# A Longitudinal Application of the Theory of Reasoned Action to Women's Career Behavior<sup>1</sup>

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Based on the theory of reasoned action (TRA; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), we hypothesized that young women's career intentions would be predicted by their genderrole attitudes and perceptions of their boyfriends' and parents' career-related preferences for them. Career intention was expected to predict future career behavior. The model was tested using longitudinal data from 105 women studied in 1973 and followed up 14 years later in 1987. Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. Results supported the TRA: women's gender-role attitudes and their perceptions of important others' preferences predicted their career intentions, which predicted career behavior 14 years later. Implications for the study of women's careers and the longitudinal application of the TRA are discussed.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, researchers began to examine the nature of women's career development. Traditional societal norms had dictated an emphasis on marriage and child rearing for young women, but new changes in social attitudes broadened women's role options. Researchers began to find enormous variability in young women's career motivation (Almquist & Angrist, 1971). Why, researchers asked, were some young women more strongly motivated to pursue a career than were others? Why were some young women less interested in a career and more interested in getting married and raising children?

*Career orientation* has often been defined as the centrality of a career in a person's life (Illfelder, 1980) or as the importance a person attaches to a career,

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relative to other sources of life satisfaction, such as family and leisure (Marshall & Wijting, 1982). While most researchers have conceptualized career orientation as a unidimensional construct, others argue for its multidimensionality. Marshall and Wijting (1982), for example, describe career orientation as consisting of two related components, *career centeredness* (a lifestyle in which one's career is regarded as more important and satisfying than other life roles) and *career commitment* (a lifestyle involving continued employment, regardless of competing obligations or financial need). For college-aged women, career orientation is probably best conceptualized as an intention—specifically, the intention either to give one's career high priority or to deemphasize the importance of career pursuits.

Early studies of women's career orientation conceptualized homemaking and career work as an "either/or" choice. More recently, researchers have examined the nature and degree of women's career orientation as a continuous, rather than dichotomous variable (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). In other words, women are no longer described as career oriented versus homemaking oriented, but rather as varying along a continuum of career orientation. This approach better acknowledges that most women plan to marry and have children, but vary in their plans to pursue a career.

### Predictors of Career Orientation

An important line of work has been to identify factors that predict which women will be strongly career oriented and which women will not. One major predictor of young women's career orientation is their gender-role attitudes; that is, their beliefs about appropriate behavior for women and men. Consistently, research finds that young women who express nontraditional attitudes toward women's roles tend to be career oriented (Keith, 1988; Komarovsky, 1982; Morinaga, Frieze, & Ferligoj, 1993; Tinsley & Faunce, 1980). An illustrative study by Parsons, Frieze, and Ruble (1978) found that among college women in the early 1970s, beliefs in equal rights for women strongly predicted level of career aspiration. In more recent work, Fassinger (1985, 1990) found that nontraditional gender-role attitudes predicted high levels of career orientation in college women. It is worth noting that findings from studies like these converge, despite the use of widely different measures for gender-role attitudes and career orientation. For example, Yanico (1981) found that young women's gender-role attitudes, as assessed by the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (Spence & Helmreich, 1972), were significantly related to their career orientation, as measured by the proportion of words women devoted to work versus home-family themes in written fantasies about the future.

A second major predictor of career orientation is the influence of important people in a woman's life. Career-oriented women report more achievementrelated encouragement and support from family members, teachers, and significant others of the opposite gender than do less career-oriented women (Stake & Levitz, 1979). Mothers are an important influence on their daughters' career orientation; daughters of employed mothers are more career oriented than are daughters of homemakers (Altman & Grossman, 1977; Bielby & Bielby, 1984). In addition, daughters of mothers with positive attitudes toward their own employment (Ridgeway, 1978) or toward combining work and marriage (Baruch, 1972; Parsons et al., 1978) are more career oriented. Evidence for fathers' influence has also accumulated. For example, Ridgeway found that young women who believed that their fathers disapproved of the traditional homemaking role or held mixed views were more career oriented than were women who believed that their fathers approved of the traditional homemaking role or held mixed views were more career oriented than were women who believed that their fathers approved of the traditional homemaking role. In her test of a model of career motivation, Farmer (1985) found that parental support was an important predictor of young women's career commitment.

