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## A Language of Silence: Analyzing the Effects of Sexist Language on Women's Classroom Experiences

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**A LANGUAGE OF SILENCE:  
Analyzing the Effects of Sexist  
Language on Women's Classroom  
Experiences**



Honors Thesis

Emily Battaglia

Department: Communication

Advisor: Teresa L. Thompson, Ph.D.

April 2020

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## **Abstract**

The English language has been defined and dominated by the male voice throughout all of history. Consequently, language has played a strong role in upholding the existing patriarchal structure of society. The extent to which this affects women is still widely unaddressed in past and current research; and much of this research fails to directly address how sexist language affects women in learning environments. For my thesis, I have conducted and assessed in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 10 high school seniors and 10 college seniors. With a significant focus on female shame, silence, and self-perception, this study reveals that the language used by both educators and peers in the classroom space has a strong influence on a female's comfort level in the classroom—especially in regard to participation. This research supports existing literature that the classroom space and the language used within it remains patriarchal, and continues to function in a way that silences, and shames, women in various speaking situations.

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**University of  
Dayton**

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## **Introduction**

Language is the primary structure in our lives that serves to shape our perception of both self and reality. Language, culture, consciousness, and behavior develop and operate entirely together, permitting us to react to the world based on the linguistic maps we hold (Kodish, 2003). But what happens when our “linguistic map” isn’t the one we created? Indeed, the English language has been defined and dominated by the male voice throughout all of history, and with this comes a silencing of women that pervades practically every component of our lives. With language comes power, and it is this power that becomes the main factor in determining who controls interactions in day-to-day life (Spender, 1981). Consequently, it becomes undoubtedly evident that language has played a vital role in upholding the existing patriarchal structure of society. Both sexes are forced to inhabit a male reality, and women’s voices become cut off from mainstream identity (Spender, 1981). The extent to which this affects women, though, is still widely unaddressed in past and current research. More specifically, much of this research fails to address how sexist language affects women in learning environments. Despite popular beliefs that women are “doing just fine” in the classroom, women still face clear gender biases in academic environments. Research involving student-teacher interaction illustrates that females often receive less and lower quality feedback than males, experience more comments about their appearance as opposed to their academic performance, and receive less attention overall than the male students in their classes. Along with this, women are more likely to be unfairly penalized for their gender when evaluated by prospective employers. Consequently, women often internalize the negativity towards them, harboring self-doubt that could potentially steer them away from a field they might have pursued otherwise (Andrus, Jacobs, & Kuriloff, 2018). A recent study published by Cimpian, Ganley, George, and Mankowski (2018) has also found that

the perceived gender discrimination a woman expects to experience in her major has become the top factor in creating unequal gender distribution in college classrooms. In other words, women are choosing their field of study based on the amount of sexism they anticipate in the classroom, and eventually, the workplace. While these studies provide important insight into the minds of adolescent females, they fail to address the linguistic root of the problem that is immensely crucial in gaining insight into the silenced voices of women in classrooms across the nation.

Ultimately, this paper seeks to further understanding of women's experiences in both high school and college classrooms. Two groups, 10 high school seniors and 10 college seniors, have acted as subjects because of the transitional phase both are approaching in their academic careers. The results of the face-to-face interviews conducted across these two samples provide a fuller understanding of the many components in the gendered classroom, especially language, which work to shame and silence women.

## Literature Review

### Chauvinistic Language & The Power to Label

In order to understand the sexism existing in the classroom space, patriarchal language and its societal influences must first be assessed. Selvan and Suguna's (2013) analysis of male chauvinistic language and the way it functions to suppress women highlights the ways in which the English language is inherently gender-biased (Selvan & Suguna, 2013). They argued that the words spoken by individuals on a day-to-day basis carry chauvinism by continuously assigning secondary status to women. This idea is exemplified in even the most basic components of speech. For example, certain negative words for women such as "bitch" and "slut" hold no male equivalent. Oftentimes, the order in which words are placed prioritizes men over women. "Men and women," "kings and queens," and "sons and daughters" are just a few of the commonly spoken pairs that denote men as superior (Selvan & Suguna, 2013). Parallel terms such as Mister/mistress and bachelor/ spinster exemplify this as well. While each set describes people of the same status, the female word in both situations has a negative connotation (Fuchs Epstein, 1986). The word "mistress" has come to mean a woman who is having an affair with and is frequently supported by a married man. "Spinster", instead of just meaning an older woman who is not married, carries a very insulting connotation.

Additional research has suggested that the male privilege to label further perpetuates the existence of a patriarchal society through language. This is not solely manifested through the practice of taking a man's name upon entering into a marriage, although that is certainly an exemplar, but also through the way individuals are addressed in status-based scenarios. For example, the person who holds the highest position at a company (often a man) will almost always be addressed as Mr/Mrs. However, the secretary will be addressed by her or his first

name; and in such instances, the secretary is typically a woman (Fuchs Epstein, 1986). Labeling women through beauty norms and promiscuity norms could also act as a way to further their subordination. By reinforcing unrealistic ways that women should look and act in order to appear more feminine, society crafts women as an object solely for male evaluation (Schur, 1984). To explain this assertion in more depth, Schur cites Lever and Schwartz's (1971) study of college dating behavior. Their research found that women engaging frequently in extramarital sexual behavior were more often than men labeled negatively for being too "promiscuous." On the other hand, though, some may label this woman as "liberated." With these two different labels it is not the behavior that is varied, but instead the evaluation. When the label "slut" or "promiscuous" leads to a negative perception of the woman herself, it is perhaps a reflection of society's response. The examples Schur provides imply that a negative label attaches a stigma that is difficult for women to escape from. By labeling individuals in such a manner, they have the potential to become devalued and displaced. This could eventually lead to treatment of such persons in a degrading or exploitative way, as the label has symbolically attached a note of permission to do so. Along with this, Schur also claims that deviant statuses allow for the creation of master status. In many instances, labeling allows men to automatically assume this position of master status, as society often hyphenates stereotypically male roles with the term "female" when a woman assumes such a position. "Female-doctor" and "female-athlete" are just two examples of this, and yet they both serve in crafting the woman in discussion as being defined first in terms of her femaleness. Consequently, her femininity labels her as more incompetent than a man. Therefore, Schur argues that the woman automatically becomes the outsider, hindering her chances of workplace advancement or general success because of the stigmatization women often face (Schur, 1984).



It is crucial to note, also, that certain female occupations label the male as deviant when they undertake a role regarded as typically feminine. For example, the concept of a male nurse illustrates an instance in which men are the marginalized sex in the workplace. Not only does this demonstrate the existence of deviant statuses amongst both sexes, but further perpetuates the gendered nature of the workplace. Prescribing nursing to women only allows the widespread belief of women's domestic role to flourish in society, while simultaneously reinforcing male and female stereotypes in public spaces (Sasa, 2019). Henceforth, it could be argued that any instance in which a sex label prefaces a job title hinders men and women in that particular profession and contributes to gendered stereotypes.

### **Implications of Gender-Exclusive Language**

Fuchs Epstein (1986) also argued that language is used to reflect and maintain the power held over women in society. When examining the history of the English language more closely, the use of the pronoun "he," is oftentimes associated with the universal (Fuchs Epstein, 1986). A study conducted by Noll, Lowry, and Bryant (2018) further analyzed this idea of epicene pronouns, addressing the notion that using "he" as the universal is no longer acceptable. They conducted two studies set 15 years apart in order to evaluate the changing effect of using "he" versus "they" as a universal pronoun. Both experiments involved participants reading sentences using "he," "they," or unrelated epicene pronouns. In order to demonstrate the ways in which pronouns influence how gendered nouns are processed, participants were then tasked with a lexical decision in which they reacted to certain gendered words. The study resulted in support of the claim that "he" slows the processing of feminine nouns, whereas "they" facilitates feminine noun processing. From their work, it was concluded that the use of the pronoun "they" is much more inclusive than "he" (Noll, Lowry, & Bryant, 2018).

Previous studies have similarly found that men and women do not respond or perceive the generic “he” in the same way, as it is believed to be affiliated with men. Therefore, the use of male-associated generics such as “chairman,” “fireman,” or “salesman” could act as another way to subordinate women through language (Fuchs Epstein, 1986). Research conducted by Stout and Gasputa (2011) evaluated the concept of exclusion through sexist language in the work environment. Male and female participants were placed in a mock interview in which descriptions of the job and workplace they were being interviewed for used either gender-inclusive, gender-exclusive, or gender-neutral language. The results of the experiment found that both male and female participants perceived gender-exclusive language to be significantly more sexist than gender-inclusive language, with women viewing it as being more sexist than men did. Along with this, when women were exposed to the gender-exclusive language, they anticipated a lower sense of belonging in the desired workplace and were also less motivated to pursue that particular occupation. Men, on the other hand, were not affected by the gender-exclusive language in this way (Stout & Gasputa, 2011). The results of this experiment support claims made decades ago by Todd-Mancillas (1981), who asserted that that gender-biased perceptions are believed to result from the frequent and everyday use of man-linked words (he/him/his).

Historically, sex biases in job ads are said to discourage men or women from applying to certain jobs that are depicted as more masculine or feminine, such as a craftsman or a telephone operator, respectively. In a study conducted by Bem and Bem (1973), subjects were divided into three groups and asked to read job ads using sex-biased, sex-unbiased, and sex-reversed descriptions. The sex-biased conditions used explicitly gender-exclusive language, explicitly stating that certain jobs would appeal more to one sex over the other. On the other hand, sex-unbiased descriptions were intended to appeal to both women and men. The sex-reversed

descriptions sought to appeal to the sex that was not often employed in a certain job. It was found that of those who read the sex-biased descriptions, only 5 percent of women and 35 percent of men were interested in applying to jobs aimed at the opposite sex. Of those who read sex-unbiased descriptions, the number increased to 25 and 75 percent. For the sex reversed description, this percentage rested at 45 and 65 percent (Bem & Bem, 1973). After analyzing this study and others similar, it can be concluded that because certain advertisements repeatedly use man-linked words, women ultimately perceive their options in the workplace as limited (Todd-Mancillas, 1981). The public use of sexist rhetoric suggests that masculine is the norm, creating images of men as the dominant gender in the minds of listeners or readers, and having the ability to reinforce male privilege and superiority (Parks & Robertson, 2004). In recognizing that women still face the same exclusion from language that they did decades ago, it can be understood that the English language remains sexist and functions in a way that continues to subordinate women.

### **Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and Gendered Language Differences**

The aforementioned research supports the argument that human understanding comes filtered through the minds of men and isolate women's thoughts (Selvan & Suguna, 2013). Various studies have argued that language is intrinsically connected with consciousness, and consequently, one's perception of reality differs in relation to their native language. If such a statement is accurate, an individual's behavior, reactions, and experiences all become shaped by the linguistic maps held within their culture; and a culture that is sexist will lead to a perception and manifestation of women's inferiority (Kodish, 2003). The Sapir -Whorf hypothesis adequately reflects this notion. Otherwise known as the theory of linguistic relativity, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states that a speaker's native language has a strong influence on their thoughts and perception (Kte'pi, 2018). The concept of linguistic relativity argues that the structure of

one's native tongue impresses upon its speakers a worldview that has serious implications, primarily because individuals learn and understand how to behave through socialization (Kodish, 2003). Studies which have examined the stark differences in male and female communication styles reveal how greatly their linguistic maps vary and how this could potentially affect a woman's self-perception. This can be demonstrated through the repeatedly articulated notion that women's speech characteristics are vastly different than men's speech. Research has frequently suggested that men and women behave differently when communicating, though it still proves difficult to separate these sex-related differences from stereotypical beliefs. For example, females have been thought to use better grammar, more tag questions, more adjectives and adverbs, and more words about emotion (Berryman & Wilcox, 1980). They are also believed to use more fillers, speak less assertively, and use a more complex pattern of speech (Mulac, Lundell, & Bradac, 1986). Men, on the other hand, are believed to use more present-tense verbs, exhibit less concern for formal grammar, speak egocentrically, and exhibit a high concern for holding the floor (Mulac, Lundell, & Bradac, 1986). With this evidence, it can be concluded that the primary difference believed to exist between these two language styles is that female speech is more tentative, powerless, uncertain, and inferior in comparison to men's speech (Mulac, Lundell, & Bradac, 1986).

