

*Papers of the  
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Future autobiographies:  
expectations of marriage, children, and careers

*by Nancy E. Williamson  
Sandra L. Putnam  
H. Regina Wurthmann*

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## CONTENTS

Preface	v
Abstract	1
Research questions	1
Method	2
Overview of essays	3
Sample	4
Results	5
Discussion of methodology	20
Summary	23
Appendix	26
References	27

*Table 1* Percentage distribution of mother's occupation, father's occupation, and anticipated occupation of respondent, by sex 5



## PREFACE

The authors want to acknowledge the assistance of Raymond L. Goldsteen, Karen Goldsteen, and Nancy Yedlin in the data collection, coding, and analysis. We also appreciated the use of the material on sex roles at the Worcester State Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts. Finally, we appreciated being able to finish the project at the East-West Population Institute and thank Monica S. Fong, Sandra E. Ward, and James T. Fawcett for their helpful suggestions.



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*ABSTRACT* In a study conducted at Brown University in 1974, we examined the extent of sex differences in expected futures of undergraduates. The students wrote "future autobiographies" in which they described their lives from high school graduation to age 80. The autobiographies revealed sharp sex differences in the following areas: Few men (but most women) described being highly involved in childrearing although most men and women wanted to have children. Few women (but most men) anticipated working in order to support a family although most men and women expected to have highly demanding careers and to work full time for most of their adult lives. And finally, many men (but few women) wanted traditional marriages. Women described egalitarian marriages, for the most part. We compared our findings with a study using the same essay approach with girls aged 14 and 15 in London in 1968.

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#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research began with these questions: How free of sex role stereotypes are U.S. university students, especially in their expectations about the future? Are there striking sex differences in expected futures for men and women in college today? More specifically, are the men anticipating being primary breadwinners with few childrearing responsibilities? Are the women expecting interrupted careers, primary responsibility for the children, and traditionally feminine careers? Do both anticipate marriage? How many children do they want and in what sex combination? What activities do they anticipate for middle age and old age? Do the women expect to be widows—a good statistical probability these days when women marry slightly older men and when men have an average life expectancy seven years less than women? Are students generally optimistic about their futures—an interesting question in a period of high unemployment, inflation, and shortages?

In order to answer these and other questions, we asked students in two undergraduate classes at Brown University (one on sex roles and the other on the family) to write "future autobiographies." The students were asked to imagine that today was their 80th birthday. They were to describe their lives since high school. After writing the essays, they filled out background questionnaires on themselves and their families of origin.

There are several reasons why one might expect current college students to be unconstrained by traditional sex role expectations. First, current college students have lived half of their lives since Betty Friedan first publicized the hazards of the "feminine mystique" (1963) and are quite familiar with the current controversy over sex roles. Moreover, college students, being young, are not yet entangled in family responsibilities. This may allow them more freedom to think of alternative futures than would be the case for older adults. Third, the particular sample used for this study could be expected to be particularly liberated from traditional sex roles, being from middleclass or upper-middleclass families as opposed to workingclass or low-income families (Hacker, 1975). Finally, the sampled students were enrolled in at least one of two sociology courses, *Changing Sex Roles in America* and *The Family*, and were thus probably more liberal in their attitudes toward sex roles than the average student at the university. All these factors might lead one to expect that the sample would not show sharp sex differences in their "futures." As will be shown, the results contradicted these predictions.

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the nature and degree of sex differences in the expected futures of a sample of U.S. university students and to make comparisons with a British study using a similar approach. The second purpose is methodological: to investigate whether useful information can be obtained by having respondents write such hypothetical essays in combination with background questionnaires. This approach has rarely been taken by sociologists studying sex roles. The more typical approach is to collect information by means of a structured interview or through open-ended interviews combined with psychological tests (for example, Komarovsky, 1962 and 1973). At the end of this paper, we will discuss the methodology in greater detail.

## METHOD

These essays were written in the fall of 1973 and spring of 1974 and took about an hour to complete. All students attending the first day of classes wrote the essays and filled out background questionnaires afterward. The essays were written before the course syllabus or content had been presented.

A few essays (10 percent of the total) did not deal with the assignment or were excessively vague and were discarded from the analysis. This left 166 usable essays. An example of an uncodable essay appears as an appendix at the end of this paper. The students whose essays

were excluded did not differ from the other students in background (sex, income, or education of parents), so that we believe the exclusion of these 19 essays did not seriously bias the sample. Fortunately for this analysis, most students were quite specific about their future plans, as this excerpt indicates:

... Some years later we [my husband and I] had two children (in close succession), a boy and a girl and then adopted a third child when the younger of our own two was five years old. I stayed out of full-time work till all the children were nine though I went to work part time when the youngest reached the age of five. . . ." (female)

The students in our sample were predominantly middleclass or upper-middleclass. Forty-six percent came from families with incomes greater than \$20,000 per year. Almost all were Caucasian and most had grown up in the suburbs of New England or the Mid Atlantic states. About half (54 percent) of the sample were males.

Our study is a replication of one done in England in 1968 by Richard Lansdown, a child psychologist. In Lansdown's study, girls aged 14 and 15, who attended a London grammar school, wrote similar essays. A description of the British study appears in *Patriarchal Attitudes* by Eva Figs (1970). The London girls were from less prosperous families than the Brown University sample. As we report our results, we will compare the two studies.

The analysis will focus on students' anticipation of marriage, anticipation of children, anticipation of future education and future occupations, expectations of becoming "superpersons" (i.e., persons who have very ambitious careers and intense marriages, and who take an active role in childrearing), general orientation toward middle age and old age, and general life satisfaction.

