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Gender profiles in children - How fifth elementary grade students attribute roles to Cypriot men and women

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Synopsis

This study investigated gender profiles in fifth elementary grade students in Cyprus. The purpose of the study was to illuminate how gender profiles produced by the media are integrated into children's personal beliefs and theories about the social roles of men and women, hence creating stereotypes. Therefore, the findings of the research will provide useful insights into the children's conceptual world and help to develop a framework for educational policy in order to tackle problems potentially created by stereotypes. Moreover, stakeholders (such as the Cyprus Radio Television Authority) will be able to match stereotypes emerging from TV programmes with children's beliefs and attitudes and suggest specific counter measures in order to minimise this effect.

Introduction: Gender profiles in Children

The role of stereotypes and their use in understanding the social world has often been a topic of research. The scientific jury seems to agree that stereotypes are part of a mental schematic structure that allows the social environment to seem stable and predictable (Fiske & Taylor, 1984, 1991; Meehan & Janik, 1990). Thus stereotypes can be realised as tools that help people organise information about their social world (Allport, 1954). Despite the advantages that the use of stereotypic categories provide for social information processing, their application can have clearly detrimental effects especially for individuals who are stereotyped in terms of choices, education, and personal relationships and via this process assigned inferior social roles (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1984, 1991; Liben & Signorella, 1987; Hughes & Setta, 2003).

Stereotypes are infused into every aspect of the societal mechanisms that shape future citizens. They are incorporated into the processes of socialisation and create lessons that are taught and learned as early as a child is born. In the contemporary era, where children spend less time interacting with their parents and peers and lose interest in reading books, television is probably the major vehicle through which children learn about appropriate behaviours, particularly gender-appropriate behaviours, and about the relative desirability of performing those behaviours. There is now fairly widespread conceptual agreement and empirical support for the view that television can and does profoundly influence both children and adults (e.g. Frueh & McGhee, 1975; McGhee & Frueh, 1980; Jennings, Geis, & Brown, 1980). From thousands of hours of viewing television, children receive messages about gender roles (Witt, 1997). The manner in which genders are represented in television programmes impacts children's attitudes and perceptions of gender-appropriate behaviour in society. Sexism can be so insidious that it quietly conditions boys and girls to accept the way they see and read the world, thus

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reinforcing gender images (Fox, 1993). This reinforcement predisposes children to not question existing social relationships. Since very young children often have difficulty telling fantasy from reality, they are particularly susceptible to the portrayals of gender types on television.

The high social impact of mass broadcasting is broadly acknowledged, and its role in preventing or reinforcing discrimination is of great importance. From that point of view, the negative role of Mass Media in the process of implementing gender mainstreaming has been broadly research evidenced. Mass Media produce and reproduce negative stereotypes, and they play a dominant role in the stereotyped socialisation of youth (Burton & Pollack, 2002; Fenton, 2000; Frankson, 2000a,b; UNESCO, 2003; UN, <http://www.un.kiev.ua/bc/tenders/99/>). Within this framework, this study seeks to illuminate how gender profiles produced by the media are integrated into children's personal beliefs and theories about the social roles of men and women. Specifically, the study attempts to identify:

- a) How Gender Mainstreaming through television broadcasting is apprehended by the students,
- b) Students' stereotypical perceptions about the role of the Cypriot men and women,
- c) Whether students' background factors (gender, SES) contribute to a differential perspective about the role of the genders,
- d) Whether students' stereotypical perceptions vary in relation with the overall time they watch television.

Methodology

The participants in the study were 588 students (284=boys (49.9%) and 285=girls (50.1%)) of the fifth elementary grade from randomly selected schools all over Cyprus. In order to obtain participants in the appropriate age group, parental consent forms were sent home. Self-administered questionnaires were given to the students who returned the consent forms. A total of 569 children completed the questionnaires. Data was collected about children's background factors such as their parents' occupational and educational status. The instrument developed for this study was a questionnaire which measures students' perceptions about the role of the Cypriot man and woman. The instrument was developed based on prior qualitative analysis of eight Cypriot TV series which revealed specific profiles about gender behaviour, emotion, self-image and stereotypes (Koutselini, Papastephanou & Papaioannou, 2006).

