The development of gender identity: Making sense of the world

Marsha B. Liss, California State University and Sandra L. Calvert, Georgetown University

A Review of *Gender Identities and Education: The Impact of Starting School*, by Barbara Lloyd and Gerald Duveen. Hertfordshire, England: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992.

. . . Seth selects the orange/pink nightie from the dressing up rack, though he has a lot of trouble getting it on before he succeeds. Then he tries to put the white tutu number on top. More difficulty. Great concentration. No-one really takes much notice. One girl, Charity, does come up to him and says 'It's not for you Seth.' He looks a bit bemused but goes back to struggling with the white tutu (Lloyd & Duveen, 1992, p. 3).

So begins Lloyd and Duveen's (1992) volume *Gender Identities and Education: The impact of starting school.* The importance of this observation cannot be understated and is evident throughout not only this book but the sex role development literature. By the 'formative years' some children have already developed clearly demarcated categories of what is and what is not acceptable behavior for each sex. Lloyd and Duveen examine children's play choices and responses to gender-based questions in the naturalistic environment of reception classes at two different schools. While their initial attention was focused on the teachers and school environment structure, they found these aspects were not as potent as the impact of the children themselves.

To some, the finding that peers are central organizers of the child's conceptualization of gender-based judgements and behaviors may seem trivial. However, this is an extremely important contribution because the vast majority of the literature has not addressed the significance of the peer group in the formation and maintenance of children's gender identities. Greater attention has historically been paid to the role of teachers (Fagot, 1985; Meece, 1987) parents (Rheingold & Cook, 1975; Etaugh & Liss, in press), and media (Calvert & Huston, 1987), but not necessarily to the combination of these factors, nor to peers. Anecdotal evidence reveals that parents and researchers have often been surprised when the child from a nongendertyped home and school chooses gendertyped clothes, activities, and toys. However, what is often missing is the link to the all-important peer group and its potential to exclude the child who does not conform or play like the group (Maccoby, 1988).

Several studies have indicated that individual children's willingness to participate in gender-nontraditional play increases after exposure to same-sex models who are engaged in gender-nontraditional play; however, when playing with the same toys following the same modeling program but *in the presence of a peer*, children do not exhibit the same flexibility in their play choices (Liss & Doyle, 1982). Similarly, when children are left alone, they may play with gender-nontraditional choices; however, when an adult enters the playroom, the child (especially boys) will suppress this play (See Huston, 1983, for reference). Lastly, children may sometimes include an opposite-sex child in same-sex stereotyped play because the child knows *how* to play not just *with what* to play (Liss, 1983; Maccoby, 1988). For instance, boys may allow a girl who plays in a rough and tumble manner to join their football game.

Lloyd and Duveen report that when the children were left to engage in free play, unsupervised by adult teachers, they usually divided into gender-based play groups. They note, moreover, that the play groups during free play are constituted by the children themselves; the boys and girls divide up primarily by gender and retreat to separate territories of the room. For instance, boys take the open spaces while girls play in the home corner. Maccoby and Jacklin (1987) have observed that girls actually retreat to the remaining space allotted to them by the boys. At first glance, teachers are not involved in creating the gender-based nature of these spaces and the play environments.

However, the teacher's role may be present unintentionally and subtly. When teachers work with children individually, more sex-segregated peer interaction occurs in the rest of the classroom. By contrast, when teachers organize children's play, fewer sex-segregated gender play groups are formed. This indicates the influence of teacher style on structure of play and play groups (e.g., Carpenter, Huston & Holt, 1986). The more visible the teacher in structuring the activities, the more gender-integrated is the children's play. So, when the teacher merely renames the 'Wendy area' the 'home corner' but does not lead activities for all the children in the 'home corner area', it will remain a gender-based play area during peer-organized contexts.

In the opening anecdote, Lloyd and Duveen focus on peer pressure for conformity to prevailing gender-traditional behaviors. The child's confusion can be quite profound; while he wants to wear the tutu and dance, he also wants acceptance by his peer group who in this case rejects his play choices. Here we find another aspect of peer group behavior—including and excluding behaviors. The peer group is important in defining the norms for the cohort; these may change over time and serve as a guideline for behavior; they tell the child what to do and what not to do. For boys, the excluding behaviors or what not to do appear more stringent as defined by the cohort (Huston, 1983); their range of acceptable gender-based behaviors becomes increasingly constrained over the course of development, resulting in overt exclusion of girls (even nontraditional ones) from their circles (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987). Girls, on the other hand, exhibit acceptable school behaviors, stay close to teachers while they learn, and engage in traditionally female behaviors (Fagot, 1985). The girls may wish to remain flexible in their choices and engage in cross-gender play groups, but find themselves explicitly excluded from male play groups; indeed when the girl tries to join the boys in play, they may intentionally intimidate her through rough and tumble play to leave their territory (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987).

