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Brilliant or Bad: The Gendered Social Construction of Exceptionalism in Early Adolescence

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Abstract

From kindergarten through college, students perceive boys as more intelligent than girls, yet few sociological studies have identified how school processes shape students' gender status beliefs. Drawing on 2.5 years of longitudinal ethnography and 196 interviews conducted at a racially diverse, public middle school in Los Angeles, this article demonstrates how educators' differential regulation of boys' rule-breaking by course level contributed to gender-based differences in students' perceptions of intelligence. In higher-level courses—where affluent, White, and Asian American students were overrepresented—educators tolerated 6th-grade boys' rule-breaking, such that boys challenged girls' opinions and monopolized classroom conversations. By 8th grade, students perceived higher-level boys as more exceptionally intelligent than girls. However, in lower-level courses—where non-affluent Latinx students were overrepresented—educators penalized 6th-grade boys' rule-breaking, such that boys disengaged from classroom conversations. By 8th grade, lower-level students perceived girls as smarter than boys, but not exceptional. This article also demonstrates how race intersected with gender when shaping students' perceptions of intelligence, with students associating the most superlatives with affluent White boys' capabilities. Through this analysis, I develop a new theoretical understanding of how school processes contribute to the gendered social construction of exceptionalism and reproduce social inequalities in early adolescence.

Keywords

gender, education, children and youth, race and ethnicity, social inequalities

"Are boys better at school than girls?" I asked Daniel and Mason,[1] two students I interviewed while conducting research at a racially diverse, suburban middle school in Los Angeles. Daniel, a multiracial White and Asian American boy, momentarily pondered my question before saying, "The average girl student is probably better than the average boy student. . . . But there's probably more best boy students than best girl students. There's probably about three super star boys like Jacob, RJ, and Curtis. . . . I can't think of three super smart girls." Mason, a White boy, nodded and chimed in, "I can think of really smart girls but not like *Jacob* smart."

The question of how gender shapes students' achievement is one of the most studied topics in educational sociology (Buchmann,

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DiPrete, and McDaniel 2008; Xie, Fang, and Shauman 2015). Research tends to align with Daniel's initial response, finding that girls outperform boys in most areas of education. Girls average higher grades (Buchmann et al. 2008), high school graduation rates (Snyder and Dillow 2012), and college enrollment rates (Buchmann and DiPrete 2006). These gendered achievement gaps have sparked talk of a "crisis" about boys' underachievement (Epstein 1998; Ringrose 2013), with pundits and journalists writing books titled *Why Boys Fail* (Whitmire 2010), *The War against Boys* (Sommers 2015), and *The End of Men* (Rosin 2012). As these titles suggest, popular discourses construct the traditional gender hierarchy—where boys receive greater amounts of power and privileges over girls—as reversed. Instead, boys are now perceived as the newly disadvantaged in education.

Despite popular conceptions, inequality disadvantaging girls and women persists (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Khan 2011; Martin 1998; Morris 2012; Pascoe 2007; Thorne 1993). Aligning with Daniel's and Mason's perceptions that only boys are "super stars," research consistently finds that gender status beliefs—or cultural expectations about traits girls and boys possess—associate boys with increased competency and social esteem (Charles and Grusky 2004; Correll 2004; Morris 2012; Ridgeway 2011; Thébaud and Charles 2018). From kindergarten through college, students perceive boys as more intelligent (Bian, Leslie, and Cimpian 2017; Grunspan et al. 2016), and children's television shows tend to depict men as geniuses (Long et al. 2010). Parents often perceive their sons as having higher IQs than their daughters (Furnham, Reeves, and Budhani 2002), and teachers are more likely to identify boys as gifted (Petersen 2013). In the workforce, men are more often described as geniuses when applying for academic positions or technology jobs (Correll et al. 2017; Dutt et al. 2016; Schmader, Whitehead, and Wysocki 2007), and women's participation rates are the lowest in academic fields where raw intelligence is considered integral to one's success, such as philosophy, math, and physics (Leslie et al. 2015).

Although gender status beliefs play a key role in limiting girls' and women's opportunities for advancement (Charles and Grusky 2004; Ridgeway 2011; Thébaud and Charles 2018), few sociological studies have identified how boys (and later men) come to be perceived as exceptionally intelligent. Instead, existing ethnographic research primarily focuses on students of color attending schools in low-income, urban neighborhoods—schools where educators' disciplinary practices often encourage students to perceive girls as academically superior to boys (Carter 2005; Ferguson 2000; Lopez 2003; Rios 2011). Without examining the flip-side of these inequalities—specifically, the processes shaping students' perceptions of privileged boys in suburban schools—scholars are left with an incomplete understanding of how school processes shape students' gender status beliefs.

The main contribution of this article is to identify the processes by which educators' differential responses to boys' rule-breaking by course level produced gender differences in students' perceptions of intelligence. To do so, I draw on two-and-a-half years of longitudinal ethnographic research and 196 semi-structured interviews conducted in a racially diverse, suburban middle school in Los Angeles. In higher-level courses, where affluent, White, and Asian American students were overrepresented, educators tolerated—and to some extent encouraged—boys' misbehavior. Because educators' leniency allowed 6th- and 7th-grade boys to repeatedly interrupt and challenge girls' opinions, boys learned early on how to monopolize classroom discussions. By the end of middle school, higher-level students perceived boys as more exceptionally intelligent than girls. However, a different configuration of gender relations emerged in the school's lower-level courses, where non-affluent Latinx students were overrepresented. In a setting where educators penalized boys' misbehavior, boys gradually disengaged. Rather than participating like they once had, many lower-level 8th-grade boys

began spending class time sitting with their heads on their desks. Because educators' stricter disciplinary practices reduced the likelihood of boys interrupting girls in lower-level courses, girls had more opportunities to participate and become confident in their public speaking capabilities. Lower-level students finished middle school perceiving lower-level girls as smarter than lower-level boys, but not as exceptional.

This article's second contribution is to illustrate how race intersected with gender when shaping students' perceptions of intelligence. Educators in higher-level courses held Asian American boys to a higher standard of behavior, tending to discourage their non-academically oriented interruptions, despite tacitly encouraging similar interruptions from White boys. Because educators' disciplinary practices provided White boys more opportunities to demonstrate their social competency during classroom conversations, higher-level students gradually began to perceive White boys as more "well-rounded" than Asian American boys. However, in lower-level courses, educators reserved their harshest disciplinary practices for Latinx boys. Because educators' disciplinary practices repeatedly called Latinx boys' competency into question, students gradually began to perceive Latinx boys as the "dumbest" students at the school. Through this analysis, my findings contribute to sociological scholarship by providing a new understanding of how school processes associate affluent White boys with exceptionalism, thereby reproducing social inequalities in early adolescence.

GENDER, EDUCATION, AND ACADEMIC EXCEPTIONALISM

Gender inequality is embedded within multiple dimensions of relations (Connell 2009; Martin 2004; Messner 2000; Ridgeway 2011; West and Zimmerman 1987). At the structural level, masculinities and femininities are ranked in a societal-wide gender order, which is created and recreated through institutions, laws, policies, and hegemonic meanings (Connell 2009; Martin 2004; Ridgeway 2011; Schippers 2007). These structural relations provide a background frame for everyday life (Ridgeway 2011; West and Zimmerman 1987), encouraging individuals to interact in ways that reinforce perceptions of inherent male superiority. For example, gender status beliefs associating men with increased competency and social esteem are routinely created and recreated during adult interactions in workplaces (Charles and Grusky 2004; Ridgeway 2011). Men often ignore women's ideas, interrupt women when they are talking, and challenge women's suggestions (Schilt 2010), thus perpetuating beliefs that men are more intelligent than women.

Individuals, however, do not spontaneously begin interacting in ways that associate men with increased competency and social esteem in adulthood; hegemonic gender beliefs have their roots in childhood (Khan 2011; Martin 1998; Morris 2012; Musto 2014; Pascoe 2007; Thorne 1993). Existing research has identified numerous processes at the school- and classroom-level that create and reinforce students' beliefs in categorical and hierarchical gender differences. Teachers are often quicker to discipline girls than boys for running, talking loudly, interrupting, and violating dress codes (Gansen 2017; Jordan and Cowan 1995; Martin 1998; Sadker and Sadker 1995), thereby encouraging students to dress, speak, and move in differently gendered ways. Furthermore, the formal age separation, large number of students, and risk of heterosexual teasing can encourage students to separate into gendered friendship groups in settings such as lunch and recess (Thorne 1993). When interacting with their friends, boys often control larger amounts of space, more frequently invade girls' games and activities, and tease or sexually objectify girls (Gansen 2017; Martin 1998; Khan 2011; Pascoe 2007; Thorne 1993). Because educators often leave boys' behavior largely unaddressed (Khan 2011; Pascoe 2007; Thorne 1993), students' patterns of interactions play an important role in legitimizing beliefs that boys are inherently stronger, louder, and more authoritative than girls.

