Sociology Shortcuts

A-Level Sociology

Education Xtra

Mind the Gap: gender identity and educational achievement

Key Points

Yu, McLellan and Winter *(2021): study based on sample of 597 students, aged 14 -16, drawn from 4 state-maintained secondary schools in England.*

Educational achievement is linked to masculine and feminine identities.

Move away from "girls' good / boys' bad" typology of achievement that ignores: High levels of male achievement; low levels of achievement of many females.

Created gender role profiles based on traditional norms of masculinity (emotional control, competitiveness, aggression, self-reliance, risk-taking) and femininity (thinness, appearance orientation, romantic relationships, housekeeping or domestic duties).

This was basis for identification of 3 male gender profiles (Resisters, Cool guys, Tough guys) and 4 distinctive female gender profiles (Modern girls, Relational girls, Tomboys, Wild girls).

Each group had a different way of "doing gender" that impacted on their motivation, engagement and achievement in English and Mathematics.

Resister males and relational females had high levels of achievement. Cool guys and wild girls had much lower levels of achievement.

Conventional explanations of gender-based differential educational achievement - the idea, in basic terms, that "Boys lag behind girls in school across many Western industrialized countries (OECD 2015)" - tend to focus on two broad areas:

• inside school explanations based on a range of ideas - from labelling to school climate - focused predominantly on the range of gender-based interactions that take place within the school. This output model argues that what happens within the school is the most crucial explanation of differences in gender achievement.

• outside school explanations that examine the impact of factors like deprivation, both material and cultural, family background and so forth that are largely outside the school's control. This input model argues that what happens outside the school is the most crucial explanation of differences in gender achievement.
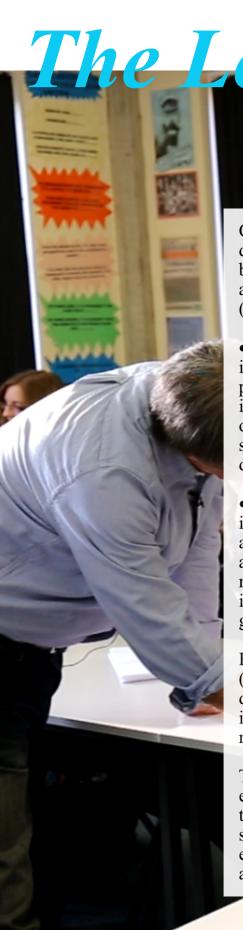
Recent research by Yu, McLellan and Winter (2021) has, however, arguably added another dimension to the debate by linking achievement to identity and, more-specifically, different forms of masculinity and femininity.

The basic argument here is that conventional explanations of differential achievement focus on two broad categories - male and female - and, by so doing, ignore the numerous sub-categories of each, where concepts of masculinity and femininity are understood and expressed in different ways.

This is significant because some forms of masculine and feminine identity are highly conducive to educational achievement while others are not. If valid, this mean achievement is less a question of whether you're male or female and more one of the extent to which your sense of masculine or feminine identity is conducive to educational achievement.

To understand gender differences in educational achievement, therefore, we need to shift the focus from *"boys versus girls" to "which boys and which girls?"* - a significant because, the authors' claim:

1. It "*reveals the invisibility of well-performing boys*". A focus on the "*girls' good / boys' bad*" typology ignores the inconvenient fact that many boys actually experience high levels of educational achievement. A significant number of boys, for example, outperform an equally significant number of girls.

2. It can "*provide a fresh look at the extent of boys' problems in education"*. By linking underachievement to particular forms of masculinity, for example, we can start to understand why some boys fail in the education system.

