The Demands of Work and the Human Quality of Marriage: An Exploratory Study of Professionals in Two Socialist Societies

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The Demands of Work and the Human Quality of Marriage: An Exploratory Study of Professionals in Two Socialist Societies

MARILYN RUESCHEMEYER*

How do the conditions of work affect personal relations outside of work, especially in marriage? The question is crucial to the quality of living in any modern society. Its importance was recognized early by Karl Marx in his analysis of alienation: alienation at work destroys the human qualities of man and thus the possibility for meaningful personal relationships. A second important condition contributing to a humanly fulfilled relationship between marriage partners is, at least in modern society, a fundamental equality. Here again, Marxists and other social thinkers of the nineteenth century not only recognized the importance of equality in marriage but understood how sexual equality and inequality are rooted in the organization of work and the conditions of production.

In an exploratory study, I looked at these problems in socialist societies to see whether serious attempts to reduce discrimination against women in the world of work and changes in some of the conditions of alienation have resulted in changed personal relations in marriage. I limited my study to professionals, not only to improve comparability and to find respondents for this exploratory effort who reflect more on their lives than many other kinds of people but also because, even in capitalist societies, professionals are said to suffer the least alienation.

The issues of both alienation and equality require more discussion. Marx wrote about the alienation of work in capitalist society as the disassociation of labor from the worker's interest and personality. He viewed the product of man's labor as his life in objectified form and saw the surrender of the control over the worker's labor, the submission of the worker's labor to someone else as the source of his alienation. The alienation of men from each other is seen as a consequence of the alienation experienced in the process of production.

A direct consequence of the alienation of man from the product of his labor, from his life activity and from his species-life, is that man is alienated from other men. When man confronts himself he also confronts other men...

Thus in the relationship of alienated labor every man regards other men according to the standards and relationships in which he finds himself placed as a worker. (Marx, 1963 : 129)

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Since Marx, the term alienation has been used to cover a wide variety of personal and social ills. For the purposes of this paper, I limit the concept of alienation to the ways in which it was used by Marx; however, I shall include, as Blauner has done, the worker's subjective reaction to his condition.

Alienation is viewed as a quality of personal experience which results from specific kinds of social arrangements. (Blauner, 1964:15)

Blauner distinguishes four components of alienation experienced by workers in industry: powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, and self-estrangement (Blauner, 1964). According to these standards, professionals are far less alienated than other workers. They have some role in defining their own problems; they take part in determining how the work will be done and in creating their time schedules; they see work as an important part of their lives and they drive meaning from what they do, rather than view their work as something to be gotten over with as soon as possible; they often participate in decisions concerning the results of their work; they are involved and identify with a professional community—or at least some colleague group—with its shared competence, language, and spirit. Aside from these advantages enjoyed by professionals in both socialist and capitalist societies, socialist societies do not have an owning class separate from those employed. Although one cannot ignore the substantial power of those in managerial positions, the German and Soviet professionals with whom I spoke did not feel they were an insignificant part of a large organization; they believed they made important contributions to the social welfare of their societies even outside their narrow sphere of expertise.

Focusing on subjective reactions in the study of alienation raises the problem of false consciousness. The worker may have so adapted to alienating conditions that they are perceived uncritically as normal. Marx inferred individual alienation from his conceptions of human nature and human fulfilment and from the study of objective conditions of whole classes. The study of individual reactions has the advantage of opening a way of assessing variations in the degree of alienation. That it may be based in part on false consciousness must be borne in mind for the analysis as a whole.

Another important factor influencing the marital relationship is that of equality between husband and wife. According to early socialist theory, the woman cannot participate on an equal basis either in the family or in the society as a whole unless she is part of the world of work.

...the peculiar character of the supremacy of the husband over the wife in the modern family, the necessity of creating real social equality between them, and the way to do it, will only be seen in the clear light of day when both possess legally complete equality of rights. Then it will be plain that the first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industry, and that this in turn demands the abolition of the monogamous family as the economic unity of society. (Engels, 1942:66)

The ideal socialist family is based on human affection rather than on economic dependence and material interests. Firstly, if the woman works, she is free
to marry for love rather than economic necessity. Secondly, both husband and wife participate in work which is non-alienating; their lives together reflect the standards and relationships of their work situation. Erich Fromm is strongly influenced by Marx in his analysis of the effects of the marketing orientation on the personality.

