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The Psychology of Gender

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Over the past century, there have been many changes in male-female relationships, in the ways men and women think of each other and of themselves, and in the societal norms for feminine and masculine behavior. The male-female distinction has been assigned meanings and significance that have implications for work, family, leisure, and almost all aspects of social life. In fact, the differences and similarities between men and women are compelling for their personal, but also their political, economic, social, and educational implications. This chapter presents examples of active learning activities and how these experiential learning exercises are adapted to the course goals and objectives in a psychology of gender course. The focus of the chapter is on how to best integrate new research findings to the students' existing knowledge base to create a new appreciation of these complex issues and how they influence each individual's life.

Course Development and Goals

The role of personal reflections

In my psychology of gender course, students are expected to (a) gain an appreciation of the basic information on the psychology of gender, (b) develop an understanding of the research methods, together with the ability to evaluate research in this area critically, (c) achieve an ability to apply the knowledge to their own life, (d) demonstrate an ability to synthesize a large amount of information coherently, logically, and rationally in written and spoken form, and (e) build a sense of community through common experiences, collaboration, engagement, sharing of information, mutual support, and shared engagement. Importantly, students should *experience* what it is like to be a woman or man and how those attributes have shaped their lives. I expect students to grapple with the ideas of what it means to grow up female or male. How do these experiences change their perceptions, behaviors, and thoughts? Gender

should become explicit in their everyday life. Because of this emphasis, students are expected to complete weekly exercises outside of class and to reflect on those. These reflections must include the newly acquired concept vocabulary. They must also show the integration of the information from the students' own observations as well as information from class discussions and the textbook. The reflections must be sent to me for feedback prior to the topic being discussed in class. Reading the reflections ahead of class allows me to collect data for use in the class discussion. The first and last reflections (how gender has impacted their own lives) are the same in order to assess student learning.

First Day

Introductions Through a Photostory

The first day of class sets the tone and atmosphere for the semester. To help students feel comfortable talking in class and to encourage them to share their experiences, it is crucial to create an atmosphere that is inclusive and devoid of judgment. Students must get to know the instructor and each other well. Thus, besides introducing the goals and objectives, my philosophy of teaching, and the major aspects of the syllabus, I present a "photostory" (free downloadable program available at <http://www.microsoft.com/downloads/details.aspx?displaylang=en&FamilyID=92755126-a008-49b3-b3f4-6f33852af9c1> from Microsoft. Note that "photostory" does not run on Mac platforms; Apple provides similar media applications that can be used instead) about my latest travels and family. This brief photo montage provides a platform for introducing who I am and what I do. This self-introduction also familiarizes students to the photostory application that they will use for their final project (see below).

Students Create a Television Ad

To introduce each other, students prepare a “television ad.” I divide the class into teams of three or four and ask students to create an ad that would “motivate students to sign up for this psychology of gender course.” The teams present their ad to the class while introducing each other. This team building exercise permits everyone to speak, to get to know each other, and it helps me assess what some of the students’ course expectations are. Examples of student ads can be found at: http://www.icherney.com/Teaching/Courses/Gender/Gender_home.htm.

First Day Assessments

To evaluate students’ current knowledge base and to assess student learning, I recommend starting the course with a pretest that consists of a few course content questions (the posttest is completed during the last day of class). Students also complete several gender inventories (e.g., Bem Sex Role Inventory) that are later used to exemplify the vocabulary and concepts. The first day, each student lists ten adjectives and nouns that come to mind for the concepts of “female” and “male.” I compile those to create a master that I refer to throughout the semester when discussing stereotypes, categorization, gender norms and roles, etc. I also instruct students to respond to some gender myths (True/False questions) that we start to debunk together. These myths are revisited the last week of classes.

Introduction and Research Methods

Placing Gender in a Historical Context

Not only is it important to introduce the new concepts and vocabulary related to gender at the beginning of the semester, but it is also important to place those into the historical context. There are several possibilities to do that. One effective way to introduce the historical aspect of gender research is to show older gender related advertising or propaganda clips. For example, I show the video clip “Easy does it,” a 1940 film by the Handy (Jam) Organization. This brief archival clip illustrates the gender roles of the 1940 very well and always engenders a vivid class discussion. This clip also serves as an example for traditional gender roles that are discussed later in the semester (see below).

