Gender Stereotypes in Childhood:
When is Difference Born?

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Abstract: *Stereotypes and prejudices are the fruit of social categorization that has the aim of organizing the knowledge of social reality, simplifying it, so as to make it more accessible. Gender categories are the basis of social organization: sexual differentiation of male and female roles supports a layered and naturalized social schema, absorbed from early infancy. This article investigates the process of socialization of gender roles during infancy, identifying the cultural and social conditioning that still today form female and male identities.*

Riassunto: *Stereotipi e pregiudizi sono frutto di categorizzazioni sociali che hanno lo scopo di organizzare la conoscenza della realtà sociale, semplificandola, in modo da renderla più accessibile. Le categorie di genere stanno a fondamento dell'organizzazione sociale: la differenziazione sessuale dei ruoli maschili e femminili poggia su schemi sociali sedimentati e naturalizzati, assorbiti fin dalla primissima infanzia. Il presente contributo si propone di indagare il processo di socializzazione ai ruoli di genere durante l'infanzia andando ad individuare i condizionamenti culturali e sociali che ancora oggi agiscono nella formazione dell'identità femminile e maschile.*

Keywords: *Social Categorization, Gender Stereotypes, Socialization, Childhood, Education.*

Are the Differences Between the Sexes Innate or Learned?

Males are: agile, athletic, attractive, capable, brave, creative, curious, fun, imaginative, "cool", strong, clever, ingenious, intelligent, muscular, optimistic, spirited, sporty, fast, but also agitated, unpleasant, untruthful, chatty, scatterbrained, dishonest, distracted, disrespectful, gluttonous, rude, fierce, rowdy, surly, ill mannered, likeable, slovenly, unenthusiastic, stubborn, and vindictive.

Females on the other hand are: affectionate, happy, altruistic, friendly, attractive, capable, good, calm, pretty, cuddly, creative, curious, delicate, sweet, polite, elegant, imaginative, wonderful, generous, kind, joyous, hard-

working, intelligent, thin, mature, organized, patient, precise, responsible, respectful, sensitive, likeable, social, sporty, shy, tender, relaxed, lively, but also arrogant, chatty, distracted, jealous, clever, nosey, gossips, overly sensitive, picky, and vain. These are the self-descriptions from a sample of male and female primary school children who participated in a study on the formation of gender stereotypes and prejudices in childhood. The female and male self-descriptions fall into two contrasting categories: males and females are perceived to be two profoundly and irremediably different groups, with generally complementary characteristics.

This initial data prompts the question: What happened in the early years of these children's lives to make their imagination so full of gender stereotypes? Who guides this view of childhood so rigidly polarized by gender? And again: what can the school do to promote a different collective imagination, finally free from sexist stereotypes and prejudices?

In our country starting in the early 1980s, with particular significance in the '90s, some scholars (Beseghi, Telmon, 1992; Bolognari, 1991; Ulivieri, 1995) attempted to apply the issues emerging from the neo-feminist debate of the '70s to the scholastic environment. They investigated how the school could promote a new way of thinking about the relationship between the sexes in the classroom that would be inspired by the idea of equality, both in respect and in appreciation of male and female character attributes.

The first step necessary for exploring this field of study was to clarify some basic concepts, firstly those of *sex* and *gender*. The distinction between the two terms reveals, on a linguistic level, two different theoretical perspectives through which the subject matter can be studied and references a long-standing debate, between nature and nurture. This distinction was also applied to the discussion of the origins of the differences between the sexes. The question can be expressed as follows: Do women and men learn to be different, or are the differences due exclusively to their biology? Are the differences in behavior and in psychological constitution determined by biological information or are they the product of cultural conditioning and environmental influence? In essence, are the differences between males and females innate or learned? This seemingly simple question rests at the center of the social debate on equality of the sexes (Rogers, 2000). The terms "sex" and "gender" refer, respectively, to the innatist perspective and the cultural perspective.

In 1975 the American scholar Gayle Rubin officially introduced the term *gender* to the scientific debate (Rubin, 1975). From that moment, it became the inaugural concept of a new analytical perspective in the field

of Feminist Studies. The expression *sex/gender system* indicates «the system of processes, adaptations, ways of behavior and relationships with which each society transforms biological sexuality into human behavior and organizes the division of tasks between men and women, differentiating one from the other» (Piccone Stella, Saraceno, 1996, 7). The *sex/gender system*, across all human societies, requires individuals who are born *male* or *female* to become *men* and *women* and, consequently, to play different roles. These roles are absolutely not interchangeable, and infractions are punishable by social sanction (Mead, 1935). During the '80s the Italian translation of the term "gender" began to quietly enter our linguistic usage as a neologism which carried certain ambiguities, because it provided a new meaning for a preexisting word. In the dictionary of the Italian language "gender" is used to refer to a grammatical category (the word "*sedia*" (chair) is of feminine gender, "*tavolo*" (table) is of male gender). Only in very recent times a definition of the term relating to its referential, and not strictly linguistic meaning, has been formulated. Gender thus turns out to be a term with dual meaning, in that it denotes both a grammatical category and a social category (Luraghi, Olita, 2006). Because of this, at times, for the sake of clarity we use the expression *genere sociale* (social gender).

