

(Re)Constructing Women: Scaled Expectations of Privilege and Gender on Campus

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REVISED: 27 February 2007

Abstract

How are privilege and/or particular gender norms for women spatially (re)produced over time and how are they challenged and changed? In interviews and mental mapping exercises with 32 students and graduates of an elite women's college from classes spanning 1937 to 2006, women's expectations of class and gender norms and expectations are found to have been developed in their everyday experiences during college. These experiences were portrayed through the scales of the body, institution, and extra-institution that participants produced in regards to the particular social and physical space of the campus. Participants' experiences, as depicted in these scales, indicate that class norms remained stable over time but gender norms shifted drastically because the privilege found within and granted by the elite women's college campus allowed for and prompted such changes. Transformations of women's gender norms corresponded with changes in the larger social sphere with a particular split between participants' experiences before and after the late 1960s.

Key Words

United States, scale, mental mapping narratives, campus, class, gender, women's colleges

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Only the final version may be cited: 2007. Giesecking, J. (Re)Constructing Women: Scaled Portrayals of Privilege and Gender Norms on Campus. *Area*, 39(3): 278-86.

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(Having a college friend get me a job on Capitol Hill) influenced...the rest of my professional development and it came from knowing this one woman, (pause) which many men probably tell stories of the old school tie. But I don't know how often it happens with women. - Ginnie '61ⁱ

[What socioeconomic class do you use to identify yourself?] Am I automatically upper-middle class if I went to Mount Holyoke? - Tina '00

Introduction

How are privilege and/or particular gender norms for women spatially (re)produced over time and how are they challenged and changed? Building from the work of feminist and critical geographers, particularly Geraldine Pratt (1998) and Aansi Paasi (2004), this research seeks to answer these questions by examining the scaled (re)production of, and challenges to, expectations of class and gender norms on an elite college campus over seven generational cohorts. Interviews were conducted with 32 alumnae who graduated from the Mount Holyoke College, a highly selective women's college in the United States (U.S.), in the years spanning 1937 to 2006.ⁱⁱ During the interviews participants answered a series of questions about their gender and sexual identity development in relation to their college experiences as they drew and labeled mental maps of the campus to accompany their narratives. Portrayals of the campus in interviews and maps indicated that gender and class norms are (re)produced and reworked through the specific scales of the body, institution, and extra-institution in relation to the physical

and social campus. The scale of the body embraces how participants were embodied within the campus and used their bodies on campus; the scale of the institution looks at both the formal educational and abstract discursive practices of and on the campus; and the scale of the extra-institution considers how ‘off campus’ physical and social networks affected students and alumnae’s daily lives. Each scale exemplifies how this all-women’s campus was and is a place where these women often managed to create a world beyond typical expectations of gender norms and, within the context of privileged expectations, at various scales from the body outward throughout each generational cohort. The greatest of these shifts coincided with significant U.S. social, economic, and political changes that began in the late 1960s for women and other oppressed groups. In this paper, the term privilege is used as a marker for those advantaged by membership in the upper social classes by economic wealth and/or occupational and personal success as so deemed by social mores.

Participants in this study attended an elite, residential, American women’s liberal arts college.ⁱⁱⁱ Top schools in the U.S. such as the previously all-male Ivy League have systematically reproduced a predominantly white, male elite throughout the 20th century (Karabel 2005), and elite colleges as a whole rarely challenge gender and social class norms that fit the prevailing, privileged patriarchal worldview. Similarly, theories around scale began with a top-down, patriarchal, and hierarchal model limited to the local-national-global (Taylor 1982). As the scales in this paper are particular to the place of the campus, I make use of Paasi’s notion that scales are produced, historically contingent, and “may be partly concrete, powerful and bounded, but also partly unbounded, vague or invisible” (2004, 543). Feminist and critical geographers have called for a more complex and problematic interrogation of scale “that challenges gender-based oppositions by upending hierarchies of space and scale” (Pratt and

Rosner 2006, 16). As discussions and interrogations of themes associated with the local provided means of deconstructing dominant themes of globalization, scale became a key concept for feminist geographers to insist that discussions of the global include the scales of the body and the home (Marston 2000).

