Effects of television content on children’s development of traditional gender role schemata: A Literature Review

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Effects of television content on children's development of traditional gender role schemata: A Literature Review

Editor's Note: This paper was originally presented at the NYSCA conference in 2015 and received the Top Student Paper award.
Effects of Television Content on Children’s Development of Traditional Gender Role Schemata: A Literature Review

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Presented at NYSCA 2015 — Student Paper

Abstract: Despite the progress television has made since its creation, the medium unfortunately still portrays subtle, and not so subtle, gender stereotypes, especially in children’s television shows. Content analyses have documented the pervasive stereotypes set forth on TV that not only portray strict behaviors for both males and females, but also often depict the female behaviors and characters as inferior (Calvert, 1999). In a wave of advocacy and regulation, parents, teachers, and children have demanded shows that better promote inclusivity and appropriate, family-friendly values. The Children’s Television Act of 1990 required broadcasters to provide educational children’s programming that would teach prosocial values and educational tools. However, even these educational programs still foster gender-stereotyped content (Barner, 1999; Calvert, Stolkin, & Lee, 1997). While research has proven that these programs depict stereotyped behavior, studies have also shown how children are actually affected by this content. This paper will look at key studies conducted over the years that have observed children’s development of gender stereotypes in correlation with their total TV consumption and the nature of the programs watched.

Despite the progress television has made since its creation, the medium unfortunately still portrays subtle, and not so subtle, gender stereotypes, especially in children’s television shows. Content analyses have documented the pervasive stereotypes set forth on TV that not only portray strict behaviors for both males and females, but that also often depict the female behaviors and characters as inferior (Calvert, 1999). In a wave of advocacy and regulation, parents, teachers, and children have demanded shows that better promote inclusivity and appropriate, family-friendly values. The Children’s Television Act of 1990 required broadcasters to provide educational children’s programming that would teach prosocial values and educational tools. However, even these educational programs still foster gender-stereotyped content (Barner, 1999; Calvert, Stolkin, & Lee, 1997). While research has proven that these programs depict stereotyped behavior, studies have also shown how children are actually affected by this content. Though not an extensive review by any means, this paper will look at key studies conducted over the years that have observed children’s
development of gender stereotypes in correlation with their total TV consumption and the nature of the programs watched.

Before this topic can be explored in greater detail, I must first make note of the use of “sex” versus “gender”. My intention in this paper is to delve into the development of gender identity, which I believe to be separate from any physical markings or genitalia. Gender is a fluid construct influenced by one’s social, economic, historical, political, geographical, and cultural surroundings. For many decades, we have presumed gender to be synonymous with sex; a person’s identity does not diverge from his/her physical appearances. However, as a culture, we have largely begun to start debating the true nature of gender and its development. Just as with race, gender has a physical marker through genitalia, but gender is truly the attributes that we assign to those who possess specific genitalia. We may be born as a scientifically male, female, or intersex, but gender is developed and more specifically, it is performed:

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—and identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body, and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Butler, 1988, p. 519)

We, as active agents, determine how to “do” gender, how to embody ourselves in this world. My point in stating this is to call attention to the studies that fail to address the differences between sex and gender. As a result, in some cases, I did take “sex” to mean “gender”. However, as research continues, I hope to see greater attention paid to the differences of these two terms and how new definitions might affect how we approach further study.

