

Understanding parental impact on children's gender socialisation

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Abstract: This research article examines the key role that parents play in the socialisation of children with regard to gender. It studies the reproduction of stereotypical attitudes, behaviours and injunctions during what sociologists refer to as “primary socialisation”. From a sociological and developmental perspective, this article presents gendered parenting practices, whether implicit or explicit, such as: identification and modelling through the traditional division of labour, the transmission of gendered norms, gender-based encouragement, the choice of toys, clothes, etc. This gendered education has potential consequences for girls’ and boys’ identities that must be carefully considered.

Keywords: gender socialisation, gender identity, parental expectations, gender stereotypes, reproduction.

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فهم تأثير الوالدين على التنشئة الاجتماعية للأطفال فيما يتعلق بالنوع الاجتماعي

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ملخص: تدرس هذه المقالة البحثية الدور الرئيسي الذي يلعبه الوالدين في التنشئة الاجتماعية للأطفال القائمة على الجندر. وهي تدرس مسألة إعادة إنتاج المواقف والسلوكيات والتوجيهات النمطية خلال فترة ما يُشير إليها علماء الاجتماع "بالتنشئة الاجتماعية الأولية". ويستعرض هذا المقال، من منظور اجتماعي ونمائي، ممارسات التربية القائمة على النوع الاجتماعي، سواء كانت ضمنية أو علنية، نذكر منها: التماهي والنمذجة من خلال التقسيم التقليدي للأعمال المنزلية، تداول وتميرير المعايير القائمة على النوع الاجتماعي، والتشجيع المنمط، واختيار الألعاب والملابس، وما إلى ذلك. ويترتب على هذا التمييز بين الجنسين في التربية عواقب محتملة على هويات الفتيات والفتيان التي يجب أخذها بعين الاعتبار.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التنشئة الاجتماعية القائمة على الجندر، الهوية الجندرية، توقعات الوالدين، الصور النمطية، إعادة الانتاج.

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Introduction

“One is not born a woman, one becomes one.” Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949) quote asserts that society plays an important role in shaping gender identity. She questions how gender identities are constructed, particularly those of women. The author clearly challenges the idea that femininity is a universal biological fact. In other words, she rejects the notion that women are nothing more than reproductive organs. She goes on to assert that femininity and motherhood are essentially cultural constructs. This is the central point of our research article. Gender differences are socially constructed through various means and in various forms. From birth, or even before, gender is already predetermined. When it comes to childhood, gender at this age is easy to internalise. Socialisation is a significant and life long process that every individual experiences. Through this process, children become easily modelled according to the instructions of the adults accompanying them. They undergo “early, intense, lasting and, for a more or less long period of time” (Lahire, 2015: 1398) socialisation. In other words, they receive a family education, which may be gendered. Through practices, models and projections provided often by parents, gender differences can be strongly emphasised and reinforced. Research and studies have confirmed the role that parents play in the development of children's gender identity. Indeed, the repetitive distribution of tasks based on gender, as well as the repetition of traditional gender roles and stereotypes, will ultimately impact both sexes negatively. Simply because, most girls would like to become teachers or nurses when they grow up, because they think these are suitable professions for girls, while most boys would like to have a tough job, such as firefighter or police officer, or even become Superman. (Yoke et al, 2024: 2112). People's assumptions about how someone should behave

can lead them to act in certain ways to confirm those assumptions. It is extremely important to address the role of parents in the socialisation of their children in terms of gender. This article therefore focuses on the gendered socialisation of children, exploring its mechanisms and highlighting the role of parents in shaping their children's gender identity. Finally, it examines the effects of gender-based education on children.

Gender socialization

The key concept in this paper is socialisation. It's defined as "the process by which human beings learn and internalize throughout their lives, the sociocultural elements of their environment, integrate them into the structure of their personality under the influence of experiences and significant social agents, and thereby adapt to the social environment in which they must live" (Guy Rocher, 1968). Basically, people socialise by learning and developing certain social skills through agents designed for that purpose. These are people and institutions, like families, but also schools, workplaces, the media, and so on (Dubar, 1991: 99). When it comes to gender socialisation, it is simply a matter of learning gender by internalising gender norms and roles, but also by interacting with the agents mentioned above. Sociologists affirm that there are two key phases of socialisation. The first period of socialisation is called "primary socialisation" and takes place mainly within the family. The second is "secondary socialisation" and takes place in contexts such as school, peer groups, professional circles, political, religious, cultural and sporting institutions, etc. (Lahire, 2015: 1397). Socialisation is therefore a continuous process that never stops. Individuals continue to develop their social knowledge throughout their lives. In this regard, the sociologist Muriel Darmon explains this continuation:

“Primary socialisation in childhood followed by a first short period of actualisation, then a second wave of secondary socialisation followed by a much longer, even definitive, phase of actualisation” (Darmon, 2006: 98).

