WHY DOES JANE READ AND WRITE SO WELL? THE ANOMALY OF WOMEN'S ACHIEVEMENT

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Numerous studies have found that women's academic achievement not only equals but often surpasses that of men. In this society, in which educational credentials are linked to jobs, promotions, wages, and status, women's educational accomplishments appear anomalous because women continue to receive far fewer rewards for their educational credentials than do men with comparable credentials. In view of the limited rewards that women are likely to receive for education, why do they do as well and attain as much education as they do? This article examines the anomaly of women's achievement in light of four hypotheses and presents empirical evidence to assess each hypothesis. Attention is paid throughout to racial and class differences in women's lived experiences in the opportunity structure. Finally, directions for future research are suggested.

The evidence is in and the conclusion is clear: Women can and do achieve academically as well as do men. The myth of female underachievement has been exposed by many studies that have indicated that women's motivation and behavior to achieve not only equal but often surpass that of men (Klein 1985; Maccoby and Jacklin 1974; National Center for Educational Statistics 1986; Stockard 1985; Stockard and Wood 1984; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1987). Today, as in the past, more girls than boys graduate from high school and more women than men receive baccalaureate degrees, and nationwide, women now outnumber men in master's degree programs. More men than women are enrolled only in professional and Ph.D. programs, but even here, the gaps between women and men are closing (National Center for Educational Statistics 1986; Stockard et al. 1980). Fields of specialization continue to be gender linked—mathematics, engineering, and the physical and biological sciences are dominated by males, and the social sciences and humanities are dominated by females—but evidence from a study of undergraduates indicates that differences are disappearing here, too (Hafner and Shaha 1984).

If the picture of women's achievement and attainment is so positive, why do educators and researchers pay so much attention to the subject? One obvious answer lies in the different areas of achievement. Because high-paying careers (those with the best pay, benefits, working conditions, and career ladders) usually require strong backgrounds in mathematics and science, the fact that women continue to lag behind men in these areas is important. A second answer involves the links among schooling, work, and income. Even though women have all but closed the overall gap in educational attainment between the sexes, the occupational world fails to reward women equitably for their accomplishments. Research suggests strongly that the inequalities faced by women in the occupational world cannot be linked, except in the most tenuous ways, to differences in educational achievement and attainment (Stockard 1985, p. 320).

The issue of structural inequality in the work world raises another question that is the focus of this article: In view of the limited rewards that women are likely to receive from education, why do they do as well and attain

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1 Recently, a member of the Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the state's flagship institution, publicly expressed alarm that unless the university's admissions formula was changed, the school could become a predominantly female institution, given the current levels of qualified female and male candidates.
as much education as they do? In this society, in which educational credentials purportedly are linked to jobs, promotions, wages, and status, women's educational accomplishments appear anomalous because women continue to receive far fewer rewards for their educational credentials than do men with comparable credentials. One might expect that if women knew of the diminished opportunities that lay ahead, they would put less effort into school because these efforts are likely to yield smaller returns to them than to males who make similar efforts. Yet, this is not the case. This article explores why gender stratification in the opportunity structure appears to be of little relevance to young women's academic achievement and attainment. It examines the anomaly of females' achievement in light of four hypotheses and presents empirical evidence to assess each hypothesis. Finally, drawing on emerging feminist theory, it suggests directions for future research.

**BASIS OF THE ANOMALY**

The academic achievement of female students is a curious reversal of a dynamic found among minority and working-class students. A study conducted by the author in 1983 indicated that both working-class and minority youths underachieve, in part, because of the poor returns they are likely to receive from education (Mickelson 1984, forthcoming). This research was inspired largely by the work of Ogbu (1979), which examined the American opportunity structure and its possible influence on the scholastic achievement of minority students. Ogbu argued that members of a social group that faces a job ceiling know that they do so, and this knowledge channels and shapes their children's academic behavior. The term "job ceiling" refers to overt and informal practices that limit members of castelike minority groups (such as blacks and Chicanos) from unrestricted competition for the jobs for which they are qualified. Members of these groups are excluded from or not allowed to obtain their proportionate share of desirable jobs and hence are overwhelmingly confined to the least desirable jobs in the occupational structure. Ogbu contended that because the job ceiling faced by black adults prevents them from receiving rewards that are commensurate with their educational credentials, education is not the same bridge to adult status for blacks as it is for whites. Black children see that efforts in school often do not have the same outcomes for them as do similar efforts for members of socially dominant groups, such as middle-class white men. Thus, they tend to put less effort and commitment into their schoolwork and hence perform less well, on average, than do middle-class white youths. As Ogbu (1979, p. 193) stated:

I think their perception of the job ceiling is still a major factor that colors [minority] attitudes and school performance. . . . Given the premise that what motivates Americans to maximize their achievement efforts in school is their belief that the better education one has, the more money and more status [one will acquire] . . . is it logical to expect Blacks and Whites to exert the same energy and perform alike in school when the job ceiling consistently underutilizes the black talent and ability and underrewards Blacks for their education?