Theoretical Overview

Gender identity formation has become a controversial and highly debated topic in the past years, as more researchers and theorists are stating its cognitive or socialization causes rather than the typically assumed biological foundations. Many now argue that gender is a fluid construction based on historical, social, and situational contexts with strong parental and peer influences. Gender identity is broadly considered to be a person’s sense of self as a male or female (Zucker & Bradley, 1995), making it a social, not a biological, identity. This identity formation starts early, with some research studies suggesting it begins as early as 18-24 months (Martin et al., 2002). From 27 to 30 months, toddlers can accurately label their sex and point out other same-sex children (Campbell, Shirley, & Caygill, 2002; Zosuls, Ruble, Tamis-LeMonda, Shrout, Bornstein, & Greulich, 2009). Though research has consistently proven that gender identity begins forming early, there are competing theories for how exactly that formation occurs.
Bandura and Walters (1963) have argued for social learning theory, or the idea that behavior, personal factors, and environmental influences operate as determinants for the creation of sex role expectations. Factors vary in strength and can act simultaneously or alone. Socialization is an ongoing process whereby people learn about cultural norms and acquire their own beliefs, values, and perspectives (Signorielli, 1988). Previously, institutions such as religion, education, and the nuclear family had the largest impact on socialization; now, media industries have risen up as highly influential institutions that may have some undiscovered effects on society. Media socialization differs from the more traditional methods because it does not allow for face-to-face interaction (Signorielli, 1988) and it is incredibly pervasive, transcending gender, race, ethnicity and religion. Television may be the most influential medium for socialization because of its pervasiveness, its ease of accessibility in terms of content and understanding, and its visual component (Signorielli, 1988). However, parents and peers likely hold the highest influence overall because they are modeling certain behaviors in real life and reinforcing what children are learning through television.

Cognitive-developmental theory, proposed by Kohlberg (1966), states that children learn gender from what they hear or see around them, citing influences such as the media and parents. Kohlberg heavily stresses the cognitive aspect of gender development:

[The] patterning of sex-role attitudes is essentially “cognitive” in that it is rooted in the child’s concepts of physical things—the bodies of himself and of others—concepts which he relates in turn to a social order that makes functional use of sex categories in quite culturally universal ways. It is not the child’s biological instincts, but rather his cognitive organization of social-role concepts around universal physical dimensions, which accounts for the existence of universals in sex-role attitudes. (Kohlberg, 1966)

Kohlberg emphasizes the developmental factor of gender identity formation through his belief that attitudes will change as children age through a dynamic process whereby children are actively structuring their own experience (Kohlberg, 1966). The first step in this process is a child’s self-categorization as “boy” or “girl” which then extends to a gender identity dependent on the cognitive schemata the child has developed through interactions, observations, and experiences (Kohlberg, 1966). Eventually, the child will acquire gender constancy, the belief that his or her gender is irreversibly fixed. With that knowledge, he or she can then seek to express his/her gender positively and in conformity with traditional gender expectations. As they mature, children gradually make the transition from recognizing their gendered behaviors to arriving at gendered thoughts. Gender constancy has been hard to pinpoint and actually find in children, so Kohlberg’s theory has been contested. However, his cognitive approach has influenced the creation of other theories (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).
Gender schema theory, also a cognitive theory, states that gender identity is influenced by observing and modeling others’ behavior and actions, ultimately leading to the creation of schemata (Bem, 1981). Theorized by Sandra Bem, schemata are defined as “cognitive structures...network[s] of associations that organize and guide an individual’s perception” (Bem, 355, 1981). These established frameworks allow individuals to process information effectively and assess its relevance and consistency with that individual’s preconceived notions. Each new encounter will be processed in one of three ways: it will be (a) absorbed into existing schemas, (b) ignored, or (c) considered inconsistent with prior knowledge and will form a new schema (Amason, 2012). Gender schemata particularly deal with one’s own and other’s attitudes and beliefs about gender and what is considered male or female. As a person has more experiences and is exposed to a greater variety of circumstances, his/her understanding of gender expands because he/she has created more gender schemata (Amason, 2012).

Television may serve as a reinforcement of already established schemata or it could bring about changes through presentation of non traditionally gendered characters. However, television probably activates previously existing schemata more than it creates new ones (Calvert & Huston, 1987). Repeated activation of gender schemata then increases the salience of those schemata in the future (Fiske & Taylor, 1984). Repeated activation causes effects on attentional patterns and memory about the content (Calvert & Huston, 1987). Studies have shown that children will attend selectively to same-sex characters (Huston, 1983) especially in gender-typed content (Sprafkin and Liebert, 1978). Children also recall behavior that conforms to gender stereotypes better than they recall non stereotypical behavior, even going so far as to change their memory of the content to conform to their gender schemata (Calvert & Huston, 1987).

