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SHOULD MEN “WOMEN UP” FOR FEMALE-DOMINATED FIELDS? THE EFFECT OF GENDERED TRAITS AND TEACHER GENDER ON PERCEPTIONS OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS



ABSTRACT: Little is known about the effect of gendered traits on perceptions of male elementary educators. This paper presents the results of two experiments conducted to fill this void. Experiment 1 explored the influence of gendered traits and teacher gender on perceptions of elementary educators. Participants ($N = 246$) were randomly

assigned to view websites that varied gendered traits (communal, neutral, agentic) and teacher gender. When choosing a teacher for their child, individuals preferred either neutral or communal teachers to agentic teachers. Additionally, participants reported that men were significantly less hireable than women, indicating a backlash against men who seek employment in traditionally feminine fields. To create a stronger manipulation of gendered traits, Experiment 2 investigated more vivid descriptions that demonstrated how the teachers' classroom actions embodied such traits. Responses from participants ($N = 261$) indicated similar main effects as the ones found in Experiment 1, which implies reliability in results. Unlike Experiment 1, no backlash against male teachers was found. The two experiments suggest that individuals seeking entry into elementary education should avoid describing themselves in agentic terms.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

"The parents didn't send their kids because there was a male teacher!"

Scoffing at the absurdity, my disgruntled father strolled into the house, booming with another story to share from his after-school program. As an elementary educator, he fills up our conversations at the dinner table about his daily interactions with the students and their parents; my usual routine consists of quiet nods and smiles. But this particular story got me curious.

Thinking back to my own elementary days, I tried to remember my previous male classroom teachers and could only name one. *Perhaps this is an anomaly!* But, devoured by wonder, I later scoured Google for answers and encountered a shocking statistic: men only represent about ten percent of elementary school teachers nationwide. Only. Ten.

As I further investigated the issue, I found many factors for lack of gender diversity in elementary education. However, one of the most glaring reasons points to gender stereotypes. According to literature, the perception that men are not nurturing and should not work with young children still exists, and such prejudices discourage men from pursuing this field. Upon assessing the current situation, I knew I wanted to take action.

Luckily, through my high school's behavioral and social sciences research program, I was able to work with my teacher Dr. Allyson J. Weseley and find some answers through science. When it came to brainstorming different ideas for my methodology, I instinctively looked toward my interest in language for inspiration. Languages are intricate systems that dictate the establishment of various sounds, grammatical structures, and meanings. As individuals communicate with one another

through language, it is believed that it largely affects the way people think about the world. For example, framing has been found to have a profound effect on people's attitudes and behavior. Through experiments in public health and marketing, scientists have been able to influence judgments simply by the subtle manipulation of language. When I envisioned the possibility of using language for my own project, I decided to explore whether the words a teacher uses to describe him or herself impacts people's impressions of their potential to teach effectively.

Months of studying a cause I care about, designing my experiment, and gathering data became months of engaging in a field that not only met my wants, but also my needs. Without having completed my study, I would have been an unsatisfied individual with an endless list of unanswered questions. And so, with the help of my mentor, science has fueled my existence. I remained restless always, and such restlessness powered me throughout my work—especially during bumps. Tying my results back to previous literature did not always go smoothly. The information on my experimental stimuli and the survey items had to be altered and adjusted constantly. Before long, I realized the tremendous amount of attention to detail, amount of trial and error, and patience required even for the smallest of advances.

As I sharpened my research skills and delved deeper into the behavioral and social sciences, I grew passionate about using the scientific method for all that I do. Through science, I can unravel the mysteries that lie within psychology, and I think that is beautiful in every single way. Thus, for high school students interested in pursuing research, my advice is to explore the questions that truly captivate their minds, their souls. The process of collecting data—as well as interpreting it all—is never easy. However, genuine curiosity can help any aspiring scientist to overcome any obstacles.