

SOCIOLOGY

It's Constraints, Not Choices

Phyllis Moen

When I directed the Sociology Program at the National Science Foundation in the late 1980s, the (then) director, Erich Bloch, requested a report from me about women in science. Bloch, an engineer, was interested in gaining an understanding of the gender gap. Why were there so few women in the top echelons of the sciences? In engineering? What were the trends and prospects for the future? Why weren't women scientists and engineers receiving more grants from the NSF?

I did a quick review of the literature, called experts in the field and at NSF, and prepared a brief report. The gist of my conclusions included the requisite discussion of "leaky pipelines," starting wide and narrowing with each turn. Evidence shows a steady decline in girls and women at every stage: a shift away from science-related interests in grade school; avoidance of preparatory high school courses; rejection or abandonment of college majors, graduate programs, and postdoctoral fellowships in science and engineering; not obtaining or remaining in tenure-track professorships. The explanations offered by the experts made sense: a hostile, or at best unfriendly, cultural climate; little encouragement; too few role models; relations based on gender stereotypes as well as overt and subtle discrimination; and, a thread interwoven throughout, choices made in the face of (current or anticipated future) work and family strains and conflicts.

Pamela Stone, a professor of sociology at the City University of New York, addresses this topic on a wider canvas, looking not just at women scientists and engineers but also at professional women in a variety of fields who have left their jobs. We have all read or heard media reports on the "opt out" revolution. Stone seeks to promote understanding of it by going deep rather than wide, choosing in-depth interviewing over survey methods to better capture the layers of complexity and contradictions behind simple



explanations. Her sample consists of 54 high achievers, a range of lawyers, physicians, professors, and engineers from across the United States who are married, mothers, and have left their career jobs. They are women who already traveled far through their respective occupational pipelines: women who "made it" in their professions and who had strong prospects for rising still further up status ladders. Why did they choose to leave their jobs? The book's title, *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home*, presages Stone's doubts about this so-called trend in women returning en masse to hearth and home.

Social scientists have documented the work and family pressures women experience, as well as the costs to women's careers of scaling back or leaving the workforce. But until now no one has systematically investigated the actual dropouts. Thus all the analyses of the stress experienced by employed women (including my own) tend to underestimate the presence, depth, and consequences of such chronic strains.

Stone's decision to study professionals makes sense. This is the group best equipped to manage conflicts and strains at work and at

home by, for example, hiring an au pair or housekeeper. When married to other successful professionals, they are often able to afford to exit the workforce. And they are the segment of the female population most apt to spearhead change in the broader society, one reason for ongoing media fascination with the opting-out phenomenon.

Stone shows that these highly educated women are also knowledgeable about the latest evidence on child development. They believe they can best facilitate their children's optimal development, but not when they themselves are in a constant time bind. She chronicles as well their professional abilities and dedication to their jobs. One of them, a publicist, talks about 100% women: "I give 100 percent. I was very, very good at what I did. But I can't give it both places, and I wanted to be really, really good at being a mother."

Often there is a precipitating event that brings on such insights: another pregnancy, a husband's career shift that requires relocation, a sick child, an automobile accident, a new (nonsupportive) boss, an increased need to travel on the job. For other women, exits are preceded by the slow, steady toll of too much to do, too little sleep, and too often careening from one deadline, meeting, or pediatrician appointment to the next. Their stories do not reflect a shift in values; opting out is not about their desire to return to the Ozzie and Harriet family of the 1950s. Stone lets the women speak for themselves, providing a deft analysis of the impossibilities they face.

It is often remarked that economists explain how people make choices, whereas sociologists explain why people have few choices to make. Ever the sociologist, Stone talks about the "illusion of choice" that is perpetuated in the very phrase "opting out," as well as by the women themselves, who tend to view their dilemma as reflecting private troubles, not public issues. By contrast, Stone faults the taken-for-granted work policies that are based on a career mystique of continuous, full-time (or more) work as the only path to security and success. Given the way jobs and career paths are structured, it is difficult if not impossible for women (or men) to manage effectively as professionals, as part of a dual-earning couple, and as parents without burning out. Stone concludes that the women she studied did not opt out, but were

Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home

by Pamela Stone

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effectively pushed out—given the absence of options permitting jobs that can be configured and reconfigured (in terms of assignments, expectations, and hours) in ways compatible with raising a family.

