

Career Aspirations and Expectations of Women in Speech-Language Pathology

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Abstract

Specific information about career aspirations and expectations of speech-language pathologists generally is lacking. How can we recruit and retain students without knowledge of their perceptions of career options and of their expectations of what a career will bring? We have some data from Australia, and the current study reports Canadian data. These data offer the potential background for an in-depth examination of what might be important to future speech-language pathologists.

A wider range of career options is now available to educated women. This is particularly relevant to speech-language pathology. Although more than half the professionals in the entire work force are now women, they constitute 91% of speech-language pathologists. Their increased numbers and increased longevity of employment (29.3 years) are having a substantial impact on the labour force (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 1986).

A career involves the interaction of an individual with work activities throughout the entire adult life cycle (Gutek & Larwood, 1987). As such, a career development might be viewed as a series of jobs that represents growth in one or more than one occupation. Progress may be measured by increases in rank, salary, or recognition and respect, and through greater freedom or more control in selecting work activities. Glaze and Ellis (1980) defined career aspirations as "the full range of opportunities which an individual is capable of seeing for himself or herself" and career expectations as "more realistic plans [that] may be somewhat narrower" (p. 19).

Several studies have reported that females had lower educational and career expectations than their male counterparts (Russell, 1973; Sutherland, 1978). Women speech-language pathology students in Australia reportedly had intermediate career status aspirations. These aspirations increased after these students started to work and remained at this increased level five years later (Nordholm, Westbrook, & Walker, 1978; Westbrook & Nordholm, 1979, 1985).

Reportedly, women more frequently exhibit discrepancies between career aspirations and expectations. This lack of congruence applies to their career plans, occupation selection, occupation status, and to job promotion (Porter, Porter & Blishen, 1973; Sutherland, 1978; Glaze, 1979; Martin, Price, Bies & Powers, 1987).

Attitudes and beliefs about one's career may change over time as additional knowledge and experience are gained. It is important to know what effects these changes might have on career decisions. In an Australian study of women students' perceptions about speech-language pathology, it was reported that perceptions changed during their training, although these changes did not affect either degree of career satisfaction or intention to change careers (Westbrook & Nordholm, 1979).

Career commitment and the accommodation of the dual roles required by family and career are important variables in working women's life style patterns (Betz, 1984). Working in a profession, getting married, leaving work temporarily to raise young children, and returning to her career is a life plan frequently seen among speech-language pathologists (Nordholm et al., 1978; Shewan, 1986; Westbrook & Nordholm, 1979, 1985). Do these dual roles affect the careers of speech-language pathologists? Shewan's (1986) report that a return from a child care leave of absence was often to part-time work and to lower position responsibilities suggests an affirmative answer.

To further our knowledge about women's perceptions of the speech-language pathology field, the current study was undertaken to examine Canadian women's career aspirations and expectations, to determine if changes occurred across stages of career development, and to investigate whether their career aspirations and expectations were congruent.

Methodology

Subjects

The 171 women subjects were students in, or graduates from, two of the seven programs in Canada offering degrees in

speech-language pathology, the University of Western Ontario and the University of Alberta. They responded to a questionnaire about career aspirations and expectations in speech-language pathology. Their ages ranged from 19 to 44. Most had been raised in communities of 10,000 or more people and were from families in the upper middle and upper classes. Subjects were at four different stages in career development. Stage I represented the beginning of career preparation, that is, second year of university ($N = 32$). Stage II represented completion of undergraduate education and eligibility to enter the work force ($N = 32$). Stage III represented the graduate degree preparation level ($N = 26$). Upon completion of their degree, subjects in this group will be eligible for, and many will obtain, CASLPA/ACOA certification. Stage IV ($N = 72$) represented professionals employed in the field, who were working in varied employment settings ($N = 63$) or graduated speech-language pathologists who were not currently employed for a variety of reasons ($N = 9$).

Survey Questionnaire

The survey included a career aspirations and expectations section organized into 14 question pairs. "Would you like..." questions asked about aspirations and "Do you expect..." asked about expectations. Demographic information about each subject also was collected.