The author's study tested Ogbu's thesis on minority underachievement but expanded the research to include class and gender—two additional social forces that are strongly related to differential occupational returns on education—by examining students' attitudes toward education in relation to their high school grades. In 1983, 1,193 seniors in nine comprehensive public high schools in the Los Angeles area completed a questionnaire that ascertained their attitudes toward education, family background, and educational and occupational aspirations, as well as various measures of school outcomes. The results showed that all students hold two sets of attitudes toward education, but only one set predicts their achievement in school. The first set of attitudes is composed of beliefs about education and opportunity, as found in the dominant ideology of U.S. society. These attitudes, which the author calls *abstract* attitudes toward education, embody the Protestant Ethic's promise that schooling is a vehicle for upward mobility and success (for example, "Education is the key to success in the future"). These beliefs are widely shared and vary little at this level of abstraction. Abstract attitudes, therefore, cannot predict achievement behavior. The second set of beliefs about education consists of *concrete* attitudes, which reflect the diverse material realities that people experience with regard to returns on education from the opportunity structure ("Based on their experiences, my
parents say people like us are not always paid or promoted according to our education”). Agreement or disagreement with statements of concrete attitudes closely follow class and racial divisions in society. The overall findings indicate that concrete attitudes, not abstract ones, predict achievement in high school (see Mickelson forthcoming for a complete presentation of the research).

This research demonstrates that the effort that students put into their schoolwork and their academic achievement is influenced by students’ accurate assessments of the class- and race-linked occupational returns their education is likely to bring them as they make the transition to adulthood. It suggests that middle-class white youths correctly interpret their parents’ experiences in the labor market as evidence that they, too, can expect returns commensurate with their educational attainment; therefore, it is not surprising that they generally earn high grades and are likely to attend college. Following this same logic, working-class and black youths put less effort into their schoolwork because they judge that for people like themselves, the payoffs for schooling are limited; hence, they receive lower grades and go to college less often than do middle-class whites (Mickelson 1984, forthcoming).

Consequently, individuals who are reasonably aware of the realities of the opportunity structure that lie ahead should put more effort or less effort into schoolwork, depending on the occupational returns they are likely to receive. It is in this context that the achievement and attainment of females appear anomalous. If occupational opportunities help shape students’ educational goals and achievements, as Ogbu and this author believe, women should not achieve as well or attain as much education as do men in comparable racial and class subgroups.

Yet women do not achieve as one might predict on the basis of gender inequalities in the opportunity structure. In other words, the relatively poor occupational return on educational investments does not appear to depress either their school performance or their willingness to earn advanced degrees. The anomaly considered in this article, then, is not “Why can’t Jane read and write?” because she certainly does, but “Why does Jane read and write so well?”

### EXTENT OF THE ANOMALY

To capture the anomalous quality of women’s educational achievement in light of the gender-linked job ceiling women face, the following discussion reviews the research on women’s educational and occupational outcomes, with special attention to racial and class variations in each. It is important to note that most sociological studies, including those that compare the educational attainment of blacks and whites, tended, until recently, either to ignore women or to treat them as persons whose social status was a function of their father’s or husband’s positions (Acker 1973, 1980; Bernard 1981; Oakley 1974). Turner’s (1964) was a classic study in this tradition; it measured women’s goals and ambitions by the occupation they expected their husbands to attain. During the past two decades, however, many social scientists have turned their attention to women’s unique experiences in achievement, education, and the labor market. It is these studies that are reviewed in this section.

#### Academic Achievement

Differences in the academic achievement of males and females involve issues of both performance and motivation. Differences in performance are mediated by age and by type of cognitive activity (Kaufman and Richardson 1982). For example, girls generally do better in school until puberty (Klein 1985). The new learning climate of the junior high school, which is more competitive and more individualistic than is the elementary school, works against girls’ strengths, such as working cooperatively in groups (Eccles and Hoffman 1985; Steinkamp and Maehr 1984). Although the grade-point averages of boys and girls are comparable in high school, girls tend to outperform boys in verbal tasks, while boys do better in visual-spatial and quantitative activities. Boys and girls differ, however, in the kind of elective courses they choose in high school (there are few gender differences in the enrollment in mandatory high school courses). These gender differences appear particularly in vocational education, where the sex segregation of the work world is mirrored in the students’ enrollment. Thus, boys are still more likely than are girls to enroll in higher level mathematics and science courses (National Center for Educational
Statisticë 1984). Many researchers have attributed the gender differences in quantitative achievement to the different courses in which boys and girls enroll (Berryman 1983; Pallas and Alexander 1983). Although the domains of academic achievement continue to differ by gender, once-popular stereotypes of girls as under- or nonachievers are now considered more mythical than factual (Stockard and Wood 1984).

Gender differences in the motivation to achieve are complex. Earlier research attributed differences in attainment and alleged achievement to girls' lower motivation to achieve. More recent studies, however, have confirmed Maccoby and Jacklin's (1974) conclusions that levels of motivation to achieve among women, including intellectual achievement, continue to equal or surpass those of men (Klein 1985; Lueptow 1980, 1984; Stockard 1985; Stockard and Wood 1984).3

Educational Attainment

Until recently, men and women differed in how much schooling they acquired. Alexander and Eckland (1974) showed that female status depressed educational attainment. Nevertheless, today, more women than men

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2 Whether gender differences in quantitative achievement are due to sociobiological or environmental factors, such as socialization and exposure to different curricula, remains controversial. However, recent work by Professor Harold Stevenson and his colleagues in the Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (personal communication, 1987) strongly supports the idea that gender differences in the performance of American students in mathematics are due to socialization and experiences in school. These researchers compared the mathematics achievement of American schoolchildren with that of children from Japan, Taiwan, and China. They found that there are no significant gender differences in mathematics achievement among Asian students.