Random Assignment Using Post-its

Similarly, the research methodology specific to gender research needs to be introduced or revisited. I developed an exercise to illustrate the power of random assignment that is very easy to use. Write a different grade point average on a post-it starting from 4.0 going downward (3.9, 3.8, etc.) and randomly distribute a post-it to each student. Ask students to divide the class by some variable of their own choosing (e.g., eye color, birth months, etc.) and to average the post-it GPAs for each group. Students will soon notice how similar the mean GPAs are. If the means turn out to be dissimilar, one can discuss the impact of unequal group sizes, skewed, or small group sizes on central distribution measures.

Critical Assessment of Research Methodologies Using Video Clips

Gender research issues and the new vocabulary can easily be integrated throughout the course. Throughout the semester, while showing video clips, as for example “Men, women, and the sex difference: Boys and girls are different” (Paul, 1996) hosted by John Stossel that illustrates theories of gender differences, I use the clip to discuss research biases. Small teams compile a list of criticisms, biases, and strengths of the research presented. These are then presented to the classmates and discussed. Similarly, on reading assignments, I ask students to evaluate the research hypotheses and conclusions. Over the course of the semester, students develop critical research skills.

Observational Research and Operational Definitions with Yearbooks

An active learning exercise that illustrates observational gender research is the “yearbook” exercise (Lipsitz, 2000). Students bring a yearbook from a coed school to class and test the null hypothesis that there are no gender differences in smiling. To accomplish this, students have to first reach a consensus on the operational definition they will use. Pairs of students record smiling data of one class from their yearbook and tally the smiling/no smiling for each gender. This hypothesis testing exercise is highly enjoyable for students and illustrates the importance of operational definitions in research. The findings can also be used to explain different gender theories, such as the deficit model (Deutsch, 1990; that women smile more because of their inferior status relative to men), or the gender

communication differences model (Tannen, 1991; that women smile more because of women's greater concern with interpersonal comfort and harmony or their different reactions to social unease).

Gender Roles and Gender Stereotypes

Violating a Gender Norm

One of the first reflections that I assign is one where students violate a gender norm. As part of their homework reflection, they first establish a list of gender norms for their own and the opposite gender. Second, they decide which gender norm they want to violate and why, and third, they describe their experience and reflect on it. I compile a list of the gender norms that male and female students chose to violate and use it in class to direct the discussion. In class, students share and compare their experiences. Very quickly, it becomes apparent that there are more negative consequences for men who violate a gender norm than for women. A video clip from "Tough guise: Violence, media and the crisis in masculinity" (Jhally, 1999) helps to illustrate the consequences of violating a masculine norm. This exercise is powerful for many, because the majority of students feel uncomfortable in the situation. This exercise is also good for introducing sexism in its different forms (i.e., benevolent, traditional, modern, hostile).

Gender Roles in "My Big Fat Greek Wedding"

A good introduction to gender roles and cultural issues is to show the first five minutes of the movie "My big fat Greek wedding" (Zwick, 2002) and also to ask students to review a television show. Small teams of three to four students choose a television show and discuss the various roles characters portray and answer questions such as: Which shows depict traditional, egalitarian, or transitional ideologies? How have these changed over the past decades? Compared to the "Easy does it" (1940) clip, what roles have changed and what roles have stayed the same? Which roles do you think will change in the future and how?

Stereotypes in Movie Trailers and Cartoons

One way to illustrate the development of stereotypes is to show trailers from popular children's movies. For example, the "Toy

Story" (Lasseter, 1995) and "Finding Nemo" (Stanton & Unkrich, 2003) trailers illustrate the fact that all but one character in the movies is masculine. I also instruct students to observe children's television shows. They count the number of male and female characters depicted in the cartoons, how many of the narrators are male or female, and the roles of each character. Students integrate those numbers and observations with information from the textbook and clips they have previously watched. They also reflect on their findings and on what this means for the development of gender stereotypes. In class, they discuss the various shows and I present the cumulative data of their observations.

