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GENDER, EDUCATION, BACKGROUND AND CAREER PROGRESSION: CASE STUDY OF RADCLIFFE COLLEGE GRADUATES

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Abstract

This study explores the professional development of female graduates of Radcliffe College, an Ivy League college in the United States. A secondary statistical analysis of the *1977 Radcliffe Centennial survey* shows how changing social, political, institutional, and economic forces influenced the post-graduate career pathways of female alumnae. Independent of era, a Radcliffe degree could propel most women to the second tier professional status level of managers. Regardless of social class background, the women experienced similar career trajectories. However it was extremely rare for these women to climb to the highest step on the career ladder, indicating the difficulties of overcoming institutional and social barriers to advancement.

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Introduction

This article examines the role and impact of social class in graduates of Radcliffe College, an Ivy League institution in the United States, during the middle decades of the 20th century in terms of their post-graduate career development. More specifically, this study analyzes how social class, gender, and historical context contributed to alumnae vocational patterns by asking to what extent did the professional status attainment and career involvement for Radcliffe women differ due to class background and cohort?

Findings can also be used to assess whether higher education – the great historical leveling mechanism – can serve as a vehicle for upward mobility regardless of gender and not as a site for replicating class hierarchies. This study links to the present by asking how much progress highly educated women have made in the professions during the last fifty years.

Since the early 1970s, studies in vocational psychology (Harmon, 1971, 1972) have presented compelling evidence that women have been confronted by considerable

barriers in their attainment of occupations that are reflective of their talents and interests. Studies reveal that women are confronted with more complex career decisions than men in part because they have been trapped between devotion to career advancement and motherhood (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Harmon, 1994; Ireland, 1993).

The literature on the career psychology of women (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Harmon, 1994; Harmon & Farmer, 1983; Hopfl & Atkinson, 2000) has highlighted the vast inequities that impact differentially on the lives of girls and women as they prepare for work and as they seek to engage in meaningful working lives. Women's vocational psychology has also recognized that sexism impacts career trajectories and vocational decision making. Brooks and Forrest (1994) claimed that women are confronted with substantial power differentials in the work force, they lack access to the most productive and facilitative conditions that would promote satisfying and rewarding work as a consequence of a labor system that differentially distributes based on demographics and not merit or effort.

Additionally, a major point of contention within vocational psychology is how social class determines the course and trajectory of one's working life. Some academics argue that social class functions as a structural factor, determining access to resources and supports that would foster high levels of occupational attainment (Blustein *et al.*, 2002; Rossides, 1990; Sewell & Hauser, 1975). In comparison, cultural production scholars (Willis, 1977) suggest that various aspects of a given social class are internalized into one's beliefs and values system. Critical to recognize is that social class is also confounded with race and gender (Helms & Cook, 1999; Hopfl & Atkinson, 2000; Liu, 2001). The distribution of resources within the United States has historically and currently been determined to a great extent by race and gender (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987) and consequently the vast majority of the poor in America are people of color (Helms & Cook, 1999).

Research has shown that social class determines one's access to the resources needed to obtain employment (Brown, Fakunaga, Umemoto, & Wicker, 1996), educational credentials (McDonough, 1997), and occupational attainment (Sewell & Hauser, 1975). Social class can either facilitate or inhibit access to the resources and barriers that influence the opportunities that people are given in their work lives (Brown *et al.*, 1996). Similarly, empirical research reveals that access to the correlates of satisfying and empowering working experiences is powerfully directed by the circumstances of one's family of origin.

If an individual is born into an upper-middle-class family with access to good housing, adequate healthcare, and the sanctioned social attributes of a given culture, she is far more likely to accomplish a work life that will parallel the great career trajectory of the post World War II period (Super, 1957). In comparison, individuals from lower socio-economic classes who have not had access to jobs that offer lucrative or even sufficient salaries are confronted with more barriers in their occupational attainment and fulfillment of their aspirations (Brown *et al.*, 1996).

In regards to the selectivity of Radcliffe College, it is well known that the most sought-after employers favor the graduates of prestigious institutions in their recruitment practices (Henson, 1980). However, recent studies have shown that students from non-privileged (low-SES) backgrounds at top-tier schools have lower career aspirations than do their peers from affluent (high-SES) backgrounds (Astin, 1993; Boatsman, 1995;

Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Low-SES students are less likely to network and to pursue other academic routes to material success after graduation (Walpole, 1997; Walpole et al., 2001). Furthermore, working-class students, graduating with the same grades from the same institutions are less likely to attend graduate school and ultimately garner lower incomes and hold less prestigious positions than their affluent counterparts (Grimes & Morris, 1997; Nunez, Cuccaro-Alamin, & Carroll, 1998; Overall, 1995).

