

1986 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

Lynn M. Appleton, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Sociology
College of Social Science

Most students no longer believe that women are less intelligent than men, that it is immoral or improper for women to compete with men, that women are suited solely for domestic duties and motherhood. My presence on this stage is testimony to the speed with which they have abandoned traditional myths about a woman's place.

Still, most students embrace an equally insidious set of myths: that women have equal opportunity for social, political and economic achievement. That women's lives are so different from men's lives is, they believe, a consequence of women's choices.

Faced with this conclusion, I point out to my students that, despite their ostensible belief in women's equality, their reasoning leads to a belief in women's inferiority. If equal opportunity exists, women must be defective in talent or temperament – because so many women seem to make so many bad decisions about how to live their lives.

Look at the statistics, I say. Women are strikingly absent from the upper echelons of the important organizations of our society. They crowd into poorly-paid and dead-end jobs. They are scarce in fields with the highest salaries and greatest decision-making power. The gap between male and female earnings has widened, rather than closed, in the past decade. Women still make substantially less money than men, even when they do the same jobs. More women than men live in poverty in the United States.

If women have equal opportunity to achieve happiness, they must be making poor choices – because the outcomes of their decisions are so unsatisfying.

So, I ask my students: are women stupid, or lazy – or both?

It is easiest to get them to understand the limits that other people place on women's achievement. They know that male colleagues may be reluctant to work with female newcomers to a job. They know that some bosses assume that only men are capable of leadership.

But, they argue, these old prejudices are disappearing. Soon, women workers will be treated like their male counterparts.

This, I suggest, is not the case. No group in human history has given up privilege voluntarily. It is unlikely that men will be the exception. Equality in the workplace will come slowly and grudgingly. The defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment suggests that substantial resistance to women's equality still exists.

But women's equality could not be assured even if gender were to become completely irrelevant to women's co-workers and superiors. Inequality is more complicated than that – more complicated by far.

Consider one of my favorite philosophical quips: you can do as you please, but you can't please as you please.

Inequality between men and women is assured by the ways in which men and women "please" – by the values that they hold, by the decisions that they make. These values and actions are shaped by the social construction of gender – of maleness, of femaleness. To understand women's choices, it is necessary to understand this social construction: the ways in which women are rewarded for acting feminine and punished for acting masculine; the ways in which women are trained to have different values than those of men – and, in particular, trained to value love more than work, to place others' interests ahead of their own.

The content of masculinity and femininity varies between and within societies. The nature of gender stratification also varies. In all societies except the smallest and simplest, men and women have different access to wealth, power and respect. The amount of inequality varies, but men always have more of these valued items than women do. The ways in which that inequality is maintained differ. Sometimes, women are forbidden to act in certain ways, to hold certain positions; sometimes, they are taught to want different things than men want. In our own society, the mechanisms for maintaining inequality are complicated and subtle; generally, they don't rely on coercion and overt discrimination. Instead, what women and men are trained to value – as well as what they are taught to take for granted – maintains the gap between men's and women's social positions.

Every day, women students make decisions that add up to an answer to the question: what will I do with my life? Most of the time, they don't know that they are choosing: they're under the illusion that they are just selecting courses for spring term, or choosing between the beach and the library on a sunny afternoon.

When they do think about their futures, they believe that they have two choices.

They can put their trust in love as their salvation, and to prepare for a job that will be a second income for their household rather than a source of sole support or of personal

satisfaction. Or, they can assert that it is possible to "have it all" – a satisfying career, a fulfilling relationship, the joys of children.

Sadly, neither choice is a realistic formula for happiness. Moreover, neither choice challenges the current organization of relationships between men and women, the way in which women currently participate in economic life, the current organization of childrearing. However, the belief that one of these choices will "work" serves to keep women and men from asking fundamental questions about the relationship between human happiness and the way in which gender organizes human lives.

Briefly, I want to talk about why these choices are not useful guidelines for happiness.

This is, of course, the sociologist's classic role: as Cassandra, as the predictor of disaster and discontent. (And, in keeping with that tradition, I need to recognize that the probabilities of unhappiness are higher for those without education, those who are disadvantaged by minority racial status or unpopular sexual preference. If happiness is difficult for the typical college-educated woman, it is even more difficult for her less privileged sisters.)

But, consider the two choices discussed above – those that our students consider.

Both are built around a central value for women, the value of love and nurturance. They differ in how they solve the problem of what kind of work a woman should do. One says: a woman's work is secondary, and her relationships are primary. One says: you can have it all.

The "safe bet," or so my students tell me, is to recognize that only one person in a relationship can have a career – and to concede the wisdom of having that person be the husband. Because they'll need the money and because work is interesting, she'll work – but without making the same commitment of energy and aspiration to her job as he does to his.

But this concession cannot assure the success of a marriage. As a consequence of factors beyond individuals' control, half of the marriages initiated this year will end in divorce. Our culture's standards for marital happiness escalate more rapidly than our culture's storehouse of skills for ensuring it.

For women who put husband and children ahead of career, divorce is as much an economic as an emotional tragedy. Alimony is rarely awarded, and even more rarely paid. Child support is frequently inadequate, and fully half of that awarded is never paid. Suddenly, a woman who was barely prepared to support herself finds herself supporting a family. Without realizing it, she gambled on a myth – and lost.

Of course, an ambitious woman refuses to choose between love and work. She vows to "have it all" – a husband, a baby, a satisfying job that pays well and offers prospects for promotion.

But when she marries, she directly confronts the uneven nature of social change.