The superficial character of human relationships leads many to hope that they can find depth and intensity of feeling in individual love. But love for one person and love for one's neighbor are indivisible; in any given culture, love relationships are only a more intense expression of the relatedness to man prevalent in that culture. Hence it is an illusion to expect that the loneliness of man rooted in the marketing orientation can be cured by love. (Fromm, 1962:451)

The research took place in the United States, Israel, and the Federal Republic of Germany, where I talked with Jewish emigrants from the Soviet Union, and in the German Democratic Republic, where I talked with East German citizens. These talks included thirty-three long, intensive, and fairly structured conversations lasting two hours or more, as well as frequent meetings on a more informal basis with both these respondents and others, such as the husbands or wives of people I spoke with more intensely or people I met on another basis.¹

My main interest was exploratory; I hoped, in this study, to catch a glimpse of the human reality of work and family life rather than to test specific hypotheses.

With few exceptions, I talked only with those Soviet emigrants who had lived at least a year in their new country in order to be able to speak with them in English, Hebrew, or German and in order to allow for time to adjust to their new country and reflect a bit more dispassionately about their lives in the Soviet Union. Because they had made the decision to leave, however, I suspected from the beginning problems of bias and decided to visit East Berlin and try to speak with professional men and women there. My East German respondents, although strongly critical of some aspects of their society, were predominantly favorable towards socialism and found capitalism an inhumane system.

The World of Work

Socialism in the Soviet Union and East Germany has succeeded in reducing certain alienating features of work. While many of the non-alienating aspects

¹ I also had talks with several people who worked with the Soviet emigrants in their new countries, such as the Hebrew teacher in a Kibbutz Ulpan (a six-month language program at a collective settlement), an English teacher of Russian professionals in Jerusalem, a German teacher in West Berlin, and some social workers in all three countries. Although the teachers and social workers were concerned with the adjustment of the Soviet emigrants to their new country, rather than with past experiences in the Soviet Union, some of the unfulfilled expectations and problems expressed by Soviet emigrants provided insight into their past. Thus, these peripheral talks were a helpful addition to the main set of conversations.
The ages and professions of the respondents are listed in the appendix. I included both the respondents from the Soviet Union and East Germany in one table; differences in their experiences will be discussed when they are relevant.
of the work of my professional respondents are shared by workers, it is important
to keep in mind that professionals have many privileges that workers do not have,
such as better wages and opportunities to travel abroad.

Socialist societies provide guarantees of employment, education, medical and
old age care, which contribute greatly to a sense of security enjoyed by most work-
ers. There are certain levels below which workers cannot fall provided they do
not engage in deviant political activity or outlandish personal behavior. Indeed,
these security expectations are so ingrained that their loss generated great tensions
with many of the Soviet emigrants I spoke with.

The general atmosphere at work described by both German and Soviet respon-
dents was one of cooperation. For example, several respondents commented
on the help they had gotten once they were accepted into a job.

"If you need experience, which you do at the beginning, doctors will help you
... or if you have problems at work, you can take courses. You have your
time—you have your job."

(a Soviet dentist)

Professional workers also participate in collective decision-making and have
important controls over their work environment. My respondents mentioned com-
mittes for grievances and women's rights, election of leadership, and the collec-
tive setting of work goals, time schedules, and deadlines.

Job security and a cooperative working atmosphere are complemented by a
reduction of competition among workers. There are no great disparities in sala-
ries. Salary raises occur for most professionals at definite time periods and, except
for a few privileged people who negotiate separately as individuals, are centrally
determined for every worker at a certain level of experience. Although some re-
spondents, for example, engineers in large organizations, mentioned tensions relat-
ing to payment of premiums, the relative standardization of salaries contributes
to the solidarity among colleagues, according to the men and women I spoke
with.

