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Gender Self-Socialization in Early Childhood

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Introduction

The role of gender in the lives of young children has garnered attention, as early gender-related concepts, self-perceptions, preferences, and behaviour have the potential to affect choices, aspirations, social networks and many other future life domains. Gender is one of the first social categories children become aware of and, in early childhood, is highly important to most children. There are three main perspectives on factors influencing gender development: physiology, socio-structure and culture, and cognition-motivation.[1] We focus on one facet of the cognitive-motivational perspective, which emphasizes children's own active role in shaping their gender development.

Subject

Self-socialization theories propose that children are "gender detectives," intrinsically motivated agents actively seeking out information about gender.[2] Further, children's understanding and awareness of gender affects how they organize and interpret the information they collect. Gender schemas, or organized knowledge structures, provide standards for them to guide their

behaviour. Finally, these theories emphasize developmental change in children's knowledge about gender and in their gender-related behaviours.[3]

Problems

Parents and practitioners may strive toward the ideal of individuality, often believing that children should be free of societal constraints based on gender. Unrestricted by gender stereotypes and prescribed roles, they hope that children will be exposed to a wider variety of situations and people to develop a broader array of skills.[4] However, some parents can be dismayed, when, despite efforts to be "gender-neutral," their young children may act or dress in highly gender-stereotypical ways. Acting in gender-stereotypical ways in early childhood is common and gender self-socialization theories explain why.

Research Context

Research on gender development has received broader attention since the late 1960s, accompanying the feminist movement.[5] An emphasis on cognition in gender development became prevalent in the late 1970s to early 1980s when psychology in general became influenced by cognitive theories.[6] Gender development research and self-socialization theories have largely focused on normative trends in White, middle-class American girls and boys. Recently, however, there have been pushes to learn from more diverse populations, as well as to conceptualize and recognize gender on a spectrum rather than as binary.[7,8]

Key Research Questions

Inquiry into the active role of children in shaping their own gender development focuses on two broad questions: (1) When do children learn about gender and how does this knowledge about gender change over time? (2) How does children's knowledge about gender affect their gender development?

Recent Research Results

When do children learn about gender and how does this knowledge about gender change over time? Psychologists have studied many types of cognitions in children related to gender, including: awareness of gender categories, understanding of gender constancy and knowledge of gender stereotypes. Children can perceptually discriminate males and females even in infancy.[9,10] However, children are not thought to conceptually understand gender categories until 18 to 24

months.[11] By about 27 to 30 months of age, sometimes earlier, children seem to have a rudimentary sense of gender identity, shown by the ability to verbally label their own gender ("boy"/"girl").[12]

Children further learn about gender and develop a sense of gender identity through early childhood. Kohlberg proposed that toddlers often consider gender to be fluid and over time learn about its relative permanence (gender constancy).[13] This involves understanding that for most people, gender remains permanent over time (*gender stability:* a boy becomes a man) and superficial transformations (*gender consistency:* a girl remains a girl even if she wears pants or plays with trucks). Traditionally, research has shown across different cultures that understanding of gender constancy is usually attained by age 6 to 7.[14] More recently, however, results from one study have put this timeline into question, as children as young as age 3 showed understanding of gender consistency when given situational explanations for gender-nonconforming behaviour.[15] In addition, some scholars have begun to recognize that the construct of gender constancy emerged from a cisnormative framework[16]. For instance, compared to cisgender children, transgender children were more likely to recognize that occasionally gender does not remain permanent over time.[17] Transgender children also recognized that their own gender as infants differed from their current gender. Thus, in contrast to Kohlberg's assumptions of constancy, scholars are beginning to recognize that gender is *not* unchanging.[18] A focus on children's recognition of their gender has shifted to a focus on children's affirmation of their gender.[18]

A third type of knowledge that children gain are gender stereotypes. As early as 18 months of age, children have knowledge of gender stereotypes that grows in amount and in complexity across development.[19] Young children often rigidly believe and endorse these gender stereotypes, but start to show flexibility (both girls and boys can be strong) around age 6 to 8.[20] The combination of attaining a sense of gender identity with knowledge of gender stereotypes provides the basis for gender schemas (organized knowledge structures).

How does children's knowledge about gender affect their gender development? Self-socialization theories posit that children's knowledge about gender motivates them to be similar to those of the same gender while distinct from those of a different gender.[3] They then learn what each gender entails and attempt to follow these gender norms and stereotypes. Research has found that after children achieve basic gender identities, they have heightened attention to information related to gender and especially attend to same-gender models. Simultaneously, they exhibit

improved memory for that which they deem relevant for their own gender, while also distorting information to fit their schemas.[21-23] With this constructed and consolidated information, children learn how to act in gender-stereotypical ways.

