

## ATTITUDES TOWARD WORKING WIVES AMONG LOW-INCOME YOUTH

William F. Kenkel &amp; Bruce A. Gage, University of Kentucky

The emerging dual role of women — worker and mother — has been prominent in research and popular writings. Yet there remain some obscurities. In part, this is because most of the studies on attitudes towards women's dual roles have used college samples, and most often samples of college females. Exceptions include Meier (1972), McMillin (1972) and Almquist (1974). There is thus a scarcity of information on the attitudes of non-college youth, of blacks, and of males. Information that helps to fill this void should be of use to those who work with youth and to the youth themselves as they work their way through the career-marriage decision-making process.

The present study uses a sample of low-income black and white youths of both sexes. The longitudinal design of the research permits comparison of attitudes of high school youth toward women's employment to the attitude of the same respondents four years after high school graduation.

## METHODOLOGY

The data for this study are from Southern Regional Research Projects 63 and 126, a cooperative effort of the Agricultural Experiment Stations in six Southern states to study longitudinally the occupational and educational goals of low-income youth. In each state, the principal investigator selected schools which served essentially depressed areas characterized by unemployment and poverty. The second phase of the research, from which the first set of attitudinal data is taken, was conducted in 1975 when the youth were expected to be juniors or seniors in high school. The third stage of research was conducted in 1979 when the respondents were 21 to 22 years of age. Of those studied in 1975, 57.9 percent were located in 1979, 35 percent were black, 65 percent white; 55 percent were female, 45 percent male. Not all of these respondents had answered a parallel question when they were in high school, reducing the number of cases at that stage to 466.

Attitude toward women working was tapped by responses to a question which asked: "What do you think a married woman should

do about working outside the home?" Four choices were allowed ranging from the most traditional that stated that a woman should not work unless her husband is unable to do so, she should work only if she has no children or all children are in high school, it is all right to work if all children are in school or if she has a good sitter, to the most liberal choice that stated that she should be able to work if she wants to do so since the children are the husband's as much as hers. The question was designed to tap the degree to which the respondent accepts a dual role for married women as opposed to the emphasis on the role of mother. The most liberal response further contains the idea that a woman who is a mother and wife has a right to control her own destiny and to decide for herself whether she will work outside the home. The four response items can be considered a scale inasmuch as the choices range from considerable to no restrictions placed on the employment of women.

## ATTITUDES OF HIGH SCHOOL YOUTH

It is clear from the data presented in Table 1 that there are sizeable differences between males and females and between blacks and whites with regard to attitudes toward women's roles as measured at high school age. In terms of the most modern or liberal response, black males were most likely to approve of a woman working if she wants to, followed by black females and white males, with white females showing the least approval. An interesting finding is the low proportion of white females, about one-quarter, who agreed with the statement that a married woman should work outside the home if she wants to. Correspondingly, a low proportion of white males agree that she has the right to make her own employment decisions.

The most traditional response choice was that a woman should not work unless her husband was unable to do so. Twenty percent of the white males gave this response but only 7 to 9 percent of respondents in the other sex-race categories do so.

The second response choice posits no real conflict between the role of mother and worker

**TABLE 1: ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT BY RACE AND SEX  
(Percentage)**

| <i>Test Statement</i>                              | <i>Black Youth</i> | <i>Males Young Adults</i> | <i>Black Youth</i> | <i>Females Young Adults</i> | <i>White Youth</i> | <i>Males Young Adults</i> | <i>White Youth</i> | <i>Females Young Adults</i> |
|--|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>Women should work outside the home: N:N:</b>    | <b>(79)</b>        | <b>(89)</b>               | <b>(75)</b>        | <b>(93)</b>                 | <b>(130)</b>       | <b>(145)</b>              | <b>(182)</b>       | <b>(194)</b>                |
| Only if husband unable to work                     | 9.1                | 2.3                       | 6.7                | 4.3                         | 19.7               | 12.1                      | 7.7                | 4.7                         |
| Only if no children, or children in high school    | 10.3               | 3.5                       | 9.3                | 4.3                         | 13.4               | 10.6                      | 13.8               | 6.7                         |
| All right if children in school or has good sitter | 28.6               | 60.5                      | 48.0               | 59.1                        | 37.0               | 47.5                      | 53.6               | 70.5                        |
| If she wants to                                    | 51.9               | 33.7                      | 36.0               | 32.3                        | 29.9               | 29.8                      | 24.9               | 18.1                        |

(Youth Sample:  $\text{Chi}^2 = 34.5, p = .001$ ; Adult Sample:  $\text{Chi}^2 = 32.0, p = .001$ )

since it stipulates that there are no children or the children are in high school. The races and sexes did not differ materially with regard to this choice.

