

Ancient Women's Roles as Portrayed in World History Textbooks in the United States

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Abstract

The study demonstrates that in the United States, not much has changed regarding the presentation of women in the most-used high school social studies textbooks. Men continue to receive significantly greater coverage than women regarding the roles they played in society. The author uses the findings from the analyses as means of explaining why a significant number of Americans feel that the nation is not ready for a female President, despite the very real possibility of the election of the first female president. Following the instrumentation of a coding criteria to conduct a content analysis of the current five most-used textbooks for the teaching of world history, the author found to his surprise that women would have the greatest involvement in the authoring and reviewing of these textbooks than ever before.

1. Introduction

The education of children regarding the existence of different cultures and the role of women within them tends to take place in the social studies classroom. Most of the time, both teachers and students use textbooks (especially world history textbooks) as the main source of information to develop lessons and learn about the role of women. (Bullough and Gitlin, 2001). History has shown that women have been the leaders of major nations and global empires since the beginning of time, yet the United States currently has never had a woman as a sitting president. How do the most-used textbooks in the United States describe the roles of women from ancient times, and do these textbooks have the potential of fostering an idea among American students on the "appropriate" roles of women as citizens in society? The current teaching of world history in the United States tend to focus heavily on the impact of the ancient empires of Byzantium, Egypt, Greece, and Rome on the Western world primarily (Zevin, 2000).

An examination of the presentation of women in the ancient world through the pages of the five most-used world history textbooks in America's public schools may give insight on how Americans may perceive the "appropriate" roles of women.

2. Context

Currently, the news media around the world has focused on the American citizens' occupation with the very soon upcoming Presidential election year of 2016 especially with regards to the former First Lady and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, who many experts slate will become one of the two frontrunners for citizens to vote for as their next president. If Mrs. Clinton becomes the first female president of the United States of America ever, how will this impact the view of Americans regarding the role women in a political, social, and economic sense or more poignantly, how will this impact the way educators (social studies educators) go about describing the role of women throughout history? How would a win by Mrs. Clinton possibly impact how social studies teachers, textbook authors, and publishers go about presenting the roles of women in the United States and beyond? Looking into how world history textbooks copyrighted since the start of the year 2000 have presented the history of women from ancient times may give some insight.

3. Purpose of the Study

The presentation of women in a gendered-stereotypical role may lead students, especially women, to feel that they have no contribution to the global community and had no significance in the past cultures of the world (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). This study seeks to examine the quantitative presentation of women versus men in ancient history through a criteria of questions highlighting the possible roles women had throughout antiquity. Moreover, this study will juxtapose these analyses with a discussion on the role of gender and current educational policy that helps to explain the results of the analysis of the presentation of women.

4. Literature

Most scholars have come to the conclusion that any omission of women's history and that of minorities cheats young women and minorities of today (The Council on Interracial Books for Children, Inc., 1977). In 1980, the United States Commission on Civil Rights (1980) reported that minorities, older persons, and women are often stereotyped by being portrayed in a manner that conforms to widely accepted ideas by white men about these groups. Most researchers acknowledge Janice Law Trecker as the modern pioneer of conducting content analysis for the presentation of women in social studies textbooks. Subsequently, Trecker's research examines the impact of the presentation of women in American history textbooks and how this presentation influences what women learn about the significance of their roles in the past and what they perceive those roles to be in the present. Trecker (1971) bases her research on the question, "Are the stereotypes which limit girls' aspirations present in high school history texts?" To answer this question, she analyzes over a dozen of the most popular United States history textbooks dating back from 1950-1960 paying close attention to all textbook entries and various sectional themes that contained the word, *women* and how the history of women had been written or omitted in such themes as colonial period, Revolutionary War, Education Movements, Women's Right's Movements, the Civil War, Labor Reform Movement, Western Expansion Era, World Wars I and II, and family patterns. Despite Trecker's (1971) discovery that the 13 total textbooks reviewed had been authored by 27 men and 3 women, she would conclude that though a significant omission of women from these different themes exist, "it is not a sign of intentional bias." Perhaps, taking a page out of the approach of Janice Law Trecker (1971), Mary K. Tetreault (1986), also makes the case that the current practice of mentioning women in "traditional roles" does not constitute an intentional bias and is not wrong to do so; however, she acknowledges the failure on the part of textbook publishers to provide other aspects of women's experiences as a form of sex-bias that stems from history still being written with a male perspective (Tetreault, 1986). Tetreault's textbook study branches off from Trecker by her making the case that publishers and teachers using these books need to provide a historical context of history by telling of women's history through the private sphere as well as the public sphere of existence for women.

