

## **Construction of Stereotypes and Their Effects on Education**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the construction of stereotypes through historical accounts and how these stereotypes have been manifested in education. It examines the choices students make and questions the validity of these stereotypes. The stereotypes considered are women as caretakers, men superior in the sciences, and Black and Latinos in need of control.

Stereotypes are the beliefs the greater population has that all of the people in a group share a single characteristic (“Stereotype,” 2015). These assumptions can be based on race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or physical attributes and may have a detrimental effect on the individuals from these groups. Stereotypes in education remain evident in academic performance, differences in self-efficacy scores, and disparities in standardized tests (Kurtz-Costes, Copping, Rowley, & Kinlaw, 2014). Many of these stereotypes are so rooted in people’s everyday lives that they go unnoticed and, as a result, become so accepted they may be taken as fact.

In education, there are several persistent beliefs that have negatively affected certain groups of people. One of these stereotypes is of males being better than females in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), whereas women are better than men in the areas of communication, such as reading comprehension and writing (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2014). Hence, there is an underrepresentation of women in the STEM fields but, not so ironically, the stereotype of men being inferior in the communication field does not have a negative effect on males (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2014). Another stereotype is of Whites being academically better than Blacks and Latinos in all subject areas. This has a damaging effect on the academic performance, career choice, and self-motivation of Black and Latino students (Fabes, Martin, Hanish, Galligan, & Pahlke, 2015).

The purpose of this paper is to examine stereotypes in education and how they affect students’ performance and the areas they choose to study. It will explore the construction of stereotypes through history and connect these to stereotypes that remain apparent in schools. It will also question the validity of these stereotypes and their persistence in permeating the classroom as well as how students view their own ability to succeed academically.

### **Constructing Gender and Race/Ethnic Stereotypes through History**

Throughout history, gender, race, and sexuality have been constructed as a means to create identities (Morgan, 1997). In the 1400s, as European explorers traversed the world, they encountered groups of people with vastly different cultures and ways of life. Instead of reacting with curiosity, they utilized these natives to construct a hierarchy in which they, the Europeans, were the norm and all other groups were deviations. As the explorers observed these differing customs, they developed assumptions which they imparted as representative of the rest of that particular population (Morgan, 1997).

The European travelers communicated their first-hand encounters through literature and art. These explorers did not take the time to understand the cultural significance of what they saw; thus they often misunderstood the physical attributes of the natives as monstrous (Morgan,

1997). In attempting to define these new groups of people they also sought to define themselves, and by doing so, they felt a superiority that would later shape how they treated the natives. These first encounters set the stage for the stereotypes people hold of varying groups today. In order to justify the conquering of natives, Europeans had to present the data to the rest of their counterparts in a way that the metropole would agree with the enslavement and maltreatment of these people (Schmidt, 2015). Concurrently, by viewing these paintings and reading these stories regularly, it would eventually normalize these acts of violence, hence validating the abuse Europeans would later impart when enslaving the natives.

Women were also considered inferior. Since they were seen as possessing a delicate nature, there was a limit to what women could do and learn. This limited the extent of their educational careers, thus assuring men remained in power. Women were also divided into different categories with savages at the bottom and civilized women at the top, and only the sensible, educated women worthy of inclusion (Moloney, 2005). Everything was analyzed and compared, from color to shape to girth, and these specifics were used to separate European women from the natives (Wilson, 2006). Men, in order to remain in the dominant position in society, had to maintain a careful balance between being sensitive and being effeminate. Overall, the race/ethnicity was constructed through a European lens and all variations were deviants of the European norm. The Europeans utilized gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality to define themselves and build an argument as to why and how they were the norm and, by extension, superior.

Narratives from travelers served to elicit fear in European women and to portray natives as savages in need of control. These embellished stories were circulated in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries throughout Europe, where they often hinted at the sexual assault of White women by indigenous men despite the lack of European female travelers (Burton, 1994). Thus, simultaneously, these narratives purported the need for European men to civilize the natives and protect European women from these men. Just as women were expected to be feminine, men were expected to be masculine. They were expected to display certain characteristics and pursue certain careers and hobbies in order to fit their role (Burton, 1994).