Stereotypes at the Local Toy Store

Another interesting active learning exercise and reflection is to invite students to visit a local toy store (Lloyd, 2008). In their reflection, students describe the colors and packaging of toys, the lay-out in the store, the intended purpose and the message conveyed by some toys, as well as the gender of the toys. For example, they describe differences between boys', girls', and neutral toys. Note that if students do not have the means to get to a toy department, they can do the exercise searching for the information on the internet. To supplement that class, besides using the observations as discussion points, I also present the latest research on toys and gender (e.g., Alexander, 2003; Blakemore & Centers, 2005; Cherney & Dempsey, 2010; Cherney, Harper, & Winter, 2006). We discuss how experiences with toys may be predictable of later behaviors and attitudes. Assigning these articles prior to the class is useful.

Magazines Illustrate Gender Stereotypes, Body Image, or Eating Disorders

Another way to illustrate gender stereotypes is to have students bring copies of men's and women's magazines to class (e.g. Vogue, Cosmo, GQ, etc.). After watching Jean Kilbourne's "Killing us softly 3" (Jhally, 2000), students break into groups and look for images that support or fail to support Kilbourne's findings. Each group then reports their findings back to the class. These ads can also be used to discuss standards of body size for men and women and the prevalence of eating disorders.

Cognitive Abilities

Mental Rotation and the Lack of Women in STEM Fields

An interesting active learning exercise to demonstrate cognitive gender differences is to have students complete the mental rotation test (Vandenberg & Kuse, 1978). Because mental rotation is one of the most robust gender difference (e.g., Voyer, Voyer, & Bryden, 1995), it is the most likely to show differences even in a small class. Before completing the test, ask students to estimate how many test items they will solve correctly. After coding their responses, students compare their estimations and scores. Differences between women and men are typically apparent, and permit an in-depth discussion of the “nature-nurture” debate. Are these differences due to sex hormones, genes, or other biological differences, or to differences in the environment? Because mental rotation is linked to mathematical performance, particularly in women, it often leads to the discussion on the lack of women in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. Additional clips (e.g., “Men, women, and the sex difference” with John Stossel) also explore different hypotheses. I also assign the article by Gould (1980) on *Women’s Brains* that describes how in the 19th century, the scientific evidence showed that women had smaller brains.

Hypothesis Testing and Research Design on Gender Differences in Mathematics

After being introduced to research findings suggesting that gender differences in mathematics skills do not emerge until junior high, students break into groups of three or four and create a list of potential hypotheses to explain this finding. They must rank their hypotheses according to how plausible they are and how much variance they are likely to account for. After presenting their ranking in class, they are instructed to evaluate each hypothesis and design a study that would test each hypothesis. When reviewing the research evidence, they can again evaluate the hypotheses.

Stereotype Threat in Mathematics

Discussions on achievement, self-concept, self-esteem, fear of success, and attribution for performance can be supplemented by illustrating the power of stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Prepare two short math tests. On half of the instruction page write

“Men have been shown to outperform women on this math test,” and on the other half: “Men and women have been shown to perform similarly on this math test.” Divide the class randomly into two groups (try to get an equal number of men and women in each group) and proctor the test. The students can score their own tests. Even if no gender differences emerge, the resulting discussion on stereotype threat and their negative consequences highlights the power of implicit cues and stereotypes. This is also an excellent theme for a reflection.

Gender Theories

Biological Theories - Raising Bruce as Brenda

The Bruce Reimer story is an excellent way to introduce biological theories. The video (e.g., BBC, 2008) tells the story of twin boys Bruce and Brian Reimer. Unfortunately, Bruce’s circumcision went horribly wrong, and based on the prevalent nurture theory of that time, Bruce was sexually reassigned to become Brenda and was raised as a girl. Many years later, Brenda became David Reimer. In 2001, John Colapinto wrote his story in “As nature made him: The boy who was raised as a girl.” This book is captivating and one that students enjoy reading. The Bruce Reimer story coupled with research on girls who suffer from Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH) present strong evidence of the “nature” part of the nature-nurture debate (e.g., Berenbaum & Hines, 1992).

