

Sarah LoPresti wrote the following paper for Professor Linda Blum's Women, Work, and Policy class. Sarah expects to graduate in December of 2007. She is majoring in Sociology with a minor in Business.

Women's Career Paths and Choice: An Investigation of Females Pursuing Elite, Traditionally Male Occupations

Introduction

The subject of this paper is one that I have been considering for a long time, yet never had the time, or resources to actively pursue. When I came across the following passage in one of our assigned readings from the Dubeck and Dunn collection, I knew that I should take the opportunity to pursue my questions a little further. "50 percent of white, black and Hispanic women major in the five lowest paying majors (education, humanities, professional degrees, fine arts and agriculture)." (Larson, 2004)

Initially this inspired me to ask; what have been the motivating factors in my life that have urged me to pursue a major in an interpersonal study like sociology as opposed to one in math, science, or technology, as my sister had? As a sociologist, I suppose that everything in my life is a product of socialization in the various institutions that exist in our society.

In this course, we have discussed the socially constructed gender tracks that exist in education and work force, as well as the separation between "women's work" and "men's work". Considering these two things, it makes sense that I would have pursued an education in interpersonal studies, as that is what I have been socialized to do. However this then raises the question; what motivated my older sister to pursue an education and then a career in science and technology when that goes against what we as females have been socialized to do?

The quote suggests that the women mentioned are "majoring" in these fields, therefore that they have *chosen* them freely. My research question then developed into: Given a choice, why do women choose the career paths that they do, specifically women who are pursuing elite traditionally male fields? Through research, and an exploratory interview with my older sister Emily, I hoped to discover how grade school education, higher education, our culture and peers, a woman's sense of self and the prospective workplace will socialize a woman, and thus her choice in career path.

Grade School Education

Since the educational institution is one of the first that females participate in that directly effects their career choice, it is important to start there, even if it seems early. In fact, many sociologists who study the career choices of individual woman have only focused on the point when they actually enter the work force, as opposed to the paths that lead them there. Many of the researchers I read are in agreement that this path begins well before the actual pursuit of a job, and even before the decision of a major. According to Sherry Correll's (2001) study, decisions regarding an individual's career are made as early as high school, in their choice of activities and class selection.

Previous to the 1970s, a limited number of courses in math and the sciences were available or encouraged for females in grade school. A greater emphasis was placed on their reading and writing capabilities. In fact, courses were designed specifically for girls, which would prepare them for domestic work. Girls were shown a very narrow range of career options, and they were often in traditionally female areas. When girls did express interest in the math and the sciences, they were often "redirected" towards more traditional fields by teachers and advisors. (Francis 2002)

In 1972 The Equal Opportunity in Education Act, more commonly know as Title IX, was passed. This legislation has, to some extent, discouraged advisors and teachers from preventing female students from challenging the gender track and pursuing non-traditional interests. (Francis 2002)

Presently, such blatant enforcement of stereotypes is not allowed, but many researchers insist that grade school continues to be an "institution of heterosexuality". Mandel and Shakeshaft (2000) state that it is during the years in this stage of education that individuals form their identity, and the rigid gender constructs, and strict peer cultures play a large role. Males are pressured to uphold the ideals of masculinity, and females demonstrate a concern with gaining popularity among their peers; this is often done by adhering to traditional feminine ideals. (Mandel, Shakeshaft 2000)

The pressure that the gender lines put on self identity can adversely affect individual academic performance and goals. A testimonial in Tanenbaum's (1994) essay reveals the effects on female students. "If you're a smart girl, you have to make a tough choice: Work hard and ask questions in class and consign yourself to the nerd corner, or hide your intelligence, thereby

increasing your chances of joining the ‘in’ crowd.” This girl’s statement offers an explanation of why some girls hesitate to pursue math, science, and technology related courses; courses which often prove to be necessary in order to pursue a higher education in fields such as engineering, computer science, medicine etc.

In other studies, it is noted that throughout grade school today, girls appear to be the favored sex and are out-performing their male peers on report cards. Tamar’s (1998) study offers equally optimistic research which indicates that the numbers of girls who are participating in traditionally male dominated classes, such as pre-calculus, trigonometry, and statistics, are increasing. Additionally, girls out-number boys in most of the advanced science courses with the exception of physics. This suggests that girls are being encouraged in these areas, and that the gender barriers are being broken down within the formal sector of the educational institution.

In my interview with my sister Emily, I asked about the amount of encouragement she had received concerning advanced math and science courses, as well her experiences with gender boundaries in general.

