

FEMALE OPTOMETRISTS IN MICHIGAN
THEIR CAREERS AND FAMILIES

FEMALE OPTOMETRISTS IN MICHIGAN:
THEIR CAREERS AND FAMILIES

by

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ABSTRACT

Background

As an increasing number of females are entering the field of optometry, many more women are balancing a career and a family. This survey assessed Michigan female optometrists' trends and opinions about the subject of women optometrists raising a family.

Methods

A survey was mailed to female optometrists in Michigan

Results

The vast majority of female optometrists in Michigan feel that optometry is a profession well suited for a woman who wants to have a family. Most of these women also feel that their jobs provide or will provide the necessary flexibility to raise a family while managing a career.

Conclusions

In general, women optometrists in Michigan feel they are successfully managing a career in optometry and a family, but not without many sacrifices. The comments provided by the respondents are a very important part of this research, and give insight that the multiple choice survey questions could not give.

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A woman managing an optometric career and a family-how does it all work? And for those women who are managing it all, how are they doing it? As a female optometry student with a desire for a career and children, I set out to find some answers to these questions from Michigan female optometrists.

Methods

In October 2004, a survey questionnaire was mailed to 197 female optometrists in Michigan. The mailing addresses for the sample population were obtained from the Michigan Optometric Association mailing list. The selection process was based on two principles: the member's name had to be clearly female (to avoid men receiving a survey based only for women), and the member was required to have a Michigan address. The survey consisted of 13 questions and covered the following areas: personal demographics, experience and mode of practice, number of hours worked per week, and personal opinions about optometry as a career for a woman who has children or desires to have children. The survey also provided opportunity for the respondents to write additional comments in response to several of the questions, and also requested any additional comments on the subject area in general.

Results

The overall response rate of the survey was 79.2%, with 156 of the 197 surveys sent being completed and returned. The data from the survey was entered into the Microsoft Office® spreadsheet program Excel®, and actuarial formulas were used to obtain the statistical data. The data was computed to express overall results of the survey and makes

comparisons in data between those women who have children and those who have no intentions of having children.

Personal demographics

In regards to the personal demographics of the respondents, the survey addressed areas such as year of graduation, age, presence or absence of children, and other questions pertaining to children for those who have children (see Table 1).

Two of the questions within the survey asked the respondents what year they graduated from optometry school and their current age. The highest return rate was from respondents graduating between the years of 1998 and 2004 (43%), and the percentage of return rates dropped with the increasing years passed since graduation. The vast majority of the respondents (77.4%) were between the 25-40 years of age. The largest group of respondents was the age group of 31-35 years (24.5%), followed by those of the age groups 36-40 (24.5%), and 25-30 years (20.6%).

The survey presented several questions to the respondents about presence or absence of children in their lives, intentions of having children, and several other questions regarding children to those who responded they did have children. The majority of the respondents (74.8%) responded that they did have children compared to 25.2% whom said they did not have children. Of those respondents who did not have children, 62.2% intended on having children, 24.3% did not intend on having children, and 13.5% were unsure if they would have children.

Those respondents who indicated they did have children were asked to list the ages of their children. Therefore their number of children may be skewed in the instance that twins or children acquired by marriage would have the same age; the age of the child would not account for the number of children. The majority of the respondents either had one (42.1%) or two (39.5%) children, while far less had three (10.5%) or four (7.9%) children. Of these respondents who had children, 97.3% responded that the birth of their child or at least one of their children was during their optometric career.