Study methodology

For the purpose of this study, a secondary analysis was conducted on an archived study at the Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Study's Henry A. Murray Center, *The Radcliffe Centennial Survey* originally conducted by Matina Horner in 1977. As part of its centennial celebration, Radcliffe College undertook and financially sponsored this comprehensive survey of the life experiences of its alumnae from the classes of 1900-1975. The survey included questions about their family background and current family status, occupational and educational histories, and major life activities.

During the thirty year time period (1940-1970) under investigation for this study, 3,354 alumnae participated in the survey. For individual classes, response rates ranged from 29% to 76%. Seven hundred seven (23.1%) respondents were graduates from the 1940s. At the time of the survey, these women were between the ages of 48-57 years and had been out of college for 26-37 years. One thousand eighty nine respondents (32.7%) were graduates from the 1950s. In 1977 when responding to the survey, these women were between the ages of 36-47 years and had been out of college for 16-27 years. One thousand four hundred seventy two (44.2%) respondents were graduates from the 1960s. These women were between the ages of 26-35 years at the time of the survey and had been out of college for 6-17 years.

The sample consists almost entirely of white women and thus a limitation to this study is that social class is not strongly confounded with ethnicity. More than 50% of the respondents were first-born children. Graduates increasingly received advanced degrees over the thirty-year period. The number of women who married peaked in the 1950s at 95.3% and then dropped in the 1960s to a relative low of 86.1%. Similarly, the number of Radcliffe women who became mothers peaked in the 1950s at 88.9% and then dropped in the 1960s to a relative low of 65%. However, the low marital and motherhood percentages are misleading given that graduates of the 1960s were still single women of traditional marriage-age and had yet to reach their peak fertility years by the time of the survey in 1977. Student diversity also increased over the thirty year period. There was a significant increase in immigrant students, non-Anglo Saxon students, and students whose parents were not born in the US.

The concept of social class

The concept of socio-economic status has been variously defined and measured (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). This data set includes two of the most standard social class indicators: fathers' educational level and occupational status (Coleman & Rainwater, 1978; Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958). A combination of these two variables is used to determine student's social class background. Using this information, women are considered to be working-class if their fathers had a high school degree or less. These fathers had occupations such as refrigeration mechanic in an ice cream plant, depot agent on the railroad, campus security officer, laborer, and electrician. Women are

considered to be non-working-class if their fathers had a college or advanced degree. These fathers had occupations such as engineers, chemists, professors, dentists, lawyers, and bankers. Given that their fathers had been college educated, it can be assumed that this group of women had been exposed to embodied cultural capital in childhood. Their fathers probably had higher incomes, attaining occupational prestige with colleagues with high cultural and social capital.

During the middle decades of the twentieth century, higher education was not necessarily a prerequisite to professional status; thus for the group of women whose fathers attended some college, the social class categorization was determined by prestige level of occupation. Clearly a limitation to this analysis is that the study is constrained by the relatively small percentage of working-class women who attended Radcliffe and by the rudimentary categorizations of social class. Yet even with approximately 8% of working-class survey respondents, the analysis provided an important perspective on gender, social class, and career development.

Of the 3354 women who graduated between the years of 1940-1970, 87 of these women did not list enough information to determine social class by neither citing their father's educational level and/or his occupation. Of the remaining women, 3009 (92.1%) classify as non-working-class. Two hundred fifty-eight (7.9%) women classify as working-class. During the 1940s decade there was a total of 84 (11.4%) working-class students. During the 1950s decade there was a total of 89 (8.9%) working-class students. During the 1960s decade there was a total of 84 (5.8%) working-class students.

The number of working-class students basically did not change across the three decades even though the population of the student body increased in size. Similar to the demographic trends based on decade of attendance, over 50% of all students were first born. There were also significantly more immigrant students from working-class backgrounds. Women from both class backgrounds were just as likely to marry, partner with upper-class husbands, and become mothers.

Measuring professional outcomes

The Hollingshead and Redlich Occupation scale (1958) was used to categorize the occupational status attainment of the study's participants. The scale ranges from the low evaluation of unskilled physical labor toward the more prestigious use of skill, through the creative talents, ideas, and management of individuals. The seven positions on the scale include: 1. Executives and proprietors of large concerns and major professionals, 2. Managers and proprietors of medium-sized business and lesser professionals, 3. Administrators of medium size business and lesser professionals, 4. Owners of small business, clerical and sales workers, and technicians, 5. Skilled Workers, 6. Semiskilled Workers, 7. Unskilled Workers.

