Women in Blue-Collar Occupations: An Exploration of Constraints and Facilitators

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This study reports on some of the variables which facilitate and impede work satisfaction among women in nontraditional occupations. A small sample of women working as machinists, pipe fitters, carpenters, electricians, technicians, and construction workers reported that sexual harassment on the job impeded their work satisfaction. Respondents' perceptions of equality in pay and promotion on the job, and congruence between work and domestic roles, served to enhance work satisfaction. Age was related to a sense of competence, perception of equality on the job, and congruence between work and domestic roles. Social support significantly enhanced work satisfaction.

The high proportion of female-headed families living in poverty has brought an increased awareness of the relationship between poverty and the low status of women in the occupational hierarchy. Because 70% of employed women are concentrated in low-paying service jobs, many do not earn sufficient wages to keep their families above the poverty level (Shortridge, 1986). One way that women can earn wages comparable to that of men is to integrate into nontraditional work, defined as jobs where 75% of the employees are males (Lenikan, 1983).
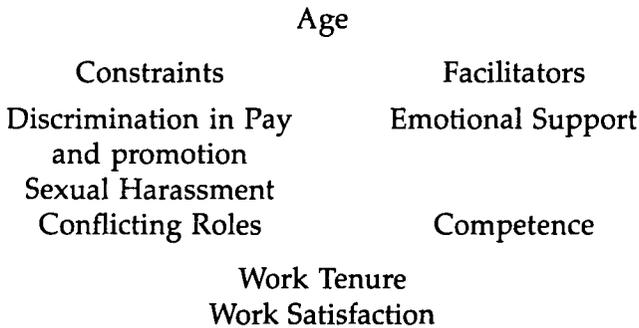
In the past decade, much research emphasis has been placed on the increased participation of women in the managerial and administrative sector of the labor force. The social science literature has devoted much less attention to the entry of women into skilled crafts, despite the fact that such occupations pay a much higher average wage than do typically female occupations (Fox & Hesse-Biber, 1986).

As women enter skilled crafts, such as carpentry and electrical work, their high turnover rates reflect the obstacles to achieving work tenure in the all male domain of nontraditional

work (Walshok, 1981). Although variables that hinder or facil-
itate work satisfaction have received increased attention in the
past decade, few studies have concentrated on women cross-
ing the gender boundaries of skilled crafts. This topic deserves
further investigation because blue-collar jobs may be more dif-
ficult for women to enter and to keep than is the case with
professional occupations (Gerson, 1982).

Figure 1 depicts a conceptual model developed by Quick
and Quick (1984). The model depicts some of the obstacles
and the facilitators associated with work tenure and work sat-
isfaction among women in administrative and managerial po-
sitions (Quick & Quick, 1984). These factors, including sexual
harassment, job discrimination, role conflict, emotional support
and competence, may be expected to impact work satisfaction
among women in blue- collar occupations as well.

Figure 1. Conceptual model of the constraints on and facili-
tators of work tenure and satisfaction

<div align="center">

Age

Constraints   Facilitators

Discrimination in Pay   Emotional Support
  and promotion
Sexual Harassment
Conflicting Roles   Competence

Work Tenure
Work Satisfaction

</div>

Barriers to Work Tenure and Work Satisfaction

The works of Walshok (1981) and Yogev & Brett (1985) sub-
stantiate Quick & Quick's model of discrimination in pay and
promotion, sexual harassment, and role conflicts as barriers to
work satisfaction and work tenure among women. After three
decades of rapid increases in the labor force participation of
women, role conflict remains an obstacle for those women
who assume the dual roles of homemaker and wage earner
(Astin, 1985). These roles tend to overlap and create stressful

situations when performance in one of these roles is thwarted by the demands of the other. Some authorities believe that gender role assignments in the home are becoming more flexible, but husbands' participation in the domestic sphere is still limited (Smith & Reid, 1982).

Inequalities in pay are reflected by the gender gap in earnings which is predicted to narrow to where women will be earning 85% of male wages in the year 2000 (Cetron, 1988). Persistent gender stratification of the labor force where women are predominantly occupied at the lower level with minimal promotional opportunities is one of the reasons they now earn only 64% of the average male wages (Rosenfelt & Stacey, 1987).

The prevalence of sexual harassment on the job is closely related to the subjugation of women in low level positions and lack of promotional opportunities. Women are increasingly articulating their opposition to verbal and physical sexual harassment often in the form of requests for sexual favors in return for career advancements (Sapiro, 1986).

The Facilitators: Social Support and Competence

The feminist movement has created an awareness among women of the beneficial aspects of emotional support. Social networking serves to enhance the sense of competence that women often lack (Cooper & Davidson, 1982). Females have been found to be much more likely to request support and they find social support more helpful and available than do men (Butler, 1985). Moreover, the buffering effects of social support in mediating work stress have been well documented (House, 1980; Pines, 1981).

Quick and Quick (1984) found that social support and a sense of competence served to buffer the effects of isolation and stress among women in managerial occupations. However, the impact of social support on the unique experiences of women in nontraditional blue collar work has not been subjected to much empirical investigation.