These, however, are stereotypes that warrant investigation, as some studies have concluded that they are manifestations of sexist speech in society. For example, an article published by Cheris Kramer in 1977 argued that sex-role standards place legitimate pressure on individuals to behave a certain way in speech scenarios. In previous research, women who were placed in problem-solving scenarios believed they had not contributed as much as their male counterparts, and yet, they were satisfied with their lack of involvement. This is a result of the

belief that women were often not expected to be as helpful in decision-making processes, and consequently leads to them conforming to this belief. The oft-argued myth of women being more talkative than men (Spender, 1979; Popp et al, 2003) is henceforth overturned in such a situation, as the participants in this study were not as involved in conversation. Along with this, past research has demonstrated that in stimulated social situations involving men and women, both parties will assume gender-adherent roles within the scenario (Leik, 1963). It seems that, based upon this evidence, stereotypes are strongly used as a guide in behaving in unfamiliar speech and behavioral situations.

Kramer's study furthered this notion, with the participants expressing a strong belief that the speech characteristics of men and women differ on numerous scales. Most importantly, Kramer's study revealed that women perceive a greater difference in speech characteristics based on gender than men do. In Kramer's experiment, the amount of times women perceived greater differences among female and male speech was recorded, and vice versa. Then, Kramer evaluated this in relation to how often women and men perceived greater differences in the 51 speech characteristics listed in the study. Kramer calculated that, on average, women perceived greater differences of roughly four times as many speech characteristics as men did. Since their assignment of speech characteristics adheres to the stereotypes men also assign them, this study suggests that women themselves once may have viewed their language just as ineffectively as the rest of society. Male speech was heavily stereotyped by both women and men as being more assertive, concise, authoritarian, and louder. Women's, on the other hand, was classified as gentler, friendlier, and polite, to name a few characteristics. These results provide evidence that men are viewed as having control over speech situations, whereas women are merely a counter language that is unable to exert such control. With such speech characteristics, how could a

woman expect to assert herself in a classroom or workplace? Women can easily become bound to speech norms, as violating these norms could potentially result in a negative perception of their femininity (Kramer, 1977). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis can be applied in these scenarios to demonstrate how impactful a patriarchal language structure can be on women's perceptions of themselves and their reality. If language truly does affect cognition to the extent the Sapir Whorf hypothesis suggests, then women perhaps view themselves just as subordinately as they are depicted through language.

### **Attitudes Toward Women in Speaking Situations**

These conclusions suggest that patterns exhibited in language can be established through social norms and cultural values. Despite evidence of a stark divide in male and female linguistic characteristics, some scholars, such as Lakoff (1973), feel women's speech behavior is a manifestation of their powerlessness. Conversational analyses in the past have depicted men's supposedly "instrumental" way of speaking, in contrast with women's more "expressive" communication style (Strodtbeck and Mann, 1956). In these instances, researchers found that men appeared to deny women equal status as speakers, once again epitomizing male dominance in language. For example, it was found in a study by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) that men were more likely to interrupt women. In fact, the male behavior in these analyses was so dismissive of the females, the conversation was compared to that of an adult and child. An analysis of this study suggests that, in the past, the marginalizing attitude toward women in communication situations also brings forth a negative audience perception of women's speech. Because women's submissive speech style is a widely believed stereotype, it is further perpetuated by a negative interpretation of credibility in situations where men and women speak similarly (Fuchs Epstein, 1986). This negative perception could still remain prevalent in public

spaces today, as research has suggested a correlation between negative attitudes toward women and negative attitudes surrounding sexist language (Parks and Robertson, 2002). In this particular study conducted by Parks and Robertson, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire which sought to measure their attitudes toward women, modern sexism, and neo-sexism. Despite the common perception that sexism in the US is declining, the 18-20-year-olds in the study did not seem to embody this viewpoint as much as the researchers predicted. Parks and Robertson were able to conclude that sexist language is an object of concern only to those who consciously or unconsciously believe that men remain superior to women.

### **Symbolic Interactionism and Female Self-Perception**

Symbolic interactionism can help to explain the ways in which the subordinated female self is created through language, socialization, and surrounding environment. This theory provides three overarching premises to aid in making sense of humans' desire to adequately interpret everyday occurrences (Jeon, 2004). At its most basic level, symbolic interactionism sees meaning as highly subjective, with individuals acting according to the meanings they interpret from the world around them. It also views socialization as an important component of meaning-making, suggesting that humans do not have an inherent ability to make sense of the world around them. Rather, they develop this skill from the relationships and interactions they have as they grow up. The third and final premise of symbolic interactionism states that culture heavily influences the way meaning is constructed. Nonverbal and verbal behaviors deemed acceptable in one country may be viewed as offensive in another (Vejar, 2019).

With this knowledge, it can be concluded that a woman's personal experiences in the classroom, a place where many hours are spent growing up, can have an immense influence on her perception of the world around her, its expectations of her as a female, and her view of

herself. This could be attributed to gender's consistent symbolic separation. Because of the explicitly stated and implied expectations of the sexes to which these studies draw attention, it could be inferred that women have been socialized into adhering to gender distinctions (Fuchs Epstein, 1986). George Herbert Mead (1934) originally describes this through the three stages of self-discovery developed in accordance with symbolic interactionism. The first stage, known as the play stage, consists of an individual identifying herself with important figures in her life and replicating her behavior in accordance with her interpretation of social norms. The game stage follows this, with the individual then assuming the role they have observed in others whom they deem similar to them. The final stage, the generalized other, believes that the anticipation of other individuals' perception of a person heavily influences the individual's behavior. Knowing that this "other" could be watching them, an individual is constantly torn between their impulsive response to a scenario and what they believe to be the more socially acceptable response (Vejar, 2019). Such a notion establishes commonly held social norms, repeatedly forcing people into gendered boxes based upon preconceived notions of gender identity. The self could then be perceived as someone who has both societal and unique definitions acting as symbols which human beings internalize (Littlejohn, 1977).

### **Societal Influences on Self-Perception**

Many of the theorists who developed symbolic interactionism stressed the significance of shared meaning as a strong factor of cohesion in society. In fact, they believed that society's influence is so strong that an individual's perception and behavior cannot be studied separately from the environment by which they are surrounded. Herbert Blumer (1969), a social scientist who expanded on Mead's work in symbolic interactionism, stressed the importance of meaning in developing the theory of symbolic interactionism. Blumer believed one of the most important



components of meaning is its formation based upon conscious interpretation. In other words, an object only becomes real to an individual when they consciously interact with it. Blumer furthers this concept with his discussion of root images. Root images could be either the primary topics of human interaction, decision, people as actors, the nature of action, the nature of objects, and/or the connections between individual actions in society. These images help constitute what Blumer calls “group action,” or, the connection of separate, various actions of individuals. Group actions are not entirely distinct from individual actions, though, as Blumer views actions as guided by the meaning derived from each person (Blumer, 1969). The concept of group action can help explain how social norms guide collective value and action. Perrucci and Perrucci (2015) demonstrate this idea in their article, “The Good Society: Core Social Values, Social Norms and Public Policy.” They argue the only way to achieve a so-called “good society” is to identify values that will provide individuals with the freedom and responsibility to work towards one. However, these values can only be sustained if and when they provide standards of action to be embodied as social norms. This would consequently guide the public policy voted upon and enacted by the citizens and representatives of a certain nation (Perrucci & Perrucci, 2015).

Though unrelated to gender, this example provides a scenario of social norms’ potential influence on human behavior. The patriarchal ideals projected upon individuals from their youth could act as primary influencers of behavioral and social standards, especially regarding the way women are treated and perceived. An analysis of Perrucci and Perrucci’s claim alongside Blumer’s (1969) suggests that meaning is given to objects based upon group norms. Manfred Kuhn’s more qualitative approach to symbolic interactionism sees the self as an object, with self-concept existing as one’s own plan of action toward him or herself as an object (Tucker, 1966).

All courses of action are then rooted in self-concept, which is made up of a person's likes and dislikes, status, goals, beliefs, and self-evaluations (Littejohn,1977).

### **Symbols and Effects on Sexism**

The effects of symbolic interactionism, social norms and their construction of patriarchal society can be seen through the way adolescent girls cope with everyday sexism. In Brown and Bigler's (2005) developmental model, it was hypothesized that girls would be more likely to perceive gender discrimination in situations with group-based stereotypes, such as areas involving STEM fields. They also believed that feminist ideals and a desire to not conform to gender stereotypes would make the girls more likely to perceive sexism. Individual factors such as gender identity and attitudes were taken into account as well. Through this study, Brown and Bigler (2005) found that while all girls do not perceive sexism equally, girls' attitudes about gender typicality and their own personal concepts had an influence on their ability to perceive sexism. In other words, girls who are unhappy with the current pressure to conform to gender stereotypes were more likely to notice sexism. Messages from parents and peers about gender conformity and feminism also affected girls' ability to perceive sexism (Brown & Leaper, 2008). From this study, the ways in which meaning is derived from social and symbolic interaction can be understood more clearly. The girls' various perceptions of sexism display how meaning can be modified through interpretive processes when encountering various "objects." The results of this study suggest individual perception and the existence of sexism is widely constructed by social symbols.

Hugh Duncan's (1968) work with symbolic interactionism articulates symbols' social role in his synthesis of other scholarly work on symbolic interaction theory. He states that communication is defined as "... an attempt to persuade others (and hence ourselves) to certain

courses of action that we believe necessary to create a given social order, to question it, or finally, to destroy it” (Littlejohn, 1977, p. 90). Duncan views symbols as one of the most influential factors in shaping communication, and ultimately, social behavior. Symbols are a public, shared reality arising from humanity’s need for social interaction. Consequently, society exists as a product of symbolic interaction (Littlejohn, 1977). With these ideas, it can be concluded that the patriarchal symbols prevalent in modern culture work to manifest a sexist attitude in various public and private spheres. However, as Duncan states in his theory, communication can be used to destroy actions that shape social order (Littlejohn, 1977). Therefore, only in collectively acknowledging and acting upon the sexism that exists within society can individuals’ attitudes be shifted.

### **Women and Muted Group Theory**

Muted group theory can assist in depicting how women are subordinated through sexist language. This theory was established initially in the 1940s by Edwin Ardener, who discovered noteworthy examples of social hierarchies in Cameroon. He found that patriarchal power amongst both the Esu and Bakweri people determined authority. In the 1970s, Ardener and his wife, Shirley, expanded upon this idea by theorizing that male and female understanding and perception differs widely due to the gendered divisions of labor that allows men to construct and control society (Ardener, 1975). From a linguistic standpoint, male dominated language then shapes the present reality of society. Muted group theory argues that women are left out in communicative interactions because of the patriarchal dominance that comes through language. Dewey’s (2018) analysis of this theory explains that because men ultimately determine the acceptable modes of communication and the ways through which it is expressed, men often misunderstand women, and vice versa. Consequently, women are left with three choices: to

translate their thoughts into male terms, express their thoughts as they are and risk misunderstanding, or remain silent. This idea is especially relevant in mixed gender spaces, such as workplaces and classrooms. While many feminists view this silence as an obstacle to overcome, others deem it as a worthy option to exercise in various speech scenarios. Regardless of these differing opinions, however, a crucial component of muted group theory that must not be overlooked is its lack of dependence on biological sex, but rather on social and cultural power (Dewey, 2018).

### **The Socialization of Female Shame**

Certain research suggests that another silencing factor amongst women is the shame they are socialized to feel from a young age (Norberg, 2012). This is primarily a result of the varying individual standards placed on boys and girls. For example, aggressive behavior in youth peer interaction is handled in a different manner for boys versus girls. The young girl who exhibits aggression in an interaction with another child will be reprimanded through direct punishment or love withdrawal in order to prevent this behavior in the future. The young boy, however, may not even be punished at all for his behavior. In fact, in some instances, he may be encouraged (Lewis, 1992). Consequently, each child internalizes what they believe to be “right” and “wrong” standards of behavior. Later in life, when they perhaps violate these codes of conduct, they may experience shame. For these reasons, shame is argued as one of the primary emotional factors in upholding social standards and values. While shame can theoretically help sustain morals in society, it also forces men and women to adhere to their gendered traits. Feelings of shame are commonly associated with powerlessness, smallness, exposure, and worthlessness. These traits are often affiliated with femininity’s expectation of being meek, emotional, passive, weak, and dependent.

Norberg (2012) suggests that shame is experienced differently based upon gender. Regardless of these gendered differences, though, shame is felt when an individual believes their identity is undesired or threatened. The most common responses to shame are found to be a desire to hide or withdraw, most prevalent when women feel exposed or anxious about exposure. This fear of being “seen” is intrinsically connected to feelings of inferiority. Norberg’s (2012) study exemplified the inherent position of inferiority women face in society when she found that male accounts of shame were not evoked by fear of exposure. Norberg found that men do not feel shame because of innate inferiority, but rather for purposes unrelated to society’s expectation of them. These include intellectual inferiority, emotional expressiveness, and physical or sexual inadequacy. Norberg concluded that a majority of women’s accounts of shame resulted from a violation of norms to which they felt bound. Female shame most commonly surrounds sexuality, attractiveness, fear of victimization, and scenarios in which they must behave assertively (Norberg, 2012). Not only does this shame interfere with self-perception, but it also interferes with speech, causing women to cease speaking altogether in various scenarios. Consequently, the social norms established and internalized at an early age have the potential to profoundly influence a women’s confidence in vocalizing her thoughts and beliefs.