We should bear in mind that the children's play and school environments do not usually provide them with the full array of social models. Schools, especially in the early years, are principally feminine environments (Fagot, 1985); girls and teachers are often in closer proximity and girls are favored by female teachers presumably because the girls display more compatible and conventional female behaviors (Meece, 1987). As a result, male teachers are not available nor accessible to young children. The findings on the effects of a teacher's sex on young children's classroom play activities is equivocal at best (Brophy, 1985) and needs further examination to extend the work of Lloyd and Duveen. We recognize that at the present time it is difficult to do naturalistic studies with an appropriate sample size of professional male reception class teachers.

Conceptual Issues

Lloyd and Duveen present findings which validate earlier work (e.g., Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987) and add significant components to our understanding of the influence of peers on the social construction of gender. However, as is common in the sex-role development literature, the *origins* of the gender-based behaviors are not discussed or explored. Let us raise a few questions and directions for future research which may serve to illuminate the bases for gender differences.

One aspect of the nature of children is to create order and sense in their worlds. Children's schemas are organized around the structures they have for organizing thoughts. Young children categorize the world into binary groupings (Armstrong, Gleitman & Gleitman, 1983). Gender is an obvious example of a binary construction readily used by children and facilitated by culture (Maccoby, 1988). Martin and Halverson (1981) conceptualize a model of gender identity in which the child uses gender-specific labels to construct an individual as well as a group identity, thereby dividing activities into male and female spheres. These labels are then resistent to change while at the same time solidifying the individual's unique identity. In sex-traditional environments, children are provided and process consistent examples of this type of binary labeling and categorizing. When a child is exposed to a broader ranges of gender-acceptable behaviors, s/he may have more difficulty making categorical sense of the choices. This may account for why the child insists on making dichotomies even in light of conflicting information. Although the content of a category can be altered, the underlying core category remains unchanged.

While the young child may exhibit sex-traditional statements and behaviors, there is little evidence of the long term effects on the child's course of development. We know that over time children's schemas and concepts become more differentiated and exceptions to the rules are allowed (Huston, 1983). Nonetheless, core, binary categories remain as a basis for constructions of thought (Maccoby, 1988). We also do not know if the child actually needs to display broadly based acceptable behavior (as measured by Lloyd and Duveen) in reception class as evidence that nontraditional gender concepts have been acquired. Flexibility in categories that vary by degree, such as masculinity and femininity, may emerge with development (Maccoby, 1988). For instance, contemporary male college students are equally likely to label their own personality characteristics as 'feminine' and 'masculine,' a departure from previous conceptualizations of acceptable personality characteristics (Renn & Calvert, 1993).

Throughout development, the labels for concepts may also change. However, relabeling is not sufficient to change the underlying cognitive schema. Thus, when a parent, teacher, or media changes the title of an activity's categorization, the activity itself may remain gender-based according to the child's conceptual system. The children know that 'Wendy's corner' is still 'girl' space even though it has been relabelled 'home corner.'

Many of the child's skills and behaviors may have already been acquired in the pre-linguistic periods of development. By the time that the child attaches a categorical label to the skills, these very skills and choices may be well-embedded in the child's behavioral repertoire. From earliest infancy, children's worlds are structured around the 'pink and blue' binary categories symbolizing male and female. For instance, children grow up in gender-constructed rooms (Rheingold & Cook, 1975) and are provided with gender-based toys (Huston, 1985; Etaugh & Liss, in press). Participation in these activities may set the child on a course (as distinguished from an internal predisposition) for gender-based binary category construction. Vygotsky (1987) claims that thought is pre-linguistic and that activity generates thought. Applying this notion to the acquisition of gender-based behaviors, we conclude that the pre-linguistic environmental activities provide a conceptual basis for the linguistic labels which will soon follow.

These labels provide far more than group membership. As the child struggles to make sense of the world, and his/her place within the world, the labels also function to define individual identity. Thus, while Martin and Halverson (1981) say that gender choices are perpetuated when the child categorizes a toy based on his/her own sex, the foundation for some of these choices may already have been built. Language and labeling may, therefore, be the processes for cementing rather than creating gender differences.

