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ABSTRACT

Scholars have long acknowledged the role schools have in reproducing a sexual division of labor. Despite the reemergence of a feminist movement and anti-sex-discrimination legislation, schools are still places where boys and girls tend to study different curricula and where traditional sex roles are perpetuated. Physics, calculus, and shop classes are still filled with boys, and home economics and office education classes have mostly girls. An analysis is presented of the cooperative education program at Woodrow Wilson High School (Washington, D.C.). Its preparation of young women for future jobs is described, and the particular types of jobs these students go into are discussed. The reasons for job choice are analyzed, and problems with the program are cited with suggestions for improvement. (CB)

REPRODUCING DOMESTIC LABORERS THROUGH OFFICE EDUCATION

by

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Introduction

As young women approach high school graduation, the images they create of their futures become more and more restricted. "Proportionately," Rosen and Anneshensel (1978: 170) discovered through a large survey study, "the number of girls who think they will fill stereotypically feminine occupations increases with age, while the percentage who expect to end up in masculine jobs declines."

This restriction is not, however, solely within types of wage labor jobs. In addition, young women's sense of identity subordinates wage labor to domestic labor identity and often excludes it entirely. As Wolpe states:

> By the time teenage girls reach school leaving age they articulate their future in terms of family responsibilities. They reject, often realistically, advice about pursuing school subjects which could open up new avenues; the jobs they anticipate are not only within their scope, but more importantly are easily accessible to them and in conformity with their future familial responsibilities (1978: 32e).

Apparently, not even social class entirely mediates the impact of being born female since "a girl whose father is a physician is as likely to expect to be a full-time housewife as is a daughter of a plumber" (Rosen and Anneshensel 1978: 180). Gender is still the key determinant of work identity.

While we have a general sense of the roles traditional sex role socialization and the sexual division of labor play in this identity restriction, the process is not well understood. By analyzing the representations and discourses of a 'typical' group of high school women as they make the transition from school to work, this paper reveals some of the specific ways in which young women's relation to the market economy is marginalized and their relation to the home economy heightened.

The subjects of the study attended a predominantly white, working class comprehensive high school in a progressive midwest city in which a major university, the state government, a food processing plant, and insurance companies were major employers. Though the social class division was not absolute, the south side of town had one other working class high school while the two middle class high schools were on the north side.

Since clerical work is the main area in which women find employment, the study focused on high school seniors enrolled in a cooperative office education program, commonly referred to as COOP. This program placed students in half day office jobs for which the students received both pay and school credit. The rest of the day was spent in related business, academic, and general education courses. I spent an academic year with one cohort of sixteen students in their classes and on the job, observing their experiences

and interviewing them, their teachers and supervisors, as well as selected graduates of the program so I could better understand women's school-to-work transition.

What I discovered were ironic and generally unintended outcomes of vocational education. Although the COOP program's explicit goal was the reproduction of clerical workers, it actually facilitated a new generation of women who identified more with domestic labor. Furthermore, identification with office work often came at the expense of a professional identity.

Marginalizing the Professional Self

Official COOP guidelines for selecting students into the program stated that the students must have clearly defined career goals which fell within the broad categories of office occupations: accounting, computing, data processing, general clerical, secretarial, typing, etc. The guidelines presumed immediate full time employment in office work upon high school graduation.

But the real students seldom matched the hypothetical official student. Instead, many were definitely college bound; some were considering college; some were testing out office work to see if they liked it; and others were using it to develop job skills, a work history, and references as a safety net in an uncertain world (Valli, 1985).

For the student with college aspirations, the COOP experience tended to temper or eliminate that desire. In

some cases, the COOP experience reinforced the conflict betweeen a professional self image and what was possible or desirable for a woman. In other cases, professional self images were discarded in favor of more immediate security or autonomy.

Top management positions, while outside the bounds of self image for some students because of their inherent maleness, were dismissed by others only after serious reflection on their initial work experiences. Those whose experience included female managers regarded the physical and psychological time commitment incompatible with the primary work of mothering. Those whose work experience excluded women managers found the career ladder to be either totally obscure or closed to women.

