



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 4
Issue 6 July

Article 11

July 1977

Sex Differences in Work Assertiveness of Social Workers

Mary Valentich
Carleton University

James Gripton
University of Calgary

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Valentich, Mary and Gripton, James (1977) "Sex Differences in Work Assertiveness of Social Workers," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 6 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol4/iss6/11>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



SEX DIFFERENCES IN WORK ASSERTIVENESS OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Mary Valentich, D.S.W.
Assistant Professor
School of Social Work
Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

James Gripton, D.S.W.
Professor
Faculty of Social Welfare
University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada

Despite comparable levels of educational qualifications and experience, women in social work occupy a status inferior to men with respect to positions, rates of promotion and salaries.¹ In other words, sexism prevails in what has traditionally been a female profession. Because of the institutionalized preference for men in social work, it is unlikely that individual acts of women to attain professional equality will eliminate sexism. However, because women have been socialized to be passive and self-effacing, they may be contributing to their secondary status by managing their careers less effectively than men.²

What is involved in assertively pursuing one's career goals? Are there sex differences in work assertiveness? What are the consequences of pursuing one's career interests more or less assertively? These are questions investigated in a 1975 study of 657 social workers.³ The findings and their implications for individual women social workers and the social work profession are presented below.

CAREER TACTICS

Career tactics refer to the actions an individual takes to maintain her/himself in a satisfying employment situation - one in which satisfactions are maximized and dissatisfactions are minimized. The career tactics an individual employs may be judged as more or less assertive. Assertiveness involves:

...behavior which enables a person to act in his own best interests, to stand up for himself without undue anxiety, or to exercise his own rights without denying the rights of others.⁴

In the work situation, assertiveness means acting to further one's career interests, or standing up for one's legitimate career rights without infringing on those of others. Non-assertiveness refers to self-effacing and self-defeating behaviors. Aggressiveness is defined as pursuing one's career goals, but at the expense of others. Since there are no absolute standards regarding appropriate work behavior, whether a behavior is labelled assertive or aggressive will depend on the position of the observer. In competitions for promotion, for example, the assertive behavior of the winner may be interpreted as aggressiveness

by the loser.

Despite the North American preoccupation with career success, career tactics have not been the subject of much study, although the view is often expressed that women are less assertive in work situations than men. Can it be assumed that, because of sex role training and the uncertainties that married women face in combining family and career, women will tend to be less assertive than men in their career tactics?

SEX DIFFERENCES IN WORK ASSERTIVENESS

Until recently most of the research on careers focused on men, but studies of British university graduates and reviews of European occupational research by Fogarty et al have contributed greatly to knowledge of sex differences in careers.⁵ The findings from European studies were consistent with the popular view that women do not promote themselves as vigorously as men in the work situation, and Horner's landmark study of female university students provides evidence that women, and especially ambitious women, have difficulty visualizing themselves as highly successful in their careers.⁶ If women fear success more than men, it follows that they will be less likely to pursue their career interests as assertively as men.

In a 1975 survey of 657 social workers, respondents were asked to complete a 10 item Likert Work Assertiveness Scale.⁷ In addition, the enquiry asked questions pertaining to respondents' actual behaviors in pursuing short and long-term career goals. Background information relating to their parents' educational and occupational status was also obtained.

Although previous research suggests that mother's employment and identification with father influence a woman's choice of occupation and level of career ambition, no relationship was observed between these factors or other parent variables and the work assertiveness scores of female social workers.⁸

There was, however, a low but significant partial correlation between sex and work assertiveness (.22).⁹ The assertiveness scores of men tended to be higher than those of women, and this finding was consistent with sex differences in a variety of reported work behaviors that were indicative of work assertiveness. Sex differences were most marked in negotiations with employers at the initial application stage, and at the time of appointment to new positions. Men social workers were more likely to specify salary expectations in letters of inquiry, and to engage in negotiations with employers about salary offer, salary increases, advancement opportunities, fringe benefits, course tuition or conference attendance, and study leave. Although female respondents in this study were more dissatisfied with their salaries than male social workers, they were much less likely to take corrective action than men.¹⁰

The correlations of these behavioral indicators of assertiveness with sex and work assertiveness scores are found in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlations of Behavioral Indicators of Assertiveness with Sex and Work Assertiveness Scores

Behavioral Indicators	Correlations with	
	Sex	Work Assertiveness Scores
1. Specified salary expectations in application	.29	.31
2. Negotiated salary offer with present employer	.29	.30
3. Negotiated salary increase with present employer	.24	.36
4. Negotiated advancement opportunities with present employer	.36	.25
5. Negotiated fringe benefits with present employer	.27	.22
6. Negotiated course tuition and conference attendance with present employer	.34	.42
7. Negotiated study leave with present employer	.29	.40
8. Actions taken in response to dissatisfaction with salaries	.77	.47

