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For more information, go to bc.edu/sociology and follow the link to SocialEyes

Send submissions for Fall 2013 to socialeyesbc@gmail.com
Editor’s Introduction

What is “sociology”? I am frequently asked. Put simply, it is the study of human society, of people. Sociology examines all things “social”: culture, structure, behavior, meaning-making, and much more. But sociology is unnerving at times. It invites one to de-naturalize and de-construct norms, mores, conventions, and (pre)conceptions of truth. It challenges one to confront systems of power and privilege, to question “common sense” belief systems, and to attune oneself to what may present but unseen, known but unspoken.

One of my favorite poets, Sylvia Plath, wonders, “Can our dreams ever blur the intransigent lines which draw the shape that shuts us in?” I understand her question to attest to her will—or wish—to undermine, transgress, or transcend delimiting societal systems and partitioning regimes of power that she confronted as a young woman in the 1950s. Indeed, it is part of the critical sociological project to do just this: to dismantle such systems, to examine whom or what they emphasize and whom or what they exclude, and to “dream” alternative, bettered realities.

Sociology is not just a subject but an initiative, one that transcends any one discipline or single school of thought. This is the belief of we who comprise SocialEyes: adequately addressing sociological matters necessitates cross-disciplinary conversation. Accordingly, this special Spring 2013 issue of SocialEyes features the exceptional work of students schooled in a variety of disciplines—from political science to applied psychology. The authors’ unique perspectives enrich and enliven the compelling analyses that we are privileged to publish here. Their words are the seeds to fruitful change.

We urge you, inquisitive reader, to join the conversation! As you page through this issue, allow yourself to be awed, to be angered, to be moved into action. Sociological inquiry is the germ of justice.

Onward,

Genevieve M. DiSpirito
Senior Editor-in-Chief
The Veil: A Practice of Shifting Meaning for Western Muslim Women
Darby Sullivan

My aim is to discuss the controversy surrounding the practice of ‘veiling’ by Muslim women who live in Western societies by appraising Western-oriented ideologies that often stigmatize the veil. Some Western countries have banned the public wearing of the veil, citing concerns that the religious and cultural practice is a detriment to a woman’s agency and power in society. In some cases, racial tensions underlie the growing atmosphere of negativity towards the veil and Islam, as the practice is often linked with Islamic extremism that spurred the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which ignited widespread Islamophobia. Many Western Muslim women defend their right to wear the veil, making claims for religious freedom and admonishing Western society’s narrow view of women’s rights. However, not all Western Muslim women have the same reactions to veiling: the practice divides Muslim women into both vehement proponents and opponents. Using scholarly research articles, I will address both perspectives and assess what factors influence Western Muslim women’s choice to wear the veil and what consequences they face due to this decision. As members of Western society, we can work to suppress stereotyping and discrimination against Muslims through increasing community education on different cultural practices, as well as emphasizing the value of viewing ideas through a non-American lens. A more accepting national discourse will discourage legislation that results from mounting Islamophobia, as well as encourage deeper reflection regarding the misogynistic practices in our own culture.

Western societies have historically dealt with controversy arising from how best to balance the interests and needs of all their diverse constituents. Incrementally, different disenfranchised groups have struggled to obtain the equal treatment, cross-cultural understanding, and full human rights that democratic nations in the Western world promise to all of their
citizens. At times, however, basic human rights are more complicated than we would like to believe, particularly when the interests of one group directly contradict the interests of another. Such a conflict can ignite the same kind of debate on human freedom that we are seeing unfold in Western societies today regarding the right of a Muslim woman to choose to wear a veil in primarily Christian and secular societies. This paper will discuss:

- What is the current discourse on the place of the veil in Western society, and how and why do Muslim women’s reactions to veiling vary?
- Does a Muslim woman’s age, ethnicity, or socioeconomic class play a role in their decision to wear the veil? What other factors might influence their decision?
- What are other important motivations that drive Muslim women to wear the veil—and which type of veil? How do the more complex factors of practicing one’s religion, establishing and cementing one’s cultural identity, enacting political change, and achieving greater freedom in Western patriarchies play a role?
- What solutions exist that can help foster tolerance and decrease levels of Islamophobia while simultaneously protecting Muslim women’s rights?

The ‘veil’ that some Muslim women choose to wear comes in diverse forms, depending on one’s culture. It can range in its level of coverage, from the hijab, which is a headscarf covering mostly the hair, to the niqab, common to Saudi Arabia which covers the entire body except the eyes, to the burqa, common to Afghanistan which has similar full coverage but includes a mesh covering on the eyes (France 2010:1). The level of variation of the veil demonstrates the inherent role one’s culture has in dictating which form of coverage is considered appropriate. This variability stems from the lack of explicit dictation in the Qur’an of
what a woman should wear beyond an expectation of modest dress. The few mentions of the veil in the Qur’an have been translated below (Islamic-world 2012:1):

And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts from sin and not show of their adornment except only that which is apparent, and draw their headcovers over their necks and bosoms. (An-Nur, 24:31)

O Prophet, Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their outer garments about themselves (when they go out). That is better so that they may be recognised and not molested. (Al-Ahzaab, 33:59)

While modesty is a fundamental value in Islam, the extent to which different Muslim societies interpret these verses depends on each individual’s understanding about what it means to embody modesty in the eyes of Allah. It depends on societal expectations and levels of piety and religious fervor. Some societies interpret Allah’s dictations as a decree against “conventional female adornments” such as “kohl, rings, bracelets, and make-up” (Asser 2006:1). Many Muslim scholars debate whether the verses are in fact obligatory or merely a recommendation of general modest behavior.

The differing claims and interpretations of the Qur’an exist not only throughout Muslim societies, but also in Western nations where the practice is viewed through an entirely different lens. While veiling practices are common throughout the Middle East and other Arab countries, they have sparked numerous debates across Western cultures that have a primarily Christian basis. However, in countries such as France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the debate is now increasingly rooted in secularism.

Since the terrorist attacks in the United States on 9/11 and in the United Kingdom on 7/7, a growing Islamophobia has influenced the Western view of the veil as a “symbol of terrorism and aggression towards non-Muslims” due to basic misconceptions and ignorance about the meaning of the headdress (Carpenter 2001:2). Many Westerners began to equate the veil with extremist Islamic tendencies. Muslim women found that after the terrorist attacks, their religious
practice changed the way “strangers perceived them, colleagues treated them, and even the way fellow Muslims expected them to behave” (Khalid 2011:3). The growing racism and intolerance against Muslims of all ethnicities result in mistreatment such as verbal slurs calling Muslims “terrorists,” racial profiling in airports and other high security places, as well as increased attention from public officials and police units (Hendrix 2011:1). The presence of a veil seems to elicit disproportionate claims of “suspicious behavior” as women are pulled over when wearing the veil “for no apparent reason […] dozens of times” (Hendrix 2011:1-2). Reports of women having their “scarves ripped off,” being “taunted at bus stops,” and being assaulted with “cigarette lighters thrust at their heads” arose as assault became increasingly common (Carpenter 2001:1).

Muslim women have even faced job loss and difficulties in employment due to their choice to wear the headscarf. For one woman for whom the scarf “cost her her first job” as a nurse, her employer claimed it was “interfering with her ability to relate to her patients” (Hendrix 2011:3). This stereotyping and discriminatory atmosphere served as the underlying basis for the newest controversy in Western societies about whether or not the veil should and could be banned in the public sphere. The acts of terrorism on 9/11 inspired a “persistent theme in conversations” about how this “Muslim tradition” of dress should be treated in terms of a national security concern (Khalid 2011:3).

The basis of intolerance against Islam and its practices can be seen as the true force fueling the legislative acts against wearing the veil. France, the most radical example, passed a law backed by President Nicolas Sarkozy in April 2011 banning the public use of the burqa and niqab in an attempt to combat the “assault on French values of secularism and equality of the sexes” (Beardsley 2011:1). This encompasses an extreme version of certain Western feminist
views on the dangers of the veil, which tend to perceive human rights based off of their own Christianity-centered cultural context, an atmosphere not conducive to insight on Muslim ideology. Those who view women’s rights with a Western lens tend to value the individual’s agency over perceived benefits of belonging to a collective group. They consider the veil’s purpose as only to “isolate women and take away their humanity,” (Beardsley 2011:2) seen often as “[outdated restrictions] imposed by men” (Asser 2006:1). Thus, Western societies view this legislation not only as an act of national security by ensuring one’s identity is displayed at all times, but also as a mission to further women’s rights by eliminating what Western societies view as a harmful, patriarchal practice.

However, many Western Muslim women oppose the very legislation that is meant to increase their agency, for they view it as an attack on their religious freedoms and their personal choice of how to dress. More religiously conservative and traditional Western Muslim women often regard the veil as “an expression of [their] faith and Islamic identity,” (Asser 2006:2) and they view the choice to wear one as “highly private, emotional and religious” (Khalid 2011:1) and as an expression of “education […] and culture” (Carpenter 2001:3). Often, these women have less Westernized education and have integrated themselves less into Western culture, so they are less adapted to Western norms. Additionally, many Western Muslim women who choose to veil find it to be less oppressive than the Western norms of hypersexualization and female objectification. The veil “forces people to judge them by their character rather than their looks” (Carpenter 2001:4). These are often women who are still religiously and culturally traditional but may also be well-educated, raised with the Western values of challenging authority and oppressive institutions that threaten individual rights. Consequently, they may be able to take a more critical look at the practices of Western culture.
The debate is centered around the Western view, as embodied by Sarkozy’s accusatory statements aligning with the nation’s new burqa ban (France 2011:1), that the veil is an extension of internalized patriarchal expectations of female submission, versus the view of the Muslim women who choose to veil, who perceive it as a religious and empowering individual choice which should not be dictated by Western thought. These Muslim women embody more of an Eastern mindset that sees “communal standards” as a positive force that fosters “belonging to a group whose cultures and values are important” (Carpenter 2001:4).

To understand the root of the issue, we must gain cultural insight and understanding regarding the different factors that motivate women to wear the veil. This will shed light onto the controversy of whether the headscarf exists as an oppressive extension of patriarchal control, an alternative means of female agency that is misunderstood in Western society, or a combination of the two. The choice to veil, and the extent to which veiling is a product of individualism or outside pressure, varies among different socioeconomic, age and education levels, as well as the national context in which Muslims find themselves. Often, a “middle-class, well-educated” Muslim woman tends to be more accepting and empathetic towards the importance of a woman’s right to make her own personal choice regarding the veil (Read 2000:8). These women consider this a right that cannot be infringed upon, as all should have “the right to express their religions and cultures” (Killian 2003:9). Because the veil is inextricably linked with one’s culture, many young, highly educated Muslims view any type of legislation against the veil as racist policies that are “specifically targeting their culture” (Killian 2003:11). Some Muslim women view these negative reactions to a symbol strongly linked with Islam as attempts of “forced assimilation” to a “monocultural homogen[eous]” Western society (Shirazi 2010:5). Often, Muslim women’s choice to veil is affected by the cultural atmosphere and emphasized societal values, though
one’s age and education are known to be the most influential factors upon a woman’s perspective on the veil (Killian 2003:20).

However, a woman’s choice to veil extends beyond basic socioeconomic, age, and education qualifiers and can stem from many more complex and interwoven factors. When delving deeper into individual motivations for veiling, it is clear that the degree to which a woman adheres to traditional values and to her ethno-religious roots is a major factor in whether or not a woman wears the veil. For many traditional women, veiling is a practice that is “prescribed in the Qur’an” as a “demonstration of […] unwavering obedience to the tenets of Islam” (Read 2000:5). Many Muslim women believe veiling is the best way to maintain the deeply held Islamic values of modesty in order to achieve a “place in heaven” (Shirazi 2010:8). A more in-depth assessment suggests that wearing the veil solely due to religious devotion also allows these women to feel a “moral superiority” over both non-Muslims and Muslims who choose not to veil. These women may feel closer to God if they believe they are adhering more to religious dictations (Ajrouch 2007:2). For many Muslim women who are disenfranchised by the dominant Western culture due to their aberrant expression of religion, such spiritual self-elevation can help subvert disempowerment stemming from “political and economic subordination” (Ajrouch 2007:1). Challenging the dominant culture by engaging in non-dominant religious practices can offer many Muslim women a form of power through resistance.

On the contrary, many Muslim women living in Western societies, often educated and closely tied to their cultural roots, view the tradition of veiling beyond that of a purely religious practice. Often the practice of wearing the veil is heavily influenced by the social context in which a woman finds herself. Many recent immigrants from Middle Eastern countries use the veil to help develop their “religious-gender-ethnic identities” that foster strong “friendship
networks” in a new Western society (Read 2000:10). Because the veil is a practice strongly influenced by one’s culture, upholding this tradition is often a “critical factor in the identity formation process” as Muslim women try to stay connected with their ethnic roots (Ajrouch 2007:2). Thus, veiling is not only a statement of one’s individuality but also a response to peer influence, as the practice can help women feel “more closely connected” to their friends, family, and community (Read 2000:10). For Muslim women immigrants who have inhabited their Western country longer and have had more time to integrate, or women who have been raised solely in Western societies, the veil lessens in significance as a link to one’s heritage.

