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## “Women made it a home”: representations of women in social studies

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This article explores recently published P-12 social studies lesson plans that include women to examine how attending to women is “getting done” in the field and how the lessons represent women and women’s experiences. Using discourse analysis methodologies, the author demonstrates that women have been included as topics in ways that do not work toward disrupting problematic discourses about gender norms. Through their avoidance of issues of power and patriarchy, most of the lessons fall short of addressing gender inequity – in the past or the present – in a significant way. More critical attention to women and gender in lessons, as well as in other curricular spaces, are important steps toward harnessing social studies’ potential to engage students in the meaningful consideration of inequitable gender relations.

**Keywords:** social studies education; women; discourse; instruction

### Introduction

As spaces in which students can develop the capacity to understand, analyse, and respond to gender issues, schools provide contexts in which gender inequity can be addressed. The field of social studies education is particularly well situated to contest issues of gender norms directly through curriculum. In the United States, social studies is the discipline within P-12 schooling with the responsibility for engaging students in the academic fields of history, geography, economics, civics, anthropology and sociology. These fields of study provide a plethora of topics through which to consider women’s lives in the past and present, to engage students in the consideration of inequitable gender relations, and to encourage students to resist and dismantle inequitable structures and norms. However, as Bernard-Powers (2001) contended in her review of the historical framing of gender in social studies, while there has been exponential infusion of gender issues in the social sciences, attention to gender in P-12 social studies curriculum “has struggled for visibility and legitimacy” (p. 181).

Comprehensive studies of the attention to women in social studies (Bernard-Powers, 2001; Crocco, 2008; Hahn, Bernard-Powers, Crocco, & Woyshner, 2007; Hahn et al., 1985), as well as research examining the representation of women in histories of the field (Crocco, 2000, 2002), textbooks (Clark, Allard, & Mahoney, 2004; Clark, Ayton, Frechette, & Keller, 2005; Crocco, Pervez, & Katz, 2009), and standards (Crocco, 2007) consistently document women’s absence. However, these studies typically include some reference to both qualitative and quantitative improvements in attention to women over the last 40 years. Although consistently nested within carefully crafted critiques of the ongoing lack of attention to women and gender as topics, many of these studies assert

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that there has been some progress in terms of the field's attention to women, as evidenced by the increased attention paid to women in curricular spaces like textbooks or teacher education publications. The descriptions of spaces in which attention to women *is* found in social studies are typically presented as unquestioningly positive, a sign of improvement, and something that should be replicated more often. The focus of these studies has been on the ways women are absent, not an analysis of *how* women are present.

In a 2011 speech that acknowledged the weakening of barriers inhibiting women's participation in economic and political spheres around the world, then US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton warned that "Evidence of progress is not evidence of success" (US Department of State, para. 16). Australian feminist Anne Summers (2013) has described this statement as "revolutionary", arguing that in terms of analyses of women's status in political, economic, and social life:

For the past 40 years, we have looked to progress. We have measured, and counted, and tallied, and in doing so, thought we were making headway. We did not look at success. Perhaps we assumed that the two things were synonymous. It turns out they are not.

Building on Clinton's and Summers' suggestions that we distinguish between progress and success when considering women's issues, this article examines existing approaches to addressing women in social studies education across P-12 contexts. Specifically, I decided to pay close attention to one curricular space – lesson plans. While the appearance of any lesson plan that includes attention to women may be seen as progress within a field that has typically ignored them, my goal was to determine if these resources were successful in terms of promoting different understandings and orientations toward women than the inequitable norms that exist currently. Through this research, I seek to contribute to and further a discussion in social studies about how to engage students around issues of women and gender in ways that might work toward a more gender equitable society.

### **Lesson plans as a site of research**

There is a connection between the ways authors construct a hypothetical pedagogical event like a lesson plan and the normative assumptions that have shaped a particular way of thinking about how attention to women in the classroom can be "done". Lesson plans require a translation from the abstract to the practical, a fertile space for identifying the kind of norms that frame content and activities about women that are seen as beneficial for students to learn from. Furthermore, the focus on lesson plans in this study is motivated by the reality that because of the sparse attention to women in standards and textbooks, teachers have to turn to other sources for examples of how to teach about women. The search within social studies publications described in this article mimics what might be undertaken by teachers who take the initiative to search out ways of including women in the curriculum.

This study is based on two understandings about attention to women in social studies education. First, the way women are represented in these texts cannot be interpreted outside of the field's history of excluding women. Second, the authors of social studies lesson plans that are about women do not uncover and share an existing truth about women's experience: rather, they actively produce a particular account of those experiences and in doing so, produce a particular account of who women are. These authors have addressed a topic that has received very little attention in this field, so in producing

these lessons, they are speaking back to that absence by accessing particular discourses that produce women as particular kinds of gendered subjects.

