



Bridging the Gap: 'Doing Gender', 'Hegemonic Masculinity', and the Educational Troubles of Boys

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Abstract

This article reviews popular and social scientific perspectives on the academic gender gap in education, specifically the finding that boys underperform compared to girls. The article highlights the utility of sociology in analyzing the gender gap and in guiding how educators respond to students' gender. It suggests that contemporary gender theories 'doing gender' and 'hegemonic masculinity' offer the best lenses through which to view academic gender differences. These perspectives can frame boys' academic troubles as an important social problem, but one that is rooted in the social construction of masculinity rather than institutional discrimination against boys.

The fourth and fifth grade boys stare out plaintively from the January 2006 cover of Newsweek magazine. With their unkempt hair and taciturn, furrowed brows, they appear both troubled and troublesome. The bold headline beneath them screams, 'The Boy Crisis: At Every Level of Education, They're Falling Behind. What to Do?' This Newsweek cover story represents just one of a welter of recent articles and books addressing what some have called the 'new' gender gap in education – the finding that girls are outperforming boys academically.

As with many issues related to gender and the popular press, discussion of this gender gap is awash with charged rhetoric and misinterpretations of scholarly work and educational practices. Titles such as *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men* (Sommers 2000), *The Trouble with Boys: A Surprising Report Card on Our Sons, Their Problems at School, and What Parents and Educators Must Do* (Tyre 2008), and *The Minds of Boys: Saving Our Sons from Falling Behind in School and Life* (Gurian and Stevens 2005) reveal the 'crisis' paradigm that dominates discussion of boys' underachievement. Because many of these works have emerged as a thinly veiled backlash against the feminist movement, feminist-inspired authors have shot back with their own interpretation – that the underachievement of boys is a myth and the few areas in which girls surpass boys simply reflect academic improvement for girls rather than boys' alarming regression (King 2000; Mead 2006). Beneath this debate over boys' underachievement lies a more general, intriguing question about what is meant by the concept of gender inequality.

In this article, I review popular and social scientific perspectives on the gender gap in education. I propose that sociology has much to offer in enhancing our understanding of this gap and guiding how educators respond to students' gender. I suggest that contemporary sociological gender theory offers the best lens through which to view this gap. This research allows us to understand boys' academic troubles as an important social problem, but one that is rooted in the social construction of masculinity rather than institutional discrimination against boys.

Tracing the gender gap

The contemporary firestorm over the academic underachievement of boys was ignited in 2000 by anti-feminist author Christina Hoff Sommers. In *The War Against Boys*, Sommers argues that feminism has overextended its reach, interfering with education and disadvantaging boys. A host of educational programs and services have been implemented, according to Sommers, which give special attention to girls while leaving boys behind and either directly or indirectly punishing them for doing 'boy' things in classrooms. Sommers responds to a succession of research in the 1990s showing various ways that girls endured disadvantages in education. This work was pioneered by the findings of psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982), who documented the plummeting self-esteem of girls in adolescence, which presumably hindered their academic progress. Researchers Myra and David Sadker (1986, 1994) provided further evidence of sexism within schools. The Sadker's (1994, 43) demonstrate numerous, vivid examples of how interactions within classrooms tend to favor boys:

Our research shows that boys call out significantly more than girls. Sometimes what they say has little or nothing to do with the teacher's questions. Whether male comments are insightful or irrelevant, teachers respond to them. However, when girls call out, there is a fascinating occurrence: Suddenly the teacher remembers the rule about raising your hand before you talk. And then the girl, who is usually not as assertive as the male students, is deftly and swiftly put back in her place.

Evidence of classroom marginalization such as this, along with the self-esteem slide for girls in adolescence, prompted several works that examined the challenges faced by girls in education. These included a policy report by the American Association of University Women entitled *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (1992), and popular books such as *School Girls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap* (Orenstein 1994) and *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (Pipher 1994). These works make the case that schools contribute to hindering the academic confidence of young women.

