

FEMALE AUTHORITY:
FEMALE TEACHING ASSISTANT EXPERIENCES AND THEIR ROLES IN THE
WRITING CLASSROOM

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I. INTRODUCTION

“When a female teacher walks into a first-year writing class, she inevitably evokes responses from students a male teacher most likely does not”

-Michelle Payne, “Rend(er)ing Women’s Authority in the Writing Classroom”

“Research on writing has remained silent on issues of gender until quite recently”

-Patricia A. Sullivan, “Feminism and Methodology in Composition Studies”

“The honest truth is that some of the students are sexist in their attitudes towards professors. This is a fact I have realized only gradually—for a long time I thought it was my personal fault that certain things were happening”

-Bernice Resnick Sandler, “Women Faculty at Work in the Classroom or, Why it Still Hurts to be a Woman in Labor”

My interest for this study began in the fall of 2010, when a current class I was taking on feminism in rhetoric and composition focused on female authority figures’ experiences in the classroom. This initial interest grew when I began co-teaching an advanced composition class at the start of my second year of graduate school. While thinking about how I was going to address the class on my first day of teaching, I could not help but wonder if being a female was going to be a factor in whether or not my students would listen to me, and whether or not I would be able to teach effectively. According to Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske, authors of the article “Gender, Power Dynamics, and Social Interactions,” “differences in how people act toward men and women in daily social interaction as well as the institutional forms of gendered coercion and differential treatment that are embedded in many cultures’ social structures,” play a part in these perceptions (386). Glick and Fiske also discuss “institutional discrimination

in the restriction of women to specific roles and their exclusion from positions of power” (386). However, to complicate matters, I would be teaching under the direction of a male professor whose presence would likely shape students’ perceptions of me. Nevertheless, I began to worry about how I, as 23-year-old, blue-eyed blonde female, teaching in the writing classroom, would be received. In addition, I could not help but wonder about other female teaching assistants and their experiences in the classroom. I also found myself recalling how I acted as an undergraduate with a female professor and how I acted with a female teaching assistant. Throughout my educational experience, it did seem as though female teaching assistants had different experiences in comparison to the male faculty members. Since I intend to have a career in teaching, I thought it would be beneficial to find out what the experiences are for female teaching assistants in the college classroom.

As this topic began to formulate as an idea, I found myself remembering how I acted with a female professor and how I acted with a female teaching assistant. Looking back and understanding that I too am a female, I found myself more concerned with how the teaching assistant taught and her form of pedagogy. Throughout my educational experience and observation, it appears that many of the teaching assistants I had in the classroom had different experiences in comparison to the male faculty members. As a future teacher, it is my hope to understand these possible gender gaps so that I can become a better instructor as I step into the field of teaching. Having had no teaching experience, other than the few facilitating experiences in the classroom of my graduate school career, I have no knowledge of how I will be received in the classroom as a female writing instructor. This question of teaching assistant experiences in the classroom is an

important one, so much so that it was recently a topic of discussion at the 2010 meeting of the Coalition of Women Scholars in History of Rhetoric and Composition at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. This group identified female teaching assistant experiences in the classroom as one of the most pressing in the field. After considering where I belong in the classroom, and reading about the questions in the CCCC workshop schedule, I decided to research this topic for my thesis.

The Problem

While there has been research done on female *faculty* members in the classroom, information on the teaching experiences of female *teaching assistants* in the writing classroom is limited. It is important to bridge this gap in this field of study because many courses are taught by teaching assistants who are often inexperienced with teaching in the classroom. There is a good chance that teaching assistants will not know how to handle certain situations, whereas experienced instructors will be better equipped to do so. The data found from this study will help beginning instructors because research done on the potential problems a teaching assistant may run into, can be very beneficial if explored before the problem actually occurs.

For instance, to help with their preparation for teaching a class, most teaching assistants are provided a practicum class on how to be effective in the classroom. In becoming more prepared for certain experiences, female teaching assistants will be better able to handle situations as they arise. By understanding that certain variables play a major role when teaching students, teaching assistants may more easily find solutions to situations that occur when they are the authoritative figure in the classroom.

The Purpose

The purpose of this research is to examine how female teaching assistants experience their roles in the classroom and what role, if any, gender plays. With this research, I hope to learn more about the experiences of female teaching assistants so that this information can be used in teaching practicum courses to better prepare teaching assistants in the classroom so they can have positive experiences. By understanding that certain variables such as gender play a major role when teaching students, teaching assistants may more easily find solutions to situations that occur when they are the authoritative figure in the classroom.

To gather data needed for this study, I provided surveys to female teaching assistants in the English Department at Texas State University-San Marcos, all whom had some form of teaching experience. I obtained further information from those female teaching assistants who agreed to be interviewed, and tried to gain access to any previous studies that contained data that was useful for this study. To gain additional information, I observed female teaching assistants in their classrooms. Many times authority figures in the classroom miss certain behaviors of students because their backs are turned, there are too many students in the class, or they are focused on helping specific students with certain issues. It is impossible for an instructor to see everything going on in the classroom, so my observations allowed me the opportunity to view what the instructor may not have seen.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following questions:

- How do female teaching assistants in the Department of English at Texas State experience their roles in the writing classroom?
- Do female teaching assistants perceive that gender plays a role in their experiences?
- What role do teaching assistants think gender plays in students' attitudes and treatment toward them?
- What specific experiences helped shape female teaching assistants' opinions and views about gender in the classroom?

Looking Through a Feminist Lens

To make this a successful study, I must remember to “stand back from [my] experiences and ask what principles or theoretical issues make these experiences important to other teachers” (Anson, Jolliffe, and Shapiro 35). According to John W. Creswell in *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, a theoretical lens provides “an overall orienting lens for the study of questions of gender, class, and race...[and] becomes an advocacy perspective that shapes the types of questions asked, informs how data are collected and analyzed, and provides a call for action or change” (62). Using a lens allows the researcher to decide what aspects of a particular issue he/she wishes to study, how he/she chooses to conduct that research, and who he/she chooses to participate in the study. This use of a theoretical lens also allows the researcher to determine where he/she stands on the issue and where he/she situates him- or herself within existing research. I will employ a feminist perspective, which

means I will examine women's social roles and their daily experiences. This perspective is used to more clearly understand gender inequality and to address issues of discrimination, sexual objectification, oppression, and the stereotyping of women.

Overview: Literature Review

To date, only a handful of case studies detail the experiences of female graduate teaching assistants in the classroom. In the collection of articles within "A Symposium on Feminist Experiences in the Composition Classroom," Marian M. Sciachitano, author of the section entitled "Introduction: Feminist Sophistics Pedagogy Group," discusses how female graduate students and female faculty members "do not experience the same authority in the classroom as white male, middle-to-upper-class graduate students and faculty" (364).

Chris M. Anson, David A. Jolliffe, and Nancy Shapiro, authors of "Stories to Teach By: Using Narrative Cases in TA and Faculty Development," discuss a new female teaching assistant's experience and the issues she ran into while in the composition classroom: "Her students, she explained, were coming to class unprepared, often sitting mutely when she tried to begin a discussion of one of her many assigned readings" (25). While Anson et al. does not explicitly attribute this teaching assistant's difficulties to gender, it is reasonable to suspect that many of these issues could be due, in part, to her gender and her inability to remain a credible authority figure.

Karen Hayes discusses her difficult teaching assistant experience in her subtitled section, "Creating Space for Difference in the Composition Class." While Hayes notes that her students "seemed to have no objection" to her teaching, she learned later that they "just weren't paying much attention" (367). In fact, getting students involved in

class discussions over assigned material is a difficulty many female teaching assistants comment on. In many cases students would not ask questions and supply answers (Johnson 394).

Other research focuses on the variables of ethnicity, sexuality, and age. I use these areas of research to scaffold my own study of female teaching assistants' experiences in the writing classroom, although I argue, too, that more work must be done to determine the experiences of those who are not full-time female faculty members. In the next section, I discuss the main points of interest for my study. In the following headings sections, I focus on what past research has been acknowledged. I expand on these ideas to show where my research questions fit into the discussion.

Overview: Female Writing Faculty Experiences

In "Rend(er)ing Women's Authority in the Writing Classroom," Michelle Payne examines the issues she faces as a female authoritative figure in the classroom setting. Using her own personal experience, Payne discusses how the change in behavior of students during different assignments potentially creates an even more complicated interpretation of how she thought she was supposed to conduct her class: "[students'] behavior complicated my already conflicted internal dialogue about my role in the writing classroom and the extent and nature of my 'control' and 'authority'" (407). Her idea of how students *should* respond to certain assignments was not what she expected, which caused Payne to see herself as a "failure" in the classroom to these students.

According to Payne, some argue that female instructors are "unfit, unstable, [and] too emotional to be in a position of power" (401). She also suggests that some female faculty may feel unable to teach effectively or to make the best decisions in the classroom

(Payne 401). Perhaps this is due to their gender or the stereotypes that other faculty and/or students have about them. Payne discusses stereotypes and arguments about females' classroom experiences that discredit female instructors: "(1) she's deluded, irrational, 'mad'; (2) she's just angry and emotional—it will pass; and (3) she created the situation herself" (404). These assumptions are damaging because they distract from the abilities of female instructors and ignore the real causes of classroom discord. Payne explains:

A female teacher's authority, though endowed by a degree and the university, is tenuous no matter which pedagogy she embraces. And if teaching is a matter of persuasion in the classical rhetorical sense, then women may have a more difficult time being taken seriously by their students when the very fact of their gender undermines their ethos. As much as I wish this weren't the case, my power and authority—my effectiveness as a teacher—is dependent on how much power and authority my students grant me. (409)

In "Feminism and Methodology in Composition Studies," Patricia A. Sullivan discusses the idea that women teach through a mask so that they can effectively communicate with their students, especially those who are male. When an instructor has to change the way she speaks to become more appreciated and accepted, this could easily have an effect on her experience while teaching in the classroom (Sullivan 131).

Overview: Teaching Assistant Experiences from Composition and Other Fields

Experiences can vary across the academic field; however, the teaching assistant experiences of females seem to be very similar. Kathleen A. Boardman, author of "A

Usable Past: Functions of Stories Among New TAs,” introduces her own research findings with teaching assistants and how the assistants had “difficult new issues of authority and credibility” (29). Past research suggests that most teaching assistants go into the classroom feeling inadequate and intimidated about teaching the students (Ray as referenced by Boardman 29).

Lynn Z. Bloom discusses her personal experience as a female teaching assistant in the 1960s in “Teaching College English as a Woman.” During that time, it was improper for a young female teaching assistant to speak her mind and provide her own thoughts on a subject. Bloom expresses that “I had come to believe that my job as a teacher was to present the material in a neutral manner, even-handedly citing a range of Prominent Male Critics, and let the students make up their own minds. It would have been embarrassing, unprofessional, to express the passion I felt, so I taught every class in my ventriloquist’s dummy voice” (535). Although Bloom’s research was conducted in the 1960s, I believe experiences of that time period are still relevant to this study because they show that these issues have been happening for many years now.

