

TOY PREFERENCES IN CHILDREN; IMPACT OF GENDER AND CULTURE, AN OBSERVATIONAL STUDY

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Abstract: *Toy preferences in early childhood have an impact on and are reflective of gender socialisation which is considered as an indicator of, amongst other things, future life decisions. This study is the pilot for the main study in which the extent to which culture affects Turkish and British children's toy preferences together with a number of related variables will be investigated in a cross-cultural perspective.*

Socialisation 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 socialisation: family, school, peer groups and mass media guide him/her through the way.

Key words: *toy, children, gender, socialization, culture, study*

1.Introduction

Socialisation connects different generations to one another and even though the members of a society change, cultural characteristics persist over time. Gender socialisation is a very important dimension of socialisation, 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 (Molu,2014).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). 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).

As mentioned in the introduction, the extent to which culture affects toy preferences is the focus of a future investigation in which Turkish and British children's preferences and a number of related variables will be measured.

Here we piloted the procedure which comprised of an observation and a questionnaire.

2.Methodology

The following methodological steps have been designed and implemented:

- 1.Design of an observation chart(for children) and a questionnaire(for parents), both translated into Turkish.
2. Nine children between four and six years of age, who attend a public preschool in Istanbul and their parents participated in this pilot study.
3. Children's toy preferences were observed in three settings; playing(1) On their own, (2) with a group of children of the same gender and (3) with a group of children of the opposite gender (in a semi-constructed observation room)
- 4.Children were then asked to explain why they chose the toys that they did (noted by the researchers on the constructed observation chart)

5. Finally, their parents were asked to fill in the questionnaire designed by the researchers.

6. Researchers analysed the data by using descriptive analysis in order to investigate the impact of gender and parental attitudes in gender stereotypical toy preference.

7. Data analysed is fit in purpose and will be used in the main study where the extent to which culture affects children's toy preferences shall be investigated for Turkish and British children as well as measuring a number of related variables.

8. Conclusions were obtained from:

Data analysis

Literature review

2.1.Data Analysis

Descriptive Analysis has been used to analyze the data collected . It is the transformation of raw data into a form that will make them easy to understand and interpret; rearranging , ordering and manipulating data to generate descriptive information.(Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2008)

3.Findings

The study group is comprised of nine children(4 boys and 5 girls), between four and six years of age, who attend a public preschool in Gaziosmanpasa, Istanbul.

Children have been observed concurrently by two researches , for 15-20 minutes, playing with a toy that they have preferred, 1) On their own, (2) with a group of children of the same gender and (3) with a group of children of the opposite gender. They have been given the opportunity for free preference of toys at each stage and in order to ensure equal opportunities for toy preference, they have been asked to collect the toys and put them in their places after each stage.

Children were asked to pick up a toy and start to play on their own by the researchers. The following table shows the findings related to their preferences.

Table1. Children’s toy preferences ; playing on their own

Student	Age	Toy Preference	Reason for preference	Shape	Colour	Function	Similarity	Familiarity	Observer's Notes
C1 (Boy)	5	Lego	Attractiveness	X	X	X	-	X	Preferred to play with legos after having seen that his friend also preferred to play with legos(attractiveness)
C2(Girl)	5	Occupation Toys	Attractiveness	-	-	-	X(in classroom)	X	Had as well preferred to play with doctor's kit previously, she likes playing with it(prior experience)
C3(Boy)	5,5	Big size Lego	Attractiveness	X	X	X	-	-	Had also preferred to play with the same toy previously (prior experience)
C4(Girl)	5	Dolls	Because she wants to play with them)Attractiveness)	-	-	-	X(at home)	X	Has expressed that she often plays with dolls at home Similarity, familiarity
C5(Boy)	5	Built a gun from lego parts	He likes to build guns and play with his friends. (Finds the toy exciting)	-	-	-	X(in classroom)	X	He builds guns from lego parts and plays with them even though the teacher does not allow him to do so
C6(Girl)	4,5	Dolls	Because she wants to play with them	X	X	-	X(at home)	X	Told the researcher that her brother has a male action figure at home similar to a doll
C7(Girl)	6	Puzzle	-	X	-	-	X(at home)	X	-
C8(Girl)	5	Puzzle	To create something.	-	-	X	X(at home)	X	-
C9(Boy)	6	Puzzle	-	-	-	-	X(at home)	X	Preferred to play with the puzzle because the girls preferred to do so(attractiveness)

Table 1 indicates that boys, while playing on their own, have preferred to play with gender neutral toys, such as lego and puzzle, whereas 2 out of 5 girls have preferred to play with gender stereotypical toys whilst the other 3 preferred gender neutral toys.