Early childhood is a time of “gender rigidity” in behaviour and beliefs.[24] Children at this age show high engagement with gender-stereotypical toys, increasingly avoid cross-gender-stereotypical toys, and increasingly dress in gender-stereotypical ways.[25-27] This pattern has been seen in transgender children as well, with transgender children preferring peers and clothing associated with their lived gender rather than with their birth sex.[28,29] In support of these theories, research has sometimes found that children’s knowledge about gender predicts gender-stereotypical behaviour in early childhood.[9,10,30] For example, children who understand gender labels or show heightened attention to and interest in gender sooner tend to hold stronger gender-typed preferences and use gender stereotypes to guide their behaviours.[30,31]

Children’s knowledge about gender is theorized to also have immediate consequences for their feelings and attitudes toward own-gender and other-gender peers.[32] Indeed, early childhood is also a time of “rigidity” in gender attitudes. Children evaluate their own gender group more positively than they do the other gender group.[33] They also tend to favor their own gender in their behaviour, such as in allocating rewards.[33-35] Gender segregation begins in early childhood as well.[36] Children increasingly prefer associating with their own gender, a phenomenon that continues through elementary school. Some research supports the idea that children’s knowledge about gender relates to gender attitudes and sex segregation.[30,34,37,38] For example, children who showed stronger attention to and interest in learning about gender tended to display stronger favoritism towards own-gender peers.[30]

Research Gaps

There is much evidence supporting the idea that children shape their own gender development. Though researchers have shown that children’s knowledge and understanding about gender is related to their gender-stereotypical behaviour and attitudes, some studies, however, find no connections.[10,11] It is likely that several factors (e.g., prenatal biological influences, media portrayals, peer and parental attitudes) interact together with self-socialization to affect children’s gender-related behaviour, yet few studies have attempted to test this interaction. One exception shows the promise of this line of future research. Girls exposed to high concentrations of androgen prenatally (congenital adrenal hyperplasia; CAH) showed decreased levels of self-

socialization.[39] This decreased self-socialization (in the form of decreased use of information that an object was “for girls”) might be a mechanism that partially explains general decreased levels of gender-typing among CAH girls. Additionally, although growing in number, few studies have examined gender self-socialization beyond White, middle-class, cisgender or American children. New research on ethnically minoritized and transgender children suggests that self-socialization processes operate similarly among these populations.[29,40] Emerging research with nonbinary children and youth has also found that they take an active approach in forming a gender identity, processing feelings and cognitions surrounding gender pronouns and gender norms[16]. Nonbinary children and youth have reported that parents (as well as books, friends, and online spaces) scaffolded their learning, but much more work is needed.[16,41] Finally, more research is needed to understand the longer-term consequences of self-socialization and early gender-typing, such as for later goals, preferences, gender attitudes and well-being.

Conclusions

While multiple factors affect children’s gender development, children also play their own active role. Starting very early on in development, children seek to classify themselves by gender once they have recognized gender groups. Young children then strive to make meaning of gender, paying attention to information about gender and forming gender schemas. Because children’s cognitions about gender change over time, it is expected that their gender-related behaviours, beliefs, and attitudes should as well. Indeed, it has been found that early childhood is often a time of increasing “rigidity” in gender-stereotypical preferences for peers and toy activities, as well as in their gender-stereotypical play and dress. There is also evidence that children relax in following these strict gender norms around the time of middle elementary school. Much research has found support for connections between children’s growing knowledge of gender and their gender-stereotypical behaviours, beliefs, and attitudes; however, these connections are not always found.[11]

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

Children’s quick grasp of the concept that our world can be sorted into gender groups reflects how heavily our society emphasizes gender. Nearly every aspect of life is infused with connotations of maleness or femaleness. A downside of highlighting gender to such a degree is that it can increase gender stereotyping and negative gender discriminatory behaviour.[42,43] This stereotyping and prejudice can lead to reduction in the diversity of choices, skills and

relationships available to children.

Even with a de-emphasis on gender in their immediate environments, children will still likely actively construct what gender means. Parents, educators, and practitioners should be aware of what associations are tied to gender groups. For example, it seems that young girls pick up on the message that being a girl means looking like a girl and being preoccupied with appearance.[44] Boys attune to messages that they need to be tough like superheroes.[45] These associations may have negative mental and physical health consequences later in development. Expanding and diversifying the meanings we associate with gender will help children also form a more expansive self.

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