Since the 1960s, studies have been conducted on women's career orientation (Matthews & Tiedeman, 1964). The early studies suggested that the majority of young women did not plan to work outside the home. Studies in the early 1970s strongly suggested that the majority of young women planned to combine marriage and career, thereby replacing the centrality of marital and motherhood roles in the lives of women (Rand & Miller, 1972; Watley & Kaplan, 1971).

Due to the growing number of young women planning to combine career and marriage, the homemaking versus career orientation distinction decreased in usefulness as a dependent variable. Rather, it was necessary to describe the nature and degree of career orientation to understand women's career choice behavior. Another major approach to the description of women's career development utilizes the concept of career patterns originally developed by Super (1957) and first used in the study of male career development. A myriad of scales have been developed to extend the theory of women's career orientation based on differing levels of vocational participation and occupational prestige (Betz, 1984; Harmon, 1967; Wolfson, 1976; Zytowski, 1969).

For the purposes of this analysis, the following scale originally designed by Matina Horner for *The Radcliffe Centennial Survey* was used to determine the career involvement of participants. Horner created the following scale to measure the graduates' participation in paid and volunteer jobs: 0. No Information, 1. No Work, 2. Part-time volunteers, 3. Full-time volunteers, 4. Part-time paid work, 5. Full-time paid work.

To measure career involvement based on both cohort and social class, ANOVA was employed. The following statements explain the statistical tests. For graduates from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, ANOVA measured differences in career intensity by years of age: twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties. For graduates from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, ANOVA measured differences in career intensity by social class background.

To measure professional attainment based on both cohort and social class, a chi-square test was computed for students' age and level of job prestige on the 1958 Hollingshead and Redlich Occupational Scale. The following statements explain the statistical tests. For graduates from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, a chi-square test measured differences in professional status by respondents' years of age: twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties. For graduates from the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, a chi-square test measured differences in professional status by respondents' social class background.

Main findings

Throughout their post-college lives, women from working-class backgrounds were more likely to have higher career involvement than their peers from non-working-class backgrounds. Although career involvement for women during their twenties and thirties by social class background was not statistically significant by social class background, overall, women from non-working-class backgrounds were less likely to work than their peers from working-class backgrounds (**Figure 1**).

Career involvement for women in their forties by social class background was statistically significant, $F(1, 3261) = 8.501, p < .05$, ($\text{Eta} = .003$, power = .830). Career involvement for women in their fifties by social class background was statistically significant, $F(1, 3264) = 8.494, p < .05$, ($\text{Eta} = .003$, power = .830). Overall, women from working-class backgrounds volunteered more and worked in the paid labor force more than their non-working-class peers at midlife. Regardless of social class background, women's career involvement score was highest immediately post-graduation and decreased sequentially by age.

Graduates of the 1940s and 1950s during their twenties were most likely to work in the paid-labor force less than thirty hours a week. By the time they reached their thirties and

were raising children, they predominantly were involved in community and volunteer activities. They never returned to the paid labor force during their forties and fifties.

However, graduates of the 1960s during their twenties were more likely to work full-time in the paid labor force in comparison to graduates of the two prior decades (**Figure 2**). Women who had graduated in the late 1960s had not yet reached their late thirties at the time of the survey in 1977 and thus career involvement data for their thirties is not completely accurate. In addition, graduates of the 1960s had not yet reached their forties and fifties by the time of the survey and hence there was no data for career involvement for these age groups.

There was significant difference on professional status attainment for women in their twenties by social class background, $\chi_{(7)} = 25.371, p = .001$. A higher percentage of non-working-class graduates than working-class graduates achieved positions at the top three professional status levels immediately following graduation. As they approached mid-life, graduates from working-class backgrounds eventually achieved equal professional heights in comparison to their non-working-class graduates. It may have taken women from working-class backgrounds longer to achieve top professional status, but their long-term dedication reflects their professional motivation and talent (**Figure 3**).

A statistical analysis was conducted to determine the highest Hollingshead ranking that the graduates from working-class and non-working-class backgrounds ever achieved. Overall, only 8% of working-class graduates achieved the top professional status as major professionals in comparison to 21% of non-working-class graduates. Sixty-seven percent of working-class graduates achieved the second status level as minor professionals in comparison to 63% of non-working-class graduates. Hence, the percentage of women from working-class backgrounds who achieved major professional status was not as high as the percentage from non-working-class women. However, the percentage of women from working-class backgrounds who became minor professionals and administrators was higher than the percentage of non-working-class women.

Graduates of the 1940s held a significantly smaller percentage of positions at the top three professional status levels than graduates of later decades during their twenties, $\chi_{(14)} = 81.551, p < .05$. Similarly during their thirties, graduates of the 1940s held a significantly smaller percentage of positions at the top three status levels than graduates of later decades, $\chi_{(14)} = 31.022, p < .05$. However by the time they reached their forties, there was no significant difference on status attainment for graduates of the 1940s compared to graduates of other decades. Graduates of the 1940s were also the only cohort to reach their fifties by the time of the survey, $\chi_{(14)} = 24.685, p < .05$. They were predominantly working as minor professionals at this time.

