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Gender Dynamics at a Christian Liberal Arts College

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Abstract

Research studies in recent decades have described the limiting effects of a “chilly climate” on women’s opportunities within higher educational settings. Additionally, much has been written about how gender role expectations within evangelical Christianity impact women. This study sought to understand the gender assumptions of faculty and students, to explore the impact these assumptions have on gender dynamics in the classroom, and to reveal the educational experiences and aspirations of female students at a Christian evangelical liberal arts college. Further, this study sought to explore whether female students feel they are thriving or merely surviving their college experience. This research utilized focus group interviews with 16 female and eight male students. The sample groups pulled from the diverse areas of academic study as well as ethnicity. Also, 10 faculty members were interviewed to hear their opinions, feelings, and experiences on the subject.

Although laws and policies in the late twentieth century give full access for all, researchers have questioned the educational opportunities for women within higher education institutions. In 1982, Roberta Hall and Bernice Sandler prepared a report for the National Association for Women in Education entitled “The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One for Women?” In this report, Hall and Sandler argued that female students did not enjoy full equality in educational opportunities. The authors summarized numerous studies from colleges and universities and documented that the campus experience of women was considerably different from that of men. Hall and Sandler (1982) labeled this limiting and stifling experience a chilly climate and described such a climate as one in which many small inequities, as well as faculty and peer behaviors (overt and subtle), create a negative atmosphere for women to learn, teach, and fulfill professional roles on campus.

Nearly 15 years later in a follow-up study, Bernice Sandler, Lisa Silverberg and Roberta Hall (1996) found that the climate on U.S. college and university campuses had not improved significantly for women. Despite the increasing numbers of female students, administrators, and faculty, Sandler, Silverberg, and Hall (1996) documented that the classroom environment still does not encourage the involvement of female students in the educational process to the same degree as male students.

Chilly Climate and Christian Evangelical Colleges

While chilly climate issues appear to be a concern on many college campuses, this phenomenon may be exacerbated at evangelical Christian liberal arts colleges by selected expectations and limitations of the broader religious community. Several authors described how women experience the conservative evangelical subculture and suggested that Christian women within these subcultures may be at risk of remaining trapped in prescribed roles or of struggling with mixed messages because of pervasive religious teaching and thinking (e.g., Balmer, 1989; Hagen, 1990; Neff & Klingsporn, 1996). Many high-profile evangelical leaders advocate a theological perspective that supports gender-based role differences presuming complementarian patterns and roles (Piper & Grudem, 1991). These perspectives have, at times, been referred to as *traditional* or *hierarchical* (Bilezikian, 1986). *Egalitarianism* is an alternate perspective that advocates for equality in roles among people, regardless of gender (Bilezikian, 1986 & 1997).

Like women in the broader evangelical community, female students at Christian liberal arts colleges are affected by the mixed messages that religious communities often send regarding women’s roles. Hagen (1990) commented that women in Christian higher education often find the subtle academic limitations placed on them particularly difficult given the gender burdens of the evangelical subculture and the sexism that these attitudes tend to promote in Christian college environments. College women are left to sort through the confusion on their own as they contemplate their academic and vocational decisions. At best, these women find their way through the complexity and emerge with their own perspectives; at worst, they feel limited and stifled in their choices for careers, scholarly pursuits, and lifestyles. Unfortunately for students, administrators, and faculty on evangelical Christian college campuses, little research has been conducted that explores how faculty and students—male and female alike—view the expectations and subtle influences of the evangelical subculture and how these expectations affect female students’ experiences in the classroom and in their scholarly pursuits.

Method

In light of the chilly climate literature and gender role expectations within evangelical Christianity, this study sought to describe the gender assumptions of faculty and students, to explore the impact these assumptions have on peer dynamics in the classroom, and to reveal the influence these assumptions have on the educational experiences and aspirations of female students at a Christian evangelical liberal arts college. Further, this study sought to explore whether female students feel they are thriving or merely surviving in this environment. The definition of thriving is to be successful academically, interpersonally, and intrapersonally (Schreiner, 2010). The college at which this research was conducted is a denominational, residential liberal arts college consisting of approximately 2,800 undergraduate students (primarily 18-22 years old).