Some students are resistant to their female teaching assistants and have been noted to cause frustration to the instructor (Payne 400). Payne discusses her tiring experience as a teaching assistant and states that she expresses her experience because “[it] represents for me not only one of the most difficult situations in being a writing teacher, but one of the most significant issues of being a female academic” (400). Payne’s personal experience focused not only on gender, but her personal history and education as well.

Overview: Student Perceptions of Female Teaching Assistants

Previous studies have indicated that some investigators see gender as an issue in the classroom when it comes to experiences of both the students and the instructors. As Sullivan has suggested, women teach through a mask to communicate with students. When an instructor has to change the way she speaks to become more appreciated and accepted, this can easily have an effect on her experience while teaching in the classroom (Sullivan 131). Students' perception of their female teaching assistant is also affected by the gender of the instructor. In their journal article, "Students' Perceptions of Their Classroom Participation and Instructor as a Function of Gender and Context," authors Gail Crombie et al. quote from previous research that "gender matters: 'The behaviors of female students and of both male and female professors were strongly related to whether or not male students were present in the classroom, and the behaviors of both female and male students in mixed-gender classes were related to the proportion of male students'" (Canada and Pringle as quoted by Crombie et al. 53). The gender of the students in the classroom could have a major effect on the experiences of the female instructors as authoritative figures.

Research Methods

Since my thesis uses both research aspects of qualitative and quantitative methods, I used a mixed methods approach for my thesis. Qualitative research is used to understand human behavior through analyzing surveys, videos, and any documents. This form of research looks deeply at items such as transcripts and answers to open-ended surveys. The importance of qualitative research is to learn patterns and distinctions about

attitudes, behaviors, cultures, and lifestyles. By starting with the research method of analyzing surveys, it was easy to continue my research of interviewing participants.

Thesis Outline

Chapter 2:

In Chapter two I review, in greater detail, the literature related to my research questions. These include Female Writing Faculty Experiences, Teaching Assistant Experiences from Composition and Other Fields, and Student Perceptions of Female Teaching Assistants. Sources within these categories provide case studies, experiences, and situations that relate to the research questions related to this study.

Chapter 3:

Chapter three looks at the chosen subject through the view of a feminist lens. It is also a discussion of my research methods and a more in depth description of how I decided to use them. I also discuss my data collection and data analysis.

Chapter 4:

In chapter four, I provide the findings from my study. My main patterns are: female teaching assistants are “mothered,” female teaching assistants are objectified, female teaching assistants experience complications with authority, and female teaching assistants perform identity. Everyone performs a gender identity; however, the findings of my study, which are found through participants’ surveys and interviews, explore the idea of what other identities a female teaching assistant must perform while in the classroom.

Chapter 5:

In this chapter, I discuss implications of my work for future research and practice. I also discuss the solutions of how to address the gender issues created in the classroom, including mentoring for the teaching assistants as well as provide them with practicum classes for more experience. This chapter also poses additional questions for those in the field to consider.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to properly assess my findings it is first important to discuss the research that has already been conducted and theories that have been advanced. I have divided this review of literature into three different sections. First, I address Female Writing Faculty Experiences. It is important to have an understanding of what many female faculty already go through in classroom settings. The second section is Teaching Assistant Experiences from Composition and Other Fields, which explores in depth the experiences of teaching assistants both in and outside the field of composition. I chose to go beyond the writing classroom to highlight connections between female teaching assistants across the board. The third section is Student Perceptions of Female Teaching Assistants. This section is important because the perceptions that both male and female students have of their teaching assistants inevitably affect classroom interaction and, therefore, affect the experiences of female teaching assistants in the writing classroom.

Although there has been much scholarship on gender differences in areas such as language and female faculty experiences, to what extent gender affects the experiences of female teaching assistants specifically, we do not know (Aries). Research in education regarding classroom management and common teacher experiences/issues in the classroom is also used to theorize and understand female teaching assistant experiences. Other research focuses on the variables of ethnicity, sexuality, and age. I use these areas of research to scaffold my own study of female teaching assistants' experiences in the

writing classroom, although I argue, too, that more work must be done to determine the experiences of those who are not full-time female faculty members.

Female Writing Faculty Experiences

Members of female writing faculty have been researched for many years now. These experiences touch on the discrimination that those in the field have felt.

Female Stereotypes

While previous research does not directly discuss experiences of female teaching assistants in the field of composition, it is nonetheless useful as a frame for this study. I believe that some of the experiences that female teachers face are due to stereotypes about women and their abilities. Susan Stanford Friedman raises the point that the culture we live in hinders women and their ability to be authoritative figures (Friedman as referenced by Sciachitano 364). In “The Impact of Gender on the Evaluation of Teaching: What We Know and What We Can Do,” authors Laube et al. reference a previous study by Linda Carli about how “decision-making groups show that except in gender-stereotyped feminine tasks, people (men especially) discount the contributions of women and are less willing to be influenced by them, particularly women who do not form to traditional gender expectations” (Laube et al. 91). Carli touches on the idea that women do not get the proper acknowledgement for their efforts, and do not receive the proper credit they deserve. According to Carli, studies have shown that women who try to break from their stereotyped boundaries are not responded to in the same way and do not receive the respect that they deserve (Carli as referenced by Luabe et al. 91). Female instructors, whether full time professors or teaching assistants, should not be afraid to “assert power and authority in the classroom,” yet these assumptions affect their ability to

do just that (Pough 72). To show how authority is an issue for female teaching assistants, Sheila Riddell and Lyn Tett's article "Gender Balance in Teaching Debate: Tensions Between Gender and Equality Policy," provide excerpts from two female participants about their influence as women authority figures in the classroom. One of the participants stated:

I think it's just that men look for different things in a career don't they, and it's possible that a lot of the traits that you need for teaching are predominantly female traits...I think caring, sensitivity, understanding, also wanting to put something back and to feel that you are doing something meaningful at your work, which I think is definitely less important for men. They probably want results, whereas women want to feel that they are doing something that really matters. (Riddell and Tett 474)

This shows how traits associated with women can affect authority for females in the classroom. The second female participant also mentioned the impact of being a female instructor:

But I would say as a rule generally it would appear that female teachers are much more likely to engage with kids and talk to them about something going on at home than male teachers who are much more likely, generally, it's a generalization, not to do that in the same way. (Riddell and Tett 474)

When female instructors care about their students in this way, they are showing a different aspect as an instructor and making themselves more vulnerable. Allowing

students to see this could cause a shift in authority. After reading about these two participants' experiences, it is clear that performed gender plays a part in the classroom.

Riddell and Tett reference this idea of gender imbalance:

Feminists are clearly divided on the questions of whether the gender imbalance in teaching is a problem, with some maintaining that the sex of the teacher is irrelevant and what matters is their performance of gender, whilst others maintain that the sex of the teacher is highly relevant because social structures which generally advantage men and disadvantage women are still predicated on, and can only be measured in terms of, biological sex, rather than performed gender. (469)

Many authors of articles in feminism and composition discuss this idea of gender imbalance.

Because of dominant portrayals of gender in society, women have been stereotyped to live a certain way and act a certain way. Katherine Canada and Richard Pringle, authors of "The Role of Gender in College Classroom Interactions: A Social Context Approach," discuss Hall and Sandler's idea "that gender influences interactions in educational environments and that the effects are particularly detrimental to the education of women" (163). For a female to be "highly interactive or dominant or otherwise to show leadership traits," in other words, to be an effective authority figure, she must "cross her gender-prescribed role, an act that, at the least, would be more difficult than behaving in accordance with her prescribed role" (165).

Classroom Impact

Gender also affects the experience of instructors due to the class level and size.

Canada and Pringle discuss the interactions that instructors run into while in the classroom:

First, the effect of professor's sex interacted with class level. In these mixed-sex classes, female professors extended more interactions and therefore had more of them accepted than the male professors did. However, the higher number for female professors was greater for introductory-than for upper-level classes. Second, the effect of professor's sex also depended on class size; the greater number of invitations extended by the female professors (and accepted) diminished with the larger classes because for the female-led classes, but not for the male-led classes, there was a negative effect of class size. (176)

Classroom size may affect female instructors' ability to maintain authority. Female faculty members defend their authority in the classroom in different ways depending on their class size and how mixed (gender-wise) the classes are. They not only conduct classes differently, but also interact with students differently (Stratham et al. as referenced by Canada and Pringle 177). Based on the information discussed by Canada and Pringle, the way female instructors initiate classroom discussions also played a significant part in their experiences in the classroom:

If a female professor believes that her classroom agenda is being challenged in some way, perhaps by body language (we frequently observed males sitting together in the back row, with their feet propped

up, seemingly indifferent to the classroom dynamic), perhaps by silence (often the same male students did not participate in class), perhaps by the content of an interaction (we occasionally observed male students making agenda-challenging comments, such as ‘I resent your bringing that up!’). (180)

As previously stated, classroom size may affect not only how the female instructors conduct their classes, but also the way students react while in that classroom.

Course and Student Evaluations

Sandler and Hall are referenced by Luo, Bellows, and Grady in “Classroom Management Issues for Teaching Assistants,” stating that “female professors experienced frequent challenges to their authority and qualifications by male students in ways not experienced by their male colleagues” (Sandler and Hall as quoted by Luo et al. 356). Based on these findings, Luo et al. theorize that gender might affect teaching assistant experiences as well, “expect that gender may play a role in TAs’ classroom management experiences” (357).

In their article, Gail Crombie et al. discuss Sadker and Sadker’s idea of women and a “chilly climate” in the classroom and how it affects both teachers and students. Based on this idea, these authors decided that “it was predicted that female students as compared with male students would perceive themselves as participating less overall, [and] using less assertive modes of participation” (57).

Female faculty experience the classroom differently because their students already define them differently based on societal influences of how women are supposed to be nurturing and easy to talk too. Past research and experiences show that female

faculty experience unfair treatment while in the classroom. Females are stereotyped, have different interactions with students, and have to deal with authority issues that male faculty members most likely would not have to experience.

According to Laube et al., gender plays a part in how students evaluate teachers. It is clear that in recent research, “Scholars who have attempted to determine whether/how gender enters into students’ evaluations of their teachers generally fall into two camps: those who find gender to have no (or very little) influence on evaluations, and those who find gender to affect evaluation significantly” (87). There is discussion that “because research points to the importance of students’ gender-and race- based expectations of their professors and student evaluation of teaching plays a role in most tenure and promotion decisions, the significant consequences for women must be addressed” (88). Gender affects how an instructor is evaluated because gender affects how the instructors’ perspective on teaching influences the students.