Through the lens of feminist and critical geography outlined above, I argue that the scaled identities formed by elite women's college students and graduates in relation to the campus are forged within and against social and spatial (re)productions of the prevailing norms of gender and privileged class dynamics. Participants' norms and expectations regarding gender and class encompass behaviors and attitudes such as dress, manners, and career options. For example, before the late 1960s these women experienced strong heteronormative expectations towards marriage and children, while opportunities for independent, occupational success were lacking. Only those who graduated before 1969 experienced a strong expectation to get married upon graduation.

Some gender norms the women discussed were more obviously classed. Connie '50 was told the following during her medical school interview in 1950 at Harvard University: ““You know, honey, if you go to medical school you'll be taking the place of some man who will be supporting his family and as soon as you have a child, of course, you won't be able to practice anymore.”” Both the possibility of success and achieved success of these participants was a rarity only for those highly educated women of the upper and upper-middle classes before the late 1960s.

Participant Overview and Context

Interviews were conducted with 32 self-selected alumnae and students of Mount Holyoke College (MHC) in the semi-rural town of South Hadley, Massachusetts. MHC is the oldest, continuing institution of higher education for women in the U.S. The college's mission statement is to educate "a diverse residential community of women at the highest level of academic excellence and to fostering the alliance of liberal arts education with purposeful engagement in the world" (MHC 2006). This legacy is part of the everyday campus dialogue; hence, gender was a much discussed aspect of participants' lives. Not all of the participants directly discussed matters of class and/or privilege although their expectations and class norms were portrayed in the behaviors and attitudes they recounted. MHC has consistently served female students over the years while the school's originally all-male Ivy League counterparts such as Harvard and Yale Universities, became co-educational in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Immediately before these changes, the U.S. passed laws that allowed reproductive freedom (*Griswold v. Connecticut* in 1965), prohibition against employment discrimination based upon race, color, religion, national origin, or sex (Title VII of the Civil Rights Act in 1964), and the beginning of the feminist movement which is often marked by the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. Until that same era, women with the intellectual ambitions, social ambitions, and/or financial means attended MHC or one of its peers, the Seven Sisters colleges, which were referred to as the 'female Ivy League'. This historic, highly selective, residential liberal arts women's college is one of 56 remaining women's colleges in the country and continues to graduate high-performing students.

Spatially, MHC's Victorian gothic design has remained almost untouched in style since 1896—both exterior and interior—so that students and alumnae are likely to share memories common to the same places on campus. I define the campus as a physical, social, and space of

postsecondary education. The physical campus is composed of the natural environments (i.e. lakes and trees) and built environments (i.e. buildings and paths) of the campus and its design. The social campus includes rituals, codes, traditions, and rules about campus life. Geographers and those in other disciplines have only begun to examine the role of the social and physical spaces of the campus in the lives of the students (Tamboukou 2000).

Alumnae and students were invited to participate through MHC's Alumnae Association, as well as through email and phone requests and face-to-face interactions. An attempt was made to solicit participants with varied backgrounds when possible; these efforts notwithstanding, the profile of participants was fairly homogenous. Participants were then included into the predefined sample size (up to 35 participants) on the basis of who emailed the investigator first. Although the sample was self-selected, participants were inclined to share both the complicated and differentiated stories the researcher sought. The sample was limited to include only participants who attended college at a traditional age (between the ages of 16 to 24) and began and completed their degrees at the college so that participants might share similar-aged interests and memories of their time on campus. The sample only included those born within the U.S. in an effort to focus on U.S. women. Half of the alumnae interviewed now reside in the New York City metropolitan area near the researcher, and half of the alumnae reside within an hour of the college. It was expected this would possibly result in different or varied recollections of the campus although no significant differences were found.

At the time of the interviews participants ranged in age from 20 years old to 89 years old. A total of 29 of the 32 participants identified as white, Caucasian, and/or WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), and seven did not identify as heterosexual. Thirty participants self-identified as middle or upper-middle class, one participant as working-middle class, and one participant

identified as upper-upper class. A total of 24 participants had taken or upon graduation planned to take advanced degrees.