Definitions about what is normal were constructed by Europeans to benefit Europeans. The authors who defined what was normal and what was deviant were White, heterosexual men who ensured they were classified as the top of all hierarchies, and the result of this history is evident in how people who do not fit into this description are treated today (Carter, 1997). Stereotypes can be seen as a tool used to maintain the current power structure (Carter, 1997).

Since the Western nations were seen as more advanced in all areas, including material and the sciences, they were the ones in control of all enterprises, and they argued it was their job to put the less-developed people to work. Because of the laws put into place to keep the hierarchy intact, Asians and Africans had to agree on the superiority of the Westerners and request to be educated similarly. Adas (2004) noted how when some Africans came into contact for the first time with White men in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, they were so enthralled by the material positions they brought that they considered them two-legged gods.

Masculinity was constructed while the British Europeans were creating their own identities in comparison to the natives of the lands they were exploring. There were two extremes in which these people were gendered: On the one hand, they could be feminine or inadequately masculine, and on the other hand they could be hyper-masculine; in both descriptions, they were seen as childlike and in need of parenting (Patil, 2009). Explorers

continually marginalized the men they colonized by defining them as other than Europeans on the masculinity hierarchy. In order to legitimize their actions, colonizers argued they were assisting their dependent countries by training them for independence later on. Another argument was that since these were juvenile nations, they did not have the ability to be self-governing; thus the nation higher in advancement had to take care of its younger neighbors (Patil, 2009).

The privilege enjoyed by White men stems from White and male defining the norm for all groups (Carroll, 2011). White was defined as the center point, the normal, that which is used to define “other” versus what is abnormal; whiteness does not have to identify itself, as it is known as what everything else is compared to. Identifying as male plays a similar role as it is used to define everything else; thus it is also seen as the norm. To be the norm is to be at the top of the hierarchy; thus, by definition, to be White and male is to be superior. This method of producing stereotypes to organize the world remains intact and can be observed in the field of education. Teachers and students are as susceptible to stereotypes as the rest of the population, and this can be observed in the following section.

### **Stereotypes in Education**

Stereotypes have been under construction since different groups of people encountered each other (Morgan, 1997). In order to make sense of these cultural differences, those in power created a power structure where they reserved themselves the top. In doing so, they marginalized those who were different than them. Women and people of color bear the burden. Gender was constructed through the differences between males and females, and race was constructed through the differences between Whites and people of color. In the process, countless stereotypes were developed which have spilled over to the area of education. These stereotypes are so pervasive that they remain evident in how students view themselves and how strongly they believe in their own ability to do well in school (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2014).

The separation of groups of people by category reinforces stereotypes because peers influence each other through imitation and modeling. The longer they are separated, the stronger their collective stereotypes, the more alike their attitudes, habits, and behaviors, and the more they influence each other’s social and academic development (Chang, 2004). A cycle is taking place where the more the stereotype is promoted, the more it is believed; hence the more it remains as part of the culture.

### **Women as Caretakers**

In the 1400s in the Americas, men and women lived peacefully in gender-parallel societies where both sexes enjoyed self-governing their own lives (Overmyer-Velazquez, 2005). They viewed the body and soul as inseparable and sex as an essential part of life that was best when practiced in moderation. Descent of the female gender in this area of the world began when Christianity was introduced by European settlers (Overmyer-Velazquez, 2005). The idea of virginity was introduced, monogamy was imposed, and sex for pleasure was denounced. As a result, women were limited to the household and its responsibilities, whereas the men were expected to head the household in all aspects, including the actions of the females in their home. Thus, the idea of women as caretakers and men as breadwinners was extended to encompass a large part of the world.

The material/spiritual dichotomy was also used to construct gender roles, where men were seen as dominating the material sphere and women the spiritual sphere (Pratha, 1993). Women were used to create and represent what was good in the world and, as to ensure they

fulfilled this responsibility, the actions of women were controlled. Moreover, modesty and spirituality were necessary to contrast civilized behavior from that of animals, and since women were exemplary in these virtues, these corresponded to females (Pratha, 1993). They were expected to take care of the children and set an honorable example while doing so. Hence, women had to act and dress in a more modest and self-controlled manner than men.