Emily- I did well in math in middle school, so I was encouraged to take the “advanced” math classes – algebra 1 instead of 8th grade math, which lead to taking algebra 2 as a freshman, when most other freshmen were taking algebra 1. As I progressed through high school, I wasn't encouraged to tackle the more advanced classes.”

“In high school I was interested in skateboarding and playing the guitar, but I was too intimidated to try them...I thought I wouldn't be good enough to be “taken seriously” and that people would think I was doing them to meet guys and not because I was genuinely interested.”

Higher Education

Despite the increase in the apparent interest in learning about math and the sciences, a gap remains in the ratio of girls who are being accepted into math and science related programs throughout higher education. Additionally, seventy five percent of all college scholarships from the National Academy of Science and Space Technology, which is a federal program, are given to men. Based on the research, it is unclear whether this is a result of fewer girls being interested in applying for and pursuing a career in these fields, or a result of men being preferred despite the level of capability being shown by the women. (Tanenbaum 1994)

Similar to grade school education, higher education for women before Title IX was significantly different from what it is today. The course offerings for women students in the formerly all male colleges often included courses in “ladylike activities” for middle class women, and more *useful* courses instructing in skills such as sewing and horticulture for working class women. At that time, the availability of education, in any form, was seen as advantageous for women; however Leatherwood (2006) articulates the concern many women have regarding the institution of higher education. “Within feminism and other progressive movements, there has long been an awareness that education can be both liberatory and oppressive, hence a demand not only for *access* to education, but for access to the kinds to education that can support and facilitate emancipatory goals.”

Leatherwood (2006) also brings up an intriguing discussion about the fact that “lifelong learning” is portrayed as an unconditionally good thing; accordingly, most literature does not discuss the many ways in which this institution is gendered, classed and racialized. Thus, “lifelong learning” is only positive and rewarding for the specific groups in society that fit into the rubric. Leatherwood’s (2006) research is based on society in the UK. In our society, “lifelong learning” tends to exclude women, racial minorities, and individuals with a low socio economic status. (Leatherwood 2006)

The agreement among all researchers I have read is; in order for the elite and traditionally male fields to gain a larger rate of women participants, women need more encouragement at young ages, and a substantial or equitable amount of financial aid for their programs. Additionally, women will need help in their pursuit of a career in their chosen field following graduation. (Larson 2004)

In the interview I asked Emily about her experiences as a Computer Science major at a largely male Technical Institute. Specifically, I asked her about her relationship with her peers, professors and teaching assistants.

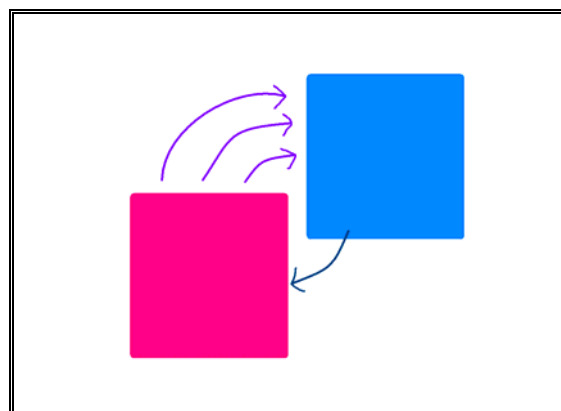
Emily- “Most students & professors treated me as if I was just another student, which I was. Everyone in the CS (Computer Science) department knew who all the girls were, because there were so few of us, but we weren't treated any differently. Freshman year, there was some element of “ooh, there's a girl, everyone turn and look!” everywhere you went, but eventually, I didn't notice people having that reaction. I may have just become used to it, or the guys may

have gotten more subtle with their “ohmygoditsagirl” reactions, but it wasn't even a very big deal.”

“There was one incident in my senior year – during office hours with a TA, it was me with 4 or 5 guys. The male T.A. made a few comments to the effect of “we should ask the girl to take notes”. Two weeks in a row he had made weird sexist comments. The guys who were there raised their eyebrows and looked over at me to see my reaction. At the end of the class, there was a T.A. evaluation, and I did detail the “incidents” during office hours. I don't know if anything ever came of my evaluation.”

Peers and Culture

Research suggests that males are more “conservative” than females in regards to their career choice... they are “less willing to experiment in transgressing traditional gender positions than are girls.” (Francis 2002) As illustrated in Visual A, “men’s work” is associated with a certain level of privilege that is not available in “women’s work”. A man’s “transgression” means giving up these privileges. Some examples of these privileges are the perception of masculinity, earnings, and prestige. Taking that into consideration, it is not surprising that men are not willing to move, while women are striving to.



