

# The Relational Career Values of Post-secondary Women Students

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## Abstract

This qualitative research explores the underlying relational meaning of the career values of women students in traditional and nontraditional university faculties. Values such as achievement, concern for others, responsibility, financial prosperity, belonging, concern for the environment, and spirituality were important for both groups of women to have satisfied in the career for which they were studying/training. Relational themes were found for both groups. Some relational themes were obvious such as helping others but other values, such as achievement also held relational meaning. Interesting are some of the relational connotations that emerged adding new dimensions to commonly accepted "work" values. Some expected differences between women in traditional and nontraditional faculties were found but also many similarities in the expectation that relational values will be satisfied in their future careers.

## Introduction

One of the most salient criticisms of the state of career development theory today is that it is ill-equipped to explain the vocational behavior of women (Brooks, 1990). Career theory has traditionally been a domain entrenched with male ways of being (Marshall, 1989). Although some theories have been revised and expanded to more adequately capture women's career development, many of the major career theories were originally formulated based on the career

experiences of men (Gallos, 1989; Patton & McMahon, 1999). Due to this male bias in career theory, many of the variables and dimensions unique to women's career development have not been explored (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). The investigation of such things as the meaning and expectation for fulfillment of women's career values has not been a focus of social science research.

Relational aspects of women's identities have been noted and examined by several feminist researchers who suggest that this factor has been neglected in the traditional theories of human development. Gilligan (1982) found that women tend to define themselves in the context of intimate relationships whereas men define themselves in terms of non-relationships, which focus on separation and autonomy. Women in her studies used words such as "caring," "giving," "being kind," and "not hurting others" to describe themselves, suggesting a value system deeply influenced by a genuine concern for others. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) researching women's cognitive development found that women develop a "connected" way of knowing which can be described as contextual, values experience, and connects concepts to personal knowledge and events. The "self-in-relation" model (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991) posits that for women particularly, connections and relationships with others enhance psychological well being. It is recognized that relational ways of being are not gender-specific, but gender-related whereby women are more likely than men to endorse them (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988).

The new ways of understanding women's psychological, cognitive, and moral development within a relational context have implications for explaining women's career experience (Crozier,

1999; Forrest & Mikolaitis, 1986; Stonewater, 1988). Forrest and Mikolaitis (1986) reasoned that individuals with a relational identity would prefer environments such as the helping professions, where this orientation could be expressed. They suggested that work environments should be assessed for the "skills, values and preferred problem-solving styles" to see if they are "more associated with helping, not hurting, and maintaining the interconnectedness between people" (p. 83). Stonewater (1988) hypothesized that women would approach the career decision-making process differently than males seeking careers where they could be connected to others in a helping role. Crozier (1999) identifies a number of ways in which a relational identity would influence women's careers such as in career choice, stages of career development, multiple life roles, career decision-making process, and definitions of career success. The connection between relational identity and traditional careers is self-evident. However, women need to be encouraged to consider nontraditional careers, and increase their awareness of the ways they can "offer relationships, be helpful to people, and make a meaningful contribution" (Crozier, 1999, p. 237). Despite the fact that overall research on the career development of girls and women has grown exponentially in the last decade (Phillips & Imhoff, 1997), there has been little attention paid to these relational constructs or underlying relational meanings in women's careers.

Values are a critical component of one's sense of identity (Josselson, 1987). Values are expressed in a variety of life roles, such as the work role (Brown, 1996). Values can be conceptualized as "the degree of importance personally given to modalities of being and behaving that are relevant to the work context

and activities" (Perron & St. Onge, 1991, p. 80). Work values have been incorporated in varying degrees and permutations into various theories of career development.

Donald Super introduced the concept of work values to the field of career theory over 40 years ago advocating for their inclusion in vocational appraisal which had for so long been limited to measures of abilities and interests (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996). Super (1957, 1980, 1990) noted that people differ in their values and that values partly contribute to a person's career pattern and satisfaction. In her model of women's achievement related decisions, Eccles (1987) discusses "Personal values", conceived of as one component of the "subjective task value" or importance attached to the different career options individuals believe are available to them. She suggests that gender role socialization could lead men and women to develop different core values (interest in people versus interest in things, for example). Consequently, tasks involving different characteristics would have different values for women and men. More specifically, self-schema and "personal values" will influence the "value" one places on various career options.

