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Why Do More Women Read Fiction?

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I. Introduction

The theory of separate spheres and the sexual division of labor has been an important point of departure in gender research and feminist scholarship. Researchers have demonstrated that the division of the world into separate spheres of public and private has helped to sustain institutions and practices of patriarchy and inequality both at home and in the work place. However, feminist scholars have also criticized the usefulness of the public/private dichotomy as a way to conceptualize the structure of society (Ferree 1990). Some have argued that the analytical distinction between "public and private" serves only to reinforce stereotypes about gender and work (Chodorow 1978; Fraser 1989). Others argue that the boundary between the two spheres has always been blurred (Guttek et al. 1981; Kanter 1977) or has increasingly become irrelevant with large scale changes in the structure of the economy (Bielby 1992; Cherlin 1983; McLaughlin et al. 1988).

Separate spheres research has predominantly focused on the division of men and women into the public realm of paid work (*economic production*) and the private realm of unpaid domestic, household labor (*social reproduction*). This division of labor is critical to understanding inequality and issues of patriarchy. Studies in this area have focused on the distribution of household chores, wage inequality, economic dependence and career stratification (Coveman 1983; Etzioni 1969; Glazer 1984; Hochschild 1989; Laslett and Brenner 1989; Shelton and John 1995; Thompson 1991)

However, as Spigel (1992) points out, separate spheres ideology is not only relevant to the sexual division of labor but also to the sexual division of leisure. Victorian and Edwardian ideas about appropriate leisure pursuits for men and women were intertwined with ideas about the separation of public and private life. Studies of contemporary society demonstrate persistent differences in how men and women spend their leisure time (O'Connor 1993; Robinson 1980; Shaw et al, 1995). Thus, in order to understand the relevance of separate spheres in contemporary America, it is important to examine gender differences in both work and leisure. However, few studies link differences in leisure to the concept of separate spheres. Instead, most researchers who study gender and leisure focus on issues of identity formation, the structure of women's free time, constraints on leisure and the "meaning" of leisure for men and women (Henderson 1990, 1994, 1996).

Reading is a past time which is closely linked to gender. Not only do men and women have different preferences for the types of books they read, but women, on average, read a greater variety of books and spend more time reading than men. In 1929, Gray and Munroe first reported that a reading gap existed when they wrote, "women read almost twice as many books, on the average, and they do this in less time as a rule." More recent studies confirm that there is still a large gender gap in reading (Lorimer 1983; Yankelovich 1978; Zill and Winglee, 1990). In particular, the gap is striking when we examine fiction reading. The survey data analyzed in this study reveal that 62 percent of women read fiction compared to 48 percent of men (table 2). After controlling for socio-demographic

characteristics, like education, we find that women are 2.3 times more likely to read a book of fiction in the past year compared to men (table 3).

Historians trace women's fiction reading to the rise of the separate spheres ideology and the "cult of domesticity" among middle and upper class families in the 18th and 19th centuries (Flint 1993; Kaestle 1991; Watt 1957). In her book *The Women Reader: 1837-1914*, Kate Flint links reading to separate spheres by showing how the subject of "women's reading" served as a focal point for debates about gender, the family and the proper role of women in the home. Watt also links the rise of the novel to separate spheres and increased leisure among middle and upper class women in the 18th and 19th century. In addition to Flint's and Watt's historical work, there have been numerous ethnographic studies recently which investigate the different meanings inscribed by women in the act of reading (Radway 1984; Cherland 1994). However, few studies of contemporary fiction reading attempt to explain the basic gap between men and women -- e.g. studies which focus less exclusively on "women's reading" and more on the differences between men and women. Furthermore, no research has examined whether the reading gap today is related to the separate spheres ideology. Finally, there is no research, at least that this author is aware of, which uses a large scale survey instrument to go beyond ethnography and history in an effort to examine the gender gap in fiction reading. In this regard, this research uses two national surveys to explore why women read more fiction than men.

In summary, the idea of separate spheres is critical to understanding the history of gender inequality in America. Because the social organization of work is embedded in concrete institutions (labor market, family and the state), which are both linked to inequality and which can be easily studied, past research has tended to focus primarily on issues of work and labor. Leisure on the other hand remains on the periphery of separate spheres scholarship -- there are few recognizable "institutions of leisure" and leisure doesn't appear to be closely linked to power and inequality. However, scholars have shown that leisure is closely related to identity and personality (Freysinger 1992; Shaw et al. 1995; Wearing 1991). Through their leisure pursuits, girls and boys develop and affirm different traits and behaviors -- aggressive vs. passive, rebellious vs. rule-following, individualistic vs. group-oriented. These traits, in turn, influence a child's confidence, self-esteem, goals and aspirations -- qualities which are closely tied to life chances in the realm of work. Therefore, the study of leisure should be central to the study of gender and inequality. Fiction reading provides a starting point along this path.

