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## An Avenue for Challenging Sexism: Examining the High School Sociology Classroom

In this interpretative qualitative study, the researchers investigated the beliefs and practices of six high school sociology teachers in relation to the teaching of gender. Using a feminist lens, this study employed mixed methods, analyzing teacher interviews, observations, and classroom artifacts. The results showed that the teachers viewed sociology as different from other social studies courses, because it serves as a more intentional way to reduce sexism and gender stratification. As such, the teachers saw the sociology classroom as a place for students to grapple with issues of gender stratification and inequity. Teachers' beliefs related to gender and sexism strongly influenced what they saw as the purpose of sociology class, and it influenced the instructional practices that they used. Recommendations are made related to professional development around issues of gender equity.

### Keywords:

Gender inequity, sociology, sexism, feminism, teacher beliefs, instructional practices

attitudes towards women (sexism) at the end of the course than comparable controls, and significantly lower than their own sexism levels at the beginning of the semester. (p. 620)

### 1 Introduction

Gender inequity continues to be a prevalent problem in the United States. While women have made some gains both socially and economically, in the 21st century, inequity persists both in the workforce and at home. In the United States today, women earn 77 cents on the dollar compared to men, and the wage gap has barely narrowed since the mid-1990s (Hegewisch, Liepmann, Hayes, & Hartmann, 2012). While women are advancing in undergraduate college attendance, this has not translated into high status positions in business, law, science, and government. Women make up 60% of U.S. college graduates, yet only twelve Fortune 500 companies had women CEOs, and women held only 20 of 100 Senate seats and 84 of 435 House of Representatives seats in the U.S. Congress. It is widely argued that institutional sexism is an explanation for these gender inequalities (Fisher, 2013).

Learning about gender and conducting courses from a feminist lens might help to bring awareness about gender inequity and, in some cases, reduce sexism. In their study on college coursework and student attitudes, Jones and Jacklin (1988) found that

students enrolled in an introductory course in Women's and Men's studies scored significantly lower in sexist

The researchers concluded that there is "strong evidence that the experience of a Gender Studies course leads to a reduction of sexist attitudes towards women" (p. 620). Pettijohn, Terry, and Walzer (2008) found that students in a course on prejudice showed a significant reduction in racist, sexist, and homophobic attitudes; specifically, the students showed 68.8% reduction in their modern sexism scores. Through a case study, Guiffre, Anderson, and Bird (2008) specifically examined the teaching of the wage gap to sociology students. While the students felt depressed after learning about gender disparities, they also were able to think critically about inequality, specifically in the work place. These studies show that sociology course work and course work that deals directly with gender discrimination might be vehicles to raise awareness and reduce prejudice.

While coursework can help play a role in reducing sexism, there is also evidence that women are often underrepresented in the curriculum and textbooks (Avery & Simmons, 2001; Commeyras, 1996; Feiner, 1993; Schocker & Woysner, 2013). Additionally, research on teaching gender in social studies, which includes the discipline of sociology, is relatively scant (Crocco, 2008; Noddings, 2001; Pajares, 1992; Schmeichel, 2011). By examining sociology teachers' beliefs and practices related to gender inequity, it might help provide clarity on how gender is addressed, or not addressed, in the social studies classroom. Moreover, the sociology classroom is an important space to study the phenomenon of gender inequity, because it is one of the few places where a direct examination of gender inequity is explicitly part of the curriculum. For example, many introduction-to-sociology textbooks include a chapter on gender. Furthermore, most high school sociology curricula specifically include gender as a standalone unit. Even though the sociology curriculum may be fulfilling a need addressing issues of gender, social studies teachers and educational researchers have largely neglected the subject matter of sociology (DeCesare, 2008). To fill this gap, this study examined the beliefs and practices of six high school sociology teachers in relation to the teaching of gender. The research questions posed were: (a) What

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do high school sociology teachers perceive as the purposes for their high school sociology courses? (b) What is the influence of their beliefs on their practice? and (c) How do their beliefs of gender relate to what and how they teach their sociology courses?

## 2 Theoretical framework and review of recent research

This study operates under the premise that gender bias exists in schools and women are underrepresented and misrepresented in the social studies classroom (Crocco, 2008; Noddings, 2001; Sadker & Sadker, 2010; Schmeichel, 2011). Sadker and Sadker (2010) have documented how the U.S. school system is failing young women. In particular, social studies curricula are failing to equally represent women in textbooks and in classroom discourse (Commeyras, 1996; Feiner, 1993; Schocker & Woyshner, 2013). Additionally, when women are represented they are often portrayed as being valued for stereotypical female traits, such as beauty (Commeyras, 1996). Beyond this, repeatedly, the same women are being sprinkled into the curriculum without much depth of coverage (Noddings, 2001). Feminism takes the approach that women should be valued equally to men both in school and in the curriculum.

