



MALE OR FEMALE? GENDER STEREOTYPING IN A SAMPLE OF ITALIAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the gender stereotypy concerning toys, traits, and jobs in a sample of 120 Italian college students attending the Faculty of Psychology in Catania. The authors measured the “gender stereotypy threshold” ranging from 70% to 100%, using the technique of forced choice relating to male and female silhouettes. College students attributed toys connected to aesthetic appearance and domestic activities to the female silhouette, while toys linked to technology and strategy, warfare, and locomotion were attributed to the male silhouette. The typical traits associated with the male silhouette were mainly linked to negative characteristics while those referring to the female silhouette evoked both positive and negative behaviors. Lastly, the typical jobs attributed to the male silhouette were characterized both by practical-manual activities and highly specialized ones, while those linked to the female silhouette were addressed to a reduced number of practical-manual activities mostly belonging to housework. Significant effects for sex and age groups were found: girls scored higher in gender stereotyping than boys and younger college students scored higher than older ones in the gender stereotyping. Future research could deepen this topic in different fields of study (i.e. hobbies and sport).

Keywords: Gender stereotypes, college students, stereotypy threshold

INTRODUCTION

Gender is considered to be the basic structure from which every human being develops his sense of socio-bio-psychic belonging and it is employed in the construction of the representation of Self and others with the same natural automatism through which, as Burr notes (1988), “breathing takes place”. According to the socio-cognitive perspective (McGuire & McGuire, 1981; Martin & Halverson, 1987), gender represents the most salient category guiding the elaboration processes of social information (De Caroli, 2005), and it is also the base for the construction of relationship models. We tend to structure our representations and expectations on the gender schema. If, for example, we meet a person that has



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been described with stereotypically feminine characteristics (i.e., talkative, sensitive, etc.), we probably imagine that she is sociable, protective, loves gardening, etc. This happens because of the social nature of the stereotypes that, as Tajfel claims (1981), are mainly “shared generalizations” by individuals and social groups. This generalization tendency can be extended to many modalities of knowledge of social environment, such as ethnic, national, religious stereotypes etc., but it is particularly salient and accessible (Bruner, 1957) in referring to the gender stereotypes.

Gender stereotypes are the fundamental means with which people come into contact with the others. They contribute to defining the characteristics connected to gender, characteristics that serve to determine the self-schema (Martin & Halverson, 1981; Markus *et al.*, 1982) and the other-schema (Hudak, 1993). If, on the one hand, the self-schema is the representation of one’s image, on the other hand, the other-schema may be considered as the representation of the image of others. According to Hudak (1993): “perceptions of oneself influence perceptions of others... Thus it is plausible that one’s perception of their self as more or less masculine or feminine will have an impact on how others are perceived” (1993, 280-281).

Gender stereotypes enable us to satisfy the need to giving consistency to the experiences that every individual has in daily life and, at the same time, to guide his behavior in a sense-making direction. These functions are evident above all when faced with ambiguous, poorly defined or unidentifiable information; people use the “reading” stereotypical modality of phenomena to give coherence to what does not appear to be coherent. In many circumstances, as verified in the developmental age (Signorella & Liben 1984; Serbin *et al.*, 2002) and in adulthood, individuals remember the stereotypical information more easily (Fyock & Stangor, 1994), modify the counter-stereotypical in stereotypical information (Carlston & Skowronski, 1994), evoke false memories, and produce new consistent links with their own stereotypes (Banaji & Greenwald, 1995).

