

Making Sense of Success: How Women Sociologists Experience their Achievements

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Summer 2010 Research Development Grant funds supported my project, “Making Sense of Success: How Women Sociologists Experience their Achievements.” The larger project of which this research is a part examines the personal experience of achievement among women sociologists in applied and academic fields. The specific achieved goals of my summer 2010 research include (1) updated literature review on gender inequality in the public sphere and on gender in academia, (2) extended reading on qualitative methods (on interviewing techniques in unstructured interview situations), (3) first-stage sample selection and initial contact and (4) initial interviews conducted at ASA and SWS meetings in Atlanta, August 2010. In contrast with the faculty development proposal, in which I emphasize women sociologists, I have since decided it would be helpful to include male sociologists and this is the next phase of my interviews. It is important to be able to determine whether there are processes at work in academic sociology that affect men in similar ways as women, or whether women are indeed experiencing their work careers differently.

Completing the specific goals of my summer 2010 research helped me to be in a better position to start the bulk of my interviews during my spring 2011 sabbatical. Additional reading on gender inequality in the professions, and on work/family balance in academia, led me to appreciate anew the importance of exploring issues of work and family with my respondents. While there is a wealth of research on this question, it is also the case that one’s sense of accomplishment at work happens in conjunction with a more holistic sense of self. The importance of the question of work/family balance is not, therefore, one only of role conflict (with family obligations getting in the way of getting work done, or vice-a-versa), though much of the literature suggests this emphasis (Philipsen 2008; Caplan 1993; Evans and Grant 2008). As professionals, women sociologists are likely to have a more integrationist approach to their work and family lives/selves. Rather than clearly separating—or segregating, in Nippert-Eng’s (1998) terms—their work time/place/self from their home life/place/self, academics often take work home; sometimes bring their kids to office hours; check e-mail from home, or the beach, or their daughter’s ball game on the weekends; often grade in the evenings, etc. The importance of this for my research is in exploring the question, and the meaning of success. The question of “success”—what we mean by it; how it differs from “job satisfaction;” who embraces it as part of their self-concept, and on what terms—is also a question of success in which realm of our lives? Early pilot interviews confirmed the importance of this question, as women sociologists in this study so far nearly to the person resist the unqualified label “successful.” For them, success as a sociologist is relative and incomplete; or, success is a state they will claim for their whole person—it is more holistic, and they consider their work selves and their home selves together when they talk about their success.

A second theme emergent from interviews thus far is the variation of women’s experience on the job. Is the climate a chilly one for white women and women of color or is there an inclusive, supportive environment? While some women express having had nothing but support, others carry a continuous burden of not quite fitting in, not feeling as if their work is valued, not feeling accepted. But for more respondents, the story is much more complicated. A generally positive work environment can be punctuated with instances of interpersonal hostility. Or something might be said or done that needs interpretation. When women have to ask themselves, “am I imagining it?” or “was that a sexist or homophobic comment?” they usually are cautious in their interpretation, assuming the best. I expand further on both these questions—(1) that of “success” and how women attribute or make sense of their

success; and (2) that of the chilly vs. supportive environment—in the extended abstract I am including with this final report and have submitted for inclusion in a book project (*Disrupting the Culture of Silence*, DeWelde and Stepnick, eds.).

Budget expenditures (\$500) included funding used toward the purchase of recording and transcription equipment, purchased from transcriptiongear.com (digital voice recorder, foot pedal, earphones, and software). The kit purchased includes the GearPlayer USB with Philipps LFH9610 digital voice recorder.

My summer research was the initial phase of the larger project, and dissemination of findings will follow the sabbatical (my sabbatical was originally planned for fall 2010 but later postponed until spring 2011). In the meantime, I have submitted an abstract, “Making Sense of Success: Women Sociologists and their Experiences in Academia,” for presentation at the National Women’s Studies Association in November 2011. As mentioned above, I submitted an extended abstract, “It’s Complicated: Women Sociologists and the Question of Inclusion in the Academy,” for inclusion as a book chapter. And I have submitted a small-grants proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities for summer funding to extent this research to applied sociologists.