# Observing gender roles among 2-year olds

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There are many different environmental factors at work that, together with young children functioning as active agents themselves, help to shape, establish and develop a child's gender identity and stereotypes about others. A daycare environment is an important catalyst in these effects, since children are exposed to their similarly developing peers for long periods of time in a structured atmosphere. To examine these effects in an empirical setting there was cooperation with a private international daycare in the greater Helsinki region, to observe eight children with an average age of 35 months during a 30-minute free playing session. For the participant contrived observation existing stereotypical traits related to femininity and masculinity were sought, combined with toy selection and playing partner selection preferences. This was followed up by a contrived situation in which the children were given a drinking cup during snack time of a color conflicting with their presumed stereotypical preference, to see if the degree of gender socialization would be a factor in the children's response. Due to preference for independent play or non-participation in the free playing session some children did not display many personality traits or playing partner preferences. The overall observation result indicated no strong gender socialization in terms of personality traits, but a clear preference for selecting same-sex playing partners. The contrived situation elicited no noteworthy response from the children in the group. From the results could be concluded that the age group has possibly not experienced socialization factors for a long enough time to show strict gender roles. Overall high well-being of the children in a private daycare could also form a buffer for mild negative events. The methodology of the observation and limited manipulation of the children's normal routine may also have played a role in the results. Furthermore, due to lack of cross-cultural similarities between gender stereotypes, personality traits from the Bem Sex Role Inventory are not the most valid determinant to tell how feminine or masculine a person is.

gender socialization, gender norms, observational study, gender stereotypes

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## 1 Introduction

The field of gender related studies has seen an exhaustive amount of research and developments over the last century, yet remains a topic that provokes interest and sparks discussions in both private and national media spheres. I'm interested in gender because it is a piece of our identity that is often taken for granted as a fundamental pillar of our being, to which certain roles and actions belong. Yet at the same time, there is a strong influence of our surroundings shaping that part of our identity. We can take one glance at another person, and based on their gender have a whole range of behavioral expectations and judgments ready, before we know anything about them. This instant evaluation from others can shape our own behavior and influence the expectations we have about other people. The topic catches my attention every now and then, since elements about gender and its associated stereotypes are encountered on a daily basis. Another aspect that makes gender interesting to me is its close link to our well-being. We experience a sense of society's expectations about our behavior based on our gender, which can manifest as some invisible pressure and judgment about our day to day actions. Being viewed as not conforming to gender stereotypes can either be empowering our sense of being a unique individual or cause inner turmoil through identity crises. Knowing more about expectations from society and the processes behind them can help alleviate some of the pressure experienced from behaving according to gender roles or not, and contribute to our well-being.

From childhood until adult life, there are degrees of segregation between genders and expectations about behavior that are quite noticeable, but perhaps less so in Finland compared to the international literature that was examined, considering gender roles are a bit more fluid on international comparisons, as shown by Wiles et al.'s (1995) analysis of Hofstede's Masculinity index. Even in more liberal countries, it's nonetheless possible for there to be negative implications for people's well-being once situations occur where gender segregation is interfered with. Our society can be considered liberal by some standards, but within that society there are still different degrees of conservatism and traditionalism that can contribute to people experiencing greater pressures to conform to gender norms.

## 2 Background

When considering a thesis topic related to early childhood development, I recalled that I enjoyed writing about gender before, so I decided to find a link between gender development relevant to young children. I still remember the first time that I became keenly aware of how strongly gender roles affect the well-being of children in a daycare. A young boy's "Cars" franchise pencil case had been forgotten at home, so he had to resort to using neutral, bland

tools while his friends had their gendered franchise items on display and in use. He had an expression of intense disappointment and distress as a result. While these types of situations might seem trivial through the eyes of an adult, they are a quite significant crisis to a young child. Was this a simple matter of a child's favored item not being available, or did this masculine themed pencil case make up a piece of the child's gender identity that was important to the child? I wanted to find out more, so I gradually increased my focus on the topic of gender roles over the course of the past few years.

