Gender Role Stereotyping

GENDER ROLE STEREOTYPES AND STUDENT-TEACHER INTERACTIONS

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Gender role stereotyping occurs when a person is expected to enact a series of norms or behaviors based upon their sex. Gender is a social construction, and other social categories such as race, ethnicity, class, religion, and language also influence that construction. In most European and North American societies, gender roles divide through male and female behavioral norms. Certain types of behaviors are categorized as masculine or feminine. However, gender as a continuum is social and relational, rather than categorical. In other words, gender only exists as a comparative quality (if people are “less masculine” than others, they are also “more feminine” than those same others, even if their biological sex is the same). Thus gender role stereotyping occurs when individuals are expected to enact certain practices or behaviors because of their gender.

Although girls' schooling experiences vary depending upon their socioeconomic status, geographic location, ethnicity, and/or disability (AAUW, 1998), many schools, and other educational institutions, reinforce and support gender stereotyped roles. Moreover, schools operate through the interactions of groups and individuals, and how students and teachers construct gender in the classroom impacts the learning environment. Two decades after Title IX of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act legislation banned sex discrimination in education programs and activities, public schools still exhibited bias against girls. In 2005, comments by the then-president of Harvard University Lawrence Summers suggesting that innate sex differences may contribute to fewer female faculty in the sciences resulted in national and international discussions on how cultural factors are more likely to explain women's participation in science than biological differences between females and males.

The gender role stereotypes that schools help to reproduce include the notion that girls are caring, nurturing, quiet, helpful, considerate of others, and place others' needs before their own. Academically able girls' achievements are attributed to their hard work, whereas successful boys are considered naturally gifted. In contrast, underachieving male students are considered lazy, whereas underachieving girls are regarded as not capable. Boys are viewed as rational, logical, unemotional, and strong and are also expected to be outgoing, smart, and naturally academically talented. Thus in schools, gender role stereotypes attribute males' academic success to innate intelligence and girls' achievements to hard work. Moreover, these gender differences are explained through biological differences without any consideration of the impact of social environment on students' learning, achievement, motivation and attitudes.

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Gender role stereotypes also influence classroom interactions between teachers and students. First, students who dominate the classroom, answering and asking most of the questions, and using the available resources, are called target students. Regardless of the schooling level, target students are typically White males. Teachers predominantly ask White male students more and harder questions than any other group of students because these students are viewed as inherently smart. If a target student fails to answer a question, teachers will often reword or reconstruct the question, breaking a difficult question into a series of simpler questions to attain the answer. If other students are unable to answer a question teachers typically move on, usually to a target student.
Overall, boys are more likely than girls to answer teachers' questions. Often they call out answers, a risk-taking behavior expected of males, and seek the teacher's attention. In contrast, girls are more likely to receive criticism rather than praise for such risk-taking behavior. Teachers reward girls for being compliant, quiet, and helpful, which are stereotypic feminized behaviors. These behaviors in girls are also associated with White culture. Thus African American girls, whose socialization encourages assertive behavior, are often at odds with teachers who deem practices such as asking questions before being acknowledged, and non-compliance, as unfeminine.

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The accepted and encouraged assertive behavior in males that produces target students also enables boys to control other resources. For example, in science classes boys dominate equipment and relegate girls to roles such as data recorder, reading instructor, or cleaning up the work area. Girls' stereotyped views of science as a masculine endeavor may mean they prefer these passive roles. However, laboratory work can be an important facet of learning science and if girls are disengaged or relegated to peripheral roles they may not fully focus on the subject matter.

Recent data shows that there are equal numbers of girls and boys enrolled in high school science classes, with the exception of physics and Advanced Placement science courses (Scantlebury, 2006). Girls prefer studying subjects that they perceive as having value, being connected to people or other living things and having relevance in their lives. Often science is taught without an emphasis on how the subject connects to the "real" world. Boys are viewed as less able than girls in reading and the language arts, subjects that are stereotyped as feminine.

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The acceptance of gender-stereotyped roles as normal behaviors, with boys being rewarded for assertive behavior, uniqueness, and risk-taking, and girls for nurturing, conformity, and placing others' needs before their own, is often invisible to students and teachers. Moreover, participants in classrooms do not notice how the subtle inequities that are the outcomes of these behaviors impact students' motivations and behaviors. For example, the expectation that girls place others before themselves has consequences regarding their attitudes towards success in school. Girls' motivation for succeeding in school is often related to pleasing others, such as parents and teachers, rather than themselves. They report doing well in classes because of a personal, positive connection with their teachers. However, that personal connection is often missing in first-year, college-level classes when they become merely one student in classes of several hundred. As young college women they may struggle with their studies because there is no one person to achieve for, and they are not used to achieving for themselves.

Girls' preference for a positive, personal connection with their teachers can also influence their course selection. For example, young women may avoid advanced mathematics or science because they dislike the teacher. Another consequence of gender stereotyping for girls is learned helplessness. When girls struggle with learning material, teachers often give them the answer, promulgating a status of learned helplessness. In other words, because they are given the answers, girls learn that they are not capable of learning.

For females, placing others first is an important characteristic of a caring, nurturing person. A consequence of this practice is girls' fear of success. Girls often may not succeed in their academic achievements because to do so may be viewed as unfeminine, which may reduce their attractiveness to boys.
For males whose achievement is attributed to their natural intelligence, problems arise when this natural ability is no longer a guarantee of success. They perceive themselves as failures and often change majors instead of addressing their fear of failure by re-examining study habits and patterns.

Gender role stereotyping impacts students' perceptions of their abilities and their achievements. Similarly, research has shown that teachers' and parents' expectations of students' abilities, achievements and behaviors are influenced by gender role stereotyping. Gender role stereotyping is usually subtle, and often unrecognized or unchallenged. The assumption that girls should assume feminine traits in school such as caring for others, and quiet and unassertive behavior, can mean that they set aside their own learning needs for others. For boys, the masculine gender role stereotype suggests that they should have natural talent to achieve, and that they are expected to exhibit rationality and logic as well as loud, domineering behaviors.

Gender role stereotypes remain strong influences in society, schools and the daily life in classrooms. Yet inequities because of gender issues are often rendered invisible to students and teachers by their very pervasiveness in classrooms. A major challenge for educators is to establish classroom environments that do not favor one group of students to the detriment of another group, and recognize that gender role stereotypes remain a major influence on schools' organization, teachers' practices and students' attitudes and behaviors.

See also: Gender Bias in Teaching, Stereotype Threat

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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