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Anderson, Mary Christine

GENDER, CLASS, AND CULTURE: WOMEN SECRETARIAL AND CLERICAL WORKERS IN THE UNITED STATES, 1925-1955. (VOLUMES I AND II)

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GENDER, CLASS, AND CULTURE: 
WOMEN SECRETARIAL AND CLERICAL WORKERS IN THE UNITED STATES, 1925-1955 
VOLUME I 

DISSERTATION 

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for 
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate 
School of The Ohio State University 

By 

Mary Christine Anderson, A.B., M.A. 

***** 

The Ohio State University 
1986 

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Leila J. Rupp 
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To
Sarah Agnes Eschbach Anderson
and
Sarah Ellen Yerian

because women's history should
be written with our
mothers and daughters in mind
I have been enormously fortunate to have had so many fine teachers. Leila Rupp has been an ideal adviser. She was generous with both time and encouragement. An astute critic, she also gave me the freedom to explore my own ideas. Warren Van Tine not only asked incisive questions but also offered a great deal of help and encouragement. K. Austin Kerr contributed thoughtful and constructive suggestions with collegiality. Roy Wortman, my undergraduate adviser, encouraged me to become a historian because of his combination of intellectual integrity and personal warmth.

Writing is often difficult, but research is almost always a pleasure. Mine was made more enjoyable by the kind staffs of the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College, the Western Historical Manuscript Collection at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, the National Archives, the Cincinnati Historical Society, and the Ohio State University Library.

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INTRODUCTION

When I announced to friends and acquaintances that I proposed to write a dissertation examining the historical realities of feminized office work in the second quarter of the twentieth century, I immediately encountered a series of deeply held but largely untested beliefs about women's work in offices. I was told that secretaries "run the office," that their intimate knowledge of the interior workings of bureaucratic organizations and their skills in manipulating the informal relations of the white-collar world gave them hidden sources of power. But others told me that women in the office did not understand the larger purposes of the organizations in which they worked, that they lacked the ambition and competitiveness to move upward in the impersonal hierarchies of business and the professions. As a former paralegal and administrative assistant--jobs different from secretarial work primarily in title and, sometimes, the presence of a dictating machine rather than a typewriter on the desk--I was inclined to accept the first view. I believed when I began this project and continue to believe that failure to recognize the significance of women's contributions to the work of the office blinds outsiders to the very real skills exercised by women in low-level office jobs as well as to the material and social hardships secretaries and clerical workers experience day by day. Yet neither
set of beliefs is more than prejudice or stereotype unless it can be substantiated by concrete examination of individual experiences, economic conditions, and change and continuity over time.

But even to attempt a social historical investigation of feminized office work in the twentieth century required sources that would reveal with particularity the experiences of women office workers. My purposes were influenced by the "new social history" that has directed our attention toward the so-called "ordinary" people of the past and toward the private and informal aspects of everyday life. Because so few of our foremothers and forefathers left qualitative, literary evidence of their daily lives, the new social history has been called the history of the inarticulate and has, of necessity, relied heavily on quantifiable sources. But office workers are by definition literate, and the growth of social scientific and government inquiry into group behavior left behind a huge body of qualitative evidence about twentieth-century office work and office workers, especially the surviving questionnaires and interviewers' reports collected for surveys of women workers. Rather than the absence of sources that I had anticipated, I was overwhelmed by detailed information from private and government studies of women workers and their employers as well as detailed prescriptive advice from management experts about the organization of office work. Adrift in a sea of facts, it was often difficult to detect historical patterns. Given that office work has been the largest and fastest growing female occupation in the twentieth century, it is not surprising that the evidence was confusing and sometimes
contradictory. Slowly, however, complex patterns did begin to emerge from the welter of details.

I do not pretend to be able to provide a total or even completely unified explanation of feminized office work for the three decades from 1925 to 1955. Instead, I have tried to outline the conditions of women's work in offices; to suggest the ideology and economic interests that motivated employers, management experts, and government policy; and to offer some interpretive questions about the values, strategies, and struggles of the women who confronted "women's place" in the office. At most, the evidence establishes some tentative linkages between the structure of power in the office and women's response to conditions as they found them and between paid work and family in the lives of women office workers. Most of all, my intent is to be fair and honest about the historical experience of the women workers whose productive labor was a necessary component of the administration of capitalist enterprise, provided the emotional and economic resources that held their families together, and humanized the impersonal institutions of twentieth-century American life. My fundamental premise is that these women were conscious historical actors who had reasons of their own for acting as they did. Whenever possible, I have sought to find their concrete, individual interpretations of their experiences and to convey their analyses of their situation in their own words.

A great deal of fine scholarship on feminized office work already exists. Cindy S. Aron's sensitive examination of the economic imperatives that pushed some middle-class, white women into employment
in federal offices in the late nineteenth century traces the gradual shift in attitudes among those women workers as they gained a sense of accomplishment from their experience in the public sphere. Elyce J. Rotella has traced the expansion and changing composition of the female paid labor force in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, stressing the growth of feminized occupations in the tertiary sector that she argues accompanied the mechanization and routinization of low-level white-collar work. Focusing on the same theme, Margery W. Davies' study of office work in the same period argues that the feminization of office work was a process of proletarianization in which employers used the tools of scientific management to rob the new female work force of the skill and knowledge that nineteenth-century male clerks had exercised. Sociologists Roslyn L. Feldberg and Evelyn Nakano Glenn have also centered their investigations of women office workers on the issue of proletarianization and workers' loss of control of the work process, although they see the application of computer technology to office work since the 1960s as a turning point in this process. More recently, in detailed studies of sex-segregated occupations, Louise Lamphere, Cynthia B. Costello, Patricia Zavella, and Sallie Westwood have discovered a distinct "women's work culture" in which women workers resist inequality and loss of control by bringing the values and rituals of domesticity into the workplace.

The literature is, however, divided: one strand emphasizes the formal structures of managerial control, while the other concentrates on women workers' responses to conditions and the importance of sex
roles. Moreover, there is a striking chronological gap in our understanding of women's work in the office. Without examining the middle years of the twentieth century, it is not possible to trace changes over time either in employment policies and management practices that affected women in white-collar employment or the ways that women's employment as office workers shaped the social relations of the workplace, family relationships, or their own attitudes. When and to what extent has feminized office work become proletarianized? How has the definition of low-level office work as "women's work" influenced the organization and social environment of the office? How have women themselves interpreted and expressed their interests? In what ways has the acceptance of wage earning among middle-class, white women, especially married women, changed the family and women's position within it?

In the years between 1925 and the mid-1950s, a subtle transformation occurred in both the female office work force and managerial thinking. By the 1920s, some low-level white-collar occupations—secretarial work, typing, filing, and stenography—were clearly sex-typed as appropriate for women, and young, white, single women were being hired to fill these jobs. Until World War II, the supply of this preferred work force surpassed demand. At the same time, a vigorous program of scientific office management was being promoted by "experts" who promised that direct control of low-level office work could be achieved through the same techniques that had been applied to factory work. By the early twenties, two organizations, the Office Management Section of the American
Management Association and the National Office Management Association, were meeting regularly to discuss programs that would rationalize, routinize, and measure production in the office. Although resistance from employers, mid-level managers, and workers frustrated their grandiose schemes, the scientific managers did develop a cohesive justification for management authority and a panoply of techniques for controlling the work process. When, during the forties and fifties, the demand for women workers for feminized office jobs exceeded the supply of young, single, white women, the management community, joined by government policy makers and reinforced by traditional forms of employer discrimination, cooperated in plans to draw older, married, and black women into the white-collar work force without disrupting the sexual and racial hierarchy of office work. For women workers, the shift meant new opportunities in paid employment and at the same time a continuation of the low pay and lack of upward mobility that they had always faced. They responded by developing patterns of intermittent and part-time paid employment that allowed them to integrate their private and public experiences, acting out their own values and priorities within the restrictive institutions of feminized employment and the family.

The first part of this study examines scientific management programs, employer practices, and government policies relating to women in feminized white-collar occupations. The focal point of this chronological sketch is the scientific office management movement as it appeared in the presentations and discussion at the annual meetings of the Office Management Section of the American Management
Association. Within the OMS, members gave detailed reports of their progress and discussed their plans for the future with candor. On the basis of their statements, no one would question that these were self-conscious advocates of scientific management engaged in a concerted effort to assert direct, formal control over the work process in the office and the behavior of the office work force. Yet by their own admission, their plans for imposing systematic control over low-level white-collar work were not widely adopted. In large part this was because, although the occupations that would be most drastically reorganized if scientific management were implemented were feminized, the impersonal methods of scientific management were incompatible with gender as an ideal that defined women according to their personal relationships to particular men.

Despite its failure to achieve a thorough reorganization of office work, scientific office management is a useful lens through which to view the conditions of feminized office work because when it is contrasted to actual practices in the office revealed by employer responses to surveys, it becomes possible to document the slow pace of proletarianization and to pinpoint the sources of resistance to impersonal forms of control. In combination, both sources illustrate that despite the disparity between theory and practice, the entire business community shared the assumption that women were and would remain subordinate to men in both the paid labor market and social relationships. When the federal government addressed the inadequate supply of women workers available for white-collar employment in the forties and fifties, its policies reflected similar assumptions. As a
set of social attitudes, gender inhibited the implementation of
scientific management, but it was also a source of informal control
that provided special rewards to individual men in the office. Gender
distinctions were also cost effective since the belief that women's
primary roles and responsibilities were domestic allowed employers to
obtain a skilled labor force at low wages.

The second part of the manuscript consists of topical essays that
attempt to reconstruct the daily lives of women office workers. The
first of these uses the records of YWCA activities in two cities to
illustrate the communities single white-collar women built outside of
the workplace. The next two chapters draw on the raw data from
surveys of women office workers to delineate the economic
responsibilities of single and married women, showing the personal
costs of middle-class women's unequal position in the sex-segregated
labor market as well as the family networks of mutual assistance among
women. The final two chapters examine women's office work culture and
argue that informal personal relationships in the office encouraged
women in feminized occupations to develop and act upon an autonomous
definition of their interests as women and as workers. Two themes
connect these investigations of women's experiences and their
interpretations of them. One theme is the historical continuity of
socially prescribed female gender roles, which were at once a source
of separate female values and priorities and also the root of
ambivalence and the subordination of women's interests. The other
theme became apparent to me only toward the end of this project. This
is the existence of an elaborate web of relationships, communities, of
women in clubs, boarding houses, extended family networks, and the office workplace. In light of women's own descriptions of their options and decisions, it now seems to me that to an extraordinary extent these mainstream, twentieth-century, white women depended on their ties to the female community for both psychic and material survival.

The central force in defining the contours of feminized office work in the second quarter of the twentieth century was gender, both as a cultural ideal of womanhood and as the value system women extrapolated from their historical experience. But the significance of gender in mitigating the managerial drive for systematic control of white-collar work and in encouraging women to maintain separate values should not divert attention from the hard fact of discrimination. One advantage of qualitative evidence is that it reveals so clearly that hiring, firing, wages, and the conditions of work did place women on an unequal footing with men and that the women who experienced the sexual discrimination of feminized office work were aware of and deeply resented the disadvantages of their position. In and out of the workplace, they employed informal tactics based on personal relationships to retain autonomy on the job and preserve their communities of family and friends. Their desire for equality took the form of visible resistance and militance only rarely because they were searching for ways to reconcile equality and community.
ENDNOTES


INTRODUCTION TO PART ONE

The four chapters in Part One examine the organization and management of women's work in offices from the 1920s through the mid-1950s, focusing on the scientific office management movement in order to trace its chronological development. From the end of World War I through the post-World War II period, propagandists for impersonal, systematic managerial control of white-collar work experimented with and tried to win acceptance for their ideas. This self-conscious elite was confronted with powerful resistance to their objectives from mid-level managers and women workers as well as with economic, social, and political realities that subverted the impersonal methods they advocated. Gender, the system of social distinctions between the sexes, was probably the most important reason for their failure. Gender created a system of informal power for men in the office and provided women with limited chances for social autonomy and control over their work. Gender was also a rationale for paying low wages to women in feminized occupations and for using their gender-specific skills in the office. The proponents of scientific office management found it difficult to supplant the informal relations that offered employers of women office workers an inexpensive labor force and power and prestige. Moreover, recurring economic and political crises during these years placed new
demands on management plans for the office. The scientific managers tried to adapt their programs to meet new needs, not always successfully.

Chapter one investigates scientific office management in the 1920s. By this time a flow-blown program, comparable to scientific management in industry was being touted for office work. The office factory would deskill office work, making it routine, repetitious, and subject to supervision and direct control. The reasons for employer rejection of these policies reveal the system of personal power and relationships that accompanied gender specific skills into the office in the context of a labor surplus. A case study of dictation and transcription shows the tactics of mid-level managerial resistance to technological innovations that would have enhanced direct, impersonal control over white-collar work. Secretarial work, with its inherent personal relationship between the woman secretary and her boss, was the form of female labor in the office most inconsistent with impersonal managerial control. The elaborate plans for making the secretary's work amenable to managerial control highlight the transfer of nineteenth-century definitions of female gender roles into the office. While direct control of this branch of female office labor was incompatible with so-called "scientific" methods of office management, tracing the ideological contradictions of the effort to reconcile the two points up the personal power of men and the discrimination against women in the office as well as the limited autonomy and control secretaries were able to reserve under the office gender system.
The Great Depression of the thirties, created intense concern among employers and managers about the cost of white-collar work. Chapter two begins with a look at cost-cutting measures among office employers during the Depression. The cost reduction efforts of employers illustrate the new problems confronting the scientific office management movement. Having defined "efficiency" as control, scientific management was often an expensive, unwieldy approach to managing white-collar work. Given the continuing abundance of women available to work in offices at low wages and in the absence of equal promotional ladders for men and women, gender proved to be cost-effective and continued to supply a convenient rationale for fluid rather than systematic forms of control in the office. Because of their fear of class conflict, scientific office management propagandists took note of and tried to apply the human relations model of management to the office during the Depression. Although no more widely adopted than the factory model of managerial control, human relations was a system of manipulation that purported to humanize the workplace and attempted to make use of workers' knowledge and skills, and it was a potentially powerful tactic for robbing workers of control.

Chapter three examines the office during the abrupt economic changes that accompanied World War II. For the first time, there was a shortage of young, single white women for feminized office work, and older, married, and black women entered office work in significant numbers. The Second World War also witnessed the first federal government attention to women in office work. Policy makers and
management experts were overlapping groups with similar interests. Both groups worried about social stability, although in contrast to the Depression, gender rather than class was the issue. Advances for married, older, and black women and upward mobility into supervisory positions for some women, were limited and temporary. Both management literature and government propaganda illustrated discriminatory patterns that characterized efforts to anticipate and plan for stability after the war. Social stability was not the only issue that drew management experts' attention during the war. The expansion of size of public and private offices increased the volume of paperwork and created complex systems that might take on a life of their own, giving some workers new opportunities to manipulate systems to their own advantage.

Chapter four indicates that social concerns about women's roles intensified in the decade after the war, as the demand for women office workers continued to swell and more married women became permanent workers. Administrative growth and the defense imperatives of perpetual partial mobilization against Communism prompted an ideological debate in which management experts and government officials searched for a solution that justified women's growing role in the office work force without disturbing their roles as wives and mothers. By the mid-fifties business and government leaders had developed the idea of "womanpower." Similar to the World War II justification of women's paid employment as patriotism, the womanpower argument stressed women workers' contributions to their families and the national economy rather than women's interests.
But at the same time that stability was achieved on an intellectual level, the scientific management movement was showing signs of dissolving. It was no longer a unified program, although various experts stressed particular strains in managerial thinking that had been germinating since the twenties. The office factory received new attention because computer technology seemed to promise renewed hope for regimentation. Other experts, however, argued for simplification rather than system in order to constrain white-collar workers’ ability to manipulate complex bureaucracies. The human relations model also received some attention and was integrated into popular social scientific stereotypes about women’s sexuality and motherhood. Although these techniques provided possible avenues of control, they had not replaced informal, personal relations in the office, and the splintering of the movement was signaled by humorous critiques from within.

This chronological survey suggests that the managerial drive for control of the white-collar work process did not proceed at a uniform pace because those who own and directed modern business enterprises had several, not always compatible, sets of interests. Their desire for formal control must be seen in relation to their interest in cutting costs to improve profits as well as the benefits they derived from traditional gender relations. The failure of scientific office management as a movement can then be seen as a result of these other countervailing pressures. On the one hand, this allowed women in the office to retain limited control over the work process and the social relations of the workplace. On the other hand, however, employer and
Managerial interests combined to place women in an economically and socially subordinate position in the white-collar work force.
CHAPTER ONE

SCIENTIFIC MANAGEMENT AND SECRETARIAL WORK IN THE 1920S

Even ten years ago a capable stenographer was really understudy to some particular individual of standing in the larger corporations and grasped a knowledge of the business and later had a prospect of working into either an executive position or acting as confidential secretary to the officials due to her knowledge of the business. One has but to glance into the "stenographic departments" of this [sic] same corporations today. Efficiency—perhaps, but in what way differing from clean factory work and with just about as much prospect of a future.

Response to Survey of Women Secretaries Bureau of Vocational Information, 1925

Introduction

By the 1920s, women composed almost half of the clerical work force in the United States, and a number of occupations on the lower rungs of the white-collar hierarchy had become sex-typed as "women's work." Typing, stenography, and secretarial work—jobs that required similar, easily transferable skills—were already highly feminized by the twenties. Since the end of the Civil War, but at an accelerated pace in the early decades of this century, expanding sales and record-keeping functions, as well as growing government involvement in the economy, caused the office to increase in size and complexity. Faced with these circumstances, some American business leaders had begun to seek new methods to organize and control production in the office. Self-consciously imitating Frederick Winslow Taylor's program
of scientific management, the advocates of scientific office management proposed to reorganize office work according to a factory model of production.

The nineteenth-century office was an all-male enclave where, according to some historians, an employer maintained informal personal relations with the members of his small work force, each of whom had the opportunity to rise within the firm as he gained knowledge and experience by performing a variety of tasks on an ad hoc basis. The newly-stratified office hierarchy of the twentieth century confined women workers permanently to low-level jobs with little hope of advancement. The introduction of office machinery—not only the typewriter, but also machines for dictating, calculating, bookkeeping, and mailing operations—opened the door to the subdivision of work in the office.

Under these new conditions, the self-proclaimed apostles of office "Taylorism" advanced a program of "efficiency" to standardize, centralize, and further mechanize office operations. Meeting together in the Office Management Section of the American Management Association and the National Association of Office Managers (later the National Office Management Association), the new office management experts publicized their experimental efforts to apply Taylor's scientific management techniques to the white-collar organization. "Scientific" methods of control could only be achieved at the expense of workers' skill, versatility, and autonomy. The skilled clerk of the nineteenth century whose knowledge and personal relationship with his employer offered him mobility, would have to be replaced by new
workers, usually women, who performed routine, repetitive tasks. Under "scientific" programs, centralized management would plan and direct the work to be done, devising efficient, uniform methods. Thus deskill clerical work could be measured for speed and accuracy and controlled by strict supervision. The new management experts also tried to enhance direct, impersonal control over work in the office by developing new techniques of regulating and recording the flow of paperwork within the office, instituting bonus and incentive plans, and experimenting with tests of clerical skills and even with psychological testing. It was no wonder, then, that in the 1920s, many astute observers, including the experienced secretary quoted above, believed that the office was well on its way to becoming a factory.5

But despite these visible trends away from the informal practices and personal relations of the premodern office, employers never wholly adopted a program to rationalize office procedures. Since scientific office management was based on an analogy between factory work and office work, it did not account for the special conditions of the white-collar workplace. Relations between managers and workers were more complex in the office than in the factory. All levels of office personnel performed interrelated tasks and participated in a single social network. When employers or executives introduced systems for rationalizing and routinizing work in the office, they risked the possibility that they, too, would have to conform to the demands of the new systems. Deeply-held beliefs about class and gender relations, as well as about race and ethnicity, also mediated programs
for streamlining white-collar production. Because they were reluctant
to threaten the class and gender prerogatives of men in the middle and
upper levels of the office organization, employers found it difficult
to institute programs and policies that might erode the informal
controls which men had traditionally exercised in the office
workplace.

Powerful beliefs about women's roles also constrained managers' efforts to impose impersonal standards of efficiency on women in
feminized office jobs. Accepted notions about the place of women in society and the belief that women's wages were relatively unimportant
to themselves or their families reinforced the policy of placing women
in low-paying, routine clerical positions, but the sex-typing of office jobs that accompanied the sex-segregation of the office work
force did not always enhance managers' ability to supervise and
control women workers. Gender-specific skills and behavior such as
decence, personal loyalty, nurturing, and "feminine" appearance,
which became prerequisites for many women's jobs in the office, were
not susceptible to direct supervision and control through scientific
management. Managers themselves confronted an internal inconsistency
in their thinking. Replacing traditional forms of control with
systematic, impersonal regulation created the potential of undermining
the rationale for male domination in society as a whole, as well as in
the office. Unable to come to grips with this conundrum, managers
continually confused the qualities of a good woman worker with those
of a good woman.
Employer policies and practices and their effects on women workers must be placed in their historical context. Changes in the size and composition of the white-collar labor force and in the organization of office work occurred within a framework created by changing economic conditions and established class and gender relationships. These circumstances placed women office workers in an ambiguous position. The expansion of office work gave women access to paid, white-collar employment, but employer hiring practices reflected class, ethnic, and racial differences among women as well as the subordinate position of women in American society as a whole. And while employers' traditional ideological commitments were efficient in the sense that they supported social stability and made use of women's new technical skills as well as their emotional labor at low cost, they were incompatible with the scientific managers' definition of efficiency as an impersonal, systematic plan for control of work.

Because employers adopted 'scientific' control only gradually, many office workers, unlike industrial workers, continued to exercise their own discretion over the pace and methods of their work. The unwillingness of employers to replace informal, personal relations with systematic measurement and supervision, combined with the segregation of women office workers in sex-typed jobs, encouraged employers to rely on traditional gender roles as a means to control female employees. On the one hand this allowed women workers to use personal relationships and gender-specific skills to exert power indirectly over their working conditions. On the other hand, however, the perpetuation of traditional gender roles in the office prohibited
women from rising to positions of authority or achieving economic equality with men in the white-collar workplace.

The Office Factory

By the twenties the self-conscious publicists for scientific office management had articulated the broad outlines of their program, but American businessmen remained skeptical and implemented their program cautiously. No one was more aware of employers' reluctance to apply scientific management to office work than the proponents of the system. The members of the OMS regularly discussed the problem at their meetings in the twenties and thirties. At the 1925 OMS meeting, F. L. Rowland, the manager of the personnel and planning department of the Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, expressed discouragement because employers had made so little effort to systematize their supervision of office workers:

We of the office will readily concede, I believe, that viewed from the standards which Scientific Management has attained in the factory, the office has made relatively little progress. We have hit some high points here and there and have attempted to apply some of the more spectacular procedures which have worked out successfully in the factory, such as time and motion studies, without having prepared a foundation.

Because so many office jobs were not routine or mechanical, employers often found it impossible to set standards or pay office workers on a production basis.

The lack of systematization in office work led Rowland to conclude glumly that "the difficulties in so many institutions seem to be insurmountable at the present time." In 1937, twelve years later, I. O. Royse, manager of office production for the Ralston Purina
Company, admitted that he could not discern any trend toward more systematic organization of the office or office workers:

Changes are taking place in some individual companies, but I question if there are any really significant or outstanding trends which will apply universally to small, medium-sized, and large offices. I am sure that many small offices—and large ones, too—are operated today in almost exactly the same manner as they were ten or fifteen years ago. I am also certain that in some companies there have been important changes. What the net result on average has been, or will be, I do not know, and I doubt that anyone does. Some businesses instituted successful programs of scientific management during the interwar years, but they were isolated examples. The advocates of the "scientific" approach did not succeed in establishing their methods as the pattern for office practice and organization.

Surveys of employers actually showed very few efforts to apply centralization, standardization, measurement or systematic personnel policies to the office. Firms that did experiment with scientific office management practices usually confined their efforts to small segments of the office work force. In 1925, the OMS Research Committee on Measuring Office Output sent questionnaires to 250 businesses, requesting information about their experiences with measuring office work. Measurement was a crucial ingredient of the drive to assert managerial control over the work process, and the entire scientific management program, whether in industry or office work, depended on management's ability to subdivide work into routine components that workers could repeat over and over without thinking or understanding. Having "scientifically" determined the "one best way"
to perform these routine tasks, usually through time and motion studies, management could tell workers how to do their jobs and measure their performance by presumably objective criteria. In the factory, this complex formula often degenerated into a simple and exploitive piece rate. The 1925 OMS survey suggests, however, that in the white-collar workplace even the tactics of routinization, subdivision, and repetition were slow to be tried.

There were only 79 replies received. Thirty-nine reported that they had no system whatever for measuring their output; 15 reported that they were measuring office output but were not paying on that basis; 25 reported that they measure the output of their clerical force and likewise paid some portion of their force on that basis.

Lillian Gilbreth, the best-known member of the committee and a leader in the field of time and motion studies, argued that "those who did not report had not attempted anything of this sort," probably because office work was so complex and varied that managers had difficulty defining the precise "units to measure." Of the twenty-five companies that did try to pay clerical workers according to production, the proportion of the work force involved was generally very small. According to the committee's report, "The straight piece work basis has met, apparently, with very little approval, only one company reporting that they used the straight piece work basis." That company, the Canadian National Railway, employed 10,000 clerical workers, but only eighteen male billing clerks were paid by piece rate, although the company did measure the work of a "large number" of clerks in hopes of increasing production. Despite the obvious regimentation in this large organization, it seems clear that
management was less concerned with scientific methods than with immediate results, reporting that it did "not know exactly where their standards for the system came from for that basis of payment; but they are satisfied it is a success." The other companies that tied wages to output paid workers a bonus for production over a certain level, but here, too, relatively few workers actually felt the impact of the system—twenty-one of the companies used a bonus system for between four and fifteen percent of clerical workers, and only three firms applied the system to between one-fifth and one-third of their clerical employees.\textsuperscript{10}

In general, the OMS found that the popular perception that employers routinely used the methods of scientific management, such as measuring production or paying on the basis of output, did not reflect reality. The committee's secretary explained,

\begin{quote}
It may throw some light on the present status of the measuring of office output if I said that a great many of the rumors that we heard were exaggerated. We heard a rumor, for instance— in fact, I was told very definitely, that Sears Roebuck was doing a lot on the bonus plan. "You must get in touch with them." A letter to them brought the reply that they were paying a very few people, who were Edison [dictating machine] operators, on the bonus plan for payment. That was almost universally the result with rumors abroad generally as to the bonus plan.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

A Women's Bureau study conducted in the early thirties indicated that Sears Roebuck had made little progress in the application of measurement or basing wages on production since the mid-twenties. Although the clerical work of a large mail order house included many routine, monotonous jobs, the company had made scant effort to use the tools of scientific management to extend control over the work process. It did evaluate some jobs on a "quasi-measurement basis,"
but the Women's Bureau interviewer did not record that any workers were paid on a bonus or piece rate plan. The bonus plan for dictating machine operators had either failed or had held little initial importance for management, and, despite the many typists, stenographers, and correspondents employed by the firm, there had been no move to mechanize or centralize dictation and transcription. Sears Roebuck had only fourteen dictating machines, a small increase from the "six or seven" which had been introduced in 1920, and the interviewer reported that dictating machines "are not generally installed. . . . [They are] not considered of any significance by the firm. If [an] executive desires a dictating machine [he] may have one but [they are] not part of any centralized stenographic division or management scheme."12

Even employers who were committed to streamlining office procedures and exercising more direct supervision over their white-collar work force faced ambiguities unknown in the factory setting. For instance, in the 1920s, one insurance company executive recalled,

I remember with six section heads, I sat through an entire afternoon trying to find out whether a certain job was routine or not. We were totally unsuccessful. Every man went away with the same opinion as to whether the job he had come to discuss was routine or not.13

It was not always easy to define routine clerical work—repetitive tasks might include special cases or long-range consequences which did not fit into standardized plans for work organization or evaluation. Because the content of office work varied, employers found it difficult to standardize procedures for supervision or measurement.
Such apparently simple skills as spelling, vocabulary, and punctuation defied measurement because of the peculiar structure of office work. In 1939 an executive in the Atlantic Refining Company told the OMS that his firm had devised tests in these subjects, but he could not tell "whether they are worth the paper upon which they are printed." Supervisors' ratings of secretaries were useless because there was no way to ensure that they were uniform. Standardized grading was little better because grammar, punctuation, and spelling depended not only on the supervisor's own usage but also on his own attention to detail. "For instance, some supervisors dictate their own punctuation, use good English, and even spell out the more difficult words. Even a below-average stenographer will probably turn out good work under such conditions." "Undoubtedly," this manager concluded, "there are methods which could be devised for rating our secretaries with reasonable accuracy but, at least in our organization, it is impracticable to put these methods to use." In order to develop a uniform system of measuring the mechanical aspects of secretarial work, the firm would have had to replace the supervisor's individual habits with standard procedure, and this management was unwilling to do.

Even the advocates of scientific office management agreed that they could not extend their program of systematic control to complex jobs which required workers to exercise their judgment and initiative. The factory model of organization applied only to repetitive, mechanical tasks, where employers could control the flow of work and measure accuracy and the level of production easily. But the
organization of office work differed markedly from factory operations. In a factory organization the factors of material and machinery have a much greater significance than in an office organization, where clerical activities predominate. In the latter type of organization the mental factor is by far of greater importance—machinery and material being of secondary consideration. In a factory organization the machinery generally sets the pace—or at least, is in a position to do so—while in the office the individual in the main controls this factor.15

The demands of business as well as individual decisions often determined the quantity and content of office work, and in these areas management had only limited control. Under these conditions, employers relied on skilled workers who had sufficient knowledge of company operations to make decisions and vary the pace of their work to meet changing demands, and employers were reluctant to subject these workers to routine and supervision.

The Female Labor Supply

In the long run, technological factors and work content influenced the organization of office work and policies affecting office workers less than social relations and belief systems. The modern office had not become an impersonal bureaucracy, and the feminization of many office jobs did not necessarily make it easier for employers to use the tools of scientific management in the office. Instead, the presence of women workers reinforced the importance of informal relations and emphasized employers' adherence to the class and gender systems.

Employers saw a pliable female labor force as a substitute for the standardization and formal controls of scientific office
management. They could strengthen their informal social control of the office by hiring young women who would accept the particular methods and social organization of their employer’s business. And in the twenties and thirties, with large pool of educated, white women available for office work, employers could afford to choose women workers on the basis of age and adaptability. An executive in an Atlanta oil refining company, for example, stated that his firm “prefer[s] young high school girls trained by [an office] machine company—they adapt themselves better than women with experience in other firms. . . . [Y]oung girls without experience get on to the ‘system’ very well.” Other white-collar employers during this period expressed a preference for young women for secretarial positions “because their minds are more open and the men want to train them themselves,” and because “[m]en all ask for younger girls. They are more pliable, [and they] can be broken in more easily, and are apt to stay longer, especially since they have not contracted the habit of changing jobs.” A Philadelphia publisher made it a policy not to hire older, experienced women because young women accepted the company’s methods and worked for lower wages: “Older women are set in their ways and if they are good workers should command good salaries.” Even firms that desired a degree of maturity in their secretaries and stenographers might refuse to hire “older” women over thirty-five because they seemed “less adaptable and able to fit in with a new employer.” The exaggerated emphasis on youth was even more evident in the hiring policy of a large manufacturing concern, which hired inexperienced young women for routine jobs and stenographers
between the ages of twenty-three and twenty-five but refused to hire "any older than 28 because they seem to have lost their vim at their age."\textsuperscript{19}

Employment agencies tried to meet the demand for women workers who could adapt to existing social relations in the office. The head of one employment agency said, "Employers always ask for personality. What they really mean is adaptability, i.e., that her [the worker's] personality be attractive to them." Agency personnel were well aware that employers evaluated potential female employees according to socially defined characteristics, although reliance on gender-specific qualities could lead employers to mistaken judgements about a worker's ability. "In securing positions," said one employment agent,

appearance is very important. An employer will call up and say that he does not care about appearance, but will inevitably select the best looking girl of the group sent to him regardless of her skill and general ability. After she is on in the job it is production that counts, the quality and quantity of her work, her reliability.\textsuperscript{20}

Class and ethnicity played an important role in defining contemporary standards of femininity, and many employers preferred to hire women who matched the white, native-born, middle-class ideal. One interviewer reported the opinion of the head of an employment agency specializing in finding women for office work that appearance is "100\% important before all other qualifications. She says," the interviewer continued, "the type they require are the white-skinned girls with thin streight [sic] mouth. The prettier they are the better their chances."\textsuperscript{21} Choosing women workers on the basis of their ability to meet cultural definitions of femininity allowed employers to enhance
their own status but it had little to do with the impersonal ideal of efficiency being promulgated in the scientific management community.

But while the benefits of applying ideals based on gender undercut scientific management's emphasis on measurable performance, employers and managers alike reflected racial and ethnic prejudice based on their fear that black women, "unassimilated" immigrant women, as well as older or married, white women would disrupt the social environment of the office. Race prejudice was so ingrained among white Americans that black women were totally excluded from employment in white offices before the Second World War, a fact so accepted that most studies of white-collar work in the twenties and thirties failed even to mention it.22 Employment policies based on the religion and ethnicity of white women were less uniform, but many firms were reluctant to hire Jewish or Catholic women or women of Southern or Eastern European descent.

Sometimes application forms required information about the religious and ethnic background of prospective employees, but other employers were more discreet. For instance the personnel director of a construction company secretly marked application blanks with a special symbol if he suspected that a job applicant was Jewish and admitted to an interviewer that the firm would hire only women who were "intelligent high school graduates of a family, not Jewish." Employers apparently believed that Jewish, Catholic, and immigrant women were less likely than native-born, Protestant women to meet accepted class and gender prescriptions. One engineering firm, for example, admitted in a survey that it did
not take Jews or Catholics. Positively never employ Jews, and very rarely Catholics. Interested in lady-like dignified girls. They always tell the agencies they do not want "chewing gum" type. Insist on modest dress.

Another large white-collar company applied similar class and gender standards to potential women employees, hiring on the basis of personality, appearance, neatness, and cleanliness:

[T]hey refuse to hire flappers. Are looking for the wholesome sort of girl with good home training and background. . . . Excessive cosmetics most objectionable. . . . [Hire only] Americans--are those who are most thoroughly Americanized. Have some Italians--i.e., of Italian descent.23

When hiring office workers, employers scrutinized the ethnicity and class orientation of both men and women. If the local pool of available labor made it difficult for employers to find "Americans" for white-collar work, a scientifically-managed company might, as Cheney Brothers did, institute a program to foster values supportive of the dominant culture:

They are in a district where there are a great many foreigners, and they have a great deal of difficulty in getting foreigners to be naturalized. So citizenship increases the bonus; owning property in the district increases the basic wage and likewise the bonus.24

Whether or not they were influenced by the popular attention to scientific office management, employers wanted a tractable office work force.

In the case of women workers, gender could mediate the importance of class, race, or ethnicity. Employers were especially interested in the personality and adaptability of women workers both because women had to adjust to the personal idiosyncrasies of their supervisors and because women had only limited opportunities to advance in the
white-collar organization. Thus employers occasionally reversed their usual hiring patterns in order to obtain a pliable female labor force. One Philadelphia publishing house hired women who were "quite young and still living with their parents because they 'have less board to pay when living at home, have more to spend on other things, and are therefore more satisfied.'" The employment officer of this firm discriminated in favor of Catholic women, saying, "Catholic girls though not so efficient are more willing to take instruction and stay longer." 25

Plans for "scientific" job classification and salary standardization in the office met with overt opposition from employers who felt that systematization would erode their personal power. In his 1937 report summarizing trends in office management, Royse was forced to conclude that employers were unlikely to adopt such programs because of "the feeling among those who approve salary adjustments that such a procedure is too mechanical and does not permit them to exercise their personal judgment, which we know is influenced to a considerable extent by the personalities of employees." 26 Studies made by the Bureau of Vocational Information and the Women's Bureau in the twenties and thirties supported Royse's conclusion that employers and supervisors continued to evaluate their personnel on the basis of personal judgements rather than uniform standards. This practice held special significance for women office workers. Gender, unlike other social characteristics, appealed to employers because it ensured personal loyalty and service to individual men in the office. The personalism fostered by traditional gender roles in the white-collar
workplace was at its root incompatible with the impersonal, systematic control advocated by the scientific office management movement.

From the moment a woman entered the office work force, social considerations colored her employer's perception of her abilities, and her personal qualities might well be more important than her skills. For example, the office supervisor of a large insurance company told an investigator with the Bureau of Vocational Information that he would hire only women who had "pleasing personalities." His decisions were purely personal, and a "pleasing personality" appeared to bear no relation to an applicant's capacity to perform office work. The interviewer said that the supervisor "couldn't (or wouldn't) define it,--said he could barely tell himself--just knew when he did or didn't like someone." Another office manager in the same study told the interviewer that "she could tell by looking at someone whether she was proficient in her work or not, and that she gave no tests at any time." Some employers made similar statements to the Women's Bureau staff in the early 1930s. One employer stated that he required only that women employees be "young and good looking," while another hired solely on the basis of "morals and education." The emphasis on personality, appearance, and morals enhanced the individual employer or supervisor's power by allowing him to judge women workers according to his own idiosyncratic opinions. While this was not efficient, in the long run it was probably as effective as plans for impersonal systematic hiring simply because there was an oversupply of well-educated women whose skills and abilities far exceeded what they were paid.
Personnel Systems and Personal Power

Class as well as gender created special conditions in the office which were unaccounted for by Taylorism as it was practiced in the industrial setting. While the scientific management of factory operations depended on removing authority from the foreman and substituting standards and methods developed by a central planning department, in large offices, department managers, whose position was equivalent to the factory foreman's, maintained much of their authority over subordinates. In part, this was a result of the different organizational and class structures of the office and the factory. The men charged with implementing scientific management techniques—office managers, planners, and personnel directors—were white-collar workers who occupied a class position superior to the blue-collar foreman but essentially equal to the department head or intermediate supervisor in the office. Given this set of class relations, department heads in the office had greater scope to resist "scientific" procedures which jeopardized their power. Members of the OMS discussed this problem frequently and recommended that office managers and personnel directors circumvent it by "selling" their program to supervisors in the office.29

In reality, however, this approach had limited success, and in the office, scientific managers were forced to make other concessions. When large firms hired clerical workers, for instance, the personnel department often did only a preliminary screening of potential employees, allowing a department head to select employees for his
department from a group of candidates. If none of the applicants suited his personal preferences, he might request that another batch of candidates be sent to him. The tactics of supervisory resistance to the impersonal hiring schemes were almost by definition informal because they aimed to subvert formal management directives. But department supervisors in one state's government devised a strategy that was discovered and thus stopped by the state civil service commission. The civil service commission required that department heads choose their personal secretaries from among the three stenographers currently at the top of the civil service list. Unless a department supervisor could show that all three candidates were unqualified for the work, he had to accept one as his secretary. Few department heads used this procedure, however, because as one of the commissioners explained to the Bureau of Vocational Information, "an easier way for him to do [sic] is to employ one of the three and then to discharge her during the probationary period and thuse [sic] to secure a new list." Once the commission was alerted to this practice, it began to crack down on employers who tried to "work down the list to secure some favorite who may chance to be sixth or seventh."  

Private employers usually allowed department heads more discretion. In 1932, an official of the Cleveland Trust Company told a meeting of the OMS that department managers in his bank had so much power to exercise their personal judgment in hiring and evaluating clerical workers that the personnel department sometimes hid personal information about employees that it considered to be "of a really trivial nature," such as religion or a "matrimonial adventure."
Rather than trying to curb the supervisor's personal prejudices, management had found that "there is little harm in withholding some minor points that might cause a manager, of unusual temperament, to make a mountain out of a molehill." The office manager continued,

Not long ago we had a young lady in the office on a certain filing job, not requiring a great deal of experience. The young woman was perfectly capable in our estimation. It developed that she had been married and divorced because of some peculiar action of her husband, and was supporting a child three years of age. We felt knowing the manager of that department, who had certain peculiar viewpoints, that there was no need of calling attention to this one point which might cause the head of that department to feel that the woman would be distracted from the work and not do the job she should, where in reality she might work harder because of the responsibility on her shoulders.\(^\text{32}\)

Both the personnel department and the department head evaluated the woman worker's situation on the basis of her personal life and her adherence to a strict code of moral conduct that might not have been applied to a male employee. Equally interesting, however, is the fact that the office manager was unwilling to curtail the department manager's authority over the employees in his bailiwick or to challenge his power directly.

**Dictation and Transcription: A case study of the effects of class and gender on scientific methods of office management**

Dictation and transcription provide an enlightening example of the problems scientific management experts encountered when they confronted class and gender ideologies in the office. As stenography and secretarial work had become sex-typed women's work, a dutiful young woman taking shorthand dictation from her boss had become an
object of conspicuous consumption for white-collar men. "It is just human nature," argued a banking executive in the mid-twenties, "for a man to prefer to have a young lady alongside his desk." But during the 1910s, mechanical recording devices became a potential substitute for the physical presence of a secretary or stenographer. For scientific office managers, the available technology appeared to be a useful tool in their plans to routinize office production.

From an economic standpoint, it was clearly more efficient for executives to record dictation mechanically so that messengers could collect the completed recordings and deliver them to a central "steno pool" where a supervisor could distribute work evenly among a number of typists. Under this system, employers could replace skilled secretaries with routine stenographers and typists whose work was easily measured and supervised. Many women workers, of course, objected to the loss of control and variety which followed rationalization, but workers complained at their own risk because the abundant supply of young, educated, white women seeking office work in the twenties and thirties allowed employers to hire more compliant workers in their stead. In some instances, worker resistance was so intense that a complete turnover of stenographic personnel accompanied the mechanization and centralization of dictation and transcription. Interestingly enough, however, some women appreciated the new system because it relieved them of the sometimes unpleasant and petty demands of an individual boss.

But whatever the reaction of workers, it was resistance from middle-level executives that stymied efforts to mechanize and
rationalize dictation and transcription. Resistance to new technology in the workplace is not an uncommon phenomenon; many businessmen, for example, refused to accept the typewriter when it was first introduced in the late nineteenth century. But in the case of the dictating machine, the reasons for hostility to technological innovation reveal the power struggle within the office over the issue of new, impersonal, centralized forms of managerial control and traditional, personal, gender-based sources of power and benefits for men already existing in the office. 37

Men in the middle and upper levels of the office hierarchy saw the disappearance of a private secretary or stenographer as a challenge to their status and quite correctly understood that they as well as women workers would be subject to the discipline of the new system. Because completed cylinders or recordings had to be ready for scheduled pick-ups, executives could no longer dictate one or two letters whenever they desired. And the impersonal steno pool left them without a sympathetic secretary or stenographer who would correct and polish their prose or retype a letter or report at the last minute in order to make minor changes in style or content. The introduction of dictating machines remained a controversial issue until World War II. Despite the many men applying for white-collar jobs in the thirties, office managers frequently retreated in the face of objections from men in the intermediate and upper levels of management to the rationalization of dictation and transcription.

At the end of the twenties, in a survey of women's work in offices done in 1930 and 1931, the Women's Bureau found that 141 (46%...
of the 309 firms asked about this topic did not use dictating machines, although by this time both the technology and methods of mechanical dictation and central transcription were well enough developed to result in significant savings in the office. Of the remaining firms, which had at least some dictating machines on their premises, only twenty-three stated definitely that they had centralized stenographic pools or transcription departments, and fifty-one companies (30% of those with machines) made statements indicating that their use of machines bore little resemblance to the centralization and systematization associated with scientific management. Employers' explanations for their policies are enlightening. For some firms, the convenience of executives rather than cost was the primary purpose of the machines. A New York City bank with 931 female employees had used dictaphones "since 1918 or 1920--in credit and departments where executives are out of the office and come in and give their dication in the evenings." A Philadelphia publisher had only two machines because "some department heads would not use" them. In other companies, machines were "seldom used" or used "spasmodically" or at the "preference of the dictator." A few cases illustrate not only resistance but also its effectiveness when it came from men in middle and upper level positions in the white-collar organization. Although stenographers in a Philadelphia investment house seemingly had little trouble with six newly-installed dictating machines, the firm's treasurer was emphatically hostile. "A super salesman has persuaded executives [in the company] that Ediphones can be used here at a saving," he said, "but my machine is
going back next week." And in a Chicago insurance office employing 251 women in a total of 356 office employees, a similar story was told from a different vantage point. Ediphones had been in use in the firm for twenty years, but centralization was a new experiment at the time of survey. According to the Women's Bureau interview notes, "Mr. M., the office manager, has wanted to centralize this work for a long time, but there has been considerable opposition to it from the men who have not wanted to lose their secretaries."

The most interesting feature of the employer responses—and one not mentioned in the published report of the Women's Bureau—is the number of firms that had tried or even purchased and installed dictating machines and then discarded them. Eleven percent of the total belonged to this category, including eleven firms which had kept a few machines purely for the convenience of some executives who liked them, and twenty-four (17%) of the firms which had no machines in use. Unless management was vigilant, mechanization and centralization might easily fail. In 1924, a Philadelphia publishing house had merged with a New York company that had both mechanical dictation and a central transcription department. These systems were installed in the Philadelphia office in 1925 when executives were transferred from New York. "As time passed, however, this department has become less popular," the firm reported in 1931, "until only three remain full time dictaphone operators, [and] several stenographers operate machines on the side." An Atlanta mail order company with sixty-eight office employees, thirty-six of them women, had tried dictating machines "from time to time" but had "thrown them out each time." In
a Chicago mail order concern, two machines were "found in the supply room" for executives who wanted to use them.

Other companies, particularly insurance and investment firms, believed that mistakes in legal or technical language resulted more often when dictating machines were used. Perhaps these mistakes were a form of covert resistance to mechanization from stenographers, and several companies reported that they had "thrown out" the new equipment because executives and stenographers both disliked it. By and large, however, managers and executives who disliked the machines were responsible for their rejection. "Dictators" in a Philadelphia insurance company, for example, objected to dictating machines because they believed that the presence of a stenographer aided in "thoughtful composition of letters." In a tight job market, women workers lacked the power to resist successfully alone. An Atlanta insurance company with fifty-eight women employees had "discontinued" use of dictating machines in 1921, after two years' experience. But in 1931, it was planning to re-introduce the machines, despite the fact that, according to the office manager, "probably about half our stenographers will leave." Resistance by workers, when it existed, was easily overcome, but executives and supervisors who resented the discipline, impersonality, and loss of authority represented by the new system had the power, even in the early years of the Depression, to preserve traditional relationships and methods in the office.

Papers and discussions at OMS conferences during the twenties and thirties revealed similar instances of managerial resistance to mechanical dictation as well as the tactics used by scientific
management experts to make dictation, and correspondence in general, more "efficient." Employers who were fully committed to rationalizing office procedures found it necessary to exert persistent pressure on the managerial work force to use efficient methods. In these cases, managers reluctantly adjusted to the new methods. "It has been my experience," one office manager said,

that the use of the dictaphone is largely a matter of education. . . . We have 25 or 30 dictaphones in our company, and I am quite sure if we took a vote on them among our dictators the week after they were installed they would be 100 per cent against them. I am quite sure if we took a vote today there would be at least 90 per cent who would be in favor of it.40

But the path of the office manager was not always an easy one: employers were more easily persuaded of the economic advantages of the new technology and organization than they were convinced to implement them. In 1936, L. H. Brigham, the office service manager of the American Optical Company, complained,

It is no longer difficult to either sell or convince an organization of the economy to be secured through use of the dictating machine and the centralized transcription of machine dictation. The problem is that of ensuring that all dictation is handled through this medium. The larger the dictating staff, the greater the problem. It is an exceptional company which can truthfully say that all of its dictation is handled on a 100 per cent machine basis.

The example of his own company illustrated the dilemma facing scientific office managers. The vice president and general manager annually reviewed the list of executives who did not use dictating machines. Although a small number appeared to have legitimate excuses, such as "marked foreign accent," or "speech impediment," the "usual answer" was "personal preference or the old standby, 'My dictation is different.'" The office manager could not attack this
issue directly, however, because his position in the office hierarchy demanded a delicate approach:

Obviously, stenographic dictators in the major executive group constitute the real problems. An office manager, though vested with proper authority cannot afford to be too autocratic and incur ill-will in these matters. He must bide his time and continually influence the situation as diplomatically as possible.

Brigham used the subterfuge of telling executives whose private stenographers were absent that substitutes were unavailable and that they must temporarily use the machines. This technique was not always successful, but constant "missionary" zeal on the part of the scientific manager, Brigham assured his audience, would convert recalcitrant executives.41

"The Private Secretary Evil"

At the pinnacle of women's office work was the private secretary. Although secretaries performed many of the same clerical tasks as women in routine office jobs, secretarial positions were highly individualized and offered more freedom to exercise initiative and responsibility. Because she handled a variety of clerical work for a single individual, the secretary resembled a traditional craft worker more than a modern industrial worker. She often escaped the close supervision and routine imposed on other women clerical workers and could maintain a degree of control over the pace and method of her work.42 Yet gender and the hierarchical relations of modern office organization circumscribed all women office workers, including the secretary. Women in routine or mechanized office jobs could, if they were persistent or fortunate, advance to secretarial positions; a
secretary, however, had little opportunity for promotion except a raise in salary or an assignment to a more important "chief."

The secretary's duties and methods resembled those of male office workers of the preindustrial era, but there the similarity ended. The female secretary was a nonindustrial worker who filled an important niche in the structure of modern capitalism. As secretarial work had become feminized, gender had become a central qualification for the occupation, with two important consequences that differentiated secretaries from traditional preindustrial modes and from other forms of modern work as well. First, by the 1920s employers had begun to associate the aptitude for secretarial work with gender-specific characteristics. Second, no matter what the class origins of a woman secretary, employers viewed her as a permanent member of the lower-level office staff, while they always saw all male office workers, down to the messenger boys, as potential executive material.

Programs for scientific office management could never completely assimilate the peculiarities of secretarial work or the woman secretary's unique position in the office hierarchy. Yet, the proponents of the management program could not afford to omit the private secretary from their system. They envisioned a unified business organization, streamlined so that all operations flowed smoothly and rapidly. To exclude from their plan any segment of the office force, especially on the lower levels of the clerical staff, would have permitted challenges to the entire order they were trying to establish. Therefore, they included secretarial work in their schemes, but never very successfully.
Although the management experts acknowledged that secretaries performed valuable and necessary services, their ideology demanded that they control secretarial labor explicitly, in the same way that they controlled the invariable, repetitive tasks of mass production. When they attempted to rationalize the work of the secretary and integrate it into their general system for reorganizing the office, they were unwilling to tolerate the ambiguities that secretaries took for granted and sometimes used to their advantage. This program would, of course, enhance managerial power and, possibly, eliminate opportunities for secretaries to work inefficiently. But since the content of secretarial work inherently required the individual worker to exercise her discretion, scientific management did not work very well in either theory or in practice in this instance.

In 1925, William Henry Leffingwell, one of the best known propagandists for the cause of scientific office management, made a forceful argument in favor of employer control in the office workplace in Office Management: Principles and Practice. Leffingwell saw few differences between manufacturing and business. In both cases the manager must establish routine, which, he explained, was based on the division of labor and "performance of any particular duty in a customary manner and order of time." According to Leffingwell, routine was an essential element of the scientific method of management because it enables masses of operations to be grouped together and handled as one unit. . . . [T]he routine simplifies for the office manager the comprehension of the general work to be done. . . . It also greatly simplifies supervision. Instead of following individual clerks and individual operations, the manager
supervises the general routine. . . . Where there is no routine
whatever, control is impossible. . . .

The office manager should continually direct his efforts to having
all daily work performed in a routine manner, even going to the
length of demanding that each operation, and the various actions
and movements which constitute it, shall always be done in exact
accordance with the manner he has prescribed, and he should insist
on this, though it is possible or even probable that a different
manner would accomplish equal results. 44

But Leffingwell had difficulty fitting the secretary into his model of
routine.

His recommendations for the scientific management of secretarial
labor were quite limited. Because Leffingwell believed in routinizing
office work as much as possible, he advocated reducing the number of
secretaries in the organization to those absolutely necessary to serve
"the ablest and most important executives." He acknowledged that this
would be difficult because "there is a constant tendency for persons
of lesser importance in official capacities, to endeavor to surround
themselves with the atmosphere of a great man, and whether or not
there is any need for it, they insist on having a private secretary."
Not surprisingly, Leffingwell could give very little concrete advice
about how to overcome "the private secretary evil." 45 On the one
hand, secretarial work could not be eliminated entirely; it was a
permanent feature of the modern office, and Leffingwell simply could
not envision an office without it. On the other hand, men in the
middle and upper levels of the office organization created the
problem, and it could not be solved merely by tinkering with the ways
that secretaries did their jobs.
Leaving the office manager on his own to cut unnecessary secretarial positions, Leffingwell did go on to prescribe the proper procedures for standardizing secretarial work. But here, too, he offered few suggestions for making the secretary’s work more routine. He outlined a form for an “assignment record,” where each secretary would list

1. The daily duties
2. Calendar of duties
3. Duties for specific days, to be brought up by tickler and transferred to
4. Duties to be done “as soon as possible”

Although this system would have introduced a general routine to the secretary’s job, it hardly met Leffingwell’s formidable criteria for routine as a principle of scientific office management. Leffingwell thought, however, that further routine could be achieved if each secretary prepared “standard practice instructions” for every major task she performed. Experienced secretaries probably would have thought that this idea was nonsense, and Leffingwell admitted as much:

As a rule it is difficult to get a secretary to prepare these instructions, as at first she cannot do it and learn the duties of the position at the same time, and later on when she has learned the latter, she cannot see the necessity of writing instructions for herself. It should, however, be explained to her that these instructions are for an emergency, and such event may prove invaluable.

In other words, even Leffingwell did not expect most secretaries to find these instructions useful, and although the thought apparently did not occur to him, some secretaries would have been reluctant to participate in a plan which would make them more easily replaceable. Significantly, both the assignment record and standard practice instructions generated extra work for the secretary’s supervisor.
Leffingwell did not enlighten the reader as to how the office manager could enforce this program when busy executives expected their secretaries to relieve them of detail work rather than to create it.

In the end, even Leffingwell had to admit that many aspects of secretarial work eluded routine. For this reason he concluded that secretarial positions should be filled by women with special qualifications. Ignoring technical skills altogether, he rated the most important traits of a good secretary as adaptability, reliability, intelligence, courtesy, initiative, and tact. This emphasis on finding the characteristics of a good worker was typical of scientific management in general, and standardizing personnel, that is, identifying the traits that suited certain individuals for particular kinds of office jobs, was an integral part of Leffingwell's agenda. But the traits necessary in a secretary were so general that they defied standard definition or measurement. Probably, any employer would want to find the qualities of a good secretary in all of his workers. The proponents of scientific management had always argued that by subdividing and deskilling work in the factory or in the office they could achieve efficiency even without intelligent, responsible workers. They wanted to become independent of the shortcomings of the available work force by measuring the narrow range of skill or aptitude required for any one specialized job. From this standpoint, secretarial work and the women who performed it were anomalies.

Leffingwell had set out to design a complete system for the scientific management of all office operations carried on by large
business organizations; he could afford to overlook the contradictions
posed by secretarial work because this form of non-routine labor was
only a small part of the whole. He believed that almost all
non-executive office work was susceptible to standardization and
routine, and he emphasized the jobs he thought management could
control rather than the few exceptions. But not all of the
supporters of scientific management could circumvent the nonindustrial
ethos of secretarial work so easily.

In the early 1920s, Wallace Werrett Charters, an educator
well-connected in management circles, focused his attention on the
woman secretary. Like the feminists of the period, Charters
recognized that the feminization of secretarial work had opened an
important new occupation to educated, white women. However, unlike
feminists who wanted to advance middle-class women's access to new
areas of paid employment, Charters was less interested in serving the
interests of women than in training women to suit the needs of their
employers. With his assistant, Isadore [Ivalee] Whitley, Charters
surveyed secretaries and employers, trying to discover the attitudes
and behavior characteristic of good secretaries. Their published
study, Secretarial Duties and Traits, attained special prominence
because for a decade it was the only book about secretaries and their
work containing detailed documentary evidence and, just as
significantly, because its authors accepted completely the values and
assumptions of the scientific management movement.

Charters and Whitley had a clear-cut purpose in mind when they
began their study. They hoped that by rigorously defining the content
of secretarial work and the attributes of good secretaries they could improve the quality of service employers received from their secretaries. They believed that employers could use detailed lists of "duties and traits" to select and train new secretaries as well as to write job specifications that would clarify the duties of the secretaries. According to the researchers, employers could use the lists of secretarial duties in the book as guidelines to help them secure "as wide a variety of useful service as meets their needs."55 Similarly, they compiled a list of the traits and "trait actions" which they believed would provide "a basis for correction when employers desire to institute programs for eradicating secretarial defects. For instance, if a secretary is inaccurate, the employer may show her the list of trait actions found under accuracy, and show the types of things to which attention must be paid if accuracy is to be developed."56 Charters and Whitley also suggested that commercial teachers and secretaries would find the book helpful because it gave detailed descriptions of the skills and attitudes possessed by good secretaries. But even when the authors addressed commercial teachers and secretaries, they defined the successful secretary as one whose work satisfied her employer's needs. They never mentioned finding a satisfying job or advancing beyond the ranks of secretarial work as elements of success.57

In order to determine the content of secretarial work, Charters and Whitley interviewed 125 secretaries whom they judged to be "superior" workers and asked them to name all of their duties.58 Following the example of other proponents of scientific office
management, they also attempted to break secretarial work down into routine operations that employers could measure and control, so they asked some of the interviewees to list all of their daily activities on charts broken into five-minute intervals and to note the number of times they used the telephone and the number of people they met in the course of a day. This approach was entirely consistent with the principles of scientific management, but the information the secretaries gave revealed that their jobs defied the routinization that would allow scientific managers to impose their program on this branch of office work. The 125 secretaries mentioned 871 separate duties, and 715 secretaries who responded to questionnaires sent out by the researchers confirmed that their jobs were also more varied than routine. According to Charters and Whitley, "tabulation of these facts indicates that the median number of duties performed by an individual [secretary] is about 130 and that there are 87 duties frequency of which is quite uniform."

The problem of reconciling the methodology of scientific management with the realities of secretarial work became even more acute when the authors tried to categorize the 871 duties. They subdivided the secretaries' clerical functions into routine tasks. For example, "Mailing Duties" included thirty-two minute procedures, many of them so routine that managers could have supervised them with little difficulty: "get mail, . . . open mail, . . . fold letters, . . . insert letters in envelopes, . . . seal mail, . . . tie up packages." Yet even some of these thirty-two routine duties—such as "make notes on mail which superior should see, . . . read outgoing
mail to check up on information, . . . [and] make up mailing
dlist"—would require knowledge and initiative on the part of the
secretary. Similarly, Charters and Whitley listed every document a
secretary might receive in dictation, transcribe, or type as a
separate duty, so that each of these categories contained ninety-seven
particular duties. The tactic of subdividing these duties made them
appear simple and routine, but the private secretary differed from
routine office workers because instead of repeating a few of these
tasks over and over in a mechanical way, she was called upon to
perform all of them on her own initiative and for various lengths of
time. In any event, Charters and Whitley could not make all
secretarial duties appear so simple. The category "Duties Involved in
Meeting and Handling People" included "make adjustments of complaints,
. . . hire employes, . . . discharge employes, . . . [and] consult
with attorney, tax-examiner, auditor, etc." Some of the secretary's
"Financial and Bookkeeping Duties" were also very complex, for
instance, "prepare personal income tax return for employer . . . [and] tax return for company, trust, corporation, etc." This awkward
juxtaposition of routine clerical tasks and executive responsibilities
was inescapable given the authors' assumptions and purposes. They
wanted to design a system that would increase management's ability to
control and supervise secretaries—in other words, to make secretarial
work more like modern industrial labor. But, at the same time, the
standardization and routinization requisite for direct control of
secretarial work was not always in the best interest of employers
because it would deny them the valuable non-routine labor they extracted from these educated women workers.

The conventional practitioners of scientific management, Leffingwell among them, argued that the explicit controls they had implemented in the factory were applicable to the office as well. They advocated reducing or eliminating the secretarial work force and dividing secretarial duties by delegating all clerical tasks to routine workers, usually women stenographers, typists, and clerks, leaving varied and complex duties for those on the upper levels of the office hierarchy, usually men. Some large organizations did adopt this approach. For instance, by 1925 one large telephone company had eliminated secretaries entirely because management had discovered that "secretaries often did much of [a] man's work, leaving him too much free time." Such programs faced serious resistance from the men deprived of services and prestige when they lost their secretaries, and such resistance was often successful because it was so compatible with accepted notions about the position of white-collar men within the hierarchical relations of capitalist society. American businessmen were not motivated solely by profits. Had profits been their only concern they might have argued quite sensibly that it would be more cost efficient to employ many poorly-paid women secretaries to replace better-paid male executives. But neither this argument, nor plans for pure scientific management in the office, could overcome the power of class and gender ideology.

Prevailing patterns of class and gender were deeply embedded in the personal relationship between a secretary and her boss, mitigating
the purely economic relationship of the wage exchange between employer and worker, and many secretaries understood that they could use those personal ties in order to preserve limited autonomy on the job. Some managers hoped that they could dissolve these individual relationships, and the power that secretaries gained from them, by standardizing and regulating the content of secretarial work, but Charters recognized that employers could exercise control through means other than routinization. Another strain of scientific management thought emphasized personnel policy as a way to supplement control of the work process by actually controlling the worker. Charters used a similar approach to apply systematically the power male employers already possessed implicitly by virtue of their class status and sex. Instead of doing away with the relationship between secretary and boss, he wanted to clarify it and to prescribe a secretary's class position and gender-specific behavior as the attributes essential for success in her occupation.

