



Educational Psychology: Perspective of Gender Stereotyping In Schools

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Abstract

In spite of advances in recognising that girls and boys, and women and men, do not have to be bounded by traditional roles, gender stereotypes persist in education and beyond. Children and youth are affected by gender stereotypes, from the early ages, with parental, school, teacher and peer factors influencing the way students internalise their gender identities. As such, not only is intervening in pre-primary education necessary, but also measures at the primary and secondary levels are key to eradicate gender stereotypes and promote gender equality. Based on the analytical framework developed by the OECD Strength through Diversity project, this paper provides an overview of gender stereotyping in education, with some illustrations of policies and practices in place across OECD countries, with a focus on curriculum arrangements, capacity-building strategies and school-level interventions in primary and secondary education.

Keywords: Educational Psychology, Perspective of Gender, Stereotyping, iSchools

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article was to test the impact of gender stereotypes in student evaluations of teaching (SET), in two online social psychological experiments. Previous research in this field indicates a gender bias in SET where women generally receive lower SET compared to men (e.g., MacNell et al., 2015; Boring, 2016; Mengel et al., 2018; Mitchell and Martin, 2018; Fan et al., 2019). With this article, we contribute to an ongoing discussion about the use of SET, both as formative and summative evaluations of teaching and teachers. We provide new insights into the mechanisms behind SET and how they relate to a lecturer's gender identity and gendered behavior.

Taking a social psychological perspective, gender biases may occur because gender stereotypes prescribe and proscribe certain behaviors for individuals of different genders. Specifically, when gender stereotypes and professional roles do not fit, the individual can be sanctioned with negative evaluations (Heilman, 2001; Heilman and Chen, 2005; Heilman and Haynes, 2005). In this article, we test to what extent women lecturers in higher education are sanctioned by low SET due to a tradeoff between behaviors expected from the supposedly masculine-coded role as a university lecturer, and the stereotypes about how women should and should not be.

Student Evaluations of Teaching

Originally, SET were introduced for formative purposes. That is, the evaluations were to be used in order to improve and shape the quality of teaching (Hornstein, 2016). Since then, SET has become a primary indicator of summative evaluations of a lecturer's performance. That is, SET are used as an overall sum of pedagogical competence, often as the sole indicator of this competence (Berk, 2005; Galbraith et al., 2012; Sporeen et al., 2013). SET are now often used for promotion and hiring decisions (Cashin, 1999; Seldin, 1999; Clayson, 2009; Davis, 2009; Seldin et al., 2010), indicating that it is important to understand systematic variations in SET.

SET were first criticized by Adams (1997), where he pointed out several flaws such as validity, reliability, gender bias, and a number of other related issues (Yunker and Yunker, 2003; Wright, 2006; Beecham, 2009; Hoefler et al., 2012; Sporeen et al., 2013; Braga et al., 2014; Stark and Freishtat, 2014; Boring et al., 2016). It is suggested that SET mainly reflects satisfaction with teaching among students after they have finished a course. As such, it is argued that SET rather should be seen as a popularity measurement, rather than a measurement of teaching capability (Beecham, 2009; Sporeen et al., 2013; Braga et al., 2014; Stark and Freishtat, 2014). This paves the way for both individual and contextual



factors to exert influence regarding high or low evaluations and leads to the aim of the present article—to test if gender stereotypes influence SET.

Several studies have shown a gender bias in SET, although the results are inconclusive. Many studies have shown that women receive lower evaluations than men (MacNell et al., 2015; Boring et al., 2016; Mengel et al., 2018; Mitchell and Martin, 2018). For instance, Boring et al. (2016) showed a systematic gender bias in SET where women lecturers received lower evaluations on seemingly objective aspects, such as how promptly assignments were graded. Likewise, Mitchell and Martin (2018) showed that a woman lecturer was rated lower on other similar aspects, such as the course itself, work load, the technology, etc. However, some studies show that women receive higher ratings than men (Rowden and Carlson, 1996; Bachen et al., 1999), and finally, some have not found a difference between evaluations of women and men (Feldman, 1993; Centra and Gaubatz, 2000). These results imply that gender of a lecturer alone is not sufficient to explain variations in SET between women and men lecturers. One possible cause to the inconsistencies in earlier results may be that both individual and contextual factors interact with a lecturer's gender (Boring et al., 2016). For instance, Boring et al. (2016) found that the gender bias in SET varied with, for example, discipline. These results are supported by Mengel et al. (2018), who showed that the gender bias is magnified in mathematical courses, and particularly pronounced for younger women lecturers. One explanation might be that the STEM-field (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) is heavily dominated by men (Makarova et al., 2019), where (younger) women accordingly violate the gender norms, resulting in a lack of fit between the expectations of their gender role and the expectations of the role as a university lecturer, which could explain the bias (Heilman, 1983, 2012). Such lack of fit, described more below, indicate that a woman lecturer behaving in a “masculine” way may receive different SET as compared to a woman lecturer acting in a “feminine” way, which essentially decreases the lack of fit. To better understand the complexity of how gender, stereotypes and fit between a lecturer's gender and their behavior operate to influence biases in SET, we now turn to social psychological theory.

Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are collective mental representations about what is typical regarding women and men when it comes to personality, behavior, and/or expression (Ellemers, 2018). This means that gender stereotypes are shared generalizations about women and men, and the consensus of these generalizations among the population is high (Hentschel et al., 2019). The content of the gender stereotypes pertain to two core dimensions in social judgment, referred to as agency and communion (Abele and Wojciszke, 2014). Agency refers to goal-achievement, whereas communion refers to the maintenance of social relationships (Bakan, 1966). Women are more often perceived as communal (e.g., caring, sensitive, loyal, and understanding; Eagly and Wood, 2012), while men are more often perceived as agentic (e.g., independent, assertive, dominant, self-reliant, and determined). Hence, agentic traits are traditionally associated with masculinity, while communal traits are traditionally associated with femininity. Importantly, gender stereotypes function both prescriptively (what women and men should engage in, and how they should be), and proscriptively (what they should not engage in and be) (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2019; Hentschel et al., 2019).

When gender stereotypes are fulfilled, that is, when women perform communal tasks and men perform agentic tasks, individuals are positively evaluated. Thus, lecturers who adhere to gendered expectations can be evaluated more favorably (Andersen and Miller, 1997). For example, Boring (2016) found that women lecturers received the highest ratings on availability and quality of contact—two characteristics typical of the stereotypes for women (Abele and Wojciszke, 2014). In relation to social perception and evaluation of others, the problem with stereotypes becomes evident when they are challenged—when gender and role, or behavior, mismatch. When stereotypes regarding roles or behavior and gender are



incongruent (i.e., lack of fit), individuals are likely to be sanctioned and negatively evaluated (Heilman, 1983, 2012; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Heilman and Okimoto, 2007; Brescoll et al., 2010). Rudman et al. (2012) discuss a gender backlash effect where women can reach higher positions through agentic behaviors, but they are at the same time disliked and hence not viewed as hireable. This leads women to a situation where they are forced between being liked or being respected, which undermines their ability to achieve positions of power (Rudman et al., 2012). For instance, when women engage in behaviors typically considered as masculine, they are less liked and their behavior is found to be less socially accepted, as compared to when men engage in the same behavior (Bartol and Butterfield, 1976; Jago and Vroom, 1982; Carli, 1990; Carli et al., 1995; Heilman and Okimoto, 2007). This seems to be true in students' perceptions of lecturers as well. When gender roles are violated by lecturers, students become critical (Chamberlin and Hickey, 2001; Sprague and Massoni, 2005). This suggests that if gender stereotypes are responsible for the variation in SET between women and men lecturers that has been observed in previous research, the role as a lecturer is coded as masculine. Traditionally, higher education has been exclusively for men, which could still affect how the role as a university lecturer is perceived in terms of gender. Moreover, being a lecturer at a higher education institution is a leadership role, and because leadership and authority traditionally are associated with masculinity (see Heilman and Okimoto, 2007), women lecturers violate gender stereotypes and may face biases and criticism (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Hence, women lecturers must balance the demands of their gender role, as well as the demands of being an authority figure, which inevitably will lead to some sort of discrepancy. Taken together, theory and empirical studies highlight the difficulty that women lecturers have in balancing the tension between agentic demands from the leadership role and communal demands from the gender role (Zhen et al., 2018).

Gender differences in the classroom

Gender roles are the patterns of behaviors, attitudes, and expectations associated with a particular sex—with being either male or female. For clarity, psychologists sometimes distinguish *gender differences*, which are related to social roles, from *sex differences*, which are related only to physiology and anatomy. Using this terminology, gender matters in teaching more than sex (in spite of any jokes told about the latter!).

