

# discoveries

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## we (women) make america work

Mothers and unions are rarely associated, but Cynthia J. Cranford (*Qualitative Sociology*, December 2007) found that women leaders successfully constructed a “union motherhood” in the Janitors for Justice movement.

By drafting children and partners



Courtesy National Museum of American History

J. Howard Miller's Rosie the Riveter.

into protests, women leaders made the union a “family affair.” Both men and women actively engaged in caring for the many children who attended demonstrations and activities, which blurred gender roles. Coordinated childcare enabled more women to participate and promoted class solidarity, and allowed leaders to frame motherhood and unionism as mutually beneficial.

Motherhood gave women a unique vantage point from which to make claims of union goals, such as health insurance for children. Similarly, union politics added both practical value (wage earning) and symbolic value (empowerment through activism). **R.A.**

## unmasking racism

Halloween festivities may have a more sinister side than smashing pumpkins or your neighbor's Harry Potter costume.

Historically the holiday has been used as a “ritual of rebellion” where dominated groups temporarily assumed the role of the powerful. But Jennifer C. Mueller, Danielle Dirks, and Leslie Houts Picca (*Qualitative Sociology*, September 2007) argue some white students now use the holiday to re-affirm their dominance through existing racial stereotypes.

According to data collected from 663 personal journals of U.S. college undergraduates, some viewed Halloween and costuming as a “safe” and culturally tolerated opportunity to “take a break from” or “defy” social norms, especially those of race. Students even felt okay about dressing up as the racial “other” in derogatory ways, wearing costumes like “Vato Loco,” “Kung Fool,” “Ghetto Thug,” and “Project Chick.” These caricatures are then written off as harmless jokes, justified by the holiday.

The authors conclude that the racism permitted during Halloween is the same that supports the material and ideological benefits and disadvantages of different racial groups in our nation. If they're right, October 31<sup>st</sup> is scarier than we thought. **R.A.**

## rock 'til you drop

Bob Geldoff said “most people get into bands for three very simple rock and roll reasons: to get laid, to get fame, and to get rich.” Unfortunately, they might also “get” an increased risk of mortality.

Mark A. Bellis and colleagues (*Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, October 2007) studied 1,064 famous musicians who performed on the All-Time Top 1000 Albums list.

They measured survival rates from the time the musicians became famous and compared them to expected survival rates for the general population. Rock stars in the United States, Canada, and Europe, they found, die far younger than those in the general population.

Their untimely demise is due in large part to their environments. According to the authors, high levels of stress, depression, and substance abuse lead to more deaths.

But when rockers get old, there's an interesting divergence between Europeans and North Americans: European stars live longer the farther they get from their initial point of fame, whereas North American stars aren't so fortunate. The latter are more likely to die from chronic conditions like cardiovascular disease because they're living without the universal health insurance that treats these chronic conditions in their European counterparts. **K.C.**

## nfl combine saps dignity

Concussions and other injuries aren't the only job risks professional football players face. Personal dignity is also compromised, according to Mikaela J. Dufur and Seth L. Feinberg (*Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, October 2007).

After interviewing athletes and observing interactions at the National Football League's mass try-out event (known as “The Combine”), the authors found potential employees were subjected to confusing, invasive, degrading, and painful evaluation procedures. The multiple medical exams, physical tests that led to injury, and job interviews that delved into the most personal parts of athletes' lives were considered unnecessary by athletes (and some evaluators).

Unfortunately, the artificial restric-



AP Photo/Michael Conroy

Offensive linemen James Martin of Boston College, left, and Palauni Ma Sun of Oregon are measured for flexibility during workouts at the NFL mass try-out event in 2007.

tions and lack of other professional opportunities force these workers to give in to these unnecessary and humiliating activities. Even though they may be on the road to becoming rich, elite athletes, blue collar workers and the working poor aren't the only ones to experience the psychological and dehumanizing effects of exploitation. **K.C.**

## the more things change...

Although military service is mandatory for both men and women in Israel, until recently staff officer training courses were completely gender segregated, making it nearly impossible for women to climb to senior military leadership positions.

A new training course was designed to change all that. But according to Orna Sasson-Levy and Sarit Amram-Katz (*Signs*, Autumn 2007), the course was no match for the entrenched masculine culture, and in some ways may have made the situation worse.

The new training course included more physical combat training, and the high physical standards made women feel they were being forced to earn their place in the military, rather than that the military was changing to welcome them. Moreover, the authors found that even though official military language admirably made "an unequivocal declaration...that women, like men, have

equal rights, value and status, and that all people deserve respect and decency," the stereotyped attitudes of trainers and trainees undermined principles of equality in the institution.