This research utilized focus group interviews with 16 female and eight male students. The initial group of students who were interviewed was nominated by the professor who oversees the honors program. After that, a snowball sampling strategy was used. Interviewed students were asked to identify students whom they perceived had similar perspectives as they did. Additionally, they were asked to identify students who had different perspectives than their own. While the study focused on the female student experience, male students were included in order to understand their views on gender dynamics in the classroom. The sample groups pulled from the diverse areas of academic study as well as race and ethnicity. Also, 10 faculty members were interviewed to hear their opinions and feelings on the subject.



Limitations

Due to the limitations of the length of this article, quotes and perspectives most worthy of consideration have been included. Several positive statements about the formation and experience of female students were represented in the interviews but were not referenced. The overall review of the transcripts and critical analysis of the research indicate change is needed in order to enhance the experience of all female students.

Gender Identity Development

Many factors contribute to one's awareness of attitudes and assumptions that play into gender identity development. This study found that various campus events and attitudes contributed to some individuals' understandings and awareness of gender and how it shapes their identity. Specifically, two female students individually spoke about the pressure to be in a romantic relationship—one of which referenced Sadie Hawkins-type events (women ask men), Roommate Roulette, and “just all these events that focus on the dating experience.” The other female expressed how this institution's culture insists female students' appearance is of high importance. She stated, “You have to have a North Face, or Ugg boots, or pearl earrings or that blonde hair,” and she felt “there's so much emphasis on that.” Another female student noted various reactions to a situation in which signs that utilized non-inclusive language were installed in one of the college building's entryways. There had been discussion on campus among faculty about the commitment of the institution to the use of inclusive language, yet this oversight (corrected after it was brought to light) was offensive to certain individuals. “Some people were just up in arms about it and other people just didn't understand how it was an issue,” said one

female student. A different female student spoke about the frustration she feels when she and her peers are gathered together to eat. She said, "I always feel that we have to wait for the guy to pray. A woman can't pray." The communal sense is that it's "the guy's job." Yet another female student spoke about an experience she had in one of her classes where complementarianism and egalitarianism were discussed. She said, "We had a lot of lively or even heated debates about those sorts of issues." All of these experiences played into these particular female students' understanding of how gender contributes to their identity. These situations and many others raised students' awareness about gender and gender dynamics on campus.

Another important finding with regard to gender identity development centers around the tensions students sense related to future choices, what the Bible says, roles or titles in the institutional church, and expectations. The people interviewed were all undergraduate students, so it is assumed that the reason they are in college is to receive further education to prepare them for their future career and life. However, many females spoke of the tensions they feel to be in a romantic relationship and how this conflicts with their education and aspirations. One particular female said, "That magic romantic relationship [was crucial] and [there was] so much drama in that regard that it was really hard for me to ... understand why ... one [would need to] pursue an education." Another female stated she has sensed "kind of a broad stereotype that I have...an emphasis on becoming a mother, an emphasis on having a relationship with a guy."

Another theme that emerged was the tension around women in ministry and leadership. One female student recalled, "At some point during my freshman year...I remember at least one, if not more than one, freshman girl saying something along the lines of 'I'm not saying that women can't be pastors, but I wouldn't want to have a woman as my pastor.'" A male student also spoke of this tension:

Another tension...we have a woman at our church who is like the children's ministry person and she's called the Children's Ministry Director...and then there's the Woman's Ministry Director but then there's like the Youth Pastor who is a man...a different title because I guess our church believes that women can't be pastors but they can be directors.

One other male student had much to say of the varying tensions in the college environment through questions he posed:

Ideals do not line up with practice. How many women are on the Board of Directors at this school and how many women are chairs of departments? This is not just. How many women are inspired to follow their dreams at [institution]? I'm not a woman, but I must question this. How many people say they want to accomplish 1, 2, 3, or I'm so excited to get engaged? Is it just relationships? Who holds the power? Who can do most anything and get away with it and who can't?