Thus, this paper will begin to integrate three areas that are important in the study of gender -- separate spheres, leisure and fiction reading. In so doing, I hope to assess the relevance of separate spheres on the structure of leisure in the late 20th century while at the same time beginning to untangle the mystery of why women read more fiction than men. **The motivating question for the research is: "Are gender differences in fiction reading an example of the enduring influence of the separate spheres ideology on contemporary American culture?"**

II. Background

Separate Spheres Ideology and Fiction Reading

The late 18th and early 19th centuries witnessed a remarkable transformation in the organization of social life in America. The rise of industrialization, the urban center and the family wage helped to create a new division between the public world of work and politics and the private world of home and family. Concomitant with these structural changes, an ideology of “separate spheres” developed amongst the middle and upper class which emphasized a division of sexual labor. Men’s roles were transformed from the organizer of family labor to the provider of wage-earned income. Women took increasing responsibility for the training and education of children and for the maintenance of the “domestic haven.” Given the commodification, uncertainties and dangers of commercial life and of the rising urban center, the home became a protected environment, a place where working men could find solace. It also served as a locus of social and personal morality. “The cult of true womanhood” came to represent the purity and sanctity of family life and the idealization of the morally responsible mother, wife and homemaker (Weller 1966).

The separate spheres ideology spilled over from the realm of work to leisure and education as well (Spigel 1992). In the 19th century, while men's education took place largely in schools and colleges, women were educated in the home -- with instruction largely confined to religious and aesthetic subjects (Marks 1976). In addition to education, there

were large differences between men and women in terms of leisure. Men participated in the public amusements of variety houses, minstrel shows, dances, dime museums, circuses, coffee houses, taverns, gentlemen clubs and sports. Women, on the other hand, partook of private amusements within the house -- piano playing, reading, conversation, and crafts. As Wolff (1990:23) writes (1990) “Women’s leisure was confined to the home....the general rule was that any women in a public place of leisure and unaccompanied by husband or a suitable male was considered a prostitute.”

Thus, as fiction reading tended to fall within the private, domestic sphere it is not surprising that historians have documented the prevalence of reading among 19th century middle and upper class women (Flint 1993; Watt 1957). Flint demonstrates that reading was popular among women not only because it was an activity which could be conducted in the privacy of the home, but also because it was intricately bound up with the ideology of separate spheres.ⁱ In countless articles and essays in magazines, advice manuals and religious and scientific journals, educators and moralists praised the benefits of reading for women. According to these sources, reading not only served as a means of relieving women’s isolation, but it enabled them to become better mothers (by setting a good example for their children) and better wives (by giving women the cultural capital needed to be more stimulating companions). In short, Flint concludes that discussions of women’s reading in the 19th century served as “a confirmation and consolidation of the dominant [separate spheres] ideology of the period.”

Since the 19th century, the line dividing public and private has increasingly become blurred. At the turn of the century, women used their identity as mothers and homemakers to justify broad interventions into the public realm (Laslett and Brenner 1989) -- e.g. the emergence of women's temperance organizations, the Women's Suffrage Association, labor reform movements and a host of other civic and political associations (Scott 1991). In addition, by the beginning of the 20th century there emerged a growing commitment to equal educational opportunities for girls and boys which resulted in the standardization of public education (Marks 1976; Rury 1991). And, to some extent, there has been a convergence in some areas of leisure -- for example, the rise of women's athletics (Rowe 1994). Finally, there have been wholesale changes in the organization of work and family -- the shift of women into the work place, the rise of single-headed families, changes in patterns of childbearing -- accompanied by shifts in traditional attitudes about the roles of men and women (McLaughlin et al. 1988). Given these transformations in politics, education, work and the family, we would expect that the separate spheres ideology would have released its hold on American culture. Why then do women still read more fiction than men?

In this paper, I will investigate three hypotheses about why more women read fiction. First, I will investigate the influence of separate spheres by examining patterns of childhood socialization. Second, I will examine whether women read more because they are simply better (more proficient) readers. And third, I will test whether women, on average, read more because they have more free time to read.