The investigation of Cypriot women's and men's representation through TV broadcasting was studied through randomly selected Cypriot television series. The Cypriot television series consisted of self-existent, meaningful episodes and refer to the daily happenings of Cypriot society, while their script is written only by Cypriot citizens - both men and women. The series assembled high rates of audience and attracted a variform television public, men, women and children, from all educational and socio-economic layers, in urban and provincial regions. The collection, coding and final sampling of television data went through a five phase process. These phases constitute graded stages of coding and investigating the characteristics of each series (frequency,

repetition, period of broadcast, duration, and area of television program) and were collected using an Instrument of Recording Behaviours (IRB) and Textualised Dialogues specially developed for the analysis of the 158 episodes of the sample. ATLAS software was used for data coding. Initially, the recordings of observed action in each scene were completed based on an observational key by a team of four researchers. The observed action of persons per scene, verbal and non-verbal – was coded in the observational key based on the following six categories, which were used respectively for both genders: behaviours, stereotypes, sentiments, roles, characterisations and self-esteem. Afterwards, the electronic forms of ‘observed’ recordings per scene were processed in ATLAS. Codes, categories, families and superfamilies of action for men and women correspondingly were progressively shaped. The final superfamilies that emerged are the following: shaped characterisations that concern the private and public life, negative and positive characterisations of personality and declarative characterisations of origin.

Statements included in the questionnaire of the present study were developed in order to best describe these superfamilies. Normative statements (a man/woman should...) were also included in order to further examine whether certain stereotypes produced by the media about men or women emerged into children’s perceptual images. The questionnaire consisted of 23 pairs of statements. The first statement of each pair refers to men while the second refers to women. The 46 statements are scaled from 1 to 4 (1= definitely not true- 4= definitely true). Extreme values (1 and 4) infer that a certain statement can be generalised hence indicating the existence of a stereotype about Cypriot men or women. A second part of the questionnaire consisted of questions about students’ background factors. Hence, further data was collected about the education and occupation of the participants’ parents as well as about the time each student spends watching TV daily and during the weekends. Data was entered and statistics calculated by SPSS 12.0 for Windows. Thus, statistical techniques of T-test paired samples, ANOVA and MANOVA were conducted with participants’ scores, with independent variables in the analysis being gender, socioeconomic status and time spent watching television.

Results

Descriptive statistics generated from the questionnaire indicated the time that children spend watching television daily ($M= 3.74$, $SD= 2.36$) and during the weekends ($M= 6.17$, $SD= 4.1$). Since the ratio of the skewness was significantly greater than 0, (1.98, 1.69) we cannot infer that the variables are normally distributed. Therefore, further descriptive statistics were performed in order to best describe the amount of time spent watching TV. Independent samples from the t-test indicated no significant difference among boys and girls in time spent watching TV daily ($t(550) = -7.48$, two tailed $p=.45$) and during the weekends ($t(550) = .201$, two tailed $p=.07$). In addition, analysis of variance indicated no significant statistical differences in the students’ responses in relation to time spent watching television daily or during the weekends. However, a significant relation was discovered between time spent watching TV during the weekends and father’s level of education ($F(4,537) = 3,445$, $p=0,004$). Post hoc test (Scheffe) revealed that children whose father has a higher education degree ($M=2.40$, $SD=1.04$) tend to spend less time watching TV during the weekends than children whose father has graduated from lower secondary school ($M=2.94$, $SD=1.31$) ($p=0,035$).

