

ROUTES TO A FEMINIST ORIENTATION AMONG WOMEN AUTOWORKERS

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This article analyzes the orientation of 150 women autoworkers toward feminism. Demographic variables had no significant independent effects when considered with other variables. Age, marital status, and education did have noteworthy mediated effects. Seniority level, workplace threat, and job skills were significant determinants of feminist orientations. Women's feelings of being trapped in a job, their feelings of job competence, and their self-esteem were also important factors. The interrelationships among the variables suggested that there are two routes to profeminist attitudes. One route is followed by older, higher-seniority women who develop a positive stance toward feminism as a result of mostly positive work-related experiences (high skills, high job competence, high self-esteem). The other route is followed by younger, divorced, or college-educated women whose negative work-related experiences (low seniority, low job skills, high job entrapment, low job competence) apparently sensitize them to feminist issues.

This article analyzes the sources of feminist orientations among women who work in automobile assembly line jobs. The few studies of blue-collar women deal with their response to working in nontraditional jobs (McIlwee 1982; O'Farrell and Harlan 1982; Riemer and Bridwell 1982). Several studies of attitudes toward

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feminism that used multivariate analyses and considered a broad range of variables have provided a definition of profeminist attitudes as an endorsement of the goal of equal opportunity and rewards and the belief that the women's movement plays an important role in striving for such parity (Dworkin 1979; Ferree 1980; Tomeh 1978).

The question addressed in this research is, What characteristics of working-class women lead to a profeminist orientation? As we will show below, previous research suggests that there are two different routes to a feminist orientation. One route is followed by women who have developed a profeminist orientation as a result of positive work-related experiences. The other route is followed by women who have experienced trials and tribulations in the world of work.

SOURCES OF FEMINIST ATTITUDES

Demographic

Most studies find that younger women tend to have stronger profeminist attitudes than older women (Morgan and Walker 1983; Thornton, Alwin, and Camburn 1983), but others do not (Macke et al. 1978). The effect of education seems to be more consistent. Well-educated women tend to espouse feminist viewpoints (Morgan and Walker 1983; Thornton and Freedman 1979). Married women are generally less feminist than the never-married (Agassi 1979; Morgan and Walker 1983). Divorced women, however, are not found to be consistently more feminist than married or never-married women (Agassi 1979; Thornton and Freedman 1983). While many studies of race differences find that there are only small and generally nonsignificant differences (Hershey 1978; Ransford and Miller 1983), others find significant differences on some dimensions of feminism (Davidson and Davidson 1977; Spitze and Waite 1981).

Work Characteristics and Attitudes

Labor-force participation *by itself* has a significant impact on women's attitudes (Ferree 1980, 1983; Thornton and Freedman 1983). Additionally, Miller, Schooler, Kohn, and Miller (1980) find that women's intellectual flexibility, social awareness, and positive self-conceptions are related to the structure and content of their jobs. Moss Kanter (1977) presents a similar theme with the concept of "opportunity structure." Jobs that are challenging, give workers control over

their jobs, and offer prospects for advancement have a number of positive influences on attitudes and behaviors—including open-mindedness, self-esteem, internal locus of control, and achievement orientation. Work-role satisfaction (Harrison, Guy, and Ludfer 1981) and, more specifically, doing well at a “man’s job” (Riemer and Bridwell 1982) are also associated with positive self-conceptions, which in turn are related to feminist attitudes.

There is also considerable evidence that some *negative* work experiences or attitudes are related to a feminist orientation. Women involved in nontraditional jobs are more apt than other women to experience role strain or conflict (Holstrom 1972). A resolution of these problems is the adoption of a more feminist view of gender roles (Garnets and Pleck 1979). Women who experience sexual harassment or discrimination or who are subject to tokenism often become sensitized to feminist issues (Dworkin 1979; Martin 1980), as do women who are part of a sizable or “threatening” minority when social networks exist to interpret these problems as *social* rather than *personal* issues (Ferree 1980; South, Bonjean, Markham, and Bolz 1983). For some women, sensitization to feminism may result from significant life-cycle turning points, such as divorce or leaving home (Walshok 1981), which create instability in personal relationships and support systems and subsequently force a redefinition of roles and statuses (Riger 1977).

