Gender enculturation

**How we learn our gender roles in society**

Directions: Read through each of the studies below. For each study, identify one strength and one limitation.

**Study I.** Martin & Halvorson (1983) carried out an experiment where stories were read to children of both genders between the ages of five and six. The researchers showed the children pictures of males and females in activities that were either in line with gender role schemas - for example, a girl playing with a doll - or inconsistent with gender role schemas - for example, a girl playing with a toy gun. A week later, the children were asked to remember what they had seen on the pictures. The children had distorted memories of pictures that were not consistent with gender role schemas - they remembered the picture of a girl playing with a toy gun as a picture of a boy playing with a toy gun. Children remembered more details and demonstrated less distortion of memory when the stories were consistent with gender schema. This supports the idea that children are actively seeking out information to confirm and develop their gender schema.

**Study II.** Martin et al (1995) carried out a study in which four-year-olds were presented with new toys that they would never have seen before, and which were gender neutral. They were then asked what they thought of the toy. After that, they were asked what they thought other boys and girls would think about the toy. Children predicted that same-sex children would like the toys as much as they did and that the other-sex children would not.

**Study III.** Fagot (1978) carried out a series of naturalistic observations of parent/child interactions. Toddlers and their parents were observed in their homes using an observation checklist. The researchers wanted to examine the parental reaction when the behaviour of the child was not "gender appropriate." It was found that parents reacted significantly more favorably to the child when the child was engaged in gender appropriate behavior and were more likely to give negative responses to "gender inappropriate" behaviors. Fagot and her team followed up by interviewing the parents. The parents' perceptions of their interactions with their children did not correlate with what was observed by the researchers, indicating that this is not a conscious behaviour.

**Study IV.** Williams (1986) studied the role of television on children’s gender roles development. He did this by assessing children’s gender stereotyping in towns where television had only been recently introduced - and then again two years later. He found that children had significantly more gender stereotypes after two years of exposure to television.

**Final task**

Which of the studies above do you think is most convincing in its findings? Why do you think that?

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