With children “knowing” more television characters than real people by kindergarten (Liebert and Sprafkin, 1988), it is important to know who these characters are, what behaviors they are modeling, and what exactly children are learning from the programs they watch.

**The Characters: Gender-Stereotypic Portrayals**

It has been consistently proven that adult prime-time television is host to a wide array of stereotyped female representations with one study revealing women are on screen less often; speak less often; are usually younger than their male counterparts; are seen in romantic contexts more often; and are more likely to work within the home (Signorielli, 1987). Those women who are employed outside the home are often seen unsuccessfully juggling their career with motherhood (Signorielli, 1982). These depictions have unfortunately continued into the modern television era, as well. Researchers looking at the representation of women in cartoons found the same disparity between real life and the media. Female characters, similar to primetime, were few in number, always in need of rescue, worked in the home, and fell in love at first sight (Streich, 1974; Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974; Levinson, 1975; Barcus, 1983). Most research on these programs have been content analyses that focus on quantitative information
such as how many male and female characters there are, how many actions they each perform throughout a show, or how many times each gendered character speaks. Furthermore, the studies cited above are purely focusing on adult television programs instead of children’s.

Though fewer in number, the studies on children’s television programs convey many of the same issues. Calvert et al. (1997) found that males consistently outnumber female characters 3:1 in children’s education programs. In the same study, male characters were additionally found to have spent more time speaking than female characters spent actually on the screen. Barner (1999) discovered there were no educational and informational programs with a female central character, although that has since changed with programs like Dora the Explorer on Nickelodeon. Other studies have found that male characters engaged in and performed a significantly wider range of behavior than did their female counterparts; those behaviors matched up to gender stereotypes with male characters acting more dominant and aggressive and female characters exhibiting dependence and nurturance (Barner, 1999; Leaper et al., 2002).

Barner (1999) conducted a content analysis of children’s educational/informational programming from five broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, and WB) airing in the Buffalo, New York, market. The eleven programs studied were either network programs or available nationally through syndication, so they are considered educational by many network affiliates. Specifically, this study analyzed programs that emphasized the “social/emotional needs” section of the FCC requirements, such as Saved by the Bell—The New Class, Sweet Valley High, and The New Adventures of Doug. Trained coders analyzed these programs for three weeks, noting characters’ genders, whether they were major or minor characters, their social behavior and the consequences of that behavior. Results showed that male characters outnumbered females 97 to 66, with males appearing in an average of 15.6 scenes and females appearing in 13.1. More importantly, males averaged 2.1 behaviors per scene while females only averaged 1.5. As hypothesized, male characters were more likely to exhibit dominance, aggression, and attention-seeking behaviors while female characters demonstrated deference and dependence. Taking a sum total of a character’s behavior and its consequences over the course of the three weeks, Barner found an interesting result: “The findings suggest that in this sample of programs, males are more likely to evoke some consequence for their actions (whether these consequences are positive or negative) which female actions are more often ignored altogether” (Barner, 1999). In his discussion, Barner explains this phenomenon by citing female character’s demonstration of dependence and nurturance, actions that typically do not warrant any consequences (Barner, 1999).

Leaper et al. (2002) conducted a similar content analysis that broadened its scope to include four cartoon genres of children’s programming: traditional adventure (central male action hero), nontraditional adventure (co-ed action teams or central female lead), educational/informational (E/I), and comedy. The researchers coded three episodes from three different shows within each genre. Examples of the
programs studied are *Aladdin* (traditional adventure), *Sailor Moon* (nontraditional adventure), *Tiny Toons* (comedy), and *The Magic School Bus* (E/I). The researchers found female characters to be underrepresented in the cartoons. Results also showed that male characters demonstrated more physical aggression than their female counterparts. Female characters were more likely to show fear, act romantic, be polite, or act supportive. In relation to Barner’s study, the researchers determined that E/I programs had significantly lower rates of aggression and negative behavior than any other genre. Male and female characters were also depicted learning different topics together in E/I cartoons (Leaper et al., 2002).

