

“I Love My Job, But . . . :” A Narrative Analysis of Women’s Perceptions of their Careers in Parks and Recreation

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of women in the field of parks and recreation regarding their careers and expectations for the future. A narrative analysis was applied to open-ended responses to a national survey about the career development of professional women who were members of the National Recreation and Park Association. The results include four areas of influence regarding women’s careers in parks and recreation: public service motivation, motivation and obligation to family, women in the workplace culture, and working in the field of parks and recreation. Conclusions indicate that women’s perceptions regarding their career appeared on a continuum from largely positive to somewhat negative based on how they negotiated these areas of influence.

KEYWORDS: *Discrimination, family, gender, mentoring, organizational culture, public service*

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The history of women in the field of parks and recreation has embodied both empowerment and constraint. Women's experiences in all areas of leisure services including parks and recreation have been shaped by both structural and cultural factors (Aitchison, 2005). Women in this field have confronted personal as well as social concerns and actively worked for change in their own lives and the lives of their communities. However, the nature of women's roles in society and the gender-power relationships in workplaces and communities has sometimes provided challenges for professional women.

Most of the studies of women in leisure services over the past 25 years have addressed issues related to opportunities, constraints, and the interplay between gender and organizational structures. Many of those studies have been quantitative in nature and have not necessarily examined the context of women's work lives. Researchers have suggested that issues women historically faced in the profession sometimes appear to be ameliorated especially as more women have entered the field. Shinew and Arnold (1998), however, noted, "Although women represent the majority of new entrants into the leisure services field, they remain underrepresented in upper management positions" (p. 177). Therefore, concerns for women in recreation-related organizations continue to be not only an issue of employment representation, but also an issue regarding the quality of women's experiences in and out of the workplace.

The purpose of this analysis was to examine the perceptions of women in the field of parks and recreation regarding their careers and expectations for the future. The focus was centered on women in professional positions in public parks and recreation, which we also referred to as recreation-related professions. *Professional* is the term used to describe women who had higher education in a specialized field related to recreation. Career was defined broadly to include work and life roles, and women's career development was used as the theoretical structure to organize the collection and analyses of these data. Additional theorizing about the data was used to further describe the lives of the women working in parks and recreation.

Background

When women were largely invisible in the workforce, issues regarding career development were of little consequence. In most discussions, women's professional lives and their career patterns were expected to model men's. If women were not able to progress in their development in the same manner as men were expected to do, they were often considered unqualified or incompetent. Many people now recognize, however, that "women's careers are often embedded in larger life contexts" (O'Neil, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2008, p. 727).

Women in parks and recreation appear to share many of the same career patterns as other working professionals. However, differences may exist between women in a public service field such as parks and recreation and women in the private or corporate sector. We provide background related to recent research on women's careers in general as well as literature about women in recreation-related professions.

Patterns and Paradoxes of Women's Career Development

Considerable research conducted early in the 21st century described the complexities that many women confront in their professional careers (e.g., O'Neill & Bilimoria, 2005; O'Neil et al., 2008; Shapiro, Ingols, & Blake-Beard, 2008; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). O'Neil et al. concluded that despite the growing visibility of women's leadership in many organizations, male-defined constructions of work and career success dominate most organizational cultures.

Some debate also has ensued about whether career development theories should be different for men and women. For example, women's lives remain relatively more complicated because society remains gendered (Shaw, 2001). Being born female continues to elicit gender role expectations that may differ from stereotypic male leadership styles and opportunities. Further, Tower and Alkadry (2008) emphasized that just because women have progressed into administrative ranks does not mean that workplaces are necessarily women- or family-friendly (i.e., a workplace culture that supports the life issues of women as well as men).

Traditional definitions of career success generally focus on the primacy of work in people's lives (Shapiro et al., 2008) and the idea of leadership and upward mobility (O'Neil et al., 2008). These definitions do not usually take into account the complexities of most women's lives regarding work and life (i.e., family, friends, leisure, or free time) balance. The definitions also do not consider the personal or social costs that some women pay regarding the decisions they make about their careers and family (e.g., delaying child birth, not marrying at all; Tower & Alkadry, 2008).

In their summary of research since 1990 about women's careers, O'Neil et al. (2008) identified patterns and paradoxes that were common regardless of what discipline or profession was studied. They identified studies that investigated issues such as mentoring, networking, sexual harassment, the glass ceiling, personal development, relational development, work-life balance, women's leadership, and human resources policies. The patterns included finding that work was embedded in larger life contexts, families and careers both were central to many women's lives, women's careers represented a variety of patterns, and women's human and social capital were critical for career development.

