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ANP429: Final Paper

4/25/18

**The Post Collegiate Woman & the Influence of Personal Relationships on  
Professional Success**

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank all my interviewees and survey participants for generously sharing their time and personal stories to help me with this project. My participants were so wonderful in sharing their experiences, positive and negative, with no real hesitation.

I would also like to thank my husband for his support through this semester while I worked on this paper. This semester coupled with this research topic encouraged me to examine my priorities personally, professionally, and academically. I am grateful that my husband was open to these contemplations, and willing to put his own things aside to allow me to put my professional and academic pursuits ahead of my personal commitments as needed.

Lastly, I would like to thank Dr. Mara Leichtman for leading our class through the methodology available to anthropologists. Her guidance and support throughout the semester to our class has allowed us all to pursue such diverse and impactful topics.

## Introduction:

As a married woman having completed a bachelor's degree and currently finishing my second, I have noticed a wonderful increase in female empowerment socially, politically, and professionally. Women are being encouraged to stand up, have a voice, and live their life authentically and to the fullest. However, I have noticed several types of media still perpetuating the idea that women cannot have successful careers and flourishing personal lives. From articles in Psychology Today and Refinery29 to television and movie story lines, this idea that a woman "cannot have it all" is still ironically being publicized.

This made me wonder: Are coupled women being left out of the current feminist renaissance and still feel pressured to sacrifice either their personal or professional life? As the semester progressed I developed a more succinct research hypothesis: "Do serious romantic relationships affect the success and fulfillment of post-collegiate women under thirty?"

## Methodology:

My research focused on women in between twenty and thirty years old who have graduated with a four-year degree from a university in Michigan but have not completed a graduate degree. As I began my research, I very early on realized that I needed to define some parameters to both keep myself organized and my research participants concise, but to also inform the reader of the fundamentals of the participants and research itself.

Initially, I began with defining a “committed relationship” in terms of my research. The term itself is highly debated amongst friend groups and in the media, which in ways made it a bit more difficult but even more necessary to define.

The definition of “committed relationship” I have ultimately ended up with was left to be a bit more open ended than I had initially anticipated, but was meant to be intentionally inclusive of all potential participants. I wanted all participants to feel able to tell their story and did not want them to feel as though sexual orientation would be a limiting factor.

“Relationships” for the purposes of this paper have been defined as between any woman of any orientation and her partner, while “committed” is represented as being in a monogamous relationship for a minimum of three months but not requiring marriage.

In terms of methodology for collecting my data, I utilized a few different approaches. I began with an initial survey posted to my personal social media page to find interested participants. While I knew of a few people that fit into my key demographic and planned to include them in my research, I wanted to broaden my scope. By creating a brief survey of more generic questions related to my topic that would take individuals no more than five minutes to fill out, I was able to identify a few additional participants.

Towards the mid-point of my research, I created another more in-depth survey in order to do some comparison between my key demographic, and women who were outside of my research scope. This survey, again, was posted

to social media in a networking group and received a larger amount of responses than I had initially assumed.

To date, the survey received thirty-eight responses, of which thirty-eight percent were from people in my target audience, with the remaining sixty-two percent representing women older than thirty years old. This gave me an interesting perspective on generational commonalities that would have been thought-provoking to pursue had there been more time.

My next method was the one-on-one interviews. This method was most certainly the backbone of my research mainly due to the nature of my topic. Because my topic focused more on the private side of women's lives, it was much more difficult to utilize other methods. By doing one-on-one interviews I was able to create a safe, non-judgmental space to engage with participants and get some in-depth, and personal information.

Lastly, I attempted to utilize participant observations. This was the most difficult method I tried to use for collecting data. While attending job and internship fairs and networking events gave me a generalized perspective of women in professional settings, I feel as though the overall information obtained was limited as they did not seem to allow me or other participants of the event to engage naturally.

Maybe had there been more networking groups that engaged with one another face to face in the area or had there been more time to venture to other areas in Michigan, perhaps this method would have been more effective and

yielded more usable results. I plan to delve further into this problematic part of my data collection later in this paper.

Events attended throughout the course of the semester included the MSU Summer Job & Internship Fair, the MSU Natural Resources Student Job & Internship Fair, the Mason Business-to-Business Expo, and the Grand River Connection monthly networking event which changes locations each month—the meeting I attended was held at Zoobie’s Old Town Tavern.