This is not an examination of the implementation of these lessons in classrooms and therefore this study does not enable any argument to be made about the way in which these lessons were enacted and taken up by students and teachers. While research that focuses on classroom practices is central to educational research, the approach I adopted in this study follows Valerie Walkerdine, who asserted “we need not point to some untainted reality outside the text, but to examine how those practices within the text itself have relational effects that define who and what we are” (as cited in Davies (2003, p. 47)). Furthermore, this research relies on the understanding that teachers often confront new ideas in education through written texts, and therefore, texts have significant capital (Gore, 1993). Lastly, these texts represent a central mode of communication between academics and the community of practitioners and as such are an important site for the exploration of how scholars are framing gender-focused work for teachers. While these texts may be interpreted, ignored, or implemented by their readers in many different ways, the focus of this research is on what ways of thinking about women and women’s experiences the texts produce in and of themselves.

### Discourse at work

Building upon poststructural conceptions of discourses as “material in the sense that [they are] located in institutions and practices which define difference and shape the material world” (Weedon, 1999, p. 103), I explored the discourses at work in producing women in social studies lesson plan texts. This specific focus on texts is a branch of discourse analysis that relies heavily upon Fairclough’s (2003) assertion that in order to understand how people make meaning from a text, researchers must consider three different processes of meaning making: how the text is produced, how it is received, and the text itself. While all three of these analytic processes are integral to exploring the relationship between a text and how readers may take it up, Fairclough states that the examination of the text itself is critical to the understanding of how the reader makes meaning of it. In this project, I focused specifically on analysing the language events within lesson plan texts about women to open them up for questioning and to see how they might contribute to meaning-making processes. In particular, I sought to analyse the texts in order to make their normalization processes visible and to see what repeated practices and citations around women they relied upon for intelligibility.

I used methods of poststructural discourse analysis (Andersen, 2003; Davies, 2003; MacLure, 2003; Mills, 2004; Prior, 2003) to understand how scholars in social studies education have shaped the discourses through which women are constituted. As post-structural discourse analysis is concerned with shifting research questions from “being to becoming” (Andersen, 2003, p. xi), my intent in this project was not to summarize what the lesson plans were about, but to consider the kind of work they were doing and how they might subject teachers and students to normalized modes of thinking and teaching about women.

Specifically, I engaged in an analysis of the texts that, according to MacLure (2003), requires two nearly incompatible things: paying very close attention to the language being used while also considering the broader social, cultural, and political contexts that shape how the reading of that language can and might take place. The goal of this close reading is not to intuit the “real” meaning of a text but to try to gain a better understanding of *how* what was said about women in these lesson plans was shaped by particular taken for

granted textual practices in which we all participate. But the ubiquity of these practices is one of the primary challenges of discourse analysis: because we are all saturated in these ways of thinking and talking, they feel commonsensical. In her description of discourse analysis, MacLure (2003) advised that

The hardest thing to see in any text is that which poses itself as natural and unquestionable. So a first step towards opening up any text would be to watch and wait for something – often a little, seemingly inconsequential thing – that somehow catches your attention, puzzles you. (pp. 82–83)

The practice of watching and waiting for something was very challenging in my reading of women in the lesson plans. Because I am a member of the social studies community of practice, the women these texts produce are very familiar to me. As researcher, woman, and social studies educator, I am subject to the same processes of normalization and citation that shaped the texts. In order to try to understand what these texts were up to and how they worked, it was necessary to try to think about the texts as *not* innocent. In the following section, I describe the data collection process as well as the analytic strategies used to problematize the data.

### Data collection and analysis

For this project, I identified articles published in social studies education journals that presented lesson plans which included descriptions and representations of women. There were several reasons for using recently published, descriptive lesson-plan oriented articles for this analysis. First, published social studies lesson plans attending to women, and in particular, aimed at practitioners, have not been explored in social studies education research: the bulk of scholarship around women has not included lesson plans either as a product or as a category of analysis. Second, I wanted to understand what practitioners who were looking for ways to incorporate women into their curriculum would find, and what ways of thinking about women could be made available by following the directions outlined in the lesson plans. Finally, I focused specifically on lesson plans published between 2000 and 2011 because I was interested in examining our recent thinking about women, rather than describing some problematic past we can imagine we have progressed beyond.

I identified six publications that were searchable in the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database and associated primarily with social studies education. This list included each of the publications associated with the flagship American social studies association, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *Social Education*, *Social Studies & the Young Learner and Middle Level Learner*, and three other social studies focused publications: *Journal of Social Studies Research*, *The Social Studies*, and *International Journal of Social Education*. There are social studies lessons published outside of these journals, but because the goal was to understand what was being written about these topics within the community, my search was limited to publications that were specifically geared toward social studies scholars and educators. I built an ERIC search with a comprehensive set of descriptors that included social studies instruction related terms and gender related terms and ran that search targeting articles in the six publications listed above and published between January 2000 and July 2011. Among the 29 descriptors in the instruction list were terms like “instructional materials”, “class activities”, and “discussion groups”. There were 26 gender related descriptors in the

gender list, including terms such as “women's history”, “sex fairness”, and “mothers”. Through this search, I identified 24 articles that both described student and teacher activities specifically, and that focused on gender, women’s history, or women’s issues in a significant way. Of the 24 articles, 16 included descriptive lessons with a focus on individual women and women’s lives.

