

Joel Greenberg reports from the American Psychological Association meeting in San Francisco

It's still a man's war

How would John Wayne have felt if his bombardier in a World War II mission was a woman? Uncomfortable? Maybe a little resentful? Observers have suggested that there is some John Wayne in most men attracted to the military, and a study by the U.S. Air Force Academy now appears to bear that out in findings about the attitudes of military men toward women.

In a survey of more than 600 upperclassmen and incoming male cadets, researchers tested the cadets' attitudes toward women both before and after exposure to new female cadets in basic training. The results showed that the male cadets' views toward women—which proved to be more traditional than the attitudes of non-military college students to begin with—became even more traditional after their first contact with the women in a training situation. (“Traditional” implies, among other things, the perception that males are the more dominant and females the more subservient of the two.)

Researchers William P. Marshak and David C. Gillman of the Air Force Academy and Lois DeFleur Nelson of the Academy and Washington State University offer several explanations of the apparent backlash against women. Men who enter military academies “are a distinct segment of the population,” say the investigators. “Their selection of a traditionally male-dominated career indicates that they would be less receptive to changing female roles.”

In addition, the integration of women into the service academies was mandated by Congress and has placed the cadets in a “forced compliance situation,” which could also contribute to their lack of acceptance of liberalized concepts of women's roles. In contrast, the data indicate that the women entering the Air Force Academy do not differ in attitudes about their roles from their civilian counterparts (they and male cadets were compared to University of Texas undergraduates). And the women's attitudes were unchanged by basic training.

Obesity: Food is where you find it

While it may seem obvious to some that fat people like to eat where there is a lot of food available, it apparently was not that cut and dried to researchers Andrew Meyers of Memphis State University and Albert J. Stunkard and Milton Coll of the University of Pennsylvania. In what they call “the most comprehensive study yet undertaken of the objective measurement of human eating behavior,” the three investigators observed 5,041 persons ordering and eating food at eight different restaurants.

The researchers report that “site of eating was by far the most powerful influence” on choice of food and the amount chosen. In one portion of the study involving restaurants that offer both smorgasbord and waitress service, the researchers found that the proportion of obese diners who ordered the smorgasbord was more than double that of non-obese persons in the restaurant. “These findings indicate that obese individuals may more often than the non-obese, select settings where higher calorie food intake is available,” they report.

However, in their other observations, the scientists “found virtually no difference in food choice between obese and non-obese individuals.” Other than the smorgasbord setting, the researchers report that “in public places neither the realm of food choice nor eating behavior differentiates obese persons from non-obese persons. There is no ‘obese eating style.’” However, they emphasize that “obese people are more likely to choose settings where larger meals are eaten. Taken together, these findings have optimistic implications for the treatment of obesity.”

The presidency and a loss of innocence

A study of children's attitudes toward the presidency eight years ago concluded that “young children view the president through rose-colored glasses. No traces of criticism, mistrust or indifference creeps into the picture.” That was before Watergate.

A 1977 study by Robert Blotner of City University of New York concludes that “it is no longer the case that children idealize the president. Most of our children [in the study] feel that Presidents Nixon and Ford were lazy, neither liking nor caring about the people, unresponsive to their needs, not particularly intelligent and, in general, not good people.”

Blotner interviewed a sample of 228 school children in 1974 and another sample of 126 youngsters in 1976. The students came from grades 4, 6 and 8 in 12 schools in Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx and consisted of black, Hispanic and white lower- and middle-class children. In the 1974 questionnaire, Nixon fared poorly when the youngsters compared him to their fathers, as well as to their ideal of a president. In 1976, Ford was also viewed somewhat negatively, but in contrast to Nixon, was “considered to be an honest man.”

Blotner cautions that the results do not indicate, as some might suggest, that children have abandoned faith in the government. “These children did not lose faith in the government. It was Nixon and Ford they disliked,” he says. “Although Nixon and Ford did not meet their ideal, they are optimistic that the next president will.”

Of Nixon, erotic films and aggression

Richard Nixon seems to be cropping up in all sorts of places in the behavioral research field—even, in this case, a study of whether erotic films make men more aggressive toward females. Iowa State University's Ed Donnerstein, a long-time researcher in the aggression field, and Gary Barrett had a portion of their 72 male volunteers write an essay on Nixon's pardon. Those whose essays were (purposely) evaluated as poor received more than an F—they were punished with a series of electric shocks given by a female or a male. They were then classified as angry. The other essay writers received only one shock and a positive evaluation—they were not angry.

Each evaluator/shocker then showed either an erotic or a neutral film to the subject. After the film, it was then the subject's turn to administer a test to his evaluator, whom he could “ostensibly” shock for giving a wrong answer. It was found that only angered males showed increased aggression after exposure to erotic films. Non-angered subjects showed no appreciable increase in aggression. In addition, the men who were angered became almost equally aggressive regardless of whether their shocker was a male or female. These data suggest “that male subjects were inhibited from aggressing toward females, even under arousing conditions,” Donnerstein says.

Childless women are fulfilled too

According to Erik Erikson, the adult who has reproduced, created a family and helped others to grow achieves an integrity and ego maturity unmatched by other accomplishments. But a study of 590 professional women who have voluntarily remained childless now casts doubt on this aspect of Erikson's theory. The same sense of fulfillment and maturity “can be achieved by those who are not biologically generative or procreative,” reports Kathryn Welds of New York Hospital's Payne Whitney Clinic. Her results “call into question Erikson's emphasis on parenthood as a necessary condition for continued development,” she reports.