The stereotype of women as caretakers is most evident in the fields of nursing and education. Ninety-two percent of nurses (Women's Bureau, 2003) in the United States are female, yet when looking at the reasons people become nurses there are few clear differences between the sexes. Boughn (2001) interviewed female and male nurses and found similar caring characteristics as well as strong desire for personal and professional power. One notable difference was the emphasis men placed on earning a competitive income to support their families and participants reported this as one of the main reasons they chose a career in nursing (Boughn, 2001). Thus, one can also observe the stereotype of men as breadwinners, or, more specifically, men need to be seen as the wage earners. Despite the lack of difference between the genders, nursing remains a female-dominated career (Women's Bureau, 2003) suggesting the stereotype of women as caretakers persists.

In education, 76 percent of K-12 teachers in the United States are female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). In 2007, women received 79 percent of bachelor's degrees in education (Planty et al., 2009). One of the arguments to explain this phenomenon is women's role as caretakers. Since women are still the main caretakers in their families, they find jobs with schedules that coincide with the schedule of their children (Rich, 2014). Not only are women still the caretakers at home, but also they are overrepresented in fields that work with children, reinforcing the caretaker stereotype.

### **White Men Superior in the Sciences**

In the 1400s, the Western world was considered by the Europeans as technologically advanced in comparison to other nations; subsequently, it was assumed that European men were better in the fields of science (Adas, 2004). They were seen as superior in the sciences to all women and the men of other geographic areas such as Asia and Africa. The consistency of this belief carved a space for two stereotypes: men as better than women in the sciences and White men as better than men of color in the sciences.

The effects of stereotypes are most evident in the choices and performances of the groups deemed as inferior. When looking at the choices students make in choosing classes, women are more likely to take fewer science classes than men, but there is no difference in the choices men make when choosing classes (Jackson, 2012). In 2007, men earned 83 percent of bachelor's degrees in engineering, meaning only 17 percent were attained by women (Planty et al., 2009). Although women remain influenced by the stereotype of being inferior in the STEM fields, such as reporting less interest in math and science careers (Turner et al., 2008), men are not influenced by the stereotype of being inferior in the communications fields. The disparity of White men and men of color in the sciences can be observed in the test performance of students (Fryer & Levitt, 2004). Black children score significantly lower in all subject areas in the elementary years and the gap continues to widen as they get older (Fryer & Levitt, 2004). Factors such as lack of resources and high teacher turnover rate contribute to this difference, with the main reason being socio-economic status in Kindergarten, yet no significant factor was found in any other grade level (Quinn, 2015). The stereotype of White men as superior in the sciences is consistent throughout the career choices of women and the test scores of people of color.

### **Latinos and Blacks in Need of Control**

There were two main arguments used by the colonizers to enslave native peoples. One was the need of supervision due to the natives' childlike attitude and the second was the need for control due to the natives' savage behavior (Patil, 2009). These justifications were needed to maintain the power structure and ensure people of color remained at the bottom of the hierarchy. The insistence and consistency of these arguments constructed the stereotype that people of color were not capable of managing their own lives and could not control their actions. In the K-12 classroom, this is manifested in the tracking of students, the structuring of classrooms, and the methods of teaching.

Oakes (2005) examined 25 middle schools and high schools in the far West, the South, the urban North and the Midwest United States and found the tracking of students based on test scores resulted in separating Black and Latino students from White students. Once tracked, students in the low-level classes received an inferior education, such as inadequate resources and less funding, when compared to those placed in the high-level classes. The self-esteem of those in low-level classes suffered immensely, they reported more negative attitudes and more feelings of inferiority, making it even more difficult for these students to succeed. The structure of the classroom and the pedagogy used by the teachers differed considerably, ensuring the students of color remained behind the White students academically. Tracking, despite the evidence against it, is still used in many schools throughout the United States as a means to control students. Low-level classes are consistently teacher-centered with little to no power of choice given to the students, and high-level classes are consistently student-centered with students being the main decision makers of what and how they learn (Oakes, 2005). When it comes to behavior, Black students are 3.5 times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White counterparts (Wilf, 2012). The stereotype of people of color in need of control is still pervading the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