In her analysis of Sartre’s account of shame, Luna Dolezal (2017) asserts that shame is the result of an inherent desire for human connection and belonging. She also concurs that the body and physical vulnerability are at the center of shame, and eventually goes on to offer a more optimistic account of Sartre’s interpretation of shame. Dolezal’s ideas draw from two major metaphors of shame, both of which imply that shame results from the presence of an audience or “other,” regardless of whether that audience is present. For example, in their book, *In Defense of Shame: The Faces of Emotion* (2011), Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni describe

shame as an individual's regard for her or himself as the object of another person's judgment. Although shame can often be correlated with physical vulnerability or being "seen," it is also an internal experience of self-evaluation. Dolezal describes this concept as similar to an "...internalized 'other' who holds the judgments and values against which the subject judges himself or herself" (425). On the other hand, the notion of a physical audience is articulated through Taylor (1985), who emphasizes that such values do not arise from nothing, but rather from socially created ideals and beliefs about how an individual should behave based upon various factors.

For Sartre, shame is intrinsically connected to the role of physical vulnerability in the presence of the other. Not only is shame felt on a physical level, but shame can be felt in regard to the body itself. It is one's physical being that rests at the core of objectivity and shame, and Sartre (2003) describes this through his analysis of physical vulnerability through nakedness in relation to the creation story told in the bible. He explains that the naked body represents our existence as defenseless objects. Clothing oneself therefore allows an individual to be seen without fully being seen, henceforth crafting them as subject. Sartre draws this connection back to Adam and Eve's recognition of shame in the garden solely because they knew they were naked. Therefore, one's day-to-day feelings of shame result from being judged as an object in a subject state. This interpretation crafts shame as a feeling of physical vulnerability through recognition of the other.

Furthering the connection between the physical body and shame, Dolezal (2017) draws attention to the value Western culture places on the mind over the body. Since Western society constantly celebrates intellect and the ability to reason, the body becomes shunned and the animal nature of humanity is denied. Henceforth, the body comes to reveal human imperfection,

as the human body can be harmed, become ill, and eventually will decay. This makes the body much more vulnerable and needy than the mind, crafting it as a frequent site of shame. Reverting back to Norberg's (2012) study exploring common sources of male and female based shame, she specifically cites the female body as one of the primary reasons for shame amongst women. Norberg's study demonstrated that a vast majority of women's shame is linked to sexuality, menstruation, and societal ideas of beauty. With these notions, it could be reasonably concluded that the sexism women face both in and outside of the classroom from comments regarding their physical appearance becomes significantly more detrimental. A study conducted by Brown and Leaper (2008) which examined adolescent girls' perceived experiences with sexism, 600 females ages 12-18 were given a survey described as evaluating "what it means to be a girl." Though the study explored various areas of sexism in everyday life, 90 percent of the respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment at least once. This harassment came in the form of unwanted physical contact, demeaning gender-related comments, unwanted and inappropriate romantic attention, and appearance-related teasing. Such comments related to women and their bodies can harm self-esteem, women's attitudes towards others, and overall body image (Goldstein et. al, 2007). In previous research, this type of harassment has been shown to have an impact on heterosexual relationships females form later in life, as they normalize demeaning behavior (Leaper & Anderson, 1997). Henceforth, sexism manifesting in the form of body-related comments could act to shame women by drawing negative attention to the physical body.

### **Classroom Shame**

With the knowledge that social spaces serve as vehicles for the creation of stereotypes and norms, immense pressure to adhere to gender roles can be found in the classroom. Gendered classrooms can be attributed to many factors--the first of these being the language and attitude

put forth by teachers. It seems that a student's learning could perhaps be heavily affected by the biases of an educator of the opposite sex. A study published by the British Educational Research Journal shows that teachers consistently rank students of the opposite sex as more disruptive (Carrington, Tymms, & Merrell, 2008). While this research does not attempt to explain these evaluations, the conclusion could perhaps be drawn that the instructor's dissatisfaction stems from an implicit bias towards the opposite sex, or even a student's violation of stereotypically gendered norms. Along with this, it appears that females are given more attention in the classroom for reasons unrelated to their academic ability. A study published by Andrus, Jacobs, and Kuriloff (2018) shows that young women in school garner more comments based on their appearance than their academic abilities, receive feedback of a lower quality than their male peers, and experience less academic attention overall than their male counterparts. This research does not hesitate to note that the pupils are, in fact, quite similar in regards to the type of educational experience they desire. In previous studies, both boys and girls equally expressed that they enjoy active learning, group projects, hands-on activities, discussions, and debates (Eliot, 2010; Hyde, 2005). Despite evidence of boys and girls expressing interest in the same types of educational experience, women are still marginalized by the primary authoritative figure in a classroom setting. Such findings correlate strongly with evidence in support of the similarities between male and female learning styles, arguing that biology plays no role in determining how a student wishes to engage in the classroom (Andrus, Jacobs, & Kuriloff, 2018). This evidence suggests that teachers have one of the largest impacts in modeling the way gender is treated in the classroom.

Gender Stereotypes existing in high school classrooms could perhaps explain why a large gap persists between men and women in STEM fields. According to a 2018 study published by



the American Educational Research Journal, both real and perceived gender bias in a certain field is the greatest deciding factor in a young women's choice of college major. Such biases prevailed over other potential components of a career such as math orientation and earning potential (Ganley, George, Cimpian, & Makowski, 2017). This fear of gender bias and need to conform to gendered career ideals undoubtedly arises from the continuous construction of gender dichotomies in primary and secondary schools. Research published by Francis (2002) illustrated the strict divide in students' career choices. While women in Francis's study were more willing to embrace occupations once regarded as un-feminine, the young men in the study were highly unlikely to choose a feminine career path. Francis claims that these findings point to adolescents' innate belief that occupations are based more upon gender than actual ability. Such notions are of concern, as they suggest a prevalence of gender dichotomies still prevailing in secondary school classrooms. Francis also articulates a need to challenge the polarized state of education, mentioning that students still feel inclined to take up traits that will denote them either as more masculine or feminine (Francis, 2002).

### **Peer Influence on Gender Norms**

While the prevalence of gendered dichotomies could be attributed to the influence of teachers and the societal values projected onto young pupils, it is crucial to look also at the influence peers have on the gendered nature of the classroom. With women's increasing numbers and achievements prevailing in secondary schools, female study culture has been proven as stronger than boys, a probable cause for the surge in female academic success. Holodynski and Kronast (2009) assert that the norms of a peer group in each classroom greatly differ from the norms of the teacher. Therefore, students must develop the emotional competence to properly express their shame and pride in a manner that adheres to the standards of their classmates. For

example, a student feeling proud because of praise from a teacher may face disdain from classmates, as excessive pride places this student above the peer group. From this notion comes the idea of the “teacher’s pet,” and can occasionally lead to a student being excluded or labeled as a social outcast. Ultimately, a student learns throughout their academic career that they cannot express shame in the classroom (Banerjee, 2000). Shame over poor academic performance represents another instance in which a student must keep silent. If they are to express their distress over failure, it shows they are concerned with the standards an authoritative figure has placed upon them, once again labeling them as socially deviant (Holodynski and Kronast, 2009).

Despite women’s increasing classroom successes in high school classrooms, a study conducted by Houtte (2004) asserts that the lower achieving, less study-oriented men could be detrimental to young women’s study habits. This is primarily caused by the pressure faced by young women in the classroom to not be deemed as deviant from the female norms demanding them to be less work and success-oriented than boys. Along with this, a desire to remain socially integrated and sexually desirable could lead to girls underperforming in order to seem unthreatening to the boys in the class. Though this hypothesis was not proven in this research, Houtte believes it is what accounts for the greater sense of belonging and overall greater academic achievement found in all-women’s schools (Houtte, 2004).

Addressing the effects of gender roles on male students, Jackson (2002) concludes it stems from a desire to embody the characteristics of the hegemonic man. Such notions involve behaving in a manner that is conducive with societally constructed ideals of what a man should be. Certain notions within this hegemonic man link an interest in academic achievement as feminine; and in order to avoid being ostracized by their male classmates, young men adopt an attitude of carelessness towards schoolwork. Ultimately, this serves as a protection of their self-

worth, as it is argued that some adolescents value their own perception and others' perception of them as being more important than their academic achievement (Jackson, 2002). The mere fact that young men are willing to jeopardize their post-secondary opportunities solely to preserve their masculinity demonstrates the problematic nature of the strict gendered stereotypes that exist in secondary schools and beyond.

With evidence of gendered classrooms still prevalent, women's shame and consequential silence in the classroom can be greater understood. The social community of a school generates a space in which gendered social norms flourish. Therefore, students experience enormous amounts of shame or pride, especially during instances in which they feel included or excluded in pertinence to both social groups and academic achievement (Barret, 1995; Scheff, 1998, 2003). Holodynski and Kronast (2009) discuss two types of norms that serve as activators for shame and pride in academic settings. The first of these is the individual reference norm, through which a student's current achievements are compared with past ones. There are both advantages and disadvantages to this method of assessment. A main disadvantage exists primarily due to the fact that while a student could have made progress in a certain subject, they do not meet the minimum standards to be an average-performing or above-average student. The advantages of this assessment, however, are its promotion of great pride in a student. Since the student can recognize that hard work and consistent effort can produce success, they are more likely to experience more pride than shame in an academic setting (Nicholls, Patashnick, & Nolan, 1985).

In order to ensure that students are not being measured unfairly, another assessment form exists: the social reference norm (Holodynski and Kronast, 2009). Contrary to the individual reference norm, Holodynski and Kronast (2009) describe the social reference norm compares students amongst their peers both in class and in larger pools. While this is an effective way to

measure relative academic success, for the low-achieving students, they are exposed to repeated failure and shame. In the long run, this can become highly detrimental to those students because they may embody a universal feeling of unworthiness or stupidity, consequently causing them to not attempt any sort of career action plan for fear of looking foolish (Lambrich, 1987). While evidence of such feelings in students comes from studies conducted decades ago, it can be reasonably concluded they still exist, as these methods of assessment still prevail in both high school and college classrooms.

Another often unrecognized form of shame in the classroom cited is test anxiety (Hoffman & Perkrum, 1999). This common classroom emotion is associated with shame because, ultimately, it is a fear of failure. Henceforth, it serves as a fear of shame (Holdynski & Kronast, 2009). A test serves as a major threat to social status primarily because it elicits fear in a student of what they may or may not be capable of and how those in their life will react to their successes or failures. Holodynski and Kronast cited a study by Hagtvvet, Man, and Sharma (2001) on 14 and 15-year-old Czech Republic students. The study examined the participants' worry cognition and found that they worried much more about how others would perceive them if they did poorly in their academics. In other words, the students' worries were not so much self-related, but rather related to others' perceptions of them.

Diane Elizabeth Johnson (2012) specifically evaluated shame and its implications on student learning in the college classroom. Six hundred sixty-four students at a northeast American university were asked to take a "Social Environment" survey in which they used a 5-point Likert format to rate descriptions related to collegiate sense of community, school burnout, personal shame, achievement goals, and the way in which they evaluate themselves in relation to others. Of the respondents, 62 percent were female and 37 percent were male. A discussion of

the survey's results demonstrated that women were more likely than men to experience shame, as well as more likely to withdraw, attack self, and attack others when experiencing such shame in the classroom. The survey found that student burnout was directly correlated with shame. On the other hand, burnout was indirectly correlated to sense of community, implying that a sense of comfort and inclusivity in the classroom could prevent both shame and academic burnout. Dealing with this shame is rather difficult, as previous research has suggested that actively employing a solution to alleviate shame can only lead to more shameful feelings amongst pupils (Trout, 2006). Most notably, Johnson specifically examines a solution regarding feelings of shame in relation to a lacking sense of community. Johnson cites Donald Nathanson (1995) and his solution of attempting to eliminate shame by establishing a sense of community by creating openness through mutualizing and sharing feelings. He also believes in a commitment to maximize positive effects and minimize negative ones. Ultimately, school has a profound effect on the formation of self. Holodynski and Kronast (2009) cited Faulstich-Wieland (2000) who claims that because personal development comes from processing information related to self and own's own behavior, social environments like classrooms play an integral role in shaping self-perception. From these sources, it can be understood that the gendered classroom has profound effects on the experiences of both men and women. Looking more specifically at the sexism women face in the classroom, pedagogy and peer interaction that invokes shame and silence can potentially create an environment which is detrimental to female learning and self-perception.