An important paradox that applied to almost all women was the nexus of work and life (O'Neil et al., 2008). The work-life balance, which has also been referred to as the work-life conflict or work-life collision, is an aspect of women's lives that often creates a double bind (Shapiro et al., 2008). The traditional male idea that work is, or should be, the primary focus of life presents a dilemma for many women who also desire a family life (i.e., defined broadly as the traditional nuclear family as well as alternative family styles and relationships with the family of origin or family of choice). Some women feel overwhelmed with the multiple demands that are not supported adequately in either the workplace or at home.

Many work policies continue to reflect men's careers and not the complexities of women's careers (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). Even in organizations that have focused on women-friendly and more progressively family-friendly policies, the culture often subtly reflects a negative perception of women who do not follow the male model of putting work first (Tower & Alkadry, 2008). This issue may be

particularly salient for some women in parks and recreation fields because of the necessity to work outside a typical 9 to 5 schedule.

Career development for women in any profession has many dimensions. O'Neil and Bilimoria (2005), for example, identified career phases for women through their qualitative research. They suggested that career development is a series of stages characterized by themes. The themes of idealism, endurance, and reinvention roughly coincided with whether women were in the early, middle, or advanced stages of their careers. Regardless of the stage, O'Neil and Bilimoria described how the career contexts (i.e., societal, organizational, and relational) and women's personal changing images of themselves evolved over time. These findings were similar to the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008), which suggested that similar to a kaleidoscope, career patterns shift as women assess their changing roles and relationships. Sullivan and Mainiero described how authenticity (i.e., being true to oneself), balance (i.e., making decisions about work-life), and challenge (i.e., finding ways to learn and grow) had major influences on the shifting aspects of women's careers. The career development models for women in other professions, therefore, provided a way to build on the body of knowledge about women in parks and recreation.

Women in the Parks and Recreation Profession

Most of the research on women in recreation-related fields occurred during the 1990s. A dearth of new data exists from the 21st century. To some extent, women's issues have been less visible in the recreation and parks field as concerns about race and ethnicity seem to be more prominent. These issues are important but researchers in other fields, as noted, do not believe that gender equity exists yet for most professional women. Therefore, examining women in recreation-related fields today can build on previous research in other areas as well as examine changes to this field.

Much of the research about women in leisure services has analyzed women as individuals without sociological, political, and critical analyses (Aitchison, 2003, 2005). However, when focusing on career development as a theoretical framework, an ecological approach offers a means to examine the cultural and structural aspects of women in their professional and personal lives. Henderson and Bialeschki (1995) described how a career development model should define career broadly to include the personal as well as professional issues that continuously interact with one another. A career development model includes factors influencing careers such as organizational structures, professional associations, current position, family responsibilities, legislation, socioeconomic level, academic and cultural background, and individual situations.

Some people believe women employed in parks and recreation as well as other fields are in a better position today than in the past because of legislation designed to protect women from discrimination (e.g., Title IX) and existing organizational policies (e.g., sexual harassment, affirmative action). Aitchison (2003, 2005) concluded, however, that despite policies to change institutional structures, institutional cultural practices often continue to negatively influence women's personal lives as well as their career trajectories. Allison (1999) also suggested that because public recreation is a social good based on democratic principles, the field should

naturally be inclusionary. Gender equity as it is manifested in organizational structures and cultures remains an important element that should be explored regardless of the perceived democracy of the field or manifested legislative progress made.

Previous research suggested that perceptions remain mixed regarding women's progress in recreation-related professions. For example, Aitchison, Jordan, and Brackenridge (1999) found in the United Kingdom that when women were asked if men treated women as their equals, 38% agreed and 50% disagreed. Almost an equal number of women agreed and disagreed regarding the notion that men get ahead more easily than women and that women often hit glass ceilings. In the United States, Anderson and Shiner (2003) reported that 75% of men said gender equity was not a problem compared to 39% of the women. Anderson and Shiner (2001) also found women reported inequity around other issues such as salary, performance expectations, respect from subordinates, and level of management participation.

Sometimes issues of equality (i.e., sameness) and equity (i.e., fairness) are difficult to negotiate when parental roles, work assignment preferences, and home responsibilities remain the primary responsibility of women (Henderson, 1997). Perhaps the goals of organizations in promoting women's careers should focus on fairness more than sameness. Aitchison et al. (1999) suggested that if women were going to enhance their careers, they needed greater recognition and allowance for family commitments, more respect and recognition, more encouragement for personal development, and greater opportunities for informal networking. Aitchison et al. also noted a dominant strategy for many women in leisure management was one of compliance or blending in, and not resistance to the status quo. Therefore, although women reported issues of inequity, ineffective organizational strategies, and issues in balancing career and family/life, Aitchison et al. reported that most women were optimistic about the future.