A statistical analysis was conducted to determine the highest Hollingshead ranking that the graduates of the 1940s achieved. Overall, only 13% of 1940s graduates achieved the top professional status as major professionals, 58% of 1940s graduates achieved the second status level as minor professionals, and 10% achieved the third status level as administrators and managers.

Graduates of the 1950s during their twenties and thirties held a significantly larger percentage of positions at the top three professional status levels than graduates of the 1940s, but held a significantly smaller percentage of positions at the top three professional status levels than graduates of the 1960s. Yet by their forties, there was no

significant difference on status attainment for graduates of the 1950s compared to graduates of the 1940s. Graduates of the 1950s did not reach their fifties by the time of the survey and hence there is no data on professional status attainment. The results for the highest Hollingshead ranking that graduates of the 1950s ever achieved mirrored the findings for 1940s graduates.

However, Radcliffe graduates of the 1960s held the largest percentage of positions at the top three professional status levels amongst the three cohorts during their twenties (**Figure 4**). Women who had graduated in the late 1960s had not yet reached their late thirties at the time of the survey and thus data for their thirties is not completely accurate. In addition, graduates of the 1960s had not yet reached their forties and fifties by the time of the survey and hence there was no data for professional status attainment for these age groups.

Career advancement, gender and social class

Working-class woman may have actively resisted what has been referred to as some of the gender-based “traps” of middle-class family life. Women from working-class backgrounds wanting to avoid the kind of domestic subordination they observed in their mothers (who most likely were not college educated, had limited career prospects, and were financially dependent upon their husbands) may have been reluctant to ascribe to the gender ideology demanded by the upper-class Radcliffe culture to become supportive wives, dedicated mothers, and upstanding members of their communities. Hence they were more likely to choose to continue involvement in the work-force as opposed to becoming full-time homemakers during their mid-life in comparison to their peers from non-working-class backgrounds.

Despite their humble origins, the women from working-class backgrounds apparently succeeded in their efforts to achieve professional success. These women clearly had talent and a drive to move away from their family’s social class environment. Their success in doing so is reflected in the fact that at midlife they were indistinguishable (at least in terms of professional status attainment) from their more privileged sisters. The only significant difference among the women was in their twenties immediately following graduation when non-working-class women achieved significantly more top positions in the work field.

There were no significant differences in professional status attainment for women from the two social class backgrounds in their thirties, forties, and fifties. Non-working-class women’s faster post-bachelor start in the work force and attainment of more top-level jobs during their twenties might have resulted from greater economic and social capital/networks and possibly their upper-class habitus (an embodied aspect of cultural capital). In order to level out any advantages that non-working-class women would have had due to cultural capital and family connections, working-class women may have needed to attain advanced degrees. Working-class women would most likely have been in graduate school during their twenties and thus achieved equal professional standing to non-working-class graduates in their thirties.

In support of these findings, Stewart and Ostrove (1993) also found that Radcliffe graduates from 1947 and 1964 from working-class backgrounds achieved equal career heights in comparison to their upper-class peers. From a psychological viewpoint, they argued that Radcliffe women from working-class backgrounds saw their mothers as

“negative role models” in ascribing to the gender role expectations of the patriarchal working-class culture and successfully “lead lives different from those their mothers had led” (p. 491). This study implies that the contrary could also be a possibility; Radcliffe graduates from working-class backgrounds may in fact have perceived their mothers to be “positive role models” for combining both family and work.

In following their mothers’ paths, these working-class daughters *chose* to continue to work while raising a family despite the lack of financial necessity for such reasons as embodying the self-sufficiency as displayed by their mothers. Although their mothers may have been trapped in lower tier employment, such jobs enabled working-class women to have an identity outside their family. Radcliffe daughters of these working-class women may have been reluctant to be defined solely as wives and mothers in typical upper-class fashion. Having the model of their mothers, working-class Cliffies may have felt fortunate to have both the opportunity for more stimulating work than their mothers *and* their acquired knowledge to resist the trappings of the feminine mystique personified by their wealthy classmates.

Gender, families and careers

This analysis wrestles with the continuous tension circling feminism and the larger social context ideology that highly accomplished women in the twenty-first century are still struggling to balance; the dilemma between career and family commitments. More than a half century after Radcliffe graduates began positioning themselves as contenders for top status positions, there is still national controversy regarding this very issue. In fall 2005, *The New York Times* reported that approximately 60% of current female undergraduates at Yale (the trend is supposedly similar at other elite schools) plan to cut back work or stop working entirely when they have children (Story, 2005). These findings were criticized as “horrifyingly retro” and the author’s methodology was deemed shaky (Douglas, 2005; Marsden, 2005; Pollitt, 2005).

