

# Returning to Work or School: Women's Career Decisions

by

Meredith M. Kimball

## ABSTRACT/RESUME

*Cette présentation se penche sur les femmes qui choisissent de demeurer à la maison et qui contribuent, par leur travail non rémunéré, à la vie du foyer et au développement de la famille. Nous y décrivons en particulier les perceptions des femmes qui sont demeurées à la maison pour les derniers dix ou quinze ans, mais qui considèrent présentement un retour aux études ou à un emploi rémunéré.*

*Vingt et une femmes ont été sélectionnées afin de participer à une entrevue sur l'histoire de leur propre vie, ainsi qu'à une série d'examens afin de déterminer leur niveau de motivation dans la réalisation personnelle et leur degré d'intelligence. Les critères de sélection étaient les suivants: 1) elles avaient un diplôme*



Susanne M. Swibold, Untitled photograph, from a 25-image series, Portrait of a Dancer - Is a Portrait of My Self, 1979 (11"x14" each)

postsecondaire; et 2) elles n'avaient pas été embauchées à l'extérieur du foyer au cours des dix ou quinze dernières années.

Nous nous concentrerons sur les entrevues qui découlent de ces histoires de vie personnelle. Les sujets couverts durant les entrevues incluaient: les origines familiales; le niveau d'instruction; la situation de vie présente; les objectifs; les perceptions relatives au succès et à l'échec.

La structure de l'analyse des données est composée des perceptions qu'ont les femmes de leur propre vie. Quatre sujets spécifiques y sont examinés: premièrement, l'attitude de personnes significatives dans la vie de la femme, soit celle exprimée par ses parents, par ses frères ou soeurs, par ses semblables, par ses enseignants et conseillers au cours de la croissance, pendant laquelle elle faisait ses premiers plans vers une carrière; deuxièmement, des situations critiques de soutien et de frustration découlant toutes les deux de sa décision originale de laisser son emploi pour se dévouer entièrement à sa famille et maintenant, vis-à-vis sa décision de retourner aux études ou dans le monde du travail. Dans cette section, le rôle de la famille et celui des amis ou d'un autre groupe de soutien, y est examiné. En troisième lieu on y examine les attitudes et les opinions en conflit. Par exemple, cette même femme qui croit qu'une femme devrait

demeurer à la maison pendant que ses enfants grandissent, mais qui peut aussi être d'avis que le fait de rester au foyer fait qu'une femme devient une personne ennuyeuse et désintéressée. Nous analyserons de quelle façon ces opinions sont exprimées, à quelle fin elles sont utilisées et comment les deux aspects d'une opinion sont maintenus. Nous examinerons en quatrième lieu, les perceptions des femmes au sujet de leurs succès et de leurs échecs et ce en nous concentrant sur la question suivante: comment les définitions traditionnelles des hommes du succès et de l'échec sont-elles pertinentes et de quelle façon elles s'expriment dans la vie des femmes.

A woman's career pattern has traditionally involved training, working until marriage or the birth of her first child, leaving the labour force to raise her children and support her husband in his career, with the option of returning to her career when the children are grown. While this pattern does not represent reality for many women in Canada (36.7% of married women are in the labour force) (2) who choose or have to engage in paid employment, for others it is the pattern of their lives. This study focuses on women who have made the choice to stay at home and are now making decisions about returning to school or entering the labour force. I will be describ-

ing their perceptions of the situation when they were taking their early training, why they chose home as the major focus of their lives, what they plan to do now, and what supports they have in their attempts to move beyond the home.

In order to find women who had stayed in the home and were thinking of re-entering school or the labour force, a letter describing the study was sent to approximately 300 women who had come to the Women's Resources Centre in Vancouver for either courses or counselling. Of the 80 women who answered the letter, 21 were chosen who met the criteria of the study. The criteria for inclusion were: 1) five or more years in the home; 2) some post-secondary education; and 3) currently involved in a decision about a further career commitment. Each woman participated in a study which involved a series of achievement motivation tests and a life-history interview. The focus of this paper is the data from the interviews. Each interview was conducted either in an office at the University of British Columbia or in the woman's home. The interview, which lasted from one to two hours, was structured around several topic areas. These included: perceptions of parental and peer attitudes toward the woman's original career choice; what led the woman to make the home her major focus; what led to a change in that focus; what she planned to do now; what she saw

as her major supports and frustrations; and what she considered successes and failures in her life. Each interview was taped and transcribed. One tape was distorted and transcription was impossible; thus 20 transcribed interviews were used.