The values-based holistic career model developed by Duane Brown (1996) gives values the central place in the career decision making process but by no means are they the only basis for decision making. Behavior will be most strongly guided by a small number of values, which are ranked hierarchically. In Brown's framework, factors such as culture, gender, and socioeconomic level have an impact on the development of values. Life satisfaction depends on values being satisfied in a variety of life roles, which are interactive. Brown recognizes the limiting effects that social structures can have on the availability of opportunities to satisfy values. Brown (1996) suggests that highly prioritized values are determinants of life role choices, such as the selection of an occupation. Therefore accurate values-based information about an occupation or environment must be available for the most effective decision making. Unfortunately, this type of information is not always readily accessible, and furthermore the stereotypes that people, especially young people, have about various occupations

are "typically ill-informed" (Eccles, 1994, p. 143).

Recent qualitative research studies in the area of women's career development have revealed the centrality of relational values to women's career identity (Jones, 1997; Lalande, Crozier, & Davey, 1998; Richie, Fassinger, Linn, Johnson, Prosser, & Robinson, 1997; Schuster, 1990; Young & Richards, 1992). Some researchers have described relational ways of being as comprising the "core" or "essence" of the reported career experiences of the women in their samples (Lalande et al., 1998; Schuster, 1990; Richie et al., 1997). Career plans of women are about more than just finding a "satisfying" career (Schuster, 1990). The opportunity to maintain relationships and connections with others on the job is a very important factor for women. When asked to discuss the most salient aspects of their work, distinct themes suggestive of relational values emerge in the career stories of women, such as teaching, giving to others, helping others, and communication. The support of others such as mentors is also mentioned (Richie et al., 1997; Young & Richards, 1992). Relational values, more global in perspective, also emerge in working for social change to improve the human condition, advocating for others, being involved in the community, and generally making the world a better and more equitable place in which to live. Interestingly, the samples utilized in these studies are not homogenous. In fact they were very diverse, incorporating women of different ethnicity (Jones, 1997; Richie et al., 1997); age (Richie et al., 1997; Young & Richards, 1992); fields of study (Jones, 1997; Lalande et al., 1998); sexual orientation (Jones, 1997) and profession (Richie et al., 1997; Schuster, 1990).

The significance of relational values, such as altruism, connection, helping, and concern for others, for women in traditional professions has been documented through research (Ben-Shem & Avitzhak, 1991; Chatterjee & McCarrey, 1991; Schuster, 1990). More inconclusive are the results concerning the relational values of women in nontraditional professions. Women in these professions have been found to be more oriented to masculine values, such as autonomy and risk (Chatterjee & McCarrey, 1991). They have also shown a desire to satisfy relational values in their professions,

such as contributing to society (Ambrose, Lazarus, & Nair, 1998), and being connected to and helping others (Richie, et al., 1997; Schuster, 1990).

The current research attempts to explore the existence and importance of relational values in women's career role. The research and theorizing of such feminist writers as Miller (1976), Gilligan (1982), and the Stone Center Group (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991) suggests that women possess relational worldviews, valuing connections and interdependence. Thus, "women's vocational identity may be organized around perceptions of their workplace self as responsive, interdependent, and empathic" (Giordano, 1995, p. 5). One of the difficulties of fully appreciating women's values in the workplace is that they are often examined through a traditional male lens. The ways that women define achievement and success in their careers may differ from the commonly accepted definitions of those constructs. While there have been numerous calls to examine relational ways of being in the career roles of women (Forrest & Mikolaitis, 1986; Gallos, 1989), there has been little research conducted in this area.