People are social animals, with a desire to belong to some societal groups. Expectations about oneself and others affects the way we feel and behave. Whether it's the young boy with his "Cars" pencil case being unavailable, a tomboy between other girls that are being brought up as sensitive and feminine, or an adult male unable to join their friends in seeing an ice hockey game: when you stray far enough from the norm, through choice or by accident, failing to live up to the role expected of you can have negative consequences for how others view you, and your well-being in general. From my experience working in daycares in Finland, I have seen recurring elements of behavior and apparent preferences that mimic and exaggerate adult conventional gender roles. More recently, during my practice placement and work at a daycare, I was again witnessing processes in crucial developmental periods among children, where the foundation is laid for their knowledge about gender, and the experiences occur where their future gender identity is built on. Gender stereotypes was a subject I sometimes addressed during my practice placement among four to five year old children, by mentioning that I liked pink, or challenge other stereotypes in the segregated play sessions of girl princesses and boy ninjas by saying that girls can also be ninjas, and boys princes. The concrete result of this was that at the end of my practice placement period, the children of both genders would occasionally combine their fantasy play in elaborate ways, where the nurturing roles that were emulated by the girls ("I'm the mommy, you're the baby, and you're the cat") being combined with the more violent tones of the boys, resulting in a compromise where both genders would play together ("I'm the mommy ninja, you're the daddy ninja"). I had already seen firsthand that young children possess the tools to overcome gaps created by gender stereotypes. If a child unfamiliar to the group would have been introduced to the mixed group of ninjas playing family, they might have a negative reaction to their stereotypically masculine or feminine role while playing being challenged, but in this case the children had come up with it themselves.

## 2.1    Working life partner

My previous experiences combined with some early impressions of literature available on the subject of gender socialization made me eager to find some links between gender theory and the practical situation in a daycare. I cooperated with a private international daycare in the

greater Helsinki region, consisting of four different age groups. The groups are small, with an average of thirteen children per group, and an emphasis being made by the staff to develop emotional safety, social and English language skills, as well as nurturing respect in a diverse environment. The staff pays personal attention to the children as individuals, in order to provide tailored, high quality daycare services. This cooperation provided a great opportunity to focus my research on one particular age group, and discover potential roles different cultures might play in the gender typing of children. I was keen on exploring the topic further by performing an observational study.

One key element in preparing for the observational study that was going to be a part of the thesis, was both the cooperation of the working life partner and the parental consent for the observation. After I had submitted my thesis contract, I was approached with an offering of support from another staff member who had done some gender studies as well. I felt there was good mutual cooperation, even though at times I failed to match my communication with my thesis plan progress. If I had gotten an idea and developed it, I would then drop the result of the development on the working life partner like a bombshell, without having separate talks or small updates leading up to those new developments. After the working life partner mentioned this, I would try to communicate my progress more frequently with both the working life partner and teachers from the age group I planned to observe. Informing the group's teachers about my plans was important, since they had a good idea whether the contrived situation would be too much of a disruption on the children's daily routines, and they have the strongest established relationship of trust with the parents. I needed to secure the teacher's support in conducting the study, and provide clear and concrete information to the other teachers. This way they would be able to provide additional information to the parents in case questions would arise, and would prefer to discuss it with a more familiar teacher. As far as the parental consent was concerned, since through my previous work I had already developed at least a rudimentary relationship with most of the parents from the group I wanted to observe, I did not anticipate a lot of problems concerning the consent to the study. Considering the fact that the number of subjects for my observational study was directly dependent on parental consent, it did remain a critical element of my preparation. I had agreed with the working life partner that I would only include children into the observational study if explicit permission from the parents had been given. I tried to word the parental consent form in such a way that any negative implications around the topic of gender socialization would be negated somewhat.

