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ABSTRACT
        Professional women tend to interpret sex
discrimination as a result of victimization against an individual
rather than an assault against a minority group. A total of 140 women
in engineering, science, and management completed a forced-choice
questionnaire concerning the personal and professional treatment of
women subjects by male and female professionals. Specific areas
addressed included the informal division of daily management
responsibilities, the allocation of power and opportunity as
reflected in job assignments, and types and frequency of sexual
harassment. The majority of women surveyed failed to acknowledge
sexism as debilitating. Specifically, they believed that social and
legal remedies for sex discrimination have been achieved. Most felt
they avoided discrimination by being professional, becoming "one of
the boys," and displaying a sense of humor about women's jokes. The
achievement of equality for any group is contingent upon the
recognition that the group as a whole is the object of discrimination
and an understanding of the objective, ideological, and institutional
character of oppression. However, the women surveyed held none of
these perceptions and firmly denied the minority group status of
women. (Author/KC)

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FORMS OF FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG PROFESSIONAL WOMEN

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FORMS OF FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG PROFESSIONAL WOMEN

INTRODUCTION

The achievement of equality for women in contemporary society is at least partially contingent on the willingness and ability of women to define and pursue their collective interests. The individual and social praxis associated with this new way of perceiving and being is generally seen as an expression of feminist consciousness. That is, "to become a feminist is to develop a radically altered consciousness of oneself, of others, and of what for lack of a better term I shall call 'social reality'" (Bartky, 1975:425). Involving, as it does, a qualitative reordering of cognitive, emotive and normative frameworks pertaining to all levels of reality, the emergence of a feminist consciousness can be problematic at worst, difficult at best.

Although the issue is considerably more complex than will be discussed below, there are at least four necessary conditions for the emergence of feminist consciousness. Three of these are included in the more restricted concept of minority consciousness. As both Hacker (1951;1974:125) and Hochschild (1973:194) have noted, there is an objective and subjective component to minority consciousness. On the objective side, it is contingent on the existence of a minority group. By definition, this involves the differential and unequal treatment of a collectivity on the basis of a shared physical or cultural characteristic. Discrimination toward women on the basis of sex at all economic and occupational levels has been well documented in the popular and professional literature and will be taken as given.

The subjective component of minority consciousness consists of two somewhat interrelated phenomena. First, it presumes an awareness that a group as a whole is the object of prejudice and discrimination. In the present case, this means a recognition of the fact that, collectively, women are defined and treated differently from, and as unequal to men. While Hacker (1974:125) has argued that there is considerable evidence to suggest that women are now generally aware of their minority status, others are less optimistic. For example, Tibbetts (1975:178,181) has suggested that many women "are not fully aware they are being treated as secondclass citizens," that "they do not recognize the inequality of their positions." In fact, it has been found that some women actively embrace traditional feminine roles. These roles are often seen as merely different, not unequal. Others have gone so far as to rebuke and challenge attempts to gain further legal and social reforms under the guise of maintaining women's present privileged position.

Secondly, minority consciousness requires individual acknowledgment of membership in a minority group. In this case, it means an awareness on the part of women that they themselves are members of this minority group and, on this basis alone, are "victimized." (Bartky, 1975:430). There is considerably more agreement in the literature concerning the failure of many professional women to recognize and/or acknowledge this feature of their minority group status. As Cassell (1977:17-18) suggests, ". . . many women find it intellectually and emotionally repugnant to define themselves as part of a low-status group." Similarly, Hochschild (1973) suggests that successful professional women often mistakenly assume

that their achievements signify equal opportunity and treatment. This perception may be attributed to a failure to recognize or acknowledge that in most cases, extra effort and special sacrifices were required to achieve this privileged position.

The fourth dimension of a viable feminist consciousness goes beyond the mere recognition of individual and collective victimization and presumes the development of a holistic understanding of the objective ideological and institutional character of oppression (Cassell, 1977:20; Bartky, 1975:431-439; Hochschild, 1973:196-199). This type of awareness seems particularly susceptible to a variety of forms of "false consciousness." The failure to acknowledge all sexism as debilitating, the tendency to pursue individual as opposed to collective change, and the failure to identify and confront structural barriers to equality are pertinent examples.

A viable solution to the problem of inequality for women requires an enumeration and specification of the character of the barriers to feminist consciousness. This paper contributes to this task in two ways. First, it provides some pertinent, albeit limited data on the incidence of false consciousness among a select group of professional career women. And second, it works toward the development of a typology of the various forms of false consciousness typically found among this population.

