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?)
American poet Mary Oliver famously asks:

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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

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  - 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?
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 with 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).
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 longing you may have that has 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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