#### OVERVIEW OF ESSAYS

In tone, the Brown students' essays were optimistic. This is not surprising, since it is unlikely that the authors would wish bad luck on themselves. Few obstacles stood in the way of their expected futures. Most of the students mentioned going on for further education after completing four enjoyable years at Brown. After graduate school came a good job or a successful small business and marriage with a highly suitable person. Several children followed, with the wife having primary responsibility for the children, usually while she pursued an ambitious career of her own. The children turned out very well. There were no retarded, unattractive, or unwanted children. The essays provided little detail about middle age or old age. Generally, they por-

trayed life as happy and fulfilled. Sometimes students mentioned hobbies like raising horses or participating in the community symphony, but usually their concerns were with their careers (first), the children (second), and their marriages (third). They gave little attention to the rest of the world and still less to possible problems they might encounter during their lives.

In contrast, the London girls described life as peaking around the time of engagement, the marriage ceremony, and the honeymoon and then becoming a routine of housekeeping and childrearing. They reported shorter work histories, usually less than ten years, in comparison with the long work histories of the Brown women. The most ambitious careers mentioned in the British study were those of actress or elementary school teacher, whereas three-quarters of the Brown women mentioned more ambitious professional or managerial careers. Compared with the London study, the Brown essays included more adventures such as travel. These differences probably reflect social class differences between the two samples, perhaps age differences, and cultural differences. The American Dream of upward mobility, of doing anything you want to do and being anyone you want to be, is reflected in the Brown essays more than in the British ones. The two sets of essays were similar in their slighting of middle age and old age, however. Young people in neither sample could visualize themselves as middle aged or elderly.

#### SAMPLE

The 166 usable essays and questionnaires were contributed by approximately equal numbers of students in the four years of college. On the average, the Brown women were from wealthier families and from better-educated parents than the men. Fifty-one percent of the women came from families with annual incomes over \$20,000 compared with 42 percent of the men. Seventy-one percent of the women reported their fathers had gone to college, compared with 66 percent of the men. Lower percentages of the mothers had gone to college—68 percent of the mothers of women in the sample and 51 percent of the mothers of men. Thirty-six percent of the women and 22 percent of the men reported their fathers had had postgraduate education.

Many of the students' fathers were professionals or managers: 40 percent of the women's fathers and 32 percent of the men's. Thirty-nine percent of the women and 31 percent of the men reported that their mothers had been housewives while the students were growing up. The distribution of parents' occupations compared with those

TABLE 1 Percentage distribution of mother's occupation, father's occupation, and anticipated occupation of respondent, by sex

Type of occupation	Mother's occupation		Father's occupation		Respondent's anticipated occupation	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Professional or technical	30	27	21	26	48	27
Administrative or managerial	4	1	22	22	5	19
Doctor or lawyer	0	0	19	6	22	25
Housewife	39	31	0	0	3	0
Sales or clerical	16	20	10	16	4	2
Blue collar or service	8	12	19	24	1	3
Not codable	4	8	8	7	17	24
Total	101	99	99	101	100	100
Number	77	89	77	89	77	89

NOTE: Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

aspired to by the students appears in Table 1. Finally, most of the students came from intact families. Only 12 percent, with no difference by sex, came from families in which the parents had separated or divorced while the students were growing up.

In short, the main background differences between the sexes were that women tended to come from families with higher education and income. Thus, to be sure of reporting on sex differences rather than social class differences, in our analysis we have controlled roughly for socioeconomic status, using family income (under \$20,000 versus over \$20,000).

## RESULTS

We analyzed the essays for content, noting whether certain topics were mentioned. For example, we had wondered whether women would be more likely to mention love in their essays. Indeed, 39 percent of the women's essays mentioned love whereas only 26 percent of the men's essays did so. On the other hand, men were more likely to remark on the physical appearance of their dating or marriage partners. Of the

ten essays mentioning physical appearance of a partner, nine were written by men.

### **Anticipation of marriage**

Concerning the expectation of getting married, we found no sex difference. Eighty-eight percent of both women and men mentioned marriage. Excerpts from two deviant essays by students not planning marriage follow. We cite these two essays in lieu of a statistical analysis since there were too few essays of students who expected to remain single.

I suppose I am still romantically looking for the "perfect lover," but I am not looking for a house to decorate and children to take care of. I don't see where I'll ever have time for it. And I have fears for the entire institution of marriage—I fear it warps people, women especially. It locks them in no matter how hard they try to stay out of the roles. Pushes them into places where they should not be. I'd rather just avoid it. (female)

Sometimes I'd wish that I was married, and start thinking seriously about the possibility, but I was too comfortable, too set in my ways by that time to change my life that much. A little selfish, maybe. I had enough responsibility now with my job. . . . (male)

Of those anticipating marriage, it was possible to determine the expected age at marriage for most respondents (78 percent). Most women expected to marry in their mid-twenties, whereas most men expected to marry either in their early twenties or in their late twenties. These ages were considerably higher than for the British girls, the great majority of whom saw themselves married by age 21; but the Brown students were already older when they wrote their essays. The Brown students intended to marry later than the national median ages of 20.8 for women and 23.3 for men (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1973).