Self-Attitudes

A number of attitudes, many of which are directly or indirectly tied to work characteristics or experiences, are related to feminist orientations: general happiness, adjustment, personal competence (Morgan and Walker, 1983), self-esteem (Harrison et al. 1981), locus of control (Chasia and Eyo 1977), job commitment, and job mobility aspirations (Agassi 1979). We would argue that self-attitudes are an important causal link between work experiences and attitudes and orientation toward feminism. While there are obviously reciprocal effects between work-related experiences and self-attitudes, a substantial body of literature supports the view that the *primary* causal flow is *from* work-related variables *to* self-attitudes. Recent research that has given special attention to the issue of directionality (Kohn and Schooler 1973; Miller et al. 1980) supports the general theory proposed by others (Kornhauser 1964; Sennett and Cobb 1972) that workers’ feelings about their jobs spill over to feelings about self. Similarly,

there are reciprocal effects between self-attitudes and a feminist orientation. Those studies that have addressed the issue of causality, however, have supported the view that the primary causal flow is *from* self-attitudes *to* profeminist attitudes (Harrison et al. 1981; Morgan and Walker 1983; Tomeh 1978).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Sample

Our sample consisted of 150 women who worked mainly at unskilled blue-collar jobs in a final-assembly auto plant. Women were approximately 10 percent of a blue-collar work force of nearly 5,200. The proportion of women varied across departments; they were absent in some departments and made up from 6 percent to 25 percent of the remaining departments. Given the varying gender ratios, we decided to sample all women in four departments with widely differing ratios. This sampling strategy was also chosen on practical grounds. The lack of management cooperation forced us to rely upon a group of women in the plant to generate lists of workers by department. After exclusion of those workers we were not able to contact by phone, the response rate was 74 percent. The respondents were contacted at home by women interviewers in 1980-1981 and administered a questionnaire covering job- and family-related topics. The average length of the interviews was 1.5 hours.

Variables

Two items, "Women should be considered just as seriously as men for jobs as executives, politicians, and even President of the U.S." and "The women's movement has done a lot for women like me," were used to measure feminist orientation. Combined to form the dependent variable, these two items produced an alpha of .64.

On demographic variables, the median age of the sample was 31 years. An age-squared term was used to test a predicted curvilinear relationship of age to feminist orientation. About two-thirds of the respondents had a high school education or less, and 4 percent had college degrees. As to marital status, 40 percent were married; 33 percent were divorced or separated; and 27 percent were single. Marital status was used as a dummy (married versus nonmarried) variable in the regression analysis and as a trichotomous variable in

the bivariate analyses. Race and mother's employment were excluded from our study after preliminary analyses (regression and cross-tabulation) showed these to be unrelated to feminist orientation.

The work characteristics measured were how long subjects had worked at the plant (the median seniority was two years) and several aspects of their current jobs. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with 20 statements tapping a number of job dimensions (from Quinn and Shepard 1974). One dimension, the level of skill of a job, was based on a three-item scale (alpha of .78) that tapped their ability to use or develop their skills on the job.

The women also were asked how many people worked in their immediate work area and, of these, how many were women; the median percentage of women was 27. This variable, called *workplace threat*, was categorized so as to represent high and low threat, following the argument of South et al. (1983), who found that tension and conflict increase as the proportion of a minority group in the workplace increases to parity. *High threat* was operationalized as a situation in which the proportion of women ranged from 27 percent to 49 percent; *low threat* encompassed the 1 percent to 26 percent and the 50 percent to 100 percent ranges.

Two items focused on feelings about having enough time to do the job and about being able to handle the job physically. The correlation between these items, which we called *job competence* ($r = .63$), was statistically significant. A second variable we called *job trap* consisted of two items that tap the perception of work as a necessary evil and fear of potential job loss ($a = .59$).