The results of these two studies highlight the unfortunate, stereotypic behavior of characters in children’s programming. While these representations need to be changed, it is more critical to analyze and observe how these representations actually influence and change children’s thoughts and behaviors.

**Media Representations: Lessons Learned**

Studies have shown that children are affected by these gender-stereotypic media representations at an age as young as four (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997). Children not only pick up on the disparities between girls and boys on their programs (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997), but that over the years, girls will begin to view males as superior (Halim, Ruble, and Tamis-LeMonda, 2013). High amounts of television viewing only contribute to the ingraining of these messages through repeated exposure (Freuh and McGhee, 1975).

Thompson and Zerbinos (1997) interviewed children from ages four to nine about their cartoon-viewing habits, the frequency of that viewing, and descriptions about the programs and characters. Interviewers also asked the children what they would like to be when they grow up and what kinds of jobs boys and girls normally have. Seventy eight percent of children thought there were more boy than girl characters in cartoons and 68% thought the boys talked more. Seventy seven percent of the boys interviewed selected traditionally masculine jobs in the future, while 54% of the girls identified traditionally female jobs. More importantly, 24.4% of girls were interested in stereotypically male jobs, but only 2.5% of boys were interested in stereotypically female jobs. This statistically significant difference suggests that boys are more confined in their gender performance and potentially do not see any value in traditionally female jobs. Boys who had a working mother reported a higher willingness for female stereotypic or gender-neutral jobs, and all children with working mothers noticed more female characters or reported no difference in the number of male and female cartoon characters. These children often reported less stereotypic behavior in both male and female characters. These results show that television has a powerful influence on children, but parental modeling is a crucial factor in the development of gender identity. The study demonstrates that even children as young as four are noticing these gender representations in their television programs and that what they are viewing is having an effect on what they want to be when they grow up. However, when stereotypic behavior on television is
paired with a non stereotypical gender portrayal by a parent, its effects can be muted or redirected (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997).

A study conducted by Halim, Ruble, and Tamis-LeMonda (2013) confirmed this relationship between television and parental modeling. Researchers interviewed 240 four-year-olds and their mothers about television viewing habits, peer and private regard about different genders, and division of housework. The results demonstrated that at four years, both boys and girls believe that people considered their own gender to be better than the other gender. For example, boys believed that other people thought boys were better than girls and vice versa. When exposure to a gendered division of housework and skewed representations on television, these attitudes changed. For boys, watching television reinforced their beliefs that boys were better, but for girls, television dampened their confidence in the superiority of girls. When mothers performed all of the housework, again girls’ perceptions shifted from same-gender to other-gender bias. Both parental modeling and television representations had strong effects on changing young girls’ perspectives of themselves and their view on how other people interpret gender roles. Interestingly, boys do not have the same results, likely due to the positive representations of males on television with which they identify (Halim, Ruble, and Tamis-LeMonda, 2013).

Another study looked at children’s self-reporting of the shows they watched and coded for use of gender pronouns, mention of gender-stereotyped behavior, and their thoughts on same-sex and other-sex characters (Calvert et al., 2002). Both boys and girls reported the same favorite television programs across each age group and as the study continued. By the end of the year, during the third phase of the study, the use of male pronouns were more prevalent than female pronouns for all age groups except for older girls. Children’s reports contained more male characters and masculine behaviors than female characters and feminine behaviors. Children reported male characters performing masculine behaviors, with female characters as likely to perform masculine behavior as they were feminine. The most cited heroic figure was Eliza, from The Wild Thornberrys. Sixty nine percent of girls wrote about her heroic actions compared to only 21% of boys; however, the study discovered that those children who listed The Wild Thornberrys as their favorite wrote more about female characters. The preference for The Wild Thornberrys, with its female lead, demonstrated that boys will watch programs with female-led characters, especially if those characters are seen as nontraditional or exhibiting traditionally masculine behaviors (Calvert et al., 2002).