3. It can be used to *"draw attention to underachieving girls in school*". In conventional models, the high achievement of *some* girls is assumed to apply to *all* girls. Significant numbers of "*failing girls*" are, as a consequence, hidden from view and the problems they face ignored.
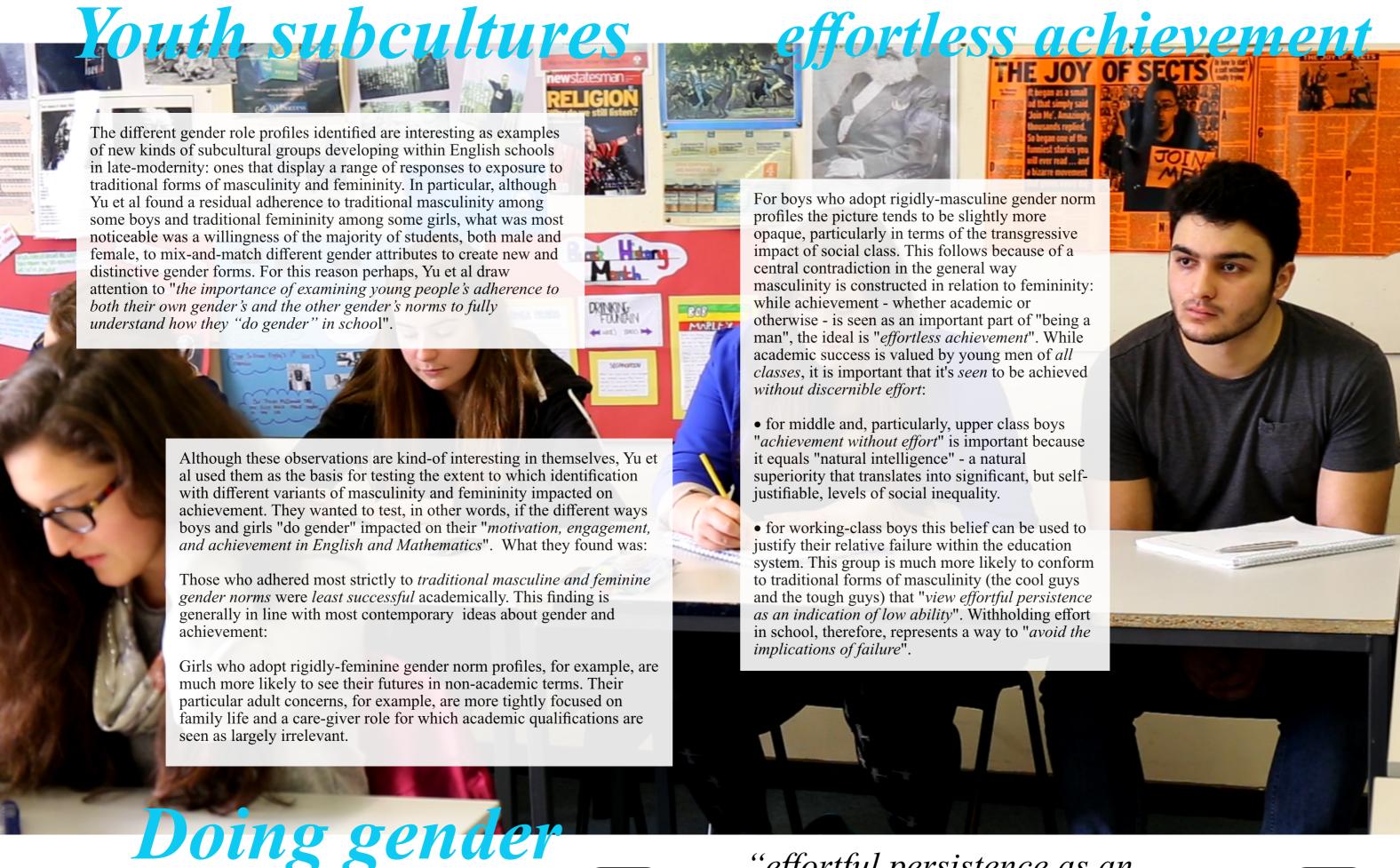
Gender role profiles

Yu et al "*shifted the focus*" using a sample of nearly 600 students, aged 14 -16, drawn from 4 state-maintained secondary schools in England. The majority self-identified as White (83%), the remaining students being Black (6%), Asian (5%), or mixed race or other (6%). Around 13% of the sample had been eligible for Free School Meals at different points within the previous 6 years.

They identified a number of male and female sub-groupings based on what they called their *gender role profiles*: "*adolescents with similar patterns of conformity across nine salient aspects of traditional gender norms*", consisting of "*nine central tenets of masculinity and femininity in Western cultures*":

1. Traditional norms of masculinity:

• emotional control,
• competitiveness,
• aggression,
• self-reliance,
• risk-taking.

2. Traditional norms of femininity:

• thinness,
• appearance orientation,
• romantic relationships,
• housekeeping or domestic duties.

A questionnaire was used to create a gender role profile for each student, the upshot of which was the identification of *3 main male gender profiles*:

1. Resisters: The largest group of boys (69%) were characterised by "*their resistance to traditional masculinity and ambivalence toward traditional femininity*".

2. Cool guys: This group (20%) were marked-out by their projection of a "cool masculinity" that "*strongly endorsed conventional ideals of masculinity, especially winning, violence, and risk-taking, while attaching importance to their appearance and romantic relationships*".

3. Tough guys: While the third group (10%) projected a "hard" image that sought to uphold "*masculine norms of emotional stoicism, extreme self-reliance, and physical aggression*" they were distinct from their cool guy counterparts by the fact they distanced themselves from stereotypically feminine qualities".