III. Hypotheses

Separate Spheres and Childhood Socialization

The 19th century ideology of separate spheres helped to construct the proper role of men and women in American society. As discussed above, this ideology was explicitly promoted in newspapers, magazines, books and advice manuals. Moreover, the ideology was manifest in the institutions of work and the physical separation between public and private spaces. While the explicit ideology of separate spheres may no longer exist in America, its legacy might still influence how Americans today come to view certain activities and behaviors as more or less appropriate for men and women -- and as a result, socialize their children in ways which are consistent with these notions (Cherland 1994). Fiction reading -- along with other passive, private and non-competitive activities -- might be understood as an activity which helps girls "do gender" appropriately. Conversely, boys might be encouraged to be aggressive, competitive and publicly-oriented individuals. Therefore, one test of the separate spheres hypothesis is whether boys and girls are socialized differently with regards to fiction reading.

There is some evidence that fiction reading in contemporary America is seen as an appropriate activity for girls and as inappropriate for boys. Dwyer (1973) writes, "...trying to teach boys to read places them in a situation of conflicting demands. In the early years, boys are subject to pressures to develop the male sex role -- to participate in active, non-academic activities...". Other research (Stein and Smithells 1969) has revealed the

popular belief among American children that reading is a "feminine" activity. And, in her ethnographic study of reading in a small, North American town, Cherland (1994) found that parents did not view reading as an appropriate past time for boys. Many fathers vehemently denied that their sons ever read fiction. In contrast, most parents in Cherland's study believed that the practice of reading fiction is a valuable and pleasurable part of a girl's childhood.

According to past studies, not only are girls more likely to be encouraged to read fiction at home, but such encouragement has a strong influence on later reading habits. Zill (1991) finds that persons who were frequently encouraged to read as children are nearly four times more likely to be fiction readers as adults compared to those who were not encouraged to read as children. Researchers have found this relationship holds for other arts activities as well (DiMaggio and Mohr 1990; Orend 1983).

Thus, the theories of separate spheres and gender-role differentiation suggest the following hypothesis:

- H1.1: Being encouraged to read as a child has a strong positive effect on whether a person is a reader of fiction as an adult. Women are more likely to have been encouraged to read by their parents during childhood. The gap in fiction reading between men and women will decline when parental encouragement is held constant.

In addition to expected gender differences in parental encouragement of book reading, past research has demonstrated that girls are also more likely than boys to be introduced to dance, visual arts and musical arts as children. Thus, arts socialization is a more common,

and hence “natural,” part of a girl’s childhood experience. Alternatively, a young boy who is socialized into the arts by his parents is more of an anomaly. As a result, we would expect him to be raised in an environment where behavior and leisure were governed less by gender stereotypes. Therefore, if fiction reading is related to separate spheres, men who were socialized into the arts as children should be more likely to take up fiction reading than men who were not. On the other hand, women who were *not* socialized into the arts as children are not an anomaly in terms of typical gender roles. Art, music or dance lessons represents only one of a variety of gender-appropriate leisure activities available to young girls. Contrary to the case of a boy who takes such lessons, a girl who does not take art lessons is not necessarily cutting a path across the gender grain. Thus, our second hypothesis can be stated below:

H1.2: The relationship between arts socialization and fiction reading should be stronger for men than for women.

Given that gender is constructed and enacted partly through participation in leisure activities such as reading, we should not be surprised that men and women diverge on a variety of other activities as well-- such as watching sports, making crafts, sewing, camping and gardening. Again, men who cross over into "predominately feminine" activities (crafts, gardening, etc.) are likely not as constrained by gender-role stereotypes and therefore more likely to be readers of fiction.ⁱⁱ

H1.3: The relationship between fiction reading and gardening, and between fiction reading and participation in textile arts, will be stronger for men than for women.

Cognition and Reading Proficiency

Many studies have found that girls achieve higher rates of reading proficiency than boys (Kincaid and Klein 1990; NAEP 1982; Gates 1961). Some scholars have attributed these higher rates to differences in the physical and cognitive maturation of boys and girls (Gross 1970; Wagemaker 1996). Not only do girls' bodies develop faster than boys', but studies have shown that girls are advanced in the development of language. Girls begin to talk before boys and their childhood vocabularies are generally larger (McCarthy 1935). While Downing (1981) cites a number of studies that refute these earlier findings, a cross-national study of 32 countries conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in 1996 found that girls consistently score higher than boys on reading tests, even across very different socio-cultural contexts. The study concludes, "the early and almost universal advantage regarding reading performance displayed by girls across domains and across countries at age nine may partially account for gender differences in reading" (Wagemaker, 1996:101). Thus, young girls may read **more** at an early age because they are **better** readers; and, they ultimately remain better readers, even after boys catch up cognitively, simply because they read more. Therefore, the gender gap in fiction reading might be explained, in part, by differences in reading proficiency.

H2.1: When reading proficiency is controlled for, the gender gap in fiction reading will decline.

