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## Vocational Bias and Gender: Evaluations of High School Counsellors by Canadian University Undergraduates

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### Abstract

Two hundred first-year university undergraduates, 136 females and 64 males, responded to a questionnaire assessing evaluations of career counselling experiences during their previous (high school) year. Responses assessed subjects' career aspirations, career confidence, assessment of persons most important to career choice, and other experiences with high school counsellors. Females generally reported experiences as more favourable than those of males, although females showed lower levels of confidence regarding chosen careers. Student responses did not appear to reflect major problems in terms of gender bias among counsellors, yet the overall evaluations of counselling were largely negative. Comments are offered in light of recent research on gender and related variables in the counselling of young persons.

### Résumé

Lors d'une étude basée sur la recherche de Tomini (1990), deux cent étudiants universitaires de première année, 136 femmes et 64 hommes, ont répondu à un questionnaire sur leurs expériences d'orientation professionnelle au cours de l'année précédente (école secondaire). Les réponses évaluaient les aspirations professionnelles des sujets, leurs confiances professionnelles, la nature de leurs activités périscolaires, leurs évaluations de la personne qui les a le plus influencés quant à leur choix professionnelle, ainsi que d'autres expériences avec les orienteurs scolaires du niveau secondaire. Les femmes ont généralement rapporté des expériences aussi favorables que les hommes, mais elles ont démontré moins de confiance professionnelle en choisissant leurs carrières. Les réponses des étudiants n'ont pas révélé de difficultés majeures quant au sexe des orienteurs, par contre, leurs évaluations de l'orientation étaient toutefois négatives. Des commentaires concernant des études récentes sur le sexe de même que d'autres variables reliés à l'orientation professionnelle sont présentées.

In a classic study, Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz, and Vogel (1970) found that both male and female professional clinicians, using a series of adjective rating scales, perceived the "normal, healthy male" as possessing more positive characteristics as compared to the "normal, healthy female," and as being virtually identical to the normal, healthy adult, that is, with gender unspecified. By contrast, the normal, healthy female was seen as possessing more socially undesirable characteristics, and as being unlike the normal, healthy adult. Since the Broverman et al. study, attention has been drawn increasingly to the issue of gender as a factor in judgements of interpersonal adjustment and mental health (e.g., Hyde, 1985; Page, 1987; Stoppard, 1989). Much of this attention has been focused on the claim of Chesler (1972) and others, namely, that a double standard of adjustment now exists in society, wherein certain characteristics are seen as positive when shown by men, but less so when shown by women. While the Broverman et al. research

has been criticized on several grounds, it still continues to be cited frequently as showing the existence of a "male bias" in society (e.g., Atwater, 1988). Moreover, several studies, focusing on various aspects of adjustment and mental health (see Page, 1987, 1991), have provided some recent support for its basic conclusions.

In the areas of career concerns and their relationship to gender, recent research has also found that the skills, traits, and employment potential of adult women may be perceived and acted upon in a manner which disadvantages them relative to men. Renner and Gillis (1988), for example, found that although most jobs for skilled and semi-skilled workers in the city of Halifax were described by employers as being open equally to both genders, in fact only 24 per cent were held equally by men and women. Further, in postsecondary education, women continue to move mostly toward career paths other than those involving science, engineering, or mathematics (Women's Bureau, Labour Canada, 1987). Moreover, although the proportion of women in the Canadian labour force has increased recently (e.g., Gothard, 1985; Tomini, 1990; Women's Bureau, Labour Canada, 1987), women still continue to be overrepresented in low-paying and low-status jobs relative to those held by men.