Through examining the connections between the description of women in these text events and broader discourses circulating about women, I sought to identify the implicit understandings of women invoked and reinscribed in the discursive spaces in which women were present in the curriculum and to think about the tools offered to students to problematize these representations. This kind of analysis requires pushing beyond what the lesson plans were about or who they were for and instead, asking what kinds of understandings about women the lesson plans promoted and produced. To do this, I read each of the lesson plans a minimum of five times. As I read, I made notes in the margins, drew arrows, underlined important phrases, and asked imaginary questions of the authors as I tried to push beyond the common sense of the lessons that were being described and tried to analyse how they were working and what they were producing. During these readings, I repeatedly circled back to feminist theory and MacLure’s (2003) work on discourse research. This allowed me to keep one eye on the close details of the text and the other eye on the broader social discourses that shape certain ways of thinking about women and gender.

In my initial pass through the lessons, I documented their basic characteristics, such as the grade levels for whom the lessons were intended and the academic subject within which the lesson was situated. Then I turned to the more subtle and nuanced characteristics of the lessons along four different axes informed by feminist theory and research. First, I explored the range of subject positions that the women represented in these texts could occupy. Second, I considered women’s agency, and how they were positioned in terms of their status within social structures and hierarchies. In the third reading cycle, I paid particular attention to women’s status in comparison to each other on the basis of race and class and in comparison to men. Lastly, I examined the ways in which the lesson plans created spaces for students to be critical of gender norms and inequitable social, political, and economic relationships between women and men. In each round of reading, I made lists of the different kinds of discursive technologies deployed to attend to and describe women in the texts. I continued to refine and collapse this list with each pass through the data set until I had identified three categories of analysis that, based on the four characteristics described above, most accurately described the lessons: add women and stir, masking power, and critical representations.

In the next section, I present an overview of some of salient characteristics of the lesson plans and then present brief descriptions of the different types. I suggest that these examples illustrate that the inclusion of women in social studies lesson plans is getting done in a way that does not work toward addressing gender inequity or disrupting problematic discourses about women.

### **Lesson plan characteristics**

The 16 lesson plans that included both extensive attention to women and described specific teacher and student activities appeared in only four of the six publications included in the study. These publications, which appear in [Table 1](#), include each of the NCSS publications and *The Social Studies*. It is important to note that three of the lesson plans that appeared in the *Middle Level Learner* came from one special issue of the



Table 1. Publications in which the lesson plans appeared.

Publication	#
<i>Middle Level Learner</i> (3 from a special issue)	4
<i>Social Education</i> (3 from a special issue)	8
<i>Social Studies and the Young Learner</i>	1
<i>The Social Studies</i>	3

publication in 2011 titled “Alice Paul and Woman Suffrage”. Similarly, three of the lesson plans published in *Social Education* came from a 2003 special issue titled “Women of the World”. Lesson plans published specifically within special issues focused on women constitute 38% of the articles included in this analysis.

While the grade band distribution of the lesson plans is fairly even among elementary, middle, and high school (see Table 2), the content of the lesson plans is disproportionately focused on History, and specifically, American History. This reflects the centrality of history in social studies curriculum but also indicates that women and women’s issues appear to have been excluded from lesson plans that addressed the other disciplines that comprise social studies education, such as civics and economics (Table 3).

Using the approach to discourse analysis described earlier, in which micro attention to the language used in the texts is paired with macro awareness of the social and political contexts which make it possible, I developed three categories, as seen in Table 4, which characterized the lesson plans in terms of how women and women’s lives were presented. Each of these categories represents approaches to analyses of the canon that circulate broadly in feminist research. As is true in most qualitative research, this data did not place itself into neat and clearly distinct categories. In some instances, the distinction between an “add and stir” lesson and “masking power” lesson was subtle, and some lessons placed in those categories had hints of “critical representation”. However, to simplify the analysis, I placed each lesson plan within the category which it most typified. While

Table 2. Lesson plans by grade level.

Grade level	#
Elementary	2
Upper elementary/middle school	3
Middle school	4
Middle/high school	5
High school	2

Table 3. Lesson plans by social studies subject/discipline.

Subject/discipline	#
American history	7
American history/civics	1
General history (elementary)	2
World history	2
World history/geography	3
Geography	1

Table 4. Representations of women and women's experiences in the lesson plans.