A silence about gender issues in the 21st century does not necessarily imply success. When "all individuals have access to comparable life, leisure, and employment choices, no need will exist for discussions about equity and inclusion" (Bialeschki & Henderson, 2000, p. 91). Whether this perception of comparability currently existed in the field of parks and recreation was important for our research. The history of women as leaders in the parks and recreation field is long and rich (Henderson, 1992). Although progress has been made in the profession, challenges continue. The women who are currently part of the changing profession may be in a prime position to offer insight that could be helpful to the next generation of young female professionals. Thus, the purpose of this paper was to examine the perceptions of women in the field of recreation and parks regarding their careers and expectations for the future.

Methods

The approach to data analyses was post-positivist, which relates to uncovering meanings from people regarding their multiple interpretations of reality. The traditional positivist paradigm used in the data collection for this study (i.e., the survey used included many close-ended questions as well as open-ended response opportunities) provided useful information regarding the specific factors that

comprised a career development model for these women. However, the qualitative data provided a means for representing the nature and complexity of women's professional experiences. We wanted to present a narrative that balanced theoretical interpretations with a compelling story (Ryan, 2006).

From a post-positivist perspective, we recognized that fixing meanings is not a neutral act and that our own interests and experiences had to be balanced in being reflexive about this topic. For example, two members of our research group had been involved with parks and recreation for over 20 years; one researcher was a working mother; one researcher was male; and one member was from China. In addition, as researchers we recognized and welcomed the value of this research in potentially addressing social change. These characteristics along with the mixed data collected placed this study in the realm of post-positivism.

Data Collection

The qualitative analyses for this study were part of a larger national quantitative study that examined specific dimensions of career development for women who were professional members of the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) in 2010. About 3,700 professional NRPA members were invited to complete the survey on Survey Monkey with 1,214 responses received during the two weeks the link was open for a 33% response rate. This analysis includes only the qualitative data from the study.

Four optional open-ended questions were included at the end of the survey that asked the following:

- How satisfied are you with your job? What is the most important reason you feel this way?
- What have been the greatest challenges/barriers to you as a woman in recreation, and how have you negotiated them?
- What do you think will be the greatest challenges/barriers for the next generation of women in recreation?
- What advice would you give to women entering the field of recreation?

Almost all respondents addressed one or more of these questions, which formed the basis for the narrative data analyses. As an aside, we were pleasantly surprised by the number of responses that seemed to indicate great interest in these questions.

Based on the demographic data collected from the quantitative study, the average age of the respondents was 45 years. The majority were White (92%) as well as college educated (93% with BS/BA or higher). About two-thirds of the respondents were married or living with a partner. Not quite one-third of the women had children under the age of 18 years living in their home. About one-half the women described themselves as in a senior management position in the field of parks and recreation. A little over one-half of the women not in senior management positions said they aspired to be in senior management. About 85% said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their current job. The average yearly salary was in the \$50,000-70,000 range. The focus of employment ranged broadly including parks, general recreation, community service, therapeutic recreation, youth, aging, plan-

ning, and cultural arts with most individuals employed in the public sector. These statistics provide a snapshot of the individuals. However, the open-ended questions were not analyzed related to specific demographic characteristics.

Data Analyses

The open-ended questions were organized and coded using qualitative data management software called MAXQDA. The data were analyzed using qualitative narrative analysis. A narrative occurs when a speaker recounts a biographical story that describes experiences or events from life (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Our narratives were in the form of short written responses (i.e., no limitation was put on the number of words for each response but the range of responses was from about one to 150 words) for each of the questions. A narrative indicates the narrator's point of view including the choice of what is worth telling. Narratives can be shaped and constructed to express emotions, thoughts, and interpretations (Chase, 2005). Our data included all those constructions.

To begin the narrative data analysis, responses from a sampling of the four questions were open-coded independently by each member of the research team and then compared to ensure agreement regarding the open codes. After the research team came to consensus with the sample of open-coded data, each team member coded a portion of the open-ended responses. At least two researchers coded the same data and negotiated any differences of opinion regarding codes. Upon completion of open-coding, the research team met to combine the open codes using MAXQDA and undertook focused coding to sift through and categorize the data (Charmaz, 2006). During this process, the researchers highlighted 10 preliminary topics: (a) education, (b) encouragement/morale, (c) networking, (d) mentoring, (e) passion for the job, (f) strong work ethic, (g) understanding the job, (h) work environment, (i) balance work and family, and (j) advocacy. These topics were later modified by the researchers as the commonalities were examined. Selective coding integrated the topics into themes that portrayed a conceptual framework to understand the perceptions of career development of women in the field of parks and recreation.

