

1 The Professional School Experience

An Informal Introduction

Professional schools are an important gateway to success in contemporary U.S. society. Once, their doors were not open to all. They excluded women, denied entry to people of color, and set admission quotas for Jews. But today, all are welcome to apply—the criteria for acceptance are based on qualifications, not demographics. And it is a qualified group indeed that is granted admission to America’s prestigious professional schools. Students entering professional schools have impressive collegiate grade-point averages. Most of them have scored well on standardized tests such as the GRE, MCAT, or LSAT. They come with impressive letters of recommendation and extensive records of extracurricular activities. Today’s matriculants may be of diverse races, genders, and class backgrounds, but their resumes are uniformly exemplary.

Unfortunately, their equivalent earlier accomplishments do not translate to equal levels of professional success. A quick look at earning disparities between men and women in the professions makes this clear: in 2000, the median net income for a U.S. male physician was \$195,000, while for a female physician it was \$120,000; the median salary in 2002 for male attorneys was \$69,680, while for females it was \$50,648; and the median income for male social workers in 2003 was \$54,290, compared to the median female income of \$43,510 (Women Physician Congress, 2003; Dugan, 2002; Linsley, 2003). Individuals who face more than one demographic hurdle are particularly challenged; for example, data indicate that nearly 100 percent of female African American attorneys leave their first law-firm job within eight years (Blumenthal, 2004).

There is a large body of literature exploring how the workplace produces patterns of social inequality, but this does not explain the fact that patterns of race, class, and gender stratification appear starting in the first

days of professional schooling.¹ The disproportionate success of white males from class-privileged backgrounds is a matter of substantial controversy within the professions. Some conservative individuals claim that academic competition at professional schools ensures that the “smartest” rise to the top. These individuals argue that the greater tendency of white men to excel is explained by affirmative action policies that grant less “smart” people of color admission to elite schools. Professionals of a liberal bent dismiss such explanations angrily. They believe that white men achieve disproportionate success because women and people of color face a conspiracy to discriminate on the part of biased professors, administrators, and employers. The problem with these lay theories is that they are both incorrect: the conspiracies they posit do not exist.

The theory that inappropriate affirmative action explains the underperformance of “nontraditional” professional students can be disproved in a number of ways. Students of color are not showered with undeserved grade-point averages by liberal college administrations, so such students’ college success cannot be explained by affirmative action. Students who are members of underrepresented minorities are sometimes beneficiaries of affirmative action in professional school admissions—but at other schools there is no affirmative action, and students of color underperform in comparison to their white peers at both sets of institutions.² Moreover, other “nontraditional” groups of professional students who do not do as well as their traditional peers, such as students with evangelical religious commitments, have never been the subjects of affirmative action policies, so their failure to be high achievers can hardly be explained away by affirmative action.

The theory that a conspiracy to discriminate explains the better grades and career outcomes of class-privileged white men is equally unconvincing. White males outperform other professional students even in classes run by feminist, antiracist social work professors. Although incidents of overt and intentional discrimination do occur at professional schools, they are fairly infrequent, while the underperformance of women and students of color is pervasive. And white men outperform other students even on exams where their names are concealed under blind grading policies meant to ensure nondiscrimination, belying the theory that a conservative cabal creates the disparities.

What then can explain “nontraditional” students’ failure to reach the same level of success as their “traditional” peers at professional schools? This is the question that led me to begin the research this book presents.

Before I begin formally to present my solution to the puzzle of the underperformance of “nontraditional” students, I offer the cases of five of the students who graciously allowed me to observe and interview them as they experienced their first year of professional school.³ I met these students at U.C. Berkeley’s Boalt Hall School of Law and School of Social Welfare while attending classes with them as a participant observer. I believe that it would be useful for the reader to come to understand, at least in part, how different students experienced the first year of professional school.

Brian

Brian was a confident and articulate white man in his midtwenties. (I have changed all students’ names to protect their confidentiality.) On the day we met for our interview, he was wearing a pair of khaki corduroys, a snowy white, unadorned T-shirt, and an elegant European watch with a curved face. Brian had always excelled academically and expected even before entering college to pursue either an MBA or a JD.