Our article focuses mainly on primary socialisation, which takes place within the family. It is generally long and intense (Lahire, 2015: 1398). During this phase, children interact with their parents and adults who may treat them differently based on their gender. As a result, children will learn what it means to be a man or a woman through gender-specific education.

Parental gendered education

Studies on gender socialisation have highlighted the impact of gender-differentiated education on children's gender identity. According to Anne Dafflon Novelle (2010), “the different behaviours that parents and anyone else involved in the baby's life adopt depending on the child's gender, will influence the child's development”. (Novelle, 2010: 28). It all starts very early. From the moment they are born, children are already categorised in their parents' minds. (Hurtig 1982, Levet 2014). According to sociologist Sylvie Octobre (2010), parental education is divided into two aspects: explicit and implicit. Implicit education is achieved through impregnation. In other words, identification with the role models presented by parents, especially the division of responsibilities within the family (Octobre, 2010: 61). Explicit education, on the other hand, works “through educational norms concerning cultural subjects (control, guidance, encouragement and prohibition are the most common methods)” (Octobre, 2010: 61).

When addressing girls or boys, adults do reinforce gender differences, knowingly or unknowingly. Indeed, parents refer to what they have learned about gender to determine what femininity or masculinity is. “how to feed baby girls and boys, nursing, how to carry them, how to talk to them, voice intonations and interactions” are all different depending on gender (Mosconi, 2016: 86). When it comes to projections, adults tend to describe to their children what is appropriate for their gender. According to Sylvie Octobre (2010), parents of girls dream of seeing them swim, dance, play music or ride horses (Octobre, 2010: 59). Family projections also involve gendered comments. From the moment babies are born, parents use different terms depending on their gender: “big” for boys and “beautiful”, “cute”, “sweet” or “little” for girls. When it comes to toys, gender differences are much more pronounced. The researcher Mona Zegai (2010) emphasised this idea in her study on toy displays in commercial centres. Toys for boys always revolve around cars, action figures, robots, aeroplanes, etc., while girls are always associated with dolls, princesses, doll kitchens, etc. (Zegai, 2010: 38). Gendered toys not only reinforce gender stereotypes; they also fail to reflect the reality of the world. What is also remarkable is that some parents continue to choose their children's toys based on their gender. In a study done by Kateryna Martiushenko and Eduard Palovchyk (2021), it confirmed that parents tend to choose their children's toys based on factors such as: the children's age, their preferences and their gender. These factors “proved to have a decisive influence on parent’s preferences and opinions regarding toys” (Martiushenko et al, 2021: 30). Lahire asserts, in this regard, that education through toys tends to construct “tacit or semi-explicit divisions of differentiated territories” (Lahire, 2001: 22): boys outside and girls

inside. This subsequently leads to a gendered division of labour and of knowledge in adult life (Mosconi, 2016: 87).

As long as clothes are concerned, parents do prefer the clothes that match their kids gender. Indeed, in a study done in Zimbabwe (2013), the results showed that “five middle-aged women, out of the ten families studied, had conservative ideas about gender-based dress codes and were keen to pass these ideas on to their children.” (Manwa et al, 2013:181). The fact that certain clothes are reserved for one of the two sexes (dresses for girls and pants for boys), or the allocation of colours to the sexes (pink for girls and blue for boys) contributes “significantly to the construction of gender from birth to death” (Guionnet and Neveu, 2014: 43).

Parental identification also plays an important role in children's gender identity construction. Indeed, identification occurs when children are confronted with the traditional division of domestic tasks. According to Edmond Marc (2004), school-age children display a new ability, which is to “detach themselves from their immediate environment” (Marc, 2004: 36). Thanks to this detachment, “they can put themselves in someone else's shoes and thus see things and themselves as they think others see them ” (Marc, 2004: 36). When children observe their mothers spending a lot of time cleaning and their fathers watching television or gardening, they automatically assume that these roles are unchanging and cannot be altered. In this case, we can talk about a manifestation of stereotypes towards both categories. The father is often perceived as superior, while the mother is inferior, “especially since family law generally grants the husband the title of “head of the family” and assigns him the role of breadwinner” (Michel, 1986: 21). Through the reinforcement of gender divisions established by his/her family and his/her awareness of the

gender differences, he/she will eventually note that gender categories are realities (Mosconi, 2016:222).

