

## THE DYNAMICS GENDER ROLE STEREOTYPES: A STUDY ON CHILDREN IN ROMANIA

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**Abstract:** *The objective of the research consisted in identifying the level and analysing the dynamics of knowledge of gender role stereotypes in various stages of pre-school age. The study assessed gender role stereotypes connected to three aspects of pre-school age: toys, occupations and activities. The research was conducted on a sample of 261 children, aged between 2 years, 8 months and 6 years, 11 months: 128 girls, 133 boys. The analysis of the level of knowledge of gender role stereotypes revealed a special dynamics, both regarding its evolution while the children were growing up, and concerning the differences extant according to the gender of the children. The results marked a relationship between the knowledge of gender role stereotypes and age only for toys. If, in the case of toys, starting at the age of three, the level of knowledge of gender role stereotypes has an ascending trajectory, the occupations and the activities preserve their specificity of association with gender categories no matter the age they were assessed at. The level of knowledge of gender role stereotypes is manifested differently also according to the sex of the children, the boys displaying a higher level of it than girls, this intensity being the same during the entire pre-school interval.*

**Keywords:** *gender-role stereotype, gender knowledge, pre-school children, early socialization*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In its vast majority, theoretical approaches to gender acknowledge the importance of the gender stereotyping process, based on early socializing of the child. As early as the age of 2-3, most children possess knowledge of gender-role stereotypes [11, 14, 16, 17], especially those who developed the capability of gender labelling of other children, which signals that understanding gender labels may accelerate the process of adopting gender stereotypes. This interval, and up to the age of 5-7, is characterized by children assuming roles, standards and gender behaviour, as children try to organize and process information received from the social environment according to gender categories. Trautner (2005) suggests that the interval of 5-6 years old represents the age at which the level of gender stereotypes reaches its maximum rigidity, children registering, after 7 years old, a decreasing tendency, normal from the point of view of gender development and a “dramatic increase” in their flexibility. Levy’s study (1995) proved the influence of these stereotypes on children’s memory, as they remember more information related their own gender than the one related to the opposite gender. Furthermore, at this age, we may notice the importance of the social power of the same-gender model or even different gender ones, especially with boys who oriented themselves towards the opposite gender model, which held a significantly greater social power than the same-gender model [3, 7, 18]. It is not only society members who influence the process of gender stereotype formation with children, as it is also altered by information provided by the mass media

[1, 2, 9, 20]. Children internalize gender standards promoted by the respective society, considering them to be absolute laws that must not be broken, and they even resort to discouraging or punishing play mates' behaviour inconsistent with gender-role stereotype [4, 6, 15], the exaggeration of manifesting gender-consistent stereotypes and behaviour being caused by the desire to construct the self-image as gender [19] by means of firm classification into one of the two gender categories, gender-related aspects thus becoming very important for the age of 3-7. In this respect, Halim, Ruble and Amodio (2011) present a new phenomenon, PFD ("pink frilly dress"), based on the behaviour of pre-school little girls intent on choosing only this type of outfit. It seems that this phenomenon is not only necessarily due to the process of parental socializing [5].

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The research aim consisted in identifying the level and analyzing the dynamics of knowledge related to gender role stereotypes at various stages of pre-school ages. Hence, we assessed gender-knowledge regarding toys, occupations, and household activities. These domains were selected because they represent some of the most important aspects of children's and their families' daily lives. Categorizing according to the degree of suitability to gender classes of toys, occupations, features, and certain activities constitutes a founding element of culture in any society.

The general premise of this study was that the level gender-role stereotype knowledge is influenced by the gender and the age of pre-schoolers. Therefore, we assumed that, in choosing toys, occupations and household activities, children will rely on socially-promoted gender role stereotypes, so that we might notice an increase, as the subjects grew up, in their level of awareness, this level being higher with boys than with girls.

## **3. PARTICIPANTS**

This study included 261 children aged between 2 years, 8 months and 6 years, 11 months, with an average age of 60.69 months ( $SD = 13.58$ ): 128 girls, 133 boys. The participants were selected from four state kindergartens, all urban. In establishing age groups, we considered the characteristics of the pre-school education system in Romania: junior group (3 years old: 3 years, 0 months – 3 years, 11 months), intermediate group (4 years old: 4 years, 0 months – 4 years, 11 months), senior group (5 years: 5 years, 0 months – 5 years, 11 months) and pre-school group (6 years: 6 years, 0 months – 6 years, 11 months).