Several steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness. The plethora of responses to the open-ended questions led to large quantities of data. Each member of our research team participated in the coding process. We also kept journals regarding the data analysis processes as well as wrote memos about the emerging themes. We came together multiple times during the coding and writing stages to discuss our coding and preliminary models for theorizing about the data. We also included thick descriptions and direct quotes to support conclusions and increase the credibility of the study. We considered negative cases (Henderson, 2006) to ascertain how the themes represented a continuum of perspectives. The outcome of our efforts was the contribution that we hope our study makes to the body of knowledge as well as social change.

Results

Two composite scenarios from the data provided a way to contrast the career development patterns that comprised the themes emerging from this study. We

used combined elements from the responses to illustrate the range of perceptions that were uncovered in the analyses. Consider these stories reflecting two women who had been working in the field of parks and recreation for 10 years:

Ms. Parker is excited as she prepares for the work week. Her position with the local parks and recreation department provides opportunities for her to serve her community and she feels the effort that she and her team put forth makes a difference to program participants. She is challenged by work activities and is able to create new programs that she sees will best fit the community's needs. Today she will leave work early to volunteer at her son's school. Balancing family and work can be tough, but flex time supported by her supervisor helps her to balance her work and personal life.

Ms. Recor heads out for just another day at work. She entered this field out of passion to work with children, but now she does what she needs to draw her paycheck and keep her health benefits. She just put in a long weekend of work, and missed her own daughter's dance recital to see that other people's children had a place to play at the community center. No one thanked her for staying late and keeping the building open longer than required. Her male colleague slipped out a little early to attend a family event. It seemed permissible for him to do that while she felt guilty if she asked to leave early. The apparent double standard was frustrating to her. At this point in her career she was trying to ride out her time, unnoticed and uninspired.

These scenarios represent two women at perhaps two ends of a continuum who were drawn to a recreation and parks career with goals of public service and making a difference in the communities in which they lived. One felt she had successfully balanced family and work while the other viewed her job as little more than a paycheck to support her family. These women entered the field with similar expectations, but due to personal as well as organizational situations had different career experiences. Therefore, we were interested in examining further the diverse perceptions of women regarding their careers and expectations for the future.

A summary of our narrative analysis indicated that many women who worked in the parks and recreation field had strong internal motivations to serve others. We noted that women in the profession had a public service motivation toward others leading them to this career path. In addition, many women had a strong motivation and obligation to be of service and to support their family and significant others. The emphasis on making a difference in the world, whether to community members or one's own family, appeared powerful. However, the demands of a career in parks and recreation sometimes conflicted with demands of family/friends, and created an internal conflict when trying to succeed at both work and other aspects of life. This quandary of "I love my job, but..." was not uncommon for women. However, we were interested in also examining nuances of the field of parks and recreation as it related to women's careers. What brought Ms. Parker

and Ms. Recor to the same career and family choices, but resulted in different perceptions and satisfactions, was examined in our study. The data pointed to four areas of influence regarding perceptions of women's careers in parks and recreation management: public service motivation, motivation and obligation to family, women in the workplace culture, and working in the field of parks and recreation.

Public Service Motivation

The women working in parks and recreation were motivated by serving the public. Respondents showed that they were intrinsically motivated by the work they did as they found the work rewarding regarding the benefits they perceived that parks and recreation provided to their communities. Many participants also noted they had passion for their profession because it was a way to serve others.

Some women responded that they simply liked the "ability to serve others." One respondent noted, "Giving back to the community and offering varied activities give me great satisfaction. There is nothing like standing in a park and watching children and adults interacting in fun activities." Other respondents offered explanations such as "I am able to do what I love and make a difference in my community," and "I feel I make a difference. . . . Improve quality of life aspects. . . . fully love it!!!" Although many women believed that what they did made a difference, one woman reminded us, "I enjoy what I do, enjoy the people I work with, love the community; it is still challenging."

Although many respondents were passionate about the field, some indicated they did not want the challenge of administration (i.e., they were not interested in upward mobility), but instead preferred serving the public directly. For example, one woman explained, "The position I currently have is removed from programming which means it is also removed from interaction with the public. [I] would be more satisfied working more with the public."