### **Quality of future marriages**

We were also interested in analyzing the quality of marriages anticipated. For more than a third of the essays (32 percent of women and 41 percent of men), it was impossible to code this. But when the students did make some evaluation, women were much more likely than men to give qualified evaluations (30 percent for women, 13 percent for men) or negative evaluations (17 percent for women, 2 percent for men) of the happiness of their hypothetical marriages. Eighty-five

percent of the men (but 53 percent of the women) expected their marriages to be perfectly happy, it may be inferred from their essays. Eighty-eight percent of the men from lower-income families (under \$20,000) and 83 percent of men from higher-income families (over \$20,000) whose essays provided the information expected happy marriages. Thus it is unlikely that the sex difference here is due simply to the lower-income backgrounds of the men. The following excerpt illustrates the extreme optimism about marriage that was more characteristic of men's than of women's essays:

I found a mate I truly loved and by her efforts, I became a full man. I gave my life to her and she to me. I suppose I am as happy as a mortal could possibly be. . . . I suppose my life became complete when I met my mate. Nothing meant any value except her. I breathed to be near her; without her, I was lost and helpless. "I gave my life to her; and she to me." What more could I ask? (male)

In contrast, the following excerpt was more typical of the women in the sample:

My only life—never again—and I feel I misused it. My lover and I married, much to our own surprise and dismay. Neither of us wanted children—all I desired was an Irish setter. But I felt as if I would be cheating myself, my one life, if I did not experience parenthood. Oh, Dr. Spock!

Yes and on and on. We had one son and one Irish setter, both of which were housetrained. My husband had a lucrative practice which made him happy—but I felt certain I had missed something very crucial. . . . (female)

In addition to the quality of the marriages anticipated, we also looked at the durations expected. Eighty-one percent of the men's essays assumed that the marriage would remain intact until age 80, compared with 76 percent of the women's essays. These figures excluded both divorce and widowhood; in fact, students rarely mentioned the possibility of divorce. In short, most of the students contemplating marriage looked forward to more than 50 years of marriage with the same person. Unless the current mortality rates of men drastically decline and these students experience no higher rates of divorce than their parents, their marital realities will probably be quite different from what they anticipate.

### **Types of marriage**

We were also interested in the expected division of labor within these marriages. The marriages were classified into three categories:

1. **Egalitarian.** Both spouses have equally important occupations and share household work and childrearing (or do not have children).
2. **Neotraditional.** The wife may have a career or job but the husband's job is more important to the family's support. The wife's work (but not the husband's) may be interrupted for childrearing if the couple deems this desirable. Furthermore, although there is some sharing of household work and childrearing, the wife is more responsible for these activities.
3. **Traditional.** The husband is the breadwinner and the wife is the housekeeper and childrearer.

Examples of each type of marriage follow.

### *Egalitarian*

My husband achieved the same success in his field as I did in mine and we remained equals, the key I think. We traveled, had a child (now a writer in New York) and continued to work until ten years ago. (female)

My wife's career has matched mine in the box office and in the press. But we've always found time for each other—and still love one another. (male; no children mentioned in essay)

### *Neotraditional*

Soon after, I got married and began my life in the mold that had been left for me to fit: that of housewife and mother. I still worked but somehow it didn't have so much meaning and I didn't get as much enjoyment, because I could no longer devote myself entirely to my work. (female)

I got married at the age of 26 and my wife worked as a teacher until we had our first child three years later. She enjoyed teaching but was not at all sad to give it up after six years and try something new. . . . I felt that parents should share the responsibilities as much as possible. I have to admit that the kids did see more of their mother than I because I was at work during the day. (male)

### *Traditional*

Within three years after finishing med school I was making about \$50,000 a year so Pam and I decided that she should retire so we could have a family. (male)

Speaking in terms of events, I can look back upon being totally absorbed with several people and finally marrying. Then my life style

and the life style of my lover became compatible with withdrawing somewhat from the world and raising children. There were your children. I knew it would happen. That I would turn into a mother most of all. Working in public relations was fun but not significant enough for me to continue with while raising children. I suppose I was happy during this time mostly because my husband made me feel that raising children was important. Staying home actually was compatible with my personality—being shy—and I think I did the right thing. My husband didn't die until after the children were grown up with careers or families of their own. I never worked again, being well-provided for, and have fared well as a wise old grandmother. Not great at all, but almost always peaceful and content. (female)

For some essays, there was too little information to classify the type of marriage, yet even here a sex difference was evident. Only 13 percent of the women's essays provided too little information compared with 55 percent of the men's essays. From reading the essays, it was clear that most of the women were thinking about how to juggle careers, marriage, and children and what kinds of marriages would be most satisfying. Men did not seem similarly concerned.

Turning to the results for those expecting to marry and those whose essays provided information about the type of marriage envisioned, 17 percent of the women and 60 percent of the men anticipated traditional marriages—certainly a large sex difference. Sixty-two percent of the men from lower-income families wanted traditional marriages as did 58 percent of the men from higher-income families. This difference between men and women thus cannot be explained by the different income backgrounds of the men. Nor for women was there an effect of income on the type of marriage expected.

The rest of the women were equally divided into the "egalitarian" (42 percent) and the "neotraditional" (41 percent) categories, as were the remaining men (20 percent versus 20 percent). For the egalitarian and neotraditional marriage types, there was an income effect for men. Men from lower-income families were more likely to prefer the neotraditional marriages (24 percent versus 8 percent) whereas men from higher-income families were more likely to prefer the egalitarian marriage (33 percent versus 14 percent). Thus we do not have a pure sex effect here. If more men from wealthier families had been included in the sample, we would probably have found more support for the egalitarian marriage.

That males generally prefer more traditional marriages than females has been found by several researchers. Russo and Stadter (1971:11) wrote of a 'cultural lag' with regard to egalitarianism among male stu-

dents in the United States, especially white males. Steinmann and Fox (1966) reported that half of the 423 American men they sampled agreed that marriage and children should take precedence over careers for women, one-third disagreed, and the rest were uncertain. The disparity for many male college students between the ideal modern female role (i.e., an egalitarian relationship with an emphasis on companionship and freedom of the woman to develop her capabilities) and the actual role these men envision for their wives has been frequently observed (King et al., 1968; Komarovskiy, 1973).

