domain and state whether they saw an occurrence (+) or a non-occurrence (-) for each statement (Kvale, 1996). With one graduate student, who reviewed 25% of the statements within each case, there was 100% agreement. With the second graduate student, who also reviewed 25% of the statements within each case, there was 98% agreement. The second manner in which reliability was maintained was by stipulating the theoretical framework from which the researcher analyzed the data. Having pre-set definitions formulated from the social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) for each domain of analysis ensured agreement over the meaning of terms and shaped the checkers' interpretations of the statements. The third manner in which reliability was maintained was through maintaining an audit trail of all of the various patterns of statements found within the interviews.

Step 6. Data Analysis

The researcher used a "top down" analysis of the transcript in which the theory selected directs the researcher's attention to the domains of interest (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). In the first phase of data analysis, the researcher selected a domain in the social cognitive career theory, such as self-efficacy, and did a line-by-line analysis of a transcript. Statements that would fit the definition of a particular domain were placed together. In the second phase, the statements within each domain were "unpacked" into factors and sub-factors (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). In the third phase, flow charts of each domain and corresponding factors and sub-factors per participant were created. In the fourth phase, interviews, questionnaires, and case study notes were analyzed for patterns of responses across cases. The researcher described the common patterns and differences found between the participants.

All of the participants asked the researcher to refrain from making direct quotes from their interview transcripts. The representations of the participants' statements were distilled to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Consequently, portrayal of the texture and richness of their experience was limited. The researcher obtained permission to use quotes that were used by the majority of the young women. Words such as "fate" and phrases such as "breaking my parents in" were used consistently by the majority of participants, and were maintained in the article.

RESULTS

Proposition #1. Self-efficacy beliefs affect choice goals and actions both directly and indirectly (Lent et al., 1994, 2000)

Six of the seven participants mentioned that they felt confident regarding achieving the goal of gaining admission into their program of choice at the college and university level. They felt definite barriers, but also felt that by engaging in a plan of action they could persist in their field. They anticipated difficulty in obtaining entrance into their program of choice or work in their field based on being considered too young by the admission committee or a future employer. The plan of action involved accumulating volunteer work to combat the age barrier that they perceived to exist, thereby "proving" to others that they could do well in the field. All seven of the young women also felt the need to "prove" their effectiveness and commitment by taking on more projects than necessary and committing more time than was required or expected within the workplace, volunteer experiences, and school settings.

Proposition #2. Outcome expectations affect choice goals and actions both directly and indirectly (Lent et al., 1994, 2000)

All the young women said that they wanted to work within the social sciences, as it reflected an enactment of their "personal values." From that stance, they felt that they could make a "social" and "societal" contribution to society.

By social contribution, they meant that they wanted to make a personal difference in individuals' lives. By societal contribution, they meant that they wanted to "give back" to the community the support that they felt they had received as well as helping people whom they perceived as being disadvantaged. They also acknowledged the personal satisfaction that they derived from their experiences. They all mentioned the importance of the role that "fate" played in the sense of personal satisfaction with the career choices they were seeking, as it reflected what they were "meant" to be doing. "Fate" was connected to a sense of "fulfilling their destiny," as they felt that their career role in life "was already predetermined and written." They also mentioned the sense of personal growth they derived from helping other people and how working in the field contributed to an expansion of their worldviews.

The participants also identified extrinsic outcome expectations. Each wanted to be perceived by her clients as an important person who could be relied upon in times of need and be seen as a potential role model by the youth with whom she would work. As well, they felt that if they were to obtain their university degrees, they would "earn the pride" of their parents. They acknowledged that the degree for which they were enrolled was well recognized by the public and that it would help them to become more employable.

All the participants anticipated that their own cultural background would be an asset to working in their field of interest. They all thought that knowing how to speak Punjabi would be an asset in the field, as they could communicate effectively with various South Asian families. They all mentioned that they felt they could relate to other South Asian families, because they had an understanding of the norms and expectations of that culture. Two out of the seven participants felt that having a bicultural framework was an asset to working with second-generation youth and recent immigrants representing various cultural backgrounds. Four out of the seven participants thought that by being of a different cultural background they could relate to other minority groups, based on similarities experienced between all cultural groups in Canada.

The participants also communicated the disadvantages in regard to their cultural capital. Three out of the seven participants stated that they were concerned that their lack of fluency in Punjabi could be misinterpreted by South Asian clients as the participant not being in touch with her culture. The participants were also concerned that employers might assume that their South Asian backgrounds would lead to work focused primarily on that specific role, limiting exposure in their field.

