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Gender Differences in Sitting Positions of College Students and an Explanation of these Differences

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This article explores the differences in the sitting positions of college men and women. After conducting unobtrusive observations of 83 students at the University of New Hampshire, we analyzed our data and found that there are differences in the way men and women sit. Men tend to sit in open positions while women tend to sit in closed positions. Differences in leg positions were more notable than differences in arm positions. In regard to arm and leg combinations, the most common combination for men was open arm/open leg. There were no significant differences between arm and leg combinations of women. We explain these differences using the theory of social construction and by pulling from various articles ideas of gender socialization. It is important to understand that gender differences in body movement and behavior are not natural. If we can recognize that these differences are learned, we can begin to eliminate gender inequality and stereotypes.

From our study we hope to gain insight into whether or not there are perceivable differences in the way men and women sit in regard to their arm and leg positions, and if so, what these differences may be. It is sociologically important to examine possible gender differences in sitting positions because such differences could be perceived as natural, thus perpetuating gender inequality and gender stereotyping. The Social Constructionist Theory (Recio 2000) generally states that humans have nothing which is innate and that each individual is constructed by society and each body is gendered. Simply stated, our movements and sitting positions are not natural, even though we perceive them to be. In reality, we have learned to sit in these positions from our society. We expect perceivable differences in sitting positions to exist between men and women. We expect that men are socialized to sit in more open positions and women are socialized to sit in more closed positions.

PRIOR LITERATURE

Sitting Positions

The idea for our research came partly from Vrugt and Luyerink's (2000) study, which looked at gender differences in body posture in the sitting position. In this study, researchers observed men and women sitting on a subway. They observed arm and leg positions in terms of three levels- narrow, medium, and wide. For the purposes of our study, we based our definitions of open and closed arm and leg positions roughly off of those created by Vrugt and Luyerink (2000). Also like this study, we did not include observations of women wearing skirts or dresses to eliminate the possibility of differences due to clothing restrictions. In their study, Vrugt and Luyerink (2000) found that significantly more women than men sat in a closed position with their arms close to their body and their legs relatively close together. Men on the other hand were observed sitting with their legs farther apart. These results are very similar to those from our research. Jenni and Jenni (1976) also noted similar findings. Females are more likely than males to adopt a closed position and females more often "fold their arms in front of the body and cross their legs or keep them together" (Jenni and Jenni 1976:859).

Gender as a Social Construction

These gender differences may often be seen as natural; however, there is much research that argues that said differences are socially constructed (Martin 1998; Morris 2005; West and Zimmerman 1987; Lorber 1994). In her study of preschool children, Martin (1998) focused on the unnaturalness of gendered bodies. She conducted observatory research in classrooms of children ages 3-5 and concluded that males and females display gender differences in "everyday movements, compartment, and the use of physical space" (Martin 1998:494) due to socialization

of gender norms from an early age. The five year old boys took up more room with their bodies, sitting in more open positions and moving around the classroom more freely than the five year old girls. Martin (1998) found that among the younger children there was less concern for and awareness of gender norms, but as age increased, gender normative behavior increased. Martin's study ties in closely with our own study. We observed distinct differences in the way men and women sit, and we look back to Martin's study for reasons why this is so. Body movements become gendered from childhood, and the gender differences that are created at this young age are then reinforced by social institutions (e.g. schools).

Another study that examines this social phenomenon was conducted by Edward Morris (2005). Morris carried out ethnographic research at a middle school in Texas. He examined how schools contribute to genderization by regulating students' bodies. Though his study looked more at the reproduction of class, race, and gender inequality, some of his findings are closely related to our research. Similar to Martin's (1998) conclusion, Morris contends that schools use discipline to "rework the behavior and appearance of students so their bodies display acceptable, normative comportment" (Morris 2005:27). Both researchers discuss this notion of the hidden curriculum and agree that much of our gendered behaviors are due, in part, to such social institutions as schools.

