SOCIAL SCIENCE

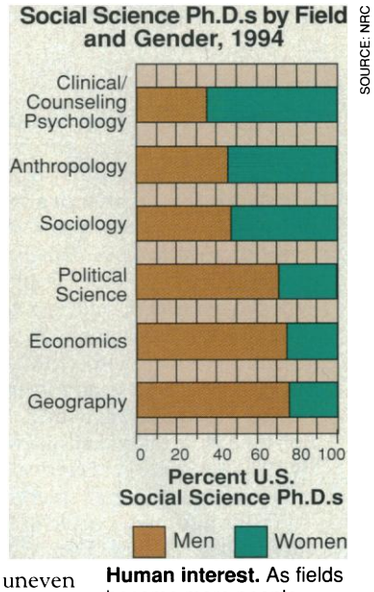
Researchers Find Feminization a Two-Edged Sword

In the early 1980s, the ranks of the social and behavioral sciences, like most scientific disciplines, were mostly filled with men, and new male Ph.D.s outnumbered females by 3 to 2. But for the past 15 years, women have been flocking to these fields, while the number of male social scientists has declined. Today, while women are still scarce in disciplines such as physics or computer science, half of new Ph.D.s in the social and behavioral sciences are going to women, according to the National Science Foundation (NSF). And in two disciplines—psychology and anthropology—the majority of new Ph.D.s are women.

The lure of social and behavioral science appears to be related more to the content of the fields than to specific efforts to attract women. "I don't think anybody had to lure them in," says sociologist Patricia Roos of Rutgers University. But now that women have achieved critical mass and more, groups such as the American Psychological Association (APA) are worrying about an ironic downside to the trend: that "feminization" may somehow be linked to a loss of status for the whole discipline. "People worry that if a field feminizes too much the consequences could be lowered prestige and lowered earnings," says Roos.

Some social sciences appeal to women because they deal with "issues central to women's lives, like ... mothering, rape, or marriage," says Carla Howery of the American Sociological Association. Adds Catherine Didion of the Association for Women in Science: "We still very much see ourselves as 'nurturers,' " hence, women's interest in the burgeoning professions of clinical and counseling psychology, where twice as many women as men are now getting Ph.D.s. And social science disciplines have adapted readily to their changing demography, says Howard Silver of the Consortium of Social Science Associations: Today, "every discipline has a feminist perspective and an ethnic perspective."

Yet, while women have reached parity in the big picture, a closer look reveals a distinctly uneven distribution of the sexes among the disciplines of social science (see chart), with more women in fields close to the humanities. In cultural anthropology, for example, almost two thirds of the Ph.D.s went to women in 1995. But in more quantitative fields, women are scarcer. In economics, only about 24% of 1994 Ph.D.s were women—hardly more than the 21% of math doctorates earned by women, according to NSF.



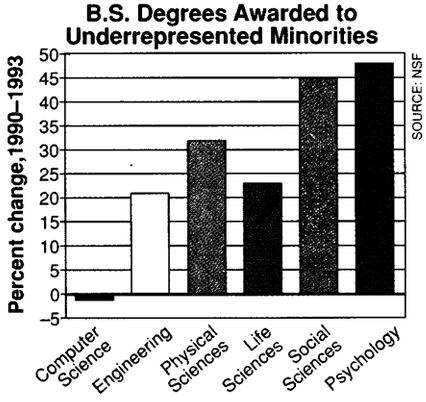
Human interest. As fields become more people-oriented, the percentage of women increases.

Minorities at the Starting Gate

For underrepresented minorities, the social sciences aren't quite the mecca they are for women, especially at the Ph.D. level. Only a few hundred blacks and Hispanics earn social science doctorates each year. But there's at least one bright spot on the horizon: More are opting for undergraduate degrees in these fields. Between 1990 and 1993 the number of bachelor's degrees in psychology and social sciences earned by blacks and Hispanics jumped by nearly half (see graph), according to the National Science Foundation (NSF).

Nonetheless, some fear that the gains may start to erode in the current climate. "Diversity is no longer a front-burner issue for higher education," laments Frank Matthews, publisher of the magazine *Black Issues in Higher Education* in Washington, D.C. To him that means the minority pipeline will stay at a trickle.

First, the good news: At the bachelor's level, social sciences are attracting many more underrepresented minorities. Part of the increase reflects a rise in total bachelor's degrees—28% for African Americans and 39% for Hispanics between 1990 and 1993, according to the Department of Education. Educators say minorities are choosing social sciences partly because these fields are relevant to their personal concerns and offer a way of helping their group. Anthropologist Yolanda Moses, president of the City College of New York, adds that many see the social sciences as offering "more concrete pathways" to well-paying jobs than do other popular majors, such as education.



Social activity. Minority enrollment increased sharply in the social sciences.

But Matthews warns that the numbers of underrepresented minorities entering college may already be declining in the face of shrinking budgets and attacks on affirmative action. So far, the American Council on Education has noted only a 3% decline in the number of recent black high school grads enrolled in college.

Even if the numbers of minorities majoring in social sciences stay up, that doesn't necessarily mean more Ph.D.s, says Matthews. Indeed, although the social sciences have more minority Ph.D.s than do other sciences (see graph, p. 1921), there's been little increase in the past decade in the numbers of blacks earning Ph.D.s in social science or psychology. Numbers for U.S. Hispanics are similar, although there has been an increase in psychology Ph.D.s, according to NSF.

One reason minorities don't opt for Ph.D.s, says Moses, is "they don't want to be in debt"—and so aren't eager to stay in school for another 5 years or more. Sheilah Mann of the American Political Science Association adds that the tight academic job market and the drying up of federal funds seem likely to reinforce the tendency of minorities to favor professions where prestige and a healthy income are more secure. "Why get a Ph.D. when they can get a law degree?" is the attitude, she says. So far, there is little evidence that talented minorities are arguing with that reasoning.

–C.H.