Similarly in 2003, Lisa Belkin’s *New York Times Magazine* cover story discussed her Princeton classmates, whose marginalization at work after having children was glowingly described as an “opt-out revolution” and which claimed that women “don’t run the world” because “they don’t want to” (Belkin, 2003)

Forty years after the initial awakenings of the women’s movement, the critical question still lingers decades later – “Why aren’t women making it in the workplace?” In stark contrast to the experiences of Radcliffe graduates who were fighting for gender equity in the workforce, Belkin’s (2003) central hypothesis detailed a different picture: women fail to reach senior positions in the workplace because they *choose* not to, placing motherhood first. This article raises the question as to whether the daughters of the path-breaking women of the 1960s have forgotten the accomplishments of their mothers who fought patriarchal barriers to give their offspring more equitable professional opportunities.

Cohort effect did influence Radcliffe graduates’ accomplishments in the professional world. As time progressed and with the emergence of the women’s movement, a higher percentage of women were becoming doctors and lawyers as well as being promoted to positions of executives and managers. However over the thirty year period, women did not radically advance in the professions; career patterns were relatively unchanged across the decades. Independent of decade, the top occupational status level contained

the smallest percentage of women and the second status level contained the largest percentage of women.

In other words, an Ivy League diploma thrust most women into the commonly referred to problem known in women's vocational literature as the "glass ceiling effect" when women easily advance to all but the top professional positions due to sexism in the work force. The feminist movement did, however, bring about some less noticeable changes; as a higher percentage of women were achieving the top status positions across time, a lower percentage of women were reaching their professional peak at the third and fourth status levels as administrators and owners of small businesses.

Women's decisions to work are constrained by the lack of family-friendly workplaces and policies and by the fact that after leaving the labor force, it is very difficult for women to reenter at the same level. Further, workplace policies affect work/family choices by limiting the ability of men to leave the workforce to care for children (Douglas, 2005; Marsden, 2005; Pollitt, 2005).

Conclusions

In recognition of the lingering professional barriers against women, a 2003 report by the U.S. Government Accounting Office on women's earnings found that sexism is still the predominant reason for the hierarchical professional achievement gap between women and men (Hartman, 2003). Only a portion of the difference between women's and men's earnings can be attributed to measurable differences in women's and men's characteristics. Analyzing data for the period 1983 to 2000, the GAO found that women earn about 44% less than men. Gender differences in work experience, education, occupation and industry of current employment, and other demographic and job characteristics explain about half of the wage gap, leaving an unexplained difference of approximately 20% of which discrimination is the most likely explanation (Hartman, 2003).

American women's participation in the most prestigious vocations has increased since the 1960s; today highly educated, upper income women are much less likely to drop out and much more likely to work for pay (Hartman, 2003) than Radcliffe graduates a half century ago. The problem is that American culture continues to encompass many values and social images that are contradictory and incompatible to professional women (Epstein, 1970).

This study shows that an Ivy League degree served as an equalizing economic force fifty years ago. Regardless of background, female graduates tended to have the same promising career progression and to encounter the same barriers to reaching the top level. Future research needs to explore in more depth whether higher education negates social class stratification across gender, different cohorts, and different types of institutions such as public universities and community colleges. Moreover the current career trajectories of female graduates from elite colleges can be analyzed to see if Ivy League degrees continue to act as an equalizer by which one's talent and abilities lead to professional success or failure regardless of social class background, gender, and historical era.

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Figure 1. Trend Analysis for Career Involvement Patterns over Time Based on Social Class Background

