

Cookies or careers?

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Nearly 5 million American children participate in the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, but until now no one has looked at the gender messages young people get when they start collecting those coveted badges.

Kathleen Denny, a sociology graduate student at the University of Maryland, College Park, analyzed scouting manuals and found that—despite positive aspects—today's scouts are being fed stereotypical ideas about femininity and masculinity. Her findings were recently published in *Gender & Society*, the highly-ranked journal of [Sociologists for Women in Society](#).

Girl scouts, for example, are steered away from scientific pursuits while boys are discouraged from pursuing artistic interests. While gender has been analyzed in children's books and television, it has rarely been examined in scouting manuals.

"The disproportionate and gendered distribution of art and science projects aligns with the large body of research that finds girls being systematically derailed from scientific and mathematical pursuits and professions due to cultural beliefs and stereotypes about their relative ineptitude in these areas," says Denny.

Among Denny's other key findings:

- Girls are more likely than the boys to be offered activities involving art projects; Girls' art activities make up 11 percent of

their total activities.

- Scientifically-oriented activities make up only 2 percent of all girls' activities, but boys science activities take up 6 percent of their scouting time.
- Girls are offered proportionately more communal activities than boys; 30 percent of the girls' badge work activities are intended to take place in groups, either with or for others.
- Boys are offered proportionately more self-oriented activities than girls; Less than 20 percent of the boys' activities are intended to take place with others.
- Despite her findings of stereotypical notions of femininity, Denny found that the boys' handbook "fosters intellectual dependence and passivity." Boys are routinely instructed to look for answers in the back of their guide, while girls are encouraged to do original research.

Denny also found that the names of Scout badges convey strong messages about gender. Stereotypical ideas about "embellished femininity and stoic masculinity" are communicated in the level of playfulness (and the lack thereof) that characterize the different badge titles.

- Some 27 percent of girls' badge titles use playful literary techniques such as alliteration and puns, while 0 percent of boys' badge titles do so.
- All 20 boys' badges (100 percent) have descriptive titles without using any playful wording, while only 73 percent of the girls'

badges have descriptive titles. The boys' badge dealing with rocks and geology, for example, is called the "Geologist" badge, while the comparable girls' badge is called the "Rocks Rock" badge.

- Denny found boys' badge titles use more career-oriented language (such as Engineer, Craftsman, Scientist), whereas girls' badge titles consistently use more playful language with less of a career orientation. (Instead of the boy's "Astronomer," the comparable girls badge is called "Sky Search." Instead of "Mechanic," a similar girl badge is called "Car Care.")

"When boys speak to others about their Geologist badge, they have a legitimate career title to use and are likely to be taken more seriously in conversations than girls discussing their achievement of a 'Rocks Rock' badge," Denny says.

She also found that the types of activities the badges entail are "the most explicitly gendered dimensions in the girls' handbook." Examples of badges that have to do with stereotypically feminine activities include: Caring for Children, Looking Your Best, and Sew Simple. In addition to activities about personal hygiene and healthy eating, the Looking Your Best badge offers activities such as a "Color Party" that asks the girls to "take turns holding different colors up to your face [to] decide which colors look best on each of you." That same badge also offers the activity option of an "Accessory Party" where the girls "experiment to see how accessories highlight your features and your outfit."

These badges are not offered in the Boy Scouts; the boys' Fitness badge, the only one approximating a personal-style badge, offers activities such as completing a weeklong food diary and telling a family member about the dangers of drugs and alcohol.

Provided by Sociologists for Women in Society

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