Four or five alumnae were interviewed from each of seven different generational cohorts spanning 1937 through 2000, and five students of the graduating class of 2006 were interviewed. Inspired by C. Wright Mills' (1961) concept of the sociological imagination, this research examines individual biographies in relation to the larger socioeconomic and political eras. Karl Mannheim's (1928/1972) concept of "political generations" also came into play when examining the women's shared geography and era that "limited them to a specific range of potential experience, predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action" (as cited in Duncan & Stewart 2000, 298). I use the term "generational cohort" to encompass both Mannheim and Mills' concepts in considering the socioeconomic and cultural aspects of the era in which participants attended college, which include: Depression & World War II (1937 – 1945), the Fifties (1946 – 1962), the Sixties (1963 – 1971), the Seventies (1972 – 1979), the Eighties (1980 – 1992), the Nineties (1993 – 2000), and the graduating class of 2006.

Methods & Analysis: Narratives in Words and Maps

Participants took part in open-ended, semi-structured interviews with mental mapping exercises that elicited narratives of how the physical and social environment of the campus reflected and affected their gender and sexual identity development. Participants were asked to respond to various questions about their notions of power, space, education, gender, and sexuality before, during, and after college and to label their maps with symbols and words to represent the memories that arose in defining their selves in relation to the space of the campus;

this paper explicitly examines participants' experiences during college. Mental mapping is the term I use for the methodological technique used to explore participants' cognitive maps—how humans think on and about space and how they reflect and act upon those thoughts in their everyday behaviors. The idea and technique has been employed by other researchers, notably Kevin Lynch (1960), Roger Downs and David Stea (1977), and Dolores Hayden (1995).

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed for emerging themes such as scale and privilege, and top-down themes such as gender. Participants' discussions of their identities around these themes were then coded in their physical, social, and historical descriptions of the campus. The mental maps were drawn on large sheets of paper and coded for structures and other features that were centrally, overly, or underrepresented and for how the interview codes were materially represented in their drawings.^{iv} Schemas (Agar and Hobbs 1987) were generated to explain the similarities that cross generational cohorts but are also specific to the women's relationship to the campus and it was out of these schemas that three scales became apparent.

Analysis: Scaled Conceptions of Privilege and Gender on Campus

In the sections that follow I outline the scales of the body, institution, and extra-institution and the connections between one another to elucidate the role of scale in (re)producing and reworking gender and class norms and expectations.

The Body

From a feminist perspective the scale of the body speaks to the anonymous work, play, and (re)production that have all been inscribed on and within women's bodies for millennia

(Pratt 1998; Mountz & Hyndman 2006). The regulation of the women's bodies on campus, such as requiring formal attire for dinner and supporting a slim list of occupational choices or possibilities, produced and reproduced gender and class norms through the late 1960s. Linda '66 remarked that it was "not a place to rebel" both in terms of gender and class presentation. Yet the privileged aspect of their class allowed them the ability to bend rules and regulations of their gender. Linda '66 went on to state, "Everybody stayed out now and then and had to climb through the French windows." Women discussed ignoring rules more and more in each generational cohort, including during the period when students were to sign on and off campus at all times and no men were permitted beyond the first floor of the dormitories. Sneaking out, often to meet boyfriends or dates, was just one of the infractions that could have lead to a marred status for these upper-class "ladies." Pratt, building from the work of Michel Foucault, writes that "the bourgeoisie constructed their class identity through the watchful regulation of their own bodies" (1998, 285). In this way of regulating their own bodies and bodily access, the women's privilege progressively broken down gender norms over generational cohorts both within and against the patriarchal structure built for and around the upper class, WASP culture on campus.

Comments about rule bending were markedly different among alumnae who had graduated since the late 1960s. The majority of these women expressed a sense of complete access to the campus, although many remarked that they had no reason to enter the traditionally masculine, working-class campus maintenance building. Tess '06 talked about how the open campus gave her a sense of freedom portrayed in the scale of her body: "No one's, like, watching me or saying [in a stern male voice], 'You can't come in here'." Like other interviews with graduates of the late 1960s and thereafter, Tess '06 equated full access to the campus with a sense of privilege and also a sense of breaking traditional gender norms for women.