This study used critical feminism as its theoretical lens. hooks (2000) argued that critical feminism challenges gender inequity through the following assumptions:

1. People have been socialized by family, school, peers, and media to accept sexist thinking.
2. Gender stratification occurs when gender differences give men greater power over women, transgender, and gender nonconforming people.
3. In our society a system of power patriarchy is in place based on the assumption of male supremacy.

To better understand teachers' instructional choices related to gender within the high school social studies classroom, critical feminism offers an important lens through which to examine gender inequity. This framework allows for better understanding of how schools may or may not socialize students under a system of patriarchy.

Although there is a significant amount of research from feminist scholars on how women are mistreated or underrepresented, a gap in the research exists on what schools and teachers are doing well. In her book *Toward Gender Equity in the Classroom*, Streitmatter (1994) followed eight teachers, all of whom believed deeply in gender equity, and whose beliefs translated into their practices. Her book used these teachers as models, providing concrete examples of how to create a classroom that strives for gender equity. For Streitmatter, this included calling on each gender equally, avoiding stereotypical gender roles, such as having girls play with dolls and disciplining students in equitable ways. For others, gender equity in the classroom is focused more on curriculum. For the purposes of this paper, a gender equitable social studies classroom focuses on both curriculum and classroom discourse. Classroom discourse is defined as

communication between teachers and students in classrooms. As Streitmatter argued, gender equitable discourse operates under the premise that women have been disadvantaged historically and therefore need extra resources or supports. Equitable treatment in the classroom may mean providing more opportunities to at-risk groups to equalize the playing field. Using a gender equitable approach, females (since historically disadvantaged) may need to be called on more or encouraged in different ways than males. Curriculum is generally defined as the course of studies provided by the state or school for the students. Gender equitable curriculum involves teaching about women where they have been left out. Crocco (2008) and Noddings (2001) both suggest including women much more often and in less stereotypical ways than the traditional textbook.

Several textbook analyses have shown that women are underrepresented and undervalued (Avery & Simmons, 2001; Commeyras, 1996; Feiner, 1993; Schocker & Woyshner, 2013). For example, Avery and Simmons (2001) found that women were mentioned 258 times in social studies textbooks, while men were mentioned 1,899 times. In another study, Feiner (1993) examined several economic history textbooks and found that stereotypes of women were prevalent. Women were also often left out of the discussion on income inequity and unemployment. The exclusion of women in social studies curricula presents a major problem; as young men and women learn about history and the social sciences, they subsequently learn little about women's roles within them, and this reinforces norms and conditions that underlie gender inequity.

Beyond the lack of representation of women in textbooks, the way in which women are represented in the larger history curriculum can be problematic. Recent research on gender and human rights in world history classrooms and curricula present a dismal picture of women's place in history (Crocco, 2008). Both the perspective presented and the language used in the social studies curriculum are used to reflect and maintain the dominant values of patriarchy. For example, Sanford (2002), in her work observing social studies classrooms, found that the language of social studies reflects male dominated values: "While curriculum documents do not exclusively/specifically refer to males, reference to 'government', 'political parties', 'military', and 'church' serve to exclude females as having little or no place in these structures" (p. 2). If teachers are following this exclusionary curriculum, schools may be contributing to the problem of gender inequity; however, if their curriculum is inclusive, then the opposite may be true. There is some research on how education in both psychology and women's studies can reduce sexism (Jones & Jacklin, 1988; Pettijohn et al., 2008). This study attempts to build on previous work by examining the beliefs and practices of sociology teachers to better understand if sociology teachers, and the course itself, can be a means to achieving gender equity in the classroom.

### 3 Methods and data sources

#### 3.1 Participants

The participants in this study comprised six high school social studies teachers who teach a sociology course. The first author interviewed each teacher twice (an initial interview and a follow-up interview) and observed, two or more times, each teacher's sociology classroom teaching. One teacher was not observed, because, due to personal reasons, she went on long-term leave before an observation could be done. The participants were purposely selected using maximum variation sampling. The six teachers' demographics were racially and gender diverse. The participants' teaching experience varied

from 1-10 years. The participants worked in both suburban and urban school districts. The participants also had a range of educational backgrounds in their study of sociology, with one participant holding a doctorate in sociology, several participants having taken sociology coursework in college, and one teacher who had no coursework in sociology. This study had a relatively small sample size as a result of the difficulty in finding participants who both taught sociology and were willing to partake in the study. Despite this, there was a high level of data saturation across the participants.

