

Toying with Gender Stereotypes in Estonia

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As I grew older, a certain indisposition about imposed gender roles stayed within me. Probably for that reason I did not pay much attention in our homemaking (home economics) class in elementary school. I wanted to take the woodwork class with the boys. I know for certain that many girls felt exactly the same way.

Naffziger & Naffziger (1974: 255) confirm that “the institution of the school helps to reinforce stereotypes”. They explain that some classes are still sex-segregated, for instance physical education, home economics and woodwork classes. They bring out, that while physical education for boys is about competitive team sports and physical activity then for girls it is about docility and proper posture. From my own school years I remember that physical education was not so sex-segregated, the activities of boys and girls were relatively similar. Nevertheless, there was still too much segregation, the home economics and woodwork classes could have been combined to offer uniform knowledge to the students.

As Martin & Halverson (1981) claim, stereotyping is important for efficient information processing. Albert & Porter (1988) suggest that children become aware of gender stereotypes and associate social power, aggression and dominance with males and 'nurturant' behaviour with the female gender. They go on to explain that as the child grows older, he begins to notice more gender stereotypes. “Children in any society are thus likely to share common, obvious, and consistent patterns associated with male and female behaviour in that society” (Albert & Porter 1988: 189).

In this posting, I give an overview of the basic play practices which were common in Soviet Estonia. I have

also brought out two of the most common theories about how children learn gender stereotypical knowledge and how toys are linked with this.

Martin, Eisenbud & Rose (1995) explain that cognitive-developmental theory states that gender-role acquisition is based on the idea, that social roles are acquired by the means of socialisation. Gender stereotypes give children knowledge about how representatives of a specific sex should act, look and even think. These stereotypes are given to children by gender labelling of objects and activities.

Social learning theory, as Serbin et al. (1993) propose, has been less concerned with the cognitive aspects of sex-role development, focusing instead on the acquisition of sex typed behaviour. Allegedly, children obtain these traits gradually over time, while observing others, who possess these traits. Thus, social learning theory is not about labelling objects, instead, it is about obtaining the knowledge through observing others who are engaged in gender-specific activities.

Appadurai (1986) has said that objects are in an interest area for many disciplines, anthropology is just one of them. This is also true in this case– as we are talking about children here, toys play an important part. In the case of cognitive-developmental theory, toys become agents, through which gender-based knowledge is given by labelling. On the other hand, with the social learning theory, the activities acted out with the toy become most important. It was also explained how the two theories should be combined. When we combine these theories that is when, in my opinion, we get a real idea of how children acquire gender based knowledge. In all cases, toys play a crucial part.

I claim that it is true that toys influence how children get gender stereotypical knowledge and make decisions about what is appropriate to their gender. But I also think that there are many more influences. For instance, being involved in an activity with someone else.



Play Practices

One of the interesting things I have found out from the interviews was the ingenuity of the children during the Soviet occupation. The shortage and similarity of toys was resolved in an interesting way. An exchange, whether permanent or impermanent, took place among the children. But what is most interesting about it, is that not only toys were the object of exchange, it was more common to swap small toys for objects with almost no value, for instance, chewing gum wrappers.

In some groups, objects like chewing gum and candy wrappers, as well as bottle-caps, had obtained a relatively fixed value. I call it fictive money, because in the eyes of these children, it might as well could have been money. Peter, a man from the first age group, explained that money holds no value to children, they do not know what to do with it (Peter 27.01.2012).

Some material objects, however, hold much more value to them. Daniel Miller (2001) has written about how things, material objects, gain importance in our lives. They begin to have social meanings. In that case it is understandable, that objects like chewing gum wrappers are more important to children than money. I tried to find some material about the phenomenon of fictive money, but to my own surprise, I could not find much relevant information. In my opinion, it shows that the practice of exchange of toys and fictive money is not as common elsewhere.

From my own childhood I remember something fairly similar – we used to change stickers. But in my opinion, that is very much different, because these were bought from the store with that intention in mind. In the '90s there were some other toys that were meant for exchange as well. Unlike those toys, the objects used as fictive money were not meant to be used like this originally. It was a spontaneous invention by the children themselves.

What will also count as ingenuity, is the fact that many children built toys for themselves. I noticed this kind of activities more with boys, who usually built slingshots, blowguns and other weapons. Model cars were not built so often, probably because it was somewhat more difficult. All women I interviewed told me that they made doll clothes themselves, as a girl. They might as well have made rag dolls, but none of my interviewees mentioned anything about that. This does not mean that rag doll were not made, it meant, that it was not as widespread.