In the literature related to the exploration of gender stereotypes, it is evident how some areas have been examined more than others. This happens in reference to the stereotypical attributions linked to toys, socio-cognitive traits, and occupations (Tremaine *et al.*, 1982; Franken, 1983) that, in most studies, seem to diversify the two genders, emphasizing the differences between the male and female genders. The studies carried out in this direction consistently indicate the presence of specific toys, traits, and occupations that, in a stereotypical manner, boys and girls attribute to their own gender or the other (De Caroli & Sagone, 2007). In the studies of Fagot (1977), Garrett *et al.* (1977), and O’Brien and Huston (1985), truck, soldiers, and tools are masculine toys, while doll, make-up set, and ring/necklace are stereotypically feminine. In the same way, traits, i.e. aggressive, strong, and assertive are typically identify as masculine, while romantic, sensitive, and sweet are stereotypically feminine (Carter & Patterson, 1982; Sellers *et al.*, 1999). Occupations such as doctor, policeman, and truck-driver are attributed to males, while baby-sitter, teacher, and secretary are associated to females (Carter & Patterson, 1982; Weinraub *et al.*, 1984). The above mentioned indications can be traced back to the literature referring to adults, pointing out some analogies between the frameworks related to the male and female models. This possible analogy can be explained, for example, by the investigation results comparing stereotypical attributions produced by children and by those who take care of them (parents or *caregiver*). The consistency of the stereotypical attributions suggests parental influence on present choices and on future expectations during the infant age. This aspect is confirmed in the studies realized by Thorne (1993), Lauer and Lauer (1994), and Santrock (1994): in fact, adults (and not only parents) offer gender-typed toys and encourage boys and girls to carry out gender-typed play activities, such as playing with a truck and preferring physical open-air activities (for boys), and playing with dolls and preferring domestic activities (for girls) (Eccles *et al.*, 1990).

The research focused on college students produced results which were often divergent (Cook, 1985), in the sense that it is not clear if this particular population develops gender-typed or scarcely differentiated stereotypes (Adams & Landers, 1978; Voss, 1980). The current study was focused on the comprehension of the gender-typed attributions direction in a sample of Italian college students attend-



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ing the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Catania in Sicily (Italy). The purpose of this study was to investigate, in particular, the gender stereotypes direction linked to toys, traits and occupational activities. It was predicted (Hypothesis 1) that college students would score high gender stereotyping in the three observed domains. Also, significant differences for sex and age groups in gender stereotyping were predicted (Hypothesis 2).

METHOD

Participants

The sample included 120 Italian college students, balanced by sex (60 boys, 60 girls) and age groups (Group I: 60 participants of 20-22 years of age; Group II: 60 participants of 23-25 years of age). The sample was randomly chosen from all college students attending the Faculty of Psychology at University of Catania in Sicily (Italy).

Materials and procedure

For the study of gender stereotypes, we used three tasks drawn from the specific literature (see De Caroli & Sagone, 2007), concerning choice of toys ("Gender Toys Choice"), socio-cognitive traits ("Gender Traits Choice"), and lastly, choice of jobs ("Gender Jobs choice").

During the investigation procedure, through the aid of a personal computer, we showed students a power point presentation consisting of 101 slides, randomly presented but identical for each student. There were 32 slides for *Gender Toys Choice*, 36 for *Gender Traits Choice*, and 33 for *Gender Jobs Choice* (see Box-1), and in each slide we inserted two silhouettes representing a male and female.

For the *Gender Toys Choice*, we selected some toys partly taken from the studies on adult age (Fisher-Thompson, 1990; Campenni, 1999): i.e. airplane, doll, play station, constructions, iron, car, football, gun, tea set, soldier, etc.

For the *Gender Traits Choice* (Bem, 1981; Best *et al.*, 1977; Orlofsky & O'Heron, 1987), we chose socio-cognitive traits, i.e. generous, ignorant, talkative, lonely, submissive, brave, robs other people's things, uses bad language, keeps promises, sweet, aggressive, etc. Since in the Italian language the adjectives may be grammatically masculine or feminine, we used the following question, i.e., "Who is the talkative one?", to avoid influencing the answers based on the gender of each adjective.

For the *Gender Jobs Choice* (Carter & Patterson, 1982; Weinraub *et al.*, 1984), we chose occupations, i.e. astronaut, baby-sitter, ballet dancer, truck-driver, sweeper, maid, florist, mechanic, traffic warden, etc. Also in this case we explicitly avoided asking college students questions like "who is the astronaut or the ballet dancer?", because this request would have altered their answers addressing them towards the male silhouette in the first case, or towards the female one, in the second. We substituted the name by indicating the specific occupation with statements like: "Who goes to the moon?", or "Who dances on the stage?" (see Box-1).

Box-1. Type of Tasks
<i>Gender Toys Choice</i> : n.32 slides
airplane, ring/necklace, kite, hair-dryer, doll, toy boat, milk bottle, bicycle, truck, pram, rocking horse, play station, constructions, iron, sewing machine, car, tools, colored pencils, teddy-bear, football, skates, pots, gun, puzzle, brush/mirror, robot, chess, tea set, soldier, drum, train, and make-up set.