Table 1. Personal Demographics

Demographic	Percentage of Responses
<u>Year of graduation</u>	(n = 155)
1969-1976	1.9%
1977-1983	5.2%
1984-1990	20.6%
1991-1997	29.7%
1998-2004	43%
<u>Age</u>	(n = 155)
25-30 years	20.6%
31-35 years	32.3%
36-40 years	24.5%
41-45 years	12.9%
46-50 years	8.4%
51-55 years	0.65%
>56 years	0.65%
<u>Have children?</u>	(n = 155)
yes	74.8%
no	25.2%
<u>If no children, intentions</u>	(n = 37)
Intend on having	62.2%
No intentions of having	24.3%
Unknown	13.5%
<u>Number of children</u>	n = 114
1	42.1%
2	39.5%
3	10.5%
4	7.9%
<u>Birth of children during career</u>	<u>Percentage of responses</u>
yes	97.3%
no	2.7%

Experience and Mode of Practice

The topic of experience and mode of practice was addressed by two questions on the survey which asked the women how many years of optometric experience they had and

what their mode(s) of practice they were currently working within (see Table 2). The multiple question addressing modes of practice asked respondents to circle as many modes of practice as were applicable.

The three most common modes of practice for the women who respondents include group/partner (33.3%), corporate (24.4%), and solo practitioner (16.7%). Of the 155 respondents, the majority (83.9%) indicated that they only worked within 1 mode of practice, while 13.5% indicated that they worked in two different modes of practice, and 2.6% indicated that they worked in 3 different modes of practice. The question did not ask for the respondents to indicate which of the modes of practice they spent the most time working within. Table 2 demonstrates the number and percentages of individuals who indicated they work in a particular mode of practice and does include those who gave multiple responses.

In regards to years of optometric experience within the respondent group, the majority of the respondents (63%) have been practicing between 1-10 years. Far less of the respondents had greater optometric experience, and this is reflective of the increasing number of women entering the field in recent years.

Table 2. Experience and Mode of Practice

Question	Percentage of responses
<u>Years of experience</u>	<u>(n = 154)</u>
1-5 years	33.1%
6-10 years	29.9%
11-15 years	18.8%
16 years	11.7%
20 or greater years	6.5%
<u>Mode of Practice</u>	<u>(n = 180)</u>
Solo practitioner	16.7%
Group/partner	33.3%
Corporate	24.4%
Academic	4.4%
Public health service	1.7%
Military/veteran's	2.2%
HMO	0.6%
Other	15.6%

Work Schedules

The amount of hours worked by the respondents was addressed by many questions.

Questions were asked to all respondents regarding work hours, but questions were also asked in particular to those respondents who have children. Those respondents that have children were asked questions in regards to whether or not their work hours had changed since having children and whether or not they took extended time off to raise their family.

Respondents were asked how many hours per week they typically worked, and were to circle the appropriate answer containing the correct number of hours. Unfortunately the survey failed to offer 31-39 hours as a choice, and therefore only those respondents who indicated they worked those hours by writing in that choice could be counted. One can assume there were respondents who truly work hours in that time range, but chose

another choice because 31-40 hours was not an option. This oversight within the survey invalidates the statistical reliability of the following data (see Table 3.) The amount of hours per week that are most commonly worked are 21-30 hours (29.7%), but only by a slight margin. The next most commonly worked hours was 40 or greater (29%), followed by 0-10 hours per week (21.1%). Although 19.3% of the respondents indicated by "write-in" response that they worked 31-39 hours per week, it is probable that the categories of 21-30 hours and 40 or greater hours received greater response numbers because respondents felt forced to make a choice even though the appropriate answer was not present.

The respondents were also asked if they worked weekend hours on a regular basis, and if so, how often (see Table 3). Although the majority of the respondents said they did work weekends (55.1%), there were still a significant number of female optometrists who said they did not (44.9%). Of those optometrists who responded that said they did work weekends, the most common response was two weekends per month (50%).

For those respondents who stated that they had children, they were asked if they had taken an extended period of time off from work in order to raise their children. The majority of the respondents (61.3%) indicated that they did not take extended time off work compared with 38.7% who responded that they did take extended time of off work. Of those who responded that they did take an extended period of time off of work, the vast majority (80%) took less than six months of extended leave. Of the 20% remaining,

14.3% of the respondents took between 7-24 months off, and 5.7% are currently still taking extended time off.