## **Methods**

### **Subjects**

The University of Dayton Institutional Review Board approved all procedures. Participants were solicited for interviews by the primary researcher. One half (10) of the participants were female high school seniors from public, coeducational high schools. Nine of the participants attended the same school. Though student enrollment in advanced coursework was not taken into account, all participants mentioned at some point in the interview that they had taken advanced (Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate) coursework. The other half were female college seniors from a private, Catholic, Midwestern university. College major was not taken into account in selecting participants. However, six different majors were represented: education, English, communication, mechanical engineering, environmental biology, and international studies. The varying academic standing amongst participants (high school vs college) was intended to explore the differences of sexist language and female self-perception at transitional stages in participants' academic careers.

### **Procedure**

Face-to-face interviews lasting 45-60 minutes were conducted. Interview locations varied, as they were chosen by the participants. Locations ranged from participants' homes to local cafes. Participants were asked 35 questions from an interview guide developed by the primary researcher. Interviews were semi-structured and participants were probed for additional detail when appropriate.

The questions were developed with the intention of revealing the participants' comfort level, overall classroom engagement/participation, and self-perception of their academic abilities

in comparison to other students. While most questions did not address gender explicitly, some asked participants to take gender into account when answering, if applicable. The questions also sought to reveal instances in which participants felt shamed or silenced while in the classroom in order to examine how language functions to silence women in speaking situations. The main goal of the questions was to attain a concrete understanding of how the participants viewed themselves and their abilities in the classroom space. The full interview guide may be seen in Appendix A.

### **Methods**

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Responses were analyzed using a focused coding method and divided into charts based on sample group (high school or college). Data analysis focused primarily on frequency, magnitude, cause, consequence, and agency of various themes and responses. The themes that emerged will be discussed in the following chapter. Results were compared within and across each sample group.

## Results

The results of this research sought to further the implications of being educated in classrooms that conform to male-dominated language. The participants were assessed regarding whether they would express a lack of confidence, and perhaps a negative perception of self, in their respective learning environments. They were told that their purpose was to answer the following questions in relation to women's experiences in the high school or college classroom: How does male-dominated language affect women's self-perception? Do women translate their thoughts into male terms in order to communicate effectively—or are they more likely to remain silent?

In order to measure each participants' experience with instructors of the same and opposite sex, they were first asked:

**Are most of your instructors male or female? Please provide an exact number, if possible.**

None of the high school students had a majority of male teachers. Six mentioned an even split between male and female teachers throughout their four years in high school. Half of the college students had taken classes primarily with male professors, as opposed to two who primarily had classes with female teachers.

### Comfort Level in the Classroom

Questions involving participants' comfort level in the classroom were asked in order to assess general feelings of welcome-ness and value in their respective learning space.

Understanding these answers provided insight toward the participants' comfort level in engaging in classroom discussion. Early in the interview, participants were asked:



**What has an instructor done to make your opinion feel welcome in a classroom setting? Unwelcome?**

Nine college participants spoke specifically of having their participation engaged with by an instructor. Participant B stated:

“I really like it when professors encourage you to talk...I feel like questions just help you grow as a learner, so when the teacher is encouraging questions and encouraging you to think about what they are actually saying and not just write it down I think I pay way more attention...”-

Participant B

“All of my professors, even if I’m completely off base, will kind of affirm at least one part of the sentiment I say...just like eye contact and acknowledging what I say and...asking me to expand and other things like that [make me feel welcome].” -Participant H

“[They] engage with what I say rather than just hearing what I say and moving on.”

-Participant J

In response to ways an instructor has made their opinion feel unwelcome, 17 participants noted that unwelcomeness specifically came in how they were spoken to.

“...anytime you had a question they [teachers] would answer it in the most standoffish way...they would act like you didn’t listen or that you were stupid so no one felt like they could bring up any questions or anything.”-Participant N, high school

“...not working with the answer you gave them [makes me feel unwelcome]. They’re looking for one certain thing from you and they’re not happy when you don’t give that to them, and they just

kind of shut you down and basically demean you a little bit and make you feel like because you got the answer wrong, you also did something bad.” -Participant A, college

“In general, you just have those teachers that make you feel stupid, especially if you do ask a question. When you have a teacher who is like, ‘oh that is a dumb question’...even if they are jokingly doing it I feel like they sometimes think it is fun to joke, but...that was a real question. I feel like that comes more from male teachers.” -Participant T, high school

“...when an instructor kind of does away with your opinion and kind of is just like, “It doesn’t matter.” Obviously in some situations they’re gonna say you’re wrong, but other times when it can be a discussion topic it can be unwelcoming. And a lot of times when they make fun of you or make a joke out of it the whole class laughs, and obviously you can laugh along, but it’s kind of like, “oh, ok. I guess I’ll be a little more quiet.” –Participant S, high school

One high school participant, K, specifically mentioned that she never felt her opinion was welcome in the classroom, stating:

“I usually just stick to the facts instead of opinions...I just feel like sometimes when I do come out with my opinion it is always questioned by my teachers and peers. In AP Government, you often have to come out with your opinions and I would often hold back and let the other kids...say more than myself.”

K was then asked:

**By not expressing your opinion, are you hindering your academic ability?**

(1) K: “Sometimes, because I do feel like sometimes I have a hard time talking in front of classes now. When I was in elementary and middle school I was always the one who would present and now I don’t like it as much because I feel like I am being questioned.”

At a later point in the interview, participants were asked to describe how comfortable they felt in the classroom. While the college participants were asked this question from a more general standpoint, high school participants were asked to describe their comfort levels as they differed in STEM versus humanities classrooms. Nine of the high school participants mentioned being uncomfortable in STEM classrooms. None of them mentioned feeling uncomfortable in a humanities classroom. The reasons for discomfort varied. Eight expressed that their discomfort came from not understanding the content well enough.

“I’ve never liked science at all. I think part of it is because he was a bad teacher. I feel more comfortable in math class, but I just don’t understand science that well.” Participant Q, high school

“I am not good at math or science, they are my worst, so when I am in the classes that are STEM-oriented I definitely struggle.” -Participant P, high school

Participant R, a high schooler, described her lack of comfort in the STEM classroom as being related to a lack of interest in the subject brought on by inadequate instructor pedagogy:

“For me personally it’s the content. I’m not interested in it, but sometimes I feel like I didn’t get the chance to be interested in it just because of the way it’s taught sometimes. I feel like STEM teachers in particular teach you the material as if you already know it.”

Earlier on when answering this question, R mentioned that a majority of her STEM teachers have been male.

To build off this question, participants were asked:

**What type of classroom environment supports your learning? Doesn't support?**

The high school subjects focused on environments that provided an open space for discussion and participation, with eight of them providing answers conducive to this. Seven college students also mentioned discussion and the desire they had to be in a space that provided a better environment for this. Classroom set-up, pedagogical style, lighting, and classroom size were all factors mentioned in creating a space which supported more discussion.

“I feel like it [smaller classes] makes it a more comfortable, less formal setting...I've been in lecture hall classes and those are fine but I feel like I could've learned the material better if I would've been in a smaller class. I guess I just like being able to form a connection with the professor...I think it's just that I like less people and I like smaller groups.” -Participant G, college

“Lots of natural light, which doesn't happen often in the (major) building. Small group working tables that aren't rows, I like mix-matched tables. The type of classroom in which the professor walks around and isn't preaching to us at the front of the board, or maybe sits at our same level.” -Participant C, college

“I really like smaller classrooms. I think you can interact more with people and get to know them as the semester goes on. I think you get a better relationship with the professor if they're with everyone and not so far away.” -Participant B, college

“Smaller classes...teachers that walk around when they're talking. I don't like teachers that just stand in front of the board, I think that makes more comfortable when it feels like they're

walking around. And I think that teachers that don't just lecture, teachers that do activities and get everybody involved and that kind of stuff [support my learning]". -Participant L, high school

"I would say for me I enjoy more read then discuss or watch then discuss. I like to discuss the things that we've learned." –Participant K, high school

In response to the second part of the question regarding environments that were unsupportive of their learning, the responses of college participants varied greatly. Once again, classroom setup, pedagogy, and classroom size were mentioned; however, no distinct patterns were found. On the other hand, a majority (8) of the high school students discussed environments in which they felt the teacher was not working to engage them in any way. This came in the form of only relying on notetaking, lecture, and/or feeling as though there is no room for questions.

Participant O, a high school student, discussed the concept of what she described earlier in the interview as a "laid back teacher," and how it hinders her learning. She described the laid-back teacher earlier on as one who teaches from their desk, doesn't care if students are paying attention, and have a general lack of care or concern for what occurs during test taking. Her answer to this question alluded to the laid-back teacher once again:

"I don't think I typically learn as well in a quiet class where you just take notes. I wouldn't be into it as much or like comprehend it as well. Just based off the way I understand material I like to talk about it more."

O was then asked:

**Is this synonymous with the laid-back teacher?**

“Yeah because with Mr. \_\_\_ you would take notes at home and he would just sit at his desk. It was definitely a more quiet classroom so I think that’s why I didn’t understand it as well as [like] English or social studies or something like that.”

Participant P, a high school student, described a similar type of instructor, using the phrase “relaxed teacher” when replying to the question regarding the type of environment that does not support her learning:

“...anything hands on or where the teacher is pretty relaxed. I want the teacher to come to me and say, ‘How do you understand the material? How are you doing?’ That is why I liked my history teacher...and lit class and not so much math because my teacher would just sit back and you’d have to prompt him and poke the bear constantly and say ‘can you please give me instruction on this.’”

P was then asked:

### **How would you describe a relaxed teacher?**

“I guess at their desk on the computer looking very reserved...it’s one of those unwritten rules that when the teacher is on their computer or writing that you don’t come bother them, so that’s what a lot of my teachers were doing and it would make me feel unwelcome or uncomfortable in the classroom...”

P mentioned that she could think of three male and one female teacher who fell into this category.

### **Classroom participation**

Participants also detailed their perceived participation in the classroom; they were asked:

**How likely are you to participate in class? What is the main determinant of this?**

Eight college participants described themselves as very participatory, with six stating the main determining factor was how well they knew classroom material.

“On a scale of 1-10 I would say seven. I try to do it a lot but if I don’t know a lot about the topic I will kind of sit back and listen and try to participate, but if it’s something I feel passionately about, or if I have a lot to talk about then I’d be an eight or nine.” –Participant E, college

“It depends on the class. In my major classes I’m really likely to participate just ‘cause I’m interested in the topic...[I participate] if I have a strong opinion or know I have the correct answer.” -Participant G, college

In contrast to this, a majority of high school participants were unable to articulate their participation in concrete terms (ie: very likely, unlikely, fairly likely to participate). They focused heavily on the factors determining their participation, implying their participation in classes was more dependent on external factors than their own personal perceived intellect. Seven high school participants described content and peers as the primary factors influencing their participation, and five stated teachers to be the main factor.

“I feel like I’ve started to wane off of that [participation] as I’ve gotten older. Even though I feel like I know more and am more confident in my abilities, I feel like I haven’t participated as much...It might just be the people I’m surrounded with. I think back when I was younger I wasn’t as worried as much about what people thought I could do, because I was really proud of it, and I still am very proud of it...I feel like people get annoyed of it when I do well, even if I say I struggled getting there. I just feel like it hurts me more than it helps me to participate because people lash back.” -Participant M, high school

“It depends on the course material. In history and English and science I participate quite a lot. I never participate in math...in math it’s like if you get it wrong you get it wrong.” -Participant K, high school

However, it is important to note that knowledge of content was important to the students because of their desire to not appear unintelligent in front of their peers. Therefore, high school participants’ likelihood to participate became heavily dependent on how they believed others would perceive them if they spoke. The response to this question by Participant R depicted the contradictory nature of the high school subjects’ answers.

“In history classes I am the main participator. I am probably that annoying student that is like told ‘we don’t need you to answer any question.’ But in science I rarely answer.”

Participant R expanded on this notion of being told she did not need to answer any more questions by recounting an instance in which a teacher told her to stop answering questions in order to allow other students a chance to speak:

“I was answering the questions because I did know and because I was passionate about the subject and I wanted more out of the class. But I was really worried after he said that to me. After that I would downplay...I wouldn’t answer the question right away...I was just so interested in the class but I was getting the impression that other people thought I wanted to show off so I tried not to do that.”

Towards the middle of the interview, participants were asked to describe themselves as either a quiet or a loud student. Seven of the college participants described themselves as loud students, as opposed to four high school participants. The responses of the high school students appeared



to be highly dependent on the classroom space they were in, as eight of them mentioned they may be described as quiet by certain teachers or peers depending on the class.

