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ABSTRACT

A study explored gender differences in toy preferences, using 824 children's responses to a southeastern newspaper's request for letters to Santa Claus. The results suggested that it is in the choice of toys associated with some aspect of the adult social structure where children's preferences show the greatest gender differences. Changes in toy preference that have appeared in the past 15 years were found predominantly for toys associated with children's own enjoyment and learning and nonrepresentative of the adult world, such as musical instruments or bikes. These current findings indicated that girls are now as likely as boys to enjoy riding bicycles and engaging in sports activities. Also, boys are now as likely as girls to enjoy arts and crafts activities. However for toys that orient children away from occupational roles, the concern still exists that play with gender-linked toys may reduce life choices of young girls. Results suggest that children's play remains an important component in development of gender identity. Findings support the idea that changes in children's preferences for those toys associated with eventual adult status or social structure provide an interesting tool by which to gauge gender equity in a given society. (AA)

Linking Gender-Related Toy Preferences to Social Structure: Changes in Children's Letters to Santa since 1978

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Linking Gender-Related Toy Preferences to Social Structure: Changes in Children's Letters to Santa since 1978

Children's letters to Santa provide a naturalistic method for exploring gender differences in toy preferences. Using 1978 Santa letters from Seattle children, Richardson and Simpson (1982) demonstrated how toy choices reinforce socialization of future adult gender roles. Children's requests illustrated gender-related patterns of socialization toward inner (domestic, private) or outer (career, public) spheres of participation. Gender differences were found to be greater for toys associated with eventual adult status or social structure (i.e, military toys, dolls). Conversely, boys' and girls' requests were similar for toys used for their own enjoyment and learning that were nonrepresentative of the adult world (i.e., games, musical, bikes). While children continue to request more sex-appropriate than sex-inappropriate toys (e.g., Bradbard & Parkman, 1984; Downs, 1983), an equally strong preference for gender-neutral toys has begun to emerge in children's letters to Santa (Almqvist, 1989; Marcon et al., 1994).

Using Richardson and Simpson's distinctions between inner/outer and representational/nonrepresentational, the present study examined 1992 and 1993 Santa letters for gender-related toy preferences linked to social structure.

Method

Sample

A total of 824 children (M age = 95 mos.) responded to a southeastern newspaper's request for letters to Santa. Girls

wrote 57% of the letters which were published (unedited) for 2 consecutive weeks (in the Florida Times Union) prior to Christmas 1992 and 1993. Children resided in a metropolitan area (Jacksonville, FL) of one million (27% minority population) that ranked 55th in the national television market.

Scoring

Requested items were grouped into 29 classes or categories (listed in Table 1). All but two of these categories were identical to those used by Richardson and Simpson (1982), and were based upon the work of Rheingold and Cook (1975) who classified contents of children's rooms. Communications (i.e., TV, telephones, video tapes, VCR) and animal accessories (i.e., cages, doghouse, pet toys) were added to the scoring system. Categories were mutually exclusive and each request was placed in only one category. Interrater reliability of two scorers exceeded .95.

Results

Chi square analysis of item categories (reported in Table 1) yielded significant gender differences (df = 1) for all but 10 categories. Girls still made significantly more requests for home-related items than did boys. However, five categories that previously reflected gender differences were now equally requested by boys and girls. Three of these (real vehicles, sports equipment, male dolls) were previously preferred by boys, and two by girls (clothes, educational-art). Three previously nonsignificant categories were now found to reflect gender differences. Boys' preference for games now significantly

exceeded girls' requests, and girls' preference for books and toy animals exceeded boys' requests. No significant gender differences were found for the two new categories (communication, animal accessories).

Insert Table 1 about here

Richardson and Simpson's inner/outer dimension accurately locates 16 of the 19 categories (84%) now found to significantly differentiate boys and girls, but only 3 of the 10 nonsignificant categories. Table 2 combines the inner/outer and representational/nonrepresentational dimensions.

Insert Table 2 about here

Whereas 5 of the 14 nonrepresentative categories show a strong correlation with gender, 14 of 15 representational categories are significantly related to gender. Thus, consistent with earlier findings, the inner/outer dimension predicts better among representational items than among nonrepresentational items. For inner and outer categories, Table 3 shows similarity in the percentage of girls' and boys' requests for items which are nonrepresenta-tional. However, among representational items, requests for inner items are 12 times greater among girls, while more than three times as many boys as girls request outer items.

