

Occupational choice and vulnerability in late life: An example of women in the USA

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Abstract. During the years surrounding WW II, many young American women entered federal government employment. Most of them assumed low- to mid-level clerical positions; however, a few became highly educated and advanced to high-level government employment. These “government girls” as they were called assumed positions of power and authority uncommon for U.S. women at that time. The large commitments required for their employment, however, limited these women’s time for fulfilling traditional gender roles, such as marriage and having children. We describe a study in progress that examines how gender role and commitment to government employment affect quality of life during retirement, especially late-life loneliness, propensity for institutionalization, abandonment, self-neglect, morbidity, and mortality. We believe that this study is replicable and applicable to similar older women in other countries. Our research topic and methods offer a unique opportunity to conduct collaborative studies on other populations of retired female workers in late life. © 2005 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Late-life vulnerability; Aging women; Federal government employment; Gender role; WW II

1. Introduction

Individuals enter and pass through a variety of social roles over their lifetime. These roles are dominated by commitments to and position within family (e.g., child, adult, spouse, parent), education (e.g., student, teacher, mentor), and work status and position (e.g., unemployed, employed, worker, manager, retired). Progression through life largely dictates opportunities for filling certain age-defined roles and their sequencing. For example, as a person matures from child to adult, she may simultaneously progress from

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student to mentor or from unemployment to employment. Events such as marriage place a person in the role of spouse, while presenting an opportunity to become a parent.

The choices involved with these transitions are far from simple, and the difficulty escalates when certain roles are at odds with social norms. For example, U.S. women of the early 20th century felt pressure to assume the accepted progression from dependent child to married adult, parent, and homemaker. Work roles for women existed, but they were largely deemed secondary and supportive to domestic responsibilities that promoted a man's economic productivity and ensured social reproduction.

Not all women, however, conformed to social norms for life roles. Within the United States, WW II provided both the impetus and the opportunity for women to seek employment in the federal government while men served in the military. These government positions conveyed both power and authority, but the job preparation, maintenance, and promotion required for these positions placed great demands on women's lives that often were at odds with traditional gender roles. Career was given higher priority than family, changing the dynamics of these women's social networks and, consequently, the support systems over their lifetimes. We argue that these "government girls," women who sought and attained high-level employment in the U.S. federal government, now lack effective support networks in later life and are at higher risk of abandonment, self-neglect, and morbidity than their peers who followed the more socially accepted domestic life path.

This in-progress study seeks to understand the connection between life-role choices, occupational and family-role choices, and late-life vulnerability among women. This study uses narrative life interviews of women who were employed in the U.S. federal government during and shortly after WW II.

1.1. Women's roles of the 20th century

Despite the rapidly dropping marriage and birth rates that accompanied the Great Depression in the United States and the attendant need for women to work outside the home, both men and women alike resisted "the changing definitions of women's proper role in society. Women, above all, were supposed to be wives and mothers" [1].

Women's work before WW II, whether in the home or in the workplace, was largely devalued. But by working at jobs traditionally held by men who were no longer there to perform them—jobs that were in some cases physically demanding and had value to society (e.g., building aircraft and ships)—these career women learned to value themselves and their work more highly than before [1], and it followed that society also valued the work that they performed.

In 1890, only 18% of U.S. women worked outside the home. By 1997, a full 60% of women did, comprising 46% of the U.S. labor force [2]. In a study of three cohorts of men and women, Carr [3] found that women who did not conform to the social norms of their time (in particular, women born between 1931 and 1944) and who continued to work despite having children showed lower self-acceptance rates than women who either reduced their total work years or left the labor force altogether after having children. Conversely, Baby Boom women and their adult female children had lower self-acceptance if they reduced their work years or left the labor force, a reflection of changing social norms. These findings suggest that adherence to cohort-specific social norms for appropriate gender-role behavior is likely to result in more positive self-appraisal and in higher levels of self-acceptance.

“Government girls,” women who worked in the upper echelons of the U.S. federal government during WW II, may well have had to make difficult life choices—pursue a career at the cost of marriage or pursue marriage and children at the cost of career. In the 1940s, when these women began their careers in the U.S. federal government, little was known about the impact of work roles on later health and well-being. Today, however, much more is known about consequences and benefits of work responsibilities and work roles [4]. This new knowledge, combined with emerging research on work-family balance [5] and a better understanding of employee commitment [6], has the potential to create opportunities for exploring late-life outcomes among women who pursued demanding careers in the mid-20th century. A further issue of concern is the persistent gender inequalities that exist in the labor market. Baron and Pfeffer [7] suggest that both cognitive and social psychological processes within an organizational context shape the “distribution of rewards in work establishments.”

In their later years, such powerful women may face difficulties when vital social and familial support networks are absent because of early-life commitments to work and careers. Such an absence may produce a variety of outcomes, from social isolation and loneliness, to diminished physical abilities and increased need for institutional care. Additional outcomes may include an increased risk for abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

1.2. Conceptual foundations

This study uses the life-course perspective, which recognizes the complex interplay of individual events, decisions and opportunities, historical contexts, and cumulative life experiences from birth onward [8–10]. The value of this perspective rests in its explicit consideration of time; that is, the synchronization of individual and family life events and the transitions embedded within the progression of historical events, policies, and norms of behavior [11]. Importance emerges not only from the complex interactions between individuals, families, and broader social institutions and processes, but also in the possible delayed effects of experiences on later life events and trajectories [12,13]. The ways in which events are experienced by men and women can be quite different, so similar events can produce notably different subsequent life outcomes [10,14].

