

Women's VU

Margaret
Cuninggim
Women's Center

V A N D E R B I L T U N I V E R S I T Y

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FROM THE FAMILY TO THE WORKPLACE

How your childhood affects your career

by GINA L. PRIGOFF

What would you think if someone suggested that your childhood experiences had a substantial effect on your current work life? If you were the first-born child in your family, for example, you may have been expected to care for younger siblings and to be responsible for household chores such as cleaning, cooking or mowing the lawn. As a result, you might have developed leadership, organization, and time management skills — qualities which are highly valued in many occupations.

Researchers have found that childhood experiences — both positive and negative — can have a significant impact on a woman's subsequent work performance. Dr. LeslieBeth Berger, a psychotherapist, interviewed 200 women to determine if there are any personal or environmental trends which contribute to success on the job. In her book, *Incest, Work and Women*, Berger identifies eight factors which contribute to a woman's vocational success. Six of these factors are directly related to family-of-origin. One of the most important is birth order, with the oldest child having a special advantage. Berger describes how the oldest child often becomes the kind of worker who gravitates toward responsibility, likes to make decisions, is comfortable being in charge, and is practical and reliable. Daughters whose mothers and/or grandmothers were also the oldest in their family have an extra advantage; watching, learning and just growing up with a capable, same-sex

caregiver increases the possibility that a child can adopt these traits and skills.

The expectations parents have for their daughters is another important factor in determining their future career success. Parents who expected their daughters to achieve in work or school, and encouraged them to develop interests and social activities outside the home helped them to become productive in life. Even when the expectations were not explicitly stated, the successful



women "knew" what their parents expected: "If I came home with a C on a report card, I'd better have a good reason for getting it."

Building self-esteem

Berger's research also found that successful women were given responsibilities appropriate to their age and ability, such as a job outside the home or family responsibilities (a factor Berger describes as "Independence Training"). Whether they were given the responsibility for taking care of the family pet or handling a paper route, these tasks helped the child to build self-esteem and allowed her to believe in her ability

to be capable, effective, powerful, and talented.

Having a respected role model and perceiving one's mother as competent inside and outside the home is another important determinant of future career success. Berger stresses that a daughter's exposure to competence requires far more than taking one's daughter to work once a year; it necessitates a total immersion in a way of life, level of functioning and expectations of women in general.

If both mother and daughter had a sense of optimism, or positive world view, the daughter was more likely to succeed later in life. This characteristic engendered perseverance, realistic self-appraisal and moderate risk-taking. Berger found that women who are successful in their careers often keep their setbacks in perspective.

They don't overly blame themselves, and they see difficulties as time-limited and related to a specific event.

While positive family factors can contribute to career success, childhood difficulties can also affect job performance. In some, but not all cases, women who experienced little family trauma had a higher probability of maintaining a successful working life. Divorces, family deaths, alcoholism, and physical, emotional, or sexual abuse can threaten a child's sense of personal safety. If the family is not able to manage these types of trauma effectively, the daughter may be more prone to interpersonal and professional struggles.

continued on page 2

Family factors in career success *continued from page 1*

This is not to infer that family trauma causes work difficulties; rather, depending on a myriad of factors within the family environment, trauma may be a contributing variable.

How does trauma or family dysfunction contribute to career difficulties?

One of the most common ways negative childhood experiences are manifested at work is in interpersonal difficulties with colleagues. Several researchers have theorized that work has the potential to serve as an arena in which unresolved early interpersonal relationship difficulties are "acted out" with

co-workers or supervisors. For example, one mental health clinician's research found that individuals who have highly critical and unsupportive fathers may transfer their perceptions of their fathers onto future authority figures and will view those relationships as equally difficult, even if there is no basis in reality for this perception. Bitter sibling rivalries may also play themselves out at work via cut-throat competition with co-workers, difficulties with teamwork, and conflicted relationships. An inter-


esting twist to this theory is that individuals are rarely aware of how and when family dramas permeate their work attitudes, behaviors and values.

My own dissertation research was designed to determine whether women who were sexually abused in childhood exhibited more interpersonal difficulties at work (i.e., conflict, isolation and less satisfaction with work relationships) than women who had not experienced

Interpersonal tension is often a result of an interaction between individual and organizational dynamics, such as poor communication, undefined job descriptions, and stress resulting from downsizing. Therefore, it may be beneficial to assess the extent to which the organization is contributing to interpersonal dysfunction in general. Assistance in learning how to cope with your own interpersonal struggles at work, or those

of others in your department, is available from a variety of sources at Vanderbilt, such as the Employee Assis-

tance Program, the Psychological and Counseling Center, mental health clinicians in the community, and independent business consultants.

