

Cognitive Career Counseling for Women

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The Career Cycle of Women

The concept of a career cycle both challenges and reinforces many of the traditional irrational messages communicated to women and men (Richman, 1988). The myth that in order to achieve success, women must follow a straight and narrow path throughout their career cycle, has led many women to avoid defining career goals, thus finding themselves working at jobs beneath their potential. When the career cycle is viewed in all-or-nothing terms, or that each stage must be completed within an exact age range and in one set direction, the entire concept of career may turn many women off or increase their fear of pursuing satisfying career goals.

The need to give more consideration to the career development of women is emphasized by the reality that today's women want to work and must work. The "must" here is rational, since to not work may result in total financial debt and poverty level existence. Women are continuing to enter the work force in large numbers. However, many women do not even recognize the concept of career, but instead seek available jobs regardless of their abilities (Wolfe, 1985). Women continue to earn less income than men for performing the same tasks. In fact, some women accept a low in-come level as long as their dire need to help others and receive approval is met. As more women enter a particular field, the prestige and compensation drop in that field. The biological clock in women certainly serves as an anxiety-producing barrier to whole-heartedly pursuing long-term career goals. Societal attitudes toward women's roles, and the personal perceptions of men and women, have led to many of the differences in the issues encountered by men and women at each stage in the career cycle.

Since the transitional career and life patterns of women are constantly in flux (i.e., women marrying later, having children later, pursuing prestigious careers), it is important to define more clearly the tasks and issues faced by women. The options of women to raise a family, pursue a career, or do both (in either order) substantiate the need to recognize that the chronological age of women at each stage of the career cycle usually takes in a greater range than that of men. Career counselors often convey expectations that something is wrong with women who do not follow the specific, sequential career patterns of the traditional career cycle. This type of attitude can be detrimental to women seeking career guidance. While societal attitudes have in part influenced the issues faced by women as they pursue careers, or choose not to, the attitudes of women towards themselves and others need to be identified in helping to break down the attitudinal barriers to women achieving their potential in the world of work.

Women seeking to develop careers can come to understand the influence of their culture's attitudes on their own personal belief systems and behaviors. Modifying internal beliefs which interfere with achieving career goals at all stages of the career cycle is an essential part of the process. As Sheehy (1974) points out, whether women choose family or career first, those transitional issues not yet resolved will recur. Examining the central themes and role conflicts, and their more productive attitudinal alternatives, will enable women to deal with transitions regardless of when they make their career and family choices.

Exploration Stage

This stage is considered to occur between ages 14-24 (Super, 1957). The selected tasks to be completed progress from

identifying interests, abilities, and occupational opportunities to securing training and integrating potential with a particular occupation. Obtaining a first trial job may occur toward the later part of this stage. The actual exploration of work takes place at first mainly through thinking, gathering information, and observing others in work styles that seem desirable. Ideally, the message re-inforced by society, and sometimes by career counselors, is that young people should integrate their abilities and interests and obtain an occupation by age 24. However, even at this stage, there are issues particular to women which may place obstacles in this nice smooth career path.

At this early stage of the career cycle, young women already experience role conflict issues which are often overlooked by their families and helping professionals. Peer and family pressures are applied to make sure young women do not postpone marriage until it is too late. Thus, many young women focus on their social lives rather than on educating or training themselves to learn marketable skills. Many young women are guided into traditional occupations which reach ceiling levels in a short time. The message is clear at an early age that women need not take their career development as seriously as men since men will eventually be there to take care of them. The belief that men or their husbands should take care of them is well learned early and unfortunately results in women finding themselves in very vulnerable, dependent positions later in their career and life cycle. As women focus on progressing socially at this stage, the expected career exploration tasks often are not completed or may be postponed until a later chronological age.