Brian conveyed to me that he was very happy with his decision to attend law school. He found the work challenging and interesting and felt that as long as he put in the necessary preparation time, he did well in class, both when volunteering to speak and when called upon by a professor. He told me that when he was called upon to answer a question, “I think there is a moment of pause, and then I feel a natural stress reaction. But I have done an enormous amount of public speaking in the past, and so I am very comfortable doing that.” If a professor chose to debate a point he had made, Brian found that he enjoyed rather than dreaded the occasion, because, as he put it, “I have always been a hard debater.” Being rational by nature, Brian felt an affinity for the rational gamesmanship of debating.

Brian not only performed well in class, he also received excellent grades. He faxed copies of his grade reports to the law firms to which he had applied for a summer associate position and received phone calls “the very next day from firms that were interested,” a response he felt was gratifying personally but rather unfair generally. The unfairness Brian perceived to arise from the fact that “as far as testing knowledge of the law, at most this accounts for 50% of the grade,” the other half of the grade being determined by “a certain writing style,” which Brian felt he was fortunate to possess, since it was not something taught in class. Many of the students around him were not so

fortunate, and he deemed it sad that their lower grades “undermined their sense of well-being or sense of self-confidence.”

Still, Brian was clearly enjoying his success at law school. He felt sympathy for students who were unable to get the high grades he had received, and yet he simultaneously felt that his success reflected his intelligence, work habits, verbal abilities, and interests. While some students complained that the reading load was too long and boring, Brian said, “By and large I feel fortunate in that I do find it very compelling, interesting reading. I enjoy it and it moves fairly quickly.”

Brian was sanguine about the likelihood that he would make a good lawyer and that he would do good as well, helping society through corporate law practice:

I believe I have a core set of beliefs, which I will not compromise. I think I will generally contribute to social well-being and the general good. I will employ my legal skills to facilitate—I plan to go into corporate law—facilitating business transactions both in that context and hopefully in pro bono work, so that at the same time I will be able to help people achieve their own goals.

When considering his future legal career, Brian enjoyed a sense of moral comfort as well as confidence in his skills.

Because of his ability to prepare quickly for class, Brian found that he had time for recreation, often going out to bars or even getting away for the occasional weekend of snowboarding and camping. He engaged in these activities with his numerous new Law School friends, whose company he enjoyed even more than he had that of his pre-Law School friends, because he felt he was more similar to the friends he had made at law school. Brian felt that he and his Law School friends were “the focused type: we work hard when we are working—and then we go play.” All in all, Brian was excelling academically and enjoying himself personally. After a brief period of adjustment in which, he says, “I was not sure what was acceptable behavior,” Brian settled comfortably into the life of a successful law student.

Jasmine

A very different first-year law student, Jasmine, was a petite, energetic Filipina who had blunt-cut, shoulder-length hair and an urbane and fashionable style. She was more casual and colloquial in her speech

than Brian was. Like him, Jasmine had a history of excellent academic performance, and her academic success had defined her within her Filipino American community in Los Angeles:

I'm the first person from my community to go to graduate school. Law school is a big deal to them, to everybody, so I know I have to do a lot of representing for them. And when I go back, they look for a lot of leadership in me. It feels good, but it's a lot of responsibility; . . . it's a burden I take on.

Like Brian, Jasmine had dreamed of going to law school for a long time, but unlike him, she has found the transition to law school challenging:

When I was little, it was for some reason always a plan that I had that I was going to go to law school. I think I was six when I started writing letters to all the top law schools—I was kind of crazy. And then I started working with kids and my life was really revolving around juveniles and stuff like that, and it was really clear that what I wanted to do was be a juvenile-court judge, and that's the reason I stay here, because seriously, if I didn't know, I would not be able to continue this.

Jasmine was uncomfortable at law school for multiple reasons—ideological, emotional, academic, social, and personal.