They also identified *4 distinctive female gender profiles*:

1. Modern girls: The largest group of girls (49%) embodied what Yu et al called a "*hybrid femininity"*, one that acknowledged the norms of traditional femininity - looking thin, being attractive, and romantically desirable - but which also embraced traditional masculine norms of emotional control and extreme self-reliance. They, for example, "*experienced discomfort in openly expressing feelings or seeking help from others*". A participant in a recent (2020) study by Rogers et al expressed the essential ambivalence of the modern girls when she argued *"We're supposed to look like girls, but act like boys"*.

2. Relational girls: This group (32%) was distinctive because although it's members rejected both *some* traditional female norms (body thinness, desirability) and masculine norms of restrictive emotionality and extreme self-reliance they "*actively embraced feminine norms of emotional connections and asking others for help*".

3. Tomboys: The third biggest group (12%) "*were completely uninterested in traditional feminine qualities and enacted stereotypically masculine behaviours*".

4. Wild girls: The smallest group (7%), although similar to their modern girl counterparts, were more extreme in their embrace of both traditional masculine and feminine norms. In this respect they "*fully embraced traditional masculine norms while presenting themselves as romantically desirable and overtly feminine in appearance*".

The different gender role profiles identified are interesting as examples of new kinds of subcultural groups developing within English schools in late-modernity: ones that display a range of responses to exposure to traditional forms of masculinity and femininity. In particular, although Yu et al found a residual adherence to traditional masculinity among some boys and traditional femininity among some girls, what was most noticeable was a willingness of the majority of students, both male and female, to mix-and-match different gender attributes to create new and distinctive gender forms. For this reason perhaps, Yu et al draw attention to "*the importance of examining young people's adherence to both their own gender's and the other gender's norms to fully understand how they "do gender" in schoo*l".

Although these observations are kind-of interesting in themselves, Yu et al used them as the basis for testing the extent to which identification with different variants of masculinity and femininity impacted on achievement. They wanted to test, in other words, if the different ways boys and girls "do gender" impacted on their "*motivation, engagement, and achievement in English and Mathematics*". What they found was:

Those who adhered most strictly to *traditional masculine and feminine gender norms* were *least successful* academically. This finding is generally in line with most contemporary ideas about gender and achievement:

Girls who adopt rigidly-feminine gender norm profiles, for example, are much more likely to see their futures in non-academic terms. Their particular adult concerns, for example, are more tightly focused on family life and a care-giver role for which academic qualifications are seen as largely irrelevant.

For boys who adopt rigidly-masculine gender norm profiles the picture tends to be slightly more opaque, particularly in terms of the transgressive impact of social class. This follows because of a central contradiction in the general way masculinity is constructed in relation to femininity: while achievement - whether academic or otherwise - is seen as an important part of "being a man", the ideal is "*effortless achievement*". While academic success is valued by young men of *all classes*, it is important that it's *seen* to be achieved *without discernible effort*:

• for middle and, particularly, upper class boys "*achievement without effort*" is important because it equals "natural intelligence" - a natural superiority that translates into significant, but self-justifiable, levels of social inequality.

• for working-class boys this belief can be used to justify their relative failure within the education system. This group is much more likely to conform to traditional forms of masculinity (the cool guys and the tough guys) that "*view effortful persistence as an indication of low ability*". Withholding effort in school, therefore, represents a way to "*avoid the implications of failure*".

Doing gender

"effortful persistence as an indication of low ability"

Like ducks on a pond

It's important to note here that although *effortless achievement* is constructed and presented as a *masculine ideal*, one to be contrasted with the despised "male swots" and even more despised "girly swots" who not only have to work hard to achieve but are apparently content to flaunt their hard work, for the majority of middle and upper class boys the lack of effort must be *more apparent than real*.

In other words, while it's one thing to *claim* not to work hard in school, the reality is likely to be very different.

While middle and upper class males may present a picture of effortless achievement, like ducks on a pond, the effortless surface serenity is underpinned by the furious paddling going on out-of-sight under the surface…

This explanation for the achievement discrepancy between boys of different classes who nevertheless share similar ideas about the importance of effortless achievement to their sense of masculine identity is supported in the study when the authors measured relative levels of perseverance and self-handicapping.

Lower achieving males, for example, were far more likely than their higher achieving peers to report lower levels of perseverance and higher levels of *self-handicapping* (the idea of doing things, such as not making much effort, that actively undermine the ability to achieve).

While this general aspect of English masculinity may help to explain why many young males are so unsuccessful in our education system it can also help to explain why some girls perform less-well in subjects that are both male-dominated and male-typed (so-called "masculine subjects" such as physics, chemistry and maths, for example). As the authors argue:

"Girls who adhere strongly to traditional femininity may be more susceptible to the gender stereotype that they lack the fixed innate talent to succeed in particular subjects".

In terms of the *three male groups* Yu et al identified a mix of high and low achieving boys:

• *Resisters*, for example, reported the belief that ability was neither natural nor fixed and could be improved through various forms of effort. This group showed "*a willingness to persevere with schoolwork and were performing well in English and mathematics*".