From the materials I read, I found something similar, to self made toys. Namely, from Chins (1999) article about ethnically correct dolls, it became clear, that children modify their toys to suit the situation. In the article, Chin brings out that children made clothes for toys and altered their appearance, so that they would look ethnically correct. Although, toys were not ethnically modified here, the local children still modified the appearance of their toys, because the selection was small and all dolls looked alike.

From my own interviews, I found out that when play occurred outside, which took up about 90 % of all play

time, it was usually done in bigger groups. The groups usually consisted of children, who lived in one particular region, for instance in one apartment building. When children from one area were from the same sex, then the groups were made up from same sex children. But from all the interviews, I noticed that given the chance, they all would have played together. This seems to contradict Serbin et al. (1993:9), who claim the occurrence of same-sex favourism. In other words, children prefer that their play groups are comprised of children from the same sex.

Another important factor was age. Mostly the children playing together were of the same age or with insignificant age difference. Children with an age difference of 2 years did not play together any more. The distinction between sex started usually in puberty, but even then, the two genders came together to play some group games as well as sports. Alexander & Hines (1994) have brought out the differences in how the different sexes comprised their groups. For instance, they explain:

Regardless of age, boys selected targets on the basis of play styles: boys consistently chose female targets said to prefer masculine activities (masculine female targets) over male targets said to prefer feminine play styles (feminine male targets) (1994: 876).

However, they go on to claim that older girls, usually between the ages 6- 8, also select playmates on the basis of play styles, where as younger girls choose on the basis of gender labels. That means they prefer masculine female targets over feminine male targets (1994: 876).

How is the story with group games? Do mixed gender groups play 'genderless' games or do the games of one gender dominate over the other? The interviews brought out that girls were the ones who usually were prone to play the games of boys. This was also reflected in the literature. Girls often played war with the boys or took up more feminine tasks within the game. That was perfectly illustrated in the interview of Anne (a woman from the second age group) who said that whenever boys started to play war, her and other girls started to prepare the ammo, in their case the rowan berries (Anne 27.03.2012). Boys mostly did not play girls games.

Another aspect that was brought out in the interviews was that although girls also played sports, in areas, where there were mixed-gendered groups, it was thought to be a masculine activity because of the competition and rivalry aspect (Peter 27.01.2012).

Another interesting aspect I have found out was that when, among the older generation, almost all the activities took place outside of the home. Then among the younger generation, a drastic turn occurred in the beginning of the '90s. That was brought on by the arrival of computers and video games. The interviews reflect how most of the free time was spent outside, but with the spreading of computers and video games, young people came indoors. When I asked Andres, a man from the second age group, why that change had occurred, he answered:

Computers, television, the internet, it is all the convenience of parents. It is easier to give a child

something to do behind the desk or the tv, where they are in sight all the time, don't smear their clothes and where you don't need to worry about them. Instead of sending them out side, to play. I think it is just taking the easy way out. That is what the majority of them do. And parents also have less time to spend with their kids. That has the same effect, people shove their kids behind the television and buy a bunch of cartoons to watch. Then they themselves can make a career, work out or just kill time (Andres 28.03.2012).

What is most interesting about the arrival of computers and video games, is the fact that both boys and girls were interested in the "new toy". Anne, a woman from the second age group told me, that she spent almost all her free time at a neighbour's house, because she had a computer and some video games (Anne, 27.03.2012).

When before, there was a discernible difference between the toys of both genders, then now most of free time was spent playing with one common object. What influence does that have on how children obtain knowledge about gender roles and stereotypes through material objects, like toys? Does that change anything considering that toys have always been somewhat gender-based? These questions need to be answered in a subsequent study.

An interesting aspect I decided to explore from the beginning was how the children of the transition period experienced the change in toy availability. In other words, was the moment recognisable when new material objects became more available? This was not interesting only from the view point of the children but also the parents, because they were the ones who started to buy these objects to their children.

Surprisingly, the interviews showed that the difference was not especially discernible. Indeed, there was a situation where some objects one could previously only dream about became available, but because there was also an over all poverty, people could still not buy the objects that had come on sale. In addition, there was a widespread habit of not throwing away things and buying objects one did not necessarily need. In other words, there was no need to buy a new toy if the child already had one, for instance, one that had been saved from the parents childhoods. According to the interviews, the buying of new toys occurred rather in families where there were small children and not many toys left over from the childhoods of the parents.

Overall, I find that although there were some differences between the Soviet Estonia and non-Soviet countries, the differences were not considerable enough to change something fundamentally. This is true especially when we keep in mind that Estonia was considered to be a 'western state' within the USSR (Rausing 1998) and the amount of western tourists was higher here than in any other Soviet state. Because of this, the effects of the western world were much more discernible here.

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