

# What Do I *Really* Want to Do When I Grow Up?

## Using Sociology to Explore Aspirations

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# Reflexivity Workshop/Class

- Instead of talking about what I do with students I will I present some actual materials that I have used to encourage reflexivity among undergraduate and high school students.
- Reflexivity” is a sociological concept referring to the process of reflecting on how **internalized social forces/institutions** can encourage/discourage us from pursuing particular life plans.

# Core Idea

- Goal of today: Taste what it might look like to facilitate greater awareness of and grappling with the varied social forces inside of us
- After I present, I will be curious to hear:
  - If you/your org do something similar with clients
  - What you might add/change to make this more powerful
  - What age groups could benefit beyond students (20s? mid-life? Older workers?)

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Nike: “Just Do It”

Inspiring, but do people have clear plans?

Do people know what the one true “it” is?

When asked many report a cacophony of inner voices: “Do this,” “Do that.”

# Sociology problematizes Mary Oliver's question

It is rarely as simple as looking inward and finding a clear answer.

We hear multiple and conflicting voices because our dreams and hopes are at least partly products of **multiple internalized social forces** that limit what we imagine is possible and desirable

# Social Forces

- Social forces can:
  - Encourage and push for the enactment of particular aspects of ourselves.
  - Discourage, suppress, or even shame other aspects of our selves.
- **Reflexivity** is the process by which we can gain clarity by grappling with how social forces shape/pull/push us.
- It is what I needed most as a young adult...



# Goal: Sparking Constructive Inner Dialogue

- Discern where different voices are coming from
- Give space for the quiet voices to be heard
- Give permission to speak to the shamed voices

When all the voices are heard and analyzed you can have a **conscious deliberation**, and perhaps answer Mary Oliver's question.

# Social Forces

Today focus on 2 important social forces:

- Gender
- Family

# Gender & Aspirations

In 2020 we might think gender no longer shapes our life plans...

# Gender & Aspirations

Consider choice of college majors:

Computer science: **70% male**

Physics: **82% male**

Mechanical Engineering: **90% male**

Human Resources: **80% female**

Nursing: **80% female**

Social work: **85% female**

# Gender & Aspirations

Two key ways gender may shape major choice/career aspirations:

- Our perceptions of our **skills** and chances to succeed
- Which **desires** and parts of ourselves we feel encouraged to cultivate and pursue

# Perceptions of skills and chances to succeed

- To aspire to a career usually requires **self-concept** as competent in the tasks necessary.

# How understand gendered selection of college majors?

Among male and female college students with **equal objective math skills** (same high school test scores and grades):

Males almost 4 times more likely to choose “quant” major (e.g., engineering)

- Is it because males simply more interested in quant subjects?

# How understand gendered selection of college majors?

- Is it because males simply more interested in quant subjects? NO

Males and females who **self-perceive** as equally competent in math are **equally likely to pursue** a quant major

Difference driven by perceived skills



# Skills Perception

Research by Shelley Correll, Stanford sociologist.

- Analyze 35,000 high school students
  - test scores/grades in math and English, and
  - students' self-evaluation of competence

# Skills Perception

Research by Shelley Correll, Stanford sociologist.

- Analyze 35,000 high school students
  - test scores/grades in math and English, and
  - students' self-evaluation of competence
- For students with **same math test scores/grades** what do you expect for their self-evaluation?
  - How might it vary by gender?

(please use chat function)

# Gender and Skills Perception

For students with **same math test scores/grades:**

→ **males more likely to self-assess as competent at math than females.**

- Do males self-assess selves as more competent at everything?

# Gender and Skills Perception

Do males self-assess selves as more competent at everything?

**No.** In **English females self-assessed as more competent** than males w/equal scores/grades.

# Gender and Skills Perception

- Why do self-evaluations of skills systematically vary by gender among those with **same objective skills**?

# Aspirations & Skills Perception

Self-concepts of skills/competence come from:

- Broad **cultural stereotypes** about who is good at what (reinforced by media, peers, teachers, parents)
  - The riddle
  - **Feedback and confirmation bias**
    - what feedback do you notice enough to shape your self-concept?
- We usually we think of stereotypes as a problem because of how other's assess us , but stereotypes also **shape how we assess ourselves!**

# Relative skills assessment

- For both males and females, better English performance → **lower** math self-assessment (compared to those w/same objective math grades, and vice-versa)
- Students make **relative comparisons** of feedback.
  - Beware: if you're super amazing at English and "only" amazing at math you may underestimate your math abilities!
  - Similar dynamic with sibling comparisons

# Reflexivity

Questions to ask yourself:

- To what extent do your self-assessments of competence/skills shape your career aspirations?
- Are your self-assessments of competence potentially shaped by **gendered expectations and stereotypes?**



# Reflexivity

- Beyond gender, what is a story you tell yourself about yourself that might deter you from pursuing one of your dreams? (example: I love x but I'm not good at it)

Free write for a minute

# Reflexivity

- Beyond gender, what is a story you tell yourself about yourself that might deter you from pursuing one of your dreams? (example: I love x but I'm not good at it)
- Now, see if you can find counter-evidence for this story. (i.e., evidence that contradicts or poke holes in your story).