Some students considered themselves too shy to stand the trauma of a new environment and new friends. For them, the COOP job was a supportive entree to the frightening world beyond school. It assisted them in making the transition from school to work. They were not left to do the work of relocation themselves. Once in an acceptable workplace and offered a full time position after high school, these students chose not to leave, though strongly encouraged by family and school personnel to attend college.

For other students, job offers through their COOP experience provided the means for a long sought-after or required independence. For middle class youth, this

autonomy is attained by going away to college (Rubin, 1976). Not so for working class youth. For them, college attendance is not freedom, but the experience of renewed or prolonged empoverishment. Receiving a full-time paycheck is the most acceptable way to establish a life apart from parents. Though this push toward independence was most often initiated by the daughter, parents, especially those experiencing financial strain, also encouraged this movement.

Maureen provides the most vivid example. Raised in a single parent household in which her mother, too proud to accept welfare, supported the family through employment in a box-making factory, Maureen was required to make regular monetary contributions toward family bills from the time she was fifteen. Employed first as a maid, then as a restaurant receptionist, Maureen was working forty hours a week at two jobs as a high school senior. Though she had seriously spoken about pursuing a science degree at the beginning of her senior year, when graduation came she enrolled part time in business classes at the local community college.

Though Dorothy was not, like Maureen, pushed by her parents into financial independence, her experience was much the same. Both women were bright and high achievers, clearly capable of college success. Dorothy's father wanted her to be a teacher--the first in the family to obtain a college degree. But his death during her senior year caused

Dorothy to reconsider her plans. Reflecting on the deferred earnings, the cost of tuition, and low teacher salaries, Dorothy decided the cost was not worth the additional financial burden to an already poor family. She needed to become financially independent.

Once in full time jobs, COOP graduates were generally reluctant to re-enter student life, which they experienced as empoverishment, dependence and subordination. Work, though boring, unchallenging, and leading no where, was superior that. Even the COOP graduate who was in a pre-med program at the university was considering dropping out in favor of extending her part time credit union work to full time; there she was at least treated as an equal.

Another student who considered a medical career was similarly deterred. For her, sexual independence was closely linked with financial independence. Moving into an apartment with her boyfriend shortly after high school graduation, she decided to forgo college to support him through school. She maintained a full time office job instead.

Objectively, each of these working class women could have attended college--traditionally a means toward greater financial independence and more autonomous, rewarding work. Yet in each case, the very drive for autonomy itself became the force which bound them more tightly into working class jobs and their present social positions. Those who stress

the internalized subordination of women's consciousness miss this hidden or suppressed, but very real, aspect.

Marginalizing the Clerical Self

Unlike those discussed above, another group of COOP students never considered college attendance or the type of work for which college would be necessary. Yet these students, too, engaged in processes of disengagement from the work environment, of preventing the market economy too much control over their self definitions. They, too, were striving for a sense of autonomy, a quest which also led to inverse consequences.

Part time work, temporary work, and changing work places are strategies women use, not only to manage family responsibilities, the explanation most often found in the literature, but to prevent the workplace from exerting excessive control (McNally 1979). Boredom and workplace problems prompt job searches and resignations-- particularly in newer, less invested employees. The young COOP workers seemed to quickly grasp the reality that, as Ellen's supervisor so cogently and sadly stated, "The longer you stay at a place, the more it owns you."

Nancy is a case in point. Regarded by the COOP teacher as both capable and attractive, Nancy was sent to interview at and subsequently was hired by one of the town's most sought after employers--a thriving mortgage insurance company with a reputation for a friendly work environment