Student Perceptions of Female Faculty

The perceptions that students have of their instructors have a mixed effect on the experiences of those instructors. Since students see male and female instructors differently, students’ approach may be extremely different depending on the gender of the authority figure at the front of the classroom. Discussions of student perceptions in the book *Communication and Gender*, by Lea P. Stewart et al., referencing Treichler and Kramarae’s article “Women’s Talk in the Ivory Tower,” Lea et al. explains that “often females are better liked. Students believe that classes taught by women are more discussion-oriented, and that classes taught by men are more structured and emphasize content mastery more” (145). It has also been documented by Lawrenz and Welch that

students felt that female instructors taught classes that were more diverse than those classes taught by men (Lawrenz and Welch as referenced by Stewart et al. 145). The way society has historically viewed women in the academic world has shaped expectations of female faculty as well as influenced instructors and their own experiences in the classroom. If students have the idea that female instructors are incapable of teaching or conducting a class, this will have an effect on the personal experiences of teachers and students.

Teaching Assistant Experiences from Composition and Other Fields

Experiences for female teaching assistants do not just center around the field of composition. Females in other fields also experience similar difficulties.

Authority

It is common for teaching assistants to question their ability as instructors and as authoritative figures. Many do not know what to expect or have an idea of how to handle certain situations-behavior and classroom management concerns. Teaching assistants experience many different management issues and interpret them differently. K. David Roach discusses in “Effects of Graduate Teaching Assistant Attire on Student Learning, Misbehaviors, and Ratings of Instruction,” how “GTAs [Graduate Teaching Assistants] often experience understandable anxieties as they approach or undertake their teaching assignments. Many experience fears about their own abilities and competence, in the subject matter and in the role of instructor. Many experience anxiety over basic classroom management and keeping students on task” (126). This fear that female teaching assistants have, often affects how they conduct discussions and teach in the classroom. Much of the research documented and discussed in this chapter is case

studies. This research is valued because of the personal experiences that female faculty and teaching assistants have mentioned. We are able to see the connections between the fields and how much gender plays in these experiences while in the classroom.

As previously mentioned by Payne, some have argued about the emotional stability of female instructors and their ability to teach effectively. Findings by David E. Williams and K. David Roach, authors of “Graduate Teaching Assistant Perceptions of Training Programs,” indicate that “GTAs are troubled by the uncertainty of their teaching position. The transition from student to teacher is an anxiety provoking experience for graduate students” (189). How teaching assistants view themselves directly affects how they conduct their classrooms as the authoritative figures.

Experiences for female teaching assistants are rarely good experiences. Many issues that Anson et al. discussed, such as students being unprepared and often quiet, could be due to the gender of the young teaching assistant and affect her ability to remain a credible authoritative figure (Anson et al.). Payne’s discussion of her own personal teaching assistant experience focused not only on gender, but on her personal history and education as well. Payne addresses how gender has “created for me a rather interesting, sometimes frustrating, always conflicting internal dialogue about my own authority (and authority in the abstract) that often renders me hesitant and distrustful, vulnerable and decentered” (400).

Several other documented personal case studies represent the experiences of female graduate students as teaching assistants in the classroom. Teaching assistants with more experience are seen as more effective instructors by many students. However, despite the amount of experience, teaching assistants often “wonder about what they

should wear, whether students will like them, and whether they can fit the role of teacher” (Luo et al. 357). Once they become more “comfortable and competent in their interactions with students, TAs are likely to withdraw from students and become more authoritarian and more objective in their approach” (358). Despite experience, female instructors often question their ability as authority figures. However, more interaction with students will allow these instructors to better communicate. In her essay “Diane: Gender, Culture, and a Crisis of Classroom Control,” Joan Skolnick discusses her documentation of a female teaching assistant’s experience in the classroom. We first read about her experience at the beginning of the essay:

The school day was over. I went back to the classroom. And I sat there. I was shaking. I felt sick. I felt sick...Then the self-examination began. I thought back over everything...how I handled it...Maybe I wasn’t emotionally tough enough. Maybe the boys saw me as weak. I went over it and over it. (111)

In her article, Hayes provides some evidence regarding why teaching assistants might feel inadequate during their teaching experiences. Hayes mentions that, in her experience as a teaching assistant, her students were not paying very much attention to her (Hayes 367). An issue that many teaching assistants appear to run into while in the classroom is trying to get students involved in the class discussions over assigned material; students tend to not ask questions and give answers for female teaching assistants (Johnson 394).

Sara Farris, author of the article “‘What’s in it for Me?’ Two Students’ Responses to a Feminist Pedagogy,” recounts a similar experience: “clearly my position as a

relatively young woman indicated to the judges that my authority in the classroom was questionable at best...I can safely assume that my feminism only reinforced their dismissal of me as an authority” (306). Based on this experience, it is easy for one to assume that young female teaching assistants will have to struggle for power in the classroom on a regular basis. It is assumed that many female teaching assistants deal with “displacements and tensions” while in the classroom, as well as encountering those students who will resist involvement in every way possible (Johnson 395). In fact, according to the findings of Luo et al., the following are the top ten concerns of teaching assistants:

- Student comes to class unprepared
- Student looks bored, disinterested, yawns while I teach
- Only a few students respond to my questions or participate in class discussions
- Student misses class frequently
- Student challenges my comments or lecture
- Student questions or contradicts me during class
- Student reads *The Daily Nebraskan* or other non-class materials while I’m teaching
- Student is overly dependent on me
- Student blames me for his/her poor work performance
- Student is belligerent (disrupts class, distracts others). (362)

This female teaching assistant, in her early twenties, describes her experience and while it is not specified what kind of class it was, her experience does not appear to be a favorable one. The teaching assistant discusses how her experience would change when her superior instructor left the room leaving her in charge: “the kids really took advantage of me in a lot of ways” (Skolnick 113). Clearly, the students did not see her as an authoritative figure which enabled the students to not listen to her in the classroom. She discusses how her first day was tragic: “the class was being uncooperative to the maximum. I couldn’t get them to quiet down. I guess I was overly emotional” (113). Was

female nature to blame for the emotional influence on her ability in the classroom? Would she have had this experience if she was more assertive and tried not to be as gentle with her students? Students tend to view female authority figures as mothers, which could benefit or hurt the experiences of both the students and the instructor.

Perhaps female teaching experiences are due to the stereotypes that society has placed upon the female gender. As previously discussed, Susan Stanford Friedman explains how the culture in which we live has created an issue for women and their ability to be authoritative figures (Friedman as referenced by Sciachitano 364).

Classroom Interaction

Gender has a large effect on classroom interaction between students and their female teaching assistants. According to Bayram Akarsu's article, "What Are Classroom Management Issues For Undergraduate Science Teaching Assistants?," "gender has been reported to have a significant influence on classroom interactions between TAs and students" (19). Akarsu also touches on behavioral issues in the classroom, except he limits his findings to those of just female teaching assistants. He found that female teaching assistants "reported experiencing four different student behaviors than male TAs from both groups [ITA and USTA]: 1 student comes to class unprepared; 2 student misses the class; 3 student comes to class late; and 4 student is eating and/or drinking during class" (20). Due to their gender, female teaching assistants have a more likely chance of encountering behavioral issues which male teaching assistants may not have to experience.

Student Perceptions of Female Teaching Assistants

Authority

Authority has been referenced multiple times throughout research. Lea P. Stewart et al. referenced the idea of Statham, Richardson and Cook's book, *Gender and University Teaching: A Negotiated Difference*, that "perhaps female students feel more comfortable in classes taught by females and are, therefore, more willing to communicate in an environment they perceive as more supportive" (145). Since students see their instructors differently based on their gender, it is clear that the variable of whether the authority figure is a male or female does have an impact on the students, which directly affects the instructors. Furthermore, female teaching assistants are assumed to be stereotyped by students. Cooper, Stewart, and Gudykunst, authors of "Relationship with Instructor and Other Variables Influencing Student Evaluations of Instructor," state that "female instructors, who are supposed to be sensitive and caring, are evaluated favorably if they confirm this stereotype through their interpersonal response" (314). The stereotype of authority women have in the classroom has had an influence on the way students react and perceive their female instructors in the classroom.

In the forward of *Women Writing the Academy: Audience, Authority, and Transformation*, by Gesa E. Kirsch, John Trimbur discusses the idea that among other factors gender is one that contributes to experiences of women in the classroom. The experiences of female faculty members are related to students' perceptions of them as authoritative figures. As Kirsch explains, "cultural definitions dissociate women from roles of authority" (3). This idea of separation is continued by Nadya Aisenber and Mona Harrington in *Women of Academe: Outsiders in the Sacred Grove*, who state that

“needing constantly to prove your worth undermines self-confidence in even the strongest women” (67).

Mentoring

Researchers focus on the lack of mentoring female teaching assistants receive and the role this might play in students’ perceptions and acceptance of teaching assistants as authority figures. When thinking about authority, a question to consider is whether a lack of mentoring for female teaching assistants directly contributes to the lack of authority in the classroom. Teaching assistants are thrown into their teaching experiences not knowing what to expect and with little to no previous teaching experience. According to the article, “TA Teaching Effectiveness: The Impact of Training and Teaching Experience” by David M. Shannon, Darla J. Twale and Mathew S. Moore, there are a “limited number of available faculty mentors who are willing to assist TAs...faculty are encouraged to exert less energy toward the duty of teaching, much less the training of TAs” (442). Issues such as this will have a significant effect on the teaching experiences of teaching assistants.

Attire

Dress is yet another variable that contributes to students’ perceptions. The way a female instructor dresses, based on her gender, can create skewed student perceptions and create a different experience when managing the classroom. It has been discussed by Roach that “GTAs are often told that they need to act and dress in ways appropriate to their roles as classroom leader or facilitator” (125). Gender affects what instructors can wear in the classroom. Female teaching assistants are not only expected to dress in a professional way, but must also abide by the social standards pertaining to dress. Female

teaching assistants must be careful of how short their skirts or dresses are, how tight and low cut their blouses are, whether they wear stilettos or flats, etcetera. When students walk into a classroom, their first impression of their instructor is of what they are wearing. Right from the start this can alter how students act in the classroom. Roach states that “many initial and enduring perceptions of an individual are formed by simple observation and evaluation of the clothing he/she wears” (126). It has also been discussed by Rosenfeld and Plax, in “Clothing as Communication,” that attire gives students a right to assume what ideals and values the instructor may have. If a student sees a man walk into the classroom dressed professionally in a suit and tie, then students are more inclined to be on respectful behavior and accept the male instructor as an authority figure. However, if a female teaching assistant comes into the room, also dressed professionally, her attire can be perceived differently by every student, which can affect how they react to her as the authority figure. As Roach states:

If, for instance, students perceive casual or sloppy GTA dress as a sign that the GTA does not have a serious professional attitude toward teaching, the GTA does not care about the students of the class, the GTA is not competent in the subject matter, the GTA is socially or relationally incompetent, etc., it is possible that students may respond to this perception by engaging in more off task behaviors in class, less diligence in completion of and turning in assignments, more tardiness/absenteeism, and perhaps even more hostile confrontation with the GTAs. (132)

The dress of the instructor affects the mindset of the student, which alters the students’ attitude towards the class, which inevitably affects the experience that the

teaching assistant will have in the classroom. This alters students perceptions of not only the instructor, but also of the class, which changes the way both the student and teaching assistant act, as well as changes the experience for the teaching assistant. The way female teaching assistants dress may be due to the way they wish to gain authority in the classroom. The question is whether trying to gain authority influences the way female teaching assistants dress, or is it that their dress affects how much authority the female teaching assistant obtains in the classroom?