Beyond wanting to help the community, many women described their love for the job and wanted to advocate for their area of public service. One respondent gave advice to the next generation by offering, "Know in your heart that this is what you want to do, do it out of love of the job." However, another woman noted, "Make sure it's your passion and not [just] a job." The women who appeared highly motivated about public service talked about advocating for parks and recreation despite the challenges. For example, a respondent said, "I like what I do a lot. However, the current economy does not seem to value recreation so it seems like I am constantly defending my chosen profession."

Respondents often prefaced their comments with "I love my job and what I do, but..." Even though some listed constraints like the "long hours," "politics," "workplace environment," "not equal pay," and "bad economy" as influencing their satisfaction, most women were positive about their contribution to public life. In giving advice to the next generation, many respondents told aspiring professionals to prepare for these challenges. For example, one respondent said she would tell the next generation to "understand the time demands since we often work when others play." Several women explained that to excel and stay motivated for public service, education and experience were vital. One woman stated, "Get your education, but get even MORE [her emphasis] experience." One woman

suggested getting training in “stereotypical men’s knowledge (i.e., learn about the mechanics of trucks, mowers...)” Despite these constraints, most women expressed motivation for their public service opportunities in parks and recreation. They were willing to work hard for what was important to them in their careers, which included both their work and family life.

Family Motivation and Obligations to Family

Along with a strong commitment to their profession, many women also described their desire to have a meaningful family life, which some women thought was highly compatible to their careers in parks and recreation. Not all women had children but those who did offered compelling comments about this aspect of family life. Several women reported that their job satisfaction was the result of their ability to work with children at their jobs (e.g., “I love youth and making a difference in the community”), while some women reported that they enjoyed their positions because it allowed them the flexibility to spend time with their own children. One woman described, “Spending time with my son--I bring him to events whenever possible and now that he is older, he can volunteer.”

Although a career in parks and recreation can be in harmony with family desires, more often women mentioned parenting as it had to be negotiated with their careers. The amount of time and energy required to raise children was perceived as sometimes directly affecting a woman’s ability to advance her professional education, network with others, or do work that required evening, weekend, and/or extra hours. The pressure to balance work life with home life was frequently mentioned as a barrier or challenge.

For some women, having children or a successful career was a dichotomous either/or choice that had social costs. One woman explained:

Children...having them. I don’t think that there is an easy way to hold down a recreation job when you have kids you have to care for. Children and recreation don’t mix when they are your own. I think as a recreation provider, you plan fun for others and do not get to partake in much fun yourself.

Another woman remarked, “I did not know how to take time off work and have a child. I did not have a child.”

A few women advised that family was important and that taking time to raise children was worth the sacrifice of career advancement. One respondent said, “I blew off a career to raise my children.” Another woman said, “I felt that having a child set back my career almost two years due to additional responsibilities and mommy guilt that prevents me from putting in the overtime that one needs to manage effectively.” One woman even emphasized, “Get out if you want to have a family.” Commonly given advice for women for the future, however, was to accept the sacrifices in one’s career that come with putting children first. Delaying or giving up career advancement in favor of taking care of children was the advice that women were most likely to give, rather than vice versa. One woman explained:

Don't give up the family. While being in the top role can be great, it is not worth the satisfaction of having children and family. If something has to give, give up being in the top spot and make the most of where you are at. Enjoy being a parent, for that has long-lasting benefits.

For many women, however, having both a work and a family life was important and possible. Negotiating parenting responsibilities with partners, for example, was discussed. One woman's advice was to "negotiate an equitable split of responsibilities at home with your husband. Don't accept it by default." Several women recognized the value of finding a partner who was willing to share house and childcare responsibilities.

Women who expressed satisfaction with the balance between raising children and their careers often noted that organizational practices (e.g., flexibility in scheduling) contributed to their success. Some women came across as tough on other women who looked for work allowances because of their parenting responsibilities. Having a family did not mean that a woman was less committed but several respondents suggested that each woman had to make her own decisions and that allowances for parenting were not always available, or advisable. One woman explained:

Women will need to decide if a lower salary is a good trade-off for your other personal needs such as flex time, child care, etc. Nonetheless, women will still need to continue to work hard to climb the employment ladder and not expect these positions to be handed over to them because of their gender.

Many women seemed to expect that individual women had to endure the burden of childcare and home responsibilities, but one woman encouraged, "...but press for cultural changes in all the ways you can in order to enjoy your family and still do (and enjoy) your job."

