Gender and the Social Worlds of Children

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Back to the Beginning

• A grad class in gender and I was hooked – many questions need to be answered
  • Why do children become gender experts so quickly?
  • What happens in preschool -- what roles do peers play in socializing gender?
  • How do children’s gender cognitions influence their social lives?
How I’ve studied gender -- a variety of methods

• Experimental, naturalistic observations
• With children and adults
• Studied real and artificial social groups (e.g., space creatures)
• A variety of approaches: social networks, dynamical systems, state space grids
• With great research teams
The talk

• Part 1: Children’s active involvement in processing social information
• Part 2: Describe the role of peers in gender development
• Part 3: Consider a wider variety of gender cognitions & how they influence children’s social environment
• Part 4: Present a peer relationships intervention: Bringing boys and girls together
My Perspective on Gender Development

• Children are active information processors
• First suggested by Kohlberg
  • Children self socialize into gender roles
• Cognitive approaches take same stance
  • Gender Schema Theories
Gender Schema Theory

- Children motivated to learn about gender
  - Search for gendered information (gender detectives)
  - Construct beliefs of what girls and boys are like
- Gender schemas
  - Intergroup processes important
- Schemas provide guides for thinking and behavior
  - Attention, exploration, memory
- Active processing can cause inaccuracies/memory distortions
  - e.g., woman police officer remembered as a man
  - Information that could disconfirm stereotypes is remembered as confirming


How Do We Learn About Gender and Other Social Groups?

- How are representations about groups learned so quickly?
- How accurate are these representations?
- Need control -- an artificial environment
Study: Life on Borka

• Created artificial world -- the planet Borka, with two groups, Algers and Glimphs
• Goal: to assess how adults learned about these two groups
• Demanding task: groups varied on physical characteristics (6 shared, 6 distinctive features with varied frequencies):
  • e.g., headshapes, hair
Borkan Study

• Procedure: adults tested in 5 trials over 2 weeks
  • Heard travelogues about Borka and saw 20 slides of creatures per trial
• Assessed learning of physical features of Algiers and Glimphs after each travelogue
Results

• Learning occurred on trial 1
• Frequency-distinctiveness effect
  • More attention paid to differences between groups
  • Paid less attention to shared features; more so for high frequency features
• Overall, active construction
  • Some accuracy, but differences were highlighted over similarities

Part 1 Summary & Implications

- Individuals quickly learn about social groups
- Learning about social groups involves active information processing
  - attending to differences between groups over similarities
Part 1 Acknowledgements

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Part 2: The Role of Peers in Gender Development

- Young children show strong same-gender playmate preferences (e.g., Maccoby, 1990, 1994)
- Pervasive patterns, cross-cultural, child-driven
- No clear explanations of how same-gender preferences occur
Why Gender Segregation may be Significant

- Boys and girls grow up in “separate cultures”
  - Girls’ play: cooperative, quiet, indoor
  - Boys’ play: active, rough-and-tumble

- Speculation that these early experiences lead to:
  - Different skill development
  - Difficulties in other-gender relationships
  - Later difficulties between men and women
Study of Preschool Gender Segregation

• 3 major questions:
  • How strong are same-gender preferences?
  • How stable are those preferences?
  • What are the consequences of same-gender preferences?

• One year longitudinal study of segregation
• Intensive observations of children’s play – daily, short duration, 10-15,000/semester, n=61
  • Coded peer partners, activity, emotions

Strength and Stability of Gender Segregation

- Same-gender play most common form of interaction
- Gender accounts for 74-81% of variance in play partners
- Play partner choices were moderately stable
Consequences of Gender Segregation

• Because it is relatively stable, then individual differences are important
• Does the amount of same-gender peer play influence children’s gender-typed behavior?
  • Does “social dosage” matter?
• Predicted change in behavior over year depending on amount of same-gender play (controlling for initial levels of behavior)
Social Dosage Matters: Exaggerated Gender Differences

• Boys who played with more with boys during fall showed by spring:
  • Increased rough and tumble play
  • Increased aggression
  • Increased activity level
  • Decreased play near adults
  • Increased gender-typed play