Although there are many exceptions, boys and girls do differ on average in ways that parallel conventional gender stereotypes and that affect how the sexes behave at school and in class. The differences have to do with physical behaviors, styles of social interaction, academic motivations, behaviors, and choices. They have a variety of sources—primarily parents, peers, and the media. Teachers are certainly not the primary cause of gender role differences, but sometimes teachers influence them by their responses to and choices made on behalf of students.

Physical differences in gender roles

Physically, boys tend to be more active than girls, and by the same token more restless if they have to sit for long periods. They are also more prone than girls to rely on physical aggression if they are frustrated (Espelage & Swearer, 2004). Both tendencies are inconsistent with the usual demands of classroom life, of course, and make it a little more likely that school will be a difficult experience for boys, even for boys who never actually get in trouble for being restless or aggressive.

During the first two or three years of elementary school, gross motor skills develop at almost the same average rate for boys and girls. As a *group*, both sexes can run, jump, throw a ball, and the like with about equal ease, though there are of course wide significant differences among *individuals* of both sexes. Toward the end of elementary school, however, boys pull ahead of girls at these skills even though neither sex has begun yet to experience puberty. The most likely reason is that boys participate more actively in formal and informal sports because of expectations and support from parents, peers, and society (Braddock, Sokol-Katz,



Greene, & Basinger-Fleischman, 2005; Messner, Duncan, & Cooky, 2003). Puberty eventually adds to this advantage by making boys taller and stronger than girls, on average, and therefore more suited at least for sports that rely on height and strength.

In thinking about these differences, keep in mind that they refer to average trends and that there are numerous individual exceptions. Every teacher knows of individual boys who are not athletic, for example, or of particular girls who are especially restless in class. The individual differences mean, among other things, that it is hard to justify providing different levels of support or resources to boys than to girls for sports, athletics, or physical education. The differences also suggest, though, that individual students who *contradict* gender stereotypes about physical abilities may benefit from emotional support or affirmation from teachers, simply because they may be less likely than usual to get such affirmation from elsewhere.

Social differences in gender roles

When relaxing socially, boys more often gravitate to large groups. Whether on the playground, in a school hallway, or on the street, boys' social groups tend literally to fill up a lot of space, and often include significant amounts of roughhousing as well as organized and "semi-organized" competitive games or sports (Maccoby, 2002). Girls, for their part, are more likely to seek and maintain one or two close friends and to share more intimate information and feelings with these individuals. To the extent that these gender differences occur, they can make girls less visible or noticeable than boys, at least in leisure play situations where children or youth choose their companions freely. As with physical differences, however, keep in mind that differences in social interactions do *not* occur uniformly for all boys and girls. There are boys with close friends, contradicting the general trend, and girls who play primarily in large groups.

Differences in social interaction styles happen in the classroom as well. Boys, on average, are more likely to speak up during a class discussion—sometimes even if not called on, or even if they do not know as much about the topic as others in the class (Sadker, 2002). When working on a project in a small co-ed group, furthermore they have a tendency to ignore girls' comments and contributions to the group. In this respect co-ed student groups parallel interaction patterns in many parts of society, where men also have a tendency to ignore women's comments and contributions (Tannen, 2001).

Academic and cognitive differences in gender

On average, girls are more motivated than boys to perform well in school, at least during elementary school. By the time girls reach high school, however, some may try to down play their own academic ability in order make themselves more likeable by both sexes (Davies, 2005). Even if this occurs, though, it does not affect their grades: from kindergarten through twelfth grade, girls earn slightly higher average grades than boys (Freeman, 2004). This fact does not lead to similar achievement, however, because as youngsters move into high school, they tend to choose courses or subjects conventionally associated with their gender—math and science for boys, in particular, and literature and the arts for girls. By the end of high school, this difference in course selection makes a measurable difference in boys' and girls' academic performance in these subjects.