School processes also shape students' perceptions of girls' and boys' academic capabilities. Focusing primarily on students of color attending schools in low-income urban areas, existing research documents how educators' disciplinary practices can encourage students to perceive girls as academically superior to boys (Carter 2005; Ferguson 2000; Lopez 2003; Rios 2011). In these schools—where students tend to be Black and Latinx—educators often perceive boys more negatively than girls, racializing Black and Latinx boys as dangerous criminals or "thugs" (Ferguson 2000; Morris 2006; Rios 2011). Educators scrutinize boys' behaviors and subject boys who break classroom rules to harsh disciplinary practices (Ferguson 2000; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Ochoa 2013), which places Black and Latinx boys at an increased risk of missing classroom instructional time, being suspended or expelled, and dropping out (Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera 2010; Perry and Morris 2014). As a result, low-income boys of color average lower levels of academic achievement and are often perceived as academically inferior to their female counterparts (Buchmann et al. 2008; Carter 2005; Hatt 2012; Lopez 2003; Valenzuela 1999).

Few sociological studies, however, have examined students' gender status beliefs in suburban schools—schools where students tend to come from race- and class-privileged backgrounds and average higher levels of achievement (Buchmann et al. 2008; Legewie and DiPrete 2012; Penner and Paret 2008; Reardon et al. 2018). Such an omission leaves a crucial gap in gender and education scholarship because gender achievement gaps are much smaller—or favor boys—among affluent, White, and Asian American students (Colón and Sánchez 2010; Feliciano 2012; Legewie and DiPrete 2012; Penner and Paret 2008). In a suburban school, race- and class-privileged students may develop differently gendered expectations about girls' and boys' academic capabilities (Khan 2011; Morris 2012), ultimately helping to explain how students come to perceive boys as exceptional (Bian et al. 2017; Grunspan et al. 2016). Indeed, by taking a racially diverse, suburban school as its point of inquiry, this article develops a new theoretical understanding of how school processes shape students' gender beliefs. Unlike the gender dynamics previously documented, I demonstrate how educators' differential enforcement of school rules by course level can encourage students to perceive race- and class-privileged boys as more exceptionally intelligent than girls, thereby reproducing social inequalities in early adolescence.

PERCEPTIONS OF INTELLIGENCE BY COURSE LEVEL

Social inequality in education is partially explained by how students are separated into academic courses based on perceived differences in intelligence. Higher-level courses, such as honors courses, provide a rigorous curriculum that fosters students' critical thinking and public speaking skills (Bettie 2003; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Morris 2006; Ochoa 2013; Perry 2002; Valenzuela 1999). By comparison, lower-level courses, such as standard and remedial courses, are often led by teachers with low expectations about students' capabilities. In these classes, educators assign monotonous coursework and emphasize formal school rules and policies (Bettie 2003; Ochoa 2013). Academic course sequences are also a key mechanism shaping students' perceptions of intelligence (Bettie 2003; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Morris 2006; Ochoa 2013; Perry 2002). Students often perceive higher-level students as "smart" and "hardworking," whereas they perceive lower-level students as "lazy" and "dumb" (Bettie 2003; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Morris 2006; Ochoa 2013; Perry 2002).

Persistent racial and socioeconomic disparities undergird students' course placement. Affluent, White, and Asian American students are systematically sorted into higher-level courses, whereas non-affluent, Black, and Latinx students are disproportionately sorted into lower-level ones (Bettie 2003;

Lewis and Diamond 2015; Ochoa 2013; Perry 2002; Valenzuela 1999). Multiple processes contribute to affluent, White, and Asian American students' overrepresentation in higher-level courses. These processes include educators' racialized perceptions (Ferguson 2000; Morris 2006; Perry 2002), students' differential access to extracurricular activities and tutoring programs (Lareau 2011; Ochoa 2013), and students' and parents' different forms of cultural capital (Calarco 2011, 2014; Muro 2016). For example, middle-class students—who tend to be White and Asian American—often interact with authority figures in ways that facilitate their achievement (Lareau 2011), such as being more likely to proactively ask teachers for help (Calarco 2011, 2014). As a result, educators often perceive middle-class students as smarter or faster learners (Bettie 2003; Calarco 2011, 2014), thus contributing to the overrepresentation of race- and class-privileged students in higher-level courses.

Educators' perceptions also contribute to racial disparities in students' course placement. Educators often perceive White and Asian American students as academically superior, racializing White students as smart and hardworking (Bettie 2003; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Morris 2006; Ochoa 2013; Perry 2002). They tend to perceive Asian American students as academically gifted "model minorities" who are especially talented in math and science (Chou and Feagin 2015; Jiménez and Horowitz 2013; Kwon 2014; Lee and Zhou 2015; Lee 2015; Ochoa 2013). Educators often racialize Black and Latinx children, however, as "dumb" or "lazy" students who belong to a poor and problematic underclass (Ferguson 2000; Kwon 2015; Ochoa 2013; Rios 2011; Valenzuela 1999). As a result, educators often call on White and Asian American students more frequently during classroom discussions and offer White and Asian American students more encouragement (Bettie 2003; Hatt 2012; Morris 2006; Ochoa 2013). Black and Latinx students often report feeling alienated from their teachers and having to work harder to gain their teachers' attention (Bettie 2003; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Ochoa 2013), which decreases their chances of being placed into—and subsequently excelling in—advanced coursework.

Perhaps because high school girls now complete more college preparatory and Advanced Placement courses than boys (Buchmann et al. 2008; Xie et al. 2015), gender remains largely unmarked in existing accounts of how academic course sequences shape perceptions of students' intelligence. Yet, considering that in kindergarten through college, students perceive boys as more exceptionally intelligent (Bian et al. 2017; Grunspan et al. 2016; Morris 2012), this omission results in an incomplete understanding of how school processes shape students' gender beliefs. Although girls are well-represented in higher-level courses, school processes may encourage students to perceive boys as exceptional. Consequently, this article asks: Do students' gender beliefs about intelligence and exceptionalism vary by course level? If so, what are the processes encouraging students to perceive girls and boys as having different dispositions toward school, and how do their beliefs differ by course level? Does race intersect with gender when shaping higher- and lower-level students' gender beliefs about intelligence and exceptionalism? If so, how?

To answer these questions, this article illustrates how educators' differential enforcement of school rules by course level contributed to gender-based differences in students' perceptions of intelligence. Within the lenient disciplinary environment in higher-level courses—where affluent, White, and Asian American students were overrepresented—students came to perceive boys as exceptionally intelligent. However, in the punitive disciplinary environment in lower-level courses—where students tended to be non-affluent and Latinx—students came to perceive girls as smarter than boys, but not as exceptional. Students' perceptions of exceptional intelligence were also racialized, with students assigning the most superlatives to White—but not Asian American or Latinx—boys' academic capabilities. By demonstrating how students' perceptions

of intelligence varied by students' gender, course level, and race, this article contributes to gender and education research by providing a new theoretical understanding of how school processes reify social inequalities in early adolescence.

DATA AND METHODS

Mountain Heights Middle School

This project uses ethnographic and interview methods conducted at Mountain Heights Middle School (MHMS) to develop a new theoretical perspective on how school processes shape students' gender status beliefs. There are two reasons why middle school is an ideal time to study gender-based differences in students' perceptions of intelligence. First, as children progress from childhood to early adolescence, "they tend to separate more and more by gender, with the amount of gender separation peaking in early adolescence" (Thorne 1993:52). Examining how gender shaped students' perceptions of intelligence during this transition may illuminate gender dynamics that are obscured during other stages of the life course. Second, students begin pursuing different academic course sequences in middle school (Morris 2006), which provided the opportunity to theorize how school processes initially shaped students' gender beliefs.

MHMS is a high-performing public school with a student body of over 1,000 students. I selected MHMS as a research site because of the school's suburban location, racially and socioeconomically diverse student body, and students' academic performance. Located in a suburb of Los Angeles with a median house value of $800,000 and a median household income of $80,000, MHMS students appear to be affluent at first glance. Yet less than 50 percent of Mountain Heights residents are homeowners. The large percentage of rentals contributes to a socioeconomically diverse student body. Fifteen percent of MHMS students qualified for free/reduced price lunch. Among students I interviewed, their parents' jobs ranged from retail clerks to president of a nearby elite university. Parents' educational backgrounds were equally varied. Some students aspired to be their family's first high school graduate, whereas other students' parents had advanced degrees from prestigious universities.

The MHMS student body was highly diverse, with students identifying as Asian American (35 percent), White (30 percent), Latinx (25 percent), multiracial (6 percent), Black (2 percent), or as belonging to another racial\ethnic category (2 percent). Because of the historical legacy of racism in the United States (Alexander 2012; Omi and Winant 2014; Saito 2009; Sánchez 1993), MHMS students' race and class were highly correlated. Among the three largest racial groups at school—who are the focus of this article—White and Asian American students tended to come from highly educated, middle- and upper-middle-class families who owned homes in the district (i.e., affluent families), whereas Latinx students often came from less educated, working- and lower-middle-class families who rented apartments in the district (i.e., non-affluent families).