IMPORTANCE OF WORK ASSERTIVENESS

Despite the popular assumption that assertiveness in the work situation enhances an individual's chances of attaining her/his career goals, little is known about the actual consequences of assertiveness. Presumably individuals who act assertively at work will maintain their self-esteem, but will other benefits accrue?¹¹

The study of Colorado and Utah social workers was not designed to assess the consequences of acting assertively, but it was found that social workers with higher work assertiveness scores had a higher ratio of job interviews to job applications (.53), were more likely to have been offered their present position or encouraged by their employer to apply for it (.31), or to have been promoted to their present position (.24).

The pattern of these findings suggests that assertiveness in the work situation does bring results. However, sex was still more strongly associated than assertiveness with five of seven indicators of favourable organizational response. Organizations were inclined to reward men social workers more generously than women, a fact well documented by recent research on sexism in social work.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings from the above study do not provide support for the image of the male social worker as highly assertive, or the counterpart

image of the non-assertive female social worker. However, there are differences in the assertiveness of women and men in specific situations. This suggests that women social workers would benefit from work assertiveness training focused on such problematic career decisions and actions as making job applications, participating in job interviews, negotiating job contracts, and securing the recognition and rewards due them for effective performance. The purpose of such assertiveness training would be to eliminate the self-effacing responses which women have learned, and to enhance their self-esteem as employees. However, the effectiveness of more assertive career tactics on the part of women social workers will depend on how such assertiveness is perceived and evaluated by their superiors.

Although sexism was not the central focus of the above study, it was shown that men tended to be treated more favorably than women by employing organizations. Therefore, the adoption of more assertive tactics will be of limited value in helping women to attain equal status with men unless sexist obstacles to women's advancement are removed. In the broader societal context, this would include enactment of the Equal Rights Amendment and related legislation, the movement toward equality of sex roles within the family, and the restructuring of occupational life to facilitate integration of work and family roles.

NOTES

1. See David Fanshel, "Status Differentials: Men and Women in Social Work," Social Work 21 (Nov. 1976), pp. 421-426; James Gripton, "Sexism in Social Work: Male Takeover of a Female Profession," The Social Worker, 42 (Summer 1974), pp. 78-89; Diane Kravetz, "Sexism in a Woman's Profession," Social Work, 21 (Nov. 1976), pp. 448-454; C. Bernard Scotch, "Sex Status in Social Work," Social Work, 6 (July 1971), pp. 5-11; and Martha Williams, Liz Ho and Lucy Fielder, "Career Patterns: More Grist for Women's Liberation," Social Work, 19 (July 1974), pp. 463-466.
2. For reviews of the research, see Arlie Russell Hochschild, "A Review of Sex Role Research," American Journal of Sociology, 78 (January 1973), pp. 1011-1029; Eleanor Emmons Maccoby and Carol Nagy Jacklin, The Psychology of Sex Differences (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974); and Julia A. Sherman, On the Psychology of Women (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1973).
3. Mary Valentich, "Sex Differences in Career Management among Social Workers," Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, University of Denver, 1975.
4. Robert E. Alberti and Michael Emmons, Your Perfect Right. 2nd ed. (San Luis Obispo, California: Impact, 1975) p. 2.
5. Michael P. Fogarty, Rhona Rapaport, and Robert N. Rapaport, Sex, Career and Family (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971).

6. Matina Horner, "Sex Differences in Achievement, Motivation and Performance in Competitive and Non-Competitive Situations." Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 1968.
7. See James Gripton and Mary Valentich, "Development of a Work Assertiveness Scale," The Social Worker, to be published.
8. Fogarty, p. 169.
9. All correlations are significant at the .05 level, one tailed if the relationship was predicted, and two tailed if it was not. The correlations are the Yule's Q Statistic. See James A. Davis, Elementary Survey Analysis. (Englewood Cliffs, N.Y.: Prentice-Hall, 1971) for a discussion of Yule's Q.
10. The fact that women did report greater dissatisfaction than men may, however, reflect a growing awareness on the part of women social workers of sex discrimination in salaries, and a shift in their expectations. In Gripton's 1973 survey of members of Canadian Association of Social Workers, women social workers, despite considerable inequities in salary and rank, did not report greater dissatisfaction than men. See Gripton, 1974.
11. Alberti and Emmons, p. 34.