This variable is clearly due to what males and females are expected to wear in the classroom. Students' reaction to their instructor is first based on physical appearance. Results from previous studies by Abbey, Cozzarelli, Mclaughlin, and Harnish, of female instructor choice of clothing in the classroom, "indicated that females who wore revealing clothing were rated as more sexy and seductive than those wearing nonrevealing clothing" (Abbey, Cozzarelli, Mclaughlin, and Harnish as quoted by Roach 180). Roach states that "clothing affects how others perceive and respond to an individual" (128). How students respond to a female teaching assistant is directly related to how she chooses to present herself. Roach also states:

In a more direct way, instructor attire may influence student affect for the teacher, student mood, student motivation to learn, and student perceptions that classroom activities are important. If the teacher dresses in a fashion to suggest that the classroom event, the activities, the assignments, the teacher-student interactions, etc. are important, the student may respond by adopting more professional attitudes toward class discussions, reading the text, preparing assignments, and studying. These types of student

behaviors, in turn, are likely to produce more positive learning results. If the teacher dresses in such a way to suggest that the class and its activities are not really serious or important, the students may respond in like form and perform less satisfactorily. (131)

How female instructors choose to dress is directly related stereotypes about women. And yet how women dress and how dress is interpreted is complicated. A woman may wear a dress because she “chooses” to, but she is also likely influenced by societal messages telling her that wearing a dress is more “appropriate” for women. On the other hand, if the dress is perceived as “too sexy,” then the woman is faulted for the choice of dress, although what is “too sexy” may be defined in multiple and conflicting ways. If a woman does not wear what society expects her to wear, then she is considered to be dressed in inappropriate attire, and therefore, loses part of her authority. Attire clearly affects the impressions of students on female instructors in the classroom, and they can have a major effect on the power the female instructor has over her students as well.

Classroom Atmosphere

In the article “Gender Issues in Teaching: Does Nurturing Academic Success in Women Mean Rethinking Some of What We Do in the Classroom?” author Renee Romano addresses case studies where students’ gender has impacted classroom interactions. Romano mentions how gender not only affects the teaching assistant, but the students as well, which creates issues for the instructor:

Teaching assistants and faculty members should explore how gender dynamics affect their classroom, and be willing to change behaviors or patterns that affect women negatively. Dealing with gender in the

classroom, like dealing with any other kind of difference (race, ethnicity, learning styles), demands that the instructor accept responsibility for creating an effective learning environment for all of his or her students. (2)

The environment in which teaching assistants conduct themselves, directly effects the perceptions of the students. This will, in turn, affect how they react towards the instructor-whether male or female. This connection plays a part in how students perceive and interact with their instructors (Romano 2). Romano states that “men and women are often unequal participants and that the difference is based primarily on gender means that women are in some ways being denied equal access, both to the conversational space and into the general discipline” (2).

As previously stated, this will directly affect how female students interact in the class, how female teaching assistants conduct the class, and therefore, affect the female assistants’ teaching experience and how students see the instructors’ role in the classroom.

III. METHODS

For this project, I chose to look at the information I collected through a feminist lens. I thought this would be the most beneficial lens because my thesis related to gender issues of female teaching assistants in the writing classroom. In this chapter, I discuss feminism as a lens, as well as the three methods of research that are possible for use in this study: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. In the end, I use a mixed method approach, one that allows me to collect both quantitative and qualitative data.

Using a Feminist Lens

Researchers adopting a feminist lens take a look at information based on a female perspective. Maeve Landman, author of the article “Getting Quality in Qualitative Research: A Short Introduction to Feminist Methodology and Methods,” discusses a feminist approach and how its “focus was on the contributions of feminist methodology to the enterprise of building quality in generating evidence about the lived experience of women; the informing premise is that social realities are gendered and, in the interests of context-sensitive evidence, this factor has to be acknowledged at all stages of the research process” (429). A feminist lens assumes that not only are men’s and women’s experiences different, but the male perspective and characteristics have traditionally been privileged in the U.S., which has led to the dismissal and devaluation of the female perspective and characteristics. I included only female graduate teaching assistants in this study. I use all female participants so I receive all female experiences and perspectives

for this study. Looking through a feminist lens allows the reader to witness that men's and women's experiences are different, which allows the data collected to be analyzed from a different view instead of a normal critical theory lens.

Methods of Study

In a pilot study during Spring 2011, I surveyed six undergraduate students who had previous experience in classrooms taught by teaching assistants. I used a 15-question fill-in-the blank format, which was given to six Texas State University students, male and female, who had female teaching assistants in their writing classes. I asked them questions about how they felt in certain situations with their female teaching assistants and if certain variables, such as age, sexuality, clothing choice, etc., played a part in their experiences with their teaching assistants. These surveys gave me an insight into students' perspectives on female teaching assistants, but it did not provide me with the information I was looking for in regards to this study. I found that students had different classroom experiences with their male and female teaching assistants. The male students also mentioned how they thought differently about their female teaching assistants as opposed to their male teaching assistants, but did not expand on those experiences as much as I had hoped.

I also interviewed a female teaching assistant and a female instructional assistant about their experiences as teaching assistants in the classroom. These instructional assistants assist the main instructor of the class in any way. I wanted to know how their students treated them and how they reacted to them. These interviews did not provide me with much information either. Since the instructional assistant was supervised by a male instructor during the class, I felt that the data was somewhat tainted. My interview with

the female teaching assistant, however, helped me determine more specifically what I wanted to elaborate on and research more directly for my study.

For this current study I use the mixed methods approach which consists of both qualitative and quantitative research including surveys, interviews, and observations. Again the research questions I hope to answer are: How do female teaching assistants in the Department of English at Texas State University experience their roles in the writing classroom? Do female teaching assistants perceive that gender plays a role in these experiences? What role do teaching assistants think gender plays in students' attitudes and treatment toward them? What specific experiences helped shape female teaching assistants opinions and views about gender in the classroom?

Quantitative Research

Joey Sprague, in *Feminist Methodologies For Critical Researchers: Bridging Differences*, discusses quantitative research noting that,

quantitative research seems more trustworthy as a source of valid information because of its emphases on researcher control and standardization of procedures. These qualities make quantitative research reports more transparent, more open to critique of their methodology and interpretations. They also help make quantitative findings persuasive in public discourse...Feminist researchers have used these methods very effectively in order to demonstrate how inequality is created and sustained. (81)

When using a survey design, the researcher must know what he/she is looking for to know what kind of survey he/she wants to provide to the participants in the study.

Qualitative Research

According to Creswell, qualitative research is “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data” (Creswell 4). This form of research includes the following forms of research:

- Ethnography
- Grounded theory
- Case studies
- Phenomenological research
- Narrative research

Sprague also discusses the use of this form of research:

What makes their use qualitative is *how* they are used—the way researchers collect and analyze the data. Qualitative approaches emphasize interpretation and nuance; researchers address interviews, texts, and observation with an intensive focus, seeking a detailed analysis of process and/or meanings...researchers use in-depth interviews to get people’s ‘witness accounts of the social world,’ to encourage interviewees to reflect on their experiences or beliefs, or to provide segments of talk that researchers can analyze to learn about their inner worlds. (119)

This form of research is important for personal interactions and relationships. These social relations are critical when receiving personal experiences and information for analyzing. Interviews and field observations are usually for long periods of time, and as Sprague states,

Gender structures most social settings, assigning men and women to different spheres of responsibility and expertise and limiting entry to specific sites of social activity. In more complex sexual divisions of labor, systems of class and racial/ethnic inequality further stratify responsibility and expertise within each gender. (121)

These gendered fields create issues and stereotypes for each individual.

Mixed Methods Research

Mixed methods research often uses researchers whose questions demand the gathering of both quantitative and qualitative data. Using a combination of these two forms of research is what leads to this mixed methods approach. A mixed methods approach is necessary when the kinds of questions researchers ask demand a bit of both forms of data.

Data of Participants

I interviewed five of the six female teaching assistants who participated in the surveys. The following is brief information about each participant:

Table 1. Participant Information			
PARTICIPANT	AGE	PREVIOUS TEACHING EXPERIENCE	TA
#1	29	3 years teaching high school; 1 year as IA	yes
#2	25	A few years of previous teaching	yes
#3	28	1 year teaching experience	yes
#4	21	1 year as IA	yes
#5	24	1 year teaching high school; 1 year as IA; tutor/mentor for several years.	yes
#6	28	Substitute teacher; 1 year as IA	yes

Data Collection

For this survey, I had the participation of teaching assistants in the Department of English at Texas State. Each participant was given pseudonym so that they felt free to

share their experiences. Some questions were based on a Likert Scale, which is a survey or questionnaire that follows a format analyzing a range of answers around answer choices of “agree or disagree” (McLeod). The survey was sent to the participants within the first few weeks of the 2011 fall semester.

As stated, the survey I provided for the teaching assistants was anonymous. Once I received participant responses, I labeled the participants as 1-6, and then I analyzed the data received to identify relevant patterns. As I analyzed the data, I was curious to see if I received conflicting accounts from female teaching assistants in the survey, or if their experiences were similar and/or comparable.

After I read and analyzed the surveys, I conducted follow up interviews with those survey participants who were willing to be interviewed that I felt would provide valid information to the study. The interviews I conducted lasted between 30-45 minutes and were audiotaped. I asked the participants to tell their own story experiences based on the questions I asked. My general assumption was that gender did play a part in the teaching experiences of female teaching assistants in the writing classroom.

As my data collection came to a close, I began the next step: analysis. As previously stated, out of the nine female teaching assistants I initially asked to participate in my survey, six responded. Then, out of those six, five agreed to be interviewed. However, only four participants were available for interview at the allotted time in the semester.

