

STUDYING PERSONALITY BY LIFE HISTORIES— BUSINESS GIRLS AND COLLEGE GIRLS.

RUTH SHONLE CAVAN

THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, CHICAGO.

Strictly speaking, life histories are fairly complete accounts of the person's life in all its phases and covering a sufficient period of time to indicate the genesis of important habits, interests, and attitudes. Such personal data are gathered by a variety of means. Some of the most common are by tests and questionnaires, interviews, written autobiographical documents, diaries, and letters. For particular problems, complete life histories are often not necessary and emphasis can be placed on a selected list of items.

The material presented here centers around the interests and problems of young business girls. It is part of a study now being made by the Religious Education Association of Chicago at the request and with the aid of the Y. W. C. A. The immediate purpose is to give more objective data than are now at hand to serve as the background for planning club and class programs. For comparative purposes, information on certain phases of the general problem has also been obtained for college girls.

The question may arise why business girls and college girls have come of the problem of so-called normal girls, that is, of girls who are able to handle their problems sufficiently well to should be studied. Perhaps the best answer is that they have not been thoroughly studied as yet. It is only recently that recognition has been given to the present conventional ways of living. The study of both college and business girls is justified by the fact that for most of the girls, college or business, whichever happens to be the lot of the individual girl, represents the first thorough and major readjustment the girl has been called upon to make. For the majority of children, the home they have known and been familiar with from infancy shelters them through their public school days. They are in an environment where their chief defects are often overlooked, where their faults are condoned, where they have love and affection, companionship in plenty, advice and counsel. They are usually dependent on the family group, not only economically, but also emotionally and for a large part of their satisfactions in the way of material needs of life (place to

sleep, food, selection of clothing, etc.) and also of psychological satisfactions (appreciation, response, praise, etc.)

In college or business the girl is at least semi-independent economically and only partially under family supervision for the spending of money. There is for each the necessity to adjust to new surroundings, to new living conditions, to new rules and conventions, to new people on every side; there is the necessity to make new friends as contacts with old ones drop away through disuse; to exert new skills, to become an individual rather than a member of a family, and to affiliate herself with new groups of which she eventually becomes a part as a new adjustment is worked out, as complete and comfortable as was the old family one.

During such a period of readjustment there is extra strain on every weakness in the girl's makeup. Deficiencies become more evident, and many which were passed over at home threaten the girl's ability to adjust to her new surroundings. There are several possibilities as to outcome. Her difficulties may have such a marked reflection in her personality that she becomes a "problem" and in time requires the attention of psychiatric care. Or she may worry along, not quite happy, but without acute personality or emotional difficulties. She is not mentally disorganized but she is socially unorganized. Or she may in time work out ways to obtain satisfactions for her major interests and feel herself competent to handle new problems as they arise. In doing this she may fit herself into a compact and routinized way of living as rigid as was the family and as difficult to break away from when some other change comes into her life. Or she may develop sufficient flexibility and resourcefulness within herself to make future changes and adjustments fairly simple.

In all this process of adjustment there is need for assistance to the girl and for study of the process, for at least three good reasons: to prevent major difficulties from arising; to assist a more rapid and adequate adjustment; to discover what training the girl might have had in previous years which would have assisted her.

The following methods and sources of information were used. A questionnaire containing 57 questions, all of which required not a "yes" or "no" but a detailed and original answer, was given to approximately 150 girls at summer Y. W. C. A. conferences. The same questionnaire was also filled out by 75 students in a woman's college. The Otis intelligence test, higher

form A, was given to approximately 200 business girls in five cities, together with a blank calling for 19 items of general information. Fifty girls were then given an hour's interview or induced to write life histories in which information was secured on educational and employment record and ambitions, the way they spent leisure time, their family, recreational, friendly, church, and other relationships. In addition to this original material, several sets of records at the Chicago Y. W. C. A. were examined and abstracted, library material was examined, and Y. W. C. A. secretaries all over the country were queried for such information as the problems and interests they had observed in business girls and the educational and recreational programs of their Y. W. C. A.'s.