Results

From the 171 questionnaires returned (73%), frequency distributions of the responses for aspirations were constructed for the four career stage groups. Contingency *chi square* analyses were performed to detect the presence of any significant differences between the observed frequency distribution and the expected distribution based on statistical probability. The same procedure was used to analyze the responses for career expectations. The *Kappa* statistic was used to determine the degree of congruence between aspirations and expectations within each career stage group (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Career Aspirations and Expectations

Education

1. Highest Degree. Participants were asked whether both their highest degree desired and their highest degree expected was a bachelor's, a master's, or a doctorate. Respondents in each career stage group aspired to higher degrees. Most (80%) expected to obtain a master's degree and few (13%) expected to remain at a bachelor's level. No significant differences appeared across career stage groups for either aspirations or expectations. Degree of agreement between the aspirations and expectations of each career group was only fair. As seen in Figure 1, 31% of the women sampled aspired to obtain a doctorate, yet only 7% expected to obtain one.

2. Leave of Absence to Continue Education. The women indicated whether they desired and expected a leave of absence from employment to pursue their education. Three-quarters of the respondents desired to have an opportunity to take such a leave, yet only 41% expected this option. Understandably then, agreement between aspirations and expectations for each group was poor. The percentage of women wanting a leave did not differ significantly across the career stage groups; however, the percentage expecting a leave declined as career developed.

Salary

When asked to indicate salary ranges wanted and expected, approximately half the women checked the \$30-39,999 range. Salary aspirations and expectations differed significantly across career stage groups. Working professionals tended toward higher salary (\$40-49,999) aspirations. For each group, only slight agreement between aspirations and expectations was found. The general pattern was that salary aspirations exceeded expectations.

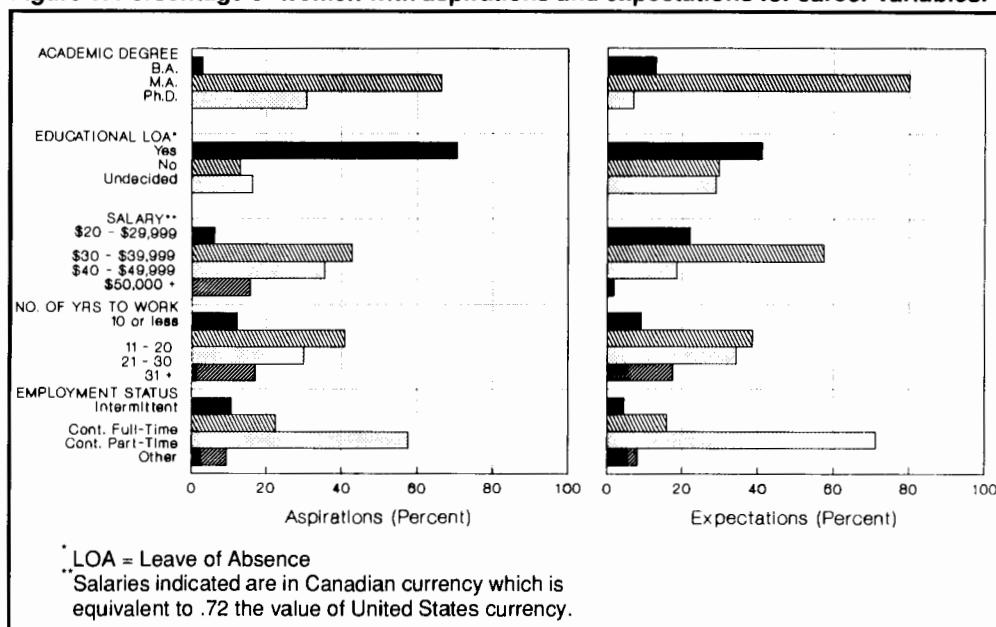
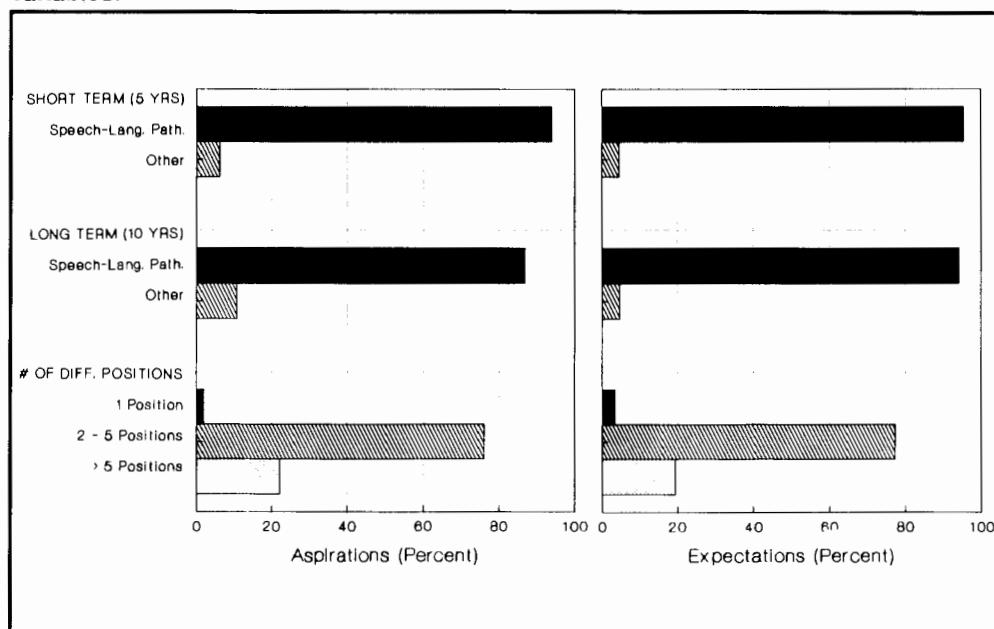
Time Commitment