Category	#
Add women and stir	9
Masking power	4
Critical representations	3

there could have been other ways to sort these lessons, this particular categorization serves to not only illuminate normalized ways of thinking about women, but to also suggest that there are a range of possibilities for how “doing gender” in social studies can be accomplished. In the three sections that follow, I draw on feminist theory to describe the categories, and then provide examples and analyses of the kinds of lessons that exemplify each approach to including women and women's lives as topics in social studies.

### **Add women and stir**

The add women and stir approach is characterized by the inclusion of women in accounts of the past or present which are not fundamentally changed by their presence. Adding women to the curriculum in this way is often promoted as an effort to create more balance in the proportion of attention paid to men and women. Within history education in particular, this way of including women was described by Tetreault (1985, 1986, 1987) as “compensatory history”. While it may be a step up from the complete exclusion of women, add and stir, which focuses on exceptional women or women in traditional roles, falls well short of transforming the traditional and often patriarchal way that stories about human life and organization are told. Through add and stir, women are simply tacked on to pre-existing frameworks that reflect elite men's experiences and understandings (Harding, 1995). Although Noddings advocated for more substantial attention to women's lives in social studies curriculum, she also contended that the add women and stir approach “was not all bad” (2001, p. 29) because it was a reminder that women should be included. I would argue, however, that its predominance within these lesson plans may indicate that it has become *the* primary way of including gender in social studies lessons. In this section, I highlight several lesson plans that represent an add and stir approach. While these lessons may serve as a reminder that women did exist in history, the representations they provide may also reinscribe problematic notions of women.

The first example, published in *The Social Studies*, is a short lesson plan for secondary students based on the history of the Jamestown colony, and is described as an opportunity for learners to “take an active role in examining history from women's perspectives” (Bair, Williams, & Fralinger, 2008, p. 176). In this lesson, students were to be given “character cards”, included in the appendix, with the name and biographical information of a female Jamestown settler, including information regarding why the woman settled in the new world. Among the six character cards presented, only two of the women expressed the “choice” to come to America: their motivations were described as looking for adventure and looking for a husband. The other four characters described on the cards did not have a choice: one woman noted that it was her husband who chose to come to Jamestown, one was a servant who had to follow her mistress, one was kidnapped, and the last was a slave. The next step of this lesson was for students to share the information on their cards, and



then as a class summarize the reasons that women came to the colony. According to the authors, responses from the students should include the following (p. 176):

- better marriage opportunities due to a shortage of men in England;
- the higher ratio of men to women in Jamestown (which meant that women could be selective);
- the chance for improved economic situations;
- cleaner environment;
- sense of adventure; more rights for women in the New World; and
- being kidnapped or forced to go.

Teachers are then instructed to put students into groups and ask them to create a “recruitment poster”, building upon the abovementioned discussion to create a historically accurate and creative advertisement “aimed at enticing British women to make the voyage to Jamestown” (Bair et al., 2008, p. 176). After the students shared their posters, the teacher is to engage the students in a discussion about which recruiting tactics were most effective. The teacher should then encourage students to

view the colony of Jamestown from a women’s perspective in this time period. The teacher closes the discussion by describing the many roles that women played in Jamestown once they arrived. Both men and women contributed to making Jamestown a colony, but women made it a home. (Bair et al., 2008, p. 176)

This particular activity encourages students to consider women’s experiences but does so outside of a consideration of the gender system operating during this time period. This is evidenced by the absence of instructions or guidelines for why teachers may want to or should engage students in a discussion about why issues of marriage, mate selectivity, routes to improved economic situations, servitude, and of course, kidnapping and enslavement would have been salient issues for certain groups of women during this time period. Additionally, there is a problematic disconnect between a recruitment poster activity and the reality that some women were kidnapped or enslaved and forced to go to Jamestown. Arguably, the reality that some women were powerless against being forced to leave their family and homes would seem to be the kind of historical knowledge that could ignite an interesting and meaningful conversation with students regarding what views of women would be necessary to make this practice seem reasonable, as well as to compare and contrast the experiences of these women with the women and men from other parts of the world who were forced to become Americans. However, the positive advertising focus of the recruitment poster seems to undercut the horror of the experience of being kidnapped or enslaved and distances students from exposure to the kind of violence that took place. This, in effect, distances students from thinking about the kinds of oppression women experienced.