The only self-attitude measured was self-esteem. Two items from Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (1965) were included in our study: "I certainly feel useless at times" and "I feel that I'm a person of worth, on an equal place with others." They correlated at a significant level ($r = .55$) and could be reliably differentiated from job competence.

DATA ANALYSIS

Effects of Variables

The direct and indirect effects of our independent variables on feminist orientation were estimated with path analysis techniques. In our path model, the demographic variables were exogenous and the remaining (endogenous) variables were ordered from cause to effect as follows: work characteristics, work attitudes, self-attitudes, and

TABLE 1
 Path Relationships in a Fully Specified Model of Feminist Orientations^a

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables							Feminist Orientation	
	Marital Status	Education	Seniority	Skills	Workplace Threat	Job Trap	Job Competence		Self-Esteem
Demographic									
age	-.139	.173	.196**	-.075	-.048	-.058	.173**	.042	.004
marital status		r = .134 ^b	.086	.091	.033	-.232***	.022	.035	-.050
education			.005	-.224***	-.068	.166	.039	-.012	.081
Work characteristics									
seniority				.171*	.179**	-.083	.116	.152*	.243***
skills					r = .014	-.184**	.179**	.023	.198***
workplace threat						.018	.032	-.037	.182**
Work attitudes							r = .006	-.079	.220***
job trap								.271***	.183***
job competence									.301***
Self-attitudes									
self-esteem									

a. The figures are standardized regression coefficients. The significance levels are notated as follows: *p < .10; **p < .05; ***p < .01.

b. Correlation coefficients (r) are shown for relationships with no assumed causality.

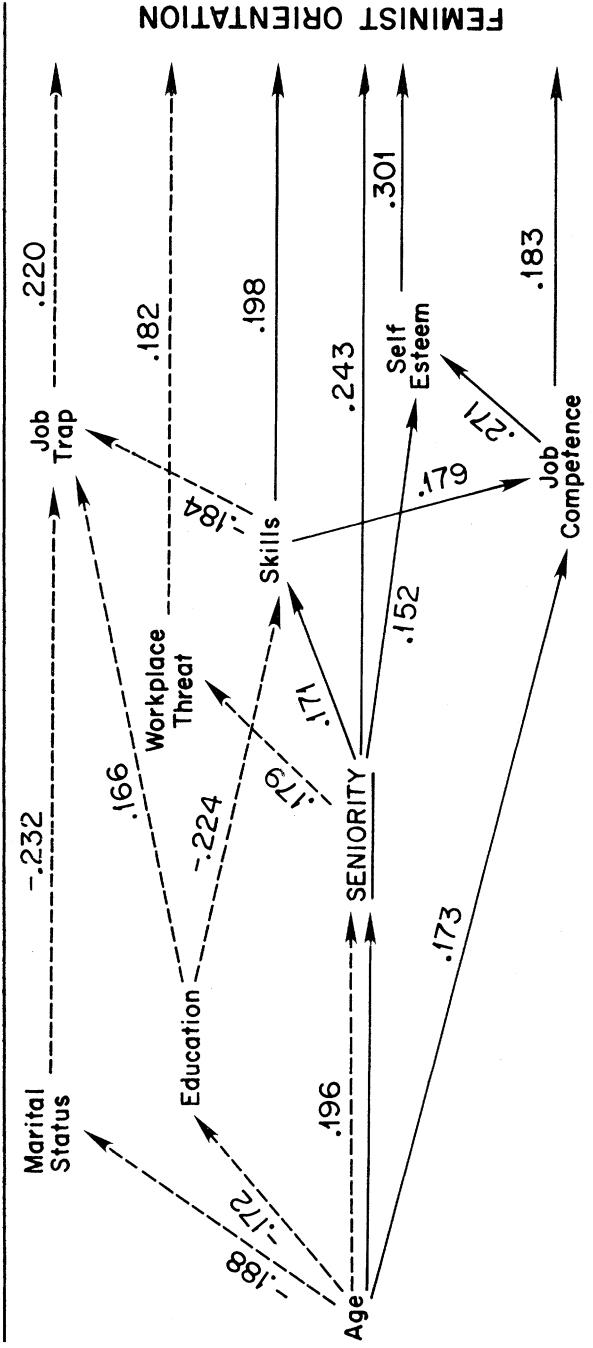


Figure 1: Trimmed Model of Routes to Feminist Orientations Among Women Autoworkers