Boyfriends may also influence young women's career orientations. A study by Edwards (1969) found no association between career-oriented women's values and the perceived values of their boyfriends. However, Almquist and Angrist (1971) found that career-oriented women had boyfriends who fostered their career plans, whereas less career-oriented women were dating men who supported traditional roles for women. Parsons et al. (1978) found that women who believed that their male peers held more positive attitudes toward careers for women were more career oriented themselves. The central role of romantic relationships in the lives of college women suggests that young women's career aspirations may be influenced by their boyfriends (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990).

In summary, previous research has identified two important predictors of young women's career orientation: gender-role attitudes and the support of important others. Obviously, these are not the only variables associated with women's career orientations. However, they represent an individual variable and an environmental/ social variable—two classes of variables important for understanding women's career-related choices (Betz, 1993). A limitation of most previous work on women's career development is that it suffers from a lack of unifying theories (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). Only recently have women's career researchers (e.g., Fassinger, 1985, 1990) begun to integrate existing research findings into testable, theory-based models of women's career orientations.

### Career Orientation and Career Behavior

Do women's career orientations influence their actual behavior? A few longitudinal studies have demonstrated that career orientation is a significant predictor of a woman's subsequent career behavior. Research by Rexroat and Shehan (1984) illustrates this point. In their study, a sample of 533 White

women, aged 22 to 24, were asked in 1968 whether they planned to be employed or to be at home caring for their family when they were 35. These women were followed up in 1980, when they were between 34 and 36 years of age. Overall, there was a significant association between career orientation and work behavior 12 years later ( $\beta = .54$ , p < .001). A high percentage (73%) of women who had planned to be working at age 35 realized their plans. However, the pattern of association between intention and behavior was affected by the general historical trend during the 1970s leading many women to enter the paid labor force. Among the women who had planned to be at home raising a family, 57% were actually employed or seeking employment when they were followed up (Rexroat & Shehan, 1984).

In another study of 64 women, Almquist, Angrist, and Mickelsen (1980) examined young women's career and family aspirations in 1968, when the women were college seniors, and their achievements in these areas 7 years later in 1975. Of 31 women high in career orientation while in college, about half (16) were leading what Almquist et al. described as *careerist* lifestyles at the time of follow-up, indicating consistency between young women's early aspirations and later behavior.

In a longitudinal study of nearly 1,800 women, Bielby and Bielby (1984) assessed women's career orientations 1 year after college in 1962 and measured their work behavior 6 years later in 1968. These researchers found a modest, yet significant relationship between women's career orientations and their subsequent work behavior. However, the presence of young children most strongly predicted whether women were working in the years following college graduation. Women with young children were much less likely to be employed at the 1968 follow-up.

These longitudinal studies suggest significant continuity between young women's career-related intentions and their career behavior years later. In these studies, discontinuities stemmed from women's responses to the demands of raising young children and historical changes in women's paid laborforce involvement. These studies represent important first steps in understanding the relationship between career orientation and behavior. Yet, they are limited in several ways. First, with the exception of Rexroat and Shehan's (1984) study, these studies involve a relatively short time frame for follow-up assessment of women's career behavior. By definition, career development is a longterm process. As Almquist et al. (1980) point out, "seven years after college graduation is too soon to predict the final patterns these women's lives will take" (p. 383). Second, these studies initially assessed women's career orientations in the 1960s. It would be useful to see if similar patterns are found in a more recent cohort of women. Finally, these studies are largely descriptive. Like most research on women's career development, they lack a theoretical



*Figure 1*. Fishbein and Ajzen's theory of reasoned action applied to women's career behavior.

framework. Given these limitations, an important research direction for the study of women's careers is to develop models that help integrate findings and specify testable hypotheses (Mednick & Thomas, 1993).

