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What Role Does Sexuality Play in the Academic Gender Gap?

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The question of how gender shapes academic performance has been a subject of study for several decades, revealing “the rise of women” in education as a central demographic transformation and defining a “new gender gap” in education that primarily refers to boys’ academic underperformance. Indeed, these trends have attracted the attention of scholars, policymakers, and the popular press. But in documenting these patterns, scholars have largely ignored one critical axis of inequality: Sexuality.

[Joel Mittleman](#), Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, begins to rectify this relative invisibility of sexuality in educational stratification research in his new study, “Intersecting the Academic Gender Gap: The Education of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual America,” appearing in the April 2022 issue of [American Sociological Review](#).

Mittleman analyzed lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adults’ college completion rates, looking at overall completion rates and also breaking them down by race/ethnicity and by birth cohort. Then, using the first U.S. Department of Education cohort study to ever assess student sexuality—specifically the High School Longitudinal Survey of 2009—he analyzed LGB students’ performance on a full range of achievement and attainment measures.

Mittleman’s study reveals two demographic facts. First, women’s rising academic advantages are largely confined to straight women: although lesbian women historically outpaced straight women, in contemporary cohorts, lesbian, and bisexual women face significant academic disadvantages, including worse grades, increased alienation from the culture of their schools, and even “dropping out” of high school at substantially higher rates. Second, the well-documented underperformance of men actually obscures one group with remarkably high levels of school success: gay men.

Given these facts, Mittleman proposes that being marginalized from dominant gender norms has important—but asymmetric—impacts on men’s and women’s academic success. For boys, a felt distance from masculinity may be academically beneficial. But for girls, alienation from femininity could be academically risky.

To illustrate this point, Mittleman applied what he calls a “gender predictive” approach. Using machine learning methods, Mittleman analyzed about 7,000 student survey items to identify response patterns that are highly predictive of being a boy—such as time spent playing video games, expectations of becoming a professional athlete, and whether one talks to their friends about their personal problems. Summarizing across these items, Mittleman found that gay boys benefit academically from being broadly distanced from the culture of masculinity reported by their straight peers. Mittleman concludes that “gay boys’ felt distance from hegemonic masculinity not only allows them to avoid the academic costs of masculinity, it also encourages them to

pursue especially high levels of academic success. Academic performance offers an accessible domain of competitive self-mastery.” Furthermore, “whereas the rules of masculinity may feel obscure or unattainable, the rules of school can feel discrete and manageable.”

In contrast to gay men’s consistent advantages, Mittleman found that “lesbian women’s academic outcomes varied substantially by birth cohort and race/ethnicity. Within the entire population of U.S. adult women, lesbian women have significantly higher levels of bachelor’s degree attainment than do straight women. On closer examination, though, this overall advantage is concentrated *entirely* among women from earlier birth cohorts. And when I examined lesbian women separately by race/ethnicity, I found that the bachelor’s degree advantage that historically accrued to lesbian women was concentrated among White lesbians.”

Mittleman’s work suggests that an area of future research could be on transgender and other queer populations, as well as work that continues to break down the gender binary that prevails in studies of educational stratification.

“By making the margins of the academic gender order visible,” says Mittleman, “LGB students allow us to see the spectrum of academic performance in a new light. Incorporating sexuality into the study of educational stratification, we find the persistent penalties for women who defy the dictates of hegemonic femininity and the tremendous possibilities for men outside the confines of hegemonic masculinity.”

For more information and for a copy of the study, contact communications@asanet.org.

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