The political atmosphere and key values of the dominant Western cultures in which Muslim women live influence their response to wearing the veil. Muslim women in Western nations embody a merging of cultural values, and thus use a “distinctly Western discourse of individual rights and personal freedom” to support reasons for displaying their cultural and religious roots (Shirazi 2010:4). The veil is used as a “symbol of solidarity and resistance” (Shirazi 2010:4) amongst younger Muslims in early adulthood in response to the rise of Islamophobic tendencies after 9/11. Muslim women embrace Western ideals of freedom of religion and cross-cultural tolerance while simultaneously resisting the growing discrimination that these societies have hypocritically inflicted upon them. Thus, wearing the veil as a “process of ‘re-Islamization’” which Shirazi (2010:4) defines as strengthening the “American Islamic identity” after 9/11 is more of a “symbol of American values” rather than a rejection of mainstream culture or a rise of extremism (Ajrouch 2007:3). Additionally, many women felt that by wearing the veil after the terrorist attacks, they could act as a positive symbol for Islam and dissociate their religion with the acts of the Taliban, thus “promoting tolerance and understanding” (Ajrouch 2007:3). Thus, by assigning “American values as a rationale” for
veiling, Muslim women can communicate cross-culturally to enact positive social and political change by encouraging acceptance of and education about non-dominant cultures (Ajrouch 2007:3).

The choice to veil can even be viewed as a means of subverting patriarchal values that exist in the Western societies in which these women live. Veiling is often a means for women to achieve “control over their lives” by representing their achieved levels of “equality, autonomy, and independence” (Ajrouch 2007:1,3). When wearing the veil, the observer no longer focuses on a woman’s body or appearance but instead solely focuses on the woman’s “intellectual abilities,” thus allowing her to feel more respected when wearing the “great equalizer” that frees her from the prying male gaze and Western obsession with appearances and female objectification (Read 2000:11). Thus, the veil can liberate women. Furthermore, normative gender hierarchies favoring male traits over female characteristics can be subverted with the ideology of shielding a woman from view, as the female is seen as “‘precious’ [and] diamond-like,” holding qualities to which men should not be privy due to their inherent flaws (Read 2000:10).

At the same time, many Muslim women in Western societies who are more assimilated to Western norms choose not to wear the veil. Especially, any women avoid extremely modest variations of the veil, such as the niqab, instead opting for the less controversial headscarf. This enables them to feel that they are still able to uphold traditional Islamic values of modesty and virtue. On the other hand, many Islamic and Western feminist Muslim women do view the veil as purely a “mechanism of patriarchal control” and argue that the debate about the veil is not so much a matter of religious freedoms but of the unequal and harmful treatment of women in Muslim societies (Read 2000:14). For them, the veil merely transforms Muslim women to
“targets of abuse,” which works against the very purpose of the veil itself (Shirazi 2010:8). Many argue that in Western societies, the veil actually “attracts more attention […] rather than distracting the unwanted gaze of men,” thus jeopardizing the entire ideology of modesty behind the veil (Shirazi 2010:10).

The veil can also be isolating for many women in Western societies, as it “prevents one from truly engaging in American civic and social life” and can even make speaking and movement more difficult (Shirazi 2010:11). Muslim women may choose not to wear the veil in order to integrate more fully into society, believing that “other facets of the religion matter more” (Killian 2003:20). Though certain “Islamic feminists” that exist within Islamic communities argue that the veiling is detrimental to women’s rights, they obtain their position through a primarily personal, Western lens that connects the veil to “oppressive social hierarchies and male domination” (Read 2000:6-7). By not acknowledging that the veil can be a personal choice made by women themselves, acting to empower themselves and their cultural identities, Islamic feminists are entirely disregarding the cultural context and perspective of the very women whose rights they are fighting to protect. The decision to wear the veil must be made independently of any governmental legislation, the wishes of any male presence in a woman’s life, and certain Western perspectives that lack insight into the alternative values that Muslim societies embody.

The question modern societies must face is how to approach the growing discriminatory practices towards Muslim women in regards to veiling and how to encourage acceptance towards practices that may deviate from the normal Western form of thinking. It is essential to encourage dialogue and cross-cultural acceptance and understanding, which can be facilitated by improving school curriculum to educate children on diversity. Specific and deliberate courses that focus on learning international and cultural perspectives and practices are essential in the attempt to
eradicate ignorance and misunderstanding; these must be rallied for at the community level through school boards. Children are heavily influenced by their families’ attitudes towards non-dominant religious groups and practices; thus parents must make an increased effort to de-mystify Islamic practices. This will in turn fight ignorant stereotypes that fuel hatred and discrimination, while concurrently educating children on the existence of a perspective that does not adhere to Western ideals. By assigning value to aberrant cultures, we can work at a local level to reduce Islamophobia and normalize the practice of wearing the veil in Western societies. Thus, Muslim women who choose to veil will no longer have to fight for their right to make this personal religious choice, and they will not have to face the harsh backlash and prejudice that may come from resisting the norms of dominant culture.

To enact such widespread change on an institutional level, we must work through the Western political system by encouraging our legislators and Board of Education leaders to pass laws enforcing a more liberal, accepting cultural curriculum. Education fosters understanding and empathy, and thus it is essential in creating long-lasting social and political change. This is only possible if individuals take the initiative by electing internationally-minded and multicultural political and community leaders. Furthermore, taking leadership roles by running for office, running petitions to invoke policy change, and calling media attention to the issue would help foster widespread change on a larger level. Currently, Western societal policies regarding the veil either “ban the practice directly” as in France, or “fail to protect the rights” of Muslim women who veil, as is the case in the US (Shirazi 2010:5). It is essential to change these detrimental public policies to ensure that these women’s right to veil, practice their religion, and exercise their individuality is protected by law, which will garner more widespread acceptance in Western society.
The practice of veiling is variable and shifting in its personal symbolic meaning for women, and its style and level of modesty. Western Muslim women choose to wear different types of veils or not to veil at all, as a result of a combination of factors, such as their age, education level, socioeconomic class, interpretation of the Qur’an, level of religious piety, and home cultural practices. Older, more traditional women tend to wear the veil more, as do women of lower education levels and socioeconomic class. The more educated, middle-class, younger women tend to choose not to wear the veil, as they have grown to adapt more to Western ideals over time. These trends are by no means universal or rigid, but they represent reasons that can contribute to a woman’s choice, at a specific point in her life, to veil.

Thus, the choice to veil is not a simplistic action dictated by culture or religion, but a complicated and highly personal practice that holds deep, self-defining meaning for many women, which can change over time. As is often the case, the lived experiences that cause women to choose to veil deviate from the outside, societal perception of why Muslim women wear the veil, often the result of the combination of complex motivations that differ vastly among individuals. A deeper insight into the motivations and perspectives of this aspect of Islamic cultures may not only foster greater understanding and detract from the power of Islamophobia, but it may also serve to encourage self-reflection on the part of the West. As Westerners, we should reappraise through an outside lens our own cultural norms and practices related to women’s dress in order to assess the detrimental effects our own customs might have on the equal rights of women. By assessing our own hegemonic ideals through outside perspectives, we can achieve a greater clarity on the potential harm our own cultural norms can have on women.
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The Sociological Construction of Homosexual Marriage as Deviance
Kristin Gordon

The fact that the rights of homosexuals are largely disregarded parallels their lack of power in society today. A lack of power is historically based on rituals and the formation of what becomes known and accepted as common sense. Max Weber distinguishes power from leadership or rule. According to Weber (1958), one group has power it can exert its will even against resistance. C. Wright Mills expands on Weber’s definition of power, saying it is “the chance of a man or of a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action” (Hamilton 1991:233). While some activists fight for the equal rights of homosexuals, legislators have not yet successfully altered the federal law. It is evident that the federal government acts as a group with significant power, one that can deny rights to homosexuals regardless of resistance from both individuals and state governments. The power of the federal government and religious institutions to deny rights to a group of people and their subsequent ability to define this group as deviant threaten both the marginalized group and society as a whole.

When groups or individuals are repeatedly denied power and marginalized in a ritualistic fashion, their subsequent position in society remains unquestioned. Rituals bind us and, when things are done in a ritualistic way, boundaries are drawn that appear to be natural. A feeling of naturalness can be associated with common sense, in which a ritual appears pre-constructed and timeless even when it is based on historical and cultural context and, therefore, always changing. The definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman is an example of this.

Based on religious doctrines found in both Judaism and Christianity, marriages have been sanctioned as a relationship between a male and a female. Genesis 1:28 says that God created man and woman, “blessed them and said, ‘Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it’”
This implies that humans have a God-given purpose to procreate. Therefore, many followers of Judeo-Christians belief associate marriage only with this procreative purpose and those who together have this biological ability.

Based on this biblical interpretation, it is considered “common sense” that marriages should exist between opposite sexes. However, the existence of this historical trend does not mean that it is a natural law to which society must adhere. For example, incestuous marriages occurred frequently in past generations, which society now deems both morally and legally wrong. Additionally, it is important to note that religious doctrines are subject to interpretation.

More conservative Christians may interpret scripture:

as reflecting God’s timeless will for human relationships […] However, progressives look at these same scriptures in much the same way that progressives in the nineteenth century looked at the Bible’s teaching on slavery. They believe that these verses capture cultural understandings and practices of sexuality in biblical times, but do not reflect God’s will for gay and lesbian people. (Hamilton 2013)

As history and cultural contexts shift and change over time, it is important to remember that the definition of marriage is not stagnant and may change as well.

The institution of marriage establishes boundaries for individuals by which they are restricted to partnership with one person. Moreover, their rights in the relationship are set in place by law. In this way, society has constructed delimiting boundaries. Once a member of the select group that is allowed to marry, individuals must follow a sort of conformity to retain their admission. While this is an attempt to maintain order in society, it proves difficult to convince outsiders that the “regulations” are just. As “outsiders,” homosexuals and those who support homosexuality deviate from the heteronormativity present today.

According to Mills ([1959] 2000), the sociological imagination states that every individual has a different personal biography that situates them in history and dictates their perspective of the world. Karl Marx (1978:489) echoes this thought, saying, “[M]an’s ideas,
views and conceptions, in one word, man’s consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life.” One’s social context largely refers to the ways in which historical, economic, and cultural access to power affect one’s life and therefore the choices that one makes. When individuals share the same environments, they often “share the same values, [and] they tend to behave in accordance with the way they expect one another to behave” (Mills [1959] 2000:31). However, when two individuals’ environments differ, their values and actions begin to differ as well. Mills’ theory allows one to better understand why some individuals may choose to define homosexuality as deviance and some may not.

In looking at the different perspectives, it is essential to understand that those who act as deviants against the norms of heterosexuality believe that agents of social control are exhibiting a form of deviance as well. Deviance and normality are reciprocal terms and are subjectively defined by individuals. Both the individuals classified as deviants and those acting as agents of social control view their practices as “normal” and the opposing practices as “deviant.” Likewise, the definition of normal is subject to an individual’s interpretation of one’s environment. Based on societal norms, homosexuality can be considered deviant from the heterosexuality prevalent in religious and political life. Thus, the definition of deviance is a social construction.

Many Catholics conclude that homosexual activity is deviant because they interpret Biblical scripture to classify it as a sin. Much of religion’s ability to command obedience from people lies in its ability to form a community bound together by common beliefs. Yet, by allowing the Church to define what is normal, these individuals grant the Church the authority to restrict their actions. Gramsci (1971) observes that power can be obtained through a hegemonic fashion. This hegemonic power uses ritual to operate not just by force or physical coercion, but
“more often than not it works by seducing our consent” (Pfohl 2009:416). Thus, power is able to win consent by making things appear natural, even if through this consent, one may support things that lead to one’s own disempowerment. This apparent contradiction is evident in the choice of many Christians to define gay marriage as a form of deviance. Religion seduces people to a point where beliefs and practices become a sort of common sense that is supernaturally justifiable and undeniable. They no longer stop to question what they are doing because they would not dare to question the word of God.

The danger of the unquestioned authority of the Catholic Church has previously manifested itself in history. In historical tradition, church leaders used their material success to justify their position in the hierarchical rule of the church, saying that this power came from God. Individuals used this wealth as justification and as a sign from God of an approval of their actions. As Weber (1958:271) explains, “[R]eligion proves the theodicy of good fortune for those who are fortunate.” Their economic advantage came to justify their dominance of others. This sanctification of wealth only proved to maintain the authority of the church to define God’s wishes, which often proved to reinforce the notion that God valued the rich more than the poor.