The Theory of Reasoned Action and Women's Careers

The theory of reasoned action (TRA; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) offers a general theoretical model of behavior that can be readily applied to this domain. The goal of the TRA is to predict an individual's behavior, and it has been successfully applied to the prediction of a wide variety of behaviors, such as contraceptive use, blood donation, voting, churchgoing, and energy conservation (Sheppard, Hartwick, & Warshaw, 1988). As presented in Figure 1, the theory posits that a person's intention to perform or not to perform a behavior is the immediate determinant of that behavior. Two factors determine this behavioral intention. First are the person's attitudes toward the behavior; specifically, a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of performing the behavior. Second are subjective norms, referring to a person's perceptions of social pressure to perform or not perform the behavior. Subjective norms reflect a person's perceptions of how important others think he or she should behave. These perceptions may or may not accurately reflect what important others actually think. Ajzen and Fishbein propose that these two factors, attitudes and subjective norms, are related. Their relative weights in predicting intention may vary, depending on the individual and the behavior.

As applied to women's careers, the TRA would propose that women's own attitudes toward having a career and their beliefs about important others should predict their career-related intentions (i.e., career orientations) and their later career behavior. To date, only one study has tested the TRA in the domain of women's work. Sperber, Fishbein, and Ajzen (1980) used the theory to predict women's career orientations, which they conceptualized as behavioral intentions. In their study, a sample of female high-school students read two short sketches. One described Jane, a career-oriented woman, and the other, Mary, a homemaking-oriented woman. To assess their attitudes about homemaking and career pursuits, participants rated how positively they felt about "having a future like [Jane or Mary]." Participants' reports of whether important people in their lives (e.g., parents, boyfriends, teachers, school counselors) thought they ought to have a future like Jane's or Mary's represented subjective norms. Finally, to assess career orientation, participants completed the statement "I intend to have a future like . . ." with Mary and Jane at opposite ends of a scale. These measures are consistent with Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) typical operationalizations of attitudes, subjective norms, and intention.

Sperber et al. (1980) found support for the hypothesis that career attitudes and subjective norms predict career orientation (i.e., intention). Unfortunately, those researchers were unable to assess the actual career behavior of these young women later in life. A logical next step would be to apply the TRA to the prediction not only of career orientation, but also actual career behavior.

The present study extends previous research on women's careers in several ways. First, it examines influences on women's career orientations and the association between career orientation and career behavior 14 years later. Second, this study tests a theoretical model, based on the TRA, that specifies hypothesized relationships among important predictors of career orientation and career behavior. Third, the current research uses structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the model. Women's career researchers have urged use of SEM to test integrative models and to explore the interrelationships of model variables simultaneously (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Fassinger, 1985; Mednick & Thomas, 1993).

### Method

The present study is based on a subsample of women who participated in the Boston Couples Study, a longitudinal investigation begun by Zick Rubin, Letitia Anne Peplau, and Charles T. Hill. In this larger project, dating couples were recruited from four colleges in the Boston area. When the research began in 1972, at least one partner in each couple was a college undergraduate (for details of recruitment, see Hill, Rubin, Peplau, & Willard, 1979). Analyses in this report are based on questionnaire responses obtained from 105 women<sup>3</sup> who participated in the longitudinal study both in 1973 (called Time 1 here) and 1987 (called Time 2 here).

#### **Participants**

In 1973, 88% of the women in this subsample were attending college or graduate school. Of those in school, 15% were freshmen or sophomores, 43% were juniors, 40% were seniors, and 2% were graduate students. The 12% of women not attending school at Time 1 were recruited through boyfriends who were college students. The majority of these women had completed some college or were college graduates. The women ranged in age from 19 to 28 years, with a mean of 21 years. Virtually all women (98%) were White. In summary, our sample involved White, middle-class, college-educated women who were initially recruited as part of a heterosexual, dating couple.

In 1973, more than one third of the women (39%) planned to pursue graduate or professional education, 34% were undecided, and 27% said they did not plan to pursue graduate studies. Nearly all of the women (91%) expected to marry within the next 10 years. Similarly, the vast majority of women (89%) stated that they would like to have one or more children in the future. On average, the desired number of children was two.

In 1987, when these women were an average age of 35, 94% had received college degrees and 70% had pursued at least some graduate work: 32% had master's level degrees and 11% had doctoral level degrees. Most women (72%) were currently married, and 60% had children or stepchildren. The average number of children was two.