One cause for Jasmine's discomfort was that she was not receiving training in the areas of law which interested her. "I feel the classes aren't relating to what I want to do; it's boring," she told me. The courses seemed framed to train students to meet the needs of wealthy adults rather than of underprivileged children. She needed to rationalize the effort she put into studying what seemed to her tangential matters:

I think there's a system, and a system runs what's happening in society and how the law works. Being in law school means learning the system, how to work the system. There are a lot of things I see that should be changed in the system, but at the same time I need to understand where it's at in order to move it.

Jasmine's relationship to the law she was studying was much more alienated than Brian's was: while Brian approached the law uncritically as something in which to immerse himself so that he could excel, Jasmine adopted a criti-

cal stance toward the law as something she wanted to master without internalizing its values, so that she could change it (and not vice versa).

A central problem Jasmine saw was that the law seemed to her coldly rational, lacking in empathy. She felt that law professors did not train students to show empathy or respect for clients: “The teachers don’t want to focus on that. . . . I think there’s a lot of human relations avoided at times. They don’t teach lawyers people skills here.” As a result of what seemed to her their rationalist bias, Jasmine felt that judges reached unjust decisions in many of the cases she read.

I have to suppress my emotional side to do legal analysis. Sometimes it’s hard to understand why judges do certain things, and then you have to look at the law and the statutes and consistency, and all that stuff plays a big part in why they’re doing it, but a lot of times if you look at the individual case it doesn’t make any sense.

While the law as she was learning it in class seemed coldly unempathetic, Jasmine felt that her empathy and people skills were the assets that would serve her best in being a good juvenile-court judge: “While I recognize the rational part, especially being a juvenile judge, I’ll really recognize the emotional part; I recognize where these kids are coming from, so I think I’ll make a good judge.” Jasmine was clinging tightly to her empathetic understanding of justice and her sense of mission—but in this she felt no support from professors and little from classmates.

Jasmine was not enjoying herself socially at law school in the way Brian was. When I asked her if she had made many friends, she replied, “Depends on what you call friends. I know a lot of people.” She was disappointed with the Law School social milieu, describing it as “a very high-schooly atmosphere” characterized by competition, cliquishness, and emotional immaturity. Everyone seemed to be intelligent, but Jasmine felt that there was more to life than being smart, and many students seemed to her to be sheltered, self-centered, and disturbingly indifferent to social justice.

Jasmine had been a rhetoric major at a reputable college, and she said she was confident she could handle law school intellectually. Nevertheless, her first-semester grades were below average. She was having some difficulty coping with not getting the good grades she was accustomed to. She rationalized others’ better performance by stating that the high scorers were not smarter than she was or more apt pupils of the law, but that “they really work their butts off,” which is something she did not wish to do. Still,

Jasmine was concerned about her underperformance and avoided looking at her grades for weeks:

It was probably my old fears coming out, about always looking at grades, and I didn't want it to hold me back from learning now, from wanting to be at school, because I think a lot of people maybe get discouraged and they just feel like they want to fall back, because what's the point? I don't want to pressure myself like that.

Jasmine did not suggest that her underperformance had anything to do with her personality or style. Nonetheless, it was clear that much of her discomfort at law school arose from issues of style and identity, and that being a law student precipitated a sort of identity crisis for her that Brian never encountered. She struggled to put this into words:

Even in my first semester here at law school, it was like, What am I doing here? I was fighting against a lot of, "I'm not like these people, I don't want to do that." . . . Throughout the whole law-school process—I'm expecting it, I guess I surrendered to it—there's just a lot of identity finding, a lot of changing.

That Jasmine's very sense of self was changing during law school raised the distressing possibility for her that she might become someone the present Jasmine would not admire. She was worried that she might "lose" herself and had felt herself "on the edge" of just giving up and becoming a corporate lawyer, although for the time being, at least, she had reaffirmed her sense of mission in serving underprivileged youth.