Work status and Free time

An alternative hypothesis suggests that women read more than men because, on average, they have more time to read. Radway contends that middle class women during much of the century "had both the necessary money and time" to be primary consumers of books. In the 1950s, Betty Friedan described women's excess time as "filled with mindless duties which imparted powerlessness and a sense of isolation." Reading fiction, therefore, served to fill excess time as well as alleviate this sense of isolation.

The evidence regarding the impact of having free time on the likelihood that a person will read books is mixed. McEvoy and Vincent (1980) find that moderate and heavy book readers are able to integrate book reading into an active schedule, thus challenging the view that non-book readers are just too busy to read. Zill and Winglee (1991:60) come to the same conclusion, reporting that "literature reading is a fairly robust habit that can persist in the face of time pressures and competition from other activities." However, using more detailed time-use diaries, Robinson (1980b) finds that newspaper, magazine and book reading are correlated positively with available free time. As Robinson (1980b) states, "reading might not require money, but it does require time." Throughout much of the 20th century, middle class women who worked part-time, or not at all, have had more time to read. This leads to the third set of general hypotheses:

H3.1: Other things equal, respondents who work part-time (paid work), or not at all, will read more than respondents who work full-time (paid work). And, the gender gap in fiction reading will decline once work status is controlled for.

If we find that working part-time or keeping house is positively associated with fiction

reading, it is possible that this has less to do with additional free time and more to do with traditional notions of gender. Women who are not employed full-time in the labor force are more likely to have been raised in families which stressed traditional gender stereotypes consistent with the separate spheres ideology (“women’s work is in the home”); such women, therefore, may be more likely to participate in “feminine” leisure activities like fiction reading. How can we separate out the effects of having more free time from the influence of separate spheres? One way would be to investigate the difference between working full-time in traditionally female jobs (nurse, teacher, typist, secretary and health technician) versus working full-time in traditionally male jobs (professional, manager, public safety, engineer, accountant, etc.). If the effects of work status on fiction reading are a result of differences in free time then there should be no difference between working full-time as a nurse versus working full-time as an accountant. However, if work status is really serving as a proxy for traditional notions of gender, then we would expect the effect of working full-time to be more negative for male jobs than female jobs.

H3.2: For the subgroup of women only, the effects of working full-time in male-dominated and gender-neutral jobs will be more negative than the effects of working full-time in female-dominated occupations.

IV. Data and Methods

I use data from two nationwide surveys on arts participation sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts (Survey of Public Participation in the Arts – SPPA 1982, 1992). I will also examine data collected by the Department of Education as part of the 1992

National Adult Literacy Survey (NadLit). The two SPPA surveys contain identical questions asking respondents about ways in which they participated in classical music, jazz, ballet, opera, plays, musicals, art museums and literature.ⁱⁱⁱ The data were collected by the U.S. Bureau of the Census as part of a larger national panel survey of households. An equal number of respondents were interviewed each month, three-quarters of whom were contacted by telephone and the rest were interviewed in person. There were 12,736 respondents to the 1992 survey and 17,254 respondents to the 1982 survey.

The NadLit survey was funded by the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics and administered by the Educational Testing Service in collaboration with Westat, Inc. Trained staff conducted personal interviews with a random sample of 24,944 adults ages 16 and older living in households who received an incentive payment to participate. Each survey participant spent approximately one hour responding to a series of diverse literacy tasks as well as questions about his or her demographic characteristics, educational background, reading practices and other areas related to literacy.

Dependent Variable

The main dependent variable in this analysis is fiction reading. For the SPPA data the variable is binary and represents a yes or no answer to the following question: "With the exception of books required for work or school, did you read any plays, poetry, novels, or short stories in the last 12 months?" For the NadLit data, "fiction reading" is also a binary variable and represents a yes or no answer to the question: "In the past 6 months did you

read any fiction in the English language?”

Independent Variables

The primary **control variables** used in this analysis include: education (measured as years of education from 1-18), gender (female=1), the natural log of income, and age. Because the effect of age is non-linear, several models include age as a categorical variable where age 1 = less than 25 years; age 2 = 26-45; age 3 = 46-65; and age 4= over 65 years of age. Also, in models testing the effects of reading ability on fiction reading, we control for English language skills using the variable “English ability.” Finally, for models looking at the effects of other leisure activities on fiction reading, we include the control variable “leisure,” which is a composite variable indicating the number of different leisure activities a person has participated in (range = 0-11).

Primary **explanatory variables** include parental encouragement of reading, arts socialization, participation in textile arts, reading proficiency and work status. These variables are described in table 1.

Methods

To examine the hypotheses listed above, two separate analyses were performed. The first examined SPPA 1982 and 1992 data separately to investigate theories relating to separate spheres, socialization and gender roles. The second examined data from the National Adult Literacy Survey to investigate competing theories relating to reading proficiency and

work status.

