

## COUNSELLOR BIAS IN OCCUPATIONAL CHOICE FOR FEMALE STUDENTS

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### Abstract

To investigate counsellor bias in occupational choice for female students, six short case studies were employed that could describe either a male or a female. Two hundred randomly selected school counsellors in British Columbia were asked to select three appropriate occupations for each case subject. When the case study described a female, the counsellors chose occupations that paid less and were more closely supervised than when the same case study described a male.

### Résumé

Afin d'étudier les préjugés du conseiller par rapport au choix d'emploi pour les étudiantes, on a utilisé six situations décrivant un homme ou une femme. Deux cents conseillers de la Colombie-Britannique ont été choisis au hasard et on leur a demandé de choisir trois emplois pour chaque sujet. Là où la situation décrivait une femme, les conseillers ont choisi des emplois moins payant et dont la surveillance était plus étroite que dans une situation analogue pour un homme.

There are nearly four and one third million women workers in Canada, comprising 40% of the total labor force. During the last decade the number of women workers has increased by almost 70% (Statistics Canada, 1979). Although women are entering the work force at an ever increasing rate, they still have not escaped the stereotype of "women's work." Nearly 80% of all working women are employed in traditional roles — clerical, sales, service or light factory jobs. Men, meanwhile, dominate construction, mining, transportation and heavy manufacturing, where salaries are high. In addition to the job discrimination they encounter, many working women simply lack the education, training or desire to qualify for high paying jobs. The lack of preparation is sometimes ascribed to the "Cinderella Syndrome," the belief by women that they always will be supported by men. Young women generally underestimate how much their future livelihood will depend upon jobs of their own (Shields, 1974) at a time when almost half a million Canadian families are headed by a woman (Statistics Canada, 1979).

Occupational sex stereotyping occurs early in the socialization of children. Schlossberg and Goodman (1972), studied children's sex stereotyping of occupations. They found that kinder-

garteners and sixth graders thought that a woman's place was in certain traditional occupations such as waitress, nurse or librarian. In contrast, these children did not think that men had to be similarly limited in their work.

In discussing the vocational decision making process in which all young people must engage, Leonard and Collins (1979), noted the impact of curriculum decisions made as early as the seventh and tenth grades. These decisions, often made in consultation with a counsellor, may determine how lucrative, challenging, and fulfilling a young person's work will be for fifty years to come. There are a number of studies which suggest that counsellors in junior and senior high schools believe certain occupations are inappropriate for women, that these counsellors react negatively to women who are interested in nontraditional occupations, and that counsellors encourage young women to follow stereotypic vocational paths (e.g., Ahrons, 1976; Bingham & House, 1973; Donahue & Costar, 1977; Medvene & Collins, 1976; Pietrofesa & Schlossberg, 1970; Stevens, 1971; Thomas & Stewart, 1971). Repeatedly researchers and theorists have pleaded with counsellors to examine their personal biases toward working women and to challenge stereotypic attitudes in their clients

(e.g., Berry, 1972; Farmer, 1971; Fitzgerald & Crites, 1979; Hansen, 1972; Kahn, 1979; Lewis, 1972; Oliver, 1975; Schlossberg & Pietrofesa, 1973).

The purpose of this study was to determine whether high school counsellors in British Columbia were open to the entire range of career choices for women. Specifically, it was hypothesized that high school counsellors would select for female case study subjects lower paying occupations that required less educational preparation and more supervision than occupations selected for male case study subjects.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

The population for this study included all secondary school counsellors who were members of the British Columbia School Counsellors Association. The sample consisted of 200 counsellors randomly selected from the membership list. One hundred and thirty-eight counsellors (69%) returned questionnaires and 114 counsellors (57%) completed their questionnaires in such a way that they could be used for analyses.

### *Instrument*

The instrument used in this study was developed by Thomas J. Donahue (1976). Six case studies were presented in written form. The case studies were constructed in such a way that each case study subject could be either male or female. Data presented included measures of ability, achievement and interest, socio-economic background, values, personality traits, and social pressures that might influence career choice. Two forms of the questionnaire were developed. On Form A the sex designation of the subjects were male for Cases 1, 4, and 6; and female for Cases 2, 3, and 5. Form B used the same case studies as Form A, but in each case the subjects were given the opposite sex designation from those in Form A. All of the information in the case studies on Form A and B was identical. Only the name of the case study subject and the gender of the pronouns were changed. The case studies were short and the entire task involved 15 to 25 minutes of the counsellor's time.