One of the boys has been observed to utilize the gender neutral toy as a gender stereotypical one and one of the girls who preferred a gender stereotypical toy has expressed that she preferred that toy because she always plays with similar toys at home.

Table 2 indicates the findings of children’s toy preferences playing with a group of children of the same gender.

Table 2. Children's toy preferences; playing with a group of children of the same gender

Student	Age	Toy Preference	Reason for preference	Shape	Colour	Function	Similarity	Familiarity	Observer's Notes
C1(Boy)	5	Puzzle	Likes the toy-Attractiveness	-	-	-	-	x	Expressed that he played with the same toy before in a place other than home
C2(Girl)	5	Play House Toys	Likes the toy-Attractiveness	x	x	-	x(at home)	x	Had as well preferred to play with the same toys previously, she likes playing with them
C3(Boy)	5.5	Lego Gun	Because his playmate preferred that toy	x	x	x	-	-	Preferred to play with this toy due to his playmate's preference
C4(Girl)	5	Puzzle	Because she wanted to design a carpet	-	-	-	X(at home)	x	Has expressed that she wanted to design a carpet with puzzle pieces
C5(Boy)	5	Built a gun from lego parts	He likes to build guns and play with his friends	-	-	x	-	-	He likes to build guns from lego parts and play with them with the other boys
C6(Girl)	4.5	Play House Toys and Kitchen Sets		-	-	-	-	-	She wanted to play with play house toys with a boy but they played for a short while before the boy got bored
C7(Girl)	6	Play House Toys and Kitchen Sets	Because she wants to play with them	x	x	-	x(at a place other than home)	x	Told the researcher that these are the only toys that she had been exposed to
C8(Girl)	5	Basket and books	Because she wanted to read books to the others	-	-	-	x(at home)	x	Expressed that she likes to read books to her playmates
C9(Boy)	6	Puzzle and tool kit		-	-	-	x(at home)	x	

As indicated in Table 2 , while playing with a group of children of the same gender; boys have preferred gender neutral toys , despite the fact that 2 boys have used the gender neutral toy as a gender stereotypical one. One of the boys preferred to play both with gender stereotypical and gender neutral toys whereas another one expressed that he preferred to play with the toy due to his playmate's choice. 3 out of 5 girls in the group preferred to play with gender stereotypical toys whereas the other 2 preferred to play with gender neutral toys.

Table 3 indicates the findings of children's toy preferences playing with a group of children of the opposite gender.

As indicated in Table 3,during play with a group of children of the opposite gender, 3 out of 4 boys have preferred to play with gender neutral toys whereas 1 boy preferred to play with gender stereotypical toys. 2 out of 5 girls have been observed to play with gender stereotypical toys whereas 3 girls preferred to play with gender neutral toys. One of the boys who preferred a gender neutral toy has expressed that he had preferred that toy with the purpose of playing action games with his playmates.

Table 3. Children’s toy preferences ; playing with a group of children of the opposite gender

Student	Age	Toy Preference	Reason for preference	Shape	Colour	Function	Similarity	Familiarity	Observer’s Notes
C1(Boy)	5	Puppets	In order to be able to play with his friend	-	x	x	X	X(at a place other than home)	
C2(Girl)	5	Play House Toys	Because she wants to play with them	-	-	x	X(at home)	X	
C3(Boy)	5,5	Occupation Toys; Doctor’s Kit	Because his playmate preferred that toy	X	X	X	-	-	Preferred to play with this toy due to his playmate’s preference
C4(Girl)	5	Puppets	Because they are fun	-	-	x	X	x	She preferred the toy and played with her friend
C5(Boy)	5	Lego	He likes lego guns	-	-	-	X	x	He wanted to play action games with his friends
C6(Girl)	4,5	Play House Toys and Kitchen Sets		-	-	-	-	-	She wanted to play with play house toys with a boy but they played for a short while before the boy got bored
C7(Girl)	6	Occupation Toys; Doctor’s Kit	She said that she likes doctors	-	-	x	X(at home)	X	Expressed that she preferred the toy because she likes the doctors, could have possibly identified the doctor with male gender
C8(Girl)	5	Puppets	Because I am a girl	x	-	-	-	-	Expressed that she preferred that toy because of her gender
C9(Boy)	6	Tool kit, saw	Because he likes the toy	x	x	-	-	-	Expressed that he preferred the saw because he liked the shape

Parental Observations

Table 4 indicates the findings of parental observations with respect to their children’s toy preferences.