Insert Table 3 about here

Finally, these current findings reflect 11 "changes" in distribution of requests for the 27 classes reported in 1978 (8 changes from significant to nonsignificant or vice versa, 3 changes in magnitude of differences). All but three of these changes were found in the nonrepresentational dimension. Among nonrepresentational requests, proportionally more changes were found in outer sphere categories since 1978. Reduction of gender differences in the outer sphere/nonrepresentational areas was the most notable change since 1978 (i.e., educational-art, real vehicles, sports equipment).

Discussion

Toys which are associated with some aspect of the adult social structure continue to show the greatest gender differences in children's preferences. Changes in toy preference which have appeared in the past 15 years were found predominantly in the nonrepresentational dimension. Children use such items for their own enjoyment and such items "signify no other, more real version of the same thing" (Richardson & Simpson, 1982, p. 433). These current findings indicate that girls are now as likely as boys to enjoy riding bicycles and engaging in some sort of sports activity. And boys are now as likely as girls to enjoy arts and crafts activities. However, for inner/representational items that orient children away from occupational roles, Kacerguis and Adams' (1979) concern that play with gender-linked toys may

reduce life choices of young girls still exists. Children's play remains an important component in development of gender identity. Therefore, changes in children's toy preferences within the representational domain provide an interesting tool by which to gauge gender equity in a given society.

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Table 1

Percentage of Boys and Girls Requesting Items in Each Category

	% Boys	% Girls	
Classes of items requested by significantly more boys:			
Games	41.6	25.7	***
Toy vehicles	19.3	6.2	***
Doll (humanoid)	17.8	7.4	***
Spatial-temporal	8.8	2.5	***
Military toys	6.2	1.3	***
Race cars	6.2	.4	***
Outerspace toys	2.0	.0	***
Machines	1.1	.0	**
Depots	.8	.0	*
Classes of items requested by significantly more girls:			
Doll (baby)	1.4	24.4	***
Doll (female)	.8	21.9	***
Clothing accessories	5.1	15.5	***
Stuffed animals	2.0	10.2	***
Doll accessories	1.1	10.0	***
Books	3.1	7.6	***
Domestic	1.7	7.6	***
Furnishings	3.1	6.8	*
Doll houses	.3	4.0	***
Toy animals	1.1	3.8	*
Classes not significantly associated with gender:			
Real vehicles	29.7	28.7	
Clothes	14.2	17.0	
Sport	16.1	15.5	
Communication	12.2	14.3	
Educational-art	10.2	13.8	
Live animals	7.9	10.4	
Musical	7.4	7.0	
Educational-teaching	5.1	6.8	
Doll (male)	4.8	2.5	
Animal accessories	1.7	1.3	

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 2

Distribution of Categories Among Inner/Outer and Representational/ Nonrepresentational Dimensions

Inner	Patterns of Association	Outer	Patterns of Association
Nonrepresentational:			
Animal accessories	...	Educational-art	...
Books	F *	Educational-teaching	...
Clothes	...	Real vehicles	...
Clothing-accessories	F *	Spatial-temporal	M *
Communication	...	Sports	...
Furnishing	F *		
Games	M		
Live animals	...		
Musical	...		
Representational:			
Doll-accessory	F *	Depots	M *
Doll-baby	F *	Doll-humanoid	M *
Doll-female	F *	Machines	M *
Doll-male	...	Military	M *
Dollhouse	F *	Race cars	M *
Domestic	F *	Outer-space toys	M *
Stuffed animals	F *	Toy vehicles	M *
Toy animals	F *		

... = no association; M (F) = significantly more males (females) yet less than twice the percentage; M * (F *) = significantly more males (females) and more than twice the percentage.

Table 3

Items Requested by Boys and Girls within Inner/Outer and Representational/Nonrepresentational Dimensions (%)

	Inner	Outer
Nonrepresentational:		
Boys	17.9	62.5
Girls	20.5	60.3
Representational:		
Boys	1.1	18.6
Girls	13.2	6.1