A similarity that spanned each of the generational cohorts was the sense of intellectual freedom they embraced in their bodies through constant intellectual conversations and more informal dress. Linda '66 recalled the moment she realized the sense of liberation found in not needing to under-perform academically in order to make sure that men stood out as smarter: “It’s just all of a sudden, wherever you went, there’s a smart woman there.” Brenda '96 shared similar sentiments:

(I)t allowed me to be an intellectual in a truer sense of the word...because it was all channeled around the ‘life of the mind’ in so many ways. Sort of letting go of the body. ...It was empowering. It was good to be smart and good to really work hard.

Yet the ‘life of the mind’ is a privileged experience only for those afforded the opportunity to study at such an institution. By placing the life of the mind as a classed marker of significance, and along with larger social shifts, each generational cohort progressively broke down classed gender norms—literal and metaphorical boundaries of bodily access and regulation—associated with expectations of women on an elite college campus.

The Institution

Paasi writes, “The conceptualization of relevant relations/structures in research objects can be a problem in any form of research, but it is especially so when these objects are not ‘concrete’ things but sets of institutionalized practices/discourses” (2004, 537). The educational institution is typically delineated by what is studied in the classroom and the work of the college administrators and faculty. The bounds of the MHC institution are also formed by discursive practices evidenced in students and alumnae’s everyday experiences. In participants’ mental

maps, the buildings on campus, the layout of those buildings, and the boundaries of the campus that may include highways, dormitories, lakes, and/or other colleges were varied, resulting in differing portrayals of the physical institution and that which surrounds it. In the interviews, the institution was defined and delimited by the students' everyday spaces, acts, traditions, and rules of the social and physical campus. The scale of the institution also absorbed any traditional notions of home as most participants referred to the campus or a dormitory on campus as "home."

The institution mimicked the lack of bodily freedom Linda '66 described about MHC not being a "place to rebel." Helga '67 depicted an institution with "this light authoritarian cast to the whole place" where administrators "wanted to make sure that my body was where I wasn't being lost," i.e. that she may become pregnant before marriage. While the 'life of mind' made for some renegotiations of gender norms, Helga '67's comments represent the traditional gender and class regulations and expectations imprinted by the institution on its students before the late 1960s.

Starting around 1969 the institution was both a typically educational and discursive space where students progressively (re)produced and reworked gender and class norms throughout each generation. The institution itself reformatted its purpose to educate women as leaders which is evidenced in the college's present mission statement. After listing the occupational and personal successes of her friends, Sarah '99 described her experience of MHC in the 1990s,

(A)t Mount Holyoke I always felt very comfortable... I sort of take that comfort level and go back to that place in my mind—and then I always think, "If (my other female friends) can do something than why can't I?" And I think that the first realization that I had of all of that was probably at Mount Holyoke.

Class privilege once built around expectations of purity and heterosexual marriage now presented itself in occupational and personal success for women's gender norms at the institutional scale.

The Extra-Institution

Participants identified the extra-institutional scale to be constituted of those spaces that affected their daily lives but sat physically and socially beyond each individual's border or "bubble" (Rita '82, Francine '06, Daria '06) of the institution, or within what she considered the "real world" (Fiona '66, Brandy '86, Sarah '99, Tina '00). As such, the scale of the extra-institution subsumed the local (the town of South Hadley and nearby colleges, towns, and routes), regional (New England), and the nation-state and global scales. Mountz and Hyndman write that borders possess "transformative potential" because "they are lines drawn to be crossed" (2006, 452). The borders between the scales of the institution and extra-institution were often delineated and/or made ambiguous by the bodily scale that transgressed them further in each generational cohort.

Paasi's (2004) rethinking of scales as 'networks' rather than purely in areal terms fits participants' portrayals of the extra-institutional scale. Paasi writes that in the study of the social construction of places, geographers have "suggested that networks/interdependences challenge bounded perspectives on place/scale and accentuate discontinuous spaces" (2004, 541). As with the scales of the body and institution, a shift in participants' ideal and classed extra-institutional networks took place in the late 1960s with those spaces and persons literally and metaphorically 'off campus.' Before that period, Stacy '60 remarked that even though women on campus held all of the leadership positions, "I thought the only way to have power was to attach yourself to a

man who had power because the men had the power.” Further while Ginnie ’61’s quote at the beginning of this paper indicates that a few social networks for women existed throughout all of the generational cohorts, her first position on Capitol Hill was limited to secretarial work.