I also tried to observe the posts of a networking group on social media to get an idea of what most of the female users were engaging with, however I ended this approach quite early on in my research as it did not seem to be effective and again, will expand upon this experience later in this ethnography.

### Findings:

When I first began to talk with women about if they felt like they ever had to sacrifice their personal or professional relationship in order to obtain one or the other, the automatic response of most was intriguingly “no”, which is not at all what I would have predicted, especially based upon the media depiction of working women and relationships. More than eighty percent of the responses to my first survey used to find interested participants indicated that they did not feel they had ever had to sacrifice in anyway.

However, as we would begin to schedule one-on-one interviews and get deeper into conversation and comfortability with one another, nearly all of the participants seemed to have an epiphany moment where they realized, “I guess I

did sacrifice something”, and began to change their tune. Most of these epiphany moments would then push the interview into an introspective moment for the participant, as they began to consider the choices they made and if this would be the same choice they would make had they not been in a committed relationship.

Regardless if through this introspective they felt that perhaps they had set themselves back professional, absolutely zero of my participants ever cited or hinted at any regret in being involved in their romantic relationship. If there was any regret felt, it was often blamed solely on not taking more professional risk or advancement opportunities as opposed to attributing their lack of professional satisfaction to their relationship.

The only time this seemed to not be the case was when children were involved in the relationship and was only noted by women surveyed who were not in my target demographic, so I made the choice to not pursue this information.

Some women I interviewed did mention that they worried that when it came time to have children they would have to pause professionally. Surprisingly to me, none of my participants said that the idea of children causing a professional set-back would make them reconsider having children, and all agreed that children held some place in their future. They said that they felt that it was there unignorably “motherly instinct” to at some point have children. When asked if perhaps their partner could be the one that sacrifices professionally and stays home with the children, most participants stated that it was not something they had thought about or considered.

As I progressed further into the semester and my research, two rather interesting commonalities in the data I was collecting began to form. A rather fascinating correlation between the women's personal and professional happiness/success emerged:

1. Women in my research pool whose collegiate education focused on the physical and social sciences appeared to have more drive professionally in contrast to their liberal arts counterparts;

2. All participants were aware of this culturally perpetuated stereotype that "women cannot have it all", but still in some way or another, felt obligated to conform or unable to escape it (meaning they felt they would have to sacrifice or "pause" professionally) once children were introduced into their personal life equation.

While I think it is presumptuous to make any sort of definitive conclusions based on my limited research, I think that these two common variables are worth denoting and exploring further. In total I spoke to three individuals with a degree in the physical or social sciences field, and five individuals with degrees in the liberal arts, though the length and depth of each interview did vary.

In our conversations, the three individuals with science related degrees seemed to have achieved happiness in both their personal and professional life and had made their professional goals a distinct priority. All three women were in their goal career and noted a relatively easy transition from college to the professional world.

In comparison, the women with degrees in the liberal arts, while having a happy personal life, seemed to have a more mixed response to professional happiness. Half are in careers related to their field of study—and only one of those women stated she had obtained her dream job.

The other three women were in careers unrelated to what they had gone to school for and initially anticipated their professional trajectory to be. One said she was happy in her current job even though it was outside of her desire field but did say she was looking to go back to graduate school to be able to get back into her desired profession. The other two stated that they were unfulfilled in their current roles, but that it monetarily fulfilled their needs—one participant said she is hoping to find a different career, but overall, professional success is less of a priority than personal happiness.

Had there been more time to continue my research, I would love to see if these two data points would hold true in a larger selection of women and/or across generations. From the limited data that I was able to gather through my second survey, I think that generation correlations are definitely a possibility, but again, was unable to pursue this hypothesis due to the time constraints of my research project.

In terms of my initial hypothesis for my current research, I think the data I gathered points to “women can have it all”—just getting there might be a lot harder than anticipated. I think it is safe to say that the media perpetuated stereotype that says women have to choose either career or personal life is most certainly outdated, particularly for the millennial crowd. Coupled women are not



necessarily being left out of this current feminist climate, they just might have to juggle more than their single counterparts. Which, to be frank, makes sense. A coupled woman most likely has more responsibilities and obligations than those who are single, just simply due to the fact that being in a successful commitment relationship takes effort.