The influence of cognitive themes in completing the tasks necessary to progress from the exploration stage to the next stage of the career cycle can be evidenced by examining some of the role conflicts experienced by young women:

***Typical Role Conflicts of Women
in the Exploration Stage***

- 1. Nonambition vs. Ambition
- 2. Social Life vs. Education and Training
- 3. Dependence vs. Independence

***Typical Self-Defeating Beliefs
and Cognitive Themes***

- 1. I *shouldn't* strive for too high a career goal or I'll never find a husband. (approval, achievement)
- 2. My social life *should* come first since desirable, feminine women do not have to work. (approval)
- 3. I will *always need* to have my parents or a husband take care of me. (confidence, certainty)

Many intelligent, talented women view *ambition* as negative and therefore do not prepare themselves for a profession or a satisfying career during this stage. They may believe that if they fulfill their potential men would not be attracted to them, or that it is not worth the effort since in the long run they will end up caring for a family as a fulltime job. This thinking is greatly reinforced by the still rather rigid view of the role of women in society. Although attempts have been made to provide counseling for young women to help guide them into suitable careers based on their individual abilities and interests, the societal reinforcers continue to be absent. The salary for the same work performance is greater for men, and negative labels

are given to the “career woman.” However, stereotype debunking is beginning to be a topic of research to help girls believe that they have career options other than traditional jobs. Cramer, Wise, and Colburn (1977) demonstrated the effectiveness of stereotype debunking. Two groups of eighth grade girls received counseling which included alternative options, information about women at work, and future trends. Post-treatment comparisons showed participants to have a better appreciation of the negative aspects of stereotypes and women’s work potential. One of the groups chose significantly more nontraditional occupations. Vincenzi (1977) found that girls, after listening to women from nontraditional occupations, were particularly influenced in opening up more to doing less sex-typing of occupations.

Since young women cannot control the views of men and society, they would benefit from challenging the view that high ambitions will lead to never marrying. This, of course, is worked on after the deep-rooted irrational belief of many women, “I can’t survive without a man,” is changed. More productive beliefs to help them successfully complete the exploration stage would be: “I will develop my potential and choose a job accordingly. I am willing to put in effort to meet a man who is not threatened by my ambitions, and I know I am okay even if I do not meet the right person for me.” Challenging the irrational belief that “it is bad to be ambitious” may prevent the serious problems encountered by divorced and widowed women who feared or denied their ambitions at this early stage of the career cycle.

Many young women fully believe that social life must be the number one priority, even at college age when men are vigorously pursuing their career goals. The thinking is all or nothing: “A man will not desire me if I focus on a career.” This either/or role conflict is experienced at all stages of the career cycle and leads many women to avoid completely entering the career world. Part-time or low level temporary jobs are often held by young women with this belief. A more productive view would be: “I desire to marry and will put effort into meeting desirable men while I continue to explore avenues for my career development.”

The conflict of *dependence vs. independence* occurs at this stage since many women now begin to leave the home of their parents. However, they often move right into the role of wife. The young woman gives herself little if any opportunity to develop skills of independence. The need for comfort and security often results in this pattern. The belief that “I will always need either my parents or husband to take care of me” also reflects a lack of confidence, which may be reinforced by family and by the societal message that women need men to survive. This thinking certainly interferes with moving towards the development of an independent career. A more productive belief might be: “I have *me* to depend on no matter who is in my life, and I can take care of myself. I may feel uncomfortable as I take risks towards independence, but I can stand it.”

As women identify the societal messages which influence their personal attitudes towards themselves and the work world, as well as challenge those beliefs that reflect the extremes of their role conflicts, the exploratory stage can be a period in time for women to gather information about themselves and the work world, and apply what they learn in a productive, realistic manner.

Establishment Stage

This stage is considered to occur between ages 24-44 (Super, 1957). The tasks to be completed during this stage progress from entering a chosen occupation and trying out different choices, to achieving full competence and reaching a period of stabilization and consolidation. Advances may be made vertically or horizontally.

Issues not dealt with by women during the previous exploration stage become more difficult now. For those who chose to marry and have children in their early twenties, the establishment stage may not be experienced at all or may come much later in their life. These women may now face the tasks of exploration and may do so with feelings of frustration from thoughts that they should have found career channels at an earlier age.

The first half of the establishment stage requires taking risks in order to eventually make a suitable person-job match.