With its academic profile, MHMS provided an opportunity to theorize whether and how students' gender beliefs varied by course level and race. Girls tended to perform about as well—or slightly better—than boys on standardized assessments and were equally represented in the school's higher-level courses.[2] There were, however, significant racial disparities in students' achievement. An examination of the processes perpetuating these race and class disparities is beyond the scope of this article (for information on this topic, see Bettie 2003; Ferguson 2000; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Morris 2006; Ochoa 2013; Perry 2002), but Asian American and White students averaged higher scores on standardized assessments. They were also vastly overrepresented in the school's advanced and honors courses (i.e., higher-level courses).[3] By comparison, Latinx students averaged lower scores on standardized assessments and were vastly overrepresented in the school's standard and remedial courses (i.e., lower-level courses).[4]

Participant Observation Research

Following a three-month process of obtaining consent from school- and district-level personnel, I began observing 6th-grade classrooms in December 2013. Over the next two-and-a-half years, I observed the same cohort until students' 8th-grade graduation in June 2016. I conducted ethnographic research several times each week, averaging three hours of observation per visit. I systematically compared students' interactions across an array of settings, including "core" classes, course levels, electives, extracurricular activities, and special events such as field trips and school dances. At MHMS, most English and math teachers spent two periods teaching higher-level courses and three periods teaching lower-level courses, which allowed me to compare how the same teachers interacted with different types of students. My observations did not follow a set schedule; instead, I attempted to randomize classroom visits, which was facilitated by MHMS teachers welcoming me into their classrooms. At the time of research, I was a young White woman enrolled in graduate school at a nearby university. Because many MHMS teachers were also college-educated White women, my positionality likely helped foster rapport.

While observing, educators rarely asked me to assist with activities, which allowed me to document classroom activities as they unfolded. In addition to writing important pieces of dialogue in a small notebook, I recorded the names of students who raised their hands to answer teachers' questions. I also documented which students spoke without raising their hands and educators' responses to their interruptions. Additionally, I made note of other classroom activities, such as when students sharpened their pencils, left their desks, or left the classroom. Some students spent class time engaging in non-academically oriented behaviors like doodling, fidgeting, whispering, or sleeping—which I also documented. When I could not take notes, such as when talking with students or teachers, I made mental notes about key phrases and wrote notes immediately afterward.[5] I expanded handwritten notes into detailed, typed field notes within 24 hours (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995), often producing 15 to 20 single-spaced pages of notes per visit.

Many students initially seemed apprehensive around me, so I used several well-established ethnographic strategies to establish rapport. First, I introduced myself to students by explaining I was, "Writing a book about what it's like to be in middle school." In addition to telling students they could tell me (or their teachers or parents) if they did not want to be included in my observations, I stressed that my observations were confidential and that pseudonyms would be used. Second, I differentiated myself from adult authority figures by sitting at desks with students, wearing casual clothes, avoiding disciplining students, and limiting the amount of time I spent talking with educators (Bettie 2003; Corsaro 2003; Pascoe 2007; Thorne 1993). Third, observing for several years was integral to establishing rapport. Students often commented about the amount of time I spent at MHMS, asked questions about my project, and remarked about the number of notebooks I filled with notes. Girls and boys of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds gradually began introducing me to their friends, inviting me to sit with them at lunch, and suggesting information for my notes. Students also began breaking school rules, swearing, and discussing topics like sex and dating around me, thus suggesting I established rapport with a wide array of students.

Interviews

To systematically compare how school processes shaped students' and educators' perceptions of intelligence, I supplemented ethnographic research with 196 semi-structured interviews with MHMS students and educators, which were audio recorded with permission and then transcribed.[6] I interviewed 6th-graders in spring 2014 (n = 39), 7th-graders in spring 2015 (n = 61),

8th-graders in spring 2016 (n = 75), and teachers and administrators in summer/fall 2016 (n = 21). Although nearly three-quarters of MHMS educators were White women, I maximized gender and racial/ethnic variability when interviewing educators. Among the 21 educators I interviewed, 13 were women (eight White, three Asian American, two Latinx) and eight were men (three White, two Asian American, two Latinx, and one Black). Interviews with educators averaged 93 minutes and were conducted in classrooms, their homes, coffee shops, or restaurants.

To reduce the power dynamic between an adult researcher and young participants, students chose between being interviewed alone or with friends. Most 6th-graders opted for group interviews (67 percent); the majority of 8th-graders elected to be interviewed alone (61 percent). Parental permission was obtained prior to student interviews, which averaged 90 minutes and were conducted during or after school. To compare how individual students' narratives changed, I interviewed 37 students more than once (i.e., in 6th and 8th grades), resulting in 175 interviews with 133 unique students. My student-interview sample approximated the racial/ethnic composition of the school: student interviewees identified as Asian American (32 percent), White (27 percent), Latinx (22 percent), Black (5 percent), multiracial (10 percent), or as belonging to another racial\ethnic category (4 percent). Among the students I interviewed, 84 were girls and 49 were boys.[7] Half the students were from middle- to upper-middle-class families who owned homes in the district (i.e., affluent), and the other half were from working- to lower-middle-class families who rented apartments (i.e., non-affluent).[8]

Data Analysis

Data analysis included reading field notes and interview transcripts multiple times and conducting inductive, iterative coding to produce categories about emergent patterns and themes (Emerson et al. 1995). While analyzing interview data, I used participants' responses as a window into the collectively constituted vocabularies structuring their experiences (Pugh 2013). I paid attention to the order in which respondents raised themes, the amount of time spent discussing a topic, moments of heightened emotions, and nonverbal cues such as halted speech.

One theme that inductively emerged was educators' different responses to boys' interruptions by course level. To establish this theme, I coded educators' responses to students' interruptions in different types of settings, using cues about educators' facial expression, tone, and verbal comments to assess their reactions. Additionally, I compared educators' responses to academically oriented interruptions—such as students answering teachers' questions without raising their hands—and non-academically oriented interruptions—such as students making jokes or teasing other students. Next, I compared how educators' responses were shaped by factors such as their personal characteristics (i.e., their race, gender, or age), students' personal characteristics (i.e., their race, gender), how frequently a student spoke out of turn, the time of day (i.e., first or last period), the time of year (i.e., beginning or end of the school year), and students' grade level (i.e., 6th or 8th grade). To avoid overestimating the frequency of boys' interruptions or underestimating the frequency of girls', I used fieldnotes to count student interruptions. I paid particular attention to negative cases and disconfirming evidence, including instances where girls interrupted. Through this analysis, I identified how school processes shaped the gendered construction of intelligence at MHMS, with the goal of furthering scholarly understandings of gender and education.

THE GENDERED CONSTRUCTION OF EXCEPTIONALISM AT MHMS

Michela: Are there any people who interrupt the teachers a lot?
Ashley: Lucas, Noah . . .
Samantha: Noah, yes!

Ashley: Ben. Ms. Emerson will be in the middle of telling us what's going on, he'll be like, "Did you just say 'swag,' Ms. Emerson?"
Samantha: Ms. Noble was saying she'll get a tattoo on her forehead that says, "Raise your hand." Because everyone just yells out.
Michela: All the people you named were boys. Do girls ever interrupt teachers?
Ashley: No, girls are really straightforward, they don't talk—
Samantha: They raise their hand! [laughs]
Ashley: And when a teacher says like, "Raise your hand," they understand this right away and like, raise their hand.

When conducting research in 6th-grade classrooms at MHMS, I repeatedly observed boys break classroom rules. Similar to the way boys import "warrior narratives" into kindergarten classroom activities (Jordan and Cowan 1995), 6th-grade boys engaged in activities symbolically associated with weapons, violence, or sports. When teachers provided students time to complete assignments, boys routinely wrestled with their friends or used a crumpled piece of paper to start an impromptu game of finger football. Boys also fidgeted in their seats, moved around the classroom without permission, and loudly drummed their hands or pencils on their desks. In higher- and lower-level academic settings alike, boys began middle school behaving in similar ways; there was no distinguishable difference in the frequency or type of misbehavior.[9]

In what follows, I focus on the classroom rule 6th-grade boys most frequently disregarded: raising their hands and waiting to be called on before speaking. Instead, 6th-grade boys regularly interrupted teachers and classmates to blurt out comments, questions, or jokes. These interruptions occurred so frequently in Samantha's 6th-grade history class that her teacher threatened to tattoo the phrase "raise your hand" on her forehead. Two years later, however, I rarely observed 8th-grade boys shout out answers or make extemporaneous comments during class. Instead, in higher-level classes, primarily composed of affluent, White, and Asian American students, boys now raised their hands before speaking. However, boys—especially those who repeatedly interrupted as 6th- and 7th-graders—continued to monopolize speaking opportunities in higher-level classes. Two years of being pushed aside by interrupting boys had a different consequence for girls. Girls enrolled in the school's higher-level courses tended to finish middle school participating less frequently, and they described their speaking skills with less confidence than did boys. In lower-level classes, however, where non-affluent Latinx students were overrepresented, boys who routinely spoke out of turn as 6th- and 7th-graders had disengaged. Rather than participating as they once had, lower-level boys—especially those who repeatedly interrupted as 6th- and 7th-graders—now spent class time sitting slouched in their seats or with their heads on their desks. Instead, *girls* in lower-level courses were the ones who most frequently participated during classroom conversations and described themselves as confident public speakers.