The theory that unequal childhood socialization influences the reading gap (hypothesis 1) was tested using the SPPA 82 data which contained a question asking respondents how often their parents encouraged them to read books as children. The variable was coded “0” if respondents were never encouraged to read books; “1” if respondents were sometimes encouraged; and “2” if frequently encourage. The gender gap in the baseline model is compared with the gap after controls for parental encouragement are entered into the model. The SPPA 92 data, which contained questions relating to childhood arts lessons at home and at school, were used to investigate the effects of crossing gender boundaries on fiction reading (hypotheses 1.2 and 1.3). A composite dummy variable called *SocArt* was created which takes a “1” if respondents received lessons *outside of school* (K-12th grade) in one or more of the following categories -- music, visual arts, dance, drama and art/music appreciation. An interaction term (*SocArt*gender*[female=1]) was used to test whether the effects of arts socialization were stronger for men than for women.

Hypothesis 1.3 was tested using the same method, comparing the interaction terms *textile arts*gender* (where female=1 and participating in textile arts=1) and *gardening*gender*.

To test the hypothesis that differences in reading proficiency explain the gender gap, I used the NadLit data and compared the baseline gender gap in fiction reading (with controls for *age, education, income, and English language ability*) with a model containing the variable “*levels*” – measuring a respondent’s prose literacy level. I also investigated the

reading gap separately for each of 5 different levels of prose literacy.

Finally, by adding work status to the baseline model, which includes controls for reading proficiency, I examined changes in the coefficient for gender in order to test whether women read more fiction because, on average, more women work part-time or not at all (thereby freeing up time for reading). To determine whether the effects of “work status” are due to time-constraints or to underlying differences in socialization and gender ideology (e.g. women who stay at home were more likely brought up in traditional families where the separate spheres ideology was more dominant), I examined the difference between working full-time in “female occupations” (where women account for more than 70 percent of work force, such as nurse, secretary, typist, teacher and health technician), neutral occupations (neither men or women account for more than 70 percent of work force), and “male occupations” (men account for more than 70 percent of workforce -- construction, manager, public safety, engineer, etc.).

V. Results

Separate Spheres Theory, Socialization and Gender Boundaries.

Are girls more likely than boys to be encouraged to read by their parents? According to the SPPA 82 data, 43 percent of women respondents reported being encouraged to read “often” by their parents; compared to only 32.6 percent of the men in the survey. On the other hand, 35.0 percent of the men report never having been encouraged to read as children compared to only 31.9 percent of the women (see table 2). And, as expected,

having been encouraged to read as a child is associated with reading as an adult.

Respondents who were most encouraged to read as children are 4.7 times more likely to be readers of fiction than those who were not encouraged to read (table 3). Also, consistent with hypothesis 1.1, the gender gap declines when parental encouragement is held constant (table 3). Our baseline model shows that women are 2.3 times as likely to be readers of fiction than men. However, once parental encouragement is controlled for, women are only twice as likely to be readers of fiction -- narrowing the gap by almost 15 percent. Thus, hypothesis 1.1 is supported by our analysis; some of the gap between men and women can be explained by different patterns of socialization.

The socialization measure above may not substantially capture the process by which children learn that fiction reading serves as a marker of gender roles. First, the question regarding parental encouragement of reading refers to all book reading -- fiction and non-fiction; thus, it does not adequately capture the gendered nature of fiction reading. Second, even when nominally encouraged to read by their parents, boys might still read less because they feel constrained by cultural norms related to reading. Another way to test the influence of separate spheres is to use an alternative indicator to operationalize the extent to which children are socialized into traditional gender roles. We can examine whether men who transgress gender boundaries in other leisure activities are more likely to transgress the boundary drawn around fiction reading as well.

Taking art lessons as a child is strongly related to gender; 24 percent of women had private lessons compared to only 14 percent of men (table 2). Therefore, men who were socialized into the arts were probably raised in families less constrained by gender-role. When we examine the relationship between arts socialization (having taken art lessons as a child) and fiction reading, we find that men who were socialized into the arts are more than 2.32 times more likely to be fiction readers than men who were not socialized into the arts. For women, however, the relationship between arts socialization and fiction reading is weaker, with those who took art lessons only 1.5 times more likely to read fiction than those who did not (see table 4). Furthermore, if we divide our sample into persons who were socialized into the arts and persons who were not socialized into the arts, we find that the gap in fiction reading virtually disappears.^{iv} Thus, our findings support hypothesis 1.2.