The present study centers around three questions. What are the interests of business and of college girls—the aims, ideals and goals for which they actually plan or which they see in their day dreams? What are the problems of business and of college girls—the things which puzzle and worry them? How does the girl attempt to meet her problems—what psychological and educational resources has she for meeting them—what “counts” in making a good adjustment?

And finally, there is the question, of what interest is all this to educational psychology?

1. The interests will be considered first—since these give the pattern according to which the girl is forming or hopes to form her life.

Business girls assembled at the Y. W. C. A. business girls' conference at Camp Gray, Mich., last summer were asked to fill out the questionnaire already mentioned. 69 of the papers were from unmarried girls, under thirty years of age, and from American homes. These girls were between the ages of 18 and 30, with 68.3% between the ages of 18 and 24; $\frac{2}{3}$ of them were stenographers, secretaries, or bookkeepers; $\frac{2}{3}$ had graduated from high school. They lived in communities ranging in size from 6000 to 3,000,000 people. Most of them lived at home, most of them belonged to some church. From various checks, it seems safe to conclude that these girls represent one large sector of the business girls' group, the conservative, steady, convention-abiding sector.

Seventy-five college girls also answered the questionnaire. They were juniors and seniors in a woman's college of the middle

west. Two-thirds of them lived in the college dormitories, one-third lived at home. They came from towns ranging in size from 6,000 to 3,000,000 people, with the median sized town 65,000. They ranged in age from 16 to 23 years with the median at 20 years. They were as a group somewhat younger than the business girls studied. Two-thirds were church members. They formed a group comparable in background and major relationships with the business girls.

Interests may be divided into immediate, remote, and visionary. The girl's immediate interests may be discovered by learning what she does, particularly with her free time, and what she enjoys doing with her friends. Sports, clubs, and such recreations as dancing, music, shows, are the chief interests which hold the business girl to her girl chum. Work, education, church work, reading, are mentioned by only a very few girls. Clubs, the family circle, dancing and shows are the chief evening occupations. Night school, lectures and reading are mentioned by a very few girls. On Sundays, the church and home predominate as places of interest. During vacations, camps and conferences were most popular, with home or visits to relatives, summer resorts (often with the family) and travel and "new things" following closely. Her hobbies are sports, with dancing, reading and music at a lower level. In other words, the girl's favorite way of spending her free time is with people, and she favors amusements with action, thrill, and romance.

In immediate interests, judging from the question on hobbies and one on activities with her girl chum, the college girl shows the same major interest in sports and athletics which the business girl has. She claims a greater interest in music, art, dramatics, reading and writing than the business girl, perhaps because her daily round of studies has accentuated her interest in them, and often aspires to some future eminence in some line of art.

For their more remote goals, both business and college girls have marriage. Eighty-one per cent of the business girls and eighty per cent of the college girls say they hope to be married by the time they are 35. More college than business girls hope to combine some type of work with marriage or regard work as a satisfactory substitute for marriage. In their day dreams, both business and college girls testify that they dream of marriage and of future business or professional success. For the college girl there are also day dreams of travel.

The business girl is not without her interest in travel. The

question, what would you do if you inherited \$1000, brought the reply, travel, from thirty-five percent of the business girls and forty-eight percent of the college girls. Helping at home ranked as second choice with the business girls, while save part or all and obtain education tied for third place. With the college girls education ranked second with save some or all a poor third. Very few college girls would contribute any to their families. This ranking of ways of spending \$1000 indicates, not less concern of the college girls for their homes, but a greater economic need on the part of parents of business girls and the willingness of the girls to shoulder some of the responsibility. The business girls' desire to save indicates also one fundamental type of past and future experience which differs between the two groups.