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clever, calm, kind, nervous, liar, generous, creative, hungry, ignorant, talkative, intelligent, romantic, lonely, submissive, whiner, brave, robs other people's things, cruel, egalitarian, busy-body, self-confident, honest, uses bad language, keeps promises, conceited, commands others, defends the weaker, sweet, amusing, sensitive, strong, athletic, bad mannered, timid, aggressive, and poor.

Gender Jobs Choice: n.33 slides

going to the moon (astronaut), driving a truck (truck driver), curing sick people (doctor), repairing water pipes (plumber), repairing broken-down cars (mechanic), building houses (mason), cleaning the streets (sweeper), working in a factory (laborer), piloting an airplane (pilot), arresting thieves (policeman), putting out fires (fireman), delivering the mail (postman), and directing the traffic (traffic warden), taking care of children (baby-sitter), dancing on the stage (ballet dancer), being paid to clean people's houses (maid), making and selling sweets (confectioner), cutting and sewing dresses (dressmaker), serving in restaurants (waiter/waitress), teaching at school (teacher), and making appointments (secretary), acting at the theatre (actor), singing songs (singer), treating teeth (dentist), selling flowers (florist), writing in newspapers (journalist), judging suspects (judge), begging (beggar), painting pictures (painter), making laws (politician), directing films (film director), slicing ham and cheese (grocer), and making discoveries (scientist).

The presentation of the slides was administered in a group setting and in one session. On the data sheet the college students had to individually indicate, using the technique of forced choice, the silhouette to whom they attributed each toy, trait, and occupation.

Data analysis

The data analysis was carried out using the SPSS 15.0 and considering the "stereotypy threshold" as gender stereotypy indicator. In reference to this threshold, the value according to which each toy, trait or job stereotypy is established, by forced choice, is expressed in the range between 70% and 100% (Koblinsky *et al.*, 1978; Liben & Signorella, 1980; De Caroli & Sagone, 2007). The mean gender stereotypy reached by each college student was established by dividing the total number of gender-typed toys, traits, and jobs into the sum of only gender-typed choices by students. The range of gender stereotypy was equal to 0-1. Mean scores below the average .50 indicated low levels of gender stereotypy, while mean scores above the average .50 indicated high levels of gender stereotypy.

RESULTS**Gender Toys Choice**

Comparing the frequencies by means of the Chi-Square Test, college students scored high gender stereotypy levels, shared by boys and girls, for a value above 70%, concerning most of the toys (see Table I). The participants attributed the toys to the two silhouettes confirming the stereotypical direction verified in the literature (see De Caroli & Sagone, 2007). They assigned to the female silhouette toys that refer to aesthetic appearance (i.e. make-up set: 96,7%; ring/necklace: 95,8%) and to domestic activities (i.e. doll: 98,3%; iron and sewing machine; 97,5%), while they attributed the technologic-strategic toys (i.e. play station: 95,8%), tools of war (i.e. gun and soldiers: 97,5%), and locomotion means (i.e. truck: 97,5%; airplane: 96,7%; train: 94,2%) to the male silhouette.



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Table I: Gender Toys Choice
Gender-typed attributions to the two silhouettes*

Toy choice	Male Silhouette		Female Silhouette	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
<i>Airplane</i>	116	96,7	4	3,3
<i>Ring/necklace</i>	5	4,2	115	95,8
<i>Kite</i>	89	74,2	31	25,8
<i>Bicycle</i>	84	70	36	30
<i>Doll</i>	2	1,7	118	98,3
<i>Toy boat</i>	104	86,7	16	13,3
<i>Milk bottle</i>	13	10,8	107	89,2
<i>Truck</i>	117	97,5	3	2,5
<i>Pram</i>	7	5,8	113	94,2
<i>Constructions</i>	107	89,2	13	10,8
<i>Iron</i>	3	2,5	117	97,5
<i>Sewing machine</i>	3	2,5	117	97,5
<i>Car</i>	109	90,8	11	9,2
<i>Tools</i>	116	96,7	4	3,3
<i>Colored pencils</i>	22	18,3	98	81,7
<i>Teddy- bear</i>	13	10,8	107	89,2
<i>Football</i>	115	95,8	5	4,2
<i>Pots</i>	8	6,7	112	93,3
<i>Gun</i>	117	97,5	3	2,5
<i>Play Station</i>	115	95,8	5	4,2
<i>Robot</i>	113	94,2	7	5,8
<i>Chess</i>	113	94,2	7	5,8
<i>Tea set</i>	114	95	6	5
<i>Soldiers</i>	117	97,5	3	2,5
<i>Brush/mirror</i>	4	3,3	116	96,7
<i>Drum</i>	6	5	114	95
<i>Train</i>	113	94,2	7	5,8
<i>Make-up set</i>	4	3,3	116	96,7