Charters did not reject the idea that some office work should be routinized. Instead, he wanted to draw a rigid distinction between the repetitive, mechanical tasks of routine office workers, and the initiative, responsibility, and intelligence that employers wanted in their secretaries. Because he accepted the assumptions and purposes of the scientific management movement, he could classify secretaries as a special class of workers who possessed specific characteristics or traits that differentiated them from other women office workers. Stenographers, whose duties consisted primarily of taking and transcribing dictation, were the women workers who most resembled
secretaries. When Charters and Whitley interviewed twenty-eight men who employed secretaries, they asked them to explain the difference between a stenographer and a secretary. The answers they received confirmed their argument that, although the skills used in routine stenographic work differed very little from those employed by secretaries, secretarial work required special personality traits not necessary in routine office jobs:

The employers who answered this question... were all agreed that the stenographer does purely routine work—"she is a diligent, faithful, human machine." They spoke of her work, in general, as "mechanical." The differentiating quality mentioned most frequently was "initiative." The one mentioned next after this was "responsibleness."... The employers were agreed that the secretary needs perhaps less technical skill—i.e., skill in typing, taking shorthand, and so on—than does the stenographer, because the secretary's success depends far more upon personality than upon professional technique with regard to mechanical operations.67

Employers used this distinction to obtain a broader range of services from their secretaries than those provided by stenographers. Charters hoped that by codifying the differences between secretaries and routine office workers he could give employers a systematic justification for receiving those special services and that his emphasis on personality would permit employers to recognize the workers they could exempt from direct supervision.

The qualities Charters labeled the "personality traits" of a good secretary were, in fact, characteristics of a nonindustrial worker who determined her own pace and methods of work. The secretary described in Charters' model lacked the independence of the preindustrial craft worker or nineteenth-century clerk, however, because her employer's class and gender dominance provided him with a mechanism of indirect
control. Linked to her employer in a personal relationship, the woman secretary was necessarily dependent and subservient. Since she rarely had an opportunity to advance her career, her class status was always subordinate to her employer's, while culturally prescribed gender roles allowed her employer to require her to perform personal services as well as business-related tasks.

When Charters used the results of his study to advise secretaries on the "proper" approach to their work, it was clear that he envisioned the secretary as a nonindustrial worker who could be controlled through the power relations of the class and gender hierarchy. For example, the secretary's "responsibleness" was evidence of her nonindustrial work ethic:

If you see a chance for service you do it even if it does lie outside the things that were laid out for you. This does not mean, of course, that you interfere with other people's work or that you are officious in any way, but simply that you are not afraid of doing a little more than you are paid for.68

The secretary's job might include many routine mechanical tasks, but she differed from the routine worker because her tasks were not repetitive and she could decide when they should be done. Thus Charters encouraged secretaries to use initiative, "If you have been told to see that certain routine duties are performed at stated periods you don't have to have someone come around two or three days before the report or whatever it may be is due and say 'Well, Miss Smith, have you started the monthly statement yet?'"69

But the secretary always exercised responsibility and initiative in the interest of her employer; she served him rather than tried to succeed on her own. Many of the services employers wanted their
secretaries to perform depended on gender-related skills and resembled the services women traditionally performed for men in the domestic sphere. Charters offered would-be secretaries an example of the transfer of traditional gender roles to the office.

[A] busy man we interviewed said that one of the nicest ways his secretary had of making herself responsible for his convenience and comfort was to keep a calendar of his family's various birthday and anniversary dates and not let him go home empty-handed on those days. . . . You protect your employer's time and energy, too, by weeding out his callers and handling everything you can yourself.70

Charters recognized that within the system he advocated, the secretary held enough power to make her potential resistance disastrous for her employer. He warned that the successful secretary would not exercise that power: "You won't do, as one man told us his secretary did one day, such a thing as reminding him that he had an engagement to speak at a luncheon one hour after the luncheon was over."71 One restraint on this kind of resistance was the secretary's economic vulnerability, and Charters reminded his readers that chronic irresponsibility would endanger a woman's job.72 Yet the more effective means of control within Charters' plan for managing the woman secretary was the continuation of traditional gender roles in the relationship between the secretary and her boss.

Because they assumed that secretarial work had become women's work, Charters and Whitley included typically "feminine" qualities among the personality traits that would make a secretary valuable to her superior. Relying on interviews with twenty-eight male employers, they compiled a list of forty-seven traits ranked according to frequency with which employers had mentioned them.73 Although many of
the traits might have applied as well to male white-collar workers as to women secretaries, employers also expected their secretaries to maintain culturally defined roles and behavior associated with middle-class women. Women in the paid labor force had very different experiences from women who remained in traditional domestic occupations, but the prescriptions aimed at both groups showed remarkable continuity. In the nineteenth century, the popular press had promulgated the "cult of true womanhood," which defined the ideal white, middle-class woman as submissive, pious, domestic, and sexually pure. By the 1920s, Charters could argue that women secretaries should bring similar attributes to the office. The style had changed from romantic magazine fiction to scientific jargon, but the substance remained the same.

The true woman depicted in nineteenth-century fiction submitted to the will of her husband, even when he was mistaken. So, too, the ideal secretary who emerged from Charters’ and Whitley’s interviews sometimes conceals her feelings and supports a measure which her employer supports, even though she does not agree with him; treats her employer with respect; does not talk back; does not say everything she thinks when she disagrees; does not lose her temper; can correct mistakes in her superior’s work, particularly in English, without calling his attention to the correction; and takes both criticism and compliment in a nice spirit.

Many employers also expected their secretaries to rearrange their private lives without complaint. For instance, one man said that his secretary, Miss F.,

would no more think of going off and leaving the office without communicating with me than she would of flying. If I were to go out this afternoon and get tied up somewhere she would not leave until seven o’clock or until she heard from me. You can see what a pickle I would be in if I got back and she wasn’t there, and I
had no key and something had to be attended to. I would have to
go to a hotel and write my letters, and send off my telegrams
myself.\(^76\)

Charters and Whitley did not include religiousity in their list
of traits, but they did expect a model secretary to show honesty,
fairness, reticence, and self-respect. The employers' examples of
these qualities indicated that they did not want their secretaries to
compete directly in the rough-and-tumble world of business, but rather
to safeguard personal and moral values. These traditional values
might conflict with the business practices of an employer, and when
this happened the only way for a secretary to reconcile her honor with
her submissiveness was to find a new place of employment; employers
rarely considered the possibility that a secretary might confront her
employer. One employer said that a good secretary "will not
countenance wrong practices—if she disagrees with the way work is
conducted and disapproves of it she will not stay on the job, this
means of course something which she cannot reconcile with her code of
ethics."\(^77\) Ordinarily, however, this situation would not occur
because employers generally understood that their secretaries would
apply their principles to benefit their superiors. According to the
employers, the superior secretary
does not lie, either to employer or to office associates; she does
not steal; she keeps her word; she does an honest day’s work—that
is, she does not loaf on the job, but gives full value for what
she receives; she gives her employer what she owes him and takes
no more than he owes her; she keeps confidences of whatever
nature; she did not even discuss our affairs with her family.\(^78\)
From the businessman's standpoint, the secretary's moral code was an essential substitute for the continuous supervision imposed on routine office workers.

Although the secretary worked outside of the home, Charters and Whitley expected her to bring women's traditional domestic skills to the office. Apparently, a businessman of high enough rank to merit a private secretary deserved the same amenities in his office that he received at home. Employers wanted secretaries who were "good housekeepers" in the office and gave examples of the housekeeping chores performed by their secretaries: she "sees to my comfort and convenience in the office by overseeing the equipment of my desk, watching ventilation, lighting etc.; when I go away she puts up little packages of stationery, stamps, etc., anything which will be of convenience to me and save me trouble."79

Their secretaries also took over much of the personal and emotional work performed by wives and mothers in the home: "She smooths people over when they are irritated, speaks pleasantly to people when they come in and makes them feel at home, takes an increased load of detail on when she sees that I am tired or worried."80 Within the formal bureaucracy of the large office, managers could design efficient systems for an impersonal performance of these functions, but in the private relationship between a secretary and her "chief" they were translated into the language of gender. This arrangement gave employers an extra range of service because the secretary provided personal attention which gratified her employer's ego and reinforced his social standing.81 Of course, the
transfer of domesticity to the business environment was incongruous. It was not always profitable in purely economic terms, nor did it fit neatly into Charters' system of codifying personality traits. Yet by including it, Charters allowed employers to take advantage of skills and behavior patterns that had already been taught to the pool of white, middle-class women who were available for secretarial work.

Finally, Charters and Whitley concluded that the model secretary could not show her sexuality in the office. She was, like her nineteenth-century sister, pure. Both researchers and employers found this characteristic entirely compatible with, or perhaps an outgrowth of, female socialization, believing that the ideal secretary would present an attractive physical appearance without being provocative. The study lumped all of the following "trait actions" together under "Appearance, Attractive Personal":

she carries herself well, has a good figure; has good taste in dress; wears becoming clothes; put[s] herself together neatly; does not use rouge indiscreetly; does not have frowsey hair; does not go in for absurd fashions; does not have bobbed hair; does not wear immodest clothes; does not overdress for the position she occupies; is inconspicuous in appearance, not obtrusive looking. She must look like a lady: I don't want her painted, rouged, perfumed to such an extent that it will be an offense to me and my patients. She should dress like a lady, not extreme silk stockings and high-heeled shoes.82

Since the secretary was virtuous, her superior had no rivals for her undivided attention. One employer, a college dean, said that he had almost fired his secretary, for paying too much attention to the boys around here. It was a very difficult position to fill properly when I am not here and the girl is out there at the typewriter. The boys come in and fuss this girl in no time. She just couldn't work. She believed
everything they said. I don't think the girls in the office
should have social connections with the faculty. They should keep
on as much as a business level as possible.\textsuperscript{83}

As a management expert, Charters may have also hoped that by
restraining female sexuality in the office he could also curb the
secretary's power to manipulate her employer. One of Charters'
students articulated this reasoning quite clearly when he said, "many
secretaries abuse the privileges granted. . . . [I]t is difficult to
keep the morale in a large office among typists and stenographers at a
high moral standard if some secretary continually disobeys the
established rules." This student claimed to have "watched the
incompetent secretary hold her job through a brazen display of sex,
and has noted the effect of such display on the quality of work turned
out by her co-workers." He wondered, "Can training in ethics or
morals by competent instructors eliminate this evil?"\textsuperscript{84} In fact,
Charters never had to carry systematization to this extent because he
relied on a set of personal values associated with conventional
middle-class womanhood.

**Conclusion**

As some lower-level office work had become feminized in the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, gender ideology had filtered
into the office. Employers' adherence to traditional beliefs about
women's roles and skills as well as personal relationships between men
and women was generally incompatible with the impersonal control and
rigid systematization of scientific office management. Secretarial
work was only the most extreme example of the contradictions between
rationalization and personalism. Those within the scientific office management movement tried unsuccessfully to minimize the contradiction by defining clear limits between secretarial work and other feminized office occupations and by suggesting ways to limit the number of secretaries in the office. Yet the definite division between secretarial work and the related jobs of stenography and typing were more prescriptive than real. Typing and stenography were recruiting grounds for new secretaries, and, as we shall see, secretaries themselves saw no clear difference between their work and the stenographers'. Moreover, the proportion of secretaries, stenographers and typists in the clerical work force, which should have declined if the deskilling process had been successful, actually increased as the century went on. These occupations composed about one-quarter of the office labor force in the twenties and thirties, increasing to roughly one-third in the forties and fifties, and since the sixties has hovered near forty percent of women office workers.85

The drive for control expressed by the self-conscious scientific office management movement was real. Its tactics for making some office jobs more routine and repetitious did affect women workers whose jobs could be mechanized or separated from personal service and relationships to men in the white-collar setting. As time went on, the propaganda of scientific office management provided a reservoir of strategies that could be applied to enhance direct control over workers divorced from the ethos of personalism. The progress of scientific office management was slow not because it was ineffective, but because men on the middle and upper levels of the white-collar
organization could also exercise other, informal mechanisms of control based on gender and at the same time derive personal advantages for themselves. And discrimination in hiring and pay justified by the belief that women's roles as wage earners were subordinate to their traditional domestic roles was in many instances less expensive than the complicated experiments in systematic management devised by the so-called management "experts." When, during the Depression, cost was of paramount concern to employers, the expense of scientific management would hinder its adoption even further.
Endnotes

1 Cambridge, Massachusetts, Radcliffe College, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Bureau of Vocational Information Papers, Collection Number B-3 [hereafter cited as BVI.], Box 37, Folder 428, letter to Bureau of Vocational Information, July 28, 1925. Names of women who participated in the 1925 BVI study of secretarial workers cannot be used because they were promised anonymity.


4 The National Association of Office Managers was founded in 1919 by twenty-seven managers and engineers. In 1930 the organization's name was changed to the National Office Management Association. The Office Management Section of the American Management Association apparently began meeting in 1925. Both organizations declared that their intent was to apply scientific management to the office. The two organizations sometimes met together and probably shared many members in common. For example, F. W. Rowland, who frequently gave papers at the OMS was also a founding member of the NAOM, and and William H. Leffingwell, one of the leading proponents of scientific management who sometimes spoke at OMS meetings, also served as president of NAOM. Gladys S. Murray, "NOMA: A Turning Point in Office Management," Office Executive September 1959, pp. 22-23; "This is NOMA," Office Executive, May 1959, pp. 5; John Mitchell, untitled foreword to Office Management Series No. 16 (New York: American Management Association, 1926), np.; and Alvin A. Dodd, "Foreword"

5 Grace Coyle, "Women in the Clerical Occupations," The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 143 (1929): 184. On the basis of interviews and questionnaires from 105 employers chosen because "they have a considerable number of employees and are likely to have a policy," the staff of the Bureau of Vocational Information noted, "We have found some indications of a trend toward establishing a 'stenographic pool' in business organizations. A stenographic staff is called upon in general, thereby reducing the number of individual secretaries." "Interview Procedure," 1 page typescript, BVI, Box 36, Folder 409. See also the draft of the completed study, "The Secretary, 1926," p. 12, BVI, Box 37, Folder 436.

In 1934, the Women's Bureau reported,

In general, the increase in number of clerical workers and development of office machines has been concommitant. Machines have tended decidedly to curb the rapid rise in number of employees with the increased functions of modern business. On some jobs office workers tending machines in the performance of their duties are not unlike the factory worker tending a machine in a factory.

The Employment of Women in Offices, Women's Bureau Bulletin 120, p. 17.


7 F. L. Rowland, "Extra Incentive Wage Plans for Office Employees," OMS No. 11 (1925), pp. 4; 16-17. Rowland supported his conclusion by mentioning the fact that of the twenty firms represented in his audience, only one paid a piece rate to any office workers other than routine typists and stenographers. Although these firms were clearly interested in scientific management, as evidenced by their having sent representatives to the conference, they were seemingly unwilling or unable to implement even incentive pay plans.


Washington, D.C., National Archives, Record Group 86, Women's Bureau Records, Box 280. [Hereafter cited as WB.] Boxes 280 and 282 contain the data sheets collected for Women's Bureau Bulletin 120 and supply much useful information not included in the published bulletin. The quotations and notes from interviews with 314 are especially useful.

Bills, "The Status of Measuring Office Output," p. 6. OMS members discussed the job of life underwriters in the insurance industry as a case in point. Although the underwriter's work could be evaluated quantitatively by the number of cases she/he processed in a given period of time, this measurement would not accurately reflect special circumstances that made some cases more difficult to process than others or the long range consequences for the company of the underwriter's decisions on the cases she/he processed, pp. 7-8.


WB, Box 281.

BVI, Box 31, Folder 374, Employer Return No. 24.

WB, Box 280.

BVI, Box 31, Folder 374, Employer Return No. 54.

BVI, Box 36, Folder 412, "Cooperating Agencies--Boston."

BVI, Box 37, Folder 428, "Agency Interview."

Women's Bureau, The Employment of Women in Offices, Bulletin 120 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1934) was the only study I know of during the twenties or thirties that even mentioned black women in office work. The study of 314 companies in seven cities, which employed
42,897 women office workers, included only eight black businesses employing 158 black women, pp. 1-2.

23 BVI, Box 31, Folder 374, Employer Returns Nos. 56 and 52. The interviewers themselves expressed class and ethnic biases and occasionally noted when an interviewee appeared to them to be Jewish or the "Jewish type."


25 WB, Box 280.


27 BVI, Box 31, Folder 374, Employer Returns Nos. 100 and 77.

28 WB, Box 281; A. C. Farrell quoted an unnamed but "well known" office engineer:

The office today is in practically the same economic condition as the factory was in the nineties; there is great attention given to process and machinery—the more automatic the better. Few office managers have even the slightest idea of what constitutes a day's work on the part of a clerk. In this matter every office is a law unto itself; comparison is difficult and there is no comparison. There is no measuring stick.

Yet, without measurement there can be no comparison, no record of improvement; without measurement science cannot exist. No matter how many examples industry offers us of improvements through scientific methods of management, the office ignores them as inapplicable, and will continue to ignore them while there is no definite method of measuring its work.


29 Nelson discusses the "destruction of the foreman's empire" and argues that some of the most significant resistance to Taylor's program for the factory came from management, Managers and Workers, pp. 48-54, 73-74.


31 BVI, Box 31, Folder 374, Employer Return No. 45.


33 Sterling B. Cramer [Illinois Merchants Trust Company] in
"Discussion," OMS No. 15 (1926), p. 12. The audience was supposed to be discussing papers on the use of correspondence manuals in the office, but the OMS members in attendance quickly shifted to the topic of mechanized dictation.


35 The following examples of worker resistance to the installation of dictating machines were revealed in Women's Bureau interviews with employers in 1930 and 1931. In some instances, it is difficult to tell whether the negative reaction of workers was a response to changes in the organization of work or the personality of the manager who implemented the change. WB, Boxes 280 and 281.

All machines were installed when present manager came to [the] office in 1927 except dictaphone. . . . Has had complete turnover since taking over the office and has hired girls from the machine companies.

Dept. was reorganized—entire set up was changed. Girls did not want to operate Ediphones and had all sorts of trouble getting started. 4 yrs. ago had 25 steno[graphers] in stenographic department. Now have 8[;] in two years time had complete turnover and 8 are reported as doing the work of 25. Installed Ediphones in 1929—change in mgt.

Six years ago, Jan. first, Ediphones were introduced; an effort was made to encourage the 17 stenographers who were to work on them to swing over to machine operation. Mr. H. [office manager] does not recall just how they dropped out, but the work was done by 3 Ed. operators and 2 typists—he would give no detail as to number actually replaced. . . . [Other information] shows 8 Ed. operators and 24 stenographers, so evidently a readjustment was made with regard to the 17 stenographers who refused to operate the machines originally. When interviewed he refused to give details as to the replacement when Ediphones were introduced, said he "did not remember."

36 The same interviews also discovered other women who appeared to adjust easily to mechanized dictation and transcription.

On Dec. 1, 1927 there were 17 stenographers, including 1 typist, who were asked to operate dictaphones; 8 dropped out and the other 9 swing [sic] over to the machines. Since the[n] 1 resigned [and] 2 more have been dropped. Those who stayed were to get an increase in salary the first of January, after the machines had been in operation a month; however, the girls were able to adapt
themselves to the dictaphones so quickly that the increase became effective the fifteenth of December, two weeks ahead of the originally promised date.

The girls are so interested and ambitious they seldom want to leave their machines. If they happen not to feel well you can hardly get them to go the hospital to the nurse, they are so eager. Bonus system has proved to the management that unless workers have some incentive, they do not work up to their efficiency.

The girls have adapted themselves to the Dictaphones very well, the most difficulty was with the dictators.

Because these interviews show only management's perspective, it is impossible to know whether these women office workers on piece rate and incentive pay plans worked so hard out of desperation or because they actually appreciated the impersonal, quantitative evaluation of their work. Trescott suggests that women workers might actually benefit from systematization because ratings of their performance depended less on the prejudices of the individual supervisor and because they were less vulnerable to sexual harassment on the job, "Lillian Moller Gilbreth," p. 30. This interpretation merits serious consideration, but so does this report of the strains imposed on women workers in a publishing house:

Several years ago addressing was done by girls on piecework basis. [Office manager] said they found that the girls worked too hard and "there were nervous breakdowns right and left." So they decided to have regular people do it in their homes, some on the typewriter and some by hand.

37 Davies, Woman's Place is at the Typewriter, pp.35-37.
38 WB, Boxes 280 and 281.
39 Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital, p. 308. Nelson, Managers and Workers, pp. 75-76, points out that scientific management of factory work was also resisted by those in the middle and upper levels of management.
42 Davies, Woman's Place is at the Typewriter, pp. 156; 160.
44 Ibid., pp. 127-28; 136.
46 Ibid., p. 630.
48 Ibid., pp. 626-30.
49 Ibid., pp. 647-79 for Leffingwell's program for "Standardization of Personnel."

50 In 1926, at a meeting of the OMS, Leffingwell seemed much more certain than many of the other office managers present that most office work could be routinized. He said, "It is possible to measure the office output and to pay on that basis at least 95 per cent of clerical workers." "Measuring Office Output," OMS No. 16 (1926), p. 6.

51 Columbus, Ohio, The Ohio State University Library, Wallace Werrett Charters Papers. [Hereafter cited as WWC.]


53 Isadore was apparently the masculine name used professionally by Ivalee Whitley. Mary Winston Jones to Miss Ivalee Whitley, September 5, 1924 and response from Isadore B. Whitley, September 15, 1924, WWC, File KC 103. In 1925, Charters began a twenty-five year research program for Stephens College, in Columbia Missouri, a project which the college claimed would educate white, middle-class women "to discharge their responsibilities efficiently and exercise wisely the influence of their positions" in the family and community [emphasis mine]. "Rough Draft of Survey of Research Program," p. 6, WWC, File KC 119 (2 Of 3). Betsy Metzger, "An Experiment in Progressive Education for Women in the 1920s," paper presented at the Fifth Annual National Women's Studies Association Conference, Columbus, Ohio, 1983, gives a positive interpretation of the experiment based on the experiences of women at Stephens.

54 The results of the Bureau of Vocational Information study were never published. Although Beatrice Doerschuck had completed a manuscript which was accepted by the Gregg Publishing Company, the two broke off correspondence abruptly in 1932. Rupert P. SoRelle to Beatrice Doerschuk [sic], August 11, 1932, BVI, Box 37, Folder 435. Frederick G. Nichols, The Personal Secretary: Differentiating Duties and Essential Personal Traits (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934) claimed to refute Charters and Whitley but, in fact, only narrowed the lists of duties and traits.

56. Ibid., p. 13.

57. Ibid., pp. 49; 51. Charters and Whitley did note that most of the secretaries queried (70 of 115) did not hope to advance to any other positions, and they offered no suggestions for the other forty-two secretaries who wanted to become executives or advance to other careers.

58. Ibid., pp. 12; 28-29.

59. Ibid., pp. 20-23. The published study did not show the results the authors obtained from these charts.

60. Ibid., p. 12; see "Table 11," pp. 97-121 for a complete list of duties and frequency with which secretaries mentioned them.

61. Ibid., pp. 97.

62. Ibid., pp. 97-104.

63. Ibid., pp. 109.

64. Ibid., p. 112.

65. BVI, Box 31, Folder 374, Employer Return No. 89. The company employed a total of 4,000 workers, of whom 300 worked in the office in some capacity.


67. Charters and Whitley, Secretarial Duties and Traits, pp. 177-78.


69. Ibid., p. 3.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid., p. 2.

72. Ibid., p. 1.
Charters and Whitley, *Secretarial Duties and Traits*, pp. 174-75.


Charters and Whitley, *Secretarial Duties and Traits*, all of these trait actions from "Exhibit L," pp. 159-73.

Ibid., p. 162.

Ibid., p. 171.

Ibid., all of these trait actions from "Exhibit L," pp. 159-73.

Ibid.

The secretary resembled the nineteenth-century women discussed by Thorstein Veblen as the objects of conspicuous consumption by men, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1899).


Ibid.

CHAPTER TWO

MANAGEMENT CONTROL IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Introduction

Although the Depression necessitated adjustments in employer policies and practices to meet changed economic conditions, hard times did not completely disrupt the patterns and relationships of white-collar work. The class and gender loyalties which had limited the effectiveness of prescriptions for scientific management in the twenties continued to shape employer attitudes toward office work in the thirties. The experiments with mechanization and routinization begun in the 1920s had not been a part of a broad movement to reorganize and centralize office production. As C. Wright Mills argued in White Collar, the centralization of office work was far more important than the use of machinery:

Neither machines nor other factory-type techniques could be efficiently applied until "small groups of uncontrolled stenographers throughout the office" were brought into "one central stenographic section." Detached office units, often duplicating one another's work, must be drawn into a central office. New work and job routines are invented in order to get maximum use from the costly machines.  

Yet centralization proceeded very slowly in the interwar years, and it would seem that relatively few women workers experienced factory organization. Large offices could centralize clerical work most easily, but in 1930 only half of all American clerical workers
were employed in offices of more than fifty workers, and in 1940 the
Women's Bureau found that most women office workers in Houston, Los
Angeles, Kansas City, Richmond, and Philadelphia worked in small
offices. More importantly, even large offices moved slowly to
centralize mechanized work. For instance, in 1930 thirty percent of
all women office workers used machines other than typewriters in their
work, but the census listed only two percent of all clerks as office
appliance operators.

This disparity suggests that although employers had invested in
technology to increase productivity and profits, the use of machines
did not subject workers to factory discipline. Instead of
centralizing mechanical tasks, employers tended to install machinery
within the existing social organization of their offices. Operating
machines thus became only another part of the worker's day, but did
not necessarily decrease her need for skill and knowledge. For some
workers, the responsibility for operating office machinery may have
added another element of variety to the work routine and also
increased their opportunity to determine their own schedules in order
to find time for machine tasks. When machines were not centralized,
employers could not create a separate group of machine operatives
whose work could be carefully supervised and measured. So, although
many observers have associated the introduction of office machinery,
which had become an important feature of the white-collar workplace by
the twenties and thirties, with scientific management and Taylorism,
employers generally did not engage in a self-conscious effort to achieve efficiency by centralizing and rationalizing work processes in the office.

**Personalism and Office Organization**

The Depression should have made employers more concerned with efficiency in office work. Businesses could preserve their profits, or at least minimize their losses, by curtailing their manufacturing operations when surpluses developed, but they faced more serious difficulties in reducing office operations because record keeping and correspondence had to be continued regardless of slackening sales. And the New Deal, which increased government involvement in the economy, created additional paper work for employers. Despite economic pressure, however, office work remained unsystematic and personal throughout the thirties.

In 1937, for example, S. N. Stevens reported to the annual meeting of the National Office Managers' Association the results of a study of 12,000 secretaries dismissed from sixty-four companies. He estimated that only one-third of the secretaries and stenographers had been fired for inefficiency. Of the remaining number, half lost their jobs because of "personality and character defects of their own," while the other half were fired because of their bosses' "personality and character defects" (although these were usually attributed to the secretary). Of course, secretarial work had never been routine, but even the depressed economy did not make it any more amenable to standardization or measurement. Stevens lamented the fact that
American businesses "had no standards for determining a proficiency level, no means of knowing how many secretaries rise above or fall below a level that may reasonably be expected of them." The audience of office managers did not quarrel with Stevens' findings; in fact, they drew on their own experiences to suggest specific examples of the personal demands made on women secretaries by unreasonable employers.

Some said that in some cases the "personality and character defects" attributed to the secretaries dismissed probably consisted of an unwillingness to go night-clubbing with the boss, or of speaking sharply when the boss himself spoke sharply on a morning when he had come to the office with a hangover. Most agreed that the boss often blames the secretary for things he himself is responsible for.

So, although emphasizing skill and efficiency in the female office work force would have been economically profitable, employers continued to stress the personal relationship between a boss and his secretary or stenographer. Gender-linked qualities, such as deference, remained essential qualifications for these sex-typed jobs. The Depression may have even enhanced the pattern because labor market conditions made women secretaries and stenographers especially vulnerable to the personal demands made by their bosses. How many other women, facing the difficulties of finding employment in hard times, kept their jobs by "night-clubbing" with the boss or tolerating other forms of sexual harassment?5

At the end of the decade the OMS surveyed the attitudes toward management of 146 clerical workers, 133 of them women, employed in seventy-three companies. The replies of these office workers revealed that during the Depression their employers had made very little progress in rationalizing office procedures or making clerical work
more routine. The author of the report believed that clerical workers
desired the introduction of scientific management to the office to
protect them from the arbitrary decisions of their immediate
supervisors, and workers' comments did accent their vulnerability.
Many workers complained about favoritism and the "personal element
taking precedence over ability." One reason for the continued
personalism of office work was that office managers apparently still
could not check the authority of department heads and supervisors.
One worker, for instance, would have welcomed firmer control from
upper management and more formal, impersonal procedures for evaluating
clerical work:

Officials and executives do not know enough about the employees.
In most cases they get no further than department heads and
strange as it may seem these "heads" do not always portray a true
picture of an individual. All personalities are not alike, and
the "intelligent" person is not always the "charming" one.

In a similar vein, another worker argued that

[The supervisor] shows favoritism. Will not promote an employee
when that employee is doing a good job where he is,
because--admittedly--he does not like to break in new help.
Thinks only of his own department and not of the employee, nor the
company as a whole.

Insulated in their own departments and relatively independent of
outside interference, department heads had the freedom to determine
social and work relationships in their own units. Within this
framework, clerical employees often found that their superiors, like
the men in Stevens' study, blamed their own mistakes on the workers
beneath them. Many replies also mentioned that some workers received
preferred treatment from their supervisors, not because of exceptional
skill or efficiency, but on the basis of personality:
Must be a personal friend of the boss to receive any recognition. . . . Favoritism shown girls who smile and joke their way to better pay while others carry the work. . . . Tendency [of the supervisor] to be too lenient, allowing some people to annoy others by loud talking, singing, etc.

Despite the continual efforts of scientific managers to establish order and routine, within the departmental organization informal methods and relationships—existing in a traditional class and gender power structure—often determined working conditions.  

Although the workers in the OMS study did not raise the issue of machine dictation, their comments clearly indicated that during the Depression their bosses had successfully resisted centralization and routinization of dictation and transcription. Male supervisors and executives had not adopted a regular schedule of dictation which would allow an even flow of work which could be handled routinely in a central transcription department. Instead, dictators depended on having a personal stenographer or secretary available to take dictation at any time, and their reluctance to use a systematic approach to their own work made the coordination of stenographic work impossible.

Workers frequently complained that their bosses were disorganized or unwilling to plan work ahead of time. From the stenographer's or secretary's standpoint, a major disadvantage of the decentralized, unsystematic organization of office work was the widespread habit of saving dictation until late in the day. One section of the OMS report listed workers' opinions on this subject:
Late afternoon dictation burns me up when:

--It comes just as you are giving the final tilt to your hat and the work must go out that night.
--When you are wondering what train you are going to catch and longing for that five o' clock cigarette.
--When he passes the time of day away with the employees laughing and joking, and then remembers that the mail has to go out, and it is nearly five o' clock.
--It keeps me three or four nights a week and it is unnecessary.
--Dictation is held all day unnecessarily and given within the last hour of work.
--He fiddles around all morning, takes two hours for lunch, starts dictating at four o' clock and you have to miss your train to finish the work.

Another stenographer provided a further illustration of the ways that some supervisors and executives resisted routinization of their work. Asked to name "things that especially "burn me up" she responded:

Men who do not know how to dictate. Would far rather have the stenographer change the letter four or five times than have it well enough fixed in his mind to dictate it correctly the first time. Changing an entire letter for some trivial correction—for example, "it will reach you within several days" was changed to "it will reach you in a week."

The point here is not that women secretaries and stenographers would have preferred to work in a scientifically managed "pool," but rather that their problems reflected the difficulties of adjusting to the idiosyncrasies of an individual boss. The picture of office work suggested by the workers' comments in this study shows that scientific management had only slight impact on stenographic work because men in managerial positions refused to accept new methods which impinged on their personal control of work or workers.8
Efficiency and Expense during the Depression

The Depression forced employers to economize in the office. The need to cut expenses further hindered implementation of the office factory because the elaborate techniques of office Taylorism were both costly and time consuming. The primary concern of the scientific managers was to achieve direct, explicit control over office work and office workers, and in the prosperous twenties they paid little attention to the costs of the plans they publicized. Given the low wages paid to clerical workers, the savings of routine and system could be less than the cost of implementation. By the 1930s, the scientific managers conceded that the factory model was frequently uneconomical, and their publications began to emphasize savings.

Businessmen, however, seemed less interested in carefully designed plans to cut the costs of office operations through standardized forms and simplified procedures than in immediate results. Rather than introducing new programs, they reacted to declining profits by reducing the labor force and lowering salaries. A 1932 survey of 218 companies employing 111,700 clerical workers showed that the average firm had reduced its work force by 14.9 percent in the two and a half years following January, 1930. Larger firms had made the most drastic cuts, and 19.4 percent of the total number of clerical workers in the study had lost their jobs since the beginning of the Depression. Since many employers subscribed to the widely held belief that married women needlessly took jobs away from men and single women, married women were disproportionately affected by cutbacks, and married women whose husbands had jobs were the first
to be laid off. Small companies apparently had less flexibility in the number of workers needed to perform necessary work in the office and were more likely than large firms to economize by lowering wages. One-hundred-fifty-three firms, employing 55 percent of the employees in the survey, had cut clerical salaries. The average reduction experienced by the 62,000 workers affected was 14.1 percent, although "the most frequent slash was 10%," and one company had cut salaries by 43 percent. Almost all of the businesses, regardless of size, had eliminated raises and bonuses early in the Depression.10

Employers also took steps to reduce overtime. Office workers did not usually receive extra pay for overtime work, but it was common practice for employers to give supper money to clerical employees who stayed late. During the Depression some employers stopped this practice. An official of an Atlanta manufacturing concern told a Woman's Bureau investigator that he believed workers had taken advantage of meal allowances. As long as workers had received $1.00 supper money for late work there had been "a lot of overtime. This stopped just as soon as the firm discontinued paying supper money--"The girls used to stay until 7:00 P.M. and get their dollar." Other employers were also suspicious of the need for overtime. The Atlanta office of the Standard Oil Company, for example, had a policy against overtime work and reported to the Women's Bureau that "any one [sic] who stays overtime more than a couple of times is investigated." At Montgomery Ward, management attributed the need to work after hours to "poor supervision... One of the company's economy measure[s]
was to cut down" on overtime work by secretaries and stenographers by requiring department heads "to account for all overtime work by their employees."¹¹

Efforts to cut the expenses of overtime work through tighter regulation of the office work force were not always successful, however. Auditors and accountants, usually men, performed cyclical overtime "connected with financial statements and closing records at the end of fiscal periods," even though the proponents of scientific management had devised systems and methods that purported to make such work unnecessary.¹² Branch offices, which had proliferated during the boom of the twenties, were also responsible for overtime in some offices. In 1931, a surveyor for the Women's Bureau noted that the office manager of a Chicago insurance company described the overtime problem in his firm this way:

They discourage overtime tho[ugh] there is still a good deal. There is always some overtime, most of which is in the underwriting dept. Mr. M. thinks it is inefficiency tho[ugh the] dept. in which it occurs may not be responsible for it. Says work sent in from the branch offices is hard to regulate.

Indeed, the expense and difficulty of coordinating and controlling numerous branch offices, each with its own clerical force, prompted many companies to close their branches during the thirties. But the elimination of branch offices, like attempts to reduce overtime, were merely ad hoc economy measures, and, although it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which employers of office workers actually put the prescriptions of the scientific management experts into practice, these cost cutting efforts rarely appear to have been connected to broader plans to introduce scientific management to the office.¹³
Reliance on a female labor force further reduced the economic incentive to cut systematically labor costs by deskilling office work because the surplus of educated young women seeking office work exerted downward pressure on white-collar wages. Women's entry into the office had originally been facilitated by low wages because educated women had so few opportunities to obtain high-paying jobs. In the early decades of the century, the influx of large numbers of women had been accommodated within the traditional organization of office work by accentuating gender differences in the workplace—by labeling certain jobs "women's work" and by requiring women workers to fit contemporary standards of gender-specific behavior. In the thirties, the equilibrium thus established suited the need to control the expenses of running an office. Employers had always invoked the "pin money theory" to explain the low wages paid to women workers, arguing that women did not need their earnings to support themselves or their families. By the Depression, this rationale had become a self-fulfilling prophecy because employers sought out single women who seemed to fit this stereotype. The fact that this was inconsistent with firing married women was simply one of the many contradictions in their beliefs about gender that apparently did not trouble employers.

As a rule, the young, single women favored for beginning work in the office lived with parents or close relatives. Employers commonly made residence "at home" a requirement for employment, admitting that it was "difficult for girls to live on [the] beginning rate unless they lived at home." Of course, low wages also made it nearly impossible for young women to leave their parents, and employers
rarely considered that in hard times a woman's wages were often a necessary contribution to the family economy. And, whether these young women remained "at home" for reasons of economy or propriety, employers believed that parental supervision of youthful female employees fostered a stable work force. Women with close family ties were not likely to leave town or change jobs. Possibly, employers hoped that young women who lived with their parents would be less independent or assertive than those who had struck out on their own. The policy of a Philadelphia insurance firm, for instance, appears to have been based on that assumption. According to a Women's Bureau investigator, the Insurance Company of North America "ask[s] every one [sic] hired if they live at home. Do[es] not want to hire those having homes in the city and not living at home." Residence requirements also allowed employers to scrutinize the class and family backgrounds of prospective employees and to exercise subtle forms of class and ethnic discrimination in their choice of employees. Some companies recruited their female clerical force from among the friends and acquaintances of employees, and the Atlanta branch of the Hartford Fire Insurance Company was probably not unusual in its policy not to hire "girls living in some localities." 

Office Workers' Skills

The large supply of young women who had learned office skills in school but had little actual experience perpetuated the individuality and informality of office practice because employers could train new workers to adapt to the idiosyncratic policies and procedures of the
firm. The surplus of inexpensive female labor meant that bringing office practices closer to the factory model would not produce any economic advantage for employers. Many companies promoted women workers within the clerical force, assigning inexperienced employees to the most routine tasks and moving them into stenographic and secretarial posts as they gained knowledge of the business and adapted to the social environment of the workplace. Women in the upper levels of sex-typed office work continued to improve their knowledge about specific business operations, presumably increasing their value to employers. But female wages for office work were low, and, although women received pay increases as they progressed through the levels of clerical work, their salaries rarely rose as rapidly as men’s.16

Employers spent little money or effort training women employees and had a constant supply of inexperienced women in low-level jobs available to replace stenographers and secretaries who left work. Routinization, which would have reduced the number and quality of skills necessary in the clerical work force, served little purpose so long as employers could use the skills women workers developed on the job at no cost to their employers. Gender prescriptions and the traditional organization of office work supplemented each other as reasons for the popularity of young women workers.

Many employers refused to hire older, experienced women, not only because they failed to meet contemporary standards of female attractiveness, but also because older women expected to use the experience they had acquired in former employment. According to
employers, older women "want to run your business the way their former employer ran his—'Just so they use a typewriter well is all we want from new employees.'" So long as there was a surplus of young women available to enter office work this system served the social and economic interests of businessmen, but was disadvantageous for women because the knowledge they acquired was often specific to a particular firm and difficult to transfer to a new place of employment. Women who worked for one employer for any length of time often found that they had few opportunities outside that company and only limited ones within it.17

This explanation of the social and economic motivations of employers for hiring young women for office work may require us to rethink some earlier conceptualizations of the office workplace and women's place within it. Elyce Rotella has proposed a "human capital model" to explain the demand and supply forces responsible for the feminization of clerical work between 1870 and 1930. According to this hypothesis, the expectation that women would work only for a short period of time before marriage made employers reluctant to invest time and money helping women gain the specific skills and knowledge necessary to advance in a particular firm, or to pay them higher wages for those "firm-specific skills." Employers would be more likely to hire women for jobs requiring only "firm-general," easily transferrable skills in which the worker rather than her employer paid for training. Rotella says,

The theory predicts that women would most likely be hired for occupations in which the required skills were general rather than specific and that women would be expected to move into jobs
whenever the required skills became more general. The changes which took place in clerical work during this period fit the model very well. Mechanization and routinization reduced the specific skill component of most clerical jobs. Training in the new general skills could take place in schools where costs would be borne by the students (and by the public in the case of commercial education in public schools).18

It is true that the introduction of office machines and new general skills, especially typing and shorthand, changed office production and created new sex-typed office occupations. It is less clear, however, that employers reorganized the office workplace in ways which deprived women workers of access to firm-specific information and experience. Empirical evidence about job content and worker training suggests that the routinization associated with scientific office management did not account for the development of new sex-typed jobs and the rising demand for women to fill them.

In order for the human capital model to provide a satisfactory explanation of the demand for women office workers, it would be necessary to show that men and women actually received different training opportunities from their employers which enhanced the firm-specific skills of men but not of women. But in the years before World War II, both men and women entering office work learned their jobs informally from supervisors and co-workers in much the same way that a nineteenth-century clerk learned his work and acquired knowledge about his employer's firm. Before graduate education in business became popular, some companies did provide training programs to prepare men for technical or managerial positions. These programs, however, appear to have been limited to large firms with a strong commitment to elaborate organizational schemes, and, as a rule, formal
training for workers of either sex was rare and gave men little advantage over women in gaining firm-specific skills.19

Speakers at OMS meetings constantly complained that managers and department heads were merely promoted through the ranks and lacked adequate preparation for their work. According to these experts, haphazard methods of training men for managerial responsibility fostered inefficiency because men tended to copy the traditions and often mistaken methods established by their predecessors. To the dismay of the leaders of the scientific office management movement, business failed to become either a science or a profession because it had no recognized pattern of training its practitioners in universally accepted principles and methods.20

Workers of both sexes received their initiation to business in routine clerical jobs. When large numbers of women entered office work, the lowest level of clerical work--typing, filing, and machine operation--did become identified as women's work, but these jobs offered workers access to firm-specific information about the content and procedures of an employer's business. And, although women predominated in the most mundane clerical jobs, many of the inexperienced young women who began their careers as typists or file clerks left those occupations as they were promoted to other sex-typed jobs as secretaries, stenographers, and, occasionally, heads of clerical departments. Employers frequently used experience in the low levels of office work as a substitute for formal training in firm-specific skills. For example, employers queried by the Women's Bureau in the thirties often said that they had a policy of promoting
workers within the company. In a Philadelphia bank, "All new employees are started either in the central filing dept., the addressograph dept., or sometimes the trust accounting dept. This gives familiarity with the general business of the bank." At Sears, Roebuck and Company, there was no formal training procedure, [but] a progression of jobs. Training is on the job with instruction from other employees. Record clerks—junior clerks frequently become billing clerks. As stenographers or dictaphone operators are needed—typists are usually promoted. . . . Stenographers become correspondents if [they are] good.21

As Rotella acknowledges, men might also begin their careers in low-level positions, using them as "entry points to high level positions."22 The management of Vick Chemical Company believed that the firm-specific skills usually acquired by women in sex-typed office jobs were so valuable that in the thirties they prepared new employees for executive positions by assigning them to clerical and secretarial positions. The assistant chairman explained the firm's "shadow system" this way:

We bring these [college-educated] boys in, sometimes girls too, and put them to work for an executive or the head of a department as his secretary or stenographer. . . . Some of our major executives who come up quickly . . . started in typing routine letters for one of the department heads. . . . [They learn] by first-hand information what is in the executive's mind and how he operates.23

During more prosperous times, the New York advertising firm of J. Walter Thompson had groomed "apprentice" workers for promotions to "executive and secretarial positions" by placing them in a "fly squadron" which substituted for absent clerical employees. Many firms had a "flying squadron" or "float force" or an "understudy" system so
that they did not have to hire temporary workers to replace employees who were absent or laid off. Although this practice might appear to support Rotella's argument that clerical work had become so routine that low-level workers needed only general skills which they could transfer from one job to another, employers saw the system as a way to develop and make use of the firm-specific skills of existing personnel.

The significant difference between men and women in white-collar jobs was not that men could acquire firm-specific knowledge or skills that women could not, but rather that employers offered different opportunities for promotion to each. Men could move into managerial and executive jobs on the basis of their informal training, while women were promoted to positions as secretaries and stenographers, which required both specific and general skills. The existence of separate, sex-typed promotional ladders restricted women from further advancement. Even the most highly skilled jobs open to women offered little status or remuneration because within the office gender system women workers exercised their skills in positions of service to men and not independently. And, since they made no investment in teaching firm-specific skills, and until World War II there was a surplus of educated women available for office employment, employers remained untroubled by the rapid turnover of their female labor force. Throughout the first four decades of this century, it cost employers little in economic terms to preserve traditional patterns of work and gender in the office workplace.
But this informal and inexpensive approach did present another problem for the business community during the Depression. As the lower levels of office work had become sex-typed women's work and women were promoted to secretarial positions, which began to require gender-specific skills, men lost opportunities to learn business skills through experience in clerical jobs. The chief of the Federal Commercial Education Service pointed out this danger to the OMS in 1933:

Firms employing women for doing certain kinds of clerical, especially secretarial, work have used and promoted women so extensively that there is an absolute absence of men in the upper levels from which promotions to junior executives can be made. We checked the private secretaries and assistants to executives in one company, and found that in 18 cases, 14 assistants to executives were women, who if the executive went out of the organization could not be promoted. . . . Take, for example, the case of a big oil company; the purchasing agent for a big oil company would hardly be a woman, and yet the secretary and assistant to the purchasing agent in one large oil company is a moderately high-grade woman.25

In a period when there was a surplus supply of men as well as women to fill a limited supply of available office jobs, reliance on inexpensive female labor threatened to undermine the class position of middle-class men who expected to obtain white-collar employment. The gender arrangement of office work confronted employers with a conflict between their narrow economic interests and their class loyalties. Throughout the Depression decade, business leaders expressed concern for the stability of the class structure, particularly for the plight of white-collar men. Only the shortages of both men and women office workers created by the war provided a solution to the problem.
Reaction to the Depression in Scientific Management Circles

Despite the need to cut costs and improve office production during the Depression, traditional social relations and organization of work in the office persisted, and there was no significant rise in the popularity of the industrial model of scientific office management. The transfer of Taylorism from the factory to the white-collar organization remained primarily prescriptive and was implemented only in scattered instances. In fact, by the thirties, the factory model was being questioned within scientific management circles. As a program advocated by a group of self-conscious leaders in the business community, scientific management was not immune from changing economic and social conditions, and, although the term "scientific management" continued to appear in management publications, the economic crisis and the threat of social upheaval caused a shift in emphasis among the proponents of strong managerial control of white-collar enterprise.

As early as 1929, OMS members debated the efficiency of subdividing office work into a series of repetitive, routine tasks. Attempts to deskill white-collar work by adopting factory methods raised a problem indigenous to the office because, unlike factory work, work in an office frequently required the worker to absorb information and understand the work process.26 Marion Bills, the assistant secretary of the Aetna Life Insurance Company, for example, believed that the traditional subdivision of work in the claims department of her firm was not productive:
In some instances, this Ford-type production might prove most successful but claim papers are often very complicated and thirteen people are having to study a file and get into their minds an entire operation. This is most wasteful of time. It is most helpful to have a general rule that when comprehension of the case takes any large portion of the time of the operation, as far as possible, one individual should do all that should be done in his department as one continuous operation.

At first glance it appears that the problem facing the experts was to distinguish between routine tasks requiring only general skills and complex duties requiring an understanding of each individual case and company policy regarding it. But Bills' presentation did not center on how to separate upper-level jobs from the lower-level occupations that might profitably be deskilled according to the factory model. Instead, she focused on claims examiners' resistance to combining duties which required comprehension with routine clerical operations. According to her, "The claims examiners feel that they are people apart, that their time is too valuable to be devoted in any sense to routine. They are very much afraid to do any work which is beneath them." A member of the audience, an executive of Liberty Mutual Insurance Company, suggested that specialization and routinization were generally inefficient in the office workplace. The lower-level women clerical workers in his firm's small offices produced more work at lower cost than women in similar positions in larger offices whose work was subdivided into discrete, routine tasks. He explained,

We have a number of offices in various cities. Our experience has been that . . . the girls in the smaller towns, smaller cities, are more likely to show initiative and get a grasp of business quicker than the girls in the large city offices. We have had very much the same experience Miss Bills has described in finding that the small unit in which one person does many things, or nearly all the things connected with a particular job, has a great many advantages over stringing it out over what she termed the
"Ford" production. In other words, fitting in the serial work so each person has a job all the time, instead of having one person doing a number of things. . . . the cost per unit is greater in the large offices, where there seems to be a confusion and lack of cashing in on time, in a greater degree than in the smaller offices.

Although other participants in the discussion attributed poor production in large offices solely to "poor supervision," the representatives of the insurance industry, one of the businesses most likely to impose factory routine on its workers, were very much aware of the problems attending subdivision and centralization. It was not simply a matter of separating skilled from unskilled work. Bills argued that even low-level clerical employees such as typists should sometimes be exempt from the sequential organization typical of factory operations and that it was inefficient to segregate typists from the "flow of the work" where they could develop and use firm-specific skills.27

The social questions raised by the Depression further eroded the popularity of Taylorism as a method of office management. Businessmen feared that economic insecurity could exacerbate class divisions and cause social unrest. Unemployment and the potential for white-collar unionization posed the threat of conflict in the office workplace and aroused special concern among employers of office workers. Management organizations and business publications changed their focus from direct control and supervision of the office work force to the moral obligation of employers to workers who were, at least nominally, members of the middle class. Harmony between office workers and management was clearly in the best interest of white-collar employers.
In a discussion of the "Social Responsibilities of the Employer of Office Workers," I. J. Berni of Proctor and Gamble Company argued that employers had a responsibility to guarantee the economic security of their workers. By drawing a parallel between conditions in 1934 and "the period of labor unrest that may be associated with the activities of the Knights of Labor in the 1880s," when his own firm had first instituted employee welfare programs, Berni conveyed the fear of instability in the class structure shared by many business leaders.28

The economic crisis called for a new approach from the original proponents of scientific office management, and OMS members began to stress that improved communications and cooperation between employees and employers would achieve better "human relations" in the office. In 1937, AMA president Alvin E. Dodd noted that, although the Depression had brought "virtual open warfare" between classes, the annual meeting of the OMS "finds office managers working with a new balance sheet—a broader balance sheet that takes into account much more than dollars and cents. It is pervaded throughout with the 'human equation' in industrial management."29

The new program served the self-interested desire of employers and managers to avoid conflict in their own domain, but it also expressed their sincere belief that all levels of the white-collar work force were members of a community of interests. The human relations model not only encouraged workers to view their corporate employers as "family," but also stressed that managers should cooperate with workers as well. The new approach
is the operating plan of spreading the responsibility and letting each one employee feel that he has a real participation in the affairs of the company, no matter how minor his position may be. Do you think for a minute that all your decisions are just, equitable, and agreed with by your staff? . . . Do you realize that a secretary who has been with you for a long time understands your moods as well as your job, probably can handle you better than anybody else, and has a right to participate in the job that comes from accomplishment? If you don't, the sooner you get wise to yourself the better.30

Social control through manipulation did not, of course, aim at complete equality in the office workplace anymore than the coercive control of earlier methods borrowed from the factory, but the new methods did reflect the world view of the business community that white-collar employees and employers shared economic and social interests by virtue of their related work and class identities.

The changing techniques of scientific office management in the thirties corresponded to the recognition that the content of work and the social relationships in the office differed from those in manufacturing enterprise. From 1900 to 1930, scientific management experts, whether in the office or the factory, typically saw their task as breaking down the work process into the smallest possible elements, examining each process through time and motion studies to determine the "one best way" of performing the job, and finally imposing the methods they had "discovered" on a sometimes recalcitrant work force. By the thirties, however, even the experts questioned the wisdom of the conventional formula. For example, Allen Mogensen, a consultant in work simplification, warned employers in 1937 that autocratic tactics generated hostility among office workers:
I am convinced that if office managers are to avoid the difficulties experienced by production men in their attempt to improve personnel efficiency, they will have to give more attention to the desirability of employee participation in the improvements. Blind and unwise attempts to apply wage incentives have in many instances led to labor organization where otherwise no dissatisfaction of any sort existed. If the office field is to avoid organization of its employees, it should devote serious thought and attention to this fundamental difference in approach. Motion study cannot be successfully installed by having a technician work out a theoretical "one best way" and force this on all workers. If this is done, by the establishment of wage incentives or by other means, production will be increased, but a point may be reached where the reaction to such coercion will assert itself with almost primitive force. . . . The substitution of compulsion for cooperation may threaten the security of the whole industrial system.

Mogensen blamed scientific management as it had been practiced in the industrial setting for alienating workers and quoted an unnamed labor leader as well as the researchers at the Harvard School of Business who had conducted the famous Hawthorne experiments in his call for white-collar employers to reject Taylorism, which he said, "is bound to lead to feelings of frustration, to an irrational exasperation with technical change in any form, and ultimately to the formation of a type of employee organization such as we have described [i.e. labor unions]."

By the time the economy geared up for war production, the disenchchantment with the office factory reached the pages of Business Week. In a 1941 article on an office management conference of the AMA, the popular magazine reported that "some office managements have failed to exhibit the executive ability necessary to deal with current problems. Where that has happened, efficiency has been impaired, routines have broken down, and, in a few cases, labor troubles—even strikes—have resulted." The article cited approvingly the
conciliatory approach advised by OMS members because "the belief that office workers think and act as an essential part of management still persists in certain quarters and is naively dangerous." Ignoring the grievances of workers was to invite unionization. So too, the "bits and pieces" method resulting from the "intense specialization" advocated by scientific managers in the twenties reduced office production because "workers take more interest when they can see most or all of a job, rather than just a small part of it."^32

As worker satisfaction captured the attention of management experts, they adapted the tools of scientific management to include participation by the white-collar work force. They had earlier tried to "sell" their program to supervisors and department heads; now it became necessary to convince workers that greater efficiency would bring economic benefits without depriving them of independence or creativity. Mogensen explained, "Whenever one attempts to teach correct methods, a stubborn resistance to change will be encountered. Every individual in the office must be sold on the need for proper work habits."^33

And when Central Hanover Bank and Trust Company introduced a methods study program in the mid-thirties, bank management adopted a similar philosophy, but not without a veiled threat of unemployment if the program should fail. "It was important," said the assistant treasurer,

that our employees become more management-minded and thus realize that increased efficiency means better service. The first reaction—and a natural one on the part of the rank and file—was that, if they could simplify methods and improve our service, they, like Haman, were building their own scaffold...
Consequently, it was necessary to explain that a concern cannot stay in business if its cost of production does not meet competition. We made it clear that, inasmuch as our product is service, and we must give the customer the most for his dollar, the lower our costs are, the more business we shall attract—and instead of fewer employees, we shall need more.

The program implemented at Central Hanover involved only motions and methods, omitting the original Taylorite emphasis on time. The variety and irregularity of work in a financial institution prevented establishing standard time measurements since "the flow of work in banks is so uneven and so dependent on industrial activity that we can never tell a great many of our employees from day to day what their next day's assignment will be." Methods and procedures, however, could be standardized and applied to the tasks at hand, despite variations in the flow of work. During the same period, other firms focused attention on speed instead of developing uniform methods. In either case, efficiency was no longer synonymous with combined time and motion studies because office work demanded flexibility and because concentration on either time or motion gave workers greater freedom and sense of participation.

"Work simplification" at Central Hanover illustrated the possibility of using elements of Taylorite practice without attempting to dominate workers directly. Like the scientific program generally, this new strategy was not applied on a broad scale, but it was an attempt to reconcile a system based on direct, hierarchical control of the work process with the social imperatives arising from a depressed economy. The first step was to solicit workers' involvement:

Everyone in the bank was requested to submit a "why" question on present operating methods or policy. . . . The response was
overwhelming. We had thrown the doors open and given each worker a chance to do what is perhaps the easiest thing on earth—to criticize or find fault.

Next, management introduced methods and motions study to the clerical force. But rather than having new methods forced on them from above, the bank's clerical force judged the results themselves, often through the use of motion pictures. Since workers evaluated themselves, allowing employees to participate circumvented hostility toward an outside expert. According to the executive in charge of the program, "One young lady, when observing herself through the camera's eye, was heard to exclaim, 'How stupid of me to do that!'"36 Employees then submitted suggestions for improved procedures outline on a process chart. Workers proved to be perfectly capable of analyzing the work process, and the bank's management adopted almost two-thirds of 197 employee suggestions in the first year of the program. In fact, by soliciting employee participation, management was able to make use of office workers' knowledge and skills. The new approach also enabled employers to reduce costs and increase profits at least as effectively as the older model and was better suited to the diversity of office work. It is difficult to imagine Leffingwell, for instance, saying as Mogensen did, "Each new problem that confronts the office worker is a challenge to him to apply the principles of work simplification which he has learned."37

Conclusion

Human relations recognized and made use of office workers' skills and craft knowledge in an effort to put those to use for employers.
Although human relations programs substituted indirect control for direct coercion, as Harry Braverman points out, it was a logical outgrowth of scientific management, which shared the original movement's general goals. Human relations was not simply a reform effort designed to humanize work relationships, but a direct response to fears of labor organization and social disruption.

The surge in the economy that accompanied the beginning of World War II soothed fears of class unrest, but the rising demand for women office workers introduced the potential for a different kind of social disruption. Employment of married women in the office and the promotion of some women to supervisory jobs previously held primarily by men constituted a threat to married women's role in the family and to the existing sexual hierarchy in the office. In the forties and fifties, the proponents of scientific office management applied the perspective of human relations to the question of gender in the white-collar workplace. And the need for policies to cope with new conditions drew the federal government, for the first time, into involvement with workers in feminized office jobs.
Endnotes


3Mills, p. 193; Elyce J. Rotella, *From Home to Office: U.S. Women at Work, 1870-1930*, Studies in American History and Culture, no. 25, ed. Robert Berkhofer (Ann Arbor, MI: U.M.I. Research Press, 1981), pp. 71-73. It is important to distinguish between the arguments of Mills and Rotella. Mills argues that the long-term trend in office work in the twentieth century has been toward increased centralization and management control, but he also asserts that office mechanization proceeded very slowly in the interwar years (pp. 192-95). Rotella, however, sees office mechanization progressing at a more rapid pace and links the new technology with the introduction of scientific management techniques to the office. From Rotella’s perspective, by the “early years of the twentieth century” technological advances had increased office productivity because they had made clerical work “for the majority of office worker, routine and mechanical” (p. 70). I would argue that it was possible to achieve increased productivity and profits through the use of office machinery even without centralization or routinization.

4For example, see Alvin E. Dodd, “The Broader Balance Sheet,” *OMS* No. 78 (1937), p. 3; and Willard E. Freeland, “The New Era Challenges the Office Manager,” *OMS* No. 63 (1934), p. 5.


6W. W. Stewart, “As Others See Us,” *OMS* No. 90 (1940), pp. 34-39. The seventy-three companies in the study employed a total of 50,000 clerical workers. Stewart surveyed two employees from each firm, and the employees surveyed worked in departments ranging in size from one to eighty workers. Ninety-eight of those questioned were private secretaries, thirty-three were general office workers, fourteen did miscellaneous office work, and one was a machine operator.

7Ibid. Some of the complaints did indicate that dictating machines were in use. For example, one stenographer disliked “people who dictate on records and do not speak distinctly for numbers, names, etc.” (p. 38). Another, while not saying directly that she transcribed machine dictation, probably did, as shown in her complaints about poor dictation: “running away, stumbling over words, . . . men who dictate with a cigar or cigarette in their mouths” (p. 37). None of the responses in this study, however, show any
indication of centralization or other scientific management methods in use. Although the OMS would have been unlikely to report workers' complaints about scientific management, the report would surely have contrasted scientific management to traditional methods and relationships if the study had included examples of scientific management of dictation and transcription.

8 Ibid., pp. 38-39; 37. The skill and knowledge of stenographers as well as the ambiguities of this kind of work were also revealed in the responses. Stewart combined a number of replies into a single statement on grammar and punctuation:

My chief complaint is that the men in my office do not know how to dictate well. In several instances they use trite out-moded phrases and never seem willing to change. Business schools spend a large part of the training time to impress on future stenographers that these expressions are not used and then the girls go out to work and find that they are being used. Naturally, the first thing she tries to do is get the dictator to change this... Most of them, probably unconsciously, use terrible English and are often annoyed when a stenographer makes changes (p. 38).

9 The rationalization of personnel records at Macy and Company reported to the OMS is an interesting example of the cost of implementing scientific officemanagement. The designers of the new system admitted that the cost of the program ($2,500 for new equipment alone) was less significant than the increase in information and, implicitly, the control of personnel it offered management.

In another firm, the implementation of a bonus plan for clerical work was also very expensive:

The Cheney Brothers have at the present time, according to a report 283 clerks. This, by the way, does not include supervisors, so that you have got to increase that number to well over 300. They have been working on their bonus system for nine years though only intensively for three. They have at the present time five people... working on nothing but the installation of the bonus system for the clerical group. They have at the present moment 81 people on the bonus system. That sounds very expensive.

Although no representative of Cheney Brothers was present to explain why implementation had been so slow, the audience was apparently enthusiastic about the results. Actually, the plan was somewhat less expensive than it appears because the clerical staff was reduced by one-third during the years the plan was being implemented. Both examples from "Discussion," OMS No. 16 (1926), p. 37. I. O. Royse, "Trends in Office Organization and Methods," OMS No. 78 (1937), p. 4, admitted that plans to systematize office production were not cost efficient because of the low wages paid to clerical workers. For
examples of literature in the 1930s which stressed the use of scientific management to cut costs in the office, see G. L. Harris, "Simplification of Office Procedure and Standardization of Forms," OMS No. 58 (1933); and W. Fathers, "Purchasing Office Supplies," OMS No. 60 (1933).

10 "Figures Measure the Plight of the White-Collar Man," Business Week, May 25, 1932, p. 23. For information on married women and bonuses see, WB, Boxes 280 and 281. Rotella, From Home to Office, pp. 121-23, agrees with my reading of this source and even argues that employers who had not fired married women apologized for not having done so "and implied that the morally correct policy was to employ only unmarried women."

11 Washington, D.C., National Archives, Record Group 86, Women's Bureau Records, Boxes 280 and 281. [Hereafter cited as WB].


13 WB, Box 281. For an example of scientific prescriptions on how to systematize branch office operations see, R. C. Baker and H. M. Harman, "Branch Office Economies," OMS No. 59 (1933), pp. 2-15.

14 Rotella, From Home to Office, p. 186.

15 WB, Boxes 280 and 281.

16 Women's Bureau Bulletin 188-1, p. 28; 188-2, p. 23.

17 WB, Box 281.

18 Rotella, From Home to Office, p. 166.

19 WB, Boxes 280 and 281. Some of the companies, usually large ones with well-developed welfare programs, offered courses to clerical employees, and the training offered did follow the lines of sex-typing in the office. One insurance company, Brown and Crosby Company, in Philadelphia, offered no courses of its own, "though the Insurance Society fee of $10.00 a year for the three year fire and casualty courses may be claimed by anyone who has claimed his first year of work. Few women are encouraged to take these courses, for their use of the material would be so small." And the St. Louis branch of Travelers Insurance Company told the interviewer that employees could take courses from the home office. "Girls," the interviewer noted, "sometimes take 'Better Letters' course."