Women in the Workplace Culture

As the previous theme suggested, being a professional woman typically required personal introspection about balancing work and family. Both men and women have to negotiate this balance, but women choosing a career in a traditionally male workplace like parks and recreation seemed to feel particularly sensitive to their "other" career of raising a family. Social norms, although changing, continue to place the responsibility of raising a family predominantly on women. Therefore, many women indicated that they had to negotiate their workplace and organization structure to be successful in meeting both responsibilities. Organizational culture including the influence of organization leadership as well as interaction with co-workers, customers, and policy makers, seemed to guide their perceptions.

The idea of workplace culture was evident by the diverse responses about barriers and discrimination. Some women described organizations that supported flex time to help care for family members and said they had "excellent leaders who

advocated for men and women in the field." Other respondents described organizations or communities made up of the "good old boys" network that had "co-workers who think that women are only to make coffee and make arrangements for meetings."

Interestingly, conflicts among women based on administrative levels were raised such as "higher level women create obstacles for the newer women to move up." In speaking about older women in leadership roles, one woman thought, "They are not only NOT [emphasis hers] advocates for future women, but are much harder on younger women than men." Advice to the next generation of women entering the field included one adamant suggestion:

Stop hurting each other! Women can be like crabs in a bucket; once one begins to get out of the bucket, the other ones grab her and pull her back in again. I would hope that women could get over their low self-esteem, stop gossiping, and aid each other in their jobs...

Gender discrimination coming from men, however, seemed to be a bigger issue in the workplace for many women. Long-time battles of trying to break norms of the female role in the workplace were described. One woman lamented that she was "competing for management jobs when I was always being steered into 'staff' positions instead." In addition to gender, many women identified other targets of discrimination that included age (i.e., being either too young or too old), sexual orientation, and race.

Nevertheless, many women noted the great advances made in the workplace over the past few decades. They indicated hires of women in management positions previously considered above the glass ceiling, and talked about women who were starting in entry- and mid-level level positions as maintenance or sport management personnel, which were traditionally considered "male only" jobs.

Other respondents, unfortunately, indicated that although workplaces had changed, their community residents' views were not always progressive. Societal norms and organizational expectations had not changed quickly. One respondent explained:

As a younger professional, I followed in the footsteps of a man who was very engaging. I had to prove myself over several years before people seemed to accept me, due to their preconceived idea that a recreation director was [had to be] a man.

The role of women in the workplace was explained further in responses offered as advice and encouragement for the next generation of women. Respondents reiterated the challenges of being a professional woman and noted that women sometimes fall prey to their own stereotypes and doubt themselves in a position. Comments such as "stay strong and remember your worth" and "don't give up your career due to current obstacles and discriminating management" were commonly offered. One woman pointed out, "sometimes I think we're [women] our own worst enemy" in relation to feeling personally inferior. These data also illus-

trated the importance of working in parks and recreation, which was not valued as a necessary public service.

Working in Parks and Recreation

In addition to the challenges of the workplace culture, the nature of the recreation field resulted in particular challenges such as working extra hours, over holidays, and during other people's free time. These expectations are often common for any area of public service, but our data seemed to suggest that parks and recreation had some distinct characteristics. Time commitment and time management were repeatedly mentioned. Because of work, many women perceived sacrifice to their personal lives as well as their families. Some respondents mentioned they had to negotiate job opportunities (e.g., whether to take a promotion or accept a different position) based on family needs or priorities.

Several women perceived that limited funding and low budgets within their park and recreation organizations made work more difficult for them than if they had been employed in other fields. Lower budgets often led to the "reduction of programs and operations" and "do[ing] more with less." Some participants noted that fewer jobs were available in parks and recreation at all levels. Further, to fight for funding, some respondents acknowledged that they "have to play the political game with other city or county departments." In parks and recreation, women often perceived that they were continually trying to demonstrate the benefits of their organizations to politicians and city administrators. This necessity for continual advocacy was time consuming and, sometimes, energy draining.

Some women also described discrimination, stereotyping toward women, and lack of networking as more serious in parks and recreation compared to other fields. They believed parks and recreation was viewed as a male-dominated field especially concerning maintenance and sports. One woman described "the perception that women are not 'sports people,' thus cannot run acceptable recreation programs." Some women also noted because of the "the good old boys" network, men often "do not include women colleagues in the decisions." They also noted sometimes they were excluded not only from the informal networks, but also the formal decision-making processes. For example, one woman said, "Men tend to listen to other men that fit their profile." Some respondents indicated that they were not taken seriously or their voices were not heard over men. One participant explained, "Sometimes, I will say something in a large meeting, and then a male will say the exact same thing and be heard and I wasn't. It is as if people just can't hear a good idea in a female voice!" These perceptions may not be unique to parks and recreation but we sense some of the women felt the tradition of the field exacerbated some of the male attitudes.