The women had originally been trained in several fields. Nursing was the most common choice as eight of the women were trained as nurses. Two women had secretarial training or had attended business school (from one to four years); three had teaching degrees; one each had a degree or training in social work, pharmacy, as an x-ray technician, music (BA) and fine arts (2 years university). Two women did not have any post-secondary education prior to marriage but had taken some training after marriage--early childhood education courses in one case and a certificate in business machines in the other. All of the women were or had been married. All but two had children. The youngest woman was 29 and the oldest 63; however, most of the women were between 35 and 55.

The most striking aspect of the women's descriptions of how they arrived at their original career decisions was lack of specific encouragement or discouragement in any particular direction. Ten of the women stated that they were neither specifically encouraged nor discouraged by their parents in their career choices. There

was very little direction offered and when advice was offered nursing, teaching and secretarial work were held out as options for women. Nursing was particularly attractive because room and board was provided during training thus relieving the woman's family of financial responsibility (Richport and Smith mentioned this specifically).(3) Besides the specific comments of half of the women about lack of encouragement or discouragement, the lack of direction offered was demonstrated in several other ways. Only two women mentioned that their parents were pleased with their career choice (Hastings, Richport). Four of the women commented either on the lack of counsellors (Fast, Harris) or on the narrow range of options open to women (Downing, Hastings). While eight women mentioned teachers that encouraged them academically, only three (King, Patton, Remick) remembered teachers who encouraged them to go to university. When asked if other adults influenced the women in career choices, only two women gave specific examples (Hastings, Bevin). Two women mentioned friends (both male) who had encouraged them in their career choices as adolescents (Remick, Smith). It is not so much that the women were without influence but that this influence seldom was focused on career or achievement issues. Most of the women, when asked, felt that some adults had been important models as to how they wanted to be in terms of personality or attitudes toward life.

Certain exceptions to this overall impression of lack of either encouragement or discouragement did occur. Encouragement, as it was remembered, most often concerned doing well in school or setting high academic standards. In some cases parental encouragement stopped short of going on for post-secondary education (Bevin, Patton). In others it included going to university because it was the accepted thing (Downing, Smith); for insurance until marriage and later if the marriage should break up (Fast, Maverick); to get a "Mrs." degree (Downing, Maverick); and/or it gave one poise (Hastings). As one woman put it:

I'm sure that they (parents) were very proud of me doing well in school, in fact most of my strokes came from that, but it was still understood that I would use that intelligence in a secondary way, that I wouldn't use it directly, that I would use it indirectly. When my husband went into business the idea was that I would use my intelligence to help him in his business, not to do something that I wanted to do for me. Or I could use it to help the children to develop. (Patton)

When looking for discouragement, what stands out the most is that any ideas of non-traditional careers met with quite specific disapproval or discouragement. One woman wanted to be a hospital administrator or lawyer--

both choices were opposed by her father as inappropriate or too difficult for a woman (Nelson). Another expressed desires to be a racing car driver or fireman which met with objections in that they were not "lady-like" or that women could not do them (Hastings). A third woman wanted to be a bacteriologist and she had been supported by her father and a friend but her mother thought nursing was a better choice (Smith). All three of these women became nurses. Another woman, whose mother was determined that all her children should get a degree, wanted to study Latin and go to university. Her mother felt Latin was not good for a girl and pushed home economics instead. In the end her daughter chose home economics (Mason). Other women changed their own career choices with less specific parental disapproval. One originally planned a career in the foreign service (having rejected her father's pressure to be a teacher), took one year of college and switched to business college because she realized that government was a very difficult field for women to get into (Downing). Another who originally planned to be a doctor, dropped these plans because of low grades in the sciences and later trained in pharmacy (Fast). A third chose x-ray technician training over university partly because of a feeling of owing her parents something financially (Bevin). Four women remembered that it was considered more important for their brothers to go to university than it was for them (Bevin, Patton, Pratt, Richport).

In conclusion, the picture presented is that these women were allowed to do what they wanted to, that they were not often counselled in the direction of a specific career; that they were encouraged to do well in school but not as uniformly encouraged to attend university; and that if they had aspirations toward a non-traditional career they were discouraged. The specific discouragements stand out against a background of a lack of specific encouragements.