In the SPPA survey, of those questions relating to leisure activities, two can be classified as predominately feminine activities -- gardening and textile arts (sewing, weaving, quilting, crocheting or needlepoint). Forty-nine percent of men and 67 percent of women garden; for sewing/weaving the split is 4.6 percent of men and 44 percent of women participate in this activity (table 2). Counter to our prediction, men who garden are not more likely to be readers of fiction than men who do not garden.^v On the other hand, the relationship between textile arts and fiction reading, while not statistically significant, is stronger for men than for women. Participating in textile arts for women increase the odds that they will read fiction by 1.37. However, for men, having sewn or done textile work in the last year is associated with a 2.02 times increase in the odds that they will be a reader

of fiction. In addition, the reading gap between men and women *is* considerably smaller when we compare those who sew/weave with those who do not.^{vi} These results suggest that men who have crossed the gender divide in other areas of leisure are more likely to be readers of fiction. Thus, our results tentatively support hypothesis 1.3.

Cognition and Reading Proficiency

Using data from the National Adult Literacy Survey, I tested whether the reading gap between men and women can be explained by differences in prose literacy. Prose literacy is a measure of how well a respondent can identify and integrate various parts of a sample passage of text and how well they can write new information related to the text. Scores on the prose literacy test range from 0 (lowest) to 500 (highest).

As expected, reading ability is strongly related to the likelihood that a person will be a reader of fiction. Persons at the highest level of literacy (level 5) are more than twice as likely to read fiction than persons at the level just below them (level 4) and sixteen times more likely than persons at the lowest level of literacy (level 1) (see table 5). Also, as expected, all other things equal, women score on average 7 points higher on the prose literacy test than do men, and this difference is statistically significant.^{vii} However, contrary to hypothesis 2.1, when we control for test scores, the decline in the reading gap between men and women is minimal (the odds ratio in favor of women is reduced only from 2.23 times to 2.20 times more likely to read fiction -- see table 5).

Based on this evidence, theories of cognition and reading proficiency fail to explain the baseline gender gap. Nonetheless, it is possible that good reading skills attenuate the effects of gender-role stereotypes. For example, a male who is a good reader may be more likely to overcome gender stereotypes than someone who is not a proficient reader. In other words, for those for whom reading is difficult, gender stereotypes might play a stronger role (given that reading is difficult and is viewed as a feminine activity, men with low skills are unlikely to take up fiction reading as a hobby). Thus, we might expect that as reading becomes easier (hence more pleasurable), more men would be willing to abandon traditional stereotypes to reap the benefits of the written word.

Based on our findings from table 6, reading skills do *not* mitigate the effects of gender role stereotypes. Instead, they appear to inflate the effects -- resulting in even larger differences between men and women at higher levels of reading proficiency. It appears that as men and women gain literacy skills, they use these skills in different ways. Women employ their literacy skills to read books of fiction, while men are more likely to read history/current affairs books as well as daily newspapers. In addition, as reading proficiency increases, the reading gap for history/current affairs books and newspapers gets larger (supporting the thesis that men and women at higher levels of reading proficiency choose to read different materials). This finding suggests that reading fiction in particular, rather than reading more generally, is a “feminine” activity in America.^{viii}

Work status and Free time

Can the gender gap in fiction reading be explained by differences in available free time between the sexes? For much of the 20th century, a large percentage of middle class women have either worked part-time or not at all. In the NadLit survey, 61.2 percent of men worked full-time compared to only 39.5 percent of women. Do women read more than men because they have historically had more leisure time?^{ix} As expected, respondents who work part-time and/or spend their time "keeping house" are 1.33 times more likely to be readers of fiction than those who work full-time for pay (table 5). When work status is held constant, the gender gap for fiction reading declines by 5.5 percent -- the odds that a women will be a reader of fiction as compared to a man decline from 2.20 to 2.08. These findings provide modest support for hypothesis 3.1 -- differences in work status seem to explain a very small part of the reading gap between men and women. It is important to note, however, that even after controlling for work status a large gap between men and women remains -- with women more than twice as likely as men to read fiction.

However, if we look more closely at the effects of work status on fiction reading we can see additional traces of the influence of separate spheres. It is possible that the negative effects of working full-time may have less to do with time constraints and more to do with traditional views of gender. In other words, women who are homemakers or work part-time are more likely to hold traditional views about gender -- and, such women, according to separate spheres theory, are more likely to be fiction readers. In fact, the findings from table 5 reveal that women who work full-time in "female" jobs read as much as women

who work part-time or stay at home. Only women who work full-time in neutral or “male” occupations read less. Thus, as it relates to *available* free time, working full-time appears to have little effect on the gender gap in fiction reading.