• Girls who played with more with girls during fall showed by spring:
  • Decreased rough and tumble play
  • Decreased aggression
  • Increased play near adults
  • Increased gender-typed play
Implications

• Boys and girls minimally different in fall; greater gender differentiation by spring
• Children’s dosage of same-gender peers influences later behavior by moving it in a stereotypic direction
  • Influence occurs within short time span
Taking a Social Network Perspective on Gender Segregation

- SN allows for separating selection and influence effects
  - Impossible in earlier research
  - Address questions of both how selection occurs and whether influence occurs
- Why select same-gender peers? 2 hypotheses
  - Activity similarity
  - Gender similarity
- Peer influence: Do peers influence children’s gender-typed activities (when selection controlled)?
- One year longitudinal study, observational data (n= 292)

Results

• Selection: Both hypotheses supported
  • Similarity on gender-typed activities and on gender similarity
  • But, gender similarity accounted for more variance than activity similarity
    • Suggests potential influence of gender cognitions
• Peer influence was evident even when selection was controlled
  • Children tended to become more like their friends in gender-typed activities over time
Part 2 Conclusions

- Children’s social environments are strongly gendered
- Peers play a role in socializing gender-typed behaviors
- Individual differences matter (social dosage)
- Hints that children’s social cognitions about girls and boys relate to selection of partners (more than activities)
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Part 3: Broadening the Study of Social Cognitions

• Move beyond gender category knowledge
  • Our focus is on identifying specific cognitions and evaluations that relate to social relationships
• A multi-pronged approach
  • **Beliefs** about gender group norms
  • **Attitudes** about own- and other-gender peers
  • **Expectancies** of inclusion by each gender group
  • **Relationship efficacy** with girls and with boys
  • **Feelings of gender typicality**

Relationship Efficacy

• Importance of social efficacy for peer acceptance
• Ignores that children’s social worlds are gendered
  • Children may have different perceptions of their efficacy with same-gender than other-gender peers
• Developed new scale – Gender-Based Relationship Efficacy (GBRE)
  • e.g., how much do you understand [girls/boys]?
  • e.g., how much do you know how to have fun with [girls/boys]?
• Tested this with 4th graders (n = 403) and 7th graders (n = 453)
GBRE Predicts Differentially: a Gender Sensitive Pattern

• Distinguishable scales (\( \alpha = .93, .92 \))
• GBRE-OWN gender > GBRE-OTHER gender
• GBRE-OWN predicts
  • Expectancies of being included by own gender peers
  • Friendships with own-gender peers
• GBRE-OTHER predicts
  • Expectancies of being included by other-gender peers
  • Friendships with other gender peers

Gender Typicality

• Egan & Perry (2001) introduced idea of gender typicality: individuals differ in whether they feel they typical of their own gender

• More own-gender typical, better social and personal adjustment

• We are extending this work
  • Broadening how gender typicality is conceptualized
  • Simplifying measurement of gender typicality
    • To use on a wide age range of children
Dual Identity Model: An Expanded View of Gender Typicality

• Self is compared to both gender groups
  • How similar do I feel to my own gender?
  • How similar do I feel to the other gender?
• Identifying with both gender groups may be important for adjustment
  • Dual identity could provide added benefits
  • Similar to idea of androgyny proposed by Bem
Our Method of Assessing Gender Identity

- Circles measure (adapted from Schubert & Otten, 2002)
  - global and specific questions about similarity
Study of Gender Similarity

- Longitudinal design, over 2 years
- 3 cohorts (K, 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 4\textsuperscript{th} grade, n = 467)
- Used circle measures and variety of other measures
  - Included gender-sensitive social measures (e.g., GBRE; friendships, inclusion) & adjustment (SE, social anxiety)
- Cluster analyzed similarity scores and examined relations with outcomes
Cluster Analyses: 4 Types

- **Own gender similarity**
  - High:
    - Both-Gender Similar (30%)
      - (dual identity)
  - Low:
    - Low-Gender Similar (17%)

- **Other gender similarity**
  - High:
    - Cross-Gender Similar (6%)
  - Low:
    - Same-Gender Similar (48%)
Similarity Clusters are Predictive