NOTE: The solid lines represent the positive route to feminist orientation; the broken lines represent the negative route. Only those relationships where $p < .10$ are shown.

feminist orientation. Our fully specified regression model is found in Table 1.

As can be seen in the last column of Table 1, the demographic variables are the only variables without a direct effect on feminist orientation. The strongest direct effects are those of self-esteem (beta = .301), seniority (.243), and job trap (.220). The perceived skill of a job (.198), job competence (.183), and workplace threat (.182) are also significant direct causes of feminist orientation. In sum, both positive (e.g., high skills) and negative job aspects (e.g., high job trap) directly contribute to profeminist attitudes. We then analyzed the indirect causes of feminist attitudes, using a commonly accepted theory-trimming procedure (Heberlein and Baumgartner 1978). Non-significant relationships were successively dropped to arrive at a parsimonious model. Figure 1 presents this model, and Table 2 summarizes the direct and indirect influences on feminist orientation (for the method of decomposition of effects, see Alwin and Hauser 1975).

Table 2 shows that the demographic variables—age, marital status, and education—influenced feminist orientation only indirectly through some of the other independent variables. The other variable types (work characteristics, work attitudes, and self-attitudes), on the other hand, had much stronger direct than indirect effects. Overall, the strongest indirect effects among the independent variables were those of seniority (.086), job competence (.082), and age (0.074). When we summed the direct and indirect effects, the relative importance of the variables is ranked as follows: seniority (.329), self-esteem (.301), job competence (.265), job trap (.220), skills (.205), and workplace threat (.182). Seniority was thus *the* single most important cause of profeminist attitudes among women autoworkers.

Routes to Feminist Orientation

The positive route to feminist orientation was through the impact of work rewards (skills and job competence) and positive self-attitudes (self-esteem). The major influence on these variables was seniority. The primary pattern of influence was from age to seniority (.196), which in turn led to jobs with a higher skill level (.171) and high self-esteem (.152). A higher skill level also contributed to an increased feeling of job competence (.179). Older women were also likely to feel more competent in their jobs, independent of the skill level of their job, as seen by the significant direct path from age to job competence (.173).

TABLE 2
 Summary of Direct and Significant Indirect Effects
 on Feminist Orientation (Figure 1 Model)

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Zero-Order Correlations</i>	<i>Effects^a</i>		
		<i>Direct</i>	<i>Indirect</i>	<i>Total</i>
Demographic				
age	.068	.004	.074	.078
marital status	-.185	-.050	-.051	-.101
education	.115	.081	-.026	.055
Work characteristics				
seniority	.203	.243	.086	.329**
skills	.215	.198	.007	.205*
workplace threat	.131	.182	—	.182*
Work attitudes				
job trap	.157	.220	—	.220*
job competence	.305	.183	.082	.265**
Self-attitudes				
self-esteem	.370	.301	—	.301**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

We interpret these patterns as showing that over time higher-seniority women have developed an orientation that they (and perhaps women in general) are "just as good" as men and deserve equal rewards. One of our respondents, 50 years old, with 16 years of experience in the auto industry, exemplified this orientation when she said, "If we didn't have it [the women's movement], we wouldn't be working in the shops. They had to say that we were just as good as men and then we had to go out there and prove it. And I sure *did*."