But beginning with Sommers (2000), several authors have argued that the majority of educational difficulties are actually experienced by boys. The data appear to bear this out. For example, boys are disciplined more than girls (including suspensions and expulsions), have higher dropout rates, are more likely to be retained, are more likely to be classified with learning disabilities, and lag behind girls in grades and reading achievement (see Buchmann et al. 2008 for a comprehensive review of gender differences in academic outcomes). Even math and science – areas once dominated by boys – have seen rapid progress by girls. While boys still enjoy a slight advantage in math achievement test scores, girls now take more college preparatory math and science courses than boys (Buchmann et al. 2008). Girls also outpace boys in college enrollment and completion (Buchmann and DiPrete 2006; DiPrete and Buchmann 2006). Such outcomes spurred a 'boy turn' (Weaver-Hightower 2003) in popular and academic writing on gender and education. People began asking, 'What about the boys?'

In the popular press, the difficulties faced by boys in school have been chalked up to overly feminized, or at least stridently gender-neutral, educational environments that disregard supposedly essential biological differences between boys and girls. The writings of Michael Gurian best represent this perspective (Gurian 2001; Gurian and Stevens 2005). Although not a neuroscientist himself, Gurian interprets research on sex differences in brain development and activity and extrapolates to current educational practices and academic dilemmas faced by boys. Gurian's writings and educational programs are larded

with simplistic overgeneralizations regarding gender. Gurian asserts, among other things, that boys are naturally more impulsive than girls, less able to focus, more physical, more aggressive, and more competitive. Gurian argues that these immutable qualities create a mismatch between boys and contemporary education. Education now employs less physical activity, less competition, stricter punishments for misbehavior, and more de-contextualized bookwork, each of which place boys at a disadvantage.

In the process of his arguments, Gurian interprets neurological research in ways discouraged by neurologists themselves (see Tyre 2006), making enormous leaps between blood flow to the brain, hyperactivity, and achievement, to cite just one example. This perspective would be innocuously humorous if not for the disquieting appeal and application of Gurian's work among educators. Schools across the country now employ practices advocated by the 'Gurian Institute' (see <http://www.gurianinstitute.com>), which include teaching boys and girls in separate environments, with low lighting, gentle music, and quiet tones for girls, and bright, high-energy physical activity interspersed with classroom lessons for boys. The gender-specific parameters advocated by Gurian even encourage keeping boys' and girls' classrooms at different temperatures. This is the type of potentially damaging experimentation that has caused scholars to challenge the foundational notion of an educational 'crisis' for boys.

Policy briefs, such as *Gender Equity in Higher Education: Are Male Students at a Disadvantage?* (King 2000) and *The Evidence Suggests Otherwise: The Truth About Boys and Girls* (Mead 2006) assert that the very idea of a 'boy crisis' is an exaggerated media concoction. This research points out that not all boys are underachieving compared to girls – if there is a 'crisis' this exists primarily for boys of poor and minority groups, where gender gaps favoring girls are quite pronounced. The authors of these reports also demonstrate that achievement and attainment outcomes do not show yawning gaps by gender. In National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests, for example, the reading and math scores for boys have generally improved or stayed the same since 1973 (National Center for Educational Statistics 2010). According to Mead (2006), the gaps between girls and boys on this national test are slim, and where they have appeared this is largely attributable to girls' achievement increasing at a slightly faster rate, not boys falling hopelessly behind.

