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General consensus from gender equity research is that gifted girls are underrepresented in the vast majority of occupations termed "high-status" and in all but a few advanced educational programs (Eccles, 1985; Reis, 1995). They receive many mixed messages about their abilities from their families and from the public, and typically achieve less when compared to their male counterparts on standard measures valued by the culture.

Some charge that females are denied opportunities especially in traditional male domains and that they underachieve. Others assert that females are presented with a wider range of opportunity in life than males because they are accepted as homemakers as well as professionals whereas men are not (Rejskind, 1993). Impassioned discussion surrounds the assertions.

Prompted by discussion of "accomplishment in superior adult males" 35 years after graduation from an Ivy League College (Gowan, 1972), a study was designed that examined a comparable group of 167 women, ages 45-70 who resided in Martha Cook, an honors dormitory at the University of Michigan. One of the study's guiding questions is ripe for study today: What are the attributes that distinguish women who are actualized?

ACTUALIZATION

Initially, it was tempting to link creative accomplishment with career achievements only. After all, achievements in a field can be measured and analyzed quite quickly, and can serve as a point of reference that others in the culture know. However, as Eccles (1986) argued, many women make contributions that are not considered "career achievements," but have profound and lasting impacts on the lives of many. To explain women's creative accomplishments solely in terms of achievement in traditional areas favors a stereotypically masculine perspective and would be a mistake.

DABROWSKI'S THEORY OF DEVELOPMENT

Several views of actualization, such as those of Maslow (1954) and Dabrowski (1964) encompass more than enculturated conceptions of achievement and include broader contexts of emotional, intellectual, and moral growth. Dabrowski's theory provided an elegant and applicable model from which data on MC women were analyzed. The theory consists of five levels of development which are characterized as follows.

Level 1: Egocentric persons are motivated by financial success, power, glory, and conquest. Persons at this level are motivated by winning. They are fierce competitors and often step on others to gain positions of leadership in competitive environments. Level 2: Approval-seeking persons are motivated by fear of disapproval or punishment from their social group. They are easily swayed by dominant and egocentric leaders. Level 3: Those at this level experience emotional turmoil as they examine their own inadequacies. They understand who they could be and are dissatisfied with who they are. Level 4: Motivated by ideals that are deep-rooted, individuals at this level commit to responsibility and service to others. They have unshakable values and much integrity. Level 5: Persons at this level are motivated by the highest principles of love and compassion. Inner conflicts have been resolved and they live in service to humanity.

Dabrowski (1964) was most interested in levels 3, 4, and 5 where the human spirit transcends into advanced development and where the individual begins to formulate an unshakable set of values. Inner conflict (Level 3) is necessary in order for the individual to move beyond group or cultural norms and is a necessary step in the process of actualization. Individuals at Level 4 integrate their "ideal self" with who they are and have found ways to reach goals that benefit themselves and those around them. Those at Level 5 no longer struggle to integrate ideal values such as love, grace, compassion, and service, into purpose-filled lives, but are committed to lives of altruism, service to others, harmonious relationships, authentic purpose, and empathy for all.

There are stark contrasts between definitions of actualization which focus on competitive achievements and Dabrowski's definition (1964), which holds up "empathy and compassion for others" as moral exemplars. For example, Hollinger and Fleming (1992) defined actualization as "the achievement of societally valued and normatively defined 'high level/high status' educational and career goals commensurate with her talents and abilities" (p. 207) which ironically falls at the lowest levels according to Dabrowski's Model. In practical terms, a woman with a "what's in it for me" mentality, who attained a position of power with little or no concern for others may be described as "actualized" according to Hollinger and Fleming (1992). However, she may be described as "egocentric" and "brutally ambitious" by Dabrowski (1964) and would be placed at the lowest levels of human development until she learned to examine her

own behavior, reflect upon her choices, and consider the effects of her choices on others. Gender equity research seems to vacillate between wanting girls, on the one hand, to earn titles, get ahead, and achieve in competitive arenas, and on the other hand, actualize through a deepening of personality, and strengthening of moral conviction and the spirit.

Recently, Silverman (1993, 1994) renewed attention to Dabrowski's theory and to inner components of actualization, especially emotion and moral sensitivity. She argued that protection of these sensitivities is critical to actualization of self and she stated:

The natural trajectory of giftedness in childhood is not a six-figure salary, perfect happiness, and a guaranteed place in Who's Who. It is the deepening of the personality, the strengthening of one's value system, the creation of greater and greater challenges for oneself, and the development of broader avenues for expressing compassion. Advanced development in adulthood is the commitment to becoming a better person and helping to make this a better world. (1994, p. 22)

Using Dabrowski's Model of Development (1964), the words and life decisions of the women of Martha Cook were studied. Specifically, attributes that characterized the most actualized MC women were examined here.