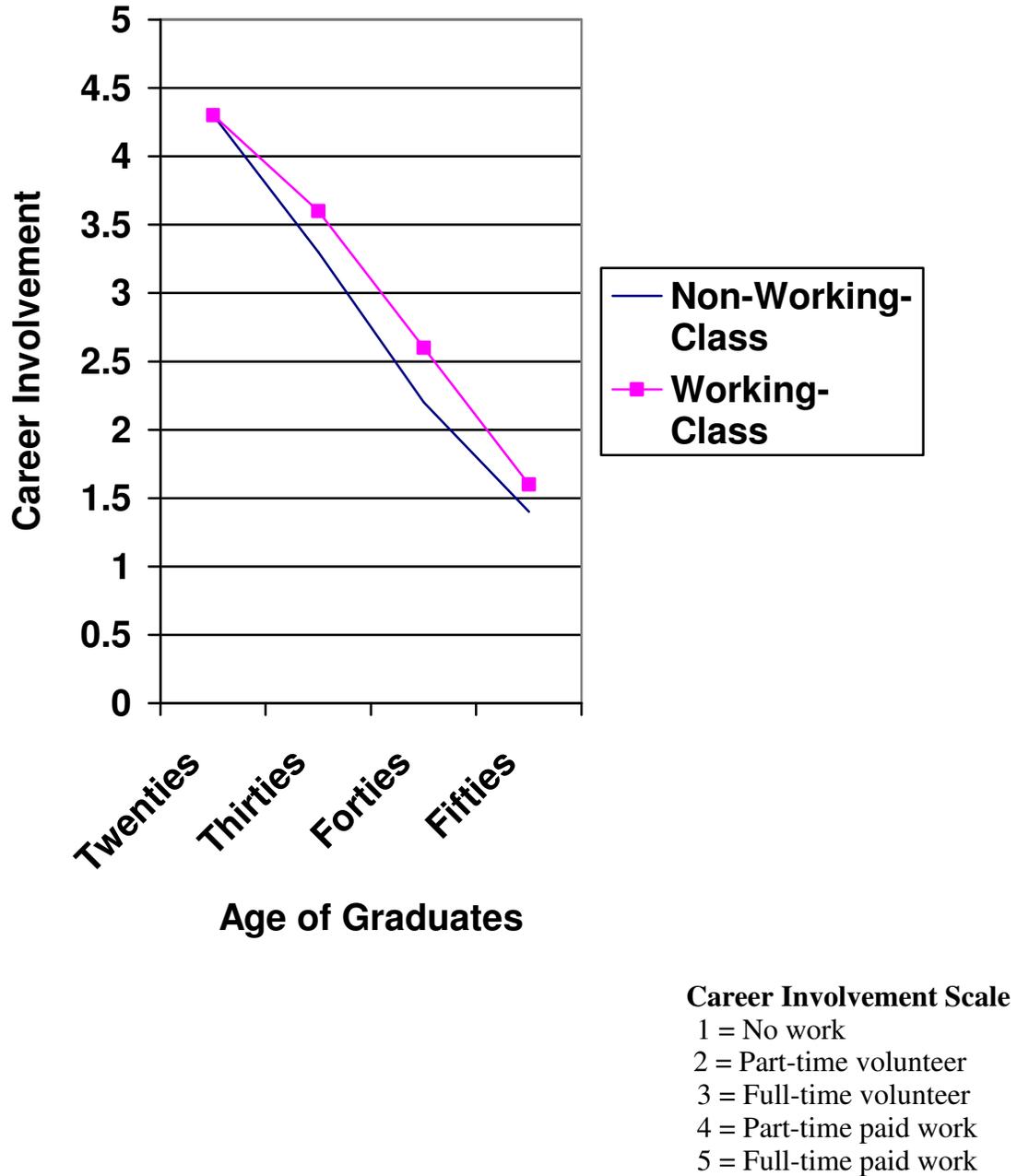
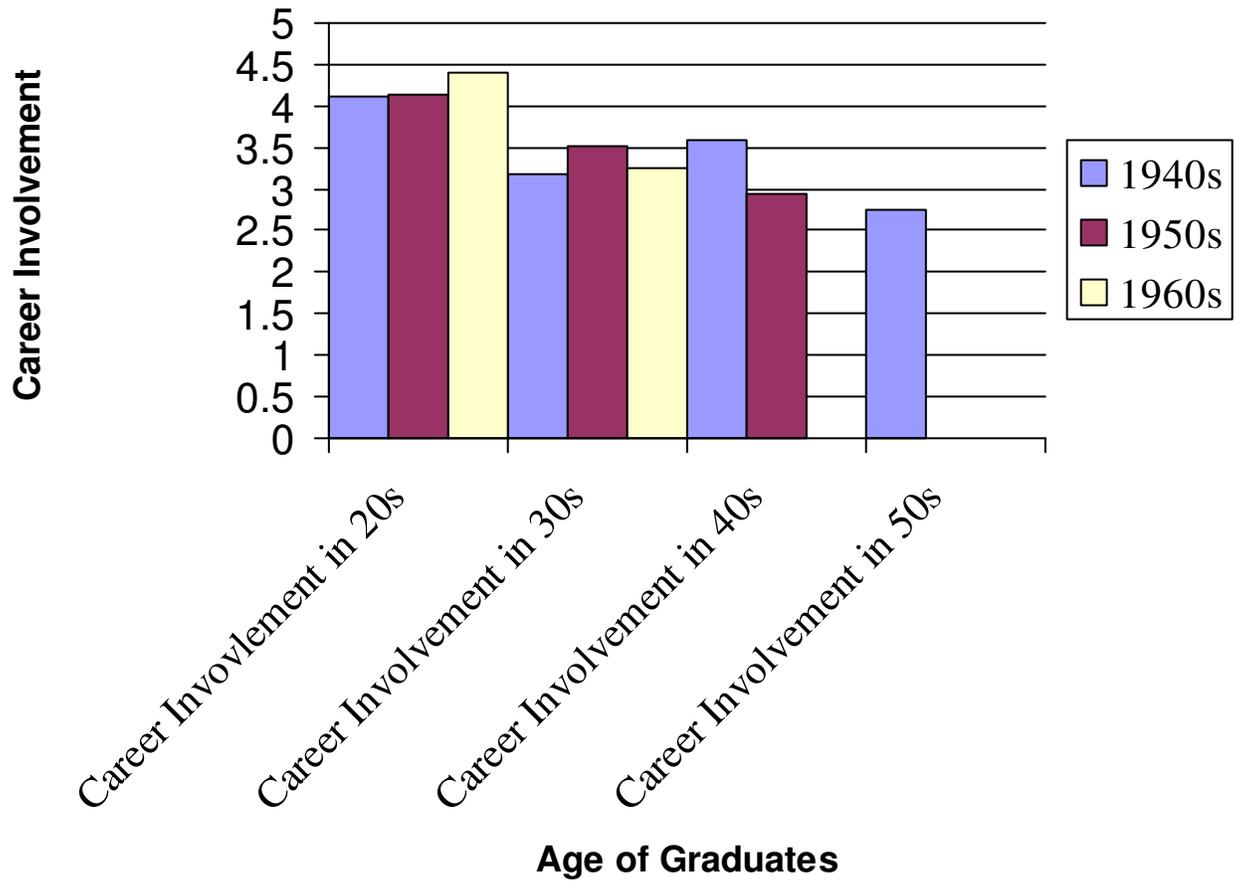