All of these women had chosen to be primarily homemakers and mothers for at least 5 and in some cases as many as 15-20 years. When asked for the factors influencing this choice, 12 women spoke of conditioning or the prevailing cultural values; 11 mentioned that they had liked being at home and had wanted to be based there; and 12 mentioned reasons relating to children. Of the reasons focusing on children the most commonly mentioned was wanting to be available to them, especially after school (Brown, Maverick, Smith). Three women also mentioned that they, in observing children whose mothers were not home as much, did not like what they saw (Maverick, Nelson, Skinner). Basically the focus on children represents the high standards the women wished to maintain in childrearing activities. As one woman put it:

. . . I feel that if my children turn out badly, then nothing else can ever compensate for that unless I was a real genius and found a cure for cancer. (Nelson)

Seven women mentioned a commitment to their husband or their husband's desires to have them stay home as a factor in their decision. Both of the women without children were in this group (Hastings, Manchester). Two women said that part of the reason they did not work was that they could not handle two full-time jobs (Thompson, Bevin). Interestingly, the only two women in the sample whose mothers had worked outside the home throughout their childhood both cited this as a motivation for their staying home. One remembered that other children's mothers did not work and that she had strong feelings about not working when she had a family (Harris); the other felt she wanted to give more to her family than her mother had (Bevin). Four women mentioned having been frustrated or having felt trapped at home (Bevin, Brown, Fast, King).

When asked about why they were now considering returning to work or school the women expressed several reasons. The most common factor influencing their decision was financial. Seven women mentioned money. For some it was a sense of either needing or wanting to become financially self-sufficient in the face of a broken marriage or what they felt to be a bad marriage (Brown, Mason, Maverick, Patton). For others it was to be able to spend money in the ways they felt were important; for example, to hire someone to clean the house or to have more money for travel (Fast, Pratt, Smith).

Four women felt that it was time for a change--that they had stayed home and that now they were ready for a new phase in their lives which included a focus outside their homes (Brown, Patton, Richport, and Skinner). Five women mentioned that they had been influenced by either the Women's Movement literature or the low status of being a housewife (Bevin, Downing, Harris, Sanderson, Smith). Two women specifically mentioned that they wanted to be an example to their children (Remick, Richport). Other reasons included self-esteem (Hastings, Harris, Nelson, Skinner, Thompson) and the need for stimulation (Harris, McIntosh, Skinner).

The women were questioned in some detail about their current plans--what they were doing at the time, where they saw it leading and what ideally they would like to do. Two aspects of their plans stood out. First, very few of the women wanted to or were returning to work they had originally trained for. Of all the women only one expressed a strong desire to return to social work for which she was trained (Manchester). She had made several attempts to obtain social work jobs and had worked on a government grant project for senior citizens. As her attempts to obtain a social work job had failed, she was currently working in an office job. Another woman who had originally taken a degree in education was teaching two college courses but wanted

eventually to go into counselling (King). Two women in nursing had taken refresher courses. One had applied for and been offered a nursing job but still felt that she would rather go back to school to study social work; however lack of time and money prohibited this course (Remick). The other one had not applied for any jobs but was considering further training in industrial nursing (Richport). Another nurse by training, was working in a related field (medical laboratory) but was not sure about re-training (Skinner). And, finally, a woman who had gone to business school said she probably would be a secretary as that was easiest but at the time of the interview was also considering several other possibilities and was in a pre-school supervisor training program (Pratt). Among the rest of the women, nine expressed the feeling that they did not want to or felt they could not return to work they had trained for (Bevin, Fast, Hastings, Harris, Mason, Maverick, Nelson, Smith, Thompson) while three others expressed doubts and reservations about doing so (Brown, Downing, Sanderson). That only five of these twenty women either wanted to return to their earlier profession or were actually taking steps in that direction has important implications for counselling women. While many young people probably do not end up in the professions they train for and some people change professions because their interests change, it is a particular disservice to young women to promote

the myth that they should choose a career which they can "pick up again after their children are grown." They may have neither the interest nor the opportunity to do so. This problem is exaggerated, particularly for the women in this sample who were growing up during the 1940s and 1950s, by the narrow range of professions seen as suitable for women. Choosing from such a narrow range heightens the chance that the individual's interests will not be consistent with the choice.