Methodological Considerations

Lloyd and Duveen appropriately chastise the field for confusing sex and gender and recommend that the latter term be used in analyzing social constructions. Ironically, they make this same error in their creation of measures (the 'Michael and Susan' instrument), their sampling of children's discourse (forced binary choices), and the accompanying analyses. For example, most of the tables are organized by headings reflecting sex and not gender. It would have been preferable to indicate greater consistency in the treatment of this critical concept. Until we go beyond boy-girl labels, there will be no conceptual difference between gender and sex and the answers to the questions Lloyd and Duveen raise will not be addressed. In addition, it is difficult to make strong conclusions in studies using a small number of classrooms and teachers. Researchers might also consider examining data in terms of whether groups of children with particular skills are comprised of one or both sexes; for instance, would discriminant function analyses show that the children who engage in traditionally male activities tend to be boys? Examination of the sex distribution of skill-related behaviors may be *more* meaningful to the understanding of gender than analyses of sex differences have been.

It is also critical for research in this genre to use greater detail of behavioral observations rather than mere activity preferences and verbal choices. Liss (1983) for instance, described the differentiated patterns of toy play by males and females. Boys use noises and activity while girls use nurturant behavior, gadgetry

(fine motor), and positive comments. It is likely that similar patterns would emerge in naturalistic settings. Future work should build on both streams of research of naturalistic choices and detailed behavioral assessments.

As a last caution, the individual differences, ranges in behaviors for a given child (as well as for males/females), and the overlap in male/female distributions for choices as well as skills or behaviors need careful examination. It is clear in this study as well as in other works (see Huston, 1983), that there are few clear-cut pervasive differences in children's gender-based behavior. The meaning of the overlap in gender-related findings has not been fully addressed. The implications for our understanding of the origins and maintenance of similarities and differences in human development and in groups of individuals will be critical.

Will the young boy who wore the tutu succumb to peer pressure and conform to gender-based dress and behavior, or will he develop with broad categories and labels for his behaviors and that of his peers? Seth's construction of his gender identity holds the answer to this question, and his relationship to his peer group provides as much influence in shaping that social construction as will his parents, his teachers, and the media.

References

Armstrong, S.L., Gleitman, L.R. & Gleitman, H. (1983). What some concepts might not be. *Cognition, 13*, 263–308.

Brophy, J. (1985). Interactions of male and female students with male and female teachers. In L.C. Wilkinson & C.B. Marrett (Eds.), *Gender influences in classroom interaction*. New York: Academic Press.

Calvert, S.L. & Huston, A.C. (1987). Television and children's gender schemata. In L. Liben & M. Signorella (Eds.), *Children's gender schemata. New directions for child development, 38*, 75–88.

Carpenter, C.J., Huston, A.C. & Holt, W. (1986). Modification of preschool sex typed behaviors by participation in adult-structured activities. *Sex Roles, 14*, 603–615.

Etaugh, C. & Liss, M.B. (in press). Home, school, and play room: Training ground for adult sex roles. *Sex Roles*.

Fagot, B.I. (1985). Changes in thinking about early sex role development. *Developmental Review, 5*, 83–98.

Huston, A.C. (1983). Sex typing. In P.H. Mussen & E.M. Hetherington (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology*. Vol. 4: *Socialization, personality, and social behavior*. (4th ed.) New York: Wiley.

Huston, A.C. (1985). The development of sex typing: Themes from recent research. *Developmental Review, 5*, 1–17.

Liss, M.B. (1983). Learning gender related skills through play. In M.B. Liss (Ed.), *Social and cognitive skills: Sex roles in children's play*. New York: Academic Press, pp. 47–166.

Liss, M.B. & Doyle, T. (1982, April). Sex typing and play: When modeling doesn't work. Paper presented at the Western Psychology Association, Sacramento, CA.

Maccoby, E.E. (1988). Gender as a social category. *Developmental Psychology, 24*, 755–765.

Maccoby, E.E. & Jacklin, C.N. (1987). Gender segregation in childhood. In H. Reese (Ed.), *Advances in child development and behavior*, Vol. 20, London: Academic Press, pp. 239–287.

Martin, C.L. & Halverson, C.F. (1981). A schematic processing model of sex-typing and stereotyping in children. *Child Development, 52*, 1119–1134.

Meece, J.L. (1987). The influence of school experiences on the development of gender schemata. In L. Liben & M. Signorella (Eds.), *Children's gender schemata. New Directions for Child Development, 38*, 57–73.

Renn, J.A. & Calvert, S.L. (1993). The relation between gender schemas and adults' recall of stereotyped and counterstereotyped televised information. *Sex Roles, 28*, 1–11.

Rheingold, H.L. & Cook, K.U. (1975). The contents of boy's and girl's rooms as an index of parents' behavior. *Child Development, 46*, 459–463.

Vygotsky, L. (1987). *The collected works of L.S. Vygotsky: Vol. 1. Problems of general psychology.* (R.W. Rieber & A. Carton, Eds.). New York: Plenum.