Visual A

The “transgression” of gender lines in occupations can cause more than individual upheaval. It has historically caused major shifts in prestige for the occupation itself. When large amounts of women moved into occupations such as nursing, teaching, and clerical positions which were formerly considered men’s work, the value and prestige that society had associated with them decreased. There are also occupations that walk the gender line because they display

qualities that are associated with both men's and women's work. Some examples are pharmacist, non-profit business, graphic designer, psychologist, and pediatrician. (Francis 2002)

There are several theories that attempt to explain why "women's work" is devalued in our society. One theory is that society grants value to certain socially constructed "skills". How much value is granted to a specific "skill" depends on how those skills were gained, who has them and the context in which they are used. In our society a "skill" is greatly valued if it was earned through formal education as opposed to learned in the home. Also, if they are used at work, as opposed to in the home, they are granted more value. According to J. Blackmore as quoted by Carole Leatherwood (2006), "Skill... like gender is relational and reflects relations in power"

In society as a whole, and on the individual level, it is often assumed that men and women have naturally occurring, and opposing sets of "skills". Some examples of the females "skills" are *maternal instincts*, and *domesticity*. The current literature has determined that these skills are in fact learned, not a product of nature. In the women's case, these skills are less valued than the males. Society has not granted them the same amount of value or prestige that is given to many of the male skills. The male "skills" are thought to be more important and applicable in the working world. Ironically, when a woman does not have the proper set of "skills" she is seen as less of a woman, or not fulfilling her womanly duty to society. (Leatherwood 2006)

This skill system plays an important role in many careers. With each occupation there is a set of skills required for you to be a successful employee. In "Gender and the Career Choice Process" Shelly Correll (2001) writes "if it is widely believed that, to be successful, surgeons have to be able to maintain emotional distance, and men are thought to be better than women at maintaining emotional distance, then the model could be employed to understand the continued male dominance of the specialty of surgery within the field of medicine." This legitimizes the use of the socially constructed "skill" and value system in most aspects of the working world. (Correll 2001)

During the interview, I asked Emily about her experiences with the stereotype "girls just don't like science and math" or "girls just aren't as good as boys at those types of things".

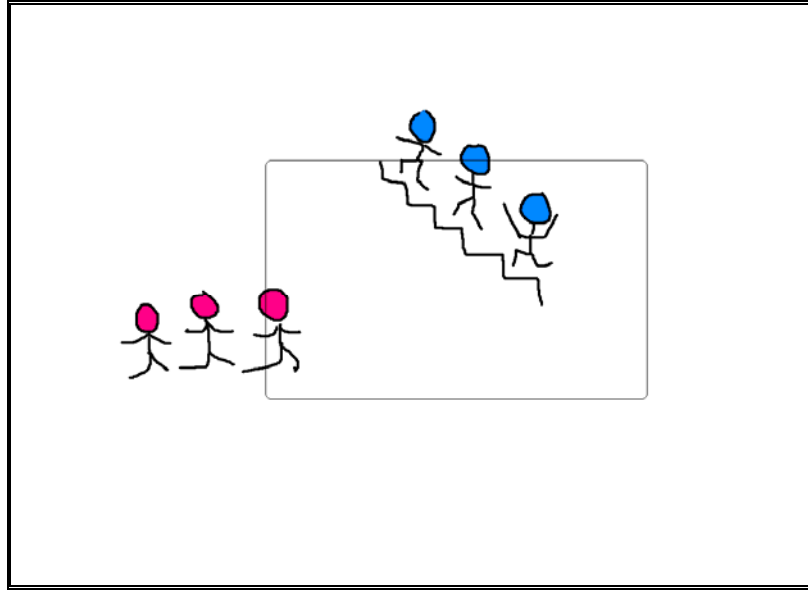
Emily- "In my experience, the people who say those sorts of things have no idea what they're talking about. There have been SO many times that complete strangers have "congratulated" me

on going to a tech school – even at WPI, the assumption was that girls were only biology majors. I was floored when the President of Harvard made those comments about girls not being as good at math and science and I thought that the backlash was completely warranted. He made a total fool of himself and he was sent the message that what he said was not true and NOT ok. It's unfortunate that people are so easily convinced by stereotypes – they pass on their incorrect impressions to others and it gets perpetuated. Fortunately, it's being proven that the sentiment that “girls just aren't as good at....” is false.”