Furthermore, the comment that “women made it a home” could be seen as making what happened to these women “ok”. Made intelligible by the still implicit understanding in our culture that homemaking is what women do and not what men do, this statement normalizes the “natural” place of women in the home and could reinscribe the notion that then and now, women’s lives can only achieve purpose through homemaking. It reifies the perception that women are natural homemakers without considering where the arrangement that men go out in the world and women stay in the home came from, why the responsibility to attend to the home was assigned on the basis of a gendered division of

labour, and the inequality of this division (Scott, 1986). The comment also inhibits recognition of the different ways that some of the women described in the lesson may have resisted the constraints of their homemaking roles and actively worked against their circumscription. In the same way that Davies (2003) noted that adventuresome women in children's literature are rewarded with their own kitchen, the only agency assigned to the adventure seeking women – once they got to the colony – was to become homemakers on the North American continent. The different lives of slaves, servants, and mistresses are muted under the guise of women's general achievement in making the colony a home.

There are other ways of talking about the lives of women during this time period of American history. For example, in her account of American women during the colonial period, historian Carol Berkin (2009, p. 14) stated there was evidence to indicate that

women attacked their mates with pots and pans; mothers committed infanticide; wives ran away, alone or with other men; housewives proved to be slovenly or lazy or unskilled at vital tasks; and on occasion, women spoke out publicly to challenge the restraint of the gender ideology their community embraced.

The inclusion of these kinds of details in a presentation of women in colonial America highlights women's agency in history and in doing so could make this time period and gender issues come alive for students: *how* stories about women in the home and in history are told is equally if not more important than the details about women's experiences that make it into the stories (Hendry, 2011).

Addressing women's stories in a more critical way, instead of the additive way demonstrated in this lesson, could open the space for students' thinking about gender equity, now and then. For example, I would argue that a focus on the arrangements that led to the arrival of women in the colony and their activities there might also include a set of questions to encourage students to critique the social order in which their actions made sense. For example, Levstik (2001) suggested that questions like, "What social, economic, and political purposes do these arrangements serve? Who is marginalized in this context? Who has power?" (p. 202), can accompany investigations of domestic life. Without these kinds of questions, the gender norms that made these women's demeaning experiences and differential treatment from men possible are either hidden or not relevant.

The absence of attention to gender norms can also be seen in another type of add and stir approach found in an article published in *Social Studies and the Young Learner*. This article featured a series of interesting lessons that describe Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan's contributions to the lives of the disabled and positioned them as heroes; however, there was no acknowledgement that they were women, or that positioning Keller and Sullivan as heroes would be a way to draw attention to women who have overcome gendered obstacles to accomplish exceptional things.<sup>1</sup> The word "woman" or "women" does not appear in the article at all. The only reference to gender comes in a footnote that states, "We use the word 'hero' as a gender-neutral description. The term 'heroine' appears in many historical documents" (Morin & Bernheim, 2005, p. 27). This lesson plan *does* include activities that would encourage students to think about people with disabilities – activities that ask students to consider what it means to live as a deaf and blind person, and to think about their interactions with people with disabilities. But the opportunity to encourage students to consider what it meant to live as women during this time, the obstacles both Keller and Sullivan faced because of their gender or the ways that gender and disability intersect were not addressed. Exploring what the

difference between hero and heroine signifies, or why the usage of the term changed, was also not exploited.

As critics of add and stir approaches to including women in history have contended, accounts that feature heroic women without explicitly acknowledging their femaleness or, in the case of curriculum, without encouraging students to situate women's accomplishments within gender systems that made their achievements exceptional, support the contention that "just to include women heroines [perpetuates] the often silent and hidden operations of gender in shaping historical analysis" (Hendry, 2011, p. 14). These kinds of articles were assigned "females" as a descriptor in ERIC, and as such might "count" as progress in terms of attention to women in the field, but I argue that they are exemplary of the kind of attention to women in social studies that is "about women" because it happens to include women, not because it acknowledges or explores what it means to be a woman in particular gendered social, political, economic, or historical contexts. By comparison, for example, lesson plan articles "about" George Washington are not labelled with a "males" descriptor. Although these lessons do include references and descriptions of women, they do so outside of the context of considering women's experiences within systems of gender that circumscribe lives on the basis of a female identity.

### **Women in our lives**

While the lessons I have described above depict women in ways that de-contextualized their experiences from gender, there were three lessons in the dataset that demonstrated ways of attending to gender that might engage students in more complex thinking about women's lives. Specifically, these articles describe activities that ask students to make connections between the women presented in the lessons and women they know. Two of these lessons describe Latina women and culture and draw on these accounts to inspire and empower students. They also describe activities in which students are asked to either interview women in their communities or identify family and friends who have had effects on their lives. The third lesson describes a family history project for elementary students as a way to write women into the curriculum. In addition to the interviews students will conduct, the project relies on images (provided in the lesson) on US postage stamps that feature women and asks students to create their own postage stamps depicting important women in their lives and identifying their contributions.

