



The Issue of the Stereotypical Confines of Gender in the Lives of Children

Taylor Chase, MacEwan University

Introduction

One may think that children have endless possibilities of what their futures will be like, or what they will grow up to be and act like, however there are many factors, both positive and negative, that will come into play as their identity and personality develops and as they start to pave their way into their future. Gender is one of those factors that will be discussed, and in this case, it is a more negative factor as there still will always be stereotypes that can limit one's potential and growth as a person. In this paper, it will be discussed how the concepts and stereotypes of gender can define and limit a child's identity, personality, and future through their parents, through their school, through their peers and through their community and society. The differences in gender expectations in children is an issue that is still happening today, and it needs to be addressed if children are to be able to have successful and happy futures, and it starts with addressing the parents.

Literature Review

Parents

Gender stereotyping can start even in the toddler stages of life, and this can be because of a parent's behaviour and influence. There was a study conducted by Fagot et al., (1992) and they came to the conclusion that when a child is between the ages of two to three, that is when stereotyping can begin, which was most notable in clothes and toys (p. 225). Also, it was stated that "children are learning to label other boys and girls accurately ... and to become aware that they themselves belong to one category or the other" (Leinbach & Fagot, 1986, as cited in Fagot et al., 1992, p. 225). This relates to the topic at hand because it shows that gender stereotyping is not only external, meaning someone else is stereotyping you, but this can happen internally where children are stereotyping themselves and are creating this sense at a very young age of what is deemed as "male" and what is deemed as "female". This can be detrimental to their identity and personality because they will now automatically feel like they have to have traits that correlate to their sex or gender and may feel like they will be judged or not accepted if they want to take on

the stereotypical traits of another sex or gender. The studies that Fagot et al., (1992) conducted were about gender labelling and gender stereotyping where they asked children of ages around two to three years old to sort pictures and objects into a specific category of male or female. The results of those studies were about equal in where around half of the children tended to label more accurately to a particular sex or gender where as the other half did not label as accurately to a particular sex or gender (Fagot et al., 1992, pp. 227-228). In this study, they also wanted to see the relation that parents, particularly mothers, had with these results and it was determined that “mothers whose children were successful labelers handed their children sex-typical toys more often than did mothers whose children had not mastered the labels” (Fagot et al., 1992, p. 228). This shows that there might be a correlation with children becoming more successful with labeling and stereotyping because of the mother’s influence. Parents are the children’s first and longest teachers that they will have in their lives so the kids will inevitably learn those gender labelling and stereotypes anyways out of the parent’s basic everyday lives because the parent is most likely acting and behaving like their specific gender. A different study was analyzed by Meredith Meyer and Susan A. Gelman (2016), about gender essentialism in children and their parents. The study that they analyzed was by Taylor et al., (2009) and the purpose of the study was to see if children were to predict whether an infant baby who was being raised exclusively by members of the baby’s opposite sex would grow up to act and have behaviours of their birth sex or would they act and have behaviours similar to those of the people raising them (as cited in Meyer & Gelman, 2016, p. 412). The results indicated “high levels of essentialism” (Meyer & Gelman, 2016, p. 415) as there was more of a chance that the children would predict that the infant baby would grow up to act and behave as their birth sex (Meyer & Gelman, 2016, p. 415). When discussing their findings, Meyer and Gelman (2016) made the note that a child would be more likely to prefer their own sex and gender’s typed activities if they had more levels of gender essentialism (p. 417). As well, a note was also made that, “parents’ gender essentialism ... was also predictive of their children’s gender-typed preferences” (Meyer & Gelman, 2016, p. 417). This again shows how a parent has an influence on the child about gender. How the Fagot et al., study and the Meyer and Gelman study relate to gender limiting a child’s identity, personality, and future is because if a child learns to have gender stereotypes and gender essentialism at a very young age, then they will continue to have this thought that they cannot act or behave, or do things the other gender might do. If a young girl wants to grow up one day and wants to work in construction and engineering, she may feel like she cannot, or that she is not allowed or capable of doing so because they are deemed as masculine jobs. Another example, if a young boy wants to wear nail polish or make-up, he might get teased or bullied as that is deemed as being feminine. By having these gender stereotypes at a young age, they are limiting themselves and others in their lives by staying in their own gender types and labels instead of just doing what they want to do. A child’s school can have a similar influence that parent’s have as well as increase that gender stereotype that the parent’s install.