The relationship between gender and career choice can be affected by several factors, including gender role conditioning and socialization (Santamaria, 1985), peer and parental influences (e.g., Otto & Call, 1985), fear of success (Horner, 1972), as well as advertising and media content (Fox & Renas, 1977). In addition, there is the issue of whether career counsellors, as well as elementary and secondary teachers, might reinforce career choices according to stereotyped beliefs about what is "gender appropriate." For example, Sauter, Seidl, and Karbon (1984) found that high school students showing interest in traditional (gender appropriate) careers felt that high school counsellors were influential and encouraged such choices, whereas those choosing nontraditional careers felt counsellors were not influential and did not encourage these choices. Several studies, cited by Tomini (1990), have also found that while counsellors and teachers are typically viewed as potentially vital sources of help, these individuals are not consistently seen by students as actually helpful to them, especially by those—particularly females—with nontraditional career interests. Some research has found that training programs for counsellors can help them avoid or overcome stereotyped views about appropriate career paths for women (e.g., Mason & Kahle, 1988); however, the more likely prospect is that young women will be discouraged from careers seen as inappropriate for them (see Page, in press; Pelle, 1982).

While some recent research (e.g., Bernard & Gilliland, 1981; Shapiro, 1977) has found only slight evidence of gender-related bias in certain counselling situations, Buczek (1981) found that the concerns of female

counselling clients were remembered less well than were the concerns of male counselling clients. The majority of studies, in any event, have been hampered by three major difficulties. One is the tendency to rely on contrived counselling situations involving role-playing counsellors or “pseudoclients.” Another difficulty is the likelihood that the responses of counsellors or teachers to interviews, questionnaires, or surveys are likely to be affected by a concern not to appear “biased” or “sexist” in their orientation or approach to counselling. Another pitfall is the possibility of a discrepancy between what counsellors say and what they do—and what clients perceive them as doing.

In view of these problems, and also to gather information about perceptions of counselling from the client’s perspective, the present study was conducted.

Specifically, the goals of the present study were to:

1. Evaluate students’ experiences with high school counsellors, that is, the degree to which: (a) counsellors were perceived as helpful and influential regarding career choice, (b) students were satisfied with counsellor discussions regarding career choice, (c) counsellors were felt to have “really listened,” and (d) counsellors encouraged or discouraged nontraditional careers;
2. Determine career aspirations of male and female first-year undergraduate students;
3. Identify individuals considered most influential regarding career issues;
4. Determine the degree of confidence expressed by students regarding career choice.

## METHOD

### *Subjects and Procedures*

Two hundred first-year undergraduate students, 64 males and 136 females, recruited from introductory psychology classes at the University of Windsor, served as subjects. All were between 18 and 20 years of age and received credit toward course grades for participation. All students reported having had several sessions with high school counsellors regarding career issues. Participation was anonymous and voluntary.

During their first university semester, all subjects completed a questionnaire under supervision of the first author. (A copy of the questionnaire is available from the second author, upon request.) This instrument assessed current career directions, activities, and various aspects of students’ personal experiences with career counsellors during high school.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results were analyzed using descriptive statistics, chi-square, and analysis of variance (see Author Notes section). A criterion level of  $p \leq .05$  was established to define statistically reliable differences. Using this criterion, the significant findings are outlined below.

In the following, traditional careers were defined as those filled to a criterion of 70 per cent or more by one gender, according to data from the 1987 Canadian Census report on occupations in Canada. Nontraditional careers were those filled to a criterion of 30 per cent or less by one gender. "Neutral" careers were those filled, within a range of 31 to 69 per cent, by one gender.

In general, our sample had a less than positive impression of their previous interactions with counsellors. Three quarters of the sample reported that their vocational guidance during high school had been inadequate and below their expectations. Only 38% of males and 39% of females reported feeling encouragement from counsellors regarding career choices in general. Only four per cent of males and 21% of females reported that a nontraditional choice had been encouraged.

Female students were more likely than males to feel that counsellors "really listened" to them. In general, students with traditional or neutral career aspirations were more likely to feel that counsellors "really listened" to them, compared to those with nontraditional aspirations. Students perceived considerably more encouragement toward traditional careers, that is, as appropriate for their gender, as opposed to nontraditional careers.

In the area of career concerns, female students were more likely than male students to feel that their high school counsellors had been generally helpful. A significant interaction between traditionality of career choice and counsellor gender suggested also that male counsellors were more helpful academically to students aspiring toward traditional occupations, whereas female counsellors were seen as more helpful academically by students considering nontraditional occupations. Overall, female counsellors were seen as more helpful than male counsellors regarding academic concerns, but there were no differences between male and female counsellors with regard to vocational or career concerns.