Attending law school had already had a curious effect on Jasmine's identity: she had developed a sort of split personality. Her entire self-presentation varied according to whether she was at school or at home with her Filipino community in Los Angeles:

In the legal culture . . . you have to adopt a different way of being, a different vocabulary and way to carry yourself . . . you have to in order to—that's how I got this far. And when I go home, if I act the way I do here, if I speak the legalese, they won't get it. So I have to go back to the different way and rechange the way I talk and everything.

When moving between the two environments, Jasmine experienced an awkward period of transition:

Sometimes it's weird where I'll go home and my cousins and my friends say, "What did you say? What?" When I go home, it's always, "You're kind of whitewashed." And when I come here, I have to get back my law style.

This split identity allowed Jasmine to exist in two disparate worlds without having to choose between them, but it was not an easy way to live.

Both Brian and Jasmine had been very successful college students, yet Brian was doing well and enjoying himself at law school, while Jasmine was not. What distinguished the two to cause them to have such disparate experiences during their first year of law school? Brian was a white man, while Jasmine was a woman of color. Jasmine had an empathic orientation, while Brian was oriented toward rationality. Brian spoke in hyperarticulate academic prose; Jasmine spoke colloquially. Jasmine had a strong liberal ideology and intended to pursue social justice aims, while Brian held basically libertarian views and intended to become a corporate attorney.⁴ Which of these factors, if any, contributed to the difference in their experiences? Does being a "nontraditional" professional student per se doom a person to underachievement? To help answer this question, allow me to introduce Miki.

Miki

A student at the U.C. Berkeley School of Social Welfare who was also pursuing a joint degree in public health, Miki was a Hawaiian-born woman of Japanese descent, vibrant, in her midtwenties, with a style simultaneously scholarly and funky. Academically energetic, Miki double-majored in college in psychobiology and Asian/Pacific Islander studies and intended to go to medical school after completing her MSW and MPH degrees. Her career goal, she told me, was "to work in a community clinic doing either OB/GYN prenatal stuff, or pediatrics work in the 'hood."

Miki was doing well academically and felt that the social welfare program "actually seems easier than undergrad." Nevertheless, she found herself at first having to adjust to a pedagogical style that was "different from what I expected." Because she was used to the teaching style of the biological sciences, Miki was expecting to memorize theories and formulae, but instead the professors said, "These are the theories you are reading; what do you think of these theories and how do you think you can apply them?"

When I asked whether this difference in pedagogical styles had made her uncomfortable, she replied:

No, it's just different, and sometimes I have to remind myself that, yes, I am learning, because I can't spit out a formula. But I like it, on the other hand, just because it allows me to be more creative; if I can master these techniques, I'll have an arsenal to use later. In a sense there is more room for creativity and more room to be just more subjective.

Miki might have needed to adjust to the different style of social work scholarship, but that she did this successfully was evident in her excellent first-semester grades.

Miki found it easy to speak in class, and she participated in discussions often. As she said, "I don't really have a problem speaking in class; in fact, I'm sure sometimes the professors would like me to shut up." She felt comfortable that her liberal views were in the program's mainstream, although the consensus seemed so strong that sometimes, she felt, "it gets boring not fighting someone." At such times, Miki would call up an old conservative investment-banker friend to debate with because, she said, with a certain chagrin, "it grounds me." Rather like Brian, Miki did not find the workload onerous and was able to complete all her course work and still have time to play with her dog and two cats or to see a movie.

If Brian was rationally oriented and Jasmine was emotionally oriented, Miki felt herself to be balanced between the two. Her desire for this balance was reflected in her pursuit of dual degrees: "Part of the reason I'm doing the MSW/MPH is because I like to jump between the empathic and rational, and part of the reason I double majored in Asian/Pacific Islander studies and psychobio was to be able to keep between the two." If forced to choose, Miki said, "I guess I would probably be more comfortable in the emotional side." She experienced no mismatch between her emotional orientation and the social work training she was receiving.