Many women are just entering the job market in their thirties and forties. While society and industry may set unrealistic expectations that these women already have a certain level of expertise or a niche for themselves, they actually still need to experience varied job tasks later to consolidate and stabilize. An irrational view is that women should be satisfied working at their first position for many years to come. This view conflicts with those women who have the healthy belief that they want to progress in their career development and continue to learn. Growth and developing their potential are more important to them than the need for security and certainty.

Many women who have reached the establishment stage have learned to compete and strive for personal goals. However, their behavior may still be in conflict with their deep-seated self-defeating beliefs.

Typical Role Conflicts of Women in the Establishment Stage

1. Marriage vs. Career
2. Having Children vs. Career
3. Nonassertiveness vs. Assertiveness

Typical Self-Defeating Beliefs and Cognitive Themes

1. I *should* put my career goals aside and focus on meeting a husband or I'll never find someone. (achievement, confidence)
2. I *must* be a good wife and put more effort into supporting my husband's career, which is really more important than mine. (approval, achievement)
3. My career is *worth nothing* if my time runs out to have children. (confidence, certainty)
4. I *shouldn't* ask for a raise because my boss may let me go. (confidence, certainty)

Those women who reach the establishment stage usually find themselves in the *marriage-career conflict*. For those women who have established themselves at some career level, even if dissatisfied with their position, the biological clock as well as internal and societal attitudes present many conflicts. The belief, "I should put my career aside in order to have the time and energy to find a husband" is an extreme and desperate thought. Marriage and career need not be incompatible; and there is no guarantee that putting career aside will lead to finding a husband, or to happiness forever after. While society assumes that men can have a satisfying career while married, women face some real conflicts. Thinking rationally that "it is good for me to continue to pursue my career as I place more emphasis on meeting men" enables women at this stage to strive realistically (but not desperately) for two different but not necessarily incompatible goals.

At the early part of the establishment stage, the husband is often struggling to advance in his career. Many women are torn between putting effort into supporting their husbands or defining their own career as a priority. Again, the need to be approved of or to be seen as a good person is often related to this conflict. Society's view of the wife's role conflicts with what may be healthy for some women. At a very young age, women are taught that a man's career is more important than a woman's career since men are the "real" breadwinners. With the double income of couples today, this is far from the truth. Women who irrationally believe that "if I were a good wife I would be putting more effort into helping my husband with his career" and that "my career is not as important" often end up feeling depressed and resentful. A more productive belief would be: "I will continue to develop my career and communicate with my husband about how we might be mutually helpful to each other."

During the establishment stage some women reach a plateau and have difficulty deciding whether it is worth putting effort into moving ahead if they are considering *having children*. Other women are satisfied with their present niche, and while wanting a family, they believe it may interfere with their current life and work style. The biological clock is a reality factor faced by women in their thirties and forties. Even for those women who decided at the beginning of their career that they never wanted a family, as they approach the chronological deadline for having children they may change their mind and experience a great deal of anxiety.

A greater number of women are giving birth in their forties. It is taking the work world a long time to adjust to this reality. Until the reality that successful career women may decide to have children and maintain their careers is fully acknowledged and accepted, the tradeoff for women may be having to give up everything, especially for those who were successfully progressing in their career development. The belief of women reaching the age deadline may be: "I must have children before my time runs out. My career is not as important to me as it was when I was younger. I shouldn't have put my career first because it would be awful if I never have children." Although realistically it is difficult, the decision to have children need not negate the ability to maintain a career. Due to cultural beliefs, a woman has to work extra hard to maintain her status. Given societal demands, the rational beliefs that may help women reduce the frustration and depression often experienced at this stage are: "I am glad I have a successful career and will now put more effort into having a family. If it does not work out one way or the other, I can still have a productive, meaningful life. I do not have to have everything to feel happy and content."