3 Although gender differences exist in vocational tracks, they are rooted in differences in the lived cultures of adolescent boys and girls, as well as in certain structural aspects of schooling, such as counseling practices. Valli's (1986) research on clerical education and Lee and Bryk's (1986) study of girls' achievement and attitudes in single-sex secondary schools suggest the importance of lived cultures for the achievement of females.

Racial and Class Differences

Historically, white working-class women generally did not seek education beyond high school because they thought that the home and family were their careers and that their husbands' "family wage" would provide them with a decent life (Rubin 1976). Bernard (1981) noted that among working-class women, the lack of a job was evidence of their husbands' abilities as providers. Today, when working-class women work outside the home, they do so in the secondary labor market, in which advanced educational credentials are not necessary (Howe 1977; Rubin 1976). Nevertheless, they often have more education than their husbands because when they work, they work in clerical or service occupations that require writing and spelling skills. Although white middle-class women often went to college in the past, most of those who sought a higher education did not necessarily plan careers because work outside
the home was not intrinsically desired or financially necessary. However, they might attempt to start careers after the children left home (Bernard 1981). Only since the 1970s, with the decline of the “family wage,” have middle- and working-class white women faced the economic and social realities that make employment and the concomitant educational credentials seem necessary.

The case of black women is strikingly different from that of white women. Black women from all classes have always worked outside their homes (Davis 1981). Because the labor market was highly segregated by gender and class, the vast majority of black women were excluded from all but the most menial domestic and service jobs. Nevertheless, black women were more likely than were black men to obtain an education, especially a higher education. This gender pattern of educational achievement represents a reversal of the pattern found historically among whites.

Consequently, the small cadre of educated middle-class blacks was composed primarily of women. Middle-class black women did not view their education as a credential for a desirable marriage or as “social finishing,” as did many of their white counterparts. Instead, they believed that education was a bona fide credential for entry into the middle-class occupational structure. Although the vast majority of these women were confined to careers in teaching and, to a lesser degree, nursing or social work, they worked in their chosen occupations for which they were trained, albeit their careers were constrained severely by a race- and sex-segregated occupational structure. Today, black women, unlike white women, do not face the relatively new experience of having to work to survive; they have always had to do so (Davis 1981; Simms and Malveaux 1987; Wallace 1980).


Differences in Returns on Education

Members of the working-class, women, and minorities continue to receive lower returns on their education than do middle-class white men. In 1982, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights reported that at every level of training, blacks, Hispanics, and women receive lower pay and have higher levels of under- and unemployment than do white middle-class men. Moreover, in many instances, the disparities are greater among female and minority workers with the most education (Treiman and Hartman 1981).

Treiman and Hartman (1981, p. 16) reported that “minority males employed full time earned 75.3 percent of the salary of similarly employed majority males; majority females earned 58.6 percent and minority females 55.8 percent.” These disparities were present even after the authors controlled for differences in seniority, education, age, specific vocational training, local pay rates, average number of hours worked, number of weeks worked per year, and other characteristics.

A primary reason for the persistence of unequal returns is that men and women continue to work in sex-segregated labor markets that have different career ladders (Sewell, Hauser, and Wolf 1980). Rosenfeld (1980) examined career trajectories (the job histories of socioeconomic status and income over an individual’s work life) by sex and race. She found that white men have a general advantage over all other groups in many aspects of their careers, including wages and status, and that women and nonwhite men have similar career profiles. Kanter (1977) described the problems faced by women in the corporate world: White men gain more status than does any other group and nonwhite women gain the least, and the differences between white men and other groups increase over time. The exception to this trend is the small number of black women with extremely high levels of education (Carrigan 1981; Jones 1987; Rosenfeld 1980; Wilkerson 1986). Among black women managers with MBAs, the evidence is mixed. Although their

4 The “epidemic” is not confined to the black community; the rate of increase in teenage pregnancies is higher among white girls than among black girls (Children’s Defense Fund 1985, 1988).
career mobility rates were nearly identical to those of men, personal and institutional factors affected their promotions differently than they did for men (Nkomo and Cox 1987). For example, mentors were more available to men than to women and men were more likely to be promoted if they had line positions, while women were more likely to be promoted if they worked in large, rather than small, firms.

Why do women continue to achieve and value education in the face of limited potential returns on their efforts? A review of the literature reveals at least four hypotheses as possible explanations for this anomaly. The following sections discuss these hypotheses and assess each in the light of some relevant research.

DIFFERENTIAL REFERENCE GROUPS

The first hypothesis is drawn from reference-group theory, which Nilson (1982, p. 1) summarized as follows:

"[M]entally healthy" individuals realistically assess their statuses in comparison to others who are perceived to be fairly similar on at least one important, visible dimension of actual or expected rewards or resources. It is only within a range of meaningful comparison that satisfaction or dissatisfaction is felt.

From reference-group theory, one can deduce that women are aware of their diminished status in relation to men but when they evaluate what a fair and just return on education might be, they look to other women, not to men, as a point of reference. Women's evaluations of whether returns on schooling are equitable are based on their awareness that there are two occupational structures, one for them and one for men (Treiman and Terrell 1975). In this context, women are likely to believe that their education is rewarded. Empirical research indicates that women's incremental return on education is similar to men's, but the intercept of the regression equation is lower for women than for men. That is, year for year and credential for credential, both men and women receive more returns on more education but they start in different places in the opportunity structure. In addition, the internal career ladders in the female occupational structure are much more limited than are those in the male sector (England et al. 1988; Sewell, Hauser, and Wolf 1980).