### *Procedure*

From a list of 28 occupations each counsellor was instructed to select three occupations which might be appropriate for the case study subject and to rank the choices in order of preference. It was thought that by asking each counsellor to make three occupational choices for each case study subject, the reliability of results would be enhanced. The list reflected the current work environment in British Columbia and the occupations

were selected in such a manner that they would form a continuum from low to high on all three variables, salary, level of prerequisite education, and level of supervision. The list was reduced by removing occupations which contained sexist terminology such as clergyman or policeman. Even though some of the occupations may not be filled currently by women in the labor market, the final list of 28 occupations represented vocational possibilities for both men and women.

## RESULTS

One hundred counsellors received Form A and 100 counsellors received Form B of the questionnaire. Coefficients representing remuneration, education, and supervision were assigned to each occupational choice by the researchers in consultation with experts in employment trends. Since the three scales of remuneration, education and supervision were ordinal scales and the study involved two independent samples, the Mann-Whitney U Test was considered appropriate. Mean differences in rank were investigated for the two forms.

Form A and Form B, having identical case study information except for sex differences, were structured to be equivalent and were tested to determine equivalence. The three coefficients for each of remuneration, education, and supervision were averaged separately for each case study. The average of the scores for remuneration, education, and supervision on Form A were ranked with the sum of the scores for each of remuneration, education and supervision on Form B. As there was no statistically significant variance between Forms A and B, they could be compared and differences attributed to differences in the sex of the case study subject rather than to differences in the forms.

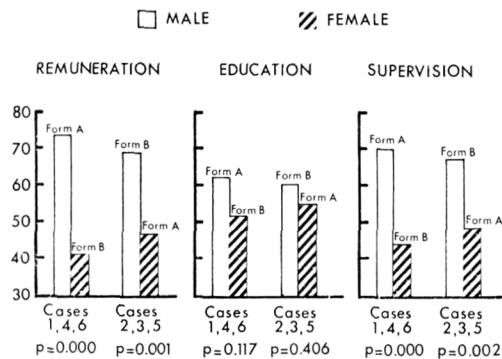
The six case study subjects were examined individually by ranking Case 1 of Form A with Case 1 of Form B for remuneration, education, and supervision. This test was repeated for all six cases on the three variables. Cases number 1, 2, 4 and 5 on both the variables of remuneration and supervision were ranked significantly higher for male case study subjects than for female subjects of the same cases (Table 1). Cases 3 and 6 showed no difference in mean ranks for males and females for the variable of remuneration and supervision. Also, there was no difference in the cases for the variable of education other than Case number 4 which was ranked significantly higher for males than for females of the same case.

The next set of tests using the Mann-Whitney U Test ranked the mean remuneration scores for Cases 1, 4 and 6 from Form A with the mean remuneration scores for Cases 1, 4 and 6 from Form

**TABLE 1**  
Sex, Mean Remuneration and Supervision Ranks, and Statistics for Each of the Six Cases (Form A and Form B)

	Case					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Case Sex:</b>						
Form A	M	F	F	M	F	M
Form B	F	M	M	F	M	F
<b>Mean Remuneration Rank:</b>						
Form A	72.26	46.00	57.31	74.18	49.01	57.92
Form B	42.74	69.00	57.69	40.82	65.99	57.08
<b>Mann-Whitney:</b>						
P:	0.000	0.000	0.950	0.000	0.006	0.890
<b>Mean Supervision Rank:</b>						
Form A	71.55	47.75	54.23	67.65	50.68	58.77
Form B	43.45	67.25	60.77	47.35	64.32	56.23
<b>Mann-Whitney:</b>						
P:	0.000	0.002	0.277	0.001	0.027	0.677

B. On Form A the case study subjects were all male and on Form B Cases 1, 4 and 6 were all female case study subjects. Cases 2, 3 and 5 on Form A (all female) were then ranked with Cases 2, 3 and 5 on Form B (all male). The tests were repeated for the variables of education and supervision (Figure 1).