The second aspect of the women's plans that stood out was the distinction between the nine women who were very definite about their career plans and the eleven women who were very indefinite. The nine women who were considered to be definite either were working at the time, going to school with the aim of obtaining a specific degree or applying for jobs. They had a clear sense of what they wanted to do and were pursuing a relatively narrow range of possibilities.(4) The eleven women who were considered indefinite often were not actually working, going to school or looking for a job. They were often confused about what they wanted to do and were considering a wide range of possibilities.(5) In an attempt to describe aspects of the situation that correlate with and might possibly explain this difference between the two groups, I have examined several factors. The presence of children and their ages were not important. Of the two women

who did not have children, one was definite (Manchester) and one indefinite (Hastings). Of the two women who had at least one pre-school aged child, one was definite (King) and one indefinite (Sanderson). The reasons for wanting to return to work or school also did not discriminate between the two groups with the one exception of the low status of housework--all five women who mentioned this as part of the motivation for their considering a change were in the indefinite group. Whether the women wanted full time or part time work did differentiate between the two groups. Only two of the women in the definite group wanted a part time involvement (Patton, Thompson), while seven of the women in the indefinite group wanted something part time (Brown, Downing, Fast, McIntosh, Pratt, Sanderson, Smith). This difference in the desire for full time or part time work probably reflected the difference between the two groups in how definite they were about seeking work or training.

While there were no simple ways to discriminate between the two groups, two variables appeared as critical in defining the definite group--these women either had very supportive husbands or they were in marriages that they felt were very unhappy and in danger of splitting up. Four women described their husbands as very supportive (Manchester, Skinner, Thompson, Nelson).

In each case the husband was described not only as accepting of what the women wanted to do but as actively encouraging their wives, that is, being proud of their wives' skills, telling the women they could do as well as the next person in the outside world. If, on the other hand, husbands were not described as supportive, the women with definite career plans tended to describe their marriages as very unhappy or rocky. One woman had been separated from her husband for over a year and had four children to support (Patton). Two others described their marriages as very difficult (Remick, Mason) and a fourth said that her original decision to gain some skills and look for work came from realizing the marriage was bad (Maverick). She had made attempts to improve the marriage which at the time of the interview she described as better. The only other woman among those definite about her career also did not feel supported by her husband but did not describe the marriage as difficult or unhappy, although she did see lack of support and co-operation from her husband as the major frustration she faced. The motivation for these women seemed to come from either active support at home or so negative a home environment that they were motivated to gain in the outside world what was missing at home. One of these latter women described her sense of motivation as follows:

. . . the thing that's keeping me

going is the bad relationship. . . it is kind of ironic that that is what is keeping me going. (Remick)

In addition to the active support that four of the definite women got from husbands, the women who were definite about their plans got more support from other people than did the women who were more indefinite. Four women in the definite group reported support from a close friend (Mason, Nelson, Patton, Thompson). Two reported strong support from teenage or grown daughters (Nelson, Thompson). One reported support and active encouragement from women at work (King) and another reported active support from women's groups, a counsellor and the women in her refresher course (Remick). Of the nine women with definite career goals and plans, only one did not discuss a person or persons she felt actively supported her in her attempt at transition (Maverick).

For the women with indefinite or unclear ideas about work or school, a very different support pattern was found. Four of the women reported husbands who were supportive (Downing, Fast, Sanderson, Smith). However, the support described by three of these women was qualified--their work was encouraged as long as it did not involve too much time or change their life style too much (Downing, Fast, Smith). The fourth woman described a support that was not active--her husband said do what you want, and left

the decision with her. For the other seven indefinite women who reported their husbands as non-supporting or negative, only one woman reported a close friend who supported her (Harris), and three women reported support from children (Brown, McIntosh, Richport). One woman reported having gotten support from other women and women's groups (Richport). In addition several of the women with less definite career plans described people who were discouraging of their plans while none of the women with definite plans did so. One woman described a friend who disapproved of her leaving her husband alone (Brown). Two women reported negative feedback from children (Brown, Sanderson), and one woman reported feeling subtly pressured by a woman's group to do more than be a housewife (Downing). Three of the women in the indefinite group did not discuss a person or persons who supported them (Bevin, Hastings, Pratt). The difference between the definite and indefinite groups in terms of active encouragement and support was striking.

In conclusion, this study points out the lack of active encouragement these women faced in making their original career choices; that the choices most women make upon returning to the labour force do not reflect their earlier training; and finally that support is critical for women making the transition from a life centered around the home to one that also includes the world of training and paid employment.

NOTES

1. I wish to thank Danalee Goldthwaite for her help in testing and interviewing the subjects and Pat Waldron for transcribing the interviews.
2. Women in the Labour Force: Facts and Figures, Information Canada, 1975.
3. All the subjects are referred to by code names.
4. Women in the definite group include: King, Manchester, Mason, Maverick, Nelson, Patton, Remick, Skinner, Thompson.
5. Women in the indefinite group include: Bevin, Brown, Downing, Fast, Harris, Hastings, McIntosh, Pratt, Richport, Sanderson, Smith.