Yet, while such work provides an important corrective to the 'war against boys' rhetoric, the argument that gender differences in education fail to constitute an important social problem seems understated. As educational research has documented, girls have surpassed boys on most measures of achievement and attainment (Buchmann et al. 2008; NCES 2010). Girls make higher grades than boys across all grade levels and subject areas, including math and science (Buchmann et al. 2008). On the 2009 NAEP test (for all grades tested), males continued to hold a slight advantage in math, but females held a larger advantage in reading (NCES 2010). In 2005, 11 percent of males 16–24 dropped out of school, versus 8 percent of females. Women's advantages have increased quite dramatically in college enrollment and completion (Peter et al. 2005). For example, in 1960, 65 percent of all US bachelors degrees were awarded to men; by 2005, 58 percent of all bachelors degrees were awarded to women (Buchmann et al. 2008, 325). Further, as Mead (2006) notes, the gender gap favoring girls is strikingly pronounced among racial/ethnic minority and low-income populations. Sociological research has uncovered sizeable gender gaps among African-Americans (Brunn and Kao 2008; Carter 2005; Hayes et al. 2006); Latinos (Lopez 2003; Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005); Native Americans and Alaska Natives (Kleinfeld and Reyes 2007), and some Asian-Americans, especially Southeast Asian immigrants (Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005; Zhou and Bankston 1998). Wide

educational gaps favoring girls are also correlated with low-income status (Entwisle et al. 2007; Peter et al. 2005). In 1999–2000, 60 percent of low-income undergraduates were women, compared to 53 percent of high-income undergraduates who were women (Peter et al. 2005). Even for White students, a low-income family background appears to result in higher educational success for girls than boys (Corbett 2007; MacLeod 1995; Morris 2008). Based on these data, some boys are experiencing a crisis in education.

Understanding the origins of such gender differences is crucial to understanding inequality in education more generally. This does not have to entail an anti-feminist political project. In fact, I propose that contemporary, pro-feminist sociological theory offers the best lens through which to make sense of these gaps. Sociological research and perspective can provide a more careful understanding of the academic gender gap; one that does not diminish or exaggerate it (Riordan 2003). I now turn to sociological research on gender differences in education.

Sociology and the gender gap

Although the topic of gender-based achievement gaps has only recently entered popular culture vogue, sociologists have noticed and discussed girls' high achievement and boys' underachievement for some time. In pioneering research in England, Willis (1977) provides a rich ethnographic account of school disconnection among a group of working-class boys termed the 'lads'. Willis highlights how these boys interpreted schooling as anathema to their working-class sense of masculinity. Masculinity for them entailed spurning school authority, 'having a laff (laugh)' in classrooms instead of paying attention, and embracing physical, industrial labor. According to Willis, a sense of strong, physical masculinity encouraged the 'lads' vehement opposition to school.

MacLeod (1995) expands Willis's work to an American context, and adds further depth to connections between class, masculinity, and school disassociation. MacLeod's ethnographic study follows a group of working-class, mostly White boys deemed the 'Hallway Hangers' who lived in an urban housing project. MacLeod documents how these boys refused to take school seriously and engaged in petty crimes, such as illegal drug use, drug dealing, theft, and assault. The boys interpreted school as a waste of time and its rules as constricting, preferring the riskiness, swift reward, and toughness associated with a 'street' life and mentality.

The ethnographies of MacLeod and Willis focus on social class, only broaching gender indirectly. Their research did not examine gender differences in achievement by directly comparing boys and girls. In 1989, a groundbreaking article by Mickelson entitled 'Why Does Jane Read and Write So Well?' examined the gender gap in achievement more precisely, through the lens of girls' academic success. Mickelson wonders why women continue to excel in school despite the fact that women make less money than men with the same education and choose more often than men to avoid the labor market. This earnings gap between even college-educated men and women remains true today (Bob-bitt-Zeher 2007). Why do women put so much effort into education when it does not have an immediate or proportional payoff?

Mickelson proposes several explanations for the 'anomaly' of women's achievement. One of the most viable of these explanations is the 'sex role socialization' hypothesis (Mickelson 1989, 2003). This view, which also aligns with the findings of Willis and MacLeod, posits that girls achieve academically because they are socialized into a feminine role and this role is conducive to school success. People tend to teach girls to be 'good girls' – to sit still, do what they are told, engage in quiet activities, such as reading, and

cooperate with others in their play. Boys tend to learn opposite behaviors – to be physically active, independent, and unruly. These socialized characteristics, it can be argued, place girls at an advantage in classrooms.