#### Measures

Measures of career orientation (intention), gender-role attitudes, and subjective norms were constructed from items in the Time 1 (1973) questionnaire. Assessment of career behavior 14 years later was based on data from the Time 2 (1987) follow-up.

Intention. At Time 1, career orientation or intention was assessed with an item adapted from an earlier measure of career orientation by Almquist and Angrist (1969). Participants were asked "Fifteen years from now, what would you like

<sup>3</sup>The possibility of response bias due to attrition was investigated by comparing those women eligible for the present study with those women ineligible because they failed to complete the 1987 follow-up (n = 34). These groups did not significantly differ in their responses to the 1973 measures used in the present study.

to be?" They ranked, from 1 to 4 (with 1 representing their first choice, etc.), the following categories: housewife, housewife with a part-time job, married career woman, and single career woman. Each participant's first choice was used to create a new variable representing the woman's career orientation, ranging from high  $(1 = single \ career \ woman)$  to low (4 = housewife).

Attitudes. Gender-role attitudes were measured using a 10-item Sex-Role Traditionalism Scale (Peplau, Hill, & Rubin, 1993). This scale assesses the extent to which participants agree or disagree (-3 = strongly disagree to +3 = strongly agree) with statements such as: "In marriage, the husband should take the lead in decision-making." Half of the items were recoded so that high scores on the scale items always reflected more traditional gender-role attitudes. The Traditionalism Scale is reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = .86 for this sample). In a different study of college women, it strongly correlated (r = .86) with the short form of the Spence and Helmreich (1972) Attitudes Toward Women Scale (Peplau et al., 1993), for which high scores reflect nontraditional attitudes. The women in our sample had a mean score of -1.4 (SD = 1.2) on the Sex-Role Traditionalism Scale, reflecting mild disagreement with traditional gender-role beliefs. The women's scores on the Traditionalism Scale ranged from -3 to +2, indicating adequate variability for our analyses.

For the purpose of SEM, the scale items were randomly divided to form three indicators of gender-role attitudes.<sup>4</sup> These three indicators, Attitude 1, Attitude 2, and Attitude 3, contained three, four, and three items, respectively. Given past research, we expected women's gender-role attitudes to predict their career orientations. Our measure of attitudes, however, differed from Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) recommendation that, for optimal prediction of behavior, measures of attitudes, subjective norms, and intention should correspond exactly to the behavior in question. This correspondence means that measures should refer to the same actor, time frame, and context. For example, if we were interested in predicting whether a woman will "take a vacation this summer," our attitude measure ideally would assess how she feels about "her taking a vacation this summer" (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). In the present study, we used a gender-role attitude measure because an attitude measure reflecting specific career-related beliefs was not available.

Subjective norms. Questions about the woman's perception of the career preferences of her mother, father, and boyfriend were used as indicators of subjective norms. (These items may best be viewed as normative beliefs, or a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>This method of dividing items from a unidimensional scale represents a legitimate way of creating multiple indicators of a latent variable (Bentler & Wu, 1993). Three indicators of the latent variable gender-role attitudes were used in order to have a roughly equal number of items for each indicator.

woman's perceptions of important others' wishes regarding her performance of a behavior. According to the theory, normative beliefs and one's motivation to comply with such beliefs combine to predict subjective norms. Measures of motivation to comply were not available.) Each participant ranked separately her mother's and father's preferences for her, using the four response categories described earlier. Each woman also ranked her boyfriend's personal preferences for being single, married to a career woman, married to a housewife with a part-time job, or married to a full-time housewife. To create measures of subjective norms parallel to those of the woman's intentions, the first-choice preferences of mothers, fathers, and boyfriends were used to create three subjective norm variables, respectively, each ranging from 1 (single career woman) to 4 (housewife).