To triangulate my data, I observed one female teaching assistant in the classroom. Since instructors do not always catch everything in the classroom, watching another female teaching assistant at work would provide me with yet another perspective on her

experience. Observers can ask questions, discover new ideas about what is happening in a situation, and expand/explore the findings that they come across through these observations and interview processes. This method allows for not only observational techniques from a distance, but face to face interactions with those involved in the study as well. It also allows the researcher the ability to analyze the behaviors and interactions that they see within that particular cultural setting, and attempts to create a detailed and thorough picture of female teaching assistant experiences in the classroom.

Data Analysis

After I received the first survey, I read the survey responses and interviews, looking for any similarities or common patterns that surfaced. I identified and refined categories each time I examined the data. In the end, I arrived at the following patterns that will be discussed in my findings: female teaching assistants are “mothered,” female teaching assistants are objectified; female teaching assistants experience complications with authority; and female teaching assistants perform identity.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter I report on the patterns found throughout my research: female teaching assistants are “mothered,” female teaching assistants are objectified, female teaching assistants experience complications with authority, and female teaching assistants perform identities in addition to gendered identities, including race, sexual preference, age, and class. I begin this chapter with an account of the survey questions and then discuss the most common patterns. Each question shows the highest percentage of agreement or disagreement to whether or not gender plays a role in the classroom. After describing each pattern found from my research, I provide examples from the participants that support my pattern claims. Following that, I make connections between the patterns and responses. I then continue to analyze my data of interview quotes from participants whose response is relevant to the appropriate pattern. This is a start to answering the initial questions for this thesis: How do female teaching assistants in the Department of English at Texas State experience their roles in the writing classroom? Do female teaching assistants perceive that gender plays a role in these experiences? What role do teaching assistants think gender plays in students’ attitudes and treatment toward them? What specific experiences helped shape female teaching assistants’ opinions and views about gender in the classroom?

Survey Results

One of the first questions on the survey is whether participants thought that gender initially played a role for female teaching assistants in the classroom. For the survey, their options to choose from were as follows: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree. After analyzing the survey percentages as a whole, 5 out of 6 participants answered with either “Agree” or “Neither Agree nor Disagree” for most of the questions. This suggests that the female teaching assistants I interviewed *did* believe gender to be a factor in their experiences as authority figures in the classroom. The question is how much of an impact do they believe gender to really carry? Table 2 on the next page shows my findings broken down into percentage relevance. The left portion of the chart has the survey questions I asked my participants. The right portion of the chart shows the answers the participants gave me to those questions. The answers are listed in order from highest percentage response to the lowest percentage response.

Table 2. Survey Question Results	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Agree/Disagree
Students feel comfortable interacting with me because of my gender. (My gender makes students feel comfortable interacting with me)		83%				17%
I feel comfortable around my male students		83%				17%
I feel comfortable around my female students		83%				17%
My gender influences what I teach		83%		17%		
Generally, my gender has an effect on students in my classroom	17%	67%		17%		
My gender affects how female students respond to me in the classroom		67%	17%	17%		
My gender affects how male students respond to me in the classroom	17%	67%		17%		
My gender influences how I teach	17%	67%		17%		
My gender affects how female students interact with me when we work in the classroom on revisions of their papers (after they received grade)		17%		67%	17%	
My gender affects how male students interact with me when we work in the classroom on revisions of their papers (after they received grade)		17%		67%	17%	
My gender affects how female students interact with me when we work one on one in my office on drafts of their papers		17%		67%	17%	
My gender affects how male students interact with me when we work one on one in my office on drafts of their papers	17%	17%		67%		
My gender affects how female students interact with me when we work one on one in my office on revisions of their papers (after they received grade)		17%		67%	17%	
My gender affects how male students interact with me when we work one on one in my office on revisions of their papers (after they received grade)	17%	17%		67%		
My gender affects how female students interact with me about their grades		17%		67%	17%	
My gender affects how male students interact with me about their grades		50%		50%		
My gender affects how female students interact with me when we work in the classroom on drafts of their papers		33%		50%	17%	
My gender affects how male students interact with me when we work in the classroom on drafts of their papers	17%	33%	33%	17%		

The questions in this table are not in order in which they appeared on the survey. Instead, they are ordered by highest percentage response of agreement. As we can see, many of the answers with the highest percentages are in the column of either “Agree” or “Neither Agree nor Disagree.” Thus even though the category of “Neither Agree nor Disagree” was indicated by multiple participants on the survey questions, we can still gather that gender played a part in their decision for that answer. What we must consider with the answer choice of “Neither Agree nor Disagree” is that the participant might not have thought gender to play a huge part, but we need to concentrate on the fact that they did not flat out disagree with gender playing a part either. The idea of gender contributing to the responses to these questions is still unknown. Since participants could not give an “Agree” or “Disagree” answer, this suggest that they are still undecided with how they feel in regards to their gender and the classroom, which means it is still a possibility that gender will affect these participants in those ways at one point or another.

Another part of the table to focus on is how many “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” answers were chosen by the participants. To clarify the percentages, 17% is equal to one participant. This means that only one participant disagreed when everyone else either agreed or was undecided on certain survey questions. From this, we can see that 5 out of the 6 participants never disagreed completely with gender not playing a role in the classroom setting.

Qualitative Findings

Studying the responses from the surveys led to the creation of the interview questions. I must note that there were only four respondents, so I cannot say that these are the *only* patterns that would appear; however, this is a starting point for more research to

be done. After interviewing each of the participants, I came across patterns that were discussed by each interviewee in some form or another. The patterns that emerged from the interviews were as follows:

- Female Teaching Assistants are “Mothered”
- Female Teaching Assistants are Objectified
 - Flirtation
 - Body Image
- Female Teaching Assistants Experience Complications with Authority
 - Common Issues of Authority and Students Resisting Authority
 - Student Facilitated Classes: Sharing Authority and Giving Up Power
 - Grading: Establishing and Giving Up Authority through Assessment
- Female Teaching Assistants Perform Identity

Female Teaching Assistants are “Mothered”

Multiple interviewees use the language of mothering to describe their roles in the classroom. I use this term of “language of mothering” to describe terms that I reference in this thesis: “mothering” and “nurturing.” Both of these terms are closely related to each other in terms of meaning for this study. Research shows that the term mothering is defined by a connection to an activity of caring and that it is a term associated with dependence and child development (Silva 12). Silva discusses how the term mothering associates itself with affectionate interactions and relationships related to parenting (15). Other research has also framed “mothering within this caring and nurturing construct” (Francis-Connolly 282) and that it is associated with a person who helps with the growth and development as an individual. Past research defines mothering as being concerned

with “protecting, preserving, and fostering their children’s growth” (Ruddick as quoted by Francis-Connolly 282). The term “nurturing” is associated with the term “caring” throughout much research. Mothering figures are there to protect, love, and provide for that person. They are there to teach right from wrong and are invested in a person’s life (Francis-Connolly 287). Both of these terms, “mothering” and “nurturing,” were found in my data. For example, multiple interview participants say they play this role of mothering by bringing candy to the classroom, asking about their students’ weekends, and by being involved in their students’ lives (without crossing any boundaries).

In her article, “Feminization of Composition,” Susan Miller discusses female instructors as being stereotyped with “qualities much like those of the mythologized mother: self-sacrifice, ‘dedication,’ ‘caring,’ and enormous capacities for untheorized attention to detail” (45-46). Society’s expectations and demands of female instructors have created the reality and stereotypes that women see in the classroom today. Due to these traditional roles that are placed on women, consequential situations can lead to more issues and problems in the writing classroom. Female teaching assistants go into the classroom thinking of themselves in one way, performing one role, but soon realize that their intended performance is not the role that they are taking on. Instructors who use mothering characteristics in their teachings are blessed and burdened with certain responsibilities. Miller’s terms of “dedication” and “caring” can be seen as positive terms of identification. However, if presented in the wrong way, terms such as “self-sacrifice” can be seen as a negative term. Some may wonder what kind of mothering individual you are if you self-sacrifice? This term leads to possible downsides to being mothering in the classroom and consequences to taking on a motherly role. Lakoff states that mothering

holds “traditionally low-status, unpaid, nonprofessional connotations” which upholds in this patriarchal culture (Lakoff as quoted by Fleckenstein et al. 186). Some feminists have even found mothering as a way that isolates women and restricts their independence (De Beauvoir as reference by Fleckenstein et al. 186). The problems with being a mothering figure in the classroom have quite an effect on students and on teaching assistants. As Ariel Gore states, “women who mother are subject to suffocating array of discourses and assumptions: ‘The world tells us we are too permissive, too controlling, too chaotic, too old, too young, too square, too whacked, too poor, too extravagant and everything in between’” (Gore as quoted by Schell 404). Since these gendered performances are socially constructed, female teaching assistants and female faculty members need to recognize and be aware that we are all marked by gender.

Participant #6 observes that the gendered role of being a female nurturing figure affects her experience in the classroom. She uses the terms that were described above by the language of mothering:

Well, I definitely think that [gender] has affected my students, um; it would be more difficult for me to articulate how. I guess the most obvious would be that as a teacher I’m very nurturing. Um, I’m very, I guess you would say motherly, to my students. And I think if I, if I were male, or man, that it wouldn’t be received in the same way...in my brain the gender role of a woman is to be motherly I guess...I’m very motherly, I know that I, I’ve always been sort of a caretaker, you know I care for people. Um, so I guess that it’s part of your gender. I imagine that if I was a man and I had

been raised under male sort of gender roles I wouldn't, I wouldn't look at that as sort of an option in my teaching.

In this response, Participant #6 used the language of mothering multiple times. She used the term "nurturing" once, the term "mothering" three times, and referenced "caring" twice. It is clear that the participant realizes that her gender is playing a part in her gendered performance in the classroom and that her being a female affects how she conducts and acts in that environment.

This language of mothering is also evident in Participant #5's comments about being perceived as a motherly figure in the classroom, despite the fact that elsewhere in her interview she claims that she does not see herself as a motherly figure:

I also care about them, like the one student's critique about like being more objective when grading papers. And I just feel like that's not possible because I know them and I know where they've been and what they can do with their writing and, um, I'm invested in their ideas just like they are, so, their, their person's do influence me when I'm giving them grades.

This participant referenced how she cared about her students, which is one of the terms which I associated with the language of mothering. Another aspect that I found to be a feminine trait was how she said "I feel" and "I'm invested" in her response. I argue that these responses are based on an emotional connection to the students. These terms are also associated with the language of mothering because they focus on feelings and concerns. Females are supposed to value emotions which is why we hear this language of mothering in the classroom. Saying things such as "I feel" shows their feminine

characteristics and how they care about those they come into contact with in and out of the classroom.

Taking on the motherly persona may lead to a positive or negative experience for female teaching assistants. If instructors see themselves as motherly figures then this can have a direct effect on how students see and treat those instructors in the classroom.

