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# The Development of The Distinction Between The Gender's Appearance and Reality: A Study on Romanian Preschoolers

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## Abstract

The present study concerns the process of forming and developing the gender identity at preschool age children in Romania through the investigation of gender identity particularities related to the ability of children to distinguish between the appearance and reality of the gender (AR). 261 children aged 2;8 to 6;11 years have been tested in two categories of AR gender tasks: the reality of the gender ("what really is") and the appearance of the gender ("what it looks like"). Depending on the promoting or non-promoting of the tasks, children were grouped as "gender-realist" vs. "gender-nonrealist". The study emphasized that the development of the ability of appearance-reality gender (AR) distinction is not related to the gender of the subjects and that, with the increase in age, more and more children acquire the ability to differentiate real gender from the apparent one. It has been observed that participants made more fenomenism errors compared to those of the realism, illustrating a decrease in the frequency of occurrence, with the subjects' increase in age, only in the case of the fenomenism error. Referring to the ability of AR gender distinction, the influence of the age upon its development was evidenced by the increase of the comprehension level, along with the age of the children, of their own affiliation and of the others' to a particular category of the gender, of the invariable character of the gender, regardless of the situation or the activity the individual is involved in.

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*Keywords:* gender identity, appearance-reality gender distinction, gender consistency

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## 1. Introduction

The development of the ability to differentiate between the apparent gender and the real one is related with the concept of gender consistency from the theory of gender's cognitive development (Kohlberg, 1966), both concepts

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illustrating, in fact, the child's ability to capture and understand the invariable character of the gender, regardless of the tasks or situations in which the individual is involved. According to Kohlberg's theory, "gender consistency" is characteristic to children aged 4½ and 7 years old or even more. The child's level of knowledge and understanding is much more developed, reason to which he notices the gender's invariance despite the changes in the look and/ or the activities developed, so he can appreciate in a correct and complete way the permanence of the gender over the time and situations (Banerjee, 2005 p. 160). Kohlberg stated that "the child's gender identity may be a stable organizer of psychosexual attitudes of the child only when he is absolutely sure about his unchangeability" (Kohlberg, 1966, p.95), this aspect is possible only after the age of about 6 years old when children begin to appreciate themselves as unalterable from the point of view of the gender development. Only then they will present a consistent behavior appropriate to the gender category to which they belong (Birch, 2000; Beal, 1989, p.226). Trautner's (2003) and Kenyon's (1994) studies have proved that the appearance–reality distinction (intensively studied by Flavell, 1983) is related to the understanding of the gender's invariable character, similar mechanisms is being relating to experiencing and to perception of gender's (superficial) changing under certain conditions.

## 2. Methodology

The present study concerns the process of forming and developing the gender identity at preschool age children in Romania through the investigation of gender identity particularities related to the ability of children to distinguish between the appearance and reality of the gender (AR). The hypothesis of the research consisted of: the level of the development of the ability to differentiate between the apparent and real gender is dependent upon the age of the participants. The research was attended by 261 children aged between 2 years, 8 months old and 6 years, 11 months old with an average age of 60.69 months (SD = 13.58): 128 girls (m = 60.20, st.dev. = 13.56), 133 boys (m = 61.20, st.dev. = 13.64) from the kindergartens in Romania. The test developed to assess this concept was adapted according to the procedures of the appearance-reality distinction paradigm (Abelev & Markman, 2006; Flavell et al., 1983). The gender's appearance-reality test (ARG; Kenyon, 1994) contains two sets of colour photos sized 10 x 15 cm which present two children of about the same age, a boy who is dressed with feminine gender specific clothes and a girl who is dressed with male gender-specific clothes. The tasks highlight the reality of the gender („what is true”) and the appearance of the gender („what it looks like”), a question being addressed about the perception of similarity (identity) among the children with proper gender specific clothes and the ones with the opposite gender's specific clothes. The participant has accomplished his task if he answered correctly the two questions regarding the appearance and the reality for each item-category (boy or girl). The maximum score that can be achieved is 6 points. There will also be analyzed the types of errors that can a child make, answering the test's questions: the realism's error and the fenomenism's error. The fenomenism's error is due to offering some answers based on the appearance at the questions related to the reality (e.g. “the boy looks like a girl and he really is a girl”), while the answers based on the reality at the questions which search to highlight the appearance (e.g. “the boy really looks like a boy and he really is a boy”) the questions are part of the realism. Both errors can occur in the same set of photos, or separately.

## 3. Results

According to the study carried out by Kenyon (1994) the level of development of the ability to distinguish between the gender's appearance and reality will be assessed through the performance obtained at ARG test's tasks and analyzed from four perspectives: individual photos, combining photographs, the errors' pattern and the similarity's pattern, each of them offering different information about this dimension of gender identity. The coefficient  $\alpha = .74$  of internal consistency achieved for ARG test represents a significant value from a statistical point of view.

- *Combining photographs.* For a participant to pass one of the two stages of the ARG test he must answer correctly to the questions relating to gender's appearance (how the child in the photo looks like) and to the gender's reality (what the child in the picture really is). The results obtained by the participants shows a rather high difficulty of this test, the frequency average in point of test passing being very low. Only 7.8 % of children aged 3 years old, 34.4% of those aged 4 years old, 50.7 % of those aged 5 years old and 54.4 % of the participants aged 6 years old have succeeded to give a correct answer to both tasks, a rising trend

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