While the conflict as to whether to behave *assertively or nonassertively* may occur at any stage in the career cycle, as women attempt to establish themselves in a career they begin to compete with others trying to make it to a high level. Difficulties in behaving assertively when appropriate are often related to a need for approval or to be viewed as a "good girl." The belief that "ambition or competition are not feminine" may interfere as well. Women often believe that they do not have a right to behave assertively; and fear that if they do there will be dire consequences. Many women remain in a job for a long period of time with excellent performance evaluations, while those who behave more assertively move ahead in a firm. Even with the feminist movement, there still remains a cultural message that it is okay for men to behave assertively, but it is unfeminine for women to behave this way. There is no guarantee that behaving competently and cooperatively will in itself be beneficial: The "go-getters" seem to be the ones who really "make it." The belief that, "I shouldn't ask for a raise because my boss may let me go or will not like me" reflects a need for approval and a lack of confidence in being able to rely on oneself to succeed. Productive beliefs related to assertiveness would be: "I have a right to ask for a raise and will let my boss know my view. I can deal with the consequences. I am more likely to achieve my goals if I let people know what I want. Just because I am competent doesn't mean others have to give me what I think I deserve." Practicing rational thinking during this complex establishment stage will enable women to progress in their career lives as well as increase the likelihood of feeling more satisfied on a personal level.

Maintenance Stage

Super (1957) considers this stage to occur between ages 45-65. The tasks to be completed progress from continuing and preserving skills necessary to remain in one's chosen occupation to beginning to develop retirement resources and plans. This stage reflects society's view that there should be a type of permanence or stability in the career cycle.

Maintaining a chosen occupation for twenty years may be unlikely given the fact that many women in their forties may be just starting to explore how to develop their potential in the work world. Ciabattari (1986) describes the "getting stuck" stage in the career development of those women with assertiveness problems or the view that it is unfeminine to compete or behave ambitiously. Since women often have to more clearly prove themselves than men in order to advance in a company, it is more comfortable in the short-term for many women to maintain the status quo. Attempting to maintain a position permanently

while experiencing negative emotions, and the reality that the workplace in itself has cycles which call for change, make it important for women to develop their skills and to believe that they have options to make positive changes for themselves. Flexible, adaptable attitudes and behaviors are productive in dealing with the uncontrollable events which occur in the world of work (Ellis, 1985).

Typical Role Conflicts of Women in the Maintenance Stage

1. Nonambition vs. Ambition
2. Noncompetitive vs. Competitive
3. Work for men vs. Supervise men

Typical Self-Defeating Beliefs and Cognitive Themes

1. Even though I'd like to move ahead, I *should* be thankful I made it this far and not push my luck. (confidence, achievement)
2. I *shouldn't* compete with my male colleagues because they would view me as unfeminine and that would be awful. (achievement, approval)
3. I *should* maintain my position working for a male boss even though I have more expertise, because it is hopeless that I could ever supervise the new male recruits. (confidence, achievement)

While the maintenance stage occurs during mid-career for many men, women often find themselves in a maintenance type of situation early in their careers because of societal stereotypes of women's occupations and/or because of the self-defeating thoughts the women themselves hold. Basing the decision to remain in a given position or occupation on unhealthy beliefs (e.g., "I'll never find anything else" or "I should be thankful for what I have achieved and not try anymore") results in feelings of depression, resentment, and anxiety. It is to be expected that obstacles will occur during the stages of career development and that feelings of dissatisfaction or discomfort may signify that it is time to make behavioral and attitudinal changes. For women who irrationally believe that striving towards their ambitions would lead to dire results (e.g., rejection), the usual hurdles come to be seen as devastating instead of as challenging aspects of their career development. Believing that "I have a right to fulfill my ambitions and I can stand it if others think it is unfeminine" will help women to make rational decisions at this maintenance stage. Whether the decision is to leave, to balance out one's life with outside interests, or to develop retirement plans, an *ambitious* outlook will help these women be true to themselves and experience more positive emotions as they complete this stage.

Many women avoid *competitive* situations even when they recognize their own ambitious goals. While the workplace may still in essence be a "man's world," women have the right to compete for available positions. The belief that male co-workers, or anyone else, would view this behavior as unfeminine is devastating to a good number of women. To compensate for their fear of what others might think, women often work extra hard to make others accept their desire to move ahead. Those women who believe that they do not have much to offer or who believe it is wrong for them to compete often avoid competition and all other risk-taking, thus stagnating in a deadend position or experiencing burnout at this stage in their career (Richman & Nardi, 1985). Ironically, some women believe something must be wrong with them when they observe fellow workers taking risks to advance or to move to new positions while they shy away from moving forward.