Reference-group theory may explain why women do not consider their mothers', aunts', and older sisters' poor returns on education to be unfair. The returns are fair in terms of a sex-segregated occupational structure, particularly if a woman sees that her role model's education enabled her to move from an unskilled, tedious, dangerous laboring position to a higher-status, clean, pink-collar job. This is exactly what educational credentials have done for many women in the past 20 years: With education, a woman can move from cafeteria worker to secretary, from secretary to teacher, and from clerk to registered nurse.6

The author's survey of high school seniors' occupational aspirations, conducted as part of the research described earlier (Mickelson 1984, forthcoming), offers an indirect test for the reference-group hypothesis. If reference-group theory is correct, the occupational aspirations of the young women in the sample should have reflected the sex-segregated occupational structure, as it seemed to do (Table 1).

The types of occupations to which males and females aspire offer tentative support for this hypothesis. First, differences in class, rather than gender, distinguish students' modal choices. As Table 1 shows, the most popular occupation of the middle-class boys and girls was business executive, while the most popular choice of both the male and female working-class students was computer scientist. (This category includes the choices

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5 Waite (1981) confirmed that 75 percent of women work in occupations whose incumbents are more than 50 percent female and that 32 percent are in occupations whose incumbents are more than 90 percent female.

6 Popular magazines offer insights into the contemporary popular female culture and women's career choices. Some of the fiction found in the "seven sisters" (Better Homes and Gardens, Family Circle, Good Housekeeping, Ladies' Home Journal, McCall's, Redbook, and Woman's Day) support the differential-reference-group hypothesis (Bernard 1981, p. 165). For example, an article in Ladies' Home Journal told the story of a housewife who decides to return to college as a solution to her midlife crisis. "So I decided to finish up my B. A. in English and then maybe learn word processing." ("I Had an Affair" 1984, p. 18). Yet, it is not clear to what extent these magazines reflect or create women's culture.
of some working-class girls who indicated that they wanted a "career working with computers," a statement that often meant that they wanted to use a word processor for clerical work.) The difference in the career aspirations of middle-class and working-class students supports O'Shea's (1984) argument that working-class people tend to choose technical and engineering occupations as vehicles for upward mobility.

In addition, when nonmodal choices are examined, one finds the traditional patterns of the sex-segregated occupational structure, although they are less sex stereotyped than are those that actually exist among current members of the work force. Thus, the occupations of teacher, fashion designer, clerical worker (the few boys who chose this category aspired to be mail carriers), beautician, and registered nurse were chosen exclusively by female students, and those of social worker and psychologist attracted a majority of female aspirants. Conversely, the occupations of athlete, electrician, and carpenter had only male working-class aspirants, and those of architect, engineer, computer technician, musician, and police officer were chosen more often by boys than by girls. Traditional gender stereotyping, however, did not occur with respect to the occupations of lawyer, computer scientist, accountant, and business executive.

The data in Table 1 show that although gender differences in occupational aspirations may have narrowed, they still persist. Women are moving away from traditional jobs, as the narrow differences in the choices of the male and female students indicate with regard to the professional and business-executive positions. Below the higher reaches of the occupational structure, however, traditional gender patterns are evident: Most girls in the study chose "women's work."

THE POLLYANNA HYPOTHESIS

According to this explanation, the typical young woman who graduates from high
school is likely to be optimistic about her future. Although she may be aware of the sexism that her mother and aunts experienced in the workplace, she interprets it as the problem of the "older generation," which the women's movement has already addressed. Such a view is likely to be a product of this historical moment and of the limited world of high school seniors. Young women today have been exposed to 15 years of rhetoric from the women's movement. They have heard of affirmative action and Title IX. They see that society is changing; women can run for the vice-presidency of the United States. The major social institutions that they experience beyond the nuclear family are the mass media and the high school, where women appear to be moving toward gender equity. The rhetoric and the reality of their world outside the family converge into a picture in which women seemingly can achieve their potentials, largely unencumbered by sexism.

Adolescent girls have not yet faced situations that conflict with the rhetoric of equal opportunity for women. They are not yet in the job market, and they have yet to enter close relationships with men in which they may face the choice of subordinating their goals and ambitions to save the family unit. It will be two or three years before these young women achieve adult status and face these possibilities. In the Pollyannaish world of adolescent girls, their education will be treated just like a man's and their careers will not be compromised by family responsibilities because their husbands will be equal partners in a dual-career marriage. For these Pollyannas, sexism is a thing of the past; they need not worry about it because the battle for equality has been won.

Indirect support for this hypothesis may be seen in the attitudes of young women surveyed in Johnston, Bachman, and O'Malley's (1975, 1985) longitudinal study of approximately 18,000 American high school seniors. The study ascertains the attitudes and behaviors of adolescents on a number of issues, including women's roles, marriage, and career and family. A comparison of attitudes in 1975 and in 1985 would indicate the change in the degree to which women believe that gender equity is possible and desirable. If the Pollyanna hypothesis is true, young women would be optimistic about the prospects for gender equality in the family and workplace and about the possibilities of combining the traditional roles of wife and mother with a career. Table 2 presents the percentage of male and female respondents.