Still, one issue remains: Does success in the workplace depend solely on a woman's family background? Berger did identify two factors in career success which are not directly linked to "nurture" experiences. These two factors are temperament and mental health. Many of the successful women in Berger's study possessed an innate temperament which could withstand anxiety, stress and setbacks. This allowed them to persevere through difficulty, to have a positive coping style, and to develop an internal sense of control. The other factor, mental health and functioning, refers to an individual's ability to adjust her thoughts and feelings so that she can soothe herself from within, and not have to rely on external means for comfort and control. Women with these coping mechanisms were more likely to find success in the workplace. 

“Bitter sibling rivalries may play themselves out at work via cut-throat competition with co-workers.”

childhood sexual abuse. The results of the study indicated that sexual abuse, per se, was not related to the occurrence of interpersonal difficulties at work. Rather, the data concluded that abused and non-abused women who perceived themselves as socially isolated and angry at work reported less overall job satisfaction. Women who were satisfied with their interpersonal relationships at work indicated higher overall job satisfaction than those who did not report relationship satisfaction at work. In sum, interpersonal difficulties in the workplace can sometimes lead to job dissatisfaction — a significant factor given that it has been linked to absenteeism, turnover, tardiness, job morale, productivity, and devotion to a job.

The presence of interpersonal difficulties in the workplace, whether or not they can be linked to family-of-origin issues, can be particularly challenging for co-workers and supervisors. It is important to understand, however, that employees do not exist in a vacuum.



Women's VU is published monthly September through June at the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gina Prigoff is completing a psychology internship at Vanderbilt's Psychological and Counseling Center and will receive her doctoral degree in counseling psychology from the University of Memphis in August. She recently completed a dissertation on the relationship between childhood sexual abuse and interpersonal difficulties in the workplace.



June 1999

M Margaret
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Calendar of Events

PLEASE SAVE AND POST

For more information on the
events listed, call 322-4843.

Tuesday, June 1

Creative Life Planning Group meets over lunch every Tuesday to share problem-solving information. New members always welcome. Noon to 1:00 p.m. Cuninggim Center. Also meets June 8, 15, 22 & 29.

Monday, June 14

Book Group meets to discuss *Phoenix Cafe* by Gwyneth Jones. Facilitated by Jane duBose. New readers always welcome. 5:15 p.m. Cuninggim Center.

Wednesday, June 16

Brown Bag Lunch for Lesbian and Bisexual Women. Monthly meeting for faculty, staff, and graduate students who identify as lesbian or bisexual. Any questions, contact Hilary Forbes at 322-6518 or hilary.forbes@vanderbilt.edu. 11:45 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. Cuninggim Center.

Thursday, June 17

Reading Sisters book group meets to discuss *Some Love, Some Pain, Sometime* by J. California Cooper. Everyone is welcome to participate — students, staff, and faculty. Books available at the VU bookstore. Noon to 1:00 p.m. Cuninggim Center.

Friday, June 18

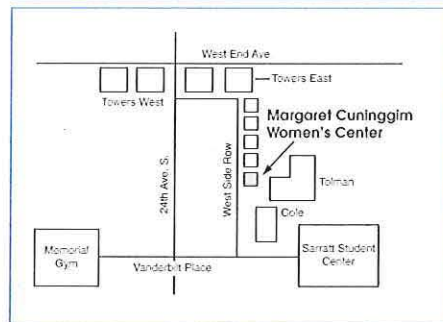
Diapers & Dissertations. Mary Shelton and Linda Knieps, former graduate students who recently received doctoral degrees in psychology at Vanderbilt, are holding an organizational meeting for graduate students concerned about the demands of balancing family and graduate work. 1:00 p.m. Cuninggim Center. See article, page 4.

Saturday, June 26

& Sunday, June 27

Writing a Woman's Life. Karen Essex, a biographer, journalist and fiction writer, holds a weekend session of her popular creative writing workshops. To register, call Essex at 269-8675. Saturday 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., Sunday 1:00 to 5:00 p.m. Cuninggim Center.

How to find us . . .



The Cuninggim Center is located in the Franklin Building at 316 West Side Row.

INTEREST GROUPS PLAN SUMMER SCHEDULES AT THE WOMEN'S CENTER

Although *Women's VU* is not published in July and August, several ongoing groups continue meeting at the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center during these months. For those with less hectic schedules during the summer, this would be a good time to try out one of these groups:

- **Creative Life Planning Group** will meet Tuesdays at noon throughout the summer.
- **Book Group** meets at 5:15 p.m. on Monday, July 12 to discuss *The Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys and on Monday, August 9 to discuss *The Cloister Walk* by Kathleen Norris.
- **Reading Sisters** is a book group organized this spring to read works by African-American women. It will meet at noon on Thursday, July 15 to discuss *The Farming of Bones* by Edwidge Danticat and on Thursday, August 19 to discuss *Mama* by Terry McMillan.
- **Brown Bag Lunches for Lesbian and Bisexual Women** will be held from 11:45 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on Wednesday, July 14 and August 11.