While the choice in content is important in determining the effects on children’s development or understanding of gender stereotypes, time spent viewing television programs is a factor as well. Freuh and McGhee (1975) found that high amounts of television watching are associated with stronger traditional sex role development for both boys and girls at any age. This is likely due to repeated and continued exposure to gender stereotypes, allowing for the development of particular gender schemata that allows these thoughts to become normative.
Each study demonstrates the effect of television content and frequency of viewing on children’s perceptions of traditional gender roles. These representations are associated with a child’s sense of self and his or her beliefs about society’s regard for different genders and they shape how that child lives out his or her life.

**Sex-Typed Toys and Advertisements: Children at Play**

As seen with the example of *The Wild Thornberrys*, female characters often exhibit both male and female behaviors, especially as television continues to progress in its inclusion of more diverse characters and experiences. With complex narratives and often larger-than-life characters, it can be hard to determine more nuanced behavior as strictly feminine or masculine. For children, it is that much harder because they cannot distinguish the framing of a situation and how it might shift perceptions in the slightest way. Therefore, many children might be more influenced by commercials, specifically for toys, in determining what is traditionally feminine and what is traditionally masculine. Commercials often present the gendered product very clearly, with use of color and child actors, to demonstrate who is meant to use this product and who is not. The salience and tangibility of actually playing and interacting with these products only serves to further ingrain the gender schemata into the child’s mind. Though I have not found any research to support the above thoughts, I suspect that they could be viable hypotheses in future research.

Commercials do mirror television in their stereotypic portrayals of gender and these skewed representations are particularly prominent. In a study conducted by Hentges, Bartsch, and Meier (2007), it was determined that school-aged commercials will have nine times as many male authorities as female authorities compared with only 1.58 times as many for commercials from adult programs” (60). The researchers note that other research, such as the Klinger, Hamilton, and Cantrell study in 2001, indicates that both girls and boys respond positively to products marketed by and for boys, while the same cannot be said for feminine products or female-driven advertisements (Hentges, Bartsch, and Meier 2007). These false representations both exist and are imitated by the children who view them. A study by Anuradha (2012) confirms the social learning theory belief that commercials, through imitation and cultivation, contribute to children’s socialization in her study of children’s television commercials in India. Anuradha conducted focus groups which showed that children had ideas about “proper gender behavior...based on the stereotyped portrayals they saw in the media, especially television” (214). The children further recognized that certain products were assigned to either boys or girls and would only ask their parents to buy those types of toys (Anuradha 2012).

Not only do these toys reinforce already established gender schemata, they can also contribute to the actual formation of these frameworks. Chafetz (1974) argues that play and games socialize children into their accepted roles as breadwinner or caretaker for boys and girls, respectively. Girls’ toys often teach skills useful for mothering and domestic work, encouraging passivity rather than problem-solving (Mitchell, 1973). The media, of course, play a large role in
modeling these behaviors for the children. A study conducted by Wolf (1975) showed that children play longer with a toy after seeing it modeled by a child of the same-sex who has no consequences or receives a positive reward. Caldera, Huston, and O’Brien (1989) videotaped 40 parent-child pairs, half father-child and half mother-child, to observe how each pair interacted with feminine, masculine, and gender-neutral toys. While observing, the researchers coded the pairs for initial parent response to the toys, level and type of involvement, physical proximity between parent and child, and verbal interaction. Unsurprisingly, the researchers found that fathers with sons were most excited when opening a box of masculine toys and mothers with daughters were most excited to find feminine toys. Boys engaged more with masculine toys and girls played more with feminine toys. Most importantly, the study showed that it was the toy type, not gender of parent or child, which dictated parents’ verbal interactions. Feminine toys “elicited significantly more teaching, praise and questions” but these same interactions were significantly lower or nonexistent with masculine toys (Caldera, Huston, and O’Brien, 1989). This finding demonstrates that parent-child interaction changes based on the toy-type, but it requires more replicated results to provide proof that the nature of the toy itself can affect a child’s socialization and development of gender schemata (Caldera, Huston, and O’Brien, 1989).

