

Ancient History and the Undergraduate Woman
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I'm the last person who should be giving this talk. I'm neither an undergraduate nor female. More critically, I have no background in either psychology or education (despite what I do for a living), so my qualifications to speak on why undergraduate women might or might not elect to pursue a career as a professor of ancient history are pretty slim. However, thanks to a very able research assistant, Peggy Solic, a grad student in U.S. Women's history in our department, I've been able to learn a few things about what studies by scholars in education and psychology have to say about the factors influencing the career decisions of young women in general and those few in particular do or do not go on to careers in academia. On that basis, I can offer a few thoughts on the incentives and obstacles undergraduate women face when contemplating the path that leads to grad school and ultimately an academic career as professors of ancient history.

A good deal of research has been done on the general topic of women and career choice, usefully summarized in a 1997 survey by Phillips and Imhoff.¹ A significant current in this work tells us that to a very great extent these decisions are beyond our ability, as teachers of ancient history, to influence. Many of these findings are scarcely surprising: home life, for instance, has a major influence on the early development of children's ideas about themselves and their career orientation. The media, children's stories, and their activities also shape their notions of what they imagine are appropriate roles for adult men and women. Restrictive ideas about these roles remain evident when they reach high school and even college. Although media depictions of women are becoming less stereotyped, most studies, at least as of fifteen years ago, the date of the most recent survey article we could find, still saw the media as depicting women in traditional roles. Whether this conclusion is less true now I cannot say; certainly we regularly see women portraying doctors, lawyers, and police officers on television. You don't see many women plumbers or professors, however.

Somewhat surprisingly, at least to me, studies have found that boys tend to be more restrictive than girls in their ideas about appropriate roles for each gender. Girls are more flexible in their self-concepts and imagine themselves in a wide range of life situations. “However,” as Phillips and Imhoff write, “despite what may be seen as increasing flexibility about women’s roles, significant negative consequences can still be expected if women engage in gender role deviant behavior, such as academic achievement or career success.” (35)

Researchers have also examined women’s ability to make educational and career choices, and several investigations have suggested that young women are more advanced in their vocational maturity than their male counterparts. This maturity entails things like involvement in planning and exploring career options. On the other hand, how school counselors, parents, and others advise women to think about their future careers can restrict the options they consider. And individuals of either gender with less traditional gender-related characteristics and attitudes can have more trouble than others in deciding on a career.

The issue of traditional versus non-traditional career choices is important, because the line of questioning that has gotten the lion’s share of attention has focused precisely on the “traditionality” of women’s occupational choices. As a result, we now have a great deal of insight into how and why women make specific career choices. Research has focused on four types of motivation for choosing a particular type of career. These are: self-referenced thought (which seems to mean how someone thinks about herself); characteristics and attitudes that are termed “gender-referenced,” meaning I think the extent to which they are associated with men or women; the influence of school and family; and interventions and assistance in making choices. How young women think about themselves can have a very significant effect on their career choices, from the range of careers they will consider to, interestingly, the level of success they consider possible for themselves in a particular career. So, while a young woman might imagine that she could be a firefighter, for example, she might also think that she would not be able to be a really good firefighter, while on the other hand she could imagine herself becoming an excellent social worker and so go in that direction. These notions are influenced by

perceptions of appropriate gender roles formed early in life and developed as part of a young women's formation of her identity. They can work to limit her choices to what she may think of as traditional women's occupations. In addition, scholars who have looked at gender-referenced characteristics have found that women with, as Phillips and Imhoff put it, "more egalitarian attitudes about women's roles often engage in nontraditional occupational pursuits." (39) So once again, we are back to the early stages of a woman's development of her ideas about the appropriate roles of adults of either gender. Not surprisingly therefore, studies have also found that parents, teachers, and various advisors can have a big influence on the traditionality of a woman's career choices.

Studies have also suggested that young women often have more complicated scripts in their heads than their male counterparts: they are thinking about becoming wives and mothers at the same time they are considering careers. Despite the increased attention that they are giving to careers outside the home, this has not detracted from their concerns for home and family. Relevant here, too, is the fact that while men also have multiple life commitments and at least potentially face similar conflicts between work and family, "there are also notable gender differences in time perspective, in role expectations, and in implicit ideas about what adulthood will be like." (Phillips and Imhoff 40) These differences, as many of you will already be aware, will feature prominently in the thinking of young men and women contemplating careers as professors.