Table 1: Paired Samples Statistics: Comparisons of mean scores for men and women

Q no	Question	S.D.	X	Pair	Q's	Sig.
1	Men are good at politics	.820	2.99	Pr1	1 & 2	.844
2	Women are good at politics	.786	2.26			
3	Men earn high income	.804	3.06	Pr2	3 & 4	.000
4	Women earn high income	.843	2.80			
5	Men must be handsome to get married	1.110	2.14	Pr3	5 & 6	.000
6	Women must be beautiful to get married	1.183	2.40			
7	Men scream hysterically without reason	1.001	2.10	Pr4	7 & 8	.002
8	Women scream hysterically without reason	1.009	2.21			
9	Men must have wedding portion to marry	.980	1.77	Pr5	9 & 10	.000
10	Women must have wedding portion to marry	1.055	1.90			
11	Men must do household chores	1.001	2.23	Pr6	11 & 12	.799
12	Women must do household chores	.759	3.51			
13	Men are good at business	.738	3.29	Pr7	13 & 14	.090
14	Women are good at business	.820	2.41			
15	Men eat constantly when under stress	.897	1.91	Pr8	15 & 16	.000
16	Women eat constantly when under stress	1.045	2.25			
17	Men are insecure and fearful	.900	1.70	Pr9	17 & 18	.002
18	Women are insecure and fearful	.985	2.37			
19	Men are good as managers	.818	3.16	Pr10	19 & 20	.025
20	Women are good as managers	.912	2.81			
21	Men are the cornerstone of the family	.842	3.44	Pr11	21 & 22	.570
22	Women are the cornerstone of the family	.958	2.69			
23	Men are emotional	.838	1.93	Pr12	23 & 24	.001
24	Women are emotional	.825	3.28			
25	Men are smart	.894	3.02	Pr13	25 & 26	.573
26	Women are smart	.855	3.17			
29	Women read the newspaper to learn the news	.856	1.91	Pr15	29 & 30	.002
30	Men read the newspaper to learn the news	.692	3.57			
31	Men are more qualified	1.005	2.73	Pr16	31 & 32	.393
32	Women are more qualified	.927	2.66			
35	Men help their friends	.822	3.27	Pr18	35 & 36	.000
36	Women help their friends	.841	3.34			
37	Men care about the poor	.886	2.46	Pr19	37 & 38	.000
38	Women care about the poor	.877	2.89			
39	Men do charity and help anyone in need	.839	2.50	Pr20	39 & 40	.000
40	Women do charity and help anyone in need	.813	2.99			
41	Men constantly think about getting married	1.018	2.43	Pr21	41 & 42	.000
42	Women constantly think about getting married	.968	2.96			
43	Men are strict as parents	.922	2.58	Pr22	43 & 44	.036
44	Women are strict as parents	.927	2.41			
45	Men are jealous persons	1.115	2.62	Pr23	45 & 46	.021
46	Women are jealous persons	1.014	2.93			

The paired samples T-test indicated that most mean scores between the statements referring to men ($1.70 < M < 3.44$, $0.738 < SD < 1.110$) and women ($1.90 < M < 3.51$, $0.692 < SD < 1.183$) are significantly different (two-tailed $p < .05$). Mean scores for women were higher in cases emphasising emotionality and inferior social roles. On the other hand mean scores for were higher in statements related to more prestigious social profiles. The mean scores and levels of significance are shown in table 1.

As indicated in table 1, students tend to consider that men compared to women earn higher income, are better as businessmen and better as managers. They also consider that men read the newspaper in order to learn the news and are stricter parents than women. On the other hand, students tend to consider that women when compared to men are more emotional, more often shout hysterically without a reason, are more insecure and fearful, eat constantly when under stress and are more jealous persons. The results also indicate that students tend to consider that women think about getting married much more than men and also tend to believe that it is more important for a woman than a man to have a wedding portion in order to get married. Students also tend to believe that women surpass men when it comes to helping friends, helping the poor and doing charity.

In most cases girls tend to be more favourable towards women than boys as indicated in independent sample comparisons of mean scores. Girls' mean scores were significantly higher than boys' ($p < .05$) in most statements where positive qualities were associated to women ($2.45 < M < 3.09$, $0.744 < SD < 0.924$ for girls & $2.06 < M < 2.92$, $0.772 < SD < 0.969$ for boys). On the other hand girls' mean scores were significantly lower than boys' in statements indicating a negative quality for women ($1.74 < M < 3.44$, $0.790 < SD < 1.01$ for girls, $2.02 < M < 3.59$, $1.02 < SD < 1.12$ for boys).

Discussion

As indicated by the results of the present study gender stereotypes in Cypriot children are an indisputable fact. Beliefs derived through this research reflect the corresponding images portrayed by TV broadcasts. Most of the findings of the previous phase of this research (Koutselini, Papastephanou & Papaioannou, 2006) concerning scrutinising popular TV broadcasts were replicated in the findings of the present phase.

