SEXUAL STEREOTYPES IN THE ISRAELI CLASSROOM: THEORETICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION AND OBSERVATIONS

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Researchers are generally agreed that sexual stereotypes are an important aspect of the hidden curriculum in the classroom. An analysis of the literature on this subject reveals, however, that most of the research in this area is concentrated in a few isolated aspects. Thus, there are numerous studies on sexual stereotypes in books and television instructional programs but few studies on the actual interaction in the classroom. This study attempts to remedy the situation in two ways: first, it presents a comprehensive proposal for a new approach to the conceptualization of sexual stereotypes in the classroom; second, it uses data derived from a series of observations in Israeli classrooms to illustrate the various categories of the proposal.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers are generally agreed that sex role socialization is one of the most important aspects of the hidden curriculum in the school. Students are taught what men and women are and what types of behaviors are masculine or feminine without the teacher or the students being aware that such messages are being conveyed. It is exactly this lack of awareness on the part of both teachers and students which makes the process of sex role socialization in the school both powerful and difficult to study.

Because of the difficulty involved in the study of this process, most of the attempts to describe sex role socialization in the school have taken the form of context analysis of teaching materials rather than an actual study of classroom interaction.

The analysis of teaching materials used in schools has shown that the depiction of men and women in those materials is often sexually stereotyped.[1] The analysis of children's textbooks has repeatedly revealed that in these materials women and girls, as opposed to men and boys, are often significantly under-represented. When females are represented, they are often portrayed in passive roles and sexually stereotyped activities such as cooking, cleaning, taking care of children and crying (Pitcher, 1963; Fisher, 1970; Frazier and Sadker, 1973; Maon, 1975; St. Peter, 1979; Kolbe and Lavoie, 1981; Heathcote, 1982).

Content analysis of children's television programs has revealed similar phenomena. Studies have demonstrated repeatedly that women are disproportionally represented in leading or other roles (Sternglatz and Sarbin, 1974; Harmony, 1975; Northcott, 1975). The same tendency to portray males as generally active, intelligent and courageous and females as relatively passive, stupid and fearful has been observed in instructional programs (Leiffer and Lesser, 1976), cartoons (Busby, 1974), family-oriented programs (Long and Simon, 1974; Downs, 1981; Weigel and Loomis, 1981; Mackey and Hess, 1982), instructional series on career awareness (Britton, 1975), and in advertisements (Manslead and McCullock, 1981).

Few studies have concentrated on sexual stereotypes in the actual interaction in the classroom. The studies that adapted this approach restricted themselves primarily to an analysis of the teacher's behavior in regard to his/her students. It has been established that female teachers prefer and encourage dependent behavior in girls more than in boys (Sears and Feldman, 1974). It has also been demonstrated that teachers (again, particularly female teachers) tend to seek the participation of boys in the class more often and that boys themselves ask more questions and make more comments than girls (Russell, 1979).

Focus on the teacher's behavior as the only area in which sexual stereotypes in the classroom may be reflected has resulted in the neglect of other, potentially stereotyped aspects of the classroom reality. This study seeks to remedy the situation in two ways. First, it presents a comprehensive proposal for a new approach to the conceptualization of sexual stereotypes in the classroom. Second, it uses data derived from a series of observations in Israeli classrooms to illustrate the various categories of the proposal. The study concludes with a discussion of the significance of these data for understanding current sexual stereotypes in Israel.

A PROPOSAL FOR A NEW APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF SEXUAL STEREOTYPES IN THE CLASSROOM

In order to expand our understanding of sexual stereotyping in the classroom it is necessary to go beyond the scope of the presently available research in terms of theory and data collection. It is necessary to conceptualize the classroom reality in holistic terms and to include in this conceptualization as many aspects of that reality as possible.

Assumptions

The following proposal is based on four assumptions:

First, the in-depth study of sexual stereotypes in the classroom is probably more compatible with qualitative rather than quantitative research design. Incidents which contain sexually stereotyped messages do not occur frequently. They are often isolated incidents which reflect and reinforce the sexually stereotyped attitudes of those who participate in them and not simple and easily quantifiable behaviors. The significance of such critical incidents can nevertheless be deep and far-reaching.

