

SHILCUTT, Tracy

Gender roles at Abilene Christian University in the 1970s and 1980s compared to present, 2019.

Key terms: gender roles, relationships, social clubs, gender expectations, gender stereotypes, female professoriate

Interview by Jane Tomlinson, September 30, 2019

Tracy Shilcutt attended Abilene Christian University from 1976 to 1980 and received a bachelor's degree in political science. ACU is a university affiliated with the church of Christ where oftentimes students will get engaged to one another before graduation. ACU also has a high percentage of participation in social clubs, or local fraternities and sororities. Dr. Shilcutt shares her experiences of being a female student at ACU, noting how she believes her committed relationship and participation in the social club Delta Theta, or D. T., affected her time on campus. She provides her perspective on what was expected of male and female students and where the lines drawn in between the gender expectations wore thin. Dr. Shilcutt currently works at ACU as a professor in the History and Global Studies department and shares her thoughts on how the campus has evolved since she was a student here, as well as where the university has room to improve.

This interview provides primary source information on gender norms and expectations at Abilene Christian University in the late 1970s as well as present day, 2019. Dr. Shilcutt's perspective shows one a glimpse of the obstacles she felt a student had to overcome or submit to, as well as how the private Christian university has progressed in regards to gender expectations.

[The interviewer is Jane Tomlinson, a sophomore History major who is enrolled in Dr. Kelly Elliott's course, Historical Perspectives on Gender and Sexuality. The interviewee is Dr. Tracy Shilcutt, a professor in ACU's History and Global Studies department. The interview was conducted at Abilene Christian University at 3:00 p.m. on Monday, September 30, 2019.]

Jane Tomlinson: This is an oral history interview conducted on September 30th, 2019 in Abilene, Texas. The interviewee is Tracy Shilcutt and the interviewer is Jane Tomlinson. So, Dr. Shilcutt, what years did you attend ACU?

Tracy Shilcutt: I was at ACU from 1976 until I graduated in 1980.

JT: And what were your degrees in?

TS: I received a bachelor's degree in political science.

JT: How did you feel it was as a female student on campus during your time here?

TS: I felt it was just normal, whatever was going on in the seventies. There were some classes that I was in, especially in my major's, that there might be one or two other women. But I never felt like I shouldn't be in those major's classes.

JT: And did you feel as if you were equal to your male peers here at ACU?

TS: In my degree I did. Uh, we had a very small department, only two men in that department as professors. But I felt like I could do anything that the male students could do once we finished the university and even while we were here, as far as academics went.

JT: And how was it outside of your department?

TS: I had a really good friend who wanted to be a missionary and I don't believe there was a path for her in the bible department because she went with foreign languages instead and got a degree in Spanish so that she could do mission work in that way.

JT: Did you have many female professors?

TS: The only one I can remember was a math teacher. I don't recall any of my other professors while I was here who were women, although I can recall some of who those women were. But I don't believe I ever had-- well maybe in, uh, P.E. I think, uh, in P.E. I probably had a woman professor.

JT: Did you feel more comfortable in a class with a female professor? Did you feel as if there was a more open environment for you?

TS: Well, since I only had the two, I'm not sure it was any different. My major's classes I felt were very open.

JT: Was there a divide between the types of majors men and women would pursue?

TS: I believe there were many women-- and this is all, you know, me just thinking back on it. I haven't done any work to see how true this is. But my feeling is that many women were getting degrees that they could use once they were married. And that would be often teaching. And again, as far as being in the bible department goes, there may have been a missions piece to it, but I believe most of the people who were getting any sort of bible degree were men.

JT: What was the ideal ACU man or woman on campus?

TS: In my view?

JT: In your opinion. And then also, what was the general consensus?

TS: Okay. Let me think if there was a general-- well, of course there was a general consensus because you voted on who would be your class representatives and things like that. So, I'm sure that there was a consensus that they were a visible leader. As I recall, we did have both men and women in leadership positions. I'd have to look at the annual to be sure, but I'm kind of seeing pictures of that. And then as far as my thought about the ideal man or woman, I'm not sure I had that thought, but I think there were probably people who fit the culture and people who didn't fit the culture, whether they were men or women, and it had to do with a variety of things.

JT: Okay. Elaborate on that, 'fitting the culture.'

TS: So the culture was church of Christ. It was pretty much people in preconceived roles, as far as men and women in particular, having to do with, not leadership per say, but leadership within a spiritual setting. And so, maybe back to the other statement, maybe people who were perceived by the group as a whole as the ideal had to do with some sort of spiritual leadership qualities.

JT: And do you think that those were biblically founded roles being presented by ACU?

TS: No, not always. Not always.

JT: Did any of those qualities align or heavily influence your personal qualities that you sought out in a man at ACU?

TS: Probably. The wonderful thing for me was that I had parents at home who would listen to things I was hearing-- whether it was at church, in high school, in college, wherever it was-- and act as a sounding board to ask me back if what I believed I was hearing was accurate. And so, a minute ago you asked something about did I believe the qualities were biblically correct?

JT: Biblically founded.

TS: Biblically founded. They probably were in someone's mind. And so I think we all bring to it a little bit something different. The tradition that had been there was not always really made-- didn't make sense to me a lot of times. And so I did ask a lot of questions, but I feel like I had support beyond the university to help me work through some of those issues.

JT: Were there any students or many students who defied these roles and expectations? And if so, how were they viewed by your peers?

TS: Back to the preconceived roles of the university, they would have-- again, have to do with people staying within their prescribed space. And there were people who got out of that space and were ridiculed or not accepted.

JT: What did it look like to step outside of that defined space?

TS: Uh, it looked like women in leadership roles. It looked like, um, gay, lesbian, or homosexual relationships. Uh, it was anything that didn't fit what you're calling that, that paradigm of what it meant to be a man or a woman.