To identify the processes shaping gender relations across the school's academic courses, I divide my findings into two parts. Part one, summarized in Table 1, demonstrates how educators' differential enforcement of boys' interruptions by course level contributed to gender-based differences in students' perceptions of intelligence. Educators tolerated, and to some extent rewarded, boys' interruptions in higher-level courses, such that higher-level 8th-graders came to perceive boys as more exceptionally intelligent than girls.[10] In lower-level courses, however, educators tended to punish boys' interruptions, such that lower-level 8th-graders came to perceive girls as smarter than boys, but not as exceptional. Part two documents how race intersected with gender when shaping students' perceptions, demonstrating how school processes encouraged students to perceive affluent White boys as the most exceptional students at the school.

GENDER RELATIONS IN HIGHER-LEVEL COURSES

Teachers' perceptions of students play an important role in shaping whether and how they decide to enforce school rules (Ferguson

Table 1. The Gendered Social Construction of Exceptionalism at MHMS, by Course Level

	Higher-Level Courses	Lower-Level Courses
Socioeconomic and Racial Composition	Affluent, White, and Asian American	Non-affluent and Latinx
Educators' Responses to Boys' Interruptions	Encouraged or Tolerated	Discouraged or Penalized
Changes in Boys' Behavior over Time	Monopolized Classroom Discussions	Disengaged from Classroom Discussions
Eighth-Graders' Gender Status Beliefs	Boys as More Exceptionally Intelligent Than Girls	Girls as Smarter Than Boys (But Not Exceptional)

2000). At MHMS, educators regularly praised the predominately affluent, White and Asian American students in the school's higher-level courses for their smartness and eagerness to learn. Mr. Lawson described his advanced math classes as "the best of the best." Although teaching standard math classes could be "drain[ing]," he said his advanced math classes had the ability to "uplift your energy" because his students had "character," great "personalities," and were "smart." Ms. Kiefer also characterized honors students as academically superior. When describing the difference between honors and standard English students, she said, "[Honors students] don't need structure. . . . With standard classes, I might have to plan out three questions [to get the answer I'm looking for]. [Honors students] can have a lot more conversations about life and the world . . . they are very observant, and they are very opinionated."

Because MHMS educators perceived higher-level students as academically superior, they tended to foster a lively and relaxed classroom environment that granted students "privileges" (Lewis and Diamond 2015; Ochoa 2013). These privileges included allowing higher-level students to leave their seats without asking permission, sit next to their friends, and listen to music during class. Austin, an Asian American student, described these privileges as one of his favorite aspects of advanced math. He said, "It's more of a higher-level [class], so Mr. Lawson gives you more privileges—like you don't have to be excused to go, like, literally anywhere around the classroom."

In the relaxed classroom environment of higher-level courses, MHMS educators rarely penalized boys for speaking out of turn. Instead, when boys spoke without raising their hands and waiting to be called on, educators tended to ignore their interruptions or provided patient reminders to follow classroom rules. The following example, from a 6th-grade honors English class, demonstrates how boys consistently interrupted without reprimand in higher-level courses:

> Mr. Green is explaining the day's activity. This class will be discussing a hypothetical ban on selling soft drinks in Mountain Heights. Tristan, a White boy, interrupts Mr. Green and says, "I'm turning 12 in this class at 11:03!" Mr. Green looks at Tristan and says, "Okay, very good." Mr. Green then returns to addressing the class, acknowledging that discussions can often lead to "talking out of turn." Despite this interruption, he wants students to "pay attention to the protocol." They should raise their hands and speak one at a time. . . . During the discussion, Mr. Green calls on Christine, a White girl, who had her hand raised. She says, "This ban is arbitrary" and explains that soft drinks could still be purchased at gas stations. Tristan loudly calls out, "No you can't!" . . . Next, Mr. Green calls on Vivian, an Asian American girl. Three boys, two of whom are White and one of whom is Asian American, are whispering to each other—they have been talking amongst themselves for most of the discussion. Mr. Green looks in their direction but

> does not say anything. When Vivian is halfway through pointing out that the ban has "so many loopholes," several boys interrupt to contest her point. Mr. Green smiles and reminds the class, "Stay within the format." Several minutes later, at exactly 11:03 a.m., Tristan interrupts to announce, "It's my birthday right now!" Mr. Green ignores his comment and calls on another student.

Before the discussion, Mr. Green stipulated that students should raise their hands and wait to be called on—a rule that girls like Vivian and Christine consistently followed. Rather than following this rule, however, Tristan and other boys repeatedly interrupted and spoke out of turn. Mr. Green could have penalized the boys' interruptions, yet he responded by ignoring them or providing patient reminders to "stay within the format."

One might assume educators overlooked higher-level boys' interruptions because their interruptions tended to be academically oriented, such as interrupting to answer questions. Yet, as suggested by Mr. Green's interactions with his honors English class, teachers also treated higher-level boys' nonacademic interruptions with tolerance. Not only did Tristan repeatedly interrupt to mention his birthday, but three boys spent the majority of the discussion whispering amongst themselves. In these instances, Mr. Green subtly encouraged Tristan's interruptions, nodding and saying, "Okay, very good," when Tristan interrupted. Then, when Tristan and other boys continued to interrupt or whisper amongst themselves, Mr. Green either ignored them or patiently reminded them to behave—responses I consistently observed at MHMS.

Educators' tolerance extended to situations where higher-level boys made inappropriate comments. For example, during a 7th-grade honors English class, I observed William, an Asian American boy, repeatedly interrupt to make jokes, including pejoratively calling another boy "a girl." As William loudly insisted that the other boy deserved being teased for "being all whiney," his teacher did not penalize him. Rather than sending him to the principal's office or giving him a lunch detention, Ms. Kiefer instead calmly explained why William's behavior was wrong. During an interview, Ms. Kiefer spontaneously identified William as a student who frequently disobeyed her. As a 6th-grader, he went as far as pouring a bottle of water on her head. Ms. Kiefer, however, attributed William's disobedience to his academic capabilities, which was typical of MHMS educators' responses. She reasoned that "really, really intelligent" students like William needed to learn "humility," thus demonstrating how MHMS educators responded with tolerance to higher-level boys' interruptions, including in situations where boys' comments were potentially distracting or offensive.

Gender Beliefs in Higher-Level Courses

Over the course of middle school, higher-level boys gradually became less likely to speak out of turn. For example, I observed 6th- and 7th-grade teachers consistently remind Zach, a White boy, of classroom rules when he interrupted. The frequency of Zach's interruptions, however, had declined by 8th grade—a change Zach spontaneously mentioned when interviewed. Whereas he had once made "insensitive" comments and "stupid jokes" during class, Zach said he had learned to "share in a class discussion without bragging about what you know." In interviews, higher-level boys consistently articulated similar perspectives, explaining they had gradually stopped extemporaneously inserting their opinions into classroom discussions.

Despite learning to demonstrate proper classroom etiquette, 8th-grade boys continued to dominate speaking opportunities in higher-level classrooms. An illustration of this pattern came during a Socratic Seminar in Ms. Nelson's 8th-grade honors English class, when I counted how frequently the 18 girls and 16 boys participated. During the 40-minute discussion, boys participated 156 times to girls' 62 times. Boys who spoke the most included the previously mentioned White boy named Tristan (36 times); a multiracial White and Latinx boy named

Jayson (25 times); a White boy named Nathan (20 times); and an Asian American boy named David (20 times). Most higher-level students were very aware of boys' routine monopolization of classroom speaking opportunities, a topic that students frequently discussed in interviews. Jayson told me, "In my [honors] English class, there's four or five people, including myself, who always speak during group discussions, and [only] one of them is a girl." Paige, a White girl, described the atmosphere in her honors math class: "It's boy after boy after boy, and then maybe a couple girls here and there, and then boy, boy, boy."