The lessons represent a different approach to including attention to women in social studies classes. By encouraging students to see the relationship between other women's experiences and their own lives, these lessons foreground gender as a topic and are more likely to generate conversations about gender and women's lives than lessons that do not ask students to make any connections between the women they learn about and themselves. While focusing on women, however, these lessons can be still be characterized as demonstrating an add women and stir approach because they do not emphasize activities which engage students in questioning the gendered structures that have imposed challenges for the women who are described. Inequality is acknowledged, but not explored. As such, these kinds of lessons are still situated within an add women and stir paradigm in which the consideration of gender systems and gender inequity and the promotion of critique are tertiary, if present at all.

Most of the lesson plans characterized as add and stir did describe activities in which students would be asked to think about history through the eyes of women, which might be seen as progress. However, the add and stir approach is counter to a more critical orientation toward history, which Segall (2002), building on Willensky (1998), contended

“is not only about adding those who have been missing in the story of the past, but about a way of interrogating their exclusion when (and even as) they are included” (p. 127). The add and stir lesson plans included some elements from the missing stories about women that might prompt an interrogation of women’s exclusion, but did not suggest explicitly that students should consider issues like *why* women struggled and why these topics have not been made central in the social studies curriculum, questions which could have added important and critical elements to each lesson.

In 1991, Harding argued that “from their beginnings, the ‘add women and stir’ approaches have tended to burst through their predesigned boundaries and raise usefully uncomfortable questions about the canons and bodies of knowledge to which they were supposed to be merely adding information” (p. 194). This may be true in other areas of social science, but these lessons are one indication that even 20 years later, this is not true in P-12 social studies education. While feminist research has demonstrated that considering and understanding women’s experiences can be a vehicle through which to explore injustice more broadly (Brooks, 2007), the lessons in this category represent an approach in which inequality is *not* acknowledged, suggesting that the field of social studies needs to continue work on developing a different kind of curricular space from which to address women’s experiences in the past and present. In the next section, I will describe another way in which attention to women’s experiences is falling short of the potential it possesses to draw attention to inequality.

### Masking power

The four lessons categorized as masking power differ from the lessons described as add women and stir because the marginalization of women because of their gender is salient to the lessons. What the lessons also have in common is that the processes, structures, and norms that made this marginalization possible are not acknowledged. In other words, women are presented in situations in which their lives are described as having been constrained because of their gender, but the source of that constraint is never touched upon. The effect of this approach, which I have labelled masking power, is that it naturalizes the circumscribed position in which the women described in these lessons find themselves. To address women’s marginalization *without* addressing why, and by whom, they were marginalized normalizes problematic understandings of power and gender relationships, both in the past and in the present. Unfortunately, it is just another example of a tradition in P-12 history education in which the oppressed are presented as if there are no oppressors (Loewen, 1995, 2009) like, for example, accounts of American slavery in which attention to slave owners is scant or completely absent. This approach to addressing marginalized groups inhibits understanding of the underpinnings of social hierarchy.

One of the masking power lessons appeared in *Middle Level Learner*. In addition to brief descriptions of six colonial women, the lesson included excerpts from primary documents written by women and a few documents written about women by men who lived in the American colonies. These portraits and primary document excerpts provide some detail about the different living conditions of wealthy women, women slaves, and recent women immigrants. The article begins with a one page overview of women’s lives in this time period, and the first sentence frames the marriage focus of this overview: “In the late eighteenth century, most white women were married by the age of each sixteen...” (Connor, 2000, p. 12). The rights women did or did not have are also described in terms of marriage, as demonstrated, for example, by the statement that “A woman’s property and wages belonged to her husband” (Connor, 2000, p. 12). However, why women did not

have rights and the ways in which men were responsible for depriving women of these rights and benefitted from the arrangement was not addressed. It is also noted that during this time men were responsible for being “tender and loving” toward their wives and that despite women’s lack of access to legal rights, “it seems that a fair share of the marriages were happy ones” (Connor, 2000, p. 12). This positive spin on women and men’s relationships is noteworthy, both because it works actively to redeem men and marriage during this time period and because the information is extraneous to the focus of the activities in the lesson. Finally, the last sentence of the introduction states “major changes in the rights of women followed only after suffrage was achieved in 1920” (Connor, 2000, p. 12), as if suffrage was handed down from above without any human agency behind it.

The set of discussion questions for middle and high school students provided at the end of the article do not recommend engaging students in a critical consideration of why women’s lives were this way or what made their asymmetrical relationships with men possible; nor did it probe for a deeper understanding of why women in different groups (slaves, immigrants, and wealthy white women) had such different living conditions. The absence of these considerations could lead students to conclude that women did not have any rights and that women in these groups had vastly different experiences because “that was just the way things were”. Levstik (2000) has argued that when curriculum glosses over inequity and emphasizes the cheerful, “students and teachers are deprived of an important mechanism whereby they might understand their own lives as having historical context(s), and they are given no help in understanding the continuation of inequities and injustice in their (or others’) society” (p. 290). By attending to inequity in an unquestioned way, this article was another example of the way women and men can be described and positioned in lessons in a way that masks the presence and forces of patriarchy (Commeyras & Alvermann, 1996).