Tina ’00 summed up the powerful role of social networks in privileged women’s independence as of late: “I guess I felt women’s power was more related to women’s ability to network, to know people, to be a little bit more dogged than necessarily intelligent.” This reworking of gender norms at the extra-institutional scale entered into and built upon institutional practices and bodily experiences. As each generational cohort strived for and expected to achieve a privileged notion of women’s success at the extra-institutional scale, and therefore reworked women’s gender norms over time, the women seemingly only served to (re)produce class norms and expectations, particularly in relation to upper and upper-middle class male roles and expectations.

Elizabeth ’37 depicted a connection to a physical network that altered the possibilities of her own gender and class. Lacking academic confidence, she considered herself a “borderline” student, yet was invited to perform prestigious honors work in her senior year:

I have always been crazy about the reading room. As you know it’s a replica of Westminster Hall in London, on a somewhat smaller scale. ... I was thrilled when I was given a carrel. Honor students were allowed to have carrels in the stacks. I loved it because it made me feel like a scholar.

Elizabeth ’37 demonstrates that students and alumnae used the physical spaces of the campus to connect themselves with global and historical powers, namely this prominent hall for British kings and the original British Parliament. Replicating Westminster Hall on campus—a Western architectural symbol of masculine power—allowed the institution and those bodies within it to

internalize the privilege located in the meaning and metaphor of that space. This again not only legitimated students' claims to their privileged status, but also served to progressively increase participants' sense of entitlement that challenged and redefined their gender norms over time.

Discussion

Three scales emerged in participants' (re)production of and challenge to notions of privilege and gender norms in their sociological and geographical portrayals of the campus: the body, the institution, and the extra-institution. Each of these scales arose frequently as participants depicted their expectations of gender and class norms on campus; further these scales overlap and build upon one another, demonstrating an interdependent relationship between participants' expectations of gender and class. Similar to Paasi's (2004) contention that identities are produced within the demands of and upon various geographic scales, these scales are essential to the women's understanding and enactment of their own notions and expectations of gender and class. While the scale of the home is often central in the study of women's spaces (Marston 2000), the everyday and scaled experiences of these young women's lives were instead channeled into and formed by bodily, institutional, and extra-institutional spheres.

Pratt (1998) examined how female Filipina domestic workers successfully reworked and challenged their embodied subjectivity within and against fixed, stereotyped identities bestowed upon them by the white, upper-middleclass community they worked for in Vancouver, Canada. The working class participants in Pratt's study used the Philippine Women Centre as a physical and social space within which to gather and recreate themselves at the bodily scale. Both Pratt's participants and the women in this study recasted their embodied roles through the use of particular places. The mostly upper-middle class, white women in this study use their all-

women's elite college campus to both replicate and subvert class and gender norms as evidenced in the bodily, institutional, and extra-institutional scales they portrayed of their experiences. This renegotiation and (re)production takes place in the freedom and binding of the bodily scale, ideals of success at the institutional scale, and the networks and "real world" borders of the extra-institutional scale.

Each of the participants expressed a sense of freedom as women in the privileges granted upon them by the campus or in their manipulation of campus regulations, and/or they expressed a freedom in the full right to entry and use of the campus. As noted above, the break between these two notions of freedom is largely seen starting around 1969. While all-male Ivy League schools became coeducational in this period, some women's colleges, including MHC, chose to remain single-sex to serve in breaking the remaining barriers of gender inequity. Women at this time experienced and helped to enact drastic changes in institutional and larger social policies that ended the "in loco parentis" role of the college. These changes reflected national and global trends in women's and young people's liberation. "In loco parentis" was the institution's right and duty (granted by the extra-institutional scale and enacted upon women's bodies) to serve in the role of parent to young women (and sometimes men) away from home.