The most effective way to understand the meaning and the innovative potential of this concept is to define gender in contrast to the term "sex". *Sex* is a strictly biological category that is based on an anatomical-physiological distinction between males and females. *Gender* is, on the other hand, a social construct that expresses the non-innateness of the differences between the sexes and affirms the central role of culture in socialization processes and the learning of masculinity and femininity. Using the definition proposed by Vivien Burr: «Gender is the social significance of sex. It refers to the constellation of characteristics and behaviors which come to be differentially associated with and expected of men and women in a particular society, our notions of masculinity and femininity. Such differences may really exist, or they may be only supposed to exist.» (Burr, 2000, 22).

Faced with the question posed by Simone de Beauvoir in the middle of the last century (1949), and still relevant today, – Is woman born or does one become a woman? – the advocates of the "gender perspective" respond without hesitation: women (and men) become women (and men). Starting from this premise, *gender studies*, developed initially in the field of sociology, and gradually expanded to become a philosophical, philosophical, linguistic and even pedagogic debate.

Childhood and Gender Categories

Stereotypes and prejudices, including those regarding gender, are the result of social categorizations aimed at dividing individuals into groups, distinguishing one's own group (*ingroup*) from external groups (*outgroup*) (Allport, 1954). The most direct consequences of this categorization are "inter-categorical differentiation" and "intra-categorical assimilation": individuals are prompted to exalt differences between members of external groups and to overestimate the homogeneity of their own group (Brown, 1995). Social categorization is a cognitive process that is an inescapable part of human existence: the world is too complex of an environment for an individual to be able to survive without finding some basic strategy to simplify and order it. Gender categories, like all other social categories, thus have a social use insomuch as they effectively perform a series of functions: they reduce the material complexity; they order behavior offering a basis for anticipating future events and for the determination of objectives; they guide attention filtering information; and they structure generalizations and interpretations (Martin, Halverson, 1981).

The need to spread a differentiated system of behavior based on biological sex is therefore intrinsic to society: gender schema organize knowledge of the social reality. The fact that we perceive sexual differences of male and female roles to be socially inevitable, as intrinsic to the natural order of things, is the most evident proof of the fact that it rests on a "naturalized social construction" (Bourdieu, 1999), absorbed from earliest infancy.

The formation of gender roles occurs so early that its effects are already manifested in the first years of life, precisely because of this there is a risk of their mistakenly being considered "innate". The split between male and female destinies is shaped from early infancy when males and females begin to weave different biographical paths in the family. This is the result of small but continuous daily choices that gradually channel the course of the one group and that of the other towards different, ever more divergent, routes. Gianini Belotti writes: «To produce individuals who are, to a certain degree, agreeable to pre-packaged destiny, which begins even before birth, it is necessary to resort to a suitable conditioning system. The first element of differentiation, which rises to value of symbol, is the color of the baby clothes prepared for the unborn child […]. The more that these models are differentiated for males and females, the more the result appears to be gua-

ranteed. This is why, beginning in early infancy, everything that could make them similar is eliminated and everything that could make them different is highlighted» (Gianini Belotti, 1973, 25-27).

If the decisions made by the adult world with regard to the education of sons and daughters are based on stereotypes that have already been tested by tradition and are automatically re-perpetuated, the boys and girls paths will be separated in the simplest and most natural way. For every crossroads there is a sign that clearly indicates the direction to take. These crossroads do not necessarily coincide with the big decisions, on the contrary, often they are passed without being noticed, almost with indifference: getting pink baby clothes for the baby girl and blue for the baby boy becomes a simple routine act, buying a doll for a girl and a little car for a boy, or even reprimanding a girl for being too active and encouraging a boy to be active; deriding the little boy who cries because he is behaving like a "*femminuccia*" (sissy) and at the same time accepting it as natural for the little girl to express her feelings and vulnerability (Biemmi, 2010). At the center of it all is a different system of social expectations that we adult men and women put into action every day so that the boys and girls gradually conform to the image that we have of one group or the other (Ruspini, 2009).

