The "Superwoman" Phenomenon

Carolyn Elliott

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Recommended Citation
Elliott, Carolyn, "The 'Superwoman' Phenomenon" (1980). CUNY Academic Works.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/454

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limited number of single graduate students, within walking distance of campus. Rent for a one-bedroom apartment is $160-180 a month, with two bedrooms running about $15 more. There is usually a waiting list, with priority given to married, full-time graduate students. Information and applications can be obtained from the Rental Office, 3424 Tulane Drive, Hyattsville, MD 20783.

4. The Women's Culture Studies emphasis has just been instituted and therefore has not yet had any graduates. American Studies graduates, however, often find professional employment in government, politics, and museums as well as in the academy.

Women's Studies Program, Darwin College, University of Kent at Canterbury, Canterbury CT2 7NY, England—Mary Evans, Coordinator.

1. Beginning in October 1980, the Women's Studies Committee at the

The theory and Development of Feminism, and then choose two or three courses from among the following: Women, Crime, and the Legal System; Women in Islam; Women and the Labor Market; Equality and the Law; The Feminist Aesthetic; Biology and the Woman Question; The Philosophical Assumptions of Feminism; Women, the State, and Social Policy; The Intellectual Origins of Feminism. Students will be examined through essays written for courses, and they will also be required to write a dissertation. In addition to the formal courses offered as part of the M.A., there is an extensive program of seminars and other activities in Women's Studies at the university.

2. Applicants are expected to have earned a good B.A. degree in either the social sciences or the humanities from a British or overseas university.

3. The cost of tuition and all examination and library fees is B.P. 2,100 (approximately $4,500 —ed.).

4. We have had no students yet.

The “Superwoman” Phenomenon
By Carolyn Elliott

Ed. Note: The following article, originally a speech delivered to the Mary Elizabeth Garrett Symposium of the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, provides a glimpse into the research that is going on at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. We would welcome similar reports from other women’s studies research centers for an ongoing series in the Women’s Studies Newsletter.

In an effort to establish themselves professionally, while preserving their identities as women, many women today are trying to do everything: to become “superwomen.” Men are supporting women in this effort, not in the expectation that women will make men unnecessary, but in order to assure themselves that women can still be women while also being professionals. Two studies done at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women bear on the “superwoman” phenomenon. One is a study of how women manage child care and household tasks while they are employed—women, that is, without extra income to purchase services freely.1 The other is a study of how college-educated women weigh the costs and benefits of having a child either early or late in their career development.2

These studies show that when women take on new tasks, they don’t give up old responsibilities. This happens, in part, because the chores need to be done and it is difficult to find someone else to do them. Another reason is that women expect to have complicated lives with multiple commitments, as has been shown by research on the developmental patterns of adolescent girls. Women are socialized to assume responsibility and to maintain relationships. Finally, it appears that women continue their old responsibilities because they feel guilty. Thus, they may do such extra housework as putting new sheets on a bed every day, as was found in the case of one family with a newly-employed mother that the researchers studied. Working women may also become overly solicitous of their children. Time-budget studies show, for instance, that children are not asked to help more when their mother is employed than when the mother is at home (this may, of course, be because it takes time to get a child to help, as every mother knows). The result is often that everyone in the family does well except the mother: standards of housework don’t decline, community involvement changes but is still sustained—only the mother gets less sleep.

Let us turn more directly to the question of guilt. Careful listening to interviews with women talking about going back to work after the birth of a child suggests that they are feeling, in addition to guilt, a sense of loss. Mothers commonly feel that they are missing important moments of a child’s life when they are absent from home. This sense of loss cannot be assuaged by demonstrations that the children are doing well while the mother works, because the issue is not how the child feels but how the mother...
A third mode of coping with the burden of multiple responsibilities is sharing housework. We are hearing much more now about shared householding, particularly among young professional couples, but also among some older couples where the wife has returned to work and the husband is trying to help out at home. When families begin to make this adjustment, particularly when it represents a change from a previously more traditional pattern, we find the husband's helping may in fact increase the sense of burden on the woman rather than decrease it. In gratitude to their husbands, wives often give them all the "fun things" to do. They give their husbands the task of reading stories to the children or of entertaining them before dinner while the wife is cooking. In housework, wives tend to ask husbands to do the big jobs, which are the jobs that remain done for a long time. Wives, on the other hand, continue to do those more routine jobs which keep on getting undone. The result is that women's load of housework, while somewhat lightened, consists of somewhat less pleasant jobs than those of the "helping" husbands. Needless to say, husbands who do housework of any sort receive little support from their peers and are often under severe career pressures.

A third mode of coping with multiple burdens is to postpone childbearing. This is a common phenomenon now among professional women who wait until they have completed their education or secured their first job. It is a strategy I have recommended to many college women and still do. But our studies again show a possible hidden cost. Postponing parenting may also be a way of postponing accommodation to the multiple demands of adult life. Women entering professional schools are usually high achievers who expect something close to perfection for themselves. By postponing parenting, young women allow themselves to think that they can have perfect careers with A's in medical school and then, somehow, having gotten that all squared away properly, they can simply proceed to add on a second career of managing a beautiful family. This new myth of the omnipotent woman may replace the old one of the supermom. Like the old image of the supermom, however, this myth will lead to unrealistic expectations and inevitable disappointments.

Neither the society in which we live nor our particular work settings have been helpful to women professionals trying to solve these problems. The popular media are now enamored of the idea that women can do anything. We read daily of women who have not only high-level careers, but four beautiful children, and who, in addition, cook elegant dinners for their successful husbands. The media have been particularly assiduous in reassuring us that professional women are still feminine and motherly.

Aside from the definition of "femininity," there is also the definition of "professionalism" to consider. In medicine, for example, the burden for women is accentuated by the concept of a "normal" medical career. Whereas in management, men question women's loyalty to the firm, in medicine questions focus on women's "seriousness," as measured by hard work and willingness to follow a standard medical career. Thus, much effort has gone into studying whether women finish medical school in four years, and whether women physicians work full time, with full-time work used as a measure of productivity.

We might question whether completing a professional degree in four years is critical—assuming that places do not go vacant and education is completed within a reasonable length of time. Undergraduate education has already loosened its constraints on time for completion of degrees, and I wonder whether medical education might not follow suit. Furthermore, one might question whether working part time for a very few years seriously reduces an individual's productivity, if measured in relation to a lifetime of medical practice. I suspect that, as we learn more about male careers, we will find that, in many fields, men also take time out. Their reasons and timing may be different from those of women: often men want to reassess their careers or gain additional skills. Studies of adult development are suggesting that actual careers are much more varied than the norms we describe to students. It is time for us to be more realistic about the expectations we make not only of women medical students, but of other women interested in a variety of professions who, at the same time, do not want to give up family life.

Carolyn Elliott, Director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women for the past five years, has recently joined The Ford Foundation in India as Program Officer.

NOTES


2. Pamela Daniels and Kathy Weingarten, "Family Timing Patterns," a study of 72 couples representing three generations, half of whom had their first child when the wife was under 22 and the other half when she was over 28. Initial results are reported in Daniels and Weingarten, "Late First-Time Parenthood: Two Sides of the Coin," working paper available at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women.