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Early preschool environments and gender: Effects of gender pedagogy in Sweden



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ABSTRACT

To test how early social environments affect children's consideration of gender, 3- to 6-year-old children ($N = 80$) enrolled in gender-neutral or typical preschool programs in the central district of a large Swedish city completed measures designed to assess their gender-based social preferences, stereotypes, and automatic encoding. Compared with children in typical preschools, a greater proportion of children in the gender-neutral school were interested in playing with unfamiliar other-gender children. In addition, children attending the gender-neutral preschool scored lower on a gender stereotyping measure than children attending typical preschools. Children at the gender-neutral school, however, were not less likely to automatically encode others' gender. The findings suggest that gender-neutral pedagogy has moderate effects on how children think and feel about people of different genders but might not affect children's tendency to spontaneously notice gender.

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Introduction

Children are attuned to gender from an early age: infants in the United States can discriminate between male and female faces in looking time studies (Quinn et al., 2011) and look longer at faces

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that match the gender of their primary caregiver (Quinn, Yahr, Kuhn, Slater, & Pascalis, 2002). In addition, most U.S. children can label their own and others' gender by the time they are 2 years old (Weinraub et al., 1984; Zosuls et al., 2009). Young children not only perceive gender but also use gender to guide their social preferences and inferences about others (Dunham, Baron, & Banaji, 2016; Martin & Halverson, 1981). Preschool-age children in the United States show gender in-group favoritism (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987; Martin, Fabes, Evans, & Wyman, 1999; Renno & Shutts, 2015; Shutts, Roben, & Spelke, 2013) and hold gender-based beliefs about others' attributes (e.g., that boys like trucks and girls like dolls; Bauer & Coyne, 1997; Kuhn, Nash, & Bruckner, 1978; Martin, 1989). Although much of the research on children's consideration of gender has been conducted in the United States, studies reveal that young children in other cultures also categorize people by gender, prefer members of their own gender, and hold gender stereotypes (e.g., Brazil: de Guzman, Carlo, Ontai, Koller, & Knight, 2004; China: Knobloch, Callison, Chen, Fritzsche, & Zillmann, 2005; South Africa: Albert & Porter, 1986, and Muthukrishna & Sokoya, 2008; South Wales: Yee & Brown, 1994).

Although the prominence of gender in young children's minds is well established (see Ruble, Martin, & Berenbaum, 2006, for a thorough review), the reason for the category's preeminence is less clear (Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002). Some researchers have posited that gender is prominent because humans have an evolved specialized system dedicated to classifying and reasoning about others based on their gender (e.g., Cosmides, Tooby, & Kurzban, 2003; see Shutts, 2013, for a discussion). An alternative proposition in the field is that children focus on gender because their social environments highlight the importance of the category. For example, both *gender schema theory* (Bem, 1981, 1983) and *developmental intergroup theory* (Arthur, Bigler, Liben, Gelman, & Ruble, 2008; Bigler & Liben, 2007) emphasize that children receive significant input—from parents, teachers, and media—about gender categories and roles. Indeed, studies show that, at least in the United States, adults regularly use nouns and pronouns to mark gender when talking to children (Gelman, Taylor, & Nguyen, 2004; see Waxman, 2010, for a discussion). Moreover, teachers sometimes use gender to organize their classrooms (e.g., asking children to alternate by gender in seating; Bigler & Liben, 2007). Such practices may contribute to, or fully account for, children's early and robust reliance on gender as a social category.

It is difficult to determine the role of social experience in guiding children's reliance on gender categories because many young children spend significant periods of time in social environments where gender is emphasized—including preschools. Nevertheless, there are a small number of preschools that are committed to the practice of “gender-neutral” classroom environments in which teachers typically refrain from using gendered language and actively work to counteract gender stereotypes. Studying children who experience gender-neutral pedagogy (vs. more typical instruction) provides an unusual opportunity to examine the role of teachers' behaviors in guiding children's consideration of gender distinctions. The current research examined whether and how such schooling is associated with children's reliance on gender information across a range of measures.

In addition to shedding light on the theoretical proposition that adults' behavior plays a key role in children's consideration of gender, research on gender-neutral pedagogy makes a practical contribution. Many have noted the negative effects of social exclusion, gender stereotyping, and unequal treatment on young children's development (e.g., Andrews, Martin, Field, Cook, & Lee, 2016; Bian, Leslie, & Cimpian, 2017; Halpern et al., 2011), and gender-neutral pedagogy seeks to address such social problems through deemphasizing gender distinctions. Furthermore, gender-neutral pedagogy is of great international interest. For example, the first 20 results from a recent (February 2017) Google internet search for “Swedish gender neutral preschools” included relevant articles from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Independent*, and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (all published since 2010). Yet we are not aware of any research comparing children who attend gender-neutral preschools with those who attend more typical schools. Such research is needed because it bears on whether gender-neutral practices (which are effortful and require extensive teacher training) can affect children's perceptions, feelings, and thoughts about gender.

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