With a non-competitive and helping atmosphere, a relative standardization of
salaries and the life-long security of one's position, it is not surprising that the
work collective becomes an important friendship group. This is formally encour-
aged, and, from my conversations, it seems that the work collective does
constitute an important part of the professional's life. Husbands and wives are
couraged to participate as much as possible in the work collective together.

"I must have my work collective...... We go together to the theatre and on
outings."

(a journalist)

"I studied ceramics with my work collective; when they gave it up, I lost
interest."

(an engineer)

*A few Soviet emigrants mentioned political manoeuvrings which were related to their Jewish
background and which caused considerable insecurity. Some even lost their jobs in the fifties
because of purges.
The Demands of Work and the Human Quality of Marriage

Although it will become evident that involvement in the work collective is not without problems, it is important that the people I spoke with did not feel like isolated workers in an unfair and insecure world; rather, they were absorbed and involved in their working environment.

Finally, my respondents found personal meaning in their work and expressed deep commitment to what they were doing. For some, this commitment stemmed from their sense of participation in building a new society; they believed that what they were doing was important, that they were “making a contribution.”

“My work is most difficult because, on the one hand, there is a problem of building a communist society with the special relationship men should have to their work, according to Marx, and, on the other hand, there are pressures to achieve in industry.”

“Several years ago, I had an attractive offer in West Germany but I refused. I wanted to bring something beautiful to the people here . . . For me, my work is most important, to make a contribution to society; I couldn’t just live a personal life; it would be boring.”

Some of the research two scientists worked on was requested by party heads. Although this control and concern may limit certain kinds of research, the professionals I spoke with felt they could sometimes influence policy.

“Our research is very much connected to the party. The regime looks at everything and we work on particular problems.”

Even those who no longer believed the system was worth working for had an intense commitment as professionals to what they were doing.

“I worry and sometimes don’t sleep at night thinking of my patients . . . The most important thing for me is my work, whether the operation succeeds.”

(a Soviet doctor)

On balance, I had the impression that the East European professionals I spoke with suffered less alienation at work than their American counterparts. This seems primarily due to greater job security and less competition, and it is particularly true of those who identify with the political system. I should make it clear at once, though, that my respondents faced a variety of serious personal problems, some of which were clearly, if indirectly, related to their work situation. I will return to these later.

Equality of Women

The hope for creating a new kind of relationship between men and women combined with the need for the participation of women in the labor force led to great changes in the roles of women in Eastern Europe. In both East Germany and the Soviet Union, nearly all women now work outside the home.

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8 I had done some preliminary interviewing with American professionals which is being continued now.
Journal of Comparative Family Studies

In the Soviet Union 88 per cent of women of working age are gainfully employed, nearly all full-time or students; in East Germany 70 per cent, of whom one third have three-quarter-time jobs. (Mandel, 1975: 322)

Both East German and Soviet women participate fully in professional work although not always in the same professions as men. Table I shows the percentage of women in three professions in several countries, including the German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Union.

TABLE I PROPORTION OF WOMEN IN SELECTED PROFESSIONS, BY COUNTRY*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation (percentage)</th>
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<td>Country</td>
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<td>Germany (Dem. Rep.)</td>
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<td>India</td>
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<td>Denmark</td>
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<td>Poland</td>
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*Most of the data in this table were brought together by Cynthia F. Epstein from a variety of sources. See her Woman's Place, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, p. 12. Jutta Menschik and Evelyn Leopold added the data for dentists in East and West Germany and for physicians in East Germany. See Gretchen's Rote Schwestern (Gretchen's Red Sisters), Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1974, p. 23. The base population for all percentages is the total number of persons engaged in a profession in a given country.

The primary areas of work of female university graduates (in the German Democratic Republic) are literature and languages, where they account for 55% of those in employment. For female graduates of lower level professional schools, the main fields are culture and education, where they fill 80% of all positions. In all other areas the proportion of women is less than one third. Among the graduates of universities and lower level professional schools under the age of 30, women have a share of more than one third in all fields except engineering, where they still account for 10-20%. (Menschik and Leopold, 1974:88)

In both the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic women are under represented in leadership positions.