Particular attention should be given to the third response category, "It is all right for a woman to work as long as the children are in school or she has a good sitter," since this choice indicates a possible conflict between the role of mother and worker. It implies that day-to-day mothering is needed but that substitute care has been arranged. Fewer males than females agree that a woman should work under such circumstances but the races were quite similar in their responses. Note, however, that only about half of the young women approve of women combining the roles of mother and worker at the stage of the children's lives when considerable mothering is thought necessary and conventional.

When the response categories on women's roles are considered together, some conclusions can be offered. First, white males have the most traditional attitudes towards women's roles. Second, few youth other than white males, believe that a woman should work only if her husband is unable to do so. Black females were the least likely to agree that a woman should work only if her husband can-

not. Third, when conflict between the roles of mother and worker is posited, the responses of most high school aged males and almost half of the females seem to favor the mother role.

**ATTITUDES OF YOUNG ADULTS**

How do the attitudes toward women's employment of the young adults compare to those expressed by the same respondents four years earlier? As shown in Table 1, there was a decline in all of race-sex categories of those who feel that a woman should work only if her husband is unable to do so. Still, 12.1 percent of the white males express this traditional attitude as young adults. The third response category, it is all right for a woman to work if the children are in school or if she has a good sitter, shows some interesting changes. The number of young adults who approve of women working outside the home increased substantially over the four years. As young adults, from 60 to 70 percent of the respondents, except white males, agree that it is all right for married women to work at this stage of the family life cycle. Close to half of the white males now approve of women's employment, up from about 30 percent when they were asked the question as high school students. The proportion of black males approving of

women's employment at the stage when there are children at home doubled over the four years.

There were changes also in the number of respondents agreeing that a mother should work outside the home if she wants to do so. Note that only 18 percent of the white women gave this response, down from 24 percent four years earlier. The proportion of black women giving full control over her occupational role to the woman also dropped but not as much.

## IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have important implications for counseling with young men and women. With regard to young men, counselors need to be aware that a sizeable proportion of low-income males, and particularly white males, are less approving of women working than females. More to the point, the males need to be aware that their attitudes differ from those of women they will likely marry. After all, class endogamy does operate to a considerable extent and almost all of the youth in our sample did state that they expect to marry. It is likely that the dual role of women will grow in acceptance in American society generally. It is interesting that at the status level at which additional income is most needed, the males are less accepting of the worker role for women than are the females. Most middle-class couples are coming to define a dual worker family almost as a necessity and the employment rates of young married women reflect this definition. Among the married young adults in this sample, half or more of the married women are working. This means that the young men, with or without help, had to readjust their thinking and possibly are not fully convinced that employment of married women is correct. It would be better if the attitudes of high school males more closely matched the realities of the situation they are likely to meet.

The implications of the findings of this study are different for women than men but are no less challenging. At high school age, only half of the women in this sample agreed that a mother with young children should be employed. It has, of course, been common in the past for women to drop out of the labor force while the children are young but this pattern is less pronounced today. Recently, the fastest growing category of women in the labor force has

been that of women with pre-school children. Do the low-income female youth disapproving of working mothers realize the extent to which their attitudes are divergent from those in the mainstream of American society? Career advancement, promotion to positions of more responsibility, and regular increases in earnings are much easier to obtain if a person has consistent labor force participation as opposed to the in and out movement characteristic of most women in the past. To be sure, as young adults the women had changed their attitudes with 70 percent of white women and 60 percent of black women approving of women working while there are children in the home. Even so, there are sizeable numbers whose attitudes are misaligned with the emerging career role of women in the United States.

Young women with accepting attitudes toward women working outside the home are not without problems. One wonders if they realize the extent of disapproval of women's employment by males, particularly if there are young children in the home. It is not that women must realign their attitudes to be consistent with those of males. Rather, with males holding more traditional attitudes and with the considerable variations in attitudes by both sexes, the potential for husband-wife role conflict seems strong. Women will interact with generally, and will supervise or be supervised by men on the job. Young women with contemporary views, embarking on career and marriage, may not be aware of the extent to which they differ from many males and, for other females. Dissemination of the knowledge on race and sex differences regarding women's roles will not in itself solve problems young people may encounter as they chart their lives and make their career decisions. Awareness of the differences, however, would seem to be a valuable aid in the search for solutions.

## REFERENCES

- Almquist, A., 1974. "Attitudes of college men toward working wives." *Vocational Guidance Quarterly*, 23, 115-121.
- McMillin, M., 1972. "Attitudes of college men toward career involvement of married women." *Mother-centeredness and college youth's attitudes toward social equality for women.* *J. of Marriage and the Family*, 34, 115-121.