To build off these responses, they were also asked:

**What qualities make a student quiet or loud? Is there one you would prefer to be over another?**

In total, nine of the participants described quiet students in a negative way. Listed below are some of the negative words and phrases which articulated this viewpoint:

- Unwilling to volunteer
- Does not advocate for herself
- Observes, sits back
- Does not know the material
- Unprepared
- Disinterested
- Cautious
- Uncomfortable

On the other hand, only three participants implied that loudness is a negative trait. An overwhelming majority provided positive words and phrases to describe the loud students, such as:

- Participatory
- Comfortable with teachers and peers
- Confident

- Prepared
- Collaborative
- Willing to ask questions
- Leader
- What they have to say matters

Seventeen participants responding to the second part of the question indicated that they would prefer to be the loud student. Participant A, a college student described her role as a loud student as one that was necessary for her own academic progress.

“I would prefer to be the loud student not necessarily because it is what I enjoy doing, it’s just that I have been in school long enough that I know the ways I stay engaged...I know that sometimes speaking out and saying things does put you up for the whole class seeing you as being completely wrong, but that’s how I pay attention...because if I’m uncomfortable then I’m in it.”

Other participants also expanded on the reasons why they would prefer to be a loud student.

“[I would prefer to be] loud but it kind of comes with a negative connotation...I just think if you’re the loud student there’s two types there’s a class clown and there’s the one who is always answering and is the teacher’s pet try-hard.” -Participant I, College

“Loud I think because like I said that’s how I learn best and if people in my class get annoyed with me so what? I’ll see ya next semester. At the end of the day, I just need to learn the information in however best I do that.” -Participant J, college

This concept of being perceived as annoying was discussed in four total answers given by the college participants. However, not one single high school participant discussed a fear of being too loud and consequently viewed as annoying. Rather, their responses focused more on the benefits they found of in being a loud student.

“I think [I would prefer] loud because I think it’s important and it’s the best I way to learn from a teacher rather than just listening to what they’re saying.” -Participant L, high school

“I would probably prefer to be a loud student because I feel like I learn more in that position and get more out of the experience.” -Participant S, high school

Participants’ perception of gendered participation was assessed through the question:

**Do you feel there is a difference in the way your instructor responds to male participation as opposed to female participation?**

Sixteen participants overall believed that there were different instructor responses to students depending on their gender. All six of the college students that believed there was a difference stated they felt male students were favored more in the classroom. Participant E, a college student, recounted the ways in which the single male student in her class is treated for his participation:

“There’s only one [male] and when he participates teachers are like, ‘Oh my gosh thank you so much for your input thank you for sharing.’ It’s almost like because they can answer a question or because they’ve decided to share what they think about a question they need to be constantly validated.”

Other college students also provided similar explanations regarding the ways in which men received greater praise or favoritism in the classroom space:

“I definitely think male opinions are valued more, especially in classes where there are not a lot of men like think as a way to get more men into (major), men are criticized less for their opinions and are invited to speak more and given more of a platform.” -Participant D

“I think definitely... a pattern that I noticed is that the boys in my class don't like to participate so anytime they do or say anything insightful or like contribute to the class the professor will always be so excited or do anything they can to affirm what they said or back them up.” -

Participant H

The college participants did not specifically address how female participation was responded to in the classroom space. This was contrary to the high school participants, who talked about the response teachers had to both male and female participation. Through their answers, nine high school participants mentioned male students being favored more in the classroom.

Of these nine students, three also mentioned female students being favored. However, female students, they claimed, were only being favored by female teachers. Participant M discussed the ways in which she felt her male peers were addressed by teachers:

“I feel like a lot of times they [teachers] expect a lot less of male students and they reward them so much more when they achieve things. They're pretty outward about that. Not necessarily like 'I expect this of girls, I expect this of boys,' but when they individually talk to them or address them in front of the class they expect so much less.”

In the later portion of the interview, participants were asked:

**Would you rather respond to a question and be incorrect, or keep the response to yourself? Would this change if you were fairly certain you were correct?**

Despite the notion that 19 of the participants mentioned at some point in the interview that they learned best through discussion, eighteen claimed they would prefer to keep the response to themselves. Of these 18, 15 cited the reason for their lack of response as fearing what others would think of them or say to them when getting the answer incorrect.

“I don’t want people to think I’m dumb and I don’t want to feel shame like I think I feel a lot of shame when I’m corrected...I fear students thinking I’m annoying...I know that I talk a lot and I know that I try really hard and I think that bothers people.” – Participant D, college

“I hate more than anything being incorrect, it’s my biggest insecurity. I will literally not answer a question if I’m wrong or if I think there’s any chance of being wrong. I’ve gotten in this habit of whisper answering and then my teacher will be like, “Say it louder,” and then I’ll hate myself.” - Participant E, college

“Keep my response to myself...I don’t want my peers to think I don’t know it.” -Participant L, high school

“I would rather just keep my responses to myself because I feel more comfortable doing that I guess rather than saying it out loud and getting it wrong and having everyone be like “...oh she got it wrong,” that would be kinda weird.” -Participant P, high school

“I mean I guess that depends on the teacher and the atmosphere they create in the classroom, because some teachers...you feel like they’re not gonna degrade you or make you feel bad about yourself...but other teachers just make you feel terrible if you get the answer wrong, you feel stupid, so it just kinda depends on the teachers.” -Participant N, high school

Fear of others' opinions of them and their intelligence was a common concern amongst participants. On average, each college participant mentioned fearing others' opinions 4-5 times in each interview. The two participants who said they would prefer to get the question incorrect cited that it was because they learn best through discussing their mistakes. When comparing the interviews of these two participants, their overall self-perception was similar in the sense that they both admitted to being good students (in regard to grades), they simply felt that they were bad ones. This was reflected in later response to the questions listed below, respectively:

**How do you think you compare (academically) to your male peers?**

**What is your overall perception of your academic capability?**

“I’m not one of the smart ones. I get good grades and everything, but they [her male peers] are more well-rounded than me.”

“ I was an all ‘A’ one ‘B’ student...but I feel like sometimes I underestimate myself just because of the vibe I get from teachers...I feel like I just need to be more confident in how I do in the classroom just ‘cause I’m smarter than I think I am, but I don’t always feel that way all the time.” -O, High School

“I honestly think I assume everyone has better grades than me...I think I’m just a bad student but I know I’m not, I do get good grades. I just feel like they [male peers] assume they are the smartest person in the room.”

“It’s like guys think they are really smart and girls are seen as very perfect students which is different than smart. That’s why I feel like I’m an imposter because I’m not this perfect girl.” -F, College

The responses to the second part of the question, which asked if participants would answer the question if they were “fairly certain” they were correct, found that half the participants were willing to answer in the event that they were 85 percent sure of their answer.

### **Sexism in the Classroom**

In order to assess participants’ experience with explicit incidences of sexism, early in the interview they were asked:

**How often does an instructor comment on your appearance, or the appearance of a female classmate?**

Fifteen of the 20 participants recounted instances in which this took place. All of the incidences disclosed by the high school participants involved male teachers. Participant S, a high schooler, recounted an instance in which:

“...he [male teacher] was talking and he was like “I can barely see that you’re wearing pants.” And then he said one time when I was wearing a skirt, “Why aren’t you wearing tights with that,” and things like that...So now I go to school and I’m like ‘okay I guess I’ll just wear jeans and a big T-shirt.’ The next day I always dress extra careful because of that.”

Other high school and college participants also shared experiences they had with comments based on their appearance:

“If it’s a girl [student] they usually comment on if you’re wearing a tank top and like shorts and all that, but with guys they never really say anything. The female teachers don’t really say anything but the male teachers will be like, “Is it (the strap) three fingers [wide]?” and all that

stuff. One teacher actually did it to me in front of the class which made me feel a little uncomfortable.” -Participant O, high school

“It definitely depends on the teacher. I know there is one teacher in particular that my friends and I would talk about a lot how he would be kind of pervy--just in general. The girls who are seen as more pretty or popular he would be nicer to them and just talk to them more in class and engage with them more...my friend even noticed when she would wear something to school that was showing off more he would be nicer to her on that day. If she wore a baggy T-shirt he wouldn't talk to her in class.” -Participant T, high school

Overall, high school participants told 53 stories of negative experiences with teachers. These involved various remarks such as appearance related comments, times in which they felt uncomfortable, inappropriate comments, and feelings of unwelcomeness. Of these stories, 48 involved male teachers. This was despite the fact that none of the high school students mentioned a majority of their teachers were male. A similar count was done with negative instructor experiences had amongst college seniors. Of the 48 stories they told, 36 involved male professors. Listed below are some of the instances recounted by college participants:

“I had a professor this semester...he would comment on how different girls have different styles and you can tell which ones are lazy and which ones are not, which I thought was weird because we were all pretty much wearing leggings...he said it in kind of a judgmental way and he mention it all the time like, “If there was a boy in this class it would be very different,” and we were all just very confused...he'd say that women are driven by their lizard brains and he never explained but he'd say that every class.” -Participant B, college



“This happens a lot because professional dress with my one professor is a big thing, and she says if you can’t pull your pants two inches off your leg then it’s considered too sexy...

Junior year, male professors would comment on professional dress...they would always just say to wear blouses, we had to be wearing three layers because they didn’t want to be seeing our bras...

Last week [female professor]...told me in front of the whole class that I had to go home and change because I ‘looked like a stripper.’” -Participant E, College

### **Classroom Shame and Pride**

As stated, shame was assessed as a factor in order to determine whether or not it was resulting in a silencing of women in the classroom. Participants were asked:

#### **Recount an instance of a time you felt shame while in class.**

In total, participants shared 23 stories of times they had experienced shame. It was found that shame was experienced both internally and externally by participants. In other words, shame came from instances in which participants were made to feel shameful by another individual, as well as shame from their own personal judgment of themselves that did not stem from any concrete action or remark from someone else. Ten of the 23 stories involved external shame, in contrast to 13 stories regarding internal shame. The stark contrast between the two experiences of internal and external shame is depicted in the following quotes, respectively:

#### **Internal Shame:**

“I feel like almost every class I feel shame in ‘cause a lot of classes are about society and what we are doing wrong. Second semester junior year (class) talked about beauty norms and the

professor was talking about how adhering to those norms harm other women...and I understand that but it's so hard because you want to belong, you want to be a person. That was one class where I felt super shameful." -Participant H, college

"I can think of times I feel like I said the wrong things. More socially than academically...like I made a fool of myself in front of a friend or teacher. I do it a lot when I talk to people, I don't really know why. There was a time when I was talking to a classmate and I was just like "I feel so stupid right now.' I was just stuttering, and it was just horrendous."

-P, High School

### **External Shame**

"I felt shamed by my peer who shamed me for speaking about what I believe in ...I believe in everyone being equal and I'm all for gay rights, and that's what we were talking about and he said I wasn't a good Catholic student...and I'm not religious and I've never had to say that I'm not religious, but then he shamed me for not being a good Catholic. The whole class got very uncomfortable...and like you see everyone else and they are religious and it's like, are other people thinking that?"

-B, College

"Probably in my pre calc class just 'cause I struggled with it a lot. We would do these two question quizzes, you'd be at your seat and you'd just turn it in and he would be standing at the front of the room and you'd hand it in and he would just shake his head and you would be like, "Oh my gosh everyone knows I did something wrong and it [my quiz] wasn't right. It made me feel stupid in a way because if I didn't get it everyone would know that I wasn't great at it." -

Participant O, high school

In contrast to this, participants were also asked:

**Recount an instance of a time you felt pride or confidence while in the classroom.**

A similar pattern was found, in which stories either reflected internal or external experiences of pride. However, in this case, 15 of the 22 stories shared by the participants involved external experiences of pride. The comparison between the internal and external experiences of pride is depicted below, respectively:

**Internal**

“Probably in English class. They usually tell kids to write a rough draft and revise a rough draft and write another draft... There was a time that I wrote a rough draft the night before and turned it in and got an ‘A.’ And I don’t wanna say that’s a theme, but it kinda happens a lot.”

- N, High school

**External**

“In theatre when I got the role of (character name) that made me feel like I was good [at acting], and when teachers say you got one hundred percent in front of the class [I feel proud].” -

Participant Q, high school

“I like if I have a different way of seeing a poem and I get the courage to put myself out there and raise my hand, and my professor says ‘I never thought of it that way.’ I think that’s totally flattering.”

