

Cooking with Gas: The Role of Home Economists in the Adoption of Natural Gas and Natural Gas Appliances

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Key words

Consumer services, public utility home economists, adoption of technology

Introduction

In the early to mid-twentieth century, the adoption of natural gas as a source of energy for cooking, heating, and lighting in homes was facilitated by a cadre of home economics graduates. Positions in Consumer Services with a public utility company provided a salary, professional status, and the opportunity to be on the forefront of household technology. At a time when relatively few women were college-educated, and few of these graduates were employed in the business sector, the home economics positions with “the gas company” were desirable jobs. Studies of women in specific sectors of the economy, such as clerical work, blue collar occupations, managerial and professional positions, and entrepreneurs of women-oriented products, have explored their experiences in the workforce (for example, Fox & Hesse-Biber, 1984; Rotella, 1981; Stromberg & Harkess, 1988). However, little attention has been focused on the role of home economists in the public utility sector.

Purpose

The purpose of this research, which is currently in progress, is to study the employment experiences of the consumer services home economists in the natural gas industry from the 1930s through the 1900s. Specifically, the project focuses on home economists employed by the Atlanta Gas Light Company (AGL). After initially launching its business in Atlanta, AGL provided natural gas services across the state of Georgia and employed home economists in all five of its divisional offices.

This research was undertaken to gain an understanding of the multi-faceted roles of Consumer Services home economists who promoted the adoption of household technology using natural gas. Their roles included direct education and service to customers, marketing natural gas through collaboration with media, and a variety of public relations activities in support of AGL’s stature in the community. Exploration of theoretical perspectives useful in explaining the economic and social context of their work, as well as the personal meanings they attributed to their work as home economists in business, is planned.

Method

Semi-structured interviews with former Consumer Services home economists are being conducted to collect oral histories about their employment experiences. The interviews are being tape recorded and transcribed. The goal is to interview 15 to 20 individuals ranging in age from mid-40s to early-90s. Content analysis of the transcriptions will be conducted to identify themes related to roles, job satisfaction, workplace issues, and identity as home economists and “agents of modernity” (Kline, 1997).

Engaging Students in Qualitative Research

The genesis of this project was in a research seminar “Exploring the History of Family and Consumer Sciences,” in which the first four authors were enrolled. The seminar was taught by the last author. Using *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the Development of a Profession* (Stage & Vincenti, 1997) as the textbook, students were introduced to early home economics leaders and the development of the profession. The reading assignments included historical discussions of careers in industries providing consumer products or services. Discussions about historical research methods and oral history were included in the seminar. The development of the research project involved the following components in which the students participated.

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Completion of Institutional Review Board and human subjects requirements

The proposal for this project (including objectives of the study, questions for the semi-structured interviews, protocol for conducting the interviews, and consent forms) was submitted to the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board. All the authors completed the CITI (Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative) tutorial and passed the test on human subjects research. The project was approved prior to initiation of any direct contact with the subjects.

Literature review

A review of literature for this project posed many challenges. First, the historical context was the broadest parameter that needed to be considered. The time frame of this study encompassed a period in which there were changes in household technology, the economy, women and higher education, gender roles, and business. Thus, the literature search involved several sources including data on women's employment outside the home, emerging careers in which women were concentrated, women's roles as consumer decision-makers, and business practices. The second contextual factor was that this study focuses on home economics careers in a specific industry, natural gas. Developing some familiarity with the development of the natural gas industry necessitated a search for such documentation. Reports of the development of natural gas in Australia (Broomham, 1987) and the United States (Herbert, 1992) were located. A history of the Atlanta Gas Light Company to 1985 provided primarily technical and business information, but contained some information about Consumer Services activities (Tate, 1985). Among the items related to career opportunities for home economics graduates was a vintage book by Woodhouse (1938), *Business Opportunities for the Home Economist*, which provided insight into the philosophy and practicality of employing home economics graduates in a variety of business sectors, and the unique contributions they could make. Surprisingly, a study of English women who were trained in domestic sciences and were employed by the gas industry in London from 1889 to 1939 was discovered (Clendinning, 2004). This study provided a macro-level analysis of the "history of consumer culture" and the role of "demonstrators" in promotion and customer relations in the natural gas industry.