Essential to our study is that the life course presents and defines roles for the individual. It also influences societal perceptions of roles at any given period in time. Social roles are those in which individuals are socially impelled to assume certain responsibilities and norms of behavior. Within these roles is an individual’s capital, a person’s collection of skills, abilities, and knowledge. We recognize three explicit and intertwining forms of capital: human, social, and personal [15–19]. In this study, human capital is defined as a woman’s economic and educational potential (e.g., accumulated education and remuneration derived from work because of it). Social capital includes social relationship potential (e.g., women, their social networks, and how they are provided risk and protective factors because of them). Personal capital includes individual efficacy and competence potential, or how an individual woman navigates her way in the world and develops a sense of self.

Taken together, research on notions of life course, social roles, and capital suggests distinct patterns for working women, especially those women who established their careers during WW II and the years immediately afterward.

2. Methods

To better understand the relationship between the careers these women pursued and how these careers influenced their late life, we chose the following study objectives:

- a) To explore the existence and nature of support networks of older women who filled high-level positions in the U.S. federal government during or shortly after WW II.
- b) To determine to what extent their pursuit of professional careers limited their traditional roles of wife and mother.
- c) To determine the range and types of outcomes that emerge in later life because of life course employment decision-making and commitments to career.

Our inquiry is guided by two conceptual foundations. The first is a life-course perspective emphasizing the interaction of historical events, individual decisions and opportunities, and cumulative life experiences (i.e., family, education, and employment). The second foundation emphasizes adoption of social roles and accumulation of capital (i.e., human, social, and personal capital).

In this ongoing study of approximately 30 participants, we will use life narratives to gain personal demographic information; an inventory of life events and states relating to family, education, employment, and housing; and meanings associated with life situations and experiences. Audiotaped interviews will be transcribed and annotated with interviewer observations; full transcripts will then be analyzed with a focus on identifying life-course factors that influence the women's current living and care situation as well as their physical and emotional well-being. Qualitative analysis will focus on age and ageism, societal roles, gender bias and marginalization, vulnerability, social support, and caregiving needs and demands.

The primary characteristics of interest in this study are female gender, having worked for the U.S. federal government during and shortly after WW II, and community dwelling. Selection of participants combines convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling techniques [20]. Participants are females who made a career in the U.S. federal government, began work from 1938–1945, had at least 10 years of government service, worked at high-level professional positions, and are willing to participate in an interview lasting up to 2 h. We believe that a number of these women are still living in the Washington, D.C. area or have friends in the region who could contact potential participants in other parts of the country.

2.1. Research procedures

Data will be collected primarily through life-narrative interviews. Unlike structured and semi-structured interviews that commonly rely on scripted questions and solicitation of topically narrow responses, the life-narrative approach relies heavily on guided storytelling. Subjects recount life experiences—events and states of being—in such areas as family, education, work, health, and housing, and they provide interpretations and reinterpretations of these experiences as they are integrated to provide meaning in their lives. Although a basic interview guide is used, narrative interviews are largely self-prompted, helping reduce the level of bias introduced by the

researcher. We seek to establish contextualized understanding of personal, economic, and social experiences. Personal experiences include growth and maturation, health, physical self, emotional self, self-identity, and personal capital accumulation. Economic experiences include employment, “the” economy, and human capital accumulation. Social experiences include family, friends, social networks, social identity, and social capital accumulation.

All interviews will be fully transcribed and error checked. Field notes and “headnotes” (observations and impressions made by the researchers) also will be transcribed and appended to the appropriate interviews. Hierarchical coding of transcripts will seek first to identify content categories and, second, to determine common themes that emerge through constant comparison across participants.

3. Results

Based on early analysis of five participants as of December 2004, the women are aging in place and living alone with few support networks. They tend to rely on the network of friends that they built generally during their working years, networks that are now dwindling. The women prefer high levels of independent living, which carries over into their planning for illness and end of life.

4. Discussion

At the time of the interviews, the women were financially independent overall, but had growing need for medical and social supports from their formal and informal networks. Because of their age, these networks are diminishing in size and number. Changes in physical and cognitive abilities may compromise the women’s safety, unless their extended friend and family networks are attentive to their needs.

These women are bellwethers of the Women’s Movement and can serve as prototypes for aging Baby Boom women. They are experiencing later-life vulnerabilities because of protracted social capital; however, this is partially compensated by their enriched human and personal capital.

We expect that this study, which invites international collaboration, is highly replicable and applicable to similar older women workers in other countries, especially women who worked during WW II. This population of women, now in their eighties and older, is declining rapidly because of death. Collaborative investigations of such women in other countries need to begin soon before this unique generation is lost.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the Graduate School of the University of Kentucky for their financial support, and Joe Petrik for editorial assistance.

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