Miki felt aware of being a woman of color in the social welfare program, but not uncomfortably so. She did not resent being asked to "give the Asian perspective" on a particular issue:

I do feel like there is a certain expectation to represent "your people," but I just took a thousand Asian-American studies classes in college, and I know a lot about the research, so I guess in a sense I put myself

in that position. I don't feel there's ever been a time when someone said, "Well, Miki, you're Asian, why don't you tell me?" I think it's because from the get-go, if there's something I know about APIs, I'll raise my hand and say, for example, "Hmong don't have a written language, so of course they're illiterate." So, then, I guess when there are questions, people naturally say, "Do you know?"

Rather than feeling stereotyped by being asked questions about Asian/Pacific Islander cultures, she felt that her academic expertise was affirmed.

Miki, in short, was as comfortable, confident, and successful in her professional program as Brian was in his, indicating that status as a woman of color does not doom a professional student to underperformance. But Miki is an MSW student rather than a law student, and social work is a traditionally feminine profession. Do all women do as well as she has in the social welfare program? Let me answer by introducing Charmaine.

Charmaine

Charmaine, a single mother of two children, described her background as "multicultural: my mother is Caucasian with Indian, and my father is black with Indian." In her early thirties, she seemed both mature and youthful, accustomed to responsibilities but playful in her fashion statements, which included a dramatically pierced tongue. When her parents divorced when she was seven, Charmaine's standard of living fell sharply, and she lived for years in poverty. She was a former client of social workers and was proud to be on the other side of the fence.

Unlike the other students I have introduced, all of whom had prior records of uninterrupted academic success, Charmaine dropped out of high school when she became a mother at seventeen. She got her high school equivalency degree so that she could get a job "doing data entry, clerical, stuff like that," and after a while she decided to try to get an associate's degree.

You know, I was happy at that time, like, doing what I was doing, but I saw that a degree could help me with raises and things like that. By the time I finished my associate's, I saw the utility in getting the bachelor's, and at the time that I finished the bachelor's, I started thinking maybe I wanted to take a different turn, and I don't want to work in the "nine to

five” for the rest of my life, so I had to begin thinking about, well, what interested me?

Having worked her way up from equivalency to community college to state college, Charmaine decided to apply to a professional program in social work as “kind of a culmination of my own desires.” While her ability to work her way up from high school dropout to professional school matriculant while supporting two children is testimony to her perseverance and intelligence, Charmaine did not have a background similar to that of the other students I have introduced, who had always excelled academically and assumed from an early age that lives as professionals lay ahead of them.

In some ways, attending the social welfare program was a powerfully positive experience for Charmaine. Having been a client of social workers, she said it was a vindication of sorts for her to be able to win admission into an MSW program. Equally empowering was the insight into her own experience that Charmaine acquired as she learned social welfare theory:

The more I learn about the basis of how policies and system structures are developed and become intact, I’m able to reflect back on why some of the things happen the way they happen, and why things happened for us the way they did, and it’s like, well, because that’s what they think, . . . and it’s very enlightening, and it’s very empowering to me, because I feel that the best way to overcome a lot of things is to understand the view from why the whole thing developed that way. I mean, I don’t just see my education as a book-smarts thing—it’s very much an integration of myself into learning and resynthesizing everything, and gaining this knowledge that I really have this desire to use, to help other people, and to help myself.

Attending the social welfare program was bringing about positive changes in Charmaine’s life—and yet these changes were painful to manage.

Not only were Charmaine’s career goals, social status, and class aspirations changing, but so was her style of self-presentation and way of looking at the world.⁵ While empowering, these changes made it difficult at times for Charmaine to be sure who she was and where her affiliations lay. On the one hand, she felt tied to people from the impoverished, largely African American and Latino neighborhood where she had lived most of her life. She said that with friends from that community, “I’m able to be myself, truly be myself,” because “we know each other; we know where we’re coming

from.” On the other hand, Charmaine felt that at Berkeley, “things could be misconstrued to the nth degree.” These comments would seem to indicate that she felt an affinity for her community of origin and alienated from the School of Social Welfare.

Yet comments Charmaine made at other points in our interview contrast sharply with her comments about being her true self only back home. When I asked how members of her community of origin reacted to her being admitted to a professional program, she said:

In their day-to-day lives of putting food on the table and things like that, they don't know from this. Going here is like going to school. Me and my mom were just laughing about this it's just under the same heading. They don't know an AA, BA, MA, PhD. It means nothing to them, and it has nothing to do with putting food on the table for that day or a lot of other things that could be happening.

