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Laura James

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Gendering Toys:
How Pink and Blue Define Life Outcomes for Children

Laura James
Sacred Heart University

In order to best understand the established gender “norms” in a society, it is pertinent to observe the behaviors of others surrounding one another. Norms within a society are the usual, typical or standard behaviors that are placed on individuals before they are even born. From the time a baby is in the womb, society established what colors represent them best, buy clothes that will look the “cutest” on them, and name them certain names that will best suite that person’s gender. This type of gender normative behavior will continue throughout that child’s life, placing them within a rigid box in all facets. This includes within the classroom, within the home, and within workspaces. The gendering society takes part in will change the way that a person interacts with all types of institutions.

To better explain these phenomena, I will explain the findings of a trip to the toy section of Target. When walking towards the toy section, the colors pink and blue stood out against the rest of the store. Looking just at the signs labeling what was in the isles, the pink sections were labeled dolls and dress-up, whereas the blue sections are labeled with action figures and building sets/blocks. While walking down the isles, before even coming into contact with the toys, the pink walls that the toys were located on had images of girls playing dolls, or dressing up like princesses, and the blue walls, where toys like Legos and race cars were located, had images of boys playing with these objects. It was clear which isles were meant for male-bodied individuals and female-bodied individuals. Beginning with the “girl’s” sections, I noticed that on the boxes that the toys were being sold in, it featured female children playing with the toy, and I found almost no images of boys on the boxes. These toys included, dolls, kitchen sets, puppy and kitten stuffed animals, dress-up outfits, and jewelry-making kits. There were some toys that are typically deemed “male” geared towards females, including Disney princess Legos and Disney princess action figures. When walking down the “male” sections, I noticed that a majority of the

toys had images of male-bodied children on the boxes. Many of these toys were geared towards building figures, violence, and combat. Toys such as these included Nerf guns, a large variety of Legos, action figures that held guns, knives or other weapons, cars, and racetracks. Some boxes, however, featured both male and female children playing with the toy. This was seen mostly on Lego sets, and was still geared more towards males rather than females.

While this may seem like not such a big deal, this type of gendering will transcend throughout a child's life. Not only have they been named and clothed a certain gender, they now have to play with certain toys and act in a certain way. The female isles at Target display a large issue; females are meant to be kind and sensitive, taking care of children and animals, making dinner, and embodying femininity. Target toys had hardly any focus on critical thinking, building, or strength in the female isles. Further, the toys in these isles aren't stagnant; the baby dolls cry, pee and poop, need to be fed, and need to be changed. The play puppies and kitties need to be pet, held, and given food and water. Barbie Dolls include babies, pets, and kitchen sets as well. "Within this production of gender duality, toys and resources position children as having different interests and attributes according to gender...such attachment and/or expression of 'care' understood as 'girl-appropriate behaviour'" (Francis, 2010, p. 336). The ideologies engrained within these toys will impact how these females act later on in their lives. Many women feel the need to become a mother, stay home with their children and support the home-life. This is also known as a homemaker model. These women don't have jobs and devote their lives to raising children, supporting their husbands, keeping the house in order, having dinner ready, and so on. This type of life began for many of these women with the toys they played with as a child. They had been taught from the beginning to take care of children, make dinner, clean up, and so on.

For males it is the opposite. “Boy consumers, conversely, are propelled via their toys and DVDs into a world of action, as well as of technology...which celebrates heroics and machismo” (Francis, 2010, p. 336-337). Males grow up feeling empowered, strong, and with a craving for success. They have been taught from a young age to destroy whatever gets in their way and to build a kingdom for success. This directly correlates with the breadwinner model many males follow. The breadwinner is a male who is successful at his job, has the ability to make enough money that his wife doesn’t have to work, and comes home to a clean house, his laundry done, and dinner on the table. They are supposed to take care of their family through making enough money to uphold that standard of life. There is very little focus on caring for others.

These phenomena, however, are just the beginning of a slew of consequences that come from gendering toys. Not only does it encourage the homemaker, breadwinner model, there are many negative stigmas that are built on these norms. With the dress-up toys, there are also makeup and jewelry toys that create the idea that females must remain feminine. Makeup, pretty hair, and a thin body, as portrayed with Barbie Dolls and Bratz Dolls, become necessary for females to feel good about themselves.

“...evident in Bratz, where their ‘passion 4 fashion’ and reproduction of hyper-femininity is delineated via their copious make-up, numerous accessories and glitzy, ‘sexy’ clothes, as well as via the themes by which they are marketed (‘Passion 4 Fashion’; ‘Fashion Stylists’ etc.). This projection of concern for aesthetic presentation and ‘mastery of submission’ (Butler, 1997) to a male gaze, to females, is clearly an integral aspect of the heterosexual matrix, to which a child audience is interpolated” (Francis, 2010, p. 337).

Throughout the educational institutions and the workplace, females must battle between femininity and the male gaze. Within public schools, there are dress codes that prevent girls

from showing their stomach or shoulders, delineating these acts as inappropriate and distracting for males. Within the workplace, women need to either cover up every part of their body in baggy clothing or be deemed sexually promiscuous for wearing tighter clothes that may show off more of their body. Women must avoid talking to men in a certain way or they may be labeled a “home wrecker”, meaning they are trying to sleep with the male they are speaking with. Further, it is not just clothing that women need to balance within these two institutions; the way in which they act requires that they be submissive, cooperative, and soft. They are taught to take up the least amount of space, pose their thoughts as questions, nod their heads when others are speaking, and allow for men in the room to speak. Men, however, are taught to take up space, that their thoughts are important and valid, and that everyone should hear them. These characteristics lead males to higher-powered positions and more pay, while women stay at positions that assist that male.

The root of these issues is the gendering that takes place at such a young age. Females are going to be less likely to be paid as well as men, are less likely to be taken as seriously for a job over a man, will forever have to balance their life choices with the male gaze, will be less likely to voice their knowledge, and will continue to be submissive to men. All of this stems from the gender norms we place on these children at such a young age through their toys. “... reminds parents and professionals they should be certain that when they interact with preschoolers in matters related to gender their behaviors accurately reflect their carefully considered values and beliefs” (Freeman, 2007, p. 363). The toys purposefully given to children due to their gender will directly influence that child’s values, beliefs, personality, and life outcomes. The blue and pink isles at Target may seem harmless, but have a much larger impact on a child’s future than many realize. As a society, we should begin to socialize our children

differently, encouraging boys to be nurturing and caring, as well as strong and confident.

Females should be socialized to be strong and confident, while also being kind and caring.

“If...it is a father’s goal that his son develop dispositions of caring and nurturing, then he should support play...that give his child opportunities to exhibit those behaviors...play with baby dolls and to role play the caregiving behaviors” (Freeman, 2007, p. 363). Vice versa for girls: if we want our daughters to be strong leaders, with critical thinking skills then we need to provide them with toys such as building blocks, puzzles, and more to develop these values and skills.

Target is just one of many examples that fall into the gender norms within society. If another toy store were observed, there would most likely be the same pink and blue isles that do not allow children to freely express themselves or grow up with a variety of skills and values. This rigid system of gender leaves our daughters with lower paying jobs, feeling inadequate in comparison to men, and battling the male gaze in every institution she would be part of. It leaves our sons with values that overpower their mothers and sisters. In order to prevent this, society must change the way it acts in regards to gender, socializing our children to be not girls and boys, but loving, caring, strong individuals who contribute to a society that all can thrive in.

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