When the men and women in the Brown study were describing marriage, they seemed to be thinking about different institutions. Jessie Bernard, in her book *The Future of Marriage* (1973), spoke of "his" and "her" marriages being quite different. This insight seems to apply to our results as well even though in our case we have analyzed expected rather than actual marriages.

### **Anticipation of children**

Over three-fourths of the students (77 percent) mentioned having children, with no differences by sex. No one mentioned having children outside of marriage, however. Of those expecting children, three-quarters (76 percent) mentioned the number of children desired. The average number of children desired was 2.6 for women and 2.8 for men. Although little sex difference was found in the average numbers of children anticipated, women were slightly more likely to mention adoption (10 percent versus 2 percent) or having a single child (15 percent versus 4 percent).

We also looked at evidence of sex preferences for children. Half of those who mentioned having children (51 percent) also specified their children's sexes. Of those, 46 percent preferred an equal number of boys and girls, 37 percent preferred a predominance of boys, and 17 percent preferred a predominance of girls. Of those preferring a predominance of males, 62 percent were men, compared with their proportion of the sample (53 percent). Of those preferring a predominance of girls, 54 percent were women, compared with their 47 percent of the sample. Thus, men were more likely to want an equal number of boys and girls or a predominance of boys, whereas women were more likely to have no preference or to want a predominance of girls.

The preference was for one of each sex if an even number of children was specified but generally for more boys if an odd number was desired. This finding, though based on a very small sample, is supported

by several larger studies (Dinitz et al., 1954; Markle, 1974; and West-off and Rindfuss, 1974).

Toward the end of their essays, women and men were equally likely (38 percent versus 40 percent) to mention having grandchildren. Less emphasis was put on grandchildren by the Brown students, however, than by the British girls for whom “. . . the marriage of children and the arrival of grandchildren seemed the only reality in later years. . . ” (Figes, 1970:169).

In addition to noting whether respondents wanted children, we also investigated plans for caring for children. Although women anticipated making arrangements for child care, men tended to think of their contribution as supporting children financially:

Before I knew it . . . I was a middle-aged content surgeon, busily supporting my sons in graduate school. My daughters were happily married. (male)

Only rarely did a male essay reflect some fear of the responsibilities involved in this provider role, as the following excerpts illustrate:

I got married to Susan, but that didn't settle me down, it simply added to my frustration and worry because I was responsible to more than one person for the first time in my life. (male)

I spent the next twenty years of my life providing for the family and before I knew it I was too old to do much any more. (male)

None of the men mentioned taking time off to raise their children or even being inconvenienced by children. On the whole, the men seemed to acquire children in their essays as one might acquire a sailboat, for enjoyment and as part of one's lifestyle. For women, children were part of a juggling act.

### **Further education and future occupations**

As far as expectations of further education are concerned, girls in the London study seldom mentioned postgraduate education or ambitious careers. In fact, few of them expected to go to college. In contrast, more than half (58 percent) of the Brown students spontaneously mentioned continuing their education after graduating from Brown. More women (62 percent) than men (54 percent) planned to do graduate study. For men (but not women) we found an income effect here; fewer of the lower-income men than of the higher-income men mentioned higher education. Thus if more higher-income men had been in-

cluded in the sample, the sex difference in expected future education would probably have disappeared. We had expected fewer women than men to mention further education, given the national pattern of female underrepresentation in graduate and professional schools. Both men and women were more likely to specify professional schools than graduate schools, as might be expected given the job market.

In analyzing future occupations, earning power, and attitudes toward work among the Brown sample, we found that one of the strongest sex differences was in whether the respondent mentioned earning or saving money to support a family. For those anticipating marriage, 34 percent of the men but only 3 percent of the women mentioned this concern. Men from lower-income families were more likely to mention it (36 percent) than men from higher-income families (24 percent), but both groups mentioned it more frequently than the women (3 percent). Furthermore, men occasionally mentioned saving money so that they could marry in the first place; women did not worry about this.

Rose (1951) and others have found a similar emphasis on the part of college males on becoming financially or occupationally established before marrying. Here are examples of the male students' ideas on the subject:

In 1978, I decided to marry my high school sweetheart (we couldn't get married before because we couldn't afford to). (male)

After saving enough money to support us, I married my high school sweetheart. Financially we were in good shape, living in a small apartment as newlyweds. We often discussed children, but both agreed another person would be a little too much on our budget so we put it off for another year. (male)

Women saw work more as a route to self-fulfillment, as a way of being useful, or as an outgrowth of their interests rather than as a means of supporting a family. In short, many women saw themselves as professionals married to reliable breadwinners.

Men were more likely (45 percent) than women (12 percent) to mention having a lucrative occupation. Because higher-income men were more likely to mention high-paying careers than lower-income men (54 percent versus 38 percent), we can assume the sex difference would have been even greater if more higher-income men had been included in the sample. Examples of this concern over income follow.

