

THE CHILLY CLIMATE

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last twenty five years we have eliminated many of the overt barriers that deprived girls and women in education. We thought that was all we had to do: open the doors and everything would be equal. We were wrong, for there are still many hidden barriers, barriers which are almost invisible to students and to faculty -- indeed most of the time both faculty and students are unaware that anything unusual is occurring. Yet the classroom is not a place of equality. The classroom is very different for girls and boys, women and men. Even though they may sit side by side in the same classroom, males and females often have very different experiences.

Women students are treated differently, by men and women faculty alike, as well as by their fellow students--in ways which ultimately undermine girls' and women's self confidence in their academic ability, lower their academic and occupational aspirations, inhibit their learning, and generally lower their self-esteem.

What I want to talk about today is how male and female students are treated differently in the classroom, and how male and female students themselves may act differently, so that ultimately, perhaps, we can begin to see what still needs to be done to make coeducation truly equal.

When I talk about women and girls, today, I mean all females, of all races and ethnicity. And I want to add here that minority men are often treated in the same way.

The behaviors I'm talking about today are not limited to males. Often women faculty and staff and other female students may engage in these behaviors; even those who are the most concerned about discrimination may unknowingly treat male and female students differently.

The behaviors do not happen in every class, nor do they happen all the time. Individually, by themselves, the behaviors are generally small and seemingly not important. But when they happen again and again, they constitute a pattern of behavior that dampens women's

ambitions, their classroom participation and self-confidence.

I'm not going to talk today about the most overt kinds of behavior. Although they have diminished greatly in the last twenty years or so, they still happen. These behaviors include making disparaging comments about scholarship by or about women. Indeed, sometimes when a student raises women's issues, faculty are hostile and ridiculing, thereby effectively silencing the student from speaking about women again, and perhaps silencing her altogether.

TREATMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

Let me start with how teachers often treat male and female students differently. You can check out these behaviors in your own classes, and in some instances students may behave this way too. Sometimes you can see the same behavior at a committee meeting.

Faculty members generally call on men more often, asking them more questions, and not calling on females as much, even when they raise their hands. White males generally get the most questions, then minority males, then white females, with black females receiving the least.

Faculty members generally pay more attention to male students. They may stand closer to males students. Professors nod and gesture when males speak, but may look elsewhere when females talk.

Teachers are more responsive to comments and answers from males than from females. Men get more feedback, more praise, more criticism, more help. In other words, when a male speaks the teacher is likely to engage in a dialogue; when females speak, they are more likely to get "uh-huh" which says nothing other than "You said something and I heard it." For some females the only praise they get from teachers is for their attractiveness or for neat work. Males are more likely to be praised for their achievements and intellectual effort, not for the way they dress.

Teachers, male and female, give women less eye contact. Eye contact is very reinforcing because it tells students that the teacher is concerned about their understanding the material and is checking to see if they are paying attention. Recently I noticed that during workshops I give on the chilly classroom, that I only looked at my watch when women were talking, I never looked at my watch when males were speaking; I gave them my full attention.

Men get more coaching -- "Tell me more about that," or "Why do you think that is?" -- words that tell the person that he has more things to say, that his intellectual effort is worthwhile.

Men are called by name more often -- it makes people feel good in conversation when they

are called by name, particularly by a person of higher status such as a teacher or administrator.

Males and females may be asked different kinds of questions -- Females are more likely to be asked factual questions, such as, "Who discovered radiation?" Men and boys are more likely to be asked harder and more open-ended questions, such as, "What is radiation?" -- the kind of question where students can really shine if they know the answer, and can try to fake it if they don't.

Courtesy and politeness may be used as a way to patronize women students -- particularly when used in a paternalistic or patronizing manner, as in "We have a group of lovely ladies in our classroom." This shifts the focus away from intellectual activities to social behavior, simultaneously trivializing women students as well as setting different expectations from them compared to men.

Males (students and teachers) may perform a task for a woman student under the guise of being helpful -- "Let me do it for you," but thereby depriving her of hands-on experience (as in a laboratory experiment). At the same time this communicates their own low expectations of the woman's ability to complete the task on her own.

Men (faculty and students) interrupt women more than they interrupt men. Additionally, women may be particularly vulnerable when they are interrupted. One study at Harvard noted that once a woman was interrupted, she tended to stay out of the discussion for the remainder of the class, and thus there are more one-time female contributors than male.

THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER ON BEHAVIOR

I want to talk next about some of the differences between men and women and how these differences can also create a chilly climate for women and girls in the classroom.

I'm going to talk in generalizations, and of course, generalizations are always subject to criticism. Certainly not all men behave in a certain way, and certainly not all women behave in a certain way. But it is just as true to say, for instance, that many women (or many men) are more likely to behave in one way more of the time than men (or many women). Such generalizations can help us understand some of the classroom behaviors faculty members and students engage in, and how gender often (but not always and certainly not solely) shapes what happens in the classroom.

Although most of us like to believe we are free of sexist prejudices, stereotypes and biases, each of us has deeply buried beliefs and expectations of which we may be unaware. Despite our conscious beliefs that men and women are "equal" we may nevertheless value men who are strong and assertive, and may be uncomfortable with women who act the same, because we expect them to be more passive and acquiescent, nurturing and nice.

Many of our gender expectations are subtle. Women are expected to be more modest about their achievements; men are expected to brag. In conversation, men are expected to analyze, explain, clarify, and control the topic and flow. In contrast, women are expected to reinforce and maintain the conversation, to reduce tensions and restore unity.

Men generally are more competitive in a classroom, speaking more often than females, trying to impress others. Often they try to be in charge, particularly when there are small groups of students working together, as in study groups or in lab groups.

