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Gender Biases in Burial Practices

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ABSTRACT:
This work continued a previous examination of gender biases in burial practices in Michigan and Washington as reflected on grave markers in cemeteries. Numerous issues concerning gender biases on grave markers were identified and are discussed.

Background
This research utilized a survey was distributed to students of Grand Valley State University (GVSU) in Allendale, Michigan. Each survey depicted a scenario encountered during the author's previous research on gender biases in burial procedures across ethnic backgrounds conducted in cemeteries in West Michigan and Washington. In this earlier effort, photographs and measurements were taken of hundreds of headstones and grave plots. Gender differences were recorded, and a timeline was formulated, showing when the gender differences were most prevalent, and when they began to decrease. There were significant differences in the display of gender biases between cultures and races found in the initial study. Surveys for the current research were based on these earlier findings.

Methodology
The surveys contained created for this study included five different cases. Each case had a picture of two or three grave markers, with either a married couple or a married couple and the gravestones of their children. Each survey respondent was asked to give his or her name, age, race, and sex. Then the respondents were asked to view the pictures and write down any observations they had.

Three of the cases depicted by the survey showed a particular gender bias that is represented in actual graveyards. The first case displayed the year of birth and the year of death for the husband and the wife on stones of the same size. The only other writing on the stones was engraved on the wife's stone, where after her own name, the words “wife of” were followed by the name of her husband. No other gender discrepancies were present in this picture.

Case Two showed more blatant gender biases. This case also showed the years of birth and death for the husband and wife. The man's name was followed by the letters “MD,” and his accomplishments were listed on his headstone, along with a quote from Scripture. The wife's stone had no personal information besides the years of her birth and death; she was individuated only as “His Wife.” The wife's stone was also smaller than that of her husband.

Case Three depicted the most extreme case of gender discriminatory practice. The wife had neither her name nor her date of death on the stone; instead, it had only the words, “His Wife.” Her stone was considerably smaller in width and height, in comparison to the husband's stone, upon which everything was engraved: his name, his accomplishments, and the years of birth and death. A third stone was added, giving their children's names and years of birth and death. It also had an engraving stating that they were the “children of” the husband.

The final two survey cases were not drawn from actual cases in the cemeteries we studied. Case four showed no gender biases at all. The stones were the same size. Everything displayed for the husband was equally displayed for the wife, and the children were recognized as offspring of both the husband and the wife.

The final case depicted a scene that was only encountered once in the field. The fifth case portrayed gender biases in favor of the wife. The headstones of the couple were the same size, and included the years of birth and death and the names of the two individuals. The accomplishments of the wife were listed on her headstone, along with a quote from Scripture. The husband's stone stated only that he was the “Husband Of” his wife. This scenario was included to discover whether respondents would notice gender biases more if they were directed towards the husband.

The surveys were administered in locations around the campus of GVSU. Permission was received from professors to administer the survey at the beginning.
of their classes; these classes were English 150 and 219, Liberal Arts 100 and 314, Social Science 300, Communications 201 and 210, and Sociology 280. Other locations the survey was administered included the computer lab, the dormitories, the library, and the Lower Commons, a small cafeteria located on the main campus.

It was recorded whether or not each individual noticed the gender biases in the pictures of grave pairs. Results were grouped by the variables of race, gender, age, and whether or not they noticed gender biases. The ages were grouped in three categories: (a) Group A consists of respondents between the ages of 18–21, (b) Group B consists of the ages 22–24, and (c) the final group, C, included all the respondents 25 years or older. Some bivariate categories were also created, in order to view the results of the incorporation of two of the variables.

Based on the prominence of gender biases in the cemeteries that were studied, it was predicted that a significant number of respondents would not focus on the gender biases displayed in the surveys. It was hypothesized that some of the same desensitization to gender biases on grave markers of the past would be revealed in the answers of respondents in the present.

Results
The results of the surveys were in the directions predicted. A large number of respondents did not notice the gender differences. The results were divided into age, gender, and ethnic group categories. The ethnic results were only based on African American and Caucasian respondents, as the number of respondents from other nationalities was too small to consider for the results.

Discussion
As was predicted, a most respondents did notice the gender biases in the surveys. The results mirror many observations made during research in the field. In previous research, the author had discovered that headstones in African American cemeteries showed the lowest amount of gender bias. Similarly, a higher percentage of African American respondents noticed the gender biases in the surveys, in comparison with Caucasian males. A lower percentage of African American women than Caucasian women noticed the gender biases, which also supports previous research, suggesting that African American females are not as familiar with seeing these gender biases. Caucasian females are more familiar with these types of biased burial procedures, so they are more apt to pick up on them.

Seventy-two percent of the respondents between the ages of 18 and 21 (Group A) noticed the gender biases, which was expected because individuals in this age cohort are being socialized in a society that has integrated many social movements emphasizing equality. Respondents in Group B are within the same socialization process as those in group A, so their percentages were equivalent. A lower number of positive observations of gender bias was expected in Group C, because it was the oldest group and more likely to be socialized in an era when gender discrepancies were more tolerated. This did not occur. In fact, seventy-six percent of Group C respondents noticed gender bias.

Interpretation
If laws and practices of our government constantly attempt to suppress sexism, why do gender biases continue to exist? Many facets of conflict theory provide an explanation. Discrimination causes conflict, and according to conflict theorists, a society cannot function properly without conflict. “Conflict theorists always view power not only as scarce and unequally divided—and therefore a source of conflict—but also as essentially coercive” (Wallace and Wolfe, p. 77). Gender biases exist because one group has power over the other. Husbands have power over their wives, and gender biases are the display of this power. Women thus become victims to the discriminatory practices of the burial procedures.

Summary
It was predicted that many individuals would be unaware of gender biases in burial practices, even though examples exist in cemeteries all over the country. The author's work has shown that people become more aware of the subject only if they have cause to be directly confronted by it. This research allowed people to look at an example of gender biases on grave markers and gave them a chance to make observations. This brought out a new awareness of the issue in the respondents.
Bibliography