## Method

### Research Design

The qualitative research being discussed in this article is part of a larger study which combined both quantitative and qualitative methods to understand women's relational values overall and in the career role (Dorval, 1999). Gender role orientation and age, two factors that have been suggested to influence values, were also examined in Dorval's study. The qualitative analysis process, according to Dey (1993) consists of three parts: describing the phenomenon under study, classifying the data, and finally making connections within the data. This simple model was followed in the present study. The first step, describing, involves activities such as summarizing the data, and pulling it together through relating central characteristics. Ultimately, description provides the basis for interpretation. Classification entails, "organizing data into categories or classes and identifying formal connections between them" (p. 275). Finally, connecting categories involves, "identifying substantive con-

nections by associating categories or linking data" (p. 275). Qualitative analysis was conducted with a computer software program entitled HyperQual (Padilla, 1990), designed specifically for the qualitative analysis of text-based data.

The quantitative component of the research involved participants completing the Life Values Inventory (LVI) which is a unique values inventory as it promotes holistic thinking by including a variety of life roles (Brown & Crace, 1996). The LVI was chosen for the study because of its inclusion of a variety of values which could be considered relational, such as belonging, concern for others, and loyalty to family or group, concern for the environment, and spirituality. Other values measured by the LVI include achievement, creativity, financial prosperity, health and activity, humility, independence, privacy, responsibility, and scientific understanding. The LVI was also chosen because in its design the authors were particularly sensitive to the unique concerns of women (Brown & Crace, 1996).

The LVI uses a Likert rating scale for 14 values, open-ended qualitative questions and then a ranking process for values overall and values expected to be satisfied in four life roles: job or career, student, family and important relationships, and leisure and community activities. The qualitative component of the study focussed on the ranking of values, on the LVI, that women expected to have satisfied in their job or career. The following question was presented to each participant, with ample paper to write her response on:

Please review the values you ranked as important to be satisfied in your job and indicate in what ways do you hope to have these values satisfied in your job? If possible, provide specific examples.

This question was piloted with a small sample to test for clarity and comprehension. The question was designed to solicit the "underlying meanings" of the career values for these women by understanding the "ways in which they hoped the values would be satisfied" and "through the examples given".

Quantitative analysis can often be enriched by qualitative information that provides "depth" and "understanding" behind the numbers (Polit & Hungler, 1999).

## Research Participants

Participation in the study was voluntary with recruitment using numerous methods: e-mail messages, notices, campus newspaper and newsletter articles, and presentations in relevant classes and undergraduate clubs. Ninety-eight full-time female undergraduate students, from a university in Alberta, participated in the study. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 52 years (Mean = 24.9, S.D = 6.1). A small percentage of the participants were married or living with an intimate partner (20%) with most of the participants identifying as single (80%). A small percentage of the sample had children (11%) with the majority of those having two children (64%).

The traditional group, 50 participants, was made up of 18 from social work and 32 from nursing. The nontraditional group, 48 participants, included 31 from engineering and 17 from science (excluding biology). A faculty was considered traditional if seventy percent or more of the total enrollees were women and nontraditional if thirty percent or less of the total enrollees were women (Lavalley & Pelletier, 1992). Biology is no longer a nontraditional career area for women (Nevitte, Gibbins, & Coddling, 1990), in fact it is the only department in the Faculty of science where female students outnumber males.

## Results

Interpretation of the results highlights the significance of relational meanings in the values that women hoped to have satisfied in their career role. The values women hoped to have satisfied in their career role included achievement, concern for others, responsibility, financial prosperity, belonging, concern for the environment, and spirituality. Each of these values will be discussed revealing the relational themes that were embedded within the meaning of the value.

### Achievement

The relational theme in Achievement was evident in the desire to help others or connect with others in some way through the job. Women in nursing and social work, mentioned such things as "making a positive impact on people's lives," "achieve good relationships with

patients and help them to lead happy, healthy lives," and "relating to and understanding individuals." One nursing student stated that, "If I am able to help only one person or an entire community, I will feel achievement." A social work student mentioned that she would feel personal achievement through witnessing or learning of the achievements of her clients. Helping others to achieve their own goals and success seemed to be an important part of achievement for some women in the sample, particularly those in the traditional group. Only one woman in a nontraditional faculty, an engineering student expressed Achievement in a relational way stating, "I want to do something that really affects the world. I want to help others, and push myself to my limit."