Evolutionary Theory – Survey on What We Look for in Future Mates

For a good introduction to evolutionary theory and sociobiology present students with a list of about 15 characteristics and traits that they may find attractive in a future mate. Ask them to rate the characteristics in terms of the importance that they attach to each in choosing a mate on a scale from 0 = irrelevant to 3 = indispensable. Characteristics such as “ambition and industriousness,” “chastity,” “good cook and housekeeper,” “good financial prospect,” “good health,” “good looks,” often show significant gender differences. These findings often lead to a discussion of the hunter-gatherer theory.

Gender Role Socialization – Children’s Books

Gender-role socialization can also be illustrated through children's books. Ask students to bring children's books to class. Have teams of three or four students record the sex of all the characters and how they are portrayed. What are the characters doing? Are they good or evil characters? How are they depicted? I also bring to class a children's book that is in a foreign language. A student volunteer tells the story to a preschooler. We later analyze the words that the volunteer narrator used to describe the pictures. Was the story told at a basic, subordinate or superordinate level (adapted to the child's age)? What types of descriptions were used? What was omitted? These types of observations help students understand the complexity of environmental input and how implicit features may influence gender development in the long-term. Using a foreign book also demonstrates cross-cultural gender differences in children's books.

Gender Role Socialization – Dress a Baby as a Boy or Girl

A video clip that illustrates gender-role socialization well is one where a baby who is dressed either in blue or pink (The Brain, 1997) is handed to a mother for observation. Mothers who think the baby is a boy tend to hand him a masculine toy and to put him on the floor, whereas mothers who think the baby is a girl tend to hand her a feminine toy and to talk to her. This clip can also serve as an introduction to other environmental influences in children's upbringing.

Emotion and Aggression

Play with Toys

A popular active learning activity that illustrates different styles of interactions between boys and girls is to provide students with different types of toys. I typically have the class sit in a circle and lay out masculine, feminine, and neutral toys in the middle. Teams of three to four are assigned an age group and asked to role play. They get a few minutes to review the research findings on play and gender. The caveat: women pretend they are boys and men pretend they are girls. Discussions cover questions such as what interactions or behaviors during the simulated play are supported by research or how the styles of interaction change with age or gender. See

http://www.icherney.com/Teaching/Courses/Gender/Gender_home.htm for an example.

Differences Among Masculine and Feminine Aggression

Students watch the film "Tough guise: violence, media, and the crisis in masculinity" (1999) written by Jackson Katz. They then break into small groups and compile a list of the most and least persuasive arguments made in the film and their reasons for these choices. They also read an article on relational aggression in females (e.g., Crick, Ostrov, & Kawabata, 2007). They are then asked to come to their own conclusions about whether there are differences in aggression between male and female teenagers and, if so, what the nature of these differences is.

Communication

Observations of Nonverbal Communication

To illustrate differences in nonverbal behavior, I ask students to observe dyads (two men, two women, and one woman and one man) in a social setting. If time permits, they can do the exercise during class. Students count the number of times each person in the dyad touches the other, smiles, or makes eye contact. Personal space is also assessed. Students then compare the nonverbal behaviors of the men and women (same-sex and female-male dyad) they observed. The discussion often leads to the interaction between gender and cultural differences in nonverbal behavior.

Deborah Tannen and Gender Differences in Communication

An excellent video recording on gendered communication that I show at the beginning of the communication chapter is "He said, she said: gender, language, communication" (DiNozzi, 2001). Deborah Tannen gives excellent examples of how male and female communication differs. Students are then instructed to think of examples from their own lives where these patterns of gender communication have happened and the consequences.

Relationships

Advice Columns and Magazines

Students bring in "relationship advice" obtained from advice columns/articles in

popular men's or women's magazines. Working in groups, students look for stereotypes of men or women in the articles, evidence that is consistent or inconsistent with research on gender differences in relationships, and are then asked to determine whether these articles discourage healthy psychological development of men and women and the success of heterosexual relationships.

