

# Selling Class: The Construction of the Professional Middle Class in America

Tessa M. Pfafman

Dr. Michael Kramer, Dissertation Supervisor

## Abstract

To understand the role of mediated messages in organizational socialization, this study analyzes the constructions of class and gender in popular business advice books (BABs). The books are used as training tools in many organizations, so to understand the role of BABs in indoctrinating employees into organizational culture, this study asks the following research questions. What are the ideological messages regarding work and organizing within BABs? What do the ideological messages of BABs reveal about power in organizing? In what ways do BABs gender the workplace?

One function of BABs is to articulate norms that institutionally reproduce capitalist modes of work. Thus BABs serve as tools for organizational indoctrination and larger scale social control. Analysis finds these BABs construct ideal, submissive, and compliant employees by diagnosing unruly employees as psychologically dysfunctional and subsequently prescribing therapeutic cures that align individual interests with those of the organization. By focusing the reader on the inner psychological-self, the books diffuse resentment towards executive class privilege.

This study concludes that BABs serve to sell readers on socio-economic class stratification by constructing professional middle class norms for work and personal life. Specifically the books construct perceptions of choice, norms of success and failure, attitudes towards education and money, and a spiritual faith in American corporations. Consequently, the books de-politicize by feminizing the professional middle class.