Behavior. To assess actual career behavior, a measure was developed from two items in the 1987 questionnaire, a closed-ended question about current marital status and an open-ended question asking "What is your current career?" Responses to these two questions were used to classify women's behavior on a 4-point scale parallel to the measures of intention and subjective norms. To test the reliability of the career-behavior coding procedure, the senior author and a trained research assistant coded all responses. Reliability was calculated as the number of cases coded identically by the two coders divided by the total number of cases coded. Reliability for coding career behavior was .96, indicating nearly complete agreement between the two raters. The senior author's coding of career behavior data was used in the analyses.

#### Results

#### Model Testing Procedures

In order to test the hypothesized relationships among constructs and evaluate the theoretical model, we used SEM with latent variables. The EQS computer program (Bentler, 1995) was used for the calculation of maximum likelihood parameter estimates.<sup>5</sup> There are several advantages to the SEM method with latent variables over multiple regression path-analytic techniques. First, latent variables are more reliable measures than are observed variables because measurement error is estimated and removed (Ullman, 1996). Second, SEM methods easily allow the user to examine models with multiple dependent variables. Third, these methods permit estimation of goodness of fit for an entire model.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>The maximum likelihood method of parameter estimation assumes that the data are multivariate normal. This assumption was supported by Mardia's coefficient of multivariate kurtosis (normalized estimate of Mardia's coefficient = 2.39).

In the present study, attitudes and subjective norms were conceptualized as latent variables (i.e., latent factors). Latent variables are hypothesized to represent underlying, unobserved constructs which generate participants' responses to observed (i.e., measured) variables or indicators (Bentler, 1995; Bollen, 1989). For example, the latent variable *gender-role attitudes* presumably underlies a person's responses to specific gender-role attitude questions. In this study, career orientation (intention) and behavior were not treated as latent variables because multiple indicators of these constructs did not exist in the data sets.

### Testing the TRA Model

A first step in testing the TRA model was to inspect the zero-order correlations among the eight measured (i.e., observed) variables representing the key constructs. The correlations presented in Table 1 are consistent with the empirical literature on women's careers, as well as the TRA's predicted relationships among variables. All three indicators of gender-role attitudes were positively and significantly correlated with career orientation (rs = .38 to .46, all ps < .01). Moreover, the three indicators of subjective norms were positively and significantly associated with career orientation (rs = .40 to .49, all ps < .01). Also consistent with the women's career literature and the TRA, women's career orientation was positively related to career behavior (r = .30, p < .01). This intention-behavior correlation is especially noteworthy because of the 14-year time interval between measurement of career orientation (1973) and career behavior (1987).

SEM was used to evaluate how well the TRA model depicted in Figure 1 fit our data. A goodness-of-fit test, reported as a chi-square statistic, indicates how well the sample variance–covariance matrix is reproduced as a function of the parameter estimates of the hypothesized model. In other words, goodnessof-fit tests, such as chi square, indicate how well the model fits the data. An obtained chi square with a probability level greater than a standard cut-off, such as a probability value of .05, indicates adequate fit. In contrast, a statistically significant chi-square value implies rejection of the model. Since the chisquare statistic is sensitive to sample size and our sample is relatively small, we also report results of three adjunct indicators of model fit: the Bentler and Bonett (1980) normed fit index (NFI), the Bentler and Bonett (1980) nonnormed fit index (NNFI), and the Bentler (1990) comparative fit index (CFI). All indicators can range from 0 to about 1, with values of .90 or greater reflecting good model fit (Bentler, 1995).

Before evaluating overall model fit, we examined the adequacy of the two latent variables---attitudes and subjective norms---included in the model. As

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Variable	1	2	3	4	5	9	٢	8	М	SD
Gender-role attitudes										
1. Attitude 1	1								-1.39	1.42
2. Attitude 2	.73**								-1.65	1.50
3. Attitude 3	.67**	.66**	Ì						-1.05	1.49
Subjective norms										
4. Mother's preference	.35**	.41**	.37**	1					2.87	0.84
5. Father's preference	.33**	.40**	.39**	.59**	Į				2.64	0.89
6. Boyfriend's preference	.38**	.28**	.39**	.44**	.34**				2.73	0.76
7. Career orientation (intention)	.38**	.45**	.46**	.40**	.49**	.46**			2.30	0.69
8. Career behavior	.28**	.27**	.25*	.31**	.23*	.31**	.30**		2.18	1.03

Intercorrelations and Descriptive Statistics of Measured Variables

Table 1

Note. N = 105. \*p < .05, two-tailed. \*\*p < .01, two-tailed.