Weber (1958:271) argues that the doctrine of predestination was appealing to people because, “The fortunate is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate. Beyond this, he needs to know that he has a right to his good fortune. He wants to be convinced that he ‘deserves’ it, and above all, he deserves it in comparison with others.” When Weber examined religion, he found that, individuals not only felt the need to help others escape poverty, they also used others’ poverty to justify their relative wealth and their honor in front of God. Those stricken with poverty were not unlucky but were simply “unworthy.” Through this practice, the Church and its followers became more self-indulgent and removed from the life and acts of Christ, who
taught that God loved the rich and poor alike. While both Christian church leaders and practitioners now recognize the fault and corruption inherent in this practice, many continue to follow the doctrines that the priests declare for deviance.

Religious institutions that define homosexuality, and thus same-sex marriage, as deviance lead followers to believe that expression of homosexual desires is unnatural and condemned by God. This parallels the way in which the Church led followers to believe that poverty was a form of deviance and a sign of God’s disapproval. While followers of these religions often experience discomfort around the issue of deviance, the knowledge used to cite this discomfort is based on conventions of culture and power. For example, individuals classify their disapproval of homosexuality as both the emotional and physical feeling of unnaturalness when they see homosexual couples. My conservative friends often describe a physical feeling of anxiety and discomfort when observing a same-sex couple, even when they are unable to provide any sort of cognitive reasoning to explain their disapproval of homosexual relationships. This implies that while individuals may cognitively support homosexuality, they physiologically believe that it is wrong. By combining this example with the discussion of rituals that produce unquestioned common sense, it is possible to see that these morals are a direct result of the naturalization of the beliefs of those in power. As Marx (1978:172) famously explained, “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.” And it is through the seemingly consensual control of society that the ideas of the ruling class are maintained, unquestioned, and passed on to future generations.

This leaves us with the question of why some individuals do not define homosexuality as deviance. As discussed, individuals come from unique experiences that shape their perspectives
and opinions (Mills [1959] 2000). Thus, the same model used to analyze why individuals may be led to define homosexuality as deviance may be used to analyze why many individuals do not.

As it is often difficult to fully understand the perspectives of others outside of oneself, I will draw on my own experience in regards to race, class, and gender in developing an example of the resistance movement that seeks to redefine marriage and thus the deviant definition of homosexuality.

My own race, class, and gender have contributed to my view of same-sex marriage as normal, and, therefore, not a form of deviance. Various socioeconomic factors can be drawn on to explain my beliefs. Class is most commonly referred to as one’s socioeconomic position in society and one’s degree of access to the accompanying material goods and power. In a socioeconomic sense, being from an upper-middle class family has placed me in an environment with opportunities that others may not have. Growing up in a small, liberal community in Washington, I was raised to be liberal in my thinking regarding both financial and social issues. Additionally, the economic resources at my community’s disposal granted me the ability to help campaign for these liberal ideals. Due to my socioeconomic status, I am also able to attend college where I have access to cognitive knowledge and research about same-sex relationships. This allows me to challenge emotional responses that I may have to homosexuality with reason and rational analysis, and thus form my own opinion of the topic independent of society’s label of deviance.

The environment in which I was raised enabled me to interact with many gay and lesbian individuals on a daily basis. Furthermore, it is viewed as acceptable to be homosexual in both my local community and in my state. Washington is considered a liberal state and individuals who live in the region are generally supportive or neutral towards gay marriage. An explanation for
this could be attributed to both the economic and racial makeup of my community. For example, people from lower classes are often afraid to come out due to a fear that job discrimination based on their sexual orientation could threaten their livelihood. On the other hand, gays from a white, upper-middle class community might feel more comfortable doing so because they already have financial stability and a network of support.

Additionally, racial minorities may be increasingly unlikely to come out as being homosexual because they already face marginalization in their communities and do not want to risk being further ostracized from what is deemed normal by society. Studies show that once an individual is exposed to someone who is not like them, they are more likely to be accepting of them. For example, the Association of American Colleges and University recently found that when intergroup interactions between college students occur, they “produce clear increases in understanding, [and] decreases in prejudicial attitudes” (Impact 1998). Thus, my economic and racial experiences have enabled me to have exposure to gay and lesbian individuals, which has played a role in my acceptance of homosexuality.

In regards to my gender, by identifying as a female, there are certain biological reasons that suggest why I am increasingly likely to be loving and compassionate towards individuals regardless of their sexual orientation. “Some research suggests women’s brains are more likely to signal empathy than men’s brains” (Simon-Thomas 2007). Alternatively, I may have been socialized to fulfill female gender role expectations, denoting that I should be loving and compassionate. Thus, as a female, it may be easier for me to empathize with the love that same-sex couples share with one another. Additionally, my status as a marginalized gender in a patriarchal society helps me sympathize with other marginalized groups. While the struggles of women and homosexuals are not the same, our marginalization can create a feeling of solidarity
and responsibility to assist other marginalized populations in their fight to gain recognition, rights, and respect.

Conversely, some males may feel the need to defend the institution of marriage as strictly between a man and a woman. The defensive stance that some men take with regards to the heterosexual nature of marriage offers an indirect way for males to confirm their masculinity and separate themselves from stereotypically feminized gay men. For males, achieving a masculine identity means repeatedly rejecting the specter that society classifies as failed masculinity. Because social norms perpetuate stereotypes of masculinity as being defined by one’s toughness, emotional disconnectedness, and interest in females, any individual who does not conform to these norms is not masculine and thus a deviant. When males disapprove of femininity in other men, they implicitly identify themselves as fulfilling the proper form of masculinity. This is because the power to label one a deviant grants one the power to define the deviance.

In addressing my personal contextual embodiment, it is important for me to note that, while religious, I am not a member of a religion that denounces same-sex relationships or marriages. Thus, I am not faced with the choice between religiously “moral” and cognitive responses to the issue. In a sense, I am lucky, because my religion promotes morals that align with my reasoned cognitive beliefs. All of these factors help define the biographical context in which my experience is based.

While I view my acceptance of homosexuality as socially acceptable, people have different perceptions based on the social and historical context in which they stand. In this way, I only hold something to be true based on the context in which I perceive it. Thus, a differing perspective could lead to a differing form of truth. However, when combined with the historical factors that lead to the ritual marginalization of homosexuals and the privileged rights of
heterosexuals to marry, it becomes clear that the labeling of homosexuality as deviance presents a danger not just to homosexual individuals but to society as well.

Many individuals claim that homosexuals do not need the legal definition of marriage to love one another. While this is true, the statement disregards the benefits that come with being legally married. As discussed previously, marriage is an institution that places strict requirements on participants in order to gain and maintain privileges associated with it. Interestingly, gay rights activists first saw marriage as too strict and oppressive and did not view obtaining a legal definition of marriage as important to their struggle. While marriage remains an exclusive and privileged institution, gay activists are now prioritizing it. Marriage opens the door to other rights from which same-sex couples are restricted, even if they have a civil union. These include adoption, health insurance, and inheritance rights. Additionally, by the nature of its legal recognition, a marriage offers couples a more official statement of their devotion to one another. As more gay and lesbian families come out and begin to start families as couples, they begin to realize how restricted they are without marriage.

When power is strictly enforced by a small group of people, it ultimately means that no one except for the agents of social control is safe from being called a deviant. And, when the agents that define deviance are able to win the consent of people to the extent that their definitions become unquestionable and viewed as naturally justifiable, we are left with a society that does not evolve, change, or adapt over time. A society that is not flexible in regard to deviance can only remain in control for so long.

The functionalist perspective recognizes that deviance has a function within society and that overly rigid boundaries that define deviance limit a society’s ability to be flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances (Pfohl 2009:225). While a society with strict conformity
may appear strong, it risks becoming attached to tradition that soon becomes irrelevant in an ever-progressing society. Durkheim explains that, “[w]here crime exits, collective sentiments are sufficiently flexible to take on a new form, and crime sometimes helps determine the form they will take” (Pfohl 2009:225). A society with norms that are too strong does not allow for this transformative deviance, and society will eventually “stagnate and wither away” (Pfohl 2009:225). Thus, the stability of our society depends upon the active redefining of deviance. The battle that currently faces us is the relabeling and reclassifying of homosexuality as normative and acceptable.

Today, a sense of heterosexism pervades society. This condition states that being heterosexual is “right” and thus a cultural norm. Forms of oppression are based on the social construction of power. They occur when one group claims and maintains supremacy over another through the use of structure, ideologies, and behaviors. As we recognize racism and sexism as forms of discrimination that negatively and unjustly impact a group of people, why do we not recognize the same for homosexuals? While this is due to the construction of personal beliefs based on one’s historical and biographical context in society, it is also due to the prevalence of prejudice and stereotypes surrounding homosexuals.

Prejudice can be enacted as heterosexism in four ways: on an internal level, on an interpersonal level, on a cultural level, and on an institutional level (Rodman 2003). The internal level describes personal beliefs that individuals have regarding groups of other people while the interpersonal encompasses the way in which one acts on those beliefs in one’s daily interactions. Cultural prejudices are standards held by society that constitute and dictate what is seen as normal. Conversely, institutional prejudice exists outside of individuals and their interactions with others. This explains why individuals who do not look negatively upon homosexuality and
do not participate in forms of heterosexism on an internal and interpersonal level can still participate in its label of deviance.

The primary way through which heterosexism is maintained is through institutional heterosexism. By denying rights to same-sex couples, homosexuality is legally implied to be deviant. A legal recognition of homosexuality as deviance only proves to enforce and maintain negative stereotypes about these individuals, creating a cycle that cannot be broken by a shift in personal beliefs and cultural norms alone. For example, a judge who does not personally view homosexuality as deviance is forced to bar the marriage of a same-sex couple because laws restrict him to do so. Therefore, in order to reorganize today’s system of rituals and rules, political and institutional reformation must take place.

While I am heterosexual and benefit from the current institution of marriage, I do not believe that my personal benefit gives me an excuse not to be active in campaigning for the equal rights of all couples. It is easy for individuals with power to do little to resist conforming to laws and customs that ultimately allow them access to power in the first place. However, sometimes it takes an individual on the inside of the boundary to redefine the boundary. The ability to break down and restructure boundaries may only be granted to those who already have power. Because homosexual individuals are a minority of the population, they must rely on allies to gain power and obtain rights that are denied to them.

The world and the context in which we live are changing at a rapid rate. “As recently as the 2000s, it was viewed as typically safer for most candidates to oppose same-sex marriage than to support it. The picture today is notably different” (Somashekhar 2013). In the past, no such acts were accepted and one would automatically be classified as a deviant for being in a same-sex relationship. Today, even extremely conservative families have been known to find
acceptance for their homosexual relatives. A basis for this can be found in the reshaping of the rituals involved in defining marriage in both a cultural context and a legal sense. The Supreme Court is currently set to hear a case that challenges the Defense of Marriage Act, an act that defines a marriage as between a man and a woman. Based on comments made early in the trial, the Supreme Court seems aware that, when creating the law, “Congress decided to ‘reflect and honor a collective moral judgment’” (Somashekhar 2013). The Justices seem opposed to the idea that Congress attempted to create a law that was based solely on the morals of a group of individuals. These thoughts reflect the notion that ideas and morals come from a subjective point of view and can and should not always be imposed on others.

Recently, my home state of Washington passed legislation granting homosexual people the right to marry. With this, several elected officials from conservative states such as North Carolina and Missouri have voiced their support for same-sex unions. This complements cultural trends that hint at a more inclusive definition of marriage. A Washington Post poll stated that support for the legalization of gay marriage increased more than 21% over the last decade and is now close to 60% (Somashekhar 2013). More locally, The Observer at Boston College, a student newspaper that aligns itself with the Catholic Church, recently apologized for its past disapproval of homosexuality and stated that it was not in line with Christian values. These examples offer proof that rituals, customs, and definitions can change in both a cultural and legal sense and give me hope that the social construction of homosexuality as deviance will soon change to define homosexuality as normative.
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A Dollar Well Spent: Consumer Choices of Low to Middle Income Single Mothers
annelise Mirella Hagar

Introduction

1 I am the daughter of a single woman.
2 Growing up, there was never enough money to build a strong savings account.
3 Although there was no extra money for savings, there was always enough to buy inessential items.

These are simple facts about my life, realities which I accepted as the norm. I never questioned them, that is, until another student in my PULSE discussion group voiced a concern about some women with whom she was working at her service placement. The student raised her hand and began to recite her qualms in the most serious manner. Her statement was very similar to the following: “But professor, I don’t understand. These mothers say they don’t have any money. They’re low-income and all they do is buy things off of the info-mercials. Why don’t they save their money instead?” The classroom fell silent for a moment, then the professor continued with some response that I am sure was insightful, although I do not actually recall what was said. This is because at that very moment my mind became flooded with questions. Why did this all sound so familiar? Why were my thoughts now prodding at my own life? Why were they now directing themselves at my own mother’s spending choices? I could not help but think how often I heard my mother express that there was no extra money for the week. And yet if there was something I really wanted, a nice new top for the weekend or whatever it was, there somehow was “enough” to buy it. “Fun money” she called it. Why did she, and I by default, tend to overspend and under save in manners similar to the mother this student was describing?