In the twenties, a BVI interviewer described the situation which arose in a company where male workers rather than management blocked the educational opportunities open to women in the clerical force:
The women secretaries and stenographers were being given special lectures in mechanical terms and operations to make them more intelligent in their letter writing. The men in the drafting room petitioned for the same kind of lectures, stating that the women who were there only temporarily till they were married, were getting more help than the men. To save possible complications and soothe the jealousy of the men the lectures to the women were discontinued. The women had no opportunity if going into the workshops even if they wanted to become more intelligent about the parts of the machinery. Of course it's perfectly true the majority of the women had no such ambition.

Cambridge, Massachusetts, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Bureau of Vocational Information Papers, Collection Number B-3, Box 31, Folder 374, Employer Return No. 96.


21 WB, Box 280.

22 Rotella, From Home to Office, p. 166.


24 WB, Boxes 280 and 281.

25 E. W. Barnhart [Chief, Commercial Education Service, Federal Board of Vocational Education], "Discussion," OMS No. 61 (1933), pp. 18-19.


29 Dodd, "The Broader Balance Sheet," p. 3.

30 Stewart, "As Others See Us," p. 31.

31 Allen H. Mogensen, "Work Simplification In the Office," OMS No. 82 (1938), pp. 12-13; F. J. Roethlisberger and W. J. Dickson, Management and the Worker: Technical vs. Social Organization in an


35See for example, articles in OMS No. 90 (1940) and No. 91 (1940) which contain several examples of time study by ignore motion and methods study almost entirely.

36Sinkey, "Methods Study," pp. 7; 8.

37Mogensen, "Work Simplification," p. 27.

CHAPTER THREE

THE OFFICE UNDER SEIGE:

MAINTAINING STABILITY DURING WORLD WAR II

Introduction

Long before Pearl Harbor, the Second World War sparked the recovery of the American economy from the Depression of the thirties. Increased economic activity created new demands for office work and office workers, and employers shifted their attention from sagging profits to improving production and attracting new workers. The defense boom created new opportunities for secretaries, stenographers, and clerical workers. Finding that they could be selective in their choice of jobs, young, white women who possessed clerical skills demanded higher salaries and better working conditions. Employer policies barring older, married, and black women from the office workplace changed abruptly in the face of a white-collar labor shortage. And for the first time, women were eligible for promotions beyond dead-end feminized positions in the office.

Most recent studies of the female experience during World War II agree that the war did not create dramatic or permanent improvements in women's roles as wage earners. This was clearly the case for women in all areas of office work. The war did not signal significant changes in the attitudes and priorities of businessmen; employers,
management theorists, and government officials successfully minimized the effects of change. Older women and those belonging to racial and ethnic minorities gained access only to the least attractive and poorest paying office jobs. Women who rose to the mid-levels of office work were generally highly educated or had extensive experience in office work—often they were more qualified than the men they replaced—and their tenure was presumed to be temporary. Women in feminized occupations also seem to have preserved their work values relatively unaffected by wartime conditions. Although many women sought work in previously male-dominated white-collar occupations, neither limited chances for career advancement in business nor the availability of non-traditional factory jobs with good wages deterred vast numbers of women from entering or returning to low-level positions in the office. Faced with limited opportunities in the factory, the family, and the office, the status of a white-collar job and the social environment of the office seemingly compensated these women for the disadvantages of secretarial and clerical work. Thus, in opposition to appearances, women in the office experienced only gradual and incremental changes as a result of the war.

The Shortage of Workers

The war confronted employers of office workers with an unfamiliar scarcity of workers for low-level feminized positions. While industrial employers offered women new opportunities to fill blue-collar jobs traditionally held by men, white-collar employers faced an expansion of the paper work which had, since the beginning of
the century, been handled by women in sex-typed dead-end jobs. In the
summer of 1942, Business Week highlighted the complaints of employers
who had before the war relied on the abundant supply of female labor
in a headline reading, "Girl Problem: Capable Office Help is so
Scarcie in Detroit that commas hardly mean a thing. City shy of
waitresses and servants, too." Blaming the inadequate supply of
female labor on the growth of white-collar work in government and
competition from industrial employers, the article lamented rising
wages for clerical workers and the declining quality of available
women workers:

If your business letter from Detroit is mispunctuated in
spots and misspelled [sic] from time to time, think nothing of it.
The shortage of trained office help is so severe in that arms
center that merely a reasonable facsimile of good secretarial work
is welcomed. Girls go from job to job, shopping for the highest
pay rates; wages are rising steadily; and supply cant take care
of demand.

Estimating a shortage of 2,000 stenographers in the Detroit area,
Business Week concluded, "bad as the situation is today, the general
expectation is that it will become infinitely worse before it
improves."^2

Management experts also recognized that in the wartime economy
workers could afford to be more selective in their choice of jobs and
encouraged employers to use benefit programs, including paid
vacations, medical insurance, and pension plans, to attract new
clerical employees. Although the proponents of scientific office
management had always favored a uniform and systematic approach to
benefits for the sake of efficiency and social harmony, it was only
during World War II that they advanced the need to attract women to
office work to buttress their stand. Additionally, the experts continued to advocate more careful hiring and training programs, now not only to increase production, but also to create a more satisfied work force and to reduce turnover. For the first time, employers had to woo women workers. The comptroller of Marshall Field and Company urged employers to adopt the new method of formally introducing new clerical employees to their supervisors and co-workers:

Remember, you have committed yourself to the payment of many dollars in hard cash for the training of this girl. She is an expensive piece of property, more costly than your experienced people; so treat her with consideration. Besides, good manners always pay.3

The scarcity of female labor for the office apparently dictated more humane tactics, but the original goal of streamlining operations and raising profits by managing the work force remained unchanged in the scientific management community.

Given the incentive of new opportunities in the white-collar workplace, many women sought training in office skills. In response to the demand for office workers, "mass production" business schools quickly trained women in typing and shorthand by treating students like products on an assembly line.4 Whether or not there was an actual dilution of the skills required for office work, businessmen and managers feared that the shortage of applicants for office jobs was causing a decline in the quality of new personnel, and advocates of scientific office management expressed concern that employers were relaxing their prewar standards. In a curious mixture of patriotic and managerial rhetoric, Louise M. Newman, the personnel manager of Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company, urged members of the OMS
to "conserve" personnel. In 1942, her company had reduced its staff by five percent by eliminating non-essential practices and retraining employees for new positions. And although, "admittedly, the applicants do not look so good today as they did a year ago," employers should not abandon their classification and salary systems or lower their standards. Newman also encouraged employers who had standardized salaries for clerical jobs to maintain their programs despite the pressures of a tight labor market. She acknowledged, however, that white-collar employers might have to make some adjustments in pay rates in order to keep workers from seeking more lucrative jobs in other offices or factories. But because factory wages were so much higher than clerical salaries, Newman accepted the popular wisdom that women would leave the office for blue-collar work:

The margin between the best salary rates and factory take-out is almost insurmountable. And although reliance on relatively good working conditions, white-collar status, and other intangibles that have normally attracted office workers is still possible, these advantages have lost some of their effectiveness.\(^5\)

Government officials also feared that women in feminized occupations might desert pink-collar employment as the war opened new opportunities to them. At the same time that government propaganda urged housewives to leave home temporarily to work in defense industry, "business girls" were discouraged from leaving their "prosaic" civilian jobs. In 1943, the War Manpower Commission asked staff member Charlotte Car to draft "a salute to the forgotten girl" for the popular magazine, *Charm*. Like most government propaganda aimed at women, Car's article assumed that glamour, excitement, and patriotism, rather than good wages, drew women to factory work. "The
girl behind the desk, the counter, before the filing cabinet," wrote Car, "has her moments of frustration, of feeling that she is standing aside and watching the biggest parade of all time pass by without a contribution from her." But Car assured young women readers that although they were "taken for granted" and their "little jobs . . . did not have the glamour of building airplanes and radar, ships and guns," the woman "who works in an office or a store . . . is the core, the central cog in the machinery of the business world." Never mentioning the wage differential between blue-collar work and feminized service jobs, Car praised women for their private, invisible contributions to the war effort:

In addition to her job, she is buying war bonds, donating blood to the Red Cross, doing volunteer work for the USO and OCD. When she washes her own clothes, instead of sending them to the laundry she is sharing some of the load. When she dresses in a sensible way, not for frills, but for the duration, she is doing her part.

Government publicists apparently expected that women would be satisfied simply by an acknowledgement of the importance of their underpaid work in feminized occupations and their unpaid domestic and volunteer activities. Whether government propaganda was designed to keep women in office work and other feminized sectors of the economy or to sell women who were not already part of the paid labor market on jobs in defense industry, its broad aims were the same: to convince women to meet the short-term economic needs of the war on the home front without undermining their traditional roles in the long run.

It was easy for management experts and government officials to imagine the attraction of high-paying, non-traditional jobs for women trapped in dead-end office jobs. Some historians, too, have argued
that during the war many women left the office to work in defense industry and that after the war these women were forced back into clerical employment to make room for returning veterans. It is difficult to prove, however, that significant numbers of women shifted from white-collar to blue-collar jobs or back again. Although the biographical information about individual working women is scarce, the New York House and School of Industry retraining program for former office workers and the American Association of University Women did collect work histories of women employed or seeking work in offices after the war. Almost none of these women had worked in factories during the war. Those who were employed in the early forties had worked either because they needed to support themselves or their families or because, for them, the war years did not coincide with the responsibility of caring for small children. Their experience in occupations other than office work was almost exclusively in pink-collar rather than blue-collar jobs: teaching, social work, nursing, or retail sales. This suggests that even during the war emergency, women based their decisions to enter or return to the job market on their stage in the female life cycle, and their choice of occupations depended more on their own expectations than on patriotic propaganda or even the rate of pay they could receive. For women, white- and blue-collar labor markets remained separate. The shortage of women office workers was not the result of the transfer of women to jobs in manufacturing, but of general economic expansion in wartime.

The fact that a large group of women found office work desirable, despite the availability of higher paying factory jobs, was a
continuation of a trend which had begun when women originally entered office work. Elyce Rotella has shown that between 1870 and 1930 women flocked to office work even though clerical salaries fell relative to wages in other occupations open to women. Through the war years and beyond, many women continued to value the "non-pecuniary" advantages of white-collar employment— it was cleaner, safer, and, more pretigious than factory labor. For example, in 1944, an official of Kimberly-Clark Corporation, which had a policy of recruiting office workers from among female mill operatives, reported, "We find no trouble in getting as many clerical workers as we need [from among the factory labor force] . . . They prefer office work and are willing to take a cut in pay, if necessary." Both workers and management viewed transfer from the mill to the company's office as a promotion, indicating that status was an important factor in the popularity of office jobs. Promotion did not necessarily increase pay, but workers seem to have equated clerical work with middle-class status, perhaps because the office offered a more comfortable environment or because working a regular eight-hour day was more dignified and more convenient than the rotating six-hour shifts in the mill.

In her study of female clerks in the federal government in the late nineteenth century, Cindy Aron has noted that even before office work became a conventional form of employment for women, it was compatible with prescriptions for middle-class women. Since neither wages nor propaganda about the excitement of factory work entirely explain the motivations of white-collar women in the early forties, it
seems likely that clerical and secretarial work continued to appeal to women who found office work consonant with their attitudes about class and gender.12

New Opportunities, Old Limitations

The special conditions of a wartime economy compounded the shortage of personnel for low-level office jobs. As the business recovery fueled by the war increased the volume of office work, government involvement in the economy created new demands for reporting and record-keeping. Businessmen complained that complex reporting procedures required by federal government agencies made it impossible to pare down their operations and intensified the white-collar labor shortage. Office machines, and even paper, were in short supply, and early in the war employers feared that the government might commandeer their office machines to meet its expanded needs. Office management experts proposed a variety of methods to help employers adjust to the scarcity of equipment and materials. Employing patriotic rhetoric, they stressed the theme of "efficiency to win the war" and repeated ideas that had always been part of scientific office management--centralization of machine operations, more careful scheduling of work loads, and teaching executives better dictation techniques to reduce the time required for transcription. They also suggested simplified procedures, eliminating non-essentials from the office work routine, and drilling employees on use and maintenance of machines. Standardized forms would reduce waste of materials, according to the managers, but employers would also have to
make special adjustments to the shortages of office supplies by making fewer copies, and by replacing letters with telephone calls and substituting hand-written for typed reports. The shortages of machines and personnel created new opportunities for groups of women who had previously been excluded from office work. Before the war, management experts had urged the adoption of testing, training, and measurement to ensure an efficient office work force, but they had never challenged hiring restrictions based on the race, ethnicity, age, or marital status of women workers. When the pool of young, single, white, women no longer provided sufficient numbers of capable workers from which to choose, however, the managers argued that hiring practices should become more inclusive. To meet the demand for office labor, scientific management publicists suggested that employers recruit older, married, and black women. Of course, since the military drew men out of the civilian labor force, the sex-typing of low-level office jobs was never called into question. And although the factory model of scientific management had become somewhat tarnished during the Depression, the influx of new workers, combined with the need to make better use of office equipment, made routinization once more attractive. Robert P. Brecht of the Wharton School reported to the OMS that,

In order to get maximum production from machines, some companies are using women office workers on multiple shifts—introducing a second shift or even 'round-the-clock-operation. . . . In companies with which I am familiar, women over 45 and younger ones whose husbands are in the armed forces are the only ones who have been used successfully on the "graveyard" shift. Girls under 21 have proved utterly unsatisfactory. They seemingly cannot order their social life and work life when the latter falls from midnight to 8 a.m.
J. C. Staehle, the director of industrial relations for the Chicago Mail Order Company, told employers that they could "conserve" equipment and "tap a valuable labor supply" by recruiting students and housewives for the evening shift. The democratic aims of the war effort would also be served, according to Staehle, by hiring blacks. "Another labor source which has not been tapped for clerical work is the Negro population," he said. "In many instances they have had more education and are more proficient in than whites because they have been unable to secure work and so have continued school longer than many whites." Those who visibly differed from the youthful, white ideal of the woman office worker—blacks and older white women—were allowed to enter the office work to meet the demand for labor, but they often remained hidden from the public and the rest of the workforce. Despite his claim to democratic motives, Staehle suggested that "night operations offer an excellent opportunity to use these people," meaning black women.¹⁴

Exhortations to expand the white-collar work force were not merely a reaction to the increasing demand for office workers; they were also a logical outgrowth of the interest in human relations that had grown during the economic crisis of the thirties. In the hands of management publicists, patriotic rhetoric was a plea to ameliorate conflicts in the workplace through gradual, controlled change. Brecht, for instance, told employers that they must democratize their hiring practices in order to achieve social harmony:

Prejudice has no right to a hearing. In the widening appreciation of its social responsibilities to which management has been
awakening in recent years, let it not avoid our own American minority problem! It has a duty to perform, and now is the golden opportunity. Failure to accept that responsibility will bring its own corrective or, in the course of time, breakdown.

And while Brecht's warning was reminiscent of Depression-era worries about economic and social conflict, Henry Niles, a management consultant and vice-president of the American Management Association, stressed the connection between greater opportunities for women and blacks with "the ideals of the true democracy for which our men have been working abroad."\(^{15}\)

But although the political and economic climate of the Second World War demanded that office managers confront the issues of race and gender, their plans and prescriptions to include new groups of workers in the office labor force were limited by their fear of disrupting the sexual and racial stratification of the office and the larger society. In his suggestion for integrating black women into the clerical work force, management writer Ordway Tead exemplified the desire to create solutions that would mesh the interests of employers and various groups of workers as well as the belief of the management experts that they could control and direct gradual social change. Employers who hired blacks would not only strengthen democratic institutions as they solved their labor shortage, Tead argued, but black workers would be especially loyal because of their past experience with discrimination. And race relations in the office would not pose a significant problem if white and black workers were properly managed: Before employers introduced new black employees into an office, they should discuss the issue with white workers and
solicit their consent to work along side blacks; black women should be hired only in groups so they could provide support for each other in a new and possibly hostile environment. As Karen Anderson has pointed out, black women continued to be at a serious disadvantage during the war because, if they were able to overcome discrimination in hiring, it was not unusual for white women to refuse to work with them.

Tead's proposal, however, like management proposals to place blacks and older white women on night shifts, did not challenge prejudice directly. Instead, Tead and other management publicists appealed to employers on the basis of their economic self-interest and patriotism and recommended that they manipulate their workers to avoid conflicts.

Government agencies responsible for overseeing the domestic economy and publicizing the need for women workers in industrial, service, and white-collar jobs also stressed that discrimination based on sex, race, and age was incompatible with economic mobilization, but concrete action to improve opportunities for women and blacks was virtually non-existent during the war. Historians agree that federal policies affecting the home front, especially the place of women and blacks, were characterized by voluntarism, lack of orchestration, and a desire to preserve prewar cultural values. The presence in government of members of the managerial elite—as policy-makers, advisors, and consultants—simply reinforced this general tendency because the ideology of scientific management aimed to strengthen, not to redesign, the established economic and social order. Neither management experts nor politicians could or would re-conceptualize women's social and economic roles or the racial divisions of American
society. Women's work in defense industry, as well as the entrance of black women and older and married white women into feminized office occupations, were necessitated by the wartime emergency; they did not represent a commitment to extend the egalitarian ethos of meritocracy to blacks or women.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the policies of the U.S. Employment Service. In its monthly Labor Market Reports for the District of Columbia, for example, USES not only categorized available jobs by sex, but also by race. Therefore, stenographic and clerical jobs were always classified as women's work, and jobs in the service sector were reserved for women and blacks. Work in retail sales was presumed to be appropriate for white women, while jobs in laundries, as domestic servants, waitresses, and cooks were divided between white women and blacks of both sexes. Despite chronic shortages of workers in some occupations, most notably office work, during and after the war, USES officials never considered re-evaluating their policies or questioned employers' requests for women or blacks to fill certain jobs.20

Karen Anderson's Wartime Women contains an excellent analysis of USES acquiescence "in discriminatory job requests from area employers," and reports a particularly interesting and visible example of the role of USES in supporting the sex-segregation of the labor market. In the summer of 1946, many returning male veterans applied to the Detroit USES office for jobs in the clerical sector, while many women who had done factory work during the war expressed a preference for jobs in industry. Rather than trying to place workers according
to their stated wishes, USES accepted employers' designations of low-level office jobs and jobs in manufacturing as "women's" and "men's" work respectively. Applicants who did not fit employer specifications were notified that their choice of occupations was unsuitable, although only women were refused benefits for failing to accept the jobs offered to them. Anderson concludes, quite aptly, that, "In order that traditional sex divisions could be maintained within the labor force, office employment policies encouraged the development of a situation where high unemployment was allowed to coexist with high labor demand." Of course, during the war, male civilian workers were unavailable even for traditionally male jobs. What this example does suggest, however, is that, patriotic rhetoric to the contrary, when the federal government was forced for the first time to formulate policies affecting feminized white-collar work, it acted to preserve the traditional gender distinctions that had shaped definitions and conditions of women's work in the office since the beginning of the century.

Other agencies of government, for the most part, paid very little attention to women in office work. Although there was an acute demand for women workers to fill feminized positions in the white-collar labor force, government publicity focused on women's work in previously male jobs. One reason for this orientation was that women's entry into heavy industry posed a visible contradiction to established female gender roles, while women's work for wages in the secretarial and clerical fields had already been successfully integrated with their traditional gender roles. Just as important,
women office workers also escaped notice because they were spread throughout the economy rather than being concentrated in a single segment of business, and federal studies and programs were frequently organized according to particular industries. The Women's Bureau, the central department of government concerned with issues related to wage-earning women, generally overlooked women office workers, concentrating instead on more noticeably disadvantaged women in manufacturing and service occupations.

The Women's Advisory Committee to the War Manpower Commission was more interested in the position of women in business, perhaps because of the class background and work experiences of some of its members. Acting as an advocate for women in the workforce, WAC strenuously objected to limitations based on age or marital status and the lack of upward mobility available for women workers. In their public statements, however, members of the WAC argued that by taking on greater responsibilities during the crisis of wartime, women would gain better opportunities later in recognition of their proven abilities. In the short run, this strategy was largely ineffective because the WAC's recommendations were unpopular with the WMC and because the WAC had little official power in any case.22

The new groups of women workers who joined the office workforce during the war were incorporated into the lowest levels of sex-typed occupations in a workplace which had a stable, well-developed gender ideology. They held the ground they had gained in the war years not because of government policies, or even because of a more egalitarian approach among managers. Rather, older and married white women in
particular became more significant in the white-collar work force during and after the war because demand for workers in feminized occupations continued to grow while the supply of young, single women declined.23

Upward Mobility

The urgent need for women workers for low-level, feminized clerical occupations was only part of the white-collar labor shortage during World War II. Employers also had difficulty filling office jobs that had not become feminized—mid-level supervisory positions and highly-skilled clerical jobs that offered the potential for advancement. At the same time that the growing volume of office work increased the demand for male office workers, military recruitment reduced the pool of available new workers and drew men already established as supervisors and high-level clerical workers out of the civilian work force. For the first time since the original feminization and sex-typing of low-level office jobs, gender became a pressing issue with potentially significant consequences for the social organization of office work. Promoting large numbers of women to fill the vacancies created by military mobilization might permanently alter the position of women in the office. In response to this new possibility, scientific office managers attempted to minimize the effects of change. Whether their prescriptions motivated employers to adopt specific strategies for dealing with female participation in the middle levels of white-collar work or merely reflected popular prejudice against the wartime expansion of women's
roles, the ideas circulated among advanced management thinkers were plainly not designed to redefine women's "proper place" in the economy or society.

Although organized programs to recruit and train women for mid-level office jobs were rare during the war, one company, Johns-Manville Corporation, did institute a formal training program to prepare women to do "men's work" in the office. The Johns-Manville plan to "upgrade" women workers is interesting in two respects: first, because it reveals the limits of even a carefully orchestrated policy to advance women to responsible white-collar positions, and second, because it poses a contrast to the general unwillingness of employers of office workers to offer women opportunities for permanent advancement in the office hierarchy despite the fact that during the war women proved their ability to perform "men's work." General office manager L. A. Griffin described the Johns-Manville plan to replace male clerks who left the office for the military with women as a gamble: "We bet we could change intelligent women from secretarial work, bookkeeping, comptometry and junior clerical work over into heavy clerical work—a type that in the past has always been done by men."24 But the company's plan was actually quite narrow in scope, and management did not envision sweeping changes in the sexual division of labor in the office. Rather, small groups of highly-qualified women were specially trained for only one position, that of district order clerk. And the selection and training process designed for women was more rigorous than any that the company had ever used for men applying for the same job.
In 1942, Johns-Manville began to recruit women for the positions as district order clerks by placing blind newspaper ads in five cities. The response was overwhelming; 2,975 women applied for eighteen openings, suggesting that women continued to have difficulty breaking into the middle and upper ranks of office work in spite of the demand for women workers in the feminized areas of office work. Since the salary of $125 to $150 a month was not substantially more than they could expect to make in secretarial or stenographic posts, and was certainly not commensurate with factory wages, the applicants for the Johns-Manville jobs must have been attracted by the promise of status and responsibility. Those who were successful had to pass through a series of three personal interviews and complete a battery of specially designed intelligence and comprehension tests. Afterward, they roomed together, at company expense, in residential hotels while they underwent two to three months of intensive training.

As a result of this highly selective process, Johns-Manville was able to choose well-educated, mature, experienced women to fill demanding, but not particularly inspiring, jobs.

The girls have widely varied backgrounds—educationally, we have a girl with a master's degree; another is a Phi Beta Kappa; two or three are university honor students and some have only completed high school. Business experience is also widely varied. One girl was secretary of the Chicago World's Fair; another was in advertising research; another was a member of the service department of one of the telephone companies; and one was manager of a small leather tannery office. Their ages vary from 25 to 35 and some are married. They get along very well together and cause us no problems.

The expense of the program—approximately $1,250 for each candidate—was indicative of the increased prosperity of the war
years, and like the management experts of the twenties, Griffin argued that the quality of the workers justified the expense.

If we can train people for this work at a cost of $1,250 apiece, it is cheap. Our previous method was to let boys grow up on the job, in the expectation that in three or four years they would qualify as full-fledged order clerks. I feel certain that boys thus trained, and trained incidentally in the faults of their predecessor, have cost us much more.

Yet Johns-Manville did not encourage women trainees to make a career with the firm. The women chosen for the program made a "gentlemen's agreement" to stay with the company for at least two years; however, "after that they are free agents. If they want to continue for another 14 years it is all right with us. But if they want to leave us at the end of two years they may." In fact, Griffin expected that "only a relatively few women will try for careers in business. They will marry and quit business." Despite the company's effort and expense, its plan was tailored to meet an immediate and temporary need and did not represent a commitment to place women on an equal footing with men. By 1943 only 100 women had been accepted into the program and Griffin felt that because of the difficulty in finding candidates who met the company's rigid criteria, "we are now in a boarderline situation so far as the continuation of the program is concerned."

Plans like the one at Johns-Manville to prepare women for permanent promotions to the better office jobs that men had held before the war had a strong appeal for ambitious women. In 1942, when the University of Chicago began to train women to be office supervisors, with tuition paid by the federal government, 900 women applied for the fifty openings in the first class. In 1943, although
women in the military and in civilian government jobs could receive training at the same time they earned wages—thus making these programs more financially attractive—the university responded to the continuing demand by enlarging its plan.26

But while women were anxious to improve their prospects, many management planners were ambivalent. Women were an attractive source of labor during the war emergency, but managers and employers hesitated to incorporate women fully into the upper tiers of the white-collar organization. For example, the following exchange during a discussion of "The Woman Supervisor’s Functions and Responsibilities," at the 1944 OMS conference, reveals not only the difficult situation facing women placed in supervisory positions, but also the less than whole-hearted support of women’s advancement among management experts:

Miss Washburn [Industrial Relations Section, National Electrical Manufacturers Association]: . . . May I put in my two cents’ worth in here on the special problems of the woman supervisor? She is often taken directly from the group she is asked to supervise. She has had no training and does not always have a natural bent for supervision. Don’t you think she should have special attention, special training? She needs it. She must be backed by her superiors, and she must be brought on. Women seem to feel that when a man is to be promoted to an advanced position, his superiors take quite a little trouble not only on his selection but in his preparation for that promotion; but that a woman supervisor is often put on the job with a kind of "sink or swim" attitude on the part of her superiors. She may come through all right. If she doesn’t, well it’s her own fault.

Dr. Cardall [Director of Industrial Relations, John B. Stetson Company]: Maybe she doesn’t need training, Miss Washburn, because to get an equal break with a man she must be four times as good to start.

Marion Bills, who had risen to the prestigious post of Assistant Secretary of the Aetna Life Insurance Company, was also unenthusiastic
about Washburn's point, arguing instead that women who rose beyond feminized jobs did not need special treatment. "I am not really differing with Miss Washburn but, of course, it has been my theme all along that women should be treated no differently than men," she said. "Therefore, if you are not giving men training and they are getting along, don't worry about us; we'll make the grade." Many other successful women would have agreed with Bills' assertion, but however correct their beliefs in the abstract, they did not address the specific issues raised by the confrontation between Washburn and Cardall.27

Women supervisors, according to Washburn, did not receive the same training and encouragement as men in comparable positions. And Cardall's casual dismissal of the problem illustrated that indifference could operate as a very effective strategy to keep all but the most exceptional women from succeeding in men's jobs. Others in the management community did see the need for formal training to teach women supervisors the "savoir faire . . . [that] is not, perhaps, transmitted from father to son, but . . . most certainly is transmitted from generation to generation of men." Yet formal training did not, in itself, address the questions of social relationships and power that Washburn had raised.28

Conclusion: Preparing for Victory

Before military victory was achieved, the office managers studied ways to restore the prewar social stratification of the office. The democratic impulse of offering equal opportunity to married, older,
and black women was often overshadowed by fear of postwar recession and unemployment. At the same time that they attempted to make use of new pools of office workers, managers stressed the moral, economic, and legal imperative of providing a place in the office for returning veterans. The Selective Service Act of 1940 required employers to reinstate veterans who had earned an honorable discharge in jobs that were the same as or comparable to those they had held before they had enlisted or been drafted, and office managers made it clear that they intended to discharge their obligations to veterans, most of them white men, at the expense of women and minorities who had both gained from and contributed to the civilian war effort.

Management planners had always seen improvements in the status of women in the office as a temporary response to crisis conditions, and some had planned from the beginning for the transition at the end of the emergency. Northwestern Life Insurance Company, for example, made it clear to employees who replaced servicemen that their new jobs would last only for the duration. "When men go into military service, we make a special effort to keep their particular jobs open, so we give the extra pay to the temporary incumbent in a separate check once a month just so the temporary character of the job will be realized," said the firm's general manager in 1942. She also warned employers to be cautious in lowering barriers to married women "in view of the difficulty of return to the established practice later." The same year, J. J. Goldie of General Tire and Rubber Company admitted that his firm was "just afraid to face the music" of trying to replace women in the office with returning servicemen at the war's end.
Anticipating "tremendous repercussions" if jobs were not returned to veterans, Goldie advocated that during the war firms hire men over sixty who would "present less of a problem when the war is over" and farm out routine work "to reliable homes, where housewives and even children could do the work without accepting regular employment in the office." 

At the end of the war, Neal Drought, head of the Personnel Utilization and Research Section of RCA Victor, suggested that employers who had not spelled out their policy in advance should consider "skill, ability, experience, dependability, dependency, and, of course, length of service" when deciding which employees should lose their jobs to returning servicemen. With the exception of "dependency," which applied primarily to married women, these factors were compatible with the concern for efficiency and uniformity in the scientific management movement. But the tendency to define women in terms of their family relationships rather than their roles as workers apparently made married women exempt from the criteria usually prescribed by the scientific managers. While he did not completely endorse firing all married women from office jobs, Drought did argue that employers should, as one company had already done, explore that as one avenue to solve their expected postwar personnel problems:

Thompson Products Company has announced that insofar as layoffs become necessary, it intends to lay off first the women whose husbands are working—regardless of seniority. Others have suggested that reemployment rights be extended to the wives or other dependents of employees who have lost their lives in combat.

In other words, for married women and women who had been promoted to
men's jobs, the victory might signal a reinstitution of the personnel policies of the Depression.

With regard to blacks who had entered office employment during the war, managerial formulas were less clear-cut, but in the long run they proved to be just as damaging. The labor shortage and their desire to avoid social conflict had dictated the experts' support, early in the war, for extension of at least limited white-collar opportunities to blacks. As the war drew to a close, however, office management publicists viewed the guarantee of jobs to returning veterans as a higher priority than their lukewarm commitment to blacks. Some wartime workers would have to be demoted and others laid off. When employers made these choices, blacks, like married women, faced special handicaps. Drought, for instance, argued that employers should evaluate black workers solely on the basis of merit and seniority. But he was unable or unwilling to acknowledge that decisions based on seniority would be especially harmful to groups of workers—blacks as well as married and older white women—who had been almost totally excluded from the white-collar work force before the war. He also failed to recognize the incongruity between his rejection of wholesale firings of blacks and other minorities on the one hand, and his willingness to concede the possibility of ejecting all married women from the office on the other. When asked, "What safeguards should be used in the displacement of Negroes?" Drought responded,

I am not unmindful of the fact that the racial problem is probably going to rear its ugly head. . . . no doubt some of these people will be at a disadvantage, partly because they have not had
educational opportunity. But, in any event, I doubt very much that any organization will simply adopt a blanket plan that all colored people are out, or all Chinese people are out, or all Philippine islanders are out, or some other delineation of that sort.32

By de-emphasizing the potential for discriminatory firings and hinging his argument on the educational disadvantages of minority workers, incidentally contradicting expert opinions expressed during the period of labor scarcity, Drought seemed determined to overlook the very real problems of racism and low seniority confronting black and minority office workers. The gains made by women and minorities during the Second World War were very fragile. Seniority rules and the belief that a married woman's place was in the home overwhelmed temporary changes. From the standpoint of its social structure, the office promised to remain after the war much as it had been before.

Although the social stratification of the office labor force was substantially unaltered by the war, the organization of office work has undergone a gradual change. Shortages of personnel and materials combined with the ballooning quantity of paperwork in the war years achieved more than decades of publicity about the virtues of scientific office management. By force of circumstance, employers applied assembly-line techniques to many clerical tasks. And the massive growth of both civilian and military government offices led to the adoption of methods long advocated by scientific office managers. The office of the Quartermaster General, for instance, adopted "scientific" techniques of standardization and measurement, and brought in management consultants from private business to aid in reorganizing its procedures.33
The implementation of scientific management principles in large, complex government bureaucracies sometimes had unforeseen consequences, however. Rules and routines produced mountains of paper and seemed to take on a life of their own. For example, management experts discovered that employees of the Social Security Board believed that they were required to write in an "indirect, impersonal manner which is safer anyway—even though it is always verbose and frequently confusing. . . . Many employees in one bureau sincerely thought that it was contrary to policy to take a clear-cut stand on any point, to say 'yes' or 'no' without hedging."34 Office management consultant Henry Niles found that office operations at the Office of Price Administration were so complex that "it took 30 feet of wrapping paper to draw a flow chart of what happened to a simple letter and all the copies that were made."35 Although the consulting experts always argued that their methods would simplify the growing red tape in government and private offices, the systems and routines introduced by scientific management in order to centralize authority at the top were in large part responsible for the problems that appeared during the war. In the late forties and fifties, the proponents of scientific office management took up this theme, and the inflexibility and intricate record-keeping procedures of the scientific program began to fall into disfavor.

The effects of World War II on office work call into question the notion that advocates of scientific office management could actually control the relationships and organization of work in the office. Throughout the war, the managerial elite reacted to crisis conditions
rather than directing the changes that occurred in office policy and practice. With regard to the immediate changes in the white-collar work force caused by the war, the proponents of scientific methods reflected the general social priorities of American employers and politicians about the proper roles of women and blacks in society and the workplace, never challenging sexism or racism even to achieve better production. As government policy makers, they upheld traditional relations, largely through their lack of intervention: Inaction was an effective means of preserving sex-typing as well as sex and race segregation in the office.

2 *Business Week*, August 22, 1942, pp. 80, 82.


6 Washington, D.C., National Archives [hereafter cited as NA], RG 211, Series 11, War Manpower Commission, Correspondence 1943, Box CA-CL.

7 See for example, Skold, "The Job He Left Behind," pp. 69-70.

8 Cambridge, Massachusetts, Radcliffe College, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, New York House and School of Industry Papers, Collection Number MC-287, Box 3, Folders 37-38. Only two of 125 older women seeking to return to office work whose resumes are contained in the NYHSI papers had done factory work at any time in their careers. Both of these women had been sewing machine operators during World War II. NA, RG 86, Women's Bureau Records, Box 1721. The data collected by the AAUW for a survey of part-time women workers in the Rocky Mountain area include work histories of thirty women doing part-time office work in 1951. The questionnaires for this survey are the same as those used for *Part-Time Jobs for Women*, Women's Bureau Bulletin 238 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1951), but these surveys do not appear to have been used in that study. All of these women had previous work experience, but none had ever done factory work. See also Valerie Kincade Oppenhelmer, *The Female Labor Force in the United States: Demographic and Economic Factors Governing its Growth and Changing Composition*, Population Monograph Series, no. 5 (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, 1970), pp. 122-27.
1 Anderson, Wartime Women, pp. 32-33, 43, comes to a similar conclusion.


17 Anderson, Wartime Women, p. 42.

18 Ibid., p. 7; Rupp, Mobilizing Women for War, pp. 87-90. For general discussion of the lack of coordination among federal agencies during the war and the desire to preserve cultural traditions, see John Morton Blum, V Was Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Harvest/HBJ Books, 1976).

19 For example, Wallace W. Charters served on the War Manpower Commission. Columbus, Ohio, The Ohio State University Library, Wallace Werrett Charters Papers, Biographical Sketch. Women's Advisory Committee member Bess Bloodworth was vice-president in charge of personnel of the Namm Store, Brooklyn, New York and had taught Personnel Administration at the School of Retailing at New York


21 Ibid., pp. 170-71.


25 Ibid., pp. 20-21, 21, 22-23. Griffing described the job of district order clerk this way: "One of the major jobs of the district office force is to handle the customers' orders; to edit and interpret them; to put them in Johns-Manville terminology; to apply the correct prices, discounts, and codes; to determine transportation allowances and prepare the orders so that the customers' shipping and billing instructions will be followed," p. 19. Griffing and Helen McKenna, "Women in High Level Clerical Work," National Office Management Association Twenty-fourth Annual Proceedings (1943), pp. 100-106.


30 Ibid., p. 25.

31 Ibid., p. 28.

32 E. W. Reilley [Chief, Organization Planning Branch, Office of the Quartermaster General; civilian occupation, management expert], "The Control Staff as an Aid to Management," OMS No. 107, pp. 3-13; Edward F. O'Toole [Chief Management Consultant, Office of the Quartermaster General; civilian occupation, insurance executive], "Control Staff Techniques," OMS No. 107, pp. 14-30.

33 Milton Hall, "Improving Office Communications," OMS No. 108 (1944), p. 15.

34 Marvin Bower, "Discussion," OMS No. 107, p. 32.
CHAPTER FOUR

POSTWAR ADJUSTMENTS AND READJUSTMENTS

IN THE OFFICE WORKPLACE

**Introduction**

In the decade following World War II, employers of white collar workers confronted many of the same problems that had arisen since the 1920s. Most important, the volume of office work continued to expand and the shortage of young, single, white women available to fill low-level feminized positions in the office remained a chronic problem. This problem was compounded throughout most of the period by a condition of partial mobilization for defense and by the threat of depression, especially in 1949. Under these conditions, women office workers' position in the office remained relatively static. More feminized white-collar jobs became available, which allowed greater numbers of married and older women to enter the office work force, but there was no qualitative improvement in the kinds of jobs open to women, and advancement was severely limited. Employers' growing dependence on married women did, however, provoke an ideological debate about the conflicting economic and domestic roles of women workers, a debate that went unresolved until the mid-fifties.
Despite changing conditions, office management experts failed to propose any new solutions for white-collar employers, but instead renewed their calls for greater rationalization and better human relations in the office workplace. The changes in office management theory were minor; the office factory of the postwar period simply incorporated recent technological advances, most notably the computer, and the human relations model adopted the language of the Cold War fear of Communist subversion. The reiteration of old themes suggests that by mid-century, the self-conscious management elite had failed to gain acceptance of its ideas and that it had little new to offer. And, while employers remained skeptical of the so-called "scientific" model, by the early fifties the experts themselves were advocating caution in the application of scientific management to the office.

Emphasizing the similarities between white- and blue-collar work, several historians have recently characterized the advocates of scientific office management as proceeding directly and purposefully in their pursuit of profits and control. But the content of managerial thought between 1945 and 1955 suggests that those who proposed to apply scientific management to the white-collar workplace were often unsuccessful in proposing effective means to achieve those goals or in winning widespread adoption of their methods. Of course, in the years between 1920 and 1955 there was a general increase in mechanization and routinization in some areas of office work, and a variety of experiments in human relations designed to shape social behavior in the office workplace were carried out. But there were several reasons why scientific management never became the controlling
definition of office organization. Most important were the internal contradictions in managerial thought. The scientific managers originally proposed to increase profits and at the same time enlarge administrative control over operations and behavior in the office. These aims were frequently incompatible with one another, and both were often at odds with the office gender system. Given the constant competition among these three sets of ideas, management propagandists were unable to develop an integrated ideology which could deal effectively with changes in business conditions, the labor supply, and the political climate. Finally, because scientific office management never came to terms with the special conditions of work in the office—that is, with complex systems of gender relations and the interconnected flow of work through all levels of the white-collar organization—the programs of the publicists could not overcome resistance from mid-level managers and skeptical employers, a phenomenon unique to management in the office. Thus, in the postwar era, the scientific management of office work merely continued its lurching and incomplete progress, but did not gain ascendancy.

Chances for Advancement

As American servicemen returned home at the end of World War II, women workers were forced out of "men's work" in the factory and the office. In manufacturing, the end of the war emergency caused a general reversal of the temporary gains made by women workers, and their proportion of the blue-collar work force returned to prewar levels by the end of the decade: from 38% of factory operatives in
1945, women sank to 27% in 1950, compared to 26% in 1940. In white-collar work, however, the war had simply intensified the on-going feminization of work in the lower levels of the office organization, and, reflecting the continuing expansion of white-collar work after the war, the proportion of women in secretarial and clerical jobs in the late forties and the fifties exceeded prewar levels. During the war, the number of women clerical workers doubled from 2.5 million to 5 million, as the proportion of women in the clerical work force climbed from 53 percent to 70 percent. In 1950 women constituted 60 percent of all clerical workers, and by 1956, over two-thirds of the clerical work force was female; the number of women clerical workers, over 6 million, topped wartime highs by over one million. But the war did not result in comparable gains for women in the middle and upper levels of office work. After the war, employers again closed advancement to managerial and supervisory positions to women, and a return to the prewar sexual division of labor in the office left women unable to compete with men in the office hierarchy.

When the National Manpower Council held conferences of business and industrial employers in seven cities in 1955 and 1956, the discussions showed that women's chances for advancement in white-collar work were little better than they had been before the war. The reasons offered for failing to promote women to better jobs in the office work force suggest that the wartime experience had not altered employers' adherence to cultural beliefs about gender roles and behavior in the workplace. In the insurance industry, one of the
largest employers of women office workers, employers based their
decisions to deny women promotions to a variety of "men's" jobs on
popular notions about women's "natural" inclinations and on normative
judgments about conventional "feminine" behavior:

Very few insurance company agents are women. It was suggested
that women do not like to sell intangibles and, also, that selling
insurance requires the kind of forceful, aggressive, extroverted
personality supposedly found infrequently among women. Many
selling jobs, it was said, make demands upon women which they do
not wish to meet, or require activities which are considered
inappropriate for them, such as travelling, night work, or calling
on clients in their homes. As adjusters they might face difficult
situations in the course of making investigations and arranging
settlements.

In some cases, employers of white-collar workers argued that public
prejudices, rather than their own, prohibited them from placing women
in positions of authority: "Banks, for example, sometimes do not hire
women in their trust departments or as loan interviewers because it is
believed that clients would have little confidence in their business
judgment. Some insurance companies do not employ women as accident
and health underwriters because they believe clients will not accept
their decisions." Some conference participants objected that such
policies were premised on faulty assumptions about women's ambitions
and abilities and "that employers may be more prejudiced than they
presume their customers to be," but this was a minority view, at odds
with the actual sexual division of power in the white-collar
organization.3

According to the National Manpower Council's report, entitled
Womanpower, in cases where formal training was a prerequisite for
promotions, women were frequently denied admission to training
programs. For instance, in 1957 only one of the four graduate schools of business operated by banking associations admitted women, despite the fact that 75% of all bank workers were women. Other white-collar employers offered training only to older women, arguing that younger women were a poor choice for training and advancement because they were apt to leave work for personal reasons. Of course, to some extent, this policy acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy, since women who had no opportunities for promotion probably did exhibit less attachment to their jobs.

Given the continuing importance of gender ideology in the office, it was not surprising that employers barred women from competing directly with men in the white-collar work force and confined women to a "separate sphere" of sex-typed work in the office. The National Manpower Council reported that women workers in the 1950s "generally .. follow a promotion system which is specific to women, and do not compete with men." Women typists and stenographers had the best opportunity to follow that traditional route of advancement within the feminized sector of office work, improving their pay and prestige as they moved from routine typing and dictation to private secretarial posts. Secretaries maintained a fair amount of control over their work and could exercise power through informal social relations in the office, but the content of their jobs and their status were defined by their informal, personal relationships with individual bosses. The fact that stenographic and secretarial jobs had become feminized in the sense that they required gender-specific skills, appearance, and behavior, made it virtually impossible for women in these jobs to
break their ties of dependence on particular male supervisors and bosses and reinforced the impression that women office workers occupied a separate sphere in the white-collar organization. Although promotion from within, based on experience, remained a common pattern for white-collar men, the Womanpower report stated that in only a few industries, such as advertising and publishing, could women use the skills and experience they had acquired in secretarial work to reach executive positions.  

Although women office workers generally recognized that their opportunities for promotion were limited, many of them did desire advancement. In 1948, Esther Becker, the supervisor of personnel relations for the Forstmann Woolen Company, surveyed her company's 225 office workers. Of the 93 percent who responded to her questionnaire, 75 percent hoped for advancement, "a greater desire than management had anticipated." Becker attributed the desire for promotions to the increasing number of married women in the work force, women for whom "the job is for the long haul, rather than a 'stop gap,'" and concluded that "the office supervisor must try to upgrade more girls."

In an effort to promote satisfaction among its women office workers, the Forstmann Company initiated a course in "secretaryship" for women employees, assuming, apparently, that women workers would be satisfied if they had the chance to advance to the upper levels of sex-typed office work. The company did not, however, respond to women's expressed desire to move up in the office hierarchy by training or encouraging them to compete with men for white-collar promotions. In 1952, a survey of several hundred "older" women office workers—that
is, women over the age of thirty-five—made by the Occupational
Planning Committee of the Cleveland Welfare Federation also indicated
that women wanted advancement, despite the fact that over half the
women interviewed believed that they had no chance for promotion.
Although 80% of the women in this survey professed to be satisfied
with their jobs, both satisfied and dissatisfied workers listed their
job-related complaints as "unsatisfactory remuneration," "lack of
opportunity for advancement," and "poor working conditions," in that
order.  

Other than private secretarial work, the only openings for women
who aspired to promotions were as supervisors of other women workers.
But despite the widespread use of women as clerical supervisors,
employers disagreed about their effectiveness. Seventy-five of the
100 employers interviewed for the Cleveland Welfare Federation's study
reported that they promoted women to supervisory jobs, yet only 9
percent of this group "felt that women excelled in this capacity."
The twenty-five employers who did not employ older women supervisors
unanimously agreed that they based their policy on sex rather than
age, arguing that "women do not work well under women supervisors."  
Some employers at the National Manpower Council conferences also
believed that women workers preferred to work for male supervisors.
This was not always a point in favor of male supervisors, however,
since some employers suggested that women wanted to work for men
because "they can 'get away with more.'" But in actual practice, the
effectiveness of women as clerical supervisors was not the issue for
employers. The continuing expansion of work in the office created a
demand for supervisory personnel, and employers found an inexpensive source of labor to meet this need by putting women in charge of other women workers. Because women were rarely placed in positions of authority over male workers, their supervisory roles did not challenge the separation between "men's" and "women's" work, and the promotion of women to posts as clerical supervisors paralleled the feminization of other areas of office work. As the Womanpower report noted,

In almost every organization . . . a point is reached where further promotion would involve supervision of men. At this point, and sometimes before, women are likely to be passed over in favor of men. The same consideration usually limits the promotion of women to top staff positions in personnel, training, and similar departments.9

Promotions to supervisory jobs did allow women to escape the personal dependence of secretarial work, but they did not place women in competition with men for further advancement. As had been the case in World War II, the increased demand for supervisory personnel opened limited opportunities for some women but did not erode the boundaries of "women's place" in the office.

Room at the Bottom

Although the return of male workers to the civilian labor market curtailed women's upward mobility in the white-collar workplace, some wartime trends continued. In fact, World War II was only the beginning of a long-range shift in the relation between the supply of and demand for labor in the feminized white-collar occupations. The increase in the volume of paper work, which had begun in the last decades of the nineteenth century and gained momentum as the twentieth
century progressed, continued unabated in the postwar era. While the trend toward consolidation in business and the adoption of complex administrative procedures had put a premium on record keeping, the "vastly expanded responsibilities and functions of government during the emergency years of depression, war, and cold war" had further intensified the demand for white-collar workers both directly and indirectly. The workers preferred by employers for clerical and secretarial work—young, single, white women—were not available in sufficient numbers to meet an increasing demand. Employers' prejudices against women who did not fit this ideal faded slowly, but hiring restrictions based on age and marital status eroded in the years following the war. And although discrimination against black women persisted, older and married white women entered the office work force in dramatic numbers, becoming indispensable, permanent workers.

The demand for secretarial and clerical workers remained strong throughout the late forties and fifties. Even during the brief recession of 1949, employers laid off few office workers, and during the undeclared war in Korea, the shortage of typists, stenographers, and secretaries was so severe that it gained national prominence. Government recruiters from the State Department and the Department of Defense toured the country offering high pay, fringe benefits, and "the glamour of working in Washington" to encourage women with secretarial skills to take government jobs. The Women's Bureau and the Bureau of Employment Security organized a publicity campaign, strikingly similar to the World War II propaganda effort to draw women
into defense plants, to attract more women to office work. But while the State and Defense Departments seemed to aim their appeals at young, single women, presumably because they could relocate more easily than married women, the Women's Bureau and the BES circulated newspaper copy and radio script suggestions that attempted to attract older and married women into local labor markets. Like World War II propaganda, the government publicity of the Korean War era stressed patriotism and emergency conditions, taking care not to undercut women's traditional domestic responsibilities. Patterns for newspaper articles, for instance, emphasized women's "patriotic duty" to aid the defense effort and keep the domestic economy running smoothly by returning to office work. One such article included this ready-made quotation to be inserted beneath the photograph of a local woman worker: "It's a real satisfaction to know that the work I am doing is an essential part of the defense effort." Private employers were urged to hire older and married women, who in peacetime would not have been desirable employees, and even to do their part for the defense effort by permitting part-time schedules for working mothers. The government clearly had no interest in encouraging mothers of small children to enter paid employment, however, and articles and scripts carefully avoided the topic of day care. According to the publicity, technology gave the American housewife so much free time that she would look forward to the stimulation of typing and taking dictation: "Some of the ex-stenographers now happily married, but undoubtedly bored with stirring up mixes and operating gadgets, could be lured back into office jobs if they realized that empty typewriters are
creating a bottleneck in defense production." A woman's paycheck was rarely mentioned as a motivation for her work, and the articles created the general impression that a married woman's income was supplementary to her family, rarely that she might be its major breadwinner.\textsuperscript{12}

But despite their increasing need for female personnel and the diminishing supply of young, single women workers, employers of women office workers were slower than manufacturers to relax hiring restrictions based on age. The upper age limit for women office workers appears to have crept up from the mid-twenties to the mid-thirties, but employers still preferred to hire comparatively young women. From 1947 onward, women over thirty-five outnumbered younger women in the American labor force as a whole, but women under thirty-five continued to predominate in the clerical work force. A 1953 Census Bureau survey showed that while one-third of all women workers under the age of thirty-five were engaged in clerical occupations, only one-fifth of paid women workers thirty-five and older held clerical jobs.\textsuperscript{13}

"Older" women workers themselves sometimes complained bitterly about hiring practices based on age, and their comments suggest that they perceived the problem to be quite widespread. For example, in 1952 a woman office worker from Atlanta, Georgia, wrote to Women's Bureau Director Frieda Miller to express her approval of the Women's Bureau's concern for older women workers. Fifty years old, "and not dead by a long shot," this self-proclaimed "booster" of the Women's Bureau said,
I am glad someone is getting wise to the fact that mature women are just as capable and reliable (in most cases more so) as the seemingly preferred group—18 to 35. Naturally, an employee [sic] prefers to look at a sweet young thing, even though sometimes she does look like she has been dragged through a keyhole on account of staying out late nights, and stays off from work often and wastes her employer's time, but no doubt there are plenty [of] bosses who still consider getting the work done of greatest importance.\textsuperscript{14}

At the same time, New York City women who had completed a training program for older women office workers conducted by the New York House and School of Industry also reported that they had encountered age barriers in their search for employment. One graduate of the program responded to a follow-up questionnaire, saying, "No doubt about it, I found maturity the greatest stumbling block. Suggest stressing the importance of maintaining a trim, youthful appearance." Another replied, "I would suggest that a mature woman should not give her right age in applying for a position."\textsuperscript{15} It was difficult even to measure the extent of age discrimination because formal hiring restrictions were complemented by informal hiring practices that excluded so-called "older" women. Informal discrimination was so pervasive that a 1950 study of five placement offices operated by the New York State Employment Service showed that the age prejudices of private employers "had been communicated to a certain extent to the staff" of the state employment service. The study concluded that staff members absorbed the popular emphasis on youth, "that they prefer to place younger people because it is easier; [and] that they reflect community opinion that older people are 'ineffecual' and 'occupational misfits.'"\textsuperscript{16} Older women seeking office work faced special disadvantages because cultural ideals of youth, physical
attractiveness, and female deference had been incorporated into the very definition of women's work in the office.

Pearl Ravner, Chief of the Women's Bureau Economic Studies Branch, blamed popular culture for many of the stereotypes that limited older women's opportunities in the paid labor market. According to her, age discrimination occurred in the work force partly because "Advertisements are developed so that they appeal to the desire to 'keep young.' Products are manufactured to help women maintain their 'looks,' zest, and sex appeal." Popular emphasis on the youthful ideal was especially detrimental to older women seeking work in feminized occupations in the service sector of the economy—as waitresses and sales clerks as well as office workers—because employers of these pink-collar workers argued "that public relations are improved if women employees who meet the public are young."

Although there were no studies to substantiate this claim, employers continued to rely on this justification for their hiring practices in the same way that they denied women promotions on the basis of their belief that the public preferred to deal with men rather than women in positions of authority.17

Popular stereotypes of the personality traits of older women also contributed to the barriers against them. Employers charged older women with "a 'know-it-all' attitude, insistence on doing things their own way, inability to get along with younger workers, irresponsiveness to direction by younger supervisors, inflexibility of personality and opinions, and oversensitivity to criticism." Older married women, once they had overcome their initial nervousness and bewilderment at
being thrust into the labor market, were especially vulnerable to criticism because employers claimed that they could detect a "tendency of middle-aged women, especially those who have raised families, to be 'bossy.'" Employers seemed little troubled by the fact that this complaint contradicted their refusal to promote women to better jobs because of their presumed lack of force and aggressiveness. The contradiction was apparent in the comments made by one employment director in 1952:

"I won't hire a 40 or 45-year-old gal for a junior secretary job. . . I can't take advantage of the gal even though she's willing. She'll be unhappy with the money. She'll want to move on up." In fact, it seems possible that employers were reluctant to hire older women precisely because their ambition or independence might threaten the existing gender system of office work. In any case, employers who did hire women over thirty-five found that their actual experience was more positive than the stereotypes might have led them to expect. These employers reported that older women had better judgment and were more loyal and reliable than young women—although the Cleveland Welfare Federation's study did show that employers believed that their older workers were less flexible in accepting new methods and adapting to their co-workers and that younger workers were faster but not necessarily more accurate in their work.

The Ideological Debate

The fact that many older and married women were becoming permanent members of the feminized office work force—and that they and their families as well as white-collar employers were becoming
increasingly dependent on their labor—combined with the economic 
demands of the Cold War to raise serious ideological questions. By 
the 1950s, contradictions had emerged in the rationale that assumed 
that women workers were simply a reserve army of labor to be called 
upon by government officials and private employers in times of 
national emergency. From the 1930s onward, Americans had lived in a 
period of chronic crisis. As the culmination of these years of 
crisis, the Korean conflict differed from wars earlier in this century 
because a state of war was never declared, and the military engagement 
was perceived as part of a global confrontation with Communism, a 
conflict that would continue far into the future. The federal agency 
charged with coordinating national manpower mobilization in the early 
fifties, the Defense Manpower Administration, described the economy as 
being in a state of "partial mobilization," perpetually prepared "to 
mobilize quickly and to resist effectively if war is forced upon 
us."

Thus, for the first time, an emergency demanding the presence 
of large numbers of women in the work force was of indefinite 
duration. Within this context, the case of women's work in feminized 
office jobs had special implications that made the reserve army thesis 
ineffective as an explanation of women's place in the labor force or 
as a basis for policy, because women in general, and older and married 
women in particular, had become an essential, permanent source of 
labor for the continually expanding white-collar sector of the 
economy. This combination of circumstances raised fundamental 
questions about women's right to work and their role in the family 
that were not addressed by the conventional conceptualization.
Participation in the office work force by older, married women forced these issues to the surface.

It was not until the late fifties, a full decade after World War II, that the rationale which justified "womanpower" as a necessary contribution to the national economy that was thoroughly compatible with women's traditional place in the home and subordinate place in the economy gained credence among government officials and employers. Between 1945 and 1955, as policy-makers and employers searched for this conservative image, they tried desperately to avoid the implications of the expanding demand for women workers as well as the growing dependence of American families on the wages of older and married women.

As it emerged in the late fifties and early sixties, the official policy of defining women's work as "womanpower" bore striking similarities to earlier justifications of women's place in the work force. Like the pin money theory, it ignored financial necessity as a serious motivation for women's paid work. And, like the patriotic propaganda of World War II, it portrayed women's participation in the economy as patriotic service or contribution, not as a legitimate method for women to serve their own interests. The new rationale achieved popularity because it served the national economic interest by conceding that women's paid work was of permanent significance, necessary to employers and the economy as a whole, even allowing that women might deserve a greater degree of equality in the workplace. The shift in emphasis did not, however, challenge women's time-honored responsibilities for child-care, housework, or emotional labor within
the family. Given the assumption that women alone would continue to bear the burden of home and family, the new policy did not seek to provide institutional arrangements for child-care or domesticity. So although women's work was acknowledged as a permanent part of the postwar economic system, individual women continued to be regarded as intermittent workers. This, in turn, perpetuated and justified women's segregation into occupations characterized by poor pay and low status.23

The most important difference between the official ideology of women's work after 1955 and earlier explanations of women's paid employment was its recognition that the paid labor of older and married women had become necessary to the expanded postwar economy. But until the full articulation of the womanpower synthesis, which defined women's new economic roles in terms compatible with their traditional domestic roles, the new economic responsibilities being undertaken by older and married women appeared to undermine their place in the home. In the late forties and early fifties, government officials believed that even the argument that women constituted a reserve source of labor who could be called upon in periods of national crisis—an argument that had justified the employment of married women in defense industry during World War II while denying them equal economic opportunities at the end of the war—might have subversive consequences because opposition to Communism dictated a policy of perpetual mobilization. Policy-makers were reluctant to include older and married women in their plans for the defense economy. Speaking at the 1951 meeting of the OMS, Howard Rusk,
Chairman of the Health Resources Advisory Committee of the Office of Defense Mobilization, encouraged employers to hire the handicapped and men over sixty-five rather than to rely on women workers to meet their labor shortage. In his remarks, Rusk spelled out his fear of the potential disruption that might result from applying the reserve labor thesis in an era of continuous international conflict:

Women workers can leave their homes in event of national emergency and produce the guns, tanks, and planes necessary to defend those homes, as was amply demonstrated during World War II. At present, however, no one knows how long it may be necessary for our nation to continue its present policy of preparedness, and most authorities agree that it would be socially unwise for large numbers of wives and mothers to enter industry on a permanent or semi-permanent basis. 24

Although Rusk’s chain of thinking reflected the general tendency of government agencies engaged in manpower planning to omit women workers from their policies, his proposal failed to take note of the realities of women’s work in postwar America. Of course, no official who hoped to preserve women’s place in the home could formally acknowledge women’s own economic motives for entering or remaining in the paid labor force after marriage, and Rusk’s focus on the demands of the national economy was totally consistent with the pin money and reserve labor arguments as well as with the later conceptualization that womanpower was a necessary contribution to the national economy. But Rusk also failed to address employers’ dependence on feminized labor in the white-collar and service sectors of the economy. This was a striking omission, especially considering the fact that he spoke to an audience composed entirely of white-collar employers and managers. Yet, in the years immediately following the war, it was only the
invisibility of women white- and pink-collar workers that allowed
government thinkers to avoid the ticklish problem of how to deal with
women as permanent and necessary participants in the paid labor force.

During the early fifties, government economic planning
consistently minimized the role of women in the labor market.
Policy-makers not only ignored women's work in feminized occupations
such as office work, but also overlooked community services which
would aid older women workers who had family and domestic
responsibilities. Women's Bureau Director Frieda Miller was
repeatedly forced to react to defense manpower plans that failed to
consider women as a source of reserve labor. For example, in late
1949, the National Security Resources Board began to investigate the
feasibility of importing foreign workers as a source of labor in the
event of war. When asked to comment on this project, Miller
responded, "We feel strongly that before attention is given to ... a
proposal [to import foreign labor] the problem of how American
manpower could be fully tapped and most efficiently utilized should be
thoroughly studied." She went on to argue that "Women provide the
chief labor reserve available to a country" and to suggest that Great
Britain's recruitment of women workers during World War II, which far
surpassed the voluntary program used in the United States, would be a
more realistic avenue for investigation than the importation of
foreign workers. The Defense Manpower Administration also excluded
women from its plans for defense mobilization, and in late 1952, when
the DMA assigned the Bureau of Employment Security and the Bureau of
Labor Statistics to draft a report on "Employment of Older Workers in
the Defense Program," Miller reacted with "some surprise" that the
Women's Bureau was not asked to collaborate on the report. According
to Miller, the DMA had not only ignored the fact that the Women's
Bureau had "been extremely active in the entire field of employment of
older persons," but also that "the largest manpower reserve is
composed of middle-aged and older women." And in 1953, commenting on
DMA working papers on "Expanding and Conserving the Labor Force" and
"Background Manpower Facts and Estimates," Miller noted,

an almost complete omission of references to women workers
throughout the two papers. . . . There is a rather long list of
possible ways in which the labor force might be augmented, such as
by hiring older workers, bringing in workers from other countries,
using the handicapped, etc., but there is no mention of women as a
labor reserve. Furthermore, the special problems of attracting
and retaining larger numbers of women workers in the labor force
are seldom mentioned. For example, the treatment of community
facilities does not include reference to such things as the need
for child-care centers and shopping and eating facilities, which
are vitally important to many women workers who have home
responsibilities.

Thus it appeared that government officials outside of the Women's
Bureau mentioned women or made assumptions about their contributions
to the economy, but hesitated to formulate any comprehensive policy
with regard to women workers, primarily because to do so might raise
discomfiting ideological issues.25

The fact that Miller was so frequently put in a position of
having to react to manpower policies formulated outside her department
was in part a reflection of the administrative weakness of the Women's
Bureau. But it is also clear that other agencies were not attempting
to usurp the Women's Bureau role, but rather that they tended to
ignore the important place of women in the postwar economy. And
although Miller did suggest that defense manpower planning ought to include women in clerical and other feminized occupations, her efforts to gain recognition for women workers generally focused on the reserve labor argument. This orientation was consistent with the Women's Bureau's history as an advocate for women workers in industry. However, given the general unwillingness of most government policy-makers to regard women as a reserve source of labor, the reserve argument itself became a useful tactic for calling attention to paid women workers and for asserting—albeit cautiously—their right to participate in the paid labor force.