*Figure 2*. Results for model based on theory of reasoned action. Circles represent latent variables; boxes depict observed or measured variables. Large single-headed arrows reflect regression paths or factor loadings; small single-headed arrows represent residual variance. Double-headed arrow symbolizes correlation between variables.  $\chi^2(18, N = 105) = 28.71$ , p = .05, NFI = .91, NNFI = .94, CFI = .96.  $\dagger p = .06$ , one-tailed. \*\*\*p < .001, one-tailed.

shown in Figure 2, three observed variables were hypothesized to reflect the latent variable attitudes. Similarly, three other observed variables (mother's preference, father's preference, and boyfriend's preference) were predicted to indicate the latent variable subjective norms. These hypotheses were supported by significant factor loadings. The statistical significance of the factor loadings was determined by univariate z tests on unstandardized coefficients (Bentler, 1995). All loadings were significant beyond the .001 level, indicating reliable indicators.

Results, presented in Figure 2, indicate that the TRA model provided a good fit to the data. Several statistical tests demonstrated the adequacy of the TRA model. The chi-square value,  $\chi^2(18, N = 105) = 28.71$ , p = .05, for the model was marginally significant, indicating statistical rejection of the model. However, the three other fit indexes (NFI = .91, NNFI = .94, CFI = .96) suggested that model fit was very good. Structural models are also evaluated by how much variance they explain in dependent variables, such as intention and behavior in the present study. Overall, the TRA model explained 42% of the variance in career orientation and 9% of the variance in career behavior 14 years later.

Four theory-based predictions were tested. In these analyses, the statistical significance of the path coefficients was determined by univariate z tests on

unstandardized coefficients (Bentler, 1995), and all significance tests reported are one tailed. Three of four theory-based predictions were confirmed. First, attitudes and subjective norms were positively related to each other (r = .62, p < .001). Second, subjective norms were significantly related to behavioral intention (standardized coefficient = .50, p < .001). Third, intention (i.e., career orientation) measured in 1973 was a significant predictor of career behavior 14 years later (standardized coefficient = .30, p < .001).

Only one predicted relationship was not supported: the univariate z test of the attitude-intention path coefficient was marginally significant (standardized coefficient = .20, p = .06). The Wald test (Bentler, 1995) indicated that this marginally significant path could be dropped from the model. We tested a revised model without this path and found that the modification did not lead to a significant degradation of model fit,  $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1, N = 105) = 2.06$ , ns. For these data, the path from attitude to intention was not essential to the model.

An assertion of the TRA is that attitudes and subjective norms do not influence future behavior directly. Instead, they are expected to affect behavior only indirectly via behavioral intention. Variables that account for the association between the predictor(s) and the criterion are called *mediating variables* (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The intention variable in the TRA is a good example of a mediator.

In our test of the TRA model (Figure 2), we found some support for the role of intention (career orientation) as a mediator. A univariate z test of the indirect effect of subjective norms on behavior was significant (z = 2.45, p < .01), indicating that the effect of subjective norms on behavior was mediated by intention. Not surprisingly, given a marginally significant path between attitudes and intention, the indirect effect of attitudes on behavior was marginally significant (z = 1.42, p = .08).

#### Discussion

Our longitudinal test of the TRA as it applies to women's career behavior was generally successful. The model based on the theory, with no modifications, fit the data well. We found that young women's perceptions of careerrelated social pressures and, to a marginal degree, gender-role attitudes, were significantly related to their career orientation. Remarkably, women's career orientations while in college directly predicted career behavior 14 years later. Results of this study contribute to the growing body of research on women's career development, as well as the empirical literature on the TRA.