Eileen E. Schell mentions in her article, “The Feminization of Composition: Questioning the Metaphors That Bind Women Teachers,” the ways in which “constructing the female composition teacher as mother reinforces dominant culture’s expectations for women as ‘natural’ care givers and nurturers” (56). Young suggests these performances create “social and linguistic pressures that coerce us to give conflicting gender performances and force us into categories” which society has socially constructed (54). When placed in categories due to our gender, we are expected to perform in a certain way ascribed to women in society. Participant #6 discusses how her motherly ways of bringing candy and toys to the classroom affect her students:

Students asked where I got all my toys and candy from. I said ‘well when you go to a lot of kids’ parties you tend to get a lot of toys and candy and since I do not have kids...’ and then my students would say to me ‘but we’re your kids.’

The students of this participant clearly see this teaching assistant as a mothering and nurturing figure because the students define themselves as the instructor’s kids. The students see the instructor bringing in toys and candy and associate this as a caring characteristic.

Just as female teaching assistants see themselves as motherly figures, so do students. Students have a clear idea of what a mothering figure should be like, although their understandings may be different from the instructors. When female teaching assistants try to take on a mothering persona, whether consciously or not, it can affect the way students react to them and treat them, which can affect the teaching assistants' experience with authority as well:

Participant #1: I guess I wouldn't be surprised if they thought I was like, maybe more nurturing because I was a woman. But I also bring in like chocolates and am pretty nurturing.

For Participant #5, she may not have tried to be a motherly figure, but clearly her students thought of her in this way because she was a woman:

I try to avoid that, just because I'm not personally comfortable with like, being a mother figure to students. Like the one student who always comes to me like I was saying, who is going through radiation and how she came to my office last time to talk about her late paper, and uh, she was trying to go on and on about all these problems she is having with her family and then the doctors and all this stuff... So I try to keep them on track and avoid saying, 'yes, yes, let me hug you', whatever, all this stuff. Not that I'm not sympathetic cause I am, just that I don't want that to be the focus, I want the solution to be the focus.

It is clear to Participant #5 that the student is trying to make a maternal connection with her by the topic the student chose to discuss. The participant illustrated the attempt to reject this connection because she *is* a female instructor. Students feel comfortable with

female teaching assistants on a more personal level and feel like they can discuss vulnerable topics. Both of these participants mention the terms “nurturing” and “mothering” in their responses. The first response by Participant #1 mentioned “nurturing” twice in her short answer. Her action of bringing candy into the classroom is a way she defines herself as a mothering figure. This is a way that some female teaching assistants show they care to a different degree than male instructors. It appears that many female teaching assistants will take their teaching role to a different level than just a traditional academic way. Participant #5 mentioned how she does not see herself as a mothering figure, however, her students did view her in that way simply based on her gender and the socially constructed idea of a woman’s role. The student, that was trying to discuss her personal life with the participant was assuming that this instructor was one who saw herself as a “mothering” teaching assistant, one who took on this socially constructed role of a mothering figure. Due to these stereotypes that society has continued to place on women, all women continue to be assumed to carry the same characteristics in the classroom. Students appear to assume that every female instructor chooses to perform the same characteristics and relate to this language of mothering; however, not all female teaching assistants perform in the same way as an authority figure.

Female Teaching Assistants are Objectified

Due to the stereotypes that society has placed among women, female teaching assistants are still seen as sexual objects. Because of this, these teaching assistants are treated differently and have to be conscious every day of the ways in which they represent themselves in society.

Flirtation

Three out of the four interviewed participants mention that many of their male students are flirtatious with them in some form. Participants said that male students make inappropriate comments or try to be extra savvy in the classroom with their comments in a jokingly flirtatious sort of way. Participant #6, #1, and #4 all mention their male students felt comfortable flirting with them:

Participant #6: My male students can at times be more sort of flirtatious you know, like kind of, flirty, they think they're so cute, you know. And I don't, sort of have that with my women students.

Participant #1: He'll say something like 'oh I'm so excited to have ya'll back today, it's great that we're going to have this whole week together.' And he'll be like 'oh yes, I missed you this weekend' ...Like when I was here last semester I did have like a guy from my class come and ask me out on a date.

These comments suggest that males do not process the consequences that the instructor may face due to this flirtation. This does not happen in every situation, but in this case it appears that some males use flirtatious comments to show dominance and use it as a way to maintain some power in the classroom. Due to a dominant ideology that men overpower women, leads some males to believe a female authority figure to be somewhat beneath them. Some males feel they are entitled to things, they feel like they must dominate females in society to maintain the control. Students may like the idea of stretching the already placed boundary that has been implemented by society.

Body Image

Female teaching assistants mentioned that specific attributes can lead to a certain experience in the classroom. Often students only see the outward appearance of instructors and forget that these women are there to teach them, not to be eye candy or be disrespected.

Participant #4: I've had some flirtation... I had one student write in um, on his, like a mid-semester evaluation that my looks were only mildly distracting. And then in class he said that um, I said like 'what am I here to teach (teasing)' and he was like 'No, you're here to look well. You saw what I wrote on the evaluation, right?' And I told him it was inappropriate.

Females are aware that they are seen this way because for years we have seen that society sees only body image. This body image also affects how female teaching assistants dress for everyday life. Participant #5 discussed her dilemma of what to wear each day to the classroom:

I was thinking how does it affect my performance in the classroom... I wear like skirts or dresses and nicer clothes usually, and sometimes I worry, like, is it too revealing, make sure I'm not showing too much cleavage, are my pants too tight... I don't want to come off too sexy for the guy students or too much like one of the girls.

The first participant referenced "flirtation" once and "looks" twice in her rather short response. The second participant mentioned how she felt that she had to dress more nicely and had to be consciously aware of her sex appeal. She continued with how concerned she was about how revealing her choice of clothing was presented in the

classroom and in the academic setting in general as well. Due to the responses of these participants, one can assume that many female teaching assistants deal with similar issues of what to wear and not wear, and how to present themselves in the classroom. Our body image and the way we present ourselves is seen not only by students, but also by other teaching assistants, professors, and colleagues as well so instructors must constantly be aware of the way we represent ourselves. Because women are seen as objects, this may also mean that females experience authority problems in the classroom. Thus women are often only being seen as individuals who are either mothering or sexual objects.

Female Teaching Assistants Experience Complications with Authority

Female teaching assistants often run into issues of authority with their students. Control can be a wonderful tool when a single person is trying to teach; however, sharing this authority can lead to learning opportunities as well. It is important for students to take responsibility when learning in the classroom environment, as well as understand when they are meant to give the authority to the instructor. Under the umbrella of authority issues are the participants' common issues of authority and students resisting authority, sharing authority and giving up power through student facilitation, and establishing and giving up authority through grading assessment. These authority issues affect the way we teach, grade, and discuss in the classroom.

Common Issues of Authority and Students Resisting Authority

All instructors experience authority issues, but female teaching assistants experience specific types of these authority issues. For example, what follows are specific responses from my interviews with my female participants:

Participant #5: Every now and then I would see a student with their cell phone out, but it's males and females. Um, every now and then I'll get a student to turn in a late paper, but that's males and females, and I stay on them really strictly and tell them this is unacceptable. You need to figure out how you're going to fix it right away for this paper and for all your subsequent papers...One student in particular who has kind of gotten under my skin a little bit. He is a male student and uh, he just, sometimes like comes into class and is really kind of apathetic and uninvolved and disinterested.

Participant #6: I have some tardies...I have noticed that here at the end of the semester...several of my students had not, in my second class, had not done the homework assignment and I asked them to leave class.

Participant #4: The student who said my looks were only mildly distracting, he comes to class late a lot, and misses a lot. And I had to talk to him about his absences...and turning things in late...At the beginning of the semester I had a student who, um, shook his head and rolled his eyes when I made a point about an article being, um, derogatory towards women, and I asked him to voice his opinion, and he was very rude about it and, um, didn't articulate his ideas well...and he got into an altercation with a girl in the class, and when I tried to like mediate the discussion and make it academic and bring it back to facts and stuff, he just refused. And so when I told him stop talking, he didn't. And I told him, 'no you need to stop.' He was being so belligerent, and he didn't. And it wasn't until the

third time that I said 'stop' that he finally stopped. And so that was a pretty big deal...I had another problem with him, um, where he, in the middle of a class activity, where we were like doing individual work, he had an outburst, like he said something to me and I was like okay that's fine, but let's talk about that after class it's not related to class content, you know. And um, the whole time I was saying that he's like 'no no no wait, shh, no wait, let me, no wait no, shh' the whole time. And so, when I was done and he stopped, he just blurted out what he wanted to tell me. And I told him that that was inappropriate, not too shush me in the class, and he said 'okay mom.'

In every response provided, all participants were able to discuss one or more issues of maintaining authority in the classroom. Out of the four participant responses, there were eight references to authority issues and students resisting authority. Participant #5 mentioned students using cell phones in her class and turning papers in late. She also discussed how male students were uninvolved and disinterested while in her class. The students who do not give the instructor their full attention are only showing that they have no respect for that person as an authoritative figure. Participant #6 discussed how her students were tardy and would not do homework. Coming to class late suggests that what the instructor has to say, from the very beginning of the class, is not important enough for the student to be on time for. Not doing homework suggests that the student does not respect the instructor enough to do the work that is assigned to them. Participant #4 mentioned how students were also late to class and how some would just skip class all together. There were also students who would shake their head or roll their eyes, as well

interrupt and refuse to listen. These facial expressions are disrespectful and show that students do not appreciate their female authority figures. It appears that those students who interrupt the class are trying to show the instructor “who’s boss” and who has the power. Despite the fact that each participant mentioned a different authority issue, I think it is easy to assume that all of the participants have experienced every one of these issues in one way or another throughout their experiences as female teaching assistants in the classroom. It is apparent that some male students try to overpower their female teaching assistants through their use of language, by the comments they make, and the choice of words they write. For instance, when students make disrespectful comments about their instructors’ attire or the materials used in class, come to class unprepared, or choose to either come to class late or not at all, leaves the respect for that instructor lost. This could be due to the students trying to overpower the female instructor and take advantage of them. This behavior is learned and we can conclude that students internalize a dominant ideology which they bring from home into the classroom.

Based on my participant answers, it is clear that some male students question and resist female authority. I found that a few of the female teaching assistants I interviewed dealt with male students talking back to them, as if in a way to maintain the power. The rude comments and constant interruptions that were mentioned by Participant #4 in the previous paragraph continue to show this power struggle that male students have with female instructors. Perhaps this was the students’ way of stretching the boundaries to see how far they could push this societal expectation of the already placed stereotypes of each gender. If male students do not question female authority then are they losing their assigned gender role? Why is it that we must “recycle the language and behavior that

reconstitute[s] [our] gender” (Young 60)? The language that the participants used to describe their students, and the situations involving their students, is telling. Participant #5 used terms such as “apathetic,” “uninvolved,” and “disinterested.” Participant #4 used terms like “rude,” “refuse,” “altercation,” “belligerent,” “outburst,” “blurted,” and “inappropriate.” These terms are associated with a negative connotation. Since these female teaching assistant participants used language like this to describe situations with their male students, it is clear that those students did not accept their female instructors as authority figures. The male students choose to accept the performance of a female teaching assistant as just that, a female.