Second, whole incidents rather than simple behaviors should be the target of the investigation. It is probably true that the teacher is the main socializing agent in this case and analysis should center on his/her behavior. It is, however, equally important to observe the behavior of the students as they interact with the teacher and with each other. Furthermore, the significance of the behavior of each participant in the interaction should be analyzed only in the context of the incident in which it occurred.

Third, all the aspects of the classroom reality, including the appearance and contents of the room (animate as well as inanimate), should be included in the analysis. It is true that the most significant effects are probably produced by the participants in the interaction but non-human aspects can also convey and reinforce stereotyped messages.

Fourth, the participants' level of awareness of the meaning of the message that is conveyed by their actions is of utmost importance. Any conceptualization of sexual stereotypes in the classroom should differentiate clearly between incidents in which the participants are vaguely aware of the meaning of the message, and incidents in which the participants identify closely with the content of the message. It can safely be assumed that the latter have a much stronger effect than the former.

Proposed Categories

Using the above assumptions as guidelines, it is possible to conceptualize the classroom reality in the following way. First, it can be divided into animate and inanimate aspects. The animate aspects are those which involve the interaction between human beings, i.e., the teacher and students. The inanimate aspects are those which involve the classroom and the various objects that are being used in it. Second, each of these two major subdivisions can be further divided. The animate aspects may be divided into teacher-students and student-student interactions. The inanimate aspects may be divided into classroom appearance as one major subdivision and teaching materials as another.

It is important to note that it is the sexually stereotyped aspects of the classroom reality that are the center of analysis in this study, rather than the interrelationship between the individuals involved in that reality. As a result, previous models which describe the socio-psychological interactions in groups, such as those of Moreno (1934), Parsons (1961), Homans (1974) and, in particular, Bales (1970), Bales and Cohen (1979), and Hare (1972), are of limited applicability.

It should also be noted that the various categories that are outlined in this section, and which describe theoretically distinct "types" of sexually stereotyped incidents may overlap in specific classroom instances.

When we consider the first subdivision of teacher-student interactions, it can be further divided into the following four categories:

(1) teacher's discourse,
(2) teacher's reinforcement of students' behavior,
(3) students' discourse, and
(4) non-verbal communication.

The second subdivision of student-student interactions may be further divided into the following three categories:

(1) comments on classroom activities,
(2) comments or discussions that are not related to classroom activities, and
(3) non-verbal communication.

The third subdivision of classroom appearance may be further divided into the following three categories:

(1) visual messages (pictures, decorations, etc.),
(2) classroom organization (furniture, learning centers), and
(3) seating procedures (who sits where in class).

And finally, the fourth subdivision of teaching materials can be further divided into the following three categories:

(1) blackboard,
(2) written materials (work sheets, booklets, books), and
(3) audio and/or visual materials (tapes, T.V. programs, films, etc.).

EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

In order to explore the various aspects of the classroom reality outlined in the foregoing model, a series of observations was conducted. Eight classes of a comprehensive high school in Beer-Sheva, Israel were observed, two classes per grade. Four of these classes, one in each grade, were vocational classes and the other four were academically-oriented.

Each class was observed for two hours a week for a total of four weeks. The subject, English Language and Literature (English as a Foreign Language), was taught by four different female teachers. This particular subject was chosen for reasons of convenience; these teachers were more sympathetic to the presence of the investigator in their classes than others. It is acknowledged, however, that limiting the study to one school subject and particularly one which is relatively more open to "foreign" (non-Israeli) influences may have affected the findings.

No attempt was made to analyze the data quantitatively. Instead, a critical incident approach was used. Following this approach, incidents which reflect sexually stereotyped messages were categorized according to the above-mentioned criteria, and analyzed in terms of content and significance.