As with past scholars before her, Tetreault uses historical quotes contained in her sample of textbooks to argue that the women's history that receives the most copy in textbooks involves women involved in public crusades such as the temperance movements, women's suffrage, abolitionism, women's education reform, and labor reform. Their work in the private sphere such as the raising children, an example of leadership development, is not seen as history, and therefore it is not a further developed subject to be analyzed by teachers and students. Some scholars consider the content analyses of Tetreault and Trecker as the most authoritative involving the presentation of women. In his critically acclaimed book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, sociologist James Loewen (1995) conducted a content analysis of U.S. history textbooks involving the portrayal of multicultural history regarding the telling of the history of Christopher Columbus and the apartheid policies of the United States with an emphasis on the presidency of Woodrow Wilson. Loewen's use of these two historic figures helps readers to understand the degree of omission of multicultural history that serves as the thesis of his book. However, Loewen, deliberately leaves out of the discussion on how his chosen sample of textbooks present information on women and feminine perspectives. In the final chapter of *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, Loewen mentions that he needed not to look at the history of women because he considers the scholarship of Mary Tetreault and others that as the most thorough (Loewen, 1995).

To see if the Sadker and Sadker's (1994) claims about the potential for textbooks to lead women to perceive themselves negatively in regards to their place in civilization had global implications, Clark, Ayton, Frechette, and Keller (2005) set out to conduct a content analysis on the presentation of women in the most-used world history textbooks used between 1960 and 1990. Their study represents one of the earliest devoted to the presentation of women in world history textbooks in their examination of the most-used world history textbooks for high school students in the decades of the 1960s, 1980s, and 1990s.

Upon using a coding method based on six criteria: 1) the ratio of female to male names, 2) percentage of pages mentioning women/women issues, 3) the number of women who received a paragraph or more, 4) ratio of women to men mentioned by name in a book caption (sidebar), 5) the percentage of illustrations devoted to women, and 6) the percentage of lines mentioning women per 10 pages, they found as in previous studies that women received far less attention than men.

But, their findings would also show that since the 1960s, the world history textbooks had a steady increase in the percentage of the inclusion of women (Clark, Ayton, Frechette, & Keller, 2005). They found a combined total of 853 names regarding women to 10,958 names regarding men in the indexes for all 18 of the textbooks (A ratio of 8 women to every 100 men). The book captions (sidebars) had 368 pictures of women compared to 2,167 pictures of men (A ratio of 17 women to every 100 men). Out of the total of 5,907 images that indicates a person, only 1,826 images feature women. The book captions (sidebars) had 368 pictures of women compared to 2,167 pictures of men (A ratio of 17 women to every 100 men). Out of the total of 5,907 images that indicates a person, only 1,826 images feature women.

Regarding the appearances of women, the textbooks show an overall steady increase of the percent of women mentioned in the textbooks between the 1960s and 1990s. The ratio of women names to men names in the textbooks' indexes had an increase from 3.2 percent for every 100 women in the 1960s, to 5.9 percent in the 1980s and, to 10.6 women for every 100 men in the 1990s. The percent of pages mentioning women increased from an average of 3.8 percent in the 1960s, to 11.4 percent in the 1980s and 16.3 percent in the 1990s. The results of the percentage of women mentioned in pictures demonstrate an exception. The percent of pictures featuring women made a steady increase from 26.6 percent in the 1960s to 37.9 percent in the 1980s. Following the 1980s, however, the percent of pictures showing women decreased from 37.9 percent to 32.6 percent in the 1990s.

The results of their findings regarding the mentioning of women in sentences show the least improvement in percentages regarding the inclusion of women. Their findings show that the percent of the sentences mentioning women went from an average of 2.1 percent for the 1960s textbooks to being 2.5 percent for the 1980s textbooks, and 5.7 percent for the 1990s textbooks. Lastly, they make a quick reference to the fact that some of the textbooks demonstrate an influx of the use of women authors from 1960s (one woman co-author), 1980s (one woman co-author), and 1990s (four woman co-authors and one of the four listed as a first author) and they make the hypothesis that this might have been a factor in the increase percentages of the presentation of women.

The results of their findings illustrate several things. First, their sample of world history textbooks contains trace amounts of information regarding women. Therefore, their study demonstrates that the problem of the limited presentation of women is not limited to just textbooks of American history. This last study and the aforementioned studies serves as the inspiration for the author's choice of examining the presentation of women in the most-used world history books copyrighted from the 2000s and the methodology used for the study.