Social support is comprised of four components; emotional, appraisal, informational and instrumental support (House, 1980). Although the concepts emotional support and social support are used interchangeable in the literature, emotional

support is used in this study because it is more conceptually clear measure than the more general term social support (La-Rocco, House, and French, 1980).

For future generations of women workers, increased awareness about the need for support on the part of young women may affect changes in future prospects for gender integration of the workforce. In addition, the effects of various types of support, including support from spouses, friends and coworkers, may have differential impact on women's well-being on the job.

Age and Work Satisfaction

Studies introducing gender as a salient variable have found an inverse relationship between age and work satisfaction. That is, young women have tended to report a greater degree of satisfaction with work than their older counterparts (Arnold & Feldman, 1982).

There is some indication that young women tend to believe that gender equality has been achieved (Bolotin, 1982). The post-feminist generation may view the non-traditional work environment as being more hospitable than do women born before the second wave of feminism in the 60s.

The Study Rationale

There is a dearth of research about the variables associated with work satisfaction and work tenure among women in blue-collar occupations. Therefore this study is exploratory in nature as the associations between the variables depicted in Figure 1 are analyzed. Specifically, the research questions addressed are whether there are age differences in the perception of obstacles to work satisfaction and work tenure among women in the skilled crafts. In other words, do younger women perceive a greater equality in pay and promotion and less sexual harassment and role conflicts, than do their older counterparts? Secondly, are there age differences in the level of emotional support and competence among women blue-collar workers? And finally, are age, perception of equality in pay and promotion, sexual harassment, role conflict, emotional support and competence significantly related to work satisfaction and work tenure?

Methodology

Sample

Employers of five organizations employing skilled craft workers were asked to distribute questionnaires to their female employees. The questionnaires were designed to assess the factors which might enhance or reduce work satisfaction. All respondents who reported having undergone at least six months of work training for the job were included in the study. This nonrandom sample was comprised of 46 women employed in blue-collar, skilled or semiskilled craft occupations in a mid-sized city in a southern state in 1986. The instructions for study participation included the assurance that participation in the study was voluntary and that individual responses would be confidential. The respondents were instructed to mail back their completed questionnaires in self-addressed, stamped envelopes attached to the survey instrument.

Respondents' occupational categories included 56% employed as electrical and engineering technicians, telephone installers or repairers. The remaining 44% held jobs as machinists, pipe fitters, carpenters, electricians and construction workers. The average work tenure among the respondents was 6 years, ranging from less than 1 year to 12 years.

The mean and the median age of the women who participated in the study was 36, ranging from 25 to 54 years of age. Eighty-nine percent were White, 9% Black, and 2% other racial categories. The median income was $30,000. The mean educational level reported by the respondents was 13 1/2 years of schooling. Twenty-five of the women in the sample were married, 13 had divorced and 6 had never been married.

Measurements

Congruence between work and home responsibilities was measured by asking the respondents whether they felt their work got in the way of family duties, or to what extent home care got in the way of work. The perception of equality on the job was a two-item measure of respondents' perceived equality in pay and promotion. Additionally, one item asked about the

frequency of sexual harassment by coworkers or superiors on the job. The response categories for sexual harassment ranged from "never" to "very often", and the concept was described as sexual innuendos, sexual jokes or harassment.

The measure used to assess competence was a three-item scale used by Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka (1981). These questions asked to what degree respondents felt confident in making decisions affecting the way they live and were able to carry out plans. Emotional support was measured by a four-item index on which the respondents rated the support they received from coworkers, supervisors, friends and spouses. These various sources of support have been found to be a reliable and valid measure of emotional support (LaRocco, House, and French, 1980). The rationale in this study for separating spouse support from support from others was to address the research question posed about the relationship between husbands' support and work satisfaction.

Work satisfaction was a one-item measure of the degree to which the women in the study were satisfied with their work. It is noted that multiple item measures may increase the reliability and validity of work satisfaction. However, one item measures were found to have acceptable criterion validity (Larsen, Diener, and Edmond, 1985). Work tenure was assessed by the number of years the respondent had worked in the type of work in which she was currently employed.

All the measures used in the study were set out in a five-point Likert format, ranging from "very much" to "not at all." The higher the score, the greater the congruence was between work and home care responsibilities, perceived equality in pay and promotion, competence, emotional support and work satisfaction. The higher the score, the lower was the frequency of sexual harassment at work reported by the respondents.

Results

Table 1 presents the significant correlations between age, perception of equality on the job, emotional support, role conflict, competence and work satisfaction. Age was found to be significantly related to the respondents' perception of equality on the job. Younger women reported less discrimination in pay

and promotion than did their older counterparts. No age differences were found in the frequency of sexual harassment, but low frequency of harassment was significantly related to work satisfaction.