There was where I made my fortune. Several brilliant deals in real estate got me started. By age 35 I was a very wealthy man. (male)

Because business continued to do so well as it always does with hard work, I was able to afford a fine house and good living for my family. (male)

Money was slowly working its way into the number one position in my life. . . . Wheeling and dealing in any way I could, began to take precedence. Thus my serious athletic career had ended and my business career had begun. (male)

And finally, in a half-serious essay:

My yearly salary shot up to \$75,000 per year—enough to satisfy anyone's needs. The family moved to Beverly Hills, California. The new house consisted of split levels surrounded by two tennis courts, a swimming pool and a nine-hole golf course. We had two Cadillacs and three golf carts. (male)

One of the few women who mentioned pursuing a career that would make her rich, wrote of opening a private art school:

. . . the money came in after the school became well-established, enabling me to give all sorts of scholarships and increase my own wealth. (female)

Even this excerpt differs from the others above in several respects. The woman has chosen a social service field, wants the money for scholarships (rather than tennis courts), and does not specify the amount of money earned. Furthermore, starting a small art school is not a safe bet for becoming wealthy.

As evidenced by the essays, there may still be a taboo against women's expressing the desire to make a lot of money. Perhaps it is significant that the woman writing the above excerpt was black. Epstein (1973) has suggested that black professional women avoid some of the restraints of white sex role stereotypes. In future studies, we plan to increase the numbers of students from racial and religious minorities to look for variations in expectations. It is a shortcoming of this study that we were not able to analyze the essays by the race and religion of the student because of the small numbers of minority students in the sample.

The lack of expressed concern about making money was also consistent with the occupations women discussed. Fewer women (5 percent) than men (19 percent) wanted business careers (see Table 1). Eight percent of the women, but none of the men, mentioned marrying someone with a lucrative profession. More women (34 percent) than men (12 percent) expected their spouses to be successful occupationally, as the following excerpt suggests:

He [my husband] progressed in his career to the point of providing me with every pleasure and I provided him with as much love and concern as I could muster. (female)

Compared with the London girls, the Brown women foresaw working in the paid labor force much longer. Of those women whose essays indicated work patterns, the majority (55 percent) expected to work 40 years or more after college. Only 13 percent mentioned working ten years or less, which was the typical work period for the London girls. Forty-eight percent of the Brown women expected to work in the paid labor force full time for their lifetimes. The rest either specified a mixed work pattern (29 percent) or a limited work pattern (8 percent), or did not mention working (16 percent). Examples of these patterns follow.

*Full-time work pattern*

My pregnancy and the birth of our child did not stop me from continuing to pursue my career. (female)

*Mixed work pattern*

I didn't have children until I was 32. Then I had two right in a row..... I quit work because I was determined to raise my children myself, although it was currently fashionable to send them to daycare centers. By the time they were in junior high school I tried social work again. (female)

After the kids were grown, Y. [my husband] and I decided to spend some time together before I went back to work full time. I had been working part time while the kids were in their teens and I was ready to resume my old schedule. (female)

*Limited work pattern*

Of course, I had stopped working (it was a bad job anyway) but next to caring for the children, there was little for me to do since we had a housekeeper (there was only so much shopping I could do and so many lunches with friends I could have). (female)

(Later in the essay this author mentions receiving alimony—one of the few references to divorce in the autobiographies. Her only mention of work concerns a brief period before marriage.)

Previous studies (Freedman, 1967; Russo, 1971; Komarovsky, 1973; Vogel, 1975) have found lower percentages of American women anticipating the full-time work pattern—from 20 percent to

39 percent—compared with half of our sample. In contrast almost no men in the Brown sample mentioned interrupted work patterns. The interruption described in the following excerpt clearly is not for the purpose of taking care of children:

Graduated from Brown in 1975, realizing that the diploma was like an insurance policy in case I needed to seek active employment in the 9 [a.m.]–5 [p.m.] establishment world—a course I would choose only in an economic emergency. Fortunately, things worked out. I continued to split my time between the Bahamas and New England—avoiding the cold weather. As golf is my main leisure time pursuit, for years I continued to play well throughout my adult years and played in 30–40 tournaments a year all over the country. Got married when I was 32 . . . and after some indoctrination my wife became accustomed to my leisurely life style. After a year or so she got accustomed to following me around to golf tournaments and became friendly with all the other golf widows. . . . (male)

(This author earlier mentions having made a “great deal of money” in a nightclub business and then buying another business. These ventures apparently supported him while he played golf.)

Almost all of the Brown women expected to be working wives and mothers, but only a third (32 percent) of those Brown men who expected to marry mentioned having working wives. Slightly more lower-income than higher-income men mentioned working wives; since lower-income men were overrepresented in the sample, the percentage of men expecting to have working wives was probably biased upward. Below are excerpts from three essays by men mentioning working wives.

I met my present wife in law school, and married her after I passed the bar exam. She is an excellent lawyer and I sometimes feel threatened or demasculated [sic] by her, although intellectually I know these are foolish fears. (male)

We both worked as I struggled through night school and finally received my master’s degree in education. (male)

When my kids had graduated from high school my wife took a job as a social worker to help pay for their education. (male)

Few of the men mentioned having wives who were independent career women or who worked while their children were too young to attend school. Most often, the men saw their wives as working in special situations—either to put the men through graduate school or to help the family out financially. The following excerpts are typical:

... for the next five years she [my wife] supported me until I got my law degree from Columbia University. (male)

While [I was] getting my education, my wife supported us both . . . and our noncollege friends put us down ("*Men should work, women should hausfrau*"). (male)

As I finished up my junior and senior year[s] at Brown I considered the future and my plans to attend medical school. I knew that if I were fortunate enough to find a girl I'd like to marry, she would be able to support me somewhat and take some of the pressure off of my parents. School would go so much smoother, too, if I had a wife. To my despair, I graduated from Brown minus a wife, a girlfriend, and an acceptance to medical school. [However, on reapplying a year later, he was accepted into medical school and found a wife.] . . . Everything had finally turned out as I had hoped. I finished med school and P.'s [wife's] income had helped substantially with the tuition and expenses. (male)