- Own-gender similarity
  - Advantageous for SE
  - But, not for social outcomes (limits friendships, increased ingroup bias)
- Dual identity (similar to both genders)
  - Advantageous for social outcomes: friendships with both genders, less ingroup bias
  - But, not for SE
- Cross-gender similarity and low similarity differ
  - Cross-gender similarity: higher social anxiety
  - Low gender similarity: risk of not feeling sense of belongingness
Implications

• Dual identity approach is promising
• Circles measure useful
• Gender typologies are helpful
  • Gender typicality is advantageous
    BUT
  • So is identifying with both genders (e.g., friendships)
Summary Part 3

- Important to consider wide array of social cognitions about gender
- Need to develop more gender sensitive measures
- Gender typicality is complex; involves comparisons to both gender groups
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Part 4: Intervening in Peer Relationships

- Should we try to broaden children’s social experiences?
The Big Challenge!

In 2008, we received funds from Denny Sanford to develop a program to improve relationships between boys and girls.

In 2014: **Sanford Harmony Program**

- Classroom-based intervention, PS-6th
- Delivered at no cost
- Backed with data and theory
- In model schools

[http://sanfordharmonyprogram.org](http://sanfordharmonyprogram.org)
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Gender Segregation

Limited Communication

Decreased Relationship Efficacy

Increased Gender Stereotyping

Negative Gender Attitudes
The Solution: Promote an Integration Cycle

• Bring girls and boys together
  • Supported by Intergroup Contact theory
  • Promote learning from peers
  • Expand range of experiences
  • Improve attitudes and comfort with the other sex
  • Encourage recognition of similarities

• Ensure positive experiences through social skills and relationship training
Bringing Girls and Boys Together: Buddy-Up Time

Teachers are asked to:

• Pair girls with boys as “buddies”
  • Without calling attention to gender
  • Keep buddies for a week at a time

• Facilitate buddy activities each week
  • Provide opportunities for cooperation and fun
  • Promote mutual positive affect
Build Relationship Skills Through Activities

• Relationship concepts
  • Diversity and Inclusion
  • Critical Thinking
  • Communication
  • Problem Solving
  • Peer Relations

• Developmentally appropriate activities
  • Early childhood: storybooks, songs, puppets
  • Late elementary: discussions, role play, games
Relationship Building Activities in PS

• Goal: use a teachable agent, avoid showing children modeling bad behaviors
• Solution: created Z the clueless alien
  • Z comes from a planet with no boys or girls; only Zs
  • Z needs to learn about social relationships on earth
  • Z makes mistakes ("whoopzies")
  • Z taught by Z-club children
• 17 original books:
  • “Everything is for everyone”
  • “Different ideas are ok”
Meet Z!

the Sanford Harmony Program
Funding provided by the T. Denny Sanford Foundation
Example of Relationship Building in Older Children

• **Goal**
  • To facilitate healthy communication strategies

• **Activities**
  • Develop an awareness of communication bloopers
    • e.g., Interrupting, withdrawing
  • Rehearse effective communication strategies
Program Evaluation Studies

• Two completed
  • Buddy Study (PS) (n=140)
  • Activities Study 5\textsuperscript{th} grade study (n= 199)
• One on-going evaluation
  • Large-scale randomized control study in 4\textsuperscript{th} grade
• Results positive thus far
  • Reduced aggression, exclusion
  • Improved attitudes (toward peers, classroom climate)
  • Improved grades (language, math)
• Optimistic about improving all kinds of peer relationships with this program
After all this, any answers?

• Children are gender experts
  • Helpful for understanding self and social world – it’s useful, but not always accurate

• Peers are important as socialization agents
  • Peers influence children’s gender typed behaviors and interaction styles

• Children’s social cognitions about peers influence their social lives
  • Cognitions influence who they select to spend time with (e.g., same-gender peers)

• Interventions into peer relationships can be effective
  • Peer partners can be modified with good outcomes

• Yes, we have some answers: still much more to do to understand the role of gender in children’s lives
Thank you!