There are two reasons why the lenient disciplinary environment encouraged boys in higher-level courses to monopolize classroom speaking opportunities. First, whereas girls tended to raise their hands before speaking, 6th- and 7th-grade boys routinely disregarded this rule. This provided boys—especially boys who consistently interrupted—a disproportionate number of opportunities to be praised for answering correctly. For example, in a 6th-grade honors math class, Mr. Carr asked students for the answer to a math problem. Although two girls and one boy raised their hands, Tristan, a White boy, blurted out the answer. Mr. Carr could have reprimanded Tristan for speaking out of turn. Instead, he responded by applauding and exclaiming, "This guy here? Genius!" These occurrences, however, resulted in fewer opportunities for girls to speak. Skyler, a multiracial Asian American and Latinx girl, noted it was often "hard to find a space to put [your comment] in." Kylee, a multiracial Asian American and White girl, said boys often spoke before she had a chance to fully formulate her thoughts: "You're thinking about [your comment], and you're trying to think really deeply about it . . . you want to have a good comment, and then contribute."

Second, lenient disciplinary policies in higher-level courses enabled boys to repeatedly challenge girls' ideas. In a 6th-grade advanced math class, Kaylee, a White girl, was reciting digits of pi on Pi Day in a voice that was loud enough to be heard across the classroom when William, an Asian American boy, interrupted. William loudly told Kaylee, "There's no o's in numbers." Kaylee retorted, "I can say o's." William countered, "They are zeros, not o's." Ms. Ezzell left William's behavior unaddressed, and Kaylee stopped speaking. Instead, she turned her attention to completing a worksheet at her desk.

Another time, a parent named David guest lectured about his job as an amusement park designer. He asked the 7th-grade advanced math students to brainstorm ideas for a new theme park. Amber, an Asian American girl, suggested creating an amusement park for cats. Several boys immediately groaned and loudly called out, "No!" Instead of reprimanding them, Mr. Lawson simply chuckled. Moments later, Logan, an Asian American boy, suggested creating a theme park for senior citizens. The class burst out laughing and several boys excitedly called out, "Yeah!" The students then spent the rest of the period following Logan's suggestion and designing roller coasters for senior citizens. During relatively unsupervised settings such as recess, boys often control a greater amount of physical space and routinely disrupt girls' activities (Thorne 1993). Within a context where teachers allowed boys to speak without raising their hands, a similar pattern emerged: 6th- and 7th-grade higher-level boys routinely invaded girls' "sonic" space (Sargent 2009).

Within the lenient disciplinary environment of higher-level courses, boys—especially those who repeatedly interrupted as 6th- and 7th-graders—gradually became more confident in their public speaking skills. For example, I observed Jayson, a multiracial White and Latinx boy, regularly interrupt in 6th- and 7th-grade honors courses. As an 8th-grader, Jayson explained that his confidence in public speaking had increased. He said, "I've always been a very outspoken person, but I feel like my ability to formulate my thoughts into actual arguments that are important has developed." Other boys in higher-level courses expressed similar sentiments, describing themselves as "a talker," "charismatic," "a walking dictionary," and "a public speaker sorta person."

However, years of being interrupted and challenged by boys negatively affected

higher-level girls' confidence. Unlike higher-level boys, higher-level girls tended to describe their 8th-grade selves as "nervous," "quiet," or "shy." For example, Mackenzie, a White girl, explained that she preferred to "hold back" during classroom conversations because, "I'm afraid to get it wrong . . . [if] your answer is really off, some people laugh . . . if there were no rude kids, I'd be more confident." When I asked Mackenzie to describe the "rude kids," she said, "they're always like making noises and making fun of other people and commenting on everything . . . a lot less girls than boys do that." Even girls who began middle school as outspoken students gradually became less confident in their public speaking skills. Sierra, a White girl who received straight-A's in all her classes, consistently participated in her 6th-grade classes, but her enthusiasm toward answering teachers' questions waned by 8th grade. As Sierra explained, "In 8th grade I've actually changed a lot because I've grown a lot quieter. . . . A lot of the guys here are really loud and [they] just kind of quiet everybody down. . . . I don't really want to say anything that might make me look stupid."

The routine interactional context in higher-level classes—structured by teachers and then navigated in gendered ways by students—contributed to boys' and girls' divergent experiences. Educators treated boys' interruptions with tolerance, allowing boys who repeatedly interrupted to have more opportunities to practice formulating their opinions into "actual arguments." Although higher-level boys became better at following classroom rules, their extemporaneous comments placed girls at an increased risk of having their voices silenced. As Sierra explained, the fact that "guys here are really loud" gradually "quiet[ed] down" even the most outspoken of girls. Higher-level girls tended to finish middle school participating less frequently during conversations and feeling less confident about expressing opinions that might sound "stupid."

Ultimately, patterns of interactions in higher-level classrooms played an important role in shaping students' gender beliefs. In a school setting where boys monopolized classroom conversations, students began to perceive boys as more intelligent than girls. For example, I asked Allison, a multiracial White and Asian American girl, and Carly, an Asian American girl, if they would describe themselves as "super smart." They replied:

> *Carly:* We're smart, not to say we're not—
> *Allison:* We're not *geniuses*.
> *Carly:* It's not like we're going to become the next Albert Einstein.

Allison and Carly earned near-perfect grades and participated in numerous extracurricular activities. Despite their achievements, they remained reluctant to describe themselves as "super smart" or "geniuses." Later in their interview, however, they described a group of boys in their courses as "super smart, genius whiz kids, who play chess all day." Other higher-level students also reserved terms like "super smart" and "genius" for boys. Alyssa, an Asian American girl, said, "Everyone in our class is super smart, but [Jacob, RJ, and Curtis] are like *prodigies*." Her friend Skyler, a multiracial Asian American and Latinx girl, added, "It's *so* overwhelming." Jenny, a multiracial Asian American and Latinx girl, said, "In my [honors math] class a lot of the boys are *way* smart. A lot of the girls are really smart, but I mean, more boys are smarter."

In the context of higher-level classes, where gender relations enabled boys to dominate classroom speaking opportunities, students perceived girls as smart, but tended only to describe boys as "super smart," "geniuses," and "prodigies." However, as I show next, patterns of interactions played out differently within the context of lower-level courses, where educators tended to penalize boys' repeated interruptions.

GENDER RELATIONS IN LOWER-LEVEL COURSES

At MHMS, educators tended to characterize lower-level students, who were typically non-affluent and Latinx, as academically inferior. Consistent with the results of existing research

(Bettie 2003; Ferguson 2000; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Ochoa 2013), MHMS educators—who routinely described lower-level students as "noisy," "rowdy," and a "headache"—did not afford lower-level students the same "privileges" routinely given to higher-level students. Instead, when interacting with students they perceived as lacking proper classroom decorum, MHMS educators placed more emphasis on closely monitoring and regulating students' behavior.

In the stricter classroom environment of lower-level courses, educators were less tolerant of boys' interruptions. Regardless of whether boys' comments were academically or non-academically oriented, educators often used punitive disciplinary practices to discipline boys. These disciplinary practices included moving boys to new seats, sending them into the hallway, or giving them lunch detentions—called "benchings" at MHMS. For example, near the end of the school year, several 6th-grade boys repeatedly ignored Mr. Carr's instructions to raise their hands before answering questions in standard math. Mr. Carr initially tolerated the boys' interruptions. He acknowledged that "summer is in the air" but warned the class against acting "squirrely." Although I rarely observed Mr. Carr discipline boys for continually speaking out of turn in higher-level classes, he benched two boys—one of whom was White and one of whom was Latinx—after they continued blurting out answers. As he placed benching slips on each boy's desk, he said, "That's a benching for you. You guys didn't take me seriously."

MHMS educators were especially quick to draw on punitive disciplinary practices when boys in lower-level courses made comments that were potentially distracting or offensive. For example, in 7th-grade standard math, Mr. Pearson began class by asking students about their weekends. After Peter, a Latinx boy, announced he had "flipped off a homeless guy" over the weekend, Mr. Pearson immediately sent Peter to sit facing the classroom's back wall. Another time, as Mr. Green's 6th-grade standard English class watched *The Odyssey* movie, Mr. Green told Mitchell, a Latinx boy, to move to a desk near the back of the classroom after Mitchell loudly shouted, "Look at his underwear, bro!" Educators rarely used punitive practices when higher-level boys made similar—if not worse—statements, but they were quick to move to punitive disciplinary practices when interacting with boys in the school's lower-level courses.

Gender Beliefs in Lower-Level Courses

In the punitive context of lower-level courses, boys gradually disengaged. Rather than participating like they once had, boys—especially boys who had been repeatedly disciplined in 6th and 7th grade—began spending class time sitting slouched in their seats or with their heads on their desks. Unlike in higher-level courses, *girls* began participating more frequently. For example, when I counted the number of times the 17 boys and 15 girls in Ms. Nelson's standard English class participated during a 10-minute discussion, boys participated eight times to girls' 14. Three boys spent the majority of the discussion with their heads on their desks—a behavior that Ms. Nelson ignored. Not only did this trend hold over the approximately 15 8th-grade lower-level classes I observed, but students also discussed this pattern during 8th-grade interviews. Francisco, a Latinx boy, explained, "In most classes the girls [participate] a lot more than the guys do. For sure."