Table 1: Participants

Participant	Background	Prior Course Work in Sociology & Teaching experience	Views on Gender	Teaching Environment
<b>Mr. Bob Williams</b>	White male in his 40s. Teaching is his second career. He previously worked in sales.	2 classes in college in sociology. 10 years teaching experience. 8 years teaching sociology.	Describes himself as gender and colorblind. Does not see sexism as a large problem today.	Teaches at a large racially and socially diverse urban-suburban high school in MA.
<b>Ms. Liz Ram</b>	White female in her late 20s. Prior to teaching worked for the U.S. military for department of defense in Iraq as an interrogator. Worked in a male dominated field.	3 sociology classes in college. 1st year teaching.	Describes herself as a feminist. Believes sexism and gender inequalities are very prevalent in our society.	Works in a large urban-suburban district with racial and economic diversity in MA.
<b>Ms. Tina Smith</b>	White female in early 30s. Has been a career-long teacher teaching both in NC and MA.	2 sociology classes in college. 8 years teaching experience.	Describes herself as a feminist. Believes our society has a long way to go before equality between genders.	Works in a large urban district with racial and economic diversity in NC. Describes her school community as socially and politically conservative.
<b>Mr. Jay Bold</b>	White male in his late 20s. Previously worked and interned in law and banking, which he described as a male-dominated field.	Enough classes in college for a sociology minor. 4 years teaching experience.	Believes that we have advanced in some gender equality but not to the point that most of his students believe.	Works in a large urban-suburban district with racial and economic diversity in MA.
<b>Ms. Michelle Law</b>	African American woman in her late 30s. Worked in the high school she grew up at as part of the Teach for America program. She has recently left teaching, citing the excessive state testing stifling her ability to be creative in the classroom.	Had one introductory college class in sociology. Has 12 years of teaching experience. Has taught sociology for 8 years.	Believes that we have advanced in some gender equality but is concerned with the lack of equal pay and treatment of women in the workforce.	Works in a large urban district with racial and economic diversity in NC.
<b>Ms. Diane Kelley</b>	White woman in her mid-30s. Prior to teaching received her doctorate. Decided to teach high school after getting her doctorate because she wanted to have a daily impact on her students.	Ph.D. in sociology. Conducted her dissertation on the division of work between men and women in the household. Has 5 years teaching experience and 3 years teaching sociology.	Believes that gender inequality exists in society. Believes strongly in the concept of doing gender, which is that gender is a social construct in Western society.	Works in a suburban affluent district that is predominately White in MA.

#### 3.2 Context

All of the teachers in this study teach high school sociology in addition to history. High schools in the United States typically do not require sociology as a course; it is primarily an elective commonly taught in the junior or senior years (final two years of secondary schooling). Yet, sociology may serve as a valuable tool in supporting disadvantaged youth (El-Mafaalani, 2009), as well as serve as a place to challenge social problems and unravel prejudices along with civic education (Katunatic, 2009). However, even though sociology courses provide a pathway to citizenship education, sociology is

marginalized in social studies. In the last national survey of high school sociology courses in 2005, less than 40% of high schools in the United States offered a sociology course (DeCesare, 2008). This may explain why social studies teachers and academics have largely neglected the subject matter of sociology (DeCesare, 2008). Over the past two decades, there has been a discussion by the American Sociological Association around creating an advanced placement (AP) high school sociology course and test (Howery, 2002; Persell, 2001). This discussion and possible movement towards an AP curriculum has sparked controversy and interest amongst scholars.



Currently, the research on teaching high school sociology is sparse, and, in the last 20 years, there is only one known study of high school sociology teachers (DeCesare, 2007). This study attempts to fill that gap.

### 3.3 Data collection and analysis

During data collection, interviews lasted approximately one hour. Questions focused on the participant's background and beliefs on gender, the purpose of their sociology class, and the use of instructional methods in regards to teaching gender (see Appendix A). During observations, the first author took field notes and recorded the classroom dialogue for transcription. Additionally, she collected all of the teachers' lesson plans, student work, and curricular materials that dealt with gender.