## **4. INSTRUMENTS**

Gender-role stereotypes knowledge related to toys was tested by means of a categorizing procedure. Children were asked to indicate the person (boy, girl, or boy and girl) who could play with various toys (presented as 10 x 10 cm black-and-white photographs) considered to be characteristic of each gender category (12 masculine, 12 feminine, 8 neutral). The items had been established as a result of previous pre-testing. The toy images were presented in a random order. With younger children (2-5 years old), we used three photographs of children (boy, girl, boy and girl) in order to facilitate task comprehension and fulfilment. Two scores may be calculated: the gender flexibility score, by summing up the answers corresponding to the "both" category, its high value indicating greater flexibility of gender related attitudes and awareness; gender stereotyping score, obtaining from adding up the masculine and feminine items classified

as pertaining only to the “for boys” or “for girls” categories, so that its high value represented a high level of awareness of gender related stereotypes.

The items regarding occupations and activities were developed relying on previous pre-testing, so as to ensure their being adapted to the Romanian population. The answer options to the occupation and activity scales include the terms “woman” and “man” because most of these roles are relevant to children only from the perspective of adults being involved in performing them. Moreover, for items whose significance was unknown to children, a definition or a description of the respective item was provided, so that children might understand what it implied.

The children were asked “who could have” each of the 21 occupations (8 masculine, 8 feminine, 5 neutral) and “who could perform” each of the 18 activities (7 masculine, 7 feminine, 4 neutral), while having the possibility to choose among three options: “only men,” “only women,” or “both men and women”. We calculated the number of non-stereotypical answers (e.g. “both”) given to stereotypical jobs/activities, the total score falling within the 0-22/18 interval, as well as the “correct” answers, consistent with the socially-promoted gender stereotypes (the feminine score and the masculine score). A small number of “both boys and girls” answers will indicate a high level of the influence of culturally-promoted gender stereotypes and a lower level of gender flexibility. A high value of the score obtaining from calculating stereotypical answers indicates strong stereotyping. Neutral items are not included in the values measured..

## 5. RESULTS

The analyze of the degree of gender stereotype awareness according to the age of subjects highlighted the existence of significant differences only in the case of the scale made up of toy-items,  $\chi^2(3) = 40.784$ , significant at  $p < .005$ , which means that children’s age influences awareness of gender cultural stereotypes by means of toys, but it does not influence stereotypes as related to occupations ( $\chi^2(3) = .891$ ,  $p = .828$ ) or activities ( $\chi^2(3) = 4.127$ ,  $p = .248$ ).

The investigation of stereotype awareness level with children according to gender lead to noticing significant differences between masculine and feminine subjects, these differences being recorded only in the case of the Toy scale, for which we obtained a coefficient  $Z = -4.712$ ,  $p < .005$ . As with the comparison according to children’s ages, no significant differences were identified between the two gender categories for the stereotypical answers given in the case of the Occupation and Activity scales.

The qualitative analysis of answers provided by children when indicating the gender category suitable for playing with certain toys illustrated the presence of some options inconsistent with the gender stereotypes promoted at a socio-cultural level.

If we analyze the answers given by children according to belonging to a gender category, we may notice differences between boys and girls regarding considering an item as being suitable for their own gender category, the opposite category or both. In the case of masculine toys, considerably more girls (10.3%) considered them to be suitable for their gender as well, than boys did (1.6%), the value of  $\chi^2(1) = 104.767$ ,  $p < .005$  confirming a higher frequency of non-stereotypical answers with female participants than with the male ones.

We notice that there are some toys that were considered by all male participants as being suitable only for this gender, items such as “towing-car,” “tool set” and “tractor,” whereas items such as “all road car” and “race car” fell into the “for both girls and boys” category by 19.5% and 18.8% of the female subjects.

Feminine toys were assigned to the “both” category by 3.7% of the boys’ answers and by 9.7% of the girls’, the value of  $\chi^2(1) = 43.718$ , significant for  $p < .005$ , recording a statistically significant difference between the answers of the two sexes, in favour of the female subjects. The highest frequency is evident in the case of the “sowing set” item, considered to be suitable “for both girls and boys” by 10.9% of the boys and by 25.6% of the girls, or of the “doll house” item, this being considered as non-stereotypical by 5.5% of the boys and by 18.8% of the girls, whereas, with the “doll clothes” item, there were very few cases of considering it as being consistent with the opposite gender stereotype category, being considered as such by only .8% of the boys and 2.3% of the girls.

Both boys ( $\chi^2(1) = 109.329$ ,  $p < .005$ ), and girls ( $\chi^2(1) = 81.857$ ,  $p < .005$ ) considered that masculine occupations are significantly more stereotyped than the feminine ones, for the typically feminine occupations being recorded a significantly larger number of choices that contradict socio-culturally promoted gender stereotypes (69.3% of the boys, 66.2% of the girls) than for occupations related to masculine stereotypes (30.7% of the boys, 33.8% of the girls).