This perspective has strongly influenced subsequent sociological research on gender differences in achievement. Even research implying that girls were disadvantaged in classrooms, such as that by Sadker and Sadker (1994) mentioned earlier, suggests that girls' tendency to be quiet, 'good girls' renders them invisible. More recent research, however, has examined how gendered paths of socialization forge educational disadvantages for boys.

This line of inquiry raises interesting questions about gender, along with intersections of gender with race and class. Unequal resources (such as less school funding, impoverished families and neighborhoods, and lower levels of social and cultural capital) constitutes one of the most common and powerful explanations for achievement gaps by class and race (Kao and Thompson 2003). Yet male and female siblings grow up in the same families and neighborhoods and usually attend the same schools – why would their achievement differ? Gender socialization approaches attempt to answer this question, and have extended Mickelson's original concept to include not only classroom compartmentment but also gendered paths at home and in the neighborhood. This view suggests that boys and girls may have different exposure to resources and risk factors related to family and neighborhood.

Some research, for example, finds that boys endure less parental oversight, making them more vulnerable to negative peer influences (Downey and Vogt Yuan 2005; Ehrmann and Massey 2008; Entwisle et al. 1994; Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005; Lopez 2003). Others suggest that because of a lack of gender-specific role models, mother-headed families create more difficulties for boys than for girls (Powell and Parcel 1997; see Buchmann and DiPrete 2006 for contrary findings). Finally, recent innovations have employed Bourdieu's theoretical framework (Bourdieu 1990, 2001; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) to propose that boys and girls are guided by a gender-specific habitus, or schemata of perception, that influences them to consume different forms and amounts of cultural capital (Mickelson 2003; Dumais 2002). Dumais (2002) finds that girls are more likely than boys to engage in extra-curricular activities that enhance academic achievement such as going to the library and taking art and music classes.

A fresh perspective on the gender gap

Sociological research has documented the academic gender gap in extensive detail. What this research continues to lack, however, is a deep theory to explain this gap. Gender role socialization remains the most popular perspective. But once deconstructed, this hypothesis appears largely descriptive: it proposes that boys and girls engage in different behaviors and these behaviors have differential effects on their education. This does not offer a meaningful explanation for why these different behaviors manifest, and why they have relevance for education. Connections to Bourdieu's theoretical framework attempt to deepen understanding of the gender gap, but this also offers little explanation for why gender-specific behaviors emerge and persist. My primary critique of much sociological work on gender differences in education (which I still consider very valuable) is that much of it does not consider contemporary innovations in gender theory. Gender scholarship has advanced beyond gender socialization and I suggest that subsequent research on the gender gap should employ these innovations. In this section, I review how contemporary gender theory can offer a deeper perspective on the gender gap in education.

I begin by delineating three issues in contemporary research on gender differences in education that could benefit from further elaboration. First, analyses of the gender gap often cast gender as a pre-existing variable that has a certain effect on achievement and attainment. This perspective occurs most apparently in popular, biologically influenced work, such as that of Guian (2001). Tyre (2008, 250), for example, contends that boys have inferior 'grapho-motor' skills, which disadvantages them when drawing and neatness are required in school, such as drawing a map or exhibiting penmanship. This casts gender as the inevitable product of biology, which presumably forges completely separate, static characteristics. Boys and girls become unwitting slaves to their biological composition, unable to change or adapt to environmental circumstances. Although most sociologists decry such biological reductionism, gender role socialization often appears as a *de facto* version of biological gender theory. Socialization becomes interpreted not as a fluid, ongoing process throughout the life course, but rather as a congealed set of traits that boys and girls carry with them to school. Contemporary gender theory, as I will discuss, positions gender as an outcome in itself, rather than a pre-established, internalized characteristic. This approach highlights the ongoing, dynamic means through which people engage in certain behaviors to establish a sense of gender, rather than how gender causes such behaviors.

