

## Multiple Role Women\*

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Due to the women's movement, economic pressures, and other cultural factors, many women today combine traditional and non-traditional roles. The notion that women are either married or have careers is rooted in the assumption that family and career roles are mutually exclusive (Van Dusen and Sheldon, 1976). A review of available data indicates that this is not the case. In 1950, 25% of married women living with husbands were employed; 25% of employed women had school-age children; 12% had pre-school children. These numbers have steadily increased until today, 45% of married women living with husbands are employed; 66% of employed women have school-age children; 34% have pre-school children (Van Dusen & Sheldon, 1976, p. 112). Enrollment in college has shown similar trends. Between 1970 and 1974, the enrollment of women increased 30%, with those between 25 and 34, the childbearing years, increasing 102% (Van Dusen & Sheldon, 1976, p. 108-109). These trends have given rise to the multiple role woman (MRW), a person who is simultaneously involved in primary responsibilities in and out of the home, i.e., being a student or paid worker in addition to being mother, wife, or partner.

Since so many women are in multiple roles, mental health practitioners need to be prepared to respond to the issues they raise. What are these issues and what directions can we suggest for counselors and therapists? First, they must be aware of the history and impact of sex stereotyping as it is reflected in the socialization process in families (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974), schools (Frazier & Sadker, 1973) and other areas of society. Practitioners need to be free of biases themselves in order to accept a woman's desire to combine home and school or employment roles. Second, counselors and therapists need to be knowledgeable in educational-vocational areas so they can help the woman explore options previously unavailable or unthinkable to her. Specifically, they need general information about women workers, for example, the number of women workers, the percentage of the labor force they account for, the kinds of jobs they are filling, legislated job rights, etc. (U.S. Department of Labor Employment Standards Administration, 1975). It is essential to have information about career opportunities and projections for change in employment patterns for women, especially shifts to non-traditional areas. For students or potential students, counselors and therapists need to be aware of educational opportunities including fields previously closed to women (U.S. Department of Labor Employment Standards Administration, 1975).

\*The ideas and recommendations presented here are primarily based on the authors' experience developing programs for multiple role women at the University of Maryland Counseling Center, College Park, Maryland and the Washington, D.C. Veterans Administration Hospital. An expanded version of this paper is available from the authors.

### *Special Concerns of Multiple Role Women*

Counselors need to be aware of the motivations and special concerns of the MRW. Typically, she seeks additional income, enhanced status and power, increased stimulation, and self-actualization. Her educational or vocational expansion often fulfills these expectations but carries with it certain costs. Most simply, adding school or a job to home life means increased demands on time and energy, often resulting in overload and fatigue. Sex role stereotypes die hard and often the woman faces the dual problems of partners who are unwilling or unprepared to share domestic tasks and difficulty in relinquishing functions which previously defined her value in the family.

The woman often encounters a loss of approval from significant persons in her life who do not understand or feel threatened by her departure from the traditional role. At a time when she most needs their support, they may withdraw it. At school or work, colleagues may question the investment of the woman who is simultaneously committed to a family. There is a lack of support in the social system as well. The inadequacy of child care and the unavailability of part-time work or flexible work schedules create great practical, even sometimes insurmountable obstacles.

Social isolation is common for the MRW. She fits neither with younger, single students or full-time homemakers whose interests, responsibilities and schedules are different from hers. The labor force, barriers prevent her from sharing concerns with others. In both settings, the MRW may be without a social network or readily accessible reference group.

Competing time demands are a primary factor in role conflict for the MRW (Epstein, 1971). One common, costly response to the problem is the attempt to be "superwoman," avoiding negative sanctions from others and guilt from within, by trying to do everything and do it all perfectly. But choices do have to be made and someone's needs may not be met. Replacing the myth of the super person with a model of behavior with more human proportions is a needed, but difficult task.

### *Directions for Counselors and Therapists*

The issues confronting the MRW suggest some clear directions. Specifically, counselors/therapists should be able to help the woman in the following ways: First they should help the woman shift her attribution of problem source from one of personal inadequacy to characteristics inherent in her situation. The woman with high expectations of herself tends to define problems as her inability to manage or cope. It is important for her to learn to accept occasional interruptions in the routine and unfulfilled expectations as inevitable. Conflict needs to be presented as normal, healthy, though painful, reflection of growth and change rather than as a sign of failure. In this process of examining external pressures, the counselor/therapist should help the woman

an explore such issues as traditional assumptions about a homemaker's responsibility for caring for everyone's needs (O'Reilly, 1972), experiences of dual career families (Holmstrom, 1972), women's fear of negative consequences accompanying achievement of success and departure from the traditional role (Horner, 1969). Of particular importance is the examination of early sex role messages and myths and their effect on self-perception. The "shoulds" which a MRW carries with her about how women ought to be or feel are often the source of guilt feelings as she tries to make her own choices.

Second, counselors and therapists should focus on ego strengths and personal assets which may be forgotten in the profusion of activities. Frequently, a MRW's self-esteem diminishes as she and others cease to acknowledge her strengths and take them for granted. Counseling/therapy must help the client recognize her accomplishments. Self nurturance is critical for the MRW because she often lacks the emotional support she needs from others.

Third, the counseling process should include an exploration of alternative ways of fulfilling roles. The MRW often accepts all family and domestic responsibilities as though she were full-time homemaker. Re-defining roles in human rather than sex role terms is a vital part of the counseling process through which the MRW (and possibly her partner or family) comes to see home and family care as a shared matter.

Fourth, practitioners should help in developing and utilizing external supports which provide identification, and specific skill development beyond the limits of counseling/therapy. These may be contacts with women of similar life styles, appropriate workshops and groups such as time-management, or assertiveness training or aid in obtaining needed services, such as, child

care, tutoring, etc.

Fifth, counseling should facilitate educational and vocational decision-making. Traditionally and typically schools and counselors have directed girls toward very restricted career choices (Iglitzin, 1972). Through counseling women should receive the sex-fair guidance and encouragement they missed getting in the past.

Sex stereotyping of family roles and vocational choices is a part of most everyone's history. For the woman attempting to deviate from these prescriptions there are, as we have seen, many problems. If practitioners are to help the woman deal with them, they must examine their values about role-appropriate behavior and be bias-free in their attitudes.

The following principles are recommended for working with multiple role women.

#### *Recommended Principles*

- Knowledge:
1. Counselors/therapists are aware of the definition, statistics, and activities of multiple role women.
  2. Counselors/therapists are aware of conflicts and opportunities inherent in the multiple role lifestyle on interpersonal, internal, and educational-vocational levels.
- Skills:
1. Counselors/therapists are skilled in leading support and therapy groups.
- Attitudes:
1. Counselors/therapists evaluate personal beliefs concerning appropriate family roles, responsibilities, child-rearing practices of parents, women holding multiple roles, and women in non-traditional vocations.