Table 2. Attitudes toward Marriage, Family, Work, and Gender Roles among Selected High School Youths, 1975 and 1985a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1975 Males</th>
<th>1975 Females</th>
<th>1985 Males</th>
<th>1985 Females</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How important to your life is having a good marriage and family life?</td>
<td>86.0</td>
<td>92.1b</td>
<td>86.0</td>
<td>93.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Being a mother and raising children is one of the most fulfilling experiences a woman can have.</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>66.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I expect my work to be a central part of my life.</td>
<td>67.0</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>76.8</td>
<td>72.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Parents should encourage just as much independence in their daughters as in their sons.</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>89.7</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>92.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Men and women should be paid the same money if they do the same work.</td>
<td>86.2</td>
<td>96.6</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>97.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. It is usually better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the family.</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The husband should make all important decisions.</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. In a family with no preschool children, husband and wife both work full time.</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>73.5</td>
<td>62.0</td>
<td>78.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. In a family with preschool children, husband works full time and wife works half time.</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>72.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. In a family with preschool children, husband and wife both work full time.</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>48.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work.</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>76.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Percentages reflect the total of "mostly agree" and "agree" response categories.
b The item did not appear in 1975; percentages are from the 1982 survey.

who agreed with 11 selected statements about equality, families, and work in 1975 and 1985.

As Table 2 shows, the attitudes of the young women changed substantially from 1975 to 1985 about careers, sex roles, and gender equality. However, there was little change in attitudes toward marriage, which was still important to most women, and no decrease in the proportion who believed that having children is one of the most fulfilling experiences a woman can have (although only two-thirds of the young women agreed with this statement). At the same time, these young women planned careers. In 1985, approximately 72 percent of them, up from 63 percent in 1975, stated that they believed their work would be a central part of their lives, and 98 percent believed in equal pay for equal work.

Other items reflect changes in views regarding gender equality in the family and the workplace. In 1985, for example, more women than in 1975 agreed that parents should encourage independence in daughters as much as in sons. However, there was a marked decrease in those who favored a patriarchal power structure in the nuclear family—from 36 percent in 1975 to 31 percent in 1985. Similarly, far fewer women in 1985 than in 1975 agreed that the husband should make all the important decisions.

Perhaps the issue that causes the most role conflict for young women is whether to work when they have young children. As Table 2 indicates, more young women in 1985 than in 1975 would accept work outside the home, even if they had small children. Furthermore, 77 percent of the young women in 1985, compared to 53 percent in 1975, agreed that a woman who works outside the home can be just as good a mother as one who is a housewife.

Taken together, these findings suggest that today’s female high school graduates want a family and a career, think that both are important, and believe that they will be able to have both without sacrificing the quality of either. The attitudinal changes from 1975 to 1985 support the argument that although today’s adolescent girls may be aware of the sexist barriers their mothers faced, they do not anticipate encountering the same ones.

Fox and Hesse-Biber (1984, pp. xi–xii) made essentially the same point:

Compared to their peers of even ten years ago, young women today feel more secure about their chances for active and full participation in areas that have been male domains . . . . When [our] students were asked to predict their lives . . . at age 40, . . . a young woman said, “At age 40 I can see myself as a wife and mother and as a successful lawyer working in a well-established firm.” . . . [F]ew expect any difficulty in combining working and family demands . . . they accept the fact that they must work hard, and they assume that, in doing so, they will be rewarded with rank and earnings commensurate with their education, training and ability. In short, they accept the American creed about equality of opportunity, advancement, and reward for performance.

The Pollyanna hypothesis suggests that today young women believe they have “come a long way”—that barriers to successful careers in both the marketplace and the home have fallen by the wayside. This belief may explain the anomaly of women’s achievement: Women do well in school because they have no doubt that they will be able to take their rightful places in industry and the professions next to their comparably educated brothers. To explode the myth that the battle has been won, more comparable worth cases must make headlines and more, Elizabeth Hishon, Christine Crafts, and Theda Skocpol may have to sue their employers for sexism.7 Perhaps young women must encounter the gender-segregated occupational structure, the gap in the salaries of men and women, and the problems that most women face in “happily integrating” the career-husband-children “triad” before their attitudes toward education, career, and family reflect, to a greater degree, the realities of modern society.

SOCIAL POWERLESSNESS

Theories of the social powerlessness of women are the basis of the third explanation for the apparent failure of sexism in the opportunity structure to affect women’s motivations

7 Elizabeth Hishon is the lawyer who won permission from the U.S. Supreme Court to sue her former employer, Atlanta’s prestigious law firm King and Spalding, for sex discrimination because it failed to grant her or any other woman partnership in the 100-partner firm. Christine Craft is the television anchor who was fired because her employers thought she was not sufficiently attractive to report the news. Theda Skocpol is the sociologist who received tenure from Harvard University after winning a sex-discrimination suit against the university, which originally failed to grant her tenure.
to achieve in school. This explanation posits that marriage is a consciously sought alternative to a career. Aware of the structural inequalities in the occupational world, women know that they cannot expect equitable returns on their education, no matter how well they have done in school, and realize that they must seek a husband if they wish to be socially and financially secure. In addition, they are aware of the economic plight of those who attempt to be independent of a male partner (breadwinner) or of those who are left to support young children alone. Thus, young women strive for future status and success by choosing a "promising" husband rather than by focusing on a career. Education still has a role; it is essential for acquiring an appropriate husband.

Educational achievement in high school allows a woman to attend college, where she can meet men who are likely to have suitable futures as breadwinners. Accordingly, the primary evaluation of social returns on her educational achievement and attainment will not be made in the labor market, but in marriage. This hypothesis applies to the middle-class woman who must marry a college-educated man simply to maintain the social status and lifestyle of her childhood and to the working-class woman who aspires to upward mobility.