While class norms on campus remained stable over time, gender norms shifted drastically not only because of women's transformations in the extra-institutional sphere, but also because the privilege found on the elite women's college campus allowed for and prompted such changes. While women growing up in the 1980s and 1990s experienced a backlash against feminism and its accomplishments (Evans 2003), the women of MHC experienced a supportive, privileged environment in which to continually challenge gender norms. It is of note that the experiences of those in college during World War II more closely fit those who attended college

in the late 1960s. It seems as if the war granted temporary economic freedom and altered class and gender expectations for those women as the U.S. government urged women to fill what were traditionally men's occupations (Sealander 1997). Marta '45, for example, was recruited on campus into a position at a Fortune 500 corporation upon graduation which she then lost when male employees returned from the warfront.

Geographers write about scales other than the body and institution, but these were not directly addressed in participants' discussions of their relations to the campus. This is likely because participants' experiences often took place within the bounds of the semi-rural campus. The nation-state, local, regional, and global scales were absorbed into their accounts of the extra-institutional scale, while the scale of the home was absorbed into that of the institution. Participants' memories and experiences of the campus did not create links to scales—such as the home and city—beyond those constructed within the residential campus. For example, Tina '00 remarked when drawing the campus of MHC versus the “real world” for the mental mapping exercise: “And we have a little walkway with an arch, leading out into the real world of South Hadley, Massachusetts.”

Conclusion

Using the lens of feminist and critical geography, this paper has examined a group of predominantly upper-middle class, white women's (re)productions of and challenges to gender and class norms on their college campus over time through the scales of the body, the institution, and the extra-institution. The interviews and mental mapping exercises with 32 students and graduates of an elite women's college from classes spanning 1937 to 2006 illuminate the complexity and contradictions in the (re)production and reworking of class and gender

expectations and their connection to geographic study. Much like Paasi's depictions of scales, the scales portrayed in participants' daily lives were partly concrete and unbounded, and historically contingent; and similar to Mountz and Hyndman's portrayal of borders between scales, the participants transformed the boundaries of their scales and the gender and class norms associated with them. Participants depicted the extra-institutional project as enacted in the institution; the institution's project was taken on as their own as they worked to define and be formed by it.

At the beginning of this paper, Tina '06 responded to the question "What socioeconomic class do you use to identify yourself?" by indirectly explaining how privilege was and is successfully inscribed while on campus through responding with her own (rhetorical) question: "Am I automatically upper-middle class if I went to Mount Holyoke?" Through this privilege that spanned generational cohorts and along with transformations in the larger social sphere for women's gender norms, MHC prompted "the physicality and collectivity of social existence in new ways" (Pratt 1998, 299) in their scaled understanding of women's gender norms on this particular college campus.

Acknowledgments

The author is eternally grateful to Cindi Katz and to two anonymous reviewers for their constructive, insightful, and thoughtful criticisms, as well as to Valorie Crooks and Jeff Masuda for their comments, determination, and leadership in bringing this scale collection together. The author wishes to extend her gratitude to the alumnae who volunteered their time and memories for this project and to the Alumnae Association of MHC for their assistance in soliciting those

alumnae. This work was partially conducted under the Class of 1905 Fellowship of the MHC Alumnae Association.

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ⁱ All names given are pseudonyms to grant anonymity to the research participants.

ⁱⁱ *Highly selective* is used by the U.S. higher education admissions community to refer to colleges with high rankings and prestige based upon the high quality of education, the admit rate of students, the caliber of their students based on class ranking and performance, and the level of achievement of their students around community leadership. *Elite* is the term used in the literature (Ostrove & Stewart 1998; Wentworth & Peterson 2001) to denote a highly selective institution while taking into account the socioeconomic standing of the college and, often, its student body. In this paper, I use the two terms interchangeably although I prefer to use the more encompassing term *elite* which summarizes both the entitlement and capital of the campus that students and alumnae embody & (re)produce.

ⁱⁱⁱ There are two major types of elite colleges and universities in the United States: small liberal arts colleges and large national universities. This paper addresses phenomenon specific to residential institutions of both types, whereby students live on campus. I use the term college in this paper to refer to the residential liberal arts college.

^{iv} Although the mental mapping methodological component was incorporated to further the verbal interviews, the methodology and analysis of the mental maps was so rich that it is necessary to address it separately in its own, future paper.