Months passed but after that day, there was no going back. I knew that this question was going to irritate me so long as it went unanswered. I wrote down my question and tucked it away in a notebook. Then, after completing the McNair Exploratory Program and applying for the
McNair Scholars Program, I was asked what I wanted to research. In that moment there was nothing more I wanted to understand than the spending habits of single mothers. This was no longer just about my mom and me; this was about a larger picture that included all single mothers from the lower income to middle-income working class bracket.

I became aware of other single mothers’ spending habits and consumer choices by looking for the commonalities among the stories. Yes, there were obvious differences, but the subtle similarities were too many to ignore. I began asking questions. What is the mother buying and why? What was her childhood like? Did her family talk to her about finances while growing up and, if not, has she chosen to share that conversation with her own child now? Moreover, how does she perceive herself and other single mothers, especially in regards to consumer choices? With the growing number of single mothers, asking these questions is becoming only more important.

Methods

I began my research by conducting qualitative, semi-structured interviews with single mothers at Casa Nueva Vida in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. Casa Nueva Vida is a non-profit homeless residence that works with single mothers and their children, usually of Latin American backgrounds. As a resident, the mother is required to either look for a job or go to school in addition to contributing to the household work and attending weekly meetings. One aspect of these meetings includes informal counseling on when and how to save money. In regards to saving, they are advised to save 30% towards purchasing a home and to use the other 70% for bills and other necessary expenses. Mothers stay in the program anywhere from a few days to a few years.
I utilized a snowball convenience sample, as opposed to a randomized sampling method. Because I had been working at Casa Nueva Vida for more than a year when I conducted the interviews, this was the most efficient way to select participants and allowed me some flexibility in finding a diverse sample based on the mothers’ involvement with the program. The data collected from the interviews is supplemented by my own observations from working at Casa Nueva Vida, which was also very useful and helped me to build trust with my participants prior to the interviewing process. For interviewees, I looked for a sample of mothers currently in the program, graduates, employed graduates, or employees who were never residents. This selection process resulted in a population sample that included homeless mothers, unemployed mothers, and low income mothers who, in many cases, are also immigrants. The mothers from Casa Nueva Vida all currently live in the Boston area. For these particular interviews, I asked a set of questions that related to the program’s success. These results, however, will not be covered in this research but may be important in future work.

The second portion of participants was also a snowball convenience sample; the only difference is that these mothers live in the Los Angeles area and have no association with the Casa Nueva Vida program. This population sample was selected in order to set up a geographical and socio-economic difference. As will be discussed later in this paper, there was not a significant difference between the mothers of the different regions as was anticipated. Instead, the income of the mother was much more relevant. However, the second half of the interviews was expanded to include single mothers of middle-income backgrounds within the working class.

The interview questions covered three different topics. The first topic focused on family dynamics: I asked the mother about her childhood, specifically asking if the mother held
conversations with her parents about finances. The follow up question asked if the mother now discusses finances with her own children. The second topic related to specific purchases the mother made recently and the reasons for making those purchases. The mother was also asked about what kind of advice she has received in regards to spending and saving and from where she received this advice. These questions were aimed at better understanding the personal reasons for making purchases and the role of advice in making decisions. The last set of questions had to do with the mother’s understanding of societal perceptions of single mothers’ consumer choices followed by her own perceptions of the same mothers’ consumer choices. In addition to this question, the mother was also asked if she thinks there is a solution to the problems as labeled by society. At the end of the interview the mother was asked what she would change about her life and if she had anything she would like to add. Most mothers used this as an opportunity to share additional insights on the topic.

Once the interviews were collected, all the responses were transcribed and coded according to essential themes that emerged from the data.

**Findings**

The first interview question asked the mothers about their background and childhood, where and how they grew up. I initially thought that a financially difficult childhood would positively correlate with a financially difficult adult life. However this was not the case for all the mothers. Some mothers did come from households with financial struggles describing their childhood as “rough,” but others did not. Whether or not the mother struggled with money as an adult was actually determined later by other events such as separating from her child’s father or moving to a new country. In her interview, one mother, thirty-one-year-old Mary, argued strongly against blaming a rough childhood for a failed adult life saying, “Tu eres quien tu
quieres ser y tú haces lo que tu decidas hacer. No importa la niñez tu has tenido o cual difícil era. [You are who you want to be and you do what you decide to do. Neither the childhood you have had nor how difficult it was is important].” Her opinion on this matter stood out as the most unique among the interviews. Others gave mixed responses—some agreeing and others disagreeing with this response.

Although the interviews indicate that not all the mothers’ families struggled with money, it is interesting to note that seven out of the nine mothers said that while growing up they were aware of financial struggles even though their parents did not have that kind of conversation with them. In addition to this answer, these mothers also mentioned that, contrary to their own upbringing, they now choose to share conversations with their own children, although their parents did not share this conversation with them. This may be a generational difference or might be unique to single mothers, as Tinson (2008) indicates in her research. The latter is most likely, especially given the range in ages of the mothers and the different backgrounds. If the mothers were all the same age, it would make more sense that this difference was caused by a change in generation.

Sources for financial advice repeatedly made reference to home life. Many mothers reported having received advice from their own mothers, also single in many cases, and other family members. They also reported taking that advice for granted until later in their lives when they changed their spending and saving habits. One mother shared, “[I received advice] from my mom, but I didn’t listen to her…I wish I had. I didn’t think she knew what she was talking about. And she was a hard working lady… If I had to do things again, it would be so different” (Lucy, 55). The “best advice” came from other sources. Two mothers pointed out that because of their jobs in financial departments, and having had to take classes in addition to their work week, they
learned a great deal about how to save better. For these two mothers in particular this was the best way to learn how to budget and save money: “The only advice I can remember was my grandma and my ma…but what really helped me was being in the accounting department” (Elisa, 41).

For the mothers I interviewed, the choice to make unnecessary purchases and spend money was always in some way motivated by their children. This was reflected in the responses to the interview question about the last five unnecessary items that the mother purchased. At the very least, three of these purchases would be made for the mother's child. At the most, all five purchases would be related to their child. The mothers revealed, if they believed their children would be made happy with the purchased items, then they would not hesitate in making the decision to purchase said items. One mother said, “If I see something that I like for my daughter I’m just like, ‘You know what, I’ll buy it’. I’ll buy it ‘cause I never know if I’ll see it again. And I know this will make her happy so I’ll just buy it even if I know I can’t spend the money” (Daniela, 40). This mother and others believed that buying things for their children would in some way make their children happy. None of the mothers in the interviews doubted or questioned this. Based off of the interviews, however, there is no guarantee that this is true. What is guaranteed, though, is the mother’s happiness that results from the idea that she is providing for her child and bringing him or her happiness.

The purchases, regardless of whom they were for, almost always included clothing. Only one mother mentioned not making any unnecessary purchases. The most noticeable difference in her case is that she has the smallest income and the least stable job. Another reason for unnecessary spending for some of the mothers had to do with a goal of creating temporal happiness for themselves in addition to their children. This was especially true for mothers
whose financial situations were extremely difficult. One lower income mother said, “I used to just buy things because I was sad because I was angry at the situation or because I was just bored so I used to go to the store and …buy for no reason” (Daniela, 40). Similarly, however, single mothers of mid-range working class incomes also thought the same in a few cases. Another mother of a higher income than the one aforementioned said,

[We spend] to make us feel better, you know, because you sacrifice to give to your children first that you kind of tend to not spend on yourself. And sometimes you tend to get a little depressed about it and you’ll buy a little something for yourself, you take yourself out for lunch or just say ‘the heck with it.’ (Lisa, 58)

Two patterns emerge from this area in the research. The first is that the more income a mother has, the more unnecessary purchases she makes. This perpetuates her financial status regardless of her income bracket. The second pattern that emerges from the data is that mothers who are younger and/or had children under the age of 16, when asked “what were the last five things purchased that were not necessities” indicated in their responses that they only purchased items for their children (games, clothes etc.). They perceived the idea of spending money on themselves as wrong and selfish; they did not see a point in spending money on anyone but their children. One mother said, “Things like that are unnecessary, especially after you have a kid. Your life ends and your kid’s life begins. Now I don’t mean as in ends as in you have to just forget about yourself. But you have to be a little less selfish and think more about your kids” (Diana, 22).

On the other hand, mothers that were older and/or had children over the age of 16 when asked “what were the last five things purchased that were not necessities” demonstrated a significant change in response. These mothers exhibited a shift in mentality. They explained that making purchases for their children is important, but when it comes down to it, there needs
to be more of a balance between spending on children and spending on themselves. One mother explained,

I think as a single mom we should take more into consideration that we need to take ourselves into consideration as well. You know, we just give more than what you are giving to yourself. So it has to be more balanced and more adequate for the rest of the family. So it is not necessarily a bad thing… I just think that for a good state of mind it should be a little more balanced. (Marissa, 38)

This mother’s purchases in particular reflected this mentality and provided a good example of a mother who experienced a shift in purchases based off of a realization. There is no way of knowing when exactly this shift happens, but it is a shift that is inevitable for many mothers as was obvious in at least three interviews.

The question that asked about the last five things purchased had two functions in the interview. First, it was simply to understand what the mother purchased, for whom and why. This revealed the expected result that most purchases were made for children. Secondly, the question provided the mother with a unique opportunity, intentionally or not, to create and present her self-image. In some interviews a mother would use this question to highlight her selflessness as a mother. She could transition her answer from the last five things she bought into a monologue about how she never makes purchases for herself and only spends money on her children. By answering the question in such a way she is highlighting her good qualities and demonstrating the character she would like the public to know.

When beginning this research, answering the question of “why single mothers do not save more” was one of the most important aspects for me. A professor with whom I met to discuss my research suggested the idea that, for single mothers and others in the low-income bracket, there is never sufficient funds to create a savings account that would prompt social mobility. As a result of this, the remainder of the income would go towards other incidental expenditures, social and practical ones. In all cases the idea that there was not enough money to
save large amounts, such that it would foster a significant improvement, held true. However, there were different approaches to how and when to spend the leftover income. One instance held very true to the prediction. One mother whose income was more in the mid-range bracket expressed in her interview that because of her income she is able to do more than some other mothers:

> When there is a little bit extra, that’s my opinion, I think that you know you kind of just say ‘oh let’s go have a good time’ or ‘let’s go out to eat’ or… You can’t do it if you don’t have it. So if you have a little extra sometimes you just want to do for your children, you want to try to have a good time, have a happy time. And you go to the movies, you go out to eat. You buy something new. A lot of mothers aren’t able to do that. Because of my income I can do that periodically. And that’s what I do. (Lisa, 58)

In other cases, some mothers did prefer to save what little they had left from their income but as a means to have immediate funds in case of emergencies. One mother discussed in her interview that in the event of an unexpected bill (replacing her front brakes, for example) having saved a little each day allowed her to have some peace of mind because the money was there. This does not mean she refrained from spending on other occasions but rather she made the conscious effort to spend a little less and save a little more, although it did not result in bettering her life in the long term.

Among the expected findings were some incidental ones that, in some ways, were more interesting than the others. The most interesting part of these findings was the perceptions of single mothers held by other single mothers. Going into this research, I understood that societal perceptions of the consumer choices of single mothers are typically negative. As I began my interviews, I became curious as to what the mothers believed these societal perceptions were. The answers varied, but most had strong similarities. In summation, most participants felt that single mothers spend too much on things they should not buy. One mother responded, “They
don’t think about the future, that’s for sure. They will buy things that they don’t need without thinking about it” (Daniela, 40). Another said, “I heard of single moms that have a low income and are buying the most expensive perfumes and the designer purses and the designer clothes, I heard of that. And I just think that’s crazy” (Lisa, 58). Although these mothers are technically within the same category of single mothers, they do not sympathize but rather separate themselves from the rest. An obvious us-them mentality emerged. Instead of expressing that the negative perceptions of single mothers are not completely accurate, these mothers reinforced them but highlighted themselves as the exception. There was only one mother of the nine interviewed that expressed her answer in first person, identifying herself as part of that perceived population. She expressed,

I’m sure that mothers spend more than they need to and more than they have because you want to be able to give everything to their kids and I know that we make a lot of mistakes. We over spend. We get into debt. Because we don’t want our kids to go without or feel that they’re not as fortunate as those kids who have both parents. But unfortunately we’re not real savvy with money. (Lucy, 55)

There was a negative correlation between the mother’s income and the intensity of the critique towards other single mothers. As income increased, the intensity of the critique became slightly more subdued: the opinion was still critical but slightly more understanding. This contrasted with the extremely critical opinions of single mothers whose incomes fell into the lower income bracket. This could be caused, in part, by the social realms in which these mothers live. For example, a single mother of a lower income might be exposed to more single mothers who, she considers, abuses the welfare system. Whereas a single mother of a more middle income might be exposed to more single mothers that are of the working class and do not receive such benefits. But this is not definite.
Another incidental finding that emerged from the research was the phenomenon of single mothers labeling other mothers as “young” based off of her behavior and consumer choices. Being “young” in this case has nothing to do with the mother’s age but much to do with a certain behavior the mothers associated with “bad” single mothers. In many of the interviews, the mothers would deem a mother “young” if she demonstrated immaturity, selfishness and disorganized priorities. Although defining this type of mother was relative to each mother interviewed, there were similarities in the responses. One mother commented, “Most of the mothers we have here are so young now. It’s not like before when I first started working here; they were older so they didn’t really care much about that. Now, the ones we have are so much younger, so they just care about their sneakers” (Diana, 22). This mother was the youngest that I interviewed for this research. That being said, it was the best case to emphasize that the biological age of the mother is irrelevant.