The importance of networking was emphasized in many of the survey responses (e.g., "network, network, network"), but women often reported feeling excluded. Some women advised overcoming this barrier with hard work, with perseverance, and by learning to be assertive. One woman explained, "A woman needs to think and act like a man in a male-dominated profession. You don't need to be a pig, but you do need to make a conscious effort to fit in a male-oriented circle, including going out for drinks, golfing, etc."

In addition to networking, mentorship was perceived as a key component of work success and was paramount as a recommendation for the next generation of women in parks and recreation. Some respondents noted the lack of available mentors in leadership roles (e.g., "I've been the first female in each of my full-time positions") as a barrier to career development. However, several women suggested that male mentors can be important. One respondent said, "I have been blessed with mentors (mostly men) who have pushed me." The advice most often given was to find "like-minded" mentors. One woman illustrated with her comment:

Find other women/mentors who are understanding and supportive of your personal and professional goals (i.e., if you want to have children, try to find other women who are mothers in your organization that can help you navigate the maternity issues).

Some women described the limited availability of promotion opportunities due to the overall low parks and recreation budgets as well as discrimination in this field. They made statements such as, "park and recreation directors stay in one location for a long time" and "those in the senior level of management never retire." One woman wrote:

The greatest barrier is the male-dominated culture. Time and again hires go to men just like the men in charge. That's why women can't make in-roads—people tend to hire people they feel comfortable with, people just like them—men who went to the same school, like to fish the same streams, call each other by their last names...

Several women described the need to prove their value and advocate for themselves in parks and recreation. Some noted that they had to work harder than men to prove their worth and competency to the organization. Others described how they had to take advantage of professional development opportunities to "gain a broad knowledge in public administration, human resources" so they could be more competitive in the parks and recreation workplace. Conversely, several women noted that the time commitment of their jobs along with family responsibilities made professional development difficult. Although one respondent recommended "there is less time, and less positions in this field, do not select parks and recreation as college degree," most of the women thought the field of parks and recreation was a satisfying and worthy career.

Discussion

The opening examples in the results section described two dichotomous composites for Ms. Parker and Ms. Recor who viewed their park and recreation careers quite differently. Our results showed, however, that a range of perceptions about working in parks and recreation existed for women, and that having a career in this field was complicated. Being a female professional in parks and recreation may be similar to the experiences of women in other fields, and yet, parks and recreation offered some distinct challenges.

We found that most women appeared to enter parks and recreation motivated by the intrinsic desire to help others by “making a difference.” A similar motivation to help others through nurturing a family sometimes conflicted with work motivations, and many women described their efforts to negotiate a work/family/leisure balance, which is necessary for a broadly defined successful career. A career in parks and recreation often was difficult to balance due to the demanding hours (i.e., nights, weekends, holidays) and hierarchical challenges related to advocating for the importance of this profession compared to other areas of public service or private industry.

We theorized based on these data that women’s perceptions regarding their career development appeared on a continuum from largely positive to somewhat negative based on how they negotiated the motivations for service with motivations for family as well as how they facilitated the workplace culture and the distinct area of parks and recreation. Many women described the complementary motivations for public service in parks and recreation and their desire to be a good family member. We concluded that most women were more positive about their careers (i.e., like Ms. Parker) if they were working for agencies with organizational structures that were supportive in reducing the conflict between work and personal life (e.g., flex time, supportive boss, understanding co-workers and community residents, and high regard for the profession). Women such as Ms. Recor wanted to love their jobs, but the barriers presented by organizational constraints and personal circumstances often cast a negative influence on their careers in parks and recreation.

Respondents’ perceptions of their careers and the outlook for future generations of women entering the profession were affected both by internal and external pressures. Pressures included the overlapping internal factors of public service and family, and the external overlapping factors of working in the recreation field and being a woman in the workplace culture. How these factors were negotiated resulted in positive (e.g., Ms. Parker) or negative (e.g., Ms. Recor) outcomes within the organizational structure.

Some of this career negotiation appeared more complicated because of the nature of work in parks and recreation (e.g., work hours). To some extent, the double bind of being a woman and working in a field that requires constant justification and advocacy seemed to put added stress on career balance. We got a sense that to be successful and satisfied with a career in parks and recreation required that women advocate for both themselves and the profession. Women who were the most positive about their jobs had determined that they did not have to choose either work or family, but that ways existed to have both work and family. Much of the negotiation process for women was dependent upon their community and their organization’s culture and structure. Support was found in communities with strong citizen advocacy and appreciation for recreation, in strong organizational leadership that acknowledged the needs of women and families, and in supportive family members that understood the demands of the job.