Schools

Since a school is where the child will learn and gain heavy amounts of knowledge, there are also heavy amounts of influence since the child is at school quite often. Gender stereotypes can

be seen in schools most visibly in the types of classes, like science, technology, engineering, and math or STEM for short. An article by Allison Master (2021) explains this stereotyped influence on children. Master (2021) decided to look into the stereotypes in STEM specifically because there is this general belief that boys have easier access and success in STEM than girls do, “women are underrepresented in many STEM fields” (Hill et al., 2010, as cited in Master, 2021, p. 203). Master’s (2021) main goal of discussion for her study and article was to inform people about how stereotypes can impact a child’s self-perception, “these self-perceptions indicate whether they believe *they* can succeed or belong in those fields”, and she wanted to focus on childhood specifically because, “self-perceptions at this time set the stage for career decisions during adolescence” (p. 203). This directly relates to the topic of this essay on how gender stereotypes can limit a child’s sense of identity, personality, and future.

Master (2021) first looked at developmental trajectory of stereotype endorsement and influence (p. 205) and she also made the note about how a child’s self-perceptions and endorsement of stereotypes can evolve as they grow older as she states that when a child is in elementary school, there starts to be a correlation between endorsement of stereotypes and self-perceptions, then once the child starts to enter middle school, they start to compare themselves to others and that correlation from elementary now becomes “more closely linked” (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2008, as cited in Master, 2021, p. 205). This shows that stereotypes will impact a child’s self-perception, and in the case of Master’s essay, impact whether a child will feel they can be successful in school. If a girl has this stereotype or knows about this stereotype about how STEM has more success and less barriers for boys then that girl will have a self-perception that she should not enter in any of the STEM fields. This thought then continues on into Master’s (2021) next point of her essay on how stereotype endorsement can influence motivation (p. 206), and Master says this can happen in two ways. The first being ability beliefs which Eccles & Wigfield (2020) defines that as a “self-efficacy to succeed at upcoming tasks, and expectations of success, which tend to be strongly related” (as cited in Master, 2021, p. 206). An example that Masters’ (2021) gives about ability beliefs, is that of “if children believe members of their group have less ability, they may assume they are also less capable” (p.206). This shows that, and relates to the topic, that if a girl believes they have no ability to do STEM related fields, it is because they are a girl and they just cannot do that even if they really wanted to, it is just not a thing girls can do. This can limit a young girl’s identity, personality, and future as she may want to take part in the STEM fields but stereotypes have impacted her self-perception and her ability to think that was ever going to be possible. The same could be said for a young boy who had hoped to partake in something that was stereotyped as more feminine. The second way that stereotype endorsement can influence motivation, according to Master (2021), was through a child’s sense of belonging, which Walton & Brady (2021) defines as a child feeling and seeing like they have positive relationships with other people and the environment (as cited in Master, 2021, p. 206). Master (2021) gives an example of this by stating, “stereotype endorsement may lower girls’ feelings of *social* belonging when they see that girls are not well represented in a field or do not typically enjoy that field; it may lower their *academic* belonging when they feel boys have abilities they lack” (p. 206). This shows that if there is little sense of belonging, then girls will struggle to succeed and excel in a STEM field as there would be too many barriers blocking them. How this influences motivation, is that if a girl had a positive ability belief and a sense of belonging, she would feel very motivated to continue on her

path in the STEM field, but if ability beliefs and a sense of belonging is lacking then there is little to no motivation which then can limit their identity, personality, and future because they will have no motivation to try and do something that could make them happy, give them a sense of identity and a successful future. Since school is also filled with the child's peers, they then also have a hand in limiting a child's identity, personality, and future as peers can be just as impressionable as parents are.