On the other hand, few women mentioned supporting husbands through school. If they did, they anticipated getting such support in return:

I considered going on to med school after graduation from law school but decided not to . . . [because] my boyfriend, who'd been paying for most of my expenses since my sophomore year in college, very much wanted to go back to school to get his master's and it seemed only fair for me to work for a while. (female)

There may be clashes over this issue in marriages of these students. The men may no longer be able to assume that their wives will be willing to work to put them through graduate school without reciprocity.<sup>1</sup>

Looking more specifically at the occupations anticipated, we found that most of the Brown men and women expected to have traditionally male careers. For those who mentioned a specific occupation in their essays (80 percent), we classified the last-mentioned occupation by whether it was traditionally male or female according to whether nationally at least 60 percent of workers in the occupational category are men or women, according to 1970 census figures (Economic Report of the President, 1973). Because the U.S. labor force is highly segregated by sex, classification was easy for almost all occupations

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1 Relevant in this connection is a recent court decision supporting a woman's legal right to reciprocal educational support from her husband, whom she divorced after putting him through law school (Dreifus, 1975).

mentioned. Seventy percent of the women mentioned going into traditionally male occupations as did 100 percent of the men.

Our study contrasts with that of Astin and Panos (1969) in which 76 percent of the college women in their sample chose "feminine" occupations and 10 percent of the men also did so. Our students were not typical of all U.S. university students, being from above average income levels; the Astin and Panos study used a stratified national sample of 246 accredited four-year colleges and universities.

The occupations anticipated by the Brown sample are presented in Table 1. A separate category for "doctor or lawyer" was created because these professions were especially popular among the students. Both men and women were concentrated in the three white collar categories; but women were more likely to be in the professional or technical category and less likely to be in business careers.

Compared with our students' preferred occupations, their parents had more varied occupations. This discrepancy is partly due to the upwardly mobile aspirations of the students but also partly due to their lack of imagination about possible future jobs. In an informal study of a different group of Brown students we found that almost none could recall having seriously considered more than three future occupations since becoming adolescents.

The majority of both men (53 percent) and women (56 percent) mentioned being successful in their occupations, but more women (42 percent) than men (8 percent) mentioned being dissatisfied with their degree of success. The remaining men and women mentioned neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction. Hence, for those expressing dissatisfaction, there was a big sex difference. Typically, dissatisfied women wanted ambitious careers but had little confidence that they would actually end up in those careers, or if they did, that they would be able to devote sufficient attention to them. This is especially interesting given that the women came from more prosperous family backgrounds than the men and might be expected to have greater confidence in their futures.

Incidentally, we did not find examples of "fear of success" imagery in these essays. The concern was more with fear of failure (e.g., to be admitted into medical school). Few women mentioned sex discrimination as being an obstacle to success. The problem, as most saw it, was that in managing marriage, children, and career, the last lost out. As noted above, some women (but no men) anticipated the vicarious success pattern—that is, having spouses whose successful careers replace the need for successful careers of their own.

### **"Superpersons"**

In order to see how men and women integrated their future marriages, children, and careers, we coded the essays according to whether they described a "superperson" lifestyle or not. By our definition, a "superperson" is one who has an ambitious, highly demanding career, is deeply involved in his or her marriage, and plays a substantial role in childrearing. Sometimes students included additional activities in this complex (such as travel, hobbies, or community work), but the three original components were enough for a student's future role to be described as that of "superperson."

Of those anticipating marriage, 43 percent of the women and only 12 percent of the men described themselves as "superpersons." This discrepancy is due mainly to the fact that fewer men mentioned taking an active role in childrearing. We found no tendency for higher-income men to describe superperson lifestyles more often than lower-income men.

Whether the "superwomen" will be able to perform all these activities up to their high standards remains to be seen. Such women may have to forego leisure time. Indeed, many more men than women mentioned sports and recreational activities in their essays. Another study has presented some evidence that adult American women have less leisure time than American men do. The 1962 National Recreation Survey cited by Stoll (1974) found that adult women, analyzed in four age groups, had less leisure time than adult men on both weekdays and weekends, except in the age group 25-44, for which women had equal leisure time on weekends. But for all six other comparisons, men had more leisure time.

In summarizing his findings from a study of female university students in the United States, Rose (1951:76) has noted an "inconsistency and lack of realism and definiteness about [their] expectations for adult roles." His criticism might be applied to the women in our sample as well.

### **General orientation toward middle age, old age, and life satisfaction**

In most of the Brown essays as in the British ones, middle age and old age were scarcely mentioned. Only 52 percent of the women and 29 percent of the men in the Brown sample mentioned at least one specific activity for middle age or old age, other than their occupations. We found no tendency for higher-income men to mention activities in middle and old age more or less frequently than lower-income men.

The same lack of activities envisioned in later life was evident in the study by Lansdown:

Just as marriage and honeymoon figured disproportionately large in the descriptions of the early years, so the marriage of children and the arrival of grandchildren seemed the only reality in later years—not what they themselves could actually be doing (Figes, 1970: 169).

We had expected fewer Brown women than men to mention activities in middle or old age, thinking that women might be more at a loss after the childbearing and childrearing stages. In fact, the men were focused on careers or supporting their families and mentioned little else besides these. The women's plans were somewhat more diversified.

A few students described their lives at age 80 as almost identical to that at age 20 with no limitations of any kind, but in most essays aging was described in vague, mildly positive terms. Although it was not easy to do so, we coded the essays according to whether they expressed unqualified optimism, qualified optimism, or pessimism toward old age. Examples of each follow.

