**Toys: Children and Stereotypical Gender Roles and Socialization**

Toys and children’s entertainment have always been divided to be gender specific, in stores, in homes, and also in learning environments such as schools and daycare. Most often, stores and parents claim this happens on the basis of pure convenience. This division has been claimed to be completely innocent of stereotypes for young children, many parents stating the gender division has no effects on their children’s lifetime roles. Through these gender-biases, it has been witness in children the latent stereotypical responsibility brought on at a young age to boys and girls. Boys, with action figures such as “GI Joe”, packaged in a rugged- forest print box, are molded to be soldier-like, tough, and dominant in their nature. Girls, however, with toys such as “Mom-and-Me Barbie” packaged in a glossy pink box, along with cleaning and kitchen look-a-likes, take on the character of a nurturing caregiver. These products found in the store, and then brought into the home, can create great instances for discussion on the subject of gender roles. Gender socialization, through toys and children’s entertainment, reinforces the teachings of male and female stereotypical roles.

In beginning to understand gender, socialization and stereotypical roles children’s entertainment brings upon them, defining these terms is critical. Gender, in the sense we intend to use it throughout this argument, refers to the difference of sociological culture between male individuals and female individuals. (Maccoby 6). As discovered in *Sociology: Cultural Diversity in a Changing World*, children are born into this world with no pre-existing awareness of difference in genders and roles they play, or are taught to play. (Bryjak, Soraka 209-245). In current study, it has been observed that even in the womb, male in comparison to females are treated, spoken to, and fantasized about by their parents differently. (Wharton 49) This is where socialization comes into effect. Socialization, by sociological definition, is “the process by which people learn the characteristics of their group – the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, norms, and actions thought appropriate for them by society” (Henslin G7). The important meaning to be taken from this definition is “…thought appropriate for them by society.” These skills, attitudes, values, norms, and actions we are taught specifically as a male or female are socialized into our minds on the basis of what those who are teaching us believe.

With a better understanding of gender and socialization of stereotypical roles under our belt, we begin to understand the thesis of how these things in children’s entertainment reinforces gender-specific behavior. We also come to understand how instrumental a parent, guardian, or teacher is in reinforcing or even displaying these stereotypes themselves based on previous information given to them, sometimes as a child, or throughout their lifetime as an adult in the home or workplace. In a parent’s role as caregiver to a child, the marketing involved with children’s entertainment displaying stereotypical roles is directed at the buyer of the goods, most often the parent, just as much as with the child who will play with them. The point of sale of an item is most often where socialization involving gender begins with a child. For example, pink clothing for girls- blue clothing for boys. In hospital rooms, children experience a very early form of gender specific actions when a pink or blue cap is placed on their head.

Product placement in stores and marketing play a very large role in gender socialization and stereotyping roles presented in the home. In many observances in my lifetime in stores containing children’s toy sections, there are many latent gender socialization techniques in placement and organization of these objects. Most often, a navy blue and green section is derived for boy’s toys, and a pink and white section for girl’s toys. The girl’s section is most often much larger and contains many products compared to the boy’s section. This, already creating the stereotype that women more often have more material possessions than men. Also, boys are given opportunities to play fix it with play tools like hammers, screwdrivers, and wrenches along with dump trucks and cranes, while girls have ‘do my hair’ Barbie. Play makeup, high heels; fancy dresses, and hair accessories are readily available in abundance, projecting the expectations of society on how a woman ought to look. These are brought into the home, creating opportunity for stereotypes to infiltrate a place where children spend most of, if not all, of their time.

These toys, brought into the home, create another cause for debate. After winning the heart, or pocketbook, of those who purchase the toys in the stores, these toys are also a tool for parents and guardians of children to teach them norms of society in regards to their gender. “For a child, society is uncharted territory. A major signpost on society’s map is socialization into gender. As we learn what is expected of us because we are male or female we are nudged into different lanes in life, we take direction so well that, as adults, most of us act, think, and even feel according to this gender map.” (Henslin 70). Our parents and teachers are the first significant others who show us how to follow this gender map. Their own gender and orientation of social norms are so deeply embedded, they do most of this teaching without being aware of what they are doing. For example, a mother may purchase a toy vacuum for her daughter. As a mother vacuums, which is seen as such a normal task and is not thought to be a teaching tool, her daughter mimics her actions along side her. When the time comes to vacuum in real life, the daughter assumes her role based on these latent life lessons. A young boy, as another example, receives a child-sized snow shovel as a gift. Along side his father, who dutifully shovels the snow, the boy mimics his father. When faced with the task in his own home when he grows up, the boy will assume his task, which was passed covertly from his father.

In the home, these roles are brought on children as displayed by their parents. Also, in the educational system in schools, gender roles and stereotypes are presented. Many playground practices present themselves to be stereotypical, children usually mimicking their older peers in games and playing. Boys are presented with basketballs at school, where they play a game with their guy friends. Girls are presented with chalk, or jump ropes, to socialize with their girl friends. Girls are also nudged by their peers on how to act, talk, dress in what is fashionable, and what boys are cute. Young boys are mentored by their peers on how to speak, act, react, and look to be appealing, normal, and fashionable. (Henslin 274-75). This eventually matures throughout a child’s school years, and advances into higher education, and into the workplace, where those of the same gender or stereotype blindly lead each other, as society would have it. Women, who experience a larger stereotype in the common workplace of the United States, will come to face the differences in pay, standing, and promotion as compared to men with the same education and experience in that same workplace, which is a subject of debate all in itself (Henslin 276-78).

To resolve what has been previously stated, gender socialization, through toys and children’s entertainment, reinforces the teachings of male and female stereotypical roles. The most common and earliest observed gender stereotype begins they day you are born, when a pink or blue cap is placed on your head. Some studies combat it begins before birth, when a woman nurtures her child in her womb with comforting words, depending on known gender. A Toy store’s role in choosing, observing, and mimicking with gender-specific objects is astronomical. We witness impressions put upon young children by their parents and peers, most often unknowingly, involving gender-specific and colored objects to be used alongside mesial daily tasks. Toys and objects create specific stereotypes for their role as an adult.

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