Impacts on children's gender identity formation

Before their birth, boys or girls, already exist in the imagination of those around them. "They very quickly take on a more or less precise form, through the desired gender and chosen name" (Marc, 2004: 34). In other words, adults classify them into two main categories: men and women, and expect them to respect the norms of society concerning gender. Firstly, it is worth mentioning the socio-cognitive theory developed by Kohlberg (1966), it's mainly about how "children develop the stereotypic conceptions of gender from what they see and hear around them. Once they achieve gender constancy—the belief that their own gender is fixed and irreversible—they positively value their gender identity and seek to behave only in ways that are congruent with that conception" (Bussey et al 1999: 677). Children go through three main stages in order to construct their gender identity. In stage 1, two-year-olds are classified into male or female categories. This categorisation is based on physical traits (Tap and Zaouche-Gaudron, 1999: 32). In stage 2, three- and four-year-olds understand that their gender is stable. Based on how they are dressed, they understand that boys will become men and girls will become women (Tap and Zaouche-Gaudron, 1999: 32). At stage 3, five-year-olds realise that "gender is a constant and unchanging aspect of their body" (Mosconi, 2016:95) and that it should not change categories. By the age of 7, their gender identity is definitively established (Tap and Zaouche-Gaudron, 1999: 32). Children are now aware of their gender identity thanks to the identification with female and male role models presented by their parents, as well as gendered projections and practices. Such constancy is explained by Kohlberg as following: "I am a boy, therefore I want to do

boy things, therefore the opportunity to do boy things (and to gain approval for doing them) is rewarding" (Kohlberg, 1966: 89).

Gender differences, accentuated by parental education, often create stereotypical social categories that exacerbate the power imbalance between men and women if gender is considered a power relationship, as defined by historian Jean Scott (1988). There is a "social superiority of meanings and values associated with masculinity over those associated with femininity" (Revillard and De Verdalle, 2006: 5). This creates dominant groups and others who are dominated by them. This domination is one of the foundations of society; it takes hold of the symbolic realm (Mosconi, 2016: 50) and representations by reducing women to wives, sisters, daughters, mothers, etc. Children can show sensitivity to this imbalance of power between the two sexes. A study conducted in 2020 on the imbalance of power relations among children aged 3 to 6, showed that these children, from different countries (Norway, Lebanon, France), associate power with masculinity. It also confirmed that girls are less inclined than boys to make this association (Charafeddine et al, 2020). Moreover, the children's expectations about how someone should act can make them behave in certain ways to confirm those expectations, i.e. stereotypes (Yang, 2014: 49). For example, if women are considered to be more emotional than men, they may see themselves in this light and develop these characteristics (Yang, 2014: 49). Girls may limit their potential by restricting their career aspirations to the conventional boundaries of stereotypical professions that assign women to low-paid, subordinate positions (nurses, sales assistants, secretaries, typists, etc.) (Michel, 1986: 26). As for boys, gender stereotypes also result in them being deprived of their sensitivity and humanity (Michel, 1986: 26). Certainly, boys suffer from anxiety because they live in fear of

resembling girls, whom they perceive according to negative stereotypes: “girls seem fearful and easily frightened to them; they concern themselves with trivial matters, play with dolls, sew, cook, and take care of children” (Michel, 1986: 26). Furthermore, exposing children to gender stereotypes related to educational abilities and skills may have a negative influence on them. For example, boys are always considered to be good at maths, while girls are traditionally known to be more interested in literature and the arts and are therefore less mathematically inclined. Girls will therefore accept and adopt stereotypical performance in mathematics. In a study conducted by Hermann and Vollmeyer (2022), it was observed a huge pressure from girls when doing “gender stereotypical task” that is calculating. Moreover, “girls were also less interested in the tasks and felt less competent while doing the test compared to the boys, independent of the experimental group” (Hermann et al, 2022 :358). This leads us to the concept of “stereotype threat” which can be defined as “the fear of confirming, via one’s behaviour, a negative stereotype associated with one’s group” (Marx, 2013). This explains why some girls and boys feel anxious and less effective when performing certain tasks that do not correspond to gender norms or stereotypes.

Conclusion

Considering gender as a natural given is a common misconception that unfortunately still persists among adults. Indeed, despite global and national efforts to promote gender equality, children continue to be raised unequally. This inequality results from the transmission and reproduction of gender stereotypes that assign women and men different, often hierarchical, positions. Hence, this article shed the light on the key role that parents play in their children's gender socialisation. Whether intentionally or not, parents transmit gender- based images and messages

to their children from a very young age. This often has negative consequences on children's gender identity. Addressing this issue would contribute significantly to global efforts to promote gender equality from the early age. Raising parents' awareness of gender-neutral socialisation, is a way of challenging and deconstructing gender stereotypes. It is important to implement policies, strategies and guidelines aimed at maintaining gender-neutral socialisation during childhood.

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