During the analysis, we used the work of Erickson (1986) for guidance. Our data analysis involved making assertions within each case and then testing the assertions against the data corpus. We then engaged in a process of coding that data for each individual teacher and drawing themes from the data. In the first stage of qualitative analysis, the first author read and re-read the transcription of the interviews and created a coding scheme which was based on the research questions. The second reader engaged in a secondary coding, examining the codes and re-coding. During this process, we reworked our codes to ensure a level of inter-coder reliability. Codes were organized into two major categories: teacher beliefs about sociology and teacher beliefs about gender. The teachers were then placed into two groups: gender-focused teachers and gender-blind teachers. From there, each teacher's teaching practices in their sociology class were examined through classroom observations and collection of artifacts that related to teaching gender, such as student work, lesson plans, and curriculum maps.

## 4 Results

After an analysis of the data, three major themes emerged related to the beliefs and practices of the teachers in this study. First, the teachers' perception of gender inequity (i.e., if they were gender-focused or gender-blind) influenced both what they saw as the purpose of sociology classes and their instructional choices. Second, the teachers often ignored or found it difficult to cover women and women's issues regularly in their history classroom, while their sociology elective classes allowed for greater emphasis on gender and women's issues. Finally, the teachers found that high school sociology is a valuable course, because it was specifically designed to challenge students to reduce sexism and gender stratification.

### 4.1 Teachers' Backgrounds and perspectives

The sociology teachers' backgrounds influenced their beliefs and, subsequently, their goals for a sociology course as well as the instructional methods they chose. The teachers varied in what they thought the purposes of a high school sociology class were. These variations,

especially in how the teachers taught about gender, directly related to their own views and beliefs about gender.

#### 4.1.1 Gender-focused teachers

Gender-focused teachers were more likely to see a sociology class as a means to reduce sexism and focus more on teaching about gender roles, stereotypes, and feminism. For this study, we defined gender-focused teachers as those who believe strongly that sexism and gender inequity are serious problems in society, and teachers translated those beliefs into their teaching practices or philosophy in different ways. All but one teacher in the sample was gender-focused. For example, Liz Ram, a gender-focused teacher, considered herself a feminist and believed strongly that the United States is a male-dominated society. As she described, the purpose of sociology is "to leave your students with tools that can help make them better citizens" (Interview, November 19, 2013). This finding was corroborated by classroom observation data. For example, during the observations of Liz's classroom, the students were analyzing song lyrics and what messages those songs sent about gender. Liz described her lesson:

So they looked at songs and the first one I played was Beyoncé's "If I Were a Boy" where she basically explains like if she were a man, how life would be different because she was previously a female and that she would know how to treat women. All the songs were basically about women who didn't have any self-confidence because of their life. We did that and we looked at the lyrics to deconstruct the songs, once you step back and actually print other lyrics and read them, you see what they are calling women. And women get called names in the songs and we just notice that men were really not called anything besides the N-word. There was no derogatory word for any guys, and there were so many derogatory words for women, and why is the guy just called N-word or a hustler, a player like nothing more negative than that. (Interview, November 2, 2013)

After the lesson one student commented, "I never thought that way about the songs I listened to before" (Observation, November 4, 2013). During this lesson, Liz allowed the students to deconstruct the way in which popular music portrayed women. This allowed the students to begin to see the stereotypes associated with women in the media.

Gender-focused teachers were also more likely to spend substantial class time on gender. From classroom observations, it was apparent that teachers who believed in gender equity would use entire class periods to discuss women's issues. Other gender-focused teachers in this study spent several classes discussing how women were misrepresented in the media and degraded through language. In fact, many gender-focused teachers used the power of language as a starting point to teach about patriarchy. One participant, Tina Smith, explained,

Language is very interesting to me. If you ask students to like make a list or just think about words that are used to hurt girls, like, what's the worst thing you can say to a girl? And if you ask them to think about those words to hurt males, they all have to do with being female. The most offensive things you can say to boys, those all have to do with being female also. And I think that if they can understand the importance of language and why words have meaning and mean something, then I think that's often-times a good start. (Interview, September 29, 2014)

Gender-focused teachers thought deeply about how to make women's struggles real to their students. Another participant, Diane Kelley, explained that she needed to do a better job teaching gender because she owed it to the young women of today. Reflecting on her own life, she felt unprepared for the difficult choices women must make. She described how one of her goals, as a sociology teacher, was to teach about social expectations for women. She said, "So, I do feel like there's a need to do gender better—for young women who are going out into this world. That's sort of one thing that I don't feel like I was ever exposed to" (Interview, November 14, 2013). The more teachers described their experience with or awareness of gender inequity, the more time and curriculum they focused on women in the sociology classroom.

