

Gender project

People



Today more than ever, toys are incredibly gendered, and send highly gendered messages to the children who play with them about what an ideal male or female looks like, acts like, and how he or she lives their life. This project aims to look at the ways in which toys are so gendered (based on one trip to a Toys R us store in Greensboro, North Carolina) and to describe the gendering of toys through three sociological perspectives.

Section One- Observations In this particular Toys R us, Items were displayed in segregated zones; meaning that there were very clear areas that were for girls' toys and separate, very clear areas that were for boys toys. From far away, these sections could be easily distinguished from one another by the headings above each of the aisles that held the toys. On the left side of the store, the signs hanging above the aisles read- Star Wars, Action Figures, and Sports, respectively. On the right side of the store the aisles were marked- Dolls, Dolls, and Pretend Play.

Clearly the toys on the right side of the store were meant for girls, and the left side toys were meant for boys. The segregated zones were also easily distinguishable at a glance by the packaging and presentation of the toys on their shelves. Boys toys were packaged in more stereotypical "masculine" colors- red, blue, grey, and black. Further, all the boxes containing boys' toys portrayed some sort of motion or action on the boxes. The action portrayed was almost always violent in one way or another; a tank moving, a fist or bullet flying through the air, etc.

Girls' toys, by contrast, were packaged completely differently. The boxes for girls' toys were pink. Purple, covered in glitter and sparkles, and almost all

had light, feminine language on them- words like "magical", "sparkly", and "princess", to name a few. Toys R us' selection of Nerf brand toys are an excellent example of how using different packaging and presentation for essentially the same item can be heavily gendered. Being a toy whose concept is rooted in violence, Nerf toys are typically for boys. However, Nerf recently released a line of toy weapons for girls called Rebelled.

All the Rebelled toys are pink or purple with flowers and glitter on them to make them appear more feminine, and they also have very girl names, such as 'Heartbreak Bow', 'Diamonds', 'Dart Diva', 'Femme Fire', 'Angel Aim', 'Pink Crush', etc. Even if two Nerf guns of the same make and model were presented side-by-side, no shopper would have any trouble knowing which one was being marketed to girls and which to boys. This loaded difference in packaging and presentation was also present with everything in the store, whether it could carry a perceived gender role or not, was gendered.

Instruments, pens and pencils, notebooks, walkie-talkies, playing balls, and several other kinds of toys were packaged in ways in which two items that were essentially the same would be obviously be marketed to one gender or another. Toys that recreate stereotypical home life are essentially having children play out their societal predetermined future roles. This is seen specifically in the 'pretend play' genre of toys. These are model replicas of the realms that children 'should' grow up to occupy.

What this means for girls is child-size kitchens and child-size cleaning toys, and baby-dolls. Girls grow up learning through these toys that their place in society is in the house and home, cooking, cleaning, and caring for children. The

boy versions of these toys are child-size model grills, toolkits, and car-building toys. The brands Home Depot and John Deere both have lines of toys for boys, depicting specifically male things for them to do. Many girl toys also demonstrate that a girl should be heavily focused on keeping herself beautiful.

There are a huge amount of toys dedicated to teaching girls how to do the hair, nails, and makeup on their dolls, and most of the dolls marketed to girls all are sold with makeup painted onto their faces. Going even further, the toys also include makeup for the girl to use on herself, teaching girls at an early age that wearing makeup is preferable for women in this society, and generally necessary for them to be considered beautiful. Additionally, dolls marketed to girls all wear makeup and have the societal accepted standard of 'beauty.

Their bodies are skinny, tall, big-breasted, and completely disconnected with what any real human woman's actual body might look like. They give girls an image to look up to that they will never attain. Boys also face unrealistic representations of the human physique in their toys. Action figures marketed to them all have huge muscles, square jaws, and other features that conform to the societal idea of the ideal male body. Toy companies go even further than giving girls unrealistic body expectations in terms of not working to connect their toys to reality.

The girls' toys section had absolutely no toys that were designed to be replicas of real people from the real world. Girls had no role models from reality represented in toys. Boys' toys, on the other hand, had several role

models represented in their action figures. These men were almost entirely athletes; baseball or basketball players, wrestlers or MASCARA drivers (another male-dominated field). These toys teach boys to idealize strong, wealthy, masculine, sometimes violent men, without giving them any more realistic images to aspire to.

Section Two- Perspectives Looking at the issue of highly gendered toys through various sociological lenses can provide us with several insights on why the toys children play with carry such thinly veiled and heavily stereotyped messages. Through a Symbolic Interactionist lens, toys themselves are symbols used to convey meaning. This paradigm focuses on the role of symbols in social interaction, and argues that society is formed when groups of people all give the same meaning to the same symbols and Greer on how these symbols play into their socialization.

Using this paradigm, toys can be regarded as symbols in that in many cases they are child versions of adult things, meaning the toy replicas of kitchens, babies, tools, cars, grills, etc. They symbolize the appropriate material symbols in the life that the child will grow in to. Stages of their development, is directing them to live and act in a certain way that society considers ideal. Structural Functionalism dictates that society is a functionally integrated, problem-solving entity.

Through this lens, the subject of gendered socialization through toys could be seen as a developed response to a certain problem. Hypothetically, using toys to teach children how they ought to behave could be a carefully constructed response on behalf of toy manufacturers to the problem of

children not being socialized 'properly'. If children were not being socialized to behave in their predetermined manners, this 'deviance' could pose a threat to traditional gender roles in the United States and to keeping things functioning the way they 'should'.

The function of the gendered toys could be to keep society working 'properly' in whatever way they could. One last way of looking at the gendering of toys is through a Social Conflict perspective. This perspective conceives the emergence and persistence of social institutions and practices as the consequence of the exercise of power and explains their transformation as the result of conflict between different groups contending for power. In terms of toys and their messages, the two groups contending for power are less groups than they are ideas.

One idea would be that people and the gender roles they should occupy should remain the same as they've been for generations, with women occupying domestic spheres of society and men occupying public ones. The idea that battles this one would be a more modern idea that men and women can and should hold the same positions in society. The fact that toys are generally more in line with the former idea shows that that is the side of the battle that is currently winning, making it the societal norm, at least in the realm of children's toys.

Toys are a constant in the development of children and thus play a large role in their socialization. While some toys teach children positive messages about caring for others, sharing, and other healthy traits, the majority of the child-play market is saturated with heavily gendered and extremely

antiquated messages about children's bodies and looks, traits, roles, behavior, and almost all aspects of their lives.

The result of this is generation after generation of children who subconsciously take in false information about what it means to be a boy or a girl, a man or a woman. Social behavior is learned at a young age, and to teach children these outdated gender roles is to freeze our society in an era gone by when we should be advancing toward a more equal world instead.