Discussion

One thing that is important to realize is that these mothers, regardless of how hard they work, are not making adequate incomes that will allow them to save to the point of improving their financial status. Instead of saving, these mothers focus on first paying necessary costs (such as rent, bills and food) then using what is left as a temporary savings for emergencies or as an additional pot of money to spend on the children or themselves. It is not that the mothers do not value saving. Actually, the majority of the mothers indicated in the interviews that saving is something with which they struggle and wish they did more. In some cases, the mother wished she had a better job that would lead to more saving.

This lack of saving, to many, seems disadvantageous to the mother’s finances and, in many ways, it is. But there is also good in this kind of spending. A mother can create the
illusion of normalcy for her children and, as an effect, bring happiness to herself and her family. The feeling is temporal but if the behavior is routinized then the feeling of happiness becomes consistent. This is an investment. For the mother there may not be any major changes for her in her lifetime. There are, however, ample possibilities for the children to improve their lives. Therefore, investing in her children, especially in regards to education, is worth every dollar.

Even with what is said here about the consumer choices of single mothers, I acknowledge that there is still a mostly negative perception of this population both from society and from other mothers within the population. As a result of this, in the interviews, I decided to ask the mothers if they thought there was a solution to the problem of single mothers overspending and under-saving and if they even felt that it was a problem in the first place. Is there a way of approaching this dilemma productively that could help single mothers learn how to save, while not completely eliminating their ability to spend a bit on the side? Half of the mothers I interviewed were convinced that there is not a viable solution and that there is no hope for change unless the individual chooses to do so. Their outlook on the situation was mostly negative. One mother emphasized,

*Sí hay solución si ponen de su parte, si ellas de verdaderamente quieren poner de su parte, si hay solución. Pero, sinceramente, si no quieren poner de su parte y no están de acuerdo en cómo se deben ahorrar, pues creo que no [Yes there is a solution if you put your part in, if they really want to put their part in, there is a solution. But honestly, if they don’t want to put their part in and they’re not in agreement with how one should save, well then I think not]. (Mary, 31)*

One mother suggested for those mothers on welfare that different vouchers be given instead of cash. Other mothers indicated that more education might help. But they were not completely convinced of that either. Based on my observations and analysis of the interviews, mothers who received financial advice in a classroom or work setting were the most aware of their own finances and had a more efficient approach to when and how to spend and save. I
believe that programming geared toward finances and budgeting would, in several cases, help single mothers. How to make that programming available to everyone, however, poses a major problem, and, of course, the programming would only be beneficial to single mothers who are interested in it. That was made obvious in all the responses to the question of the existence of a solution.

**Conclusion**

The consumer choices of single mothers are under-researched and merit more attention. Although this work tries to explore the topic, it is not sufficient. In the future, should more work be done on this topic, a larger and more random population sample should be used as this research was limited by time and my experience as a researcher. With this change, the results from the study would be more useful. However, I do believe that the findings that were taken from these interviews are highly valuable and insightful at least to these single mothers.

In addition to a larger sample size, exploring how single mothers improve their situations through the use of social service-trading networks (for childcare, for example) would be useful. This is an area in the research that would add many perceptive points.
DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPANTS

[Mother number, age, marital status, number of children, ages, relationship to program, ethnicity, location/geographical movement and assigned pseudonym]

M1: 22, never married, 1 child, 15 mo., employee at CNV, Dominican-American, New York to Boston, MA [Diana]

M2: 31, never married, 2 children, 12, 5, employee at CNV, Puerto Rican, Puerto Rico to Philadelphia to Boston, MA [Mary]

M3: 46, never married, 4 children, 25, 21, 22, 11, former resident at CNV, African-American, Brooklyn, NY to Boston, MA [Michelle]

M4: 37, separated, 2 children and 1 nephew for which she has custody, 15, 13, 6, resident at CNV, Dominican, Boston, MA [Isabel]

M5: 40, never married, 2 children, 16, 19, employee at CNV and former resident, Colombian, MA [Daniela]

M6: 38, never married, 1 child, 19, not related to program, Mexican, Los Angeles, CA [Marissa]

M7: 58, married once, 3 children, 41, 20, 16, not related to program, Mexican, Los Angeles, CA [Lisa]

M8: 55, never married, 1 child, 20, not related to program, Mexican, Los Angeles, CA [Lucy]

M9: 41, married once, 1 child, 17, not related to program, Salvadorian, Los Angeles, CA [Elisa]
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Go, Fight, Win!—Performative Masculinity in Cheerleading
Malia Allen

Cheerleaders, usually distinguished by pom-poms and skin-tight uniforms, are typically present at most sports games. From football to women’s basketball, they have an undeniable role in the sports culture at many schools. At Boston College, the team consists of predominantly white, middle to upper class girls, reflects the racial makeup of the school, but does enroll about ten male members on the team.¹ Within Boston College, a private Jesuit American university, cheerleading can become a context where concepts of hegemonic masculinity can be negotiated, and where the performance of masculinity and femininity within a feminized activity can be recognized.

**Defining Hegemonic Masculinity** In order to study how hegemonic masculinities are negotiated within the context of Boston College’s cheerleading team, let us clarify the definition of hegemony. “The concept of hegemonic masculinity,” claim Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:46), “presumes the subordination of nonhegemonic masculinities, and this is a process that has now been documented in many settings.” There is not one form of hegemonic masculinity—it is influenced by context, the interaction of gender, subordinate masculinities, and other aspects of society (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005:829). For the purposes of this paper, hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity present within a specified context. Within Boston College overall, it is a white, middle class, heterosexual form of masculinity that symbolically emphasizes power and male dominance. The rest of this paper will aim to shed light on how this concept of hegemonic masculinity influences male cheerleaders, and how male

cheerleaders reform different concepts of hegemonic masculinity within the context of college cheerleading teams.

**Race, Class, and Sexuality in Cheerleading** Due to race, class, and gender, cheerleaders with more cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977) and privilege have more room to cross gender boundaries. Thus, men with hegemonic statuses at Boston College are more likely than men with subordinate masculinities to successfully maintain their hegemony, even as cheerleaders. In addition, the “threat” male cheerleaders feel of being perceived as homosexual not only exposes the heteronormativity of society, but shows how society tends to relate men that perform ‘feminine’ activities to a deviant sexual orientation or a failure of performing masculinity.

Because Boston College consists of mostly white students who either come from or perform middle to upper class status, male cheerleaders can take advantage of their cultural capital in many forms, including (but not limited to) a “normative” presentation of white, male, and middle to upper class privilege; thus they have more leeway to achieve gender in non stereotypical ways. In terms of establishing hegemonic masculinities at Boston College, it is evident that gender, class, and race are all part of an interacting system where class-based masculinities come into play. Pyke (1996:544) argues, “[S]tructures of inequality are expressed in ideological hegemonies, which construct gender in ways that reemphasize and normalize the domination of [...] privileged men over lower-class men.” For most of BC’s male cheerleaders, their ability to participate on the cheer team is most likely influenced by their status as privileged men and their access to hegemonic masculinity. Because they hold more power in society, higher-class men can have more flexibility than women or non-hegemonic men\(^2\) to act as they please. With the racial, class, and gender privileges that Boston College students have, male

\(^2\) Only saying “men and women” is limiting, and I do not mean to suggest an exclusive gender dichotomy.
students are given more opportunity to experiment with gender roles, so being a cheerleader can be an activity that their class and race supports, instead of something that challenges it.

For college women, cheerleading may be a way to reproduce emphasized, hegemonic femininity and perform class because “cheerleading has served as an icon of normative—meaning white, heterosexual, middle class, and American—girlhood” (West and Grindstaff 2006:500). For female cheerleaders, cheerleading can become an arena to perform this “normative” femininity, whereas for male cheerleaders it can be an arena to exercise the benefits of class-based hegemonic masculinities. (However, it can be argued that as a cheerleader, men at BC who normally present hegemonic masculinities can feel a threat to their hegemonic status.)

Because the nature of this activity is ‘feminized’—and thus ‘non-masculine’—they may perform hyper-masculinity while they cheer as an alternative way to prove their hegemony (Pyke 1996: 531). Within the context of Boston College though, it seems that men with hegemonic masculinities (in terms of race and class) who are involved in cheerleading are not considered to be entirely subordinate. Especially because Boston College has a strongly supported football team, cheerleading may be given a certain amount of respect, which highly influences how these men are perceived. Male cheerleaders, most of whom already embody hegemonic masculinities, then may use their status to reform and reproduce a different type of hegemonic masculinity within the context of Boston College’s cheerleading team.

Although Boston College mainly consists of the ‘powerful majority’ (white, middle class, heterosexual, i.e., hegemonic masculinity) and students thus have more leeway to cross gender boundaries, male cheerleaders within this context may still feel the need to reaffirm their legitimacy. In “True Life: I'm A Male Cheerleader” (Wormer 2009), written by a male cheerleader from Boston College, it is striking to recognize how he takes the stance of an
oppressed individual, asking for acknowledgement from his “oppressors” for self-validation. Patricia Hill Collins (1989) presents this concept in her article “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought” and details how those who are oppressed must overcome many obstacles in order for their own viewpoint to be legitimized. In a similar way, this male cheerleader speaks from an unexpected viewpoint, for “[a]ll social thought […] reflects the interests and standpoint of its creators” (Collins 1989:751). The tone of the BC article is mainly informative, but there are clearly elements of validation and persuasion, which I will mention later. It is clear, however, that as a male cheerleader, the writer feels the need to voice his experience as his reality differs from how those in the ‘powerful majority’ perceive it. “Not everyone understands what it is like to be a male cheerleader,” the cheerleader says, “which is why I was asked to write this article in the first place. There are countless negative stigmas surrounding male cheerleading that become baseless as soon as one actually learns about the sport from a man who has done it” (Wormser 2009). The writer is using Collin’s knowledge-validation process by claiming that his experiences qualify him to convey the reality of his situation. It is his way to legitimize his position as a man who, despite his ‘deviant’ actions as a cheerleader, still embodies Boston College’s perception of hegemonic masculinity.

In looking at the interaction of race, class, and gender in cheerleading, one can see how, for example, an African American man’s participation in cheerleading can have different results than a white man’s. First of all, race and the challenges that it poses are already at play because of the racial and socioeconomic make-up of Boston College. According to Mills (1959:7), “contemporary man’s self-conscious views of himself as at least an outsider, if not a permanent stranger, rests upon an absorbed realization of social relativity and of the transformative power of history.” Using the sociological imagination, a cheerleader’s circumstances at Boston College
must be observed within a larger context in order for his experience to be understood. Thus, a male cheerleader at BC who identifies as black or African American faces different expectations for being non-white, as well as for being a non-white male doing a ‘feminized’ activity. There are different, stereotypical expectations for African American men, like becoming a professional athlete or embodying the “bad boy rapper” image that change with history (Ferber 2007). Those expectations then influence the perception of that African American male cheerleader so that he is deviant not only at a gendered level but at a racial level as well. His participation in cheerleading could result in his not being perceived as a ‘real black man,’ thus shifting the area of focus to sexuality and masculinity. Overall, this example (only one of many) demonstrates how race, class, and gender can and do constantly interact with one another.

In terms of sexuality, male cheerleaders may often feel that their peers question their heterosexuality, and, consequently, male cheerleaders seek to publicize it. Looking at the interaction between sexuality and gender (and race and class) in cheerleading, male cheerleaders can use claims of heterosexuality to perform homophobia and establish their masculinity. According to a cheerleading study on orthodox and inclusive masculinities, “the expression of homophobia is […] largely accomplished through covert mechanisms of heterosexism” (Anderson 2005:345), and male, heterosexual cheerleaders can thus somewhat reclaim their hegemonic statuses by asserting heterosexuality. In her article about children’s gender nonconformity, Emily Kane (2006:162-164) highlights how many parents, especially heterosexual fathers, link the process of interacting with “feminine” things to homosexuality or a deviant sexual orientation. This perceived link tends to be true within this context as well, and for male cheerleaders to maintain their version of hegemonic masculinity, they recognize that “a key form of subordinated masculinity is homosexual (or not heterosexual)” (West and Grindstaff
Thus, male cheerleaders often work to differentiate themselves from feminine activities that can cause them to possibly be seen as homosexual. In all, race, class, and sexuality are all impacted by and interact with gender in cheerleading.