Studies of middle-class white women show that many continue to go to college for the same reasons that the daughters of the elite attended in previous decades: to obtain a liberal arts "finishing" and to find appropriate husbands (Bernard 1981; Finley 1983; Mickelson 1989; Ostrander 1984). Educational achievement in high school is necessary for middle-class women to gain access to college. Therefore, for some middle-class women, occupations and careers may not be the critical measure of a return on their education; for them, finding an appropriate husband means that the education has "paid off." For upper-class women, this dynamic is slightly different. Ostrander (1984) reported that elite women rarely work outside the home but consider their roles to be those of society volunteer and hostess, helpmate to their husbands, and primary socializing parent for their children. They view higher education as essential to fulfilling these roles.

Marriage is also an alternative to a career for working-class white women but for different reasons. Rubin (1976) stated that working-class women choose early marriage when their childhood illusions of glamorous occupations dissolve. These women in particular believe that staying married is an economic necessity, rather than an option (Richardson 1981). Finley (1983) noted that working-class adolescents choose early marriage as a way out of oppressive home situations of powerlessness and poverty. This author (Mickelson 1989) found that many white working-class women who married immediately after high school did so consciously to leave the poverty of their single mothers' homes. Although many of these young women reported that they believed in the value of education and planned to attend college eventually, the immediacy of their poverty overpowered any other social forces in their lives. Thus, many working-class white women may chose early marriage instead of the much more time-consuming and risky route out of poverty—college and a professional husband or a career of their own. Both Finley (1983) and this author (Mickelson 1989) also found that some white working-class women consciously chose to do well in high school so they would have the opportunity to go to college where they would meet middle-class men. Often their mothers explicitly encouraged their academic achievement in these terms.

The case of black women is more complicated. Black women, especially educated black women, have always been able to gain employment (in a sex- and race-segregated occupational structure) more reliably than have black men. The complex gender and class patterns of educational and occupational attainment among black Americans are certainly rooted in historical differences between opportunity structures for men and for women and for blacks and for whites. Today, black women from middle-class families are the most likely to achieve and attain academically. Those with high levels of educational attainment (five or more years of college) are more likely to have jobs commensurate with their education than are white women (Jones 1987; Wilkerson 1987). Middle-class black women do not necessarily perceive marriage as a route to upward mobility or out of poverty. Although many hope to marry a man who will keep them in the lifestyle to which they have become accustomed, they expect to work as well. Because black families have historically been characterized by flexible
gender roles, middle-class black women are familiar with the role of breadwinner. Perhaps black parents, more than whites, fear the precarious position of women who do not have occupational resources of their own. Education is crucial "just in case something happens," one black middle-class mother cautioned her daughter and her daughter's friends (Mickelson 1989).

Many working-class black women are highly motivated to succeed in an occupation. Even if they are married, they know their husbands are unlikely to earn enough to take care of their families. For certain black women, especially in the lower class, marriage may be a liability. Poor women build mutual support networks from which they draw resources for survival (Stack 1974), and husbands may be a threat to these networks, since they inhibit a woman's ability to rely on these diverse resources. For such women, the avoidance of marriage may help them to survive financially. The precarious condition of black men as breadwinners is reflected in the advice that one black father gave his two daughters, "Get yourself an education so you won't have to stay with no sorry man" (Mickelson 1989).

For both middle- and working-class women, black and white, education and marriage have different meanings for potential social status. Arguably, white adolescent girls are aware of the less-than-favorable occupational options that await them and know that for most women (at least for white women), the safest and most reliable route to high status as an adult may be through a good marriage. Although the situation is more ambiguous for young black women, marriage remains important to the economic survival of black families. Wilson (1988) made this point as well in his discussion of the structural origins of the underclass.8 As Featherman (1978, p. 53) commented:

[V]icarious achievement (through a spouse) remains a major mechanism for intergenerational continuity or change in status for women, supplementing or complementing the opportunities for achievement through independent pursuits outside marriage and the home economy.

SEX-ROLE SOCIALIZATION

The fourth hypothesis with regard to the anomaly of women's achievement comes from the literature on sex-role socialization. According to the asymmetry model described by Kaufman and Richardson (1982), boys' achievement is motivated by the desire for mastery and other intrinsic rewards, while girls' achievement is directed toward winning social approval and other extrinsic rewards. Little girls want to please and be "good" so they will earn love and approval. Women's motivation for achievement, it is suggested, evolves from early childhood needs for love and the approval of others, more than for mastery and self-reliance, which underlies the motivation of men. Clearly, this distinction is rigidly simplistic. Marciano (1981) suggested a subtler explanation: The "center of gravity" of women's motivation to achieve is an orientation to others, while the "center of gravity" of men's motivation is a desire for mastery and self-gratification. Girls perform well in school because good performance is compatible with affiliative motives and consistent with the "good girl" role into which they are socialized (Kaufman and Richardson 1982; Maccoby and Jacklin 1974; Weitzman 1979, 1984).

The sex-role socialization hypothesis actually has two aspects. First, girls do well in school because they are socialized to be good. Being a "good girl" in school means dutifully following orders and instructions from teachers, being decorous and compliant, and accepting rules with little protest. This is the kind of behavior that is more compatible with female than with male sex roles. Weitzman (1984, p. 172) explained how girls' early sex-role socialization produces a particular kind of motivation to achieve that is not found in boys:

The dependence and affection-seeking responses seen as normal for both boys and girls in early childhood become defined as feminine in older children. . . . [G]irls are not separated from their parents as sources of support and nurturance, and they are therefore not forced to develop internal controls and an independent sense of self. Instead, the self they value is the one that emanates from the appraisals of others.