As far as the masculine items of the Activity scale are concerned, the highest values of frequency of answers that contradict gender-stereotypes were calculated for the “goes fishing” item, 27.3% and 21.1% for boys, respectively girls, whereas the lowest values were recorded for the “drives a race car” item, just 3.1% of the male subjects’ answers and 5.3% of the female subjects’ answers being non-stereotypical.

Another aspect we focused on was the difference in choices contrary to gender role stereotypes operated by boys and girls for the two types of items. Consequently, we noticed that the non-stereotypical choices of boys for the items associated with the masculine are significantly different from those performed for the items related to the feminine,  $\chi^2(1) = 101.531$ ,  $\alpha < .005$ , only 26.6% of the male subjects’ answers for masculine items being of the “both” type, whereas, for the typically feminine items, this option was selected in a ratio of 73.4%. Still statistically significant, there is the difference between the non-stereotypical choices selected for the two categories of items by the female subjects,  $\chi^2(1) = 108.806$ ,  $\alpha < .005$ , 25%, respectively 75% of the options contrary to social stereotypes being for masculine, respectively feminine items.

Comparing the frequency of answers inconsistent with the gender stereotypes assigned by boys in the case of feminine items to that of non-stereotypical answers of girls for the masculine items, the conclusion may be drawn that there were significantly more non-stereotypical choices made by boys than by girls,  $\chi^2(1) = 124.326$ ,  $\alpha < .005$ , the boys considering that feminine activities may also be performed by opposite sex individuals, more so than girls considered in the case of masculine activities.

## 7. DISCUSSION

The level of gender stereotype awareness registers an increase at the same time as age increases, this result being consistent with previous research [13, 15], the lowest level registering at the age of three, when the child is granted more freedom regarding assuming gender role, the social pressure being much more diminished than with older children. However, even at the age of three, children are aware of adequate behavior for their own gender or for the opposite gender, their level being quite high, 30% of them obtaining the maximum score. An interesting fact is that this relation obtained only in the case of gender stereotypes promoted by means of toys, as it is not present in the case of the other two dimensions, namely occupations and activities. A similar result was obtained by Brown and Bigler (2004), who noticed the absence of a relation between activities related to gender stereotypes and the age of subjects. A possible explanation

might be that, unlike the toys that the child comes in daily contact with and whose connection to gender may be altered by certain factors, occupations and activities keep their specific association to gender, the child noticing models provided by his/her own family or by society, which generally remain constant. If, concerning toys, the boy is allowed to play with dolls, kitchen ware or the iron, especially at very young ages, having them replaced by parents and other social agents at older ages, he/she will notice that the fire-fighter is a man, the hunter is the same, that only the mother or the father takes out the garbage, these behaviors not altering too much from year to year. Hence, the child is allowed to play with opposite-gender toys, but, as far as daily occupations and activities are concerned, most often than not, he/she stands corrected, being rewarded only for that behavior, those attitudes or beliefs consistent with the gender stereotype, the ones which are not being discouraged and, often, sanctioned.

Once more [8, 10, 12, 13, 16, 21] we found evidence of difference between the two sexes regarding their relating to gender behavior and stereotypes, at least in the case of toys, boys proving to have a higher level of awareness in this respect than girls do, which can be explained by more stimulation of gender specific behavior with boys, whereas girls enjoy a certain freedom in this respect.

We noticed an increase in the level of gender stereotype awareness as the age grew, which is partly due to greater awareness in this respect and/or to a growing influence of the social environment and/or by the increase in expectations of the stereotypical type, all these causing greater stimulation of gender specific behavior and discouragement of that which contradicts gender role social rules. Under the circumstances of social alterations that lead to the ever greater involvement of women in the activities stereotypically considered as being specific to men, girls have started being educated in this respect, so that masculine toys such as “all road car,” “race car” are perceived as suitable for their gender as well. Nevertheless, these gender contradictions appear to be more frequent with girls than with boys [10], their assessment of toys mostly conforming to norms and values promoted at a social and cultural level, this situation being more obvious with regard to typically masculine toys. At the same time, toys typically associated with the feminine gender are considered to be more compatible with both sexes than the typically masculine ones, particularly by the boys. Thus, our results confirm, on the one hand, previous remarks according to which boys are much more stereotypical than girls concerning the level of toys being adequate for a certain gender category, regardless of their type. On the other hand, however, we may notice that typically feminine toys are perceived, by the boys, as being more consistent with both the masculine and the feminine gender than the ones corresponding exclusively to the masculine gender, from the point of view of socially-promoted gender role stereotypes.

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