Both groups are seriously interested in men and while there is a minority in each group which does not have dates with men most of them do. For the college girls, dating is more or less confined to the summer vacation. For business girls the norm is one man friend with one to three dates per week. For college girls the norm is one to three men with one to three dates per week.

To sum up, we would say both groups are interested in sports and physical activities, both wish deeply to travel, and hope eventually to marry. Both have a steady interest in church and home. For a certain number of each group, money, clothes, personal status, are of prime concern. The business girl has an interest in education in general, the college girl in certain cultural and art phases. Both are concerned with their immediate occupations (jobs or school) and wonder rather vaguely how to obtain future success.

2. Next, the problems: What are the actual problems that disturb business and college girls? These problems also indicate interests—the interests which have given trouble.

A certain number both of business and college girls fail so utterly to adjust to problems, that they come to some type of official notice or develop psychopathic qualities. We will pass over this group and consider only the problems of the normal group.

One question asked was, "what do you lack to make you really happy?" Sixteen percent of the business girls and thirty-eight percent of the college girls said they lacked nothing. In other words, business has brought to girls more problems and the feeling of greater lacks than college brings. Education, certain personal qualities, and marriage or men friends, are the three chief things lacked by business girls. Personality traits, money

and clothes rank first with college girls and enormously higher than with business girls, while marriage and men friends lag somewhat behind. It is probably true that for both groups the desire for charming social and personal qualities and for money and clothes, if translated, means men friends and marriage.

As to important problems solved since the girls entered business or college, twenty-four percent of the business girls and ten percent of the college girls had none to solve. Here again it is evident that the business girl meets more difficulties than the college girl. Problems concerning money, saving, economy rank highest with the business girl, with problems concerning her job coming second. For the college girl, problems concerning school rank first, what to do after graduation second, with money matters and personal problems of conduct tying for third.

Twenty-seven percent of the business girls and twenty-one percent of the college girls feel handicapped by health or some physical defect.

3. What equipment has the business girl to help her attain her interests and meet her problems?

One approach to this problem has been made through the use of the Otis mental test, higher form A. The following information is based on the results from the first 107 tests given to unmarried business girls under thirty years of age. On the thirty minute basis, the scores range all the way from 9 to 75. Nine is exceedingly low and raises the suspicion whether the girl co-operated. Seventy-five is the highest possible score obtainable on the test. The median score was 50, which is a high normal score and above the score of 42, which Otis regards as the average adult score. There were only 7.5% of the girls who fell below the normal ranking, 49.5% who ranked as normal, and 43% who ranked higher than normal. Otis expects in a normal distribution to have 20% below normal, 60% normal, and 20% better than normal.

These business girl scores may be compared with scores for college students. One hundred fifty-one freshmen in the woman's college referred to earlier in this paper were tested. The range was from 27 to 73 with a median score of 54. Upper classmen in the same college rank somewhat higher.

Otis reports scores for college students. For 524 students in nine universities and colleges, the lowest score was 20, the highest 75, the median 60. The medians of the individual colleges ranged

all the way from 37 to 68. Intellectually, then, the business girl is well equipped to meet her problems.

It is hoped a little later to be able to give about one hundred girls various personality tests to discover other traits than intelligence which may figure in their success. There are at hand now several other types of information.

Educationally, the 107 business girls have had all the way from 7th grade education through 4 years of college. The median and the mode are both four years of high school. Nevertheless, as many as 41% have had less than 4 years of high school work.

Vocationally, how well prepared are these girls to meet their problems? Sixty-four girls or almost 60% are stenographers, secretaries or bookkeepers with one teacher and one telegraph operator included. The others hold such unspecialized positions as clerical or general office worker, typist, comptometer operator, cashier, salesgirl, etc. The educational range of the girls in the unspecialized group is as wide as that of the specialized group. Both groups have girls with eighth grade education and both have college graduates. It is significant that of the fifteen girls with some college training, seven are doing clerical work. Apparently it is not length of time spent in school which counts, but the type of training secured.