**FIGURE 1**

Sex, Mean Remuneration, Education and Supervision Ranks on Male vs. Female Cases

Analysis of data yielded results rejected the null hypotheses at the .05 level of confidence for the variables for remuneration and supervision. In this study counsellors in British Columbia chose higher paying occupations that required less supervision for male case study subjects than for identical female case study subjects. The null hypotheses was accepted with the education variable. The counsellors did not choose careers with higher educational

prerequisites for male case study subjects than for identical female case study subjects.

**DISCUSSION**

It was assumed that attitudes regarding occupations suitable for young women would be revealed while the counsellor struggled with the specific problem of selecting three occupational choices for case study subjects. Occupations chosen for case study subjects were quite similar. This conformity may indicate that the case studies did provide enough information concerning the case study subjects' personalities and capabilities. The counsellors selected occupations that had lower pay and more supervision for female case study subjects than for identical male case study subjects. Since attention was focused on a problem that did not appear to be primarily related to sex of the case study subject, the choice of a career could be made without the counsellors judgment being strongly influenced by contemporary social pressures.

In this study counsellors did choose similar levels of prerequisite education for male and female case study subjects. The data indicated that even though counsellors chose occupations for females that required high levels of formal education, they seldom chose a career that paid a high salary or was supervisory in nature. These counsellors may be reflecting a middle-class attitude that everyone who possibly can should pursue higher educational development. A girl may be encouraged to pursue a university level of education without regard to a specific career goal. Women may be encouraged to attend university to meet eligible males and to add to their value as wives and mothers. Thus, education may become a goal in itself rather than a means to advance occupational positions. This education, however, may not be enough to gain entry into high paying jobs that utilize supervisory skills.

Counsellors, perhaps without awareness, encourage conformity to currently accepted gender roles in the labor market. The counsellors in this study showed a marked tendency to choose different occupations for males than for females. Rather than attend solely to the talents and interests of the case study subjects, these counsellors selected occupations which reflected the present world of work.

Regardless of the case study information, the female case study subjects were assigned the traditional low level occupations such as hair stylist, sales clerk and secretary. Small business owner, manager, chartered accountant and architect frequently were choices for male case study subjects. The category semi-skilled or skilled worker was chosen infrequently. Perhaps the counsellors in this study did not have a clear idea as to

jobs included in this category. Or, perhaps the counsellors were reflecting a bias concerning higher education. The labor market today has a shortage of semi-skilled and skilled workers. Although these jobs often require a lower level of formal education they often pay well and may be supervisory in nature.

Two case studies (3 and 6) appeared to be in some way unique. Only these two from the total of six case studies had no significant statistical difference on all three variables of remuneration, education, and supervision. For these two case studies there was occupational equality between the sexes according to career selections made by the counsellors. Both case studies described a person capable of better than average ability with an interest in theoretical work. The Case 6 subject was described as a "book worm who has a hard time getting along with his or her peers." Case 3 described someone who also would rather work with data than with people or things. Perhaps the qualities described did not fit the counsellors' stereotypic image of the typical female.

Since these two case study subjects were not traditionally feminine, counsellors may have avoided selecting traditional female occupations for them. Counsellors may be willing to encourage nontraditional occupations for somewhat unusual females. The case study subjects who may have been regarded as different, yet capable, were assigned by the counsellors in this study to occupations which required advanced education, high levels of pay, and that were supervisory in nature.

Counsellors in British Columbia who participated in this study did exhibit a negative bias towards women in their choice of occupational roles. They selected occupations with lower levels of salary and more supervision for female case study subjects than for identical male case study subjects. The attitude reflects the current labor market where most women are concentrated in low paying, less rewarding positions. Bias against female occupational choice may not be in the counsellor's awareness; however, such bias undoubtedly has an effect on the nature of counseling and occupational information received by girls. This study represents one more plea for professional development workshops and in-service training for counsellors in issues of women and their occupational roles. When counsellors encourage all clients to explore the full range of vocational choice, then girls and women may begin

to contribute to Canadian society in a manner equal to their talents and abilities.

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