Proposition #3. The relation of interests to choice goals will be moderated by opportunity structures and support systems. Interest-choice goal relations will be stronger when opportunity and support are perceived to be high rather than low. Conversely, these relations will be attenuated when perceived barriers are high rather than low (Lent et al., 1994, 2000)

Lent et al.'s (1994, 2000) proposition was not supported by any of the seven participants. Participants viewed perceived barriers as "challenges" that needed

to be addressed and found different ways to persist in their areas of interest, despite lack of support from their environment. In all cases, support from the family for their choice of career in the social sciences was limited, as their parents had preferences for their daughters to enter more male-dominated fields that represented more secure, stable, and lucrative futures. The participants selected the occupations in spite of initial low parental support. They persisted in their interest areas and developed various strategies within the family to "break in their parents" to elicit parental support over time for their career decision. They used various strategies to defy their parents in a respectful manner and establish a sense of independence within the family:

1. They restricted the amount of time spent talking with their parents about their career decisions. Only when they had made a final decision did they engage in an open discussion with their parents in which they would "defend" their choice by outlining their present and future educational plans in a decisive manner by discussing their job prospects, educational requirements, and institutional options.
2. They "proved" to their parents that their interest in the field was genuine by engaging in various types of volunteer experiences in the field of interest.
3. They restricted the type of information they gave their parents about their careers to prevent their parents worrying about them entering potentially dangerous fields.
4. They gained "allies" within the family, such as their brothers and/or sisters, to support them in their decisions.
5. They demonstrated a level of commitment and follow-through in their career choices to show determination to "complete what they had started."
6. They engaged in a process of apparent compromise with their parents. For example, they agreed to enter college or university, take courses in the area that their parents hoped they would go into, and adopt a "wait and see" attitude as to whether they would do well in those subjects. In addition, they took courses in areas in which they were interested. They then compared the results and demonstrated to their parents why their own career choice was the preferred choice, since they had tried out their parents' suggestions. They focused on how they did and how they felt engaging in both fields. As a result, they proved to their parents why their favoured career paths were better for them to pursue. By appearing not to rule out their parents' preferences for a career, they were not perceived as a "disrespectful child" by their parents. However, they were still able to defy their parents' norms in a subtle manner that came across as a rational decision reflecting their strengths and abilities.
7. They emphasized that they were choosing to work in a field that embodied their parents' value systems. The young women recognized that gaining their parents' support would be a long-term process, but that it would eventually work.

In regard to the structure of opportunity within the workplace, all seven young women mentioned that they perceived attaining higher management positions in their field as being difficult, because men primarily held these positions. They all saw this as a challenge that they felt they could overcome with time and accumulated experience. They did not see it as an aspect that would deter them from their career choices. Six of the seven young women also mentioned that they perceived the shortage of South Asian women in their field as an indicator of a "gap" that needed to be filled. They did not see it as a deterrent to entering the field. Rather, they saw it as a challenge that they wanted to assume by establishing themselves in a field lacking Indo-Canadian female representation and thus helping a clientele that might otherwise be missed.

Proposition #4. People will attempt to enter occupations or academic fields that are consonant with their choice goals, provided that they are committed to their choice goal and that their goal is stated in clear terms, proximal to the point of entry (Lent et al., 1994, 2000)

Once all the young women had solidified a career choice goal, they were very committed to planning and following through with obtaining the requirements necessary for entrance into the particular program of choice. For entrance into a specific program, whether at the college or university level, the plans made were detailed and task-specific. When career choice goal commitment was high, the goals aimed for were specific in nature and expressed close in time to choice implementation. They were not as aware of the variety of social work or child and youth care positions that existed within the field. However, they all knew that they were aiming to be social workers or child and youth care workers upon entrance into the program.

As the interviews were completed with students in the third and fourth year of their academic program, five of the seven participants communicated non-specific plans upon completion of their academic programs. Their career choice goals were vague as to what specific work setting they wanted to work within and the plans they formulated for searching for work. The reason behind the non-specificity of the plans and goals was that some of the individuals felt that planning for entrance into the job market was still a distal goal for them to contemplate. Their proximal goal was completion of their academic program. As well, the participants wanted to maintain an "open mind to job possibilities" so that they could enter the market where they would be needed. Additionally, the young women were not clear as to how they were going to negotiate life-career stresses with their families, such as confronting expectations of marriage in the face of their desires to live and work independently within their field and remain single. Of the seven participants, five were not clear as to how they intended to create a balance between their parents' plans for them and their own hopes upon completion of their academic program regarding career life planning.

Two of the seven participants mentioned that they intended to address career life planning by pursuing graduate studies upon completion of their undergradu-

ate program to help establish a more "independent self" and "buy more time" before contemplating marriage. The other beneficial aspect of gaining entrance into a graduate program was that since education is highly regarded by the ethnic community, it would be considered socially acceptable for a young woman to pursue graduate studies before marriage. Both these participants were engaged actively in researching graduate programs and had taken task-specific steps to address career life planning. In one case, the participant had filled out the applications for graduate programs without her parents' knowledge and decided to deal with the consequences upon gaining admission. In the second case, the individual engaged in open discussion with her parents regarding her firm intention of applying for graduate school.

