

## From the Guest Editors

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# Women, Work and Culture

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When asked by the Editor-in-Chief to revisit the state of women and work after a decade, interest was intense to learn about the changes that had ensued during that period of time. What became readily apparent is that an entire issue of the journal needed to be devoted to this topic and that the addition of the concept of culture would provide a broader and more complete overview of women and work.

Women and work are intricately associated. Whether paid or unpaid for the work they do, women fill many worker roles. Women's lives have changed in the past decade but they have also remained the same in many ways. While women account for 51% of the United States population, they comprise 60% of the labor force, continuing to work in traditional 'female' occupations [1]. Dilemmas surrounding unpaid work persist, as does the lack of validation of the pivotal roles women play in society. The primacy of family and the care giving it denotes in the lives of women figure prominently in their efforts to balance the competing demands family life presents with their working lives. A number of work alternatives women utilize to achieve this dynamic balance are cited in this special edition. Issues of health, sexual harassment and the 'glass ceiling' phenomenon are described. The growing entrepreneurial spirit of women starting their own businesses is also discussed.

Many of the above issues are impacted by additional cultural factors (other than gender) such as class, ethnicity, role expectations, age, and ability. Often, 'culture' is viewed as only relating to race and ethnicity. However, the editors of this special issue use the

broader definition that "includes demographic variables such as age, gender, and place of residence: status variables such as social, educational, and economic levels; and affiliation variables." [2, p. 279] By identifying the characteristics above as important aspects of study, and intentionally examining them in relation to women and their work, the complexity of the intersections of gender, culture, and work are revealed.

With an expanding awareness of the effects of diversity in a culture and on the health of society, the editors sought articles that would inform the audience about women, work, and culture. Women's lives do intersect within the larger culture around various aspects of work. This special edition is devoted to increasing awareness of some of the issues involved in this intersection.

MacRae begins the issue with a comprehensive retrospective review of the status of women over the past decade. In an examination of current issues such as health status and work options, including factors such as the 'glass ceiling', entrepreneurship, management opportunities, and unpaid work. MacRae compares the issues of today's working women with those of ten years ago and finds some, but not nearly enough, positive changes.

The next few articles describe the roles of women and the impact on work. Hakansson, Eklund, Lidfeldt, Nerbrand, Samsioe and Nilsson present a study on occupational roles among middle-aged women which explores the stability of the pattern of health/work and sickness absence over a three year period. Results indicated that healthier women experienced a more valued

worker role and higher well being than did less healthy women.

O'Brien and Janssen's study examines the role of women in academic administration who participated in an internship program at a comprehensive university. The study reflects on a decade of time and reinforces the continued concepts of 'cooling out' and glass ceilings within higher education. Five clear recommendations are cited by the authors to address the ongoing marginalization of women in higher administrative positions in academic life.

Maynard and Blain examine the role of working mothers through a case study which explores the impact of a work-related injury on one mother's ability to meet the physical demands of childcare and homemaking tasks without jeopardizing her physical recovery or job security. The authors introduce an assessment tool, the ErgoMomics MOMS which measures musculoskeletal symptoms during routine homemaking and childcare tasks. Findings indicated that educating mothers in ergonomic techniques may be beneficial in helping them manage both work and home expectations.

The next three articles address disabilities issues related to women and work. Randolph completed a qualitative study that examined workplace discrimination for women with disabilities. Through thematic analysis, it was determined that, despite legislation, women with disabilities continue to experience discrimination in the workplace.

Gottshall, Gray and Drake report on a case study of the collaborative medical care provided by both military and civilian women working for the US Air Force. This collaboration enabled one Marine access to assessment, intervention, and successful return to active duty. This study provides an example of the effective collaboration of women as providers of medical care within the military's medical framework.

A study to determine the prevalence of computer-related musculoskeletal complaints in female college students was completed by Hamilton, Jacobs and Orsmond. Students were also measured for any 'job strain' they experienced in their jobs as students. Results indicated that female students did experience musculoskeletal discomfort during or after computer use, but did not appear to experience job strain. Although a statistical correlation could not be

made, students who used laptops reported a higher incidence of musculoskeletal symptoms than those who used desktop computers.

The following two articles address other cultural issues related to work; namely, race/ethnicity and class. Wells writes a compelling article describing how the lives of Mexican American women are being affected by their changing workforce participation. She discusses how cultural values and educational attainment consistently have a strong impact on the occupational choices of these women, and how the intersection of gender and race/ethnicity influence their success in the workplace.

Froehlich addresses women and poverty in her article, highlighting the issues of oppression, stress, motherhood and the social construction of class. She examines the issue of the 'working poor' and the impact on women and their needs. Froehlich ends by discussing ways in which poverty can be dismantled.

And, finally, Black concludes the special issue by questioning what it means to be a caregiver in today's health care arena. She provides a thoughtful analysis of how culturally competent care, client centered care, and the feminist ethic of care intersect. Descriptions of each type of care underscore shared basic characteristics of provider knowledge, skills, and respect for the client leading to client empowerment. The simplicity of this equation belies the complexity of a caring practice and presents continuing challenges to the caregiver.

Today's world is made more complex by changing demographics and sociocultural role expectations. The breadth and scope of the ten articles in this special issue of "Women, Work and Culture" highlight the complexity of some of the many issues women face today in the workplace when gender, class, race/ethnicity and other cultural factors intersect.

## References

- [1] R. Spraggins, *Women and men in the United States: March 2002*, Population characteristics, P20-544, US Census Bureau, Washington, DC, March, 2003.
- [2] S.A. Wells and R.M. Black, *Cultural competency for health professionals*, The American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc. Bethesda, MD, 2002.