
Project Title: Decisions that Matter: Subjectivity and agency in the career choices of Pakistani women doctors.

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Problem Statement: Under-representation of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) careers and education is a problem in most countries across the world. Despite multiple policy interventions, academic ranks and administrative leadership do not present a picture of gender equity (Henwood 2010; Etkowitz, et al. 1994). Women in Pakistan face a similar situation: Men consistently outnumber women at all levels of education, in STEM careers and in administrative positions (Pakistan Council for Science and Technology 2013). However, medical education presents an interesting paradoxical phenomenon. In contrast to other STEM fields, the number of women students in medical colleges have been increasing consistently, and in most medical colleges they now outnumber men. Although this is an indication of evolving roles of women in the highly conservative society of Pakistan, there remain obstacles: Unfortunately, this increase in number of medical graduates has not translated to a concomitant increase in the number of working female health practitioners (PMDC 2015) as most of the women who graduate do not go on to actually practice medicine. Despite the obvious importance of this issue, not only for gender equity but also for the resource scarce health system of Pakistan, no systemic investigation of career choices of women doctors in Pakistan has been carried out.

Statement of Objective: Building on a broad anthropological and social literature on identity formation, subjectivity and agency, this research project tries to understand the social and cultural structures of Pakistani society related to women doctors' work, sexuality and gender. It also explores women doctors' own active negotiation of their identities and subjectivities through their lived, embodied experiences, attitudes and practices within these structures. Existing literature on women in science focuses primarily on the structural barriers to women's advancement. It does not account for the underlying subtle (and changing) gendered power relations that permeate everyday life and which can constrain (or enable) the choices of women. By building on and bridging the gaps between these two bodies of literature, this project will empirically investigate the following research questions: 1) What are the cultural discourses in Pakistani society about the women doctors related to their gender, sexuality and work? 2) How the women doctors (working or not working) experience or contest these discourses in their day-to-day lives? What are their own feelings, perceptions and attitudes regarding their different roles and their career choices? 3) What is the relationship of dominant form(s) of discourses and women's experiences to their subjectivities and their career choices? Are there any differences between those who continued to work and those who decided to leave the profession?

Data Collection. To answer these questions I will conduct a one year ethnographic investigation in Lahore, Pakistan. During the field work, I will collect field notes from participant observation with women doctors by observing their day to day life and interactions. I will conduct interviews with women doctors (those who are currently working as well as those who are not) using a special technique called person-centered interview and observation (Levy & Hollan 2015). I will also conduct semi-structured interviews with their family members (spouses, parents, etc.) and representatives of institutions including hospitals and government officials involved in policy making for medical education and practitioners.

Intellectual Merit. Findings in the project will contribute to the anthropological discussions on how complex subjectivities are formed within the dynamics of in-equal power relations. This research will illuminate how discourses related to work, sexuality and gender are interpreted by workplaces, families and women themselves in Pakistani society. The proposed theoretical and methodological framework allows for a nuanced and complex analysis of career choices of women, their subjectivities, embodied experiences and social and cultural structures that guide them (Ortner 2005). This will also be the first in-depth ethnographic study of lives and career choices of Pakistani women doctors and among the very few studies about the professional women in Pakistani society. Resultant insights can then be applied to the understanding of career choices of women not only in Pakistan but in the world elsewhere.

Works Cited:

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