FINDINGS

The findings are presented according to the categories outlined in the previous section. Each category is explained and then one or more incidents which reflect it are described and analyzed. Since it is impossible to describe all the incidents that have been observed and which fit a particular category, only the most revealing and often

most extreme cases are mentioned. Each of these incidents represents a unique set of circumstances that may not have occurred more than once. However, incidents similar to those described and which cover most of the categories that are outlined in the previous section have occurred in the classes that have been observed and are therefore typical of the reality in those classes.

Animate Aspects

a) Teacher-student interaction

1. Teacher's discourse. Teacher's discourse, either in the form of lecturing or in response to student's instigation, is a frequently-occurring category in classrooms. Consequently, it is likely to contain sexual stereotypes. The following is an example which reflects this category. The incident occurred in a Grade Nine vocational class, which was discussing authors' writing practices.

Student: Did the author write it himself?
Teacher: Yes, his wife didn't help him and neither did his dog.

As an example of the category of teacher's discourse, this exchange represents a case in which a rather innocent question by a student was turned into a sexually-stereotyped incident. By using the words "his wife didn't help him and neither did his dog," the teacher managed to convey two messages: (a) that wives do not usually contribute to their husband's literary work, and (b) that wives and dogs belong to the same category.

The next example is from a Grade Nine academic class. The class was discussing a detective story.

Student: How did the detective know that the guy was not married?
Teacher: His clothes were dirty and untidy. It shows that he didn't have a wife to clean them for him. If you had a wife, she would make your clothes look tidy.

The second example is another case in which a rather innocent question by a student becomes an opportunity for the teacher to express her views on proper behavior for men and women in society, i.e., men are expected to work (e.g. as detectives) and women are expected to launder their clothes and take care of their personal cleanliness.

2. Teacher's reinforcement of students' behavior. In contrast to the previous category, we are dealing in this case with incidents in which the sexually-stereotyped behavior is initiated by a student and is reinforced by the teacher. The first example is from a Grade Ten vocational class. The incident occurred after the teacher asked for volunteers to role-play a conversation in a store. One of the girls in the class volunteered to play the role of a client.

Teacher: What do you want to buy?
Girl: I want to buy a car.
Teacher (incredulous): You want to buy a car?
Girl: Yes... No, it's a toy car for my son.

The girl in the above example was about to make a bold statement and declare that she was going to buy a real car for herself. Faced with the teacher's reaction, she rephrased her statement, turning the car into a "toy car for my son." Thus, by merely expressing her amazement at the choice, the teacher reinforced a stereotyped view of women as individuals who cannot be trusted with the large sums of money that are required to buy a real car but can be expected to buy toy cars for their male children.

The second example is from a Grade Ten academic class. In this case the class was discussing the meaning of the word "courtship."

Student: If you want a girl...
Teacher: Not exactly. If a young man takes his girl to the cinema...

In this case, the student is the one who suggested that courtship is a situation where the man is active and the woman is passive. The teacher reinforced this attitude by phrasing it more accurately and by choosing the word "girl" to refer to the female and "man" to refer to the male.

3. Students' discourse. This category includes incidents when students express sexually-stereotyped views as part of an ongoing interaction with the teacher but with no direct attempt on the teacher's part to influence or induce such expressions. The following example is from a Grade Eleven vocational class. The class is discussing Julius Caesar's last conversation with his wife just before his encounter with Brutus and his fellow assassins. Caesar's wife is begging him not to go.

Boy: This is one case when you should listen to women.
Teacher: I'm happy to see that you are listening at all.

In this example the teacher, instead of reacting to the sexually stereotyped message of the boy's statement, chose to ignore it by turning it into a joke. This choice of response is likely to induce the boy to repeat this statement (or similar ones, reflecting the same views). It is also likely to induce the other students in the class to expect, accept and repeat such statements.

4. Non-verbal communication. The non-verbal element of a message is recognized by all theorists of small group interaction as an essential aspect of the communication process. It can strengthen the effect of the verbal aspect or contradict and weaken it. It is also possible for a message to be conveyed by means of the non-verbal aspect alone (Bales, 1970; Bales and Cohen, 1979; Hare, 1972 and others). The following examples illustrate the third possibility, with the sexually stereotyped message being conveyed exclusively through the non-verbal aspect of the message.