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire designed to measure various forms of subtle discrimination experienced by professional women in the workplace generated some unanticipated data that both illustrates and clarifies

some of the issues raised in the preceding discussion. Consisting
primarily of forced-choice questions, the questionnaire solicited
information concerning the personal and professional treatment of
the women subjects by male and female professionals. Specific areas
addressed in the instrument included the informal division of
responsibilities in the day-to-day operation of the office, the
allocation of power and opportunity as reflected in job assignments,
the accessibility of various forms of support systems, and the
types and frequency of sexual harassment. Appended to the survey
were three open-ended questions which, in general, asked the
respondents to identify patterns of behavior that they felt enhanced
or detracted from their and other women's ability to perform on an
equal basis.

One of the questions also provided the respondents with an
opportunity to offer advice concerning sex role related issues to
women graduates entering the professional job market.

The questionnaire was sent to all alumnae of a private,
four-year college which graduates majors primarily in the areas
of engineering, science, and management (N=445). One hundred and
sixty-six (166) usable surveys were returned. Of these, one
hundred and forty (140) provided comments on the open-ended
questions. A content analysis of this subsample of responses
serves as the basis for the following discussion.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Perhaps the most striking feature of the responses to the
open-ended questions was that so many respondents volunteered so

much information which, in essence, was antithetical to feminist consciousness. Seventy-five (75) respondents or fifty-four percent of those who responded to these questions made at least one comment that was implicitly or explicitly critical of the relevance of feminist principles to their own employment experience and/or to the position of working women as a whole. For so many to say so much about an issue that was never explicitly identified or even implied in the questionnaire suggests that false consciousness, and perhaps even the seeds of reactionism, may be rather broad-based and deeply rooted in the ideational structure of professional women.

Perception of Women as a Minority Group

The rejection of the minority group status of women took two general forms. At the most extreme level, a small number of respondents (N=17) questioned the very need for doing a study of sex discrimination. There were two rationales offered for this query. First, there were those (N=4) who, while acknowledging that women are treated differently and even unequitably in the workplace, felt that this was as it should be. As one respondent noted, "I feel a man and a woman will never achieve equality. They are both different and should take pride in their differences." For these individuals, differential (and by implication, unequitable) treatment is to be expected, is a fact of life. It is not the result of prejudice or discrimination. After all, the rationale goes, women are also superior, only in other respects. From this perspective, while women most assuredly constitute a group, they are hardly a minority.

Second, there was another group (N=13) who claimed that, while
sex discrimination toward women as a group may have been a problem,
recent social and legal efforts have alleviated this situation.
(This does not include three individuals who sent letters in lieu of
the survey to the effect that, at least in their organization, women
were treated equally.) Representative of this was one woman's
recommendation to "forget you ever heard of sex discrimination . . .
it's not as bad as you hear about." Or, as another woman exclaimed,
"It's against the law."

The recognition that significant social and legal remedies for
discrimination have been achieved is noteworthy. An awareness that
the position of women, at least in the professional realm, has
improved is also not without merit. However, the claim that discri-
mination is either no longer a problem or only a minor issue simply
does not correspond with the evidence. Perhaps, as is too often
the case, political naiveté or exuberant optimism has allowed
these activities to be interpreted as progress or even goal
attainment.

At a less extreme level, there was a rather significant
number of respondents (N=38) who, while acknowledging that some
women were treated unequally, took this discrimination to be a
result of personal traits. The basis thesis underlying this
orientation appears to be a variation on the theme of individualism;
that is, the treatment a person receives is generated by and thus
is a direct consequence of his/her own actions. Responses such
as: "Generally you get what you ask for in terms of the way you
are treated at work" and "A lot of women are treated unfairly

because they ask for it" typify this attitude.

Differential treatment in these cases was generally attributed to one of two individual characteristics. First, some of those who were discriminated against were typed as being overly assertive, or, as a couple of respondents suggested, were guilty of expecting more than equal treatment. Women who favored preferential treatment in hiring and career enhancement were often put in this category. Second, others were portrayed as acting too feminine or of drawing attention to themselves as women and in this manner, suggesting that they were deserving of special treatment. Women who were flirtatious, who refused to "get their hands dirty," or whose habits of dress were too traditional, were included in this category. In the words of one subject, "The only women I have seen hindered by their sex were those who tried to use their sex to gain extra privilege." Another respondent stated, "Women suffering from sex bias in employment are those who aggressively use their gender to get ahead." Again, in both instances, the behavior of the individual was seen to precipitate the differential treatment.