To further support the idea that gender is not natural or biological, but rather socially constructed, we look to West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of "doing gender." Basically, this concept proposes that gender is an accomplishment that we achieve. It has become second nature to us because we are socialized from such a young age. We assume that we are born a gendered being. On the contrary, "Individuals are born sexed but not gendered, and they have to be taught to be masculine and feminine" (Lorber 1994:4). The resulting effects of these teachings

are gendered behaviors and body movements (e.g. sitting positions), which we have witnessed in our observations. West and Zimmerman (1987:133) also noted a system of categorization called the “if-can” test which we employed in our study. The test states that “if people *can be seen* as members of relevant categories, *then categorize them that way*” (original emphasis). Because we couldn’t ask demographic questions in our observations, we categorized the subjects into the most appropriate category of either man or woman.

Patterns of gender difference in sitting positions clearly exist. We look to the literature as well as our own observations for support of these differences. We also look to the literature for explanations of these differences. We have looked at various studies and consistently found similar explanations; “For humans, the social is the natural” (Lorber 1994: 8).

METHODS

Our null hypothesis is that there will not be differences in sitting positions of men and women and our alternative hypothesis is that there will be differences in sitting positions of men and women. Our second hypothesis is that men will sit in a more open position and women will sit in a more closed position. We decided to collect qualitative data using unobtrusive observations. Observations were the best option for us because we wanted to study people in their natural setting and it allowed us to capture nuances that a survey would not have. Our method of data collection was also extremely cost effective and allowed us to conduct research on our own time. We did not need informed consent from our subjects because we observed them unobtrusively and in their natural environment. Along with the many strengths of conducting observations, we also uncovered several weaknesses. We could have had researcher bias and only observed people who were sitting in a way that supported our hypotheses. Also, we

were unable to ask demographic questions, so we could never be sure of the subject's age or if they were a student at UNH. Sitting positions may have been influenced by other factors such as the subject's mood, health, or activity (e.g. eating or doing homework).

Variables

Our independent variable is gender and our dependent variable is sitting position (i.e. arm and leg positions). We classified our subjects as either man or woman. We chose to use gender rather than sex because gender is more easily perceivable. To determine a person's sex, we would need to physically see their genitalia. We created specific definitions to define arm and leg positions. A closed leg position is any position where the inner thighs are touching or the knees are less than five inches apart. A closed arm position is one in which a person's arms are either touching the sides of their torso, crossed, or in their lap.

Sample

In our study we observed 83 students at the University of New Hampshire-Durham. We only included those men and women who we perceived to be between the ages of 18 and 24. We excluded any women wearing skirts or dresses because this could directly affect their sitting position. We chose to conduct observations in three locations: the MUB Union Court, Holloway Commons Dining Hall and the Dimond Library. Originally we had chosen to observe at Breaking New Grounds but after multiple failed attempts to observe there due to lack of seating, we changed our third location to the Dimond Library. We chose to observe at the MUB Union Court because there is generally a large amount of people there. Also, there are many commuters who eat or do homework at the Union Court, so this allowed us to get a more representative sample. We chose to observe in Holloway Commons because it is the largest dining hall on campus and it is in a central location. We didn't want to observe in either of the other two dining

halls because they are much smaller and are located near freshman dorms, which may have led us to collect data on mostly lower classmen. We chose to observe in the Dimond Library because the majority of people there are sitting and we assumed we would observe a variety of class ranks.

We each went to these three locations multiple times and observed for about 20 minutes each time. We went at separate times so we didn't have an over-representative sample. We wrote down the gender, age, and attire of each subject as well as their arm and leg positions. Our selection process of subjects could have had an effect on our results. We didn't use a specific method of sampling, though random sampling (e.g. observing every fourth person) may have eliminated potential observer bias.

RESULTS

We analyzed our data quantitatively with a self-developed method. We went through our field notes and tallied the raw numbers of each subject's gender and sitting position. We then calculated the percentages and entered them into an excel spreadsheet. Table 1 presents the number and percentage of men's and women's sitting positions. Table 2 presents the number and percentage of men's and women's various arm and leg combinations.

TABLE 1

Comparison of arm and leg positions of men and women in raw numbers with percentages in parentheses.

	Men	Women
Arm Positions		
Open Arm	24 (70.6)	19 (46.3)
Closed Arm	10 (29.4)	22 (53.7)
Leg Positions		
Open Leg	35 (87.5)	12 (27.3)
Closed Leg	5 (12.5)	32 (72.7)

Note: This data was calculated using the following sub samples- visible arm positions for men: 34, visible arm positions for women: 41, visible leg positions for men: 40, visible leg positions for women: 44. The percentages were calculated based on each individual sub sample and not the whole sample.