How people come to choose to become academics is the subject of a 2004 study by Jennifer Lindholm.² In surveying earlier studies, she notes that they have repeatedly identified two broad classes of influences, early developmental experiences and career specific influences. In terms of the former, academics tend "to be first-born or only children and to come from families that stress the value of intellectual pursuits and academic achievement."(605) Often they are highly intelligent, and prefer solitary, autonomous activities as kids. While some feel that their school experience was rewarding, others report being bored with it. Generally, they tend to be more independent of their parents in making career decisions. Career-specific factors can

include an influential professor and the intrinsic attraction of research as well as freedom to pursue personal intellectual interests and the allure of the challenges these pose. The occurrence of these traits is similar among men and women. Gender makes a difference in the fact that comparatively more women are attracted to the ideal of becoming a professor by the possibility of influencing social change. Also interesting is the fact that when parents play a role in the choice of an academic career, their influence is greater among women than men: 36% of women, as against 29% of men cite their mother's influence while a father's influence is greater among women by 34% to 30%. Above all however there is just something about academic life that those who pursue a career as professors find deeply attractive and that factor does not vary by gender. So if that is the case, why have historically fewer women than men chosen to enter the professoriate, which around 2002, was about 41% female, a figure that includes lecturers and instructors?

That is the question that Sari van Anders attempts to answer in her 2004 paper.³ She identifies significant "leaks" in the academic pipeline from college through grad school to an academic post. As she writes, "the proportion of women declines at each stage along the pipeline, from undergraduates (58.9%), Master's students (52.3%), doctoral students (36.1%), and academic job applicants (20%)." (512) Van Anders posits that women self-select out of academia because of the experience or perception of systemic barriers to success rather than overt discrimination. These barriers center on having and raising children and the geographic mobility required of an academic career, and a study she undertook among a group of graduate students at the University of Western Ontario bears out her hypothesis. More men than women among her sample intended to pursue an academic career, and what made a difference in their decisions had little to do with research interests, competence, or teaching. All these were positive influences when they thought about an academic career. The big divide, as you might expect, lay in issues of parental leave, childcare, and geographic mobility, with women viewing these as disincentives much more so than men. Interestingly, van Anders found no differences among her respondents in men's and women's desire to have children. But they differed

sharply in how having children would fit into an academic career. “Women,” she writes, “want to have children at younger ages than men do, and are more certain at which career stage they want to have children. This strongly suggests that women are well aware of the need to plan childbearing in accordance with both their fertility and their career stage. Men and women obviously view childbearing differently: men view it as something that will happen; women view it as something they need to fit into their lives and careers.” Women therefore are acutely aware that “the period of time involved in pursuing an academic career, as opposed to a career in other sectors, coincides with nearly the entirety of reproductive years for women.” (519)

The results of a 2005 AHA study on “The Status of Women in the History Profession” bears out these findings. Although geographic mobility did not feature among the answers of respondents to this survey, since presumably they already had jobs and so had done most of their moving around, issues of childbearing and children were prominent. While family, formal equality, and departmental climate were the issues that dominated the concerns of women history professors, the study notes that “finding a way to balance work, family, and scholarship loomed as the most pressing issue facing the youngest cohort of respondents, many of whom are of childbearing ages. It was also an issue that caused their older counterparts much distress, and, for some, has taken a new form in the guise of elder care.” (7) High on the list of concerns was maternity leave, and finding a way to integrate this into the constraints imposed by the tenure clock created a potentially awkward and precarious situation for untenured women. Even those whose universities had formal maternity leave policies expressed concern that taking time off would hurt their chances for tenure.

So where does all of this leave us? It seems that in considering the entry of undergraduate women into the “pipeline” leading to a career teaching ancient history, we need to distinguish two issues, the decision to become a professor and choice of ancient history as a field of study. In terms of the former, it seems clear that the groundwork is laid early in life, in a woman’s upbringing, in the influence of mass media, and in her socio-cultural environment. Although research has found that serendipity was responsible for some faculty winding up

among the professoriate, the majority had long felt drawn to aspects of the academic life. So while we can encourage those tendencies, I don't think we are going to be able to sway many women away from a career in marketing or dentistry in favor of the groves of academe who aren't already heading in that direction. And that in turn may affect how we view the imbalance among men and women majors in history. With some notable exceptions, men typically outnumber women among history majors by anywhere from 3:1 to 3:2 despite the fact that women undergraduates now typically outnumber men on college campuses. There has been much discussion of why this should be the case and what might be done about it, but while increasing the number of women who choose to major in history is undoubtedly a good thing in and of itself, I am not sure it would lead to more women electing to become professors of ancient or any other sort of history. For if a predisposition to an academic career is already there when a young woman arrives at college, then what will draw her to pursue that career in history is simply exposure to the subject itself and how well it is taught. In other words, they may already be self-selecting into that minority of women who major in history, and boosting the overall number of women history majors will not necessarily increase the number of potential professors among them. The real challenge is how to get this predisposed minority of undergraduate women to choose to pursue a career studying history rather than, say, English or psychology, which raises the problem of why certain subjects get stereotyped as "male" or "female." I confess I do not have an answer. What the research shows is that these sorts of gendered stereotypes get implanted early in life and can persist well into a young person's college years, so that by the time we see him or her there's not much we can do about them. Still, the critical leak in the pipeline I think does not occur at the undergraduate stage. The big fall-off in the proportion of women occurs later, in graduate school or once they've received their Ph.D.s, as they confront the conflict between their desire to pursue an academic career and their desire to have a family. Here the solution is obvious: better maternity leave policies; greater flexibility in how we apply the timeline to tenure; more family-friendly work environments; more husbands doing their fair share of childcare and housework; more and more affordable day care. Once