There are two reasons why the stricter disciplinary environment in lower-level courses increased girls' participation opportunities. First, in classroom settings where educators expected students to raise their hands before speaking, educators' disciplinary practices lowered the risk of boys interrupting girls. For example, Marina, a Latinx girl, volunteered to share an introductory paragraph she wrote in 6th-grade standard English. Although Lucas, a Latinx boy, tried to interrupt as Marina was reading, Mr. Green told Lucas to "hold" his comment. After Marina finished, Mr. Green applauded her for including "three very

specific and provable concrete details" in her thesis. In addition to providing Marina the opportunity to speak, Mr. Green's willingness to enforce the rules also allowed Marina to be complimented for her "very specific" and "provable" thesis. If Lucas had been allowed to speak out of turn—which was often the case in higher-level courses—it is plausible Marina would not have finished reading her thesis to the class, nor received the same compliment from Mr. Green. I consistently observed educators respond in similar ways when boys attempted to invade girls' sonic space in lower-level classes, thus increasing girls' participation opportunities.

Second, within the stricter disciplinary environment of lower-level courses, boys gradually grew to fear educators' reactions. This pattern was especially pronounced among boys who were repeatedly disciplined in 6th and 7th grades. For example, Lucas and Noah both began middle school as bright, enthusiastic students, yet were often "benched" for interrupting in their lower-level classes. As 8th-graders, both were failing most of their classes and tended to spend class time nodding off to sleep or sitting with their heads on their desks. When interviewed, Lucas, a Latinx boy, explained he "didn't feel comfortable" speaking during class. He attributed his discomfort to his teacher: "[My teacher] judges some people, so like she kinda gets me all, like, afraid to ask questions or ask for help. Or anything." Noah, a multiracial Asian and Arab American boy, told me he felt "dismotivate[d] [sic]" in his 8th-grade classes. He said, "I don't think [my teacher] likes me . . . she just acts different to [me]. . . . If [I] say like one comment . . . she yells at [me]." Lower-level boys, who were at an increased risk of being "judged" by their teachers, gradually became less confident participating. However, as long as boys did not explicitly disrupt classroom activities, MHMS educators largely ignored their disengagement. One English teacher approached boys who "deliberately" received F's in her lower-level classes with the attitude of, "Fine, don't do the work. You can sit there, and you can choose to fail, but you'll do so quietly, and you won't interfere with anybody else."

Educators' stricter disciplinary practices in lower-level classes enabled girls, however, to participate more frequently and finish middle school expressing more confidence in their public speaking skills. I observed that Caitlin, a Latinx girl, began participating more often over the course of middle school. In 8th-grade standard English, she spoke about twice as frequently as other students in her class. During an interview, Caitlin described herself as "loud" and "very comfortable asking questions and giving answers." Sonia, an Arab American girl whose participation in classroom discussions increased over time, also described herself as a confident public speaker. During an interview, she said, "I'm not like shy . . . [if you get the answer wrong] they're just gonna go on with other stuff. . . . So just take the chance."

The effect of course placement on girls' confidence was made clear by Leslie, a multiracial White and Asian American girl who transferred from honors to standard math in 8th grade. I observed Leslie raise her hand to answer nearly every single question in an 8th-grade standard math class. Her participation was noteworthy because she rarely spoke in 6th- and 7th-grade honors math. She articulated how the different courses shaped her willingness to participate: "[In standard math] I ask a lot of questions, and I answer a lot of questions. Too much . . . if I raised my hand and I answered wrong in honors, I felt intimidated." In standard math, where boys were less likely to invade girls' sonic space, Leslie felt more comfortable asking and answering questions. Now, she was speaking "too much" in comparison to others. In lower-level classrooms, where MHMS educators disciplined boys for interrupting, girls did not express the same fear of judgment that girls in higher-level courses described. Instead, they finished middle school as "loud" and "confident" speakers.

Unlike in the school's honors courses, where students perceived boys as more exceptionally intelligent, lower-level students tended to describe girls as smarter than boys. Caitlin,

a Latinx girl, said, "Boys are not smart. . . . I feel like girls at the school have a better chance of having better grades than the boys." Likewise, Lucas, a Latinx boy, described girls as "just smarter" than boys. After telling me that girls performed better in school than boys, Daniella, a Latinx girl, said, "It feels to me like sometimes guys have a harder time processing stuff—sometimes it's just in one ear and out the other." Educators evaluated lower-level girls' academic capabilities in a similar manner, as evidenced by Ms. Perkins, who said, "Now in terms of the [students] that are not doing as well [in standard math], I can tell you it's generally the boys."

Students in lower-level courses, however, were still enmeshed in the school's broader patterns of male dominance. Although lower-level MHMS students perceived girls as smarter than boys, they did not view girls as "geniuses" or "prodigies." Instead, lower-level students continued to perceive girls in their classes as academically inferior to the school's higher-level students. Take, for example, how Leslie—a multiracial White and Asian American girl who transferred from honors to standard math in 8th grade—differently perceived higher- and lower-level students. Despite describing girls in lower-level courses as "good student[s]," she said, "the people in [honors math] were all smarter than me . . . everyone there was really smart, like all the geniuses." Brook, a Latinx girl enrolled in standard courses, articulated a similar perspective. She described herself as "smart," so I asked whether she had considered enrolling in the school's honors classes. Upon hearing my question, she burst out laughing and said she was not "smart enough" for higher-level coursework. When taken as a whole, intragender relations at MHMS constructed higher-level boys as superior to lower-level boys, and intergender relations constructed higher-level boys as superior to higher-level *and* lower-level girls. Consequently, educators' differential regulation of boys' interruptions by course level helped ensure that students perceived race- and class-privileged boys in the school's higher-level courses as the most exceptionally intelligent ones at MHMS.

PERCEPTIONS OF BOYS' INTELLIGENCE BY RACE

Along with educators' differential enforcement of school rules by course level contributing to gender-based differences in students' perceptions of intelligence, race also intersected with gender when shaping students' perceptions (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Collins 1999; Crenshaw 1997; McCall 2008). In what follows, I show how educators held Asian American boys to a higher standard of behavior than White boys in higher-level courses, tending to discourage Asian American boys' non-academically oriented interruptions, which encouraged higher-level students to perceive White boys as more "well-rounded" than Asian American boys. In lower-level courses, educators often reserved their harshest disciplinary practices for Latinx boys, such that 8th-graders perceived Latinx boys as the "dumbest" students at the school. This argument is summarized in Table 2.

Gender and Race in Higher-Level Courses

When making comparisons between affluent White and Asian American boys, who comprised the overwhelming majority of boys in the school's higher-level courses, educators responded to boys' interruptions differently based on boys' race.[11] When boys repeatedly interrupted, educators tended to afford White boys more leeway, especially when boys' interruptions were non-academically oriented. For example, when Ms. Perkins divided her 7th-grade honors math students into small groups, she placed Christopher, a White boy, with three girls. After hearing his assignment, Christopher raised his fists into the air and gleefully announced he was a "ladies' man" who was "feeling lucky." Despite the comment's sexual undertones, Ms. Perkins chuckled before returning to announce other students' groups. However, she responded

Table 2. How Race Intersected with Gender When Shaping MHMS Students' Perceptions of Intelligence, by Course Level

	Higher-Level Courses	Lower-Level Courses
Socioeconomic and Racial Composition	Affluent, White, and Asian American	Non-affluent and Latinx
Racial Differences in Educators' Responses	Provided White Boys the Most Leeway	Quicker to Penalize Latinx Boys
Effect of Educators' Disciplinary Practices	White Boys Had the Most Opportunities to Demonstrate Their Competency	Latinx Boys' Competency Was Repeatedly Called into Question
Eighth-Graders Perceptions of Boys' Capabilities	White Boys as More "Well-Rounded" Than "Socially Inept" Asian American Boys	Latinx Boys as the "Dumbest" Students at the School

differently moments later when Sam, an Asian American boy, discovered he was the only boy in his group. He loudly groaned and exclaimed, "I'm going to kill myself . . . kill me now!" Ms. Perkins frowned and told Sam to stop talking. I consistently observed educators hold Asian American boys to a higher standard of behavior, subtly discouraging interruptions they tended to tacitly encourage from White boys.

By the time students were in 8th grade, educators' differential responses to boys' interruptions played an important role in shaping students' perceptions of boys' intelligence. Despite describing both White and Asian American boys as intelligent, students ascribed more superlative characteristics to White boys. Take, for example, how students described Jacob, RJ, and Curtis, the three boys consistently identified as "geniuses" or "prodigies." Nearly all students praised Jacob—a White boy who was voted "most likely to become president" in the superlatives section of the cohort's 8th-grade yearbook—for being "well-rounded." When describing Jacob, Austin, an Asian American boy, said, "[If] my friend and I don't get a problem [in math], we go to mainly one person. His name is Jacob . . . he's an all-around great guy and he's very intelligent." Shannon, an Asian American girl, said, "And the thing is, [Jacob's] well-rounded. . . . He's good at athletics and like every subject that he tries."