Her husband will be willing – even eager – to have a professionally successful wife. But he will often be reluctant to accept less nurturing, less attentiveness, less cooking and cleaning than his father received in another era.

So his needs become a formidable pull on her time and energy – and babies increase the strain. Truly shared childcare is a rarity. Generally, the mother assumes the bulk of responsibility for children. And when she goes back to work, she faces a world in which employers are indifferent to employees' parental responsibilities, and in which daycare is expensive, inaccessible and often of poor quality.

If the couple divorces, she generally assumes most of the responsibility for raising the children – responsibilities that were assumed jointly, now to be met alone. Her status as single parent poses a formidable obstacle to professional success. She copes, she struggles and she makes do: she cannot have it all. And people say of each couple's unhappiness and divorce: "oh, that marriage failed" ... as if the thousands of dissolved marriages were independent events, as if each divorce was the result of each couple's unique problems. Few pause to ask the more basic questions: Why is this institution so fragile? Why, at every juncture, do women sacrifice more for their spouses and children than do men? Why does divorce do more harm to women than it does to men?

At this point, some of you are undoubtedly wondering what this has to do with the university, with education and with the tradition of a convocation address.

Remember, however, that I am talking about university students and the tragically inadequate ways in which they make important decisions about their lives. Therefore, I am talking about some significant oversights in the education that we provide our students.

When we award their degrees, we welcome them into the company of educated people; we attest to their completion of a university's curriculum, not to their successful learning of a trade. This is a university, and we are professors: we educate, rather than train. Education is not a matter of learning to do one thing well, while continuing to live the rest of one's life as if one had never learned to read or write or think. Education increases the student's capacity for vision and criticism, enhances awareness of possibilities and demystifies the world.

So something is wrong when our students consistently follow an outmoded and unworkable social script, act unreflectively and uncritically, passively accept the limited range of choices made available to them. They may be competent in their fields, but they are poorly educated: they can't – or won't – think about their lives.

Don't blame us, my colleagues would hasten to say. Indeed, at this convocation two years ago, Dr. Smiley provided us with an eloquent analysis of the fallacy of blaming educational institutions for students' failings. And, as a sociologist, I would be remiss if I did not emphasize the way in which family background shapes persons' cognitive skills, and the way in which position in the hierarchy of class and race shapes a family's internal culture.

Because we are a public university, our students are not the children of the elite.

Most are from working class and middle class families; many are first-generation college students. Most have spent their school years in overcrowded and underfunded schools, studying a curriculum that could not be tailored to their needs and interests, taught by teachers who are overworked and underpaid.

Many of our students often arrive with a stunted capacity for serious thought, a limited ability to make arguments, a dearth of enthusiasm for learning. Their cynicism about their education is painful to observe, and difficult to alter. They want to graduate as quickly as they can, with as little effort as they can expend. They divide their world into two segments – "school" and "life" – and the two rarely overlap. Across the university, most of us struggle with the same dilemma: to convince our students that what goes on inside our classrooms is real life, is important, is worthy of their (and our) time and effort.

For many on the faculty, it is tempting to withdraw from the struggle. We can turn our backs and talk to the blackboard; we can rest on our lecterns and read aloud from old notes; we can become as dull and uninterested in our classes as we believe that our students are. We can grow cynical, become indifferent and disengage.

But if we do this, we cease to be professors; we renounce all claims to being intellectuals. Instead, we become bureaucrats, processors of paperwork, glorified software packages that deliver the same lectures to a changing audience of indistinguishable and unreachable strangers.

As individual professors, we rarely change students' lives – but, as a faculty, we can and should make a difference to our students' lives. Whatever our disciplines, we can demonstrate the value of reasoned inquiry, the merit of critical analysis, the excitement of creative work. Through whatever subjects we teach, we can educate.

Any student's education is enhanced by a consideration of the social and the moral: through study in what have been called the "liberal arts." Until recently, issues of gender often were overlooked in such curricula. However, I am pleased to announce, FAU has begun to plan a women's studies program. By this time next year, the program should be organized and implemented. Through its courses and programs, it will broaden the scope of the education available here. It will increase the university's ability to foster analysis, to encourage questioning, to open up new worlds to those who study in it.

But, even if a student never gets to one of the Women's Studies Courses, s/he will be a beneficiary of the program. One of the central values of the academic world is that a university should offer an education broader in scope than any one student can encompass during the course of their studies. Academics believe that only a lifetime is time enough to complete an education.

Academic values are a peculiar and fragile set of values – perpetually assaulted by the utilitarianism and dogmatism and unreflectiveness of the rest of the world. Academics have a conservative responsibility – to insist the value of studying the works of those who have thought deeply and well about important matters. But the value of such study can be lost in the textbooks' presentation of the history of ideas stated as if one side's victory was a foregone conclusion. The academy has a radical tradition of relentless challenge to the status quo, of questioning the basis of that which is taken for granted. We owe our students an appreciation of the discontent, the struggle and the passionate arguments that have produced the major breakthroughs in our fields. We owe our students an introduction to the challenge of asking and answering questions, of reasoned debate as a substitute for cynicism, skepticism or sophistry.

An educated person is not educated to one field, to one task – but is educated to linking action to reflection and argument to choice. Certainly, I do not believe that the education of women holds the key to equality. That is a foolish belief, and a dangerous one. However, I do believe that educated women – and educated men – are capable of using their analytical skills to demystify the world around them, to discern and defend their interests, and to act intelligently to create a better world. If sociology has one central insight, I think it is this one: that people do make history, although not under conditions of their own making. If they can understand the conditions of their own lives in a truer and clearer way, their ability to act effectively is enhanced and the likelihood of human happiness is increased.