Because of the assumption that at least partial mobilization would continue even after the resolution of the Korean conflict, government policies in the early fifties aimed to minimize social conflict. Consequently, women and blacks received scant attention, and major efforts to solve the labor shortage by ameliorating discrimination against these minorities were simply not initiated. The DMA, for instance, attempted to carry out federal policy through voluntary regional labor-management committees, an organizational format that reinforced the general tendency to overlook women and blacks. In 1951, Bess Bloodworth—a former member of the Women's Advisory Committee to the War Manpower Commission—represented the Women's Bureau at a conference of state Employment Security Administrators and DMA regional directors in the southeast. Although she was sympathetic to the "difficulties of partial mobilization" and "the danger of relaxation" in the struggle against Communism, Bloodworth's report to the Bureau also illustrated the problems she
encountered when she tried to draw attention to women and blacks:

When they called on me to comment on problems that would confront the areas when a tight labor market developed (they had written a long list on the blackboard) I stated that they had left out two—one, discrimination against women, especially older women, and the other, discrimination against negroes. Some of them glared at me, but I went merrily along to tell them of the great influence I thought they had, as individuals, in their communities, and how much I thought they could do to broaden the sights of employers by doing a bit of an educational job on them now and then. I won over some, I think, but when the evaluation of the conference was made . . . someone said that they thought some of the consultants "went far afield," so I was probably IT.27

The unpopularity of Bloodworth's stand suggests the isolation and powerlessness of those who advocated expanding economic opportunities for women and blacks as part of the solution to the labor shortages created by defense production.

The climate of opinion among government officials and employers formed a barrier against new policies of inclusion for blacks or women, but black women, who bore the brunt of double discrimination, received even less public attention than either white women or black men. On the few occasions when the subject of black women workers was discussed, representatives of both the public and private sectors abdicated responsibility for discrimination against black women. For example, during 1952 hearings of the President's Committee on Government Contract Compliance in defense industry, Rear Admiral Morton L. Ring raised the issue of employer discrimination against black women in office work in his questions to Elizabeth Herring, the national human relations secretary of the YWCA. Government, management, and labor representatives on the committee seemed willing to accept Herring's assessment that black women faced greater
discrimination than either black men or white women. According to Herring, "You may find an industry which is modifying its policy to the extent of employing Negro men, but still won't employ any Negro women. Then the other thing that we find is the women of a minority race suffer doubly that [sic] women in general face in industry of not having quite the same opportunity for up-grading and for promotion to skilled positions." Significantly, however, management members of the panel shifted the blame for discrimination away from private employers and onto white women office workers. Dwight Palmer, Chairman of the Board of General Cable Corporation stated,

that since women for a long period of time, we will say, were discriminated against, and still are in so far as equal compensation for equal service, that those women who have been successful in cutting through the concrete ceiling are a little bit loath to provide themselves with additional competition, and therefore it is quite natural, along with their up-bringing as well, that they might, in a good many cases, resist the influx of minorities more than even the male might whose relations are strictly on a business basis, but with the women there is a certain amount of social connection. We had that situation, we have had it twice in our company, where the women were the ones who bucked the situation, and they were supported by the men, but the men did not originate it.

Another management representative, Oliver Hill of Hill, Martin and Robinson, professed to be "interested in minority work," but continued that, "I have long recognized the fact that the greatest opposition [to black women workers] comes from women. . . . Women are generally more intense in their feelings." This was, of course the same rationale that employers had used to hire black women only for night shift office work during World War II. By blaming white women office workers—who had no real authority in the white-collar workplace, whatever their real or imagined race prejudice—private employers
managed to free themselves from the onus of responsibility, just as they used supposed popular prejudice and gender stereotypes to excuse their refusal to promote white women in business.28

Public officials and private employers shared the desire to preserve race and gender arrangements, and policies originating in Washington show only part of the pervasive fear that social disruption might result from changing patterns of female employment. Employers of white-collar workers reluctantly hired older and married women for feminized office jobs only when shortages of young, single women forced them to do so, and it appears that anxiety about the erosion of traditional definitions of women as wives and mothers was as important in shaping employer attitudes as the wish to maintain women's ornamental and subordinate place in the office workplace. Although it is difficult to document the attitudes underlying the hiring practices of white-collar employers, the activities of large employers of office workers in Hartford, Connecticut, illuminate some of the social choices made by private employers. In 1951, the shortage of clerical workers, typists, and stenographers in Hartford had become acute, especially in the insurance industry. Yet the leaders of the local business community refused to consider plans for improved day care, which would have allowed mothers of young children to enter the work force as full-time workers. The Greater Hartford Community Council went so far as to sponsor a meeting on the day care problem, but "the consensus of this group was that there was no present need for additional centers although local day care and camp facilities are crowded." Instead of expanding child-care facilities, local employers
chose to alleviate "the extreme shortage of qualified office personnel" by recruiting "experienced business women"—a euphemism for older and married women—for work in the evenings after regular business hours. Faced with the lack of adequate day care, many women gladly accepted night work, and by September 1951, the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company had over 300 women on its waiting list for the night shift. In Indianapolis, tape recorder dealer Robert Trattner hired former secretaries to do typing at home for businessmen who used his dictation equipment. Hailed as a way for married women with secretarial experience to "keep house and yet keep up their secretarial work," the Trattner system was also very attractive to married women with child care responsibilities. Trattner reported that he had been "deluged by 600 replies" to his first classified ad in 1950, and by 1953 he employed 400 part-time secretaries in twelve cities, "gals . . . mostly between 30 and 40 years old with two or three children." These women had valid personal and economic reasons for attempting to combine domesticity and paid work, but it is impossible to know whether they would have chosen to carry the burden of additional working hours if other alternatives had been offered to them. And, despite the demand for women's paid work in the national and family economies, neither business nor government was willing to initiate any positive actions that might relieve women of their unpaid domestic labor.29
Management as Science

Management experts were also preoccupied with the continuing growth of the office work force and the need to maintain social equilibrium in the decade after World War II. Yet the solutions proposed by the managers lacked originality or cohesion. Ideas and programs that had been proposed in the twenties and thirties enjoyed a new vogue in the late forties and fifties. But at the same time, managers also introduced a note of caution, suggesting that perhaps in systematizing and regulating white-collar work, business had failed to become more "scientific" or more "efficient."

By the end of the war, management had received recognition as a profession, and its practitioners were considered an indispensable part of the modern business organization. The original group of self-conscious and self-appointed experts in scientific management had grown into an entrenched body of practitioners claiming expertise through specialized business education and holding a myriad of positions as corporate managers and consultants. Yet for all their pretensions, the managers could not, even in the postwar era, lay claim to a unified, undisputed theory of business administration. By 1962, Wilbert Moore, an advocate of a "relativistic theory" of management, could describe the growth of professional management as a process of corporate imitation rather than a science:

Some one persuades Company A that it is important to have a special department to deal with the theory of organization and management itself. Company B, seeing this development, reasons that Company A must have made a thorough study and reached a decision only after mature consideration. Under this assumption there is no need for Company B to make its own study or linger long over the decision. It adds its own staff. Company C finds
this reasoning even more persuasive, since two companies have added the new department. By the time Company E gets into line, there will be enough technical people in similar positions to form an association, hold meetings, and read learned papers to one another.

In the late forties and early fifties, however, Moore's humorous description would have found little favor among office managers. They, like the rest of American society, had been affected by the pervasive fear of the Communist menace, and members of the OMS listened to papers on "Protecting Records in Time of War" and heard Eldridge Haynes, publisher of *Modern Industry*, tell them that inefficiency was a threat to capitalism. As agents of efficiency, the office managers were assured of a role in the economic mobilization against Communism, but they continued throughout the postwar decade to express concern that office management had failed to become sufficiently "scientific." Despite at least three decades of experiment and publicity, the management experts had failed to impose the rationalization and control necessary to make office work comparable to factory production, and in 1949, John Wiltse of Johns-Manville told OMS members:

> a fundamental reason for the increase [in the workload of the office] is that office operations have not been subjected to the same technical advances and controls which have been applied so effectively to production processes. . . . For certain highly repetitive jobs like billing or typing, operations have been set up on a measured basis, by billing group or central typing pool, but the usual yardstick for most clerical operations has been merely a comparison of the number of current personnel with the number employed in prior periods. This is not scientific management, nor is it conducive to the control of costs in a well-organized and efficient manner.

Like the proponents of scientific management in the twenties, Wiltse
urged white-collar employers to standardize measurements and procedures to take the "guesswork" out of managing the office.30

Yet, schemes to rationalize and mechanize office work enjoyed renewed popularity between 1945 and 1955. In 1950, for example, T. H. McDonough, manager of office services for H. J. Heinz Company, reported to the OMS that after four years of work, the American Standards Association had developed a set of "general office standards applicable to all business." And by beginning his remarks with praise for Leffingwell, the foremost scientific office manager of the twenties, McDonough made it clear that the resemblance between the contemporary movement to standardize white-collar work and the management literature of the twenties was intentional. Business Week, which had little interest in tracing the historic roots of the scientific management movement, simply announced that advances in technology and management methods suddenly made it possible to base office organization on the factory model. In 1949, that popular publication reported to readers that a "revolution" was occurring that put the office "on the threshold of almost unbelievable advances." According to Business Week, "the industrial revolution is spreading into the business office--with almost the same breath-taking speed and thoroughness that it took over the factory." Spurred by the rising cost of administration and the labor shortage, mechanization was about to take over the office. But despite the postwar boom in office equipment sales and the possibility of computerizing the office, Business Week admitted that many of businessmen and even office machine manufacturers
still have strong objections to office mechanization. They argue that offices have not yet become like factories; the work is still by no means entirely routine. Therefore, they claim, the most efficient machine in any office is the human being.

Nevertheless, Business Week continued to publicize the idea of the office factory, telling businessmen in 1951 that the traditional time-study method of scientific management was "now available" for use in the office. The magazine reported, "Up to now, past performance has been about the only yardstick [of efficiency in the office]--and it's a yardstick no company would use for a factory operation." The management consulting firm of Paul B. Mulligan and Company had, however, been able to establish standards for a "fair day's work" in the office. Twenty-five firms had adopted Mulligan's industrial engineering methods, complete with stopwatch and measurement manual, and Business Week predicted, "the next move, may be a dollar-and-cents incentive system for clerical help."31

The claims that scientific management could finally be applied to white-collar work and the view that office work had remained impervious to management expertise existed side-by-side at mid-century. This paradox was partly the result of disagreement among office management specialists about the content and organization of work in the office. For instance, although Business Week looked forward to increased use of incentive pay for office workers, some professional managers had already lost faith in the incentive system. In 1944, A. H. Strieker, management consultant to the House Civil Service Investigating Committee and a former manager at General Electric, discredited incentive plans for office work. According to
him, only "a few companies" used incentive pay in the office, "but not many, not enough to talk about intelligently. I personally don't favor office incentives as a rule." Stricker did remain committed to the general philosophy of scientific management, but argued that simplification and standardization of office work would make incentives unnecessary. Of course, whether or not the so-called "experts" endorsed incentives, all agreed that routinization was an essential goal. Yet even here, managers disagreed about the definition of "routine" work. Wiltse, for example, had stated that it was relatively easy to apply scientific methods to such "routine" work as typing, but Waldo Williams of Ardens Chicago Mail Order House, whose company had applied measurement and incentives to 90% of its clerical staff, believed that stenographers and typists had to be excluded from such plans because those jobs could not be standardized. Acceptance of the "scientific" approach did not resolve questions about how to apply scientific methods to white-collar work, and the plans and prescriptions for achieving greater efficiency in the office workplace revealed the disorganization of management thought.32

There was also another reason for the paradox of office management: the goals of the management movement had never been clearly spelled out. Management popularizers had always encouraged the assumption that scientific management would make office work more "efficient" and, therefore, increase profits. But management publicists could not prove this contention, and, as the experiences of the twenties and thirties had shown, there was considerable evidence in the other direction. During economic good times, when employers
and managers alike could afford to overlook strictly financial considerations, the issues of costs and profits lay submerged, and the other goal of the management movement—consolidating managerial control of the workplace—surfaced. Employers' desire to dominate the work process, as well as the success of the professional managers in publicizing their programs, helps to explain the intermittent popularity of scientific office management in the middle decades of the twentieth century. The iconoclastic management theorist Wilbert Moore illustrated an example of this phenomenon from his experience while on a tour of a large corporation. His discussion is especially interesting because it deals not with the office but with industrial production, although the potential for increased costs were inherent in any scientific management plan, in either office or factory:

At a particular plant the local managers reported enthusiastically on their success with "methods study" (also called "scientific management," time-and-motion study, efficiency, engineering, etc.). By their calculations a rather substantial saving had been made in direct labor costs as a result of the program. In the question period I assumed the most innocent voice I could muster and asked whether their cost-accounting system permitted them to compare their payroll savings with the salaries and other costs of the methods study. After some consultation among the managers it turned out that the comparison had not been made. I then proceeded to rub salt into the wounds by suggesting that even if the program was in fact losing money, as I thought likely, they might still want to continue because of their preference for the kind of people who make method studies over the kind of people who handle materials.

According to Moore, the cost of administering such plans was often unjustified, although they did enhance the prestige of upper-level white-collar workers:

Incidentally, "productivity" measures relate units or value of output to man-hours of labor input by workers only. A company that steadily substitutes one or more clerical, technical, or
managerial employees for every displaced production worker can ride to the bankruptcy court on a wave of productivity increases. Elementary arithmetic indicates that a reduction of direct production workers will increase the proportions of other occupational groups, but I get the distinct impression that productivity gains also result in some fairly extensive overstaffing, especially in various technical and advisory capacities—adding the luxury of service and advice to the luxury of custom-made office furniture.\textsuperscript{33}

When the economy faltered, however, the expense of complicated plans for exerting management prerogatives could cause disenchantment.

Just such a situation arose in 1949, causing some management thinkers to re-evaluate the success of their program for restructuring the office. During the brief recession of that year, John Wiltse warned the OMS that "wasteful practices [had] crept into office operations" during the war. According to Wiltse, "the need for cost consciousness may not have been appreciated as much as it should be until the past year or so," when managers were forced to focus their attention on the rising cost of clerical salaries and administrative procedures. George Vanderbilt, assistant to the vice-president in charge of accounting for Standard Oil Company and head of the ASA project for establishing office standards, told the OMS that "the volume, variety, and complexity of paper work being performed today continues to grow in geometric proportion." In a paper entitled "The Paradox of Mechanization," Vanderbilt asserted that unnecessary mechanization had occurred because instead of studying the utility and cost-effectiveness of office machinery, many businesses had purchased equipment based on the claims of salesmen or simply to appear as modern as other firms. "Mechanization," he said, "is often improperly applied and complicated routines are established to perform tasks
which could be completed in other ways more simply, at less cost, and
with greater employee satisfaction." And at the same meeting, in
keeping with the new emphasis on eliminating rather than fostering
more work for the office, I. J. Berni of Proctor and Gamble presented
a paper called "No Filing—No Cost," which suggested that automatic
filing of routine letters was an unnecessary waste of time and
space.\(^{34}\) As they had in the Depression of the thirties, managers
urged simplification rather than the creation of new procedures.

In fact, some managers argued, "we may find opportunities for
cost reduction in the cost of our cost reduction programs." According
to this line of thought, systems and measurement designed to regulate
office procedures had become both too expensive and unwieldy. Roy
Walls, General Office Manager of Bridgeport Brass Company, for
instance, believed that,

after prolonged use, the procedure as such too frequently becomes
the end while the original intent behind the procedure is lost in
a maze of intriguing but unproductive trivia. To phrase my point
in a slightly different way, a procedure or policy is devised to
accomplish a certain result. The pressure brought to bear to make
people conform to the details of the procedure sometimes nullifies
the objective for which the procedure was devised in the first
place.

This criticism of management systems for controlling white-collar work
had appeared as early as World War II, when the growth of government
and private bureaucracy had begun to expose the weakness of the
scientific model of control, and by the late forties and fifties,
management thinkers like Wall realized that as a system of control,
scientific management systems created new avenues for workers familiar
with the minutiae of the system to re-assert their control. However
tempting the goal of a rationalized system of office organization composed of carefully subdivided and measured work and rigidly controlled by top managers, scientific management ideology had been unable to achieve it. Hopeful writers, like those at Business Week, might conclude that UNIVAC or the creation of concrete standards for work measurements would transform the office into a factory, but unless these systems could successfully redefine the content of white-collar work and the social systems of the office workplace, offices of the future would certainly be managed as "unscientifically" as those of the past.35

From Mayo to Momism: Human Relations in the Office

Even before World War I, management's drive for control had begun to extend beyond efficiency in the work process to include the human relations of the workplace. From their efforts to control the work process, it was a short step for management thinkers to attempt to control workers themselves. In this schema, workers and even managers were simply raw materials whose social relations were as susceptible to manipulation as the physical elements of production. But while interest in human relations was a continuous thread running through managerial plans and programs throughout the twentieth century, it was most apparent whenever there existed a potential threat of political radicalism or social disruption. Among the office management publicists, the so-called human relations model was most evident during the Great Depression and the Cold War. During the late forties and fifties, the issue of human relations appeared in scientific
office management literature with special urgency, reflecting the Cold
War concerns of the management experts. For instance, according to
George Vanderbilt, one of the reasons employers should exercise
cautions in mechanizing work in the office, was that the routinization
that accompanied mechanization might rob workers of "job interest, job
satisfaction, and pride of accomplishment. We should," he said,
"endeavor to plan work groups so the members can develop team spirit
and the desire to belong. We must give each individual as much
responsibility and freedom as possible so that he will know we really
consider him an individual and a partner in the organization." In a
1949 presentation to the OMS, S. R. Leach, the general auditor of the
York Corporation, also stressed the need for management to convince
workers that their interests were the same as their employers', but
unlike Vanderbilt, Leach made his political concerns more explicit:

During the past ten years, there has been a radical change in
the complexion of affairs in commerce, industry and civil life,
with somewhat more than a desirable amount of pink showing in the
spectrum. . . . In this decade we have seen marked changes in the
personal characteristics of our employees . . . to the point where
today there are festering sores in such important areas as
employee attitudes toward management and in the day-to-day
personal conduct of the employees in our offices. It is in the
field of human relations that we have a veritable gold mine in
which to prospect for greater efficiency, increased production
and, conversely, for decreased costs in the office.

And although Leach's analysis is diametrically opposed to that of
Marxist scholars who bemoan the lack of class consciousness or
militance of white-collar workers, his concern appears to have been
based on a belief shared by other managers. At General Motors, for
example, both blue- and white-collar workers received company
publications, which aimed, according to the head of GM's employee
publications section, Milton E. Mumblow, to "persuade employees of the company's interest in human values and its acceptance of its social responsibilities[,] . . . counteract the unrest sown by those who profit most from misunderstanding[,] and] . . . develop the same attitudes on the part of the families of the employees." And although GM's employee publications communicated the same message to all workers regardless of class, the company did try to preserve traditional class divisions by printing separate newspapers with different contents for its factory and office personnel.36

The unvarying theme among human relations experts in the thirties and the postwar years was the need to foster harmonious relations between workers and management, but the means for achieving this end did change over time. While the publicists of the human relations model in the later period suggested plans for increasing motivation and job satisfaction by manipulating workers' attitudes, the human relations plans of the Depression years, which emphasized testing, impersonal interview procedures, and formal rating of employee performance, had been much more direct. Many employers were skeptical of such formal, bureaucratic procedures—one survey in the mid-thirties showed that only about 7 percent of 2,400 companies queried used tests of any kind—but publicists tried to convince them that testing was on "a much sounder basis" than ever before, due to "the efforts of a few sincere scientists who, appreciating to the full that the success of testing depends on a practical and a scientific approach to the entire problem, have labored tirelessly in the preparation of tests and in the establishing of procedures and
techniques by which the tests could be evaluated." Throughout the thirties, the advocates of expanded control of the so-called human factor claimed that human relations in the office could be made "scientific," that is regular, predictable, and, most important, impersonal. For example, E. D. Bartlett, Director of Office Personnel for the Atlantic Refining Company and a former Chairman of the American Management Association Test Group, argued that ability, aptitude, and psychological tests were superior to other plans for evaluating workers because they were the most impersonal, and by implication the most "scientific." In 1938, he stated unequivocally, "It has been proved that most men do not select [employees] accurately on the basis of a personal interview alone. . . . The fundamental weakness in interviewing," he said, was "the interviewer's inability to analyze his impressions of an individual objectively and without prejudice." But in advocating purely objective methods for weeding out the "misfits" in the office work force, Bartlett had to skirt a potentially explosive issue: truly scientific tests that evaluated workers without regard to class or gender created the potential of disrupting existing social systems that clearly served the broader interests of management. Bartlett, not surprisingly, did not raise this issue, but it was an inherent problem in applying objective, scientific procedures to human relations problems. One reason this issue did not arise was that Bartlett faced another, more immediate problem when he attempted to apply tests to office workers because impersonal measures could undermine supervisors, and thus disrupt the social hierarchy of the office workplace. Bartlett recognized this
problem and recommended that tests be "used, with great caution, to check supervisors' ratings." He was forced to conclude, however, that "deference to supervisor" outweighed science: "In the final analysis . . . we are seldom justified in insisting that the test score, unsupported by other evidence, represents the true facts when it differs from the opinion of the supervisor. To do so is to arouse the opposition of the supervisor to the test program, to say nothing of disturbing morale in general."37 In other words, the human relations experts of the thirties, like the scientific managers of the office work process, had to bow to the resistance of low- and mid-level managers.

Not all managers thought it necessary to go to the extreme of applying objective test measurements to office workers, but there was a general agreement in the thirties among the advocates of better human relations that personnel procedures should be depersonalized. Standardized application forms, interview procedures, and rating plans appear to have been very popular in management circles. Many of the plans advanced in those years stressed not only performance but psychological adjustment. In 1938, Richard S. Schultz, who was in charge of Industrial and Personnel Research for the Psychological Corporation, advised OMS members that using a standardized application form when hiring new office workers would reveal much concerning personality and attitude. For practical purposes, . . . evaluation of personal adjustment and attitude may contribute more than a precise measure in a personality test . . . . It is possible after reading over a complete application blank to make a tentative rating on such broad items as general background, educational status, experience and practical ability, work habits, and general value to the organization.
Four years later, Robert N. McMurray, Associate Director of the Psychological Corporation, was still preaching this approach to the OMS. He advocated that a standardized interview technique be used to evaluate all new white-collar employees. The standard interview should cover,

1. The applicant's work history; 2. his schooling; 3. his home environment as a child; 4. his present home situation; and 5. his health. These are all important because if the individual is immature or suffers from any form of emotional maladjustment which will interfere with his vocational success, symptoms are likely to show themselves in one or more of these five areas. . . . On the basis of the information obtained in the study of the applicant's personal history, it is also possible to form judgments concerning his or her motivation. . . . For many types of work, especially those of a routine or unpleasant character, motivation is of cortical [sic] importance. If the applicant does not have a real economic need (dependents to support, a home to pay for, etc.) he is very likely, in the present labor market, to be unstable and, therefore, undesirable for the job.

By designing a uniform system of this kind, management would be able to make impersonal, presumably scientific, decisions about the individual, personal characteristics of its employees. This approach was, of course, based largely on the work of Elton Mayo and his followers who had discovered the personal and irrational aspects of worker behavior in their experiments at the Hawthorne plant of Western Electric and had attempted to promote ways for management to manipulate these factors. Yet in trying to put individual psychology in the service of managers, Mayo and the other early proponents of human relations had, in fact, made psychology less scientific. Factors like economic need were not psychological at all, but rather concrete historical conditions faced by the workers whom the human relations experts were trying to manipulate. While economic factors
may indeed have provided an accurate measure of an employee's adjustment (really his or her pliability), it was not any more "scientific" or effective than earlier employer practice. So, although the advocates of testing, standardized hiring procedures, and psychological evaluations were making a very real effort to enhance managerial control in the years before the war, it is dubious that they made any real headway because they had constantly to bend their theory and practice to meet the concrete social and economic conditions of the office workplace.38

By the early fifties, however, management thinkers were much less enamoured with "scientific" systems, which they recognized as being costly, arbitrary, and often unworkable. Formal bureaucratic procedures to control the human relations of the white-collar workplace had become more widespread than before the war, but management theorists were beginning to stress the importance of flexibility and supervisory leadership rather than immutable systems. Although formal control of human relations in the office had apparently created new layers of procedures which expert workers could manipulate to their own advantage, the systems had done little to dislodge personal relationships in the office.

In the late forties, for instance, Arthur Kolstad reported to the OMS on the results of a series of attitude surveys he had conducted among white-collar workers. In many cases, the complaints voiced by workers in the postwar period were almost identical to those of workers in the twenties and thirties. Workers objected to "having to quit in the middle of one job to do something else that could just as
well wait; . . . having to do a job over because someone changes his mind about how it should be done; . . . [and] having to do last-minute rush jobs that could just as well have been planned ahead." In general, their complaints suggest that office work had not been successfully systematized. Two common responses—"having to waste time on a job for lack of complete instructions or information about what is wanted, . . . [and] not being told enough about the purpose of the work or how it is to be used or what it is supposed to accomplish"—did suggest that formal bureaucratic procedures had perhaps robbed at least some workers of some knowledge and control over the content of work. But while it is difficult to judge the extent to which office workers had lost the ability to plan and control their work in the first half of the century, it is quite obvious that the personal relations in the office workplace had remained virtually untouched by the efforts of self-conscious management enthusiasts to tighten their control. The majority of the workers in Kolstad's surveys stated that their supervisors showed favoritism. According to him, "the most frequently described examples of favoritism [are] . . . 'The wrong people are criticized for doing less work than those who really sit around and do nothing.' . . . [and] 'Ones spending most time talking to the boss usually get best advancement.'" In other words, the scientific management propaganda of at least thirty years had not decreased the power of mid-level managers who preferred to maintain personal, idiosyncratic methods and relationships in their own departments. The attitudes expressed by the workers in Kolstad's surveys were similar to those found by Michel
Crozier in his sociological study of French office workers in the 1960s. And Crozier's interpretation of these kinds of complaints might suggest that the workers who made these complaints were, in fact, expressing a sense of involvement in and control over the content of their jobs. Crozier said, "Most employees who adopt a critical point of view are well integrated, on the whole satisfied, and impatient to be put to the test. But, more than awkwardness or weakness, it is managers' indifference—or at least apparent indifference—to subordinates' work and to their problems that shocks employees." If Crozier's analysis is correct, scientific office management appears to have disrupted the organization of office work in few important ways by the mid-century. 39

As human relations became less rigidly "scientific," the role of supervisors and mid-level managers attracted attention because it was they who were the mediators between workers and management; having absorbed the management ethos, they were charged with soliciting worker cooperation with management goals. Thus, in the postwar years, the human relations experts extended their vision upward to include supervisory personnel. Gilbert Moore's description of this change deserves attention because it ties together many of the themes in the development of the human relations model. According to Moore, Dale Carnegie's advice for "how to win friends and influence people" was nothing more than Mayo for managers. Moore continued,

The doctrine of "human relations" in industry, once a tactic for keeping employees loyal and out of unions, has become the style of life everywhere in the corporation. First names are the proper form of address. . . . The work unit is the "team," and the whole managerial group is the "family." Bosses are instructed to be
solicitous of the private problems of their subordinates and at times to practice, within limits, lay psychotherapy in getting them to talk out their problems. In effect a kind of "bureaucratic kinship system" is established with the older generation nurturing the younger. . . . Indeed, in this predominantly masculine society, we may push the metaphor to its absurd extreme. The corporation seems to seek an arrangement which is surely an anomaly in human society, that of homosexual reproduction, with the necessary counterpart of that the "father image" is rampant.

Here again, changes in American society as a whole had influenced managerial ideas: the postwar diatribe against "momism" had infected human relations. As early as 1948, W. H. Hepner, a psychology professor at Syracuse University, had lectured the OMS on the "adjustment concept" for evaluating supervisors. Although the emotional labor expected of low- and mid-level managers in the revised human relations model resembled the traditional role of women in the family, Hepner stressed its "masculine" aspect instead:

Good supervisors are emotionally emancipated from home ties, especially from the mother. This does not mean that the good supervisor resents his parents. But the emotional tie to the mother has been clearly broken. The father is usually viewed as a helpful but not a restraining influence. . . . It is usually easy to recognize the man who has an Oedipus complex or mother fixation because . . . he has difficulty falling in love, wants to look after his mother, and leans on his secretary rather than his male business colleagues for advice. [emphasis added]

The woman secretary had always been a threat to managerial prerogatives because she represented a countervailing power based on her gender-specific role in the office. Unable to eliminate her, management attacked her power by associating her with the unpopular cultural symbol of "mom." 40

Once secretarial work had been defined in gender-specific terms, the secretary herself had become relatively insulated from the
managerial drive for control and efficiency. The secretary, the
younger and more decorative the better, remained a status symbol for
male managers, equivalent to the other amenities of executive status:
a key to the executive lavatory, posh surroundings, and a high salary.
But more than that, the woman secretary linked the broader social
structures of gender and family to the office. The office was not, as
Moore suggested, homosexual, but homosocial. Bringing to the office
distinctly female values that had been nurtured in the homosocial
world of the home, the secretary performed traditional domestic and
emotional labor for her boss, who in turn operated in the equally
homosocial world of management. Both secretaries and their bosses had
an interest in preserving this complex set of personal, unregulated
relations between men and women in the office and in thwarting
managerial control. Women engaged in this struggle for power partly
as a defensive action to protect their work from advancing
routinization, but they were also acting on their own autonomous
values and priorities. For both secretaries and the lower layers of
management the strategy seemed to have been effective, revealing the
contradictions in management thought and putting the office managment
movement into a reactive position, always searching for some way to
make the office workplace "efficient." As David Noble has argued in
his study of the engineers who played a central part in articulating
management ideology, the resistance of the men and women who were the
objects of management's plans to assert its authority were as
effective in shaping management as its own "design" to reshape the
work process: "No matter how sophisticated their approach, how
flexible their methods, how pure their intent, the corporate engineers have consistently encountered considerable difficulties in trying to implement their designs "in the field," opposition which they disparaged as "labor trouble," "personnel problems," or simply "politics." According to Noble, opposition to the corporate interests of management, "manifested in the myriad "problems" which must forever be analyzed, engineered, or administered away . . . both underlies the evolving corporate design for America and defies it." In the office, intricate class and gender relations enabled women workers and their supervisors to overcome scientific office management.


3 Ibid., p. 92, p. 91, p. 92.

4 Ibid., p. 102.

5 Ibid., p. 239.


8 Ibid., summary p. 4.


10 Ibid., p. 13.


14 Ibid., p. 4; "A booster for the new plan" [signature illegible] to Frieda S. Miller, April 2, 1952, WB, RG 86, Box 978.

15 Cambridge, Massachusetts, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, New York House and School of Industry Papers, Collection Number MC-287, Box 1, Folder 9.


17 Ibid., p. 9.


22 Alice Kessler Harris describes the National Conference on Womanpower in 1955 as "a major turning point in official thinking," about women's role in the economy, Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 308. Judith Sealander argues that in 1956 Women's Bureau publications began to emphasize women in professional and technical jobs, a change she attributes to the desire of government officials "to channel more women into nontraditional jobs" (p. 156). Sheila M. Rothman, Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present (New York: Basic Books, 1978), pp. 320-31, also notes that by the early sixties, government labor analysts were urging women to return to the labor market to avert future labor shortages.

23 Kessler-Harris, Out to Work, pp. 306-08, argues that the focus on womanpower led to later demands for equality from women who saw the
contradiction between their importance to the economy and their inequality within it. This may be true, but as long as official policy did not re-conceptualize women's family and domestic obligations, demands for equality would have to find other sources for their justification. Even those women who saw paid work as a positive personal experience for women, Esther Peterson and Margaret Hickey, for example, did not challenge women's domestic responsibilities or offer concrete proposals which would enable women to integrate their economic and family roles. See, Sealander, As Minority Becomes Majority, pp. 161-62, and "Excerpt from Speech," pp. 3-4, July 25-27, 1957, Margaret Hickey Papers, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri Manuscripts, St. Louis, Missouri. As Eileen Boris makes clear with regard to New Deal government policy, in "Regulating Industrial Homework: The Triumph of Sacred Motherhood," JAH 71 (March 1985):745-63, whatever the specific aims of social feminists, male reformers in government, organized labor, and business, all agreed that motherhood was an unassailable social value. Therefore, although reform measures such as the prohibition of homework under the NIRA may have improved pay and conditions for some women workers, they never disrupted the sexual division of labor or women's subordinate place in the paid labor market because they never touched women's unpaid domestic labor. This situation persisted into the postwar period, shaping government policy both before and after the articulation of the womanpower synthesis.


25 Memorandum to Leo Wertz, Acting Director Office of International Labor Affairs, from Frieda S. Miller, Subject: "Letter from Mr. Clark of NSRB," January 12, 1950, WB, RG 86, Box 1039, NA. Memorandum to Leo Wertz, Deputy Director DMA, from Frieda S. Miller, Subject: "Implementation of Defense Manpower Policy #7--Employment of Older Workers in the Defense Program," November 5, 1952, WB, RG 86, Box 1038, NA. The weak position of the Women's Bureau within the Department of Labor was revealed in an attachment to this memorandum when Miller noted, "Since the major labor reserve in a time of acute emergency will be middle-aged or older women, we have for a considerable time hoped to work on a study which will highlight the salient factors, but have been unable to do so because of a lack of personnel." Memorandum to John F. Hilliard, DMA, from Frieda S. Miller, Subject: "Preliminary Working Paper on Expanding and Conserving the Labor Force and Paper on Background Manpower Facts and Estimates," January 5, 1953, WB, RG 86, Box 1038, NA.

26 Judith Sealander, in As Minority Becomes Majority, pp. 7-10, p. 162, has highlighted the administrative position of the Women's Bureau, using the term "outsiders as insiders" to describe Women's Bureau bureaucrats. As Minority Becomes Majority, pp. 7-10, p. 162. Memorandum to John F. Hilliard from Frieda S. Miller, Subject:


28 "Stenographic Transcript of Proceedings Before the President's Committee on Government Contract Compliance, Washington, D.C., 17 June 1952," p. 498, p. 500, p. 501, Department of Labor, Special Assistant to the Secretary Charles W. Straub, RG 174, Box 435, p. 498, p. 500, p. 501. White women office workers were undoubtedly racially prejudiced. To call attention to the fact that employers used that prejudice to excuse their own discriminatory policies is not to condone the prejudice of white women. The management community made determined efforts to control almost all aspects of worker behavior and attitudes except racism.


33 Moore, Conduct of the Corporation, pp. 21-11.


John C. Burg [Manager, Service Promotion Department, Hotels Statler Company], "Discussion," *OMS* No. 79 (1937), p. 15. For employers' reluctance to adopt scientific testing procedures see also, Richard S. Schultz [In charge of Industrial and Personnel Research, The Psychological Corporation], "Discussion," *OMS* No. 84 (1938), pp. 12-13. E. D. Bartlett, "Attitude Tests and the Selection of Office Workers," *OMS* No. 84, p. 6, p. 5, p. 4, pp. 10-11. The general skepticism within the management community itself is suggested by the biography of Bartlett preceding his paper: "His practical approach to the subject of tests [has been] recognized and appreciated. He takes an extremely realistic attitude toward tests and, although recognizing to the full their value in industry, does not lose sight of their limitations" (p. 4). According to Schultz, Atlantic Refining was one of the few companies with "a practical testing system" (p. 13).

Ibid., p. 14; Robert N. McMurray, "Improving Interview Techniques," *OMS* No. 97 (1942), p. 4. A classic example of the human relations experts ascribing the effects of actual social and economic hardships to psychological maladjustment is contained in F. J. Roethlisberger and William J. Dickson, *Management and the Worker: An Account of a Research Program Conducted by the Western Electric Company, Hawthorne Works, Chicago, Illinois*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), pp.292-313. The authors recount interviews with four employees who, they say, display "morbid preoccupations" and "obsessive thinking" which make them unable to evaluate their work experiences rationally. For example, Mrs. Black, a production worker who dislikes her supervisor and fears that she may be laid of tells the interviewer her family's economic problems (both her husband and brother are unemployed) and her dislike for her drunken stepfather. She concludes her interview with the comment that she dislikes her supervisor because he is "mean" which reminds her of her stepfather's behavior. Instead of attributing her trouble on the job to her real problems with economic insecurity and patriarchal power—both at home and on the job, Roethlisberger and Dickson conclude that she shows "distorted thinking" and an "irrational" dislike for her supervisor.

1971), p. 117.


The theme of part one is that informal control of office work based on personal power persisted through the middle years of the twentieth century. The conditions under which women in feminized white-collar occupations worked afforded them some limited control over the work process and personal relations in the workplace. But the costs of this system were also high for the women of the office. Low pay, confinement to low-level jobs, discriminatory hiring, and social subordination bounded their choices. Part two describes women's responses to these conditions. In this section as well the emphasis is on continuity. Twentieth-century women office workers maintained historical continuity by carrying the values of the nineteenth-century gender system with them into the office with them, and they sought continuity in their daily lives by integrating traditional domestic roles with their newer roles as paid workers outside the home.

In chapter five the records of local Y.W.C.A. activities in Cincinnati and St. Louis offer a glimpse into the closed world of young, single "business girls." The women who chose to participate in the Y.W.C.A. structured their communities around the familiar rituals of women's domestic experience. Yet because their office jobs allowed them a measure of independence, they could direct these activities on
their own, without the restrictions of the patriarchal family structure or the guidance of female kin.

The temporary isolation of institutional female communities contrasts to the experiences of single and married women office workers in the family economy discussed in chapters six and seven. Using qualitative evidence from studies that include 1,289 women office workers, these chapters illustrate the contributions of white-collar women to their families. While many of these women obtained some economic independence by virtue of paid employment, almost all of them acquired new economic responsibilities to their families.

Chapter six outlines the continuum of economic need among single women office workers and their families, illustrating the ways that their paid and unpaid labor benefitted their families. The recurrent patterns of the female life cycle appear in these women's attempts to balance their responsibilities. The married women whose economic contributions became more significant with the demographic transformation of the female office workforce during and after World War II are discussed in chapter seven. The strategies of the married and "older" women office workers in this chapter appear to be elaborations of those developed among single women. Both groups were women in the middle, adjusting the family's resources to meet its needs and trying to balance responsibilities to others with their responsibilities to themselves. Their economic and psychic survival often depended on their links to other women, and this study of the
middle-class family economy suggests that women in feminized office occupations were the basis of extended networks of female friends and kin.

Chapter eight returns to the office workplace by examining women's office work culture in the 1920s. The incorporation of gender into the definition of feminized work in the office created a new model of work which was not comparable to either preindustrial or industrial labor. The nonindustrial work culture of secretarial workers reflected this reality, offering women tactics for asserting control in the workplace. Rather than engaging in confrontation or conflict, women in the office, adhering to gender-specific priorities that valued personal relationships, used frequent job changing and intermittent employment in order to achieve satisfactory working conditions. It is quite clear from their descriptions of work in the office, however, that they were aware of discrimination against them and resisted their inequality.

Chapter nine investigates women workers' nonindustrial work culture during the Second World War, when conflicts over changes in the female paid labor force—particularly the promotion of a few women to supervisory positions and the growth of industrial employment for women—seemed to threaten the gender system in the office that was the basis for female autonomy. Gender was, after all, the shared experience that bound women in the office together. Despite the oppressive nature of the gender system, for these women it also represented a separate morality emphasizing personal and emotional relationships as opposed to impersonal hierarchy.
As they transferred traditional female skills and values to the workplace and added economic responsibilities to an extended family network to their existing emotional contributions, women in feminized office occupations humanized the institutions of workplace and family. Their efforts to retain autonomous values and to meet the needs of others without sacrificing themselves completely reveal creativity and perseverance. But it cannot be argued that the women of the office willingly accepted their place in the work force or the family. Part one documents discrimination with quantitative evidence. Part two uses similar evidence to show that women were well aware of their subordination and that through their female communities insulated themselves as best they could from its effects. Historians can and should question the implications of separate female values and communities as strategies for resisting sexual inequality, but the evidence does not warrant an assertion that the women of the office failed to recognize their own inequality or that they would have chosen their position in the work force or society if other options had appeared to them.
CHAPTER FIVE

AFTER WORK: THE HOMOSOCIAL CULTURE

OF YOUNG WOMEN OFFICE WORKERS, 1920-1948

Evening coming—
the office girl
Unloosing her scarf.

Jack Kerouac

Introduction

By the early decades of the twentieth century, expanded opportunities for young, single women in feminized white-collar and service occupations had created a new phase in the female life cycle. Although the dominant culture continued to define women primarily in relation to their family and domestic roles, wage earning before marriage was accepted as an additional, but temporary, stage in women's lives. During the twenties, thirties and forties, the majority of paid women workers in the United States were single women who worked in jobs characterized by poor pay and lack of upward mobility because the incorporation of the "working girl" into the framework of existing gender roles was a convenient justification for limiting the opportunities open to paid women workers. But despite their dismal economic options, many young women discovered that even the circumscribed autonomy gained in paid employment freed them from some of the restrictions they experienced in their families and
allowed them to develop a rich social life of their own. After business hours, in clubs and boarding houses, young women office workers cultivated a female community that shared the personal and emotional emphasis of women's office work culture, and in contrast to Kerouac's austere image, these "girls" appear to have relished their new role.

Evidence of these female communities is so scattered that it precludes systematic study by an individual historian, but material on the Y.W.C.A. business girls' clubs and residences, which provided a formal organizational structure for activities among young women in white-collar occupations, gives a picture of at least part of this world. The monthly and annual reports of Y.W.C.A. business girls' clubs in two cities—Cincinnati, Ohio, and St. Louis, Missouri—and of the "Y.W." residence in Cincinnati were accessible to me, and an examination of local Y.W.C.A. activities in these two cities between 1920 and 1950 illustrates the ways that individual women used existing institutions to create informal woman-centered communities that reflected the realities of their experiences in the paid labor force as well as older patterns of female friendship. Although local Y.W.C.A. boards of directors and staff hoped that the services they offered would protect and uplift as well as offer recreation to young working women, it was the "business girls" themselves who chose to make use of Y.W.C.A. facilities, and on their own terms. They took part in making decisions both in their clubs and the residence, and because the Y.W.C.A. depended on voluntary participation by the young women it hoped to serve—participation that dwindled if its activities
were unpopular with its membership—its religious and educational programs were often overshadowed by the social activities favored by the "girls." "Business girls," it seemed, looked upon the Y.W.C.A. as a place to find friends with whom to enjoy their temporary freedom. White-collar women in both cities shared a similar outlook that reveals the connections between women's attitudes and behavior in the office workplace and a broader set of woman-centered values and priorities that had its historical roots in women's traditional gender roles.3

Club Life

As a part of the great reform movement that swept across industrializing America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Y.W.C.A. was committed to aiding and protecting young wage-earning women and to bringing them under wholesome social and religious influences. At the turn of the century, the Y.W.C.A. organized clubs for "industrial girls," offering not only a social outlet for young working-class women, but also the chance to mobilize on behalf of protective legislation and union organization.4 Over the next four decades, thousands of women in paid employment participated enthusiastically in club life. For example, a 1929 survey of 100 women in Cincinnati who earned between ten and twenty-five dollars a week illustrates the importance of club life to young working women in the twenties. Ranging in age between seventeen and fifty-five, this sample included thirty-six office workers as well as eighteen women who worked in other white- or pink-collar occupations. Forty of the total number belonged to a club or other organization. Among women
earning more than fifteen dollars a week, who could more easily afford club dues, the proportion who engaged in organized activities rose to almost half (see Tables 1, 2, 3).5

Originally attentive to poor women who were driven into domestic and factory employment by economic misery, the association only later expanded its program to include white-collar women. As late as September, 1919, the Cincinnati business girls’ club had only twenty-five members, although this number was an increase over the ten women who had been members at the beginning of the year.6 In the summer of that year, the secretary of the Industrial Department said that while the local Y.W.C.A. failed to reach many of the city’s working women, “We are, however, proud of one thing, in which we seem to be outstanding, and that is that while many associations have many office girls and few real Industrial girls, we have the real article.”7 But within a decade the situation had changed dramatically. In 1925, with thirty-six women in two clubs and forty-three other “business girls” attending ukelele classes, a separate business girls’ department was established, and by 1928 the Cincinnati business girls clubs claimed over 500 active members.8 At the same time participation by working-class women had fallen off, and the general secretary acknowledged, “We do have to face the fact that at the present time we have few industrial girls in this Association.”9 As local industrial clubs struggled to survive in the late twenties and thirties, business girls’ clubs continued to attract several hundred women. Membership figures are unavailable for the St. Louis Y.W.C.A. for the twenties and thirties, but in 1946, between 170
and 213 women were counted as active members in that city's business girls' clubs, and a total of 344 women had taken part in some aspect of the Y.W.C.A.'s business girls' activities as "visitors, guests, and girls who did not come regularly enough to be counted as members" (see Tables 6 and 7 for the composition of St. Louis business girls' clubs). 10

Y.W.C.A. business girls' club usually held meetings once or twice a month, and dinner or refreshments were often followed by a planned program or educational classes. Although the Y.W.C.A. staff tried to encourage book reviews and lectures on economic affairs and current events, the "girls" themselves sometimes had different priorities. Athletic activities—exercise in the gym, swimming, hiking, bicycle rides, and weekend camping trips—were almost always popular with young women who held sedentary office jobs. Programs with social or economic themes were often less well-attended than recreational events or entertainment. For instance, in the late twenties, ukelele lessons were the most popular weekly class among Cincinnati's "business girls," and appear to have been the core of the business girls' program there for several years. In the forties, bridge lessons, photography classes, handicraft projects, and lectures on etiquette, make-up, and fashion interested young, white-collar women in St. Louis. Dramatic productions and glee clubs also sparked enthusiasm, perhaps because they gave women in feminized occupations a rare opportunity to achieve public recognition for their efforts. For example, for eight weeks in 1927 over fifty Cincinnati business girls' club members devoted two evenings a week to rehearsals for a musical
comedy, "Oil and Vinegar." Although the cast and crew were full-time white-collar workers, they evidently felt their efforts had been well rewarded: the director "asked the girls after the last curtain, "Well, girls, shall we give another sometime?" And every girl shouted—"Yes!" 11 And in 1946, one St. Louis club sponsored spring and Christmas concerts, apparently without much encouragement from the Y.W.C.A. program director who reported that "the girls haven't too much talent, but love to sing and work really hard at it, and as a result, their concerts are surprisingly good." 12

Club members' insistence on recreational programs and their closed social networks frequently frustrated the Y.W.C.A. staff in its efforts to interest "business girls" in "meatier" subjects. In this respect white-collar club members were a vivid contrast to the blue-collar women in the industrial girls' clubs who were often active union members and took stands on political issues affecting women in paid employment. 13 In 1935, the Cincinnati Y.W.C.A.'s business and professional secretary said that one of the "defects" of the women in her department was that they were "[t]oo self-centered and complacent about themselves and everyone and everything else." 14 A decade later, the program director in St. Louis was having similar difficulties with the clubs under her direction. The activities of the L.T.A. club, the largest local business girls' club, with sixty-seven members between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine, were "almost entirely" recreational. In her annual report on this club, the program director commented, "They are almost too loyal to their club, and support any
of their own activities. . . . The past year has been a bit unfortunate, as the club officers, especially the Pres., were certainly not interested in anything very constructive." But through their shared social activities, members of the group had developed a strong community which extended beyond its weekly meetings: "the club had at least one social gathering a month outside the 'Y', such as slumber parties, theatre parties, [and] picnics." Another club, Tau Chi, also focused almost exclusively on social functions. The nine young women in this club had served together as War Recreation Hostesses, and according to the program director, they refused to plan programs in advance, preferring to conduct their weekly meetings "à la a social sorority, which I'm sure they feel they are." The program director attributed their social pretensions to the high proportion of "professional girls" in the group, and the Tau Chi club did include three teachers as well as one woman with the ambiguous occupational description "communications." But the club also contained two office clerks, two stenographers or typists, and one secretary. All of these women held feminized white-collar jobs, but they also differed greatly with respect to the status of their occupations, and possibly education and income as well. Yet there was no apparent discrimination within the group. The club's activities—for 1945-1946 these consisted of hosting dances for young officers and inviting a representative of the Elizabeth Arden cosmetics company to speak on make-up—suggest that these women had found a common ground for friendship in their gender-specific experiences. Although their club activities did not always satisfy
the objectives of the Y.W.C.A., and even appear frivolous, these young women were using the framework of the Y.W.C.A. business girls' clubs to emphasize what was most clearly their own—the visible signs of their gender identification. On the job, they could enforce their gender-specific standards only in the context of constant subservience to their male superiors. Within their business girls' clubs, however, they could build female communities that articulated their values and concerns explicitly.

The Residence Community

Institutional residences for wage-earning women were even more fertile ground for the development of a sense of community among women in feminized occupations. Originally an outgrowth of philanthropic efforts to protect and uplift young, single women who would otherwise be "adrift" in an urban environment, "homes" for working women were established in most American cities in the early decades of the twentieth century. United by their sex, age, and experiences in the paid labor force, and sexually segregated by their institutional living arrangement, women in organized residences perpetuated many elements of the women's culture that had bound nineteenth-century women together in the private, or domestic, sphere.

Communal life in residences for wage-earning women was rarely documented. Evidence from particular institutions does, however, exist, and case studies of these local examples allows us to begin the long, cumulative process of reconstructing the consciousness of twentieth-century women workers. A 1927 study of Cincinnati listed ten such homes for women, with room enough for 831 occupants, but only
the records of the central (white) and the West End (black) Y.W.C.A.'s have survived, and because the black experience seemed to play a more important role than class or occupation in the social relationships of the West End branch, it is not discussed here.18

Opened in 1869 and moving to large quarters in 1905, the "Y.W." residence provided lodging for over 100 women as well as temporary shelter for transients, who were often young women who had come to the city from rural areas seeking jobs or, occasionally, adolescent women who had been abandoned in the city by their boyfriends or fiancés.19 Transients rarely remained in the Y.W.C.A. for more than a few days, until they could be reconciled with their families or referred to other social service agencies. But women in paid employment who rented rooms for months or even years were the heart of the residence. Like several of Cincinnati's other institutional homes, the Y.W.C.A. placed limits on the age and income of occupants. The particular limits as well as enforcement varied over the years, but the general purpose of restricting residence to young women whose low wages made it difficult for them to find decent lodgings elsewhere and of pushing out those who had established themselves in the city in order to make room for new occupants, presumably less acclimated to life as wage-earners, remained constant. All of the residents were white—the Friendship Home for Colored Girls and the West End Y.W.C.A., which could house a total of fifty-six women, were the only local institutions that accepted black women. But the Y.W.C.A. showed no religious discrimination, although when the Martha House, a home for Jewish women, opened in 1920, the residence secretary noted that
"several of our Hebrew girls went to live there leaving us but one Jewess at present." 20

Even after the Y.W.C.A. moved to a more spacious building with places for almost 250 residents in 1929, new applicants for rooms usually exceeded the number who left because they had found other accommodations, married, or reached the three-year maximum length of stay. Although information on the occupations of residents is scanty, figures for 1935 showed that of 575 women who had lived at the Y.W.C.A. in that year, the vast majority were office workers or held other feminized white- or pink-collar jobs. Only thirty-nine, or slightly less than seven percent, worked in industrial or blue-collar occupations, perhaps because their lower wages forced them to find cheaper rooms if they were unable or unwilling to live with relatives (see Table 5). 21

The women who roomed at the Cincinnati Y.W.C.A. found more than a place to live. The institution itself was paternalistic; by attempting to re-create traditional family life, the Y.W.C.A. hoped to safeguard the "respectability" of young, single women who had left conventional roles in their families. In 1920, the residence secretary reaffirmed, "It has been our policy to conduct our residence as a home, not a hotel to meet the need of young, self-supporting women on low salaries." 22 Superficially, at least, life at the Y.W.C.A. had many of the accoutrements of the middle-class family: the parlor was decorated with pictures and plants donated by wealthy patrons, at Christmas the "girls" sang carols around the piano and ate homemade cookies, and the residence built in 1929 was equipped with
two "fudge kitchens" for use by residents. But the residence family did not fit the traditional, patriarchal model. There were no male authority figures, except for several men who served on the board of directors, which functioned at a distance from the daily routine of the residence. The residence secretary, a paid staff member who lived in the dormitory, acted as a surrogate mother, counseling the "girls" about their personal problems and, occasionally, expelling unruly residents. In 1921, for example, the secretary reported in January that "it has been necessary to ask three of the permanent residents to withdraw from the house because they have failed to keep the rules," and again in August, "one girl was asked to leave because of irregularities in her habits, and also because it was discovered that she had been married."23 In 1923, shortly after a new secretary arrived "to find herself the mother of eighty-seven girls," she reported to the residence committee, "After careful and prayerful consideration your secretary has found it necessary to dismiss one girl for insubordination."24

Residence secretaries in the late twenties and thirties seemed reluctant to dismiss permanent residents unless they had committed a serious offense. For instance, several women were asked to leave when it was discovered that they had stolen money, one because she was arrested for unpaid doctor's bills, and another because she paid her rent with "bad checks."25 But in 1931, when several occupants failed to live up to the "Y's" middle-class expectations of propriety for single women, the secretary apparently chose to deal with the matter indirectly, rather than to undergo the unpleasant task of confronting
them directly. She explained,

We have had several serious problems to face caused by the deportment of a small group of girls. These reports mainly coming from friends outside our building. By putting the reins on more tightly, they have decided to quietly check out, (and for good.)

Dismissals of permanent occupants were infrequent, however, and it was more common for residents to leave the house to marry or because they had reached the maximum length of stay. For instance in April 1923, "seven of our girls" left the residence "to find other homes as their time had expired. The girls left with many regrets after begging to be allowed to remain." More often than she disciplined them, the residence secretary attempted to protect her "girls" from the actual and perceived dangers confronting single women in the city. Transients sometimes disrupted the well-ordered life of the residence, and male prowlers were a recurrent problem, which neither the secretary nor the police seemed able to solve. When residents became ill, the secretary made certain that meal trays were delivered to their rooms, and if it was necessary for them to be hospitalized, they knew that she would visit them and monitor their medical progress. The image of herself as the mother of an extended female family was an important component of the secretary's role, sometimes continuing even after occupants had left the house. In August 1928, the monthly residence report noted "another interesting event, the inspection of new babies brought in by two of our former residence girls. The Residence Grandmother heartily approving." Although residence life was always confined by the paternalism of middle-class staff and the middle- and upper-class
leaders of the Y.W.C.A., the element of social control was mediated by
the homosocial nature of the house "family." Moreover, the protective
mothering they received at the residence offered young women in paid
employment a sense of security in the face of the physical and
psychological isolation of living alone.

In fact, residents generally accepted the regulations imposed on
residence life by the Y.W.C.A. Historian Lynn Weiner has pointed out
that despite the friendships some women found in institutional homes,
women from working-class backgrounds frequently found their
paternalistic restrictions distasteful. Weiner quotes former
prostitute Mamie Pinzer, who said, "the atmosphere in such a place [as
the Y.W.C.A.] would make me want to do something hideously wicked,
just to see what it was like."29 Perhaps because most of the
residents of the Cincinnati Y.W.C.A. worked in white-collar and
feminized service occupations, and probably came from middle- and
lower middle-class families where they had experienced more
restrictions than working-class women, they found it easier to adjust
to the rules of house life. There is no record of the rules governing
occupants of the Cincinnati Y.W.C.A. before 1927, but early that year
eighty residents attended a meeting to discuss regulations for the
house, probably because some women were not abiding by the rules
currently in force. But the women did not object to restrictions on
their behavior, instead, "rules were considered and voted a very good
thing," and the residents appointed a committee to draft a revised set
of rules. The new regulations, in the form of a humorous verse, do
not appear to have been particularly onerous—the only real
restriction was that after eleven at night the "girls" had to be inside and their "beaux" outside the building, although two nights a week residents could stay out later (see Appendix II). For some women, life in the residence may have actually been less restrictive than in their own families. In 1931, a young woman who had hosted a bridge party in the house "was very happy about it, saying she had never been allowed to have a party in her own home." For young, middle-class women, the Y.W.C.A. afforded a combination of safety and relative freedom.

There were also special advantages to institutional living. The "Y," for example, relieved wage-earning women, whatever their class background, of many of the domestic chores shouldered by single women who lived in "light housekeeping" apartments or with relatives. A housekeeper cleaned rooms weekly, and since all residents took their meals in the Y.W.C.A. cafeteria or restaurants, none had to cook. Some women may have chosen to live in "homes for working girls" because they were usually cheaper than apartments or rooms in safe and pleasant neighborhoods in the city. Many women must have felt that freedom from the burden of housekeeping and low rent compensated for formal regulations and lack of privacy at the Y.W.C.A. Others may have sought out the relatively scarce rooms in institutions like the Y.W.C.A. because living in a woman-centered community appealed to them.

Whatever their motives, once involved in the relationships and rituals of the residence, its homosocial world became a central part of their lives, and the pleasures of female companionship may have
made rules designed to protect young, single women from the dangers of unrestricted heterosexual contact in an anonymous city seem irrelevant. In many cases, women found the residence itself more appealing than the amusements outside. In 1920, when the Y.W.C.A. changed its rules to allow the occupants to keep their lights on later at night, residents began to spend fewer evenings outside of the house. One occupant told the secretary "that it was lots more fun to stay home now evenings, and that whereas last year few girls spent their evenings at home, now it was hard to get up a crowd to go out." Public forms of entertainment, then, were apparently less satisfying (as well as more costly) than staying at home in the company of other women. Had women found the atmosphere of the residence oppressive, however, longer hours would hardly have lured them back.

House residents carried on a remarkable number of social activities together. The daily routine of the house depended as much on informal friendships among residents as on the paternalistic intentions of the Y.W.C.A. or its residence secretary. For example, in her October 1919 report the secretary noted, "This week 'setting up' exercises have been instituted, the house girls going up to the roof in their kimonas on the ringing of the rising bell, and there having 10 minutes of drill led by one of their number. The enthusiasm will probably not last long, but it seems worthwhile to take advantage of it even for a short time." The women in the residence that year seem to have been an especially spirited and close-knit group. In December, the Christmas celebration included more than the church
service and formal dinner planned by the secretary—on Christmas eve
the "girls" also "hung their stockings on their door knobs, and there
was much merriment over filling them with fruit, candy, and little
jokes. Christmas morning the whole house rose early to investigate
the stockings." 33

The vitality of the homosocial society of the residence continued
throughout the twenties and thirties, and impromptu get-togethers and
surprise parties were regular events. In the heat and humidity of
summer, residents had the equivalent of slumber parties when they
slept on the roof on cots they supplied themselves. In July of 1935,
with the roof garden "in festive array . . . with . . . flowers
planted in the urns," residents gave a "Moon Eclipse Party." 34 And
the importance of social life within the residence to its occupants
was obvious in the invitation, written by some of the "girls," to
another roof garden party in 1937, which was clearly not meant for
outsiders:

Tall girls, small girls. Plump girls, all girls.
Wear your shorts, wear your slacks,
Wear your bathing suits and caps.
Pajamas, nighties, or dresses will do,
None of your outfits will be taboo. 35

But parties and celebrations were only the highlights of residence
social life; the female community also included the unplanned events
of daily life. In 1925, the residence secretary remarked that "each
night the girls meet and dine with other girls in the cafeteria where
the spirit of fellowship prevails." 36 Any change that allowed greater
informality in the house expanded the range of communal activities.
For instance, in 1935, the Board of Directors noted, "The innovation
of serving breakfast on the 5th floor for the girls in the residence has been a success, the girls enjoying the privilege of having breakfast while in negligee." Social relationships among women made the residence a home, not in the traditional sense of the word, but rather a home that reflected the texture of women's experiences.

Familiar Rituals

The homosocial culture of both Y.W.C.A. business girls' clubs and the residence existed in the context of the expectation that most young, single, wage-earning women would move on to conventional marriage and domesticity. This expectation shaped the shared rituals of clubs and residence. Y.W.C.A. parties and dances, for example, offered the opportunity for working women to meet single men with similar class backgrounds. Several times a year the Cincinnati residence hosted formal dances for men from the Y.M.C.A. and the Harrison House, a residence for white-collar men, and in contrast to the informality of female social life, these dances, with the hall decorated by flowers and candelabra, resembled the elaborate social functions held by families in the upper strata of society for their daughters. Formal affairs were supplemented by smaller club and residence parties, and for the women who lived at the Y.W.C.A., the residence parlors were a safe and comfortable place to entertain suitors. According to the residence secretary, the house was an especially popular place in the winter, when outdoor amusements were few. In January 1935, she reported, "Our sixth floor parlors have
been a haven for our girls and their boy friends during the zero degree weather. All settees and chairs were occupied, and many had to go to the second floor lounge."  

Residence women marked the engagement of one of their number—often to a co-worker or a young man from the Y.M.C.A. or Harrison House—with parties and showers. As many as three or four residents married each month in the interwar years, and most of them seem to have received showers from their friends. In October 1935 the residence report noted,

There is a friendly spirit prevailing throughout the department. Three of our girls are brides-elect and there have been as the weather man would say "prevailing showers" in the building, by their friends. Two of the girls have already furnished their homes.  

None of the residence secretaries ever mentioned what gifts an engaged woman received from her friends, but "prevailing showers," sometimes involving more than thirty residents, must have created an extra expense for women living on small salaries.

The 1929 study What Girls Live On—And How did take notice of the amount spent annually by Cincinnati "working girls" for gifts for family and friends. Although "some might think [this expense] should not be included in a budget for a low-wage girl," the study showed that ninety of 100 women earning between fifteen and twenty-five dollars a week purchased gifts for others. The median amount spent rose as a proportion of income, from roughly one week's pay for women earning under fifteen dollars a week to about two weeks' wages for those who earned twenty to twenty-five dollars (see Table 4). What Girls Live On did not show the amounts spent on presents for
particular people or specific events such as bridal showers, but the significance of gift giving among female friends may be inferred from the fact that the study did not list costume jewelry—an inexpensive personal item young women would have been quite likely to buy for each other—as an expense in its otherwise detailed budget. The authors had found that the women in their sample spent a miniscule amount on jewelry not only because they bought it on sale but also because "it was found that this was often received as a gift." Whatever the particular gifts a residence woman was given by her friends in preparation for the transition from "working girl" to married woman, her wedding was the final step in her departure from residence life. Either because they could not expect formal weddings from their families or because of their sororial ties to the house, occupants of the residence sometimes used its chapel to celebrate their weddings after the new residence was built in 1929.