- I, College

**Self- Perception of Academic Ability**

In order to assess the participants' self-perception in greater depth they were asked questions that sought to reveal how they perceived themselves in relation to others, as well as how they believed others perceived them (metaperceptions). They were first asked:

**How do you compare (academically) to your male peers? To your female peers?**

The participants often provided multiple opinions in their response (i.e.: equal to or smarter than male peers). In total, twenty-four different answers were given. Thirteen participants overall believed they were, in some way, better students than their male peers. However, only three of these 13 stated that they were better than male students without any exception. All three of these participants felt the need to preface or follow their statements with similar phrases, as seen below:

“I think I far exceed their academic capabilities and that sounds horrible, but I think I do.”

-E, College

“I feel like it's cocky to say above them, but definitely above the majority of males.”

-N, High school

“...not to sound brag-y, but I am near the top of the class.”

-T, High School

Seven of the participants mentioned at some point that they were equal to their male peers academically, while four believed they performed worse than their male peers.

Of the 20 answers provided regarding their academic abilities in comparison to their female peers, 13 participants expressed the belief that they were equal to their female peers. Four

participants responded that they believed they performed better than other females. All four were high schoolers. Three participants believed they were worse students than their female peers.

Participants were asked to address their male peers specifically toward the end of the interview and were asked the question:

**In what ways do you think you have advantages over your male peers in class? In what ways do you think they have an advantage over you?**

Two of the respondents felt they did not have any advantages over their male peers. Thirteen participants discussed advantages relating specifically to female stereotypes, such as being seen as weaker, more emotional, or more compassionate in the classroom. Participant A, a college student, spoke of the ways in which she believes she has used her femininity to her advantage throughout her academic career:

“...the classes I need the most help in are my science classes, which tend to have mostly male teachers and they tend to be older and have stricter ideas about gender. I definitely have appeared to them in office hours very feeble and very helpless, and I think that because I’m a woman I can garner their sympathy...and I feel like a guy wouldn’t have garnered that kind of sympathy and compassion that I could...while I do feel all those things, being able to play up on all those things touches a certain part of them (male professors) that I couldn’t get as a male.”

Other high school and college participants also described the ways in which stereotypical feminine traits provided advantages over their male peers in the classroom:

“I don’t feel any pressure to not make an emotional plea about something...I’m never worried about seeming too masculine in the way a male classmate will worry about seeming too feminine.” -Participant J, college

“I am more emotional and I can read people way better than my male peers.” -Participant C, college

“[I have an advantage when] giving information on more liberal topics because most people at Fenton are white and male, so I feel like I have an advantage with being female. So like if they give a presentation on diversity it doesn’t feel as serious as if I gave it...because if we talk about women’s rights it seems better coming from a woman than a man.” – Participant K, high school

“We are seen as being weaker so they [teachers] feel like they need to give you extra support and sometimes that’s really nice...I do feel like us girls get more attention because teachers feel like we have more feelings so they do think twice before saying things to us.” -Participant R, high school.

When responding to the second part of the question which asked the advantages male students have over them, six college students talked specifically about the male voice and the advantages male students have in speaking situations.

“They [men] go in either being neutral or valued so they don’t have to prove what people already assume about them--which is that they are confident and their opinions are good. And often when men make critiques they’re being smart and when women make critiques they are being sensitive, and I would love if I could say things that I know are smart and right without people thinking I’m being sensitive.”

-D, College Student

Seven high school participants discussed male students being favored more by teachers. This ranged from males receiving more opportunities in class, being taken more seriously by teachers,

or having more excuses made for them. Participant N described how she witnesses this both in school and in everyday life:

“Definitely demographically...you know what I mean...they have more excuses. People make excuses for them more. Where girls are expected to do better grade wise, boys’ grades are like ‘they get what they get.’ I don’t know, I feel like girls are expected to achieve more.”

Participant S described the ways in which her male peers receive more help from teachers:

“...when you have those quiet [male] students you see teachers making more of an effort with them to do better, whereas the quiet female counterparts tend to just get left behind in a sense.”

Participant M detailed how despite being stronger in certain classes, she is never viewed in that way because of gender stereotypes in the classroom space:

“I think a lot of people expect them to be better at a lot of the STEM things and that is hard to combat because I am not, say, “allowed” to be better than them just because of what people expect and what they know of them. There’s a few guys in my grade and everyone expects them to be on top...even though I’ve been outscoring them for years and it’s just like something I can never get over.”

Continuing with their male peers’ perception of them, participants were asked:

**Do you feel your male peers underestimate, overestimate, or have an accurate perception of your academic capabilities?**

Again, a number of participants provided more than one answer in their response. Twenty-four answers were given, with 16 participants stating that they felt underestimated by their male peers

at some point throughout their high school or college career. Participant A, a college student discussed her feelings of being discredited and undervalued in the science classroom:

“I definitely think that it’s most obvious in my lab groups, like the hard science labs. It was interesting, I noticed it in organic chemistry, I was the only girl on our team and many times they all talked amongst each other for things and sometimes I think they forgot I was there, like they literally would even start conducting things without me and I would feel like I was invisible and not there. And even when I said something it was completely ignored, but like if the guys said something it would be immediately accepted... but if I said something it had to be fact checked and it was often doubted.”

Participant T, a high school student, cited the ways her male peers doubt her answers as a form of underestimating her:

“I feel like in general they underestimate. I don’t know if that is because I’m a girl or just because I come off as not as smart until you actually see me on paper sometimes. I feel like I’ve been underestimated more than overestimated by my male peers...I have this one male friend I’m in class with and we would be studying and he’d be like ‘I don’t think that is right’ even though I know I told him how to do the problem correctly. It would be kind of underestimating me even though he asked me for the answer.”

While two participants declined from providing responses, only four participants felt their male peers had an accurate perception of their academic abilities. Four felt they were overestimated by their male peers.



“Mostly they underestimate or overestimate. Most of the time they don’t know me really well. They either expect me to get a 100 all the time, or they think the exact opposite—like I am not really what I am.” – Participant M, high school

“I would say a lot of them overestimate a lot of girls in a way depending on the subject like in English they always think girls are really good at English...but with math they definitely underestimate.” -Participant O, high school

Yet, of these four, only one felt overestimated completely. The other three participants mentioned that they were overestimated in some subjects and underestimated in others. The one participant that felt overestimated in all subjects, however, still mentioned her female peers being overestimated:

“I mean most of the people in my grade kind of know what I’m capable of so I wouldn’t say they underestimate me. If anything they kind of overestimate me because they know like kind of my academic level and what I’ve done in the past few years. But I’ve definitely seen a lot of my friends get underestimated by a lot of other people in our grade.” -Participant N, high school

The same question was asked in regard to classroom instructors:

**Do you feel that your instructor underestimates, overestimates, or has an accurate perception of your academic capabilities?**

Nine participants provided more than one answer in their response. Of these nine, six stated that they felt underestimated by their instructors, and then were able to “prove themselves” in order for the instructor to gain an accurate perception of their abilities as a student. Participant M, a high school student, was one of the six who described this in her response:

“I feel like now they have an accurate representation of what I can do, just because I feel like I’ve been proving myself for so long...because I was a freshman in a lot of upper classes I had to prove myself for a while and I think that my personality was pretty held back and I was pretty shy in the classroom...but then I felt like I had to push myself and be more vocal to show them what I could do so they wouldn’t underestimate me like they were.”

Overall, 12 participants felt underestimated at some point in their academic career. Similar to participant M, 15 participants mentioned speaking scenarios in answering this question, regardless of whether they felt underestimated. This ranged from participating in class to prove their abilities, gauging their instructors’ perception of them through the way their instructor spoke to them, or feeling like the instructor did not like them because of comments they made in the classroom. Participant H discussed her feelings of being underestimated by professors because of the comments she made in classes at the beginning of her college experience:

“Freshman year it [academic ability] was probably underestimated...whenever I would say anything in class it was definitely brushed over, and all my essays and theses were kind of dismissed...whenever I gave a thought about feminism or gender or whatever it was just kind of acknowledge but redirected in to the original conversation. I think I kind of just shut down...and I doubted my ability to read texts critically because I thought I was using the wrong critical lens than what the professor was expecting or wanted us to use...”

Participant I, a college student, felt professors had an accurate representation of her because of her interaction with them:

“I would say they have an accurate understanding...I make an effort to go to office hours and stay after class so for me, I care, and a lot of students don’t.”

The final question of the interview asked:

**What is your perception of your academic ability?**

Only three participants explicitly stated they believed they were smart. Participants who spoke positively about themselves described their abilities in relation to their work ethic, skillset, and “performance.” Participant S, a high school student, described how her conscious effort influences her overall academic performance:

“I think at times I can be very curious and I can really wanna explore something; and at times I can be lazy about things. I think if I put in the time and work hard at something then I can do well, but if I just put in the normal amount of effort I won’t. I think it’s all give and take in that performance sense. I would say I am between average and above average, I’m a little above average, but not too much.”

Other participants detailed their abilities in a similar manner:

“I think that I do well in school. I work really hard and I do all of my work...when I do get a good grade I feel really proud of myself and satisfied because I don’t slack off I actually work.”-

Participant L, high school

“I would say that in some cases to a certain extent, I do as well as I want to. I just think of some classes where there’s things I’m not willing to give up, in (class) I worked really hard but I also didn’t give up a lot of things in my life and If I had wanted to get a higher grade I bet I could’ve if I was willing to sacrifice more...I think I would be doing so much better academically if I was willing to sacrifice—which I’m not.” -Participant A, college

Twelve participants mentioned their work ethic, similarly to the participants listed above, as opposed to innate intelligence. Eleven participants gave negative responses to the answer, even if it was prefaced or followed by positive information. Participant J, a college student, described herself as intelligent, yet downplayed it by reinforcing that her intelligence was similar to everyone around her:

“I think that I’m smart in a way that everyone else is...I think I am capable in the sense that I get good grades so I don’t have to try that hard to get them, and I think if I went to a different school that could be a different story. To me it’s all relative so I don’t feel comfortable putting myself on that spectrum or put anyone on that spectrum of very, very intelligent.”

The following quotes also emphasize this notion of giving an answer that is both positive yet self-deprecating:

“I would say I’m a perfectionist...I know I’m a good student and I know I have the capabilities to be a great student, but I think my nature as a human who is incredibly high strung prevents that from reaching its potential because I think a lot of times on I’m amazing, but then you put it in the real world and it doesn’t look as great.” -Participant E, college

“I really think if I look at the facts about how I always do my homework and get good grades [I’m a good student]. I just always feel like I’m the worst student ever, like how have people not figured it out yet? I don’t know I think its just my mind playing tricks on me, but normally I think I’m a really bad student.” -Participant F, college

“I’m the classic little kid that was told I was always really good at school...like obviously now I’m not as gifted as I thought and so I feel like I need to just put more effort into school.” - Participant H, college

## Discussion

The results of this study support existing literature which emphasizes not only the existence, but also the negative implications, of patriarchal language (Selvan & Seguna, 2013). More specifically, it provides an understanding of how patriarchal language affects women in the classroom. The participants' responses regarding their lack of comfort in the classroom space primarily focused upon the way they were spoken to by their instructors. Their specific mention of feeling unwelcome because of how they were spoken to is consistent with past findings that men deny women equal status as speakers (Strodtbeck & Mann, 1956). While it was unclear whether the examples given in response to the question regarding welcome-ness were specifically related to male teachers or professors, the high number of negative anecdotes about male instructors reiterate the notion that men and women do perhaps communicate differently (Mulac, Lundell, & Bradac, 1986), and such differences can have a detrimental effect on female self-perception and perception of language in general (Kodish, 2003). Previous research which discusses the marginalizing attitude of men toward women in speaking situations (Fuchs-Epstein, 1986) could also explain why the majority of negative anecdotes recounted by participants in this study were about male instructors. Perhaps the female instructors with whom students interacted were not behaving in a manner that led them to feel unwelcome in the same way male instructors did. It is crucial to note, also, that an overwhelming amount of negative stories were told about male instructors despite only five participants having a majority of male instructors throughout their academic career. This dissatisfaction with actions, attitudes, and pedagogical style of male instructors is consistent with recent research (Carrington, Tymms, & Merrell, 2008) which asserts that a student's learning could be heavily affected by the biases of an educator of the opposite sex.

These results also align with the ideas expressed in muted group theory. One of these notions, brought forth by Dewey (2018), asserts that because men ultimately determine the acceptable modes of communication and the ways through which it is expressed, men often misunderstand women, and vice versa. This could explain why women in this study struggle with male instructors, and it could also help make sense of why women feel unwelcome in certain classroom situations. Perhaps they, as muted group theory states, feel left out of communication situations.