3    Theoretical framework

Different theoretical schools have contributed to our understanding of gender, with varying focus throughout the years. The evolutionary standpoint is that our gendered society helps men try out what limitations there are on socially accepted aggression in their search for a place in the hierarchy of dominance, while women practice skills of nurturing that they will need in the future to care for infants (Maccoby 1998). Freud's psychoanalytical theory is perhaps the best known, where a child's awareness of their own genitals, and their relationship with their parents, are seen as the most important factors in the development of gender identity. It is however difficult to find evidence for central themes of Freud's theory, for example the castration anxiety that is a part of the Oedipus conflict. Young children are unlikely to understand the concept of castration, so it is not plausible that a fear of castration would cause a child to behave in a certain way. A conservative theory such as this where biological sex is seen as the ultimate factor in determining one's personality doesn't fit very well in a modern, holistic view on gender identity. There are meaningful things that can be taken from other biological perspectives on gender, though. There are of course the physical differences between the sexes, with small associated temperamental differences (Else-Quest et al. 2006).  Genetic differences between genders play a larger role for girls, since boys experience stronger social pressures to conform to their gender identity (Iervolino et al. 2005). These initial small dissimilarities between genders will later be deepened through socialization effects. This socialization refers to the process through which an individual's caregivers and people in their environment develop the individual's behavior, through teaching norms and values.

According to social cognitive theory, a child with a secure attachment to a caregiver develops an earlier awareness about themselves (Pipp et al. 1992). Through secure attachment, a child has developed a relationship with a caregiver, viewing them as a source of protection, security and comfort. The child trusts that the caregiver will eventually come back to the child even when the child is alone or with others. This self-awareness gained from secure attachment is later expanded through dialogue with the child's caregiver. Talking about past events helps the child to establish autobiographical memory, where they place themselves as an individual human being in their memory of events that have occurred (Farrant and Reese 2000). This is especially significant for the age group of my observation, since their vocabulary is advanced enough to have an interactive dialogue with their caregivers about a wide variety of subjects. However, parents talk differently with their child based on their gender. Boys are probed for specific information about things happening in the past, while girls are encouraged to explain their own account of past events (Reese et al. 1996). Children's exposure to different ways of establishing autobiographical memory around the time they learn to talk contrib-

utes to the assumption that different genders are perhaps not that much different to begin with, but are definitely socialized differently.

Once a child's self-awareness has been established, the next step is to place that "self" in different categories that emerge from observing reality. With regards to gender, for example, children might start to associate the color blue and cars as subcategories belonging to their understanding of their gender. According to Kohlberg (Maccoby (ed.) 1966), it is natural to start developing a positive view of traits associated with your own category. It is in these traits associated with a child's different mental categories that the gender stereotypes relevant to my observation become apparent. Through gathering knowledge about categories that can be applied to themselves and to others, children start to establish a gender identity. One aspect of a child's gender identity includes an awareness of pressure to conform to the gender categories, as well as an opinion about other gender categories as viewed from within the person's own category (Egan and Perry 2001). As the children develop and build knowledge about gender categories, they gradually integrate behaviorial characteristics, traits, interests and attitudes that are more common to their sex than those of the opposite sex (Maccoby 2002).

3.1    Gender socialization

The concept of gender goes a step further then the biological differences between the sexes: it is part of what shapes and defines a person's identity. Already in the earliest stages of our development, we start to see ourselves as either a man or a woman, although it is more accurate not to see gender as a binary system, where you either belong to one category or you don't, but a multidimensional spectrum of gendered traits (Constantinople 1973, Marsh and Myers 1986). Stern et al. (1987) found that we experience society's conventions about the gender category we belong to ourselves as reasonable, but the way we define the opposite sex is a bit more bewildering. Kohlberg (Maccoby (ed.) 1966) argues that natural origins of gender differences are eventually modified by cultural factors, with roles fitting to a particular sex being taught to us and being positively reinforced by our environment. This division of roles is paired with societal expectations about one's behavior – if your biologically determined sex is *x*, it is presumed that you are also going to behave in accordance with culturally determined gender roles that fit with *x*. The society we belong to views the psychological differences between men and women as such that men are more concerned with the challenges that the world around them poses, while women are more involved with caring for others (Spence and Hall 1996).