The first example is from a Grade Eleven academic class. The class is discussing mating rituals of birds.

Teacher: Among many bird species the male is more colorful than the female. This probably makes him more attractive to the females.
Boy: With human beings it's not necessary, because the females chase after the males, anyway.
Teacher (smiles broadly): We won't go into that philosophical issue.

In this case the teacher's smile, much more than her statement, conveys the message that the boy's views are legitimate. Her definition of the issue that is involved here as a "philosophical" one is much less significant than the message that is conveyed by her facial expression.

The second example is from a Grade Twelve vocational class. During the discussion one of the boys made a statement which compared all women to prostitutes (the word 'prostitute' was not actually mentioned but there was no question about the meaning of his statement).

Teacher (obviously embarrassed, smiles broadly and says): I see that women's lib hasn't reached you yet.

Again, the teacher, instead of confronting the sexually stereotyped message in the student's statement, chose to treat it as a joke, rendering it into a legitimate expression of views. Furthermore, by referring to the women's liberation movement (using the derogatory expression "women's lib"), she managed to switch the responsibility for that exchange from herself, the adult authority and role model in the class, to an abstract institution which is supposedly the only one responsible for women's rights. In this case, as in the previous example, the teacher's non-verbal response was probably more effective as a means of condoning the student's sexually stereotyped remark than her rather neutral verbal message.

It is interesting to note that humor and jokes are important vehicles for conveying sexual stereotypes in the classroom and in society in general. This form of communication enables the initiator of the sexually-stereotyped message to express his/her views without taking full responsibility for their content. It also enables the recipient (who is sometimes the victim of the derogatory message) not to experience feelings of humiliation and anger which he/she would have experienced had the message had conveyed differently (Barges, Barrett, & Fox, 1980; Schrink, Poole, & Regoli, 1982).

b) Student-student interaction

1. Comments on classroom activities. In contrast to the categories in the previous section, here we are dealing with statements made by students in the class, not meant to be heard by or responded to by the teacher. These remarks were always made in Hebrew. Since Hebrew is a language in which high school students are much more fluent than in English, the views and attitudes that are expressed in Hebrew can be considered as better indicators of their sex role ideology than those expressed in English. The difference in language, and the fact that the categories in this section deal with students' discourse only, may also suggest a much higher personal involvement and consequently a stronger effect of the sexual stereotypes on the students than the effect of the messages in the previous categories.

The next example is from a Grade Eleven vocational class. The teacher is trying to induce the class to discuss boy-girl relations in the school.

Teacher (talking in English to one of the girls): What do you do to make the boys interested in you?
Girl (obviously has no idea): I... I...
Another girl (whispering in Hebrew to the first girl): You don't do anything. You wait for him to talk.

This is an example of sexually-stereotyped messages to which students are exposed in the class without the teacher's knowledge. Although the message is in Hebrew and therefore not part of the formal lesson that is being taught, its effect as a means of reinforcing sexually-stereotyped attitudes is a significant one. In this case, the sexually-stereotyped view is that a woman who is interested in a man does not have the option of initiating the contact but has to wait for the man to make the first move.

2. Comments that are not related to classroom activities. This category involves comments and sometimes whole discussions that are carried on during class time (always in Hebrew) between the students, with the teacher being partly or completely unaware of the issues that are being discussed. From the students' point of view, this is an important aspect of the classroom reality. It is also an important area in which sexual stereotypes are introduced, expressed and reinforced. Since the teacher perceives these discussions as interruptions and is quick to notice and try to stop them, the exchanges usually take the form of short comments. The major difference between this category and the preceding one is that the comments that are grouped under this category are indirectly related to the issues that are being discussed in the class.

The first example of this category is from a Grade Ten academic class. The students are discussing ideas for birthday presents.

Girl (out loud, in English): This year I'm going to buy a toy train for my brother.
Boy (whispering in Hebrew to another boy sitting nxt to him): She doesn't have a brother. I guess she meant a doll.