Many teachers in the study saw sociology as a place for women's voices to be heard. For instance, Diane Kelly, a gender-focused teacher, commented:

Actually, we talked to our students about that [sexism], and if we have moved far away from that. And even my students are conflicted with that answer, which is they'd like to believe that we have moved away from that sort of a setting but the reality is when we start seeing films in class and learning in sociology. I think, unfortunately, they come to the realization that we haven't really moved that far away [from sexism]. (Interview, October 29, 2013)

Diane Kelley echoed her sentiments when asked what is important for students to learn in the sociology classroom:

I think it's important to expose children to how the pendulum swings, how a radical feminist was very valued for a while and then all of a sudden it swings back, the ideas and then the negativity that comes along with it. So I think it's really, really important for them to understand that. (Interview, November 14, 2013)

Teachers, like Diane, who believed in sexism and gender stratification saw the sociology classroom as an important place to teach about these issues and bring awareness. Through classroom observation, it was evident there were numerous discussions of unequal pay, women's treatment in the media, lack of women in

power, and the use of language to perpetuate male dominance.

#### 4.1.2 Gender-blind teacher

Bob Williams was the one gender-blind teacher in the study. Bob did not view sexism as a problem and spent little time on issues of gender inequity in his sociology classroom. He described himself as gender-blind and did not view sexism as a major problem in society. He described sociology class as an elective "that should be on the lighter side" (Interview, October 17, 2013), rather than a place to reduce sexism. Bob explained what he covered in his class:

we have the frameworks that we're supposed to cover. So I cover the frameworks. I want them to have a lot of fun, and I'm hoping that they'll take more of an interest in sociology. (Interview, October 17, 2013)

Bob did not spend as much time on gender in his sociology class as the gender-focused teachers, possibly because he was unsure if society was still male dominated, as he stated in the interview:

Interviewer: Do you think that we live in a male-dominated society or not so much anymore?

Bob: That's a tough one. Yes and no. I hate to be sexist, but it's like I think, yes, there are certain male things. I think that's changing a lot. But I don't know to what degree.

You know what I mean. I think it's changing. It's more towards the middle.

[Bob went on to explain that he sees himself as gender, race, and class blind]

Interviewer: Do you see yourself as sort of color-blind? Class-blind?

Interviewee: I kind of do. I mean, hopefully I'm not being naive and altruistic, but I kind of do. I kind of feel that I just see people for people.

Interviewer: And with gender?

Interviewee: Yeah, the same thing. (Interview, October 17, 2013)

Bob went on to describe how he does not think about race, class, or gender, because he would not want to only be thought of as a White, middle-aged man. However, by choosing to be gender, race, and class blind, he also chooses not to delve as deeply into those topics in his curriculum. Therefore, the purpose of his class is very different from that of gender-focused teachers. Gender-focused teachers saw the sociology classroom as a place to challenge cultural norms and male domination. However, if one operates under the lens of not recognizing differences, then the desire to teach about those differences and the ramifications of sexism disappears.

#### 4.2 A Place for Women's Voices

##### 4.2.1 Extending gender in the social studies curriculum

The gender-focused participants believed that women and the study of gender were undervalued and under-





represented in the social studies classroom. They described sociology as being a place that specifically dedicated curriculum space to women, women's issues, and gender. Through classroom observations and the sharing of their curriculum, there was evidence that women's issues and sexism were covered much more in the sociology classroom compared to the other social studies subject that the teachers taught. As one participant, Jay Bold, noted, the textbooks in the world history class have left out women. Jay said:

[Besides sociology,] I teach world history and it is clear who is writing history and how it is being written. There's definitely an undercurrent when we're talking, unfortunately, about in world history. To date, what is mostly written is about a male view of world history, and finding resources [on women] is difficult because most of the content that we cite and we source is being written by a male. So in sociology it's easier to delve into those topics and unearth certain nuances of gender typing and roles between males and females. (Interview, October 29, 2013)

Many participants echoed similar sentiments. Liz Ram explained,

Yes, so the difference between teaching women's experience in the history classroom versus the sociology classroom is in a history classroom, even when you have a woman's perspective it's still using the context of a larger narrative that's a White male bias. But, in the sociology class that's where I think you are outside of that White male bias and we can do the women's experience as a standalone story. (Interview, November 14, 2013)