Different views were expressed regarding the issue of gender roles and expectations for how these are lived out practically. On the traditional side of the issue, one female said, “I think there are distinct roles for men and women, but that doesn’t mean that women need to be oppressed or suppressed in that.” A male student said:

The husband and wife have differing but equally important responsibilities within the relationship and...the husband’s responsibility is to take the initiative in seeking to provide for the physical and spiritual needs of his family. I view it as a sort of thing where the husband has ultimate responsibility for the welfare of his family. That doesn’t mean he has more power in the relationship. It’s just that he has the responsibility...and conversely the role of the wife is to support and help the husband bring about basically all aspects of the relationship.

One female student shared that she felt tensions on this issue based on how she grew up, her ideas of what the Bible says about gender roles, and how that now plays out in her life in the various areas of work, family, and church:

The man is the head...times are changing, women are more educated...one day I want to become a very successful business woman...and I know I’m capable of doing that, and I don’t want somebody short-changing me because I’m a woman...but when it comes to family, family is definitely different, but when it comes to the church now that’s another story.



On the egalitarian side of the issue, one female shared how her views have changed, “I always grew up thinking that women shouldn’t be pastors, but now I don’t think that’s necessarily biblical because I think that God does call them to do that.” Another female recalled, “I grew up with a mother who was more of the breadwinner in the family...she was definitely more dominant...and a part of the third wave of feminism.” Still another female student stated, “If you have the gifts of preaching or teaching, you use them.” Lastly, a female student with a unique experience shared:

Moving to America...my dad actually got involved. He saw that there was a lot of opportunity here. He was like, you know, it does not matter if you’re a woman; I mean if you’re my son or my daughter, you have the same chance to become whatever you want to be.

Overall, students reported a number of different situations on campus and in the classroom that increased their awareness of gender dynamics. Many students gave evidence that they are thinking through different perspectives and determining their own views and commitments with regard to gender identity development.

Teaching Styles and Classroom Activities

Sandler, Silverberg and Hall (1996) argued that female students tend to be more satisfied with the learning process if they feel welcomed in the environment, engaged with what is happening, connected with others, and affirmed as equal learners. In this research project, students were asked what contributed to a positive learning environment in their classes. A few people spoke about how room arrangement contributes to the setting being positive. A female student stated the following:

One of the biggest and funniest things that affect me is just the way the desks are set up. I know that rows are traditional...but there again, because my favorite way of learning is that collaborative circle type environment...a non-intimidating environment and he [the professor] was in the circle with us and facilitated discussion. But I can distinctly remember, he wanted to hear everyone's voice and affirmed all ideas.

Another factor that contributes positively to the learning environment, some students noted, is when the format of the class is discussion-based, rather than simply lecture. One female stated “[I like] discussion based classes because we’re learning from each other—we’re all contributing equally...it’s more relational and in that way the professor is really able to get across what they mean and more applicably too.” Another female noted,

Discussion groups have a collaborative experience rather than feeling that sort of authoritative – “I’m going to stand up in front of you and lecture and write things on the board.” I’ve always felt that to be sort of overpowering in a way, no matter what the gender of the specific professor may be.

15

However, some students did state their appreciation for lecture-based format, specifically in certain subjects. One male student said, “For math or physics a lecture-driven course is, I would think, more conducive to my learning than some alternative method.” One female student in our study said, “I like a good lecture.”

A third factor, for many students (in contrast again to lecture), that contributed to their successful learning of a subject was when they have the opportunity to be active in the classroom learning experience. “I’m one of those persons who learns better when there’s interaction to be able to talk to your neighbor and see their perspective on something,” said one female student. Another commented, “When there’s a lot of activities in the classroom I learn so much better.” A male student also noted, “Interactive things where we can have experiential learning” assists him in grasping the material. Overall, these comments support research by Sandler, Silverberg and Hall (1996) that female students value learning activities in which they are engaged, welcomed, and affirmed as equals in the learning process.

The group project was one subject that frequently came up during the interviews. Specifically, there were a few themes that arose, the first being workload. A female student stated:

I feel like in groups guys just think girls are going to take care of them and that they don't have to do anything and they don't have to invest themselves in it fully because they just assume we're going to take care of it, which we end up doing because if we don't do it, they don't do it.

