

Women are the Breadwinners and Men are the Homemakers: Gender Socialization in Culture, Society, and Education

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the impact of gender socialization in culture, society, and education, with a focus on how both student's and teacher's cultural and societal conditioning influence their behaviors in educational settings. To answer the question of what gender norms and beliefs of a teacher are transmitted to the classroom, the paper examines of how society and culture reinforce gender roles in education. Examples of gender socialization, gender roles, and sex stereotypes are used to discern the inequality in teaching students of different genders and sexes. The paper further analyzes how teachers' biases can be detrimental to the learning of their students and how societal norms are sustained through self-fulfilling prophecies. Finally, the importance of gender competence for teachers is spotlighted and the significance of gender equity, as a powerful way to assure that students are granted fair opportunities in education, is brought to the foreground.

Introduction

Gender socialization as a norm seems to be a cultural universal trait of all societies. Gender socialization is considered a major component of socialization as a whole; it is the “process through which individuals learn to perform certain roles considered appropriate for each sex” (Erden, 2009, p. 410). Learning how to act and interact in a society is generally key for survival. We learn how to do this through various methods of socialization, through understanding societal norms, and enforcing sanctions on those who go against norms. Ultimately, girls and boys are socialized differently in a society so they may better fit their predetermined gender roles. Depending on who you ask, gender roles can be based on both nature and nurture; just like race, gender is socially defined. However, the origination of some gender roles stemmed from the biological differences in females and males.

In many societies around the world, a simplification and generalization of male gender roles involves being the breadwinner of the household and doing manual/outside labor (to name only a couple), and female gender roles include being the homemaker and caretaker of the children and family. Bear in mind that there are some societies where such gender roles are reversed and assigned to the opposite sex. So, how do such “predetermined” gender roles affect our students? Do teachers treat the sexes differently? If yes, what are the long-term consequences and are they really considered consequences? These are just a few of the questions that will be answered in a narrow scope throughout this paper. It was discovered that, yes, research has been done on gender socialization and education but not as much as one may hope. The issues being raised in this paper embody the impact of gender roles/socialization in education. One of the key objectives of education is to enable students to be aware and realize their capabilities while trying to reach their full potential and sometimes gender roles/expectations get in the way of such freedoms.

Gender Socialization, Gender Roles, and Sex Stereotypes

There is a common misconception that no difference exists between sex and gender, however, simply put gender deals with the parts one plays in society (gender is one’s social identity – an identity that is culturally accepted for each sex, male or female) while sex deals with the parts a person has. Gender is also a large part of one’s psychological and cultural identity. Needless to say, both play an integral role in how we live our lives individually and in our society. Gender roles like boys do the yard work, the car fixing, technical adjusting, while girls do the cooking and cleaning, babysitting, are just a few examples of simplified gender expectations. These gender roles differ from family to family, from culture to culture, and from country to country, but an expectation of each sex is typically set. These in turn are a part of a culture’s norms; they help teach people how to conform and behave in a society.

Gender socialization was defined in the introduction, however, other definitions exist. Shepard defines gender socialization as “the social process in which boys learn to act the way society assumes boys will act and girls learn to act in ways society expects of them” (Shepard, 2013, p.281). Upon first reading this definition, we may find no issue with it; however, if you were to give it a second read, you may see the subtlety of the word choice. The definition in itself is perpetuating gender socialization by saying boys are assumed to act a certain way while we expect girls to act differently. Such subtleties are a prime example of how our society reinforces gender roles and how we may not be aware that we are a part of perpetuating a negative lifestyle upon our students.

At birth, we are socializing our children toward a particular gender. For example, boys are wrapped in blue blankets while girls are wrapped in pink blankets. This is the establishment of

incurring either feminine or masculine ideals. For we tend to associate pink with females and blue with males. This is also seen later in life when there is a hesitance within the male sex to not wear pink due to it being too feminine, and men continually deal with the questioning of their masculinity. Other forms of gender socialization involve the distribution of chores among siblings. Which sex tends to do more household cleaning chores and which tends to do more outdoor labor? What children are taught to wear is another way to reinforce gender expectations. How parents treat their children can reinforce gender roles. Girls tend to be coddled more while boys are told to suck it up and not cry.

Males and females are socialized differently. Children learn at an early age what is expected of them and what is gender appropriate. Some of these norms are learned from gender/sex stereotypes like men being seen as strong, independent, sexually aggressive, and confident, while women are seen as submissive, dependent, emotional, nurturing, and sexually passive (Shepard, 2008). These traits are reinforced in the household followed by the educational system. "Each teacher...will transmit her own gender role expectations to children, reinforcing appropriate behaviors and punishing inappropriate ones" (Erden, 2009, p. 410). It is difficult for teachers to avoid bias in the classroom. Our beliefs and experiences help shape our teaching methods and approaches. "Stereotypes are recognized and acquired by the individual in the course of gender socialization. The educational system, as a leading institution of socialization, plays a key role in this process" (Auhadeeva, Yarmakeev & Aukhadeev, 2015, p. 33). School is where a great deal of gender roles and gender stereotypes become fixed in the student's mind and where behaviors are greatly practiced.