8 Wilson (1988) has been criticized by those who interpret his discussion of the unavailability of marriageable men for underclass women as an argument that poor women are but a husband away from economic insolvency. Although he denies that this was his intent, the relative lack of a detailed discussion of the effects of the sex-segregated occupational structure lends support to his critics.
Consequently, girls develop a greater need for the approval of others . . . than do boys.

The second part of this argument revolves around the male sex role and achievement. Although the female sex role demands that girls be good and do well in school, the male sex role, particularly among working-class white boys, requires a degree of resistance to authority figures like teachers and a certain devaluation of schoolwork because it is "feminine" (Stockard et al. 1980; Willis 1977). The lived culture of working-class men glorifies manual labor, which involves physical strength, a willingness to get dirty, and an attitude of rebellion against, and independence from, superiors, as distinguished from the attitudes of submission and appeasement associated with women (Bologh 1986). Thus, the high achievement of female students may be due to two separate sex-role processes: Girls do well because they are socialized to be good and they do better than some boys because the sex-role socialization of boys requires a degree of academic underachievement. As Stockard et al. (1980) noted, good students display behavior that is generally sex typed as feminine. Therefore, it is understandable if boys do not conform to the role of good student because being a good student would mean acting feminine. Boys do not refuse to learn, but they may not reflect learning in the ways that are required for high grades. Until this century, even elite white men tempered their achievement in college to receive a "gentleman's C."9

Indirect support for this hypothesis appeared in two studies. Stockard and Wood's (1984) investigation of underachievement among Oregon secondary school students revealed that underachievement was much more common among boys than among girls. This author's study (Mickelson 1984) offered limited support for this hypothesis in a comparison of students' grade-point averages. Data in Table 3 reveal that in all instances, the achievement of the female students surpassed that of the male students (p<.0001).

Moreover, working-class gender differences in grade-point averages were almost three times greater than the middle-class differences, especially when one compares white working-class male and female students. The gender differences in grades are in the directions one might expect if the sex-role socialization hypothesis is correct. Finally, in response to a question about the importance of getting an education relative to going to work, white working-class male students, more than any other race-by-gender-by-class subgroup, reported that going into family businesses (which were overwhelmingly in the skilled crafts or services) was more important than getting good grades (Mickelson 1984, p. 144). Taken together with the significant class and gender differences in grade-point averages, this attitude toward work vis-à-vis education lends indirect support to the sex-role socialization hypothesis.

**DISCUSSION**

The anomaly with which this article began remains essentially unresolved. Why do women do so well in school when they can expect only relatively limited returns on their educational achievements? The rationale underlying the educational attainment of most men—gaining credentials that will bring higher pay, better jobs, and promotions—is, in many ways, inadequate for women. The academic achievement and attainment of women defy this logic because women continue to match (and often surpass) men without the same occupational returns from schooling that men receive.

The four hypotheses explored in the previous section offered a variety of perspectives on the question of why women achieve in school. The first three hypotheses exam-

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9 An interesting twist on this was reported by Fordham and Ogbu (1986), who described how able black students consciously hide their ability and temper their achievement lest they be labeled as "acting white." The similarities and differences between labeling achievement as either feminine or white behavior, an implication of pariahlike status in both cases, need further exploration.
ined how young women view the connection between education and the occupational structure, while the fourth ignored structure altogether. Although these hypotheses offer some insight into the question of women's achievement, all four hypotheses suffer from certain problems:

- Reference-group theory assumes that women are aware of the greater returns from education that men receive but do not care. This idea requires a major leap of faith.
- If one accepts the reference-group premise that young women are aware of a sex-segregated occupational structure, one must deny the Pollyanna and the social powerlessness hypotheses. The Pollyanna theory presumes that the basis of the reference-group hypothesis—a sex-segregated occupational structure—is a thing of the past. The social powerlessness hypothesis denies the direct relevance of occupational returns on education for women's decisions and proposes that good marriages, not careers, are the fundamental motivation behind women's educational attainment. If this is true, then a sex-segregated occupational structure is less relevant than is women's primarily dependent status in society.
- Furthermore, the Pollyanna theory and the social powerlessness theory are mutually exclusive. One denies that young women perceive sexism as a factor in the status-attainment process, but the other identifies sexism as such a prominent component of the status-attainment process that marriage appears to be the most reasonable alternative for women who seek social and financial security.
- The sex-role socialization hypothesis focuses completely on the individual and her early socialization experiences. It fails to link her behavior in school to such broad social-structural phenomena as those discussed in the other hypotheses. Any account of social behavior that fails to incorporate structure is limited in its explanatory power.

