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The Taint of Expectation

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The Rhodes Scholarship is one of the world's most prestigious. But who are these Rhodes Scholars? Where do they come from, and who have they become? This article tries to answer these questions by looking at the backgrounds of the Rhodes women and their lives following the completion of the Scholarship. In particular, it focuses on their careers and their families and analyzes to what extent, if at all, these factors have affected their ability to fulfill the expectations of such an esteemed title.

What makes the Rhodes Scholar? Obviously, the intellectual ability and drive of the individual marks them out from others. But where does this come from? The family background of "achievers" in society is an interesting topic, and looking at Rhodes Scholars in particular, one finds further support for the view that success in life is inextricably linked with the social situation and attitude of the family. Parents of Rhodes Scholars are well educated, the vast majority (83 percent of fathers and 74 percent of mothers) having achieved at least a university degree. Predictably then, these parents, particularly the fathers, reach high levels in their careers, which include academia, business, medicine, law, journalism and other positions of responsibility. Very few Scholars come from families of blue-collar workers, even fewer from families where the father is unemployed. It is noteworthy that less than a fifth (17 percent) of Scholars have fathers who have not achieved a university or graduate/professional degree.

Rhodes Scholars, it appears, have overwhelmingly come from relatively "successful" families. Not only have their fathers and mothers (albeit the latter to a lesser degree) achieved a great deal in their education and careers, but 80 percent of their parents remained married throughout their children's formative years. It seems likely that such a supportive and stable background enabled, both financially and emotionally, the future Rhodes Scholar to pursue her ambition, or indeed, to have ambition. This assumption is supported by the messages emphasized by the Scholars' parents. While they did not obviously push their children to achieve the highest paying professions, few encouraged messages that would seem to undermine education or the progress of women in particular. Instead, the future Scholars grew up in

households where, alongside more traditional directives such as worship, they were encouraged to be independent and “civically active.” The positive focus and ambition of the family was clearly not lost on the Scholars who, among other reasons, applied for the Scholarship to be the best person they could be, to advance their careers, and for international exposure.

It is surprising then, given the family background and motivations of the Scholars, that such a significant number feel they were unworthy of the Scholarship. Almost half (44 percent) of the respondents feel they did not deserve the Scholarship. When looking at the younger Scholars, those aged 32-37, this figure rises to 49 percent of all respondents. There is also a significant difference in the attitude of Scholars depending on where they are from. In all age categories, twelve percent fewer women from the U.S. feel they deserved the Scholarship compared to those outside of the U.S., and again the greatest divide is between the youngest Scholars; 20 percent more American women believe they were undeserving of the Scholarship than non-U.S. recipients.

Why is it that so many women, particularly young American women, feel they did not deserve the Scholarship? One may ask whether this reflects the privileged socio-economic backgrounds of many of the Scholars. Could it be that younger women especially have higher expectations of themselves? It is a difficult question, but the answer may lie in the fact that notably over half (53 percent) of all recipients feel they have failed to live up to the expectations of the Rhodes Scholarship. Arguably, one implication is that a sizeable number of female Rhodes Scholars feel they did not deserve the Scholarship because they have not fulfilled its prescribed expectations. Such negative beliefs do not appear to stem from low self-esteem or other emotional traits of the Scholars. In contrast, nearly three-quarters (74 percent) describe themselves as self-confident females. At the same time, however, it is interesting that only 14 percent of those who have achieved the prestigious title describe themselves as “a winner.”

Glancing at the information about the lives of female Rhodes Scholars, they certainly look like winners. Nearly half (49 percent) consider the Rhodes Scholarship to have been a passport to success and as a result, the vast majority of Scholars have succeeded in careers of a mid or high social status, including academia, business, law, medicine, teaching, journalism and nursing. Not only do Rhodes women have successful jobs, but an overwhelming 78 percent of the women “love” their jobs. Very few are not financially, emotionally or intellectually satisfied by their work. In relationships too, Rhodes Scholars seem to be relatively successful. The vast majority (89 percent) are in relationships of some kind. Those in long term relationships appear relatively

stable and happy; choosing, for example, partners who are very supportive of them and their careers.