THE WOMEN OF MARTHA COOK

The authors chose a group of 312 alumnae of Martha Cook dormitory at the University of Michigan who were residents between 1950 to 1970. The group ranged in age from 45 to 70 with nearly half (48%) of the group about 50 years old. The women had the highest grade point averages on campus; 80 percent were honor and scholarship award winners. Even the least academic women at MC scored in the top 10 percent on measures of potential and achievement. The women of MC were expected to lead campus organizations, abide by the honor code of behavior for MC, and donate their talents to the common good of the dormitory as well as to the university.

Quantitative and qualitative methods were used for this study. Data were collected using the Survey of University Women which focused on family background, education, occupation, development of talent, and life-satisfaction; articles, chapters, diaries, and recordings of their work; and other materials written about the women of MC. Survey items asked women to rank their priorities in life and to describe their most significant life events, accomplishments, and satisfactions.

A total of 167 surveys were completed and returned, providing a 54 percent response rate. (A random sample of nonresponders revealed that they were a very similar group to those who responded to the survey.) Two researchers read each completed survey. This was no small task given that many surveys included attached biographies, newspaper clippings, autobiographies, announcements of upcoming publications and performances, brochures, syllabi, vitae, publications and cassettes, letters from and articles and essays written by and about MC women. The researchers were also the audience for a number of women who gave detailed descriptions of pet peeves, unabashed love for husbands and families, spiritual growth, views on local issues, abortion, current candidates, the president's initiatives, and so on. (It was naïve of the researchers to think that this creative group would simply respond to the survey; however, realization of this naïveté came after the elaborate and creative responses were received!)

Responses to questions about "the most significant accomplishments in their lives" were analyzed using statistical procedures (ANOVA and Chi-Square) and Constant Comparison methods outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Criteria for determining actualized MC women are based on Dabrowski's Model and described by Hall and Hansen (in press).

WHAT THE WOMEN OF MARTHA COOK REVEALED

The following eight assertions that describe the lives of the most actualized MC women are subject to elaboration and amendment as more women tell about themselves.

1. THE ACTUALIZED MC WOMAN WAS IMPELLED BY POTENT AND PERSONAL LIFE PURPOSES

Her purposes were like "callings" and her need to act on those callings surpassed many of her other needs, specifically the need for approval of others and need for financial security. The actualized MC woman had deep personal insight and felt there were deep purposes to most of life's activities. She deliberately placed herself in positions to achieve her purposes, as can be seen in these comments:

To major in English was inevitable; the call of stories had been a siren song ever since childhood. To delight readers with my words was the most exciting life I could imagine. Together (with my husband) we encouraged the children to use their time and talents to enrich their lives and make this world a better place in which to live. [The most significant event in the last 20 years is] becoming director of the non-profit contemporary visual arts gallery where I ... saw the gallery evolve into a widely respected cultural center in our community and beyond. The gallery is noted for its elegant and varied presentations as well as for its responsibility in its dealing with artists.

Dabrowski (1964) distinguished between actualized individuals with personal purpose and insecure individuals who need others to validate their self-worth. Some MC women were hindered by their need for approval or financial security as can be seen in these comments:

I'm too concerned about what people will think of me. Too afraid of making mistakes; keeps me stuck in my job and prevents me from exploring my artistic potential. [My most significant accomplishment is that I] worked 20 years for the same boss.

A strong sense of purpose was noted by other researchers of gifted and eminent women and was described by Kerr (1985) as a "powerful sense of personal mission and identity." Many of the MC women felt a sense of personal mission and had progressed into Levels 4 and 5 of Dabrowski's Model (1964).

2. MC WOMEN VALUED RELATIONSHIPS OVER PROFESSIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS

When asked to "describe the most meaningful event" they had experienced in the last 20 years, 83 percent of MC women referred to a relationship-oriented event (birth, marriage, death, spiritual awakening); with the majority (52%) directly stating "raising my children." These were not women who chose "raising children" because they had little else to do. These were the same women who headed medical facilities, traveled the world, and wrote influential articles and books, to name a few worthy endeavors. In spite of fierce competition from other activities, MC women chose "raising children" as the most meaningful life event. Other research tells us that gifted women often place relationships at a premium. White (1990) followed up on students of the Speyer School (Hollingworth, 1926) and found that females claimed their major accomplishment as their children. Similarly, Post-Kammer and Perrone (1983) found that 73 percent of women studied reported that work was second in importance to close relationships. Authentic empathy for others emerges during Level 4 of Dabrowski's Model (1964) and translates into genuine empathy for one's family, friends, colleagues, and the world, both locally and globally. MC women confirmed through their own words that human relationships were central in their lives and provided one of the foundations for their work.