**Doing Gender in Cheerleading** Partly in response to threats posed to their sexualities, male cheerleaders (as well as all people) ‘do gender’ at an interactional level, and many use it to prove their heterosexuality and reaffirm their hegemonic masculinity. At an institutional level, both professional cheerleading organizations and the overall sports culture of our society enable gender to be ‘done’ and enable gender inequality to be replicated. Using the powerful concepts of the West and Zimmerman (1987:126) article “Doing Gender,” one can see that male cheerleaders at Boston College constantly interact in a way to accomplish gender, and institutions are set in place to aid these interactions.

**Interactional** One of the primary ways in which male cheerleaders accomplish gender is by asserting their heterosexuality and displaying hyper-masculinity to compensate for their participation in a feminized activity. (Again, this form of masculinity that they are accomplishing is the previously defined hegemonic masculinity of Boston College). In a quote from a male cheerleader at Boston College, he claims that “the team had everything [he] was looking for: it was something new, it was a challenge, and it provided [him] with camaraderie. Oh, and there were also beautiful girls ... lots of beautiful girls” (Wormser 2009). In other words, “the most common narrative heterosexual male cheerleaders used to explain their transgression into feminized space [is] a well crafted and collectively constructed story about men lusting for their female teammates” (Anderson 2005:345). By attributing his participation to attraction to the

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3 This is a very limited statement because cheerleaders associated with different cheerleading associations tend to have different stances on homosexuality (West and Grindstaff 2006, Anderson 2005), and some male cheerleaders may not worry about being perceived as homosexual.
women on the cheer team, this male cheerleader not only establishes himself as heterosexual—thus contributing to his hegemonic image—but he insinuates that his female teammates merely have a sexualized role. In asserting that he cheers for the appropriately ‘masculine’ reasons, something *challenging* with *camaraderie* and *beautiful women*, he resultantly turns something society stereotypically deems ‘feminine’ into a masculine activity, making it acceptable and less deviant.

In addition, male cheerleaders interact in many ways “which reinforce the notion that being strong and being straight ‘naturally’ go together. For example, some mentioned the importance of throwing impressive stunts as a way to ‘prove’ they weren’t gay” (West and Grindstaff 2006:511). West and Zimmerman (1987:136) remind people that “actions are often designed with an eye to their accountability, that is, how they might look and how they might be characterized.” This phenomenon manifests itself once these men acknowledge that in their interactions, they are subject to accountability for their gender.

Moreover, these male cheerleaders attempt to make it seem fundamental that men are the ‘strong, stable’ basis for cheerleading while disguising the fact that these supposedly ‘natural’ gender roles are actually a social construction. “Despite the fact that the entire field is culturally feminized, many cheerleaders of both sexes maintain that certain tasks within the sport are actually highly masculinized activities, even if women perform the same tasks in the all-women’s division of cheerleading” (Anderson 2005:342). Here, we can see that when men are throwing women up in the air, they are establishing their actions to be masculine and are thus ‘doing gender,’ but when women are doing the same action, it is not considered masculine. In her article about gender identity, Lauren Walters (2011) alludes to how it is acceptable for girls to do ‘boy’ things but when boys do ‘girl’ things, the negative backlash is much stronger. To
counteract the negativity, male cheerleaders do ‘emphasized gender’ to make their actions in cheerleading seem masculine, as opposed to feminine.

Another way in which male cheerleaders perform gender at an interactional level is through the construction of a symbolic ‘other,’ in order to assert their own validity and identity. In her article about Filipino girls in America, Espiritu (2001:436) acknowledges that “the construction of white Americans as the ‘other’ and American culture as deviant serves a dual purpose,” one of which is to “present an unblemished, if not morally superior, public face to the dominant society.” In a similar way, male cheerleaders can and do create an “other” out of non-cheerleaders (the dominant society) as a way to assert themselves to be better or “morally superior.” The male cheerleader from Boston College claims, “Anyone can wear something as well established as a football sweatshirt around campus, but show me a man that can wear a cheerleading sweatshirt and I'll show you a man with confidence and swagger” (Wormser 2009). Here, he is devaluing and delineating the non-cheerleading ‘other’ by saying it takes the confidence of a ‘real man’ to be a male cheerleader.

**Institutional** Gender in cheerleading is also done by institutions that are set in place; not only do they enable male cheerleaders to establish their masculinity within a feminized arena, but they also allow the reproduction of gender inequality. Cheerleading institutions, primarily the Universal Cheerleading Association (UCA) and the National Cheerleading Association (NCA), play a critical role in the performance of gender, as does the larger American sports culture.

The UCA is more gender conservative, while the NCA allows much more flexibility in its judgments and rules (West and Grindstaff 2006:513). The structure of outside institutions, which regulate college teams and tell them what is and what is not ‘gender appropriate,’ evidently participate in the ‘doing’ of gender. “What version of masculinity a team embraces is
shaped by which cheerleading company a team affiliates with [...] because different companies promote different styles” (West and Grindstaff 2006:513). However, even though the NCA is more liberal in its policies by allowing male cheerleaders to dance in some form, men are restricted from “twirls, spins, or leaps” or “[anything] suggestive” (West and Grindstaff 2006:513). Therefore, the cheerleading institutions enforce the idea that ‘non-feminine’ is masculine, and generally it is unacceptable for men to cross these socially constructed gender boundaries.  

Looking closely at the arguments of West and Fenstermaker (1995) in their article “Doing Difference,” one can see that their argument that any sort of difference, whether it be race, class, or gender, is done via interactional accomplishment and interactional institutions. The authors emphasize the importance of context, and “depending on how race, gender, and class are accomplished, what looks to be the same activity may have different meanings for those engaged in it” (West and Fenstermaker 1995:32). So, for example, some men may trivialize cheerleading as non-masculine, but paradoxically for most male cheerleaders, this activity has become a way for them to establish their masculinity. Also, one can see that institutions reinforce the differences between male and female cheerleaders. By claiming that men should not ‘twirl’ or ‘leap’ because it is a “naturally” feminine action, these institutions are creating an environment where twirling and leaping become non-masculine activities that men should not do. This directly relates to the concept that “[s]ituations defined as real become real in their consequences” (W.I.Thomas in Wharton 2012:137) because only by creating differences do the differences manifest themselves and become “real” rules. For example, by saying male cheerleaders must be ‘strong and manly’ to be masculine (a situation perceived as real), then being ‘strong and

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4 Perhaps there is a rationale behind the differences between the institutions, but that is not the subject of this paper. It is also critical to that the above statements are based on generalized observations and that there is always the possibility of change within the said institutions.
masculine’ thus becomes a requirement for male cheerleaders (and the situation becomes real in its consequences).

Looking at race, class, and gender through an even wider scope, one can see how the overall sports institution affects how men and women do gender in cheerleading. The debate over whether or not cheerleading is a sport raises questions about femininity and masculinity. In response to the differences between male and female cheerleading roles, experts acknowledge, “Such differentiation serves to ‘masculinize’ cheerleading for men and to ‘feminize’ it for women. Yet these two tendencies clash when it comes to legitimacy as a sport: while masculinization helps cheerleading gain credibility, feminization renders it vulnerable to trivialization and ridicule” (West and Grindstaff 2006:514). Society determines sports to be ‘masculine’ activities, where female participation is different and of secondary importance—hence the National Basketball Association and the Women’s National Basketball Association. Within cheerleading, there are arguments that it is too feminized to be a sport, revealing that such a strong association with women and stereotypically feminine functions (supportiveness, usually cheering only for men’s teams, etc.) illegitimates cheerleading’s ability to be considered a sport. According to West and Grindstaff (2006:506), “Coed college cheerleaders attempt to bring cheerleading under the umbrella of sport in two main ways: by focusing on the competitive nature of cheerleading, and, related to this, by emphasizing the skill or athleticism of cheerleading.” Normally, both competition and athleticism are strongly associated with men as opposed to women and femininity. In all, athletic institutions in the United States and the country’s sports culture tend to trivialize activities that have strong ties to women or ‘feminine activities’ by its reluctance to consider them sports, while in turn valuing men and masculinity.
Gender Inequality in Cheerleading

This discussion about the institutional performance of gender in cheerleading directly relates to gender inequality, for claiming that cheerleading is only a sport once men or masculine qualities are its defining factors, society is valuing masculinity over femininity. In addition, this concept suggests that it is unacceptable for men to do ‘girly things’ unless those ‘girly things’ can be justified as masculine. There is a “‘different but equal’ perspective on gender relations (including gender performance) [...] that the roles of men and women are equally important but organized differently according to gender appropriateness” (West and Grindstaff 2006:512). Gender inequality in cheerleading is currently produced in a number of ways, some of which include having different try-out requirements for men and women, having sexualized uniforms for women (e.g. short, revealing skirts and cropped tops) and less-sexualized uniforms for men, having men refrain from sexualized dancing, and trivializing cheerleading because it is a predominately female activity. Most of these methods are justified by claiming that men and women have essential differences, but, actually, “[d]oing gender means creating differences between [...] women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological. Once the differences have been constructed, they are used to reinforce the ‘essentialness’ of gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987:137). There are other ways in which gender inequality is perpetuated, as mentioned throughout. However, the aforementioned are the ways that I feel are most important to address.

Gender inequality in cheerleading is not inevitable because it was started as an all male activity and gradually became feminized over the years, illustrating how its gendered attributes are a social construction. Cheerleading is currently being introduced as a co-ed activity, and with progressive institutions, like the NCA, that do not necessarily enforce strict hegemonic masculinities or femininities, gender equality in cheerleading can eventually be reached.
However, this will not happen until equality in sports is reached and until female roles are recognized as legitimate (as opposed to strictly supportive or aesthetic) and until there is a balance. To minimize inequality, work would have to be done both at an interactional and an institutional level, and in order to break down gender inequality; cheerleaders of all genders would need to adhere to similar and equal requirements. Nevertheless, definitions of ‘equality’ are relative, so in attempting to avoid inequality, people and institutions must be critical of the rules they set.

“Un-doing Gender” People can never ‘not do gender,’ and “social change [...] must be pursued [...] at the interactional level of gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987:147). Cheerleaders (and everyone else) at Boston College are always doing gender, but actions can be taken to equalize the ‘doing of gender’ by deemphasizing social rules and expectations in order to celebrate the differences of both genders. Beyond these changes, the ‘un-doing’ of gender requires a change of mindset that sees past the socially constructed differences that separate male and female cheerleaders. Wharton (2012:48), in her discussion about how socialization influences society’s perception of gender differences, concludes “what is considered appropriate for each gender varies according to societal and cultural context, time, and place, among other variables.” In general, this argument has validity, for it alludes to the fact that gender relates to context, and it suggests that gender is indeed ‘done.’ However, one of the limitations of Wharton’s argument is that she implies a sex dichotomy; when she says “each gender” she means either male or female, a binary outlook that narrowly limits gender to being only ‘one’ or ‘the other.’ So, in relation to cheerleading, “un-doing” gender might mean embracing an outlook that abandons limitations of a perceived gender dichotomy, as well as concepts of ‘essential

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5 Again, I say “both genders” for simplicity’s sake, not to indicate gender binary.
differences,’ while acknowledging and looking beyond cultural and social variables. “Un-doing”
gender would mean respecting cheerleaders as athletes because their actions merit “sport” status,
ot not because it is male involvement that makes is a legitimate sport. “Un-doing” gender would
mean equally appreciating cheerleaders’ stunts for the skills that they are displaying, rather than
the amount of ‘masculinity’ or ‘femininity’ they are performing. “Un-doing” gender would mean
thinking of cheerleading (and sports in general) that is not specifically associated with a certain
gender.

Limitations and Conclusion One of the main points that I am unable to adequately
address is the presence of an alternate form of hegemonic masculinity that is present in most of
the colleges that are associated with the National Cheerleading Association. Both West and
Grindstaff’s article and Anderson’s article mention how approximately half of the male
cheerleaders in their studies embody a form of masculinity that did not devalue or sexualize
female teammates, promote heterosexuality over homosexuality, or focus on reproducing the
hegemonic masculinity typical of Boston College. Of course their claims have limitations as well,
especially in the scope and range of their interviewees, but it is a significant difference that I did
not have time to explore.

To conclude, race, class, and gender constantly interact within this context to ‘do gender’
and to reproduce gender inequality at individual, interactional, and institutional levels. Collegiate
cheerleading at private universities⁶, especially Boston College, provides an arena for hegemonic
masculinities to be reflected on, reformed (in part), and negotiated in complex, multifaceted
ways.

