PLAY, TOYS AND GENDER SOCIALIZATION

Esra EMOLU, Ph.D.,
Marmara University, Turkey
emolu@marmara.edu.tr

Abstract
 Socialization is the process whereby the infant learns how to become a member of the society by adapting to the ways of the culture he/she lives in .Four agents of socialization: family, school, peer groups and mass media guide him/her through the way.
Gender socialization is a very important dimension of socialization, it is the process during which children of different sexes are socialized into their gender roles and are taught what it means to be male or female.
Amongst the most important components of gender socialization are play and toys which serve as the key tools that provide the infant with the appropriate gender traits.
Besides their psychological and pedagogical aspects, the sociological functions of play and toys can be analyzed in the cultural context in order to emphasize their importance in child development.
Culture plays an important role in the assignment of gender – appropriate traits to the infants and play and toys function as the key elements in the process.

Key Words: Socialization, gender socialization, gender roles, culture, play, toys

Socialization and gender socialization

Socialization is the process   by which human beings incorporate the social norms pertaining to a certain culture or cultural group, and it occurs throughout the life course. It is the process whereby societies have structural continuity over time; the values and norms specific to a culture is transmitted from one generation to another and hence endure over time.

Socialization connects different generations to one another and even though the members of a society change, cultural characteristics persist over time.

One of the main aspects of socialization is gender socialization which can be defined as a more focused form of socialization during which children of different sexes are socialized into their gender roles and are taught what it means to be male or female.

The classical example of gender socialization is the experiment done with a baby that was introduced as a male to half of the study subjects and as a female to the other half. The results are interesting and quite disturbing at the same time. When the participants thought they were playing with a baby boy, "he" was offered toys, such as a hammer or rattle, while if the participants thought they were playing with a baby girl; "she" was offered a doll. The participants also touched the baby differently. It was found that baby boys are often bounced, thus stimulating the whole body, whereas girls are touched more gently and less vigorously (Gleitman, Friedlund & Reisberg, 2000, as cited in Crespi, 2003).

Gender socialization begins from the moment we are born; with a simple question; is it a boy or a girl; and each of the agencies of socialization reinforces the gender stereotypes.

Most parents are extremely interested in learning whether their newborn infant is a boy or a girl, and *intentionally* or not, this knowledge elicits in them a set of expectations consistent with beliefs about gender-role-appropriate traits. Parents generally prefer that their children adhere to traditional gender-roles, and are concerned when they do not (Martin, 1990).

Theories of gender socialization
Social Learning Theory

Having its roots in behaviorism, social leaning theory suggests that gender socialization works when children are rewarded for engaging in appropriate sex-typed behavior which are consistent with their assigned sex category.

Sex-typed behavior can be defined as behavior expected and therefore seen as appropriate when performed by one sex. Children learn this type of behavior by observing others, mainly the same sex parent, as well as the messages communicated by media.

Children learn what behaviors and roles are expected of them by observing others' behavior being reinforced or punished. Seeing someone reinforced for a behavior, such as a girl playing with a doll being reinforced for being nurturant, may be expressed as the appropriate, reinforcing behavior for a female. Therefore, a girl may associate reinforcement with that behavior, which may make that behavior appear positive for a female (Crespi, 2003).

This theory suggests that predispositional characteristics to a certain sex can be nourished by learning from the people around us. Gender socialization works, according to social learning theorists, by rewarding

children for engaging in sex-typed behavior that is consistent with their assigned sex category. The classic example is crying; while a little girl may be soothed when she cries, a little boy may be told that boys don't cry. Crying is a sex-typed behavior, seen as OK for girls and therefore not a punishable behavior. But because it is not seen as an appropriate behavior for boys, the little boy may be punished or corrected for his crying behavior. Through these kinds of interactions, gender socialization occurs (Crespi, 2003).

Like every theory, social leaning theory has its limitations; it is mainly criticized for research results which has shown that children do not always identify themselves with the same sex parent nor do they always choose the same sex partners as playmates.

Cognitive Development Theory

This theory, derived mainly from the work of Piaget, suggests that gender socialization occurs as the child passes through the stages of development. As children pass these stages, they actively socialize themselves rather than being passively socialized.

The first stage happens between the ages of two and a half and three, when children acquire a gender identity. Children of this age should be able to correctly identify their own gender as well as identifying the gender of others around them (Crespi, 2003).