Table 1

Correlation Coefficients Between Age, Constraints and Facilitators of Work Satisfaction

	Age	Training	Satisfaction
Equality in Pay and Promotion	– .27*	– .39*	.27*
Sexual Harassment	– .17	– .05	– .23**
Role Congruence	.31*	.08	.23**
Competence	– .22**	.03	.04
Emotional Support			
Others	– .12	.07	.49*
Spouse	– .17	.05	.18

* p= < .05
**p= < .10

Age was not related to the utilization of support from friends, coworkers or spouses. However, talking with family, friends and coworkers was significantly related to work satisfaction, while support from spouses did not affect work satisfaction.

The younger the woman, the greater she reported her sense of competence in carrying out tasks at work and in the home. Older women tended to report greater congruence between home and work responsibilities than did younger women.

Although no significant correlations were found between work barriers, facilitators and work tenure, equality in pay was related to length of work training. The longer the training period, the more the respondents perceived that they were discriminated against in pay and promotional opportunities. Finally work tenure was not significantly related to the obstacles to or facilitators on work satisfaction.

Discussion

It is important to note that the respondents' average income of $30,000 per year was much higher than for women in general since only one woman worker in ten received more than $20,000 per year annual income in 1982, according to Lief-Palley (1987). It is unclear to what extent the high average wage was attributable to union memberships among the respondents. Union membership among skilled craft workers is much higher than for employees in typically female-type occupations (Fox & Hesse-Biber (1984) and this is one reason for women to cross the boundaries to unionized higher paying male-dominated occupations.

The relatively high wages among women in the skilled crafts are important in terms of the economic well-being of women who comprise the largest poverty population in this country. The entry of women into nontraditional work may be an important poverty reducing strategy.

The results suggest that the fit between the new generation of women workers and the nontraditional working environment may be greater than has been the case for women in the past. This is true with regard to women's perception of equality in pay and promotions as well as competence in decision-making and carrying out their plans. The enhanced social status of women in general is likely to result in greater participation of females in nontraditional occupations in the future, including the skilled crafts.

The results indicating that women who receive longer work training report greater discrimination in pay and promotion seem to substantiate the reward dualism hypothesis. According to this prediction, systematically different rewards exist between males and females with roughly equal credentials, especially as education and training increase (Sanders & Wong, 1985). In general, there seems to be a pervasive ceiling effect to the advancement of working women, which is also true for women in skilled craft occupations.

The high average age of the respondents in this study indicates that many women may begin their work life in female-type occupations before crossing nontraditional boundaries. In the works of one respondent in this study: "Opportunities for

women in nontraditional jobs is just in its infancy. If I had my job to live over, I'd have a completely different first four years".

For the postfeminist generation of women workers in this study, the problem of sexual harassment on the job is still prevalent. Such harassment is a particularly severe obstacle to work satisfaction among women blue-collar workers (Walshok, 1981). Group norms in the all male domain of blue-collar work may dictate a greater tolerance of sexual innuendos, jokes and even harassment as a protection of gender boundaries. Future generations of women workers may have to persevere in a work atmosphere where sexual harassment continues to serve as a constraint to work satisfaction even as other barriers for women entering blue-collar work are minimized.

The women participants in this study reported various ways in which they responded to sexual harassment on the job. Some women reported that ignoring incidents of harassment was the most functional alternative for them, while others occasionally exchanged jokes and innuendos in an attempt to upstage the men.

On the home front, women are still not receiving the emotional support from their spouses that would buffer the stressful effects of discrimination on the job and the conflicting demands of dual roles. This is particularly true for younger women who experience greater conflicts between home care and work roles than do older women. Emotional support, both in the form of having someone to talk to about work-related problems and help with home care, seems to be a relatively scarce commodity for younger women.

In regard to instrumental or task support, anecdotal evidence offered by the respondents indicates that husbands' unwillingness to assume coresponsibility for domestic and child care is one of the factors that contributes to unfair division of labor in the home. Many women seem to tolerate husbands' limited support in the home because they feel guilty about neglecting their roles as homemakers and mothers (Yogev & Brett, 1985). A 30 year old respondent articulated her need for more help: "All of the responsibilities in the home are mine, including the care of our two- year-old. We are hoping my husband

can learn to share some of these responsibilities, or at least help out some".

Social policy formulation are not easily extended toward more equitable division of labor in the home. But child care and flexible work hours, both of which feminist activists and scholars have strongly advocated in recent years, provide a partial solution for working mothers. Equitable pay, promotional opportunities, and freedom from sexual harassment call for strict employment policies and enforcement. In the absence of national legislation to promote gender equality, women must strive to unite in the work setting to demand improved opportunities and working conditions.

The exploratory nature and the small sample in this study preclude generalizations of the findings to all women in the skilled crafts. It also should be noted that the sample is skewed toward women in the semiskilled crafts because of the relatively few number of women in the more lucrative skilled crafts (see Fox & Hesse-Biber, 1984). The results, however, point to the need for more extensive multivariate studies of the factors found to affect work satisfaction and tenure among women blue-collar workers. The combined effects of age, competence, marital and parental status of women should be examined and the impact of these variables on role conflict and work satisfaction among women in nontraditional occupations needs to be assessed.

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