This slow but relentless training in female and male roles manifests as early as the entry to the kindergarten, around three or four years of age. At this age the boys and girls have already identified with their roles and perfectly understand the behavior that is appropriate for their sexes. Some studies (Yee, Brown, 1994) reveal that gender prejudices that are greater and appear earlier in girls. The girls, as early as three years of age, are the first to master the processes of differentiation of gender, expressing a decided preference for their own gender and demonstrating prejudice towards their male peers. Furthermore, the girls self-evaluations are more positive than those of the boys. One of the first studies (Zalk, Katz, 1978) aimed at measuring the intensity of the preference for one's own gender (*gender pride*) and the prejudice towards the opposite gender (*gender prejudice*) revealed that children generally assign more positive attributes to their own gender, but both boys and girls attribute the more negative characteristics to the males. This data is consistent with the results of a study conducted in the mid '90s in several Italian nursery schools (Capecchi, 1999) with girls and boys between the ages of three and five. «The girls continue to consider their own gender more positively (for

example "females don't tease, they are more kind") and to express more negative judgments of the other gender (for example "males don't heed the teacher and tease us"). Boys, on the other hand, do not state a decided preference for males. On the contrary, they judge their own gender negatively (for example "males are more naughty than females, they hit and fight") and describe the opposite gender more positively (for example "the girls are more well behaved and draw better"» (*Ibidem*, 32-33). Both boys and girls see the group of boys as the group that is more deserving of reproach and the group of girls as more kind and capable. It can be hypothesized that this attitude results from the gender culture of the class and, particularly, on the influence of the female teachers that express negative judgments on the male behavior (as too energetic and aggressive) reinforcing in both of genders the idea that boys behave "worse" than girls. It is indeed known that the differences in teachers' expectations for their students, working according to the well known mechanism of the "self fulfilling prophecy", become in some way prescriptive and prophetic because they contribute to the formation of the students' self expectations (Rosenthal, Jacobson, 1968).

Gender Role Socialization in the School

In the process of socialization of gender roles there are various groups that interact with each other – the family, the peer group, the media, and the market (Ghigi, 2009) – but there is one group that continues to play a central role: the school. The main conduit through which sexist stereotypes enter the school consists of those same teachers who, often unknowingly, project expectations onto students that differ based on their genders. The results of some studies on teachers conducted in the Anglo-Saxon region beginning in the 1970s are illuminating in this sense. These studies expose the unequal treatment given to students of different genders, caused by differences in the teachers' expectations. According to elementary school teachers interviewed by Clarricoates (1980), male children, although they were more difficult to control than female children, are considered to be preferable and more satisfying students. Even when they do not perform as well as the girls in class, they are generally perceived to be more intelligent and capable. In the opinion of these same teachers, the success of the girls is owed more to effort than to ability.

A sexist cultural legacy is still present, even in the Italian teaching staff, which is now composed largely of women. Various studies, beginning in the 1970s (Belotti, 1973; Ulivieri, 1996), exposed the complicity of female teachers in the uncritical perpetuation of a sexist and conservative culture, that – paradoxically – penalized their own gender. Simonetta Ulivieri, in referring to the neo-feminist movement and to the student movement of the '70s, asked, with a certain puzzlement, if and in what measure these events shaped the attitudes and the mentality of the teachers: «It is therefore necessary to verify in what measure the women teachers when faced with the needs, the analysis, the proposals expressed first by the movements of women generated within the political parties and later by the feminist movement, were able to call into question the schools, as bearers of values, often obsolete, as transmitters and disseminators of a culture molded by others, shaping girls and young women with the cultural parameters and customs that were developed by the centuries old knowledge and power of the patriarchy» (Ulivieri, 1995, 198).

There were many reports of discriminatory and restrictive educational practices that still today constrain the females' choices to goals that are predetermined and limited by their sex (Bellafronte, 2003; Lipperini, 2007). We must not, on the other hand, forget that, even though the girls are the most penalized by the rigidity of gender roles, the sexist stereotypes can also have an oppressive effect on male education, as this passage clearly points out (Bourdieu, 1998; Ciccone, 2009; Connell, 1995).

Identifying the social and cultural conditioning that forms female and male gender identity is thus a crucial step in stopping the growth of sexist stereotypes and prejudices in boys and girls. The most ambitious objective, which should greatly involve the school and the teachers, is still the goal expressed by Elena Gianin Belotti forty years ago: «restore to each individual who is born the opportunity to develop in the way that is most suitable for that individual, irrespective of the sex to which he or she belongs» (Gianini Belotti, 1973, 8).

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Notes

[1] Study was conducted during the school year 2013-2014 at the *Istituto comprensivo statale di Calenzano* (FI) and involved a total of ten classes – from the first grade to the fifth grade – of Anna Frank, Concetto Marchesi, and Don Milani Primary Schools. The study had the aim of tracing the ideas, the convictions, and the stereotypes about males and females that had already been internalized by the boys and girls in order to be able to implement education aimed at providing critical tools for deciphering stereotypes and gradually eradicating prejudices.

[2] In *Devoto-Oli. Vocabolario della lingua italiana* 2009 (Edumond Le Monnier, 2008), among the definitions of the term 'gender' we find: «Male and female, understood as the result of an entirety of cultural and social that make up each of the two sexes and influence their roles and behavior. Examples: *gender studies*, *gender awareness*».

[3] We here take for granted that the meaning of "gender" to which we refer is social gender.

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