By the age of five, children acquire *gender stability*, they know that their gender is permanent and will be theirs for the rest of their lives. By the age of seven, children reach the stage of *gender constancy* which is the final stage of gender understanding. Once having reached this stage, children become aware of the fact that even though a person might make changes in his/her physical appearance; this does not change the underlying sex category According to cognitive development theorists, actual gender- typing does not begin until children achieve gender constancy at age seven, and afterwards children begin to actively select from their environment the behaviors that they see as consistent with their gender identity; once a little girl begins to see herself and others as gendered, she will be self-motivated to engage in feminine behaviors and to model herself on the other people she identifies as women in her environment. This is driven in part by children's need for cognitive consistency; if children know what their gender is, then what they do and think should line up with that gender (Crespi, 2003).

Cognitive development theory does not completely dismiss the importance of the external environment, or of society itself. Society obviously provides the material from which children pick and choose to achieve gender-congruency. But it does locate much more of the power in the process of socialization with the targets (children) rather than with the agents of socialization.

Cognitive development theory is criticized for its limitations in explaining the differential dynamic between boys and girls, because it puts the main emphasis on boys. Another critique for this theory is that there has been research findings on children showing that they demonstrate preferences for objects and activities based on gender by the age of three (Unger & Crawford, 1992, as cited in Crespi, 2003).

Gender Schema Theory

Gender Schema Theory, developed by Sandra Bem questioned why sex became the important organizing principle around which children built their identities. A schema is a cognitive structure and network of associations that helps to organize an individual's perception of the world (Bem, 1983).

A gender schema, is a cognitive structure that enables us to sort characteristics and behaviors into masculine and feminine categories and then creates various other associations with those categories (Bem, 1993).

Socialization occurs as children assimilate their self-concept, the way they think about themselves, to their gender schema. Children learn the content of their particular society's gender schema, or the network of associations around the characteristics of masculine and feminine. They also know that they fall into one or other of those categories based on their own sex. When they begin to think of themselves as masculine or feminine, that particular gender schema is also associated with their sense of identity. They learn that when they are picking behaviors and ways of thinking to assimilate into their own sense of selves, they should limit themselves to the particular subset of behaviors and attitudes appropriate to their own gender (Bem, 1983).

Since every culture puts emphasis on gender, the members of a particular society are convinced that the structures cannot function without the existence of gender categorization. Culture creates and emphasizes the importance of gender categories and makes us believe that they are indispensable. In the course of enculturation, external socialization agents teach the individual his/ her gender through gender schemas.

The androcentrism schema, that is the belief that masculinity is superior to femininity, exists in most of the cultures and has a deep influence on gender socialization. Unlike the first two theory, this theory is specific to gender socialization and tries to find the balance between the inside out and external process of socialization.

The Psychoanalytic Theory

Having its roots in Freud's psychoanalysis, this theory, again specific to gender socialization, emphasizes the importance of women and tries to account for the ways in which gender becomes deeply embedded in the psychic structure of our personalities.

Nancy Chodorow, the main defender of this theory, argues that learning to feel male or female derives from the infant's attachment to his parents from an early age and emphasizes the importance of mother, much stronger than does Freud (Giddens,2009).

Since the mother is the dominant influencer in their lives, infants tend to involve emotionally with the mothers, but the attachment should somehow be broken at some stage in their lives in order to allow them to develop their self- identities.

According to Chodorow, this breaking occurs at different stages for boys and girls; girls tend to stay closer to their mothers, they keep hugging and kissing her and imitating her and this is why they develop a sense that is more continuous with other people; first with their mothers and then with their husbands and this is accounts for their being more emotional and sensitive (Giddens, 2009).

However, boys experience a more radical break, learning masculine traits and avoiding to become" mummy's boys". As a result, they become less skilled in relating with others and more achievement and analytical oriented, male identity is learned in such a way that they perceive emotional closeness as a threat (Giddens, 2009).

Chodorow's theory has been criticized for undermining the importance of women's struggle to become autonomous, independent individuals and taking only white, middle-class family as a model, and ignoring the existence of different family types such as single parent families.

Gender role stereotypes

The category-based beliefs about gender-appropriate traits are called gender-role stereotypes. Parents serve as role models in teaching gender appropriate traits to their children, both explicitly and implicitly; explicit modeling occurs when parents teach their children the *appropriate* traits by directly telling them; for example when a parent tells a story of achievement associated with masculinity to his/her son, the theme is reflected as parental expectation.