Oftentimes, toy companies and advertisers will assign a sex-type to a seemingly gender neutral toy. Schwartz and Markham (1985) conducted a study where they presented college students with a list of 48 types of toys and asked them to label the toys as “for girls” or “for boys.” These labels were then compared to the toy catalog and the product’s advertisement to see how perception matched up with the product’s presentation. The results showed that even for toys labeled as only moderately or slightly masculine/feminine, their presentation was overly gender-stereotyped. For categories of toys that are seemingly gender-neutral, the individual products are often marketed as gender-specific, such as a pink tricycle with a flowered basket for girls compared to a blue mountain bike for boys. In a similar fashion, some advertisements depicted children with sex-inappropriate toys or toys that would traditionally be for a child of the opposite-sex: “A boy shown in a juvenile-scale kitchen was being served by a boy. A girl pictured with a magic kit was the boy magician’s assistant. A boy was shown with a fashion doll, but the doll was surrounded by athletic equipment including barbells” (Schwartz and Markham, 1985). There were some advertisements that displayed a child playing with a non stereotypic toy in a nontraditional way. However, in these instances the advertisements typically depicted both sexes interacting with the toy, as if to sanitize the effect of a nontraditional activity (Schwartz and Markham, 1985).

Toys advertised with both sexes whether gender-neutral, masculine or feminine, correlate with television’s portrayals of female characters enacting masculine and feminine behavior, but male characters never displayed feminine behavior. This translates to sex-typed toy play for young boys. Overall, boys spend more time with toys and play significantly more with masculine toys than girls do with
feminine toys (O’Brien, Huston, Risley, 1983). Similarly, boys are far more attuned to same-sex characters than are girls. These consistent findings across television and now sex-typed play hint at a stronger pressure on boys to adhere to gender norms. Society has stronger and clearer definitions of masculinity, which could explain this higher preference for same-sex toys in boys. The conflicting signals for girls in terms of media representations and sex-typed toys could be seen as a benefit; however, there appears to be more leniency because society values masculine behavior and traits and thus accepts girls who display those behaviors and traits.

Research has also shown that children are aware of these gender norms and the pressure for conformity. Brinkman et al. (2014) conducted a study of children aged ten to thirteen who had participated in a larger study. The researchers gathered the students into focus groups where discussion leaders asked questions like “Have you had experiences where you were treated differently or badly because you were a boy or girl?” The researchers operated from a socialization theory of development whereby they understood gender development to be a process that occurs over time and viewed children as active agents in their socialization, rather than passive recipients of social messages. Their experiment strongly suggests that children are very much aware of gender norms and stereotypes and make active decisions regarding how to display their gender. When alone, children will engage in more gender-neutral or gender-bending activities, but will not engage in those activities with another child, especially of the opposite sex. The answers from the focus groups also suggest that children understand the importance of authenticity and often remarked that it is more important to “be yourself” than it is to conform to gender stereotypes. However, they clearly weigh the benefits of authenticity with the costs of nonconformity. The students also mentioned the fluidity of gender and situational factors that change how that gender expression is received, proving their active involvement in their own gender performance (Brinkman et al., 2014).

The similar strands of gender identity formation found through television viewing, advertisements, and sex-typed toy play create a framework from which to analyze the role of gender in society. Clearly, there are a large variety of influences, some stronger than others, that contribute to children’s development of gender identity and traditional gender role schemata. With the findings presented in this paper, one can draw a mental picture of a typical child observing and absorbing the lessons learned from television and commercials and embodying those lessons in their everyday behavior, demonstrated through play. These forces work together in a system of gender norms and oppression that reinforce male superiority and female subordination.

