

Educated in Romance: Women, Achievement and College Culture

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This is an "ethnographic and sociological" study by two anthropologists. It explores why most of a sample of young women who started at two universities in 1979 dropped out or lowered their academic aspirations and career goals before graduation and failed to fulfill their ambitions.

The universities, one predominantly Black, are located in the southern United States. The authors selected a sample (N = 23) of volunteers so that half of the women at each school were planning to major in math- or science-related fields, had strong academic performance in their high school college-preparatory tracks and "had an expressed serious commitment to pursuing a career in the future" (p. 63). Students were interviewed and observed closely over the first three semesters of college and again in 1983. Seventeen informants were contacted in 1987. If any women at these two colleges were likely to achieve their academic and career goals, these doubly selected students should have. But eight years after entering college only three women appeared to be employed full-time in an occupation resembling a career: "others were working in clerical or other low-paying jobs, like waitressing or cleaning" (p. 193). Most were economically dependent on husbands.

Chapter 3 provides an excellent review and critique of the theoretical and empirical literature and would be useful as assigned reading in courses in the sociology or anthropology of education or in women's studies. The historical context and the trends in development on both sides of the Atlantic and elsewhere in reproduction theory, cultural production theory and "Practice theory" in relation to gender are clearly and concisely set out. Unfortunately, there is an excessive amount of repetition throughout the rest of the book.

From the data, the authors derived a "cultural model of romance" which pervaded the student culture and which "established 'attractiveness' as the commodity of value in an ongoing 'sexual auction'" (p. 96) and "set men up as the judges of women's claims to prestige in the peer system" (p. 106). Women were drawn into spending more and more time on the interpersonal politics of romance and less on their studies. The women had "fragile ties to other women . . . responded to their shared vulnerability to the sexual auction block, not by teaming up to oppose it" (p. 108). They rarely discussed their majors or career plans with each other and the pressure of the peer culture "led to a marginalization of or a failure to develop their ideas of themselves as having careers in the future" (p. 200). The authors conclude that patriarchy and "gender hierarchies, as they are reflected in the schools, are mediated largely by peers" (p. 222) and that "the peer culture was important ultimately in constructing women's economic marginality and their subordination to men" (p. 85).

The findings are insightful. However, in the face of women's admission to law, medicine and graduate programs in management, as well as their actual achievements in the occupational structure by 1987, it is very hard to accept this as representative of the effects of the way in which the student culture defines and structures the future of gifted women on the basis of this small sample.