It is true that [in the German Democratic Republic] 25% of the directors of schools are women, 13% of the mayors of cities, 36% of members of the
bar, 44% of union functionaries; however, in industry, only every 11th position is occupied by a woman. (Menschik and Leopold, 1974:88)

Some of the problems women have in being appointed and elected to leadership positions relate to their traditional roles within the family. Although the problems and prospects of leadership positions for women in socialist countries cannot be fully discussed in this paper, a later section on the integration of work and family life will provide some insight into the difficulties faced by women aspiring to these positions.⁴

Several of the women I spoke with started their professional studies after working in lower level jobs and when they already had families and children. These women were not exceptions; in both the Soviet Union and the G.D.R., there are opportunities for further education, and work positions are available for more qualified people although the decrease in need in some professional fields in the Soviet Union has restricted opportunities (Jacoby, 1971:33-39; Lipset. 1973:359).

In socialist countries, women are given time out from work with full pay for some period before and after the birth of a baby, and they may take a longer period without pay in order to care for the child. Conditions vary from country to country. In the G.D.R., the legislation shows evidence of concern for what happens to the woman after she returns to work. Women get their salaries paid for six weeks’ vacation before and twelve weeks after the child is born. They may take a year off to spend with their child after birth while retaining their affiliation with their place of work and must be given a position of similar rank after their return.

Encouragement and support for women to work are part of a system of supports for workers in socialist countries. Aside from the many opportunities to study and the time allowed out before and after the birth of a child, there are cribbes for infants and kindergartens (although not enough and of mixed quality); there are special supports for single women, who in the G.D.R. are among the first to receive new apartments and places for their children in cribbes; there are inexpensive laundry services and the canteen or inexpensive restaurant where most workers eat their main meal at noon.

Crucial for the encouragement women receive are the public discussions of their right to work and the importance of the man’s contribution to the household chores. Although there are great problems in practically working these goals out, they were generally viewed as legitimate by the men and women I spoke with. The men thought it normal and important for the woman to participate in the world of work. In addition to ideological reasons, both men and women agreed that women have problems staying at home.

“A woman can’t stay in the house the whole day and not work. It would drive her crazy.”

(a male Soviet psychiatrist)

⁴ For an interesting discussion of these problems in Czechoslovakia, see Scott (1974).
"A woman has to participate, be a part of life—then they both give. She has money of her own; it gives her honor...My family is important but I can't live without my work."

(a female Soviet industrial engineer)

As will become clear, this acceptance of the new woman's role is uneven, and there are serious unsolved problems. More problematic was the actual participation of husbands in household work. My East German respondents, younger and more integrated into the political system of their country, reported fewer problems in this regard than the Jewish emigrants from the Soviet Union, although there was no difference in the high proportion of women working. This suggests there is no automatic connection between the participation of women in the labor force and the equality of their status and power in the family.

I have, for purposes of this discussion, stressed the positive aspects of work conditions, the many structural supports of working men and women and the encouragement given to women to study, to enter and to remain active in the world of work. I did refer to the difficulties of gaining admittance to certain professional schools, the inadequate number of criibes for children, tensions related to premiums and the problems of getting work at all if one is associated with oppositional political activity. The briefness of these references is not an indication that they are to be taken lightly. Political and national or religious difficulties, unsolved daily practical problems and economic hardships are straining and exhausting. Even if we assume, or hope or fantasize for theoretical purposes, that these difficulties will be lightened, the problems of arranging both a professional working life and a satisfactory family life are far from solved for professionals in socialist societies.