Second, biological and gender socialization approaches downplay the relationship between gender and inequality. The gender differences observed in education continue to occur within an overarching social context of male power. Even given the recent progress of women, men continue to hold more political power, make more money even when controlling for education and work experience, and more often victimize women through violence (Bobbitt-Zeher 2007; Connell 1987; Messerschmidt 1997). The feminism/anti-feminism debate in the popular press swirls around this very issue, with one-side charging that gender inequality now is experienced by boys, and the other insisting it is still experienced by girls. Most sociological research would agree that although things have improved, women continue to hold less social power than men. Yet gender socialization approaches in sociology remain curiously silent on connections between gender and power (see Connell 1987). These approaches tend to document gender differences without fully examining how such differences emerge from and contribute to broader societal gender inequality. Perhaps, such differences are reproduced precisely because of the complex workings of power.

Third, biological and socialization approaches both tend to cast 'all boys' and 'all girls' as monolithic, entirely discrete categories, with little consideration of variation between and within these groups (Epstein 1988; Spelman 1988). Males and females have distinctive biological markers, but such sex differences are just part of a dizzying complexity of individual genetic and personality attributes, which averages conceal. Biological reductionism elides the fact that many boys outperform many girls. College-bound boys continue to outpace college-bound girls on the SAT, for instance, and show a substantial advantage in math scores (534 average for boys in 2009 versus 499 average for girls) (College Board 2009). Gender socialization approaches can fall into a similar trap by implying singular masculine and feminine roles, when in fact people exhibit multiple 'masculinities' and 'femininities', differing according to social class, race, cultural context, sexual orientation, and personality (Connell 1995).

To address these issues and clarify what is meant by gender inequality in education, I propose that future research on the gender gap should utilize two prominent gender theories: 'doing gender' and 'hegemonic masculinity'. These contemporary feminist perspectives can help underscore fluidity, variability, and complex inequality in the social production of gender and relevance to educational outcomes.

'Doing gender' and education

A 2009 issue of the journal *Gender & Society* devotes itself to one of the most influential theories in recent research on gender: 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987, 2009; West and Fenstermaker 1995; see Butler 1999 for a slight variation; see Yancey Martin 2003 for a review). The 'doing gender' perspective re-conceptualizes gender not as something that people 'have' as an immutable characteristic, but something that people 'do' or continually accomplish through interaction. We do not carry gender around inside of ourselves; instead, we enact and produce it through our social interactions. Gender emerges, undergoes modification, and is reproduced constantly throughout our everyday social lives. This means that gender is highly tenuous and surface-oriented – something displayed, performed, and enacted rather than something deeply ingrained. At the same time, gender does appear highly consistent, and gender norms are more often reproduced than contested and altered. According to West and Zimmerman (1987), this is because people tend to be held 'accountable' for their actions in ways consistent to their sex category. Acting outside the norms, such as a man wearing a dress, is strongly sanctioned by others because this disrupts our sense of social stability and decorum. In short, this perspective casts gender as an outcome – an ongoing social production that is often consistent, but still continually and actively forged.

This approach offers a new view of gender differences in education. Instead of gender having a pre-existing 'effect' on educational outcomes, 'doing gender' would examine the educational impacts of gendered behaviors that boys and girls enact and make each other accountable to. In this sense, gender is accomplished partially through the enactment and organization of educationally relevant behavior. Messerschmidt's (1997, 2000, 2004) work in criminology provides an excellent model for this type of analysis. Similar to education, Messerschmidt notes that distinct gender differences emerge in the criminal justice system, with boys and men committing crimes more commonly than girls and women. In analyzing these outcomes, however, Messerschmidt does not look at how being male predisposes boys and men to crime. Instead, he examines how some boys and men use crime as 'a resource for "doing masculinity" in certain situations' (Messerschmidt 2000, 6). In other words, the violent and transgressive acts leading to many crimes are often interpreted as consistent with masculinity. In committing such acts, certain boys in certain contexts display and reinforce their masculinity (Messerschmidt 2000). As discussed earlier with MacLeod's (1995) 'Hallway Hangers', some boys may interpret crime as more consistent with masculinity than schoolwork. Boys in various contexts may oppose school, present indifference to it, or take risks with it, because such 'manhood acts' are defined as consistent with masculinity in their context, and these acts aid them in conveying that masculinity (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009).