This comment clearly reflects the stereotyped views that boys and girls enjoy different kinds of toys and should be given different kinds of presents which are compatible with their sex.

The second example is from a Grade Twelve vocational class. The subject of the discussion in class is the history of the sewing machine. The teacher, trying to involve the students in the discussion, asks the class what could have been the historical reasons that brought about this invention.

Boy (whispering in Hebrew to another boy sitting next to him): She doesn't have a brother. I guess she meant a doll.

This is an example of a student's resentment and probably anger at his teacher, disguised as a sexually-stereotyped remark directed at "all women."

3. Non-verbal communication. This category includes cases wherein the sexually-stereotyped verbal message is reinforced by the non-verbal one. Since most of the comments in this category are made in whispers, facial expressions and other modes of non-verbal communication are of utmost importance. The following example is from a Grade Nine academic class. The students are discussing movies as a form of recreation. One of the more attractive girls in the class makes the following statement:

Girl: I think it's unfair that a girl cannot invite a boy to go to the movies or to a party.

Boy (turning his face to those sitting behind him with mock seriousness and whispering in Hebrew): She's right, we really must do something about it.

Here, again, humor is used as a means for conveying a sexually-stereotyped message. The effect is produced by the contradiction between the verbal and the non-verbal aspects of the message. While the verbal aspect states that the girl's statement should be regarded seriously, the non-verbal aspect (facial expression and body movements) conveys the message that she and her remark should be ignored and ridiculed. The sexually-stereotyped messages here are: (1) the norm which expects girls to play a passive role in their relationship with boys is a justified one, and (2) any attempt to change or fight it should be ridiculed, especially when initiated by a girl who (because of her looks) does not suffer personally from that norm.

Inanimate aspects

a) Classroom appearance

1. Visual messages (pictures, decorations, etc.). Most of the classes that were observed had sexually stereotyped pictures and decorations. Two classes had several *Playboy* centerfolds, presenting naked women in different positions. Three classes had caricatures which were cut out from newspapers. Most of these caricatures presented women in various sexually-stereotyped scenes (the wife who wrecked the family's car, the jealous wife who is resentful of her husband's interest in a younger, more attractive woman, etc.). The most extreme example of this category appeared on the wall of a Grade Eleven vocational class. The decoration, which was written clearly enough to be read from any angle in the room, said: "In Turkey, women are like records. First you use them on one side and then on the other." This saying was written in Hebrew and was available to the students to read throughout the whole day.

2. Classroom organization. Most of the classes that were observed had areas dedicated to various extra-curricular activities. Students could browse through the materials that were collected by special class committees and presented in those areas. In most cases the areas were identified according to sex as the boys' area and the girls' area. The boys' areas were mostly dedicated to rough sports (mostly soccer) and the girls' areas were dedicated to fashion and cosmetics. In three classes there were career information areas. Here again, the differentiation according to sex was apparent, with females presented in traditionally female occupations (teacher, nurse, secretary, etc.) and males presented in traditional masculine occupations (engineer, manager, etc.).

3. Seating procedures. Sitting in groups of one sex seemed to be common although it is by no means school policy. In most classes, boys sat in the front seats and girls in the back. This too is not school policy, nor was it initiated or encouraged by the teachers. The fact that boys were sitting in the front seats enabled the teacher to hear the comments they made more easily than those of the girls. One of the results was that boys were indeed getting more of the teacher's attention than girls (a point previously mentioned by Russell, 1979).

A similar phenomenon was observed when the class was working in groups. Here again (especially in the lower grades where group work is more common) boys seemed to prefer to work with boys, and girls seemed to prefer to work with girls. This fact is important not only as a sociometric observation (as such it was noted as early as 1934 by Jacob Moreno), but also because of the total indifference of the teachers to it and their reluctance to attempt to induce any change in this practice.