Respondents with children were also asked if the amount of hours they work had decreased since having a family, and if so, by how much. The majority of the respondents (68%) have decreased the amount of hours worked per week since having children compared with 32% who have not decreased their work hours. When asked by how much their work hours decreased, 45.3% had decreased their weekly work hours by 25-50%, 31.3% had decreased their hours by less than 25%, and the remaining 23.4% had decreased their hours between 51-100%.

Table 3. Work Schedules

Question	Percentage of responses
<u>Hours per week</u>	<u>(n = 155)</u>
11-20 hrs.	14.8%
21-30 hrs.	29.7%
31-39 hrs.	19.3%
40 or greater hrs.	29%
<u>Work weekends?</u>	<u>(n = 147)</u>
yes	55.1%
no	44.9%
<u>If yes, how many?</u>	<u>(n = 74)</u>
1 per month	13.5%
2 per month	50%
3 per month	9.5%
4 per month	27%
<u>Average frequency of weekends worked</u>	2.28 (2 weekends per month)
<u>Extended time off work?</u>	<u>(n = 106)</u>
Yes	38.7%
No	61.3%
<u>If extended time off, how much?</u>	<u>(n = 35)</u>
0-6 mos.	80%
7-12 mos.	11.4%
13-24 mos.	2.9%
>25 mos.	0%
Currently taking time off	5.7%
<u>Decreased work hours since having family?</u>	<u>(n = 106)</u>
Yes	68%
no	32%
<u>If work hours decreased, by how much?</u>	<u>(n = 103)</u>
< 25% of hours per week	31.3%
25-50% per week	45.3%
51-75% per week	15.6%
76-100% per week	7.8%

Opinions about optometry as a family-orientated career

This survey asked two questions in regards to optometry being a family-orientated career and also provided the opportunity to give additional comments to the questions. The results are demonstrated in table 4.

This survey asked the respondents whether or not they felt that "optometry is a profession that is well suited for a woman who wants to have a family," and the respondents overwhelmingly responded "yes." Over 92% (see Table 4) responded that they did feel that optometry was well suited for a woman who would like to have a family, and only 7.2% responded that they did not feel that way. If the results were recalculated to only include the responses of those women who did not have children (and had no intentions of having children) the majority (87.5%) still responded "yes" compared to 12.5% whom responded "no." One woman who did comment that she felt optometry was well suited for a woman who wants to have a family also commented, "In the early 80's women were under more pressure to be 'full-time'...and many women of my generation gave up a family for a career." She also noted that she feels now that having a family is more "acceptable."

Respondents who had children or intended on having children were also asked whether or not they felt that their jobs had provided the necessary flexibility in order to adapt to having children, or if they did not have children that their job would provide that flexibility. Once again, the majority (81.9%) of the respondents responded that yes, their job did or will provide the necessary flexibility as compared to 7.2% of those who felt

their jobs would not, and 12.3% whom did not respond. In regards to the flexibility of their jobs, respondents were given the opportunity to comment on the subject, and many respondents took the opportunity to express their opinions. Several respondents made universal comments that balancing career and family is not easy, and one optometrist commented, "There is no single recipe for a balanced career and family life. Many sacrifices are made by all members of the family...and it is wise to think about all the implications long before having a family."

Of the optometrists who responded that their jobs did have the necessary flexibility, the most common comment was that optometry provides the opportunities to work part-time or full time, and the opportunity to alter the hours of availability to see patients. The mode of practice in which these women practiced varied greatly and so did the opinions about different modes of practice. For example, one woman would comment that she felt corporate optometry was more flexible than working in private practice, and the next would comment that she left corporate optometry to pursue more flexibility in an alternate mode of practice. This however, is to be expected when trying to analyze the flexibility of a career with a "yes" or "no" question.