'Hegemonic masculinity' and education

'Doing gender' tends to focus on explaining gender differences rather than the power and inequality undergirding these differences. The concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' extends this gender practice approach into the complexities of gender power (Connell 1987). The developer of this concept, Connell (1987, 1995), asserts that there is not one singular way to be a man. Instead, various possible masculinities (and femininities) exist. These modes of manhood constitute specific relations of practice. In other words, some methods of masculinity tend to be infused with more power and prestige over women (and other men) and accordingly, tend to be seen as more 'manly'. Connell terms the

most powerful and revered form of masculine practice 'hegemonic masculinity'. This constitutes a contextually specific, ideal pattern of manhood that represents and legitimates masculine power, including characteristics such as physical strength, rationality, stoicism, and toughness. Such qualities not only set men apart from women, they represent superiority over women and perceived 'feminine' qualities.

Other ways of being a man are possible, but hold less reverence than the hegemonic ideal. Connell (1995) describes subordinated, complicit, and marginalized masculinities. Subordinated masculinities refer to men seen as decidedly un-manly – within schools this could pertain to certain boys or actions derided as effeminate or homosexual (e.g. 'fags'). From this perspective, the infiltration of perceived feminine qualities and behaviors by a male body represents the ultimate transgression of masculinity (Pascoe 2007). Complicit masculinities refer to men who might not fully represent the hegemonic ideal (few do, according to Connell), but still extract benefits from it. Few boys play high school football for example, but the spectacle and popularity of this sport serves as a vivid reminder of masculine strength, speed, and power. Finally, marginalized masculinities refer to how masculinity is defined and experienced differently through categories of inequality, such as race and class. As mentioned, gender gaps favoring girls are widest among African-Americans. Research suggests that part of the explanation for this could stem from how educators interpret black boys as overly aggressive and hostile, resulting in punishment and other forms of educational marginalization (Ferguson 2000; Lopez 2003; Skiba et al. 2002). Their masculinity becomes interpreted as a 'hypermasculinity', one that is belligerent, aggressive, and rebellious (see also Pyke 1996 for connections to social class).

As both Connell and Messerschmidt emphasize in their work, it is helpful to think in terms of resources for doing masculinity and threats or challenges to doing masculinity (Connell 1996; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt 2000). In various spatial and temporal contexts, the foundations for doing masculinity in hegemonic or normative ways might begin to erode, creating acute challenges (Kimmel 1996, 2005). This can produce a 'crisis' of masculinity (Kimmel 2005, 64) in which men seek new and sometimes alternative resources for displaying and re-inscribing the presumed strength of manhood. This framework suggests that masculinity is inherently unstable, and in certain situations the quest for men to present themselves as superior to women can result in ironic costs. Messerschmidt (1997) and Messner (1992) have documented costs such as incarceration and severe physical injury for men who attempt to forge a hypermasculinity through crime and sports. Similarly, boys in school, especially from lower-income or marginalized backgrounds, might feel an exigent need to display their masculinity through idioms such as sports or fighting, not through academic success (MacLeod 1995; Morris 2008). Even simply defying school rules can be seen as 'central to the making of masculinity when boys lack other resources for gaining these ends' (Connell 1996, 220).

New questions for the gender gap

Some masculinity scholars have already considered how these theoretical concepts extend to education and boys' underachievement (Connell 1996; Kimmel 2000; Mac an Ghail 1996). However, such work remains theoretical rather than empirical, especially in the United States. Further empirical research on the gender gap can benefit from the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and doing gender. These perspectives can help ask new, potentially illuminating questions about the gender gap and boys' underachievement.