5. Methodology

In wanting to analyze the presentation of women during the ancient periods from the five most-used world history textbooks, the author of this case study developed a coding criteria of questions known as *The Criteria for Evaluating World History Textbooks for Gender Fairness*. The criteria consist of the following series of qualitative and quantitative-based questions listed below based on the various known roles that women have had for centuries and some of the thematic topics used by scholars aforementioned in the literature review:

Category One: Quantitative Questions:

- I. *How many times are women mentioned in writing and editing credits as compared to men?*
 - a. How many women as compared to men serve as author or chief editor of this textbook?
 - b. How many women as compared to men did the textbook publisher employ as consultants (academic, teacher, and students)?
- II. *How many times are women presented in sentences as compared to men?*
- III. *How many times are women presented in illustrations as compared to men?*
 - a. Does the book cover include women? If so, how many?
 - b. Does the book cover include men? If so, how many?

- c. Do the illustrations within the textbook pages show women? If so, how many as compared to men?
- d. Do the illustrations within the textbook pages exist as sidebars? If so, how many?

Category Two: Qualitative (Thematic) Questions

IV. *Are women and men presented as having roles in the illustrations?*

- a. Do the illustrations present women in the following roles?
 - i. *domestic roles*
 - ii. *non-domestic roles*
 - iii. *citizen roles*
 - iv. *governmental roles*
 - v. *religious roles*
 - vi. *military roles*
- b. Do the illustrations present men, in the following roles?
 - i. *non-domestic roles*
 - ii. *citizen roles*
 - iii. *governmental roles*
 - iv. *religious roles*
 - v. *military roles*

The choice of questions serving the Criteria for Evaluating World History Textbooks follows the procedures for content analysis listed below (Covert, 1977):

1. Identify the universe of content (that content which is to be analyzed).
2. Obtain examples of the content to be analyzed.
3. Identify the coding units (how the content will be divided).
4. Specify a category system (choose a classification system into which the content will be fitted).
5. Apply the selected category system to the individual coding units.
6. Revise categories based on application.

Upon establishing the coding themes for the Criteria for Evaluating World History Textbooks for Gender Fairness, the author went about determining which textbooks constituted among the five most-used texts in America's public schools. The author determined the choice of books for this study based on two factors: first, a study spearheaded by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and educational scholar Diane Ravitch (2004) involving the content of world history textbooks and second, matching the foundation's choice of textbooks with the textbook adoption choices for textbooks through contact with the curriculum specialists at the state boards of education for Florida, Texas, California, and New York: the four states with the largest population of students in the United States. Consequently, the five textbooks used for this study on investigating the presentation of women in the ancient world that nearly matches Ravitch's choices for investigation. Moreover, the author has found school districts in states outside of the "big four" that still use these same textbook editions. The five books chosen for this study are as follows:

1. Roger B. Beck, Linda Black, Larry S. Krieger, Phillip C. Naylor, Dahia Ibo Shabaka, *Modern World History: Patterns of Interaction* (McDougal Littell, 2003).
2. Elisabeth Gaynor Ellis and Anthony Esler, *World History: Connections to Today* (Prentice Hall, 2003).
3. Mounir A. Farah and Andrea Berens Karls, *World History: The Human Experience* (Glencoe, 2001).
4. Sue Miller, ed., *World History: People & Nations* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 2000).
5. Jackson S. Spielvogel, *World History*: (National Textbook Company, 1999, Glencoe, 2003).

Upon completion of the analyses of the content of all five textbooks and considering the results of past content analyses of textbooks for the presentation of women, the author found as no surprise that men still had an overwhelming representation of women but some unexpected findings did surface that makes for a discussion about quality vs. quantity.

6. Results/Findings on the Textbook Presentation of Women:

The presentation of the roles of women in the ancient world from all five textbooks reveals quantitatively that men overall receive more coverage in the presentation of information than women through the use of the coding questions from the Criteria for Evaluating World History Textbooks for Gender Fairness. The statistical tables (see Appendix) highlight the roles of men more so than women in each of the five textbooks through the ancient world content themes. Moreover, when adding the total percentages from all five textbooks under each of the six categories *individually*, the following results show up:

Domestic	47 percent
Religious	29 percent
Non-domestic	25 percent
Citizen	20 percent
Government	16 percent
Military	6 percent

However, some surprise results did occur unlike the other aforementioned studies in this article. Tables 1 and 2 (see Appendix) show men having only a slight edge over women in their participation as authors/editors and reviewers of the textbook prior to these textbooks' publication! All aforementioned studies involving the presentation of women in textbooks show a dominant percentage of men as authors, in particular. A reasonable explanation exist when considering the implications of the surprise result that women had significant involvement as authors and as reviewers of these textbooks.