VI. Discussion/Conclusion:

Summary. In this paper I seek to explain why women are more than twice as likely to be readers of fiction than men. In particular, I examine whether women read more fiction because cultural norms and patterns of socialization emphasize fiction reading an appropriate activity for young girls. Also examined is the alternative theory that women read more because they develop the cognitive skills necessary to read at an earlier age than boys and remain more proficient readers throughout their lifetimes. In other words, women read more fiction because they are encouraged to read as children by parents and teachers (separate spheres and socialization), or because they are better readers (cognition). In addition to the influence of early childhood experiences and cognitive capacities, the effects of work status and free time are examined by investigating whether the gender gap is explained by differences in labor force participation. Perhaps women read more fiction because they have more time to read.

Our data provide strong support for the socialization theory and virtually no support for the cognition arguments. While it is true that women, on average, scored higher on the NadLit reading proficiency test, adding controls for reading proficiency did not significantly diminish the reading gap between men and women. On the other hand, it appears that

differences in the extent to which parents encourage sons and daughters to read can account for almost 15 percent of the gender gap in fiction reading as adults. In addition, evidence suggests that childhood lessons in the arts (an experience much more common for girls), is more strongly related to fiction reading for men than for women. Likewise, participation in the female-dominated hobby of textile arts is a stronger prediction of fiction reading for men than for women. And, the fiction reading gap virtually disappears among men and women who were introduced to the arts at an early age and among those who participate in the predominately "feminine" hobby of sewing, weaving and working with textiles. Thus men who cross traditional gender boundaries in terms of their leisure activities are much more likely to be readers of fiction than men who do not.

We found modest support for the hypothesis that women read more because, by comparison, fewer work full-time in the labor force. When work status was controlled, the reading gap between men and women declined by approximately 6 percent. However, the negative effects of working full-time on fiction reading were limited to only those jobs that would be considered gender-neutral or male occupations. Working full-time in female occupations, like nursing and teaching, is not associated with lower levels of fiction reading. Thus, the negative effects of working full-time may actually reflect differences in gender ideology (e.g. the influence of separate spheres) and not differences in available free time.

Overall, it appears that differences in gender role stereotypes and childhood socialization

offer the strongest explanation for the gender gap in fiction reading. While these stereotypes and practices are not always linked to an explicit ideology of separate spheres, ideas about appropriate and inappropriate leisure activities for boys and girls reflect the cultural norms that originate in the doctrine of separate spheres. Thus, many American parents view fiction reading as an appropriate activity for girls and as inappropriate for boys. As long as boys still perceive fiction reading as “feminine,” fewer will make it an important part of their leisure pursuits.

These findings have implications for the power dynamics involved in gender differences in leisure. Most people acknowledge that reading provides a wealth of social, intellectual and personal benefits. Thus, if young girls read more fiction, they should be gaining advantages and skills which their “fiction-illiterate” male counterparts are missing out on. Ironically, while fiction reading might be beneficial to girls in terms of developing cognitive skills and doing well in school, it is one of a number of “feminine” leisure pursuits which is passive and generally home based. According to Blau (1989), inequalities persist for women in their opportunities for leisure. Today, girls are still socialized into passive, private and non-competitive activities, while boys are channeled into activities which tend to be aggressive, competitive, creative and leadership-oriented. Inequalities in leisure may contribute to differences in skills and dispositions which are differentially rewarded in the spheres of work and politics.

Limitations. The SPPA and the NadLit data allow us to investigate several prominent theories relating to gender differences in fiction reading using large-scale sample surveys. The variety of measures in these data made it possible to control for potentially spurious relations between reading and gender. Few studies of reading practices have had this advantage. Nonetheless, a significant gap between men and women remained in almost every model examined in this analysis. In other words, socialization, reading proficiency and work status only account for some of the variation in fiction reading between men and women. It is quite likely that better measures of socialization at school and at home (for example, whether children received books as gifts, whether they shared books with friends, or the types of "play" activities they pursued as children) would explain even more of the variance.

More detailed measures of leisure and time-use as adults (for example with data from the National Time-Use Survey) would provide a more precise analysis of how men and women use free time and how these differences affect fiction reading. Moreover, our dependent variable ("whether or not a person has read a book of fiction in the past year") is a blunt instrument for comparing differences in reading between men and women. Ideally we would have information about the type and quantity of books read over the course of a year by each respondent. For example, of those respondents who read fiction, do women read greater quantities of books than men? Do they read more often? Or, how do men and women differ in the types of books purchased and read?