The negative route to feminist orientation came through the impact of negative work characteristics (a high-threat workplace) or work attitudes (feelings of job trap). These women were a more mixed group in terms of age than the first group. Younger women were more likely to have higher levels of education, lower seniority, and, consequently, jobs with less skill. These factors contributed to a feeling of being trapped in an unrewarding job. One interpretation of our finding that higher education led to feelings of job trap is that these women made a trade-off that had negative consequences. In analyses not presented in this article, we found that well-educated women were more likely to have had a prior white- or pink-collar job

and, comparing auto work to these jobs, found that they traded higher pay for less intrinsic satisfaction.

Another and somewhat older group of women ended up feeling trapped in their jobs as a result of divorce. In bivariate analyses not shown here, divorced women were more likely to feel trapped than either married or single women; 54 percent of divorced women felt trapped as compared to 34 percent of the married and 29 percent of the single women ($p = .07$). This trapped feeling may have been the result of their having to provide for a family as the sole breadwinner. Nearly half (46 percent) of the divorced women started working in the plant *after* their divorces. Among the divorced women, those who felt trapped by their jobs were apt to have children under 6 years of age. They also indicated (though these differences were not statistically significant) that arranging child care, effectively disciplining their children, and having enough time for their children were problems.

A second part of the negative route to a feminist orientation was through workplace threat. Women with high seniority were more likely to be working where women were perceived as a threatening minority, rather than where women were either rare or numerically dominant. We interpreted the feminist attitudes resulting from this work situation as a consequence of problems that women were likely to experience with male workers. As we showed in an earlier analysis of this sample (Gruber and Bjorn 1982), workplace threat was a significant determinant of sexual harassment. Further data analysis for this study (not reported here) showed that high-threat workplaces affected feminist attitudes only *when* these women experienced sexual harassment. It appears that a strong feminist orientation was an end result of a work environment in which women experienced treatment that was aimed at women as a *group* (e.g., harassment or discrimination). This finding parallels that of Ferree (1980), who found that job dissatisfaction influences feminist views when the social context supported interpretations of this dissatisfaction as a woman's problem.

DISCUSSION

We found two routes to profeminist attitudes in our sample of blue-collar women; one was the result of negative work experiences and negative self-conceptions; the other was the result of largely positive experiences and positive self-conceptions. The negative route suggests an interplay between work experiences and significant

life experiences outside the plant. The women in this group were diverse—single and divorced, having low and high levels of education, young and middle-aged. Their unique life situations, however, pushed them along this same path.

Divorced women experienced job entrapment, and many who were single parents felt keenly the double burden of employment and parenthood. Young educated women, and those who previously had more rewarding jobs, gave their work on the auto assembly line a low evaluation, which increased their sense of entrapment. These feelings led to a feminist orientation.

In contrast to the first route, the second was taken by a more homogeneous group—married, older, high-seniority women—who derived significant psychological rewards from their work. These women seemed to fit a pattern noted by Riemer and Bridwell (1982)—high-seniority women gave a positive rating to the skill level of their jobs, which, in turn reinforced a sense of job competence; as a result, they felt good about themselves. While high seniority opened the door to a number of rewards, it is also placed some of these women in high-threat work situations. As women gain seniority, they are more apt to work in an environment in which they are a minority, but a large enough group to pose a threat to the men who formerly monopolized the workplace. Such workplaces are marked by inter-gender conflict (e.g., sabotage, discrimination, sexual harassment). As a result, these women also developed a feminist orientation. It seems likely that any job that provides a woman with a sense of job competence and a positive self-image will create a fertile ground for the development of a feminist consciousness, but it may take negative experiences to make these women active. The connection between feminist consciousness and action among women workers is a topic worth future study.

Our study raises questions about the generalizability of the two routes for other work contexts. Do women feeling trapped in pink- or white-collar jobs also develop a feminist consciousness? How does divorce interact with a sense of job trap in these work contexts? Do high-threat work situations have the same influence on feminist attitudes in other work contexts? Based on our research, as well as that of others, we speculate that a feminist consciousness is more apt to develop among women in nontraditional work roles. In other words, we feel that the rewards are more stimulating but the trials are more painful for women in nontraditional work. Future research will determine the accuracy of this claim.

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