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⁶ This paper has a narrow focus and does not explore the negotiation of hegemonic masculinities within
teenleading at public high schools, universities, or in professional arenas.
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An Exploration of the Myth of Acting White & Acting Black
K. Preito-Hodge

Introduction

Misrecognition and misrepresentation have become the sites through which the perpetuation of marginalization has been able to thrive. For many years, social scientists have played a pawning game in their research by providing stereotypical and inaccurate portrayals of “the experience” of certain marginalized communities. The conceptualization of “acting” other than one’s “color” is something that continues to be heavily debated within Black and Brown communities across the nation. In this essay, I seek to define and examine the popular misconception of “acting white” as defined by scholars, provide a critical framework for looking at the issue, and possibly revitalize the standing definition according to these communities regarding what it really means when someone is said to be acting a certain way. For the purpose of confidentiality, the names of the individuals interviewed will be altered.

Why Acting White?

Coming from an entirely Black community and being raised by several Black women, I have oftentimes heard individuals being charged with the accusations of acting white. My conceptualization of this phenomenon went unquestioned up until my first years in college; acting white for me meant the rejection of Black culture or even the conformity of tone of voice that individuals often use when addressing their white counterparts. Acting white for me was something that I felt that I was forced to do while working in retail. Acting white is something that many people of color are forced to perform when entering public spaces in order to accommodate individuals of European descent.

Upon taking the course, the Sociology of Education, I became informed that many scholars regarded this phenomenon in a very different way. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu
believes that there are three forms of capital that individuals may possess: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital (Bourdieu 1986). Cultural capital refers to the non-monetary or hidden form of capital that takes time to accumulate and is oftentimes transmitted from generation to generation. Cultural capital, according to Bourdieu can be broken down in three subsections, the most important being that of the objectified state. He mentions that cultural capital in this state consists of “material objects and media, such as writings, paintings, monuments, instruments, etc.” (Bourdieu 1986:87), and that this form of capital “can be appropriated both materially—which presupposes economic capital—and symbolically which presupposes cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1986:50).

Nigerian-American anthropologist, John Ogbu (1986) attempts to incorporate pieces of Bourdieu’s theory on cultural capital in his Oppositional Cultural Theory. Ogbu theorizes that Black students and other involuntary immigrants (those whose ancestors were forced into the U.S) equate academic success with the dominant culture. Moreover, to assimilate into the dominant culture means betraying one’s native culture—hence the emergence of the notion of acting white as popularized by many scholars (Ogbu 1986). In other words, Ogbu believes that academic success is something that Black and Brown students associate with whiteness, which is why they may underperform in school settings. He thus believes that these involuntary immigrants placed value on their own culture (which did not conform to that of the educational expectations of the white bourgeois) in order to authenticate the exclusiveness of their native group.

**Non-Dominant vs. Dominant Cultural Capital**

Can dominant and non-dominant cultural capital coexist? This is a question that many scholars have questioned throughout the years. According to American sociologist Prudence
Carter (2003:138), dominant cultural capital “corresponds to Bourdieu’s conceptualization of powerful, high status cultural attributes, codes, and signals. Cultural capital provides individuals with an ability to ‘walk the walk’ and ‘talk the talk’ of the cultural power brokers in society.”

Non-Dominant cultural capital, on the other hand, refers to the expressive means of a culture, which is often attributed to the lower class and is used to authenticate one’s belonging and status positioning in a particular community. Furthermore, non-dominant cultural capital can be viewed as a tool for survival in these communities. For instance, in his book Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society, UC Berkeley sociologist Martin Sanchez-Jankowski (1991) speaks of the ways in which he gained acceptance and trust among the gangs that he studied by utilizing the bit of non-dominant cultural capital that he possessed. This non-dominant form of capital is characterized by his ethnicity, which built a certain level of trust with the specific communities that he studied (Sanchez-Jankowski 1991). He points out:

> However, on one occasion I did have some difficulty. It turned out that a member of the gang, for reasons no one ever discovered, had told police about some crime […] he told the leadership that he had heard that I was the one who had informed. The gang confronted and physically attacked me. Sometime later, however, other gang members found out from their informants who had really supplied the police with information. The leaders contacted me […] and gave me permission to study them. (Sanchez Jankowski 1991:11-12)

**The Coexistence of Different Forms of Cultural Capital**

The previous section briefly suggests the ways in which dominant and non-dominant cultural capital are able to coexist and how both forms of capital provide a means that navigates toward an ultimate end. Dr. Sanchez-Jankowski is a professor at UC Berkley, which automatically provide him with a form of dominant cultural capital. His Latino roots provide a form of non-dominant cultural capital that allowed him access to these otherwise off-limit communities. In this case, the coexistence of these two forms of cultural capital allowed him a form of social, cultural, and economic security. He was able to navigate through two distinct
spaces. But how does this coexistence look for individuals who have not fully attained the social and economic capital that a college professor may have? Can this balance occur for individuals who still live in inner-city communities? And if so, how?

According to Claude Steele, individuals must choose between the two. He believes that one must dis-identify oneself if one wants to seek success:

> You can be valued and rewarded in school [and society] […] but you must first master the culture and ways of the American mainstream, and since that mainstream [as it is represented] is essentially white, this means you must give up many particulars of being black—styles of speech and appearance, value priorities, preferences—at least in mainstream sense. (Cook and Ludwig 2008:277)

He goes on to say:

> Once disidentification occurs in a school, it can spread like the common cold…Pressure to make it a group norm can evolve quickly and become fiercer. Defectors are called ‘Oreos’ or ‘incnegros.’ One’s identity as an authentic black is held hostage, made incompatible with school identification. (Cook and Ludwig 2008:277)

While I somewhat agree with the statement that one must give up certain things to assimilate into mainstream society, I do not believe that one must fully dis-identify oneself with one’s native community to attain a certain success. This is where I believe the ideology of “code switching” comes into play.

Code switching simply describes one’s ability to navigate through both white and Black spaces utilizing both dominant and non-dominant cultural capital. For instance, one of my study participants (whom I will identify as T) spoke to me about his use of code switching between public and private spaces. He and other participants described this transformation as a part of speaking “professionally” while in public, predominantly white spaces, in contrast to switching into Black vernacular and more comfortable tones when in predominantly Black and Brown spaces. From personal experience, I can attest to this use of code switching, as I mentioned in the first section. The ability to code switch provided me with both forms of cultural capital: one that
is said to be expressive and provide a sort of relation to Black and Brown communities and one that is said to provide the ability to “talk the talk” of different groups.

**Cultural Capital & Education**

Many social scientists and educators have come to the common misconception that students of color reject educational attainment, when in reality many of these students value it highly. Ludwig and Cook (2008), in their article “The Burden of ‘Acting White’: Do Black Adolescents Disparage Academic Achievement,” use certain markers of achievement between Black and white students who attempt to disprove Ogbu’s Theory of Oppositional Culture. They found that students of color and white students spent about the same amount of time doing homework and that students of color were no more likely to skip class or miss school than their white counterparts (Cook and Ludwig 2008:281). The very idea of these students spending time completing homework provides a sort of contradiction to Ogbu’s theory. If students of color did attribute academic success to white culture (and not to their own), then it may be said that they would spend little to no time doing homework and that they would be more likely to miss school or class. This, in a way, negates Ogbu’s theory of academic success and its equation to whiteness.

In order for students of any color to thrive in any space, there are essential obligations from an educational institution: to provide the student with comfortability, respect, and an overall healthy and adequate learning environment. For many students of color, especially those who reside in the inner city, these basic necessities are oftentimes not met by the institution. Thus, the learning environment becomes hostile when students’ and teachers’ race, culture, and lifestyles clash. In providing a progressive and healthy learning space for students of color, teachers and administrators have to be willing to understand and accept the cultural differences that may arise in the classroom or any school settings for that matter. They have to be willing to
accept that some students of color are under a lot of stress outside of the educational institution. Provided these circumstances, they must be willing to invest in both the academic and personal growth of students.

According to Prudence Carter in her study on cultural capital and schooling, she notes, “[T]eachers did not tolerate assertive students” (Carter 2003:148), and therefore many of these assertive students displayed resistance in the classroom. She also notes how educators came to ignore the students that did display these types of qualities and came to expect less of them. This echoes Karolyn Tyson’s (2003) viewpoint on schooling in her article “Notes from the Back of the Room.” Tyson believes that the reasoning behind the resistance between both parties (educator and student) is attributed to cultural and class divides between students and their teachers (both Black and white) as well as the unclearly stated and unattainable goals of the institution:

[S]imply knowing what schools expect does not protect adolescents because in that awareness is the knowledge that what the school wants, they do not possess. Older minority and working-class students are thus frustrated and angry by what they perceive as the schools’ devaluation and disrespect of who they are, their knowledge, ability, and culture. (Tyson 2003:328)

In the above passage, Tyson touches on several vital points when explaining the controversy that students and teachers find when interacting with one another. She mentions the “schools’ devaluation and disrespect of who they [the students] are, their knowledge, ability, and culture” (Tyson 2003:328). This statement captures the lack of recognition and qualification of many teachers and administrators, and in turn sheds light on the reasoning behind many students’ “behavioral” issues.

Tyson’s statement brings back memories from my days in middle school. The next participant whose story I will cite shall be called Lai. She was one of my best friends up until my later years in high school and one of the most intelligent people that I knew back then.
Throughout middle school Lai was labeled as one of the school’s “issues”: she always talked back to teachers if she did not like what they said, always spoke up for others, and she always did what she wanted to do. Because Lai was resistant to the conformity that was expected of her, teachers’ labeled her a problem child and began to expect less of her. Her grades would have been amazing, but considering behavior and effort were both portions of the final grade, she suffered greatly because of teachers’ perceptions. In other words, because Lai did not conform to the ideal standard of behavior that required a degree of submissiveness, Lai’s academic performance suffered greatly. This was not because she did not excel academically but because she refused to sacrifice who she was as an individual at the expense of pleasing teachers.

The solution that one may believe to work in these scenarios would echo that which W.E.B Dubois (1935) theorizes in his article “Does the Negro Need Separate Schooling?” Though this article was written many years ago, I believe that it still holds a valid and useful argument when solving problems within education:

The question which I am discussing is: Are these separate schools and institutions needed? And the answer, to my mind, is perfectly clear. They are needed just so far as they are necessary for the proper education of the Negro race. The proper education of any people includes sympathetic touch between teacher and pupil; knowledge on the part of the teacher, not simply of the individual taught, but of his surroundings and background, and the history of his class and group; such contact between pupils, and between teacher and pupil, on the basis of perfect social equality, as will increase this sympathy and knowledge; facilities for education in equipment and housing, and the promotion of such extra-curricular activities as will tend to induct the child into life. (Dubois 1935:238)

Here Dubois is calling for the education of students of color by teachers of color. I believe that this solution may work in some respect, but I also believe that this solution may be defective in assuming that teachers of color have an effective ideology when teaching students of color.

Tyson also speaks to this issue when she mentions her field notes at an alternative school. Alternative schools are those that are non-traditional. They consist of smaller class size, diverse curriculum, attention given to special needs students, etc.
She believes that the school was great in respect to trying to provide students with affirmation and positive images, but she also mentions a incident during which one of the Black teachers, Miss Clifton, scolded her students for being “poorly” behaved after a white woman came to help the class make candles. In this instance, Tyson takes note that these children were very well behaved during these activities, though this was contrary to Miss Clifton’s belief. Tyson believes:

This incident captures well the marked emphasis on behavior and the heavy demands placed on black students to conform to the highest standards of behavior so that they do not confirm the stereotype of the uncivilized black person (see also Delpit 1996; Leacock 1969). In the presence of the “Other” (Fordham 1996), even during what could have been considered a fun and creative activity, silence and self-restraint were required. Hale-Benson (1986:49) noted that “Black children usually are given very strict guidelines for behavior on the bus or in public because loudness and boisterousness could make white people feel that all Blacks are that way.” Ladson-Billings (1994:31) referred to this phenomenon as the “burden of blackness.” (Tyson 2003:333)

This incident illustrates the process of internalization that prevents students and teachers from conducting healthy and autonomous relationships. For instance, the children may now interpret themselves as “bad” because of the incident or even allow it to affirm common stereotypes that haunt Black children. The process of internalization was also briefly mentioned in past sections when I spoke of code switching and taking a “less aggressive” tone when speaking to white people. Internalization attempts to instill that the only way to progress is by honoring whiteness and truly believing that one must accommodate whites. This may be thought, in some respects, to better Blacks, but in reality, it perpetuates the inequality in education, which spills over into the wider capitalist system. Moreover, I believe that Dubois’ theory on educating people of color would be applicable only if teachers are able to eliminate all of the stereotypes that they have when instructing students; however, one also must realize the larger unstated goal of public schooling, which is assimilation into the white patriarchal rule.