A male student also stated, "It's usually the females that take the lead in forming groups or discussions or stuff...some of the more self-organizing leadership." A female asserted, "Often times, I want to be with the female students because they're probably going to know the deadline, send out emails...it's something I value." Another female asserted, "I've seen guys not pull their own weight when they're in a group of females."

Faculty members are sometimes aware of this issue as well, as noted by one male professor. "One thing I do see when they work in small groups," he said, "is it almost always a woman who is assigned to take notes or report. So I force them to choose a guy sometimes just to balance it out."

In the group project portion of classroom activity, another theme emerged that roles are often assigned by gender. As the previous male faculty member was aware, one female student also stated the "expectation that the woman will take notes." One female commented she felt "guys [are] able to speak in front of the classroom with more ease." Another female said, "There is a higher expectation that the guys will lead it." A third female confirmed this and said, "but it's expected of me to be silent during the presentation of that group project." Yet another female commented, "I think in my classroom that women look to men to initiate." A female faculty member noted, "deferring to the male student—you be our spokesperson...when there's a male in the room it's a different dynamic and that's often what it looks like, wanting him to be a leader." Collectively, these comments indicate that in small group interactions, male and female students follow certain behavioral expectations and patterns that represent traditional, non-egalitarian assumptions about who does what.

16

Gender Dynamics in the Classroom

The term *gender dynamics* is used to describe the interactions and subtle perceptions that pertain to gender issues. Classroom gender dynamics play heavily into whether the learning environment feels positive to students. In this research comments were made about male and female participation in discussions or in asking questions. One female student asserted, "[The] male voice was more valued." A male faculty member confirmed, "But I've heard men discounting women's contributions at times." A male student commented, "Definitely men speak more often, women hardly ever speak. Sometimes I get up and say, 'Women, speak up!'"

Another theme within the subject of classroom dynamics is the issue of interruption. One male student admitted, "I interrupt women." A male faculty member stated, "Men feel more comfortable interrupting women...I don't know if comfort is the right word. They interrupt women more than women interrupt men." Another male faculty stated, "I do think my women students in my class are more frequently interrupted, particularly if they talk about feelings." A female faculty confirmed this stating, "On average, definitely males interrupt more than females interrupt."

With issues of participation, one female student stated, “I would say that the most active participants generally are male students.” Particularly, a male faculty commented, “By and large I think the men sort of just rush in and they’re going to give you their views.” Another male faculty member asserted, “Women have to be encouraged; they tend to be more hesitant about their views...they are more ready it seems to accommodate others’ objections.” A general statement was made by a male faculty member regarding participation: “I rarely see a female student who is bored in class or sit and at least not pretend to take notes, but I see a lot of male students who don’t take any notes at all and are checked out, or appear to be checked out.”

Faculty members play a key role in setting the gender dynamics tone within a classroom. One female student shared that the way in which faculty “talk to women—it’s more patronizing, in a way. Like their voice and demeanor kind of changes...I don’t know how to explain it...their non-verbals—it’s kind of weird.” Another female stated, “My voice wasn’t as valued and I knew that and that was communicated and I think that still happens today I think, actually kind of secretly.” One woman claimed that this institution’s culture took her voice away. A male student commented he has noticed, “If women want to do anything, it’s judged on her ability to be a man.” When taken together, these comments reveal gender-based patterns of communication that can negatively affect the classroom experience for women.

Perceptions of and Responses to Women as Learners

Students also made observations about male faculty members and female students. One female student said, “A lot of professors are more...toward female students, not lenient but soft spoken.” A male student also observed, “The professor was a little bit easier or not quite as harsh with the girls.” A second female commented, “One professor...talked to me really patronizing that it was so awkward for me...so much I started to question if I was competent.”

Another common theme that arose frequently was the perceptions peers have of each other. A male student stated, “Inherently in the classroom men are viewed as better than women.” Another male student said bluntly, “I’m sick and tired of being around women who are not very ambitious.” Regarding females’ perceptions about their classroom experience one female noted, “I know my intelligence isn’t like diminished or diminutive in any way, but I feel like it lacks affirmation.” Another female commented, “I’ve always felt a subtle sense of competition—I have to do better and I have to prove something, more so than my male peers.” These comments represent students’ awareness of differential treatment of students by peers and faculty members and how that negatively affects the learning environment for women.