Liz felt the sociology classroom allowed women's issues to have their own significance outside the traditional male context. In one lesson, Liz Ram took two class periods to examine the gender bias for female politicians in the media. She had the students look at clips on the treatment of women in politics. The clips ranged from overt to subtle sexism towards female politicians in the media. The students responded with gasps from watching the video of the clips. One female student responded that she "can't believe the media focused so much on what women politicians were wearing." Another male student responded saying, "When you compile these clips altogether you can clearly see the gender bias and understand why we have so few women politicians" (Observation, November 19, 2013). The lesson Liz Ram put together appeared to have a profound impact on her students, yet it took considerable class time (a block period of 90 minutes and a regular period of 60 minutes), because she stopped the video often to highlight points and solicit student feedback. Liz felt a lesson like this was only possible in an elective class, because she had time and curricular freedom. The gender-focused teachers in this study found it easier to teach about gender in the sociology classroom because it

was a safe and open space to move away from the patriarchal framework found in the history curriculum, textbooks, and, sometimes, classrooms. In sociology, the teachers believed the curriculum allowed women to have a voice.

#### 4.2.2 The power of an elective

As a result of being an elective, sociology allowed for more content flexibility and time in the curriculum to address issues of sexism and gender. When Tina Smith was asked about how she has taught gender in the sociology classroom, she responded by explaining, "I think it's easier in sociology to do. It's just like topics allow you to. I think my goal in the class is to break down a lot of gender boundaries" (Interview, October 21, 2013). Jay Bold echoed a similar sentiment:

It's a pivotal part. It's a core component of sociology, the interactions between people. Understanding the differences between 50% of the population and being okay with accepting differences, but not pigeonholing a particular gender as a type and not allowing them approved mobility or the freedom to feel and be who they are based upon preconceived notions or being reared in the family that reinforces those types and being around peer groups that reinforce those types. (Interview, October 29, 2013)

Jay often used his sociology lessons to challenge cultural norms. In one lesson, Jay was discussing the wage gap with his students. He asked his students if cultural biases play a role in unequal pay between men and women. One female student responded, "I think there is a lot of pressure for women to stay home. Traditional gender roles still expect women to cook and clean," and, after a lengthy discussion, Jay then asked his students, "What can we do to promote gender equality?" One student responded, "I think we should make a social movement to have men taking on stereotypical female roles. We should use social media to breed acceptance for stay-at-home Dads" (Observation, November 15, 2014). Later, the students started to debate if government intervention was necessary to stop the wage gap. While students disagreed about whether the laws were necessary, they all appeared to agree that education promotes change and that more people need to be aware of the pay gap between men and women. In this lesson, Jay motivated his students to acknowledge gender inequity and search for solutions. This both brings awareness and empowers students.

The gender-focused teachers in the study believed it was easier to teach gender stratification in sociology, because the curriculum encouraged the teacher to address more current events. One teacher stated that she enjoyed teaching sociology more than her other classes, because there are many more opportunities to relate the material to the students' lives. For example, Michelle Law said,

Well, one thing is I feel like the curriculum allows you to have more time. Sociology lends itself for interpretation, bringing in different examples and bringing in even real up-to-date examples of what's happening that allow the students to connect with it. And I think that helps a lot with Sociology and allows you to go in deeper with these issues. (Interview, November 7, 2013)

Michelle mentioned how she had a very powerful class discussion with her sociology class around hair. The students' discussion of the hair sent powerful messages about gender divides and racial divides:

The girls really did a great job in explaining to the boys what it means to them in terms of having a good hair and how their hair defines them. I have one girl who's a mixed [race] student and she would explain to them [that] she has naturally curly [hair]; usually she wears it curly, but needs to straighten to seem more classy. Conversations like this on hair are very valuable because the students are exploring racial and gender norms. (Interview, November 7, 2013)

The teachers in this study repeatedly mentioned how the sociology classroom was a special place for discussion and exploration, because there was more time in the curriculum, the material could be connected to the students' lives, and it was a place to address sociology-related current events. The teachers also mentioned that, because there was not a state assessment or common exam at the end of the year, they had more time to focus on student exploration and discussion. These factors made it easier and more natural for teachers to discuss and teach about gender.