Student Facilitated Classes: Sharing Authority and Giving Up Power

All of the female teaching assistants said that they conducted a student facilitated classroom. The teaching assistants start the discussion in the classroom as it begins, but they expect to stand back more and maintain student involvement. Women value a feminist teaching perspective. This form of student engagement is good in a sense that it gets students involved. There are positive aspects of student facilitation, however, by giving the students power, it also takes away the authority from the instructor. As stated by Participant #5:

I try to take the lead less, maybe. I think that’s kind of considered a feminine way to teach, is to share authority and responsibility...that’s one way that I, my gender affects how I teach. I try to give them lots of opportunities to speak or lead discussion groups.

Participant #1 also discussed her idea of student facilitation:

My classroom is not really teacher driven as much as I try to make it student driven. And maybe there's a split in gender there. Like I'm very confident with my class being pretty heavily led by students and where the conversation goes.

Participant #4 stated:

As a woman I tend to be, I try to let the students have more of a voice and I ask them a lot of what their opinion is. Like, a lot a lot. After our first peer review I had them write a review of the peer review process-if they liked it, didn't like about it and I tried to implement their changes in the next peer review. And the next one I asked them like, give them options of how to do peer reviews and let them choose how they wanted to do it. Um, so I think I ask my students probably a lot more of what they want to get out of the course than a male teacher probably would. Um, I think I'm a lot less threatening in the classroom. Like, I let them get away probably with things that other teachers wouldn't, because I want them to be comfortable.

Each one of these participants discussed their experiences of sharing authority with their students. It is clear that many of my female teaching assistant participants lead their class with more student facilitation and student to student interaction. Participant #5 emphasizes how she takes on a feminist way of teaching by sharing authority and responsibility during the learning process. She uses discussion groups to keep her students engaged in the course material. Participant #1 also mentioned her experience of sharing authority with her students in her classroom. Participant #4 discussed how she

gave her students a voice and asked them for opinions about what they liked and disliked about certain materials and activities used during the class. Allowing students to voice their opinion about the course provides them with an idea that they are a part of the class, not just another student paying for a class by an instructor who doesn't care about what the student wants to get out of the class. By using this feminist perspective, students feel less threatened by the instructor and it helps them to feel more comfortable in the classroom. However, when sharing authority, students often forget who is actually in charge and the class can get out of hand rather quickly. This comfortable feeling can lead to a power struggle because students feel less inclined to give the instructor their full attention when it is asked for.

Grading: Establishing and Giving Up Authority Through Assessment

Female teaching assistants experience authority issues in relation to grading. The teaching assistants discussed that either they themselves, or their students, think of them as hard graders. During the interviews, I asked the participants whether they thought their gender affected how their male and female students interacted with them about grades.

Participant #4 stated:

I think men can get away with being a little more negative, not being perceived as a bad thing...when you grade, you feel like you have a persona, you know? It's like weird to find a persona that's both authoritative and not bitchy.

Women have the burden of having to play one identity while also trying to perform other culturally-sanctioned identities. For example, women must try to be authoritative while also remembering not to be too "bitchy." Females must find a balance between these two

personas, which is not an easy task since every student thinks differently about different actions.

This is another way that female teaching assistants have control in the classroom. How an instructor grades is mentioned to have some influence due to gender. As women, do we feel the need to be stricter with our grading to earn respect? Do women feel the need to justify our reasons for our grading style because of our gender?

Participants #5, #6 and #1 also said that gender has an influence on how they grade.

Participant #5 continued that:

I give them those grades then have to kind of explain why they've gotten the grade, you know? And so I'm kind of having to explain myself and my own reasoning for doing the things I do as an instructor and as a person of authority in the class.

Participant #6: After talking with many of my students in office hours, um both male and female students, they think I'm a tough grader.

Participant #1: I will say just talking with other TAs, all the guys are like, 'wow, you're a really harsh grader.'

Based on these responses, two participants were directly told that they were tough graders by male teaching assistants and male students, as well as some female students. The other two participants dealt with finding an in between position of being a friend and an authority figure. One participant discussed how she felt that she had to explain herself when giving grades and as an authority figure in general. The other participant said she felt that she had to be more polite and sensitive when grading and recognized that male teaching assistants have the luxury of being more negative in their grading. The way

female teaching assistants' grade is partly due to gender, and this has something to do with authority. Female instructors feel they need to be harsh graders in order to be seen as authority figures, but at the same time are "called out" on being harsh graders because they are also expected to be nurturing. Women are expected to be this kind of nurturing figure, and when they perform the identity of a harsh grader, they are going away from the normal stereotype. It can be implied that women should not be harsh graders solely because they *are* women, and a harsh grader is not the traditional role of a female. Since this is the case, it leads me to believe that teaching assistants think of themselves as harsh graders to prove that they are serious. It is a way for them to demand respect and maintain that authority in the classroom.

Female Teaching Assistants Perform Identity

We perform other characteristics besides gender, such as race, sexual preference, class, and age. All of these characteristic identities are wrapped together in some form or another. Society has told us how certain identities are supposed to be performed, so we expect to see these stereotypes played out while in the classroom. We must keep in mind that each individual consists of more than one identity. When in the classroom, the issue is determining which identity the teaching assistant should perform-the "given" identity or the "embraced" identity. The problem is that these different identities appear, often without the teaching assistant even being aware of it. This can create confusion when trying to figure out which identity the teaching assistant wants to perform and which identity the student wants/expects to receive. Every time a teaching assistant steps in front of the classroom, "everything we say or don't say and the way we do and don't do

things and the way we say or don't say something is taken as a performative answer to this new question" (Young 127).

In the article, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Judith Butler states that "If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (520). We continuously perform our gender in ways that society wants us too. If this stereotype does not change, and society does not change its expectations of females, then this gender performance will continue to repeat itself through future generations.

As stated by Young, there are other factors that affect instructors' roles and the teaching of literacy in the classroom. Other than acknowledging that gender is a contributing factor to teaching experiences, race, sexual preference, and class are also major factors that need to be analyzed and researched more. These factors are not the focus of my study. However, I want to mention these points because many of the female teaching assistants I interviewed address the idea of these aspects, which play a part in their own literacy practices in the classroom and the effect it had on their experiences as authority figures. The following participants discuss what identities and additional facts affect them in the classroom.

Participant #1: I definitely think age matters...I think the fact that I'm a graduate student definitely matters...I think race definitely matters.

Participant #4: I think a big one is my vulnerability...I think [age] influences...

One of the additional factors that the interviewed female teaching assistants mention is race. Not only does gender affect our behaviors in the classroom, but so does our race: "I put forth my best efforts to be black, to adjust my speech and behaviors so that they cohered with my race" (Young 1). It appears that because of our race, we are expected to once again, act, speak, and behave in a certain way. How we are supposed to speak directly relates to our literacy practice because we must "comply with the gender behaviors appropriate for [our] race and sex" (46).

Participant #6: I think that ethnicity, absolutely...I think age also affects it, the way I dress, the way I talk...

Three out of four interviews mentioned different identities other than gender to potentially affect their experiences in the classroom. Two participants mentioned race/age, and all three mentioned age. These identity roles affect how students react to the female teaching assistants and how the teaching assistants react to the students as well. As we can see there are many additional factors that also play a part in the experiences of female teaching assistants in the classroom. How much these roles play a part in these experiences we do not know. It is important to understand that there are different identities that instructors perform while in the academic environment.

Michael A. Hogg, Deborah J. Terry, and Katherine M. White, authors of the article "A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory," discuss the idea of identity theory. They state that "identity theory links role identities to behavioral and affective outcomes, and acknowledges that some

identities have more self-relevance than others” (257). These factors affect our identity and inevitably shape who we are in the eyes of others because we are forced to perform the roles which society places on us because of our characteristics. Peter J. Burke and Donald C. Reitzes, authors of the article “The Link Between Identity and Role Performance,” continue with this idea of identity: “It is one’s *actions* that others judge as being appropriate or inappropriate for the *identity* one has, and appropriateness can only be gauged in terms of the meaning of the behavior relative to the meanings of the identity and alternative counter-identities” (Heise as quoted by Burke and Reitzes 85). People perceive our identities by the socially constructed ideals of society and of the stereotypes that are placed among certain figures in certain fields. According to Hogg et al., “identity is the pivotal concept linking social structure with individual action; thus the prediction of behavior requires an analysis of the relationship between self and social structure” (257). These roles affect students’ interpretations of women as authority figures, as well as the interpretations of the female instructors. How do you separate these performances? Which performance do students see or identify with? Which performance does the female teaching assistant see or identify with? To try to determine what performance to use one must consider this idea discussed by Hogg et al., that “role identities are self-conceptions, self-referent cognitions, or self-definitions that people apply to themselves as a consequence of the structural role positions they occupy, and through a process of labeling or self-definition as a member of a particular social category” (256).

There is no right way to be an effective instructor because there are many factors that play into an instructor’s pedagogy and their identity. Instructors need to be “free from having to choose a passing identity or a resisting one” (Young 50). Your identity does

impact how you teach and how you learn. According to the participants I interviewed, they all believe, in some form or another, gender to be a big role in the classroom. Gender affects what female teaching assistants teach, how they act, and how their students perceive them in the classroom. We cannot disregard this form of identity as impacting both the instructors and the students' experiences in the classroom. However, it should not determine whether you are seen as successful or acceptable based on certain characteristics. Due to my findings, it is clear that one's identity affects their impact in the classroom. Stereotypes are what define a person's accepted literacy and pedagogy use: "As college professors, we're forced into linguistic constraints" (63). Due to these factors that define our identity, we are expected and somewhat required to teach and learn in certain ways. Since we are raised with these stereotypes, we teach what we know. Our gender, sexual preference, race, age, and/or class directly affect the dynamic of class interaction. Therefore, these factors do in fact impact literacy forms in the classroom. If we try to teach outside of the "norm" then we go against the dominant ideals. Going outside of the norm questions those who are dominant and this "scares them, [because it] challenges their power—something" (85).

Society remains silent because questioning these performances will challenge what we know and what we are comfortable with. People do not like change; those who are the dominant do not like change. Those who are the dominant shun the idea of moving to different forms of literacy and authority because those in power do not ever want to give up that power. This "negative imaging and exclusivity is nowhere more evident than [in the academy,] in the stance toward nonstandard language varieties" (Young 89). Society has constructed what we believe to be the 'right' form of literacy

based on each individual's characteristics, but society forgets that different genders, races, classes, ages etc. all teach in different forms. There is no standard language, therefore, there should be no standard performance expected. The classroom should be a safe place "where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (118). We should not have to pick a certain aspect of ourselves to "perform" when teaching just as we should not have to perform with language. Other identities naturally create other forms of language. This creates an issue because language is then changed and causes a different form of learning to be created and accepted.