Peers

Peers and friends have a similar influence on gender stereotypes to a parent's influence, and to some children, their peers' opinions can matter more than their parents'. In a study conducted by Xiao et al., (2019), they talk about gender enforcers and how that can come about in children as young as pre-schoolers and how that can relate and impact their peers. Xiao et al., (2019) start off their study by mentioning how gender is a very important social category in the lives of young children because the children in each gender, boys and girls, are separated into groups of their own gender which influences them to develop behaviours, interests, identities, and personalities of that specific gender (Leaper, 1994; Maccoby, 1998; Martin & Fabes, 2021; DeLay et al., 2017, as cited in Xiao et al., 2019, p. 671). It was also noted on how gender norms are existing in children's lives, this is done by watching and observing others partaking in gender norms and conformity and this in result leads to connecting with peers if they themselves conform to their gender whereas if they do not then they could get teased or bullied (Fagot, 1977; Langlois & Downs, 1980; Smith & Leaper, 2006, as cited in Xiao et al., 2019, p. 672). Gender enforcers, according to the authors, "involves any action that either encourages strict adherence to gender norms and roles or discourages actions that violate norms" (Xiao et al., 2019, p. 672). Addition to this, children can be gender enforcers because they are influenced at young ages to have stereotypes on gender, and so "many young children may act as gender enforcers and do so by excluding others from play or activities on the basis of gender" (Xiao et al., 2019, p. 672).

Interestingly, it is considered that at times, especially in pre-schoolers, that children sometimes play with their opposite gender or play with toys that are stereotypically supposed to be played with by the opposite gender (Colwell & Lindsey, 2005; Fabes et al., 2003; Golombok et al., 2008; Jadvá et al., 2010, as cited in Xiao et al., 2019, p. 673) and so because of that, "it is conceivable that many children experience some form of gender enforcement from peers" (Xiao et al., 2019, p. 673). Children are influenced by their peers, as stated by the authors, and that the children learn from their gender enforcer peers to act and behave more like them (Martin et al., 2013, as cited in Xiao et al., 2019, p. 673). This shows how children can go from being and acting more gender-neutral to being and acting according to their specific gender because their peers are gender enforcing them to. This relates to the topic because this article shows how much influence and impact a peer or a friend can have when one is trying to figure out their gender and who they are and what they want to be. Children like to be similar to their friends so it makes sense that this article showed that how children can start to act like their peers and become gender enforcers to other children and onto themselves. Another study which is similar to the Xiao et al., (2019) study is one done by Nabbijohn et al., (2020) and they talk about the bias surrounding gender variant

peers and gender conforming peers. The study that was analyzed by Nabbijohn et al., (2020) was done by Kwan et al., (2019) about children from Hong Kong as well as Canada and there were two ages groups from both countries, four-to-five and eight-to-nine. Those children were asked about their friendship preferences on “hypothetical GC and GV boy and girl target peers” (as cited in Nabbijohn et al., 2020, p. 2). The results were expected as such that boys preferred other gender conforming boys and gender variant girls as peers, “suggesting a general preference for stereotypically masculine peers” (Nabbijohn et al., 2020, p. 4), and for girls it was essentially the same with a favourite for more feminine peers in preferring gender conforming girls and gender variant boys (Nabbijohn et al., 2020, p. 5). This relates to the topic because, for example if there was a gender variant boy who liked to play with dolls, but he still wanted to play the dolls with other boys, but the other boys who are more gender conforming do not want to play with the dolls because they are for girls so that one boy would be teased and excluded. This then in turn can lead the boy to start becoming a more gender conforming boy just to be able to play with the other boys and to stop the teasing, even though he might still want to play with dolls. He would rather stop acting like himself, stop doing what he would rather do to adhere to the gender stereotype and make the other boys happy. While gender stereotypes can appear in parents, schools, and with peers, those stereotypes did not just appear out of no where, and that is because those stereotypes have been grounded in society and the community as a whole for a long time.