Back to the future: What we found in terms of the gender gap in NSF grant awards in the late 1980s was, in fact, an application gap. NSF funded women scientists' research in the same proportion as men's, of those who applied for research funding. The crux was that far fewer women than men submitted proposals.

Since then, I have continued talking with women at professional meetings. Many have in fact submitted a proposal for NSF or other federal research support, often early in their careers. But when it was not funded, many of them gave up. Most scholars who do receive grants have also had unsuccessful proposals. But they applied again (and again) with honed, even more scientifically sound and more compelling proposals, until they were successful. Did the women who gave up do so by "choice" because structural forces provide neither the encouragement nor the resources required to do the hard work of reworking, revising, and persevering in submitting applications? Proposal writing may have been buried in the myriad of tasks for professors trying to manage and integrate their own careers with their obligations as mentors, models, spouses, parents, and children of aging parents.

Nearly 20 years later, little has changed in professional career expectations and trajectories. For example, people can opt out of demanding jobs, but they cannot opt back in. Nor can most scale back on job demands or work fewer hours, unless they are close to retirement (and even then not always). Reading Stone's book, I recalled a senior government official who in the mid-1980s said to me, "Women simply have to choose. Do they want careers or families?" It is not by accident that women who have achieved prominence in their field are disproportionately never married or divorced (or else married to a man who has dialed down his own career). They are also more likely to be childfree, have only one child, or have started their families later in life.

Women are not the only ones wanting career flexibility. Aging baby-boomers are looking for ways to keep working, drop out for a brief time, or shift their focus. Most older employees don't want to continue putting in the long hours so often required in their professions. Yet they, like Stone's sample of mothers, often have only two options: continue as is or leave the workforce.

Science and engineering, the professions,

businesses, and governments all thrive on innovation. They are improved when people are willing to take a different perspective, challenge conventional wisdom, and respond to what no longer works by trying something new. Stone's account in *Opting Out?* highlights the need for employees to be able to customize their career paths. Which universities, centers, corporations, and agencies will develop increased work-time flexibilities and creative possibilities that offer employees meaningful engagement at every stage of their lives? Meeting that challenge will benefit families, businesses, and societies alike.

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BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE

The In-Group Rules

Ben W. Heineman Jr.

In *Bending the Rules*, Robert Hinde addresses the controversial and timely subject of how the behavioral sciences apply to the study of morality. In contrast to moral philosophers who focus "on how people ought to behave," he concentrates on "how they *think* they should behave and how they *actually* behave."

For Hinde, an emeritus research professor at Cambridge University with expertise in ethology, primatology, and developmental psychology, moral codes are "essentially social matters; precepts are meaningless unless accepted by the group to which one belongs." The propensity of people to divide their world into "in-groups and out-groups," he argues, leads to "moral" behavior within the group but a bending of that code (hence the title) when dealing with the "other." Morality is a product of biological and cultural evolution: the interplay—in specific settings, societies, and historical moments—between

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the two opposing human potentials of selfish assertiveness (to win inevitable human competition) and "prosociality" (to facilitate group cohesion, in part to win competition against other groups).

As a behavioral scientist, Hinde concludes that what is seen as right may differ with the situation. Thus, there is no single moral answer, and "there are no general objective tests for morality except that most actions, to be moral, must be conducive to group harmony." As chair of the British Pugwash Group (which is dedicated to the social responsibility of scientists), Hinde does not, however, wish to be a "relativist," without his own moral perspective. And neither would have Sir Joseph Rotblat, a Pugwash founder and 1995 Nobel Peace Prize winner (who was to be a coauthor but died in 2005).

Beyond answering descriptive questions about how individuals acquire a moral outlook, Hinde attempts in three ways to introduce his normative views. First, he submits that using scientific methods (from biology, ethology, psychology, sociology, and anthropology) can help us understand the "other" in different groups and cultures and that under-



Wartime goodwill. Frederice Villiers's imaginative depiction of the spontaneous beginning of the 1914 Christmas Truce, when German and English troops on the Western Front observed an unofficial temporary cessation of hostilities.

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