The salary scale of the unspecialized group runs about four dollars less per week for the beginners and the difference becomes vastly greater among experienced workers of each group. Thus the highest paid secretary received \$37 per week and the highest paid bookkeeper \$46 but the highest paid clerical worker received only \$27 per week.

In intelligence level, the clerical group ranks as high as the specialized workers.

It can only be concluded from this array of data that what counts in adjustment vocationally is type of training, rather than length of time spent in education or degree of intelligence (assuming of course a certain minimal level of intelligence).

Many of the other maladjustments are closely linked with the type of work the girl does. If she is in a large office or lives in a girl's rooming house or club or has sisters in business there is the question of status. Is she an unspecialized, low-paid clerical worker while the girl across the hall or her sister is a highly paid secretary? Does her low salary make it impossible for her to have

the kind of room she wishes, to wear clothes as fine as those of her friends, to take vacation trips? Does her low salary make it impossible for her to assist her family and meet their needs without impoverishing herself? Can she spare the money for further training? Certainly in the low paid jobs she cannot hope to save enough to enable her to attend school full time and the problem revolves around night work, the energy involved, the giving up of good times and of friendships, which for the business girl are pursued chiefly in the evening.

The business girl has, of course, other qualities which aid her in solving her problems. There are qualities which are not statistically statable without tests, but which have become evident during interviews. She is fairly flexible; she does not break easily under a strain. She comes for the most part from homes without high economic standing and even in her mediocre job she often has more than she had before she began to work. Her desire for education tends to die out in time and she admits that she would not make the sacrifices necessary to obtain one. This is an adjustment and removes her craving. Unfortunately it is a rather unprogressive adjustment.

4. From the point of view of education, what should business girls have had to fit them better for life—and what might they still have?

(a) They should have a complete four-year course in high school. Many girls stop before they graduate, either because their parents demand it or because their own ambitions are vague. Later, many of these girls find that they need the full high school course, either because of the background it gives or to fit them to go on into some specialized or professional field.

(b) The girl who must work after she leaves school ought to have some special vocational training. This usually means shorthand, typing, or bookkeeping. Girls without such training can fill only the most general and the lower paid positions, such as filing, general clerical work, or switchboard work. For many girls, this vocational training must come during high school, or it is never attained.

(c) Whether schools can do much for the physical, mental, and emotional difficulties is a question. Certain schools, especially city schools, give attention to physical well-being. Mental testing permits some classifications of pupils, and vocational guidance helps. Here and there a school has placed in its program mental hygiene work.

(d) There is need to have some way to carry over from school days, the interests and friends the girl has there acquired. Girls quickly lose their cultural interests and their old friends unless some opportunity is provided for expression. Is it too much to expect the school to provide for a time at least, some activities for its recent graduates to carry them through this difficult transition period until they have found new contacts with their business associates?

(e) After a year or so of work the girl needs guidance as acutely as she needed it while in training. Positions which were names to her in high school have become real for her. She knows what business requires and she knows where she is lacking. The glamour of her first entrance into business has worn off. Unless she has a young man in the immediate offing, she frequently wishes to get into some other type of work. Often she knows what type she wants. But she does not know, and without outside help probably never will know, whether she is fitted for the work, what the educational requirements are, etc.

(f) There are of course agencies which provide for some of these things, and in city schools night classes fulfil certain of the needs. The agencies, such as night schools of universities, Y. W. C. A.'s, girls' clubs of various sorts, are too frequently confined to the larger cities, and because of financial or other reasons they often reach only a fraction of the girls in need of assistance.

There are certain interests and problems for which the school can probably not give assistance, such as the desire to travel, the need for more adequate ways of meeting men, the further improvement in personal qualities. But many such interests are blocked in their fulfillment because of inadequate or improper schooling in earlier years.