Another masking power lesson, a brief document-based lesson about Belva Lockwood, the first woman admitted to the US Supreme Court Bar (Potter, 2002), also stops short of addressing patriarchy explicitly. The lesson provides an overview of Lockwood’s life, including her admission to law school in 1870 at age 40, and her attempts to gain entry to the bar of the federal courts. Her work in lobbying for legislation to end discrimination against women practicing law in the federal court system resulted in the “Bill to Relieve Certain Legal Disabilities of Women”, which was passed by Congress and signed by President Hayes in 1879. Throughout the description of the obstacles that Lockwood faced in her attempt to practice law in federal court, patriarchy, and the men who worked against this woman’s efforts to secure rights for women attorneys, are largely invisible actors in this description. For example, the excerpts presented from the legal arguments of the male judges who ruled against her early efforts to gain entry to the bar reflect objections that are situated in terms of the existing law, making their objection to her inclusion based upon statute, not upon their (or any other individual’s) conceptions of women. While patriarchy was not addressed, what were foregrounded in this text were Lockwood’s individual efforts and the efforts of several men who assisted her. This in effect makes her struggle a very individual journey against a nameless and faceless oppressor, aided by powerful male advocates. Additionally, like many other lessons in the dataset, the questions provided at the end of the text have some focus on women and women’s achievements, but do not ask students to consider the gender system in place or to relate this historical event to the present. This, in effect, masks the sexism that made Lockwood’s struggle to practice law necessary and misses the opportunity to ask students to consider current issues of sexism in the workplace.



In addition to shying away from any acknowledgement of patriarchy, the lessons in the masking power category fail to encourage students to consider women's marginalized status within the context of the factors and forces which constrained women's experiences at those points in time. This is problematic because as feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987, p. 65) argued

for women (as also for others in the society similarly excluded) the organization of daily experience, the work routines, and the structuring of our lives through time have been and to a very large extent still are determined and ordered by processes external to, and beyond, our everyday world.

Without this understanding, students, left to their own devices, are likely to interpret women's actions and behaviour in history in the same way they interpret the actions and behaviours of the main characters in traditional historical narratives – white, male political and economic leaders who are typically presented as rational actors within social structures that impose no limits to their agency. As such, these accounts serve to contribute to the rationalization of women's circumscribed participation in the public sphere and their natural place in the private sphere through the implication that like male historical actors, this must have been what historical women *chose* to do.

Harding (1993, p. 155) contended that “All of us must live in social relations that naturalize or make appear intuitive, social arrangements that are in fact optional; they have been created and made to appear natural by the power of dominant groups”. Harding argues that in order to overcome the impression that women freely choose to participate in society as less than complete members, it is necessary to adopt a critical perspective capable of disrupting the foundations that undergird the logic of women's marginalized status. While the lessons in the masking power category positioned women's marginalization as central to the lesson, they did not address or even acknowledge the social relations that made women's status a reality. In order to avoid reinscribing problematic notions of women's position in society, it is critical that lesson plan authors present accounts of women's marginalization in history or in the present as nested within the context of the gender relations of that time and place. In the next section, I describe lessons categorized as critical representations of women in order to provide examples of what this kind of contextualization of gender relations can look like.

### **Critical representations**

The lessons that I have categorized as critical representation are distinct from the rest of the lessons in this study in that the activities they describe have an explicitly critical orientation. In other words, the goal of these lessons is clearly to engage students in a consideration of gender inequity. One of these lessons is an article about using fiction to engage students in a consideration of women's lives in Africa (Doughty, 2003). This article described ways that teachers could use literature “to integrate the ideas and experiences of African women into our curricula” for the purpose of providing a view of African women that might transcend their stereotypical depiction as “poor, abused, exotic, or victim[ized]” (Doughty, 2003, p. 17). One of the novels described in the article was noted for its “themes of agency, work, gender roles, and marriage” and in one activity, teachers are encouraged to draw on these themes by asking students to act out the roles of the main characters in order to “explore the ‘proper’ place for women [and to] debate the issues from a variety of perspectives” (Doughty, 2003, p. 18). For another



novel, teachers are instructed to engage students in an activity that will enable them to “look closely at who exerts power over the lives of the women characters” (Doughty, 2003, p. 19) and to compare the fictional women’s experiences with the influences they experience in their own lives. This kind of acknowledgement of power, as well as the use of words like “reassess”, “challenge”, and “complicate” throughout these instructions for teachers, signals this article’s orientation towards a critical engagement in the consideration of gender: all of the activities are designed to encourage students to examine the taken for granted notions they have about African women through a specific focus on factors that limit women’s choices. In doing so, students are asked to engage in a consideration of who holds power and why. Furthermore, they are asked to relate this to their own lives.