The Problems of Integrating Work and Family Life

Intense commitment to work does not mean that men and women can feel free of responsibilities in the household. Even with all the efforts to ease the amount of household work, there is still shopping, which, especially in the Soviet Union, is an exhausting experience according to many of the people I spoke with, child care and help with homework, some food preparation, some household chores. Who is responsible for this after a long working day? In spite of the appreciation of the husbands for the working lives of their wives, the women saw themselves as having the main responsibilities for their families. The Soviet emigrants thought of this traditional role of the woman more as a natural division within the family than the East Germans, but women in both countries, although certainly not all, complained that their husbands were not helping enough. Sociologists I spoke with in East Berlin suggested that, when women marry, they accept the traditional roles but, later on, as they go back to school or get involved in their professions, they demand more equality at home. This observation was certainly confirmed in my talks with Soviet and East German women. The man may react angrily to the new relationship in the house and, if he cannot accept it, the marriage may break up.
"I had been away for a year to the Soviet Union...My wife said that now she wanted to improve her qualifications, that I should do for her what she did for me. It was my hardest year at work. All sorts of commitments came due...Before, we used to go to concerts, the theatre—now I was doing nothing but work. She couldn't get emotional attention from me and turned to someone in her school. We got a divorce..."

(an East German)

My impression was that German professional men, even while retaining some traditional attitudes, accepted the legitimacy of their wives' demands. Soviet men recognized the burdens of their wives but often did not see the solution involving their own participation in household tasks. An East German raised in the Soviet Union made this difference dramatically clear:

"I think that there should be automation for cleaning the windows, etc., but not that the man should do it. In Russia, the men are more conservative, Even if the women has equal work, she's not the same as a man. She's still the mother —that's natural."

The more progressive convictions of most German professional men and women, supported by frequent public discussions of this issue, however, have had and I think will continue to have tremendous impact on the future of equality between men and women in East Germany.

Problems of the new role of women come to a head over the matter of childcare. It is the woman who, in most cases, takes the time out to care for the infants. Where this has not happened and the woman has insisted on the man taking over the care of the child while she pursues her profession, the man has not only found the time he has to put into childcare difficult but has been unable to accept his wife's dropping out to such an extent from the life of the family.

Many women take this period out for the early care of their children with joy. However, they expect their husbands to later share more fully in the household in order for them to establish themselves satisfactorily at work. Yet these interests in further education and work development add new demands on an already strained "time budget" of the couple. As I observed before, the man may have great difficulties accepting the changes of his wife's and his own role.

Despite diminished alienation at work, there are also difficulties flowing over from work affecting personal relationships. Since both men and women now are interested in working, there is not only tension about the division of labor in the household but both are involved in their work. Each may, to begin with a seemingly trivial matter, worry about completing concrete tasks at work in time. This pressure exists even when the deadline is collectively set by the workers, which is often the case according to the people I spoke with.

"There is difficulty when the collective decides on a deadline and you have to make it. The different groups in the collective must work together and if you miss the deadline, everything is messed up and then you're criticized."

(an engineer)
Usually, the demands on professionals go beyond their actual work "duties". It is not that they are "ruled over" by managerial or political elites but, through a long professional and political socialization process, come to feel their work roles as an integral part of their being, although with great variety, of course. A teacher, for example, in both the Soviet Union and the G.D.R. may be doing research, is expected to meet regularly with parents, attend party and union meetings, and take further professional training.

"I'm already nervous on Sunday before the week begins. My husband complains I flare up easily."

"If my husband asks me to do something extra in the morning I explode because my work is all planned."

Aside from the strain and the nervousness which both men and women now experience because they have too much to do, their very absorption in work, which is an absorption in a world and with people very much apart from their lives together as husband and wife, may cause difficulties.

"In Russia, among high level professionals, the problem is absorption in work...often the wives find someone else who isn't such a great professional but will pay more attention to them, with whom they can live."

(a Soviet woman)

"My wife was a ballerina...It's impossible to be married to a ballerina—that's no kind of life. She had a tight regime...When she finally came home from a performance, she was exhausted. The profession itself interested her. We had no private life."

(a Soviet man)

Although the work collective encourages participation of husbands and wives, often the "outsider" does not feel an integral part of the group. One woman complained that her husband once belonged to a collective which went out drinking several times a week. A few of the women were disappointed their husbands did not care for their colleagues.