Relationship Building Through Personal Ads

Another way to introduce relationships is to ask students to view personal ads in magazines or on the internet. In their reflection, they report how many words and what types of words men and women use to attract mates to their cause. The way men and women describe themselves in personal ads illustrates the values that each attach to certain characteristics. The findings can lead to discussions about mate selection and evolutionary theories, as well as the different expectations men and women have when in a dating or committed relationship.

Mental & Physical Health

Students are given a chart detailing the top ten causes of death for both men and women in the U.S. They work in groups to generate hypotheses explaining any differences or similarities seen between these two lists. This hypothesis building leads to a discussion of how lifestyle and behavioral factors, along with gender-role socialization, have an impact on the health-related behaviors of men and women.

Group Projects

Photostories as Creative Research Project

At the end of the semester, I like to assign a creative project. Students are divided into groups of two or three and assigned a topic that was not covered in class. Alternatively, they can choose their own topic. Recently, I have assigned debate questions (e.g., Is gender identity innate? Are men and women more similar than different?). The presentations must not exceed 6-7 minutes, must be based on research, and must be created using the photostory (Microsoft; see above) software. The groups must create their own slideshow and narrate the text. Many also add music to their presentation. Examples of photostories are presented at:
<http://www.icherney.com/Teaching/>

[Courses/Gender/Gender_home.htm](#). The photostories are played in class and the classmates ask questions about the topic. Each presentation is peer-reviewed and rated on a scale of 1 to 10 on the quality of the information presented, answers to the student questions, quality of the photostory, creativity and thoughtfulness, quality of the organization, content coverage, and whether they get the "message" of the presentation. The photostories are then uploaded on my website where they can serve for future presentations.

Conclusions

Students learn best when they are actively engaged in the learning process and associate the learned material to their existing knowledge base (Cherney, 2008). In a study examining students' memory for course content in psychology courses, including a psychology of gender course, students remembered best the concepts they had acquired when being actively engaged in the exercise and having to reflect on that concept. Overall, when students were asked to list ten things they remembered from the psychology of gender course, 64% listed gendered play (see above activity), 48% communication differences, 44% health related gender differences, 40% photostories, and 32% romantic relationships. All these events except for the photostories, were introduced using activities and had a reflection homework accompanying the activity (Cherney, 2008).

Annotated Bibliography

Biological preparedness for gender roles. Alexander's study suggests that an innate bias for processing object movement (boys) and color/forms (girls) may contribute to different behaviors in young boys and girls and their toy preferences. In other words, preferences for toys may indicate a biological preparedness for a masculine or feminine gender role.

- Alexander, G. (2003). An evolutionary perspective of sex-typed toy preferences: Pink, blue, and the brain. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 32, 7-14. doi: 10.1023/A:1021833110722.

Bruce becomes Brenda and then David. This documentary tells the story of twin boys Bruce and Brian Reimer, and how Bruce's circumcision went horribly wrong. Based on the prevalent nurture theory of that time, Bruce was

sexually reassigned to become Brenda and was raised as a girl. Later, Brenda became David Reimer. Additional information is also available from John Colapinto's book (see below).

- BBC (2008). *Dr. Money and the boy with no penis* [internet clip]. Google Video. Available at: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=3767337480016853964#>

Feminine and masculine toys. This study examined the different characteristics of feminine and masculine toys. The researchers found that girls' toys were associated with physical attractiveness, nurturance, and domestic skills, whereas masculine toys were associated with violence, competition, and movement.

- Blakemore, J. E. O. & Centers, R. E. (2005). Characteristics of boys' and girls' toys. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 53, 619-633. doi: 10.1007/s11199-005-7729-0.

Understanding play complexity and reasoning about toys. This study examined 3-5 year-old children's gender classification, reasoning, and play complexity with gender neutral and ambiguous toys. Color was the most frequently used reason for toy gender categorization.

- Cherney, I. D., & Dempsey, J. (2010). Young children's classification, stereotyping and play behavior for gender neutral and ambiguous toys. *Educational Psychology*, 1- 19. doi: 10.1080/01443410.2010.498416.