Hence, within children's conceptual schemata, the female profile in relation to its male counterpart is illustrated in lines of emotionality and social inferiority. Women's profile is depicted as an affecting yet not rational human being. A woman is often carried away by heightened emotionality in extreme feelings and behaviours such as jealousy, nervous consumption of food and unreasonable hysteria. Women are believed to feel more insecure than men and set getting married as one of their higher priorities. Children's perceptions about females portray women as caring individuals who help their friends and anyone in need. Respectively, men's profile is constructed along the principle of social status. Men earn higher income, are better as businessmen and managers.

Despite the fact that children attribute an inferior social role and status to women, one must be aware of the limitations and barriers that gender stereotypical roles impose on

both genders. Just as girls are trapped in passive roles, boys and men are rarely described as people demonstrating emotions of sadness and fear. Thus, as women are brought up to be confined and inferior towards men, men are deprived of their emotionality. Stereotypes limit boys' and girls' freedom to express themselves and suppress their character and personality.

Surprisingly, perceptions about gender profile were found to be independent of socioeconomic status, despite the fact that a large percentage of the participants' mothers were university graduates and had an occupation of high status. Thus, even though men and women are crossing the boundaries of gender stereotypes and are taking on increasingly androgynous roles, traditional gender-role stereotypes persist in the face of disconfirming information. Even when faced with behaviours that are clearly inconsistent with these stereotypes, individuals retain, and even strengthen, their stereotypic beliefs about men's and women's roles (e.g., Stangor & McMillan, 1992). According to the schema-maintenance through compensation model, individuals generate expectations concerning the future behaviours of other members of the deviant target's group even when the group member is related to the deviant target only in terms of common category membership (Hughes and Seta, 2003). Thus, 'one rotten apple does not spoil the whole barrel' - a generally adaptive aspect of this process when applied to the maintenance of socially valued stereotypes.

Despite the fact that no relation was discovered concerning the student's responses and time spent watching TV, we cannot neglect the large amount of time overall the children devote to watching TV. We can therefore argue that even a minimum exposition to television programmes is an adequate condition for absorbing the salient messages of gender discrimination. This of course is only an assumption since our methodology does not allow deduction of such a conclusion without further investigation of the degree that all the other socialising agents play in the process of creating stereotypic perceptions and beliefs. It is therefore essential to conduct further investigations in order to examine the role that parents, peers, teachers and other siblings might play in the construction and perseverance of stereotypes. These agents must be an integral part of an equation that would consider interwoven relations of these factors hence allowing the drawing of conclusions about the cumulative effect that each factor, or groups of factors might have on nurturing gender discrimination. Additional research must also be undertaken in order to explore the quality of broadcasts that children are exposed to and examine whether the same pattern of beliefs exists in relation to the programmes quality. Hence a quality framework must be established in order to ensure that all socialising agents are in line with the EU gender mainstreaming policy which is primarily based on right to be different and the commitment on an effort to change the structures that preserve the unequal relationship between the two sexes.

Gender mainstreaming is defined as reorganisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and all stages, by the actors that are normally involved in policy making. Gender mainstreaming policy involves both women and men and makes full use of human resources, it makes gender equality visible in the mainstream of society and it takes into account the diversity among women and men.

Conclusion

For mainstreaming to be effective, what is required is a suitable infrastructure of political, financial and professional support. This infrastructure is not however solely adequate. A new ethos must therefore be established which will be based primarily on the person itself thus allowing the transcendence of barriers placed by stereotypical and normative definitions about men and women. Males and females must seize the opportunity to form categories that define and shape acceptable behaviour and way of conduct. Black and white polarities are giving way to fuzzy gray zones in the same way that homosexuals have fought their way into the recognition of their right to be different. However the quest of equality, whether it is related to gender, ethnicity, religion or elsewhere, is a long one. The longest lever that humanity has at its disposal is education. Via education the construction of equality will follow the deconstruction of inequality hence creating in the long run the new culture that will celebrate and honour difference.

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