Past studies of women's careers have demonstrated a relationship between young women's gender-role attitudes and their career orientations (see Betz,

1993, for a review). The significant positive correlations between the indicators of gender-role attitudes and the career orientation measure shown in Table 1 support this idea. Furthermore, the SEM analyses examined the independent effects of gender-role attitudes on career orientation, controlling for shared variance between attitudes and perceived social pressures. In the model we tested, young women's gender-role attitudes were marginally related to their career orientations. Limitations to our measures, such as a lack of correspondence between the attitude and intention measures, may have influenced this result.

Our findings demonstrate that important others influence young women's career decision making. In our sample, young women's perceptions of their boyfriends' preferences for combining marriage and career were related directly to their own preferences. It is important to note that the direction of influence between young women and their boyfriends cannot be determined from our analyses. Perhaps young women's career-related preferences change over time as they are influenced by relationship partners. Or, the observed relationship between young women's and boyfriends' preferences may not be a function of social influence. Instead, women initially may "select" boyfriends whose attitudes and values match their own. Further research is needed to test these competing explanations. Our study also highlights the importance of young women's perceptions of their parents' attitudes: Parental preferences were related to young women's own career intentions. Parental support, encouragement, and expectations, especially as perceived by daughters, can influence career aspirations. Future studies might profitably explore the influence of a wider range of important others in a woman's social network, such as friends, teachers, siblings, or other family members.

This longitudinal study suggests that young women's career-related plans may be fairly stable over time. We demonstrated a link between women's career aspirations while in college and their career behavior 14 years later. The college years may represent a critical time in which women formulate their career-related intentions. These early intentions may influence the priority women assign to a career later in life.

Our findings have implications for the TRA. Previous tests of this theory across different domains have led some researchers to conclude that the TRA predicts behavior even when researchers overstep boundary conditions originally proposed for the model (Harrison, Thompson, & Rodgers, 1985; Sheppard et al., 1988). We found some support for this idea. For example, Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) stated that in order for the TRA to predict behavior successfully, intention must be measured close in time to behavior. Over long time intervals, they argue, intentions may change and thereby be less predictive of behavior. However, some intentions are less likely to change over time than are others. Our study, as well as those of others (Bielby & Bielby, 1984; Rexroat & Shehan, 1984), suggests that women's career-related intentions may be quite stable over time. In another longitudinal test of the TRA, Harrison et al. (1985) found evidence for the stability of high-school students' intentions to pursue higher education over a 15-year time interval. Taken together, these studies suggest that, for relatively stable intentions, the TRA may have merit for longitudinal prediction of behavior. It is important for future research to examine the stability of behavioral intentions within this domain and others, and to provide further longitudinal tests of the theory.

Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) also have suggested that the TRA works best when the measures of predictor variables correspond closely to the behavior of interest. In the present study, measures of subjective norms and career intention met this condition: All referred to preferences for combining work and marriage 15 years in the future. As expected, subjective norms were a significant predictor of career intention. In contrast, our measure of attitudes reflected general beliefs about gender roles and did not correspond closely to the other measures. Perhaps as a result, we found that attitudes were only marginally predictive of career orientation. Sperber et al.'s (1980) study provides further support for the possibility that the nature of our attitude measure diminished its predictive power. In that study, career-related attitudes corresponded closely to the measure of career intention, and attitudes were a significant predictor of intention.

Some limitations of this study should be noted. Most of the psychological research on women's career aspirations has focused on White, middle-class college students (Mednick & Thomas, 1993). The present study is no exception. Findings for this sample may not generalize to women from different ethnic groups, lesbian women, or women who were not in a dating relationship while in college. Also, the women in our sample were in college during the early 1970s, a time of growing support for the feminist movement. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a major influx of women into the American work force. The impact of these historical changes on our findings is unknown. Clearly, findings for the TRA model we tested should be replicated in other samples before firm conclusions may be drawn.

In summary, the present study contributes to knowledge about women's careers in three ways. First, we have demonstrated the importance of longitudinal studies for documenting how women's career aspirations and behavior unfold over time. It is clear that women's career intentions in early adulthood significantly predict their career behavior many years later. Second, we have illustrated the usefulness of applying existing social psychological theory, such as the TRA, to the study of women's careers. Third, we have shown the value of sophisticated methodologies such as SEM in enabling women's career researchers to develop and evaluate integrative, multivariate models.

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