Likewise, these expectations might as well be exhibited implicitly, such as a father driving the car and the mother sitting next to him teaches the child the *appropriate* gender expectation.

The extent to which cross-gender behavior in children is discouraged has been found to be dependent upon the sex of the child (Male or Female). Studies have shown that boys who engage in traditionally feminine activities are viewed more negatively than girls who engage in masculine activities (Feinman, 1981; Martin, 1990). Women have been found to be more accepting of children's cross-gender behavior than men (Martin, 1990).

We can observe the reflections of gender role stereotyping almost in every domain of children's lives; ranging from their bedroom colors to their toy preferences and play styles.

Gender –Stereotypical Toy Preferences

Children as young as eight months may already show a preference for 'boys' or 'girls' toys. Sex differences in toy preferences were noted in research as early as the 1930s (Parten, 1932. as cited in Alexander et. al. 2009). Even adult male and females display preferences for male- typical and female-typical toys (Alexander et. al., 2009).

Research with nonhuman primates implies that the toy preferences of boys and girls may be shaped partly by inborn factors. These innate preferences for certain features of toys, coupled with social influences may explain why toy preferences are among the earliest expressions of sex-linked social behavior (Alexander et. al., 2009).

Developmental psychologist Garvey (1990) traces the origins of sex-typed toy preferences to parental behavior, to the parents' influence as models. Children who choose traditional sex-typed toys are more likely to have parents who hold traditional gender role attitudes (Rheingold, 1975, as cited in Goldstein, 2012). Toys and games are often designed specifically for boys or girls and gender stereotypes are especially evident in the distribution of gender specific toys to children. In one study parents were asked to sort toys into three categories: masculine, feminine, and neutral. The parents were then asked to play with their toddlers while being observed. Researchers found that the parents of the boys tended to exclusively play with masculine toys while entertaining their child. The parents of the girl toddlers were a little more flexible in their choice of toys and would use both feminine and neutral toys to amuse their children (Wood, 2002). This study reflects the unyielding expectations by which boys are required to play with only masculine toys and the acceptance of girls playing with toys of a feminine and gender neutral nature. The distribution of toys has often been seen as one of the most prevalent forms of gender role socialization within the family (Campenni, 1999). Fathers generally have more strict gender stereotypes than mothers and this is also very much reflected in their toy purchasing preferences especially when purchasing toys for their boys, fathers hold strong gender stereo-typical preferences and usually go for, guns, cars, trains etc.., however they display a more flexible attitude while choosing toys for their girls, even though they usually end up with dolls, tea sets, etc. Mothers, on the other hand, have more positive attitude towards gender neutral toys; both for their boys and girls.

In another study aiming to investigate the reasons for different toy preferences between boys and girls; 120 infants, ages 12, 18, or 24 months' have been shown paired images of cars and dolls in different colors (Jadva, Hines and Golombok, 2010).

There were no significant sex differences in infants' preferences for different colors or shapes. Instead, both girls and boys preferred reddish colors over blue and rounded over angular shapes.

Benenson et al conclude in their study that indeed there are early sex-typed toy preferences, but that apparently color and shape are not the reasons for them. In their drawings, girls tend to draw butterflies, flowers and humans, while boys draw moving objects like cars and trains. It may be that the key to sex differences in toy preferences comes, not from the color or shape of a toy, but from its function, that is, what the toy can do. Boys may inherently prefer toys that (can) move, while girls show no such preference (Benenson et.al, 2011).

Gender Stereotypical Preferences for Play

Boys are typically more physically active than girls and this is reflected in their play. 'While children will still express their individuality, on the whole girls prefer to play more quietly and in smaller groups, boys will run around and tend to make more noise. Group play with girls can still be competitive, but it tends to be expressed emotionally rather than physically,' (Else, 2009). Efforts to suppress boys' rough-and-tumble play and play fighting are usually unsuccessful (Holland 2003).

Parental choices also influence the type of play; research has shown that fathers tend to get engaged in more physical play with their sons whereas there is no significant difference in terms of physical play choices of the mother.

Play is a form of social interaction for parents and their children and through play, parents tend to model the appropriate gender traits to their children; children are discouraged for cross gender play and are encouraged for gender stereotypical play. Masculine toys also promote physical play and body movement whereas feminine toys promote domestic and imaginative play.