A final shortcoming of all the hypotheses discussed in this article is the uneven ability of the theories to explain the achievement and attainment behavior of women from diverse racial and class backgrounds. It is likely, for example, that the Pollyanna phenomenon is more characteristic of middle-class women, while reference group is a more likely explanation of working-class experiences. Social powerlessness theory is also relevant mainly to middle-class white women; it is especially inadequate for poor and working-class black women.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the four hypotheses offer some insight into the anomaly of women's achievement, none truly explains it. One important reason for the theoretical shortcomings of sociology concerning women's lives stems from the tendency to generalize from the experience of white highly educated middle-class men to all people in society (Acker 1973, 1980; Bologh 1986; Gilligan 1983; Richardson 1981). Such generalizations impose inappropriate categories on a woman's definition of the situation (Berg 1987). Future research can benefit from the emerging body of feminist theory that argues that a social theory which accounts for the male experience will not necessarily describe the female experience successfully. A number of feminist scholars have attempted to break out of this androcentric paradigm, but theories and empirical work that capture the female experience in education and in the opportunity structure remain incomplete. For instance, the assumption that women evaluate returns from education through the same system of meaning as do men leads one to conclude that women's achievement is anomalous. Yet if women's achievement and attainment are understood from an alternative, feminist paradigm that is built on women's lived experiences, they may not be anomalous.

For example, recent feminist scholarship has challenged the division between public and private worlds found traditionally in social science and has offered a potentially useful framework for understanding women's lived experience in relation to education and occupations. Bologh (1986) suggested that the boundaries between the private world (domestic life, home and family, and communal relations) and the public world (economy and politics) are demarcated less clearly for women than for men. A continuum, rather than a dichotomy, captures more accurately the public and private dimensions of women's lives.

Women's experience is characterized by systems of interdependencies, relationships, and networks. Women are not as likely as men to see family responsibilities as distinct
from and competing with professional responsibilities. For women, the two are part of one reality and must be accommodated simultaneously. This is not to say that women are ignorant of the tensions and crosspressures (such as role conflicts) between public and private demands. Rather, they recognize the internal tension between individual and community because the two are linked irrevocably and inextricably in their experience (Bolough 1986). Gilligan (1983, p. 19) noted, for example, that women’s resolution of moral problems relies on “conflicting responsibilities rather than . . . competing rights and requires for their resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract.” This idea suggests that women approach their lives by weaving diverse elements into a single tapestry of public and private roles. A world view such as this inevitably will affect the way women evaluate the meaning and significance of education in their lives. This perspective suggests that returns from education are refracted not only through the lens of income, status, and career ladders but through familial and community roles.

Aspects of this argument may appear similar to human capital theory’s explanations of the sex-segregated occupational structure and the lower status and monetary returns from education that accompany traditionally female jobs. Both emerging feminist theory and human capital theory propose that women take their familial roles into account when making occupational choices. But the theories are fundamentally different. Central to human capital theory is the notion of actors who maximize individual self-interest in the marketplace and that all people define self-interest in the same way. Accordingly, women, like men, choose careers that will maximize their market value. Women accept the lower pay and limited career ladders of jobs in the female occupational structure because these are the quid pro quo that permit serial entries and exits with fewer penalties than jobs in the male sector.10 In contrast, emerging feminist theory proposes that many women have a different notion of value that is related to human relationships. From this perspective, the concept of individual self-interest that is based on the highest rate of economic return from educational investment loses its explanatory power. If women operate from this other set of values, they may ask, “What is useful to people, to my family, to my community?” Although both explanations of women’s occupational choices take family issues into account, the underlying models of human capital theory and emerging feminist theory are different.

The structural arguments with which this article began offer a partial account of the way social forces affect women’s educational accomplishments. As Ogbu (1979) and Mickelson (1984, forthcoming) have shown, there is a link between the opportunity structure and women’s educational outcomes. Historically, women responded to new labor market opportunities by getting more education. For example, Olneck and Lazerson’s (1974) study of immigrant children during the early part of the twentieth century found that girls were more likely than boys to be in high school because the employment opportunities for men without high school diplomas were greater than those for untrained women. The growing sectors of the economy that were open to women—secretarial and office work and especially teaching—required specific skills for which women had to be prepared. It thus made more economic sense, at least in the short run, for boys to take jobs and girls to continue in school.

Now that a wider range of occupations is opening up to women, primarily in the professions (and, to a much lesser degree, in the shrinking skilled blue-collar sector), women are responding and obtaining the educational credentials they must have if they are to have any chance to enter these jobs. Overall, women’s educational profiles respond to the race- and class-specific opportunities that are there; however, women fail to respond to the “job ceiling” they face because of their gender. It is in this way that the structural explanations are incomplete. Although these explanations account for the role multiple feedbacks between gender-role socialization, discrimination, and institutional practices” (p. 554) as the primary reasons for the poor returns that women tend to receive from education.

10 Recent research challenged human capital theory’s explanation of the sex-segregated occupational structure and its accompanying wage differentials. England et al. (1988) demonstrated that the human capital model does not hold up under empirical scrutiny. Their analysis offers indirect support for structural factors like “the
of the race- and class-linked job ceiling in depressing the achievement of minority and working-class students, they do not explain why the gender-linked job ceiling fails to depress women’s achievement net of race and class. Arguments that connect school outcomes to the opportunity structure must be broadened to account for the anomaly of women’s achievement and the various racial and class patterns within that social landscape.

To this end, future researchers might consider the perspective of women’s lived culture in which public and private spheres are more likely to be interwoven than dichotomized, as they are in the male world. Although a call for incorporating women’s experience into research designs may sound banal, it is necessary because so little feminist research exists in the social sciences. It will be difficult to understand the anomaly of women’s achievement or any other aspect of the women’s lives without such a feminist perspective. Until this perspective is adopted, it is unlikely that social scientists will capture the ways in which gender contributes to the organization and structure of social life.

REFERENCES


THE ANOMALY OF WOMEN'S ACHIEVEMENT