For more information on any of these groups, contact Hilary Forbes at 322-6518.

New group offers support for grad students balancing demands of work and family

The first-hand experiences of two recent Vanderbilt graduate students who struggled to balance family needs with graduate work have spurred them to form a group offering advice and advocacy for parents in graduate school.

Linda Knieps, who received a doctorate in psychology at Vanderbilt in 1997, and Mary Shelton, who received her Ph.D. in May, say they would like to help other graduate students avoid some of the mistakes they made in dealing with family issues.

Shelton, who has three children, said a lack of information was the biggest

All interested graduate students are invited to attend an organizational meeting of the group "Diapers and Dissertations" at the Women's Center on Friday, June 18 at 1:00 p.m.

problem she confronted in balancing academic and family concerns. When she started grad school in 1988, graduate students were not expected to have babies, she recalls. But as more women have entered graduate school, conflicts between academic demands and child-care needs have gotten more attention.

Knieps and Shelton say the group has two main goals:

- To reduce the time parents spend in graduate school, by providing support and information that will help them stay on track and make better decisions.
- To improve conditions for parents in graduate school by advocating for institutional change that will create more family-friendly conditions.

Although Knieps and Shelton will serve as co-facilitators of the group, the structure and schedule will depend on the needs of the participants.

World-class volunteer wins Muliebrity Prize

Graduating senior Margaret Larson has a commitment to volunteerism and women's issues that extends from the Vanderbilt campus to some of the poorest and neediest locations on earth.

In recognition of her wide-ranging efforts to help women here and abroad, Larson was awarded the 1999 Muliebrity Prize by the Margaret Cunningham Women's Center. The prize is given annually to an undergraduate student who demonstrates leadership in promoting the achievements, interests and goals of women and girls.

Since 1991, when she was 13 years old, Larson has traveled overseas every summer to offer her help on construction projects, counseling, health care and teaching, mainly with women and children. At Vanderbilt, she has worked for three years in the International Teaching Assistance Program of the Center for Teaching. This semester, she co-facilitated a group of eight international teaching assistants, all women, who met to discuss issues they had confronted in the culture and in the classroom.

Larson credits her "visionary" parents, Wallace and Margaret Larson of Phoenix, Ariz., for spurring each of their three children to participate in international volunteer work. "They wanted us to see the world in a different way," and step outside the culture of material wealth they lived with at home, Larson explains. She says she and her siblings have been inspired and transformed by the experience.

At Vanderbilt, Larson majored in French and roomed with her younger sister, Marcia (A&S '00), who nominated her for the Muliebrity Prize. In her nomination, Marcia wrote:

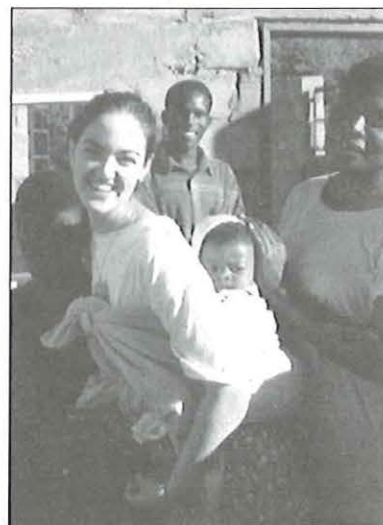
"Hearing the wailing cries of AIDS orphans in rural Zimbabwe villages, one woman chose to hear their cries and work in an orphanage helping these children find shelter, food and emotional support.

Seeing the victims of prostitution in Thailand, one woman chose to sacrifice her summer to teach these women English and enable them to find opportunities outside of being sued, beaten, and sold. . . .

Seeing the needs, hearing the cries, Margaret Larson responds by giving of her time and of herself to enable women to achieve their dreams."

International helping hand

Margaret Larson (A&S '99) has traveled around the world to participate in volunteer projects for poor, sick and powerless women and children. In 1997 she worked with AIDS orphans in Zimbabwe (right) and in 1994 at a fertility clinic in Nigeria (below).



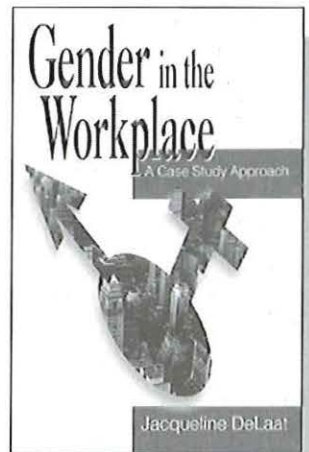
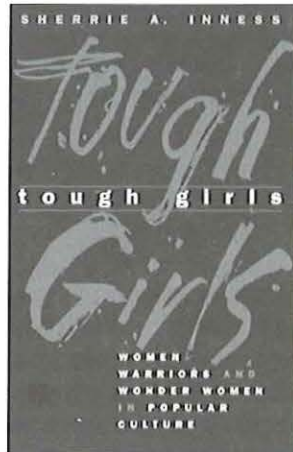