The questionnaire and research protocol

The first step in the process of developing the questions to ask the former AGL home economists was determining the categories of information that would meet the purposes of the study. Next questions were written to guide the thoughts of the interviewees. The wording for the majority of questions was open-ended for the purpose of obtaining experiential, qualitative responses. An attempt was made to word the questions clearly, yet leave the opportunity for the interviewees to follow their own line of thought. Similar questions were grouped together to try to keep the interviews from shifting randomly from one subject to another. Follow up and prompt questions were identified to elicit more detail. If an answer was ambiguous and needed further clarification, interviewers were instructed to use more straightforward questions to gain clarity. For example, if someone answered a question starting with "a while back," the interviewer was advised to follow up with "when exactly was that?" The semi-structured questionnaire was tested in mock interviews conducted with women who had employment experience, but who had not been employed by AGL.

Interviews with subjects, preliminary impressions

About one-half the intended interviews have been conducted. Interviews were arranged at the convenience of the subjects. Although transcription and analysis of the interviews is still in progress, some preliminary impressions are of interest. All of the subjects had degrees in home economics. They reported that these degrees prepared them to work with consumers educating them about their appliances, doing foods demonstrations and testing recipes, and communicating with the public. Early on the job, the home economics graduates were thoroughly trained by AGL about the properties of natural gas and the operation of gas appliances. The home economists recollected enjoyable memories of their positions with AGL. They reported considerable autonomy and flexibility in their positions, and noted the variety of activities their jobs entailed, including trouble-shooting in customers' homes, working with the media, guest lecturing in college equipment classes, and teaching middle school chemistry classes about the attributes of natural gas. The annual AGL calendar with recipes tested by the home economics staff helped promote the company, but also contributed to the *esprit de corps* among the home economists.

Challenges of a theoretical framework

Because of its multi-faceted nature, it is difficult to pinpoint one specific theoretical framework to be used with this study. Several theories could be used to frame the information to be extracted from the interviews. Home capital theory can explain decisions to invest in education and is generally assumed to be related to the motivation to achieve higher earnings later. Women employed by AGL all held degrees in home economics, the major specified by the company for employment in their positions. Based on preliminary impressions from the interviews, investment in their human capital appears to have been a calculated decision by these women. Employment or labor force participation theories predicting why women enter the workforce could explain why these women with home economics degrees entered jobs in the business sector focusing on consumer relations. The changing role of households, changing roles of women, and the emergence of a consumer economy converged to create a demand for women with a particular educational background (home economics). The theory of labor market segmentation is also relevant to this line of thought. Furthermore, given wage disparities between the home economists and positions held by men, feminist theories examining the women's wage gap or the motherhood wage penalty could be applied. Further exploration of theoretical frameworks will continue as additional themes emerge from the content analysis of the interviews.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research-in-progress is to study the employment experiences of the consumer services home economists employed by the Atlanta Gas Light Company from the 1930s through the 1900s. When the qualitative analysis of the interviews begins, there will be many questions lurking in the minds of the researchers. Foremost, the task is to identify the common themes within the interviews. How do these women view the work they performed in relation to consumers and in the context of the gas company? Will the former natural gas home economists express satisfaction with the work they performed? Will they harbor resentment toward AGL because of the discontinuation of their positions in the early 1900s when the industry was deregulated? What challenges did the home economists face in the gendered environment of the natural gas industry? What is the image and philosophy about their work that has persisted beyond their employment by the gas company? Do they describe themselves as educators, technology innovators, saleswomen, ambassadors, or something else? The content of these interviews will contribute to the field of family economics and resource management as documentation of a segment of the economy and an occupation of historical significance.

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