Of those females who felt that their job did not provide the necessary flexibility many commented that they had left their jobs (or would like to) in search for another that would provide the necessary flexibility. Another woman commented her job lacked the necessary flexibility because it was very difficult to reschedule a day of patients when a child was sick or to reduce the number of hours worked per week in a busy practice.

If so many of the women feel that their job did or will provide the necessary flexibility, what kinds of adaptations were made? Although there were several questions that addressed the amount of hours worked before and after having children, many of the respondents took advantage of the invitation at the end of survey to give additional comments on any of the topics in the survey to express their personal situations and how they are balancing a family and a career.

One of the most common comments about how women are managing their careers and raising their families a successful endeavor was the integral support of their spouses. Comments were written of men who changed careers to have more flexibility, take personal days to help when children were sick, and quit their jobs to become stay at home dads. Another important comment frequently mentioned was the importance of being able to have coverage during maternity leave and days off when their children are sick. Although noted by women in all modes of practice, women in solo practice mentioned this difficulty the most. Several women mentioned that they are currently partnered with other women who all desire to make it a priority to have a successful career while raising a family and are willing to cover for one another. Of those women who work in private sector, several commented that they employ optometrists in their practice part-time in order to spend more time with their children. Slightly more unconventional methods of balancing career and family (which could be more popular in the future) included hiring in-office caretakers within their practice to care for their children. One woman commented that this was a successful arrangement for her and that her patients "loved it."

Table 4. Optometry in Relation to Children

Question	Percentage of responses
<u>Optometry well suited for women, family?</u>	
<u>Entire survey</u>	<u>(n = 153)</u>
Yes	92.8%
no	7.20%
<u>Of those women with no intentions of having children</u>	<u>(n = 9)</u>
Yes	87.5%
no	12.5%
<u>Does or will job have flexibility for family?</u>	<u>(n = 155)</u>
Yes	81.9%
No	5.8%
No response	12.3%

Comparisons between those with children and those with no intentions of having children

Along with overall compilation of the survey results, several of the survey questions were re-analyzed based on the following two conditions: having children or having no intentions of having children. The areas analyzed included year of graduation, age, optometric experience, mode of practice, hours worked, and opinions about whether or not optometry is well suited for women who desire to have a family. Although the sample size for those respondents who had no intentions of having children is very small (n=9), the comparisons still provide useful data (see Table 5).

In regards to year of graduation, age, and years of experience, those women who have no intentions of having children generally graduated earlier, are slightly older and have more optometric experience. Of those women who have no intentions of having children, 66% graduated before 1991 compared with 41.4% of those women with children graduating before 1991. The majority (66%) of those women without intentions of having children

were between the ages of 41-50, while the majority (66.1%) of those women with children were between the ages of 31-40. Those women without intentions of having children were also considerably more experienced with 66% of the women having greater than 16 years of experience, compared with only 19.1% of women with children that had similar years of experience.

There were no major differences between the mode of practices between the two groups, although those with no intentions of having children had a slightly greater number of respondents who worked in solo practice (20% compared with 17.3%), and corporate optometry (30% compared with 18.9%). On the contrary, those with children had a slightly higher number of respondents who worked in a group/partner practice (37.8% compared with 30%). There were negligible differences between the other modes of practice.

Those respondents without intentions of having children typically worked more hours per week than those with children; however the statistical reliability of this data is greatly reduced due to an inherent error in the survey. The survey failed to offer 31-39 hours as a choice when respondents were asked to circle how many hours per week they worked. Therefore only those respondents who indicated they worked those hours by writing in that choice could be counted. If this error is temporarily disregarded, it is interesting to note that 89% of women who had no intentions of having children worked greater than 31 hours per week compared with 36% of women with children who worked similar hours. This indicates many more women with children are choosing to work part time.

There were no significant differences in whether or not women with children or without children worked weekends or the number of weekends per month they worked.