A frequent complaint about the modern nuclear family is that, when the man leaves the house to work, he is no longer directly involved with his wife in activities for the common good of the family, even if he does bring home a paycheck. The problem is greatly relieved if the wife also goes out to work; however, the relief, the solutions bring with them their own problems, their own pressures on family life.

I am not only thinking about the normal work day but also the activities the work colleagues participate in together, the union meetings and party obligations which take time and which take husbands and wives away from each other for even longer periods. Because the demands of work are concrete, oftentime determined, because the consequences of not working well are not only disturbing but have practical impact on one's daily living and because people are devoted to their work, both men and women respond to the demands of work, leaving family relationships for energies and hours left over. The respondents cared
about both their work and their families but, if the absorptions in work were too
great, there were effects on the family many of the respondents found difficult
and unwelcome, yet felt unable to change. Among the East Germans I talked to,
there was not one couple where one member had not been married before or
where the marriage was not now in serious trouble. Among the Soviet Jews,
where family life is somewhat more traditional, half of the respondents had been
divorced and were now alone or in new marriages. I am not suggesting that
work caused all the difficulties; however, many of the men and women indeed felt
strong connections between absorption in work and the breaking up of their
marriages.5

Conclusion

There are several important questions raised by this discussion of alienation
at work and the equality of men and women in the G.D.R. and the Soviet
Union. On the one hand, according to the conception of alienation developed
by Marx, it seems that alienation at work has been diminished; yet, men and
women are tense in their relationships and feel overburdened. One important
source of these problems can be traced back to the work situation, even if in
many respects it is relatively non-alienating. The demands of work do not fully
take into account what is happening to people outside. The individual learns
that he or she must work within a certain institution and that the demands of
that institution may often be at odds with other demands and with his or her own
personal concerns.

Should not the reduced alienation of professional men and women allow
them to have more fulfilling human relationships? The paradox is that profes-
sional work, though relatively non-alienating, tends to be all-embracing and
people are inclined to become totally absorbed with what they are doing; the
strength and energy for personal relationships is diminished, even if the caring is
strong. Men and women are absorbed in different worlds, with different people
and sometimes a different "spirit."

Despite the participation of women in the work force and the structural
supports encouraging their education and equality, the woman is overloaded.
Especially in the Soviet Union, the man does not fully participate in household
work. Although among professionals in East Berlin there is a great deal of
discussion about equality and more sharing of household work, women still feel
they have ultimate responsibility for the house and especially for the children.
At the same time, professional women have the same ambitions and work interests
as their husbands.

A stable, sharing relationship is of great importance to the men and women
I spoke with; marriage and the nuclear family are not mere relics of the past for

5 From comparative interviews in the United States, it is my impression that the problems in
American marriages are as intense, though for other reasons which cannot be discussed in this
paper; however, the Soviet and East German women have more supports if the marital relation-
ship is broken.
people who grew up in families disrupted by war and imprisonment. The issue is how work can be structured to allow time and energy for personal commitments; this is a problem professionals face in other industrial societies as well (Wilenski, 1963: 107-146; Young and Willmott, 1973).

The consequences of the demands and absorptions in work and the problems of changing family roles result in difficulties which men and women are not really prepared for. They assume as young adults a certain harmony in their work and family lives which is not there. The possibilities of incorporating two such important aspects of one's being, one's working life and one's personal relationships, are limited despite the many supports working men and women are given in socialist societies. These supports are only the beginning of solutions. Reduced working hours for both men and women, increased sharing of tasks and the open and sharp questioning of what is happening and what should happen in the work world of professionals may lead to a lessening of the tension between work and personal life. Dealing with this tension, intellectually and politically, remains an unfinished task.

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Scott, Hilda

Wilenski, Harold

Young, Michael and Peter Willmott
APPENDIX

PROFESSIONS AND AGES OF RESPONDENTS FROM EAST GERMANY AND THE SOVIET UNION

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<thead>
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<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
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<td>Composer</td>
<td>Adult educator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dentist</td>
<td>Anthropologist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educator and administrator</td>
<td>Editor, publishing house</td>
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