The Israeli military may have made a real effort to train women for authority, but even in a top-down institution, making men and women equal is harder than it seems. **M.L.K.**

## are americans really ready for a female president?

Even though Haiti, France, Pakistan, Chile, and dozens of other countries have had a woman at the helm, Matthew J. Streb and colleagues find that Americans still might not be ready to elect a woman president (*Public Opinion Quarterly*, Advance Access).

A 2005 Gallup poll estimated 92 percent of the American public would vote for a woman of their own political party, but this study showed more than 25 percent of the American public can't stand the idea of a woman president. The difference in the two findings is due to a phenomenon called social desirability bias: those responding to conventional surveys are likely to be influenced by the desire to conform to social norms, especially in the presence of a researcher.

So, when face-to-face, it's socially unacceptable to profess anything but support for a female president. But when we're allowed to be totally anonymous—like in a voting booth—a lot of Americans apparently aren't ready for a commandress-in-chief. **M.L.K.**

## 80% of adults suffer from aging

In a recent study of online anti-aging advertisements, Toni Calasanti (*Social Forces*, September 2007) found the industry isn't just about smoothing wrinkles and easing arthritis—it's also about treating the onset of the aging

"disease" and restoring the gender inequalities associated with youth.

The multi-billion dollar anti-aging industry fills its ads with laser treatments and hormonal therapies promising to "stop the Aging Monster in its tracks." In doing so, Calasanti argues, inevitable aging is equated with a medical condition that can, and should, be prevented.

However, the claws of the Aging Monster produce more than preventable wrinkles. The "shameful loss" of youth is connected to a loss of distinct gender identities. For women, skin creams and Botox promise a more youthful—and thus more feminine—appearance. Ads targeting men, on the other hand, claim aging reduces performance and physical strength.

So, it seems, growing old has become optional. But the available options depend on your gender, not the Fountain of Youth. **W.L.**

## if nobody's leading, is it anarchy?

People often assume an organization will fall apart if nobody's in charge. But according to Dmitry M. Khodyakov's study (*Social Forces*, September 2007) of the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, which has no conductor, musicians can enjoy their relative freedom without turning into a noisy, disorganized mess. They just need trust and control.

The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra was founded by musicians looking for more artistic freedom in a chamber orchestra with no hierarchical control. The musicians soon found, though, that with complete freedom came a certain degree of chaos. With no conductor to call the shots, each musician was insistent the group try their particular interpretation of each composition.

The musicians managed to overcome this problem by putting rotating groups of musicians in charge. Only a few people made decisions at a given time, but every musician eventually got



Photo by Steve J. Sherman

The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra has trust and control instead of a conductor.

a turn to play boss. And as they played successfully with each other, the group developed more trust in each other's abilities.

The interplay of trust and control allows musicians not only to feel comfortable going with the flow, but also to openly disagree with each other without fear of ruining their cooperative relationships. **M.L.K.**

## weighing college decisions

It seems grades aren't the only scale that matters when it comes to going to college.

A recent study by Robert Crosnoe (*Sociology of Education*, July 2007) that reports obese girls are less likely to attend college than their skinny peers reminds us how the social life of the lunchroom can be associated with problems in the classroom.

Drawing from a survey of 10,000 high school students, Crosnoe evaluated the consequences of social stigma and school contexts to explain why girls—and not boys—are most affected by a few extra pounds.

Obese girls suffer more emotional distress from teasing and name-calling than other girls. They're also more likely to skip school, fail classes, and self-medicate with drugs and alcohol. Together these factors account for one-third of the obesity effect on college attendance. However, going to school with lots of other obese girls boosts the odds an overweight senior will make it to campus in the fall. **W.L.**

## red counties, blue counties

With the presidential season upon us, many Americans are wondering whether the nation will go red or blue. Sociologists have studied how voting patterns are linked to social class, but Rory McVeigh and Juliana M. Sobolewski (*American Journal of Sociology*, September 2007) offer a new explanation of voting tendencies.

Using 2000 Census data, the authors found the number of women and racial minorities in the workforce is related to whether a county votes for a Democratic or Republican president.

Even after controlling for political partisanship and income, counties with occupations that are completely segregated by sex see an 11 percent higher rate of Republican voting. The GOP vote is even higher when women and racial minorities are better positioned to compete for jobs—like when a large proportion of women and non-whites hold bachelor's degrees. The authors argue this pattern emerges because white males prefer more conservative candidates when women and racial minorities are perceived as a threat to their occupational niche.