Table 4. Parental Observations with respect to their children’s toy preferences

Student	C1(Boy)	C2(Girl)	C3(Boy)	C4(Girl)	C5(Boy)	C6(Girl)	C7(Girl)	C8(Girl)	C9(Boy)
1. What are your toy preferences for your child?	Car	Dolls	Car, Puzzle (I do not prefer guns)	Dolls, Kitchen Sets, Stickers, Activity Books	Ball, Tool Kits	Dolls	Kitchen Sets, Doctors Kit	Dolls	Car, Ball
2. Why did you prefer this toy for your child?	Because he likes to play with cars	Because of her gender	My son likes cars	Because she likes them	Because he likes to play with them, he likes to repair things	Because she prefers them	Because she likes to role play her favourite occupation	So that she can start learning how to communicate with babies	Because he likes to play with them
3. Have you ever taken the educational function of the toy into account when you made your choice?	Yes, I think it is important	Yes, I have	Yes	Occasionally, I would rather to buy toys that would make my child happy	Sometimes	Yes, I have	Yes	No	Yes
4. Do you allow him/ her to make his/her own choice or do you guide them in their preferences? Why?	I allow him to make his own choice, I do not guide him	Yes, I allow her but I also guide her because she wants to buy everything, especially flashy toys, so I need to guide her	Yes, I allow him, but I also guide him, especially when he wants to buy guns	I usually allow her but I also guide her by showing her other options especially when she wants to buy something expensive	I usually guide him when he wants to buy expensive toys, I try to show him other options	I usually allow her but sometimes she wants to buy toys which are not very functional such as flashing guns	I sometimes guide her so that she can buy a functional toy	I allow her to make her own choice, I do not guide her because she would not listen to me	I usually allow him to make his own choice but I also guide him in order to buy age appropriate toys
5. Do you think that children should play with gender stereotypical toys? Why?	Yes	Yes	He should play with gender stereotypical toys so that he can develop appropriate gender traits	She can play with opposite gender toys but should I notice that she spends too much time with them, I would investigate the reason/s why	No, I think he should play with different types of toys in order to have knowledge on their functions	Yes, I think girls should play with feminine toys such as dolls, kitchen sets, etc..	Yes	Girls should play with feminine toys so that they can be prepared for their future roles as housewives	He could play with feminine toys if he needs to play with girls
6. Would you be concerned if your son played with dolls (or daughter played with cars)?	I don't know	I would not be concerned	I would not be much concerned but should it be excessive , then I could be concerned	I would not be concerned unless it is too much	I would not be concerned, I would like that	I would not be concerned	Yes	I would not be concerned	No

7. What would you do if you found out your son plays with dolls (or daughter plays with cars)?	I would be angry	She can play, after all, it is a toy	I would warn him or seek professional help in order to guide him to play with gender appropriate toys	I would seek professional help if it were excessive	I would monitor how he played with the doll, and try to understand why he were playing with it	I would not do anything, she can play with every kind of toy unless it is harmful	I would monitor her other behaviours.	I would react strongly, I would remind him of his gender and offer him gender appropriate toys
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As indicated in Table 4, parents of 4 boys in the study group have expressed gender stereotypical toy preferences for their sons, in addition to this, 1 parent also had a preference for gender neutral toys. Parents of 4 out of 5 girls have expressed gender stereotypical toy preferences for their daughters whereas 1 parent prefers gender neutral toys as well.

When the reason for their preferences were asked, parents of 4 boys have expressed their children's liking of the toy as well as the parents of 5 girls, with only 1 parent of a girl strongly emphasizing her preference due to gender.

Regarding the impact of the educational function of toys on parents' preferences, all 4 boys' parents have expressed that they take the educational function into account whereas 4 out of 5 girls' parents have indicated the same with only 1 parent indicating the opposite.

Regarding the impact of children's demands on parental preference and parental guidance in toy purchase, all 4 boys' parents have indicated that they allow their sons to make their own choice and do not intervene in their preference unless they consider the toy as dysfunctional or harmful. It has been observed that there is a convergence in the answers.

Parents of the girls have indicated that they guide their daughters in their preferences and do not intervene unless they consider that the toy is inappropriate for the child's development. Only 1 parent has indicated that she does not guide her daughter since she would not take her advice.

Regarding the question whether they prefer to buy gender stereotypical toys for their children, 2 out of 4 boys' parents have indicated that their children should play with gender stereotypical toys whereas the other 2 have indicated that they do not have gender stereotypical preferences.

4 out of 5 girls' parents have indicated gender stereotypical toy preferences whereas only 1 parent has indicated that her daughter could play with opposite gender toys but she would seek professional help should she notice any "excessive preference".

Regarding their concern about their children's playing with opposite gender toys, 3 out of 4 boys' parents have indicated that they would not be concerned, only 1 parent did not give any comment.

3 out of 5 girls' parents have indicated that they would not be concerned and 1 parent has indicated that she would not be unless it is excessive, whereas 1 parent has indicated that she would be .

Regarding their reactions about their children's play with opposite gender toys, parents of 4 boys have replied respectively as;

I would be angry.