First, research should consider how various factors might present challenges and resources for boys to perform masculinity. Such resources and challenges can manifest on global, regional, and local levels (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The rise of a post-industrial, service-based economy might compromise the ability of working-class boys to represent masculinity through traditional manual labor employment, for example. My research finds that such a situation prompts boys to seek alternative avenues of demonstrating superiority such as sports or fighting, but to avoid academic behaviors that are perceived as feminine and which lack a guarantee of male dominance (Morris 2008). Research should explore how such challenges to masculinity may or may not surface in various contexts. In higher-income neighborhoods, masculinity might rely more on success in a white-collar career than manual labor, which could explain the far narrower academic gender gap among high-income White students. But even in the suburbs certain threats might challenge boys' masculinity. The broad reach of criminal justice-inspired disciplinary procedures such as zero tolerance, security cameras, and metal detectors (Kupchik and Monahan 2006), for example, might spur more rule-defiance in boys than in girls if boys place higher value on displaying toughness and bravado. Future research should explore such possibilities, along with variations by race, class, place, school policy, structural and historical shifts, and other factors.

Second, research on the gender gap need not focus on boys. Over-attention on the 'trouble with boys' implicitly casts girls as passively insignificant, and forgets that gender is a relationally constructed concept. We should ask how and why 'doing femininity' often aligns with educational success. This could parallel gender socialization approaches in examining how femininity is constructed through the image of the 'good girl' who follows directions and pays attention in class. But such research should also recognize how girls' achievement reflects the complex workings and constraints of gender power. Girls and women might use academic success as one of the few available routes to empowerment and recognition in schools, families, and employment.

Third, research should pay more attention to the exceptions – the misfits and the outliers instead of just the average. Unique cases, such as examining boys who excel academically despite challenges, or the experience of girls who 'act like boys' (Pascoe 2007), can reveal more about what constitutes the norm than a relentless focus on the norm itself. How is masculinity constructed for school-focused boys, especially in schools where this is uncommon? How is femininity constructed for girls who get into fights or drop out? How do such constructions matter for school attachment and achievement? Contemporary gender theory uncovers the hidden instability of gender, and research should attempt to better capture the fickle, contradictory ways that gender and schooling intertwine. Fourth, and related, research should consider different levels of schooling (primary, secondary, post-secondary) in constructions of gender and achievement. How are the understandings of masculinity and femininity that guide schooling similar and different as students progress through their educational careers?

Finally, returning to the popular culture debate that opened this article, it is important for researchers and educators to realize that the gender gap is not a problem of 'girls against boys' but a problem of gender. Contemporary gender research shows that displaying gender in normative ways, and cultural definitions of masculinity as superior to femininity, result in costs not only for women and girls, but also for men and boys. The answer lies not in tightening those already constrictive gender differences through gender-specific educational programs and environments, but in creating educational settings where a variety of gender expressions can flourish. We need to provide space for boys and girls to collaboratively 'undo' these gender types (Deutsch 2007), not insist that they reify them.

Short Biography

Edward Morris is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Kentucky. He received his PhD from the University of Texas at Austin and previously taught at Ohio University. His research interests include the intersections of race, class, and gender, White privilege, and education. His research has won awards and has been featured in the popular press. His publications include articles in *Symbolic Interaction*, *Youth & Society*, *Sociology of Education*, and *Gender & Society*, and a book entitled *An Unexpected Minority: White Kids in an Urban School* (Rutgers University Press 2006). Currently, Dr Morris is analyzing data from a comparative ethnography of two high schools – one urban and one rural. This analysis focuses on (i) reasons behind the ‘gender gap’ in achievement favoring girls among disadvantaged students, (ii) the ‘stop snitching’ code and distrust of formal authorities in conflict resolution among students, and (iii) micro-level processes of exclusion, boundary maintenance, and differentiation among students.

Note

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