Play styles for boys and girls are also strongly influenced by culture:

Culture refers to the traditions and values of our communities and through play, children explore and learn the rules and symbols of their communities. 'Through play, children recreate roles and situations that reflect their sociocultural world, where they learn how to subordinate desires to social rules, cooperate with others willingly, and engage in socially appropriate behavior. Over time, these competencies are transferred to children's everyday behaviors.

Cultural values are reflected in play and are transmitted from one generation to another. In congruent with cultural expectations and their appropriate gender traits; girl plays are often indoor, less physically active and even if physically active, far less rough and tumble; whereas boy plays are often outdoor, more physically active, and often rough and tumble.

This is modeled and secured by parental and societal role-models and can be observed in different cultural contexts, eastern and western and throughout the history.

Conclusion

Research has shown the reciprocal influence of gender stereotyping on plays and toys and plays and toys on gender stereotyping. Enculturation occurs during the course of socialization and gender traits, approved by culture, are reinforced by each agent of socialization.

Play and toys serve as the main tools of social interaction during the early stages of socialization, especially between parents and children, siblings and friends. Even though play and toys vary across time and cultures, their function remains the same. Gender roles are taught and reinforced by play and toys and this might have intended consequences in the future lives of the infants as well as some unintended consequences.

Among the intended consequences; securing the future traditional roles of the infants; girls as mothers and housewives and boys as fathers and breadwinners, even though there has been major changes in the definition of these roles especially in the past five –six decades, can be named, whereas among the unintended consequences are the gender stereotypical subject choices and their consequences in the labor market.

It is important to talk about the redefinition of gender roles, especially after the second half of the twentieth century, with the influence of feminist movements and the inevitable impact of these sociological changes in the toy industry. Toy market should become more gender neutral and promote toys which could be played by both sexes and more outdoor play, played by both sexes, should as well be promoted.

The double benefit of more outdoor play played together by both sexes would be the prevention of major health problems such as obesity and the reducing of gender stereotyping which would be beneficial for the overall labor market in terms of more options for subject choices. A good example of how toy companies become more sensitive to gender stereotyping can be found in the link (http://itunes.com/apps/tedconferences/ted), in the case of McKenna Pope; where Hasbro, a major toy company, started producing a gender neutral toy by modifying a feminine one. The issue, however, remains open to further discussion and research.

References

Alexander, G., M., and Charles, N. (2009). Sex differences in adults' relative visual interest in female and male faces, toys, and play styles. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, 38, 434-441.

Aronson, E., Wilson, T.,D. & Akert, R., M. (2010). *Social Psychology*. (7th edition). Pearson, Saddle River: NJ.

Bem, S., L. (1983). Gender Schema Theory and its Implications for Child Development: Raising Gender-Aschematic Children in a Gender-Schematic Society. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society. 8, 598-616.*

Bem, S., L. (1993). *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality.* Yale University Press, MA.

Benenson, J. F., Tennyson, R., & Wrangham, R. W. (2011). Male more than female infants imitate propulsive motion. *Cognition, 121*, 262-267

Campenni, C.E. (1999). Gender stereotyping of children's toys: A comparison of parents and nonparents, *Sex Roles*, 40, 121-138.

Crespi, I. (2003). Gender socialization within the family: A study on adolescents and their parents in Great Britain. Department of Sociology Catholic University of Milan.

Else, P. (2009). *The Value of Play.* London: Continuum

Feinman, S. (1981). Why is cross-sex-role behavior more approved for girls than for boys? A status characteristic approach. *Sex Roles*, 7, 289-299.

Garvey, Catherine. (1990). *Play*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Giddens, A. (2009). *Sociology.* (6th Edition). Polity Press, Cambridge: UK.

Goldstein, J. (2012). Play in Children's Development, Health and Well-Being. Toy Industries of Europe. Brussels.

Holland, Penny. (2003). We Don't Play with Guns Here. War, Weapon and Superhero Play in the Early Years. McGraw-Hill.

Jadva, V., Hines, M., & Golombok, S. (2010) Infants' preferences for toys, colors and shapes: Sex differences and similarities. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Macionis, J., J. & Plummer, K. (2008). *Sociology*: *A Global Introduction.* (4th Edition). Pearson, U.K

Martin, C. L. (1990). Attitudes about children with nontraditional and traditional gender roles. *Sex Roles*, 22, 151-165.

Wood, E. (2002). The impact of parenting experience on gender stereotyped toy play of children. Sex Roles, 47,39-50.