7. Implications

Some scholars argue that women in the academy may cater to “the adopting of academic (and androcentric) interests of the men who control their fates” (Martin, 2000, p. 149). This may explain Trecker’s approach at her historic study of textbooks as she did not mention by name in the body of her paper her choice of textbooks that had just 3 women as authors out of the total 30 authors of these books and all the textbooks had multiple authors (Trecker, 1971, pp. 251-252). Furthermore, the academic reviewers and authors more than likely had read textbooks and have been taught an androcentric view of world history at an institution of higher education—starting with the subject of ancient history. Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant (1991) argue that the degree of what is in textbooks reflect the symbolic representation of the world and of society according to the values of a power-holding social group. Furthermore, they argue that what is presented in textbooks is used to represent legitimacy on the dominant status held by particular social group, and these materials and media handed down to students have the potential to indoctrinate a confirmation of such status to students who are members of the a dominant group and those who are in a minority. For instance, Tignor et. al (2011) discusses in the first chapter of their college-level world history textbook that women and men began changing societal roles as a result of the agricultural revolution despite women’s pivotal (and leadership role) in developing agriculture—let alone, teaching men how to farm. They base their premise on a theory that a woman’s ability to lactate led to the division of societal roles (Hrdy, 1999) where men became the more dominant as they performed more backbreaking work and then took their dominance in the fields to the household. They then make the argument that as populations became denser with growth, political differences created patriarchal inequalities that would spread around the globe. Their textbook chapter focuses on the ancient civilizations in Europe, Asia, and Africa while making no mention of the strong evidence of matriarchal leadership that took place in the civilizations of the North and South American continents.

What if Americans had learned in their high school social studies courses and college courses about leaders like the Egyptian pharaoh, Cleopatra VII? Cleopatra ascended to the throne as pharaoh jointly with her brother Ptolemy XII upon the death of their father Ptolemy XI and had aspired to expand the Egyptian influence beyond Africa and saw the Roman dictator Julius Caesar as a person who could help her fulfill her aspirations (Reich, 1908). Cleopatra had a significant role in the history of the Roman Empire as she fought alongside her partner Marc Antony in the civil war pitting her and Antony’s forces against Octavian at the Battle of Actium (Miles, 1988). Though she lost that war, historians acknowledge her as the leader of her troops (Miles, 1988). Only two of the five textbooks (World History and Connections to Today) surveyed in this study mention her as a just a queen in one sentence.

Cleopatra benefitted from a society that valued and cherished women for the biological fact that they give birth and not men—a far cry from the theory of gender roles being altered at the expense of women for their role in society as lactating mothers. Subsequently, Egypt through religion developed into a society that openly promoted women as equals to men (Reich, 1908). Women in ancient Egypt enjoyed the full array of freedoms that allowed for their complete control over their minds and bodies (Miles, 1988). Moreover, none of the textbooks mention the reverence that the ancient Egyptians held for women and how this reverence affected the politics practiced in that ancient civilization. The teaching of history can no longer ignore these omissions of the role of women from the ancient world to the present.

8. Conclusion

As the United States of America nears the year 2016, many Americans will have to rethink their view on the role of women in their society as a new president will start his or her term in January of 2017. According to the Pew Research Center (Kent, 2015), most Americans believe a woman will serve their nation as its president within their lifetime. This milestone, if the current Democratic party frontrunner Mrs. Hillary Rodham Clinton wins the presidential election of 2016, would make the United States only the 19th country in the world to have had a female leader as head of state (Kent, 2015). Furthermore, 38% of Americans believe one major reason there aren't more women in top elective office in the U.S. is that they are held to higher standards than men, and that another 37% of Americans say that the nation is just not ready to elect female leaders (presidents). What was not said however is that these percentages of Americans grew up in an educational environment where their textbooks stated and their teachers taught more about the accomplishments of men while the women stayed home and raised the kids!