### Concern for Others

Concern for Others was a value that appeared very frequently in the data and by definition would be expected to have relational meaning. Mentioned by women in both the traditional and nontraditional group, it was most frequently discussed by the former. The major way that Concern for Others was expected to be accomplished was through "*Helping others*." The responses ranged on a continuum within this theme with some less directly relational, such as "helping others by sharing knowledge" as one engineering student commented. Two women from nontraditional faculties explained that concern for others in their career would mean "*Teaching*" or instructing others. Other comments were more directly and deeply relational as expressed by this social work student, "A deep understanding of others' situation as we walk through their troubles together." Many women in the traditional faculties alluded to the fact that Concern for Others is inherent in their job by virtue of the nature of the work. Some of these women noted this as the reason for entering the profession.

Some women in both traditional and nontraditional faculties mentioned nurturing, caring for, and comforting others, as well as helping others to attain hope, solace, happiness, and self-actualization. A nursing student phrased her point of view in this way, "One of my greatest joys is to calm frightened people, help hurt people and just generally help peo-

ple out when they need it” and “My concern for others drives me and enables me to help people in that really personal way.”

The desire to help others was also expressed on a macro level. Some women in both the traditional and non-traditional group stated that they wanted to help communities or contribute to the betterment of society as a whole. Improving the quality of life of others was also mentioned, particularly of those who are less fortunate. An engineering student stated, “I hope to one day go overseas to work with under-developed countries and assist them with water purification/irrigation/solid waste management.” A science student noted, “I hope to have a job that allows me to improve the quality of life for other people or animals or aspects of the environment.”

A few of the women in both groups mentioned acting as an advocate for those in need, with another theme being “*Responsibility to others.*” An engineering student stated that concern for others should be kept in mind because “a civil engineer’s work is for the direct use of other people; safety and utility must be remembered in what an engineer constructs.” Another engineering student had similar sentiments suggesting that “by entering the engineering profession, the welfare of the public and environment is the main priority; it is the first priority in the Code of Ethics.” This theme is closely connected to the relational dimensions found in the value of Responsibility.

### Responsibility

The majority of the women in the study, who stated that they wanted the value of Responsibility to be satisfied in their career role, suggested that this would be possible through being “*Trustworthy*”. It could be argued that by its very definition, the word “trustworthy” implies a relationship, whether this is with another person or a larger entity such as an organization or company. The responses comprising this theme, however, differed as to whether or not they explicitly mentioned demonstrating trustworthiness to someone else. For example, one engineering student stated, “I hope to be known as a responsible engineer. I plan to satisfy this by applying good work ethics, and just doing my job

to my full potential.” More obviously relational were the comments such as this statement from another engineering student, “I want people to be able to trust me and depend on me to do what I promise I’ll do and be able to help them.”

Many women in both groups noted that in their careers they would be relied upon and counted on by co-workers, supervisors, organizations, and clients or patients. A few women in the traditional group described the trustworthiness needed to be in a position where one is dealing with patients or clients in great need. Trust seemed to be considered an important precursor to good relationships with others. A science student wrote “It is important to me to know my supervisors and co-workers consider me reliable, and can be trusted.” Similarly, a nursing student stated, “As a nurse it is important to instill a level of trust between the nurse and patient in order to provide optimum care.” Others noted that being in a position of trust carried with it ethical and legal obligations. An engineering student noted, “As an engineer, I will be responsible for every design or procedure I approve. This is a large duty because if anything I approve was to cause damage to property or human life (i.e. collapsed building or bridge that I designed) I could be held personally accountable, incarcerated with criminal charges...”

Another relational theme that appeared in the data was being responsible through “*Making Contributions*” to others or making a difference in another person’s life. A social work student revealed that she personally had been helped in her life and felt responsible to help others through her work. Four students mentioned the responsibilities they had to others such as family members or partners. For example, a social work student stated, “as part of a family, I am responsible for earning a living through working.” A science student remarked that there are certain duties that she expects and accepts in her roles as friend, daughter, and girlfriend.