A jaundiced observer might conclude that these young white-collar women were simply aping the customs of elite society. And it is true that Y.W.C.A. "business girls" often appear more conventional than adventurous; even their choice of feminized occupations suggest that these were not women who openly rebelled against the social restrictions imposed on them as women. Yet the very fact that they worked outside the home for wages distinguished them from middle-class, white women in the previous century, giving them small but independent incomes and exposing them to influences beyond home and family. Women who participated in homosocial club activities clearly must have thought that their relationships with other young
women of like experience met needs that their families alone could not fulfill. And, since the vast majority of single women in paid employment continued to live with families or relatives, women who left their families for life in a women's residence, sometimes in a new city, must be seen as having declared at least temporary independence from family roles. When they joined in the patterns of social activity that prepared them for marriage and domesticity, they did so on their own. They not only chose this option, but also controlled and directed the experience themselves.41

Because the sororial culture of business girls' clubs and residence life never directly challenged the prescriptions of the prevailing gender system, it remained relatively unnoticed, and it is difficult to assess the extent to which women workers were attached to its values. But despite this problem with the evidence, the behavior of the women who took part in these activities does offer some important clues about the ways that individual women interpreted and chose from the limited range of alternatives open to them. One possibility for women in feminized white-collar occupations was to focus on their identity as members of the paid labor force—that is, as members of an economic class. In fact, some women did turn toward professionalism or trade unionism in order to improve their status on the job, but in the middle years of the twentieth century, neither of these movements stirred enough interest among women in the office to become a powerful force for economic or social change.42 Another alternative—represented by "business girls'" homosocial networks—was to emphasize a shared female identity. But since it was the dominant
culture's gender system—especially its continuing prescription that the most important roles of middle-class, white women were as wives and mothers and not as wage earners—that defined the differences between women and men, the white-collar women who chose this alternative expressed their woman-centered values in terms of prevailing cultural attitudes about gender. By emphasizing heterosexual relationships and by giving the rituals surrounding courtship and marriage an important place in club and residence life, these women accentuated their separation from the values of the dominant masculine culture. Because both professionalism and trade unionism represented the impersonal relationships of the marketplace, neither of these models allowed women to maintain the kinds of personal, human relationships they had developed as women through female socialization in the home and in their gender-specific roles on the job.

Les Coeurs Gais, one of the St. Louis business girls' clubs of the mid-forties, provides one especially clear-cut illustration of the ways that young women office workers could use the artifacts of the prevailing gender ideology to assert an indigenous set of female priorities. In April 1946, the woman in charge of the "Business Girls Shop" in a local department store gave a presentation to members of the St. Louis business girls' clubs on "styles for the business girl, and . . . how these clothes could be purchased on limited budgets." The twenty-eight members of Les Coeurs Gais, almost all of them workers in feminized white-collar occupations between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, "took exception to many of her ideas
regarding dress for the young girl." Instead of the businesslike clothes in "practical" dark colors suggested by the department store representative, "they preferred light colored summer clothes," which, not incidently, coincided with conventional notions of femininity. "In this way and in many others they disagreed [with the speaker] and during the summer months this talk was referred to a number of times."

In the fall, Les Coeurs Gais adopted as their major project for the year a "style show," that would better represent their own image of themselves. As their theme they chose "Trousseau of a Bride." The advertising industry encouraged feminized patterns of consumption, but it is significant that young women in feminized employment interpreted these elements of their prescribed roles in their own ways. After all, although club members were apparently quite willing to accept the notion fostered by the retail industry that they should spend their hard-earned dollars on clothing, they rejected the particular style of clothing the department store was trying to sell them because it did not mesh with other elements of their gender identity. The style show was the largest project the LCG had ever attempted, but they were so enthusiastic that they needed almost no supervision from the club advisor.

[They] immediately agreed that the clothes to be worn would be their own with as few borrowed as possible. ... Their clothes were the clothes that they wore every day or in a normal months [sic] time. This meant they they included everything from blue jeans and wool shirts, house dresses and aprons (house dresses were simple summer dresses and the aprons were borrowed--this was because the girls believed these should be included in a trousseau), working clothes, suits for work and suits for dress, date dresses, evening clothes, lounging pajamas and negligee and as the climax the bride and her two attendants.
The inclusion of "working clothes" and "suits for work" may mean that Les Coeurs Gaits approved of paid employment after marriage, or simply that they already owned these items and wanted to show them off. In either case, the dominant images were those associated with traditional definitions of woman's place in the domestic sphere, complete with aprons and house dresses, rather than their activities in the paid labor force.

Gender

The young wage-earning women involved seemed unaware of the paradoxical nature of their behavior. The autonomous social relationships of their clubs and residences were possible only because the women who participated in them had some measure of freedom from their families. Unfortunately, we know almost nothing about social networks among non-wage-earning women in the mid-twentieth century, but it does seem unlikely that young, unmarried women whose identities as daughters and sisters had not been expanded by paid employment had many chances to develop female communities with the same degree of freedom as "working girls." Yet "business girls" culture celebrated the traditional events of the female life cycle, and "business girls" in groups shared rituals that emphasized their expectations of marriage and domesticity at the same time that domesticity itself was becoming more isolated and more isolating.

Even when the opportunity to marry declined, Y.W.C.A. club activities continued to focus on heterosocial and heterosexual relationships as a prelude to marriage. For instance, in 1935 when the Depression was forcing many young people to postpone marriage, the
best attended interest group sponsored by the Cincinnati Y.W.C.A. was not dramatics, gym, handicrafts, or psychology, but "boy-girl relationships." In 1946, the St. Louis program director felt that many business girls' club members "were keenly aware that [because so many men in their generation would not return from the war] they were probably not going to marry and would have to continue to work," but the most popular programs that year appear to have been the LCG style show; a lecture on the psychological problems of the returning veteran; and, "the most lively of all," a discussion called "You and Sex," which almost certainly did not include lesbian relationships. Possibly, club members' intense interest in their relationships with men reflected social stress accompanying disruptions in marriage patterns. This explanation does not, however, take into account the homosocial context of "business girls'" concern about heterosexuality, courtship, and marriage.

Here was present a full range of female friendships and woman-centered events very much like what Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has described as "the female world of love and ritual" inhabited by white, middle-class women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The sororial bonds of women's culture in the earlier period existed within, indeed depended upon, the segregation of women and men into separate private and public spheres. Within this dichotomy, nurturing and emotional qualities, what Nancy Cott has called the values of the "heart," were attributed to women as a sex, while men were presumed to represent the rational, impersonal qualities of the public sphere of business. According to Cott,
Although it was intended to stress the complementary nature of the two sexes while keeping women subordinate, the identification of women with the heart also implied that they would find truly reciprocal interpersonal relationships only with other women. They would find answering sensibilities only among their own sex. . . . Women characterized by "heart" presumably would seek equivalent sympathies in their friends. And just as women were viewed as inferior to men in rationality, men could not be expected to respond in kind to women's feelings.

Nineteenth-century women's culture did not directly challenge the doctrine of separate spheres because, as Cott points out, "The irony of the situation was that without marriage supplying women with home and children, the central prerequisite of their sex-role disappeared." In the twentieth century, it was feminized work in the office, business girls' clubs, and homes for single working women, rather than boarding schools and kinship, that allowed women to maintain peer relationships that would incorporate female values. The location of women's culture shifted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but its content had remained the same. And like its predecessor, the community of women office workers was based on values that lacked legitimacy in the world of business. By the mid-twentieth century, the rationality that had originally characterized male behavior in the public sphere had taken idealized form in the impersonal, "scientific" manager and the anonymous "organization man." Yet the personalism of women's office work culture (described in the last chapter) and the homosocial associations of white-collar women outside of work rejected this as a model for female behavior.
The male and female worlds remained separate, and, as a symbol of
shared female experiences and values, domesticity had more resonance
for women in the office than the business ethos.

Once a group of women office workers had established a community
in a club or boarding house, they tended to form a closed circle that
did not readily admit new-comers or outsiders. Les Coeurs Gais, for
example, "could not absorb new members rapidly enough to make them
feel a part of the group." Particular clubs tended to have a
relatively short life-span because, unlike the intense friendships of
eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women's culture which encompassed
every stage of women's private lives—not only courtship and marriage,
but also childbirth and death—the formal organizational framework for
women's culture among young, white-collar women did not include events
in the female life cycle that followed marriage and retirement from
paid work. Chi Lambda Chi, a Cincinnati club, disbanded in 1931
because after four years together in Y.W.C.A. activities as high
school students and an additional four years as a business girls' club, attendance had fallen off as members "developed other interests,
... with several the usual 'boy-friend' is at present looming
high." Those who remained active in the Y.W.C.A. chose to become
members-at-large rather than join other clubs.

Occasional references to women who wrote letters to the residence
secretary telling of their new lives or to former residents who
brought their babies back for "inspection," as well as the presence of
a housewives in three St. Louis clubs (see Table 8), suggest that some
women tried to preserve their ties to the "business girls" community
after they married. But by and large, former "business girls" seem to have had difficulty sustaining their old networks after they made the transition to marriage and motherhood, although because club culture accepted the belief that marriage began a new phase in a woman's life, the transition seemed not to create tension or resentment between individuals.

Women who did not marry might remain involved in the community until they were in their mid-thirties, although Y.W.C.A. organization and policy made it difficult to sustain their associations much past that age. Limits on age and length of stay in residences for "working girls" were a case in point. The Cincinnati Y.W.C.A. overlooked these rules in the early forties, however, and many women apparently began to see the residence as their permanent home. In 1947, when the board of directors reinstituted an age limit of thirty-five and a maximum five-years' occupancy, sixty women who surpassed these limits were forced to move.53

Older women who remained in business girls' clubs had to recruit new members to replace those who left the group, sometimes a painful process for an already established community. In the summer of 1945, the advisor of the Business Girls' League, one of the oldest St. Louis clubs, made this report illustrating the difficulties that accompanied the aging of individual club members and the club itself:

The B.G.L. Club is made up of girls who range in age from 25 to 35. When I first came in March '44, they had started a new lease on life. Most of the girls have been closely associated with the Y.W.C.A. for about five years and had "gone stale" a bit. There was some discussion of them not continuing as a Bus. Girls Club in the department, but rather on their own. This evidently did not appeal to them, as they started recruiting and building up
their membership. This hopeful phase did not last too long, and
the Club is now again in about the same condition. The girls are
not interested in all over program and cannot be depended upon to
support much of anything that is not a B.G.L. Club project.54

A year later, however, the B.G.L. was the second largest of the five
St. Louis clubs. It had retained its core of older women; of the
twenty-eight women over thirty among the total of 171 members in all
clubs, twenty-five were B.G.L. members, who composed fifty-four
percent of the club. But efforts to recruit younger women had
apparently been successful, and there were now eleven members
(twenty-four percent of the club) between eighteen and twenty-four
years old. Significantly, these younger members were not attracted
by, and perhaps were not even integrated into, the club's social
network. The annual membership report noted, "These [eleven] girls
have been attracted to the Business Girl's League because of the Glee
Club. It is not necessary for them to join the club in order to
participate but some do."55 Since there are no subsequent reports for
the St. Louis business girls' clubs, it is impossible to know how the
B.G.L. club and its members reacted to the continuing aging process in
later years.

In general, membership in Y.W.C.A. business girls' clubs declined
as women entered their thirties, and women over forty never appear in
business girls' reports in either St. Louis or Cincinnati. By the
time they reached their mid-thirties, women who stayed in the paid
labor force must have seen their wage-earning role as permanent rather
than transitory and may have felt uncomfortable in a club culture that
did not reflect this experience. Perhaps these women, finding that
their old communities now left them unsatisfied, entered new networks of female friendships in organizations like the National Federation of Business and Professional Women that accepted and tried to improve women's status as paid workers.

Class

The Y.W.C.A. encouraged "business girls" to consider economic and political questions, especially white-collar unionism. Records of both the Cincinnati and St. Louis Y.W.C.A. contain evidence of short-lived attempts to arouse business girls' club members interest in the union movement. But although some members did react favorably to the idea of unionization, in the long run, efforts to mobilize young women in feminized occupations failed miserably.

In Cincinnati, the business girls' committee of the local Y.W.C.A. began a project in white-collar unionization in 1935 because "the national Y.W.C.A. is interested in fostering labor unionism among girls doing clerical work." Its first action was a survey of downtown office workers. Almost immediately, committee members encountered antagonism from employers. When stenographers at the county court house were interviewed about their working conditions, county officials were irate. According to the committee member who had tried to collect survey data at the court house, "The opposition seemed to be due to the suspicion aroused by the questions . . . in regard to labor unions." Another committee member who had surveyed office workers in private employment reported that she had also met a great deal of criticism on the part of employers to any attempt on the part of the Y.W.C.A. to inquire into the working conditions of their employees. She said
they felt the Y.W.C.A. was organized to care for leisure time activities of girls and was stepping out of its normal functions in delving into their working conditions. She said she also felt the Y.W.C.A. could not afford to antagonize the employer group, which in the end it depended upon for financial support.\textsuperscript{57}

With major contributors threatening to stop their subscriptions, the committee decided it was "risky to rouse such antagonism" and dropped the project.\textsuperscript{58}

Local business and political interests successfully intimidated the middle- and upper-class women on the business girls' committee because the Y.W.C.A. was originally a philanthropic and religious organization rather than an advocate of unionization. Although the national Y.W.C.A. convention had endorsed collective bargaining in 1920, the issue had provoked dissension. According to historian Mary Frederickson, "wealthy women within the organization looked . . . with increased suspicion" on the staff members and industrial workers who had sponsored the endorsement.\textsuperscript{59} In Cincinnati, neither the national policy on collective bargaining nor the discussion of labor unions within the industrial girls' clubs caused much controversy, perhaps because these activities did not directly threaten employers' economic interests. The survey of women clerical workers in the downtown business district made the association's stand on unionization a visible public issue, and only then did controversy arise. When the local leaders turned their attention to unionizing women office workers in the thirties, they did so not on their own initiative but at the direction of national headquarters, and their commitment was shallow. Already wedded to philanthropy from business, the Cincinnati Y.W.C.A. also had representatives from local businesses hostile to the
very idea of trade unionism sitting on its board of directors—conditions hardly conducive to union activism.

In addition to its aborted survey, the Cincinnati Y.W.C.A. also tried to educate members of its business girls' clubs about "movements of employed women." But despite "talks and discussions and dramatics presenting this idea to the group," the business girls committee announced at the end of 1935 that "no action of any kind has taken place and little interest actually expressed except by one or two individuals." Although certainly more than "one or two" club members were interested in the topic, the general reaction to the program was disappointing. In the fall, thirty members signed up for an interest group to discuss "business and industrial relations," but only thirteen actually attended its first and only meeting. A similar discussion group was scheduled for the Y.W.C.A.'s winter term, but while thirty-six of seventy women who had completed questionnaires "expressed an interest in unions and a desire to know more about clerical unions," only three of the ninety-one club members who participated in winter term programs were willing to attend an interest group on this issue, and only one of them listed it as her first choice. The annual report summed up the situation: "Thus we have come to a standstill, especially in finding the girls unwilling to even study organization for fear of the word reaching their employers and their employers firing them, since there is so much feeling against their employees being made aware of union organization."
Fear of retaliation was justified, given the overt hostility of employers and the lukewarm support of the Y.W.C.A. But the clubs may have been a weak vehicle for mobilization in any case because club members themselves were divided on the issue of union organization. For some, identification with a working-class movement was impossible: the women who belonged to business girls’ clubs were, by and large, in comfortable, if not lavish, circumstances and probably did not experience their low wages as an acute problem. And because the non-industrial organization of office work allowed them freedom and variety on the job, they may not have been attracted to union activity— as factory workers undoubtedly were— as a way to reassert collectively their control over the work process. According to the committee, it was not only employer intimidation that inhibited organizing efforts, but also the fact that “some girls are opposed to unions because of the dues necessary to belong and some feel they stifle initiative and that no set standards could be drawn up for office workers because of the range of kinds of jobs white collar workers do.” Just as important, although we do not know the class backgrounds of these women, many must have come from middle-class families and therefore lacked an historical consciousness favorable to trade unionism. This may explain why one club member was so disturbed that unionization was advocated in the fall meeting on business and industrial relations that she reported what she had heard “to a member of the Board of Directors who came from the employer class.” Although the committee thought that she “knew nothing about the subject and misinterpreted the facts presented that night,” her report
stirred "much agitation [among board members] and the group had to be discontinued."
Ordinarily, the board probably paid very little attention to the seemingly innocuous content of club meetings, and if they had not been informed by a club member that unions had been a serious topic of conversation, clerical organization might have proceeded much farther.

But the group had also encountered difficulties that had nothing to do with the board's interference or even members' attitudes toward unions per se. The leader of the first night's discussion was a club member who had attended the Workers' Education School at Bucknell College. Although the committee thought she was "capable," and her summer school experience must have made her knowledgeable on the subject, "the girls resented one of their own taking such leadership." Had the group continued, the committee believed that it would have been necessary to find another leader from outside the club. There are at least two possible reasons why the "business girls" might have rejected leadership from "one of their own." One is that the summer school graduate was, for some reason, an unpopular individual. The other, equally plausible, is that one member appeared to be elevating herself above the others and assuming authority in ways that were incompatible with the egalitarian friendships of the club's female community. Just as nineteenth-century women's culture provided women in the domestic sphere with the only peer relationships available to them, the homosocial culture of business girls' clubs gave young, single women office workers their only opportunity to escape the subordination they experienced both at work and in their
families. It seems improbable that these women would willingly introduce patterns of leadership that would reduce some members to subordination within the group or allow a controversial subject to disrupt their network of friendships.

In the St. Louis business girls' clubs of the forties, the question of labor organization was almost invisible. Here, too, the Y.W.C.A. tried to introduce the topic of white-collar unions, but since these efforts remained within the clubs, they did not awaken the wrath of anti-union employers. In St. Louis, as in Cincinnati, the issue was a source of conflict among club members. The program director reported that "a number of the club leaders are antagonistic toward unions and it is only when these girls are outnumbered that discussions are easily maintained." With the exception of this one topic, records of Y.W.C.A. business girls clubs in both cities rarely even hint at discord among club members, but by eliciting differing interpretations of their class interests from club members, the question of unionization threatened to dissolve the bonds of homosocial culture. Gender, not class, was the common historical experience shared by all club members, and in the end, the potentially divisive issue of class identification was submerged in the interest of social harmony in the female community.

Conclusion

Fiona McNally and Margery Davies, feminist scholars who have done extensive research on women clerical workers, have argued that young women in low-level white-collar occupations have generally chosen to marry and leave paid employment not because they found domesticity
Intrinsically more satisfying than wage-earning, but because of their subordination in the office. McNally, for example, suggests that a feminist analysis of women as temporary workers should "stress the lack of choice and opportunities which necessitates resignation to one's fate and which renders an attachment to the home an understandable response to the fact of limited alternatives."^65 

Davies goes further, arguing,

It should not be thought that women by their "natures," chose to emphasize their gender instead of class identification. This was a question not of choice but of women's structural position in society. . . . A woman who had to choose between a life of domestic work and working at a deadening low-level clerical job or as an executive's personal servant earning no public recognition whatsoever was not given much of a choice.66

Clearly, McNally and Davies are correct to emphasize women's inequality in the white-collar work force and their lack of options outside it. But implicit in their argument is the assumption that young, single women office workers saw marriage as a bleak alternative. Yet "business girls" homosocial culture celebrated women's traditional domestic roles, not as an escape from feminized office work, but as a symbol of women's gender-specific values. Patriarchal gender ideology did prescribe that white, middle-class women in the twentieth-century should be only temporary and subordinate wage-earners and then retire to the home, in the same way that it prescribed certain jobs within the office—typing and stenography—as "women's work." But by ascribing to women "natural" abilities in these domestic and office occupations, the gender system left direct control of those activities in women's hands. White, middle-class women in the twenties, thirties, and forties occupied a
separate sphere only marginally larger than the private sphere of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; yet so long as they were segregated, they could maintain their own standards and priorities and create their own communities. For reasons of their own, women office workers did choose "to emphasize their gender instead of class identification."

Their choice did, however, create its own set of problems. Since social inequality was the pre-condition for their female community, if they challenged that inequality, they might also disrupt the gender-specific values that united them. As workers, they were joined by economic inequality, but to assert their class interests would be to threaten their solidarity as women. The final paradox was that their homosocial world was based on the individual freedom and autonomy they experienced as wage workers, but when they fulfilled the expectation of that community by marrying, they also left it. For all its vibrancy, business girls' culture lacked continuity or the ability to improve women's status in the larger society.67
FIGURE 1

House Rules, Cincinnati Y.W.C.A. Residence, 1927
Written by a Committee of Resident "Girls"a

Girls, this is our home, not some school
So why be guided by an iron clad rule?
Now the following lines are just suggestions
If you don't [sic] understand, please ask questions

At eleven o'clock the house will close
This means of course, "Good night, Beaux"
But you may choose two nights of the seven
To be out late, WAY after eleven,
And once each week, if there's [sic] extra fun,
You may even stay out until the clock strikes one.

If, however, you're away for the night
Don't you think it fair and just about right
To leave a note in the little black book
So in time of stress, we'll know where to look?

When you leave your room please lock your door
Even when visiting about on the floor
And if you go out, turn in your key
The reason for this is as plain as can be.

Once each week the maid will clean
Your number and day can plainly be seen,
Will you hand up your dresses and put pretties away
So that broom, brush, and mop may have full sway?

The telling of this is just silly chatter
But, NOT DOING these things, quite a different matter
And as time passes by, if we're not proud of you
I'm afraid you'll be asked to bid us Adieu.

______________________________
aYoung, "Report of the General Secretary for March, 1927," Folder 45, Box 10, CHS.
TABLE 1

Ages of 100 white women interviewed for 1929 study of wage-earning women in Cincinnati, What Girls Live On--And Howa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17 years old</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 - 19 years old</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 - 29 years old</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 - 55 years old</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


TABLE 2

Occupations of 100 white women interviewed for 1929 study of wage-earning women in Cincinnati, What Girls Live On--And Howa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of Employment or Occupation</th>
<th>$10-$15</th>
<th>$15-$20</th>
<th>$20-$25</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offices</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switchboard and Telephone Operators</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stores</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factories</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laundries</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>29</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
<td><strong>21</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a Compiled from Ibid., p. 10
TABLE 3

Membership in clubs, benefit lodges, and unions of 100 white women interviewed for 1929 study of wage-earning women in Cincinnati, *What Girls Live On—And How*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weekly earnings</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Membership in clubs, benefit lodges, unions</th>
<th>Percentage of membership by income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$10-$15</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15-$20</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20-$25</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All income groups</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### TABLE 4

*Amounts spent for gifts for family and friends by 100 white women interviewed for 1929 study of wage-earning women in Cincinnati, *What Girls Live On—And How*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weekly earnings</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Number who purchased gifts</th>
<th>Percentage who purchased gifts</th>
<th>Amount spent annually</th>
<th>Median amount spent annually</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$10—$15</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>$2 to $85</td>
<td>$14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15—$20</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>$5 to $100</td>
<td>$30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20—$25</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>$10 to $77</td>
<td>$50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All income groups</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>90 b</td>
<td>90</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


By contrast, only sixty-seven women contributed to a church, and, overall, they spent less on church contributions than on gifts: "Seven of the lowest-wage group gave $10 a year and over; eight in the $15 to $20 wage group gave $20 and over; eleven of the highest-wage group contributed $20 and over," *Ibid.*
### TABLE 5

**Ages of 615 Occupants**  
Of Cincinnati Y.W.C.A. Residence, 1935a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 to 24 years old</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 to 29 years old</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 to 34 years old</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 years old and overb</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>615</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

*aCompiled from "Girls in Residence--1935," Folder 10, Box 14, CHS. Of the total, five were "foreign" and twenty-nine married.*

*bAlthough the Y.W.C.A. papers do not indicate any formal change in the rule barring women over thirty-five from the residence, the policy was clearly in abeyance by 1935.*
TABLE 6

Occupational Distribution
of 575 Occupants of Cincinnati Y.W.C.A. Residence, 1935a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Office Workers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stenographer</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerk</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookkeeper</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comptometer [operator]</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typist</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department Manager</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underwriter, Insurance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-professional Feminized Occupations</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selling</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautician</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cashier</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostess</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cafeteria Director</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel Supervisor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White-Collar, Professional</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Service</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art Work</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal [Personnel?] Work</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio Broadcasting</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering Draftsman</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological laboratory</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue-Collar</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seamstress</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laundry</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compiled from "Girls in Residence—1935," Folder 10, Box 14, CHS.
### TABLE 7

**Occupations of Members**  
St. Louis Y.W.C.A. Business Girls' Clubs, 1946

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B.G.L. Club</th>
<th>L.T.A. Club</th>
<th>Tau Chi Club</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Office clerk</td>
<td>Office Clerk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office clerk</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stenographer or Typist</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Office Clerk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookkeeper</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office Machine Operator</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office Supervisor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Stenographer or Typist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial Assistant</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptionist/Doctor's Assistant</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laboratory Technician</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saleswoman</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les Coeurs Gais</td>
<td>Stenographer or Typist</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stenographer or Typist</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office Clerk</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office Machine Operator</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptionist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone Operator</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y's Size Club</td>
<td>Office Clerk</td>
<td>Office Clerk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office Clerk</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office Machine Operator</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stenographer or Typist</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Receptionist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptionist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

*Compiled from "Narrative Report, September–July 1946, Central Branch Business Girl’s Department,” Box 46, WHMC.*
### TABLE 8

Occupational Distribution of 171 Members of St. Louis Y.W.C.A. Business Girls' Clubs, 1946

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Office Clerk</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stenographer and Typist</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office Machine Operator</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookkeeper</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other white-collar or service occupation</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total white-collar</strong></td>
<td><strong>162</strong></td>
<td><strong>94.8</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue-collar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>171</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Compiled from "Narrative Report, September-July, 1946, Central Branch Business Girls' Department," Box 46, WHMC.*
### TABLE 9

**Ages of 171 Members St. Louis Business Girls' Clubs, 1946**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>B.G.L. Club</th>
<th>L.T.A. Club</th>
<th>Les Coeurs Gais Club</th>
<th>Tau Chi Club</th>
<th>Y's Size Club</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>59.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>22.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>15.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Compiled from "Narrative Report September-July, 1946, Central Branch Business Girl's Department," Box 46, WHMC.*
Endnotes


3. Committee minutes as well as monthly and annual reports by the paid departmental secretaries from 1911 to 1948 are contained in Boxes 8-15, Cincinnati Y.W.C.A. Papers, Cincinnati Historical Society, Cincinnati, Ohio [hereafter cited as CHS]. The reports on business girls' clubs are most complete for the years between 1925 and 1936. These are supplemented by the Minutes of the Board of Directors, Boxes 3-6, CHS. Although reports on the St. Louis Y.W.C.A. business girls' clubs are available only for the years 1944 to 1948, the reports for these years are rich in detail, Box 46, Metropolitan St. Louis Y.W.C.A. Papers, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri Manuscripts, University of Missouri, St. Louis, Missouri [hereafter cited as WHMC]. In both cases, the records are uneven, with unexplained gaps resulting from turnover in local Y.W.C.A. staff, reorganization of activities, and possibly, loss of some reports. The contours of the female community among women working in feminized white-collar jobs are, however, quite clear.

All the women discussed in this chapter are white. Although the Y.W.C.A. did espouse racial equality, activities for black and white women remained segregated throughout this period. The association's separate black branches carried on many of the same kinds of activities as white branches, and black clubs and residences served black women as institutional bases for expression of their own autonomous culture. For black women, however, race was inextricably intertwined with class and sex, and any account of local black branches of the Y.W.C.A. would have to include a careful analysis of the inter-relationship of these three elements of black women's experience. The sort of sensitive and detailed analysis the subject deserves would involve many issues not directly related to those at hand and has not, therefore, been attempted here.


Sue Mossman, "Girls' Work Department, 1920," Folder 34, Box 8, CHS.

Ada Wehrly, "Report on the Industrial Department, June 1919," Folder 22, Box 8, CHS.

Rose Tennant MacFadon, "Business Girls Department Report, 1925," Folder 21, Box 10, CHS.

Laura H. Young, "General Secretary's Report for July and August [1928]," Folder 10, Box 11, CHS.

"Narrative Report, September-July, 1946, Central Branch Business Girl's Department," Box 46, WHMC.

MacFadon, "Business Girl's Report for December 1927," Folder 39, Box 10, CHS.

"B.G.L.,” Box 46, WHMC. Without specific references, it is impossible to tell the origins of club names. In this instance, it appears that "B.G.L." was an acronym for "Business Girls' League," "Narrative Report, 1946," Box 46, WHMC.

Members of the industrial girls' clubs in Cincinnati engaged in many of the same social activities as "business girls," but they were also much more involved in economic and political action. In 1919, for example, the secretary of the industrial department reported on union membership in terms that suggest that she was not certain that committee and board members would respond positively:

Please forget, if you can, that this is a report. Reports have a bad way of being read, accepted as read, and then forgotten, because everyone has an idea that all is well and there are no problems. And there are problems. Cincinnati has been feeling the general industrial unrest. It is not only in the East somewhere or out on the Coast, but right here at our doors. Some of our most loyal Y.W.C.A. girls are most actively concerned in the strike of garment workers and cap makers. More than once they have excused themselves to attend their union meetings and we owe them an intelligent study of the situation.

Wehrly, "Report of the Industrial Department," (probably April 1919), Folder 22, Box 8, CHS. In 1921, members of local industrial girls' clubs were absorbed in the issue of minimum wage legislation and sent
one member to the state capital to testify in favor of a minimum wage
bill, Edith Wagoner, "[Report of the Industrial Department,] March 31,
1921," Folder 9, Box 9, CHS.

14 Constance T. Blair, "Annual Report, Business Girls" Folder 1,
Box 14, CHS.

15 "L.T.A.," Box 46, WHMC.

16 "Tau Chi," Box 46, WHMC. Even the club's Greek letter name
suggest that these women compared themselves to a sorority.

17 Weiner, From Working Girl to Working Mother, pp. 52-60. My
thinking on this topic has been influenced strongly by Lisa Fine who
describes the white-collar women who lived in a Chicago residence
between 1900 and 1920 as "women in transition," letter to the author,
January 30, 1935.

18 Frances Ivins Rich, Wage-Earning Girls in Cincinnati: The
Wages, Employment, Housing, Food, Recreation and Education of a Sample
Group, ed. Ellery Francis Reed (Cincinnati: Helen S. Trounstine
Foundation and The Young Women's Christian Association of Cincinnati,
1927), pp. 28-30. I am indebted to Pat Carter for this citation.

19 Blum, "Cincinnati's Women's Christian Association," p. 57.

of the Residence Secretary, 1920," Folder 44, Box 8, CHS.

21 "Girls in Residence--1935," Folder 10, Box 14, CHS.

22 "Report of Residence Secretary, April 1920," Folder 44, Box 8,
CHS.

23 Florence E. Smith, "Report of the Residence Secretary, January,
1921" and "Report of the Residence Department for August, 1921,
Folder 13, Box 9, CHS.

24 Nellie L. Lester, "Report of Residence Department, August,
1923," Folder 9, Box 10, CHS.

25 Young, "Report of General Secretary, June, 1928," Folder 10, Box
11, CHS; Statira B. Childress, "Residence Report for September, 1931,
Folder 11, Box 12, CHS; Childress, "August Residence Report--1932,"
Folder 24, Box 12, CHS.

26 Childress, "Residence Report for July 1931," Folder 11, Box 12,
CHS.
Anna L. Williams, "Report of Residence Department, April 1923," Folder 9, Box 10, CHS.

Lester, "Report of the Residence dept., August, 1928," Folder 17, Box 11, CHS.

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Cindy S. Aron has shown that the experience of white-collar work altered the consciousness of white, middle-class women who entered federal government offices in the nineteenth-century, adding to their self-esteem and making them more self-confident, "To Barter Their Souls for Gold": Female Clerks in Federal Government Offices, 1862-1890," Journal of American History, 67(1981): 835-53.


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Constance T. Blair, "Minutes of Business Girls' Committee Meeting, November 12, 1935," Folder 1, Box 14, CHS.

Blair, "Minutes of Business Girls' Committee Meeting, December 3, 1935," Folder 1, Box 14, CHS. Frances Rich had encountered similar difficulties with local employers when she attempted to interview women workers for her 1927 study, although she was not interested in fostering labor unionism among wage-earning women, Wage-Earning Girls in Cincinnati, p. 10.

Blair, "Annual Report [of Business Girls' Committee, 1935]," Folder 1, Box 14, CHS. In January 1936, the committee decided to omit questions about white-collar unions from its survey in order to placate hostile employers, Helen H. Wolfe, "Minutes of Business Girls' Committee Meeting, January 9, 1937," Folder 14, Box 14, CHS. Here the historical record stops cold. The Cincinnati Y.W.C.A. Papers do not contain any other records of the business girls' committee activities in 1936, and the surveys that were completed in late 1935 and early 1936 are also absent from the collection.


Ibid.

Ibid. For a discussion of the summer school for office workers and its ties to organized labor, see Alice Kessler-Harris, "Education in Working-Class Solidarity: The Summer School for Office Workers," in Sisterhood and Solidarity, pp. 223-51.

Cott, Bonds of Womanhood, pp. 188-90.

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CHAPTER SIX

WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE:

SINGLE WOMEN IN THE FAMILY ECONOMY

I was eager to help all the family, to be sure, but how much of me did they really need—all? How much did I belong to myself? To what extent had I the right to ignore myself . . .?

—Wanda Gag

Historical Methodology and Soap Operas

Some of the most valuable resources for twentieth-century American social history are the raw data from surveys done by private organizations and government agencies. Questionnaires and interview notes offer a rare glimpse into the behavior and values of the women who have worked in offices. Because these women were, by definition, literate and because they were anxious to break out of their invisibility at home and in the office, they often responded to investigators in great detail, reciting not only their life and work histories but also explaining the decisions that had confronted them and their motives in choosing particular courses of action. The rich, although scattered, evidence in such sources made it possible to examine the life or employment histories of 1,289 women who had worked in offices in different parts of the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. These histories reveal something about social relationships on the job and even more about women's reasons for working and the interrelationship between paid employment and
female roles in the family. Using these sources as qualitative evidence disclosed an informal, hidden network of female friends and kin linked together by economic and emotional bonds that took new forms for white, middle-class families as the women in them began to participate regularly in the female office labor force.

In the mid-twenties, the Bureau of Vocational Information, an organization formed to promote women's educational and economic advancement, and which had close ties to the elite women's colleges, discovered that college-educated women more often requested information on secretarial work than on any other single occupation. In 1925 and 1926, the BVI conducted a survey of more than 2,500 women secretaries. The results of the study were never published but the 2,057 questionnaires and notes on 459 interviews available at the Schlesinger Library provide a fairly complete picture of the conditions under which women secretaries worked in the 1920s and their own reactions to their circumstances. The following chapters use 650 of these. Although the study was national in scope and aimed to reflect accurately the geographic distribution of women office workers as well as their distribution in large and small offices, it was not representative in several important ways. Given the organization's purpose and outlook, it is not surprising that the BVI attempted to show that secretarial work, if not professional, was at least an "entering wedge" for educated women's advancement in business. The BVI staff sought out what they termed "high-type" women—that is, the elite corps of private secretaries—and excluded stenographers, typists, and routine office workers as much as possible. The women
included in the study appear to have been entirely white, and primarily native-born women of western-European descent. Ninety percent of the group had never married, and well over half were under twenty-five years old.\(^2\) Despite its obvious lack of balance, however, the BVI study is the most comprehensive source available for the quantity and quality of information it contains. The questionnaires contain work histories as well as information on education, job content, and attitudes toward work and advancement.

Another cache of information exists in the records of the Women's Bureau of the United States Department of Labor. Although the Women's Bureau usually concentrated its research on the seemingly most disadvantaged women workers, those in domestic service, sweatshops, and factories, it did undertake several studies of women office workers and sometimes included office workers in studies of other topics. In some instances, the survey data were purely quantitative and the results published in the Women's Bureau bulletins; in others, the raw data are missing or difficult to track down. But the work histories of 213 women in Utah and Cleveland, Ohio, who had experience as office workers and were interviewed in 1939 for the study *Women Workers in Their Family Environment*, offer a detailed picture of women's economic responsibilities and their relationships to their families. The interviewer's notes are perceptive and they often quote the women questioned for the study. So, too, similar life histories of part-time workers collected in cooperation with the American Association of University Women in 1951 include similar information for about thirty women who were working part-time in offices. Because
this sample is composed of AAUW members, they like the BVI sample were probably more highly educated and economically better off than many women in clerical occupations. 3

Finally, the initial interviews, resumes, and follow-up questionnaires of 396 women who applied to a retraining program for "older" women workers conducted by the New York House and School of Industry in the early fifties offers yet another pool of personal data that reflect the interplay between paid employment, family responsibilities, and economic need in women office workers' lives. 4 All of these women had previous experience in office jobs that required typing and shorthand, and some were of the same generation as the younger women sampled by the BVI in the twenties. These life histories are very useful for reconstructing the reasons that older and married women, the fastest growing group of women in office work after World War, entered and re-entered the office, but the interviews and resumes only list past jobs rather than tracing reasons for changes earlier in the life cycles of the participants.

Since these sources were collected by different organizations at different times and for different purposes, it would be difficult to draw comparisons based on the quantifiable information in them. But they do allow women to speak about their experiences in their own words, and they reveal the subtle texture of middle-class female life because women themselves often included information about their circumstances that they, rather than the investigators, thought was important. Moreover, these stories illustrate the intricate patterns of relationships that were tied to women's participation in the paid
labor force. Patterns of frequent job changing and intermittent and part-time work reveal the continuity of female attachments to family at the same time that paid employment in offices introduced new possibilities and obligations into middle-class women's lives.

The patterns of these female lives are recurring and flexible rather than linear. They reveal an ebb and flow of economic and emotional connections based on a web of informal, personal relationships. Women's words contained in survey data are valuable precisely because they show continuity and change, complexity and ambivalence. In some ways, these life histories resemble popular daytime soap operas in their emphasis on intricate networks of personal relationships and transitory but repeating small dramas that achieve no final resolution. Perhaps one reason that television serials can attract and hold a female audience is that, while they provide synthetic glamour and danger, they also tap into the shared experiences of modern women's lives.

An attorney once told me that the "problem" with the secretaries in his office was "the soap opera syndrome." By this he seemed to mean that they became involved in the personal and particular circumstances affecting clients instead of the impersonal legal questions that would result in winning or losing in an adversarial judicial system. As an explanation of women's segregation at the bottom of the white-collar work force, his statement seemed an excuse for discrimination. When they are given the chance to do so, women can and do operate efficiently in the competitive, impersonal worlds of business and the professions. And the ability to recognize
pertinent details or the importance of human relationships would enhance any career. One reason secretaries have been so valuable to their employers has been their ability to maintain the personal undercurrents of the white-collar world. But women may, in fact, operate on a distinct, historically-rooted value system that stresses personalism more than an impersonal hierarchy, relationships and feelings more than competition.

Carol Gilligan found just such differences between women and men in her study of female moral development, _In a Different Voice_. One of the women she interviewed was a lawyer, Hilary, who was profoundly disturbed by the conflict between the impersonal rules of her profession, which stressed winning, and her own sense of personal honor in her relationships with other people, even when they were her adversaries in court. Like the women office workers in the next two chapters, Hilary was confronted by the incompatibility of impersonal masculine values and female values based on personal feelings and relationships. But unlike Hilary, women in feminized office jobs in the second quarter of this century had to deal with this conflict within a discriminatory system of employment.

**Historical Periodization**

The growth of white, middle-class women's work in feminized white-collar occupations in the first half of the twentieth century presents an intriguing problem in historical periodization. Recognizing the divergent experiences of women and men, historians of women have argued that the moments and meaning of historical change
differ by sex and that one methodological priority of women's history should be to develop new models of historical periodization that accurately represent the realities of the separate female experience. Yet students of modern American history have had difficulty carrying through on this injunction, largely because the process of rapid industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries transformed virtually every aspect of American life. It is hard to imagine any other unit of time that has such compelling unity. Histories of labor, business, and social thought in this period generally find the culmination of industrialization in either World War I and its aftermath of conflict and repression or in the economic upheaval and readjustment of the thirties.

This conceptualization has been useful in American women's history because, as workers, working-class women also experienced industrialization as a dramatic change in their way of life and because, after the passage of the suffrage amendment in 1920, there was a break between the woman-centered feminists whose outlook was rooted in the nineteenth century and the "new women" who came to maturity in the twentieth century. But the social history of middle-class women's work in the office fits uneasily into this scheme. Feminized office jobs did begin to open up in the late nineteenth century, and by the twenties the pattern of single women's participation in the lower-levels of white-collar work had become established and accepted. The rising labor-force participation of married women, beginning in the twenties and thirties and gathering momentum in the forties and fifties, appears to have created a
watershed in women's experiences of paid work and family. In fact, this demographic shift was not a break with the past, but rather an elaboration of the career patterns already prevalent among single women in the middle class. By centering investigation of twentieth-century women's work and family roles on single women's experiences and using their perspectives as a basis for comparison with married women workers, it becomes possible to trace the continuity of the middle-class female life cycle and to see women's broader family responsibilities outside of marriage and maternity.

Both individually and as a group, the single women who led the wave of women's participation in office work were women in the middle. The educational qualifications and personal qualities demanded by employers almost guaranteed that they would come from middle or at least comfortable working-class backgrounds. More privileged, college-educated women were experimenting with the excitement of peer group culture and demanding the right to heterosexual satisfaction, and women from poorer families were exerting their independence in the environment of the modern city. But the women in the middle were less individualistic, less able or willing to assert their rights, and the independence they achieved through their office jobs was only qualified independence. The family was the central reference for their economic decisions. The amount of income and domestic services their families did or did not need not only conditioned their initial entry into the white-collar work force, but also shaped and directed their occupational decisions throughout their lives. These women felt a tension between their responsibilities to their families and their
own goals and ambitions. Even Wanda Gag, a self-described "new woman" of the twenties who managed to resolve this tension with some success, could not escape personal conflict entirely. She was an exceptional woman from an unconventional family who had unusual vitality, sense of adventure, and devotion to her goal of becoming an artist. Women with less idiosyncratic families or less firmly defined career ambitions were also less able to cut themselves loose from this acute conflict of interests. Just as the Y.W.C.A. business girls carried nineteenth-century domestic values into their new roles, middle-class single women as a whole continued to express personal devotion to their families and to fulfill their traditional roles of subordination to family interests. But despite the continuity of values and roles within the family, the possibility of paid employment in a respectable job created a massive demographic change that placed those values and roles in a new context.

The new roles of single, middle-class women had a stunning effect on the middle-class family. Single women's earnings made it possible for families to meet economic emergencies, provided for advanced education for other family members, and increased the family's capacity to consume. The implications of this gradual change went unrecognized because single women's paid work was devalued and because their traditional domestic roles were not eroded in the process. Single women made significant economic contributions to their families, but they earned low wages in dead-end jobs, and only intermittently participated in paid employment, meeting their families' demands for money or unpaid domestic services as the need
arose. By masculine standards, they did not have careers at all. But they could, and sometimes did, support an entire family on their abysmally small salaries when there was a failure of male earnings, and by the twenties and thirties, invisible economic bonds among female kin, based upon single women's earnings, were being superimposed over the emotional bonds of middle-class women relatives and friends.12

As married women's labor-force participation increased, married women's career patterns and economic relationships to their families embroidered on the patterns already established by single women. The use of their income to aid other family members and the integration of domestic duties with paid employment in the public sphere built on single women's combination of roles. This, of course, is not surprising: the married women who entered feminized office work were frequently the same women who had been single women office workers a few decades earlier. Marriage and childbearing did not change women's definitions of the family, but simply enlarged the family roles they had learned as daughters, sisters, aunts, and nieces. Family, then, remained for them a fluid set of extended relations with kin, especially other women with whom they could exchange economic resources, unpaid domestic skills, and emotional support within a framework of values that remained removed from the dominant culture's definition of the family as the nuclear unit formed by marriage and childbearing. When single women office workers described their motives, responsibilities, and conflicts they revealed these fluid roles and relationships. The choices they made in an effort to
balance their responsibilities changed the family and reveal a
twentieth-century women's world that descended from the nineteenth
century and reproduced itself as the next century progressed.

Pin Money and Independence

The life histories of single women in feminized white-collar
occupations in the twenties and thirties reveal that they were
distributed across a wide spectrum of economic need. Many single
women worked from absolute need because their families could not
support them. They were forced into paid employment to support
themselves and, sometimes, the rest of the family as well. Others in
less desperate circumstances found that an office job gave them a
small independent income which they could use to increase their own
level of consumption and make some contribution to the family economy.
But whatever their level of need, their motivations for joining the
office labor force and their expenditures of what they earned were
derived from the context of the family economy. After 1940, studies
of women workers focused on the paid employment of married women as
either a social problem or a potential source of new workers and have
generally failed to examine the experiences of unmarried women whose
work for wages is no longer perceived as raising any problematic
social or economic issues. This leaves a serious gap in the primary
sources on unmarried women. The general rise in women's wages and an
increase in government aid to families in economic distress,
especially through Social Security, may have loosened the economic
bonds of single women to their families after the 1930s.13 But it is
worth noting that as late as 1960 two-thirds of American women between eighteen and twenty-four not listed as heads of household lived with other family members, usually their parents, suggesting that single women continued to participate in the reciprocal economic relationships of the family economy.  

Almost as soon as paid employment for young, single women became acceptable as a temporary stage in the female life cycle, it became expected that women would work for wages before marriage. For example, a single woman fifty years old questioned about her work history by the Women's Bureau in 1939 recalled that she had taken a job as a bookkeeper in 1905 because "working was the thing to do." She had held the post until 1910, when her family moved to another state, and had apparently not held paid employment after that, although she remained single and was living alone at the time of the survey. Another woman in the same study had worked as a typist in 1927 and 1928. She "worked in the first place because she had always expected to work." She did, however, drop out of the labor force to marry when she was nineteen, and twenty years later could not even estimate her husband's wages. Another woman of the same generation had begun work when she was eighteen, as a sales clerk in her father's fruit store in 1924. She told the Women's Bureau that she "wanted to work---had nothing else to do." She quit working for her father a year later when she "obtained [a] regular position" as a file clerk and bookkeeper for a railroad, a position she held until she married four years later. A young single woman who had started work in 1934 when she was twenty years old held several temporary positions "for the
experience" before she found a permanent position in a law office which lasted until the office closed in 1936. She did not indicate any later experience in the paid labor force, but it is interesting to note that although her mother had never worked for wages, this woman "started to work because she believed that every girl needs to have some business experience. Also wanted to be self-supporting."¹⁸

Perhaps the most extreme statement of the expectation that an unmarried young woman should enter paid employment came from one of the BVI secretaries, a high school graduate who had done secretarial work from 1921 until 1923, when she married and retired from office work. She wrote to the BVI, "I am interested in the question of jobs for girls who do not need them financially, but who want them because of their education, their energy, and their theory that he [sic] who contributes nothing has no right to live." She may have counted herself as one of these women since she reported that the "most interesting thing to do was to get a very minor position on the State Department payroll and then to do as much as your ability warranted." She had worked as a typist for the State Department and had found that hard work and intelligence were "rewarded by something interesting to do provided you do not demand pay commensurate to your work." Apparently she believed that this experience had been preferable to her later work as a social secretary to several cabinet wives, which was "dull and uninspiring. To be absorbed in your work," she concluded, "you must feel that it is of real use, and writing invitations to dinner parties isn't."¹⁹ Given the low pay, lack of upward mobility, and "uninspiring" content of most women's office
work, it is not surprising that without the stimulus of economic need, all of these women dropped out of white-collar work, although even a temporary experience of wage earning may have changed their outlook and priorities.

The popular notion that young, single women worked only for pin money, rather than from economic need, not only rationalized low pay and poor working conditions for women workers, it also preserved the belief that male wage-earners, both as husbands and fathers, were the primary bread winners for their families, reinforcing the separation of male and female roles and submerging questions about the prevailing gender system. By ignoring the potential for economic and social change inherent in women's new roles in the paid labor force, the pin money theory devalued women's changing experiences and consciousness. Actually, the pin money theory was at variance with reality; most single and married women surveyed in the twenties and thirties about their experiences as paid workers reported that their motives for entering paid employment included the need to support themselves and contribute to their families. The low wages in feminized occupations encouraged single women's participation in the family economy by making it difficult for them to achieve complete economic independence. In a sense, they were dependent on their kin because they could not afford to support themselves. But their earnings also reduced their families' expenses, and their own accounts show that many contributed to their families of origin by paying rent, taking responsibility for essential household expenses, and carrying the burden in periods of unemployment in the family, as well as by
shouldering many domestic and emotional responsibilities. Both
dependency and contribution were reflected in their lives, limiting
them on one hand and expanding their options and sense of self-worth
on the other.

In the relatively rare instances when young, single women appear
to have entered office work for reasons that might support the pin
money thesis, they described their reasons for seeking paid employment
in language which suggested that earning a disposable income of her
own could increase a young woman's sense of autonomy. A woman who had
worked for eight years before her marriage in 1917 reportedly "Took
first employment in order to buy own clothing. Did not have to work
but wanted extra money." And in fact, she changed jobs, finding a job
as an office clerk after five years as a retail sales clerk, in order
to earn more money.21 Another woman who was twenty-six when she was
queried by the Women's Bureau in 1939 had done clerical work in a
department store for five years, beginning work in the depths of the
Depression simply "to earn own money."22 This young woman as well as
her two brothers, also both in their twenties, lived with their
parents, but none made any monetary contribution to the household.
Both women emphasized the importance of having money of their own,
implying that an income paid by an employer and spent without parental
supervision made them less dependent on their families and
expanded—albeit in limited ways—the choices they could make on their
own.

Earning an independent income also opened new opportunities for
single women. Some worked to save money for a particular goal. Many
women whose families could not or would not finance their education or their desire to travel found that office work enabled them to pursue these ends. At the same time, the ability of a single woman to accumulate a sum of money might also allow her to escape a particular office job if it became unpleasant. A young woman who had gone to work as a clerk in the telephone company in 1903 because "it was expected of her after finishing school" and because she "wanted to be self-supporting," left her job in 1906 because she "wanted change—went to Europe." The next year she returned to work as a stenographer in an insurance company, a job she held until she married five years later.23 A Utah woman in her mid-twenties had taken a clerical job in state government in 1923 "to be independent and have own money." She left her job three years later to travel to California and spend a year in college before returning to office work in 1927.24 And in 1925, a New York City secretary in her twenties who had held five jobs in her eight years of experience told the BVI that she was planning to leave her job in the near future and that she had already "booked passage to Europe." She reported that she had "no more interest in this position" and was quitting because of the lack of advancement. The personal demands of her employer must have also influenced her decision. She said, "There is something selfish in the demands of an employer on his secretary. . . . Most men are willing to cash in on the fact that a secretary is conscientious."25 In this case it appears that the disadvantages of feminized employment in an office were offset by the economic independence not only to leave the job but also pay for a trip abroad when the job was over.
The trade-offs between economic independence and opportunity on one side and the limitations of sex-typed office work on the other were quite evident in the experiences of a forty-year-old stenographer interviewed by the BVI in 1925. This woman had worked for seven years as a stenographer in the U.S. Navy Department. The BVI interviewer, who was very status conscious, said that this stenographer "is a woman of culture, breeding, and education. She comes from an old New England family, I judge of social standing and some means. I further surmised that she does not have to work of necessity but from choice." The interviewee's chief complaint about her job was her inability to secure a promotion—a problem both she and the interviewer believed faced many women in the federal bureaucracy. This particular woman felt that partisan politics had played some part in her lack of advancement, but also believed that she had "aroused the antagonism of her chief through a frank discussion of her situation after she had been in the government a length of time which she felt entitled her to a promotion." Perhaps this woman's privileged upbringing and her family's economic security encouraged her to assert herself directly in a confrontation with her supervisor. But an equally plausible explanation might be that her experience as a paid worker had given her the self-confidence to protest the discrimination against her.26 Despite her discontent on the job, this woman had decided to keep her government job until she completed her bachelor's degree at George Washington University. Either her family would not finance her college education or she wished to achieve this goal on her own. In either case, she stood in an ambiguous relationship to her job. On
the one hand, her low-level post in a feminized occupation gave the
opportunity to acquire a college degree. On the other hand, however,
her determination to educate herself tied her to a job she disliked.

The availability of jobs in feminized white-collar occupations
did not simply provide a measure of economic independence for single
women. It offered them new social roles as well. In the nineteenth
century the public sphere of paid employment and politics was closed
to women. As Cindy S. Aron has shown, the experience of paid
employment changed the consciousness of the first generation of white,
middle-class women who entered federal employment after the Civil War,
and encouraged them to develop a new sense of self-confidence and
pride in their accomplishments.27 In the twentieth century, this
process repeated itself for many of the individual women who entered
the white-collar labor force. Their new public roles as paid workers
was a positive experience with broadening effects for many of the
young, single women whose previous experiences had been confined to
their family roles. For example, women who did office work related to
the war effort during World War I sometimes described the work they
had done during the war as "exciting," "thrilling" and
"exhilarating."28 A similar satisfaction with her contribution to
society was expressed by the woman who had been chief clerk in the
Department of Justice in charge of Mann Act enforcement. Although she
had nineteen years of experience in office work when she responded to
the BVI questionnaire, this job, which she had held between 1912 and
1914, remained the one she had enjoyed the most:
The enforcement of the White Slave Traffic Act was an interesting work. It dealt with animate, not inanimate things. Every piece of paper represented perhaps a report on some human being.29 But the sense of contributing to a patriotic endeavor or social reform was not a necessary component of women's satisfaction with their public roles as white-collar workers. A church secretary in the BVI survey, for instance, enjoyed her job because it gave her a "feeling of being responsible for real work."30 And one of the BVI secretaries who had found work during World War I "exciting" was single and thirty-eight at the time of the survey but after fourteen years of secretarial experience still believed that office work offered the "possibility of interesting developments" and "contacts with different, if not always interesting, people."31

The wider range of social contacts was complemented by the chance for public recognition. An unmarried woman of thirty-two, whose seven years of secretarial experience in a real estate firm followed two years of teaching, was found by a BVI interviewer to hold a position that put her in the "public eye." According to the interviewer, she "somewhat enjoyed this spectacular side" of her job. The chance to achieve recognition made office work qualitatively different from women's traditional occupations. Neither single nor married women could generally expect that their family roles would garner public recognition or attention. And teaching, the most acceptable occupation for middle-class women before the twentieth century, rarely gave women the opportunity for recognition or appreciation from other adults. New public roles did not, however, dissolve cultural prescriptions based on gender. Employers and managers had, after all,
defined "woman's place" in the office according to gender, and women,
too, interpreted their roles in the office in terms of their gender
and "femininity." The real estate secretary who enjoyed her place in
the "public eye" apparently took great stock in her dress and
appearance and felt that her job included "creating a certain
atmosphere in the office." Although the BVI interviewer stated that
the secretary was "self-confident," her notes went on to say that this
was a "woman of considerable tact who could manage to meet men on a
basis of equality and yet not be aggressive in so doing." In other
words, she was able to mesh her activities in the workplace with
traditional values and prescriptions.32

Single Women in the Family Economy

Historical research on unmarried women in the twentieth-century
is sparse. By and large, it has focused on young, working-class women
in the first half of the century and stressed the ways that family
bonds--economic and emotional--have reinforced patriarchy and limited
single women's independence. Leslie Woodcock Tentler, for instance,
has shown that the systematic devaluation of young working-class
women's contributions to the family economy discouraged them from
seeing paid employment as a significant and permanent feature of their
lives, giving them little reason to assert their interests on the job.
Joanne Meyerowitz has suggested the resourcefulness of young
working-class women in Chicago for whom separation from their families
was an opportunity for independence.33 While these perspectives are
useful in illustrating the limitations that family roles can impose on
unmarried women and, in Meyerowitz's case, in pinpointing women as agents of an important social change, the experiences and attitudes of single women who held office jobs in the twenties and thirties complicate this picture of historical change.

Almost all unmarried women office workers participated in a twentieth-century family economy in which their decisions about paid employment were closely linked to their family roles and responsibilities. Although demographers have noted that in the twentieth century American families have become smaller and more nuclear, signaling, perhaps, a loosening of intergenerational family ties, this has been a gradual change. Unmarried white-collar women who related their motivations for work, economic obligations and living arrangements indicate that they were not on the cutting edge of family change; they were bound to their parents and siblings in shared households as well as by economic relationships and family loyalties. And while their position in the family might encourage unmarried women to see themselves as dependent and their economic contributions as supplemental, most single women also believed that they had important responsibilities. They were more than dependent on their families, they contributed to them as well. Because many of these women came from the middle class or the upper levels of the working class, the opening of feminized white-collar occupations provided them with a new, previously unavailable avenue for achieving recognition, power, and independence within their families. While many young, working-class women, especially the daughters of immigrants, would have perceived wage earning as a continuation of an earlier family
economy necessitated by economic insecurity, young women from middle-class families were less likely to see paid employment in an office as the perpetuation of an older pattern. For them, perhaps, a paycheck was not already tied to their subordination as daughters. As their contributions became increasingly necessary to make ends meet or to maintain status for insecure twentieth-century, middle-class families, they often felt their responsibilities a burden, in itself suggesting that they did not accept the popular devaluation of unmarried women's contributions to the family.

Although economic independence or pin money did attract some young women to office work in the first four decades of this century, it appears that many more unmarried women were pushed into paid employment because their families could not fully support them. In a 1939 study which included office workers, the Women's Bureau asked women their reasons for working, correctly believing that most paid women worked out of necessity. The interviewers' notations, "self-support" and "to support self," the reasons that almost any man would give for holding a job, usually translated to mean that they could not rely on their families for support. A thirty-five year old clerical worker in a garment manufacturing concern had supported herself for eleven years. Fortunately, she had inherited her home from her family, but the bleak realities confronting a woman alone trying to support herself on $70.00 a month were obvious when she was asked whether she supported anyone else on her meager salary. No, she replied, "living takes all." Of course, it was common for young single women to marry and leave paid work, but for women who never
married or married late, a paying job was necessarily a way of life. A fifty-eight year old Utah woman had supported herself since she was fourteen. In the first seventeen years of her working life she held jobs as a saleswoman, domestic, and telephone operator, interrupted for only two years when she went on a mission for the LDS church. At the time of the survey, she had worked for twenty-seven years as the registrar in a public school and was living with her fifty-seven year old never married sister, a sales clerk, sharing housework as well as living expenses.35 A much younger woman, a teacher in her early twenties, worked in order to earn the things that families of means might ordinarily provide for their daughters. Between 1937 and 1939 she had held a series of part-time and temporary office jobs to support herself and earn money for college. As soon as she found a full-time teaching position, she began to save $50.00 from her monthly pay of $88.33 so that she and her fiancé could marry and build a house.36

While recognizing that paid employment was necessary, women unable to escape the lower levels of the office hierarchy sometimes chafed under their economic obligations. For example, the BVI study includes a legal stenographer-secretary about thirty years old, living with her parents in New York City. She had held five stenographic or secretarial jobs in her thirteen years’ experience. She must have found her work unpleasant, and she had quit her first four jobs for a variety of reasons: “advancement impossible,” “unpleasant development in the office,” “firm dissolved, new conditions not attractive,” “stupid work . . . work distasteful (mostly copying from atrocious
rough draft)." In the end, she returned to her second employer, and although she thought the "people unpleasant," she had stayed on for five years. Asked which job she had most enjoyed, she stated bitterly, "No question of enjoyment. I don't enjoy working for my living. My present one is most profitable." Perhaps in an implicit comparison of office work to the other kinds of employment open to women, she added, "The line of work is most interesting," indicating that she derived some satisfaction from the content if not the environment of her job. Although she did not say that she supported her parents, they almost certainly depended on her income in some way. Trapped doing work she did not like by the sex-typing of office work and the over supply of women workers in the twenties, she filled the gaps in the family economy.

The low wages in feminized occupations made it difficult for women in the lower-levels of office work to achieve economic independence and virtually impossible for them to provide for an entire household, but they did make important economic contributions to their families. This may have been especially true during the Great Depression, when widespread male unemployment and general economic insecurity increased reliance on any family member who could find and keep a paying job. Because women's office jobs were often more secure, although less well-paid, than male work in industry, the earnings of white-collar women may have become relatively more important to their families. Certainly there was more evidence of unmarried women's contributions to the family economy in the 1939 Women's Bureau study than in the BVI survey done in 1925. But the
way that questions were posed in the BVI survey as well as the questions that were not asked may have disguised the family responsibilities of white-collar women in the more prosperous twenties. As might be expected from an organization that advocated paid employment for women, the BVI did not directly ask women to explain their reasons for working, a question that would have implicitly required women to justify their participation in the paid labor force. And rather than asking women about their contributions to their families, the BVI asked about the number of partial and full dependents supported by the women in its study, making women's informal contributions to their families almost invisible. One secretary, an unmarried woman in her early thirties who lived with friends rather than family, noted in the space provided for number of dependents, "called upon to help in certain circumstances but not real dependents." She, and probably others, must have thought that to have "real dependents" meant to meet a large proportion of another person's economic needs on a permanent or at least long-term basis. While this definition of a "dependent" might describe the obligations of many male bread winners, it devalued the very real responsibilities of a woman secretary or clerical worker whose salary was her family's primary resource in those "certain instances" when its income was reduced or its needs increased.

It is difficult to tell whether the family economy in which a number of poorly paid workers in a family combined their wages to overcome the economic hardship of the Depression was simply a continuation of an existing pattern of family survival among
working-class families or had spread to new groups of the population. But it is apparent that in the thirties economic cooperation was a necessity for many families. In families where male wages were reduced, the wages of a daughter or sister in a feminized office job could be essential, as it was for the two sisters (one of them a stenographer and sales clerk in an appliance store) and one brother among seven siblings who helped to support the others because their "father's work [was] irregular." The complex family living arrangements described by some women in the Women's Bureau study also allowed relatives to combine and thus stretch their low incomes. A young stenographer, for instance, lived with her married brother (a clerical worker), and his wife (who did not work for wages), and their eleven-month-old son, as well as another unmarried brother who worked as a mine mucker. She contributed $20.00 a month to the household and reported that she had entered the work force because she "had to support herself." She did only "a little housework," but with three wage earners sharing expenses, the family was able to pay a domestic servant a dollar a day twice a week, almost half of the stenographer's contribution.

The small but steady pay of low-level women office workers took on special significance if the other sources of a family's income were uneven or unreliable. Farm families in particular must have found a daughter's wages especially important to supply a steady flow of cash. For example, the Women's Bureau survey included a stenographer in her early twenties who lived with her parents and two sisters. Her father was a farmer, and she was the only other wage-earner in the household,
although she had a sister several years older than herself. The interviewer's notes reported that she "contributes no definite sum but pays various bills." Another woman in a similar situation lived with her widowed mother, three brothers and one sister on a chicken farm, where her siblings apparently did much of the agricultural labor. She had found a full-time job when her father died in 1935, and in 1939 she gave her family $33.00 a month from her $50.00 pay check to "pay for all groceries and toward rent." During the Depression, a daughter's wages were also important to families that had traditionally relied on a male wage-earner for its sole support. A dentist's daughter, for instance, had found a job in 1926 "to support myself." The many people forced to pare their expenses during the Depression may have seen regular dental care as an unaffordable luxury, and this stenographer's father had probably suffered a loss of income in the thirties. Thus her middle-class family depended on her paycheck not for any "set amount," but rather to pay "various bills for [the] family."