Proposition #5. Self-efficacy beliefs influence career and academic performance both directly and indirectly through their effect on performance goals (Lent et al., 1994, 2000)

For all seven participants, as their ability to manage the educational environment increased, their level of performance also improved. The young women also stated that they set academic goals for themselves, such as achieving scholarships and higher grades, as their sense of self-efficacy increased. All women stated that they set high performance standards for themselves and tried to improve their performance during their practicum and volunteer experiences as part of their professional development. Their sense of self-efficacy helped them to determine outcome expectations for themselves at both an academic and a professional level in their field.

<div align="center">DISCUSSION</div>

The aim of this research was to provide a selected account of the role that self-efficacy appraisals have on the perception of supports and barriers regarding Sikh Indo-Canadian young women's career decision-making processes to enter the social sciences. Based on this study, a few theoretical implications arise in which some propositions of Lent et al.'s (1994, 2000) social cognitive career theory were supported, while other areas were found to be in need of further development.

Salient findings of the study in support of Lent et al.'s (1994, 2000) social cognitive career theory were: (a) all the young women created outcome expectations of engaging in the field that were consonant with their self-efficacy appraisals and interests; (b) as their sense of self-efficacy increased as they managed their educational environment, they would set higher performance standards and outcome expectations for themselves; and (c) direct experiences in volunteer, work, and educational spheres helped the participants form outcome expectations of engaging in the field.

The findings based on the study that were contrary to Lent et al.'s (1994, 2000) social cognitive career theory were: (a) despite contextual influences and support for their career decisions being low in their family and ethnic community, the participants still persisted and maintained an interest in the field; (b) despite the opportunity structure of education being perceived as a barrier, aca-

demic career choice goals were maintained and planning behaviour was still strong; and (c) participants did not express specific plans close to completion of their degree. Participants viewed being "open-minded" as a proactive stance as it allowed them to enter the job market easily. As well, they were unclear as to how to negotiate the life-career stresses of confronting the normative expectation within their family of marriage upon completion of their degree. Lalande, Crozier, and Davey (2000) also found that uncertainty experienced by women in defining their career paths was linked to women factoring significant relationships into their career decision-making process.

Based on this study, incorporating an interlocking model of persistence would be an interesting addition to the social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994). One could explore how people persist in career goals when support for the career choice goal is limited. Lent et al.'s theory could benefit from an additional proposition stipulating how strong self-efficacy beliefs have an impact on the perception of lack of support.

The findings of this study can assist in the development of culturally relevant interventions. The research generated various workable strategies that the young women used to elicit support from their parents for their career decision. Other Indo-Canadian women facing the same career choice dilemmas might benefit from learning more strategies to help them persist in a career choice and yet not alienate them from their families. It is also important for a counsellor to consider the level of ethnic identification of clients (Sue, Ivey, & Pedersen, 1996). If individuals do not hold the normative expectation of their family or ethnic community in high regard, such individuals would not necessarily feel that their family or ethnic community was a barrier to their career development.

Based on the current study, it might be beneficial to inquire regarding the role that fate may play in one's career decision-making process (Bloch & Lee, 1997). Fate was mentioned by the participants within this study as an important aspect of their conceptual framework when considering how they made career decisions. They made the distinction between faith and fate. They perceived faith to be connected to maintaining a "hopeful" stance versus fate which was connected to fulfilling one's "destiny." Conceptualizing fate in connection to destiny could be important to consider, as perceptions of fate and destiny might have an impact on self-efficacy appraisals.

The conclusions of the study have implications at a policy level for educational settings. At the high school level, parent-youth life-career planning workshops can be created by and with Indo-Canadian young women along with a counsellor to help facilitate the process. Encouraging young women to engage in planning life-career workshops within their own ethnic community would help to address their concerns in a culturally sensitive manner.

The limitations of the study should be noted. Since the sample size consisted only of seven participants, it limits generalizability of the findings as it is unknown if similar experiences are held by Indo-Canadian women who vary in (a) self-efficacy appraisals, (b) cultural background (Muslim or Hindu), or (c) enrollment in various careers. However, the sample procedure did produce a very

specific group of Sikh Indo-Canadian women who exhibited strong levels of self-efficacy. Therefore, counsellors can learn from research that focuses on the strengths of individuals. It helps counsellors in working with people who are not as self-confident by being informed as to what works for people.

It is important to extend this area of study and compare the career decision-making process of Indo-Canadian young women to how they make decisions in other life domains. The strategies that they use to elicit parental support over time for unsupported career choices might be similar to how they would approach making other choices that might not elicit immediate parental support. As well, further studies are needed to explore the perception of supports and barriers that Indo-Canadian women experience entering various academic fields in the sciences to see if the findings from this study can be generalized. Understanding how career decisions are made will shed more light on how to serve the needs of Indo-Canadian women in their life-career choices.

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