### Financial Prosperity

A theme within Financial Prosperity that emerged, “*Provide for family,*” had obvious relational overtones. Making enough money in one’s career to support one’s family was mentioned equally by women from traditional and nontradition-

al faculties. Some women in both groups spoke about children they already had, “When I have my degree I will be making enough money to support myself and my son” noted a nursing student. Others, like this science student, were planning for the future, “financial prosperity will be satisfied in my future job if I am paid well and given benefits for myself and my potential family.” A science student noted that she wanted to be in a position financially to take the time to go to the school concerts of her children and spend time with her husband.

### Belonging

Feeling a sense of affiliation, inclusion, or acceptance in the workplace was a desire expressed by some of the women from both groups. Some, like this engineering student, commented on the desire to feel like a valued member of a work group or team, “Belonging would be satisfied by working as part of a team where I feel that my part on the team is important.” Developing friendships, bonding with co-workers, and “fitting in” were all discussed as ways of cultivating a sense of belonging. An engineering student expressed that she wanted to be “well-liked” by her co-workers. Another engineering student noted that in order to enjoy work, it is important to get along with co-workers. Expanding beyond co-workers, one nurse mentioned feeling belonging as part of a larger team of health professionals. The nurse-patient relationship was also mentioned as a situation in which one feels a sense of belonging.

### Concern for the Environment

Caring for the environment through protection of natural resources, or improving existing conditions (air pollution, water quality, deforestation, and so forth) was important for some women, particularly in the nontraditional faculties. Making the world a better place to live for humans, other animals, and plants was a priority. Some engineering students mentioned, “contributing to society,” “making a difference,” and “creating designs that will make life better for people.” One engineering student noted, “I want to be able to go home at night and feel that aside from just making money, I did something real. Something that is good for the environ-

ment that goes beyond making money.” Another engineering student felt a responsibility not only to humankind at present, but was also concerned about the future stating that it was “our duty to conserve the earth for the generations to come.”

### Spirituality

A few women in both groups discussed the ways in which their religion or spirituality could influence their behavior and activities in their careers. An engineering student mentioned incorporating integrity and honor into her work as a method to “glorify God” through her career. Some women in the traditional faculties expressed the fact that Spirituality could be satisfied in their career through putting the needs of others before their own, and helping those who are suffering or in need. A science student stated that she lives her faith by her example. Sentiments regarding feelings of connectedness to God or a higher power and to others were common among both groups of women. A science student revealed that she feels a connection to a higher power through her connection with nature and therefore hoped that her work as a geologist would “get me into nature a lot.”

### Discussion

Relational themes are present in women’s expectations of having their career values satisfied, whether they are enrolled in a traditional or nontraditional faculty. Relational themes are obvious within values, which have a “caring” or “concerned” connotation, such as Concern for Others. However, there are also relational themes present in values such as Achievement, where the traditional or “male lens” would generally not display a relational understanding.

Helping others was a major relational theme across the values; this was conceptualized both as helping individuals but also on a more global level of helping society. On an individual level, it included helping others by offering hope or solace but also by assisting them to achieve happiness and self-actualization. Helping others was a very strong theme in the value of Concern for Others and in Spirituality but also, perhaps surprisingly within the value of Achievement. The “usual” definition of career success

includes factors such as “career advancement, stable occupational roles, and levels of status symbolized by power and money” not helping others (Hashizume & Crozier, 1994, p.106). Powell and Mainiero (1992) note that the traditionally male vision of career achievement, “getting ahead” in an organization may be “dated” due to the new realities of the workplace such as decreased job security and downsizing. For some of the women in the study, a sense of Achievement was experienced through helping others. Making a difference in the lives of others constituted achievement for these women. Unfortunately, the literature does not often recognize or give credence to this meaning of achievement. Gallos (1989) noted the absence of a language “to talk about what does a career look like that is simultaneously high on achievement and high on relationship” (p. 124).

Three core achievement styles: direct, instrumental, and relational achievement, have been suggested by Lipman-Blumen, Handley-Isaksen, and Leavitt (1983). Relational achievement is when a sense of achievement is attained through collaborating with others, contributing to a group task, or experiencing it vicariously through the achievements of others. Relational achievement in the career role, note Hashizume and Crozier (1994) is not a contradiction in terms, however when it is mentioned, it is often pathologized. The relational meaning for achievement found in this study offers support to some previous research that found a correlation between achievement/self-development and altruism (Pryor, 1983; Hendrix & Super, 1968).