### 4.3 A Mechanism to Reduce Sexism

#### 4.3.1 Sociology class as a mechanism for change

By spending more time on gender and women's issues, the gender-focused teachers were able to use the sociology classroom as a place to reduce sexism. In many ways, they took an activist stance and saw the sociology classroom as a way to fight sexism. Tina Smith explained,

I think a huge part of something I'm trying to do, in order for us as a society to grow, is to get rid of the sexist feeling, that even though these kids may not think they're sexist, they actually are in the ways that they've been socialized and the way they think or even like the small little jokes they'll make about women in the kitchen. There is still this sexism. And the only way for our society to move forward is to eliminate sexism. And I think sociology helps with that because we'll show gender inequality and why that keeps us behind other countries of the world. (Interview, September 29, 2013)

Observational data corroborated that Tina was actively advocating to reduce sexism in her classroom. For example, she often made references to inequality between

men and women in her classroom. In one instance, Tina told the class, "Ladies, pay attention! Women make up 51% of population, but only 20% of government, and we have never seen a woman president" (Observation, November 20, 2014). The female students reacted to this with shock, and this provided a starting point for Tina to discuss systematic sexism. Similar to other gender-focused teachers, Ms. Smith brings awareness to her students about gender inequity and encourages them to discuss this issue further.

The gender-focused teachers in the study believed that the students were unaware of gender inequity and male dominance in American society. They believed their students were uninformed about the reinforcement of sexist values by the agents of socialization in American culture. Liz Ram described how agents of socialization reinforce gender roles:

We haven't been able to see cases of men and women behaving in ways that challenge those norms. They are provided with information such that women are just naturally better with kids. I'm trying to get them to break down how that's socially constructed. (Interview, November 14, 2013)

Some teachers even felt their students held onto a system of power in patriarchy without realizing it. Tina Smith commented,

It is in a lot of cases a male-driven society; what is expected of a young female is that she is supposed to be married by a certain age and have children. So I think those kinds of expectations, even the females do it, show sexism as well from the students. (Interview, September 29, 2013)

The gender-focused teachers believed sociology class was a chance to expose their students, who weren't aware of the sexism they displayed, to different cultural norms and, specifically, norms that valued women equally in society. Because the sociology classroom can become a mechanism for many teachers to reduce sexism and bring awareness, it becomes a unique place, and it can have a substantial value for students. Jay Bold explained,

I like to joke around and when they ask me what is sociology is about, I just say, 'Oh, it makes you a better person.' And it's sort of a lofty and silly thing to say but the people who know most about sociology, it probably resonates more with them at how simple the phrase is, but how probably how true it is. (Interview, October 29, 2013)

The gender-focused teachers in this study viewed sociology as important, because it challenges students to break cultural norms and begin to think about inequity. They described how, for many high school students, the sociology classroom might be the first time they question not only cultural norms but also their own values and



assumptions. The sociology curriculum gives students the time and ability to challenge personal notions about gender and sexism.

### 5 Significance

Research on the role of gender in the social studies classroom is limited (Crocco, 2008; Noddings, 2001; Schmeichel, 2011), and this study begins to fill that research gap. As we see in this study, the sociology classroom may be (or may not be) an avenue to teach about this marginalization and a place to discuss sexism and overcome patriarchal thinking. However, teacher beliefs play a key role in this. Additionally, this study helps further our understanding of the impact teachers' beliefs about gender have on their practice. Helping social studies teachers understand their own personal biases can help improve the teaching of gender and hopefully promote awareness of how teachers' views might influence their curricular choices. There is evidence that social studies teachers' beliefs on gender influence not only what they see as the purpose of high school sociology classes, but also the time they spend on gender issues in their curriculum.

While this study focused on in-service teachers, it has implications for both pre-service and in-service teacher education. Teachers might not naturally think about gender when planning their curricula, but they could be encouraged to do so. Although sociology teachers may be more aware of the role of gender and sexism in society, due to the course content, this study showed that some sociology teachers might still take a gender-blind perspective. Both in-service and pre-service social studies teachers need appropriate preparation on how to teach sociology (DeCesare, 2008) and, more broadly, gender. It may be beneficial to require pre-service teachers to take sociological courses on gender or methods around teaching gender, so that more teachers would be prepared to teach this valuable elective. Yet, it is unlikely that districts will increase the number of sociology courses offered to high school students. However, social studies scholars are pushing for more inclusive curricular choices (Crocco, 2008), and this could include more sociology among the traditionally offered history and social science high school courses. Another avenue for teacher preparation and professional development programs is to educate teachers on the implementation of curricula that directly examine gender bias. It is crucial that social studies teachers better understand how gender and sexism should be addressed across the social studies discipline, which will give gender a more prominent role in the curriculum. Doing this may help lead to a greater awareness of sexism and gender inequity.

