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Gender Socialization in Clothing

Although I have always been critical of the gender socialization in children's clothing, or so I thought, I obviously had not known the extent of it. Knowing my recognition of the girls-pink, boys-blue phenomenon that has been occurring since my younger days and before that, I thought I was aware of it. Through the examination of early pre-teen clothing in various stores, the gender socialization was further apparent in the manner in which the retailers presented and described the clothes, colors of the clothes, the adornment of the fabric, and the insignia of the items.

When browsing the websites of children's clothing retailers, I noticed that the descriptions of the girls and boys' sections of the stores were presented differently. For example, on Gap.com the GapKids clothing is separated by sex. The boys' main page utilizes dark blues, orange, and greens while the girls' page uses light blue, pink, coral, and green. On these pages, the girls' clothing is referred to as "sassy" and lengths of dresses are described in terms of activities (e.g., "patio style"); to me, this insinuates the girls are meant to lounge instead of being physically active. On the other hand, the boys' clothing was described as "rugged", "cool", and "vibrant", which are engaging adjectives.

It was also interesting that the adult categories of "petite" and "plus-size" were referred to as "slim and plus" for girls and "slim and husky" for boys. This seems to play into the concept of hegemonic masculinity; one of its ideas is that males are supposed to be strong and good-looking. Right away, the use of "husky" seemed to be a stronger, more appealing word than "plus". This may also say something to the boys about being larger than the "average" person, though I couldn't tell if it sent the message that males need to be perceived as strong no matter what or that it was alright to be larger.

The clothes themselves also revealed many patterns of gender socialization through the clothing color, the adornment of the fabric, and the insignia on the clothing. For the most part, the

boys' clothes were primary colors, vibrant, and usually darker shades of the colors; these colors included blue, green, orange, brown, and sometimes red and yellow. The colors of the girls' clothing overlapped, but were usually lighter shades. Many of the clothes I looked at were pink, blue (light blue or turquoise, not navy), white, purple, and sometimes green. Often the girls' clothes had patterns and prints, usually of flowers, animals (e.g., embroidered flamingos) or animal prints, or other select items (e.g., cherries, hearts). The prints and patterns were very limited for the clothing of the boys, and they were mostly stripes, plaids, and cargos. I traditionally (or maybe stereotypically) associate plaids and cargo with workers (i.e., farmers or lumberjacks) and the military, respectively. Both of these careers or, if you will, activities portray very independent, strong, and active images. What do flamingos say? Florida? Retired people? *Lounging*.

The first thing I thought of when seeing the light colors and elaborate patterns of the fabrics of the girls' clothes was that there is no way the girls can go play outside without having their parents worrying. This difference in the colors and patterns was even demonstrated in the "activewear" of the girls and boys clothing! No one minds if a plain t-shirt gets dirty because it's: (1) not that unique/special, (2) easily cleaned, and (3) easily replaced. Even though the girls' clothes were, for the most part, made of the same fabric as that of the boys, these clothes just looked nicer; therefore, it'd be more of a shame to play in them and/or get them dirty. This gives me the idea that girls are meant to be looked at and therefore should make sure they remain well-groomed and pretty. Not surprisingly, this is a dominant theme in the ideas of hegemonic femininity.

Additionally, this theme was demonstrated in the fact that the girls clothing often had more/extra adornments than that of the boys. Many of the girls' tops had eyelets, ruffles, bows, and fluttery sleeves. This reminded me of how, in earlier times, adult women workers could not emulate all of the latest fashions because of the extra adornments (e.g., ruffles) on them; these adornments would interfere with their work and just were not suitable for their active lifestyle. The upper-class women could wear these styles because they were expected to be passive and remain still. Similarly,

the girls are probably limited by these extras and therefore have to limit their activities when wearing these clothes. Although the girls' styles today are looser and are not as physically restricting as [the referred to] women's styles once were, they are limiting in different ways. For example, fluttery sleeves are easily caught on things and ripped and if one of the ruffles, often the focus of a garment, is stained or somehow ruined, the shirt is thought to be un-wearable.

The insignia, including script and graphics, on the clothes also portrayed something about the gender socialization in our society. The writing and pictures on the boys' shirts in conjunction usually described the engagement in sports and other activities; often the writing would say the name of a [socially approved "male"] sport or activity (e.g., baseball, basketball, BMX) and the graphic would show someone participating in it or would be of the equipment needed to play. Sometimes the script would be of sayings (e.g., "hang ten") related to sports. Overall, the words used were either active themselves (i.e., in tense) or described something active. Other graphics included flames and select animals (e.g., sharks), which were often intense and ferocious.

The girls' clothing, however, couldn't have been more different. The script often consisted of adjectives such as "happy", "beautiful", and "sweet". There were also occasional phrases on the tops, but it was hard to find one that didn't use such adjectives. These phrases usually had something to do with the summer or beach. The only real active verb I found on a shirt was "smile", but it was used in combination with the nice, inactive adjectives. "Smile" could mean that girls should really have fun in what they do, or it could mean that girls should be interested in appearing pretty and fun and therefore should be smiling; the pessimist in me says it's the latter. The graphics were usually of pretty, but not [usually thought of as] strong animals (e.g., ponies, flamingos, butterflies), sweet treat foods (e.g., cherries, ice cream), or hearts and rainbows. The difference in meaning between the girls' and boys' scripts and graphics were obvious. Both sets of clothing seemed to make statements about the types of activities the respective sexes should engage in, with the boys being pushed to participate

in sports, active, and strong pastimes while the girls were encouraged to focus on their appearance, being nice/sweet, and taking a passive role (e.g., hanging around at the beach).

The final theme I noticed in the children's clothing was the emulation of adult garments. Typically, a large portion of the girls' clothes reflected current women's fashion. For example, the retailers sold yoga pants, baby doll-style shirts, and shrug sweaters for the girls. Some of the boys' clothes reflected some of the current fashions for men (e.g., polo shirts), but there was a portion that reflected the general, mature style of males. The difference between the representations of adult clothing was that the girls' garments mimicked the women's casual styles while the boys' clothing reflected both the casual and dressy/work styles for men. For example, the dressiest of the girls' clothes were frilly, ruffle-filled, very childlike dresses, while all of the retailers I looked at carried at least sport jackets, if not full suits, for the boys. In terms of gender socialization, this may demonstrate that boys are supposed to grow up to fulfill professional, business roles, while girls are not. This reflects the hegemonic notion of masculinity that men should be financially successful, which puts the pressure on males at a young age.

To my surprise, I was actually shocked at the gender socialization in clothing that I had previously missed. Not only do the colors of the garments say something about society's expectations of the sexes, but the adornments, graphics, and insignia on the fabrics also encourage specific activities (or inactivity) for the girls and boys. Also, the presentation of the clothes on behalf of the retailers further defines the assigned roles of the sexes. Despite the changing role of women in society over time, girls seem to be limited by their clothing in the same way females used to be. Additionally, boys are being held up to the ideas of hegemonic masculinity at such a young age. With such a fast-paced turnover of clothing styles in retail stores today, you'd think something would have had to change in regard to the gender roles portrayed. Apparently not.