Helping others is a value that has been well documented in previous research as significant for women (Di Dio, Saragovi, Koestner, & Aube, 1996; McConatha & Schnell, 1997; Skoe and Diessner, 1994). It makes intuitive sense those women who choose a traditional career such as social work or nursing would value helping clients and patients in a variety of ways. Although helping others was definitely more prominent for women in the traditional faculties none the less, it still was mentioned as a value with relational connotations for women from the nontraditional group. This supports the findings of Subotnik and Arnold (1996) and Ambrose, Lazarus, and Nair (1998) who found that women

in nontraditional fields have a desire to be helpful or useful to others and to society to serve a greater good.

As noted, helping others on a macro level was also a significant theme, expressed across the values of Concern for Others, Concern for the Environment and Spirituality. The theme here usually involved making the world a better place in which to live on a more global basis. This suggested feelings of connection with not only humankind but also other living things such as plants, animals, and even at times Mother Earth. A feeling of being connected to a higher power was expressed by some women when doing their work. This theme also often involved a longer time dimension of not only helping now but into the future, projecting that the work one does now may have a long lasting positive impact. This is similar to a finding by Lalande et al. (1998) of women in science and art faculties who expressed a connection to the larger universe and a need to make a lasting contribution.

Being connected to others in meaningful relationships at work was another relational theme that appeared across the values of Achievement and Belonging. These women expressed a desire to be part of a team and to have satisfying relationships with co-workers, supervisors, and clients. This theme of affiliation appeared for women planning to work in both traditional and nontraditional areas. It has been recognized that “expressive” traits like connection may play an important role in a nontraditional career like engineering given the amount of teamwork involved (Jagacinski, 1987). One of the most significant ways of being connected was to be in a trusting relationship with others, which was expressed through the value of Responsibility. It was desirable to these women to be viewed as trustworthy or dependable by others, which has definite relational connotations. These women want to be in relationships, which involve being responsible for the safety and welfare of others, whether this is dealing with an ill patient or building a reliable bridge. The women in this study showed a valuing of those relationships whether they were directly or indirectly involved with people, they are still meaningful to them.

Making a contribution was another relational theme that emerged in the values of Responsibility and Financial

Responsibility. Many of these women felt it was their responsibility to contribute to the well being of others. One way that this was expressed was towards their families, both in the values of Responsibility and Financial Prosperity; women noted the wish to contribute financially. Although Loyalty to Family or Group was not a highly ranked value to be satisfied directly in the career role the connection to family, need to balance work with family, and this desire to contribute to family did appear across various values.

Findings of the present study contribute to our understanding of values. Particularly interesting are the relational connotations that emerged from the qualitative data, adding new dimensions to the commonly accepted definitions of certain "work" values such as Achievement, Responsibility, and Financial Prosperity. Moreover, women in both the traditional group and nontraditional groups mentioned these expanded definitions of values that are usually not considered relational. Themes of connecting with or helping others in some way, while endorsed by more women in the traditional than the nontraditional group, were evident for both groups as important facets in career.

The findings of the present study support the theorizing of feminist researchers such as Forrest and Mikolaitis (1986), Gallos (1989), and Crozier (1999) who suggest that a relational dimension should be incorporated into theories of career development applicable to women's careers. The inclusion of this construct could serve to more fully understand and appreciate the career choices women make. As women's participation in post-secondary education increases and particularly in the nontraditional faculties researchers may expect to see more traditional or relational values being expressed by women students in nontraditional faculties. The findings of the present study suggest that women desire to have relational values satisfied in their future career role whether they enter a traditional or nontraditional faculty. For women in the traditional group in particular, Concern for Others was the most important value in the career role. However themes of helping clients, patients or society as a whole; being trusted by co-workers and employers; making a mean-

ingful contribution; and feeling a sense of camaraderie with co-workers, emerged from the qualitative data in the present study as important factors for all women. These variables are left largely unaccounted for in the major theories of career choice and development.

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