So if the 2008 presidential election turns out to be a nail-biter, look around your office. Your coworkers may hold the key to the White House. **H.M.**

## gender and posture

In experiments where people perform tasks like identifying matching shapes or completing simple math problems, they tend to score higher and feel more confident when they're sitting in an upright position.

However, Tomi-Ann Roberts and Yousef Arefi-Afshar (*Cognition & Emotion*, June 2007) found that good posture may actually make women perform worse and instill less confidence.

In their study, men provided more accurate answers to math problems when seated upright than when slouching. The opposite was true for women. Likewise, when asked to evaluate their performance on a task, women who slouched felt better about their performance than those who sat straight, and the opposite was true for men.

The authors speculate that an upright posture, which is often an indication of high status and dominance, may feel less natural and comfortable to women. Another possibility is that women rely more heavily on their environment to interpret their behavior than men (who rely more on internal thoughts and feelings). The authors also suggest women may feel like they're in a sexually inviting, and therefore more vulnerable, position when sitting upright. **J.S.**

## is the personal(ity) political?

*Liberals are generous, conservatives are stingy. Conservatives are conscientious, liberals are disorganized and unrealistic.*

These popular stereotypes, along with some prominent social theories, suggest a strong connection between personality and political viewpoints. John R. Alford and John R. Hibbing (*The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 2007), though, argue there's actually little relationship among politics, behavior, and personality.

The authors tested for interpersonal temperament by having people play trust games—they gave subjects the options to be cooperative and trusting by giving money to a public fund or selfish freeriders by keeping their money to themselves. Perhaps surprisingly, self-proclaimed bleeding-heart liberals were no more likely to play nice than their anti-tax, conservative counterparts.

The authors also found that how people actually behave around others doesn't necessarily coincide with their views about how social life should be structured and organized on a larger scale.

They conclude personality, interpersonal temperament, and political temperament are three distinct, often disconnected, attributes. **J.S.**

## the politics of capital punishment

Capital punishment has long been one of the most hotly contested issues in America. Two recent studies reintroduce questions about whether the death penalty is an objective, value-free implementation of the law.

David Jacobs and Stephanie L. Kent (*Social Problems*, August 2007) found that social factors influence how capital punishment is applied. Executions are more likely after presidential elections in which candidates stress law-and-order

platforms, but subside in the face of sustained civil rights protests. Indeed, all factors examined, political pressures are the most important determinant of executions, even in a system designed to be free of political influence.

Still, only 10 percent of those sentenced to death are ever actually executed. To learn which death row inmates are most likely to face execution, Jacobs and Kent with colleagues Zhenchao Qian and Jason T. Carmichael (*American Sociological Review*, August 2007) looked at what happens after sentencing. They found the race of the victim is the most significant determinant, with those convicted of killing a white person more than five times more likely to be executed than those convicted of killing a person of color. Again, however, the political environment affected the use of the death penalty: More executions took place in states where Republican candidates received the most votes. **J.W.**

## after taft-hartley

Michael Wallace's study of the Taft-Hartley Act may help us understand possibly the most famous labor law in American history (*The Sociological Quarterly*, September 2007).

Wallace examined strike activity between 1948 and 1980, the year before U.S. President Ronald Reagan so famously crushed the air traffic controllers strike. He found that not only did Taft-Hartley significantly reduce the number of strikes throughout the nation, it significantly altered the content of these strikes.

Taft-Hartley explicitly outlawed many effective labor strategies such as sit-down strikes, sympathy strikes, and secondary boycotts. The act, and subsequent similar labor laws, also created arbitration boards, dispute hearings, and other avenues of redress for discrimination complaints, workplace control, and most non-economic disputes, therefore narrowing the legitimate use of strikes to wage disputes and other purely eco-

nomic concerns.

As a result, governmental policy can be seen as central to channeling conflict away from fundamental issues of workplace control and challenges to the capitalist system and into disputes over purely bread-and-butter issues.

**J.W.**

## good grades keep divorced dads around

After divorce, it can be difficult for non-resident parents to remain active in their kids' lives. A new study finds the behavior of adolescent children plays an important role in keeping the lines of communication open.

Daniel N. Hawkins, Paul R. Amato, and Valarie King (*American Sociological Review*, December 2007) found that happy adolescents with fewer problems inspire, rather than result from, their non-resident fathers' active involvement in their lives. Fathers are especially likely to get involved when their teens are doing well in school.

Active dads influence their adolescents' well-being when they live together. But when they live apart, the researchers speculate, the system of mutual influence breaks down. Clearly, the parent-child relationship is not a simple one-way street.

**C.S.**

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