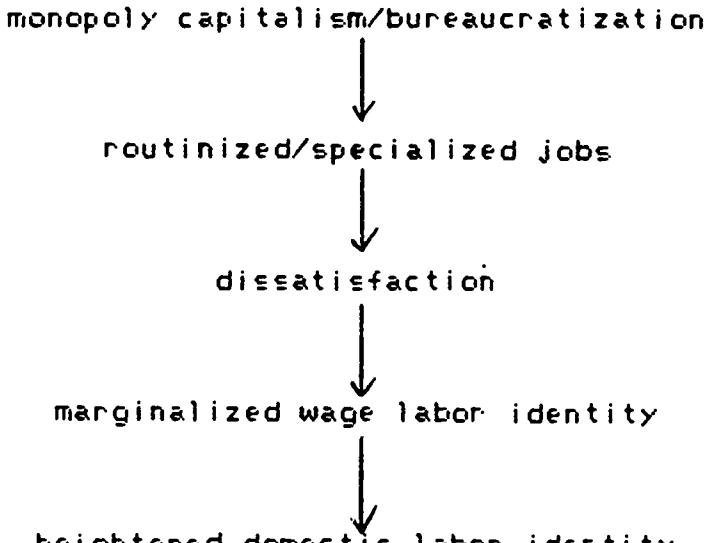
and internal promotions. Upon graduation Nancy was offered a full time position which she promptly rejected in favor of continued part time employment with the firm. A glamorous young woman, Nancy preferred to seek out a second part time position at a local shopping mall where she would be more visible and more central to the source of fashion distribution. She was acting to prevent narrow boundaries from blocking her options and self development.

Nancy's selection of a second job site was not random. It was a choice embedded in cultural notions of social spaces appropriate for women and by the ideology of "the glamorous woman" perpetuated even in the COOP program. Students were encouraged to model themselves after GLAMOUR magazine in preparing for job interviews, to highlight not their work knowledge but their bodily image (Valli, 1983).

Once students had jobs the marginalization of a clerical identity most swiftly and forcefully occurred in excessively specialized and routine office jobs, jobs which lacked variation and required relatively little knowledge. Approximately one-third of the COOP students I interviewed were file clerks and typists: jobs with the highest degrees of routinization and specialization. Although file clerks might on occasion be asked to type, photocopy or collate, they spent the vast amount of their time alphabetizing, sorting, and filing--sometimes at breathtaking speed.

The typists, as would be expected, spent the bulk of their time typing. The typing generally involved encoding isolated bits of information onto forms and insurance claims. Hundreds of the same type of forms would be completed by a typist. Typists always did some photocopying and collating and sometimes filed or assisted with mailings.

Compared to the limited range of tasks file clerks and typists were assigned, clerk typist and account/credit clerk placements engaged COOP students in a wide variety of assignments. In addition to filing, typing, photocopying and handling the mail, they also answered phones, delivered messages, kept records, manipulated statistical data, made appointments, and functioned as office receptionist. Not surprisingly, these students were far more satisfied with clerical work than were typists and file clerks. Dissatisfaction was highly correlated with the routine and specialized nature of the job (Valli 1986). Since these jobs are primarily found in the expanding monopoly capitalist sector and in large bureaucratic state agencies, there is every reason to believe, as Braverman (1974) has argued, that clerical positions are becoming increasingly more routine. The repercussions for women office workers can be depicted as follows:



What were some of the specific everyday experiences of new office workers which heightened dissatisfaction? Production rate was one, particularly when fast rates of highly fragmented work (e.g. sorting) were required. This intensification of labor increased error rates and dissatisfaction. Even supervisors recognized the problem of work intensification: "The women aren't given time to get organized, to think about what they're doing. Who wants to sign their name to something that's done wrong? Everyone thinks, 'Oh, who's that who made all those mistakes?'"

Strangely enough, mistakes and dissatisfaction also increased when work was too slow and too repetitive. One COOP student, placed as a clerk typist assisting a bank vice-president, received rave reviews from her supervisors during the first two quarters of the course. When she wa

switched to a filing department in need of some extra short term assistance, her evaluation plummeted. Efforts were immediately made to move her, for fear she would not complete the semester.

Rigid accountability systems also characterized routine jobs and heightened dissatisfaction. These systems included regular reports of work quantity, error rates, performance increases and rule infractions, and tended to infuriate workers, expecially when perceived to be unfairly applied: when supervisors were not similarly accountable, or when supervisors penalized some workers but not others for the same violation.

New workers were also given work which they perceived to be the responsibility of their superordinates. Work regarded as too mundane for a certain level employee was often passed down to a subordinate. Young workers were highly critical of this practice. One alumna, for instance, complained about being "the little slave, the go-fer, the person they send to do this and that." Debbie resented the work her supervisors gave her, which she believed they were simply too lazy (not too busy) to do. Because of this situation, she was looking for another position at the time of our interview. Another alumna voiced the same objection:

> ...the lower you are on the chart the more work you have to do....instead of gathering information themselves, they just call down for it. They're just putting off things they should handle themselves.