Students used fewer superlatives, however, when describing RJ and Curtis, two Asian American boys. Rather than praising them for being "well-rounded," students tended to perceive them as lacking Jacob's social competency. For example, Mike, a White boy, described Curtis and RJ as "very good at math." He explained that both were "very good at academics in general, but [they're] not that amazing at other things . . . [they're] smart, but I don't know how much of a social life they have." Mason, a White boy, said, "I guess that's just their thing—at lunch you see them, but instead of talking they're just like memorizing and stuff . . . like Curtis, the other day I saw him [at lunch] reading the textbook instead of talking to his friends." His friend Daniel, a multiracial White and Asian American boy, nodded and described both boys as "crazy." He said, "Sometimes it's annoying when kids try to do too good . . . their whole life is just to get 150 percent in like every class . . . they like memorize all this stuff and they act weird too."

Over time, educators' differential responses played an important role in shaping higher-level students' perceptions of boys' academic capabilities. Because educators tended to respond more positively to White boys' non-academically oriented comments, boys like RJ and Curtis had fewer opportunities to demonstrate their social competency during classroom conversations than did White boys

like Jacob. Despite being "super smart," students began to perceive Asian American boys such as RJ and Curtis as "weird" for lacking the well-roundedness that White boys such as Jacob possessed. Consequently, within higher-level classrooms, where educators held Asian American boys to a higher standard of behavior, 8th-graders tended to perceive affluent White boys as the most exceptional students at the school.

Gender and Race in Lower-Level Courses

In the school's lower-level courses, educators' responses to White, Asian American, and Latinx boys' interruptions also varied. Consistent with the results of existing research (Lewis and Diamond 2015; Ochoa 2013; Rios 2011; Valenzuela 1999), educators were quicker to penalize Latinx boys. During a 6th-grade standard math class, for example, I observed two students—Mitchell, a Latinx boy, and Jonah, a White boy—whispering to one another during Ms. Ezzell's lecture. Although both boys engaged in the same behavior, Ms. Ezell singled out Mitchell. Pausing mid-lecture, she asked, "Mitchell, what's the answer to problem four?" After Mitchell shifted uncomfortably in his seat for several long moments, Ms. Ezzell broke the silence by sternly reprimanding him. She told him to "pay attention" because he was "missing" important information.

In addition to being quicker to penalize Latinx boys, educators often reserved their harshest disciplinary practices for them. In situations where boys made comments that were potentially distracting or offensive, educators tended to draw on disciplinary techniques that made a spectacle out of Latinx boys' misbehavior (Ferguson 2000). Recall how Mr. Pearson sent Peter, a Latinx boy, to sit facing the classroom's back wall after Peter said he had "flipped off a homeless guy" during a 7th-grade standard math class. As Peter walked to the back of the classroom, Mr. Pearson publicly shamed Peter for his inability to follow classroom rules. He loudly said, "You think that's appropriate classroom behavior?" Later in the class, however, Mr. Pearson responded differently when Aaron, a White boy, insulted another student. Referencing the comment Peter had made earlier in the class, Aaron loudly called out, "Maybe you'll be a homeless person someday!" Although Mr. Pearson frowned and told Aaron to "stop talking," he did not send Aaron—a White boy—to the back of the class, nor did he publicly chastise Aaron for his inability to demonstrate "appropriate" classroom behavior. Like Mr. Pearson, educators tended to discipline Latinx boys in highly visible ways that drew other students' attention to their inability to demonstrate proper classroom behavior. Because of educators' differential responses, Latinx boys bore the brunt of the school's harshest punitive disciplinary practices. Latinx students comprised 25 percent of the MHMS student body, yet over the nearly three school years I observed, nearly all the students serving lunch detentions were Latinx boys.

Educators' differential responses to boys' interruptions played an important role in shaping students' perceptions of lower-level boys' intelligence—or lack thereof. When describing lower-level boys, students tended to characterize Latinx boys as the school's *least* intelligent students. Charlotte, an Asian American girl, described Mitchell, a Latinx boy: "Every time I see him in the hallways, I'm just like, you know what? I just don't even want to look at you right now, because you are so gross and terrible and dumb." Brynn, a White girl, also described Mitchell as "so dumb." She said, "He's always talking about wanting to be in the military. He's so dumb. . . . For people who aren't able to learn in school, you're either one of those people who are plumbers and electricians and stuff, or you go to the military." Emilio, a Latinx boy, characterized Ty, another Latinx boy, in a similar manner: "We have the dumbest kids possible. . . . Ty is so stupid." Finally, Alexis, a Black girl, described Simon, a Latinx boy, and Ty as "dumb people."

The fact that MHMS students named Latinx boys as the "dumbest" students in the

school was noteworthy because educators routinely benched several White and Asian American boys for repeatedly interrupting in 6th- and 7th-grade lower-level courses. As 8th-graders, these boys rarely participated in 8th-grade classroom discussions. However, in a setting where educators' disciplinary practices were less likely to draw White and Asian American boys' competency into question, students reserved their harshest criticisms for Latinx boys. Rather than describing White and Asian American boys who disengaged from school "stupid," 8th-graders instead described these boys as "annoying," "distracting," or "disruptive." Consequently, race intersected with gender when shaping lower-level students' perceptions of intelligence, with students perceiving Latinx boys as the least intelligent students at the school.

DISCUSSION

Gender status beliefs associating men with increased competency and social esteem are a key mechanism limiting girls' and women's opportunities in education and the workforce (Charles and Grusky 2004; Correll 2004; Ridgeway 2011). Few sociological studies, however, have identified how school processes affect students' gender status beliefs. The main contribution of this article is to demonstrate how educators' differential regulations of boys' interruptions by class level contributed to gender-based differences in students' perceptions of intelligence. In higher-level courses, where educators perceived the predominately affluent, White, and Asian American students as academically superior, educators tolerated—and to some extent encouraged—boys' interruptions. In 6th and 7th grade, boys learned to challenge girls' opinions and monopolize classroom conversations, such that 8th-graders perceived boys as exceptionally intelligent. However, in the school's lower-level courses, where educators perceived the predominately non-affluent, Latinx students as academically inferior, educators were quicker to penalize boys' interruptions (Ferguson 2000; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Ochoa 2013; Rios 2011). Because educators' disciplinary practices encouraged boys to disengage from classroom conversations, girls had more opportunities to participate. As 8th-graders, lower-level girls expressed more confidence in their public speaking skills and were perceived as smarter than lower-level boys, but not as exceptional.

Through this analysis, my findings provide a new theoretical understanding of how school processes contribute to the gendered social construction of exceptionalism. Seemingly natural differences in students' academic dispositions were constituted through students' daily experiences in school (Ferguson 2000; Foucault 2012; Khan 2011; McNeil 2013). Whereas educators' harsh disciplinary practices in urban school districts can encourage students to perceive girls as academically superior to boys (Carter 2005; Lopez 2003; Rios 2011; Valenzuela 1999), educators' leniency in a suburban school served as a protective force for race- and class-privileged boys. With educators' patient reminders, race- and class-privileged boys who began middle school repeatedly misbehaving in higher-level courses gradually joined their peers in demonstrating proper classroom behavior. Two years of being pushed aside by interrupting boys, however, had a different consequence for girls. Similar to the way boys often invade girls' physical space during relatively unsupervised settings such as recess or in hallways (Musto 2014; Pascoe 2007; Thorne 1993), the lenient disciplinary environment in higher-level courses allowed 6th- and 7th-grade boys to repeatedly invade girls' sonic space (Sargent 2009). Girls in higher-level courses finished middle school expressing less confidence in their public speaking skills and participating less frequently than boys. Consequently, educators' leniency gradually translated into boys' dominance, with 8th-graders perceiving higher-level boys as more exceptionally intelligent than girls.

Students associated differently gendered meanings to intelligence in the school's lower-level courses. Educators' reliance on punitive disciplinary practices gradually contributed to

marginalized boys' disengagement in lower-level courses, despite their beginning middle school behaving in similar ways to higher-level boys. Unlike boys in the school's higher-level courses, lower-level boys who began middle school repeatedly interrupting did not join their peers in gradually learning to demonstrate proper classroom behavior. Instead, they finished 8th grade feeling alienated from their teachers, unmotivated in school, and participating less frequently. Because educators' punitive disciplinary practices contributed to boys' disengagement, my results contribute to the extensive body of research documenting how punitive disciplinary practices can disadvantage marginalized boys in school (Ferguson 2000; Gregory et al. 2010; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Ochoa 2013; Perry and Morris 2014; Rios 2011; Valenzuela 1999).