### **High School Students in STEM Classrooms**

A struggle with male instructors was also depicted in the high school participants' discussion of their discomfort and lack of confidence in STEM classrooms. While they primarily mentioned content as the main reason for feeling uncomfortable, it can be inferred that their lack of understanding comes from the way content is being delivered—and it was often by male instructors. This could either illustrate a discrepancy in communication styles and pedagogical preferences amongst males and females, or perhaps a perpetuation of stereotypes that women do not have a place in STEM classrooms or careers (Francis, 2002). The discomfort expressed by the participants is also concerning because it shows a strong lack of interest in STEM subjects, a field which is already dominated by men. Despite an increasing push to give women access to these spaces, it appears that the participants in this study feel they are still unwelcome and inadequate.

The participants' lack of interest and confidence in their STEM abilities also points to results found in research by Francis (2002) which concluded that adolescents still may have an innate belief that occupations are based more upon gender than actual ability. Such ideas are of a great concern, as they suggest that the gendered classroom flourishes from the time a child first

begins their education. While none of the participants explicitly mentioned sexism when detailing why they felt uncomfortable in STEM classes, the emphasis of their responses on lack of understanding content alludes to being educated in a space in which information was not being conveyed to them adequately. After all, women are not innately bad at STEM topics, but it appears that they generally lacked confidence in that area. It could be inferred that this is either a manifestation of gendered classroom ideals, or perhaps a communicative gap between students and instructors which is hindering learning progress. Participants did mention male STEM instructors in some of their response, once again suggesting that male-dominated language acts in a manner that marginalizes women in learning spaces and speaking situations (Ardener, 1975). In their general discussion of spaces which encouraged their learning, the participants frequently mentioned how discussion and one-on-one engagement with their instructor helped to foster a better academic environment and increased understanding. Perhaps the STEM spaces in this study lack room for a female voice, and do not provide the same sense of welcome created in other classrooms. This idea illustrates the capacity language has on influencing a female's perception of an academic space and her place within it. Ultimately, the STEM classrooms in this study appear to be predominately masculine spaces because of the pedagogical style and attitude created through the language deployed within them. From male-dominated instruction, male interest is stimulated, and female interest seems to be consequently silenced. The STEM classrooms in the present study serve as strong manifestations of muted group theory in everyday society. The male-dominated language used in these spaces work to keep women out by shaping the reality of that field into one that is controlled by men.

The participants' discussion of their poor performance also exemplified a form of academic shame in STEM subjects. Though most participants were not further questioned about

this shame specifically, Holodynski and Kronast (2009) believe that shame over poor academic performance represents another instance in which a student must keep silent. The participants' expression of not feeling comfortable enough to ask questions in these spaces demonstrates a cycle of failure in which a student is not performing as well as they would like to, but feel too fearful to ask for help. This ultimately leads to increased failure and lack of interest. In the instances recounted in this study, discomfort stemmed from a lack of understanding, and ultimately, from the instructor. This notion exemplifies how patriarchal language functions to masculinize a space and create a cycle in which women are repeatedly forced out of a certain field.

### **Quiet Versus Loud**

A significant portion of the study focused upon participation, especially regarding perceived “quietness” or “loudness” in the classroom. The participants' discussion of what they believed made a student quiet or loud revealed that they often described the quiet student in a negative manner. The words they used to describe quiet students were synonymous with a student who was unintelligent, lacked confidence, and ultimately, was uninterested in class discussion. Very few students described a loud student as possessing negative traits, despite mentioning at various points in the interview that certain male students were loud in a way that often did not contribute to the class. A student who was loud, according to the participants, was intelligent, confident, comfortable with others, and a leader—the exact opposite of a quiet student. It was of significant interest that the students chose to not only describe a quiet student as one who was not comfortable/confident speaking out loud, but also as one who was unintelligent. This was a concerning result in the study, especially after discussing the participants' experiences in which they felt uncomfortable and/or silenced in the classroom.



Perhaps, in the moments they fell silent, they perceived themselves as being viewed as unintelligent as well. Along with this, a majority (17) of the participants said they would rather be the loud student, yet they also mentioned the negative connotations that could come with being a negative female in the classroom. The participants discussed the delicate balance that exists between being viewed as either an engaged, participatory female or an obnoxious, annoying one. This fear of being seen as “too annoying” if they spoke too much was brought up frequently by the participants. This appears to be a manifestation of both the gendered classroom and socialization of women into being less talkative in public spaces or spaces where opinions are given. This fear was expressed through the way women spoke of being the loud student, often saying they felt uncomfortable participating too much, but knew it was necessary to succeed. This frequently expressed notion reveals that women may in fact believe that it is unacceptable for them to behave in a certain manner in the classroom space, but because it is the way they learn best, it is necessary for their own success.

### **Female Silence in the Classroom**

Regardless of whether the participants in this study were in a STEM classroom, they were more likely to remain silent when they felt shamed or unwelcome in a classroom space. This sense of shame stemmed frequently from a fear of others perceiving them as unintelligent. The results of this study aligned with previous findings which assert that female shame results in silence and withdrawal (Johnson, 2012; Norberg 2012). In establishing that they learned best through discussion, but stating that they were silent in instances in which they feared they could be perceived negatively, participants are hindering their capacity to learn and engage with classroom material. For example, the high school participants’ inability to express how frequently they participate conveys how dependent their speech in a classroom is on external

factors. They allow their anticipated reaction of peers and instructors to dictate their participation in a course, illustrating the depth that others' opinions of them plays in their overall engagement in the classroom. This concern with others' perception demonstrated the high capacity a female has in experiencing shame.

Their capacity to feel shame and hasty retreat from situations in which they anticipate shame demonstrates the ways in which a female is heavily socialized to feel shame more than their male peers (Norberg, 2012). Ultimately, shame is felt when an individual believes their identity is undesired or threatened—just as the women in this study felt their academic identity would be threatened by answering incorrectly. Norberg's discussion of shame asserts that a withdrawal from shame situations occurs when women feel exposed or anxious about exposure, consistent with the findings in this study. Norberg also mentions that this fear of being seen is intrinsically connected to feelings of inferiority, an emotion that is perhaps created by the language being used in these spaces. Many of the participants later spoke of loudness or increased classroom participation as something that was necessary to achieve success, yet something they felt uncomfortable doing. Norberg mentioned these scenarios, ones in which women must behave assertively, as another source of female shame. Feelings of shame and inferiority have the capacity to lead to female silence. The participants' discussion of their own silence and fear of being viewed as unintelligent demonstrates that they did frequently experience classroom shame, and in some scenarios, it hinders their learning.

Shame was also experienced through the explicit sexism the participants, or their female peers, faced through comments regarding their appearance. Because the body and physical vulnerability are believed to be the center of shame for women (Dolezal, 2017), the examples the participants provided in which an instructor had commented on their appearance represent

moments of shame in the classroom space. When an instructor publicly draws attention to a woman's appearance, they are placing her in a position of physical vulnerability. The stories told in this study regarding comments on physical appearance often resulted in feelings of discomfort, withdrawal, and insecurity. When prompted, some participants mentioned that such appearance-related comments were never directed towards male students. The attention given to women in the classroom about their appearance is consistent with the findings of Andrus, Jacobs, & Kuriloff (2018), which suggest that young women in schools garner more comments based on their appearance than their academic abilities. All the comments towards the high school participants came from male teachers, which demonstrates the supposed bias which exists from an instructor of the opposite sex (Carrington, Tymms, & Merrell, 2002). The college participants' discussion of appearance-related comments was different from that of the high schoolers in the sense that when the college student could not think of a story about comments made toward her appearance, she instead told a story about an instance in which she had felt threatened by an authoritative figure. This "threatened" feeling occurred when an instructor had behaved in either a sexual or deliberately sexist manner towards her or another female student. These stories were always told without the participant being prompted. In telling these unsolicited stories that were not necessarily related to a comment about their appearance, it revealed that the participants felt any instance in which their place as a female was being threatened they equated to a comment related the body or their physicality. This could again reveal the strong connection between the physical body and shame (Dolezal, 2017), as these stories were ones which resulted in shame for the women.

### **Shame Versus Pride**

Shame did not always come in the form of a comment from another individual. The results of this study revealed the self-evaluative nature of this emotion. The examples provided by the participants involved both external comments and internal feelings, and these internal feelings often resulted from the participant comparing herself to another individual, even if that individual was unaware or hardly involved with her. It also occurred when the participant felt negatively toward herself for a seemingly insignificant reason, such as arriving a couple minutes late to a class or getting an answer wrong, even though she did not answer aloud. Not only does this demonstrate Dolezal's (2017) conceptualization of shame as a self-evaluative emotion, but it also illustrates the immense pressure a female places upon herself in the classroom space. The desire to constantly be doing well in class was reflected through a majority of the participants, and demonstrates the gendered classroom once again-- as some studies suggest that high classroom achievements and work ethic are equated to femininity (Jackson, 2002).

The pressure women placed on themselves, or felt was subjected upon them, was further demonstrated through the different ways in which the participants experienced pride or confidence in the classroom setting. Despite shame occurring from internal or external experiences, the majority of the participants' experiences with pride came from external comments from educators or from positive, written comments on their work. Pride was not often experienced in small, seemingly insignificant moments in the way that shame was. With the knowledge that it requires more explicit validation for the participants to experience pride, it can be concluded that it is perhaps more difficult for a female to feel positively about herself in a classroom space than it is for her to feel negatively. The knowledge that the women in this study experienced shame regularly and from self-evaluative occurrences is concerning, as Johnson's (2012) study found that student burnout was directly correlated with shame, and indirectly

correlated with a sense of community. Therefore, the classes in which students feel the most shame and exclusion could stimulate a lack of interest in that subject.

### **Female Perception of Peers**

Though male students were not interviewed for this study, the female participants perceived their male peers as being more confident in speaking situations, and more confident in the classroom overall. The participants' remarks discussed the ways in which a male student appeared less likely to feel shame. This may have been partially due to their belief that male students are favored more, have more excuses made for them, or, as many of the college participants discussed, have more of a "voice" in certain spaces. Along with this, a majority of participants felt that their instructors responded differently, and more positively, to male participation. Participants often felt that less was expected of their male peers, yet they were praised more for speaking aloud-- even if what they were saying was not particularly noteworthy. Only three participants mentioned instructors responding more positively to female students. All three of these participants were from the high school sample, and they believed that the more positive reception to female participation only occurred when the instructor was female. These findings reveal that men are not only being given a greater advantage in the classroom space, but also have a more societal advantage as well. Just as recent research has discussed, men feel less shame in the classroom (Johnson, 2012) and perhaps more overall academic attention than women (Andrus, Jacobs, & Kuriloff, 2018).

In the responses provided by college participants, instructors' responses to female participation was never mentioned. This was in contrast to the high school participants, who mentioned the ways in which instructors responded to both male and female participation. This could reveal the extent to which men are being favored in college courses, as the college

participants did not feel the need to detail how women were being addressed in these situations. Despite mentioning that female students were typically more participatory, leaving their female peers out of this response regarding participation suggests a general lack of engagement females are receiving from their instructors. While females may be dominating participation in classes, they may not be receiving the same attention their male peers garner when participating. Another reason for male students' greater comfort as perceived by the females in this study could be advantages given to them by the patriarchal language used in classroom spaces. Because language is beneficial to men (Fuchs Epstein, 1986; Selvan & Seguna, 2013), it is ultimately creating a space of greater comfort and understanding for them, while creating a space of shame and misunderstanding for women.

Not only did participants perceive their male peers as experiencing less shame, but they also believed that their male peers underestimated their—and other female classmates'—academic abilities. They felt this was expressed in the way their male peers spoke to them in the classroom, often questioning and doubting their abilities. Many of the participants mentioned this occurring in STEM classrooms, while some believed it occurred early on in their high school or college career, and eventually dwindled as the participants “proved” themselves to their male classmates. The notion of a female proving herself as a worthy intellectual also came up in the findings related to how participants believed their instructor perceived them. In stating that they had to prove themselves, the participants articulated a more negative self-perception than they did when answering other questions throughout the interview. Not only did they express a belief that they were already perceived as being less intelligent than their male peers, they also revealed that the only instances in which they were perceived as being more intelligent was in humanities courses or instances in which their male peers simply wanted to hand off work to them.

This notion of being overestimated in subjects regarded as more feminine reveals the prevalence of the gendered classroom. In believing their male peers perceived them as less intelligent, whether upon first meeting them or consistently throughout high school/college, the idea of men being more dominant and intelligent in public spaces was manifested. Not only this, but the women's belief that they had to prove themselves through speaking and participation reiterates the importance of language in the classroom space. Despite mentioning that participation in certain classes made them uncomfortable, many of the participants felt it was necessary in order to gain respect in the classroom space. With this knowledge, and the knowledge that male students are perceived as already feeling more comfortable in the classroom space, it appears that women can have an enormous disadvantage in the classroom spaces in which they choose to remain silent.