If these associated factors were not enough to drive women from routine office work, the repetitive nature of the tasks themselves, creating extreme experiences of self-estrangement, was:

> ...I would like to do something else because I do the same thing every day and it gets pretty boring. I would like to do different things. And learn something else, too.

> When I was just in files I always felt like I was going to fall asleep. In filing it was the same stuff over and over.

Even the special education student (officially classified as mentally retarded) found herself extremely bored and dissatisfied with the routine nature of her filing job.

Those clerical workers who pictured themselves staying in a given department for some time quickly produced an environment which humanized the workplace in a distinctively feminine way. Pictures of boyfriends, fiances, husbands and children quickly filled available desk space. School-made decorations adorned office walls, especially at holiday

time. Children's fundraising products were regularly sold. Homemade cakes marked each other's birthdays. The workplace was invaded by the culture of the traditional family.

These were actions by women office workers to prevent the workplace from locking out their authentic selves. They were buffers to alienating work, attempts to reintegrate the public and the private domains so rigidly separated in modern capitalist economies. While these practices weakened the insulation of the public from the private, they ironically strengthened the barriers between male and female office workers. The social activities and symbolic representations of the two groups bore little in common. Since women were generally the only ones to engage in these activities, images of women as homemakers were continually re-created for the COOP students. Woman's work, even her office work, involved creating a homelike environment.

Little analysis or critique of the work experience was included in the students' office-related curriculum during the course of their senior year. When students publicly voiced concerns about boredom or favoritism, the comments were generally cut off or re-directed. Nor was much effort expended on the development of office skills and knowledge beyond basic units on filing and payroll procedures, letter styles, phone techniques, and proofreading.

Students were, one might say, being trained rather than educated. They were provided only with basic competence to

produce entry-level work, not with skills to evaluate working conditions. This artificial limitation on knowledge gave the false impression that there was not much to learn about office work and nothing to be done to change office conditions. Dissatisfying work conditions, because undiscussed, took on the appearance of being a natural and unchangeable rahter than a socially constructed reality. Because of this orientation, the school component of the COOP program further marginalized the students' wage labor identities.

Conclusion

Scholars have long acknowledged the role schools play in reproducing a sexual division of labor. Despite the re-emergence of a feminist movement and anti-sex discrimination legislation, schools are still places where boys and girls tend to study different curricula and where traditional sex roles are perpetuated. Physics, calculus and shop classes are still filled with boys, home economics and office education classes with girls.

So the fact that in the early 1980's Woodrow High School's cooperative office education program was preparing only young women for clerical work is not surprising. What is jolting to common-sense notions of vocational education is that a program which ostensibly prepares young people for the market economy can so effectively marginalize wage labor identity. We are, in other words, accustomed to schools

helping boys get shop floor jobs and girls get office jobs. We do not customarily think of office education helping girls become homemakers. Yet numerous aspects of COOP did just that.

If Bernstein (1977: 315) is correct in positing that "insulation is the means whereby the cultural is transformed into the natural," that "insulation suppresses arbitrariness" then a program such as COOP has the potential of revealing the culturally arbitrary--in this case, the sexual division between domestic and wage labor. By intensively preparing women to be autonomous through their wage-earning capabilities, COOP officially stands in opposition to women's dependence. However, this position is seriously eroded through practices mentioned here: placing women in routine jobs, encouraging use of the 'feminine' body, and de-emphasizing skill development and analysis of the workplace.

These conditions make the quest for autonomy which the COOP students undertake illusory and short-lived. Part time employment does offer more control over time and expands the physical space in which to "actualize" the self. The immediate trade-off, however, is the lessened freedom which lower earnings bring; the long-term trade off is the rather permanent self-distancing from the market economy which forces dependence on someone, generally a husband, who earns a family wage (Barrett and McIntosh 1982).

Obviously, it is not only an initial work experience (represented here in the COOP program) which marginalizes women's wage labor identity. The culture of romance remains a powerful force in predisposing women to become unpaid domestic workers as does the prevalent expectation that women, not men, do housework and child-care (Barrett 1984; Christian-Smith 1985; Gaskell 1983). Nonetheless, initial work experience could offset some of this tendency if it were not so dissatisfying.

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