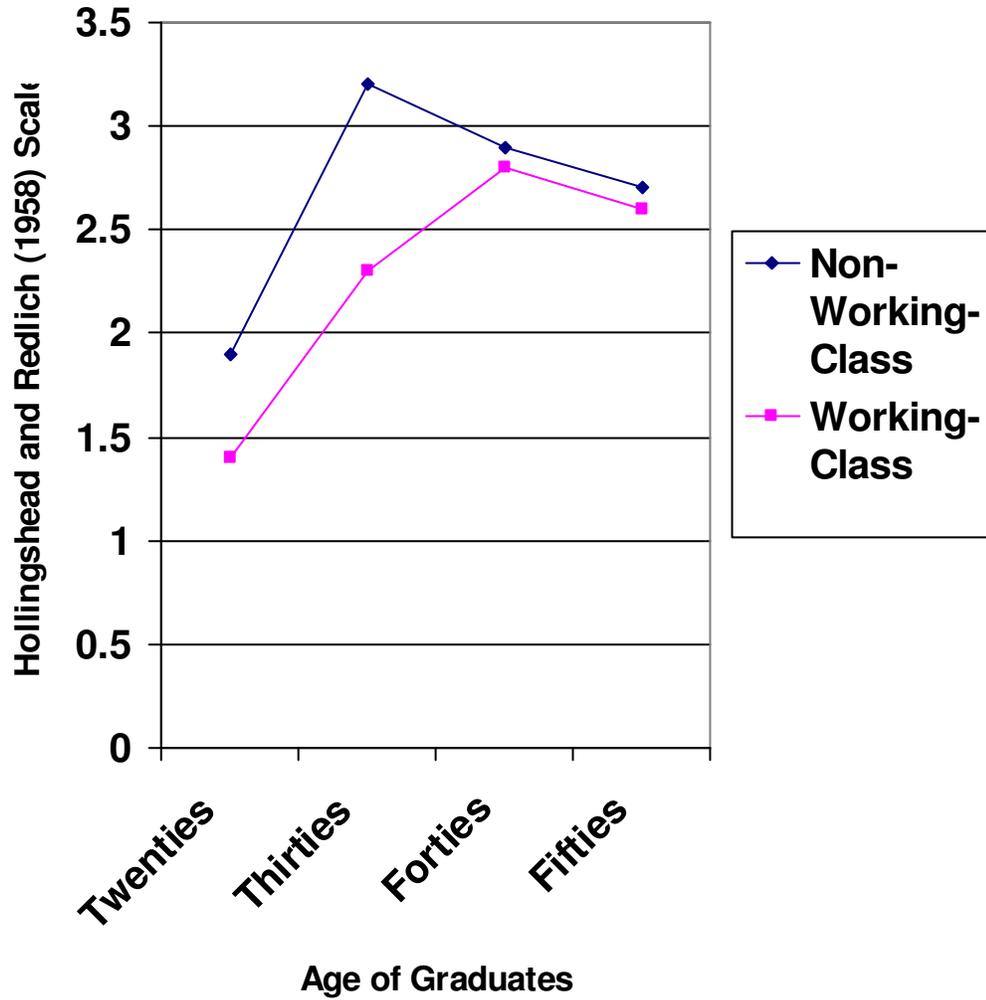
Figure 2. Career Involvement Trajectory by Decade of Attendance



