Gender and student misbehavior: Evidence from implicit and explicit measures

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Study 1 focused on preservice teachers' implicit associations.
- Preservice teachers associated male students with negative behaviors.
- Study 2 relied on teachers' implicit personality theories regarding student gender.
- Teachers' attributions depended on the behavior problem.
- Externalizing behaviors were perceived as male and attributed to the parents.

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ABSTRACT

We investigated teachers' implicit personality theories in two studies. A gender IAT showed that 98 preservice teachers implicitly associated male students with negative and female students with positive student behaviors. These associations were related to interventions for male students' misbehaviors. A vignette study administered to 30 experienced teachers revealed gender-specific assignments. Externalizing behavior was seen as male, and causes as well as teachers' responses to student misbehavior were less favorable for the male student in the vignette. Our results show teachers' contributions to the "boy crisis" and call for education programs to sensitize teachers to gender-specific biases.

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Both teachers (Tsouloupas, Carson, Matthews, Grawitch, & Barber, 2011) and preservice teachers (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006) report high levels of concern about how to effectively manage discipline problems in the classroom. Some student misbehaviors elicit more concern from teachers than others do. For example, yelling out (Infantino & Little, 2005) and hindering the progress of other students have been identified as behaviors that teachers list among the most worrisome (Houghton, Wheldall, & Merrett, 1988; Wheldall & Merrett, 1988). Student misbehavior has been associated with student gender, as research has shown that boys show higher rates of disruptive behavior (Beaman, Wheldall, & Kemp, 2006), behave more negatively (Driessen, 2011), and are also perceived as more troublesome than girls (Wheldall & Merrett, 1988). Accordingly, male students receive more reprimands (Beaman et al., 2006) than female students, and even though teachers give positive feedback at higher rates to boys than to girls (McClowry et al., 2013), teachers nevertheless find it more difficult to manage boys' behaviors (Jackson & Smith, 2000; K. H. Robinson, 1992). These higher management difficulties can be due to the fact that teachers evaluate the temperament and educational competence of boys more negatively than those of girls (Mullola et al., 2012) and that boys more often show emotional-oppositional and aggressive behaviors than girls (McClowry et al., 2013). These differential student behaviors and teacher perceptions are reflected in less close and more conflictual relationships between teachers and boys (Saft & Pianta, 2001; Spilt, Koomen, & Jak, 2012). This implies less effective classroom management with respect to boys than girls because research has emphasized the importance of positive teacher-student relationships for good classroom management (Marzano & Marzano, 2003).
Even though these gender-related differences between students—all connected to the new “boy crisis”—have been well-documented in previous research (Downey & Vogt Yuan, 2005), far less is known about the implicit associations that teachers hold between various student behaviors and student gender and whether such implicit associations are related to teachers’ responses to student misbehaviors. Thus, the current research focused on closing this research gap.

1. Theoretical background

With respect to the implicit associations between student behavior and gender, stereotypes and implicit personality theories come into play and can be linked together. In line with implicit personality theories, Ashmore and Del Boca (1979) defined stereotypes as “a structured set of inferential relations that link a social category with personal attributes” (p. 225). As such, stereotypes and implicit personality theories both entail associations that people implicitly learn about attributes and their relations to membership in a social group (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991). To this extent, the gender-related differences in student behavior outlined above can contribute to the implicit associations teachers as well as preservice teachers develop. Such implicit associations are assumed to be mentally represented in terms of associative network models (E. R. Smith, 1998). Via cognitive links, the attributes and behaviors associated with the members of a social group are connected with the group or label as well as with each other (E. R. Smith, 1998). This associative network operates via spreading activation (Collins & Loftus, 1975), implying that the activation of the group label automatically spreads to the attributes and behaviors linked to the label. In turn, this activation increases the accessibility of the attributes and behaviors associated with the social group. Thus, the mere presence of a person who is perceived to be a member of a particular social group can automatically activate the corresponding implicit associations (E. R. Smith & Branscombe, 1985).