In the working-class family economy of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, families openly planned on receiving the wages of unmarried sons and daughters as a matter of sheer survival. Because the contributions of so many unmarried daughters in the twenties and thirties were irregular—payment of a particular bill or a sum of money to tide the family over—it was, and continues to be, easy to overlook or devalue unmarried women's roles as providers. Louise Tilly and Joan Scott have suggested that the change in the early twentieth century from a family wage economy to a family consumer
economy may have enlarged the autonomy of working-class daughters as newly feminized occupations gave them a wider range of options in choosing a job and families became less dependent on their children's wages. Working-class families therefore began to accept their daughters' right to withhold part of their earnings in order to participate in the growing youth activities and consumer culture. Leslie Woodcock Tentler has noted a similar change among the daughters of the American working class in the 1920s. While it is quite clear, as Tentler asserts, that the family as an institution as well as the burgeoning consumer culture constrained women in ways that blunted the liberating potential of women's growing labor force participation, it is also important to recognize that changes in women's economic roles may have also created subtle changes within the family unit. The very devaluation of a daughter's wages offered some women leverage for indirectly asserting their own interests. With the failure to recognize the significance of single women's contributions to the family economy in the twenties and thirties, the rationale for parental regulation of a woman's earnings was eroded. Not only did this mean that young women gained freedom to spend on themselves, but also that they were better able to control the amount of their contributions to the family and how they would be spent.

Although the existence of a mid-twentieth-century middle-class family economy can be documented through women's statements about their reasons for taking paid employment and their use of their wages, it is more difficult to uncover the mechanisms by which family members made financial decisions. Sometimes it is the most unusual case that
offers a clue. The Women’s Bureau sample, for instance, includes a stenographer in her early twenties who lived with her parents. The interviewer reported that she paid “various bills and buys furniture for the family to make her $12-15 [monthly] contribution” to the family. This seems a peculiar donation to the family; since the stenographer’s father was employed and the family also received a small income from renting a piece of real estate, it seems unlikely that it had not already acquired furniture or had lost what it had through repossession. Although she counted herself as contributing to the family, the stenographer daughter had obviously found a way to control the form that her contribution would take and to assert her own taste within her parents’ home. And as odd as this instance may seem, it may in fact represent an emerging pattern of inter-generational economic adjustment. If I Have Four Apples, Josephine Lawrence’s classic novel about the insecure lives of the lower middle class in the thirties, contains an almost identical situation. In Lawrence’s novel, Darthula Hoe is an unmarried woman living in her parents’ home who is spending her money to make payments on furniture she is buying on time. Lawrence’s emphasis on Darthula’s allegiance to the tastes propagated by the advertising industry may well capture the importance of consumption to many young women. Darthula examines her parents’ home with a critical eye, thinking, “A home of her own would only be worthwhile if it contained the right tables and chairs, smart drapes, the loveliest rugs.” Unlike the stenographer queried by the Women’s Bureau, however, Darthula contributes almost none of her wages to the family, and in fact, her
selfishness is one of a whole series of reasons for the Hoes’ unmitigated financial disaster. Darthula, of course represents only one extreme of the continuum between personal desires and family obligations. The hundreds of women who participated in the BVI and Women’s Bureau studies knew the tension that existed between family responsibilities and personal independence and used the tools at hand to negotiate a place for themselves. And as Lawrence knew from her own experience as a single working woman supporting her mother for over two decades, there were many other unmarried women forced by unforeseen circumstances to take on heavier burdens.

In families faced with an economic crisis, the income of an unmarried woman in a feminized occupation often provided the critical margin of survival. The death, illness, or unemployment of a male breadwinner could leave his daughters with little choice but to take over his responsibility to support the family. The Women’s Bureau interview notes are filled with terse statements from unmarried women who linked their work histories to their families’ needs. The secretary to a high school principal, for example, “began work [in 1933] to support [her] widowed mother and younger sisters and brothers.”48 Two sisters in their thirties—one a clerk in county government, the other a teacher—explained their wage earning by telling the interviewer, “Father died in 1924—there were 4 children still to go through school at that time.” Fifteen years later they were still working, and although their younger siblings must have completed school, the unmarried sisters had apparently taken on a new responsibility, since they reported that their twelve-year-old niece
lived with them. Presumably the New Deal expansion of the welfare state made families less dependent on the wages of unmarried daughters in emergencies. Yet single white-collar women in the Women's Bureau study rarely reported that their families received any income from Social Security or other relief agencies, perhaps because middle-class families were too proud to appeal to government agencies or because even government aid was insufficient, in itself, to meet their needs.

In any case, unmarried women donated more than money to their families, and a family emergency often required a single woman to change her career plans or return "home" to her family of origin in order to take over domestic duties or to care for the sick or aged. A single woman in her thirties, for instance, had worked as a stenographer for five years, somehow managing to complete two years of college in order to become a social worker. Although she had lived and worked for three years in Los Angeles, she had returned to her family home in Provo, Utah, in 1934 to help support and keep house for her widowed mother, "crippled" and "on crutches," and her older sister, "a lifetime invalid" who was unable to work. Another stenographer had also returned to her family in Utah after living for seven years in California to help support her mother and sister "after [the] death of [her] father" in 1938. And while historians and sociologists have acknowledged the role of married women in the 1930s who "took up the slack" by entering the paid labor force in order to maintain the family's pre-Depression level of consumption as well as by performing additional domestic and nurturing duties to help other family members cope with the insecurity of the period, unmarried women
had been filling these roles far longer. A former clerical worker in Cleveland told the Women's Bureau that she had quit her first job in 1921 "to find [a] part-time job so she could keep house for her father," but returned to a full-time stenographic job a year later in order to "support herself and help educate [her] sister." The BVI as well as the Women's Bureau discovered many office workers who had helped their younger siblings to complete their education: "Paid college expenses of sister who just graduated," said one. Another "helped 2 brothers and one sister through college" in addition to contributing to her parents' support. Like married women who took paid employment to raise the standard of living for their families, unmarried women contributed substantially to their siblings' chances for success, even when they had been unable to attend college themselves. One of the BVI secretaries had given money to her three sisters while they attended college, although she had attended business school for only a year after her high school graduation in 1910. So many women, in fact, reported similar circumstances that it seems plausible to suggest that the wages of women in newly feminized white-collar occupations were partly responsible for the rising percentage of American youth attending college in the mid-twentieth century.

Because the BVI survey gave women an opportunity to explain their circumstances in their own words and also included interviewers' observations about individual secretaries, it offers more information about the ways that women interpreted their experiences and the adjustments they made at different stages in their life cycles. For
example, life histories of three of the BVI secretaries illustrate the pressures and costs that shaped the lives of unmarried women forced to choose between their own ambitions and their families' needs. The first woman, in her mid-thirties, was obviously a capable worker. Early in her career she had done stenographic, clerical, and bookkeeping work, and by the time of the survey, after twenty years' experience, she had advanced to the top of the stunted hierarchy of feminized office jobs to a position as head of the stenography department supervising twenty other women. But she told the interviewer that her family obligations had cut short other aspirations:

[She] was financially unable to go to high school. When she finished grammar school, her eldest brother decided that he wanted to be a minister. The father was dead and this brother was contributing to the support of the family. [She] then decided she would give up school and take her brother's place in contributing to the family support. She helped send him through an academy, . . . through college and through seminary. The week before he was to get his degree, he died of fever. The sacrifice of her own education now seems to have been so futile.58

The second instance is a clear-cut example of downward mobility, illustrating that disruptions in an unmarried woman's family might actually reverse an initially successful career. In a letter to the BVI, this respondent stated proudly that she had been one of the first women purchasing agents in Chicago. She had left this job, however, because "my mother was so ill that the urge and need for money was the paramount thought." She then took a series of secretarial jobs, working her way into a position as confidential secretary to a wealthy man. She had left this job, too, because "my father had failed . . . necessitating my giving up the idea of a home of my own—as I felt
then—and beginning at the bottom again. Had I been able to choose for myself, I would have continued in the position which I had grown to love and built it into real work.” And her situation continued to worsen. Her mother died, which, she reported, “broke my health,” and then an “injury” or “accident” depleted her savings. She moved west and took the first job she could find, as a part-time bookkeeper in a sanitarium.59

Sometimes women were able to negotiate a reduction in family demands. The third work history reveals an unmarried secretarial worker who had achieved what must have been for her a happy ending. She was approaching thirty and had done office work in social service organizations for ten years while she supported her mother and grandmother. A member of the BVI staff must have known her, because the questionnaire form contains the following comment:

*Very much a domestic person who has more or less fought against necessity for working in an office. . . . She has always been rather restless as I’ve known her and, thank goodness, she’s getting married in May. Altho. she’s carrying on her work conscientiously up to the time of leaving her interests are all turned toward her home and she is not enthusiastic about secretarial work as a permanent career.*

The respondant’s own remarks, however, cast some doubt on her “domestic” inclinations. She had taken college courses intermittently throughout her career in an unsuccessful effort to become a social worker. About secretarial work she said,

*Always hated it. . . . So much required in education and training and always limited in scope. Not enough salary to pay for energy and work usually. Always giving in a position and no future in it.*60

Perhaps, then, marriage was, as some historians assert, a way out of a
lifetime of unpleasant, dead-end office jobs. But it also must have been an escape from an unmarried woman's obligation to support her kin. This secretary's mother and grandmother would, almost certainly, continue to require support from someone else; perhaps the secretary's new husband or other relatives would send them money, or perhaps they might even take up residence with the newly married couple. Yet from the secretary's standpoint, her direct financial obligations would cease, since married women's primary responsibilities are generally presumed to be to their husbands rather than their families of origin.

Single women's functions in their families included housework, care of the sick and elderly, and emotional nurturance as well as economic assistance. Men, too, helped to support their families of origin—although according to the Women's Bureau, men made financial contributions less frequently than women and in smaller amounts—but they were rarely expected to perform these forms of "women's work" under any circumstances. And in contrast to married women, who received cultural approbation for their gender-specific labor as wives and mothers, single women, who were frequently castigated by social scientists and popular literature as sexually frustrated and purposeless, found that their individual families expected unmarried daughters and sisters to take on domestic and emotional responsibilities in addition to their roles as wage earners. The BVI apparently did not consider housework significant enough to merit consideration, but some single women raised the issue themselves, usually when their domestic tasks diverted time and energy away from their personal goals. A Nebraska secretary living with her mother and
sister was in her forties but had never been able to attend college courses at night. Although she thought further education would have been useful to her on the job, she explained:

In my own case, I have found it physically impossible to carry on a course outside of working hours. After the day’s work in the office I always have from two to three hours at household tasks at home each evening—following which, my mind and body have been too tired to do justice to any educational work—even serious reading.63

Two other single women compared their domestic chores with married women’s and implied that the BVI’s question about the advantages and disadvantages of secretarial work for married women devalued the work single women did in the home. A Minneapolis stenographer who listed one minor dependent and one partial adult dependent remarked, "In light of 5 years experience in keeping up and supporting a home for a sister and father, my frank opinion is that no one can do justice to two positions, and the time, thought and strength necessary in the keeping of a house will detract just that much of the strength that should really be given to the firm."64 The other, a college graduate in her mid-twenties, lived with her parents, and although she did not indicate that they depended on her for economic support, she responded to the question about married women secretaries,

I don’t think this [marriage] is a basis for contrast. Single women have, unless they live alone, as many family demands as married women. Merely being married does not change the aspect of the matter. Why not, if I may make the suggestion, differentiate upon the ground of home-makers and non-homemakers?"65

If a woman remained single as her parents aged, she might appear to be the logical member of the family to care for them, since she
seemed to have fewer other domestic or emotional obligations than her married siblings, and unmarried brothers probably lacked training in gender-specific skills or were expected to devote more effort to their careers. The many women who either remained in their parents' households or returned to them at various stages in their lives suggests that, despite the demands of their careers, unmarried women office workers took their responsibilities to aging parents seriously. Because the BVI asked only about secretaries' economic contributions to their families, the women who mentioned that they cared for their parents were probably those for whom the experience was especially trying at the time they responded to the survey. For example, a secretary in her middle twenties said in an apologetic letter to the BVI that accompanied her questionnaire: "My blank looks very untidy but I nursed a sick mother all night and am nervous this morning as the dreadful penmanship shows, not to mention the typewriter oil that got on it." A former secretary about ten years older than the last told the BVI that she had recently left a $145 a month secretarial post for a routine clerical job with the Philadelphia school system paying only $92 because the shorter hours and longer vacations allowed her to spend more time with her mother, who was ill. "I cannot be away from home long enough to fill a full-time position at present," she explained. And the familiar connections between the transitions of the family life cycle and an unmarried woman's career in feminized white-collar work were evident once again in the work history of a private secretary in her fifties. Her first job as an office clerk in 1892 and 1893 had lasted for only
six or eight weeks, while she had worked to make "enough money to go
[the] World's Fair." After this brief experience earning "pin money,"
which must have given her a taste of independence and adventure while
she was in her early twenties, she dropped out of the labor market for
several years. In 1899 she took a six week course in typing and
shorthand and re-entered the office work force and remained in
full-time employment as a secretary and public stenographer until 1925
when she had been working for eleven years as a private secretary. At
the time of the survey, however, she informed the BVI, "I have started
on a vacation which means six times as hard work as my winter job,
housekeeping in a large country mansion, and taking care of and
worrying over my mother who is ill." Whatever the motives behind or
rewards from her twenty-six years of office work, the demand for her
unpaid—though no less difficult—work in the home had drawn her out
of the office, at least temporarily.69

Because unmarried adult women had no particular
firmly-established domestic or wage-earning roles in the nuclear
family, demands on them were most acute in the event of family crisis.
The paid employment or unpaid domestic labor of unmarried daughters,
sisters, or aunts compensated for family disruptions caused by male
unemployment, death, or failing health. This pattern of flexible dual
roles among single women had also existed among middle-class families
in the nineteenth century, but the proliferation of feminized
white-collar jobs in the twentieth century added new opportunities to
teaching and writing, which were the only culturally approved forms of
wage earning for most nineteenth-century middle-class women, and thus
encouraged single women to turn to paid employment more frequently. And in this new context, the needs of employers of office workers and of middle-class families were mutually reinforcing in their effects on single women. Because office jobs offered such limited opportunities for advancement, there were no serious penalties for leaving any one position, a structural feature of the market for women office workers that fostered intermittent participation in the white-collar work force that meshed with the shifts in degree and kind of family obligations that unmarried women experienced at successive stages of their lives. The costs for white-collar women, as a group and individually, were great: in the absence of a definite division between their public and private roles, many single women office workers were especially susceptible to family demands that thwarted their personal ambitions or were forced to concentrate on the immediate and peculiar demands of their personal circumstances rather than their collective interests as permanent workers.

So, while dissatisfaction with their position in the paid labor force and/or the family was almost universal among the unmarried women in the BVI survey, it is the range of responses that demonstrates most clearly the significance of single women's dual family roles in shaping their behavior and attitudes. Unmarried women with heavy family obligations sometimes seemed unable even to unravel their public and private roles, thus making it almost impossible for them to define or act upon their interests in either sphere. In a letter to the BVI, a secretary who had supported her mother for thirteen years on her salary as an office worker revealed the conflicts that
immobilized her. She said,

I am at the stage where I am 'happy' and 'unhappy' all in one. My position here is splendid and as pleasant as anything could be but I feel a bind and can't seem to see a way out. I have a feeling that I want to train myself for something entirely different—landscape architecture or some sort of a position that could be carried along with my present position until well established. This is essential because I have financial responsibilities which take practically my full salary.  

Quite different, however, were the attitudes and behavior of two secretaries—both about fifty years old—who appear to have escaped strenuous demands from their families. Instead, they had found ways to make their own demands on a system of work that ordinarily imposed constraints on women's autonomy. The first secretary must have displayed an assertive manner that nineteenth-century women reformers or late twentieth-century feminists might find congenial, but was unattractive to the BVI interviewer who described her as "a decided spinster type. One would expect to find her on a church committee in a small New England town. Seems very positive and might easily be overbearing." During her eighteen years in the work force, this secretary had held at least twelve different office jobs, using the intermittent pattern of feminized office work to her own advantage. She had left each of her first three jobs after a year or two because she "thought [she] could earn more." She had then taken a series of stenographic positions in London, Paris, and Vienna because she "wanted to go abroad." After four years in Europe, she returned to the United States, but continued to express her dissatisfaction and independent judgments on the job, leaving jobs that she "didn't like," and moving because she wanted a "higher salary" or had been fired.
perhaps because of her lack of deference.\footnote{72} The other respondent had developed a less confrontational style, but nonetheless enforced her own demands, not by changing jobs, but by starting her own business as a public stenographer. She told the BVI that she "reserved" half of every working day for her business and on the other half days was hired to re-organize other offices having "difficult problems." As a skilled, self-employed worker, this woman enforced an independent standard of a fair day's work which would have been familiar to the autonomous craftsmen of the nineteenth century: "From 1906 to date, I have been in a position to name my own salary. . . . I never take more than the work is worth according to my notion." Reporting that her income was "what I want to make it," she calculated that she earned about $200 a month from her combined jobs.\footnote{77} While both of these women appear to have had to support themselves—and thus worked from economic need—neither of them mentioned any financial obligations to their families, and each had used her isolation from family demands to assert an independent public role as a worker that expressed her attitudes and served her own economic interests.

The Economics of Personal Relationships

According to psychologist Carol Gilligan, the conflict between "selfish" individual desires and commitments to others is the central moral problem in women's lives: "It is precisely this dilemma—the conflict between compassion and autonomy, between virtue and power—which the feminine voice struggles to resolve in its efforts to reclaim the self and solve the moral problem in such a way that no one
is hurt." It seems logical, then, that women unencumbered by economic or emotional dependents would be better able to choose an independent direction in their lives and make demands in the workplace because they did not confront a struggle between their own interests and the needs of other family members who might be hurt by their decisions. On the surface, the more common stories of women who served their families while sacrificing independence and autonomy imply that the family was an oppressive institution for the single, middle-class women who found office employment in the interwar years. In actuality, however, these women did not perceive a static dichotomy between individual independence and oppression, but rather an ongoing personal struggle between their aspirations and compassion for other members of their families, in which they made choices in particular situations on the basis of known, tangible relationships.

In order to understand this conflict from the perspective of women themselves, it becomes necessary to separate the ideology of women's place in the family as an abstract notion, which certainly did provide a rationale for systematic sexual inequality, from the historical reality of specific women as part of, connected to, and cooperating with their families. Detailed studies by historians and sociologists of the organization within particular American families have revealed not the stable, nuclear family ideal but a series of adaptive relationships that provide economic, domestic, and emotional support to participants. Despite differences in time, place, race, ethnicity, and social class, these families were remarkably similar in their flexibility. In families as disparate as those of Wilson
Benson, a nineteenth-century Irish immigrant to Canada studied by Michael Katz; Viola Jackson, a resident of a twentieth-century black ghetto studied by Carol Stack; and the white, middle-class families studied by sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s, connections among individuals shifted to serve the needs of members coping with economic insecurity or transitions in the family life cycle. The white, middle-class families whose daughters entered white-collar employment in the interwar years also fit into this pattern of flexible economic and emotional relationships.

Continuity and flexibility should not, however, divert attention from the fact of broad historical change. Social approval, and even expectations, of paid employment among unmarried, middle-class women resulting from the expanding market for office workers increased the resources of middle-class families to deal with transitions and emergencies while maintaining their middle-class status. For single women, the changes in work force participation put their activities in a new context, creating new options as well as new burdens. As the boundaries between public and private spheres became blurred, some women had the choice to combine roles while others faced new and painful choices. Rather than passive victims of family ideology or historical change, unmarried middle-class women were, instead, participants who actively made choices to contribute to their families in different ways. Their choices were limited, but the constraints they experienced stemmed only partly from the ideology and organization of the family; equally important was the persistent discrimination that locked some single, white, middle-class women into
low paying, dead-end jobs, and kept others out of the office altogether on the basis of their age or inability to meet conventional standards of feminine attractiveness.

Although family crisis imposed the greatest burdens on single women, intensifying the moral struggle identified by Gilligan and often resulting in unfulfilled dreams of independence or accomplishment, it also appears that some women transformed economic hardship into durable female networks of sharing that could enhance the self-esteem of competent working women. Unmarried women were most likely to become life-long breadwinners for their families if they had female dependents. Their brothers usually became self-supporting when they reached adulthood, and middle-class men, if they lived to old age, had often made some provisions for their own support. It was ordinarily widowed mothers and sisters, who could not find a paying job because of age or child-rearing responsibilities, who relied on the earnings of others. A single woman bookkeeper-stenographer in Birmingham, Alabama, for example, reported to the BVI that she lived with her sister and had three partial dependents, adding, "since 1906 [I] have helped widowed sister rear and educate two daughters."77

Female family networks might also extend beyond a single household. Two unmarried sisters in the Women's Bureau survey lived together, sharing housework and income. Both were in their forties, and although they were teachers in 1939, each had many years of office work behind her, and throughout their work histories they had contributed money to their family. At the time they were questioned, their siblings were grown, but the two continued to send $200 a year
to another sister's children "for clothing." A thirty-two year old clerical worker for the U.S. Forest Service, who lived alone and had moved away from the state temporarily in the early 1930s, sent $500 a year—more than a fifth of her salary—to her widowed mother and sister. Single women could also support more distant relatives within the informal extended female family network. A county government clerk, thirty-eight years old, told the Women's Bureau that she lived with and supported a seventy-three year old "foster sister" who was in "poor health" and could not work.

The constructive possibilities of these female family bonds are most clearly illustrated by a former secretary from New Orleans who told the BVI interviewer that she had entered the white-collar work force in 1903 because "she belonged to that group of women forced out to work by the depletion of family finances following the Civil War." The narrow range of opportunities open to women who needed to earn a living had imposed severe constraints on her career. According to the interviewer, she was "[e]vidently a woman of great capabilities, who has never been able to use these to the fullest." In the year before the survey, her employer's company had failed and she had been unable to find another secretarial job because no one would hire a secretary in her fifties. Yet she was unwilling to bend to circumstances. The interviewer described her as a "'live wire.'" "Her hair is gray," the notes continue, "and she said she would not stoop to hide the fact, as she believed in 'growing old gracefully.'" She had "supported and brought up two nieces who are now independent," but the ties among
them must have been strong and positive because, although her nieces were grown by 1925, they still lived with their aunt.81

Conclusion

In many ways, single women office workers were women in the middle. Their paid and unpaid labor filled the gaps in a modern middle-class family economy. Discriminated against in the public world of paid employment, in the family they performed emotional and domestic work not usually expected of men. Although they could be legitimately proud of their contributions to their families, they faced hard choices throughout their lives between self-interest and their obligations to others. In the longitudinal patterns of their lives, the links among women that sustained their families, especially female kin, become visible. The married women who were entering feminized office work in larger numbers during these years elaborated on the patterns of family obligations as well as the female networks established by unmarried women.
Endnotes


2 Cambridge, Massachusetts, Radcliffe College, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Bureau of Vocational Information Papers, Collection Number B-3 [hereafter cited as BVI], "Bureau of Vocational Information, January 1925," [pamphlet], Box 1, Folder 1, p. 10; "The Woman Secretary 1926," [24 page typescript], Folder 436, Box 37, p. 1; "The Woman Secretary, Part I," [unpaginated typescript], Vol. 5, Box 37; "The Woman Secretary, Part II," [unpaginated typescript], Vol. 6, Box 37. The returns themselves, consisting of forty-eight folders arranged alphabetically by state, are contained in Boxes 29-35. I had originally planned to read all of the surveys. This task quickly proved to be too time consuming; so, while I read every questionnaire for the first folder, I read only every other one for the second folder, and every third return for all subsequent folders, except that in the cases of Massachusetts (3 folders) and New York City (eight folders) I read only every fifth response. Since I have used this material as literary rather than quantitative evidence, and since I could not detect any significant geographic differences in the responses, the 650 questionnaires used in the discussion of the family economy and secretarial work culture seem to be representative of the working conditions and attitudes of the total group in the BVI survey.

3 Washington, D.C., National Archives, Record Group 86, Women's Bureau Records, Boxes 443 through 449 of the Women's Bureau Records contain raw data from interviews with women workers conducted in 1939 for Women Workers in Their Family Environment, Women's Bureau Bulletin 183 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1941). Although there should be cards for 309 clerical workers from Utah and 1,225 from Cleveland, I could find only 213 women who had done office work at any time in their careers. [Hereafter cited as WB 183]. NA, RG 86, Box 1721 contains questionnaires from thirty part-time office workers collected by the AAUW in the Rocky Mountain states. [Hereafter cited as WB—RM].

4 Schlesinger Library, New York House and School of Industry Papers, Collection Number MC-287, contains information on roughly 396 "older" women who applied to or entered the training program in 1953 and 1954.


13 For the rise in female earnings during the twentieth century, see


15 WB 183, Box 448, No. R7-5.
16 WB 183, Box 449, No. W-6-7.
17 WB 183, Box 447, No. P8-26.
18 WB 183, Box 447, No. P4-9.
19 BVI, Box 29, Folder 357, No. 366.

20 Lynn Y. Weiner, From Working Girl to Working Mother: the Female Labor Force in the United States, 1820-1980 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 25, argues that most single women worked from economic necessity. In From Home to Office: U.S. Women at Work, 1870-1930, Studies in American History and Culture, no. 25, ed. Robert Berkhofer (Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Research Press, 1981), p. 58, Elyce J. Rotella argues that single women became less responsive to the level of either male or female wages, indicating that they were working to support themselves and thus by implication were less tied to the family economy than they had been at the beginning of the century.

21 WB 183, Box 446, No. B4-20.
22 WB 183, Box 444, No. 872.
23 WB 183, Box 447, No. B4-8.
24 WB 183, Box 445, No. 740.
25 BVI, Box 33, Folder 386, No. 1942.
26 BVI, Box 29, Folder 358, No. 374.


28 BVI, Box 29, Folder 357, No. 296; Box 31, Folder 371, No. 830; Box 29, Folder 354, No. 205.
29 BVI, Box 29, Folder 354, No. 238.
BVI, Box 29, Folder 353, No. 397.

BVI, Box 29, Folder 357, No. 296.

BVI, Box 29, Folder 360, No. 444; Aron, "To Barter Their Souls for Gold," p. 836.

Tentler, Wage-Earning Women, pp. 13, 32-33; Meyerowitz, "Holding Their Own."

WB 183, Box 445, No. 731.

WB 183, Box 443, No. 978.

WB 183, Box 444, No. 898.

BVI, Box 33, Folder 386, No. 1120.


BVI, Box 35, Folder 395, No. 2285.

WB 183, Box 443, No. 976.

WB 183, Box 444, No. 890.

WB 183, Box 444, No. 945.

WB 183, Box 445, No. 1097.

WB 183, Box 44, No. 891.

Tilly and Scott, Women, Work, and Family, pp. 186-87; Tentler, Wage-Earning Women, pp. 92-93.

Josephine Lawrence, If I Have Four Apples (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, Inc., 1938), p. 65.

WB 183, Box 444, No. 880.

WB 183, Box 443, No. 964.

WB 183, Box 445, No. 1088.

WB 183, Box 444, No. 882.

WB 183, Box 447, No. A6-9.

BVI, Box 35, Folder 396, No. 2370.

BVI, Box 29, Folder 356, No. 259.

BVI, Box 29, Folder 356, No. 256.

Kobrin, "The Rise of the Primary Individual."

BVI, Box 30, Folder 362, No. 624.

BVI, Box 29, Folder 354, No. 71.

BVI, Box 35, Folder 395, No. 515.


BVI, Box 32, Folder 379, No. 1361.

BVI, Box 32, Folder 376, No. 1249.

BVI, Box 29, Folder 358, No. 319.


BVI, Box 29, Folder 360, No. 395.

BVI, Box 35, Folder 395, No. 1331.

BVI, Box 35, Folder 395, No. 1910.

Cott, Bonds of Womanhood, pp. 30-36; Aron, "To Barter their Souls for Gold."

BVI, Box 34, Folder 387, No. 374.
BVI, Box 33, Folder 385, No. 202.

BVI, Box 29, Folder 354, No. 128; Montgomery, *Workers’ Control*, pp. 11-12.

Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, pp. 71, 147.

Ibid., p. 101.


BVI, Box 29, Folder 353, No. 9.

WB 183, Box 445, No. 798.

WB 183, Box 445, No. 743.

WB 183, Box 445, No. 1083.

At the moment I am tremendously interested in finding a position for a splendid little woman who is going partly-hungry because 'no man will hire her.' She is capable, strong, well-equipped, sincere and faithful, possesses letters of high endorsement—and yet, (apparently because not especially attractive as we use the term, somewhat superficially), is losing heart, as is her splendid boy of twelve. . . . Last evening she talked with me until very late, and for the first time I noticed symptoms of the brave spirit quailing, and the steadfast eyes filling! . . . Can't you help her? Oh, do try. She is young yet.

—Letter to the Bureau of Vocational Information, 1925

Single and Wedded: Transition and Variation

After 1940, social scientists, government agencies, and feminists tended to overlook the continuing labor force participation of single women, focusing their examinations of women in the paid labor force almost exclusively on married women. The emphasis on the implications for the family of married women's wage work reflected a demographic transition as well as the ideological preoccupations of those who examined twentieth-century women's lives. Married women's labor force participation rate rose steadily after the turn of the century and by 1940 more than half of the female labor force was composed of married women. As early as the 1920s, married women's paid employment—once justified only in cases of absolute penury and usually associated only
with other groups of invisible women, immigrants and blacks--was noticeable among white, middle-class women and perceived as a direct challenge to the ideological prescription that women's place was in the home. According to historian Lois Scharf, the ideological debate between feminists and anti-feminists in the twenties hinged on precisely this issue: whether or not married women had a right to satisfying and remunerative work in the public sphere. The consequences for the family and the presumed conflict between wage earning and domesticity remained underlying concerns as the debate about married women's employment developed in subsequent decades, although economic conditions as well as the participants in the debate changed. By the thirties, economic dislocation and widespread male unemployment raised the suspicion that married women workers took jobs away from "deserving" spinsters and men with families to support. During the forties and fifties, the demand for women workers in sex-typed occupations, office work in particular, rose beyond the supply of unmarried women available to work, and employers and managers became enmeshed in the debate, attempting to encourage married women to participate in the wage labor market and at the same time preserve conventional definitions of women's place in the family. Today the argument continues between feminists and the new right proponents of the "traditional" family, and its perpetuation is disconcerting because it implies that women's right to make independent and equal choices in either the public or the private sphere remains open to challenge. Even more unfortunate, however, is that the focus on married women stems from a cultural ideal originally
formulated in response to the particular historical realities of nineteenth-century, white, middle-class, married women, and therefore obscures rather than illuminates the actual experiences of twentieth-century women. The highly charged, emotional disagreement about married women's roles poses a rigid dichotomy between women's autonomy and their attachment to their families, while women themselves seem to have perceived their families as sources of comfort and support as well as tension and ambiguity. And poor women, for whom the family has been absolutely necessary for sheer survival, disappear from view.

Despite the absence of information about individual single women who belonged to the clerical work force after 1940, demographic evidence does allow us to make some educated guesses about their experiences during and after World War II. There is no reason to suppose that the range of experience—from youthful semi-independence, to the strenuous demands of meeting family crisis, to autonomy or female community—altered significantly, although it seems likely that there was a shift within this continuum and that a period of youthful semi-independence became the most typical pattern among unmarried, middle-class women. The declining birth rate combined with a rising marriage rate caused a reduction in the number and proportion of single women in the work force and the population as a whole, but at the same time public acceptance of wage-earning as a temporary stage in the female life cycle before marriage indicates that a limited period of wage earning while under the parental roof continued to be a common experience for middle-class women whether or not they married.
later. The tendency for the spectrum of possibilities experienced by single women in the twenties and thirties to become weighted at this end in the forties and fifties seems even more plausible because, although independence and peer group culture gained recognition and there was a rising percentage of young, single women living alone in the middle years of the century, a large proportion of young women remained in their parents' households.

Frances Kobrin's figures illustrating the "rise of the primary individual" confirm this: in 1940, 33 percent of all women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four were household heads (usually an indication that they were married), 56 percent lived with other family members (usually their parents), and only 11 percent lived alone or with unrelated persons. By 1950, the percentages had shifted to 45 percent, 44 percent, and 11 percent respectively, and by 1960 they rested at 51 percent, 36 percent, and 13 percent. Although the proportion of "primary individuals" among this age group did rise significantly, as did the marriage rate, over one-third of women in this age group—apparently a majority of those who were single—continued to live with their parents. The direction of this shift in the continuum was amplified by a simultaneous increase in the life expectancy and a drop in the likelihood that families would experience the sort of economic crisis that could drive its daughters into the labor force out of necessity. Peter Uhlenberg, for example, has calculated that the proportion of children who experienced the death of at least one parent before the age of fifteen fell from 24 percent in 1900, to 10 percent in 1940, and 5 percent in 1976. Yet
for the smaller number of single women who did experience the death of a parent or other family crisis, economic and psychic burdens must have remained almost as heavy as ever. To be sure, state and federal government aid designed to compensate families without male earners has increased in this century, but this may not have relieved the daughters of the middle-class from their dual responsibilities. Economic assistance from workers' compensation or Social Security would not sustain a middle-class level of comfort or consumption, and institutional forms of care-taking for the sick and aged probably seemed inadequate by comparison to the care administered by middle-class women who had been taught gender-specific skills in their childhood. But while the demographic transition and the growth of the state may have increased the probability that single women would experience paid work as a transitional phase characterized by at least partial economic freedom, the roles of family breadwinner, nurse, or housekeeper remained possibilities.

The categories of twentieth-century female experience that emerge from the histories of unmarried white-collar women provide new insight into the lives of married women office workers. Rather than using marriage or the family as the central reference, a model based on single women, alone and in relation to their families and other women, places women in the foreground. Direct comparison and contrast between single and married women may reveal family and marriage as separate threads in the webs of relationships that were spun by and yet entrapped the middle-class white women who performed feminized labor in their homes and in the office. Unlike single women who found
themselves torn between family obligations and personal aspirations because their roles were overlooked in the ideological dichotomy between public and private, married women faced even more restricted options in their white-collar careers because, according to cultural prescriptions, their primary roles were on the domestic side of the public-private split. With more direct, socially sanctioned family responsibilities to husbands and children, married women more than the unmarried were part-time or intermittent office workers. And married women, whatever their level of absolute economic need, frequently entered or re-entered feminized office occupations in response to family crisis in the same way that single women ordered and re-ordered their wage-earning to compensate for family emergencies. Divorce, widowhood, a husband's unemployment, or inability to maintain an established level of consumption on one income drove many married women into office work. Here, the critical distinction between single and married women is that while family emergencies curtailed single women's success in the public world of white-collar work, married women's wage earning seemed to signal that the private, domestic roles they believed they had chosen upon marriage had failed to meet their expectations. And finally, in the postwar years, because of the rising life expectancy, there was a striking convergence in the experiences of married and single women. For some married women, the aging of their parents' generation created new dependents, most often mothers or mothers-in-law, and by taking work in an office they assumed the same economic responsibilities that unmarried daughters in the middle class had carried earlier. The greater likelihood that a
woman would survive to old age, often as a widow, also caused married women's work histories to resemble single women's, as they joined the work force in an effort to support themselves.

A woman-centered framework also reveals that married or not, the women who have staffed the twentieth-century office have not only faced similar conflicts between work and family and made similar compromises between the two, but have also been motivated by shared values. Both groups were vulnerable to the recurring pattern of family need and failed expectations within a context of constricted opportunities in the feminized labor market. Under these circumstances, marriage or the meliorative influence of a paternalistic employer were handy escape routes for some women, but reliance on other women could be a significant alternative for married as well as single women. Economically insecure as individuals, female kin could survive by combining their resources. Mothers, daughters, and sisters were linked by reciprocal contributions of cash and care. And although married women had fewer opportunities to establish the networks of autonomous individuals maintained by single women, their stories illustrate other connections as married women attempting to juggle an office job and child rearing turned to other women to care for their children during office hours. The existence of these networks shows twentieth century, middle-class women, regardless of marital status, constructing bridges that would allow interplay between their public and private lives.
Costs and Benefits of Paid Employment

Reflecting the popular debate over the feminist position that married women had a right to paid employment and economic independence, the final question on the 1925 BVI survey asked secretaries to evaluate "the advantages and disadvantages of secretarial work for married women." In response, a few secretaries expressed an optimistic conviction that the issue had been resolved. Marriage "makes no difference," said one married secretary in her thirties. "That was the old-fashioned idea, but I think it is not general now." Another married woman in her twenties argued that married women, like men, could separate their personal lives from their careers:

I do not consider that a married woman should consider her marriage at all in regard to her work. Her work should come first, or she should not be working. Probably, in my position the irregularity of hours might be considered a disadvantage by some, but I feel that would not be a question of matrimony but of disposition.

Most women who answered the question, however, were less concerned with married women's rights in the abstract than with the practical problems and conflicts they had seen or experienced for themselves. Far from being established as a philosophical principle of individual rights, their public role as paid workers continued to confront married women with a series of conflicting responsibilities to themselves and others. From the twenties through the fifties, married women could only attempt to solve these individual problems within the framework of their traditional net of family and personal
relationships rather than from the elevated perspective of a hierarchy of impersonal, political or economic rights. ^10

Single women who responded to the question seemed particularly apt to comment on the conflict between a married secretary's responsibility to her employer and her obligations to her husband. For example, a single woman with fifteen years' office experience cited the Biblical injunction "No man (or woman) can serve two masters." ^11 And according to a divorced woman who had not worked during her marriage, "[It would be] rather difficult, I should imagine, for a business woman to be at the beck and call of her employer, with her thought mostly on his work, and at the same time discharge her marital duties well." ^12 Perhaps because they themselves were "office wives" who performed many of the same functions for their employers that married women performed for their husbands, unmarried women foresaw the difficulties of the double role. As they envisioned the contesting demands of marriage and the office, unmarried women feared that either husband or employer would suffer. Explaining her opposition to married women in the office, one single woman suggested that "contact with so many men [in the office] might cause domestic trouble." ^13 Another empathized less with the married secretary than with her husband. Although she recognized the financial advantages of a married woman's salary, she believed that office work takes [a married woman] from her home when she should be supervising her household arrangements and looking out for her children and tires her out so that she can't be the right stimulous to her husband. Having worked myself for ten years and gone home at night exhausted, I feel that a man has a right to expect a restful atmosphere at home." ^14
From a different standpoint, employers, too, questioned the personal loyalties of married secretaries. A single woman who knew that the government office where she worked denied promotions to capable married women told the BVI interviewer, "On account of the confidential nature of the secretarial position, men chiefs and department heads are apt to prefer single women. This is based on the assumption that a married woman is apt to tell her husband confidential matters which may cause some difficulty."  

In practice, married women in the office work force may have been able to adjust the competing claims of men in the office and at home—after all, women's domestic work as nurturers and caretakers had historically required them to negotiate among the various needs of family members. Married women office workers were more pre-occupied, however, with the double burden's drain on their time and physical energy. While unmarried women's domestic work was often unrecognized or unappreciated, married women's responsibility to care for husbands and children was taken for granted. Married or not, the women who worked in the office acknowledged that, unless she could afford to pay a servant, a married woman wage-earner did a double shift, as one single woman demonstrated when she tried, inconclusively, to weigh the pros and cons of office work as an occupation for married women: "If she is carrying on the usual home jobs outside the office—the sitting posture might be a rest; the doing almost the same things over and over would be doubling up pretty hard; the indoor work would be a mistake."  

A widow also pointed out the physical strain of combining housework and an office job and believed that a married woman might be
"better in a secretarial position than she would be as a clerk in a store, or positions that require her to stand all day, if she does her own work at home."\textsuperscript{17}

And although studies of working women rarely included those married women who left paying jobs because they were overwhelmed by doing two kinds of work, many women must have done so. One woman in the 1939 Women’s Bureau study reported that she had worked for several years after her marriage "in order to get a start financially," but eventually quit her job "because her office job placed too much responsibility on her in view of her home responsibilities."\textsuperscript{18} A former secretary interviewed by the BVI had kept a secretarial job so that she could pay for her husband’s college education. She worked for three years after marriage until "illness" forced her to quit, but she returned to another secretarial post a year later. According to the interview notes,

\begin{quote}
Her experience leads her to say that the disadvantages of secretarial work for married women are no different than any other work that requires hard work all the time one is on the job. She did not have the strength to clean the house and be a secretary so her household was neglected. She realized that she must give satisfaction on her job if she were to earn the money necessary to keep her husband in school."
\end{quote}

Despite the subject’s almost palpable sense of relief that she had been able to leave paid work to "keep house," the interviewer felt it necessary to check with her former employer to make certain that she had not been fired. But, in fact, the employer had been quite satisfied with her work and so completely unaware of the strain on her that he had asked her to stay on.\textsuperscript{19}
For married women in the twentieth century, domesticity has been a full-time job, both in fact and as a matter of social convention. Despite changes in household technology, housework has continued to demand huge quantities of time and energy. And while the physical demands of domesticity have remained constant, the nineteenth-century glorification of married women's place in the private sphere added new forms of emotional labor to the physical demands of housekeeping, which the twentieth-century ideal of companionate marriage further intensified. Obviously, then, many married women who had the choice would avoid additional work outside their homes. But other BVI secretaries believed the issue was more complex. These women mentioned not only the difficulties of combining marriage and office work, but also the potential rewards of independent income, mental stimulation, and social interaction that a married woman might find in paid work. For example, one married secretary said, "The advantages are that it is pleasant work and enables the woman to continue to be independent. The disadvantage is the double responsibility of keeping the home and work at its best." A divorced secretary who had experienced both marriage and paid employment, although perhaps not simultaneously, said that office work "keep[s] a married woman keen and alive to affairs of business" but also "tends to kill home life." Seeing the advantages did not, however, allow these women to resolve the essential tension between public and private. Their responses were inconclusive; they listed the advantages and disadvantages of office employment for married women but could not decide whether the benefits or the costs were more important.
Perhaps this was simply a pragmatic response, more consonant with the realities of their own lives than feminist theories that equate paid work with liberation for middle-class women while seeing it as a double burden for poor and working-class women. This hidden dichotomy in contemporary American feminist scholarship is pointed out by Myra Marx Ferree in a fascinating review that makes the imaginative research design of German feminist sociologists accessible to an American audience. According to Ferree, German scholars have recognized that married women in the paid labor force live a "divided life" in which [married] women are torn between two modes of existence, neither of which is totally satisfactory. The German research shows that married women have divided opinions about the benefits of their paid employment; in one study, 34 percent of married women valued the income they received from their jobs, while 36 percent believed that social contacts and recognition on the job were the primary benefits of work outside the home. Those most likely to leave their jobs were those overburdened in both public and private spheres. This research clarifies the attitudes of the BVI secretaries who found the combination of marriage and paid employment an insurmountable burden as well as those who mentioned potential benefits in addition to disadvantages. Like German working-class women who "describe both fulfillment and disappointment in paid work and housework alike, their response can be characterized as fundamentally ambivalent to each. This ambivalence shows up in conflicting feelings (emotional ambivalence), inconsistencies of opinion (cognitive ambivalence), and in the wish to be in two places
at the same time (divided will)." As Ferree argues, this ambivalence is the result of structural features of women's experience: feminized labor is poorly paid and intellectually limiting, and housework is difficult and undervalued, thus either option may be unsatisfactory alone.

According to Ferree, the German sociologists' recognition of the "divided life" of married women who do paid work suggests that even professional work appears as an "essential aggravation": essential in that it secures the means of existence and also provides the opportunity to acquire and exercise specialized competencies in which one may rightfully take pride; an aggravation in that it limits and suppresses spontaneity, emotion, and all abilities and interests not occupationally relevant and subordinates personal relationships to occupational demands, making them increasingly instrumental. In a society organized around occupations, lack of paid employment is a psychological as well as an economic problem; in a society made up of human beings, reduction to the capacities used in one's job is equally problematic. . . . The division between housewife (use-value oriented) and worker (exchange-value oriented) is increasingly felt by individual women, rather than distinguishing between women and men or between groups of women.26

In a social and political sense, this division is a hardship for women because it is not shared equally by men who experience little conflict between public and private by virtue of their better economic opportunities and escape from domestic responsibilities. On an individual level, however, some women are apparently able to manipulate the divisions in their lives in order to obtain the satisfactions of both instrumental and emotional labor. The German scholars have found that "paid work offers possibilities for more distanced and instrumental interaction than that available in the home; thus workplace ties provide a form of emotional relief greatly valued" by some married women.27 This phenomenon has an equivalent
among BVI respondents who found that their office jobs were a helpful antedote to the intensity of their domestic responsibilities. One married woman in her late twenties acknowledged "the difficulty for a woman without a maid to run successfully two full time jobs," both of which were "exacting," but she argued that secretarial work "keeps a woman alive and sane in regard to herself, her family and people in general."28 And a widow working as an office assistant to support herself and a minor child told the BVI that she thought office work was attractive to married women because it kept them "in touch with [the] public," a married woman in a white-collar job, she said, was "more alert and [has a] wider view of life and broader. [She] has not the time to worry—[about family problems?] which are apt to come up."29

In response to the economic and social division between home and market that created their ambivalence, married women often adopted a flexible approach that enabled them to mesh the apparently opposing worlds of family and workplace. In contrast to the rigid ideological separation of public and private "spheres" that had defined gender roles since the nineteenth-century, twentieth-century married women who entered the white-collar work force perceived the boundary between their dual roles to be fluid. For them, paid work was not simply a way to achieve individual economic rewards or independence, and the family did not mean only the subordination of women's individual interests in marriage. Rather, like unmarried women, they interpreted the conflict between "home" and "work" as a personal moral dilemma which required them to balance various responsibilities and
relationships. Thus, it became possible for them to resolve their ambivalence, although only tentatively and imperfectly.

Looked at in this way, single women's belief that the demands of marriage and an office job were irreconcilable becomes explicable. Seeing the alternatives in abstract terms and assuming that marriage made a woman's family responsibilities more permanent and definite than their own, unmarried women imagined the gap between paid work and marriage in the stark light of social prescription. This was exactly the position of two single women in their very early twenties who tried to answer the BVI question on marriage and secretarial work. Both feared that paid work would subvert relations between husband and wife, but for different reasons. One thought that a married woman "is apt to get very independent in this sort of a position. There would be quite a few new experiences, meeting new people, etc., and a married woman might get dissatisfied and not want to stay in her home." The other suspected that "while [a] wife is out working 'with' [her] husband and wearing out some other girl is resting; and he remarries."31

But married secretaries, who saw their own marriages as particular relationships to another person, could re-interpret the issue and mesh their responsibilities to themselves and their husbands, preserving their own marriages but actually subverting the ideology of marriage. A married woman in her thirties, for instance, argued that an office job "keeps a woman up-to-date so her husband will not outgrow her--so to speak." Since a woman's responsibilities changed over the course of her marriage, the
fluctuating demands on her were just an extension of the life-cycle patterns of single women. So, on one hand, a married woman in her twenties without children found that the disadvantages of her situation were relatively slight compared to the advantages. The advantages of paid work after marriage were, she said,

The independence that modern women enjoy. The constant contact with people that make[s] it easy to keep up with the "times." The luxuries that one can purchase without feeling that some household article is being neglected. . . . The disadvantages I believe lie mostly in the restricted social life one must lead. Afternoon teas and luncheons must be declined.33

On the other hand, a secretary in her thirties, married with three children, found it "difficult to concentrate on business. Personal and family interests apt to dominate the mind." Although she, too, derived satisfaction from office work, she stressed that the individual benefits that a married woman worker enjoyed would also benefit her children: office work "keeps one progressive and in touch with present day methods and therefore the mind and body young. Fine for mothers of boys."34 This particular woman had also adopted a strategy that would become increasingly common among married women with children as the demand for low-level office workers increased over time; only a year before the survey, she had returned to office work after a six-year absence, and only on a part-time basis.

Married women's pattern of intermittent and part-time office employment not only allowed them to integrate their conflicting responsibilities, but also suited employers whose need for women in the office grew as the century progressed. It is impossible to state too emphatically that this does not mean that married women workers
cheerfully settled for the limited and limiting white-collar opportunities open to them; instead, they devised pragmatic strategies that offered them some economic and psychological satisfactions under conditions that hedged them in on every side. Employer policies that sex-typed the least attractive and worst paid jobs in the office gave women little incentive to concentrate their efforts exclusively on paid work. Moreover, competitive careerism and single-minded dedication to business was also unappealing to these women because, as Ferree points out, this masculine value system slighted the alternative values associated with personal attachments and relationships. While they would have clearly preferred better pay and a chance for advancement, these twentieth-century women also wanted to preserve the older, female values of domesticity. Consequently, the responsive, task-oriented approach of use-value production in the home carried over into their work histories.  

The intricate pattern of a lifetime spent responding to her family's need for her paid and unpaid labor, general economic conditions, and her own individual desires is clearly visible in the life history of a thirty-six-year-old Cleveland woman interviewed by the Women's Bureau in 1939. She had started work as a teenager in 1912 doing burring in a factory because she "wanted to be independent and liked to work. Also she had to support herself." In 1915 she found clerical work in a department store, but left a year later when she "went to visit her sister and just stayed on." In 1917 she took a cost accounting job in a shipyard, but lost her job when the "shipyard closed after [the] war." Although she soon found another cost
accounting position, she had to leave in six months' time because, according to the terse interview notes, "mother ill." She returned to office work in a department store in 1921, and then left because there was "no money in job." Her next three jobs lasted only a few months each, although not by her own choice; in two instances she was laid off as a result of the post-war depression, and in the third the company went out of business. Finally, from 1922 to 1928, she settled down to work as a voucher clerk in manufacturing concern. Married in 1925, she remained on the job until she became pregnant "because she didn't like housework and wanted to get a start financially."

Apparently finding no compelling reason to re-enter the work force, she had held no paying jobs in the eleven years prior to the Women's Bureau survey.36

The complex interaction of work, family, and personal desire fostered an attitude toward the demands of business that, according to masculine definitions of work, was cavalier. One of the office workers in the 1939 Women's Bureau sample, for example, had done bookkeeping and clerical work from 1920 to 1927. "Before marriage [she] worked for self-support. [She] worked three years after marriage because she didn't like to give up her salary." When asked to explain why she left paid employment, she gave an answer that is incomprehensible if one assumes that competition and the drive to improve one's salary and status are the primary goals of white-collar work. She told the interviewer, "Just quit—no reason. Tired working."37 Another woman had worked for five years before marriage "because she preferred working to staying at home." In the first four
years of her marriage, she did clerical work during the summers and took occasional temporary office jobs, and her reason for working remained exactly the same: she "didn't like to stay at home." But during the eight years before the survey, she recorded no paid work, either because the satisfactions of working outside of the home had dulled with time or, more probably, because her domestic duties had increased.38

From the managerial perspective, these attitudes express an absence of ambition or concern for the purely economic rewards of paid labor and may even be used to argue that women's domestic obligations, personal values, or acceptance of traditional gender roles cause the substandard conditions of feminized occupations.39 This interpretation is inconsistent with the remarks of employers who admitted that they discriminated against women as well as women's own statements about the reasons for their behavior. In fact, intermittent and part-time work were among the only tactics available to women office workers attempting to assert their own priorities.40

Dropping out of the work force or taking temporary jobs, like frequent job changing, were ways to resist the dehumanizing effects of managerial efforts to control the workplace or impersonal economic individualism. Quantifiable measurements of job satisfaction or women's motives for working tend to subsume women's behavior into politically neutral categories. They do not account for either ambivalence or resistance, nor do they give proper weight to the impact of employer discrimination.41 Quantification would fail to capture the reasoning of a Cleveland woman who explained to the
Women's Bureau why she had left her job as a stenographer for White Sewing Machine Company. In 1925, while she was single, she "took first employment in order to occupy time." Seven years later, eight months after her marriage, she quit and did not re-enter the labor market again before 1939. Her decision to quit was a direct response to her employer's effort to increase control of the work process and an indirect reaction to her perception of its hostility to married women workers: "Speed up and new timing system indicated some employees were going to be fired—probably married women—so she left before she could be fired." Economic exchange within the family unit mitigated the dangers of this approach to job-related discontent among both single and married women, but it was much more prevalent among the married than the unmarried because their husbands could ordinarily be expected to support the family.

Leaving a job was usually a way to resist unpleasant working conditions or a reaction against being overburdened by the double workload of home and office, but part-time work made it possible for a married woman to overcome her divided will and actually be in two places at once. The survey cards filled out by thirty office workers who participated in an investigation of college-educated, part-time women workers conducted by the American Association of University Women and the Women's Bureau in 1951 illustrate the ability of part-time office workers to translate ambivalence into a positive condition. Twenty-nine of these women were married; one was a widow. All lived in the southwestern states of Colorado, California, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming. Asked to tell whether they took paid
employment to "supplement or increase income," "use your skills and abilities," "to have outside interests and contacts," or for some other reason, over two-thirds of the group listed some combination of reasons. Over three-quarters of them mentioned earnings as a reason for finding a job, but only five (17 percent) said that income was their only reason for working outside the home. Social contacts were as important as monetary rewards, although the chance to use their skills ranked much lower, and was mentioned by only ten women—not surprisingly, given that the tasks usually assigned to women in the office were rarely commensurate with a college education.43

Responding to a question asking whether part-time work was "worthwhile," many of them noted the same advantages as married BVI secretaries almost thirty years before. "Yes," said one, "I have a personal satisfaction in knowing I'm doing something constructive (other than playing bridge and the like)."44 Another who worked in her father's real estate business found her job "very worthwhile—educational—as well as insight into corporate working and the tremendous effect government is having on private holdings."45 Despite the fact that office work usually did not demand the special skills they had acquired in college, none of these women reported that they were bored by it. For the bookkeeper in a YWCA office, paid employment was an outgrowth of her unpaid volunteer work for the organization. As reasons for working she mentioned using her abilities and skills as well as outside contacts, stating that "interest in the work" was the primary attraction. Although she made the deprecatory aside "(only part time)," she also said it was
"decidedly" worthwhile because it gave her the "satisfaction of doing a job well." 46

When weighing their motives, many of these women named both the paycheck and the stimulation of participating in the world outside the home, seeing them in combination rather than choosing between them. Thus a church secretary listed the apparently selfish enjoyment of limited financial independence and the satisfaction of contributing to the church side by side without a trace of awkwardness: "The remuneration, though not very much, helps in buying personal things. Also I have the satisfaction of knowing my work is needed and worthwhile." 47 "The extra income gives us some extra's that we wanted. I like to be busy for awhile," reported a clerk in Colorado, both of them suggesting that as part-time workers they did not experience the alienation that might be expected from workers in low-paying, sex-typed jobs. 48

Because they incorporated tangible cash rewards and personal pleasure into a single value system, it would be difficult to argue that their office jobs were simply a form of entertainment for bored housewives (however good that might be in its own right, since undiluted domesticity may be draining and frustrating). Thus, for example, a young mother whose husband, a student, was not employed and who took in typing "to be done at home in evening" in addition to twenty hours of office work each week, did not list "financial gain" as her only reason for working. Her job, she said, "provides diversion from household duties. [It] acts as mental stimulant." 49 Nor were these relatively privileged women simply trying to escape
domesticity. That, too, had value for them. According to a legal secretary, part-time work "stimulates interest in civic affairs. Affords an opportunity to be of service to the public. Great asset in keeping up personal appearance. Creates added appreciation of family and home life." Reconciling her public and private roles was possible, she believed, because she did not work full-time. She stated firmly, "I do not enjoy working outside the home if that work demands so much time that duties and responsibilities at home must be neglected."50

Perhaps the ultimate combination of home and office work was achieved by the women who worked for their husbands. While this seems also to be the ultimate in exploitation since these working wives received wages for neither their domestic nor their clerical services, they professed to enjoy their lot. One who worked because of her "desire to help husband in his work," said that the "contacts [and] companionship with husband" made the work worthwhile.51 The secretary and bookkeeper for her husband's dairy estimated that her work "save[s] the dairy at least $100 a month," and gave her the "satisfaction of being part of a growing business."52 One of the greatest advantages of many part-time jobs, especially for women who worked for their husbands, was that the work was irregular and task-oriented and, therefore, could be arranged to fit around the already task-oriented organization of housework and child care. Her hours varied, reported a New Mexico woman who did secretarial work for her geologist husband "whenever it suits her[?] mood."53
Their efforts to piece together the disparate elements of their lives—to step outside but not to challenge existing gender roles—engendered a kind of independence among these women. For instance, a woman who earned about $50 a month of what she called “pin money” by typing in her own home liked the work because she could “keep skills I have—Do not feel I bog down mentally.” She refused to take a full-time position, however, because she did not want to be “tied down.” Seen from one angle, these women were simply making the best of a bad situation in order to extract some small satisfactions for themselves by manipulating alternatives that subordinated their own interests to others. But from another perspective, one that accepts the testimony of these women that they did find positive rewards in both parts of their divided lives, their flexibility and responsiveness were in themselves virtues, allowing them to transcend the barrier between public and private values.

Married women office workers experienced the same spectrum of personal and family economic need as their single sisters. While some found their earnings a source of independence or a supplement to the other rewards of labor force participation, others were forced into the job market. Because their expectations were shaped by gender roles that had held good since the early nineteenth century, they entered marriage relying on their husband’s bread-winning capabilities, rarely planning to be permanent workers themselves. So the death, illness, or unemployment of a spouse could be devastating. Nonetheless, they often displayed great resilience and resourcefulness. The chief examiner of a large city civil service
commission interviewed by the BVI had begun work as a stenographer and worked her way up through exceptional effort:

A most earnest and persistent worker. Left a widow with three small children—practically destitute. The oldest child is now in college and the other two nearly through high school. She owns her own home and has a car. Loyalty to family, friends and work is her outstanding characteristic.55

A widow in the 1939 Women's Bureau study had worked as a bookkeeper before marriage and returned to work as a social worker in a county welfare department after her husband died. After five years she was not only supporting her three daughters but was also able to give money to her twenty-four year old son. "[He] worked to help mother when widowed--now she is helping him through school," the notes report.56 The general absence of promotional opportunites in female white-collar careers, however, meant that many women were not so successful.

The advantage of feminized occupations for a woman attempting to compensate for the loss of her husband's wages was that there was a steady demand for women who could master the relatively simple technical skills they required. Even in the twenties, when an abundance of young, single women workers allowed employers to discriminate against married women, there were some who actually preferred widows and divorced women because they considered them more reliable. An executive in one large firm, for example, was "very loathe" to hire or retain married women because of their "instability," but told the BVI that he believed "the grass widow is the very best investment."57 And the welfare director in a manufacturing company reported hiring married women "only if husband
is incapacitated or dead." In 1951 this was precisely the situation of an Albuquerque woman who had been doing part-time secretarial work for ten years, one of the few respondents in the AAUW survey who worked for purely economic reasons. Although the information is sparse, she seems not to have originally intended to work for pay after marriage. But it appears that when her husband became "too ill to work," she took a direct route to finding paid employment by enrolling in a business college and using its referral service to find a job immediately upon graduation.

It was generally possible for married women in straightened circumstances to obtain work in feminized white-collar fields, but unlike women who gained a sense of independence by working for pin money or to supplement an already adequate male wage, these women experienced their low wages as a hardship. They could sometimes join in an effort to make ends meet by combining several sources of income within the family (often in partnership with single women), but they could also devise other ingenious schemes for making their clerical skills more productive. One BVI secretary had been a dental hygienist working for her husband until failing vision left him unable to practice dentistry. In response, she switched from one feminized occupation to another, taking up office work and thus allowing her husband to start an insurance business. "This seemed the only business we could go into, where he would be occupied and would not use his eyes. I have all of the clerical end of the work," she said. Instead of making a cash contribution, she compensated directly for his disability.
This kind of flexibility was not always sufficient to overcome the low wages and discrimination of feminized employment, however. In 1939, a forty-eight year old teacher explained her anger at the systematic disadvantages of feminized labor. She had left teaching when she married but had to return to paid employment four years later out of "economic necessity" because she and her husband had "three sons to raise." For five years she ran a private kindergarten and did part-time clerical work in her mother's beauty shop. When the kindergarten failed and she found herself ineligible for a teaching job because the school board had banned the hiring of married teachers, she had "scraped up some intermittent clerical work" to supplement the wages she earned from her mother. Meanwhile her marriage had also failed. Although she had been able to re-enter teaching after her separation, the Women's Bureau notes reveal that she was "very bitter about the rule of school board preventing married women teachers. Says if she could have gotten teaching job while married she could have "saved family"—wouldn't have separated probably."61

The similar experiences of single and married women in the office work force were part of an interlocking pattern. The continuum of economic need was determined by the structure of work and family as institutions, and women's efforts to balance their responsibilities extended over the entire female life cycle. Therefore, the behavior of married women in answer to economic need in their families was often an extension of the responsibilities they had established before marriage. For instance, a thirty-five-year-old clerical worker in the
federal government had been working continuously for seventeen years when she recounted her reasons for wage earning to a Women's Bureau investigator in 1939. She had begun work in 1922 to "support [her]self and help family." Her contribution to her family of origin later increased because her mother "lost all [of her] savings during [the] Depression and [the interviewee] had to assume total responsibility." And rather than improving her situation, her marriage in 1937 added to her obligations a year later when her husband lost his job.62

The specific economic demands on a woman varied at different stages in her life cycle, but the pattern of economic responsibility begun early in life was often simply transferred to new generations within her family. The early life history of a fifty-three-year-old woman from the same Women's Bureau sample resembled that of many single women in large families: she had gone to work as a cashier-bookkeeper while still in her teens "to support [her]self and help family—[she was the] oldest in family of ten children." She had dropped out of the paid labor force when she married in 1905, but returned in 1911, a divorced mother. After that time she had worked at several clerical jobs and had been elected county recorder twice. In 1939 she was a clerical worker in county government, still supporting herself and also "help[ing] children recently married—[and] out of work during [the] Depression."63 Thus the generations of her family were connected by their reliance on her wage-earning ability.
Aggregate data on the rising work-force participation of married women in the mid-twentieth century suggest that the middle-class women who were largely responsible for this demographic phenomenon took paid jobs not out of absolute economic need or the wish for individual independence often associated with paid employment, but from a desire to raise or maintain their families' standard of living by supplementing the earnings of a working husband. While it is true, as Winifred Wandersee argues, that these women subscribed to "family values," census data and the results of large sociological studies disguise the longitudinal patterns of middle-class women's lives. In attempting to knit together their divided lives, individual women were guided by their past experiences in paid employment as well as shifting, rather than static, economic needs within their families. Not simply entering the paid labor market, they were, more often, re-entering it or remaining there. In 1939, for example, a twenty-nine-year-old clerical working in an accounting firm told the Women's Bureau that she had held the same job for eleven years remaining after marriage and the birth of a child "to supplement family income and because the work interests her." At the same time, a forty-nine-year-old woman who had taught school for three years before she married told the interviewer that she had found a job as a clerical worker and bookkeeper in a general store in 1929 because of a "desire to be busy." Both she and her husband, a chain store manager, contributed all of their earnings to the household, while their twenty-three-year-old daughter, a teacher, contributed nothing to the family from her $100-a-month salary. So, although this married
woman had joined the office work force out of personal preference, she and her family had apparently found a use for her income, and, in all likelihood, her daughter's independence to consume as she liked depended on her mother's wages. In both instances, the joint motivations of personal satisfaction and family finances were derived from continuing experience in paid employment.