What are "boy" and "girl" toys? Boys and girls classified gendered toy pictures into "boy toys" and "girl toys." The results showed that many children used egocentric reasoning as an explanation of why particular toys were considered feminine or masculine.

- Cherney, I. D., Harper, H. J., & Winter, J. A. (2006). Nouveaux Jouets : ce que les enfants identifient comme « jouets de garçons » et « jouets de filles » *Enfance*, 3, 266-282. Translation : New toys for tots: What preschoolers identify as "boy and girl toys."

The Bruce Reimer story. Colapinto's book recounts the story of Bruce Reimer who was raised as Brenda and who later became David Reimer.

- Colapinto, J. (2000). *As nature made him: The boy who was raised as a girl*. Harper Collins. ISBN-10: 0060192119.

Do women smile more than men? This article describes the deficit model that women smile

more because of their inferior status relative to men. This theory can serve for a discussion for why women smile more than men (yearbook exercise).

- Deutsch, F. M. (1990). Status, sex, and smiling: The effect of role on smiling in men and women. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 16, 531-540. doi:10.1177/01461672 90163011.

Sexist images. This is a documentary about sexist images of women in the media. It discusses how women continue to be portrayed by advertising and the effects this has on their images of themselves.

- Jhally, S. (Director). Kilbourne, J. (Producer). (2000). *Killing us softly 3* [video recording]. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation.

Visit of a local toy store. This chapter describes how students can find out gender messages by visiting a local toy store.

- Lloyd, M. A. (2008). Gender messages in toys: An out-of-class project. In Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr. (Ed.), *Favorite activities for the teaching of psychology*, (pp. 273-274). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Society.

Debate on gender differences. John Stossel (ABC News) illustrates theories of gender differences. The clip examines the differences between the sexes and whether they are the result of biology or environment.

- Paul, G. (Director), Breen, J., Gustafson, N., Messina, G. (Producers) (1996). *Men, women, and the sex difference: boys and girls are different* [video recording]. Films for the Humanities and Sciences.

Finding Nemo. The fretful Marlin and his young son Nemo become separated from each other in the Great Barrier Reef. Nemo, a clown fish, is unexpectedly taken from his home and thrust into a fish tank in a dentist's office overlooking Sydney Harbor. The trailer depicts the lack of female characters in this popular children's movie.

- 2-minute theatrical trailer for *Finding Nemo* [Electronic source.] Stanton, A., & Unkrich, L. (Directors). (2003). Los Angeles: Pixar Animation Studios. Retrieved August 03, 2010 from <http://www.pixar.com/featurefilms/nemo/theater/index.html>

Gender communication. An article that describes the gender communication differences model that women smile more because of women's greater concern with interpersonal

comfort and harmony or their different reactions to social unease. This article can be used to illustrate why women tend to smile more (i.e., in yearbooks).

- Tannen, D. (1991). *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation*. New York: Ballentine.

Is it a boy or a girl? A brief video clip showing a baby dressed as a boy or as a girl and the behavior of mothers who are asked to play with the baby. Mothers who believed the baby was a boy gave the child boy toys and put the baby on its stomach on the floor. Mothers who believed the baby was a girl gave the child girl toys and were more likely to hold the baby close to themselves and talk to her.

- The Brain: Teaching Modules (1997). *Gender development: social influences*. (2nd ed.). Colorado State University. Retrieved at <http://www.learner.org/resources/series142.html?pop=yes&pid=1571>

Robust gender differences in mental rotation. The mental rotation test contains two separate subtests, each with 10 spatial rotation exercises with a total of 20 exercises altogether. Each exercise consists of a drawing of a three dimensional object composed of blocks (target) and four drawings to the right of the target object. The four drawings consist of two correctly rotated pictures of the target, and of two distracters (mirror images). The participants must mentally manipulate the target object and find the two correctly rotated objects. This test shows the most robust cognitive gender differences.

- Vandenberg, S. G., & Kuse, A. R. (1978). Mental rotations: A group test of three-dimensional spatial visualization. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 47, 599-604.

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