Teaching materials

1. Blackboard. In the classes that were observed, the blackboard was used to demonstrate grammatical rules and manipulations and to summarize the major conclusions of class discussions. In the examples that were presented, an overwhelming number of sentences had a masculine subject (he did, he said, etc.). In the few cases when females were the subject, they were presented in sexually stereotyped activities and/or occupations.

2. Written texts. This category and the next one have been extensively studied by previous researchers. As mentioned in the introduction, it has been repeatedly demonstrated both in Israel (by Maon, 1975) and in other countries, that classroom written materials are often highly stereotyped. Due to this fact, the present study did not include a thorough analysis of written materials.

The data obtained during the observations in the classes seem to substantiate the previous research in several areas. First, an overwhelmingly large number of sentences used for purposes of demonstration and exercise presented boys and men as subjects. Second, when referred to, females appeared in sexually-stereotyped activities and occupations. And, third, the themes that appeared in the literature selections were also often stereotyped.

3. Audio and/or visual materials. This category includes tapes, television programs, films, etc. Although these materials are sometimes used in Israeli classrooms, none of the lessons that were observed in this study made use of them. Consequently, it is impossible to use them for illustrative purposes.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has implications in two main areas. The first is the study of sexual stereotypes in the classroom. As a sub-category of the more general concept of the hidden curriculum, sexual stereotypes are an important part of the socializing messages that are conveyed in class. As this study has demonstrated, a variety of aspects which are involved in the classroom reality can be used as means of conveying sexual

stereotypes. Only a few of them have been explored and analysed in previous research. It remains for future research to expand the study of this subject theoretically by incorporating in the model more aspects of the school reality and, empirically, by applying the model to a larger number of classes and school situations.

The second implication is the study of sexual stereotypes in Israel. The literature on sexual stereotypes in Israel can be divided into two sections: sexual stereotypes in the educational system, and sexual stereotypes in Israeli society. The second area of research is usually tied in with studies of the status of women in Israel in general.

The most thorough analysis of sexual stereotypes in the educational system and in Israeli society in general was conducted in 1978 by the Committee on the Status of Women (appointed as an advisory committee to Prime Minister Rabin and headed by Knesset Member Ora Namir). In its report, the Committee stated that the depiction of women in books used in school (subjects as varied as Hebrew Literature, History, Civil Studies, Physics, Biology, English and Mathematics) is highly sexist (C.S.W., 1978:81-85). The report also stated that the assumption that a woman's place is in the home, tending to her husband and children, is reflected in many other discriminatory practices conducted by the Israeli educational system (ascribing students to school courses on the basis of their sex, lack of technological training for girls, etc. [C.S.W., 1978:56-72]). Finally, the report made it clear that the sexually-stereotyped values which are evident in the educational system are reflected in many other areas in which women are discriminated against in Israel (the army, the labor force, the legal system, the political system, the mass media, etc.).

Similar findings, but from a more subjective point of view, appear in Lesley Hazelton's book, "Israeli Women, the Reality Behind the Myths" (1978). In this work, the author compares the liberated aggressive attitude of Jewish women in Palestine at the beginning of the century to the submissive, traditional ideology prevailing among young Israeli women today. The same view which sees the social role of women in Israel as regressing towards a less equalitarian, more traditional one has been expressed by Weinberg and Denmark (1978), and more recently by Israeli et al. (1982).

The findings of this study, despite its limited scope, seem to fit into this general picture. The sexually-stereotyped classroom incidents seem to reflect a reality in which sexist attitudes are encouraged or at least not discouraged. Teachers, who are probably unaware of the potential effect of their own and their students' behavior in regard to sexual stereotypes, make sexist statements and accept such statements from their students without trying to confront and change these behaviors.

It remains for future research to determine to what extent the findings of this small-scale study are indeed indicative of the situation in the educational system in Israel.

NOTES

[1] The definition that is adopted here for sexually stereotyped or sexist attitudes follows George W. Albee (1981). According to his definition, a sexually-stereotyped or sexist attitude is one which "ascribes superiority or inferiority, not supported by evidence, in traits, abilities, social value and personal worth to males or females as a group."

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