The distinction between supplementing an already adequate male wage and working to meet an absolute economic need is susceptible to different interpretations. Historians endlessly debate whether married women use economic need as a socially acceptable justification for work outside the home, have re-defined economic need to reflect a rise in the standard of living that includes a high level of commodity consumption, or use their earnings for purchases that are more practical than conspicuous. All three interpretations have some validity, but none takes into account the fact that women's definitions of economic need have been influenced by their past and present experiences. Life histories, however, do illustrate this process. For example, one subject in the 1939 Women's Bureau study had begun work as a stenographer in 1911, when she was seventeen and single, in order to "earn [her] own living." A year later, she quit her job in Iowa for the "adventure" of moving to Missouri. After working as a stenographer there for for two years, she married and left paid work. But in 1935 and 1936, now living in Utah, she was forced to take seasonal work in the food processing industry because her "husband [was] out of work." Although her husband had obtained a WPA job, she remained in the paid labor force and in 1939 had been a
general laundry worker for three years. She labeled her reason for continuing to work "economic need," and because the jobs open to her in the thirties were a drop in status and pay from her office experience, she almost certainly perceived her role as a wage earner to be a sacrifice undertaken for the benefit of her family. Yet the Women's Bureau also reported that she had household "conveniences" and was helping to support her son's university education, not luxuries but expenditures that suggest that experience as a wage-earner had changed her definition of economic need.68

Even the language they used can sensitize us to the subtle changes in consciousness among the middle-class women who took office jobs in the middle years of the twentieth century. A part-time worker in her late forties or early fifties who participated in the AAUW-Women's Bureau study in 1951 had worked intermittently as a teacher and office worker with breaks for "marriage and family over a period of years." She said that her job as a typing clerk "gives me a feeling of security in keeping my daughter in college"[emphasis mine].69

Economist Julie Matthaei has argued that the increase in married women's paid employment involved a "heretical" reinterpretation of their domestic roles. According to Matthaei:

Rather than adjusting their families' needs to their husbands' incomes, or patiently waiting for their families' incomes to increase, these homemakers judged their husbands' incomes to be inadequate to their families' commodity needs and entered the labor force to remedy the situation. Such a homemaker gave priority to her own conception of the family's needs rather than simply adjusting family needs to that which her husband's income could purchase. This was a logical extension of homemaking.70
And, Matthaei adds, this change in attitudes had been augmented because married women's experience on the job gave them "a new sense of themselves, a new sense of pride, and an enjoyment in their work."71

This subversive process is transparent in the comments of a married clerical worker who had begun her career in office work at the beginning of the Depression in order to support her family when her husband lost his job. By 1939 her husband, a brakeman, was again employed, but she had kept her job because, as she told the Women's Bureau interviewer, "He is 'the kind that cannot see' music lessons or college for [their sixteen-year-old] son. [She] says she has to do it alone—wants her son trained for a good job." Moreover, in response to her new experience, she had not only redefined economic need, but also the family. As well as providing educational advantages for her son, this woman also sent $400 or $500 a year to her grandmother and $20 a month to her mother-in-law from her earnings.72 In an extension of the pattern of female kin among single women, married women, too, participated in networks of economic and emotional support that extended beyond the nuclear family.

The Extended Family as an Economic Unit

Married women's use of their wages to aid relatives beyond their own nuclear families was quite common among the white-collar women in the Women's Bureau Depression-era survey, and the existence of extended families as economic, although not necessarily residential, units was not surprising during a period of general dislocation in the
national economy. One thirty-four-year-old woman in the sample had begun work as a telephone operator in 1923 to support herself before marriage and held the same job until 1930, about the time that her first son was born. At that time she "quit to stay home," but her husband, another railroad brakeman, was "laid off the next month," and she returned to wage work as a teletype operator for eight months. By 1931 her family was apparently able to do without her earnings, and she retired once again. In 1935, however, the family faced another reversal ("husband ill--financial difficulties," the interview notes report), and at the time of the study she had been working steadily at a clerical job in county government for four years. Yet her wages were not used solely to meet the economic demands of her own household. The notes continue, "[her] husband's job [is] uncertain as to steadiness, [and they] are buying their home and helping a relative buy a home."^73

Chronic layoffs and low wages were also reasons for the continuous work histories of two other county government clerical workers also married to railroad men, but in these families as well, married women's earnings created the possibility of making substantial contributions to relatives outside the nuclear family. One, the thirty-eight-year-old wife of a locomotive fireman, told the Women's Bureau that she had "supported [her]self since [she was] twelve years old," first by doing part-time domestic work to "earn [her] way through school" and then as a finisher in a laundry helping to support her widowed mother. After completing her mission for the Church of the Latter Day Saints in the early twenties, she resumed support of
her mother by doing clerical work from 1926 until 1931. From 1931 to
1935, possibly the early years of her marriage, she held many
part-time and temporary office jobs, sometimes several at once, and in
1935 she took the full-time clerical position in county government
that she held in 1939. Many relatives had benefitted from her
twenty-five years of wage work: "during all [her] working career
[she] has always contributed to relatives. Put sister through high
school and business and school—total of $300. Last two years has
made loans to two brothers—$60 and $70 apiece." And although her
husband had experienced long periods of unemployment, the notes reveal
that the couple "help [her] mother-in-law and her two children who are
home—this household has only $40.00 a month coming in. [She] and her
husband pay weekly amount on grocery bill, pay all light bills and
interest on loan on home. Also pay tax bills and street paving
bill."74

The other woman had held the same clerical job in county
government for nineteen years. She "started work to support [her]self
and support widowed mother," but had "continued after marriage to help
raise family living standard and help various relatives." In the six
months prior to her interview, she and her husband had sent $500 to
relatives because her "husband’s sister [was] dying of cancer" and
probably needed money to pay medical bills. This amounted to
two-thirds of the interviewee’s monthly wages of $125 and was not
offset even by the additional $25 a month her brother paid for
boarding with her. When economic demands from kin were small, her
income did raise the couple’s standard of living and ability to
consume, but her regular wages also filled in the gaps created by emergencies confronting the extended family network. Similarly, a stenographer for the U.S. Forest Service who had married in 1934 said that her job was a way "to help get ahead." According to the interview notes, she "is contributing to help raise family living standard—[she and her husband] are hoping to build [their] own home this spring." As was often the case, paid employment after marriage was part of the longitudinal pattern of her career; throughout her ten years of office work, she had "always worked to help [her] family." And despite marriage and her desire to improve her own household's status and security, she and her husband annually contributed $100 to their widowed mothers "for taxes, clothes, and coal." By expanding the family's cash resources, married women's poorly paid work in feminized white-collar occupations enabled the nuclear family to meet emergencies and increase its level of comfort, but it also strengthened the economic flexibility of a larger circle of relatives at different stages in the family cycle.

Glenn Elder's examination of the families of adolescents growing up in Oakland, California during the Great Depression provides further evidence of the existence of extended family networks of economic support in the thirties. In a cross-class comparison of middle- and working-class families that experienced economic deprivation, Elder shows that middle-class as well as working-class families relied on married women's paid employment, money from relatives and boarders, and government aid to overcome economic insecurity. Among families that had maintained their pre-Depression standard of living,
working-class mothers were more likely than those in the middle class to hold paid employment (19 percent and 9 percent). In deprived working-class homes, however, the proportions were much higher: 30 percent of the wives of employed husbands and 37 percent of wives with unemployed husbands held paying jobs. In contrast, in deprived middle-class households, 21 percent of women married to unemployed men and 39 percent of those whose husbands were employed participated in paid employment. According to Elder,

The primary explanation for this outcome is found in the adaptation of self-employed men to economic conditions. Despite heavy losses of income, a large percentage of these men were able to avoid bankruptcy or loss of the business, and the merchants did so in part by cutting payroll costs through employment of family members. Forty percent of the wives of the self-employed held jobs, in contrast to 25 percent of the wives of unskilled or skilled men.77

Like the part-time workers of the fifties who performed secretarial work for their husbands, these women, too, provided an important, often unrecognized, economic resource for the family, and it was precisely this group of economically deprived families that was least likely to receive income from relatives and boarders. Seventeen percent of deprived, middle-class families with an employed father acquired funds from this source, while 27 percent of similar families with an unemployed fathers did so, the latter proportion roughly comparable to the 26 percent and 25 percent among deprived working-class families. Among all families, 16 percent of middle-class families and 21 percent of working-class families reported that they received income from relatives or boarders. Elder concludes, "Throughout the 30s, less deprived families were more
likely to utilize family options than public assistance, and it is among these families that alternative modes of economic support are most clearly seen. Maternal employment and support from relatives markedly reduced the likelihood of social dependence." When we remember the married women in the Women's Bureau sample whose wages were distributed to relatives beyond their households, the significance of married women's paid employment as an economic safety net for their extended and nuclear families becomes even more striking.

The economic reciprocity of relatives within and outside of the household was not merely an adjustment to the Depression, however. By the 1950s, sociologists had begun to notice and study the "modified extended family" in modern industrial society. While historians have focused on the decline of the family economy within the nuclear family in the twentieth century, these sociologists argued that there were strong family networks exchanging economic resources as well as services and emotional nurturance between and within generations. Based on their studies of families in the fifties and sixties, these sociologists argued that because of the general aging of the population and the prolonged dependence of children completing their education and setting up new households of their own, the middle-aged generation had assumed new economic burdens. But intergenerational family aid to relatives was only part of a larger net of informal exchange that also included help during illness, care of children, advice and emotional support that criss-crossed the modern extended family.
But because these sociologists were rarely concerned with identifying the gender-specific differences in these networks, they did not recognize that women, especially married women wage earners, were often at the center of these webs of family interdependence. Margaret Blenkner only hinted at the possibilities of woman-centered analysis when she pointed out that older people not in institutions often relied on their children for help in a crisis. The child most often called upon is a middle-aged woman, either a daughter or other relative on whom the older person counts, and who expects to be counted on in times of illness or other stress. If the situation requires, the older person moves into the child's home... Not only does the woman perform the caretaking function for the old, it is also the woman who seeks help for them from nonfamily sources when she herself cannot give it.

In a study of 223 applications to a voluntary New York City social service agency, Blenkner found that relatives (other than spouses) of people over sixty applied in twenty-six percent of the cases. Three-fourths of applications from relatives came from daughters; nieces or sons ranked next in frequency, followed by nephews and daughters-in-law. Sixteen percent of the applications came from friends, again usually women. Although neither Blenkner nor other sociologists who stressed the importance of extended kin networks of support examined the importance of women's paid employment, Blenkner did discover that relatives of older people generally sought aid from nonfamily sources because they could not afford to provide assistance themselves without threatening their own financial security. The absence of children or other relatives increased the likelihood of assistance from the agency. It would seem logical, then, that...
middle-aged families in which a woman brought home a paycheck could give more aid to their parents' generation without turning to formal government or social service institutions. Thus the rising labor-force participation of married and so-called "older" women over thirty-five in the 1940s and 50s must have compensated for the increased responsibilities to both older and younger dependents on middle-aged families.

In fact, information about older women office workers in the fifties suggests that in the postwar years large numbers of married women remained in or returned to low-level, feminized office jobs in order to meet a family crisis, help support their parents, or educate and launch the next generation. In other words, the economic obligations that had characterized single women's wage-earning roles were becoming typical for married women as well. Fully 70 percent of the respondents in a Cleveland Welfare Federation survey of 400 clerical workers who were over thirty-five years old said that they were working to support themselves and others, while only slightly more than 15 percent worked "to supplement their husband's income, to help buy a home or provide a higher standard of living." Their emphasis on the economic need to work reflects, in part, the fact that only one third of the women in the Cleveland study were married, while the remaining two-thirds were divided evenly between women who were widowed or divorced and those who had never married. But of the total, roughly a third had at least one totally or partly dependent relative over sixty living in their homes, and 90 percent classified themselves as permanent workers.83 Similarly, sixty-six participants
In the New York House and School of Industry re-training program for "older" women returning to office work in 1953 and 1954 stressed the need for income as a reason for trying to re-enter the labor market. Of the total, twenty-seven, slightly more than 40 percent, indicated that they wanted paid employment to help meet the cost of living, help educate their children, or just to keep busy, but the majority needed work in order to support themselves or others or because their husbands were wholly or partly incapacitated and unable to support the family.84

Three questions in the initial interview with women entering the NYHSI asked applicants whether their husbands were able to support the family, the amounts their children contributed for their mother's support, and whether or not they were "entirely dependent on [their] own efforts" to support themselves. Since single women over thirty-five who needed a paying job had ordinarily been supporting themselves continuously since early adulthood, most of the women seeking re-training were married. Single women who could not find a job might be facing destitution. When asked whether she would have to support herself by her own efforts, one never-married woman replied, "yes--desperate."85 As their parents aged, many single women continued or assumed their traditional role as providers for needy parents. A fifty-five-year-old woman who had worked for seventeen years before finding herself out of a job in 1953, reported that she not only supported herself, but also her mother who had "only [a] small pension."86 A forty-nine-year-old single woman had a more sporadic work history. She had worked briefly in 1934 and 1935 in a
foreign money exchange and again from 1943 and 1945 as a switchboard operator and later a teletype operator, both jobs including typing and filing. In 1954, with her father retired and her mother suffering from diabetes she needed a job to provide for herself and help her parents, whom she listed as partial dependents.  

Marriage itself did not guarantee economic security, and although the crisis of male unemployment affected fewer families in the fifties than in the thirties, married women were increasingly faced with the possibility of a husband's illness or death. For some, the reversal of their expectations caused bewilderment. The wife of a clothing salesman who had lost his job replied to the question asking whether she had to support herself, "seems so." Despite the growing role of government in meeting the economic needs of individual citizens, many of the women office workers of the fifties were either unaccustomed or ashamed to turn to the state for assistance. Interviewers for the Cleveland Welfare Federation survey believed that "insecurity and fear of old age" was a major [personality] problem among the workers 35 years and over," yet these women seemed unaware that they would qualify for Social Security benefits at retirement. "Practically all" of the Cleveland women interviewed were covered by Social Security, but three quarters of them said that they were not covered, did not know if they were or failed to mention social security at all. They were, however, well-acquainted with the private retirement plans offered by their employers. Even those who knew that they would be eligible for Social Security misunderstood the program, and "a considerable number" said that "it was a salary tax in which the
employer's only participation was "taking it out of my paycheck each month." When they did receive income through the government, they often found it inadequate to meet their needs. A widow with a son in Korea reported to the NYHSI that she received "some allotment" from her son's military pay, but she still felt that she was totally dependent on her own efforts to earn a living. A former legal secretary-stenographer who had worked from 1922 until 1938 was forty-nine and a widow. She needed to re-enter the paid labor force, she said, because the "small social security" payment she received for her sixteen-year-old son would terminate in two years.

The failing health of an aging male breadwinner created displaced homemakers who were being forced to earn a living at the very time when they were losing the attractiveness of youth still considered by many employers to be a necessary qualification for an office job. A husband's illness was a source of emotional and financial crisis in the family, and its effects on a middle-aged or older woman could be almost as devastating as widowhood. The language with which they described their situation reflected a mixture of resignation and preparation to meet the new economic demands on them. The forty-seven-year-old wife of an accountant whose ill health had forced him to cut back to four days' work a week had been a legal stenographer for two years in the twenties and had worked part time from 1939 to 1945. Asked whether she needed to be self supporting, she replied, "may be before long." Another former office worker who
had not held a paying job for twenty-eight years prepared to return to work because, with a sixty-five-year-old diabetic husband, she thought she had "best get back." 93

A husband's unemployment or low income in middle age caused special pressures on married couples who found that both their parents and young adult children needed financial help. By finding work, many women hoped to balance the insufficiency of a husband's wages as well as to create an additional surplus that could be passed on to the older and younger generations in the family. The wife of a labor organizer, for instance, wanted to find an office job because her husband, who paid organizing expenses out of his own pocket, could not manage to support a family that included at least one relative (probably a parent) who was partially dependent on the couple. 94 As in the thirties, the pattern of intermittent employment among married women acted as a shock absorber, cushioning the impact of economic emergency in the nuclear family and responsibilities to relatives.

The wife of a postal worker said that she "must help out" because her husband had "a Pacific War disability . . . [and his] earnings [were] not sufficient even if no dependents." As it was, they had especially heavy expenses because they were carrying the full burden of supporting her mother and paying the "bills from [her] father-in-law's long illness and death." 95 A former office manager in her fifties was trying to return to the office after a nineteen year absence because her "husband's business folded . . . [and he was] looking for work." Although they supported two dependent children, she hoped that by finding a job she could also help her brother whom, she said, "takes
responsibility” for their aged parents. As Blenkner had discovered, these middle-aged women took their responsibilities to their parents to heart. One woman whose husband had a steady job began re-training solely because her parents had retired—"one [is] ailing[,] . . . [and they] need help for their future." Even a widow who was the sole support for herself and dependent child wanted to help her mother who was "ill [with a] broken hip [and has] only diminishing savings." Reluctant to turn to impersonal, bureaucratic agencies for assistance, and far from abandoning their aging parents, these “older” women saw paid employment as an avenue for increasing their ability to care for their parents within a family context.

They responded to the needs of their children in much the same way. Women whose children had reached college age usually had diminished child-care responsibilities, and so found it possible to help meet the added expenses of a child’s education. The expectation of prolonged dependence among young adult children led many mothers to hope that by finding a job they could compensate for a husband’s inability to pay the bills for a son or daughter in college. One mother who had worked as a bookkeeper and typist between 1919 and 1923, and again as a general office worker from 1946 to 1949, was returning to work for a second time at age fifty-one because her “husband was probably losing [his] job [because of a business] reorganization [and their] boy in college [was] working[,] but needs help.” The wife of a gem salesman had similar motives. She reported that her husband’s business was “very bad . . . [and] does not cover expenses and education for son.”
An obligation or desire to "help out" their children was quite common among the mothers in the NYHSI program, but the particular needs of the younger generation varied widely. A widow of sixty-one who had been working for twelve years as a clerk-typist expected that she would have to remain in paid employment indefinitely to earn her own living and support her grown son who contributed "little" to the household because he had cataracts and "cannot hold [a] steady job." Another widow wanted to return to office work to support herself, but also to send money to her daughter married to a serviceman, saying that the young couple and their infant "need help." At the other end of the spectrum were women who worked only to supplement an already comfortable existence. One fifty-year-old grandmother who had not earned a paycheck for eleven years wanted a job "to help out grandchildren and keep busy." It is significant that, whatever their own particular level of economic need or ability to contribute to others, these women of the middle generation shared similar family priorities. As well as compensating for emergencies caused by loss of male earnings in the nuclear family and improving the level of consumption in their households, their earnings also linked generations into an extended family economy.

The sociological research of the fifties and sixties suggests the extent to which young families relied on economic assistance from their parents. Nearly 47 percent of young married couples interviewed by Marvin Sussman, for example, received financial aid directly from their parents in addition to 17.6 percent who received valuable gifts from their parents. A study of 312 middle-class families in
Minnesota in the early sixties revealed that 41 percent of the economic help distributed through intergenerational family networks in a single year came from the parental generation and that their married children were on the receiving end of such monetary transfers 49 percent of the time. In some instances, the middle generation was able to supply help to older and younger generations because they were better established and more secure, but Valerie Kincaid Oppenheimer argues that, in fact, many male earners in this generation were barely holding their own and that the rising proportion of married women in the paid labor force may have been a response to this phenomenon. Diminishing child-care duties, combined with the increased demand from employers for their presence in the labor market, pulled wives of the middle generation into paid labor, with the result that their wages became the central source of familial aid.

Economic exchange from the parental generation was, however, only part of a wider web of economic and emotional relationships within modern extended families. The younger generation also provided economically for both their parents and grandparents. Hill found that 34 percent of the married children in his sample gave some kind of monetary help, and among Sussman's respondents, 14.6 percent of this generation gave money to their parents, 10.3 percent gave money to siblings, and 6.4 percent received some cash from their siblings. The NYHSI question asking older women whether they received any support from their children reflected the popular acceptance of this pattern of aid, especially in emergencies. One of the applicants to the retraining program obviously expected some such aid. Her husband had
been unemployed for two months because of a cardiac condition, and her son had "just returned from Korea." She answered the question "not yet," but presumably expected that her son would help out in the future.107 A widow with three grown children resumed office work after thirty years at home precisely to free her children of this financial drain. She said, "must be self-supporting to relieve children of burden at present so they can marry and start [their] own families." Her attitude also disclosed the hidden assumption that had trapped so many single women in dead-end jobs: her answer implied that married children had less responsibility to provide for their parents in emergencies. Of her three adult children, only the two who were not married were contributing to her support at the time she entered the retraining program.108

Fully 93.3 percent of the families in Sussman's sample participated in some transfer of economic or social aid to their families. Hill's study revealed 3,781 instances of reciprocal help among the 312 families, only 1,674 of them taking place in the intergenerational context. Less tangible forms of support—especially child care and help during illness, but also including "advice," "household management," and "emotional gratification"—were as important to the extended family as cash aid. The exchange networks were more diffuse, with less concentration on parental giving and adult children's taking when services rather than cash were involved. Neither Sussman nor Hill, however, noted the extent to which these forms of non-monetary service relied on women's unpaid domestic and emotional labor.109
For instance, 90 percent of the women in the Cleveland Welfare Federation's survey of clerical workers performed housework in addition to their paid work in the office. These duties were sex-typed forms of labor in which women had developed special skills during their early socialization and were almost certainly being reciprocated within informal networks of female kin. While the rigid dichotomy between public and private was breaking down in the area of women's paid employment, the new fluidity of middle-class women's roles in and out of the family was sustained by female relationships that not only resembled but in all probability were direct descendents of nineteenth-century links among female kin and friends.

Domestic activities and emotional relationships within the family continued to be a central focus of women's lives, and new public roles in the workplace added to but did not supplant women's existing priorities and duties. For instance, although the professionalization of medicine and the reliance on hospitalization for serious or chronic medical care had transferred many of women's nineteenth-century nursing duties to paid workers in bureaucratic institutions, 76 percent of the families in Sussman's sample had either given or received family help during illness. Moreover in another study, he discovered that middle-class mothers "responded almost unanimously to requests from their daughters for assistance during the latter's confinement." Despite changes in the economic structure of health care and women's new economic responsibilities, childbirth and the
work created by the presence of an infant in the home still required
the emotional and physical care that institutions did not provide and
that mothers and daughters had traditionally supplied for one another.

Child care presents an especially important area of mutual help
within female kin networks. Parents of young children must almost
universally leave their children in the care of others at least
occasionally. Of Hill's young married generation, 78 percent had
received and 34 percent had given some family aid in this area.
Almost forty-seven percent of Sussman's sample had participated in
some kind of child-care exchange: 20.5 percent of the parents'
generation provided some kind of care for their grandchildren; 29.5
percent of the younger generation provided such aid for siblings, and
10.8 percent received sibling help.112 This emphasis on providing
child care within a non-institutional, family setting supported by
informal relationships among women is consistent with the general
reliance on informal family exchange rather than public agencies. It
also accounts for the reluctance of many mothers to use institutional
day-care facilities in the relatively rare instances where they were
provided. Ten of the part-time office workers in the AAUW-Women's
Bureau survey in the early fifties had to make some arrangement for
the care of young children while they were at work. Only one used a
day nursery and only one other relied on a man—a husband who was in
poor health and could not work—to care for their children. Of the
remainder, three used a maid or combination of a maid and a relative,
four others relied on female relatives, and one on a friend to look
after their children. The moral and psychological issues surrounding
day care arrangements fit exactly into the framework of responsibilities and relationships outlined by Carol Gilligan. Women who, as a group, felt a strong responsibility to provide economically for their grown children and aging parents also wanted to fulfill their responsibilities to their small children, and whenever they could turned to existing relationships with other women they could trust to help them meet their needs. In fact, the rising labor-force participation of mothers with young children created a new network of female relationships, and home day care, provided by a relative or friend, reproduced female relationships by allowing other women to combine domestic duties with earning and thus resolve their own "divided lives." Home day care replaced boarding as a way for married women to add to the family economy, this time relying on the wages of other women.

It remains virtually impossible to assess in quantifiable terms the ramifications on the family economy of women's work in feminized white-collar occupations. Sociological techniques are useful because they can probe informal relationships. But the results reflect the sociologist's own priorities and remain snapshot images of generational relationships at a single moment in time. Rarely do they reveal the fluid family and work roles in an individual woman's life cycle or disclose the structural consequences of women's growing participation in the office work force. Historians of the family have discovered that ordinary people in the past were often inarticulate in the sense that they did not leave literary evidence of their motives, feelings, and behavior. Historical inquiry on the family, therefore,
must draw conclusions from numerical evidence collected for public purposes. Census data, birth and marriage records, inheritance and residence patterns stress patriarchal lineage and formal ties of dependency. They tell us very little about the invisible, fluctuating relationships among family members or the myriad of particular decisions made by women who maintained and supported the economic and emotional links of the family. Use of social survey data as traditional qualitative evidence has two special advantages. First, it uncovers women’s own descriptions of their motives and strategies and the informal context of relationships, responsibilities, and ambivalence that has shaped twentieth-century changes in women’s lives. Second, the cumulative weight of qualitative evidence shows the significance of middle-class women’s new economic responsibilities in their families and gives formal recognition to the contributions and sacrifices of individual women.

During the middle years of this century, the women who entered and re-entered feminized occupations in the office made choices on the basis of personal, emotional, and moral responsibilities in a web of relationships to family members. Individually, they had ambitions for achievement and recognition as well as a desire to harmonize their experiences in the separate worlds of home and work. Together they joined flexible networks of women within families that exchanged paid and unpaid labor while sharing mutualistic and cooperative values. But in order to satisfy their obligations to the nuclear and extended family or obtain even minimal economic or psychic rewards from their paid employment, these women had to participate in a system of work
that reinforced traditional gender ideology and denied them equal pay or equal rights. Their mutualistic outlook placed them at a further disadvantage in the competitive world of business because they were unwilling or unable to disrupt the web of relationships with conflict. During the Depression and the postwar period, as married women's careers as office workers came more and more to resemble the work patterns of single women, it was ambivalence rather than independence that characterized their divided lives. Their connections with other women encouraged reciprocal exchanges of money, services, and nurturance that compensated for their marginal position in the labor market. A woman adrift from female kin might find herself, like the widow described at the beginning of this chapter, destitute because of low pay or discrimination. If so, her only resource might have been a woman friend on whom to depend for emotional support or to help her communicate her plight to institutional agencies.
Endnotes

1 Cambridge, Massachusetts, Radcliffe College, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Bureau of Vocational Information Papers, Collection Number B-3, Box 30, Folder 362, No. 601 [hereafter cited as BVI].


4 For a good discussion of the relation between federal government policy and employers' interests see, Eileen Boris, "Regulating Industrial Homework: The Triumph of "Sacred Motherhood,"" JAH 71 (March 1985): 745-63.


7 Demographic evidence alone does not necessarily reveal the attitudes toward aging parents or informal economic strategies of families. Kobrin, "Fall of Household Size," p. 109, argues that numbers suggest a decline in adult children's responsibility for their parents, while Uhlenberg, "Death in the Family," p. 175, argues that there has been no change in norms.

8 BVI, Box 29, Folder 354, No. 238.

9 BVI, Box 29, Folder 353, No. 12.


11 BVI, Box 29, Folder 354, No. 62.
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18. Washington, D.C., National Archives, Record Group 86, Women's Bureau Records, Box 448, No. W-6-29. [Hereafter cited as WB 183].
19. BVI, Box 34, Folder 392, No. 2183.
22. BVI, Box 33, Folder 386, No. 742.
23. BVI, Box 32, Folder 375, No. 1131.
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27. Ibid., p. 525.
28. BVI, Box 33, Folder 383, No. 1658.
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31. BVI, Box 35, Folder 395, No. 2336.
33 BVI, Box 32, Folder 376, No. 1291.

34 BVI, Box 29, Folder 354, No. 64.


36 WB 183, Box 447, No. D-2-2.

37 WB 183, Box 446, No. W-4-9.

38 WB 183, Box 449, No. R3-10.


41 Filer, "Male-Female Wage Differences," p. 437.

42 WB 183, Box 446, No. B4-24.

43 NA, RG 86, Women's Bureau Records, Box 1721. All the interview cards for this unpublished study are contained in one box [hereafter cited as WB-RM].


45 WB-RM, No. U-P-33.


49 WB-RM, No. C-FC-29.


51 WB-RM, No. C-P-66.


53 WB-RM, No. NM-C-21.


55 BVI, Box 29, Folder 354, No. 227.
56. WB 183, Box 445, No. 1085.
57. BVI, Box 31, Folder 374, Employer Return No. 15.
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60. BVI, Box 29, Folder 353, No. 6.
61. WB 183, Box 445, No. 789.
62. WB 183, Box 445, No. 761.
63. WB 183, Box 445, No. 779.
65. WB 183, Box 445, No. 776.
66. WB 183, Box 444, No. 922.
68. WB 183, Box 443, No. 968.
71. Ibid., p. 253.
72. WB 183, Box 443, No. 962.
73. WB 183, Box 445, No. 773.
74. WB 183, Box 445, No. 775.
75. WB 183, Box 445, No. 780.
76. WB 183, Box 445, No. 763.
78 Ibid., p. 52.


84 Schlesinger Library, New York House and School of Industry Papers, Collection Number MC-287, Box 1, Folder 8 [hereafter cited as NYHSI].

85 NYHSI, Box 1, Folder 11, No. 306.

86 NYHSI, Box 1, Folder 11; Box 2, Folder 25, No. 257.

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93 NYHSI, Box 1, Folder 11; Box 2, Folder 25, No. 290.
94 NYHSI, Box 1, Folder 11, No. 308.
95 NYHSI, Box 1, Folder 11, No. 246.
96 NYHSI, Box 1, Folder 11; Box 2, Folder 24, No. 301.
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108 NYHSI, Box 1, Folder 11; Box 2, Folder 24; Box 3, Folder 37, No. 137.
110 Cleveland Welfare Federation, "Older Women Clerical Workers," summary p. 3.
111 Sussman, "Relationships of Adult Children with their Parents," p. 84.

114 BVI, Box 30, Folder 362, No. 601.
GENDER, CLASS, AND CULTURE:
WOMEN SECRETARIAL AND CLERICAL WORKERS IN THE UNITED STATES, 1925-1955
VOLUME II

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

Mary Christine Anderson, A.B., M.A.

*****

The Ohio State University
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CHAPTER EIGHT

WOMEN’S OFFICE WORK CULTURE IN THE 1920S

Secretaries National Anthem

You've gotta be a stenographer, umph, humph and a little bit more,
You've gotta be a bookkeeper, umph, humph, and a little bit more,
You've gotta be the telephone girl, collector, and janitor,
REFRAIN:
Then you'll be a secater-ree, umph-humph and a little bit,
umph and a little bit more.

You have to run a real Church School, Guild Meetin's and everything,
You've gotta play the pipe organ and in the choir sing,
You've got to have a memo-ree, that'll carry things galore,
REFRAIN
You've gotta have that chronic smile, a sweet disposition, too,
You've gotta be cook for the Men's Club and wait on the tables too,
You've gotta polish silver and brass, 'tend to lights and lock the door,
REFRAIN
You've gotta sit on the job all day, do errands by the score,
You've gotta call the ves-ter-ee, ONCE?--and then some more,
You've gotta meet the Charity call, listen to their tales of woe,
REFRAIN
You've gotta hear a million complaints, be nice to the parish bore,
Make the rector seem what he ain't, umph-humph and a little bit more,
You really should be twins or tripolets, you really should be four,
REFRAIN
If you can live on corn beef hash, and ask for nothin' more,
If you can remodel last year's frocks and keep out of the picture show,
If you can work for love alone, care nothin' for a sal-a-ree,
REFRAIN:
Then you'll be a secater-ree, BUT you'll NEVER get a little bit,
NEVER get a little bit,
NEVER get a little bit more.
Introduction

It would be difficult to imagine a less militant or class-conscious woman worker than the Louisiana church secretary who gave a copy of the "Secretaries' National Anthem" to an interviewer for the Bureau of Vocational Information in 1925. Described by the surveyor as "a girl of independent means . . . keenly intelligent," Miss H. worked "because she does not like to spend her time on social activities only." Yet she and the other church secretaries with whom she must have sung this song at a summer camp and training school for church secretaries in Sewanee, North Carolina, had made an incisive analysis and critique of the conditions under which they worked. Although they did not directly challenge the system that required hard work, long hours, and personal subservience in return for poor pay, they were clearly aware of their subordination in the paid labor force. In its description of secretarial work as well as its humorous, non-confrontational style, the "Secretaries' National Anthem" illustrates consistent themes that emerged throughout the mid-twentieth century, whenever women secretaries discussed their work. Although the particular tasks performed by other secretaries might not have included running a church school, singing in the choir, or cooking for the men's club, many of the demands made on the church secretary described in the song were typical of twentieth-century secretarial work in general. Employers ordinarily expected secretarial workers to take responsibility for a variety of clerical tasks and to exhibit tact, patience, and an ability to make the boss "seem what he ain't." Many secretaries probably did wish that they
were "twins or trip-o-lets." And just as many recognized that their work was worth at least "a little bit more."¹

Because the most detailed information on the experiences of individual women office workers was collected by women's organizations which were concerned with the conditions facing educated, white, middle-class women, the primary sources are skewed toward the most elite group of women in the office—secretaries and the stenographers and typists who often advanced to private secretarial posts. Government studies conducted by the Women's Bureau were much more likely to include clerks and routine office workers, but the Women's Bureau concentrated on obtaining information on large samples of the female office labor force, and its data, therefore, contain fewer details about the experiences and attitudes of individual women workers. But, while it is difficult to know whether the experiences of secretarial workers (secretaries, stenographers, and typists) were representative of other groups of women in the white-collar work force, it is possible to discern the broad outlines of the shared experiences and consciousness among the secretarial workers who were at least one-quarter to one-third of all female office workers between 1920 and 1955.²

The experiences and attitudes of women secretarial workers do not fit neatly into the existing explanatory framework of labor history. In the last two decades labor historians have shifted their emphasis away from institutional studies toward a broader examination of working-class life, but conceptual models in the field continue to be based on the study of blue-collar men. The work of E. P. Thompson,
which is in large part responsible for the new direction of research in labor history, introduced the concept of "working-class culture" to explain how the customs and values male workers brought to the workplace shaped their response to industrialization and were transformed into class consciousness in the process. As a consequence of Thompson's remarkable redefinition of the study of labor history and Herbert Gutman's adaptation of Thompson's concepts to American workers, the traditional economic themes of labor history—the conditions of work, union organization, and protest—have been expanded to include the relationship of paid work to family, race, ethnicity, and community institutions. Yet the central pre-occupation with class consciousness and class conflict, or their absence, has remained unchanged. The broader definition of the field has linked labor history to social history and the history of women, including women in the study of the working class, but both the "old" and the "new" labor history continue to leave women workers on the periphery of their analyses of work itself. The study of women in feminized white-collar employment poses a special challenge to labor historians because women in the office have rarely joined labor unions or engaged in organized, visible forms of protest, and have often identified themselves in opposition to factory workers rather than as members of the working class. In fact, secretarial workers have not even shared an experience of the transition from pre-industrial to industrial work comparable to men's.

It is insufficient simply to use existing methodology, to explain women's experiences in the workplace without developing new conceptual
models that explicitly compare and contrast the specific historical experiences of women and men. The gender system, reproduction, women's family roles, and relationships among women must be incorporated into existing conceptualizations. For instance, Thomas Dublin's fine, detailed study of female operatives in the Lowell textile mills uses the terms developed by Thompson in his analysis of English working men's resistance to industrialization to explain the attitudes and behavior of women who entered the factory system. Yet despite his careful quantitative methodology, Dublin's study lacks the particularity of Thompson's work because it does not distinguish between male and female experiences of preindustrial conditions or elaborate on the possible differences between male and female work culture. Leslie Woodcock Tentler's study of working-class immigrant women at the turn of the century does contrast women workers' lack of ambition to the assertiveness of male workers. Although Tentler stresses the cultural differences between women and men workers, she necessarily reaches negative conclusions about her subjects' behavior because she evaluates women according to the standards of male behavior rather than evaluating women's priorities on their own terms. Similarly, Margery Davies suggests that female clerical workers somehow misunderstood their own interests when they failed to develop a working-class consciousness of their economic oppression. While the work of these historians demonstrates that labor history can contribute significantly to the history of women, none of them has moved beyond the confines of male labor history to redefine economic and labor issues in female terms. Thus each of them is forced to
explain women's behavior as the result of outside forces: implicit in their arguments is the assumption that women's roles in the family are inherently oppressive and that paid employment, interpreted by masculine standards of economic independence, competition, and class interest, is potentially liberating for women. If, however, we are to reconceptualize labor history to do justice to women workers, particularly those in feminized white-collar and service occupations, we must evaluate work and family only as particular aspects of women's concrete historical experiences and go on to analyze the ways that women have drawn on their experiences in those institutions to formulate an autonomous female interpretation of paid employment. We must develop the conceptual links between work and family and even further broaden the study of labor history to include the ramifications of the gender system on the work process and workers' consciousness. At present, labor historians are groping for a synthesis that can make sense of the divergent methodological approaches and vast expansion of new knowledge in their field. Calls for a synthesis are, however, premature so long as women's historical experiences and their interpretations of them remain isolated from the general debate. A close examination of the ways that women secretarial workers perceived and responded to their work environment may suggest alternatives to male-defined models of the economic and cultural themes of labor history.

When seen through the eyes of women workers, secretarial work resembled work in a preindustrial setting more than modern industrial labor. In contrast to workers in industry, who repeatedly perform a
single minute operation in the production process and whose work is measured and controlled by the length of time spent rather than the completion of a task, secretarial workers performed many different tasks at their own pace in an environment conditioned by personal, social relationships with the boss and co-workers rather than impersonal, systematic supervision. On the job, a shared experience that owed more to traditional than modern industrial patterns of work was reinforced by the perpetuation of another, older pattern of social relationships among women. As the gradual process of industrialization had begun in the early nineteenth-century, the segregation of white, middle-class women into a "separate sphere" in the home had enabled these women to cultivate a sense of sisterhood based on their domestic role as care-givers and guardians of nurturant, emotional relationships. Because secretarial work continued to be less regimented than most other forms of labor in twentieth-century America, and because the content of secretarial work had incorporated many of the emotional responsibilities women performed in the domestic sphere, women in secretarial jobs could transfer the values of this separate "women's culture" to the office.  

When they described their jobs, women secretarial workers stressed the domestic tasks and emotional labor they performed as well as the irregular rhythm of work that revolved around the personal demands of others. Thus they seemed to accept the gender-specific definition of feminized office work promoted by their employers and some management experts. But agreement on the content of women's
office work should not disguise the fact that while bosses and managers attempted to use sex-typed descriptions of secretarial work to inculcate loyalty and deference in the female office work force, women workers themselves accepted the controlling rationale for a quite different reason. On the one hand, white-collar employers, like other employers of female workers who produced a service rather than a commodity, focused on the woman worker's personality and behavior, using the gender-specific attributes of secretarial work to keep women in subordinate positions in the white-collar work force. On the other hand, when seen from the bottom up, from the perspective of women office workers themselves, the introduction of cultural definitions of "femininity" to the workplace not only allowed, but actually encouraged, women to bring distinctly female values into the office and to connect their experience of paid labor to female values and behavior outside the workplace.

Recent studies of women workers in other feminized service industries in the first half of the twentieth century, Susan Porter Benson's on department store saleswomen and Susan Reverby's and Barbara Melosh's on nurses, are on the cutting edge of the effort to redefine the social relations of production from a woman-centered perspective. Building on the work of Thompson and Gutman, Benson and Melosh in particular have examined the ways that beliefs about female gender roles influenced the relationship between male employers and female workers, and suggest that in cases of sex-typed female employment, gender was a powerful force in shaping the contest for control of the work process. According to these historians, because
employers found it very difficult to rationalize the services performed by women in feminized occupations, workers were able to develop distinctive occupational work cultures. The definition of work culture developed by Benson and Melosh is a particularly useful approach to understanding the perceptions and behavior of women in feminized service occupations. Benson defines work culture as "the ideology and practice with which workers stake out a relatively autonomous sphere of action on the job, a realm of informal, customary values and rules which mediates the formal authority structure of the workplace and distances workers from its impact." As Benson discovered in her investigation of women sales clerks, "The informal work group which thrived among saleswomen was grounded in the social relations of the selling floor. It was, in fact, exactly because new management practices in the department store industry altered these relations only minimally that they failed to undermine the position of the informal work group and the strong influence of work culture over worker behavior." The strong work culture among these women workers was the basis for asserting their own judgments about the content and social organization of their work. Melosh has pointed out, "Occupational culture is not just an elaboration on work; it is the critical link between a job's official protocol and its actual performance. . . . Located at this vital juncture, occupational culture at once reveals workers' central contributions to production and suggest a powerful wedge for claiming and extending workers' control on the job." The feminization of sales work, nursing, and office work in the twentieth century was not purely a demographic
phenomenon, and it represented more than merely the routinization and proletarianization of the jobs assigned to women. Gender-specific skills and behavior were identified with the services women workers performed and became part of the content of women's paid labor.

Secretarial workers created a work culture similar in many respects to occupational culture among saleswomen and nurses, but also responsive to the particular economic and social conditions of work in the office. In the case of secretarial workers, gender ideology was especially entrenched because the services performed by women workers were not offered to a public clientele--department store customers or hospital patients--to enhance an employer’s profits, but rather to employers themselves. Emotion, nurturing, loyalty, and personal service were not easily measured or controlled, but they were an integral part of the work of women secretaries, stenographers, and clerical workers, giving them a large arena in which to develop "informal, customary values and rules." Feminized work in the office also provides an opportunity to elaborate on the concept of women's work culture because of the availability of detailed survey responses from and interviews with secretarial workers. Although these sources are richest for the twenties, their depth more than compensates for their uneven distribution over time. These accounts reveal at close range secretarial workers' understanding of the interactions between workers and their employers and among workers in the office. Because they also disclose women workers' perceptions of the close connection between their economic position and their social position as women and family members, it becomes possible to link secretarial workers'
behavior on the job to the broader social context of historical experiences they shared with other women by virtue of their sex. The introduction of gender-based values to the office gave women a set of ideas that allowed them to stand outside the competitive, patriarchal business system; women office workers existed within the system while rejecting its assumptions.

Despite constant and continuing tension between office workers and their employers centering on control of the content and process of work, conflict remained submerged. Unlike the male workers—whether craftsmen or industrial workers—usually studied by labor historians, women in the office did not express or attempt to redress their grievances through visible, direct protest. Women office workers showed little interest in joining the traditional labor union movement between 1920 and 1955. Most secretarial workers did not see themselves as part of the industrial proletariat; indeed, neither the content nor the organization of their work were arranged according to the modern industrial model. Equally important, women in the office adhered to a set of specifically female priorities that had traditionally shunned conflict or confrontation. Rather than organize to challenge conditions they recognized to be unfair, women office workers expressed their discontent through indirect protests and used individual strategies to protect their interests. On its surface this pattern of behavior may appear to suggest that they lacked group solidarity or a coherent understanding of their subordination. Actually, the case was just the opposite. Secretarial workers seem to have chosen their course precisely because their female work culture
implicitly favored cooperation among individuals and personal amelioration of conflicts over confrontation. Secretarial workers were acutely aware of their economic, sexual, and emotional insecurity on the job. Yet they were willing to accept this serious problem in order to maintain their own values, removed from the competitive, impersonal ethos of modern capitalist enterprise. Their approach was not simply protective; it was, like nineteenth-century women's culture from which it drew so much, a rejection of dominant patriarchal values. But despite its continuity with nineteenth-century women's culture and preindustrial work discipline, twentieth-century women's secretarial work culture represented a new nonindustrial work ethic which joined elements of traditional women's culture based in the home with the realities of paid labor in feminized white-collar occupations.

Nonindustrial Work Culture in the Twenties

In the mid-twenties, the Bureau of Vocational Information, an organization formed to promote women's educational and economic advancement, and which had close ties to the elite women's colleges, discovered that college-educated women more often requested information on secretarial work than on any other single occupation. In its 1925 survey of over 2,500 women secretaries, the BVI sought out what they termed "high-type" women—that is, the elite corps of private secretaries—and excluded stenographers, typists, and routine office workers as much as possible. The women included in the study appear to have been entirely white, and primarily native-born women of
western-European descent. Ninety percent of the group had never
married, and well over half were under twenty-five years old.17
Despite its obvious lack of balance, however, the BVI study is the
most comprehensive source available for the quantity and quality of
information it contains.

When read as a group, the responses to the BVI survey reveal the
existence of a gender-specific, nonindustrial secretarial work
culture. The description of secretarial work that emerges from the
BVI questionnaires is almost identical to that presented by Margery
Davies in Women's Place Is at the Typewriter, based on her reading of
secretarial manuals and management literature.18 The significant
difference is that when secretaries themselves described their work,
they were much less likely than the authors of such prescriptive
literature to draw a distinction between themselves and women in other
branches of clerical work and more likely to see the lack of further
promotional opportunities and their personal dependence on an
individual boss as a source of tension and dissatisfaction. While
they may have been socialized as women to submit to the authority of
their male superiors, they recognized the inequality of their position
and did their best as individuals to circumvent the most dehumanizing
aspects of male power in the office. In the absence of a comparable
set of sources for clerical workers in more routinized jobs, it is
impossible to know whether secretarial work culture extended to other
branches of women's office work. Because women in the lowest levels
of clerical work experienced the loss of control usually associated
with industrial production, perhaps they, more than secretarial
workers, interpreted their position in economic or class terms rather than as the result of gender distinctions. But since the extent to which even routine clerical work was subjected to the rigid, impersonal discipline of industrial work is subject to question and since lower-level clerical workers, more often than secretaries, worked in groups with other women, gender—as the source of both oppression and an alternative system of values—probably encouraged a general office work culture encompassing women in all feminized white-collar occupations.

The Secretary's Job

It would be impossible to argue from the BVI responses that proletarianization had accompanied the feminization of secretarial work. The work described in the surveys was not repetitive, routine, or systematically controlled by management. The recurrent themes in the comments made by the BVI secretaries were the variety and unpredictability of their jobs and the need for initiative and judgment on the part of the secretary. These responses were consistent with those in another study done earlier in the twenties which had queried 715 women secretaries about 871 possible office duties and found that the average secretary performed 130 separate tasks. In fact, this earlier study had been difficult to carry out because the women secretaries persistently argued that their jobs were unique and that they had nothing to contribute to a general study of secretarial work. The BVI secretaries would have agreed that their jobs were highly individualized. At a minimum, most typed, took
dictation, did filing, composed letters, and dealt with people both inside and outside their offices.

The questionnaires revealed that secretarial work encompassed many tasks that required more than clerical skills. The secretaries prized the variety of their work, not only as an escape from monotony, but also because they could acquire a general knowledge of the flow of work in the office. The secretary to a college president, for example, performed both clerical and non-clerical work in her office and had a sense of the organization of the office and her place within it. She listed an interest in her work as one of the attractive features of her job, saying, "Do work I like, such as preparing reports of various kinds by myself." Ordinarily, being a cog in a machine is a metaphor for loss of control, but this secretary used the phrase to express her sense of contributing to the work process: According to her, a secretary was "in the midst of things . . . and can add to the whole thing by doing her work well--a very useful and necessary cog." Another secretary said that an attractive feature of a secretarial job was "The interest in following through undertakings." In other words, unlike workers who performed routine work in industry, she maintained understanding and control over her work. And a legal secretary stated that her job included such non-clerical duties as screening clients and correspondence regarding foreign patents, "of which I have made a special study." In the category labeled "unique duties," she listed personal shopping for her employer's wife; then, as an afterthought, she commented, "perhaps not so unique."
In some ways, these women workers resembled nineteenth-century male clerks because, despite their inability to move upward to positions of formal authority, they could acquire knowledge of an employer's business through their experience. For example, a secretary/stenographer with varied duties in a real estate firm had watched the company grow into a relatively large office employing fifty people. She said, "My personal success is due to having started out with one firm and after a number of years . . . [becoming] fully acquainted with all details [in the office] except selling."23 This aspect of secretarial work may have been especially attractive to educated women who lacked other outlets for their skills and education. A secretary working for a consulting engineer, who herself had a bachelor's degree in engineering and had taught math and engineering at the university level, felt that her job offered her the "opportunity for individuality of thought and method, diversity of duties."24 According to her, a secretary "should be informed on all matters her employer handles." The belief that a secretary could or should know as much about the business as her boss was common among the women in the BVI survey. In a similar vein, the secretary to a bank trust officer in Santa Ana, California, reported that "Having had so many years experience in Santa Ana, and being acquainted with most of the business people, naturally a great many people come to me direct with matters."25

These secretarial workers generally equated the absence of routine with freedom from monotony and the chance to use their initiative. These were the attractive features of their work. One
secretary said she enjoyed the "freedom to organize work as I choose without interference." Another enjoyed the "freedom in working and planning . . . freedom to work out one's own ideas." But, although it seems clear that most of these women had not experienced the loss of control over work associated with the regimentation imposed by management over factory workers, the relationship of close personal dependence on an individual boss did limit their independence on the job. One woman stated that a "secretary should be able to do almost anything her employer would do in the normal run of business." For her, one of the advantages of secretarial work was the lack of monotonous routine. At the same time, however, when asked about the disadvantages of secretarial work, she replied, "only those incident to working for another rather than oneself." Another secretary liked the variety and "freedom from mere routine," but also disliked the "unusual and unforseen demands on your time: your lunch hour and leaving hour are often entirely dependent on the personal requirements of your employers, in addition to extraordinary 'pushes' in the quantity of work."  

An irregular rhythm of work characterized by periods of intense activity interspersed with periods when the pace of work slackens or stops altogether was typical of preindustrial work. By contrast, industrial work discipline requires a steady pace of work and is dictated, not by the worker's sense of accomplishment, but from above as a prerogative of management. Neither of these patterns accurately describes secretarial work: while the uneven pace of work resembled that of a preindustrial artisan, the boss, as a part of
management and as a man, controlled the particular moments of activity or inactivity. In this and other studies, secretaries and stenographers often blamed the unevenness of their work and the need to work late on the boss’s disorganization and unwillingness to plan his work in advance. Special demands on their time also resulted from the fact that secretaries were frequently called upon to meet the public and deal with other people in the office, and these demands created interruptions which made work unpredictable. An executive secretary in a hospital, for instance, said that her job required a "willingness to do anything regardless of interruptions. . . . Everybody naturally comes to me for everything, at times it makes quite a "rush."

Another secretary professed to enjoy the "sense of doing something worthwhile, of being the one who can be depended upon," as well as learning all the operations of the business, but she disliked her long hours and the fact that she was "required to do unusual things on short notice, thus disarranging previous well-thought out plans for the day’s work." These two aspects of secretarial work were really just two sides of the same coin, which secretaries seemed to see as a set of trade-offs. The unpredictability of interruptions and meeting the demands of others appeared to be the price to be paid for control over other aspects of work. The response of the secretary to the president of a college, a college graduate in her mid-twenties, suggests the ambivalence experienced by many secretaries. On the one hand, she appreciated the chance to use her own judgment, saying, "I would despise the work, if I wasn’t allowed that." On the other hand, she
disliked the speed required of her and the need to get a "maximum of work done in spite of constant interruptions." Overall, she said, she liked her job ("except for a little too much typing") because it kept her busy so that she had "no time to get discontented."33

The unpredictability of work in the office could cause nervous strain. A secretary with seventeen years' experience responded to the survey question asking the necessary qualifications of a good secretary, "nerves must be good to stand the strain of meeting emergencies."34 Secretaries were often expected to take on responsibilities for which they were given no formal authority. A good secretary, the BVI secretaries and the authors of secretarial manuals agreed, took initiative and did more than she was told. If she did so, however, the division of authority in the office was blurred, making her vulnerable to criticism whenever problems arose, whether or not they were her fault. One secretary who believed that an attractive feature of the secretary's job was the chance to "attack and solve problems under her 'own steam,'" also commented that "One is likely to suffer the blame for one's own mistakes and many of the mistakes of the supervisor in the bargain. The work is harder [than other women's office jobs] and the responsibility is sometimes a burden."35 A twenty-eight year old secretary-stenographer in a manufacturing firm gave a detailed description of the vulnerability of a secretary who was given responsibility but no power. She said that the work taxes the nervous system somewhat as one lives in the fear that perhaps it was not wise to alter an order and never knows whether she will be taken to task for using unwarranted authority. . . .
it is important that I use my judgment and write not what is said but what is meant, there is a good deal of verifying to do. The senior partner is difficult to understand and very ambiguous. . . . To be frank, in this present position I feel the need of some sixth sense to help me perceive those things that are not manifest and hear that which is not said. . . . If the letters are well presented, it is the work of the men who dictate them: if they are not, it because of the abominable stenographer. 36

Another secretary listed the disadvantages of the secretary's post as "nervous strain incidental to diversified interests and divided attention; responsibility for mishaps and mistakes whether they are hers or not; difficulty of executing her own plans while at the beck and call of another's demands, I intensely dislike the sound of the buzzer!" 37 In fact, several secretaries in the BVI study mentioned "the buzzer" in similar terms, suggesting that, for them, it symbolized the tension they experienced as they attempted to accomplish tasks on their own initiative under conditions that did not permit them to control the overall organization of their time.

The issue of responsibility raises an interesting set of questions. Responsibility for accomplishing her own work without direct supervision was supposed to distinguish the secretary's work from routine office jobs, in other words, to elevate the secretary's status relative to other women office workers. Secretaries themselves were divided as to whether responsibility was an advantage or disadvantage of their work: Some professed to enjoy their special responsibilities, while others disliked or wished to avoid independent responsibility. So too, the scholarly literature is divided. Margery Davies believes that secretarial work did indeed differ from the other, more routine office jobs assigned to women and attributes the
absence of working-class consciousness among secretaries to their desire to distinguish themselves from other women in the office. Thus, Davies suggests, secretaries prided the opportunity to exercise initiative and responsibility because these were the distinctive features of their work, which enabled secretaries to see themselves as an elite group within the female office work force. Alice Kessler-Harris takes a different approach. Apparently drawing on the statements of a number of secretaries in the BVI survey who did not want to take on the vague and often unpleasant responsibilities usually assigned to a woman secretary (and who may have chosen their particular jobs precisely because they were more routine than some other secretarial posts), Kessler-Harris argues that secretaries generally "expressed an appreciation for the job's limitations." To some extent, both representations of women's attitudes toward secretarial work are accurate. Given the informal organization and diversity of these jobs, it is possible to plead either side of this case with equal plausibility for some secretaries.

Both Davies and Kessler-Harris focus on the position of women secretaries in the class structure. For Davies, the central question is whether or not secretaries were a privileged group compared to other women in feminized office jobs. For Kessler-Harris, the key point is that women secretaries were satisfied despite their subordinate position in the white-collar work force. Both assume that most feminized office work was comparable to proletarianized male work in industry. Their only disagreement is over the issue of whether or not secretaries were included in this pattern. But the apparently
ambivalent statements from secretaries themselves about responsibility and nervous strain suggest that these women occupied an ambiguous position that does not fit neatly into existing conceptualizations about class and status. To understand the consciousness of twentieth-century secretarial workers we must focus instead on the ways that gender molded both women's place in the office and their responses to their situation. As secretarial work had become feminized, and contemporary gender ideology had filtered into the office, women workers had begun to perform much of the emotional labor women had traditionally performed in the domestic sphere—concern for the emotional well-being of family members had become "handling people" in the office. This, in turn, created a distinct, non-industrial, organization of work which fostered a gender-specific work ethic among women secretaries. It is clear that secretarial workers were not subjected to an industrial time and work discipline. At first glance, their ability to control at least part of their time and to understand the work process appears to be closer to the experience of nineteenth-century clerks or even pre-industrial craft workers than that of modern industrial workers. Yet, because cultural definitions of gender shaped the skills and behavior required of women secretaries, these workers lacked the autonomy of either male clerks or pre-industrial craftsmen. They belonged to an entirely new category of workers because the content and organization of their work was shaped by gender.
Gender-Specific Skills and Relationships

The transmission of female gender roles into the office workplace was most obvious in the incorporation of women's traditional domestic and housekeeping duties into the definition of secretarial work. Secretaries unquestionably performed many of the tasks that women had performed in the home without pay: They were responsible for keeping the office neat, scheduling the boss's social life, buying gifts for his family; and sometimes even shared in running the employer's household. On one level, the inclusion of domesticity and personal service in the definition of the secretary's job simply reflected the traditional patriarchal power structure. But this does not fully explain the significance of the domestic labor that was transferred to the office. Although the skills required to perform domestic tasks in the office do not fit within masculine definitions of the term, the emotional labor performed by secretaries did require skills that women learned informally in the home. Secretaries, like wives and mothers, dealt with callers and resolved personal conflicts. One secretary mentioned as a qualification for secretarial work, "being able to meet people and attend to their little demands that are of no real consequence, with a show of interest." Another said, "I like to meet people and I like to smooth out tangles." According to a third, her duties included among other things, a "certain helpful hovering about."

The term often used to describe the personal element of secretarial work, the "office wife," points out the importance of the secretary's relationship with her supervisor or employer. Although
this relationship was defined by paternalism on one side and personal service on the other, many secretaries mentioned good personal relations with the boss as an attractive feature of their jobs. One young woman went so far as to say that she enjoyed her position because she liked "to be close to the driving power of a big machine." Although most secretaries expressed themselves less fancifully, favorable comments about employers were not uncommon and usually went hand in hand with appreciative reports of a particular boss's kindness, generosity, or fine moral character. A tendency among workers to interpret the relations with management as personal does, as some historians have suggested divert their attention from the broader opposition of interests between workers and capital. But a secretary's immediate superior did actually wield power—economic and sexual—over her, and some of the women queried appear to have had a very realistic understanding of their position. For example, one woman who acknowledged the similarity between domestic and office work, said that secretarial work had no disadvantages "unless personal service." She went on to add, "but paid." Perhaps she drew the distinction between paid and unpaid domestic labor on the basis of her personal experience—she was thirty-five, single, and lived with her mother, who relied on her for financial support.

It was clear that the relationship with an individual employer or supervisor shaped the conditions under which a secretary worked. Secretaries were well aware of this. One noted that the disadvantages of secretarial work were "largely dependent on the manner of the man
you are working for." Another, who had held several stenographic and secretarial jobs, listed "lack of consideration of employer" as a possible disadvantage of secretarial work. She, however, found her present job satisfactory because she had a boss who is generous with praise."\textsuperscript{45} Rosabeth Moss Kanter, who has produced some exciting insights into secretarial work in her \textit{Men and Women of the Corporation}, would call this comment evidence of "praise addiction." According to her, women secretaries who display this attitude are exchanging praise within the context of a deferential personal relationship for power and equality.\textsuperscript{46} This explanation may, however, deprecate the secretary's understanding of her own situation. An alternate explanation might be that the desire for praise was simply part of the desire for satisfactory working conditions. An unpleasant boss could make work an ordeal, as this description of work under a disagreeable supervisor illustrates: "Employer a man of quick temper, a procrastinator, extremely impatient and critical. Therefore, I was constantly drawing on reserves of tact, patience, always pouring oil on troubled waters to keep the wheels revolving and using all my ingenuity to have him see the people he should and do the things he ought." This woman, incidentally, left the position she described to find work in a more congenial atmosphere.\textsuperscript{47}

Sexual aggression was perhaps the most extreme form of male power in the personal relationship between the secretary and her boss. The BVI secretaries rarely raised the issue of unwanted sexual attention from men in the office. These women had every reason to be cautious even in identifying the problem. Male office managers themselves
acknowledged that women who refused a superior's advances were often summarily fired. One employer interviewed by the BVI had apparently discharged a married woman secretary simply "because of her attitude and then too her husband used to call for her at night and I couldn't stand that." 48 Usually, secretaries identified sexual harassment on the job in oblique statements: "A too close personal contact [with the boss] often brings about unfortunate developments," or "disagreeable experience with her employers." 49 A New York City secretary in her mid-twenties reported, "Close contact with employer -- often requires much common sense, understanding, knowledge of human nature, and tact, to prevent its becoming dangerously personal." 50 A single woman, thirty-three, who contributed to her mother's support, had been forced by her employer's advances to leave a job paying $50.00 a week to start another at only $35.00:

Of course, a woman frequently has to guard against attention from the men or man where or by whom she is employed. This experience was the reason for the writer's leaving the most interesting position she has had. Others have had similar experiences. 51

More revealing (and disturbing) are the experiences of two stenographers who reported incidents of overt sexual aggression by their employers to a staff member of the St. Louis YWCA's committee on employment in the late 1910s. The first, a woman of sixteen or seventeen, had been recommended by an office machine company for a job working for two men in a small real estate concern. Each day this young stenographer was left alone in the office with one of her employers while the other one went out to lunch. After she had worked in the office only five days, the man with whom she was left alone
"became very affectionate." According to the YWCA report, he "kissed her, by force placed her in his lap—placed his hand in her waist and between her legs—was hindered from doing worse by [the] entrance of someone in the outer office." Although she did not tell her other employer about the incident, he fired her the same evening without offering any explanation. The YWCA staff member continued,

The girl reported [the] matter to her mother, [a] woman who does laundry work by the day—The mother—on advice of [a] relative went to the Prosecuting Attorney. She was told to report the matter to certain other officials in city hall[, which she did. In each case being referred to some one [sic] else. She came to see that she hadn't much legal evidence—having only her daughter's word etc. Dropped the matter but is very indignant—and permitted me to use her name if I could do so in this report.