Commitment to career was examined by having subjects select which of five time ranges in years (e.g., 11-20 years) they aspired or expected to work as a speech-language pathologist. Figure 1 shows that approximately half the respondents both aspired and expected to spend 21 or more years in the work force. Approximately 10% aspired and expected to work 10 years or less. Similar distributions of the number of working years were found across the career groups. Agreement between aspirations and expectations was from moderate to substantial.

Career commitment also was measured by intermittent or continuous and part-time or full-time employment status. Most respondents (80%) desired continuous work, with 58% wishing full-time and 22% wanting part-time employment. Similarly, most respondents (87%) expected continuous work; by contrast, 71% expected full-time and 16% expected part-time work (Figure 1). More working professionals than students wanted and expected part-time work.

Career Mobility

1. Short-Term and Long-Term Plans. To obtain information about personnel retention and occupation mobility, women were asked both whether they would like to be and whether they expected to be working in the field in five years' time (short-term) and in ten years' time (long-term). Almost all (90-100%) respondents both wanted and expected to be in the field in five years' and ten years' time (Figure 2). Expectations and aspirations were similar for the three student groups. The working speech-language pathologist group, however, aspired to alternative plans; 12% selected another career and 5% aspired to raise a family.

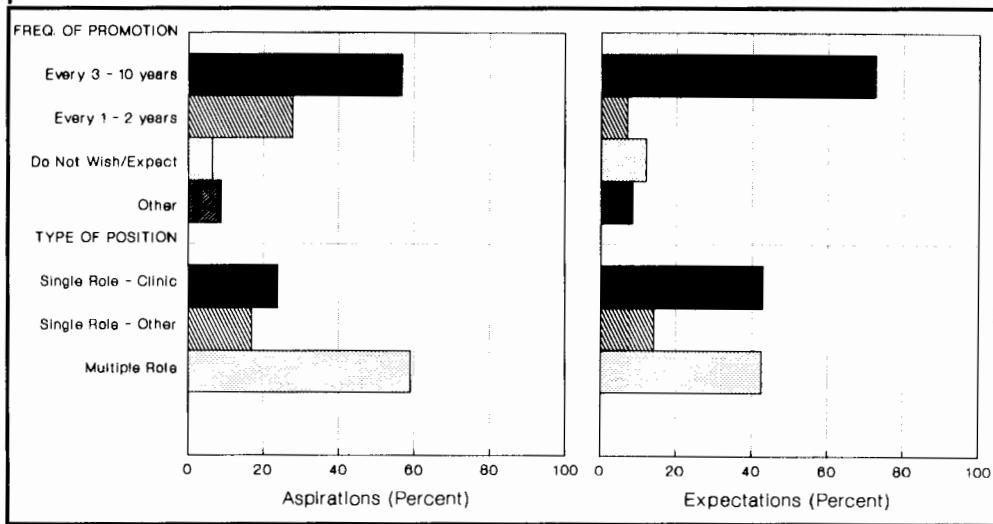
Figure 1. Percentage of women with aspirations and expectations for career variables.**Figure 2. Percentage of women with aspirations and expectations for career/job mobility variables.**

2. Job Mobility. The number of positions women wanted and expected to have during their career provided an index of job mobility. As shown in Figure 2, approximately 75% both wanted and expected to have from two to five different positions. There were no statistically significant differences for either desired or expected mobility across the four career stage groups. As career path progressed from preparation to employment, aspirations and expectations converged, with almost

perfect agreement for the working speech-language pathology group.