Newly prominent 'tough' girls remain cultural outsiders

Over the past three decades tough women have become increasingly prominent in the popular media — in television, films, novels, women's magazines and comic books. Sherrie A. Inness discusses this development in *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

"Tough" is difficult to define and has numerous meanings. Most people associate it primarily with men; toughness is often considered to be the opposite of femininity. The writer discusses how the media depict toughness in women, how this has changed over the last few decades and how society is still uneasy about women who don't conform to certain stereotypes. Tough women are often suspected of being lesbian, a label that has been used to discourage assertive behavior in women. As gender stereotypes have changed over the years, so has the media's portrayal of tough women. Females in nontraditional roles have become much more acceptable. The media both reflect social changes and help to shape consumers' attitudes.

Inness, who teaches English at Miami University, examines the depiction of strong, heroic or nontraditional women over the years in television shows like *The Avengers*, *Charlie's Angels*, *The X-Files* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* as well as in such films as *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Thelma & Louise* and *The Terminator*. She also discusses how femininity and toughness are portrayed in articles and advertisements in women's magazines, which are valuable indicators of society's changing atti-



tudes. While comic books give increasingly important roles to aggressive or heroic female characters, they frequently perpetuate sexist stereotypes. Children's cartoons today often include female characters, but they usually play subordinate roles and are dressed in skimpy costumes. In addition to discussing gender and recent science fiction, the writer illustrates how the mass media are devoting more time or space to the success of girls and women in rugged and male-dominated sports.

Inness concludes that "the tough girl might help to radicalize how women view femininity, but she is still very much an outsider in a culture that assumes that the smiling model on the cover of *Ladies' Home Journal* is somehow a more 'normal' woman than Xena or Ripley, an assumption that binds women to the cult of femininity and separates them from authority and power."

Jacqueline DeLaat's *Gender in the Workplace: A Case Study Approach* (Sage Publications, 1999) is a slender volume designed both for college stu-

dents and for workers concerned about or already confronting sex discrimination. The writer, a professor of political science and leadership at Marietta College in Ohio, believes that "gender issues in the workplace are often subtle, difficult to address, and difficult to prepare students and workers to address."

She gives a brief overview of some of the most common problems faced by women at work

and presents detailed case studies for examination and discussion. Many young women and men assume that gender bias in the workplace is a thing of the past. While most discrimination may be illegal, many women discover to their dismay that it is still quite prevalent. Organizational culture, which is slow to change, plays a major role in many types of workplace discrimination.

The case studies presented in the text involve gender stereotyping and discrimination in an international company, the glass ceiling in a prestigious law firm, mentoring for young women in medicine, a pregnant professor whose husband is also in academe, and sexual harassment in the Army. The five studies, which are quite complex, are based on legal cases, personal interviews and incidents reported in the press. DeLaat includes suggested readings on each topic, extracts from or explanations of relevant laws, and questions for students or workers to discuss. There are usually many possible methods of combating complicated situations of workplace bias.



Announcements

- Nominations are now being accepted for the **Mary Jane Werthan Award**, given annually by the Women's Center to honor an individual for contributing to the advancement of women at Vanderbilt. Nominations, along with any supporting materials, should be sent to the Women's Center. The deadline to submit a nomination is July 15. The award is named in honor of Mary Jane Werthan, the first woman member of the Vanderbilt Board of Trust, and is presented in the fall at the Margaret Cuninggim Lecture.
- **Choosing a chancellor.** Women on campus who want a voice in the selection of a new chancellor should note that June 15 is the deadline for submitting suggestions to the search committee. A questionnaire was distributed by e-mail to all faculty, staff, students, alumni and others. Return the questionnaire by e-mail to chancellorsearch@vanderbilt.edu or send other written comments to the Office of the Chancellor Search at 102 Alumni Hall.
- **Women Leading: Today and Tomorrow** is the title for this year's National Conference for College Women Student Leaders in Washington, D.C. College women from across the country will meet at Georgetown University June 10-12 to examine leadership issues for women. The conference is sponsored by NAWE and encourages women students to use their campus experiences as foundations for continuing leadership after graduation. More information is available on the NAWE web site: www.nawe.org.
- **Call for proposals.** The Mid-Atlantic Women's Studies Association is seeking proposals for presentations at its conference Oct. 30 at Drew University in Madison, N.J. Proposals can include papers, workshops and panels on women's studies teaching, research and practice. The deadline for submitting proposals is June 30. For more information contact Wendy Kolmar of Drew University at Wkolmar@drew.edu.

Enjoy the summer! Women's VU resumes publication in September.



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