This last question would allow us to examine the hypothesis that women read more fiction because they have been especially targeted by publishers as consumers of romance novels. Radway (1986) provides evidence that in the 1960s publishers began to promote the genre of gothic and romance to what they believed was a large and predictable audience -- middle class women. As women are the main consumers of romance novels -- comprising 93 percent of the audience -- and as romance novels have come to dominate the paperback book market, it would follow that women read more than men partly because they read more of this particular genre of fiction. The reading gap might diminish once romance novels are excluded from the analysis.

Large-scale surveys of readers conducted by the publishing industry, which distinguish between types of fiction (literature, adventure, romance and science-fiction), would help evaluate the “supply-side” theory of the romance revolution.^x Also, by examining what kinds of fiction men and women read, and by using more detailed reader-response analysis (as in the ethnographic studies of Radway and Cherland), we can get a better idea of how fiction is linked to emotional and psychological needs of readers. For example, perhaps women read more fiction because it serves as a “compensatory activity” in a male-dominated world (Radway 1986).

Reading is a complex social practice. Nonetheless, by examining the large scale effects of differences in childhood socialization, reading proficiency and work status, we can begin to uncover the mystery of why women read more fiction than men. However, fiction

reading is only a point of departure for learning more about the relationship between leisure, separate spheres and gender inequality.

ⁱReading was also a means of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1902). According to Veblen, the possession of leisure time served as a marker of elite status for middle and upper class families in the 19th century. Fiction reading was associated with idleness and free time, and as such, became a popular activity among the wives of the bourgeoisie.

ⁱⁱAn alternative approach comparing the differences in leisure activities between men and women with differences in reading would focus more on time constraints and leisure substitution. Thus, the proximate cause for men reading less is not gender stereotypes; rather they read less because they spend their time doing other things, such as playing sports and watching t.v.. However, past research has demonstrated that book readers tend to be "more active" than non-book readers (Robinson, 1980). Thus, readers find time to read without sacrificing the many other activities they are involved with. There is little evidence of a substitution effect in leisure. Using the SPPA data, I found that watching television, playing sports and working on the house actually correlate with a higher probability of reading fiction.

ⁱⁱⁱThe question concerning fiction reading differed slightly between 1982 and 1992. In 1982, the survey asked the single question, "have you read a novel, short stories, plays or poetry in the past 12 months?" In 1992, they asked each activity separately – e.g. "have you read novels?"; "have you read short stories?" etc. The 1992 data were recoded to match the 82 data. If a person answered yes to any of the fiction reading questions in 1992, they were coded as a "yes" for the dummy variable indicating whether a person had read fiction in the past 12 months.

^{iv}Model not reported.

^vThe results for gardening are quite unexpected. In fact, we find that gardening is positively related to reading for women and negatively related to reading for men. I believe that "gardening" is capturing very different activities for men and women. For women, it is likely associated with indoor plant and vegetable and flower gardens. For men, it is likely associated with landscaping -- an activity which is not, in any sense, viewed as "feminine" Thus, there is no reason to believe that men who garden are more likely to be fiction readers.

^{vi}For example, among the subgroup of men and women who do not sew (or work with textiles as a hobby), women are 1.9 times as likely to be fiction readers than are men. However, among the subgroup that does sew (e.g. comparing men who sew with women who sew), the gap is reduced by 78 percent and women are only 1.21 times as likely to read fiction. Model not reported but available upon request.

One might argue that the gender gap narrows for subgroups of people who do the same activity (sewing, crafts, etc.) simply because differences between individuals inevitably wash out as we narrow our sample to include people who have more and more similar tastes and interests. In other words, men and women may vary on a number of dimensions which are not included in the model, but which affect the likelihood of reading fiction (e.g. personality measures such as temperament, confidence, orientation, etc.). As we divide individuals into smaller groups with similar tastes, we might, in effect, begin to control for some of the immeasurable variation. Thus, the gender gap would virtually disappear if we created a subgroup of people who like oatmeal, play scrabble, watch old movies and collect stamps. However, when we examine subgroups of respondents divided on the basis of whether they go camping (an activity which attracts persons of similar dispositions and interests), we find virtually no difference in the reading gap (even though camping is positively associated with reading).

^{vii}Model not reported.

^{viii} However, even though men read more newspapers and history books, the evidence suggests that they still read less overall. First, the gender gap for these other reading materials is considerably smaller than the gap for fiction reading. Second, when we examine the total number of different types of materials read by respondents over the course of the year (fiction books, religious books, magazines, newspapers, etc.), the reading gap for men and women remains significant. Women read more different kinds of materials than men.

^{ix} Given the unequal division of household labor, many researchers of work and family would question the assumption that women who work part-time or stay at home have more leisure time than men who work full-time (see Milkman and Townsley 1994).

^x Unfortunately, these surveys are not generally available to scholars in an accessible form useful for detailed analysis.

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