we mitigate that conflict, we should see women in greater numbers electing careers as professors and, perhaps surprisingly, men as well. I quote from an article by Peter Conn in the Chronicle of Higher Education in April of last year:

Reimagining graduate education might also respond to the ambivalence that many students have expressed about their careers. In an important survey conducted at the University of California by Mary Ann Mason and her collaborators, the researchers concluded, “Neither men nor women consider tenure-track faculty positions in research-intensive universities to be family-friendly career choices. Less than half the men (46 percent) and only a third of women (29 percent) imagine jobs in these settings to be somewhat or very family friendly.” Many students report that “they did not want lifestyles like those of their advisers or other faculty in their departments.” In Mason's opinion, “the structure of academia at all levels is turning people away from the profession.”⁴

Still, whatever we manage to accomplish on this front, we need to separate it from the question of whether there are obstacles peculiar to the study of ancient history that are deterring women more than men at any point along the path from undergraduate to professor. We are all well aware of the major obstacles confronting all students. The precipitous decline in the teaching of Latin—to say nothing of Greek—over the last half of the 20th century has meant that students arrive at college with little or no training in these languages, to say nothing of exposure to the history of the ancient world. And the rise of world history at the expense of a more traditional focus on western civilization has dislodged antiquity from its long accustomed place as the fountainhead of European history. The substitution of social studies for history, too, is likely to have further diminished students' familiarity with the histories of Greece and Rome. Add to that the fact that when history is taught at the high school level it is often presented as simply a bunch of facts to be memorized, and it is no wonder that students shy away from our courses. However the critical question is whether there is a fundamental difference in what

women and men find challenging and intellectually stimulating, and if so whether the stuff of ancient history furnishes enough of what appeals to each to ensure that those women likely to want to become professors of history will elect to pursue the study of antiquity as often as they do other fields of history. I suspect not. Consider the fact that around the turn of the century, 28 % of full-time history faculty were women, but in Scheidel's count of ancient historians in the U.S. around the same time, the proportion of females was slightly less than 22 %, a small but possibly significant difference.⁵ So it is worth asking whether the kinds of source materials we have to work with tend to attract the interest of more men than women. Unlike modern U.S. history or the history of early modern or even medieval Europe or pre-modern China, where the range of topics and problems for which evidence exists is broad and the evidence itself is often abundant, ancient sources are often exiguous and focused narrowly on war, diplomacy, and politics. Should we then take an essentialist view that there exist specifically "women's" subjects that mainly appeal to women, so that we might lure more female potential professors into our undergraduate courses and start them along the professorial pipeline if we enhance those aspects of our courses that focus on them? Or can we assume that undergraduate women are no different intellectually than their male counterparts, so that better teaching generally will draw them into our courses and lead some of them on to further study and a few of those into grad school and ultimately on to the professoriate? This is an area where I hope discussion among the audience and the other members of the panel will be able to offer answers to a question that I have so far been unable to resolve in my own mind.

Notes

1. Phillips, Susan and Anne Imhoff. "Women and Career Development: A Decade of Research." *Annual Review of Psychology* 48 (1997): 31-59.
2. Lindholm, Jennifer. "Pathways to the Porfessoriate: The Rome of Self, Others, and Environment in Shaping Academic Career Aspirations." *The Journal of Higher Education* 75 (2004): 603-35.
3. Van Anders, Sari. "Why the Academic Pipeline Leaks: Fewer Men than Women Perceive Barriers to Becoming Professors." *Sex Roles* 51 (2004): 511-21.
4. *Chronical of Higher Education*, April 4, 2010:
<http://chronicle.com/article/We-Need-to-Acknowledge-the/64885/>.
5. These figures of course do not compare like with like. Schidel counted ancient historians whatever their departmental affiliation whereas the count of women historians includes only women in history departments. So if we were to exclude ancient historians teaching in classics or other departments and count only those in history departments, the figure might well change, although whether up or down it is impossible to say.