Career Involvement Scale

- 1 = No work
- 2 = Part-time volunteer
- 3 = Full-time volunteer
- 4 = Part-time paid work
- 5 = Full-time paid work

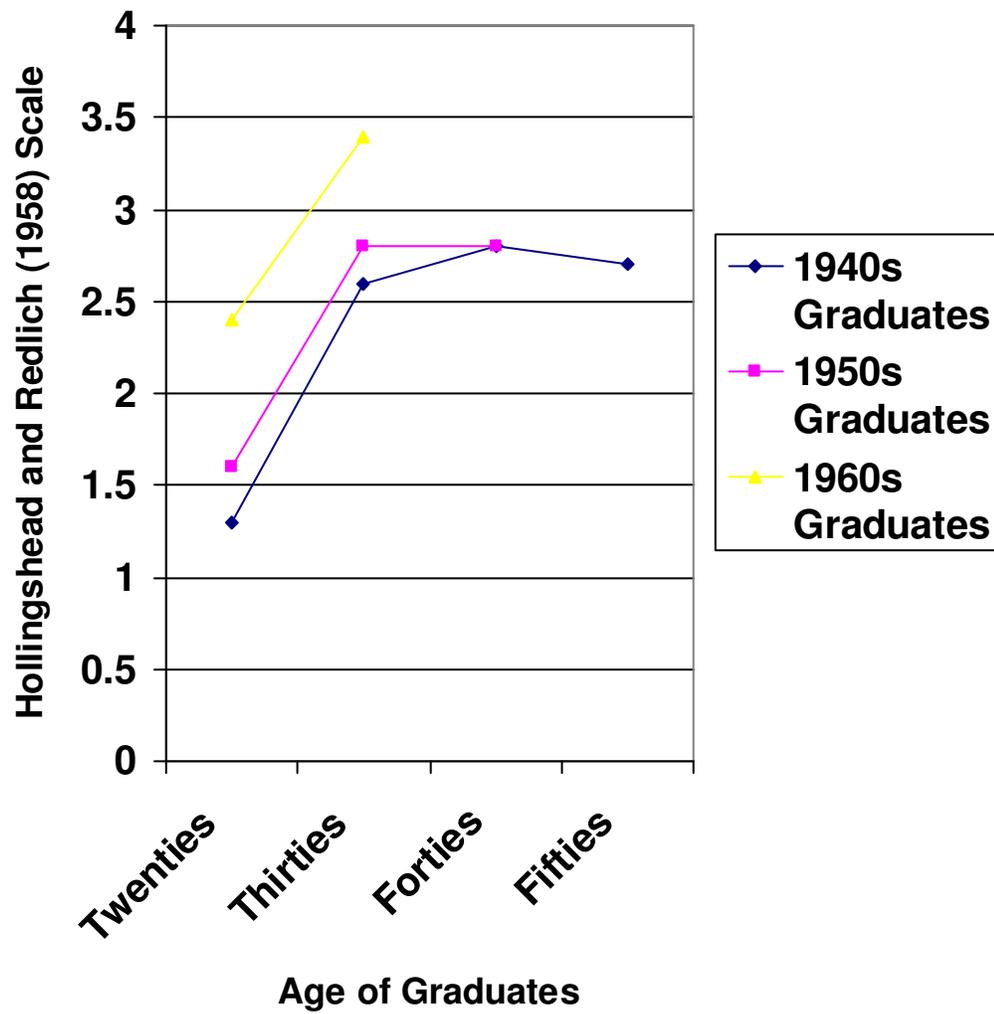
Figure 3. Trend Analysis for Professional Status Attainment Averages over Time Based on Social Class Background



Hollingshead and Redlich (1958) Scale

- 1 = Skilled Workers
- 2 = Administrators and Managers
- 3 = Minor Professionals
- 4 = Major Professionals

Figure 4. Trend Analysis for Professional Status Attainment over Time Based on Decade of Attendance



Hollingshead and Redlich (1958) Scale
1 = Skilled Workers
2 = Administrators and Managers
3 = Minor Professionals
4 = Major Professionals