JT: And while at ACU, did you feel the 'ring by spring' pressure to marry or be in a committed relationship?

TS: Well, no, but I was.

JT: But by your own accord.

TS: But my own accord. Uh, and it was certainly very prevalent during that. And so maybe-- maybe I did feel some pressure from that, uh, that I-I was not willing to give up myself to do that until we had very long talks, Bryan Shilcutt and I did. So, there you go.

JT: Did it ever feel like you were playing into the ideal ACU woman role by pursuing that relationship?

TS: I'm sure it did. I'm sure it did, but I'm trying to think even among my friends. So, I'll give you one example of the ways that pressure was extended was through the women's clubs. They would have a night where people would announce their engagement and that was given really high priority. So I'm sure that within that constructed environment there-- whether, whether you felt like you had to have the ring or not, there was probably that expectation that it was an appropriate thing to do. That there-- you know, if you, if you're at a Christian university, you know, that's the only place you can find a Christian mate, right?

JT: And you mentioned being in club. How did that kind of shape the gender roles, do you think? How do you think social clubs at ACU helped define or redefine set gender roles here at ACU?

TS: I think probably what they did is just reinforce those roles. Every club was a little bit different. I think if there were any people stepping out of the norm with that and in a club, there probably would've been some unkindness that came out of that.

JT: Do you think your club fit that specified woman's role well? Or do you think it was more made up of ladies stepping outside of that role.

TS: Interesting. Well, I was in D. T.'s, and we were known for our prowess at, uh, sports. And so, there may be a way that we moved outside of that, in that regard. And I'm sure there were other clubs that were equally as talented, but we took our, uh, intramural sports very seriously. And so I don't know if that answered your question, but that's, that's what came to mind.

JT: What was the general outside consensus? The girls who weren't in D. T., what was their idea of D. T.?

TS: It wouldn't have just been women who were thinking this, it would have been men and women. It was, it was considered the, uh, female version of Sub-T.

JT: Would you say that that was accurate?

TS: Sometimes. Sometimes not. Sometimes Sub-T wasn't accurate, you know what I'm saying? And once you get those reputations, there is something so invasive about the reputation that it's really challenging to escape from that.

JT: Do you think that having organizations such as D. T. on campus, where they did redefine or step outside of the gender paradigm, do you think that having an organization like that on campus helped to break down the preconceived notions of the biblically founded gender roles and expectations?

TS: I'm not really sure. I think that's a really good question. Do you think the campus has redefined its gender roles? Do you understand what I'm saying? So what I, what I hear you asking is if we made a difference on campus for gender roles, and I'm not sure that that would be an accurate statement.

JT: Okay.

TS: Does that make sense?

JT: Yeah, absolutely. So, what are some ways, now that you're a professor at ACU, so you've had your fair share of time here on campus, what are some things that have contributed to the breakdown and development of shifting gender roles here?

TS: One thing I would say is that I had both male and female role models who were professors when I came in, and I think that-- especially from women who valued tenure and promotion as a way to express that the academy is more than just a male-dominated place-- I think those women gave me the gumption, if you will, to pursue tenure and promotion there. So I would say that's one way that as a professor I have benefitted from that.

JT: And what year did you begin working for Abilene Christian?

TS: I started in 2001 on a one-year contract, and then 2002 was my full year.

JT: And you think that a large factor contributing to becoming a professor here and building up your tenure was having female professors as mentors?

TS: I think it as understanding it could be done. And so there were women who were saying, 'we can be tenured, we can be full professors,' and that had not occurred to me. That that would be something that would be important. And to hear them say, 'I'm gonna do this and you can too,' and invite me on that was really important. But I did also have men inviting me at the same time, so it was more of an agreed, collegial, positive environment. There's, you know, there's always some negative, but that was really important for me with the tenure and promotion piece I think, especially.

JT: And so, since you were a student here and now as a professor here, what are some highlights of the way the campus has changed in regards to gender roles and expectations?

TS: Okay, so you're not talking about all the beautiful flowers and everything?

JT: Right, right, right.

TS: So from the eighties, I think you can see it clearly that there are more women in positions of the professoriate. And I think that really what I have gained is a-- I feel very welcome by my male colleagues. And that may not be true for everyone, but that has held mostly true for me-- that they value what I bring to the table, and that I've got a place at the table. And so I think it's not only being able to bring it, but it's being able to sit down and have that relationship as well. So I think that for the health of the university, especially in that academic realm, to have and hear women's voices is really important and has, has happened.

JT: And do you think that that progress is made from individuals such as yourself seeking out those opportunities, or the university as an institution making those opportunities more available?

TS: I think it's both. I really do think it's both. And we're-- are we forty years? Fifty years down the road? The world has changed. Our culture has changed. And even though private Christian universities might lag behind, we have come screaming and kicking into our own with this, I think as far as gender roles are concerned.

JT: And finally, what are some ways you think our university could improve in its gender expectations and equality, or like, inclusivity of its students?

TS: I think we're in a really important time where we're asking questions about what 'gender' means, and I think that as a university we need to have those conversations and we need to be willing to listen to one another in those and have regard for things we may not have thought of before, or things that may not have been appropriate-- and, and I put those in quotes, 'appropriate.' Just like being a, a woman in the bible department may not have been appropriate before. Back to your question about the bible, there's always something you can pull from it to prove your point, but I think this is one of those places we have to sit down and do really hard work to understand and listen to each other as humans and as creations of God.

JT: And finally, do you have anything you'd like to add or clarify?

TS: Probably. I'm not sure I do right now, but, um, thank you for having me.

JT: Yes, thank you so much.

ACC/ACU Gender and Sexuality Project
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