This study contributes to research on social studies education and highlights evidence of the value of sociology as a high school course. Sociology, an often-undervalued discipline of social studies, is a central place to examine gender inequity and women's issues, which are traditionally overlooked in history and social science courses. It also serves as a place for students to challenge

gender stereotypes and become aware of structural sexism in American society. It is clear that social studies teachers have largely neglected the teaching of gender in social studies (Crocco, 2008). At the same time, sociology provides an important opportunity for a direct examination of gender inequity, especially since, for some high school students, a sociology class might be the first time they have a chance to think deeply about sexism or challenge male dominance.

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## Appendix A: Interview Topics

### Research Question:

What do high school sociology teachers perceive are the purposes for their high school sociology courses? What is the influence of their beliefs on their practice? Do the teachers' beliefs of sociology relate to their teaching of gender? If so, how?

### General Information

1. Record the participant's name
2. Why did you decide to be a teacher?
3. What courses and levels of those courses do you teach?
4. How long have you taught sociology? What are your favorite qualities of the sociology course? What struggles do you have with the sociology course?

### Teaching Philosophy/Beliefs

5. If you were to describe one of your typical sociology classes, what would students be doing? Describe for me what good teaching looks like.
6. What do you think the main purposes or goals of a teacher should be? When you teach, is there a specific perspective that guides your teaching?
7. Probe: Do you see the role of a teacher to reduce cultural bias?
8. What is your general philosophy of teaching?
  - a. Probe: Does your philosophy include reducing sexism or others isms?

9. Do you think your prior experiences have an impact on your teaching or teaching philosophy? How? Can you describe?
  - a. Probe: If you have had prior experience with sexism, gender inequity, how does that impact your teaching?

### **Teaching Philosophy as It Relates to Sociology**

10. What do you see as the purposes of high school sociology classes?
11. Do you teach (using the same instructional methods? about the same subject matter? perspectives? from the same teaching philosophy?) the same in your sociology class as you do in your other classes? If not, what do you do differently?
  - a. Probe: Any time the interviewee mentions gender or sex, ask them to elaborate on the above questions.

### **Curriculum**

12. Can you describe your sociology curriculum? What main themes or topics do you cover in the class? What main activities or projects do the students engage in?
13. What are your favorite topics to teach and what are your least favorite topics?
14. How do you teach about gender in sociology class?
15. How does your teaching philosophy have an impact on how you teach these topics?
16. How does your background have an impact on how you teach these topics?  
Probe/Reminder: Ask for documentation, aka lesson plans, student work (consider asking teachers to e-mail you some recent lesson plans, activities, student work after the interview)

### **Beliefs of Sociology & Gender Inequity**

17. Are you familiar with the term “agents of socialization”? If no, explain to participant what the term means. Do you believe agents of socialization (media, schools, peers, and family) socialized us towards sexism?  
Probe: If so, how? If not, why not?
18. Do you believe there is gender stratification? Do we live in a male dominated society?  
Probe: If not, why do you think this isn't so? If so, can you provide examples?
19. Do you believe it is your role to teach to reduce sexism? If so, how? If not, why not?
20. Do you challenge sexism in your classroom? If so, how do you, or how do you try to, challenge sexism in your sociology classroom? Is this different than how you would do it in a general social studies classroom? Can you supply some examples?

### **Demographic Questions**

21. How do you identify racially? How do you identify in social class? How do you identify in gender? How do you identify in sexual orientation? Name, gender, class, race, sexual orientation.
22. Why did you decide to be a teacher?
23. What courses and levels of those courses do you teach? How long have you taught sociology? What are your favorite qualities of the sociology course? What struggles do you have with the sociology course? How long have you been teaching for? Have you taught in any other schools or districts?
24. Describe the student demographics of your current district and school. What is the best quality of your school and/or department?



## Appendix B: Classroom Observation Sheet (Streitmatter, 1994)

### General

What did I notice about the lesson, content, or curriculum in terms of gender?  
What were the main issues that struck me during my visit?

### Curriculum

How long was spent on each topic?  
How were events portrayed?  
What was the language used around gender?

### Classroom Discourse

Who is the class by gender?  
Who is called on by gender? Record time with each gender.  
Describe non-verbal contacts.  
Describe verbal contacts.  
Who is disciplined? Who is praised?  
What topics are discussed? At what length?  
Who does not talk at all?  
Who talks the most?  
What is not taught?

### Methods

What instructional methods are used?  
What is the organization of the classroom? Does this seem to facilitate gender equity or hinder it?  
What words does the teacher use during instruction or interaction? Are the words gender-neutral, gender bias, or promote gender equity?  
Who does the teacher monitor? How?