

Sample Data Collection Assignment #1B

Toys allow children to imagine themselves in different roles and situations. If a child picks up a doll and pretends to take care of that doll, then the child may be practicing for parenthood. If a child picks up a red fire engine, then the child may be imagining what it would be like to be a firefighter. The toys that adults encourage children to play with may influence the types of activities that those children envision for themselves, and the range of possible roles that are open to them. The textbook states that parents “often encourage their children to develop gender-typed interests by providing different kinds of toys for daughters than for sons” (p.104). However, this “gender-typing” of toys does not begin with the toys parents select for their sons and daughters. It begins far sooner – with manufacturers, advertisers, and retailers of toys each making strong distinctions between “girl” and “boy” toys. The book notes that advertisements for “boy” toys (such as action figures) usually feature active boys at play, while advertisements for “girl” toys (such as dolls) usually show girls playing with the dolls. For this assignment, I visited the toy section of a large chain store to see if stereotypical “boy” toys were marketed differently from stereotypical “girl” toys. I had never before browsed a toy store while trying to be aware of gender stereotypes, and what I noticed was quite striking.

METHOD

I went to the toy section of the Roseville Target store on a Sunday evening. First, I walked up and down each toy aisle, noting the types of toys that were shelved together. I also looked at the packaging of the toys to see if certain colors and writing styles were used with certain kinds of toys. While browsing all of the toy aisles, I found a woman in a Target uniform stocking shelves in the toy area. I asked her if she usually worked in the toy department, and she told me she did. I then told her that I was looking for a toy for a cousin. (I chose to say “cousin” because it is a gender-neutral term.) The first question the woman asked me was if the child was a boy or a girl. I told her that my cousin was a boy. Next she asked me for the child’s age. I told her he was ten. She immediately brought me to the

action figure section of the store and suggested that I buy him a “G.I. Joe” action figure set. I thanked her for her help, and then looked at the toys for a few more minutes before leaving the store.

RESULTS

The first thing I noticed while browsing the aisles of toys at Target was that the “boy” toys were located closest to the entrance, and that the “girl” toys were located furthest from the entrance. The toys were clearly separated by gender-type and by age, with the oldest “boy” toys being in the first toy aisle, and the oldest “girl” toys being located in the last toy aisle. The ages of the toys progressed inward from both the “boy” and the “girl” side, so that the center aisle was mostly composed of Fisher-Price baby toys. Most of the Fisher-Price toys seemed to be gender-neutral.

The toys located in the “boy” section were action figures, army men, toy guns, Nerf toys (balls, cross-bows, bow & arrow sets), hand-held electronic games & robots, tool sets, gooey slime in plastic containers, and other toys that promoted active play. Many of these toys were packaged in bright or florescent colors with black backgrounds. The writing on the packaging was bold, large, and sometimes quite evocative of the toy’s purpose – some of the writing on the army men packages looked like it was dripping blood, and the “gooey slime” type toys had writing on the containers that looked just like “gooey slime.” The accessories for the “boy” toys were often violent – most of the action figures came with several weapons and different types of body armor.

The toys in the “girl” section were mostly domestic type toys – baby dolls, Barbie, doll clothes, baby bottles, cribs, dishes, “dress-up” clothes, stuffed animals. There was even a series of Barbie-type dolls that came with their own baby, crib, bottle, and other baby-care accessories. The “girl” toys were usually packaged in pastel or jewel tone colors – pink, lavender, turquoise. The writing on the packages was usually a more “feminine” writing style – loopy cursive letters, overlapping bubble-type letters, there was even one package where the i's were dotted with smiley faces. The “girl” toys were clearly designed for passive, quiet play.

While being helped by the clerk in the store, it was clear to me that the two most important factors in aiding my toy selection were the gender and age of the child. The clerk did not feel it was necessary to ask me any questions regarding the child's personality, or the child's likes and dislikes. Simply knowing that my "cousin" was a ten-year-old boy told her all she needed to know about this fictitious child. It was as if the clerk's mental process was as follows: "Ah-ha! Male and ten? G.I. Joe is the toy for all children in this category!! All ten-year-old boys are the same!"

CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

From my experience in the toy store, I feel that my eyes were opened to the ways in which our culture tells boys and girls which toys are "ok" and which toys are "not ok" based upon their gender. It seems to me that this limiting of toy selection in childhood must be linked in many ways to the limiting of life-choices and professions for adult men and women. It also makes me ponder the "nature/nurture" debate further. How different are males and females at birth? If we each being receiving gender-shaping messages from infancy, how can we ever untangle our inborn traits and tendencies from our learned gender identity? Am I working as a secretary because I was told that this was only one of my options?

The behavior of the clerk was, I assume, quite typical of most clerks working in toy departments. As we have learned in class, stereotypes are essentially short cuts that allow us to organize and process information quickly. If the clerk only has to make recommendations based upon gender and age rather than on the unique personality of each child, then this is quick and easy. However, this short cut short-changes the children involved by reinforcing the message that there are only certain toys and certain ways of behaving for each gender. In other words, it maximizes the differences, rather than the similarities, between children.

The textbook makes the point that there are numerous factors that shape gender identity in children. The toys that are offered to children, the way the toys are marketed by advertisers, and the way that they are sold in stores is part of this larger picture. Reading the text and doing this assignment have given me a much clearer picture of how children learn gender stereotypes. Hopefully this information will be useful to me when I decide to have children of my own.