* χ^2 Significance level $p < .01$

Gender Traits Choice

Data analysis showed that the stereotypy threshold was obtained only in 12 socio-cognitive traits, out of the initial 36 (see Table II). The characteristics assigned to the male silhouette were negatively defined, except for the trait of 'brave' (70%), while those referred to the female silhouette evoked both positive (keeps promises and sensitive: 75,8%; sweet: 72,5%) and negative behaviors (busybody: 72,5%).

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Table II: Gender Traits Choice
Gender-typed attributions to the two silhouettes*

Trait choice	Male Silhouette		Female Silhouette	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
<i>Talkative</i>	25	20,8	95	79,2
<i>Brave</i>	84	70	36	30
<i>Busybody</i>	33	27,5	87	72,5
<i>Uses bad language</i>	106	88,3	14	11,7
<i>Ignorant</i>	88	73,3	32	26,7
<i>Keeps promises</i>	29	24,2	91	75,8
<i>Sweet</i>	33	27,5	87	72,5
<i>Sensitive</i>	29	24,2	91	75,8
<i>Robs other people's things</i>	95	79,2	25	20,8
<i>Cruel</i>	86	71,7	34	28,3
<i>Bad mannered</i>	107	89,2	13	10,8
<i>Aggressive</i>	85	70,8	35	29,2

* χ^2 Significance level $p < .01$

Gender Jobs Choice

In relation to occupational activities, the participants stereotypically attributed a more articulated "professional repertory" in favor of the male silhouette; in fact, out of 29 gender-typed jobs, 19 were considered typically masculine and 10 typically feminine (see Table III). The male silhouette was marked by activities that include both practical-manual jobs (i.e. mason: 97,5; truck-driver: 95,8%; laborer: 85,8%) and highly specialist and cultural jobs (i.e. astronaut: 82,5%; judge: 79,2%; scientist: 75,8%; journalist: 72,5%). On the contrary, the female silhouette was represented by a reduced number of jobs mainly referred to domestic activities (i.e. dressmaker: 95,8%; maid: 91,7%; baby-sitter: 87,5%) and practical-manual ones (i.e. secretary: 76,7%; sweeper: 75,8%).

Table III: Gender Jobs Choice
Gender-typed attributions to the two silhouettes*

Job choice	Male Silhouette		Female Silhouette	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
<i>Baby sitter</i>	15	12,5	105	87,5
<i>Scientist</i>	91	75,8	29	24,2
<i>Politician</i>	106	88,3	14	11,7
<i>Film Director</i>	107	89,2	13	10,8
<i>Fireman</i>	113	94,2	7	5,8
<i>Dressmaker</i>	5	4,2	115	95,8
<i>Pilot</i>	112	93,3	8	6,7
<i>Traffic warden</i>	99	82,5	21	17,5
<i>Judge</i>	95	79,2	25	20,8
<i>Sweeper</i>	29	24,2	91	75,8
<i>Teacher</i>	20	16,7	100	83,3



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Secretary	28	23,3	92	76,7
Ballet dancer	13	10,8	107	89,2
Truck-driver	115	95,8	5	4,2
Waiter	36	30	84	70
Journalist	87	72,5	33	27,5
Policeman	113	94,2	7	5,8
Dentist	98	81,7	22	18,3
Astronaut	99	82,5	21	17,5
Postman	94	78,3	26	21,7
Florist	23	19,2	97	80,8
Postman	94	78,3	26	21,7
Mechanic	118	98,3	2	1,7
Grocer	92	76,7	28	23,3
Plumber	113	94,2	7	5,8
Maid	10	8,3	110	91,7
Mason	117	97,5	3	2,5
Singer	36	30	84	70
Laborer	103	85,8	17	14,2