Thriving

The last portion of the study included questions on what contributed to students’ thriving or merely surviving, according to Laurie Schreiner’s (2010) article, which defines thriving as academic success, general sense of well-being, having hope, excitement, confidence, doing well and getting better, accomplishing things, having a positive outlook and healthy relationships. One female student stated she felt “great women role models and female professors” contributed to her sense of thriving. Many of the female students

did say they felt as though they were really thriving currently at this college. Positively, one said, “Coming [here] gave me that view of life and the endless possibilities and the potential I had.” Another stated, “I came to an understanding that it’s okay to be me.” A couple of women spoke about their thriving being related to their spiritual growth in understanding “who I was, especially in Christ and the kind of person I was becoming.”

With regard to their future, they were asked about whether they anticipated thriving in the areas of occupation, family, church involvement, and living out their own expectations and goals. When asked if they felt equipped, one female student responded positively, “Thriving would also be to connect with the divine in a way that my spirituality is deeply rooted in my faith and can be reflected in the way that I live.” Another female shared:

I feel unprepared emotionally from stuff that has happened in my past, where I’ve come from in that regard. I feel that who I am right now is the best person I have ever been and I would like to continue that trajectory towards awesomeness.

Others were not as positive in their views of the future. One female stated, “I don’t really feel confident about me thriving. I will be surviving...I’m pretty much petrified about it.” Another female student said, “I don’t know exactly how prepared I feel. I think it will be what it will be. I’m not really concerned, I guess.” So while students may feel they are thriving currently at college, they tended to have less confidence about their ability to thrive after graduation.



Analytical Conclusions

Taking into account our findings from interviewing undergraduate students and faculty at this evangelical Christian liberal arts university and past research on the educational climate for women, such as undertaken by Hall and Sandler (1982), female students experience their education differently than their male peers. This is due to female relationships with fellow students, faculty influence, and many other factors, such as communication patterns and roles assumed on class projects, that contribute to inequities. The classroom and campus setting can be less affirming for females in their intellectual pursuits because of a high value placed on women being in a relationship, pressures women feel to conform to society’s standards for them, and the limiting messages to women regarding their gender roles.

While many students communicated they feel they are thriving in their present college setting, some struggle with the idea of thriving post-college due to the pressures they feel to have a family, receive further education, and/or achieve occupational success. Partially, their struggle is due to their experiences with gender identity development and classroom dynamics.

Implications for Practice

Because gender dynamics have a powerful influence on women, affecting their educational experience and serving as an important force in their lives, there are opportunities to address the campus climate and learning environment for women. This research brings forth several implications for alleviating gender role tensions experienced

by female students. The strategies below are categorized such that various constituents of the community can implement change. Specifically, strategies are recommended for (a) creating a more inclusive campus climate, (b) enhancing the classroom-learning environment, and (c) empowering female students.

First, by way of affecting the classroom climate, academic administrators should instruct and assist professors in fostering female student involvement and autonomy through pedagogical approaches, incorporating contributions of women in the curriculum, identifying aspects of student peer relationships that affect classroom behavior of women, and understanding effective mentoring strategies for female students.

Second, faculty and student development professionals should assist female students as they negotiate significant challenges related to positive gender identity development, stereotypes associated with certain choices or behaviors, self-assured classroom involvement, and finding effective mentors. Opportunities for open dialogue regarding choices for the future are important and should be facilitated with adult women as well as male peers and adults. Institutions should also consider surveying recent female graduates in order to understand their level of thriving and determine which strategies in particular were especially helpful in preparing them for success.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, addressing a chilly climate and how it affects students, both male and female, must be considered an institutional-wide priority. In order to affect the campus climate, administrators, faculty, and student life personnel must recognize, understand, and commit to actively and collaboratively addressing concerns related to the chilly climate experience of women on campus. This includes listening to female students, communicating clearly what sexist behavior is, and ensuring women are well represented in public forum, chapels, and campus programs. 

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