Male students are more likely to be concerned about autonomy and prefer to interact with others through competition and power. Women students are more likely to be concerned about connecting to other people and developing relationships and are more likely to interact by cooperating and synthesizing. Thus females may be uncomfortable when men or women assert their autonomy; men may be uncomfortable when women or men try to establish some level of intimacy. (Of course, everyone has autonomy and intimacy needs, but in most people, one or the other will predominate in their behavior.)

Women are more likely to seek intimacy, friendship, and community; men are more likely to seek power and status. More men than women enjoy competitive verbal sparring and controversy; a classroom which stresses intellectual competition makes them feel good. In contrast, females often present information in a way that invites others' opinions rather than defend a single viewpoint.

Women tend to raise their hands when they want to ask or respond to a question. Men are more likely to quickly call out the answer without waiting to be called on--a pattern of behavior which has the effect of limiting women's contributions.

DEVALUATION

Male and female behaviors are perceived very differently. I want to talk for a moment about devaluation. Throughout our society, what girls and women do is seen as less valuable than what men do.

There have been numerous experiments in which two groups of people rate things such as a set of articles, pictures of works of art, a set of resumes. The names of the authors are changed for each group. Those items for the first group which have men's names, have women's names for the second group, and those items with women's names for the first group have men's names for the second group. In other words, the gender of the author is reversed for each group. The results of these studies are remarkably consistent: Articles that have a male name attached to them tend to get higher ratings than when the same article has a woman's name. Both men and women do this: They devalue those items ascribed to females. Studies of how women's success is perceived show a similar pattern: Men's success is attributed to talent; women's success is attributed to luck.

Women may be seen as less bright because they may speak in a more polite, hesitant and deferential manner, while men may be seen as brighter because the valued speech is strong, concise, clear, and assertive, the way that many men speak.

Even when men and women behave the same, women's behavior may be devalued. For example, males value verbal aggression as positive, except when women speak that way. Silence itself may be viewed differently for men and women. Men who are silent may be viewed as "thinking." Women who are silent may be viewed as shy or not knowing much.

HARASSMENT

The last thing I want to talk about may make some of you uncomfortable, maybe even angry. Some people may even want to accuse me of male-bashing. Because what I want to talk about next is the way in which students often treat each other, particularly male students harassing female students. Do you remember when it was okay for the boys to tease the girls? People laughed -- or at least the boys laughed. The girls may have been uncomfortable, but no one took this kind of teasing seriously. In fact, many people thought of it -- and some do -- as cute, as "boys will be boys", as normal, natural behavior. Remember the rhyme: Georgie Porgy, pudding and pie, kissed the girls and made them cry." Well, this kind of behavior, a kind of sexual bullying -- is not okay anymore. When big boys do it, in the workplace, or in colleges, it is illegal. Sexual harassment, whether it occurs in the classroom or outside of it, makes coeducation less equal for girls and women. Between 70-90 percent of undergraduate women report that they have experienced at least one sexual incident from one or more male students to which they reacted negatively and viewed as a serious incident.

Student-to-student harassment is one of the most explosive issues on campus. Many times male students harass women students both sexually and otherwise; they may push women away from the computers; they may roll their eyes and show other negative body language when some women speak; they may tell women that they don't "belong" in physics, in mathematics, or in engineering. Some may even hiss or boo when women raise women's issues. They may make blatantly sexist remarks by denigrating or ridiculing women, engaging in rude behaviors that express hostility to women in the classroom or to women in general.

If these behaviors are overlooked, if there is no discussion or other response to behavior demeaning to females, the message to men and women in the classroom is clear: Such behaviors are acceptable.

CREATING EQUITY

One of the major issues which must be faced in the coming century is that of gender and race in the classroom: how do we bring about classroom equity? For it is clear that men and

women sitting in the same classroom do not receive the same education; despite the good intentions of faculty members, the classroom experiences of women, shaped by gender and race, are often different from those of their brothers who sit by their sides.

Many people have noted the advantage of single sex education for females, and suggest that this is the way to insure that women receive a good education. Indeed, there is a small but growing body of research that suggests that women often learn better, participate more and have greater self-esteem when educated in single sex institutions. There is also a tiny body of research that suggests that single sex education for males has either no effect or a negative effect, suggesting that men need coeducation and women need single sex education.

The ultimate question, however, is not whether single sex education or coeducation as we know it is better for women or not, but whether we can improve coeducation so that it is truly coeducational, so that women and men alike can benefit equally from it.

CONCLUSION

Many years ago, back in 1972, when I worked for the passage of Title IX, the law that prohibits sexual discrimination in most educational institutions, I thought it would take about two years and we would solve all the discrimination that existed. After two years, it was clear, that we needed at least another year, and then another two, and then I thought in the next five years, then fifty years --- I no longer think it will come easily or quickly. We are talking about changing the relationships between men and women, toward making them more equal -- a social change which ultimately will have as much impact as the Industrial Revolution.

The relationships between men and women are changing. We, women and men, are a generation of transition. We are giving up old ways of relating to each other and are not quite sure what the new ways ought to be.

Let me close now with a newly discovered "Biblical" revelation which is symbolic of the new mood of women and which was discovered by a woman archeologist, accompanied by an all women team of assistants. And you will probably recognize the paraphrase:

And they shall beat their pots and pans into printing presses
And weave their cloth into protest banners
Nations of women shall lift up their voices with other women
Neither shall they suffer discrimination any more.

That may sound apocryphal, but I suspect it may yet prove to come from the book of Prophets, for what women are learning is the politics of power and the politics of change. This school, and other schools, and the nation, and the world, will never again be the same.

REFERENCES

Sandler, Bernice Resnick, Lisa A. Silverberg and Roberta M. Hall, The Chilly Classroom Climate: A Guide to Improve the Education of Women. National Association for Women in Education, 1996.