Gender Equality in and through Education

It is important to state and be aware of the fact that gender roles/socialization in today's (Western) world are shifting. Societies are stepping away from old views of women being the caretakers and men being the breadwinner, but it is a slow and difficult process. Despite the shift, there is still evidence pointing to the unfair treatment of the sexes in schools as well as differing expectations for each sex. "It was found that teachers [in 1990] perceived male students as being their best students. They found their best students to be more logical and competitive, and to enjoy mathematics more compared to their best female students...teachers believed that boys possessed scientific skills to a greater degree than girls" (Erden, 2009, p. 410). If there are educators who strive to teach each sex differently and make assumptions on how they learn, are they doing a disservice to their students and/or society?

There was an extensive study done by Myra and David Sadker in the late 1980s. The study focused on fourth, sixth, and eighth grade students and found that boys were overall more assertive than girls. "Boys were eight times more likely than girls to call out answers, whereas girls sat patiently with their hands raised" (Shepard, 2013, p. 281). Sadker and Sadker believe this behavior was caused by differential treatment given by the teachers. There was an understanding that it is okay for boys to blurt out the answer because, 'boys will be boys' while girls are expected to not shout and to raise their hand. Sadker and Sadker found these results to be subtle yet impactful: "Boys should be academically assertive and grab teachers' attention; girls should act like ladies and keep quiet" (1991, p. 86). So, how often do such subtleties go under the radar and what harm is truly coming of them? These are questions educators and parents alike need to ask themselves.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

One area educators need to be careful to avoid is negative self-fulfilling prophecies. A self-fulfilling prophecy is where a person is told something (whether true or not) and they start to

believe to where it eventually comes true. A perfect example of this would be telling girls they are not good at math. There is much debate over whether or not boys truly are better at math or that both sexes fair equally well but are socialized to believe differently. Once again, we come back to the subtleties of teaching. What one says can truly make a difference for better or worse. Children should be allowed to freely express their interests in education and life without being stereotyped as not good enough to succeed at certain subject matters.

The gender approach in education aims to promote schoolchildren's individual manifestations of gender characteristics (masculine, feminine, androgynous), their freedom of expression and the development of the qualities that may go beyond gender stereotypes, which means successful gender socialization, self-actualization, and self-realization (Auhadeeva, Yarmakeev, & Aukhadeev, 2015, p. 34).

The above quote is what educators should strive to achieve. Individuality and learning who you are is an important part of growth. If a young boy shows interest in sewing, they should not be denied the chance to pursue that skill. Too often prejudices based on sex can be seen in how teachers treat their students or how students perceive how they are being treated. A study conducted by Auhadeeva, Yarmakeev, & Aukhadeev showed that 79% of students believed their teachers were friendlier to girls, which was tied to the sex stereotypes of girls being more obedient and careful and better at school while boys were seen as distracted and less diligent (2015). Much of this paper thus far has covered more of the nurture argument, but the aforementioned traits are more associated with sex. How does biology play a role in gender socialization? Are girls truly more obedient and boys less diligent?

Biological Determinism and Reverse Gender Socialization

There is a term in sociology that describes the actions of males and females as solely dependent on their sex and the biological traits of each sex (Shepard, 2013). This term is known as *biological determinism*. The main idea behind this concept is that males and females have a diverse and different biological makeup that influences their behavior in society. For example, males have higher levels of testosterone and, therefore, will be more aggressive, while females have more estrogen and, therefore, will be more emotionally connected. It is said that heterosexual men subconsciously choose mates that are younger and more physically fit while heterosexual women choose more mates who are more economically stable (Shepard, 2013). Why? Does it all come down to biology and survival of the fittest? Both sexes have an innate need to produce offspring and protect them. Males choosing mates that can better handle childbirth and are more likely to produce healthy children. Females are looking for a household where their children's basic needs would be met and money tends to assure that. However, this is only one form of thinking in sociology and many sociologists do not see biological determinism as a single variable for the difference in gender behavior.

One of the origins of gender roles goes way back to hunter and gatherer societies; there are still some societies around the world that live under this lifestyle. Why is it that males were the ones who went off to battle or did the dangerous tasks of hunting while the women stayed home? One factor pertains to the survival of the human species. To a certain degree, men were considered more dispensable than women. The population only required one male to sustain itself (obviously not the best route to take) in regards to procreation. Whereas, it would take multiple females to more thoroughly keep a society alive.

Margaret Mead, an American anthropologist, who examined how culture and socialization can influence gender role behavior (Shepard, 2013), studied a few primitive tribes in New Guinea. The results worked to disprove some of the biological determinism theories presented by demonstrating the complexity of human nature. Her discoveries showed both men and women taking on what were traditionally roles of the opposite sex or both sexes acted masculine. Therefore, biology was not always the sole independent variable behind behavior.