I would guide him to play with gender appropriate toys, I would seek professional help .

I would monitor him in order to find out how he communicates with the doll.

I would remind him of his gender and give him gender appropriate toys.

Parents of 5 girls have replied respectively as;

- She can play with these toys, after all,they are also toys.

- Should there be an excessive tendency, I would investigate the underlying causes through professional help.

- I would not do anything, she can play with every kind of toy.

- I would monitor her other behaviours.

One parent did not want to reply to this question without giving any reason

Table 5 indicates the children's and parents' toy preferences combined.

Table 5. Children's and Parents' Toy Preferences Combined

Toy Preferences	C1(Boy)	C5(Boy)	C3(Boy)	C9(Boy)	C4(Girl)	C2(Girl)	C7(Girl)	C8(Girl)	C6(Girl)
On their own	LEGO	LEGO	LEGO	PUZZLE	DOLLS	OCCUPATION TOYS	PUZZLE	PUZZLE	DOLLS
With a play mate of the same gender	PUZZLE	LEGO	LEGO	TOOL KIT	PUZZLE	PLAY HOUSE TOYS	PUZZLE	BASKET AND BOOKS	KITCHEN SETS, PLAY HOUSE TOYS
With a play mate of the opposite gender	PUPPET	LEGO	OCCUPATION TOYS, DOCTOR'S KIT	TOOL KIT	PUPPET	PLAY HOUSE TOYS	OCCUPATION TOYS	PUPPETS	PLAY HOUSE TOYS
Parental Preference	CARS	BALL, TOOL KIT	CARS, PUZZLE	CARS, BALL	DOLLS, KITCHEN SETS, STICKERS, ACTIVITY BOOKS	DOLLS, TEA SETS ETC...	KITCHEN SETS, DOCTOR'S KIT	DOLLS	DOLLS

As indicated in Table 5, of the 4 boys in the study group

C1, has gender neutral toy preferences whereas his parent has gender stereotypical toy preferences.

C5, has gender neutral toy preferences whereas his parent has gender stereotypical toy preferences.

C3, has gender neutral toy preferences whereas his parent has both gender neutral and gender stereotypical toy preferences,.

C9, has both gender neutral and gender stereotypical toy preferences whereas his parent has gender stereotypical toy preferences.

It can be observed that neither the boys nor their parents have preferred toys identified with the opposite gender such as kitchen sets, play house toys and dolls.

As indicated in Table 5, of the 5 girls in the study group;

C4, has both gender neutral and gender stereotypical toy preferences whereas her parent has gender stereotypical toy preferences.

C2, has both gender neutral and gender stereotypical toy preferences whereas her parent has gender stereotypical toy preferences

C7, has gender neutral toy preferences and so does her parent

C8, has gender neutral toy preferences whereas her parent has gender stereotypical toy preferences.

C6, has gender stereotypical toy preferences and so does her parent

It can be observed that neither the girls nor their parents have preferred toys identified with the opposite gender such as tool kits, cars and ball.

4. Discussion

Findings indicate that the children in the study group have gender stereotypical or gender neutral toy preferences when observed in the three play situations mentioned in methodology section. It is noteworthy that none of them preferred to play with opposite gender toys even during play with a group of children of the opposite gender.

Findings also reveal that parents have more gender stereotypical toy preferences in alignment with children's preferences.

Another finding is that children's preferences are also influenced by other children's preferences, the child might want to play with a toy that his/her friend prefers, due to attractiveness.

Another interesting finding is that even though some parents might allow their children to play with opposite gender toys, when it comes to buy toys for their children, they would rather to purchase gender stereotypical ones.

Findings also reveal parents' concerns about their children's play with opposite gender toys, should this happen, they would rather to closely monitor the situation or seek professional assistance in case of excessive play.

5. Conclusion

In the light of the findings, it can be observed that children's toy preferences are influenced by those of their parents'. It is quite difficult for a child to play with a toy which is considered as gender inappropriate by his/her parent, especially outside the classroom setting.

It can be concluded that cultural stereotypes have an impact on parents' toy preferences. They think that by giving gender stereotypical toys to their children, they can promote future gender appropriate roles. This is especially important for girls, as can be seen in one of the girls' parent's answer: "Girls should play with feminine toys so that they could be prepared for their future roles as housewives".

This impact on gender socialization is considered as an indicator of, amongst other things, future life decisions.

Literature also reveals that toys provide gendered experience; feminine toys promote the development of nurturance and domestic skills whereas masculine toys promote the development of spatial skills, risk-taking and competition.

This study is limited to a small study group and is carried out as a pilot for a main study in which Turkish and British children's preferences and a number of related variables such as gender of the child, gender and educational level of parents and cultural beliefs are being measured in a cross-cultural perspective.

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