3. MC WOMEN WERE COMMITTED TO THE COMMON GOOD

One of the most powerful findings from the study was that the majority of women of MC were service-oriented and committed to a common good. This makes sense given that they were selected to live in Martha Cook, in part, based on their willingness to contribute to the common good of the dormitory. Following college, the women served through their professions, their volunteer work, and their families and friends. They sensed an unselfish purpose for themselves and held close to a philosophy of servanthood that undergirded many aspects of their lives. The altruistic nature of the group as a whole, pervaded the study as is seen in the following comment.

Getting to a point in my career where I can see that my role is that of leadership and service and they are one and the same has given me a satisfying sense of accomplishment about the work that I've been involved with over much of the past 20 years.

While few of the MC women seemed selfish, those who pursued a sense of self solely through their family relationships or solely through achievement recognition were clearly distinguished from women who pursued paths leading to a common good. One woman, for example, stated:

I receive my self-esteem through the way my husband and family are perceived by our community.

Dabrowski (1964) characterized the highest levels of actualized persons (Level 5) by their altruism. Living a life in service to humanity is to live according to the highest standards of life. The most actualized MC women displayed qualities of altruism and service.

4. MC WOMEN LED PRODUCTIVE LIVES

Another main finding emerging from the thematic analyses was that many MC women led extremely productive lives. According to their own words, they shared interests such as a happy home life, well-adjusted children, good friends, personal growth, and meaningful pursuits. We elaborate on marriage and raising children in another article (Hall & Hansen, 1997), but believe it is important to emphasize MC women's dual commitment to family and personal purpose as is revealed in the following comment:

My husband encouraged me to use my education, to acquire more when needed. Just as I encouraged him to use his, to acquire a Ph.D. when he so desired. I feel we worked together to achieve this and at the same time to raise a large family.

In addition to working hard to develop the character of their families, they worked hard toward their personal purpose. To simply list accomplishments of MC women would take a volume in and of itself. MC women served as judges, conducted in world-famous music halls, administered well-known medical facilities, earned Fulbright scholarships, authored famous publications, were deans at well-known universities, were CEOs and company presidents, listed in Who's Who, and honored by the president of the United States and other dignitaries. One PTO worker in the study advocated for desegregation of the Chicago Public Schools, another woman brought media to areas of the world unfamiliar with media, another hosted conferences in remote areas of the world, while others served as Peace Corps volunteers, explored exotic jungles, conducted archeological digs, volunteered to direct orchestras or choirs in local and world-class theaters, ministered to the needy through churches, mentored immigrants, and expressed their creativity through arts and theater groups, and beautification projects. In contrast, other MC women struggled to be productive as can be seen in this comment:

My husband supports my endeavors financially as long as they don't interfere with what he sees as his need for

attention from me. I have no other source of income.

Productive MC women had reached at least Level 4 of Dabrowski's Model, the level where individuals have found a way to reach their own ideals. Persons at Level 4 are generally effective leaders who show high degrees of responsibility, effectiveness, objectivity, and productivity along lines that benefit others in society.

5. MC WOMEN WERE PROFOUNDLY OPTIMISTIC

They were like all other women in that they lived through life's intermittent turmoil, upheaval, and emotional uncertainty. However, some MC women maintained a sort of equilibrium through it all. They were able to withstand intense de-centering experiences and the accompanying pain and confusion. The turmoil helped them re-center, cope, and strengthened their optimism as can be seen in selected comments:

At age 27, I divorced my husband of 5 years and without alimony or child support ... raised three children. I worked continuously and though I married again at age 50, my husband died nine weeks later. As a result of (my husband's) death, I retired alone. This stage of my life ... is totally unlike the early part. However, I build on those past experiences and they make this such a delicious period. I definitely believe that good things are always happening. That phrase was the beginning theme for my essay in 1963 when I sought entrance to the Martha Cook Building. I still believe it. And, 30 years later, I have lots of accumulated experience to further prove that thesis. Knowing that I have a great number of diverse inner resources which are available in difficult times and that I have the ability to turn most any circumstance in positive directions is very empowering.

The researchers were amazed at the levels of optimism revealed by actualized women of MC. It was not because their lives were easier that they were more optimistic. It was because they chose to see the good that happened in their lives. At higher levels of Dabrowski's Model, the choice to grow is conscious. Actualized persons recognize that pain is inevitable if one is to grow, and they hold a life perspective that allows them to translate painful experiences into growth steps. Their perspective allows them to "count their blessings" in the darkest hours of their lives and enables them to move forward with strength, resolve, and hope.