Females with nontraditional career aspirations did not rate counsellors as less helpful than did females with traditional aspirations, nor did they perceive counsellors as having influenced them less. No significant relationships were found between student or counsellor gender and perceived degree of counsellor influence upon career choice.

Student satisfaction with counsellors' discussions of job opportunities in the Canadian workplace specifically was not related to counsellor

gender or to traditionality of the student's career choice. However, females generally expressed greater satisfaction with these discussions.

Both males and females cited teachers as having influenced career choice more than counsellors. Females were more likely to see their mothers, rather than fathers, as influencing career choice, whereas males were more likely to perceive their fathers as influencing their choice. In addition, students cited others of the same gender as having influenced career choice more than others of the opposite gender.

No significant relationship was found between career traditionality and degree of confidence in one's career choice, although males' confidence was seen to be consistently higher than that of females, regardless of type of career choice. Interestingly, 61 per cent of students reported they were not currently considering career suggestions previously offered to them by high school counsellors; 16% indicated they were currently considering such suggestions. Of career directions which had been considered to date, both males and females were much more likely to have considered traditional rather than nontraditional career possibilities.

Regardless of student or counsellor gender, students felt generally that counsellors exerted little or no influence on career decisions. In general, while students did not usually feel that their interests in nontraditional careers were actively discouraged by counsellors, neither did they feel that they were encouraged. In general, counsellors' recommendations to students were clearly oriented toward traditional, "gender appropriate," occupations and pursuits.

While mothers, friends, and fathers were cited most frequently as influencing career interests, these interests were not reported as being strongly influenced by parental occupations per se. Since female students specifically were likely to cite other females as having primarily influenced their career choice, it would seem important that they be exposed to other females, as mentors and role models, who are practicing nontraditional professions.

In general, and somewhat contrary to our expectations, the present data did not show that male and female students experienced large differences in their counselling experiences. We were nevertheless struck by their largely negative assessment of these experiences. We also noted the relative lack of acceptance, among counsellors, of nontraditional career alternatives for male students. In a study of practicing teachers (see Tomini, 1990), we have also found that teachers accepted the idea of female students entering nontraditional professions for women considerably more than they accepted the idea of male students entering nontraditional professions for men. This is also consistent with results from other recent studies (see Page, 1987; Page, in press; Stoppard, 1989) which have found that gender role nonconformity in males is

viewed generally as more serious, more noteworthy, and more in need of corrective action, compared to such nonconformity in females. It is in this sense, as reflected also in the research of Broverman et al. (1970), that womens' roles in society may be viewed as being less vital or somehow less significant than those of men.

### *Concluding Comments*

In general, female students evaluated counsellors just as favourable as did male students. It may be that counsellors have become more aware of the needs of female students in recent times, or at least that students are perceiving that this is the case. Perhaps male counsellors particularly are now meeting needs of female students more adequately, or are equally helpful or unhelpful regardless of student gender.

In reflecting on our data and results, especially in view of current concerns with counsellor bias and womens' access to the workplace, we noted that few differences emerged which seemed directly related to gender, or which seemed to reflect undue bias from prevailing gender role stereotypes. Such may indicate some improvement in the current situation regarding this aspect of counselling with adolescents. Also, counsellors may now perceive young men and women to have similar career potentials. Perhaps the results become more noteworthy for their failure to find consistent or dramatic differences. Yet other aspects of the findings remain unsettling. Counsellors' efforts, for example, did not support the interests of male students with nontraditional interests, nor those of nontraditional students in general. Nor did counsellors appear to value the adherence of females to stereotypically feminine roles as highly as that of males to stereotypically masculine roles. Lastly, while the present counsellor evaluations did not identify gender bias per se as a critical issue, more research is required to better understand the apparent estrangement observed between counsellors and their adolescent clients.

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### Author Notes

More detailed information regarding statistical analyses and methods of scoring are available from the authors upon request, or can be found in Tomini (1990).

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