Stereotypes are beliefs people treat as facts when considering the actions and lives of groups of people. Stereotypes can be negative and untrue and may serve a purpose for those in power. As seen in the historical construction of gender and race, stereotypes have more to do with the people who constructed them than the people they are about. White, heterosexual, male explorers made assumptions about everyone who was different and ensured these assumptions were spread and believed by their peers in their homelands. These constructed stereotypes served as a tool to justify what the explorers wanted to achieve, the conquering of nations and peoples. It was to their benefit for everyone, including the natives, to believe that the "others" of differing nations were of a lower class, primitive and uncontrollable. When observing these different cultures, they described them in part by what they witnessed and in part by what they wanted to portray. The goal of these explorers was not just to conquer these lands, but also to profit financially from their exploitation.

To keep the power structure in place, the Europeans used religion, in particular Christianity, to condition the natives into complacency. There was great emphasis on the roles of the genders with women being assigned lives in the private spheres and men being assigned lives in the public spheres. This created an imbalance of power as women were expected to take care of the children and household with little room for educational growth, and men were expected to provide financially for their families, which meant they were able to roam and expand their lives with little restriction. Women were expected to take care of the home, and it

was necessary to control their actions as those actions were representative of the culture. This limited women, guaranteeing the men remained in power. This is directly related to the stereotypes of women today. Women, despite many political and social changes throughout the last century, remain constrained to the role of caretaker. Moreover, since women represent the nation estate, they are expected to be humble, submissive, agreeable, modest, and likeable. These two stereotypes confine the actions of women; the former by limiting what people believe women can or should do, such as which careers to pursue, and the latter by restraining women's behavior to reflect what is expected by society. In education, this stereotype can be observed in the fields women choose to study, such as education and nursing.

The colonizers described Blacks as primitive, monstrous, beastly, and childlike. Hence, the natives were in need of guidance. With the excuse of Christian duty, the Europeans justified providing this control and did so by colonizing these nations and instituting slavery. They argued they were helping the natives by acting as the father figures of these children. With this argument came laws and policies that restricted the actions of the natives as they were assumed incapable of making important decisions, even those decisions that affected their lives and the lives of their families. By definition, the child does not have the same level of ability as the parent; thus people of color were seen as intellectually inferior. All these differences were necessarily established to create the illusion of a racial hierarchy. Today these stereotypes are still evident in the underrepresentation of people of color in positions of power, the overrepresentation of people of color living in poverty, and the lack of media attention on issues affecting these groups.

Stereotypes affect women and people of color in education in differing ways. In many parts of the world, women are denied access to education or denied the same quality of education available to men. In the United States, women can choose their careers and the extent of their education, yet because of the insistent stereotype of women as homemakers, there is an overrepresentation of women in caretaking roles, such as teachers and nurses, and an underrepresentation of women in positions of power, such as chief executive officers and political office holders. People of color do not graduate at the same rate as Whites and score significantly lower on standardized tests (Winters & Greene, 2002). Despite having access to education in the United States, people of color are less likely to attend institutions of higher learning and more likely to drop out of high school. When considering the history of this nation, the validity of these stereotypes must be questioned. There is no evidence suggesting innate characteristics are the reason why certain groups are more successful than others, meaning the solution must be in people's social construction.

Many attempts have been made to alleviate the inequalities between groups of people, but much more needs to be done. White, heterosexual men consistently negotiate their identities to remain in power; thus these attempts at creating equality have not been fully successful. Stereotypes are maintained through a lack of communication and cooperation between people of different cultures. If there is a consensus between people of different backgrounds to unite and get to know each other, many of these stereotypes will naturally disappear. Throughout the last decade, much attention has been placed on these issues, and this is the start to real change. Placing matters of sexism and racism at the forefront through media outlets increases their visibility and forces the masses to consider the importance and need for change. In the classroom, segregating students through tracking and zoning should be eliminated as to encourage multi-level, culturally integrated classes, representative of the population. Stereotypes

will only disappear if people make a conscious effort to challenge them.

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