* χ^2 Significance level $p < .01$

Gender stereotypy by tasks: GTC, GTrC, and GJC

Participants scored high levels of gender stereotypy in all three tasks: for GTC, $M=.92$, $SD=.09$, for GTrC, $M=.76$, $SD=.20$, and for GJC, $M=.85$, $SD=.11$. Pearson-product moment correlations showed that statistically significant relationships occurred for the GTC and GTrC ($r=.37$), GTC and GJC ($r=.66$), and GTrC and GJC ($r=.54$). Correlation was significant at the .01 level.

To verify the hypotheses, a 2 (sex of participants) x 2 (age groups) x 3 (type of task) analysis of variance was carried out on the mean gender stereotypy obtained by participants as shown in Table IV. Statistically significant effects for sex ($F_{3,114}=4.24$, $p=.007$) and age groups ($F_{3,114}=5.31$, $p=.002$) were found: in fact, girls scored higher in gender stereotypy than boys (GTC: $M=.95$ vs. $M=.90$; GTrC: $M=.81$ vs. $M=.72$; GJC: $M=.88$ vs. $M=.83$) and younger college students scored higher than older ones (GTC: $M=.94$ vs. $M=.91$; GTrC: $M=.82$ vs. $M=.71$; GJC: $M=.89$ vs. $M=.82$). No interaction effect due to sex and age was found.

Table IV: Gender stereotypy by tasks for sex and age groups – Total sample (N=120)

Tasks	Sex	Age Group	Mean	SD	$F_{(3,114)}$ for sex	$F_{(3,114)}$ for age group
Gender Toys Choice (GTC)	boys	I	.92	.06	10.83*	7.29*
		II	.88	.10		
	girls	I	.96	.03		
		II	.93	.09		
Gender Traits Choice (GTrC)	boys	I	.79	.17	5.35**	9.19*
		II	.66	.22		
	girls	I	.85	.15		
		II	.76	.21		
Gender Jobs Choice (GJC)	boys	I	.87	.07	6.89*	13.87*
		II	.78	.12		
	girls	I	.90	.07		
		II	.85	.13		

Range of gender stereotypy: 0-1
Significant level: * $p < .01$ ** $p < .05$



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DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The topic connected to the gender-typed expectations of Italian college students in reference to the play setting (with the “gender toy choice”), the identity specificity (with the “gender traits choice”), and, lastly, the occupational repertory identified as typical for the male and female profile (with the “gender jobs choice”) was analyzed.

These three areas constituted a kind of general framework in which, above all, toys and professional activities are articulated in a consistent manner. The toys stereotypically attributed to the male silhouette (i.e. truck, play station, robot, etc.) and to the female one (i.e. iron, doll, etc.) were particularly coherent with the stereotypical attributions related to professional choices (see De Caroli & Sagone, 2007). In addition, the practical-manual jobs (occupations such as mason, laborer, truck-driver, etc.) and the intellectual ones (occupations such as judge, astronaut, film director, etc.) were linked to the male working field; the professional activities addressed, mostly, to practical-manual jobs and “inside the house”, instead, were assigned to the female working field. It seems that men exclusively assume the management of decisions, affairs, and leadership, as in Boyce and Herd’s study (2003), in which the relationship between gender stereotypes and characteristics connected to power is prevalently attributed to men and almost denied to women.

In relation to the gender traits choice, the results suggested an interesting border “permeability” of the male and female profile because participants showed several traits in a balanced way for the two silhouettes. The limited numerical consistency of traits indicated the reduction of the “psychological markers” that distinguish the two genders.

According to the hypothesis 1, college students scored high levels of gender stereotyping in the three domains, in the sense that they produced a dichotomous representation of male and female genders, particularly in toys and jobs. In reference to hypothesis 2, the choice of toys, traits, and jobs was rigidly stereotyped in girls and in younger college students.

Future research could be carried out to verify the relationship between representational profiles linked to two genders and individual ideas on Self as male or female. Furthermore, it would be very interesting to extend this survey to other domains such as hobbies and sports, and to verify this issue in subjects attending different Faculties (such as Law and Engineering).

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