**Conclusion**

I hope to have provided enough information for individuals to start to rethink the notion
of acting white. From my interpretation, acting white has much to do with the ways in which individuals come to fully reject Black culture in preference to white culture. While many may say that code switching is a form of rejection, I believe that it is a strategic way to get what one wants without losing who one truly is. I believe that the equation of whiteness and education is highly problematic in that it maintains the ideologies of eugenics, which theorizes biological and racial inferiority. This obviously perpetuates not only stereotypes but also the disenfranchisement of people of color. One must recognize the hand of capitalism and the remnants of slavery that are encompassed in the notion of “acting white.”

By the very definition of capitalism and the caste system, there will be very few individuals flourishing at the top and a tremendous amount holding the foundation of society at the bottom. Some people have to own the business and some must be exploited by the business; thus the educational system must follow this motto. The issue then becomes not a matter of acting white or the yearning for educational attainment, but the systematic oppression and institutionalized racism that is imposed on communities of color. A part of this systematic oppression and institutionalized racism is the belief that only dominant cultural capital will allow students to achieve academically. The disrespect and devaluation of non-dominant cultural capital can thus be seen as a way to further marginalize communities of color by misrecognizing their values and beliefs. Only when teachers, administrators, media, and social scientists begin to realize that both of these forms of cultural capital are able to coexist will we have a revitalizing definition of the value system of students of color.

It is important to clarify the misconception of “acting white,” which many social scientists have come to believe, by providing an accurate representation from students of color and their conceptualization of what it means to act in a certain manner. I hope that this
exploration has provided a sense of clarity to the notion that Black and Brown students do not value educational attainment less than their white counterparts, and their conceptualization of “acting white” has much to do with the ways in which one may reject Black culture and not education.
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The ‘one percent’ of the world is colloquially understood as the most elite. In the United States of America, the term designates the top tier of its wealthiest citizens. The Miniature Earth Project, which reduces the world to a village of one hundred people, reports that just one person – or one percent – is fortunate enough to receive a college education (Village 2012). It seems self-evident to aspire for the ‘one percent’ minority when it is advantageous. But what if this mentality were to suffer a vicissitude? Astoundingly, there is a ‘one percent’ that is universally disadvantaged by a global system.

Despite gains made by women for equality in most other arenas, men monopolize battlefields; over 99 percent of combatants in world history have been male (Malešević 2010:275). Military organizations are based on a hierarchal system, divided by gender at the most basic level. The complex relationship between warfare, masculinity, and femininity is derived from this hierarchal structure of military organization. Consequently, women are universally excluded from combat due to the disadvantaged nature of their position.

War is a social event that requires collaboration, strategy, effective organization, and skillful action carried out in combat. While modern militaries have made strides to include women in the realm of warfare, the overwhelming majority of the world’s 20 million soldiers are men, and commanders are almost exclusively men (Connell 2000:213). Women have been limited to traditional roles and responsibilities, like nursing and psychology, which keep them away from the frontlines. These roles emerge from a historical context in which men have been socialized to embrace violence, and women are “recruited into jobs that repair the consequences of [it]” (Connell 2009:4).
The concepts of masculinity and femininity are interdependent, and manipulating the pair to form a rigid dichotomy affords modern states the ability to divide citizens with ease. Malešević (2010) notes that “no state can afford to turn all citizens into bloodthirsty killers,” so when commandeering an army, it is important for states to assign citizens to roles of either action or support. The concept of masculinity has long been linked to action and the military. The ideals of “masculine heroism […] glues the army together and keeps men in line, or at least enough in line for the organization to produce its violent effects” (Connell 1995:214).

Conversely, femininity is aligned with weakness. An entire group has therefore been assigned the “secondary role of civilians” (Malešević 2010:305). Entire societies have come to accept this system of division via axiomatic markers. The military system confuses biological sex with the more complex term ‘gender,’ despite the great differences between the terms. Physical markers may constitute sex, but sex is not gender. Gender is neither innate nor is it an attribute. Most fittingly, gender is a verb – a socially process, and enacted through behaviors and expectations (Connell 1995:71). Thus, the military system reinforces misinformed understanding.

The interdependent nature of warfare and societal structure underscores the injustice of a gender dichotomy that excludes women from combat. For example, it has been suggested that “war militarized the male, and the male militarized the routines of factory, office, and school” (Simons 1999:91). On the micro-level of society, gender relations can be analyzed by the gender regimes of a particular context. The world gender order results as a metaphorical umbrella. The exclusion of an entire gender in warfare is not the product of one culture or gender regime – rather, it is a universal phenomenon that defines world gender order by placing women in a devalued, secondary role.
Biological, cultural, and social theories can hardly explain the omnipresence of the exclusion. Women are excluded because militaries are structured by the abovementioned ‘civilian/female’ and ‘military/male’ dichotomy; thus, the exclusion is an unfortunate byproduct. Although the myriad alternative explanations proposed cannot fully account for the worldwide exclusion of women, the points they offer substantiate prevailing sentiment about gender differences. Because war and modern civilization emerged in conjunction, these ideas assist in understanding how the structure that emerged is justified (Malešević 2010:296).

A noteworthy approach is masculinism, which points to an assumed link between masculinity and warfare. Biological masculinism emphasizes anatomical differences that purportedly make men more suitable soldiers. It argues that the generally increased strength and stature of men make them more desirable combatants. The “biological impediments” of women, including menstruation and pregnancy, alternatively make women unfit for the rigors of warfare (Malešević 2010:281). On average, men typically have better spatial skills, which is useful in warfare for tasks like map reading (Malešević 2010:277). Men also have as much as twenty times more testosterone than women, which is linked to aggression – and, presumably, the violent tendencies required for battle. While these arguments possess varying degrees of merit, all can be countered point-for-point.

First, the body size of soldiers is irrelevant as warfare demands savvy strategy and not blunt force. The women in history that have succeeded as soldiers negate the claim about women’s biological disadvantages. Female soldiers do exist: Malešević (2010:282) lists many examples, from Soviet female pilots in WWII to female Vietcong soldiers to current US women serving in the Iraq wars. Next, a variety of strategic and physical skills are necessary for militaries – including those typically possessed by females. Finally – and notably – testosterone
and aggression simply do not equate to military success. Testosterone levels are not a source of aggression, but rather, “the consequence of social relations” (Connell 2000:215). Malešević (2010) explains that adrenaline is more predominant on the battlefield, a stress hormone that is similar in both males and females.

Like the biological masculinists, social masculinists claim that the more aggressive nature of men is socially learned and necessary for battlefield dynamics. Aggressiveness is actually detrimental to militaries when it impedes on the rational and measured approach necessary for victory. Regardless of the role of aggression, it is important to note that women can also be socially conditioned to act in that way. Trained female soldiers are often more “ferocious and militant in combat” than male soldiers (Malešević 2010:281). Social masculinism also purports that militaries are descendents of male hunting groups, which demand gender-specific bonding for group cohesion. This argument is obliterated by archaeological research that indicates the groups were actually formed by entire communities – males, females, and children. Historical examples of successful female warriors confirm that small-group dynamics are not uniquely male (Malešević 2010:278).

Although women are generally excluded from combat, there have been notable female soldiers throughout history. Unfortunately, their role has been consistently undermined by society. For example, sixteenth-century Inca women fighting the Spanish invasion were regularly portrayed as combatants, a “normal part of an alien social order” (Macdonald 1987:6). This “alien” designation implies the notion’s supposed primitiveness.

Furthermore, over 34,000 soldiers in the Gulf War were women, who “broke the rules and the sky did not fall” (Muir 1992:25). Faced with social and physical challenges, they worked together to navigate the struggles of entering a male-dominated battlefield and warfare.
The obstacles were far from unworkable, as masculinists would have women believe. Rather, the women learned by trial and error and now have this knowledge to pass on to future soldiers.

The great irony of including women in contemporary warfare is that more often than not, they are utilized when situations are dire; that is, female forces are only recruited when the men are dwindling and warfare is at the pinnacle of danger. The inclusion of women is therefore necessary when there is the greatest risk but is eschewed in times of lowered risk (DeCew 1995:64). Despite the success of modern women in the military, Macdonald (1987:6) concludes, “Where war is defined as a male activity, and where highly-valued masculine characteristics are often associated with war, a female warrior must be seen as inherently unsettling to the social order.”

In Nicaragua, the Sandanista military has high levels of female military participation. Still, male and female soldiers are trained separately – not because of inadequacies of the women, but a “failing” on the part of some men who cannot relate to women as soldiers (Macdonald 1987:11). It is suggested that the men will also instinctively protect the women, which poses a dangerous disturbance to the job at hand. Unfortunately, it seems there is no easy solution when the nature of the military has “a rich vein of misogyny” (Muir 1992:20). The structure itself perpetuates gender stereotyping.

In the United States, the Rostker v. Goldberg case provides a fitting example for contemporary views on a woman’s role in combat. The 1981 case stemmed from President Jimmy Carter’s reinstatement of the Military Selective Service System, a mandatory draft registration for males aged eighteen through twenty-six and his subsequent recommendation that women be included. When the act reached Congress, the majority recommended against mandating that women register. They determined that because women “were excluded from
combat by statute in the navy and air force, and by military policy in the army and marines,” a
draft would be inappropriate and unnecessary (DeCew 1995:59). Although challenged by
attorney Robert L. Goldberg, the Supreme Court upheld the decision and declared it did not
violate existing legalities requiring equal protection for men and women. This emphasizes how
the nature of combat restrictions affects not only warfare but also the perception of women on
the part of our legal system.

Thus, combat exclusion directly affects contemporary women. For example, men
dominate other branches of enforcement as male police officers, prison guards, and security
agents (Connell 2000:213). This disproportionate distribution of authority positions only serves
to reinforce ‘glass ceilings’ in so-called masculine jobs, and the patriarchal nature of society.
Also, a US Supreme Court decision upheld Massachusetts’s “absolute” hiring preference for
veterans – who are predominantly male – notwithstanding the obvious negative impact on
women (DeCew 1995:68). Supporting troops and veterans is undoubtedly an admirable,
patriotic cause for citizens. But when the economic and social disadvantages are overlooked, it
perpetuates a skewed system.

In the United States, the important role of women in warfare reached its peak during
World War II. Their efforts and support, on and off the battlefield, were needed most when men
were away. The fictional ‘Rosie the Riveter’ was used as an encouraging symbol for women
joining the staffs of factories and offices. Women even began playing professional baseball in
the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, as the war endangered the fate of Major
League Baseball. Yet a “full scale propaganda blitz” on behalf of the government sent women
back to the domestic sphere after war in order for men to return to their civilian jobs (DeCew
1995:72). Regardless of the success of many women in these roles, it remains societal
inclination to provide its most valued citizens with honor and responsibility, while the secondary citizens merely provide relief.

An article by a female marine, entitled “Get Over It! We Are Not All Created Equal,” vehemently argues against the possibility of including women in infantry. Captain Katie Petronio (2012) asserts that integrating women is a question of their longevity and enduring the “physical and physiological rigors of sustained combat operations.” She describes the injuries with which she has been afflicted in combat and notes that gender-specific medical issues will arise from including women in infantry. Further, she feels the change “will rock the foundation of our Corps for the worse and will weaken what has been since 1775 the world’s most lethal fighting force” (Petronio 2012). Petronio reminds readers that she is only pointing out differences she has discerned from experience. She asks policymakers to include the opinions of women with firsthand experience, rather than advocates guided by ideals. Petronio’s plea is worthwhile but reminds us to seek the opinion of many more women. Her opinion alone will not suffice but neither will that of removed policymakers and activists. It is to our advantage to gather these firsthand accounts, in order to ensure our efforts are appropriately guided. Still, as Muir (1992) noted in *Arms and the Women*, challenges to female soldiers are not insurmountable. Simply, they must be encountered, investigated, and dealt with accordingly. Women are owed this effort.

Female exclusion from combat cannot be explained by inherent gender differences because they simply do not exist, and the notion legitimizes inequality. Studies emphasize there are no substantial difference between traits of the two genders – in fact, there is “massive psychological similarity between men and women” (Connell 2009:62). Masculinity and
femininity provide a continuum on which similarly sexed individuals vary according to their deep inner worlds and social contexts. Still, an emphasis on differences prevails.

The hierarchal structure of warfare has assigned women to a role of secondary citizens, which not only affects their opportunities on the battlefield but also their experiences in modern civilization. The effects of this polarization are ominous and perpetuate a complex relationship between masculinity, femininity, and warfare. Further, Connell (2000:223) notes that military aid, the most predominant form of all international aid, is a gendered agency with gendered effects. This maintains a patriarchal gender order. Ideals of inclusion and equality are therefore imperative to work toward, although change cannot be expected immediately. The nature of the modern state will continue to promulgate incongruity, but the question right now is not about immediate change or even whether or not women should be included. Understanding the flawed military structure, how, and why women are universally excluded is an important preliminary step toward revolutionizing gender disparities.
References


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