If 'we' can succeed, 'I' can too: Identity-based motivation and gender in the classroom

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ABSTRACT

Gender matters in the classroom, but not in the way people may assume; girls are outperforming boys. Identity-based motivation (IBM) theory explains why: People prefer to act in ways that feel in-line with important social identities such as gender. If a behavior feels identity-congruent, difficulty is interpreted as meaning that the behavior is important, not impossible, but what feels identity-congruent is context-dependent. IBM implies that boys (and girls) scan the classroom for clues about how to be male (or female); school effort will feel worthwhile if successful engagement with school feels gender-congruent, not otherwise. A between-subjects experimental design tested this prediction, manipulating whether gender and success felt congruent, incongruent, or not linked (control). Students in the success is gender-congruent condition described more school-focused possible identities, rated their likely future academic and occupational success higher, and tried harder on an academic task (this latter effect was significant only for boys).

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1. Introduction

"I think girls work harder than boys. Maybe not doing your work is a sign of being cool." (Male middle school student, Portland Press Herald, 2006)

"Girls are a lot more organized. Every homework I remember to do is because it's still in my head. In contrast, 90 percent of the girls have the neat handwriting, the notebook, the color-tabbed notes." (Male high school student, Portland Press Herald, 2006)

The boys quoted in the Portland Press Herald (2006) experience school as gendered. The first boy identifies working hard in school as a girl thing, something not cool for boys. The second boy identifies organization as a skill girls have and boys simply do not have. If working hard is not cool for boys and being organized seems just not possible for boys, then whenever their gender is salient, male students do not need to seriously weigh the pros and cons of choices such as studying vs. goofing off. Instead, they know they are boys, and this identity directs their choices. In that sense, their choices feel identity-based and identity-congruent but are likely to produce negative academic consequences for them as well as for other boys who identify school as gendered.

Indeed, nationwide girls seem to rule the classroom, outperforming boys on virtually all visible indicators of classroom success, particularly among low income and minority populations (EPE Research Center, 2007; Roderick, 2003). Girls participate more in academic clubs, student government, and school newspapers (Bae, Choy, Geddes, Sable, & Snyder, 2000), select harder courses (King, 2006), earn better grades (Peter & Horn, 2005), and equal (math) or outperform (language arts) boys on standardized tests (CEP, 2007). Girls finish high school (EPE Research Center, 2007) and go on to college (King, 2006) at higher rates than boys. We use an identity-based motivation perspective to consider the implications of this experience for children's identities and effort in school. We make two core predictions: first, that both boys and girls are sensitive to gendered cues about who is likely to succeed in school; and second, that this sensitivity influences both the content of children's identities and their willingness to work hard at academic tasks. With regard to identity content, experiencing one's own gender as successful means that academics are more likely to be salient in one's own imagined possible future identity. Similarly, with regard to current investment in school tasks, experiencing one's own gender as successful means that one should be willing to persist even if a task feels difficult. With regard to expectations for adult success, experiencing one's own gender as successful implies that one should expect success in adult career and educational endeavors as well.

The idea that current success matters for future identity construction was described in early writings by Erikson (1963). During

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adolescent identity development, youth seek clues in their present situations about the adult they may become. Both one's own current successes and the successes of people like oneself are useful in predicting who one may become: one's future adult identity. Erikson (1963) also emphasizes that identity development is rooted in socio-historical and cultural context. In his description of the 'Eight Ages of Man,' Erikson (1963) tasks adolescents with the challenge of integrating how they view themselves with the roles available to them in this context. This requires that they fit their individual "dreams, idiosyncrasies, roles, and skills cultivated earlier with the occupational and sexual prototypes of the day" (Erikson, 1963, p. 307). From his perspective, both boys and girls are sensitive to messages about gender as they seek information about the identities currently available to members of their group. If in the current time and place, a look around the classroom leads boys and girls to the conclusion that girls are more successful, then Erikson would predict that girls would be more likely to develop success-based identities. As reviewed next, a similar argument could be made based on the gender identity literature which provides evidence that gender is part of children's self-image from an early age. These perspectives predict a gender effect with girls working harder than boys in school and girls having more school-focused possible selves or future identities than boys. However, what these perspectives neglect is that whether gender comes to mind and its consequences for behavior and identity content are not fixed. Instead, context dynamically determines whether gender is salient and shapes what identity content is linked to gender. As predicted by identity-based motivation theory, girls and boys are sensitive to subtle cues about what it means to be a boy or a girl but not to the source of these cues. In the current study, a small experimental manipulation shifts the salience of academic success in children's imagined future identities (both for the coming year and as an adult) and increases boys' current effort in school.