It is clear that a person's gender is a factor in their success and impacts whether a person is discriminated against. In the classroom, as well as in the world, women, despite their race, sexual preference, class, or age, are disregarded in the professional, world as suggested by many scholars: for example, Linda Carli, Michelle Payne, Renee Romano, Eileen E. Schell, and Marian M. Sciachitano. But why is it that one aspect of our performance can define our entire identity- how we act, speak, learn, teach, and dress? Why do these factors affect our capabilities? Gender is defining teaching assistants' roles in the classroom whether we choose to admit it or not. Society looks at a person and only sees what is on the outside- not qualifications or ability. This happens because society places so much emphasis on what is to be considered the norm, which is a dominant, white male. Society automatically perceives women to carry certain characteristics and stereotypes them into categories because of what they are told is the norm. I think society wants to continue this stereotype for women because many are afraid of getting away from the dominant ideal and are scared that women may be just as powerful as men. The

fear of women being just as equal with their qualifications and abilities is a reason to downplay them as anything other than a domestic housewife.

Females are not treated the same way as the dominant sexual identity (white male) just as those in the GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered) community are treated as ‘other.’ In *Queer America: A GLBT History of the 20th Century*, author Vicki L. Eaklor discusses these historical and present discriminations and states that “sexual orientation has nothing to do with the ability to make a mark, let alone make history” (7). This thesis does not focus on other sexualities and their affect in the classroom; however, I thought it was important to show how many genders, sexualities, races, and members of class are expected to live up to the perceived idea of how they need to act, speak, and dress to be successful and accepted in today’s society.

History has shown that gender plays a part in the acceptance of those who are not white, middle-class men. Our gender defines our equality in life: “When people have chosen certain characteristics—race, class, religion, ethnicity, sex—and determined that those characteristics have been used to deny them equality, they are said to be operating in a system of identity politics” (Eaklor 3). These characteristics define a person’s equality in society or the way in which they are treated because of social norms and expectations. Gender clearly plays a role in the treatment and attitude towards those who are not considered the “norm,” and since male is the norm, female are the ‘other.’ Since society creates this “perfect” dominant picture of what the world should be like, those who are “different” are told to act a certain way because that is what is expected: “The self-imposed pressure on the United States to succeed (by whatever definition) was tremendous, while its self-image as ‘God’s chosen nation’ added an apocalyptic

dimension to potential failure” (21). It appeared that if society did not live up to this perfect God’s chosen nation, than they would be doomed. For this “perfect” society to be deemed as acceptable:

Sex and gender were supposed to match exactly and the characteristics of each were appropriate (even necessary) to its sphere and complementary of the other in a balanced society. Men needed to be masculine, meaning physically and intellectual strong, aggressive, competitive, and rational. Women were to serve humanity by protecting the feminine virtues of spiritual strength, passivity, cooperation, compassion, and emotion...a “good” woman took along her femininity, just as a man did not leave his masculinity at the office. (22)

Society expects a certain gender to have a certain identity, therefore, forcing them to act in a certain way. When teaching literacy, a man is supposed to be masculine and a lecturer, whereas a woman is supposed to be kind and act as a motherly figure in the classroom. We place these perceived notions on individuals based on their gender, sexual preference, race, and/or class. Who is to say what “normal” is when “norms can vary across time, place, class, and other factors” (Eaklor 29)?

In order to overcome these issues we must first educate those who believe in this dominant ideology. We have to educate people about the sexist issues that females are facing not only in the field of composition, but in society in general. Then we must learn and understand these troubles and find a way to quit this repeated cycle of females being seen as less in the classroom.

V. CONCLUSION/IMPLICATIONS

In this thesis, I argue that female teaching assistants do believe gender plays a role in the experiences of female teaching assistants in the classroom. Female teaching assistants perceive that students view them differently when they are in the position of authority. These differences also create a different experience for teaching assistants because they have to act and conduct themselves in particular ways to maintain power and respect. Since teaching assistants feel this way about how their students treat them, they behave in ways that respond to this perception. In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss the implications of this study for future research, teaching, and training.

New Questions to Consider

The questions I initially asked in my research led me to the data and analysis that I have laid out in this study. Through the countless hours of obtaining information and listening to participant answers, I have also started wondering about many other questions pertaining to female teaching assistants and their experiences in the classroom. For example, future researchers might want to ask the following kinds of questions:

- To what various factors do teaching assistants attribute their experiences in the classroom?
 - What role does race play in teaching assistants' experiences?
 - What role does class play in teaching assistants' experiences?
 - What role does age play in teaching assistants' experiences?

- What role does sexual preference play in teaching assistants' experiences?
- How do teaching assistants negotiate multiple identities in the classroom?
- What forms of training and mentoring help teaching assistants address these issues?

Implications for Future Research

To obtain more valuable information, researchers need to study a bigger number of participants from more than just one department at one University. Experiences may be different in other locations due to multiple factors so it is important to expand the study. We need to continue to survey and interview participants of all races, sizes, ages, and genders so that the information will not be biased toward one kind of female teaching assistant. We need to look at the participants over a longer period of time so that there is more information for the researcher to analyze and discuss. By expanding the study, researchers will be able to not only address the gap that I have brought to question, but other possible gaps in the research as well. We must further do research on how identity and the stereotypes placed on our gender affects teaching assistant experiences as authority figures in the classroom.

Implications for Teaching and Training

We must educate students and instructors in every way possible about the common gender issues in the classroom. Many institutions provide practicum classes that teaching assistants are required to take during their teaching experience. One way to enhance these classes is to revise them so that issues of gender are addressed explicitly. This class is an easy way for teachers to address ways on how to approach problematic issues if one comes into contact with them. For example, the practicum might contain a

unit on behavioral issues that a teaching assistant may encounter because of their gender. In addition, those in the class might be required to observe other teaching assistants when they are conducting their own classes to see how others would handle certain situations. These observations could then be discussed during the course so that solutions to the problems can be found. The practicum courses could also lead into workshops where teaching assistants can role play in scenarios where situational circumstances may happen, and they may become better equipped to handle the issues. It also gives the teaching assistants an opportunity to brainstorm ways to fix those particular situations if they were to arise.

Another way is to have mentors assigned to teaching assistants- specifically, female mentors paired with female teaching assistants. Mentors are there to provide assistance and guidance for the “newbies” in the teaching world. A mentor is an ideal person for a female teaching assistant to ask about problems in the classroom. Most likely the mentor has been in contact with some form of that same problem and may be able to provide assistance in how to handle the situation. They could also come observe the class and personally see how the problem is being addressed at the time that it occurs.

I have concluded that teaching has come a long way in the past few decades; however, stereotypes of gender still create conflict for teaching assistants in the classroom. It is important to continue the research on this subject because it is far from being an over-discussed topic.

APPENDIX A: SURVEY CONSENT FORM

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey. I am a graduate student in the MA in Rhetoric and Composition here at Texas State University and am interested in the experiences of teaching assistants in the writing classroom.

This survey is anonymous, unless you agree to be interviewed at some point after you complete the survey.

This survey should take approximately 10 minutes to complete. I would also be interested in discussing the interview further with you, if you agree to be interviewed. An interview, should you agree to one, would take approximately 30-45 minutes and would be scheduled at your convenience. If you agree to be interviewed, please fill out the information at the bottom of this survey.

Place completed surveys in my box by Tuesday, September 20, or email back to me at a.rice0922@yahoo.com. If you have any additional questions, please feel free to email me as well.

APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS

Your gender:

Your age:

Years of teaching experience:

Generally, my gender has an effect on students in my classroom.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

My gender affects how female students respond to me in the classroom

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

My gender affects how male students respond to me in the classroom

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

My gender affects how female students interact with me when we work in the classroom on drafts of their papers

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

My gender affects how male students interact with me when we work in the classroom on drafts of their papers

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

My gender affects how female students interact with me when we work in the classroom on revisions of their papers (after they have received a grade)

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

My gender affects how male students interact with me when we work in the classroom on revisions of their papers (after they have received a grade)

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

My gender affects how female students interact with me when we work one on one in my office on drafts of their papers.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

My gender affects how male students interact with me when we work one on one in my office on drafts of their papers.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

My gender affects how female students interact with me when we work one on one in my office on revisions of their papers (after they have received a grade).

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

My gender affects how male students interact with me when we work one on one in my office on revisions of their papers (after they have received a grade).

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

My gender affects how female students interact with me about their grades.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

My gender affects how male students interact with me about their grades.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

Students feel comfortable interacting with me because of my gender. (My gender makes students feel comfortable interacting with me.)

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

I feel comfortable around my male students.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

I feel comfortable around my female students.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

My gender influences how I teach

Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

My gender influences what I teach

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

What additional factors, if any, do you believe affect how students interact with and respond to you in the classroom and/or office?

I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to interview you if you are willing. If so, please provide your name and available interview times below:

Name:

Available interview times:

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Why/How do you think your gender has affected your students in the classroom?

Why/How do you think your gender has affected how your female students respond/interact to you in the classroom?

Why/How do you think your gender has affected how your male students respond/interact to you in the classroom?

Why/How do you think your gender has affected how female students interact with you when working on drafts of their papers in the classroom?

Why/How do you think your gender has affected how male students interact with you when working on drafts of their papers in the classroom?

Why/How do you think your gender has affected how female students interact with you when working on revisions of their papers in the classroom (after they have received a grade)?

Why/How do you think your gender has affected how male students interact with you when working on revisions of their papers in the classroom (after they have received a grade)?

Why/How do you think your gender has affected how female students interact with you when working one on one in your office on drafts of their papers? Does that change when you work one on one with them on revisions after they received a grade?

Why/How do you think your gender has affected how male students interact with you when working one on one in your office on drafts of their papers? Does that change when you work one on one with them on revisions after they received a grade?

Why/how do you think your gender has affected how female students interact with you about their grades?

Why/how do you think your gender has affected how male students interact with you about their grades?

Why/How do you think gender plays a part in how comfortable students feel when interacting with you?

Do you think your gender affects how comfortable you are around your male students?

Do you think your gender affects how comfortable around your female students?

Have you experienced any behavioral issues (late papers, coming late to class, talking during class etc.)?

Why/how does gender influence how you teach?

Why/how does gender influence what you teach?

Can you describe a time when you felt gender was a factor in the classroom?

Can you tell a story that captures your experience as a female teacher?

What additional factors, if any, do you believe affect how students interact with and respond to you in the classroom and/or office?

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