However, it is important to note that gender roles are just as restrictive, if not more so, for males. Because society values what are deemed as traditionally masculine traits, it is encouraged for females to gender-bend and act more masculine. Society vilifies men who attempt to acquire more traditionally female characteristics. Overall, these studies demonstrate the need for greater awareness
about the effects of gender-stereotypic representations on television through programs and commercials, but should also demonstrate the need for actual initiatives to abolish such stereotypic portrayals.

Discussion

It is important to note, first and foremost, that many of the studies cited in this work were published before the Children’s Television Act and thus, could be considered outdated. While I chose to foreground my research around the Children’s Television Act, I did so mainly to offer a comparison between governmental regulation claiming to provide educational, entertaining programs and its failure to do so based on these problematic representations of gender. These stereotypic representations have occurred prior to the law’s enactment, as demonstrated in those studies dated before 1990, and they have continued despite potentially preventative legislation. Additionally, it may seem strange in such an innovative field where new research is constantly emerging for most of my sources to be 20-30 years old. However, in my pursuit of compiling seminal studies on how television may affect an individual’s formation of their gender identity, I discovered that most studies were either content analyses offering interpretations of or quantitative data on the program itself that disregarded the children watching, or were simple surveys on what children learned without concern for the specific content viewed. While this is problematic for my own research in attempting to provide a relevant compilation of materials for those interested in this subject, it also demonstrates that both the research methods, in addition to governmental regulation, need reform. Many of the research studies discussed above failed to approach the situation in a holistic manner. As I came to realize the lack of sources truly discussing how children develop their identity in terms of gender and what role television might play in that, this paper became a commentary on gender role stereotypes and children’s acquisition of these stereotypes through television. I hope to see a greater prevalence of comprehensive, holistic research studies that utilize psychological theories of development to actually observe the role of television in the development of gender identity, rather than its influence after the fact.

Though only a brief look into the world of gender identity formation and its correlation to media, this paper presents many key studies in the discussion of television’s effect on development of traditional gender role schemata. There have been many content analyses and studies conducted that have researched what exactly television programs are saying about different genders and how that influences society. However, this paper draws attention to a smaller, yet arguably more susceptible, fragment of society: children. Though it is unacceptable for any medium targeting any age group to depict stereotypical characters, it is unethical for those stereotypes to appear in children’s programming. The Children’s Television Act of 1990 was a moment of progress, but it has failed to make the sweeping reforms necessary in children’s programming. More stringent measures need to be taken to ensure these harmful and detrimental portrayals are not seen
by children. Though children are active agents in their socialization process, a barrage of stereotypic images can sway perception and development regardless.

These psychological theories were crucial for the framing of this paper, because each study structured their approach differently based on their operating assumption. Though social learning theory, cognitive-developmental theory, and gender schema theory all promote children as active agents and recognize gender as a construction, each theory varied on how much autonomy children have and to what extent they are formed by the forces at work around them. These psychological theories are not the only foundational approaches to take either. Researchers could also apply communication theories, sociological approaches, or feminist theories that again might provide a better framework from which to operate. Oftentimes, research succeeds in answering the what, but not the why. Having a strong theoretical foundation could be the key to establishing more in-depth answers that speak to exactly how gender evolves and what, if any, importance television has in that process.

We must continue this discussion on gender identity and the media in future research, conferences, and in the actual rooms creating the media images surrounding all of us. As theory evolves and we continue to view gender as a spectrum upon which we all fall, this dichotomous binary of “man” and “woman” can hopefully be eradicated. Like with so many things, it is to our children that we look to for the future and for progress. If we can socialize our children now to understand their gender as a fluid process evolving over time and in different situations, we can rest assured that they will do the same for their children. Media might play a crucial role, but it is our parents and peers that need to promote inclusivity and openness in their homes to affect any real change.

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