It seems from my data that my initial presumptions that women were following the media led ideology of having to sacrifice their career for their love life is not the overwhelmingly majority for my target audience, but rather, seems to be the minority.

#### Significance:

I think perhaps the largest takeaway from my data in the simplest form is the fact that there is still such a significant, and inaccurate, stereotyping of modern women. While there seems to be a gradual growth of female empowerment, gender equality, and so on being reported in the media it is this “damsel in distress” “women cannot do it all” ideology that needs to be put to rest. Only then can women truly be empowered to conquer all of their goals.

As a child growing up in the 1990's, I remember there was a big push of trying to get girls into the sciences. That is was not just a subject for boys, and that girls were just as smart and innovate. I think perhaps a similar resurgence needs to become popular: you can be a boss and be a wife, you do not have to be one of the other.

From the interviews and surveys participants completed over the course of this semester, it is quite evident to me that women are not afraid to use their voice and express how they feel about the world whether that be positive or negative. These women that participated in my research are smart, compassionate, caring, hardworking individuals, so why can they not have it all?

The media, whether women like it or not, does hold a profound impact on our perception and often our self-worth. There needs to be a shift in focus: talking less on about what a woman wears, why she is not married, why she does not have kids. Instead let us ask her the meaningful questions: what are you passionate about, and what makes you feel happy and successful?

### Problems:

Easily one of the first problems I realized when deciding on this topic was having to be conscious of my own personal bias. While I ultimately went forward with this project because I could identify with the women in my research, it very easily could become a subject where my opinion could have run rampant. Bias is often an issue for anthropologists regardless of topic due to the fact that it is common human nature to want to compare experiences. It is however our duty to remember to draw conclusions about a culture based solely around the culture's own parameters, and to keep our own ideas and cultural privilege on the veranda.

The next problem for me was definitely time. As stated above, I am married. I'm also in my later twenties as compared to most college students and

have a full-time job. Time quickly became my enemy and was a limiting factor in the amount of data and research I was ultimately able to complete. It is one of my larger regrets that I was unable to spend more time with my topic and expand upon various aspects of it. While some of the time limit factor is solely because of the length of the class, my personal constraints increased this feeling. If I were able to spend more time on this project, and as I have stated throughout, delve deeper into my hypothesis, I think there is a large amount of data yet to be discovered.

Lastly, methodology presented its own sets of challenges. Arranging interviews became difficult due to my own busy schedule, and that of the women I interviewed. Some creative methods had to be utilized including conducting one interview over Skype.

Another would be the lack of participant observation opportunities. As I had noted in prior sections of this paper, the nature of my topic did not seem to lend itself to many participant observation activities. The events I did try to attend were very limited, and the amount of time I was able to spend gathering quality information about women in my target demographic even more scarce.

The networking event I intended was the most productive event of the ones I observed, but even so, it was an uncomfortable environment. Most of the women that attend the event either came with and talked mostly with people they already knew, or they came by themselves and did not stay long at the event. As noted previously, if there had been more time to find and attend other networking events in other cities, maybe it would have been more productive.

I tried to observe an online networking group on social media that is exclusively geared towards women to see what their conversations tended to pertain to. However, this quickly began to feel like it was not the best use of time as most of what the women posted about was in regard to personal matters as opposed to professional. The number of professional related inquiries was so scarce, that this method was quickly abandoned early on. However, it may have been a good counterpart to look at that perhaps professional networking is not as large of a priority for women, but it did not seem like a construct lead to follow for the purposes of my paper.

#### Conclusion:

I think unfortunately, women are constantly going to be the center of media scrutiny and stereotyping. Nevertheless, continuing to make positive strides and encouraging women to live their lives to the fullest needs to continue to be a growing trend. Women are more than a relationship. They are more than just their career.

I hope that through my research, sharing my work with my class, my professor, and having these conversations with my participants that this continues to be a thought in their minds, and women continue to strive to have it all and do not feel limited by unrealistic societal assumptions.

On a personal level, I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to be able to tackle a topic meaningful to me and go through the process of anthropological research and ethnographic writing. While this is a much more limited experience

than actual conducting field research, this has given me the chance to utilize the skills I have learned in this and other anthropology course and to begin to develop a voice of my own.

#### Appendix:

Attached to paper copy at your office:

- Interview Questions
- Survey Questions
- Survey Results

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