Careers vs. Systems of Oppression: Sexism & Socialization

By: Matthew P. Cowley, M.Ed.

“I can take your resume, but we typically find that only men want this job.”

Imagine being a young woman majoring in mechanical engineering and hearing this from a recruiter at a manufacturing company who, to this point, has been your top choice for employment. When I heard this story from Luisa* my instinct was to classify the individual recruiter as sexist. Perhaps he is, but rushing to this assertion ignores the larger issues that will be considered in this article To be clear, this article is written with the assumption that the recruiter’s statement is evidence of a larger system. First, we must examine the society which has created a work environment that is populated primarily by men. Secondly, we must examine both Luisa’s and the recruiter’s particular place within that culture. Lastly, we should consider solutions. Instead of condemning the recruiter, we will work to find ways to interrupt the cycle that led to the hurtful statement that opens this article.

Socialization is one of the most critical concepts to understand as it relates to the story above and Sensoy and D’Angelo’s “Is Everyone Really Equal?”. Socialization is the “systematic training into the norms of our culture…[it] is the process of learning the meanings and practices that enable us to make sense of and behave appropriately in that culture” (p. 15). It is this process that trains us to understand the *way the world works.*It is also this process that teaches a man that Luisa, being a woman, does not *really*want the manufacturing position that she is inquiring about. Socialization is not a scapegoat, but it does help us to see why we

should be careful about villainizing the recruiter in this story. It is easy to preclude that this man is sexist and ignore this as a clear example of gender socialization. Even in 2017, many careers are socially gendered. Teaching is considered to be a female career, engineering is considered a male career, non-profit is considered a female career, being an entrepreneur is considered a male career path. We learn these distinctions at a young age. For example, boys are given toolset replicas as toys, teaching them to value working with their hands as well as taking things apart and putting them back together. Girls are given baby dolls (some of which even require diaper changes) that solidify their role as a caretaker. These lessons also guide our decisions about what subjects to invest in during our K-12 academic career, and they also help to inform our choice of major and career. This gendering is based on artificial assumptions, but these assumptions have created a very real lack of female within STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) and business. These are lessons that both Luisa and the recruiter receive and internalize.

Our recruiter, however, is not absolved of all responsibility. His discrimination against Luisa was based in a prejudice that stemmed from his socialization. He was likely not intending to be malicious. Regardless, he should be responsible for not only managing what he says, but also understanding the impact of his words. His status and membership within a dominant group matters. Additionally, if recruiters are not aware of these things, I believe that it is the responsibility of educational institutions like career centers and consulting firms to educate and interrupt the cycle of oppression. Many career centers offer several trainings and programs to educate employers on embracing diversity in

their applicant pool, and most also use personalized consulting to support their diversity hiring initiatives. However, despite all of the rhetoric around embracing women in STEM and despite the educational webinars and workshops, incidents like the one that Luisa encountered still arise. To be fair, the demands being place on employers often do not leaving time for professional (and personal) development, but I believe we often miss the mark because we squander the opportunities we do have to do critical work with diversity-focused educational sessions that are superficial at best. Many sessions focus on embracing and celebrating areas of diversity that appear within the *surface level* section of the Iceberg of Culture Model shared in the Sensoy and D'Angelo text. We claim to facilitate diversity trainings, but in reality we are merely discussing ways to relate to those who speak a different language, or have different skin complexion from our own. What we ignore is the deep culture and socialization that is at play in the lives of both the recruiter and Luisa.

The recruiter contributes to, but is also a product of society. He has been taught that it is rare for women to enter STEM fields, and he has been taught that even when they do, they do not find fulfillment by working in manufacturing. He likely believed that he was doing the Luisa a favor by sparing her the disillusionment that comes along with choosing the wrong career path. However, the recruiter's contributions to the sexist system are not benign. They have material consequences in the lives of students like Luisa. In fact, he is helping to perpetuate the same dearth of women in STEM that led to his comment. This cycle is not easily broken, but understanding it will help to start the process of disrupting it.

Luisa is also the product of socialization. She belongs to a culture that places value on her ability to "act like a woman". Manufacturing is seen as masculine, so interest from a young woman is viewed as outside of the norm. Luisa's recounting of this story was prompted during a career coaching appointment. I listed a number of organizations that she could consider applying to. Upon naming the offending company, Luisa looked and down and shook her head. She then proceeded to tell me about her interaction with that recruiter and how it had impacted her career aspirations. She had not considered any manufacturing positions after this, because she assumed that most employers would not take her interest seriously. She also began to genuinely doubt her interest in manufacturing altogether, because she assumed that experienced professionals were knowledgeable about the workforce.