The patterns and paradoxes that confront many professional women were also similar for the parks and recreation women in our study. Many women perceived they had two full-time jobs in being a worker and a family member (Shapiro

et al., 2008). They also perceived that they sometimes had to choose either work or family. Similar to Tower and Alkadry (2008), some women described the social costs of choosing work over family or vice versa, the drawbacks to a successful work career if family had to be chosen over work. The women seemed to want to resist the traditional career model for men where work is primary over everything else. Many seemed to want to embrace Shapiro et al.'s description of "have-a-life-not-just-a-job" (p. 315). However, many of the women believed it was possible to have both if the organizational culture and structure where they worked supported women-friendly, or even better, family-friendly work policies (e.g., parental leave, flexible scheduling). The professional women in our study were not asking for special favors, but in many ways were expressing that they wanted to have time for family and friends, just as their work was focused on providing opportunities for others to have such a balanced life. Many recognized that they needed to advocate for themselves but also suggested that organizational structures and traditional linear career patterns required reconsideration.

The patterns and paradoxes described by O'Neil et al. (2008) were evident in this research (i.e., women's careers included work and larger life issues such as families, career patterns were varied, and women needed both human and social capital to be successful). The aspect that seemed somewhat different for women in our study compared to others in society was the nuances of the field of parks and recreation. Although not unlike some other public service jobs, the necessity of often working while others play and these women's strong commitment to the value of recreation as a social good in communities complicated their work and personal lives. Not all women were optimistic about the future, but most believed they were in an important profession and change was worth seeking not only for themselves but also for the generation of professional women that would follow. No one's life is simple or easy, but most of these women seemed to recognize that along with the positive elements of working in the parks and recreation profession also came the challenge to improve themselves, their profession, and their communities.

Comparing these results to past research about women in parks and recreation is somewhat difficult given the qualitative nature of our data. Women appear to be relatively satisfied with their careers compared to less satisfaction found by Henderson and Bialeschki (1995) as well as by Aitchison et al. (1999). Nevertheless, the findings suggest that more is yet to be learned about how workplace cultures in parks and recreation might better support women.

Limitations and Future Research

This analysis was part of a larger national quantitative study that examined specific dimensions of career development for women who were professional members of NRPA. Thus, women professionals who were in the field but not members of NRPA were not included. Many of the women were in middle to senior management, which is probably not representative of the thousands of women employed in this field. Therefore, as O'Neil et al. (2008) also noted in their examination of the literature about women and work, the sample was a somewhat elite group of women. Many women are employed in leisure services that may not be in professional or especially management positions.

Another limitation was the nature of the data. Responses were analyzed from

open-ended questions in which the respondents chose to answer or not. Some of the responses were quite short and the inability to probe further was at times frustrating. We were unsure what some of the responses really meant. However, because of the quantity of data and the number of women who took time to write lengthy responses, we believe we had enough meaningful data to draw conclusions and undertake some theorizing.

Although perhaps not a limitation, the economic climate in recent years may have had an influence on perceptions of the women professionals in this study. Many women talked about their frustration toward budget cuts, which impacted program availability, the number of positions, and therefore, their work load.

Despite these limitations, we believe we were able to identify some of the diverse perceptions and perspectives of women working in parks and recreation in the 21st century. Although changes are occurring in society as well as in specific professional fields, the change is often slow in its evolution, which seemed to be true in the study of these women. Some attitudes have changed regarding women in parks and recreation fields, but organizational cultures and structures seem to have lagged. More research is needed in parks and recreation concerning the policies that can make for equitable workplaces. As proponents of positive leisure, it is ironic that parks and recreation professionals have not advocated better for their own life balance.

We recommend continued study to examine organizational cultures and structures that will be family-friendly. Similarly, more research is needed on the role of leadership (e.g., different levels of leadership like mid-level supervisor, agency head, and elected officials) as well as the sources of human and social capital that are available to women in all aspects of their career development. Additional research to expand the sample group to include nonmembers of professional organizations as well as young and entry-level professionals could be insightful. A comparison of results based on geographic region and agency size (i.e., number of employees, budget, population served) may also provide interesting insights regarding dimensions of career development. Finally, examining the career development of men might also be fruitful as men seem to be assuming greater responsibilities for childcare in many families.

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