Society

It can be hard for a child to figure out their identity, personality, and future when society is always telling you what you should look like, act like, behave like, and what you should do all based on gender. A study by Pillow et al., (2022) wanted to look at the gender categories and gender stereotypes as a whole with no relation to parents, school, and peers. They made the same note that many of the other authors took note of in their articles and studies that were analyzed in this essay, that children get a sense of gender stereotypes and gender categories starting at a very young age (Pillow et al., 2022, p. 329). Pillow et al., (2022) wanted to get to the bottom of gender stereotypes and gender categories by doing a study with children who were in pre-school and one of the studies they did was a sorting task where for example they would put a certain object that relates to it's gender stereotype, like a hammer would go to a boy for example (p. 333). The results of this study indicated that the children had high levels having a gender stereotype as out of a score of zero-to-eight, eight being a high indicator of gender stereotyping, the children were just shy of reaching a solid eight (Pillow et al., 2022, p. 335). This relates to the topic, and that this shows how society can influence gender stereotyping is that these findings were based on the children's experience in their social surroundings and environment, “social experiences influence children's attention to, and stereotyping of, social categories” (Bigler & Liben, 2007, as cited in Pillow et al., 2022, p. 332), and as well, the authors stated that the sorting task “were used to examine the influence of children's own categorization and stereotyping activities on their inductive reasoning” (Pillow et al., 2022, p. 332). It was based on a more overall sense, of many contributing factors, mostly their social experiences in the world that they have had so far. This relates to the topic because it is one thing to have a parent, a peer, or your school experience to tell you or enforce

your birth gender, but it is another thing for a child to put those stereotypes onto themselves based on what they already gathered was going on in society. To further continue on, there was an article done by Sandra Lipsitz Bem (1983), and she discussed the gender schema theory. Before she delves into what the gender schema theory was, she wanted to give background on three other main theories of gender stereotyping. The first was psychoanalytic theory, which Bem (1983) defines it as how a child's identification can be emphasized by the same-sex parent because the children become sex-typed (p. 599). The second theory that is quickly defined is the social learning theory where it "emphasizes the rewards and punishments that children receive for sex-appropriate and sex-inappropriate behaviours" (Mischel, 1970 as cited in Bem, 1983, p. 599), as well as "locates the source of sex-typing in the sex-differentiated practices of the socializing community" (Bem, 1983, p. 600). The last theory Bem (1983) quickly defines is cognitive-developmental theory where it "focuses almost exclusively on the child as the primary agent of his or her own sex-role socialization" and that it "follows naturally and inevitably from universal principles of cognitive development" (p. 601). These three theories are still important to know and can also relate to the topic because it shows ways in which a child can have gender stereotypes, especially with social learning theory and cognitive-developmental theory as those are more universally based in social surroundings.

What is interesting here, is that social learning theory and cognitive-developmental theory has features that exist in the gender schema theory (Bem, 1983, pp. 602-603). Bem (1983) takes first note on what the gender schema theory is by stating, "gender schema theory proposes that sex typing derives in large measure from gender-schematic processing, from a generalized readiness on the part of the child to encode and to organize information – including information about the self – according to the culture's definitions of maleness and femaleness" (p. 603). Here, it shows that, if using this theory, that a child can use information that is already out there in society to shape their identity, personality, and future, based on what culture and society says what their birth gender is supposed to do and be. Bem (1983) continues on this though by adding, "gender schema theory begins with the observation that the developing child invariably learns his or her society's cultural definitions of femaleness and maleness" (p. 603). This directly relates to how society can influence and impact a child's identity, personality, and future as what they may learn about their birth sex is not what they aspired to be and yet they want to fit into society so they ignore what they may want to do and become what society expects them to be like. Bem (1983) continues to add onto this thought by stating, "as children learn the contents of their society's gender schema, they learn which attributes are to be linked with their own sex and, hence, with them-selves" (p. 604). This shows how children can use society to define themselves, instead of forming their own identity, personality, and future with what they want in themselves.

Conclusion

Children face many factors that try to negatively influence their formation of their identity, personality, and future, and those influences are not positive ones. The most prominent influences that are seen in children is through their parents, who start out their children out with their own

stereotypes. The next was school, which has classes and fields that hold more success and easier access to some genders over the other making the child feel like they have to conform to their gender's specific pathways. The third was a child's peers who can enforce gender conformity and make a child feel bad if they do not want to conform. Lastly, there was society in general and the gender schema theory which is based on how society can influence a child conforming to their gender by what the society deems as male or female.

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