Similarly, Howard Zinn (2003), an American historian, later discovered similar switches with the League of the Iroquois that had socialized to a completely matriarchal society where women had the power, respect, and even took charge of military activities. All of the aforesaid conveys the importance of societal influence. Ultimately, “individuals can fairly easily be socialized into the gender of the opposite sex” (Shepard, 2013, p. 277). This statement is imperative to gender socialization in schools. When discussing the impacts teacher’s biases, and the consequent behaviors, can have on their students, especially during primary education, we need to bear in mind the somewhat malleable nature of our youth, i.e., children can be molded just as much by the actions of others as by their own experiences, among other factors.

Gender Competence of Teachers

One of the avenues toward more gender equality in the classroom is making teachers aware of their biases toward gender and how they transmit those beliefs in their teaching. The beliefs of teachers “have an impact on their behaviors in the classroom, their preparation and delivery of instruction, and their learning from their own teaching practices” (Erden, 2009, p. 409). Erden mentions how empirical studies provide supporting evidence to the aforementioned statement. Teachers’ perceptions and behaviors are the making of their past experiences; experiences that were influenced by society and culture. Teachers are just as much a product of their culture and society as their students. “A gender competence of the teacher means awareness of the organizational, psychological, pedagogical, and didactic aspects in managing schoolchildren’s educational activities based on their gender-specific attitudes” (Auhadeeva, Yarmakeev, & Aukhadeev, 2015, pp. 35-36). Eliminating preferential treatment of students and children in society no matter their sex is a way to better the lives of our students and society as a whole. Gender competence can also lead to acceptance which creates its own ripple effect.

Shifts and What We Do Can

Today in the United States, gender socialization is shifting gears into a society with less focus on a patriarchal theme; however, patriarchy is still very evident in U.S. culture, society, and education. “Research has documented remarkable change in women and men’s attitudes about gender in the United States over the past several decades” (Cunningham, Beutal, Barber, & Thornton, 2005, p. 863). Too often children are pressured to choose a gender at an early age and, if chosen gender is not one that matches their sex, they tend to face strong social pressures to go against their individuality and their true gender identity. However, there is a debate now that switches up the standard belief of which sex is hurting in education. The strong feminist movement of gender equality has focused more on the inequality of females versus both sexes.

Therefore, a shift is becoming evident, especially in higher education; we are seeing more women graduate high school and attend college than men. Some of the reasons for the gender role shifts in the U.S. are social structural factors like “educational attainment, women’s employment, living arrangements, and family formation...to the extent that individuals believe that the family responsibilities of women and men should be relatively similar” (Cunningham, Beutal, Barber, & Thornton, 2005, p. 863). As more women becoming the breadwinners.

Hopefully, this shift will equate to a more equitable society and more gender equality in the classroom for both sexes.

How can we make a difference as educators in the realm of gender equality teaching? We must first become aware of where our gender biases stand as well as the gender biases in our culture and society. Next, we must be willing to make the necessary corrections to our beliefs and behaviors toward gender roles. The aforesaid can be done in various ways. One could take a course on gender equality in education and maybe this should be a requirement for teacher education programs. A teacher could record how they teach and respond to their students while in the classroom followed by critically analyzing how they treated each sex. Research was done by Tipton and Robertson in 1993 that had teachers do the above; the results involved the teachers being surprised at how they treated male and female students differently. Another idea is taking an implicit association test which is where a teacher could see if they have certain preferences toward each sex. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the teacher to be aware of their personal beliefs and biases and recognize the necessary changes that are for the betterment of their student's education. "In all, different expectations from male and female students shape and modify the intellectual development of them limiting their capacities to achieve their fullest potentials" (Erden, 2009, p. 410). Education is a basic human right and plays an important role in allowing for discovery of individuality.

Conclusion

Teachers and students alike need to be aware of how gender socialization leaves impressions on their social lives inside and outside the classroom. There is no specific way to live life, but there are certain societal norms that are not meant to be broken and others that could use some tweaking. Many gender roles and stereotypes are some of the aspects of society that could flourish from some changes. Johnson (1997) mentioned that we, as a society, act like those playing a game of Monopoly. We carry on with the idea of having to follow certain rules and goals that society defines for us, and those rules tend to limit our abilities. It is a rarity for people to realize they can change the rules. In education, we have to examine those rules and understand where those rules came from. In order to do that, we need to place ourselves in those people's shoes. "To use the game analogy, it's a mistake to assume that we can understand players' behavior without paying attention to the game they're playing" (Johnson, 1997, p. 35). Then we need to determine their applicability. Depending on the circumstances, there are many rules that need to be broken or restructured. Simple examples could be the books children are allowed to read due to "questionable" content and the reinforcement of specific gender roles. As educators, we need to spark our students' interest to ask questions, to determine if that "questionable" content is just that or if certain gender roles are ones we have to follow. The idea is to help create "individuals who are motivated to interrogate their personal assumptions as well as those that are embedded in the educational and larger social systems in which they operate" (Leland, 2000, p. 4). Always have them asking, "Why?" More times than not it is not the answer that provides knowledge but learning what questions to ask. "Instead of being positioned as helpless victims, they are positioning themselves as social activists who are challenging the status quo and asking for change" (Leland, 2000, p. 6). Just because we are assigned a certain sex at birth does not mean we have to act a certain way; teachers and students should embrace their true identity even if it means going against the grains of society. There are some rules that perhaps are meant to be broken.

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