When the respondents were asked whether or not they felt “optometry was a profession was well suited for a woman who wants to have a family,” the majority of both parties answered “yes” to the question. Although there were more respondents who did not have any intentions of having children who answered “no” to the question (12.5% compared to 5.3%), the majority of both groups of women still felt optometry is a profession well suited for having children.

Table 5. Data Comparison of Those With Children vs. No Intentions of Having Children

<u>Question</u>	<u>Percentage of responses</u>	
	<u>Have children</u>	<u>Have no intentions of having children</u>
<u>Year of graduation</u>	<u>n = 135</u>	<u>N = 9</u>
1969-1976	2.20%	0%
1977-1983	18.50%	22%
1984-1990	20.70%	44%
1991-1997	28.90%	22%
1998-2004	29.60%	11%
<u>Age</u>	<u>n = 125</u>	<u>n = 9</u>
25-30 years	9.60%	0%
31-35 years	37.40%	22%
36-40 years	28.70%	11%
41-45 years	13.90%	33%
46-50 years	8.70%	33%
51-55 years	0.87%	0%
>56 years	0.87%	0%
<u>Years of experience</u>	<u>n = 115</u>	<u>n = 9</u>
1-5 years	22.60%	11%
6-10 years	34.80%	22%
11-15 years	23.50%	0%
16 years	13%	33%
20 or greater years	6.10%	33%
<u>Mode of Practice</u>	<u>n = 127</u>	<u>n = 10</u>
Solo practitioner	17.30%	20%
Group/partner	37.80%	30%
Corporate	18.90%	30%
Academic	3.90%	0%
Public health service	2.40%	0%
Military/veteran's	3.10%	0%
HMO	0.79%	0%
Other	15.70%	20%
<u>Hours Worked per week</u>	<u>n = 116</u>	<u>n = 9</u>
0-10 hrs.	9.50%	0%
11-20 hrs.	19.80%	0%
21-30 hrs.	34.50%	11%
31-39 hrs.	17%	33%
40 or greater hrs.	19%	56%

<u>Work Weekends</u>	<u>n = 110</u>	<u>n = 9</u>
Yes	51.80%	56%
No	48.20%	44%
 <u>If so, how often?</u>	 <u>n = 50</u>	 <u>n = 5</u>
1 weekend per mos.	18%	20%
2 weekend per mos.	58%	40%
3 weekend per mos.	4%	20%
4 weekend per mos.	20%	20%
 Optometry well suited for women, family?	 n = 100	 n = 8
Yes	94.70%	87.50%
No	5.30%	12.50%

Discussion

Over the last ten years, 54% of the students graduating from the Michigan College of Optometry have been women, and the current graduating class is over 75% female. As more and more women join the ranks of optometry, the topics addressed in this survey become increasingly important. This survey was intended to study a sample group of female optometrists intended to be representative of the increasing number of female optometrists who are investing in optometric careers and families. The subjects broached in this survey are important to many female optometrists, and this was evident in the immense response rate from the survey. Of the 197 surveys sent, 156 of them were returned (79.2%). This excellent return rate may be an indicator of how many of these women who received the survey felt strongly about the subject content.

As previously stated, an overwhelming number of the respondents from this survey feel that optometry is a career well suited for a woman who desires to have a family. This is comforting as growing numbers of females continue to graduate from optometry school

ready to begin careers. The majority of women who had children also felt that their job provides the necessary flexibility in order to successfully manage a career and a family. It is important to note that many of the women responded through comment that they either had to leave jobs that did not provide that flexibility or pass up jobs that would not provide that flexibility. Although not directly asked within the survey, many women commented about the integral role that spouses play in maintaining a balance between career and family.

In regards to adaptations that women are making to manage a career and family, there is not a large number of women who are taking extended leave from their careers to raise their children; the majority of those women with children have reduced their number of weekly hours worked.