It is crucial to note, however, that many participants in this study perceived their male peers as underestimating them, despite the females believing that they were just as intelligent, if not more intelligent than their male peers. This could be representative once again of a discrepancy between the way men and women perceive their role in a space. Whereas women view concrete evidence (high GPA, class ranking) as proof that they are better than their male peers, perhaps men rely more on stereotypes to make their assumptions. Despite evidence that women are doing better than men in the classroom (Houtte, 2004), it appears that men still view themselves as being superior and treat their female peers as such. However, after evaluating the results for this study, it could be stated that young women still feel they are not as intelligent as their male peers. This was expressed in the way the participants responded to the question which asked if they believed they were academically "better" than their male peers. The participants who believed they were better responded to this question in a highly apologetic manner. Their

response was either prefaced or followed by a statement mentioning that by expressing their superiority in relation to their male peers, they knew they could be perceived as rude or harsh (i.e., “I know this sounds rude,” or “This may sound cocky”). The low number of participants who felt they were more academically advanced than their male peers demonstrates the manifestation of social beliefs that men are superior. Most of the participants expressed that they believed they were either equal to, or above, their male peers. This was presented as a very safe answer. Their inability to provide a concrete answer once again proved the uncertainty they felt about themselves and their academic abilities. This could be a result of women feeling they were less proficient in some subjects, or it could be another example of the gendered classroom at work. The women in the study may not believe that they are *allowed* to be better, overall, than their male peers. The participants who felt they were better students than their female peers never expressed such apologies for expressing outright confidence in their abilities. This demonstrates an attitude in which the participants felt they were unable or not expected to be better than men, yet it was perfectly acceptable for them to be better than other women.

The participants’ discussion of the advantages they believed they had over their male peers also demonstrated the gendered nature of the classroom, as the majority of women felt their advantage came through stereotypical, feminine traits. In stating they believed they were seen as weaker or more emotional and could purposely behave in a way that would garner them more help in the classroom, the participants ascribed themselves to traits they have been socialized into possessing. While these notions were not necessarily negative, they demonstrate the ways in which women ascribe meaning to themselves through the patriarchal norms that have been projected upon them since their youth. Because so many of the participants felt similarly about their advantages over male peers, the significance of shared meaning as a strong factor of



cohesion in society should be considered. The responses to this question aligned with discussions of symbolic interactionism, social norms, and their influence on individual and collective action (Blumer, 1969; Perucci & Perucci, 2015). Some, not all, of the participants said they harnessed these archetypal female qualities to their advantage—explicitly revealing how the patriarchal ideals of women being weaker, more fragile, and emotional influences female behavior. Despite believing these traits can be to their own personal advantage, enacting this behavior is highly concerning. By deliberately interacting with their professors and peers in a way that conforms to the standards society has set for them, participants allow the creation and perpetuation of the dominant social order to continue, perhaps unknowingly. This is drawn from evidence brought forth by Littlejohn (1977), which states that communication is defined as “...an attempt to persuade others (and hence ourselves) to certain courses of action that we believe necessary to create a given social order, to question it, or finally, to destroy it” (p.90). Therefore, the communication that occurs in the classroom between female students, their peers, and instructors, could act as a vicious cycle in which women are disadvantaged in the classroom, appear weak in order to receive adequate help for their academics, and then consequently contribute to the continual stereotype of women being perceived as weaker by society. It is crucial to note, however, that at the core of this cycle are the patriarchal symbols such as rigid gender roles, beauty norms, and sexist rhetoric which work to create a sexist attitude in public and private spheres.

### **Female Self-Perception of Academic Abilities**

Sexism was also present in participants’ answers regarding their perception of their own academic abilities. A vast majority of the participants had a difficult time articulating how they perceived themselves in an academic space. By providing more than one answer in their

response, which typically resulted in negative self-perceptions, the women demonstrated a lack of confidence that often contradicted statements made at other points during the interview. For example, less than half of the participants expressed the belief that they were less intelligent students than their male or female peers (four believed they weren't as smart as male peers, three believed not as smart as female). Yet, despite the confidence many had in answering this question, 11 spoke negatively of their academic abilities. This contradiction could perhaps illustrate another example of women being highly socialized to behave a certain way. This could come from a fear of being seen as boastful or annoying, or simply from a desire to not be deemed deviant from the female norms demanding them to be less work and success oriented, and less threatening, than their male peers (Houtte, 2004). Along with this, a majority of the participants' answers focused upon their work ethic, and not intelligence. This aligns with ideas brought forth in attribution theory, which assert that women will attribute their success to hard work, and men attribute their success to intelligence (Siegle et al, 2010). In fact, only three total participants explicitly stated they believed they were smart. The strongly held notion of believing their success in the classroom was solely controlled by their hard work demonstrates another detrimental shared meaning amongst young women in the classroom. In believing that they were not innately intelligent, the women displayed a negative self-perception because they oftentimes expressed that they felt they could be working harder than they believed they were. This attribution of success to hard work could perhaps stem from the way women are socialized at a young age. When assessing other results in the study, such as those evaluating shame versus pride, female students in this study placed immense pressure on themselves—which could perhaps explain their focus on hard work on this classroom.

### **Limitations**

This study had numerous limitations. For example, the participants were not recruited in a systematic manner to create a diverse sample size. Major, GPA, and class ranking were not taken into account. When interviewing the high school participants, it became clear that many had high GPAs or were ranked in the top of their class. This could have had a strong influence on the results and perhaps explain why the participants appeared to place so much pressure on themselves in the classroom. The same seemed true of the college participants, who expressed in a vast majority of their interviews that they were high-performing, engaged students. Taking major into account for the college participants could have also influenced the ways in which students perceived themselves amongst their peers. For example, certain participants mentioned their classes consisted mainly of male students, whereas others said they had very few male students in their classes or major in general. This could have had an effect on the participants' overall college experience, as well as the way they responded to questions regarding their male and female peers and instructors. Recruiting participants from one university and two high schools in the same city could have also affected the students' experiences and the way they perceived their place in the classroom. The schools attended by the participants were primarily made up of white, middle class individuals, which added to the lack of diversity in the sample. Having a sample size which consists of different schools from different parts of the country could have an influence on the experiences of the women. Along with this, all the participants were white. Including race as a factor in the study could lead to different findings as well.

The face-to-face interview process is another limitation for the project. Depending on the comfort level of participants in the presence of the researcher, their ability to articulate their answers may have been hindered. Because of the open-ended nature of the questions, the data rested upon the participants' ability to recount stories to the best of their memory as well as

convey them in the most effective manner possible. Therefore, some points of interest could have been left out in the data if a participant was unable to recall or adequately explain certain response at the time of the interviews. The amount of information disclosed was entirely up to the participant as well. In a face-to face scenario, it could perhaps be more difficult for some of the individuals to discuss highly personal information even with the promise of anonymity. Conducting interviews as opposed to mass survey sampling also hindered the number of participants partaking in the study, which made the data highly limited in the sense that it did not look at many individuals' experiences.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Studies in the future which build off this research could ask the same questions to men. Doing so could assess the ways in which men perceive themselves in a space and contrast it with the ways in which women see them, and vice versa. Along with this, looking specifically at either high school or college students could add more focus to the results. Because the responses surrounding experiences in the STEM classroom proved to be a high point of interest, this study could also be conducted with only STEM majors (college) or ask questions solely about experiences in STEM classrooms (high school). Conducting the study in this manner could help gain more insight into the reasons why women are still not entering STEM fields at the same rate as men. On the other hand, the study could be conducted using another large sample of students in the humanities, and a comparison could be made to analyze the differences in experience and how it is influenced by content, instructor, and peers. In future research, diversifying the sample size would also be immensely important, as this particular sample did not take race into account in the literature or sample itself.

Along with this, observational research could take place in the classroom spaces both in college and high school to observe the classroom rhetoric and pedagogical styles. This could evaluate the differences in gendered participation, communicative classroom style, as well as the nature of the gendered classroom. Studying the topics in this way would allow for a further exploration of the points of interest brought up in interviews throughout this study. A longitudinal study could evaluate the high school participants' self-perception in the classroom over time, especially as they enter the college classroom. Conducting such a study would assist in observing whether a female's self-perception is built up in a positive manner in the college classroom. Future longitudinal research could also look at these topics from the time a child begins school until the time they graduate. Since many participants discussed the ways in which their classroom comfort declined with age, a longitudinal study beginning when females are in elementary school could evaluate the ways in which females are socialized to behave a certain way in the classroom throughout their academic careers.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Though limited, this study provides a better understanding of how language and the communication which shapes a female's identity has a strong influence on her academic experiences. It also reveals the ways in which patriarchal language continues to subordinate women in public speaking situations, at times limiting their opportunity for individual and academic growth.

Most importantly, the results of this study demonstrate the importance of speaking in the classroom space. Not only did it support the notion that verbally engaging in the classroom enhances student learning, but also that speaking places an individual in a position to be scrutinized by others. As predicted, women felt silenced in various classroom scenarios where

they feared the shame that came with feeling as though they were wrong, said the wrong thing, or said more than they felt was expected. They were more likely to remain silent in instances when they felt they might be wrong, judged for their remarks, or express an opinion which differed from the classroom majority. Despite acknowledging that engaging in discussion helped them learn, the women in this study were quick to retreat in situations when they feared the shame that accompanied being wrong.

The participants' discussion of their male peers also reiterated the silence women felt forced into while in the classroom space. Perceiving their male peers as more confident, accepted speakers suggested that the participants viewed themselves as less confident and less accepted speakers. This idea is commonly expressed in discussions of gendered differences in communication (Berryman & Wilcox, 1980; Kramer, 1977; Mulac, Lundell, & Bradac, 1986), and its manifestation in this study demonstrates the continued prevalence of gendered classroom spaces. The existence of the gendered classroom and the patriarchal language that often operates within it was demonstrated through the many ways in which women felt most marginalized by their male peers and instructors. The participants' perception of their strengths as being stereotypical feminine traits, their weaknesses in STEM subjects, and their attribution of their success to hard work and not intelligence all demonstrate archetypal femininity manifesting in the classroom space. These patterns could reveal the ways in which socialization through language and symbols comes to influence a woman's perception of herself. It is through patriarchal ideals that these language and symbols are created, and their prevalence in the classrooms discussed in this study reveal the power language has in influencing female self-perception in an academic space.

Because an individual spends their most crucial, developmental years in school, it is important that classroom spaces are ones of inclusion and comfort. While it is nearly impossible for every student to feel completely at ease in a classroom space, the language, pedagogical style, and overall classroom tone can help to provide a sense of openness to individuals of all genders. In the classroom itself, this calls for a shift in language by the primary authority figure. However, this shift cannot take place without an overall change in societal values and beliefs about gender. These beliefs are the primary contributing factors to the socialization of individuals and help to perpetuate patriarchal order in society. Though limited, the results of this study bring attention to a necessary and pressing shift in language and communicative styles in private and public speaking spaces. Without this, a silencing of women will continue to enact its detrimental cycle of forcing females out of speaking situations.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

Are most of your instructors male or female? Please provide an exact number.

How does your instructor typically address the class?

How often does your classroom instructor comment on your, or a female classmate's, appearance?

What has an instructor done to make you opinion feel welcome in a classroom setting?

Unwelcome?

Do you feel there is a difference in the way your instructor responds to male participation as opposed to female participation?

Do you feel that your instructor underestimates, overestimates, or has an accurate perception of your academic capabilities?

Describe how comfortable you feel in a STEM classroom? A humanities classroom?

How likely are you to participate in class? What is the main determinant of this?

Describe how classroom participation typically "looks" in an average class you attend.

Would you describe yourself as a quiet or loud student? Where do most of your female classmates fall on this? Male classmates?

What qualities make a student quiet or loud? Is there one you would prefer to be over another?

Would you rather respond to a question and be incorrect or keep your response to yourself?

Would this change if you were fairly certain you were correct?



What type of classroom environment supports your learning? Doesn't support your learning?

Could you say you have experienced both of these environments?

What three *positive* words would you use to describe your academic experience in [high school, college]? Explain.

What three *negative* words would you use to describe your academic experience in [high school, college]?

Recount an instance in which you felt anxious while in class.

Recount an instance in which you felt shame while in class.

Recount an instance in which you felt pride or confidence while in class.

In what ways do you think you have advantages over your male peers in class? In what ways do you think they have an advantage over you?

What careers (college students) or majors (high school students) do you foresee many of your female peers heading into after graduation? Why? What about your male classmates?

Do you feel your male peers underestimates, overestimates, or have an accurate perception of your academic capabilities?

How do you think you compare (academically) to your male peers? Female peers?

What is your perception of your academic capability?