1.1. Gender identity

Why should gender matter? Gender is a core identity; it is established early, and there is evidence that it is consequential for both boys and girls. Boys and girls know their own gender before their second birthday (Martin & Ruble, 2009), and knowing whether one is a boy or girl influences what one prefers to do and what feedback matters. Preschoolers increase their effort on a maze task after being shown the successful maze completion of a same-gender child and decrease their effort on the task after being shown the successful maze completion of an opposite gender child (Rhodes & Brickman, 2008). Both boys and girls scan their environments for gender-connected information, constructing gender stereotypes about the traits, abilities, and behaviors of boys and girls (Bigler & Liben, 2007; Patterson & Bigler, 2007). Having learned their own gender, boys prefer behavior that is gender-typed as male, whereas girls prefer behavior that is gender-typed as female (for a review, Martin & Ruble, 2009). When asked about future occupations, boys express more interest in professions stereotyped as masculine, while girls are more interested in feminine-stereotyped professions (Liben, Bigler, & Krogh, 2001). Even in experimental situations in which novel toys are presented as preferred by boys or girls, girls report more liking of the toy that girls prefer (and boys like the toy they are told is preferred by boys) even if it is a less attractive toy (Martin, Eisenbud, & Rose, 1995).

Although gender stereotypes may become more flexible during adolescence, this does not mean that the influence of gender fades. There is some evidence that both genders remain interested in engaging in gender congruent action during adolescence (Alfieri, Ruble, & Higgins, 1996; Martin & Ruble, 2004). It is possible that

gender may become an even more salient determinant of identity and behavior during puberty. First, physical changes may make gender even more psychologically salient. Second, pubertal adolescents are rewarded for engaging in gender-congruent behavior (Eccles et al., 1983; Hannover, 2000; Hill & Lynch, 1983). Third, effects of gender identity on behavior are not necessarily consciously chosen. Consider the research on stereotype threat which documents that standardized test performance of both women and men is influenced by making gender salient (for a review, Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). As documented by Spencer, Steele, and Quinn (1999), effects are congruent with gender stereotypes about capabilities, with women showing declines in math performance if gender is subtly brought to mind. The effect of gender is completely eradicated if participants are either informed of the effect (Johns, Schmader, & Martens, 2005) or told that there are unlikely to be gender differences on the particular task being performed (Spencer et al., 1999).

While the stereotype threat literature has focused primarily on the negative effects of gender identity for women, there is some support for the notion that boys may be more influenced by gender than girls. First, what gender-congruent behavior entails may be more tightly defined for boys than for girls. Second, boys are more likely to be sanctioned for failing to pay attention to the gender relevance of behavior. Boys prefer gender-congruent behaviors at an earlier age than girls (Bauer, 1993). They face more criticism for engaging in gender-incongruent play activities (Fagot, 1985; Fagot, 1994) and show more interest in enforcing and adhering to gender norms (Leaper, 1994; Leaper & Friedman, 2007) than girls. Even parents reinforce more narrow gender roles for boys than for girls (Fagot & Hagan, 1991). More broadly, it is possible that boys are more sensitive to many types of environmental cues beyond information about gender. In support of this gender-specific sensitivity, findings from correlational studies examining the influence of parents (Bee, Mitchell, Barnard, Eyres, & Hammond, 1984; Morisset, Barnard, & Booth, 1995) and neighborhoods (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 1994; Oyserman, Johnson, & James, 2010) on child outcomes indicate increased sensitivity to environmental influence among males as compared to their female peers.

Taken together, the gender identity literature documents that gender identity is established early and that from an early age children care about what their gender implies for their own actions. Gender, gender identity, and gender-based stereotypes continue to matter as shown in the stereotype threat literature, which demonstrates that contexts that make gender salient can influence outcomes outside of one's awareness. While the gender identity literature focuses on the stability of identity content, we now turn to the identity-based motivation literature which focuses on the dynamic and situated nature of identity.

1.2. Identity-based motivation

Identity-based motivation theory (IBM) assumes that the self-concept is multifaceted, including many diverse and not well integrated identity-components whose content is dynamically constructed in context (Oyserman, 2007; Oyserman, 2009a, 2009b; Oyserman, Fryberg, & Yoder, 2007). People prefer identity-congruent to identity-incongruent behaviors. Furthermore, people are more likely to use identity-congruent than identity-incongruent lenses to interpret their social and physical world. IBM specifies this underlying motivational process with three core postulates that can be termed *action-readiness*, *dynamic construction*, and *interpretation of difficulty* (Oyserman, 2009a; Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Action-readiness refers to the prediction that identities cue readiness to act and to make sense of the world in terms of the norms, values, and behaviors relevant to the identity. However, which actions are relevant and what sense to make of