

SESSION 12: Opting Out

Readings to complete before class:

- (1) Belkin, Lisa. “The Opt-Out Revolution.” *New York Times* (October 26, 2003).
- (2) Wallis, Cynthia. “The Case for Staying at Home: Why More Young Moms Are Opting Out of the Rat Race.” *TIME* (March 22, 1994).
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,993641,00.html>
- (3) Boufis, Christina. “Strange Bedfellows: Does Academic Life Lead to Divorce?” *Salon* (March 24, 1999). <http://www.salon.com/it/feature/1999/03/24feature.html>
- (4) Hilborn, Robert C., Ruth H. Howes, Barbara L. Whitten, Suzanne R. Foster, and Margaret L. Duncombe. “What Works for Women in Undergrad Physics?” *Physics Today* 56, no. 9 (September 2003): 46. <http://www.aip.org/pt/vol-56/iss-9/p46.html>

Discussion notes:

(1) Belkin, “The Opt-Out Revolution” & (2) Wallis, “The Case for Staying at Home”

- How wide-spread are these phenomena?
- Profiles mainly of white, upper-middle-class, highly educated women.
- An important cultural clue for other groups, though.
- Work isn’t about “self-fulfillment” for everyone – most working women don’t have the choice to stay home with their kids because their families need the income.
- Sad for men that they don’t often feel they have the same “opt out” choices as women.
- Why is the media so enchanted with this issue?
- Do these articles confirm traditional ideas/fears? Progressive? Feminist?
- How realistic is the “detour” career option? (Education, good start to career, pause for a few years for little kids, resume at same level when kids are in school.) Not much data yet...

(3) Boufis, “Does Academic Life Lead to Divorce?”

- Anecdotes of many MIT female professors single or divorced, with no or few children, fertility problems post-tenure.

- Efforts by MIT and other institutions to alleviate tenure pressure on new mothers (and sometimes new fathers), especially to make tenure extensions automatic and not require a request (which may depend on the whims of an advisor or a woman’s worry over looking “weak” or “not dedicated”).
- Frenetic tenure questing bad for men too, not just women, of course!
- Different biological clock for men and women. Tenure track years = women’s fertile years.

(4) Robert, et al, “What Works for Women in Undergrad Physics?”

- Physics problems not just for girls: low retention of female students (and faculty as they advance forward) indicates problems for *everyone*.
- Lack of mentoring: a vicious cycle.
- Leaky pipeline: conflicting reports.
- Astronomy generally much better than physics on gender ratio. Possible explanation: astronomy much more of a solitary pursuit, without downsides of heavily-male group lab environments.

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