As Table 1 shows, there are distinguishable differences between sitting positions of men and women. This data supports our alternative hypothesis and rejects our null hypothesis. Our second hypothesis, which stated that men would sit in an open position and women in a closed position, was also generally supported, though differences in arm positions were not as significant as we expected. Considerably more men than women sat in an open leg position and considerably more women than men sat in a closed leg position. Our data shows minimal differences in arm positions between men and women. More men than women sat with an open arm position and more women than men sat with a closed arm position, however the percentages were too similar to be significant.

TABLE 2

Comparison of arm and leg combinations of men and women in raw numbers with percentages in parentheses.

Arm and Leg Combinations	Men	Women
Open Arm/Open Leg	18 (56.2)	8 (29.6)
Closed Arm/Closed Leg	0 (0)	8 (29.6)
Open Arm/Closed Leg	3 (9.3)	9 (33.3)
Closed Arm/Open Leg	11 (34.4)	2 (7.4)

Note: This data was calculated using the following sub samples- visible arm and leg positions for men: 32, visible arm and leg positions for women: 27. The percentages were calculated based on each individual sub sample and not the whole sample.

As Table 2 shows, the most frequent arm and leg combination for men was open arm/open leg, with the next most frequent combination closed arm/open leg. From this data we can see that over 90% of the men with visible arm and leg positions sat in some combination involving an open leg position. This is an overwhelming percentage. Another significant finding is that none of the men sat in a closed arm/closed leg position. The findings for arm and leg combinations of women were somewhat less illustrative. Roughly the same percentage of

women sat in an open arm/closed leg, open arm/open leg, and closed arm/closed leg position. The lack of difference in women's arm and leg combinations could be due to the small sample size.

CONCLUSION

From our study we have found that gender differences in sitting positions do exist. Though our data cannot be generalized to a greater population, we observed definite differences in the way college men and women sit. Men tend to sit with their legs open, and women tend to sit with their legs closed or crossed. The differences in arm positions were not as extreme, but more men than women sat with open arm positions and more women than men sat with closed arm positions. In regard to arm and leg combinations, the most frequent combination for men was open arm/open leg, while the women did not display notable differences in arm and leg combination. It is interesting to note that none of the men we observed displayed a closed arm/closed leg position.

Our data supports and is supported by previous literature on this topic. In general, it has been found that men position their bodies in a more open manner, while women tend to take on more closed, confined positions. This pattern seems to apply more to men than women, with women more likely to breach the norm than men. These findings can be explained using the Social Constructionist Theory (Recio 2000). Essentially, this sociological theory states that human behavior is completely social. There is much supporting literature behind this idea that aids in unraveling the importance of our findings (Lorber 1994; Martin 1998; Morris 2005; West and Zimmerman 1987). If men and women are socialized to "do gender" starting when they are young boys and girls, the culturally constructed aspect of their behaviors is made invisible. Gendered movements and behaviors come to be seen as natural, and therefore, such things as

gender inequality and gender stereotypes are accepted and also perceived as part of the natural order of society. However, these things are not the norm, and it is important to understand this in order to eliminate gender inequality and eradicate gender stereotypes.

Through our research we have come to learn that analysis of human subjects can be very difficult, especially when conducting unobtrusive observations. We used the “if-can” test (West and Zimmerman 1987) to determine the gender of our subjects as well as approximate age. Our findings could have been improved if we had a larger sample size, which would have given us more representative data. It also would have improved the validity of our findings and lessened observer bias to randomize subject selection. A potential weakness of our study is that both researchers were aware of the hypotheses, which may have contributed to observer bias.

For future research on this topic, we would suggest that researchers train other observers who are unaware of the hypotheses. We would also suggest that future researchers expand observation locations. It would be beneficial to observe students in other settings including buses, classrooms, and dorms. It would be extremely interesting to conduct a longitudinal study to observe how children are socialized to gendered sitting positions from a young age, and how this socialization is strengthened over time. It may also be enlightening to conduct a guided group discussion with small groups of men and women to gain an understanding of their perceptions of gender differences in sitting positions. Lastly, future research should look at gender differences in sitting positions in relation to other variables including age, race, and geographic location of the sample.

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