It may be true, of course, that situationally inappropriate forms of militancy could qualitatively and quantitatively detract from job performance. Likewise, certain types of traditional feminine behavior may detract from professional competence or effectiveness. Either situation would warrant less than an optimum evaluation. Often, however, one suspects that such reactions are more of a justification of rather than a legitimate reason for differential treatment. Perhaps more importantly, this perspective

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mistakenly assumes that acting "right" will somehow result in "right" treatment. As will be demonstrated below, this is generally not the case.

Self-identification as a Minority Group Member

The individuals mentioned in the previous section did not see women as a minority group and therefore, by definition, did not see themselves as a minority. Even the small group who acknowledged that women were equal to men, but at the same time noted that men appeared to be better off professionally, tended to dismiss the inequities as non-sex role related. They either blamed the inferior position of women on personal inadequacies, or simply minimized or played down the evidence that discrimination is a factor in the way women are treated. Most of the obstacles women encountered were somehow redefined as normal hurdles associated with the professional career ladder.

Many other respondents did admit that women as a group were the object of sex discrimination. A significant number (N=45) of these individuals were, however, emphatic in claiming that they personally were not subject to such treatment. A couple of personal traits were identified which, in these women's minds, exempted them from minority group membership. Some (N=33) felt strongly that the key to their success in this respect lay in their professionalism and in their ability to adapt to the demands of the situations in which they found themselves. The phrase, "be professional in attitude, actions, work habits, etc.," was repeated many times in their comments. One of the most frequently given pieces of advice was: "Prove you are a professional, and you

will be accepted as an equal." A smaller number of respondents (N=13) suggested that being "one of the boys" enabled them to be accepted by, and to perform on an equal basis with men. Being "one of the boys" included such behavior as "rolling up [my] sleeves and doing the necessary work (manual or otherwise)," "participating in the company's sports," and "learning to have a sense of humor about women's jokes."

In general, this process appears to be akin to what Hochschild (1973:197) has referred to as "de-feminization." Caught in a double bind between a feminine identity and a female reference group on the one hand, and the objective demands of their professional role on the other, career conscious women may find identification with the "majority" advantageous. In becoming a professional, they may subjectively relinquish the feminine component of their identity, hence their perceived ties to the larger minority group.

Although this may be advantageous at one level, such a decision fails to recognize that inherently, all women are "other" in a patriarchal structure. Masculinization for women can be as much a barrier to equitable achievement as a less professionalized, more feminine presence. Both forms of behavior call attention to the fact that the individual in question is atypical, is different from the norm. In either case, the label predefines differential, and in this case, unequal treatment. Thus, the denial of minority group membership through identification with the majority does not assure equality even for the individual woman. While she may succeed, her progress is unlikely to be comparable to that of a male with equal abilities and drive. And she often will pay a

stiff personal price for her accomplishments, among them, isolation, resentment by men and often other women, and perhaps even the freedom to choose a "dual career," experiences not encountered by her male counterpart.

Understanding the "Social Reality" of Discrimination

The articulation of a political strategy for the amelioration of sex discrimination is a complex, and as yet, uncompleted project. There are, however, several themes that seem to be generally acknowledged as crucial to any viable social reform in this area. Although a limited amount of information pertinent to this issue was volunteered by those surveyed, there was sufficient data to suggest that, among those who acknowledged that discrimination was a problem, many lacked both a holistic understanding of the social structural character of the issue and a realistic sense of the politics of such an undertaking.

This false consciousness took several forms. The most common misconception in this regard was the belief that sex discrimination is an individual matter and that it can be effectively challenged at that level. This attitude was expressed in several different ways. First, there were those who felt that women who were the object of discrimination "asked for it" by the way they dressed, talked, acted, etc. As noted above, equitable treatment could be guaranteed if those in question simply acted either less feminine or less militant, depending on which professional norm was being violated. Second, there were those who felt that they had individually escaped the confines of minority group membership. Again, success was defined in individual terms and was apparently seen as

open to any woman who was willing to put in the appropriate type and amount of effort.