9. Bibliography

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10. Appendix

Table 1: Gender of Authors or Chief Editors of the Textbooks

Textbook	<i>N</i> (Authors)	<i>N</i> (Chief Editors)	<i>P</i> (Women)	<i>P</i> (Men)
People & Nations	0	1	100	0
The Human Experience	2	0	50	50
Patterns of Interaction	5	0	40	60
World History	1	0	0	100
Connections to Today	2	0	50	50

Table 1: *Gender of Authors or Chief Editors of the Textbooks*

Table 2

Percentage of Women Working as Book Review Consultants

Textbook	<i>N</i> (Consultants)	<i>P</i> (Academic Consultants)	<i>P</i> (Teacher Consultants)	<i>P</i> (Student Consultants)
People & Nations	22	40	57	0
Human Experience	28	24	45	0
Patterns of Interaction	75	21	53	52
World History	30	25	39	0
Connections to Today	62	35	53	67

Table 2: Percentage of Women as Book Review Consultants

Table 3

Number of Sentences Involving Women and Men in the Coverage of Ancient Greece

<i>Textbook</i>	<i>N</i> (sentences)	<i>N</i> (sentences covering women)	<i>N</i> (sentences covering men)	<i>P</i> (sentences covering women)	<i>P</i> (sentences covering men)
<i>People & Nations</i>	476	66	410	14	86
<i>The Human Experience</i>	576	145	431	25	75
<i>Patterns of Interaction</i>	402	50	352	12	88
<i>World History</i>	356	60	296	17	83
<i>Connections to Today</i>	341	57	284	17	83

Table 3: Number of Sentences Involving Women and Men in the Coverage of Ancient Greece

Table 4

Number of Sentences Involving Women and Men in the Coverage of the Roman and Byzantine Empires

<i>Textbook</i>	<i>N</i> (sentences)	<i>N</i> (sentences covering women)	<i>N</i> (sentences covering men)	<i>P</i> (sentences covering women)	<i>P</i> (sentences covering men)
<i>People & Nations</i>	423	36	387	9	91
<i>The Human Experience</i>	414	47	367	11	89
<i>Patterns of Interaction</i>	477	49	428	10	90
<i>World History</i>	356	60	296	17	83
<i>Connections to Today</i>	342	44	298	13	87

Table 4: Number of Sentences Involving Women and Men in the Coverage of the Roman and Byzantine Empires

Table 5

Number of Sentences Involving Women and Men in the Coverage of Ancient Egypt

<i>Textbook</i>	<i>N</i> (sentences)	<i>N</i> (sentences covering women)	<i>N</i> (sentences covering men)	<i>P</i> (sentences covering women)	<i>P</i> (sentences covering men)
<i>People & Nations</i>	73	13	60	18	82
<i>The Human Experience</i>	103	24	79	23	77
<i>Patterns of Interaction</i>	98	24	74	24	76
<i>World History</i>	98	29	69	30	70
<i>Connections to Today</i>	130	39	91	30	70

Table 5: Number of Sentences Involving Women and Men in the Coverage of Ancient Egypt

Table 6

Number of Sentences Involving Women and Men in the Coverage of the Fertile Crescent and Mesopotamian Civilizations

<i>Textbook</i>	<i>N</i> (sentences)	<i>N</i> (sentences covering women)	<i>N</i> (sentences covering men)	<i>P</i> (sentences covering women)	<i>P</i> (sentences covering men)
<i>People & Nations</i>	124	12	112	10	90
<i>The Human Experience</i>	269	31	238	12	88
<i>Patterns of Interaction</i>	316	38	278	12	88
<i>World History</i>	190	24	166	13	87
<i>Connections to Today</i>	189	29	160	15	85

Table 6: Number of Sentences Involving Women and Men in the Coverage of the Fertile Crescent and Mesopotamian Civilizations

Table 7

Number of Illustrations Covering Both Genders in the Four World History Themes

<i>Textbook</i>	<i>N</i> (Illustrations from each textbook respectively)	<i>N</i> (Illustrations involving women)	<i>N</i> (Illustrations involving men)	<i>P</i> (Illustrations involving women)	<i>P</i> (Illustrations involving men)
<i>People & Nations</i>	52	13	39	25	75
<i>The Human Experience</i>	88	23	65	26	74
<i>Patterns of Interaction</i>	84	13	71	15	85
<i>World History</i>	75	18	57	24	76
<i>Connections to Today</i>	56	17	39	30	70

Table 7: Number of Illustrations Covering Both Genders in the Four World History Themes

Table 8

Percentage of Illustrations Portraying Women in Various Societal Roles

<i>Textbook</i>	<i>P</i> (Domestic Role)	<i>P</i> (Non-domestic Roles)	<i>P</i> (Citizen Roles)	<i>P</i> (Governmental Roles)	<i>P</i> (Religious Roles)	<i>P</i> (Military Roles)
<i>People & Nations</i>	60	36	0	13	23	10
<i>The Human Experience</i>	43	24	0	13	32	13
<i>Patterns of Interaction</i>	33	14	50	10	29	0
<i>World History</i>	33	24	0	8	53	0
<i>Connections to Today</i>	67	40	50	35	25	9

Table 8: Percentage of Illustrations Portraying Women in Various Societal Roles