But again, consider my caution about stereotyping: there are individuals of both sexes whose behaviors and choices run counter to the group trends. (I have made this point as well in "Preparing for Licensure: Interpreting Gender-Related Behavior" by deliberately concealing the gender of a student described.) Differences within each gender group generally are far larger than any differences between the groups. A good example is the "difference" in cognitive ability of boys and girls. Many studies have found none at all. A few others have found small differences, with boys slightly better at math and girls slightly better at reading and literature. Still other studies have found the differences not only are small, but have been getting smaller in recent years compared to earlier studies. Collectively the findings about



cognitive abilities are virtually “non-findings,” and it is worth asking why gender differences have therefore been studied and discussed so much for so many years (Hyde, 2005). How teachers influence gender roles?

Teachers often intend to interact with both sexes equally, and frequently succeed at doing so. Research has found, though, that they do sometimes respond to boys and girls differently, perhaps without realizing it. Three kinds of differences have been noticed. The first is the overall amount of attention paid to each sex; the second is the visibility or “publicity” of conversations; and the third is the type of behavior that prompts teachers to support or criticize students.

Attention paid

In general, teachers interact with boys more often than with girls by a margin of 10 to 30 percent, depending on the grade level of the students and the personality of the teacher (Measor & Sykes, 1992). One possible reason for the difference is related to the greater assertiveness of boys that I already noted: if boys are speaking up more frequently in discussions or at other times, then a teacher may be “forced” to pay more attention to them. Another possibility is that some teachers may feel that boys are especially prone to getting into mischief, so they may interact with them more frequently to keep them focused on the task at hand (Erden & Wolfgang, 2004). Still another possibility is that boys, compared to girls, may interact in a wider variety of styles and situations, so there may simply be richer opportunities to interact with them. This last possibility is partially supported by another gender difference in classroom interaction, the amount of public versus private talk.

Public talk versus private talk

Teachers have a tendency to talk to boys from a greater physical distance than when they talk to girls (Wilkinson & Marrett, 1985). The difference may be both a cause and an effect of general gender expectations, expressive nurturing is expected more often of girls and women, and a businesslike task orientation is expected more often of boys and men, particularly in mixed-sex groups (Basow & Rubenfeld, 2003; Myaskovsky, Unikel, & Dew, 2005). Whatever the reason, the effect is to give interactions with boys more “publicity.” When two people converse with each other from across the classroom, many others can overhear them; when they are at each other’s elbows, though, few others can overhear.

Distributing praise and criticism

In spite of most teachers’ desire to be fair to all students, it turns out that they sometimes distribute praise and criticism differently to boys and girls. The differences are summarized in Table 1. The tendency is to praise boys more than girls for displaying knowledge *correctly*, but to criticize girls more than boys for displaying knowledge *incorrectly* (Golombok & Fivush, 1994; Delamont, 1996). Another way of stating this difference is by what teachers tend to overlook: with boys, they tend to overlook *wrong* answers, but with girls, they tend to overlook *right* answers. The result (which is probably unintended) is a tendency to make boys’ knowledge seem more important and boys themselves more competent. A second result is the other side of this coin: a tendency to make girls’ knowledge *less* visible and girls themselves *less* competent.

Table 1: Gender differences in how teachers praise and criticize students

Type of response from teacher	Boys	Girls
Praises	Correct knowledge	“Good” or compliant behavior
Overlooks or ignores	“Good” or compliant behavior; <i>incorrect</i> knowledge	<i>Mis</i> behavior; correct knowledge
Criticizes	<i>Mis</i> behavior	<i>Incorrect</i> knowledge

Gender differences also occur in the realm of classroom behavior. Teachers tend to praise girls for “good” behavior, regardless of its relevance to content or to the lesson at hand, and



tend to criticize boys for “bad” or inappropriate behavior (Golombok & Fivush, 1994). This difference can also be stated in terms of what teachers overlook: with girls, they tend to overlook behavior that is not appropriate, but with boys they tend to overlook behavior that is appropriate. The net result in this case is to make girls’ seem more good than they may really be, and also to make their “goodness” seem more important than their academic competence. By the same token, the teacher’s patterns of response imply that boys are more “bad” than they may really be.

At first glance, the gender differences in interaction can seem discouraging and critical of teachers because they imply that teachers as a group are biased about gender. But this conclusion is too simplistic for a couple of reasons. One is that like all differences between groups, interaction patterns are trends, and as such they hide a lot of variation within them. The other is that the trends suggest what often tends in fact to happen, not what can in fact happen if a teacher consciously sets about to avoid interaction patterns like the ones I have described. Fortunately for us all, teaching does not need to be unthinking; we have choices that we can make, even during a busy class.

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