A third group felt that personal attributes such as a good self image (N=16), a self-confident manner in relationships with males (N=20), and the demonstration of competence in job performance (N=27) would be sufficient to counter any prejudicial barriers to professional performance and career advancement. The limitations of the data leave the distinction between this group and the previous one a bit ambiguous. There does, however, appear to be an important difference. Whereas in the former group, the emphasis was on achievement through the negation of group identity and affiliation, in the latter, it was on gaining equality in spite of minority group membership. For this third group, all that was seen as necessary was for each person to individually compensate for her status as a woman, or, alternatively, to let her performance remove the negative connotation of the minority label from the group title.

This attitude was particularly apparent in the group's insistence on retaining their feminity in conjunction with their professional role. For some (N=5), this desire seemed to be predicated on a fear of alienating their male (and occasionally female) colleagues. Others noted that they like to be treated "like a lady." For yet others (N=11), the women simply expressed displeasure at the prospect of giving up certain parts of their self-concept.

Several suggestions were offered concerning how to reconcile the often conflicting demands of this dual role. Some respondents (N=10) suggested that dressing like a "professional woman" would

reduce the likelihood of alienating men who might be threatened by overly masculine women. Some members of this group added that this type of attire would insure that their business associates would treat them with the respect due a woman. A few (N=5) indicated that it was important for women not to become "one of the boys." This also was seen as reducing the risk of alienating one's coworkers. Finally, some respondents simply noted that it was important, both with regard to personal and professional interests, to find some method of balancing these two concerns.

There is, of course, a major problem associated with this orientation. In a "man's" world, to be feminine is to be other, hence less than an equal. This in itself invites and, in fact, mandates differential treatment. At the same time, however, for a woman to act masculine (which is necessary in most professional settings if one is to compete as an equal) is also taboo. Castrating bitches are not held in esteem. Again, acceptance as an equal is negated. In other words, no matter how women act, they remain an object of differential and discriminatory treatment. Stated otherwise, women can never be equal in a patriarchal system. The failure to recognize this structural and ideological paradox compromises any attempt at achieving individual or collective equality.

A number of respondents did acknowledge the existence of external sources of discriminatory treatment. Their perceptions were, however, qualified in three important ways. First, some of those surveyed felt that only a small number of males were responsible for the overwhelming majority of discrimination.

Several (N=6) proposed that most discrimination which did exist came from older men and that this would obviously diminish as younger men took their place. It was also hypothesized that most younger men who were discriminatory in their treatment of women were simply ignorant of the nature and consequences of their behavior and that they could be reformed with relative ease.

Another group (N=21) was even less critical of the treatment of women. They proposed that a certain level of stereotypic sex role behavior was to be expected, and that the best policy in the case of minor or subtle forms of such treatment was to simply ignore or tolerate them. As one respondent commented, "boys will be boys." "After all," she continued, "it's all harmless fun." Several of these individuals also expressed the sentiment that it was a good idea to maintain a "sense of humor" relative to sexist jokes, sexual innuendo, and the like. A couple went so far as to suggest that women should join in this process as a means of enhancing their acceptance by the larger (male) group.

In none of these cases was it at all apparent that these women were aware that "minor" offenses are merely the tip of a much larger institutionalized pattern of discriminatory behavior, or that acceptance of and/or participation in this type of interaction can act both to legitimize the inferior status attributed to women and to reduce individual credibility and effectiveness in the pursuit of professional goals. The tendency for these women to "look the other way" reinforces and thereby encourages men to continue their alienated behavior. By implicitly condoning these actions, women actually become silent partners in their own oppression.

Another group of respondents (N=28) took this logic a step further, suggesting that women should avoid any blatant feminist stance. For some, this position relates to a fear of being seen as a "women's libber," a label which it is felt solicits discriminatory treatment. As one respondent stated, "If a woman starts a job with a militant attitude, she is a threat to the men around her. They will react negatively to put her in her place." For others, the issue is broader than this. They appear fearful of antagonizing the male cohort in general, else women lose present or risk future gain. The adage, "don't bite the hand that feeds you," best represents this position.

The obvious assumption here is that men have all the power and that the future status of women is dependent on their good will and benevolence. While it may be true that men do have considerable power, and that certain gains can be achieved through "kow-towing" to them, such a perspective overlooks the power of women and their ability to collectively affect change. It also ignores the question of whether any group can ever really be free and equal when they act at the pleasure of another.

SUMMARY

Although this data must, of course, be interpreted with caution, it does raise some rather significant questions concerning the prospects for the elimination of the objective minority status of professional working women (and for that matter, of women in general). The failure of women to understand the character of their status and the requirements for further

gains would speak poorly for the future. A further empirical and
theoretical specification of the actual dynamics of this situation
appear warranted.

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