• *Tough guys*, perhaps counter-intuitively, were mixed achievers: although they "*performed poorly in English*", achievement levels in mathematics were better than their cool guy peers. One explanation for this is that their low reported levels of perseverance in English reflected their belief it was a feminine subject - hence to perform well in it would weaken their sense of masculine identity. Conversely, where maths is frequently seen as a masculine subject there was greater incentive to make a greater effort to do well in this subject as a way of reinforcing their sense of masculinity.

• *Cool guys* performed poorly in both Maths and English when compared to their male and female peers. This group strongly-endorsed traditional masculine norms and "*reported low perseverance and heightened self-handicapping*". In other words, they put the least effort into their studies and consciously devalued the importance of academic achievement.

While, given the association of subjects like maths and science with traditional forms of masculinity, it may seem odd that cool guys performed poorly in the former while their tough guy peers performed better, the authors suggest "*a lack of perseverance and heightened self-handicapping…might be in part explained by their strict adherence to winning and risk-taking*".

This may seem like another perverse combination: not showing much effort at academic work was a risky behaviour - and numerous studies, from Lyng onward, have shown how risk is integral to some forms of traditional masculinity - and one that was unlikely to result in "a win", such as passing English or Maths GCSE.

If the cool guys made an effort and failed they would not only lose face, they would also lose in terms of diminishing their own sense of masculinity. By *not* making an effort, however, failure could be rationalised. They could have achieved if they'd wanted to, but effort was for losers: "*In this way, they can preserve the illusion that they can win and outperform others if they try*". And there was always the remote possibility that academic success could be achieved without much effort: a win-win situation that, in reality, never arose…

On the basic of the above the authors conclude "*These variations in motivation, engagement, and achievement across the three groups challenge the simplistic framing of the "underachieving boys" debate and paint a more accurate picture of boys' problems in education*".

Junlin Yu, Ros McLellan and Liz Winter (2021)
*"Which Boys and Which Girls Are Falling Behind? Linking Adolescents'
Gender Role Profiles to Motivation, Engagement, and Achievement".*

Conclusions

In terms of the *four female groups* Yu et al identified a similar mix of high and low achieving girls:

• *Relational girls* *"considerably outperformed other girls in English"* and also outperformed most boys - particularly cool guys and tough guys but also many resisters. The authors suggest that the idea girls outperform boys in the English education system is largely a consequence of the academic success of this group. Relational girls are significant in that, in common with their resister counterparts, they largely rejected rigid constructions of gender. This meant they were *"willing to display effort and engagement even in subjects that could be viewed as counter-stereotypical to their gender"*. In Maths, however, this group showed similar levels of achievement to both their modern and tomboy counterparts.

• *Modern girls* showed a lower level of achievement in English and a similar level in Maths to their *relational* counterparts. The authors attribute this to both their gender-normative behaviour focused on traditional feminine concerns such as appearance, popularity and romance and the idea that *"academic effort is perceived as uncool during adolescence, and adolescent boys and girls displaying high effort are rated by their peers as lower in popularity"*.

• *Wild girls*: given their similarity to modern girls it's not too surprising to find similar levels of achievement in English. In Maths, however, this group performed least well of all the female groups.

• *Tomboys* mirrored their tough guy counterparts in both behaviour - embracing various norms traditionally associated with masculinity and rejecting those traditionally associated with femininity - and achievement. Their performance in Maths was on a par with *relational* and *modern* girls and better than *cool guys*. Compared to other female groups they underperformed in English, suggesting to the authors *"that doing well in a female-typed subject might be viewed as incompatible with their gender roles"*.

Yu et al suggest two ways that strict adherence to traditional gender roles might hinder the educational achievement of both boys and girls:

1. For both boys and girls, where a subject is seen as *"incongruent with their gender roles"* achievement is much more likely to be lower.

• Boys who project traditional forms of masculine identity, for example, tend to struggle with feminine-identity subjects such as English - of Sociology and Psychology post-16.

• Similarly, girls who adhere to traditional types of feminine identity struggle with male-designated subjects such as Maths and Science.

2. Those groups who conform to *"gendered ideals of behaviour and appearance"* tend to place greater value on their peer status within the school and experience *"conflict between maintaining peer status and trying hard in school"*. When the interests of the subcultural group and the school clash, therefore, it is invariably the former that wins out.

In addition, explanations for male underachievement - things like an incompatibility between norms of masculinity and female-gendered subjects or a conflict between peer popularity and the wishes of the school / teachers - can equally be applied to explain female underachievement.

Overall, therefore, the authors conclude their findings *"challenge the practice of treating boys and girls as two uniform groups in gender gap research"*.

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