The desire to "make it" may be there, but women who fear competition or who fear being seen as competitive tend to rationalize away their true desires. Telling oneself that "competing is healthy and it doesn't matter if my colleagues think I am

unfeminine” will help women achieve a satisfying maintenance level and be able to move on when they wish to do so. Women who look forward to competitive situations are less stressed when firms have layoffs or set up circumstances that change the status quo.

Towards the end of the establishment stage and the beginning of the maintenance stage are those women who find themselves in a position to supervise men. Those women who believe they need approval or view having status as unfeminine may sacrifice this opportunity in order to avoid the discomfort of not being accepted. The traditional role has been that bosses have female secretaries and physicians have female nurses. Supposedly this is changing, but the underlying belief that women should look up to men and follow men’s directions is still maintained by many women, men, and companies. In order to be free to take advantage of positive career opportunities, women would benefit from believing: “I will perform my best as a supervisor with both my male and female staff. I can stand it if some people think I am unfeminine to be at this high level with male subordinates. I know I can do this job as well as a man!”

Decline Stage

This stage is considered to occur at age 65 and beyond (Super, 1957). The tasks to be completed during this stage progress from a period of declining activity to managing resources to sustain independence and to cease vocational activity. In this light it may be interesting to note that although statistically men die at an earlier age than women, this is not considered in society’s work expectations of individuals. At age 65 and beyond, many women are still learning to develop their potential and find themselves either doing volunteer work or remaining on jobs in which employers view them as responsible, reliable, and trustworthy. At this stage, it is healthy for women to be able to review their career lives with satisfaction and continue to pursue outlets for their interests. Since so many widows find themselves unable to secure jobs paying a living wage, it makes it even more important that women plan for this stage earlier in their career development. Our society has not yet taken into account the contributions women can make at a stage usually considered as the time for retirement.

Typical Role Conflicts of Women in the Decline Stage

1. Retires with Husband vs. Continues Working
2. Gives Up Position to Young Men vs. Remains in Status Position
3. Works to Help Others vs. Works to Save Retirement Income

Typical Self-Defeating Beliefs and Cognitive Themes

1. Even though I have the energy and desire to maintain my career, I *should* retire with my husband. (approval, achievement)
2. It would be insensitive and selfish of me to remain in my position when I *should* give it up so young men who have families to support can move up in the ranks. (approval, achievement)
3. I *should* be helping others through volunteer work at this stage instead of working to save retirement income. (approval)

If their husbands are alive and retired or disengaging from their career, these women often face the conflict between *spending time at home* with their husbands or *continuing to fulfill their potential in the work world*. Guilt often results when

women believe that “I should be with my husband since he was the breadwinner for so many years.” A woman’s belief that “I should retire when my husband retires,” even though she would like to continue in the work force, may also result in resentment towards her husband and feelings of depression and a lack of fulfillment. By communicating with her husband, and perhaps compromising vis-a-vis shared time for enjoyable activities, both individuals are more likely to adjust to the work-to-retirement transition. The beliefs “I have the right to pursue the later years of my career with individuality” and “I do not have to feel that I am a bad or selfish wife” would enable women to view retirement as a healthy, natural transition.

Women who have achieved their career goals or are close to achieving them may begin to feel uncomfortable knowing that *young men are eagerly waiting to take over their jobs*. Those women who believe they need to receive approval or to be seen as sensitive and unselfish may leave a position for these irrational reasons rather than “deny” the ambitious young men in their firm. It would be more productive to believe “It is unfortunate that others cannot now have my job, but I have a right to do what is good for me. It’s not awful if they think badly about me.”

Successful career women in this stage who believe that “Because I have made it, I now should stop and devote myself to others” may again give up what they enjoy and reduce their future financial security. Taking care of oneself first does not make one into a bad person. Many women who have made it to the top, or near the top, never feel quite comfortable with their success and believe on a deeper level that it will all be taken away from them or that they do not really “deserve” it. Believing that “I have a right to remain at work as long as my company permits, and that I am not a bad person or unfeminine because I am not choosing to help others for free” substantiates the reality that even later in a career or at a later age, women continue to strive, learn, and grow.

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