This statement would seem to indicate that it was from her community of origin that Charmaine was feeling alienated. A fact she disclosed later in the interview made this point even more clear. When I asked how people from her home community reacted to her choice of a career in social welfare, she replied solemnly:

I don't discuss it. It wouldn't be something we would discuss, because they would have the conception of, “She's a social worker!” It has a bad connotation where I come from; . . . they cut your benefits, or things like that.

Charmaine had chosen a professional career path that she could not discuss with the community she came from. She felt that her old acquaintances could not understand the person she was now. Yet she simultaneously held the contradictory feeling that only “back home” could she “truly” be herself. Like Jasmine, she was suffering a crisis of identity.

To the extent that Charmaine desired to change from the kind of person who had needed to rely on social services as a client to the kind of person who serves others in a professional capacity, it would seem that she paid the price of her identity crisis willingly. But there were other ways in which she felt uncomfortable in her program that were solely negative. Central among these was her feeling that the professors and students around her, who were supposed to be educated and sensitive, held stereotyped beliefs about people living in poverty.

It makes me so irritated when I feel that the well-to-do are making broad, sweeping generalizations about those of us who come from a poor background, and they're wrong. That infuriates me! Let me bump that up from irritated to infuriated. Yes, I have heard folks here say things that . . . I just see red, because I really feel it bespeaks that you didn't take the time to get out to know people, and you just have assumptions about them.

It was disturbing to Charmaine that an attitude toward the poor which she felt was personally insulting was held by people whose profession was aimed at serving impoverished clients.

Another reason Charmaine felt uncomfortable in the social welfare program was, she said, that

there are so few people of color here, and you can define that however you want to define it, whether you're talking black, Latin, and so on. I was struck by that from about the first week. I was kind of uncomfortable with that, because the question comes up for me, "Well, are you telling me that there are just not enough of these people that cut the mark?"

At times, Charmaine presented herself to me as a person who wouldn't let her underrepresented minority status upset her, as when she stated: "I think anyone would have to look around and say, there are not too many people who look like me here. Whether I let it bother me, I can't really say that it bothers me, but I'm aware of it." At other times she admitted to feeling "intense rage" about it. When I raised the question of whether she had a disability, she laughingly listed her rage. While Charmaine presented this as a sort of joke, it was accurate in a way: she was disabled from concentrating on her studies when she was raging at racism and classism in the program, and she was disabled from integrating into the profession when it inspired her ire instead of her respect. If being a professional involved feeling superior to the poor or accepting racial disparities, then Charmaine wanted none of it.⁶

Although the students in the social welfare program are predominantly female, I met many women who, like Charmaine, were uncomfortable there—sometimes feeling positively challenged but more often negatively so. What, then, of the men in the program? At the time of my research, less than one-quarter of the students in the U.C. Berkeley School of Social Welfare were men. Would their status as a numerical minority predispose them

to feel uncomfortable, like Jasmine and Charmaine, rather than comfortable, like Brian and Miki? To suggest an answer, let us consider Peter.

Peter

Peter was a married white man in his early twenties. His look, when I met him for our interview, was reminiscent of Brian's: he was wearing khaki pants with a white button-down shirt. Unlike Brian, however, he wore a small stud earring in one ear. Like Brian, he was very articulate, although his voice was softer, and he never cut me off in conversation the way Brian sometimes did; instead, he listened to me sensitively, making constant eye contact, leaning toward me, and nodding to show that he was following me. His manner was sufficiently "feminine" that when I first met him, I assumed he was gay. Yet there were also very masculine aspects to his personality.