Implicit associations in terms of stereotypes (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000) as well as implicit personality theories (Eagly et al., 1991) develop via a person’s past experiences with members of a social group. Hence, through their daily routine, teachers have many opportunities to observe male and female students behaving in the classroom. However, even preservice teachers with low or no teaching experience have developed gender stereotypes and implicit theories through their own socialization processes (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). With each single perception (e.g., the perception that male students show negative and disruptive behaviors), the cognitive link between two concepts (i.e., “male students” and “negative behavior”) becomes stronger and stronger (E. R. Smith, 1998). Strong associations possess the ability to automatically activate each other (Greenwald et al., 2002) and consequently operate on an implicit and automatic level (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995) without people necessarily being aware of these automatic and strong associations or their influence (Bargh, 1994).

Such implicit associations can influence perception and judgments (Amodio & Devine, 2009; Banaji, Hardin, & Rothman, 1993) even though people may explicitly disavow such associations. Even if people are sometimes aware that their judgments are biased, they might not be aware that they hold implicit associations that are responsible for their judgments (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Controlling the influence of implicit associations on judgments is a process that requires cognitive capacity and is thus more effortful than automatic thinking (Devine, 1989). When considering the cognitive capacity that is needed to control automatic thinking, the importance of exploring implicit associations in research is made evident.

This seems to be particularly true in the educational context, as the process of teaching requires teachers to manage different tasks simultaneously without having extensive time to think about their judgments or behavior (Santavirta, Solovieva, & Theorell, 2007). These situations involve limited cognitive capacity, which provides the pathway for implicit associations to influence judgments as well as behavior, and this limit to cognitive capacity represents one condition for automatic thinking in terms of stereotypes (Bodenhausen, Macrae, & Sherman, 1999). This assumption specifically holds for preservice teachers, as they have not had much teaching experience, and thus, they tend to feel even more overwhelmed than experienced teachers do (Moos & Pitton, 2014). Automatic thinking frees the cognitive resources teachers need for the challenging task of teaching (Berliner, 2001) and is thus highly relevant in the educational context.

Therefore, the first aim of Study 1 was to investigate the implicit associations between different behaviors and student gender. Corresponding to empirical research findings that have shown that teachers perceive that male students face difficulties in adjusting to school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Bennett, Gottesman, Rock, & Cerullo, 1995; Brown, Higgins, Pierce, Hong, & Thoma, 2003; Murdock, Anderman, & Hodge, 2000) and show lower school attachment (Frey, Ruchkin, Martin, & Schwab-Stone, 2009), we expected that preservice teachers would implicitly associate male students with negative learning and working behaviors, whereas they would associate female students with positive behaviors.

Besides the question of the nature of implicit associations with respect to student gender, it also makes sense to ask whether such associations are related to judgments. Thus, the second aim of Study 1 was to investigate the relation between teachers’ implicit associations and their responses to student misbehavior. We chose responses to student misbehavior because teachers’ perceptions of male students’ difficulties in adjusting to school might be related not only to teachers’ judgments of student achievement (Bennett et al., 1995) but also to teachers’ responses to student misbehavior (Arbuckle & Little, 2004). To this end, teachers have been found to punish male students more harshly (Arbuckle & Little, 2004; McFadden, Marsh, Price, & Hwang, 1992; Petras, Masyn, Buckley, Ialongo, & Kellam, 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002) despite the additional finding that punishments are ineffective responses to student misbehavior (Gershoff, Purcell, & Holas, 2015; Paolucci & Violato, 2004) as they can lead to higher rates of student misbehavior (Gershoff, 2010; R. Lewis, Romi, Qui, & Katz, 2005).

How implicit associations are related to judgments is conceptualized in the Reflective-Impulsive Model (RIM; Strack & Deutsch, 2004). This model specifies two different systems that operate in parallel. The reflective system requires a great deal of cognitive capacity, and the resulting behavior is preceded by a conscious and deliberative decision process. The implicit and automatic processes are located in the impulsive system of the model. This impulsive system is conceptualized in terms of an associative network, as outlined above, and Strack and Deutsch (2004) suggested that the perception of one attribute activates other associated attributes as well as the associated behavioral schemas. This schema activation is seen as the precursor to actual behavior. The predominantly activated behavioral schema reflects habits (Strack & Deutsch, 2004), and habits can be defined as automatic behavioral tendencies that link a certain goal with a particular behavior (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2000). In this vein, implicit associations should be related to behavioral tendencies, and thus, we expected that implicit associations as measured with the IAT (see the Materials and Procedure sections for a detailed description of the method) would
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