The stricter disciplinary environment in lower-level courses, however, served as a protective force for marginalized girls. Similar to the way bureaucratic rules and policies can reduce the amount of gender inequality women encounter in workplaces (Morgan and Martin 2006; Ridgeway 2011), educators' willingness to enforce classroom rules reduced the likelihood boys would repeatedly invade girls' sonic space. Not only did girls have more opportunities to answer educators' questions, but they were also less likely to have their opinions challenged by interrupting boys. Girls in lower-level courses finished middle school participating more frequently, described their public speaking skills with more confidence, and were perceived as smarter than lower-level boys, but not as exceptional. Because of the differential status associated with the school's higher- and lower-level courses, MHMS students perceived girls in lower-level courses as less intelligent than students enrolled in the school's higher-level courses. Educators' differential enforcement of school rules by course level encouraged students to perceive race- and class-privileged boys in the school's higher-level courses as exceptionally intelligent, thus demonstrating how school processes shape students' gender beliefs in ways that associate boys with increased competency and social esteem (Charles and Grusky 2004; Correll 2004; Morris 2012; Ridgeway 2011; Thébaud and Charles 2018).

The second contribution of this article is to show how gender intersected with race when shaping students' perceptions of intelligence. In higher-level courses, educators treated affluent White boys' interruptions with the most tolerance. During classroom conversations, educators tended to ignore or encourage White boys' non-academically oriented comments, yet discouraged Asian American boys from making similar types of comments. Because educators often view Asian American students as "model minorities" who highly value education (Kwon 2014; Lee and Zhou 2015; Lee 2015; Ochoa 2013), MHMS educators may have perceived Asian American boys' non-academically oriented interruptions more negatively than ones made by White boys. In lower-level courses, MHMS educators reserved their harshest disciplinary practices for non-affluent Latinx boys. Not only were educators quicker to penalize Latinx boys, but they also tended to make a spectacle out of their non-academically oriented interruptions. Considering that educators often racialize Latinx boys as academically inferior students who belong to a problematic underclass (Kwon 2015; Ochoa 2013; Rios 2011), MHMS educators may have perceived Latinx boys' non-academically oriented interruptions as more troubling than ones made by White or Asian American boys.

Within a school where educators' responses to higher- and lower-level boys' interruptions varied by race, students gradually learned to associate different characteristics with boys' intelligence. Students finished middle school perceiving affluent White boys—who had the most opportunities to assume authoritative positions during classroom conversations—as more "well-rounded" than affluent Asian American boys. Along similar lines, because educators' disciplinary practices repeatedly called non-affluent Latinx boys' academic competency into question, students finished

middle school perceiving Latinx boys as the "dumbest" students in the school. Gender has remained largely unmarked in existing accounts of how academic course sequences shape perceptions of students' academic capabilities (for an exception, see Bettie 2003), so my results provide a point of departure from existing research. Educators' differential regulation of boys' interruptions by course level and race encouraged 8th-graders to perceive affluent White boys as the most exceptional students at the school. These same processes also encouraged students to perceive non-affluent Latinx boys as the least exceptional students in the school. Consequently, race intersected with gender when shaping students' perceptions of higher- and lower-level students' academic capabilities.

This article also provides directions for future research. Due to the small percentage of Black students at MHMS, I remain limited in my ability to make claims about suburban educators' responses to Black boys' interruptions. Existing research has found that Black boys are racialized as "stupid," "criminals," or "thugs" (Ferguson 2000; Ispa-Landa 2013; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Rios 2011), but educators' responses to their interruptions might vary across course levels in ways that shape the meanings associated with Black boys' academic capabilities. Furthermore, students' parents may play an important role in shaping educators' differential responses to boys' interruptions by course level. Middle- and upper-middle-class parents often interact with educators in ways that enable them to customize their children's educational experiences (Lareau 2011; Lewis-McCoy 2014), which may discourage educators—either implicitly or explicitly—from disciplining race- and class-privileged boys who repeatedly speak out of turn during classroom conversations (Lewis and Diamond 2015; Ochoa 2013). Finally, the small number of teachers of color at MHMS limits my ability to examine the relationship between educators' race and their responses to boys' interruptions. Racial congruence may help explain why MHMS educators, who were overwhelmingly White, treated White boys' interruptions with the most tolerance (Dee 2005; Pigott and Cowen 2000), which highlights Gregory and colleagues' (2010) call for research that examines educators' implicit racial biases.

CONCLUSIONS

Middle school is a time when students "try on" various identities and make important decisions about their anticipated career paths (Adler and Adler 1998; Morris 2006). Because this is a formative time in students' lives, the implications associated with MHMS students' experiences may extend far beyond 8th grade. Race- and class-privileged boys might be more inclined to develop an interest in academic fields where raw intelligence is considered integral to one's success—fields such as math, philosophy, or physics, where women's participation rates remain low (Meyer, Cimpian, and Leslie 2015). Furthermore, the fact that race- and class-privileged boys learned to monopolize speaking opportunities may advantage these "geniuses" and "prodigies" in higher education and the workforce, where men routinely interrupt and speak over women (Jacobi and Schweers 2017; Schilt 2010). At the same time, well-roundedness is a personality trait valued by admissions officers at elite universities (Hartocollis 2018; Stevens 2009), and employers often take candidates' "likeability" into consideration when making hiring and promotion decisions (Ortiz and Roscigno 2009; Quadlin 2018). For this reason, "socially inept" Asian American boys may be disadvantaged when compared to their "well-rounded" White peers well into adulthood. In the workforce, for example, employers perceive Asian American men as lacking the social competency and leadership skills to be promoted to upper-level management positions (Chen 1999; Chou and Feagin 2015; Espiritu 2008).

It is equally likely that non-affluent Latinx students' experiences of being tracked into the school's lower-level courses will have a lasting effect on their academic trajectories. Latinx boys who disengage from lower-level

classroom discussions might enter high school engaging in behaviors that educators perceive negatively (Ferguson 2000; Ochoa 2013; Rios 2011), potentially placing them at risk of being suspended, expelled, or dropping out (Perry and Morris 2014). These perceived "dumb" boys also may be less likely to secure the grades or teacher recommendations needed to enroll in postsecondary education (Ochoa 2013; Rios 2011), potentially explaining why low-income girls of color are more likely to graduate high school and attend college in comparison to their male peers (Buchmann and DiPrete 2006; McDaniel et al. 2011).

The fact that lower-level girls were perceived as smart—but not geniuses—may disadvantage Latinx girls long after middle school. Although Latinx girls may be better positioned to pursue postsecondary education than Latinx boys, completing advanced coursework is crucial for securing admission to elite colleges and universities (Stevens 2009). When compared to White and Asian American students, Latinx girls may be more likely to attend community colleges or vocational schools (Bettie 2003; Ochoa 2013)—schools that enroll disproportionate numbers of women of color and first-generation college students (Posselt et al. 2012). However, even if these "smart" Latinx girls pursue advanced coursework in high school or enroll in elite postsecondary institutions, girls and women of color are often penalized for being "loud" or overly assertive in comparison to White women (Ispa-Landa 2013; Morris 2006; Wingfield 2010). Consequently, the confidence and public speaking skills Latinx girls accrued within the school's lower-level courses may inadvertently disadvantage them in other, higher-status settings. It is for this reason that MHMS educators' differential enforcement of boys' rule-breaking by course level may help constitute the foundation of broader patterns of inequality embedded in higher education and the workforce more broadly.

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Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. During the 2015/16 academic year, 80 percent of girls and 75 percent of boys at MHMS met or exceeded standards on the statewide math exam.
3. At MHMS, 89 percent of Asian American students, 81 percent of White students, and 57 percent of Latinx students met or exceeded standards on the 2015/16 state math exam.
4. MHMS students' course placement was determined by their performance on school placement tests, statewide standardized tests, and teachers' recommendations.
5. Only verbatim quotes from interviews or observations are presented in quotation marks.
6. Teachers received $40 cash for being interviewed. Sixth-graders received a $10 Jamba Juice gift card, 7th-graders received a $10 Starbucks gift card, and 8th-graders chose between $10 cash or a $10 Starbucks gift card.
7. Because boys were more likely to interrupt and speak out of turn, ethnographic research more clearly illuminated the meanings boys associated with their daily experiences in school, leading me to interview roughly twice as many girls.
8. Students self-reported their racial identification. Students' socioeconomic status was determined by their qualification for free/reduced price lunch, their parents' jobs and educational attainment, and whether their parents were homeowners (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Bettie 2003).
9. I refer to advanced math and honors courses as "higher-level" courses; I call standard and remedial courses "lower-level." I use this terminology because 6th-graders were placed into two different academic streams. Approximately 60 percent of MHMS students completed "higher-level" courses, meaning they enrolled in advanced/honors math, honors English, and an elective (often band). By

comparison, 40 percent completed "lower-level" courses, meaning students completed standard math, standard English, and an elective (or a remedial course in lieu of an elective).

10. To maintain educators' privacy, I have concealed their race. However, the patterns outlined are consistent by educators' race. In other words, White educators and educators of color demonstrated similar responses to boys' rule-breaking, depending on boys' course level and race.
11. At MHMS, there were approximately two Latinx boys in each higher-level classroom. Because these boys tended not to interrupt during classroom discussions, their experiences are not the focus of this article.

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