This story is a perfect example of why examining deep culture and socialization is important. There are tangible consequences associated with acting out the socialization that we have received. In this appointment, Luisa displayed textbook symptoms of internalized oppression. We see Luisa silently enduring micro-aggressions from the dominant group, having low expectations of herself, and believing that the dominant group is more qualified for and deserving of their positions. Because of this, my attempts to *empower* Luisa fell on deaf ears. I wanted to disrupt her experience within this sexist cycle. I tried to explain to her that this one recruiter did not control her destiny, but she saw his words as evidence from experience, and she was unwilling to challenge it. I pushed her to challenge it and she replied- "It sucks that I have to be responsible for doing that." She was right. That does suck.

Allow me to read the minds of at least a few of the readers-

“If the student had a problem with the comment, she should have said something…”

This kind of thinking places a tremendous burden on the oppressed population. It essentially blames them for not sticking up for themselves, shifting the focus from the way that the student was treated in the first place. At its core this statement is what Sensoy and D’Angelo would call a refusal to recognize structural and institutional power. Our dominant group members must acknowledge and truly understand that “minoritized group members… have conditioned patterns (internalized oppression) that predispose them to defer to the dominant member. [For example,] Women overall will talk less when men are present and defer to men’s presumed leadership” (p. 136). Gender identity and status (student vs experienced professional with hiring authority) combine and have a tremendous effect on communication. Coded in this same response are also a rejection of the politics of language, and an invalidation of the claims of oppression as over-sensitivity. The word *if* appears frequently when one is challenged on their choice of words. It implies that noting offensive was actually done, because if something had happened the student could have approached them directly. This word allows the offender to maintain their claims of innocence by suggesting that their choice of words is not *actually* offensive, but perhaps could have been perceived that way. Ultimately, since they are not admitting to an objective wrongness, they place the onus on the offended individual to reach out and bridge the gap.

So how do we disrupt the cycle? There are programs across the country dedicated to growing the interest of young women in STEM fields. The promise of these programs is that if we can interest young women in careers that have been traditionally viewed as *male,* we will solve the problem. Unfortunately, this line of thinking often ignores the employers. Some, like Girls Who Code, partner with employers to ensure employment for their students or to solicit financial support. Rarely, however, do these programs attempt to educate the employers. I think that education is the key to interrupting the cycle, but this education must go deeper than the surface level *diversity is good*trainings that we often see. We need to help employers explore their own biases and prejudices. It is not enough to proclaim a desire for diverse candidates.

Sensoy and D'Angelo challenge us to remember that "these patterns are deeply rooted and will not interrupt themselves" (p. 151). Hosting a workshop to educate our employers on the realities of being a woman in STEM does no good if recruiters are never forced to examine their own contributions to the patterns and structure of sexism. Without this, many recruiters may project these issues onto others and never look within. It is not necessary for them to blame themselves, but knowing how they fit within the puzzle will help. In the final chapter of the book, the authors break down what it means to be an ally and to act in service of a more just society. They suggest that it is imperative for an ally to "[engage] in continual self-reflection to uncover your socialized blind spots" (p.157). They also give advice for ways that allies can take action in more public settings. One stands out as immediately relevant. The authors recommend that allies be willing to *change the process,* which essentially means

being willing to stray from the norm in order to be more inclusive. Many of our recruiters speak to students one-on-one at career fairs and other events. While this does provide a personal touch, it also exposes the students to the subjective opinions of one individual. Perhaps it would be helpful to have two recruiters per student. This would help to reduce comments like the one made to Luisa, and also ensure that these kinds of biases do not go unaddressed. Some might think that this is encouraging a *big brother* scenario, but I think that many would come to realize that "the "isms" are always operating and thus feedback about something problematic you've done is not an accusation" (p. 159). Feedback is progress. The career center will not be around during every recruiting event, so asking employers to police themselves is the most natural strategy.

Each Fall and Spring semester we see nearly 8,000 students at our large career fair. This year, as I looked across the sea of students dressed in suits, I wondered how often some version of Luisa's story was being repeated. This is not an easy thing to fix. We have all been socialized and we all have prejudices. I believe that it is our responsibility as educators to *go there* with our recruiters. We are already having educational conversations, but we need to have deeper conversations that require our employers to examine themselves and the way that they respond to world around them. Their future as a company, and the future of our students' lives depend on this.

**Luisa is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the student.*

Sensoy, Ozlem, and Robin DiAngelo. *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*. New York: Teachers College, 2011. Print.