Work Environment

Based on my research, and several discussions in class, it has become clear that the dynamic within the working environment is a major influence on a woman's choice to enter, as well as to stay at a certain workplace. This is particularly true for women who are pursuing careers in the elite traditionally male occupations. After Title VII was passed in 1964, and the EEOC had had a chance to establish itself, the workplace began to improve for women. The 1970's saw a large increase in the “feminization” of many previously male dominated occupations. This is believed to have aided in decrease of occupational sex segregation. (Coventry 1999)

With the large influx of women, it appeared as though the men were exiting at the same rate. This is illustrated in Visual B. Many of the lower-level jobs had a majority of women work them. According to the literature however, men were not leaving. They were being promoted to the upper-level jobs and leaving the lower paying work to the women. This suggests that although women were entering new fields that were previously male dominated, they were not getting the jobs, and the paychecks that they had hoped for. This resulted in *internal* sex segregation. (Coventry 1999)



Visual B

This is the beginnings of what is now known as the **glass ceiling** for women; they were allowed in the door, but not to move up in the same ways the men were. This has been a very large deterrent for women considering a position in traditionally male fields. According to the literature, the large numbers of women in a career, does not mean that the career is female dominated if the positions of power and prestige are predominantly held by males. This is often the case in the elite traditionally male fields and often a woman will choose to pursue other things if she knows she will never be able to move up in her chosen field. (Coventry 1999)

Title VII has stopped employers from discriminating against people because of their sex; however it cannot eradicate the cultural belief that males have “skills” which make them better at certain jobs than women. The believed origin of these “skills” is not important; the skills can be divinely bestowed, a product of being born, or learned. There is an unspoken expectation that men are more “competent” than women in certain fields. This is often the case in the elite traditionally male fields. This perception of competence, according to Correll (2001), “legitimizes inequality in achievement –oriented societies.” Therefore, a woman may be denied a position over a comparably qualified male because perception of competence.

My final question to Emily asked about her experiences as an educated woman, with a degree in an elite and traditionally male field, in the workplace. Specifically I asked about her experiences with condescending behavior, harassment, and opportunities and disadvantages that she has experienced.

Emily- “I do find that men in work or office settings tend to assume I don't know anything about computers. I don't hesitate to ask questions if I don't know the answer, but frequently men, usually older than myself, will “step in and take over.”

“A male co-worker came over and was being TOTALLY condescending, basically acting as if I had never seen a computer before. I was pretty insulted, so I told him I wasn't an idiot (ok, maybe not the BEST choice of words, but he was honest to god talking to me like I was born yesterday and had lived under a rock until I got to work that morning) and that I had a BS in Computer Science. He got all defensive and huffy and it was really uncomfortable between us.”

“There are certainly situations where I feel comfortable saying “oh, I got it, don't worry!” and politely refusing help. Other times, I know there's no point trying and I just let them “help” me. It's not very feminist to not say anything, I know...but sometimes the men mean well, sometimes they really are just trying to impress me, other times they are the type who KNOW that girls just aren't as good at (whatever) and that they just need to step in before I screw it all up. **Sooooo, basically, it wasn't weird to be a girl at a tech school...it's more weird to be a techy girl in the “real world”.** Nerds can bond over their nerdiness, regardless of gender...it's harder when you aren't what people expect you to be.

Choice

Shelly Correll (2001) verbalizes the sentiment of many researchers, and probably many women when she writes “a fuller understanding of the persistence of sex segregation in the labor force can be gleaned by examining the seemingly voluntary process by which men and women make career relevant choices.” The literature on gender socialization as connected with career choice seems to agree, that in fact, there is little choice for women to make at all. There is some choice, but it appears that rather frequently, women are forced abandon their passions because of pressures they receive throughout their education, from their peers and culture, and finally, from the workplace.

Consider women have *chosen* to pursue traditionally female jobs even though they know they are not going to be sufficiently paid. Women may choose to do this work because they know it is important to society, although not highly valued. *However*, not all women that are taking up these “female” positions in society have *chosen* them in the sense that they have an array of comparable jobs to choose from and this was their choice, just as lower SES workers do

not choose to pursue the lower paying jobs that exist in society. There is a series of societal pressures that have minimized their options.

My exploratory interview with Emily helped me to connect the literature with reality. Her experiences prove that most of the ideas I have become familiar with are true, and illustrated for me what they look like to a woman who is experiencing them daily. It is interesting to note that she has not yet found a job in her chosen field, while her fiancé who is a software engineer has. This of course may be because she has not pursued a career as aggressively as he. But I think that her experiences thus far may cause her to reconsider her original career expectations and goals.