Rhodes Scholars have clearly achieved much in their lives, but, for some at least, not enough to fulfill the expectations of the Scholarship. Why? Closer analysis shows that life for Rhodes women continues to feature discrimination and require sacrifice and compromise, regardless of the prestige of the Scholarship. Despite the success of Rhodes women in their careers, for example, it seems that for a worrying number, discrimination remains. Some Scholars are concerned by the economic discrimination continued to be faced by women, and this is an unsurprising response when one looks at the experiences of Rhodes Scholars in the job market. Despite loving their jobs, nearly half (48 percent) of Rhodes Scholars find it harder to get promoted or recognized at work because they are women. A similar percentage (46 percent) admit to feeling that they have been directly discriminated against because of their gender, and over half (54 percent) have adopted masculine traits at least some of the time. This is not the only compromise born out of discrimination; nearly two-fifths (38 percent) have consequently downplayed their ambitions, slightly more (42 percent) have yielded to the opinions of male colleagues, and over half (56 percent) have consciously communicated in a manner less confrontational than their male counterparts. It is arguable that such experiences will shape the attitudes, as well as the opportunities, of women; it is telling that the vast majority (77 percent) of the Scholars also believe that women are less likely than men to pursue traditional positions of power.

Equally difficult is the challenge many women face trying to balance their career and their families. The ability of so many to allocate their time to a vast number of responsibilities is commendable. But it is not easy. Looking at what the Scholars consider to be their most difficult decisions, a significant majority (62 percent) place “striking a balance between work and family” high on their list. Successful careers have meant longer hours, and despite the high number of Scholars in apparently happy long-term relationships, over half (52 percent) still do not feel that they are able to spend enough time with their partners; a notable point considering over three-quarters (77 percent) of the women believe having a fulfilling life partnership is a prominent definition of success.

For over half of the Rhodes Scholars (58 percent), their partner is only one element of their “family.” For these women, it appears that the greatest struggle remains the challenge of being a successful career woman and a mother. Of those that have children, a third admit that

professional choices have affected the number of children they have chosen to have. This is not surprising when one considers the impact of having children on a female's career; before the child is even born it seems that simply taking maternity leave can significantly harm the career prospects of even a Rhodes Scholar. Although the vast majority of those with children actually took up to six months maternity leave, over a third (36 percent) believe the choice to take maternity leave affected their professional status. Compared to their partners, the women surveyed were nearly twice as likely (81 versus 43 percent) to limit or turn down career opportunities because of their children. This decision may not necessarily have been forced upon these women. With children, some Scholars have become less ambitious, priorities have changed. But it is undeniable that it is still women who are largely responsible for the upbringing of children; the third-highest-ranking issue of concern for Scholars is the adequacy, cost, and availability of childcare. This is in addition to the fact that for 40 percent of the women, achieving promotion or gaining recognition in the world of work is directly undermined by their status as a mother.

Sacrifices are clearly being made, and yet women still feel they are not fulfilling their role as mothers. For example, nearly half (48 percent) do not feel they can spend as much time with their children as they would like, and it is unsurprising, therefore, that a slightly greater number (52 percent) admit their children probably feel their mother does not spend enough time with them. It seems for some, work and motherhood create a no-win situation, and it would be interesting to see if there is a correlation between those Rhodes Scholars with children and those who felt they had not fulfilled the expectations of the Scholarship.

Female Rhodes Scholars are an exemplary collection of women. As applicants to the Rhodes Scholarship they strove to be the best they could be, advance their careers and gain international reputations. Many have fulfilled these aims. Rhodes Scholars have succeeded not only in a vast array of careers but also in their personal lives. And yet, we cannot escape the fact that a significant number of Scholars, particularly within the U.S., feel they have not fulfilled the expectations of the Scholarship. Whilst not concluding that this renders such women "failures" in any way, it is a statistic that raises questions about possible difficulties that may have prevented or hindered such women from fulfilling what they felt was expected of them. Rhodes Scholars themselves are concerned about the position of women in society, economic discrimination, and balancing work and family life, and it seems that they are justified in their concerns. It is also true that attitudes and aims change over time. Indeed, the majority of

Scholars define “success” in a non-careerist fashion: by feeling inwardly satisfied, alongside having a fulfilling life partnership and having children who are proud of you.

What research shows about employment generally, is that women are still battling with sexism and discrimination at work. Females are still being passed over for promotion and recognition, and mothers still face the almost insurmountable obstacle of being “a good mother” and progressing in her career. The Rhodes Project data shows that Rhodes Scholars are not exceptions to this. Alongside having a full partnership and being inwardly satisfied, being respected as a leader in their profession is very important in the Rhodes Scholars’ definition of success. Yet it still appears much harder for them to achieve this compared to men in their position. The Rhodes Scholarship may be a passport for success for many, but it does not seem to have enabled all Scholars to overcome the obstacles still faced by women in today’s society. Perhaps this is why some feel they have been unable to fulfill its expectations.