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# Gender & Aspirations

Two key ways gender may shape career aspirations:

- ~~● Perceptions of chances to succeed (skills)~~
- Perceptions of own **desires**

# Perceived Desires

- Our culture contains gendered expectations about our desires and longings.
  - For men and women some desires, life plans, are encouraged, welcomed, others are discouraged or even ridiculed and shamed
- The forces gendering our desires start very young

# Example

- Research shows boy peers react positively to boys who play in masculine way but NOT to boys in feminine/neutral play.
  - **At age 2!**

# Gendering and rigidity

- Recall gender and college major choices:

To what extent do these reflect which desires, enjoyments, visions of futures, we have been encouraged to pursue and which ones we have been discouraged/shamed away from?

# Reflexivity: Dig Deeper

- Write to yourself (no need to share) about the most significant longing you may have that has been discouraged/shamed because of not conforming to gendered expectations?
- Beyond gender, what are the most significant longings you may have that have been discouraged/shamed because of not conforming to societal expectations of “responsible,” “mature,” adults?

# Reflexivity

- Short peer-to-peer discussion

I will put you in a private break out room with one peer

In thinking about your future direction discuss the role of (i) beliefs about what you are “good” at, and/or (ii) pressures to conform to gendered or other societal expectations.



# Social Forces

- ~~• Gender~~
- Family

# Parents and Aspirations

- Parents influence children's' aspirations in many ways including:
  - Examples they set
  - Directly or indirectly communicating expectations

# Parental examples

Parents, intentionally or not, teach by example. Lessons are taught when:

- Pick a job because it pays well enough to support family, even if not enjoy it.
- Pick an enjoyable career but one that requires staying at work late even if miss family dinner, etc.

What are the lessons these examples might teach?

# Reflexivity & Parental examples

- What do your parents' work/relationships say to you?
  - How might your life plans be shaped by just observing your parent(s)?

# Parental expectations, hopes, dreams often **indirectly** communicated (Mary Jacobsen)

Stories of who kids are:

- “you're a chip off the old block”
- “you’re just like your father/mother/grandparent”
- Ever since you were born you’ve loved X

Stories are not directive, not say you must/should do x, but do they have effects?

# Parental expectations, hopes, dreams often **indirectly** communicated

Write for yourself: How might families stories about you—consciously or not—shape your life direction?

# What were your parents dreams that never got fulfilled?

- Jacobson (psychologist) argues that whatever your parents "dreamed and never attained will profoundly influence your life."

A common pattern among parents is to wish to give their kids the "gifts and opportunities that eluded their grasp."

My story....

# Reflexivity

- What might you be taking on because parents communicated (verbally or non-verbally) that it is important or honorable?
- What have you desired, gravitated toward, dreamed of, that your parents communicated (verbally or non-verbally) is unimportant? Risky ? Shameful?



# Reflexivity

- Short peer-to-peer discussion

I will put you in a private break out room with one other student.

In thinking about your future direction discuss the voice inside of you that comes from family influence, direct or indirect.

# Reflexivity

You may end up doing the same/opposite, of your parents' careers/unfulfilled dreams,

Key: **conscious choice** made with awareness of the full range of your values and desires.

Most of us internally conflicted/confused. The goal is to listen to all our voices, analyze, weigh, and reflect

# Adding the Voice of Flow

Flow: engagement so intense that time seems to stand still. You are so engrossed by the activities that you lose sense of time/space.

- Typically whole body involvement, feelings of calm, clarity, joy.
- “play for grownups.”

(Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, 1990)

# Peak Experiences Exercise (credit: Amy Mazur)

- Reflect on 2-3 “peak flow experiences”
- Write them down including:
  - Key details and
  - Why you consider it a peak experience

# Peak Experiences Exercise

- Take a minute and reflect on 2-3 “peak flow experiences”
- Write them down including:
  - Key details and
  - Why you consider it a peak experience

Now look at all the experiences:

- What **themes** emerge?
- What do these reveal about what you like to do?

(If time, in small groups, each share your favorite flow experience)

# Peak Experiences Exercise

Key question: How much do you allow these flow experiences to have a voice in your internal dialogue about your life plan?

# Reflexivity: Sparking Inner Dialogues

We each have lots of voices inside of us saying “do this” or “do that.”

Goal of reflexivity:

- Discern where different voices are coming from (e.g., gender, cultural or familial messages)
- Give space for the quiet voices and give permission to speak to the shamed/stigmatized voices (ones that may not fit expectations)
- Include the flow experiences

When all the voices are heard, you can have a **conscious internal conversation** and perhaps answer Mary Oliver’s ultimate question!

# Thank you

- I'm curious to hear your reactions about how this may work with non-student adult clients
- What you might add/change to make this more powerful and relevant to different groups?
- If there is interest I am open to presenting a version of this workshop by Zoom to a group of your clients or collaborating to create an even better workshop

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