The other stenographer, a "very splendid girl" according to the report, had found her job through a newspaper ad. She remained on the job for only one day, however, because "[t]he man in the office became affectionate—kissed the girl and said very insulting things to her. Did not actually touch her [sic], but everything indicates that he would have done so save for the girl'\[s] indignation." In this instance, the young woman confided her story secretly to the YWCA staff member because her mother had warned her "not to mention [the] matter as she would not have her name linked with anything of this kind for worlds." Even the middle-class woman who worked for the YWCA was powerless to respond to stories like this except to inform—"in confidence"—other local employment agencies of the "special bad men" who came to her attention. She said sadly, "Have been told that certain men in larger firms say suggestive things to the most attractive young women--make appointments to meet outside, etc. . . .
These [stories] and many other that came to my notice came in confidence and no records [were] kept."52 In most cases, then, the threat of social or economic retribution was a powerful protection for men in the office against women who tried to disclose evidence of sexual harassment. Women who protested other work-related problems did not invite the same social ostracism as those who complained of sexual aggression, but protest for any reason predictably resulted in sudden unemployment.

The personal relationship of secretary to boss, which was based on dependence, was not the only social interaction in the office. Relationships with co-workers were also important and valued. The emotional labor performed by secretarial workers enabled them to humanize the office. For instance, when a member of the BVI staff interviewed the secretary/office manager of a local board of education, she noted that the secretary was "a warm, generous type of person about whom the whole office evidently centered for morale and tone." But, although this woman supported several younger siblings, she told the interviewer that she had no intention of looking for a better paying job because the personal contacts in her present job "outweighed the possibility of a higher salary."53 While many secretaries in the study probably did not think to discuss their friendships with co-workers because the questionnaire focused primarily on job content and status, enough replies mentioned social relationships in the office to suggest that they were significant. A secretarial stenographer in a public school system reported that she enjoyed "work among pleasant people who are all interested in the same
Another woman mentioned the "pleasant working conditions" in her company and "the office associations" as the attractive features of her job. A thirty-one year old woman who had held six different positions in her twelve years' experience as an office worker remembered her first job fondly: "My first position at a National Bank was very pleasant. It was like one big family there and I met some very delightful people." And a teacher who did office work during summer vacations reported that she enjoyed her summer office jobs because of the "pleasant associations with other workers in the same office and other offices." "To my mind comes the memory of all the different people I have met and the many friends I have made, this is to me the attractive part of the work," said one secretary after nine years' experience.

Some secretaries, of course, felt that white-collar work conferred status, or that secretaries had more prestige than other women within the office. One college graduate in her mid-twenties, for example, stressed that her firm had "absolutely rigid standards regarding staff personnel," a fact she appreciated. Another secretary, also a college graduate, liked the "association with persons of refinement, culture, and education" in her job. Some secretaries, then, did apparently find status a substitute for economic advancement and formal authority. But others clearly valued the sense of community in the office for its own sake, and, in fact, nurtured personal relations for that reason. The secretary to an officer in a retail automobile company, a college graduate who might have shown a desire to maintain social superiority, said instead, that
"the ability to get along with people makes the work more pleasant. No need to highbrow other members of the organization just because of position and such."\(^{61}\)

The importance of the community within the office—especially the interactions among women workers—was suggested by a woman with eighteen years' experience as an office worker. Since she was deaf and thus unable to hold a secretarial post, she had worked for eleven years as the head stenographer in a telephone company. Based on her experience "breaking in and training young women," she believed that "an agreeable disposition and ability to deal with others, particularly women," was an essential qualification for secretarial work.\(^{62}\) The significance of egalitarian relationships in the office was pointed out more forcefully by a woman who had worked for several years in the national offices of a large protestant denomination. She had originally held the position of office executive, but had moved into a secretarial position, which was, of course, a drop in status. She said that the transfer "relieved me of the constant worry of keeping things running smoothly, settling petty differences, etc. I really think that I had too much sympathy for my subordinates to be a successful, hard-headed-and-hearted executive, though I allowed myself to show no favoritism and I had no intimates in the office force."\(^{63}\) In other words, she had found authority over other women in the office hierarchy a burden rather than an opportunity for her own advancement.

Although the women in the BVI survey generally agreed that private secretarial work was less routine and offered greater scope for individual initiative than other women's office occupations, they
were divided over the question of whether the content of the secretary's job or her relative status were easily distinguishable from those of other women in the office. The promoters of scientific office management more often than secretaries advanced the notion that secretarial work was qualitatively different than so-called routine office jobs. Because of its variety, demand for initiative and the close personal relationship between a secretary and her boss, the private secretary's job did not fit within their scheme for "scientific" measurement and systematization in the office. In order for their program to be successful, the advocates of scientific office management had to show that the private secretarial work was qualitatively different from the subdivided, repetitive jobs that fit within their scheme for controlling office work. In an effort to limit the number of workers outside their system, they tried to distinguish between private secretaries and those whose work most resembled the secretary's: stenographers. According to the propagandists for scientific office management, the stenographer's job was narrow and routine; it was mechanical and entailed nothing more than taking and transcribing dictation.64

Perhaps because, like many people in the twenties, the BVI staff had been influenced by the popular prescriptions of the scientific management experts, the BVI questionnaire included a very specific question on the "dividing line" between secretaries and stenographers. Probably, as advocates of better opportunities for educated women, members of the BVI hoped to find a firm division between secretarial and other branches of feminized office work that would enhance the
prestige and professional status of secretarial work. But the secretaries themselves sometimes had difficulty making the distinction. Many secretaries believed that there was no "dividing line" at all, but rather a gradual change from stenographer to secretary as the individual worker gained knowledge and experience and took on additional responsibilities in the office. The formal job title seemed to be less important than changes in the informal relationship with the boss; a stenographer became a secretary, said one woman, when "your boss begins to discuss all phases of the business with you and ask your opinion and advice." A woman who had advanced from a lower level, presumably routine job as a clerk/cashier to a secretarial position in a brokerage firm said that while a stenographer's job was primarily dictation and transcription, and therefore monotonous and uninteresting, a secretary could act individually. Yet she made it clear that she saw no clear separation between the two jobs when she added, "either one is often both." A college-educated secretary responded that "Many a worker, by the way, is labeled a 'stenographer' when in every sense of the word she is a secretary." In fact, some employers preferred to assign secretarial duties to worker with the title of "stenographer" to avoid paying the higher wages commanded by private secretaries. Another secretary in a brokerage, whose work included having charge of the company's statistical department, had been promoted from a stenographic job. She said the difference between a secretary and a stenographer was "$10 [a week?] and a small amount of personality as far as my position goes." A college graduate in her early twenties
who had worked for four months as a stenographer before finding work
as a newspaper reporter, and "hated it," said that she "couldn't say"
what was the difference between a stenographer and a secretary. She
continued, "Sewed buttons on my bosses [sic] overcoat—guess I was a
secretary."69 One secretary even hesitated to fill out the
questionnaire because she was not sure whether she was a secretary or
a stenographer. She asked her employer, however, and her assured her
that he considered her a secretary.70

Instead of a rigid distinction between secretaries and other
women office workers there was, in fact, a continuum. Most private
secretaries advanced to their supposedly prestigious positions by
working as typists and stenographers. It was not unusual for
employers to recruit their women secretaries from typists and
stenographers who had learned the content and procedures of company
business through experience. Although typing and stenographic jobs
were, usually, more routine and repetitive than the secretary’s, they
were not comparable to deskilled—or proletarianized—jobs on an
assembly line. As Barbara Melosh has pointed out, "Typing and
stenography are not the same as machine tending."71 Even the most
routine jobs in these fields demanded a fair degree of skill and
independent thought and allowed workers to acquire the same kinds of
knowledge about their employers’ methods and activities as
nineteenth-century male clerks had learned on the job. Given the
continuity of experience and the mobility within the entire group of
secretarial workers, it is difficult to maintain that private
secretaries were, or perceived themselves to be, cut off from women
workers who performed similar work at lower levels in the white-collar hierarchy. There were, clearly, divisions among women in the office, but there was no single fissure between the private secretary and other women in feminized office jobs. To the extent that a division did exist, it seems an incomplete explanation for the absence of a working-class consciousness among women in the office. But women's own gender-specific cultural values and priorities also shaped their response to the conditions they found on the job.

Dissatisfaction and Conflict

Even the privileged minority of private secretaries recognized their economic and sexual inequality. They did not interpret their subordination exclusively as an economic division of interests between themselves and their employers because the reality of their situation transcended a simple class dichotomy. Gender as well as class shaped the conditions under which they worked and enforced their unequal position in the workplace. Confrontation could be dangerous both economically and sexually. And in the complex world of the woman office worker, gender posed a paradox because while it compounded a woman worker's vulnerability, it also made possible the more humane nonindustrial organization of feminized work and allowed women in the office to maintain an autonomous value system, a morally superior vantage point from which to judge their male supervisors and employers. Militance conforming to the male working-class model would have threatened women workers' autonomous gender-specific cultural priorities.
Secretaries frequently mentioned low pay and lack of promotional opportunities as the primary disadvantages of their occupation. Evidence of dissatisfaction appeared regularly in the BVI survey, suggesting that, although women secretaries usually did not challenge their inequality openly, they were not passive victims of economic exploitation or patriarchal gender prescriptions. In fact, they often connected issues of class and gender in their complaints. It was not unusual for women secretaries to say that they felt "constant irritation resulting from the discriminations against women in business." One young woman who had held several stenographic and secretarial jobs objected to her "LOW WAGES—JUST BECAUSE YOU ARE A GIRL EVEN THO YOU DO AS MUCH AS A MAN COULD IN YOUR POSITION AND WHICH CALLS FOR AS MUCH HEAD WORK." A BVI survey question concerning the advantages and disadvantages of secretarial work provoked an almost violent response from a thirty-nine year old woman who had worked for seven years as a high school teacher of secretarial subjects in addition to her seven years' experience as a stenographer and secretary. She said the advantages of secretarial work have been done to death in the books and exist only now and then in real life. That is why I have never made up my mind to go back to teaching; I question whether I could have the faith or the heart to prepare countless young people for the life as I have seen it in large part. When girls talk to me about giving up teaching for "secretarial work" (on which people cast such a rosy light) I say, "No—you're selling your birthright for a mess of pottage if you do." . . . Let capable individuals prepare themselves for other fields.

Few secretaries, however, were as openly angry about their position in the office hierarchy as this one. Despite their awareness that they occupied an economically and socially inferior place in the
white-collar workplace, they seemed willing to accept those conditions as they found them in order to preserve the nonindustrial work ethic.

Throughout the twenties and thirties, the number of women seeking white-collar work surpassed the number of jobs open to them, and employers routinely discriminated against women on the basis of age, marital status, ethnic origin, and religion. But, despite their economic vulnerability, the most common pattern of individual resistance among the women questioned by the BVI was to change jobs when conditions were unsatisfactory. Given the scarcity of feminized office jobs in the twenties, these secretarial workers showed a remarkable willingness to risk their economic security by quitting. They had held a total of 7262 jobs among them, and had left, for various reasons, 5007 of those positions.75

The reasons they gave for having changed jobs provide some insight into their consciousness. Consistent with the economic vulnerability of women in the white-collar work force, 1234 positions (24.6%) had ended because they were temporary or because of a reduction in the work force. But the secretaries also said that they had left 1275 (25.5%) positions because they had an "opportunity for a better position." This explanation was, however, quite ambiguous, and since only thirty secretaries admitted that they had been fired, this number probably includes jobs from which women had been fired as well as many which they left because of poor working conditions in addition to those quit by women who truly found better work elsewhere. The
other explanations given by the secretaries for leaving particular jobs are more enlightening and can be divided roughly into the four categories shown in Table 10.

The largest category, about one-third of the remainder, consists of various specific reasons for discontent and indicates that many secretarial workers were willing to take their chances in the tight job market rather than accept unsatisfactory working conditions. One particularly restless secretary who had held fourteen jobs in nineteen years explained the reasons for her frequent changes this way:

[To] the average reader of my personal record I might appear to be a "floater." Personally, I do not feel this is true. My moving about has been a sort of seeking after the ideal... [E]mbbedded in my consciousness is the fact that an employee has the same right (tho' they seldom exercise it) to choose their position, as an employer has to choose his help.76

Searching for the "ideal" position was, of course, a personal response to dissatisfaction, an attempt to leave poor conditions behind rather than change them. But it was one way that a woman office worker could act to advance or protect her own interests. It was a way to assert personal power given a limited set of options. The case of a thirty-two year old single woman secretary in New York City illustrates both the possibilities and constraints of this approach to dealing with working conditions. This woman lived with her mother, sister, brother, and brother's family. She bore total responsibility for both her own support and her mother's. In eleven years she had held three jobs. She left the first after ten years because "no future; desire to try different work." She quit her second job after only three months because it was "temporary and misrepresented." At
the time of the survey, she worked as a secretary-stenographer for a manufacturing firm, but was dissatisfied enough to state, "will not remain." She advised other women to train for more enjoyable kinds of work. "Of course, one doesn't have to stay 'put,' but changes are expensive affairs and we can't all afford the luxury." Thus her obligation to support herself and her mother must have limited the amount and kind of change she undertake, but by sharing living expenses with her siblings, she had apparently been able to leave two positions that she disliked.77

Grouped together in the second largest category are the reasons that suggest that at least some of these secretarial workers had the initiative and resources to leave a particular job in order to pursue an individual goal: study, travel, rest, or change in geographical location. In other words these women could envision alternatives to their dead-end office jobs and, because many of them came from middle-class backgrounds, had the means to pursue their personal desires, although a financial setback or boredom could also drive them back to office work. This category is, however, more ambiguous than the first. For example, a "change in geographical location" sometimes meant that a woman chose to move from a desire for adventure or experience new surroundings, but women also moved to be near family members who needed their support or if their own poor health dictated a change in climate.

The third group of reasons for leaving secretarial jobs illustrates the ways that women's careers were shaped by demands from outside the workplace. In almost half the 511 cases in this group,
women left work because of poor health. The rest were divided among those who left work or changed jobs for "family reasons," usually to support or care for dependent relatives, and those who left paid employment when they married. The small size of the last number is unrepresentative because the BVI tried to limit its sample to women who were in the labor force at the time of the study. The pattern of intermittent work, tailored to mesh with their economic and emotional responsibilities to their families imposed restrictions on women's careers in the office. At the same time, however, the inter-relationship of paid work and family also encouraged secretarial workers to quit an unsatisfactory job rather than to submit in silence or protest directly.

Finally, the smallest list was composed of reasons for leaving a secretarial position that implied some economic advancement. Three-hundred-five women remained in the feminized office occupations but received either a raise in pay by moving to another job or followed a boss to a new position. Moving up with the boss probably conferred an increase in salary and status, showing that a woman worker's personal relationship to her superior could create a limited form of job security. Another 369 women included in the survey had used secretarial work as an "entering wedge" to better jobs in less feminized branches of white-collar work. But just as the BVI sample tended to under-represent women who left office work for marriage, the emphasis on the "entering wedge" argument probably led the BVI staff to seek out women who had moved into more prestigious occupations.
Even so, clear-cut examples of upward mobility rank as less important than dissatisfaction and personal priorities in explaining frequent turn-over among women office workers.
### Table 10

Reasons given by BVI secretaries for leaving 2468 office jobs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Dissatisfaction</td>
<td>828&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- &quot;desire for change in work&quot;</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- &quot;no future in position&quot;</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- &quot;work not congenial&quot;</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- &quot;working conditions not satisfactory&quot;</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- &quot;people not congenial&quot;</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- &quot;work too heavy&quot;</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| II. Individual goals and desires | 815 |
| - "change in geographical location" | 429 |
| - "to study" | 272 |
| - "to travel" | 72 |
| - "to take a vacation or rest" | 42 |

| III. Personal necessity and family demands | 519 |
| - "health" | 221 |
| - "marriage" | 152 |
| - "family reasons" | 138 |
| - "living conditions unsatisfactory" | 8 |

| IV. Economic opportunity | 305<sup>c</sup> |
| - "more salary" | 242 |
| - "follow employer to new position" | 63 |

<sup>a</sup>The BVI secretaries gave explanations for having left a total of 5007 jobs. Table 10 does not include 1275 jobs left for "better position elsewhere," 1234 jobs left because "force reduced" or "job ended," or 30 jobs from which women were "dismissed."

<sup>b</sup>Another group of 142 women in the survey but not included in these figures, left secretarial work for other kinds of employment. Of that number, 40 (28.17%) left the field because they did not like the work.

<sup>c</sup>This number does not include the only woman in the study who retired with a pension. Also excluded from these numbers are 369 women who found that secretarial work was an "entering wedge" for other kinds of paid employment.
Recognizing their economic and social subordination in the office, secretarial workers defined the issues in their own terms. They interpreted conflicts as personal rather than class antagonism. But within the value system of women's office work culture "personal" meant more than "individual" or "solitary," it also encompassed the social and emotional relationships in the office. By personalizing relationships on the job women were able not only to maintain control over their work, but also to humanize the work environment. And it is difficult to imagine that women who believed that it was their role to humanize relations and resolve personal conflicts in the white-collar workplace would choose to create conflict in order to further their interests. They were much more likely to change jobs in search of a more congenial atmosphere or better pay.

Personal relationships were beyond the realm of disinterested competition or confrontation—they allowed women to evaluate conflict in terms that were comprehensible to them. Even when secretarial workers objected to loss of control over their work, mechanized dictation, for example, or introduction of "scientific" management techniques, they tended to blame the supervisor who instituted the new system rather than the system itself, and their reaction was often simply to look for a new job. But this sort of personalism enabled women in the office to evaluate managerial prerogatives from an independent perspective. This feature of the personal aspect of women's office work culture was captured nicely by a BVI interviewer who included this observation in her notes from an interview with a cashier in a New Orleans brokerage:
She reported difficulty she was having with a new office manager imported from Chicago. She thinks he is not only bossy, but boorish and refuses to have anything to do with him. I judge that she is not adapting herself to "business" conditions, but modifying them to meet her standards. 

The personal and social interpretation of conflict in the office workplace was nothing more or less than an effort by women workers to preserve their own gender-specific standards in the alien and hostile world of business.
Endnotes

1 A secretary who had apparently attended the summer camp and training school gave a typed draft of the "Secretaries' National Anthem" to an interviewer for the Bureau of Vocational Information. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Radcliffe College, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Bureau of Vocational Information Papers, Collection Number B-3 [hereafter cited as BVI], Box 30, Folder 368, No. 743.

2 Because the evidence documenting the experiences of women in the office in the mid-twentieth century is scattered and very poorly indexed, I cannot pretend to have used all of the pertinent sources, and this list is incomplete. I have used the very comprehensive materials in the raw data of the BVI survey, cited above and discussed in the text, as a foundation for creating an overview of the complex women's work culture that had emerged by the twenties. Other sources which supplement this picture are cited whenever possible.


5 The absence of class consciousness was one of the central themes of John R. Commons and the "Wisconsin School" and was articulated in its most sophisticated form by Selig Perlman in Theory of the Labor Movement (New York, 1928).


7 Dublin, Women at Work.


11. The concept of "women's culture" was initially developed by historians of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women to describe the autonomous values and relationships sustained by women in the "separate sphere" of private and domestic life. Although it does not use the term, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relationships between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 1(1975): 1-29, is pivotal because it illuminates the rich emotional content of women's relationships built around the separate experiences of the female life cycle. For a thorough discussion of the ways that historians of women have used the concept of women's culture and some of the problems arising from it, see: Ellen DuBois, et al., "Politics and Culture in Women's History: A Symposium," Feminist Studies 6(1980): 157-78.

Nancy F. Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 182-96, 199-201, places the sense of sisterhood and female solidarity firmly in the context of the economic changes affecting women's lives and argues that sororial relations, while not feminist in themselves, were a precondition for feminist activity. Cott also suggests that women's unpaid domestic labor resembled preindustrial patterns of work, further separating male and female experiences (pp. 58-62). Her argument has explanatory value in distinguishing between "women's work" and industrial labor in the period of initial industrialization when the ideology of separate spheres was being articulated in response to changing economic conditions. I prefer the term "nonindustrial" to describe women office workers in the twentieth
century because some preindustrial aspects of work had become permanent features of women's work in offices and were not superseded by an industrial mode of work.


13 All three authors agree that the crucial point is that women's work in these feminized occupations could not be deskilled to the same extent as male work in the industrial setting because it included skill in social relations. Benson, "The Clerking Sisterhood," p. 54; and "The Cinderella of Occupations: Managing the Work of Department Store Saleswomen, 1900-1940," Business History Review 55(1981): 1-25; Reverby, "Search for the Hospital Yardstick," pp. 213, 219; and Melosh, "The Physician's Hand," p. 184.


17 "Bureau of Vocational Information, January 1925," [pamphlet], Folder 1, Box 1, BVI, p. 10; "The Woman Secretary 1926," [24 page typescript], Folder 436, Box 37, BVI, p. 1; "The Woman Secretary, Part I," [unpaginated typescript], Vol. 5, Box 37, BVI; "The Woman Secretary, Part II," [unpaginated typescript], Vol. 6, Box 37, BVI.

18 Davies, Woman's Place Is at the Typewriter, pp. 129-62.

20. No. 730, Folder 368, Box 30, BVI.

21. No. 7, Folder 353, Box 29, BVI.

22. No. 509, Folder 362, Box 30, BVI.

23. No. 151, Folder 355, Box 29, BVI.

24. No. 246, Folder 356, Box 29, BVI. For a full discussion of women with advanced degrees in science and mathematics who had to accept work in feminized employment, see: Margaret W. Rossiter, Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 248-66.

25. No. 86, Folder 354, Box 29, BVI.

26. No. 222, Folder 354, Box 29, BVI.

27. No. 20, Folder 354, Box 29, BVI.

28. No. 111, Folder 355, Box 29, BVI.

29. No. 229, Folder 354, Box 29, BVI.


31. No. 15, Folder 353, Box 29, BVI.

32. No. 239, Folder 354, Box 29, BVI.

33. No. 270, Folder 357, Box 29, BVI.

34. No. 395, Folder 360, Box 29, BVI.

35. No. 305, Folder 357, Box 29, BVI; William Henry Leffingwell, Office Management: Principles and Practice (Chicago: A. W. Shaw, 1925), pp. 626-30; and Davies, Woman's Place Is at the Typewriter, pp. 130-32.

36. No. 1250, Folder 386, Box 33, BVI.

37. No. 81, Folder 354, Box 29, BVI.
38 Kessler-Harris, Out to Work, p. 233; Davies, Woman's Place Is at the Typewriter, pp. 160-61.

39 No. 1, Folder 353, Box 29, BVI.

40 No. 234, Folder 354, Box 29, BVI.

41 No. 545, Folder 362, Box 30, BVI.

42 No. 383, Folder 358, Box 29, BVI.

43 Stearns, Lives of Labor, p. 177; Tentler, Wage-Earning Women, p. 77.

44 No. 388, Folder 359, Box 29, BVI.

45 No. 560, Folder 362, Box 30, BVI.


47 No. 527, Folder 363, Box 30, BVI.

48 Employer Interview, Folder 428, Box 37, BVI.

49 No. 71, Folder 354, Box 29; No. 1108, Folder 373, Box 31, BVI.

50 No. 1710, Folder 384, Box 33, BVI.

51 No. 1937, Folder 386, Box 33, BVI.

52 "Recent Cases—Experiences in Office," [3 page, handwritten notes], Folder "1915-1919," Box 48, Metropolitan St. Louis Y.W.C.A., Western Historical Manuscript Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri Manuscripts, University of Missouri, St. Louis, Missouri.

53 No. 23, Folder 353, Box 29, BVI.

54 No. 174, Folder 355, Box 29, BVI.

55 No. 225, Folder 354, Box 29, BVI.

56 No. 2048, Folder 357, Box 29, BVI.

57 No. 426, Folder 360, Box 29, BVI.

58 No. 2203, Folder 394, Box 34, BVI.

59 No. 229, Folder 354, Box 29, BVI.

60 No. 364, Folder 358, Box 29, BVI.
61 No. 249, Folder 356, Box 29, BVI.

62 No. 425, Folder 360, Box 29, BVI.

63 No. 924, Folder 372, Box 31, BVI.

64 Charters and Whitley, Secretarial Duties and Traits, pp. 177-78; Davies, Woman's Place Is at the Typewriter, pp. 129-30.

65 No. 31, Folder 353, Box 29, BVI.

66 No. 234, Folder 354, Box 29, BVI.

67 No. 973, Folder 371, Box 31, BVI.

68 No. 495, Folder 362, Box 30, BVI.

69 No. 2317, Folder 376, Box 32, BVI.

70 No. 397, Folder 360, Box 29, BVI.


72 No. 609, Folder 362, Box 30, BVI.

73 No. 1398, Folder 382, Box 32, BVI.

74 No. 911, Folder 371, Box 31, BVI.

75 "The Woman Secretary--Part II," Vol. 6, Box 37, BVI.

76 Letter, [unnumbered], Folder 355, Box 29, BVI.

77 No. 1474, Folder 388, Box 34, BVI.

78 No. 744, Folder 368, Box 30, BVI.
CHAPTER NINE
GENDER AND CONFLICT IN THE OFFICE: 
THE WORLD WAR II EXAMPLE

Femininity and Masculinity as Collective Values

Women office workers recognized and resisted the oppressive conditions under which they worked, but their efforts to enforce their own standards of work and behavior on the job have generally been invisible to historians, as well as to employers and management experts, because they were not expressed as union organization. The personalism of women’s office work culture, with its emphasis on particular, concrete human relationships in and out of the office, discouraged impersonal confrontation over purely economic interests. Gender distinctions provided the rationale for the sexual division of labor in the office. On the one hand, then, they operated to confine women to poorly paid, low-level jobs. On the other hand, however, the sex segregated environment of the office that resulted also allowed women to cultivate informal networks with which to assert their own collective priorities. Thus women who participated in nonindustrial office work culture guarded the definitions of gender that mediated the formal hierarchy of power in the workplace. Under ordinary circumstances, women’s informal resistance to male authority in the office was hidden because it was expressed in the language and symbols
of gender rather than class. But when the office gender system was disrupted—as it was during World War II—women workers responded with their own brand of militance, and the significance of gender as the basis for unity among women was, for a brief moment, revealed.

Because the cultural ideal of gender represents the historical distinctiveness of male and female experiences, it can be a powerful vehicle for asserting collective identity among sex-segregated workers. As David Montgomery has shown, nineteenth-century industrial craftsmen defined their own standards of work and asserted collective control against management authority on the basis of a specifically masculine definition of themselves as workers:

the craftsmen's ethical code demanded a "manly" bearing toward the boss. Few words enjoyed more popularity in the nineteenth century than this honorific, with all its connotations of dignity, respectability, defiant egalitarianism, and patriarchal male supremacy. The worker who merited it refused to cower before the foreman's glares—in fact, often would not work at all when a boss was watching. . . . "[M]anliness" toward one's fellow workers was as important as it was toward the owners. "Undermining or conniving" at a brother's job was a form of hoggish behavior as objectional [sic] as running more than one machine, or otherwise doing the work of two men.¹

The masculine ethic was not less important as a basis for asserting their collective control of the work process for the fact that it rested on the subordination of women, as reprehensible as that may have been. And although the feminine values asserted by the women of the office reinforced formal patriarchal power in the office and sometimes acted as a barrier to cross-class solidarity among women, its shared values and networks among women provided women on the lower
levels of the white-collar organization access to informal kinds of power and a language with which to define an autonomous, mutualistic work ethic.

Conformity to the visible norms of the gender system in dress and appearance was an important way for women in the office to express their own identity, and conformity separated secretaries and clerical workers from both their male supervisors and from women who adopted the competitive, individualistic attitudes of men in business. The BVI secretaries, for example, were quite explicit in their belief that a secretary should meet conventional forms of feminine attractiveness, not only as a practical strategy that might win favor from her employer, but also as a part of her personal identity. One private secretary in her mid-twenties had either written or copied a set of "Common sense rules to aid a girl in the business world," which, she said, "have helped me more than anything else in my endeavor to accept responsibilities and gain the confidence of my employers and my business associates." Today, the word "secretary" is generally applied to almost any woman in the sex-typed office occupations and implies the absence of upward mobility within the white-collar hierarchy. In the twenties, however, secretarial work was still perceived by some as a cut above routine clerical work. While it was already a clearly sex-typed occupation, opportunities for advancement did not yet appear to be entirely closed to the competent secretary. Having accepted a new role in the public world of business, this young secretary had adopted a style that she hoped would improve her chances for success—accepting the "responsibilities" of paid employment and
gaining the confidence of her "business associates"—but did not break with the middle-class ideal of womanhood. Among her rules were injunctions to "dress quietly, but use the finest materials and fit obtainable in simple clothes. Linens and frills must always be fresh and one's person must be immaculate. . . . Your work must be as fresh and attractive as you endeavor to make your person."2 The stress on simplicity, quality, and cleanliness represent the femininity of the middle-class and native-born.

These "common sense rules" for secretarial success echo the words of Sara Smolinsky, the Jewish immigrant torn between assimilation and her ethnic identity in Anzia Yezierska's novel Bread Givers, published in the same year as the BVI survey. For Smolinsky, attending college is not only a stepping stone to a teaching position, but is also a way to assimilate the dress and demeanor of middle-class youth. Having achieved her goal, Smolinsky goes shopping to equip herself for her new station in life:

I must be plain as I am without ornaments. Here's the Sport Shop—that's where the college girls get their college clothes. . . . What fine suits in that window. There! There! That graceful quietness. That's what a teacher ought to wear. . . . Plain serge only! Yes. But more style in its plainness than the richest velvet.3

But while the immigrant heroine of Bread Givers is torn between middle-class American tastes and the traditional values of the immigrant community, women secretaries in the twenties more probably found the outward forms of genteel femininity a link with the collective female values of the past as they entered the male world of business.
Because women's office work culture emphasized personal relationships and female definitions, women who did not accept these values—who seemed either too competitive, superior to other women in the office, or did not conform to feminine standards—were ostracized in much the same way as men who did not conform to the dignity, respectability, and confrontational style of "manliness" were excluded from the sense of brotherhood shared by skilled nineteenth-century craftsmen. The controversy over college-educated secretaries in the twenties revealed the interplay between class and gender loyalties in the office. Many employers refused to hire college-educated women for secretarial work because these women were too ambitious and easily dissatisfied with personal service, subordination, and lack of promotion. But secretaries and stenographers, too, displayed hostility to college-educated women. A Boston insurance company employing thirty stenographers and six secretaries reported to the BVI that it had employed "two college women who had such a superior attitude that the other girls objected, and they in general made themselves rather unpopular, so that they had to dismiss them." The office manager in a large architectural firm, a woman who had begun work as a stenographer for the company and worked her way up to the position of treasurer and office manager, told the BVI interviewer that

from her experience in other offices and from her meeting with college women at the Clubs she felt that college education unfits girls in some respects for stenographic and secretarial work. She mentioned especially the affectation on the part of the college women of masculine dress and manners. She considers this as a great handicap because both men and women look unfavorably upon such women.
Although the interviewer, herself highly educated, believed the manager to have been prejudiced by a few "unfortunate" contacts with college-educated women, it is exactly her prejudice that is interesting. She had achieved advancement without violating feminine standards, and in all probability adhering to a conventional female approach had actually aided her career by making her less threatening to male prerogatives in the firm. Yet, despite her own success in a field dominated by middle-class male values of competitiveness and individualism, she refused to become "masculine." She remained a woman in business, operating successfully within the male system but divorced from its standards. In fact, her hostility to women whose "masculine . . . dress and manners" betrayed a direct, competitive strategy for advancement in business suggests that she continued to empathize with the gender-specific code of stenographers and secretaries.

The gender-specific values of women's office work culture became particularly visible during World War II because the shortage of male workers allowed women to move into occupations previously closed to them. During the war, women found new opportunities not only in industrial jobs but also in supervisory positions in the office. And, although the number of women in clerical work also grew, the war did not significantly change the conditions of feminized office work. Therefore, the movement of women into traditionally male occupations impinged upon the feminine ethos of office work culture without offering greater equality for women in dead-end feminized jobs, and
these women workers reacted by asserting female values that differentiated them from both office management and industrial workers.

**Womanhood and Management**

Women supervisors in the office found themselves in an especially difficult position because they were generally promoted only to the lowest levels of management, to jobs as supervisors of women clerical workers. Because these new women managers were directly responsible for enforcing management policies, they faced constant friction with their subordinates. Male management experts who had previously confined women to carefully defined gender-specific roles in the office workplace were also suspicious of women in supervisory posts and blamed the perceived emotionalism of women as a group for the failure of specific women to succeed once they had been promoted to management. In 1942, when a group of management specialists discussed their experiences with women supervisors, all agreed that women's failures were usually due to resentment from other women and the supervisors' inability to respond to prejudice impersonally:

The strange part of it is that some of the younger women in the department do not seem to object to the woman supervisor. But girls, especially girls who are close to the age of the supervisor, will resent her. In fact, they seem to resort to tactics to undermine her effectiveness. They don't do it so much in the department; but you will find that it works from the outside. They will start something in some department away over in the corner, and then, the first thing you know, the grapevine has got back to the department. Then the first one to get on the defensive is the supervisor and she will almost imagine something has happened before it really has...
We also have found that the reaction of opposition does not come from the younger men, or even from the older men, those beyond 45 years of age, but rather from among women about her own age.

I finally found out that one of the most productive pieces of advice I could give a woman supervisor is to develop a little tougher hide and try not to imagine things that she believes will come to a head.

... Many single women go into business to find a husband. Such girls won't work for a woman if they can get out of it.

... As early as 1931 our company attempted to have a woman supervisor over a group of women in a stenographic bureau, which does all the stenographic work in the organization. We found after about two years, however, of attempting to make a successful supervisor out of this woman, that the very fact that she was a woman seemed to be the one reason why the women employees resented her. It appeared that she could not forget, as men seem to be able to forget, when they cross swords with another department head or another employee, that after the thing is over, they put down their swords and are friends again. It seemed that those employees and their supervisor carried these altercations on later into personal grudges or personal animosities. At the end of two years we had to dispense with the woman supervisor in this particular group.

These members of the managerial establishment did not dispute women's intellectual abilities, but rather questioned whether women had the personal qualities necessary for leadership. Women needed to learn the impersonal, masculine style of dealing with conflict, according to the experts. One participant confidently predicted that "after women have had training in the principles of administration for a hundred years, as men have had, we won't have some of the unpleasant things happen that have been mentioned." It was the wartime labor shortage and not managerial commitment to women's equality that had created the demand for women department heads and supervisors that had prompted
Rationalizing the sexual inequality of white-collar work by blaming women's own attitudes and behavior was a convenient excuse for continuing sex discrimination.

The experts could easily stereotype the behavior of women supervisors and clerical workers—gossip, jealousy, and sensitivity to criticism—as peculiarly female. This does not mean, however, that the managers' descriptions of women in the office were inaccurate, but rather that the scientific managers attributed the situations they observed to weaknesses in female character. They did not take power relations into account, nor were they willing to concede any other possibility than that women would have to conform to a masculine style of leadership if they wished to advance in the office. But, in fact, the conflicts between women in positions of authority and their subordinates were the product of women's special position in the white-collar organization.

Gossip, as Rosabeth Moss Kanter points out in her ethnographic study of a giant corporation she calls "Indasco," is one of the few ways that women who lack formal authority in the office can exercise power. According to Kanter, the unfortunate consequence of relying on gossip as a form of power has been that "in using available power and control tactics, . . . some secretaries [have] also reinforced stereotypes of women as gossip-prone and emotional." Kanter also substantiates and explains the belief of scientific office managers in the forties that older women were the most likely to resent female superiors. Affirmative action created a similar reaction in the 1970s:
The powerless may ... resent a boss's advantage, particularly if they think that they could just as easily be the boss. One woman at Indsco who had not attended college was forthright about her hostility toward "credentialed" women brought in to manage her department as a result of affirmative action efforts, while she was still held back. She resented the special treatment they were getting. Women who are jealous of another woman's promotion and try to let her know she's really no better than they may instead provoke her to try to demonstrate her superiority and her control. This is the "lording it over us" behavior some women have complained of in women bosses. From the subordinate's perspective, it is hard to be generously happy about the success of someone getting a chance denied to you.

The distribution of power responsible for this pattern had changed very little between World War II and the 1970s. Women managers at Indsco rarely progressed beyond the lowest rung of the managerial ladder—the supervision of women clerical workers; they received negligible support from men in more powerful positions; and because they felt vulnerable, they were intensely sensitive to any appearance of insubordination from the employees in their departments. Although women exhibited these traits more often than men, it was their place in the organization rather than feminine emotionalism that generated them.

The supposed unpopularity of women supervisors among women workers is a persistent piece of office folklore, although its basis in fact is doubtful. In a 1923 speech to the Simmons [College] Club, M.A. Burgess, a statistician and an alumna of Simmons, attributed the "inner conviction of inferiority" among business women to the propaganda that "women cannot work together." According to Burgess, the young woman entering white-collar work almost believes it herself. When I was a senior at Simmons, I remember emphatically stating that under no conditions would I ever work for a woman, and just the other day I learned that a
recent senior class voted unanimously the same way. . . .
Incidentally, women do work together excellently. They don't usually quarrel, and they don't usually have bad nerves. I have only worked under two hysterical people—people who really did pound the desk and fly into rages—and it happens that both of these were men. 

In some cases, women who experienced the supervision of a female superior seem to have formed favorable opinions of them. In the American Management Association's 1940 survey of 143 office workers, 130 of whom were women, 137 answered a question asking whether they would prefer to work for a man or a woman. Only five expressed a preference for a woman boss, fourteen had no opinion, and an overwhelming majority, 118, wanted to work for a man. Some of the last group may have witnessed the defensiveness of a relatively powerless woman supervisor first hand. A letter to the AMA from an office manager who offered his/her own opinions about the questions on the survey expressed a view similar to Kanter's. Among the "irritations and grievances" that arose among office workers, this manager found "resentment toward the authority of a group leader who is given limited responsibility for the work of several employees."

But the workers listed as preferring to work for a man also included "a number" of qualified responses from workers who said that they had no basis for judgement since they had only worked for men and one from a worker who said that she/he "used to think I preferred a man, but my present boss is a woman and ideal." Of eight complimentary comments about particular supervisors quoted in the survey results, at least two referred to women. "By her thoughtfulness and courtesy she seems to get the maximum efficiency out of her department," read one.
According to the other, "She is pleasant, witty, and above all, she is a real sport. There is nothing she does wrong." The success of these women supervisors in overcoming the sensitivity and vulnerability that might reasonably have been expected of them suggests that the constant reiteration of women workers' supposed unwillingness to accept another woman in a supervisory post actually did, as Burgess argued, reinforce prejudice. The success or failure of women in upper-level white-collar positions hinged not on the "natural" inclinations of women as a group, but on real conflicts of interests and values.

Seen in this light, the question is not whether women office workers were more emotional than their male counterparts, but rather, what the significance is of women's expression of emotion in the white-collar workplace. On the one hand, the scientific office managers concluded that emotionalism hindered women's advancement and that women could only become effective supervisors if they adopted an impersonal and, by implication, masculine, "scientific" outlook. Kanter, on the other hand, argues that women in sex-typed jobs act as an emotional reservoir in the otherwise impersonal bureaucracy of the corporate world, which fosters dependence on specific individuals, praise addiction, and parochialism, making it difficult for women to achieve upward mobility on the job. Although Kanter's emphasis on power is intended to suggest alternatives to the "masculine ethic" of management ideology, her interpretation of the effects of the emotional roles played by women in the office is not entirely different from the explanation offered by the management experts of
the forties. But when seen from the bottom up, from the perspective of women in feminized office occupations, emotionalism is only one feature of the personalism of office work culture. Emotion as well as nurturing, loyalty and personal service were integral parts of the work of women in the office, gender-specific forms of labor that linked them with the women's culture of the past and gave them scope for asserting informal power because they could not be easily measured or controlled from above. When managers complained about the tendency of women workers to be emotional, they failed to see that women were acting on their own set of priorities, priorities that placed individual feelings and relationships above impersonal standards of efficiency or the formal lines of authority in the white-collar organization.

It was no accident that the emotional orientation of women's office work culture first appeared as a problem for management thinkers during the Second World War. Previously, the personal element of women's work in the office was visible only in the relationship between female workers and their male superiors. So long as there was a surplus of available labor for feminized jobs, male resistance to the depersonalizing effects of scientific management was far more important than resistance among women workers who could easily be replaced. However, when the wartime economy generated a demand for women on both the middle and lower rungs of the organizational ladder, the power women could exercise through their informal work culture was revealed. Women who took supervisory positions were changing their allegiance, not only in class terms by
becoming part of management, but also in gender terms because they were suddenly expected to "ape a man." 10

The Johns-Manville experiment in training a few highly-educated women for "men's jobs" as order clerks during the war generated just such conflicts among different groups of women within the office. One of the new order clerks, Helen McKenna, reported that when they began work the new recruits had encountered active hostility from "the typists, mail clerks and filing clerks who have been with J. M. for five, ten or fifteen years, [who] feel a little resentment and even suspicion and jealousy because we have come in right over their heads and taken these more advanced jobs." The emotional response of workers in feminized jobs was conveyed to the newcomers through the office's informal gossip networks, making them feel as if they had been "thrown into a cold shower bath of mean remarks." Although their training for management had prepared them to deal with problems of "psychological adjustment," McKenna said that it was difficult to overcome "hurt feelings" when "the little typist will come along with some remarks." One of the new order clerks, a former high school teacher, even "went home and cried a few nights." And while men in the office were "nothing but very friendly and cooperative," "professional women" in the firm who had forged their own strategies for "dealing in a difficult field" also resented the young women who received formal training and support from male management. 11

The women who were installed above feminized workers in the office during the war were violating a deeply-held code of values, and their women subordinates used the power of female work culture against
them. Those who reached managerial and supervisory positions
sometimes failed because they responded to women's work culture in its
own emotional terms, and other times apparently succeeded by adopting
strategies that allowed them to deal effectively with both women and
men in the office. The Johns-Manville order clerks were unpopular
with both the "girl typists" and "professional women" partly because
they had received special advantages and also because their
instruction encouraged them to accept the "masculine ethic" of
management that defined conflicts among women as irrational,
individual "psychological problems." Interestingly enough, they too
seem to have relied on their own community to share support in the
face so many hurt feelings. It is important not to denigrate the
actions and beliefs of women in the feminized white-collar occupations
or women who rose from those occupations to positions which ostensibly
carried more status and authority. The emphasis on individual
feelings and relations that lay at the heart of this female
occupational culture was more than simply a way to manipulate power
relations in the office; it was a rejection of male-defined,
competitive notions of power and success. Women workers did not
merely react to conditions as they found them but actively cultivated
autonomous values rooted in their shared historical experience as
women. While it is true that as long as women alone exhibited
emotional qualities in the office they would be disadvantaged vis a
vis men, it is not true that impersonal competition—"crossing
swords"—was intrinsically more constructive than gossip or hurt
feelings.
The sexual hierarchy of office work minimized the conflicts between distinctly different male and female values. Men and women co-existed in the office but were not integrated. Sexually segregated promotional ladders guaranteed that men and women would not compete for the same rewards, and sex-typed job content, especially the emotional labor which was only required of women, created separate work ethics. Ambitious women who were able to use wartime opportunities to improve their status were forced to accept their gains within the framework of masculine values. They could succeed only if they divorced themselves from the historical values and roles women had initially carried with them into the office. Women left behind in sex-typed dead-end jobs were no less confident in their abilities, but they continued to work in a separate "feminine" sphere and to uphold a separate ethic. Because women's advancement in the office during World War II was minimal and often temporary, the tension for individual women who desired promotions and between groups of women divided by their different places in the office persisted after the war ended.

Middle-Class Womanhood and Working-Class Women

The wartime employment of women in previously male jobs in industry also intensified friction between women in feminized white-collar work and working-class women. Here, too, office workers expressed themselves by adhering to gender-specific values and behavior, as women clerical workers in industries that also employed women on the assembly line attempted to retain the outward symbols of
traditional femininity in order to distinguish themselves from blue-collar women. For example, management writer Gilbert Moore described the visible differences between women white-collar and production workers in a steel mill he had visited during the war:

Some twenty women, dressed in company-supplied blue smocks, were tin-plate inspectors at an average wage of about 85 dollars a week. At the plant cafeteria for lunch a similar number of secretaries and clerical workers were on hand, dressed in "heels and hose" not supplied by the company. Their average wage (or rather salary) was 35 dollars a week. Not only did the two groups not intermix, but they were not recruited from the same sector of the community. A "factory job" was suitable only for the daughter of an immigrant. The secretary might well come from a quite proper family.13

Except in the hiring policies of employers who wanted women in the office to be decorative as well as efficient and in published advice to aspiring secretaries, the dress and appearance of women office workers ordinarily escaped the notice of outsiders. Only rarely did the significance of "femininity" become visible as an assertion of collective identity and interests.

Because the extraordinary conditions of female employment during the war threatened to erode the distinctions between white- and blue-collar women workers, it provoked a collective response from office workers that illustrated the importance of gender-specific values in the workplace. Karen Anderson reports that just such a threat resulted in an unusual instance of militance and outright defiance of management by clerical workers in the auto industry.

At the Detroit Highland Park Plant women office workers responded to a company order mandating slacks for all women workers by wearing dresses to work. Bernice Clark, a secretary, explained the women's refusal to go home and change after they were ordered to do so by commenting that "we want to feel like ladies."14
Taken alone, these examples seem to suggest that women in feminized office jobs saw the accoutrements of conventional femininity as a way to preserve a sense of superiority over their sisters in industry. Within the broader context of women's office work culture, however, it appears that these women workers feared, not loss of status or prestige, but loss of autonomy within the office itself. Office work culture depended on a gender-specific definition of work and social relations. Through their personalism, women in feminized white-collar jobs exerted control over the work process and asserted their values as women. During the war, women clericals in industry perceived that the presence of large numbers of women in production jobs might undermine the separate female identity that had heretofore insulated them from direct managerial control. By clinging to the emblems of femininity, they were resisting their own proletarianization.

Although two models of masculinity existed in American society—one the collective "manliness" of working-class men, the other the competitive individualism of middle-class businessmen—there was only one cultural prescription for femininity based on the middle-class ideal of womanhood. Thus, in emphasizing their "femininity," white-collar women were implicitly identifying themselves with middle-class values. This does not mean that they also identified their interests with management's; their office work culture shows quite clearly that they did not. But gender rather than class was their central, explicit reference point. In Akron, clerical workers in the rubber industry adjusted to wartime changes in the standard attire for office work, not by confronting their employers,
but by adapting to new conditions in ways that stressed their femininity more than separation from working-class women. According to J. J. Goldie, office manager for General Tire and Rubber Company, "Our dress ideals for female office help have changed, in Akron. . . . In some Akron offices girls even wear slacks and, in most offices, flowers in their hair." When asked about the significance of the flowers, Goldie seemed at a loss, but finally concluded, "I suppose they wear the flowers because they still want to resemble women."15 In fact, these women were very similar to the YWCA "business girls" who rejected advice to wear dark-colored suits to work in favor of dresses that accentuated gender differences in the office.16 Flowers, like skirts, and "heels and hose," represented a particular work ethic that separated women in the office from both the loss of control experienced by factory workers and from the competitive, masculine values of business.

Conclusion

Although the demand for women workers in low-level feminized office jobs remained strong after the war, women were replaced by men in better paying jobs in management and industry, minimizing conflict between traditional gender values embedded in women's office work culture and non-traditional gender roles. The collective assertion of femininity again became submerged from public view, until the reinvigoration of an active feminist movement in the 1960s encouraged women office workers to reinterpret womanhood. Organizing and protest
have been successful because the new unionism among office workers recognizes the value of sex-typed labor at home and at work, linking women's interests as workers and as women.
Endnotes


2 Cambridge, Massachusetts, Radcliffe College, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Bureau of Vocational Information Papers, Collection Number B-3 [hereafter cited as BVI], Box 30, Folder 363, No. 566.


4 BVI, Box 31, Folder 374, Employer Return No. 41; see also Washington, D.C., National Archives, Record Group 86, Women's Bureau Records, Box 280, No. Stl. 6-2-07.

5 BVI, Box 31, Folder 374, Employer Return No. 77.


8 BVI, Box 37, Folder 428, M. A. Burgess, "The Inferiority Complex and the Business Woman," Talk given at the the Simmons Club, November 19, 1923, 5 pp. typescript.


12 Leila J. Rupp argues in "Women, power, and History," Women: A Journal of Liberation 6 (1978), pp. 4-9, that historically women have used the means of power accessible to them but because these forms of power have differed from the male-defined notions, they have often been labeled devious or manipulative.


16 See Chapter 5, "After Work."
CONCLUSION

The intricate administrative apparatus of twentieth-century capitalism swelled the ranks of the white-collar work force and feminized low-level clerical occupations with a new group of workers of dubious class identity. In attempting to understand the class position and behavior of white-collar workers, some analysts have evaded questions of gender by focusing simply on how the increasing presence of women workers affected male workers' perceptions of their class interests.1 Shifting the focus to women, feminist scholars such as Margery Davies, Roslyn Feldberg, and Evelyn Glenn have built on Harry Braverman's emphasis on the managerial drive to control the work process and argued that the feminization of clerical work was a process of proletarianization because the office jobs assigned to women were poorly paid, dead-end, and allowed them very little formal control of the work process.2 Clearly, any effort to analyze women's work in the office must come to grips with the interdependence of feminization and proletarianization. But the emphasis on proletarianization remains an incomplete explanation of the history of twentieth-century women's work in the office because it is based almost exclusively on the masculine model of class, proposed by classical marxism, which maintains the nineteenth-century dichotomy between public and private spheres and interprets the exploitation of
women office workers in narrow economic terms as it occurred in the public sphere of paid work. Thus, in this analysis, women's gender roles in the private sphere of family and domesticity appear to distract them from pursuing their class interests in the public sphere. This analysis must be broadened and deepened to account for the interrelationship of modern class and gender systems that developed as women's place in the office became more entrenched.

Beyond showing the theoretical importance of the imperative to control at the top of capitalist enterprise, we must also re-envision class and gender relations from the perspective of women workers themselves.

Throughout this dissertation I have argued (1) that formal managerial control of work characteristic of proletarianization proceeded quite slowly precisely because it was hindered by male managers' adherence to gender-based forms of power relations that sometimes conflicted with direct, class-based forms of control; (2) that women office workers' economic roles as workers were interwoven with their gender roles in the family and among networks of female friends and kin; and (3) that women carried traditional gender-specific values into the office, using them to assert informal power. This perspective is similar to that of historians who have argued that the sense of sisterhood based on shared gender-specific values, developed in the separate female sphere of the nineteenth century, could be used to reject masculine values and power.³ Twentieth-century women office workers, however, had a different historical experience because, rather than maintaining women's culture in a separate, domestic world, their experience transcended the
nineteenth-century public-private dichotomy. For them, class and
gender, work and family, were not distinct, but rather inseparable and
interlocking. They asserted separate, autonomous female values and
relationships without a separate female world. Their interests as
women and as workers were not separate or conflicting, but
intertwined, and they did not respond simply to class or gender
oppression alone, but to the interconnection between the two.

The feminization of low-level work in the tertiary sector was
comparable to the process of industrialization because it demanded a
new labor force—in this case composed of women who had been excluded
from paid industrial labor in the nineteenth-century—and because it
created a new definition of work itself. For, although women's work
in offices resembled the repetitive, routine work of the industrial
proletariat in some respects, employers' very real drive to assert
control over the work process was frustrated on a number of counts by
the incorporation of emotional labor into the content of feminized
jobs. The personal service and nurturance expected from a
secretary—as well as the nurse, salesclerk, teacher, or flight
attendant—required skills and in this sense were closer to the
preindustrial craft ethos than to deskilled proletarian labor. Here,
however, the analogy to the male craft tradition breaks down because
women's skills in new sex-typed occupations were learned in the
historical context of women's experience in the private sphere.

The nurse's relationship with patients, the department store
saleswoman's relationship with customers, the teacher's relationship
with her students, the flight attendant's relationship with her
passengers, as well as the office worker's relationship to her boss, were quite literally the heart of feminized labor. Personal relations insulated women who worked in these jobs from direct supervision and rationalization because relationships varied according to the needs and dispositions of the individuals involved at any given moment. Embodying not only separate skills but also separate female values, emotional labor united women on the job. While gender-specific skills and the values inherent in them could be described and prescribed by the dominant culture, they could not be directly controlled and thus posed a barrier to the imposition of scientific management. And because the elements of the female craft were presumed to be natural rather than learned, they and the workers who performed them might be overlooked or degraded but not deskilled: they contained within them the potential for exploitation but also room for autonomy and power, if not authority.

Management attempted various strategies for asserting control over feminized labor, with varying degrees of success. The movement toward self-service in department stores simply eliminated much paid gender-specific labor.\(^5\) In the hospital, the elaboration of hierarchical differentiation of technical skills created distinctions between nurses whose work became more specialized from routine workers whose labor combined the elements of factory organization and domestic service. Nevertheless, this change was slow and incomplete, creating a conflict between nurses who attempted to retain the craft tradition of apprenticeship with its emphasis on patient care and other nurses who have seen professionalization as a way to benefit from the changes
in hospital management. And in the airline industry, management trains flight attendants in "deep acting" techniques that shape workers' personal, emotional responses, attempting to appropriate gender specific skills directly, with the consequence that alienated workers either leave the job or "turn off" all emotional responses whatsoever.

Although scientific management has affected both teachers and office workers, its success has been muted by the continuing demand for personal relationships. Outside the classroom, teachers were subject to the authority of principals and school boards, but women retained control in the classroom, developing personal relationships with students and other teachers. In the office, automation has subordinated some workers to industrial models of control, but despite management efforts to do so, secretarial workers have not been replaced by automation, and their numbers have grown apace of routine workers. Secretarial labor promises to remain significant in the future because men in the office benefit directly from the emotional labor of this low-paid but emotionally skilled nonindustrial labor force. The growing number of semi-professional female white-collar workers, with glorified titles such as administrative assistant and paralegal, do nothing more than traditional secretarial work. The expansion of these new secretarial fields may widen the cleavage between routine and non-routine work in the office, but it also provokes conflicts within the secretarial work force that resemble those among nurses. Some secretarial workers see professional
ideology as a route to advancement while others maintain their links to women's non-industrial work culture.

Feminization was a historical process in which women workers were actors using all the resources available to them to preserve their autonomy and retain their links to their collective female past. One of the most important recurring themes in the developing history of work and family in the lives of so-called "ordinary people" is that people thrust into unfamiliar urban and industrial environments adapt traditional strategies and communal values in order to survive.¹⁰ Like other groups of workers, women office workers used their historical experience of community to adapt to and survive under new conditions of work as well as to resist their loss of control in the workplace. The theme of adaptation in the face of change makes the behavior of women in the office explicable and their relative quiescence becomes evident, not as acceptance of their subordinate position, but as the transfer of female values and mutual support communities to a new environment. The response of women in feminized office jobs cannot be fully understood as a conflict between management and workers. The personalism that was the focus of office work culture represented values that extended beyond the workplace: the personal relations between a woman and her boss and among co-workers were extensions of women's culture in the domestic sphere and women's relationships to kin in the twentieth-century family economy.

Participating in white-collar work after its initial acceptance as "women's work" and during the demographic shift that allowed
married women to enter office work, the "women in the middle" 
illustrate the historical nature of the process by which women 
transferred the values of their family and domestic roles into the 
public world of paid employment. In The Free Women of Petersburg: 
Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860, Suzanne Lebsock 
shows that when Petersburg women in the antebellum period had the 
opportunity to act independently in the public sphere by executing 
wills, they made legal decisions based on the "distinctive values" of 
"their experience with nurture, with personal service, and with the 
maintenance of life day by day" in the private sphere. Acting on 
what Lebsock calls "persistent personalism," these women, more often 
than their male contemporaries, made special bequests that took into 
consideration the particular needs of and relationships among 
individuals. Similarly, contemporary sociologists are discovering 
that women's work culture in sex-segregated employment—whether 
white-collar or industrial—also involves what Louise Lamphere calls 
"bringing the family to work" by shared celebrations of life-cycle 
events.

The female office workers who went to work in the middle of this 
century bridge the gap between these two analogous sets of behavior. 
The "persistent personalism" that placed human relationships at the 
forefront tied them to what was separate and distinct about women's 
traditional domestic roles at the same time that office work fostered 
new relationships among women in office work culture and the extended 
family economy. Of course, white office workers in the mid-twentieth 
century are a single example of the process. Clearly, differences in 
class, race, and ethnicity, as well as time and place, shape the ways
that women link their private and public experiences. The next step in research and interpretation is to compare and contrast women's cultures, public and private, among different groups of women at different historical moments. This sort of research would yield important information about the commonalities and distinctions of family and domestic life over time, but might also point the way to greater unity among women of different classes, races, and nationalities by revealing the patterns of women's responses to institutions of male design and power.

Lebsock acknowledges the danger of emphasizing the distinctiveness of female experience because it may justify discrimination, but she argues that "if we find that all along women have managed to create and sustain countercultures, then the chances increase that as women come to power, a more humane social order will indeed come with them."^3 It is no accident that Lebsock uses the term "counterculture" to denote the community of values among Petersburg women. Their emphasis on the personal and particular was a different moral system very much like the system of morality Carol Gilligan describes among women late in this century.^4 By sharing moral judgements within the female community and acting upon them, women in any female culture reject the standards of the dominant culture and its institutions.

The swelling literature on women's work culture has, according to Alice Kessler-Harris, raised "the question of whether, far from being an agent of liberation, wage work may simply affirm and strengthen women's domestic attachments." Historians' attention now centers on the extent to which separate gender-specific work culture opposes or
resists the conditions that oppress women. Kessler-Harris argues that, despite sororial relations among women workers and "temporary victories" against management, women's work culture "does not confront the structure within which power is exercised." This is a well-taken warning not to romanticize the rituals and networks women in sex-segregated employment have devised simply to survive discrimination and exploitation. The life and work histories of women in the office work force provide vivid examples of the sacrifices made by individual women in service to their families and their employers. By humanizing the existing structures of work and family, women in feminized white-collar employment preserved the very institutions that oppressed them. But the moral framework within which they made their decisions had little connection to the dominant culture's vision of women in either institution. Women's experiences sustaining relationships "day by day" was the root of a separate ethic of emotion, personal concern, and individual responsibility that implicitly challenged the patriarchal moral hierarchy of impersonal competition. Moreover, women in the office did recognize and resist the disadvantages of feminized work. As participants in a complex family economy, individual women sought jobs that offered better pay and conditions or attempted to balance the benefits of paid work and domesticity through part-time and intermittent work. As members of female communities in the workplace, they resisted direct managerial control and the adoption of competitive strategies by other women, both of which threatened to undermine the importance of personal relations as part of feminized labor.
The real question, it seems, is not one of resistance, but rather of how women's countercultures can be mobilized to challenge directly women's inequality in both public and private worlds. The recent burgeoning of clerical workers' organizations and strike activity among women in feminized white-collar occupations suggests that conditions for mobilization are improving. In order to resist control of the movement by male dominated labor unions, clerical workers have sometimes found it necessary to organize outside of existing unions or at least to distance themselves from union leadership steeped in masculine traditions of union leadership and strategy. Linking women workers' problems on the job to discrimination against women, 9 to 5, National Association of Working Women, encourages office workers to consider not only unequal pay, working conditions, and promotion but also explicitly women's issues such as sexual harassment, day care, and the distribution of domestic labor within the family. And while 9 to 5 is openly directed toward organizing women in the office, its founders are also supportive of women who are not sympathetic to unionization and advise office workers to build on their relationships with co-workers and to use their informal power to improve conditions. Both the 1984 strike of clerical and technical workers described by Molly Ladd-Taylor in "Women Workers and the Yale Strike" and the 1979 strike by insurance workers analyzed by Cynthia B. Costello in "WEA're Worth It!" Work Culture and Conflict at the Wisconsin Education Association Insurance Trust," were motivated by sex discrimination and lack of respect for workers as women (and at Yale by the invisibility of women's skilled labor) as well as by low
pay and poor working conditions. Despite the continuing hostility of management and the economic vulnerability of women workers, the incorporation of gender-specific grievances and interests into the movement promises to draw more women into direct confrontation with the economic and social subordination of feminized white-collar work because it reflects women's own efforts to integrate their experiences.

But we must be as careful not to romanticize the future as we are to deal with the concrete realities of the past. The integration of personal and political issues in the white-collar women's labor movement, just as in the resurgent feminist movement, requires such a radical revision of individual and social relationships and such far-reaching reinterpretation of formal and informal power that changes will almost certainly be gradual rather than dramatic. While women's attachment to the prevailing gender system is a source of tremendous potential power, it has in the past immobilized women. Having placed relationships at the center of their moral code, women face intense and painful personal conflicts as they attempt to liberate themselves by reconciling their personal and political responsibilities. And it is worth remembering that women's cultures can be exclusionary. The women who made a place for themselves doing "women's work" in the office between 1925 and 1955 were hostile to women who did not conform to their standards of femininity in the workplace: blacks, factory workers, and women who struggled to achieve a masculine definition of success. But since women's office work culture represents the continuity of a moral system that
recognizes and values the needs and feelings of individuals, it seems quite possible that the women of the office could extend their web of relationships, making them more inclusive and more powerful. One hope for the future is that mobilization of workers in feminized occupations might fulfill the radical implications of women's distinctive personalism.

In looking to the past and the future, it is only fair to give credit where credit is due. The women who performed so much of the labor that made modern American business function smoothly often found that their skills and the results of their hard work went unrecognized and their sacrifices unrewarded. They were angry about discrimination and dissatisfied with inequality. But perhaps they would want to be remembered for what they accomplished in spite of hardships that they did not choose. The unpaid domestic labor and reform efforts of middle-class women had benefitted their families and communities since the beginning of industrialization, but when these women became paid workers they provided new economic resources for extended family networks. By the mid-twentieth century, both private and public communities of women were knit together by economic reciprocity as well as shared values. The benefits for others were enormous. The earnings of white-collar women sustained family standards of living; educated the young; and protected family members from the crises caused by unemployment, sickness, old age, and death, and their emotional resources continued to give the personal comfort and support that humanized life in an impersonal and competitive society. If their humane values are not abandoned, individuals will have to
continue to contribute to and even sacrifice for large and small communities. In a just world, however, the accidents of birth that now determine race, class, and sex will not dispense to some groups or individuals disproportionate responsibilities for service.
ENDNOTES


4. Although prostitution and domestic service are also sex-typed female occupations that incorporate personal service, they are not discussed here because they are not directly subject to the formal bureaucratic structure of modern capitalist enterprise.


19 Lebsock, *Free Women of Petersburg*, pp. 143-44.
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