Another critically oriented lesson provides instructions for engaging students in an analysis of photos of American women from the mid-1800s. Students are asked to question the assumptions they make about the images, deliberate about the purpose of the photos, and to consider “how visual representations promoted cultural and social notions about women and how they were to be viewed or treated” (Woyshner, 2006, p. 361). Through this activity, students are provided the space through which to disrupt notions of the naturalness of gender roles. Additionally, the lesson instructs teachers to ask students to consider the ways in which men are depicted in the photos as the standard and to consider the absence of women of colour from the images, a task which specifically opens up an examination of gender norms and systems of power. The lesson description concludes with the statement that “We cannot begin to achieve gender inequity, nor can we adequately prepare citizens, until we teach our young people about how women and girls have been represented in the media, history, and artifacts” (p. 362).

The lessons categorized as critical representations, with their explicit attention to power, as well as their explicit goal of engaging students in the consideration of gender inequality, are markedly different than the rest of the lessons in the dataset. While it is certainly a concern that only 3 of the 16 lessons analysed in this study could be characterized as critical representations, what I hope to show by including these lessons is that it *is* possible to include gender in critical ways in social studies and that these kinds of lessons can be accepted for publication in widely disseminated practitioner publications. In other words, while a less critical way of attending to women, through either add and stir or masking power approaches, may be normalized in social studies education, it is possible for other kinds of lessons to enter the discourse.

### **Moving forward: implications**

In the introduction to a 1996 gender-focused special issue of *Theory & Research in Social Education*, Jane Bernard-Powers wrote:

Social studies education has been and continues to be vulnerable to the criticism that while it professes to represent and value social justice and diversity, its leaders and texts have failed to address injustice. Omission and neglect of gender as a significant dimension of human experience and identity serves to miseducate generations of young people. It is a silent coercion of considerable magnitude. (pp. 5–6)

The majority of the lesson plans included this study, while referencing women and therefore counting as “progress”, stop short of addressing social justice and treating gender as a significant dimension of human experience. They have positioned students to think about women in ways that exclude an acknowledgement or critique of structures

of power and oppression and eliminated the consideration of patriarchy by making men innocent bystanders to the oppression women experienced. Furthermore, by failing to prompt a consideration of women's experiences in the past with gender relations today, most of the lessons "pertained to other women, other Other, not those in today's classrooms being subjected to similar, though often more subtle, forms of subjugation and discrimination" (Segall, 2002, p. 133). This is a critical omission in work that could give students the kinds of tools to think about gender equity. While a small number of these lesson plans did describe teacher and student activities that could place attention to women in social studies within a context that would encourage students to consider historical and current gender inequities, most of the lesson plans opted for undemanding and less critical versions of how women and gender could be presented in social studies education and therefore contribute to the silent coercion to which Bernard-Powers was speaking.

Attention to women in social studies cannot work towards equity as long as it is characterized by a shifting away from the troubling and potentially difficult explorations of systemic processes that shape gender relationships in asymmetrical ways. Instead, the social studies curriculum must continually challenge normalized assumptions about women, now and in the past, and encourage students to consider the impact of these gender assumptions on their own lives and the world beyond. This means that in order for social studies, as well as other curricular areas in which gender is addressed, to be spaces in which gender equity is attended to successfully, more critical approaches to including women and gender in social studies are needed to emphasize that the relationship between historical or contemporary political, social, and economic conditions for women are rooted in systems of power. If we want to treat gendered systems of power as *not* natural and inevitable, but rather as contextual, socially constructed and malleable, it is imperative that we continue to probe, as Scott (1986) suggested, "the implicit understandings of gender being invoked and reinscribed" (p. 1074). Gender relations contribute to structural power imbalances that have contributed to, for example, the limited representation of women in American politics and the appalling violence against women in our culture and they have to be acknowledged. Within social studies education, then, what it means to be a woman or a man or a girl or a boy, in history, government, economics and geography, is related to power relations that cannot be ignored.

In addition to improving the lesson plans we create for teachers, this study also points to the need for more critical, close analyses of *how* women are present within studies that examine the presence of women in curriculum. While it is not my goal to critique studies that have identified women's absence from the field, I do argue that in pointing to places in which women are now present, we might heed Clinton's warning that progress should not be confused with success. The findings presented in this article indicate that it is an error to assume that the appearance of women in lesson plans, or within other curriculum that includes attention to women, contributes to student's understanding of gender structures or inequity. While it is important to continue documenting shifts occurring in the field in terms of the inclusion of women and other marginalized groups, it is also important to look closely at *how* these groups are included. Adding this component to our analyses can offer important insights about the obstacles – beyond just inclusion – we still face in incorporating equity concerns in social studies in meaningful ways.

### Note

1. Not surprisingly, there is also no acknowledgment of Keller's dedication to the promotion of radical socialism throughout her adult life.

### Notes on contributor

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