Peter described himself to me as a "fiscally conservative liberal" and as a "Democrat who dresses like a Republican." Unlike Miki or Charmaine, Peter was part of the 15 percent of his class in the management track of the social welfare program. (In contrast to the program in general, the management track was dominated by men.)⁷ Peter said of his decision to apply to the management track:

Most people who decide to pursue a career in this area are interested in providing direct services, and I understand the appeal of being able to provide individual, face-to-face assistance to people in need. That's what lies at the core of social service work, and I do not denigrate it in any way—I have the highest respect for direct service providers. But I feel that my talents lie more in the area of ensuring that an organizational structure exists which can ensure that the client population is given swift and appropriate assistance, and that the social workers within the organization face the fewest institutional barriers to being able to provide that assistance.

Peter was a predominately rational person, and when speaking of the organization in which he did his clinical work, he sounded dry and business-like, using phrases such as "the integration of rehabilitative services" and "the way the funding structure gets operationalized." But there was more to Peter than a rational affinity for cost-benefit analyses. He was also a committed Christian who, after rededicating himself to attending church, felt pulled toward public service on religious grounds. He explained to me: "I

do feel that I have been called. It was a powerful experience for me when I came to understand this pull as a calling, and to realize that I need to use the abilities that I have to benefit those who have been less fortunate.” Peter’s parents found his feeling of having been called hard to accept—“They have the typical bourgeois aspirations for me that most middle-class parents have”—but for him, it was the feeling of fulfilling his calling that gave his professional career choice meaning.

Peter was satisfied with his choice of schools, and comfortable in his program. His grades were excellent, and he found the program easy: “Since the course work has not been challenging, I’ve come to realize that it is up to me to challenge myself intellectually.” He was working many hours on his reading and at his clinical placement, but he found he was still able to relax and listen to music, or to spend some unstructured time with his wife.⁵ Peter was also comfortable with his peers, whom he described as “caring and dedicated.” When I asked if he ever felt uncomfortable being in a minority as a male, he replied:

Oh, far from it. I have been very comfortable here. I have always been a person who has had many female friends, and I have no problem being in a majority female setting.

Nor did Peter ever feel that others “poorly judged” him for being a straight white male.

Peter, in short, was socially, academically, and morally quite comfortable in the social welfare program. He said that he supposed he was successful at professional school because of his good preparation and because of following his calling. He certainly did not attribute his success to being male (or middle class, straight, and white, for that matter), yet his comfortable integration in the social welfare program was shared by most of his male peers, but by only about one-third of his female peers.

Patterns

Throughout the two years of my research, I encountered many first-year professional students who, like Brian, Miki, and Peter, were comfortably integrated into their law or social welfare programs. Students such as these felt that they were “just going to school” and attributed their success meritocratically to their abilities and efforts. I encountered many other students, however, whose experiences were similar to Jasmine’s and

Charmaine's. These students had a lot on their minds besides "just going to school": they were having problems integrating into their professional programs that were related to issues as fundamental as their sense of self. Many were worried that they might lose important aspects of their self-definition, such as their ideological commitments, their capacity for empathy, or their community loyalties. Some were struggling with finding themselves in their programs through personal growth—a process that, while positive, precipitated an identity crisis. The students facing these difficulties while trying to integrate into their professional programs were generally suffering academically, because they were preoccupied with issues other than "just going to school."

This is the phenomenon that my book explores: the place of identity in the professional socialization process. My basic thesis is this: students such as Brian, Miki, and Peter enjoy a consonance between their personal identities and the professional roles they encounter in professional school. They are thus able to internalize the role of lawyer or social worker easily, in a process so smooth as to be imperceptible to them, and they are able to focus on the intellectual tasks of professional school with little distraction.

Students such as Jasmine and Charmaine, however, suffer from a mismatch between the personal identities they possess upon entering their professional programs and the professional roles those schools proffer. They are therefore unable to internalize these roles without suffering a jarring dissonance between their personal identities and their fledgling professional identities. This dissonance presents a problem, because to be successful as professionals, students must internalize an appropriate professional identity. It also leads to a secondary problem, in that seeking to find a way to manage or resolve their identity dissonance distracts these students from focusing on their studies. My research aims to explore how the problems of identity dissonance disadvantage professional students in comparison to their identity-consonant peers.