Frequency of Promotion

Frequency of promotion has been used as one measure of career growth or progress. To evaluate this career aspect, each respondent indicated whether she wanted and expected no

Figure 3. Percentage of women with aspirations and expectations for position type and promotion variables.

promotions, promotion at least every 1-2 years, at least every 3-10 years, or other. The most frequently aspired (57%) and expected (73%) promotion was every 3-10 years (Figure 3). However, almost 30% wanted a more accelerated promotion rate of every 1-2 years, although they did not expect to achieve this in reality. Overall, 6% did not wish to be promoted (10 of these 11 respondents were working speech-language pathologists) and 25% of this working group did not expect to be promoted.

Aspirations and expectations for frequency of promotion generally lacked congruence for each career group. In general, the discrepancies were in the direction of a slower promotion rate expected than desired.

Type of Position

To our knowledge, there were no data available that represented a career ladder for speech-language pathologists. One might expect that moving to positions that require greater responsibility would be considered an advancement along the career ladder. Thus, the questions about type of position wanted and expected were open-ended, with several examples provided to the respondent for illustrative purposes. Responses were categorized into the single role positions of clinician and other (administrator, supervisor, lecturer) or multiple role positions (combinations of clinician, administrator, supervisor, lecturer).

Figure 3 shows that respondents most frequently aspired to multiple role positions (59%). The percentage increased across the career stage groups. The single role position of clinician (24%) ranked second, with this selection decreasing across the four career stage groups.

Although expectations for the single role clinician position and a multiple role position were equal (43%) for the overall group, this resulted from opposing changes across the career stage groups cancelling each other out. To illustrate, 72% of second year students expected to be clinicians, only 28% of working professionals expected this position. By contrast, 28% of second year students expected a multiple role position, while 54% of working professionals did.

Agreement between desired type of position and that expected varied from fair to substantial. Disagreements occurred in the direction of aspiring to positions other than that of clinician, although expecting to be in this role.

Discussion

The educational aspirations of this sample of Canadian women would be rated as high. Thirty percent aspired to three degrees, compared with the 10% of female and 23% of male university students studied by Sutherland (1978). Westbrook and Nordholm (1985) reported that 33% of their working professional speech-language pathologists planned further professional study. When these plans included a higher degree, however, it was a master's.

Educational expectations for these Canadian women were lower than their aspirations. Perhaps many of the women with lower expectations were also those with lower aspirations, those who did not wish to continue their education. Lower expectations for taking an educational leave, especially among the working professional group, may reflect its impracticality either for economic reasons or for work environment restrictions. Alternatively, these women may have felt able to assume

multiple roles of working and attending an educational program.

Discrepancies between educational aspirations and expectations for these women appeared rather compartmentalized. Almost all wanted (90%) and expected (94%) to be working in speech-language pathology in 10 years. The majority expected to be employed on a continuous full-time basis. A large percentage of these women's salary aspirations spanned the \$30-49,999 ranges, and salary expectations were generally one range lower than aspirations. This salary gap was confirmed using the actual salary reports provided by working professionals. It appeared logical and consistent with the desire to achieve career success that they would aspire to a higher salary range than they were already achieving.

Having selected a career, a majority of these women both hoped and planned to devote a considerable number (at least 21) of their available working years to it. Their responses were consistent with United States women's pattern of working an average of 29.3 years and appeared compatible with combining career and family roles, the most frequent life style pattern selected by the Australian speech-language pathologists studied by Nordholm, Westbrook, and Walker (1978) and Westbrook and Nordholm (1985).