6. MC WOMEN WORKED FOR BALANCE IN THEIR LIVES

Nearly all MC women worked for balance in their lives. They feared gypping those who relied on them personally (mostly spouses and children) and did not want to sacrifice personal relationships in order to heed their calling. Still, they did not want to sacrifice their calling solely for personal relationships. They admitted to struggling with issues of balance in their lives and tried to not take the well-being of themselves, their families, or their friends for granted, as can be seen in this representative comment:

My life is most satisfying when I am able to balance my family, my friends, my church, my job, and my recreational activities. I must confess this is not always easy to do. But, when it all comes together, it is exciting and rewarding.

Those who recognized the importance of "love and work" in their lives were distinguished from their counterparts who compromised on close relationships in order to pursue achievement goals or those who compromised on their calling in order to preserve a close relationship, generally with their spouse. The actualized woman was supported by relationships characterized by interdependence and which served to bring out the best in her and those she cared about. Because she balanced her need to create and her need for relationships, she was not faced with the psychosocial dilemma of choosing between standards of achievement and attainment of intimacy (Gross, 1989). In general, her family enjoyed her intellectual drive and commitment to service, and she was not asked to choose between meaningful family relationships and a meaningful path of growth. She had both. Dabrowski stressed a dual commitment to human relationships and to moral purpose. In fact, deep moral purpose at the higher levels of his model was not possible without meaningful relationships, According to Dabrowski, one must have both to be actualized.

7. MC WOMEN WERE MORALLY SENSITIVE

Actualized MC women were characterized by their deep and powerful moral sensitivity. Numerous examples of selfless acts moved the researchers to tears. It is an understatement to describe such awareness of the presenting needs of others, be they physical, intellectual, spiritual, or emotional needs, as "inspiring." This selected comment from an MC woman is just one example of the deep moral sensitivity witnessed in so many other MC women.

After four months of work, and ... in light of a lot of devastating information about how the Vietnamese people felt about losing their orphaned children, we made an agonizing decision not to be a part of an adoption from Vietnam. Miraculously, two months later, our local social worker found us a beautiful 4-month-old Caucasian boy whom we adopted.

One cannot transcend the lower levels of actualization, according to Dabrowski, without keen moral insight. To couple a personal life purpose that bettered the world with a commitment[cont. on p.50] to growing relationships and service to others, requires moral sensitivity. Actualized persons, according to Dabrowski, not only had moral sensitivity but exercised that sensitivity in order to simply notice and meet the often undetected needs of others.

8. MC WOMEN REVEALED A MATURE PERSONAL LIFE PERSPECTIVE

Actualized MC women as a group, commonly offered a perspective on life that included sickness, death and loss as well as accomplishments and achievements; the good and the bad. Many women described changed life priorities prompted by pivotal life events such as losing a spouse or child, or having medical or emotional problems that put their/view of life in a different light. While many women experience dramatic life events, actualized women reflect upon the lessons learned from traumatic crises, and put such defining times into a positive life perspective.

In 1986, I had a heart attack, aortic valve replacement, two emergency D & Cs, and a laser ablation of the uterus for hemorrhaging. It changed my priorities. The death of my 30-year-old daughter [was my most meaningful life event]. She was a wonderful person, respected and liked by many. She was a lawyer, and was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1989. I'm sorry she had that terrible illness, but am glad she could share it with many friends and colleagues, so they could benefit from an understanding of her life and death.

The ability to look at oneself and one's life objectively and compassionately is necessary to be actualized according to Dabrowski, and there is little doubt that many MC women did just that. Their rich inner life and resulting life perspective allowed them a solid place in a world with slippery values. Their perspective provided meaning for them personally and provided a sense of inner peace and satisfaction with life.

CONCLUSION

The findings from qualitative analyses are valuable and they make sense. If the subject valued her personal mission as well as unity with family and others, she was more likely to seek her own steadfast growth in both areas. She looked for opportunities that would serve her personal mission as well as camaraderie with others. For the most part, the actualized MC woman remained emotionally available to her family and friends, and talked openly about trusted relationships, while consistently forwarding her life's purpose. She was not willing to set aside her contribution to society. She owned her own sense of purpose in life and did not sublimate her own goals for the goals of her spouse, children, or others. Her altruism came through her career and volunteer accomplishments at the same time she enhanced the lives of others. Through her inner strength and optimism, she was able to overcome many of life's disappointments and challenges. She expected support from her spouse and family and attempted to be interdependent rather than dependent. She actualized her talents and was able to contribute to society in the process.

Added material

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