#### *Unqualified optimism*

My wife and I are both living still and I feel as though I could live another 80 years. (male)

#### *Qualified optimism*

Although my wife passed away ten years ago, my children take good care of me. My son is running my business and my daughter is happily married to a man she met at college. As I look back over my life, I can feel proud that I made myself someone and I led a basically good life. (male)

#### *Pessimism*

Here I am eighty years old, tired and rundown and wasted away. I can't hear, my eyesight is failing, and no longer can I run around and be on the go like I used to be back in high school. . . . [Then] it was a life full of dreams and ambitions. The future was the gate to heaven. You felt you could accomplish anything and now it is all behind me. I have nothing to look forward to and I have accomplished one-fourth of what I set out to. I never thought about dying—there was too much living to do, but now that's all I think about. (male)

Forty-seven percent of the women's essays compared with 38 percent of the men's were unqualifiedly optimistic. Only 10 percent were pessimistic, with no sex difference.

Over 80 percent of the men and women began or ended their essays with some general statement about having been satisfied with their lives as a whole. Fewer than 20 percent anticipated any major or minor impairment (mental or physical), with no differences by sex. We had thought more women than men might write essays that included episodes of mental illness, given that women apparently have higher rates of mental illness (Gove and Tudor, 1973), but this was not the case.

#### DISCUSSION OF METHODOLOGY

There are several limitations of this study. The original sample size ( $N=185$ ) was small, especially for cross-tabulations, and included students from only one university. The Brown students were not representative of any larger group owing to the sampling method used. Since we did not have a probability sample, we did not use significance tests. For these and other reasons, our findings should be considered exploratory and descriptive.

We did not have longitudinal or baseline data that could show whether these students changed their expectations over time or whether their parents (or some other group) had similar expectations when they were of college age. The main comparison was with Lansdown's study, which varied in the respondents' ages, residence, and family background. That study included only girls and was done five years earlier. We also compared the Brown students' anticipated careers with those of their parents. For example, whereas 39 percent of the women's mothers were full-time housewives during the time the women grew up, few of the Brown women (3 percent) expected to be.

A possible problem with the essay approach is that the essays themselves may lack test-retest reliability. In order to check the reliability of the so-called autobiographies, we had half the sample write short essays four days after completing the original assignment, in which they could record any second thoughts about their future lives. Few of this group changed the events recorded in their original essays, however. Their willingness to stand by their original statements presumably was not caused by lack of interest in the assignment, for most of those sampled reported that they considered writing the essays a valuable exercise. Whether the students would make substantial changes after a longer period of time, we do not know.

The essays may also lack predictive validity, given the vagaries of life. We did not expect to predict individual future behavior, however, but were interested in group expectations by sex. Family planning sur-

veys (e.g., Campbell et al., 1963; Whelpton et al., 1966; and Freedman and Coombs, 1968) have shown that expected numbers of children are not good predictors for the individual, but the averages tend to be good predictors for the group or subgroups. Idiosyncratic events may intervene for individuals while the general patterns remain the same.

On many issues, the respondents seemed to be unrealistic, partly owing to the hypothetical nature of the assignment. One way of making the essays more realistic would be to ask the women to write about their lives to age 80 (the present average life expectancy for white females in the United States who have reached age 20 according to the Monthly Vital Statistics Report, 1975) and to age 73 for the men (their comparable average life expectancy). Then at least the students would have to think about this demographic discrepancy. Another way to make the essays more realistic and also more structured for coding purposes would be to ask respondents to discuss certain topics in their essays.

We tried to solve the problem of reliability in coding by having each essay read and reread by at least two coders. Then the codes for each item were compared. Whenever a discrepancy occurred, the coders read the essay again and discussed the code, resolving the difference. As might be expected, there were few coder discrepancies on such items as the number of children mentioned but more on whether the essay revealed an "optimistic" or "pessimistic" orientation toward old age. This analysis dealt mainly with the more reliable items.

There may have been bias in the coding since the coders knew the sex of each respondent. At first we tried to remove from the essays any reference to the respondent's sex. This proved unfeasible, however, since there were clues as to sex in almost every paragraph of each essay. There does not seem to be any easy solution to this problem other than being aware of it and to use coders who are not aware of the research hypotheses.

There was one last methodological problem. Just because a respondent did not mention something (for instance, a preference about the sexes of children) in the essay does not mean he or she was unconcerned about it. This problem is unavoidable with the projective technique.

Given these limitations, what can we say about the advantages of the essay approach and under what circumstances does it seem most appropriate? One of the strengths of the future autobiographies over either open or closed-ended questionnaires is that a respondent is more likely to discuss in the essays issues having salience to him or her

(Williamson, 1975). In contrast, a questionnaire may ask confusing, meaningless, or leading questions. A respondent may not have an opinion (or have an uncrystallized opinion) on the topic in the questionnaire. In a closed-ended questionnaire, there may be no response category that does justice to the respondent's answer. In short, the essays may provide less distortion or simplification of a respondent's views.

Furthermore, the essays are in the respondent's own language, retaining the richness and nuances of the writer. The researcher may sometimes get a better idea of what meaning different events have to the respondent than would be possible with a questionnaire. There is a difference, for example, between a respondent who mentions in passing that she or he had two children (because it was expected, and why not?) and a respondent who says his or her most important goal in life was to have and raise two children. In the coding of a KAP (knowledge, attitude, and practice of family planning) survey, these two individuals would be lumped together.