Career commitment may be measured by employment status and career duration. Continuous full-time employment is viewed as being more involved in career than part-time or intermittent statuses. Overall, the aspirations and expectations for the majority of the women studied were for full-time employment. The desire and expectation for alternative options to full-time work were greatest for the working professional group. At least moderate agreement occurred between aspirations and expectations for the women at these career stages. Discrepancies followed the pattern that alternatives to continuous full-time employment were desirable but not expected.

Whether speech-language pathologists remain in the field or whether they select other occupations during their career paths has importance, such as estimating the supply of personnel in the work force. Almost all the students studied wanted and expected to be in the field in 5 and 10 years' time. Although only 6% of the working speech-language pathologists expected an alternative occupation in 10 years, more than one-quarter desired a change. A proportion of this size suggests the need to examine this issue further.

The majority of the women studied expected to be in the work force for at least 21 years and 75% wished and expected from 2-5 positions in their career. Estimates of job mobility could therefore be calculated. Greatest mobility, with 5 positions over a 20 year time span, would represent a change every

four years; least mobility, with 2 positions over a 20 year time span, would correspond to a change every 10 years. Although job mobility per se was not independently examined, Punch (1983) reported that within a three year time span, 39.8% of ASHA members changed professional activity (e.g., supervision, service provision, etc.) and 39.2% changed work setting (e.g., schools, hospital, etc.).

Career development and career success have traditionally been associated with job promotion. Described as progression through the ranks or higher position, promotion is viewed as a positive mark in a career path (Gutek & Larwood, 1987; Larwood & Gattiker, 1987). Therefore, it was predicted that this group of women who expected to have a long tenure in the work force would desire promotions. That over one-half the women aspired to a promotion at least once every 3-10 years and another quarter wished more frequent promotion, supported this hypothesis. However, a segment of the working speech-language pathologist group (10) did not wish to be promoted, and fully 25% (20) did not expect to be. Whether no promotion potential existed within the job structure, whether the increased responsibility associated with promotion was not desirable, or whether the potential changes in professional activities may not have been viewed as desirable (Martin, et al., 1987) are some, although not all, possible explanations.

That expectations did not generally meet aspirations did not appear to cause women to leave the profession. However, obstacles to career advancement would seem to be an important issue to monitor in a long term study of speech-language pathology.

It is difficult to determine whether type of position selected represented anything other than an expressed preference for specific professional activities or a preference for more varied activities. The high frequency of aspiration and expectation for multiple role positions across the four career stage groups might reflect a perception that these were higher status positions. Westbrook and Nordholm (1985) reported that speech-language pathologists did seek higher positions, although status and promotion may have been confounded in their study.

If the finding of few significant changes across the four career stage groups studied here is replicated with future research, this suggests that aspirations and expectations of several career variables are relatively stable. This permits and indeed suggests counselling future speech-language pathologists about career issues early in their career development.

The data reported here are subject to limitations. Although a substantial number (171) of subjects were included, it was

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not possible to select a random sample and, although there are no apparent biases in the data, this methodological limitation is acknowledged. Cross-sectional data were used to infer longitudinal progression relative to career stage. Future research needs to follow speech-language pathologists longitudinally.

Summary

Four groups of Canadian women at different stages of career preparation and practice completed a survey questionnaire that contained demographic information and questions about aspects of their career aspirations and expectations. High aspirations were evident in the educational area. Many aspired to obtain a doctorate degree and to take an educational leave of absence. Aspirations for stability seemed apparent from their desire to remain speech-language pathologists in the next 10 years, to work in the work force for upwards of 20 years, and to limit their job mobility. These women desired salaries in the upper ranges associated with multiple role positions and promotions at least every 3 to 10 years. Many desired part-time work.

Expectations matched aspirations in several areas, indicating that their aspirations were viewed as achievable goals. Length of time in the work force, retention in the speech-language pathology field, and job mobility showed this congruence. In other areas, expectations did not meet aspirations, particularly for educational goals, income, and frequency of promotion, several aspects that are associated with upward career mobility. Their expectation was that they would probably be on a full-time basis in contrast to their aspiration for less time commitment. Where congruence was lacking for type of position, many expected a single role clinician position rather than a multiple role position.

Limitations to this study are recognized, particularly as they relate to generalization of the data. With due caution in mind, finding few changes across the four stage groups suggests that it may be important to inform future speech-language pathologists about career aspects and development as early as possible in their career plans.

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