In comparing those respondents with children and those who have no intentions of having children, there were no significant differences in the mode of practice chosen, or the opinion of whether or not optometry as a career is well suited for a woman who desires a family. There were however significant differences in personal demographics and the amount of hours worked per week. Those without intentions of having children had generally graduated from optometry school earlier, were older, and had greater optometric experience than those women who have children. Of those respondents with children, the majority worked significantly less hours per week than those women without children, and the majority of women with children have decreased those hours since having children.

Although no survey can be representative of an entire population or perfectly address individual situations through multiple-choice questions, I believe this survey gives an accurate picture of the general population of female women optometrists.

Limitations of the Survey

Writing and analyzing this survey was a learning experience, and subsequently there are several shortcomings of the survey. First and most obviously was that the question, "How many hours do you typically work per week?," omitted a choice of 31-40 hours. This error affected not only how people responded to the survey, but also the analysis of the survey. There were many respondents that indicated that they worked between 31-40 hours by writing their response next to the question, but it can be assumed that there were many respondents who chose a different answer because the correct response was not included as a choice in the survey. Analysis of question five was performed on all of the surveys, but limited conclusions can be drawn because of the error.

The second shortcoming of the survey was in relation to question number thirteen which asked respondents to respond whether or not they had taken extended time off in order to raise their family. Although 38.7% responded that they did take extend time off, the survey may have missed a significant number of Michigan female optometrists who are currently taking time off to raise their families by failing to mail a survey to them. The mailing list for this survey was obtained from the Michigan Optometric Association, and

it is possible that optometrists that are currently taking time off from work would not have active membership in the Michigan Optometric Association.

A third shortcoming of the survey was the way that questions such as numbers 6 and 13 were written. Each question asked the respondent a question that could elicit a different answer depending on the person's opinion of what the question meant. Question 6 states "Do you work weekend hours on a regular basis?," and question 13 asks "Was there a period when you took an extended period off of work in order to raise your family? If so, how long of a time period was this?." Each question could cause a respondent to interpret "regular basis" and "extended period" differently. These questions were still analyzed but could have been written in a more concise manor.

Figure 1. Survey

Survey of Michigan Female Optometrists

(Please circle or fill in the appropriate answer)

1. In what year did you graduate from optometry school? _____
2. What is your current age?
a. 25-30 b. 31-35 c. 36-40 d. 41-45 e. 46-50 d. 51-55 e. 56 or greater
3. How many years have you been practicing optometry?
a. 1-5 b. 6-10 c. 11-15 d. 16-20 e. 20 or greater
4. What is your mode of practice? (circle all that apply)
a. solo practitioner b. partner/group practice c. corporate d. academic
e. public health service f. Military/Veteran's Health h. HMO g. other
5. How many hours do you typically work per week?
a. 0-10 b. 11-20 c. 21-30 d. 40 or greater
6. Do you work weekend hours on a regular basis?
a. yes b. no
If yes, how often? _____
7. Do you feel that optometry is a profession that is well suited for a woman who wants to have a family?
a. yes b. no
8. Do you have children? a. yes b. no (If no, please answer 8a)
8a. If no, do you intend on having children during your optometric career?
a. yes b. no c. unknown
9. What are the ages of your child/children? _____
10. Was the birth of your child or at least one of your children during your optometric career?
a. yes b. no

11. Do you feel that your job allowed the flexibility necessary to adapt to having a family? Or if you do not have children, your job will allow you the necessary flexibility if you do have children?

- a. yes b. no

Comments: _____

12. Has the amount of hours you work decreased since having a family?

- a. yes b. no

If yes, by approximately how many hours per week? _____

Comments: _____

13. Was there a period when you took an extended period off of work in order to raise your family? If so, how long of a time period was this?

- a. yes b. no

Time

Period: _____

Thank you very much for completing this survey. Any additional comments you would like to offer on the subject would be appreciated.

Comments: _____