Another advantage of the essay technique is that such topics as the anticipated number of children are discussed in the context of plans about marriage, work patterns, and leisure activities. This is preferable to KAP studies that ask about ideal family size without regard to marriage and career plans, childcare arrangements, or economic conditions. In the essays, the respondent specifies the hoped for (or, in some cases, the most likely) conditions and then describes the number of children that fit best into the picture.

The technique may have predictive value. A study using a similar approach (Ezekiel, 1964) used future autobiographies effectively to predict the overseas performance of Peace Corps teachers.

The use of subsequent questionnaires allows more systematic data collection to supplement the essays. The same information can be gathered for all respondents, both for descriptive purposes and for investigation of possible explanations for variations found in the essays. In our study, only background items were included in the questionnaires, but additional attitude items might well be added in subsequent studies.

One other advantage of this technique is the ease of data collection. (The problems come with the data analysis.) Data on a large group can be collected by one individual in an hour or so. Individual respondents are unlikely to receive different impressions about the essay since all those in the same setting are given the same instructions.

For the essay technique to be appropriate, respondents must be

sufficiently articulate and literate to write the essays. In some situations this may be a serious limitation. For instance, a sociologist in the Republic of Korea, Sawon Hong, asked Korean students in high school and in earlier grades to write similar essays, but the material she obtained was not informative. Since writing is involved, the technique is not suited to household interviews, although it might be valuable to experiment with oral essays. Finally, sufficient cooperation is necessary since more thinking and effort is demanded by the essays than by most questionnaires.

*In short, if the necessary conditions are met, we believe that future autobiographies can make an important contribution to sociological research, allowing easy collection of information that is often salient, rich, meaningful, in proper context, and sometimes useful for prediction.*

#### SUMMARY

This study, which employed a projective technique to learn about attitudes toward marriage, family size, childrearing, and careers among approximately equal numbers of male and female undergraduates at Brown University, replicated and expanded upon an earlier study by Lansdown in England. The students were asked to imagine they were 80 years old and to write essays describing their adult lives. The lives expected by the Brown students were more adventuresome and ambitious than those described by Lansdown's subjects, who were British school girls. Most of the Brown women wanted professional careers, in addition to marriage and children. Nevertheless, the Brown students were strongly influenced by sex role socialization, just as the English girls were. Few Brown women (or English girls) expected to be supporting their families. The women rarely mentioned saving money to start a family or choosing a lucrative career, though they sometimes anticipated having financially successful husbands. In both studies, most women foresaw being wives and mothers.

In their attitudes toward marriage, childrearing, and employment, there were striking differences between men and women in the Brown sample. Most of the men wanted traditional marriages, whereas most of the women wanted egalitarian or neotraditional marriages. (Only 9 percent of the men wanted egalitarian marriages, compared with 37 percent of the women.) The women expected to have demanding careers in traditionally male professions. Most men, however, did not expect to have working wives, or at least ones whose careers figured in family decisions. If the men did mention working wives, they usually

described them as helping to put the husbands through graduate school or, in later years, helping to put the children through college. The essays thus suggest the possibility of conflict if these men and women marry one another or similar people.

An additional problem may be the disappointment, anticipated more frequently by women than men, regarding occupational success. Women had less confidence that they would achieve their career goals, which were nevertheless important to them. The sample women were thoroughly imbued with the desirability of success. In fact, women made up the majority of those respondents we call "superpersons"—that is, persons who expected to combine marriage, childrearing responsibilities, and a career outside the home.

There seemed to be general agreement about desirable family size; the mean number of children expected was 2.6 for women and 2.8 for men. Nearly half of those who mentioned the sex of their expected children preferred an equal number of boys and girls. Of the remaining, more preferred a predominance of boys than a predominance of girls. Those having a preference tended to desire a predominance of children of their own sex. More women than men mentioned adoption or having a single child. Whether there would be conflict over this issue would depend on who was matched with whom.

We found little evidence in the men's essays of resistance to acquiring dependents. For many of the Brown men it would be reasonable to postulate a strong "need for dependents" to establish their identities as adult males and as responsible individuals.

Despite the differences in their expected futures, few of the respondents anticipated marital problems or divorce. (Women, however, were both more specific about their marriage plans and somewhat less optimistic than men about the possibility of realizing them.) Nor did respondents anticipate such problems as less-than-perfect children, serious illness, or death of a spouse. Very few imagined living alone, despite the increasing occurrence of this phenomenon in the United States, especially among older people.

Indeed, few of the respondents in either study had very specific ideas about what middle or old age would be like. The Brown women were more likely to specify activities outside their careers than were the men; this might suggest that the women would adjust to old age better, but many other factors are involved. In general the students expressed optimism about aging and satisfaction with their lives.

We conclude that if young people discussed their expectations before making decisions about marriage, careers, and children, they

might be better prepared for the future. Perhaps men and women should exchange “future autobiographies” before seriously considering marriage. The insights thus gained might prevent or alleviate potential conflicts.

## APPENDIX :- Example of an uncodable essay

Looking back, this day marking my eightieth year of life, I am most definitely prone to believe I have lived life to the fullest or at least made all attempts to do so, with regard to commitment to self, community, family and God. Consequently I feel no pains, rather only deep contentment. Following my college years, I embarked upon a new purposeful journey in an effort to establish a very definite plan for my future. College did not hold all of the answers I had hoped for in my earlier years. Rather it presented a great many possibilities, all of which I felt a strong urge to seek out. My life was at an all-time high. I was an exuberant, energetic being who wished only to get out on the open road, to really let loose. However ambitious and excited I appeared to be, there still was a problem of not having a definite game plan. . . . (male)

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