These environmental factors playing a role in shaping our identity require us to experience them for quite some time for them to become integrated in our identity. To dispel uncertain-

ty about whether the group at the daycare to be observed, with ages from two up to three years, would already be sufficiently socialized according to their gender, some initial research was conducted. Williams and Bennett (1975) developed a method to explore children's knowledge about gender stereotypes, called the Sex Stereotype Measure. First, they let psychology students grade adjectives based on whether they fit more to a male or female stereotype. Based on the suitability of the adjective for children's vocabulary, other researchers would then construct a short story, concluding with a question (for example "which person is the strong person?") about an unknown person, using adjectives that fit the male or female stereotype. The story would be read to a child, who would then choose who the story was about, by pointing to a picture of a man or woman. If the child would hear a short story with adjectives fitting a female stereotype, for example describing an emotional, mild or sensitive person, and would then point out that the story was about the woman in the picture, they would have matched the stereotype with the gender. They found that five year old children already possess good knowledge about gender stereotypes (Williams et al. 1975), which means that the socialization processes must already be taking place and be possibly observable during the preceding years. However, between ages two and five a developmental trajectory occurs with rapid changes, so it would be just as likely for the socialization processes not to have taken root yet.

## 3.2   Formation of a child's own gender norms

A clever experiment by Gweon and Schulz (2011) supported my search into whether or not two year old children would already capable of the rational processes required to develop gender stereotypes. They showed a 16-month old child three different colored toys, tubes with a button on top. The buttons didn't have any function. The green toy had a hidden switch at the bottom of the toy, so it could produce some music when the toy was pressed down on a hard surface. The red toy was on a piece of cloth that the child could pull closer to them, or point at, in order for their parent to give it to them. In different settings of the experiment, different experimenters would either demonstrate that the green toy worked for them or not, by pressing the button on top of the toy while the toy was on a hard surface. This would create the illusion that pressing the button would cause music to start playing. The toy would then be given to the child, who was seated in a baby chair with a soft felt cover on the table tray. The soft material on top of the table would prevent the hidden switch in the toy from activating the sound. When the children failed to make any music with the toy, they would give it to their parent, instead of taking the other colored toy or asking for it. The child had seen and heard that the toy can make a sound, but couldn't reproduce the sound themselves. Rather than making the assumption that the toy was broken, and reaching for the different colored but otherwise similar toy, they assumed that they were doing something

wrong. If they saw that different experimenters couldn't get the toy to work reliably, they would ask for the other toy instead of ask their parent to help them get it to work.

The results from this experiment can be generalized to how children under two years old are already capable of figuring out cause and effect. Gender roles and differences in activities between parents are perceivable by children, and conclusions can be drawn about people based on the way they dress and behave. It seems likely for children at a very young age to be able to establish some rationale where different behavior or preferences can be attributed to different sexes. While two year olds may lack the insight into reasons why for example one of their parents may be cooking more often than the other, children may attribute these differences in domestic activities to information that is obvious to them, like sex differences alone. It's important to note at this point that a child's environment is not a dominant force that dictates new knowledge and roles that the child is trained to emulate. Rather, the child is actively integrating information from their environment in order to create and restructure concepts about and attitudes towards gender (Maccoby (ed.) 1966). Attention from caregivers also plays a factor in how a child shapes themselves through others. Before their first year, children already seek out attention through modifying their own behavior, and if a child displaying a certain kind of behavior will lead to them receiving more attention, it is only natural that this behavior is reinforced by the child themselves. By doing this, children lay the groundwork for their perceived personality, by adopting different behavior in different social situations (Cooley 1902).

Even before children develop a sense of self and theory of mind, where they become aware that other people have their own consciousness and view things differently, there are already factors in play that contribute and shape their identity. According to Erikson's psychosocial development stages (1959), children aged between 1 and 2 years old need a predictable environment in which there is a long term established sense of trust in order to develop their autonomy, a sense of independence. Arguably, predictable gender roles could contribute to a stable environment, although caregivers who have adapted more balanced gender roles still provide that stability. Regardless, the primary caregivers and other people close to the child are important shaping factors in this environment. Children want to make sense of the world, using information that is easily accessible to them. They witness patterns around them, and come up with their own explanations accounting for the presence of these patterns (Cimpian and Salomon 2014). If these patterns contain some links to the gender of a person showing a certain type of behavior, for example if a child's mother or father consistently perform different activities, or they repeatedly hear about these from story books, the information contributes to a child's gender schema, a cognitive information system associated with people of a certain gender (Bem 1983).

Giddings and Halverson (1981) made comprehensive categories of different types of toys and which gender prefers to play with them. They showed that boys between 2 and 3 years old play with vehicles a mean 2,2 hours per week, which makes it their preferred type of toy playing activity, aside from a similar amount of time spent playing with educational and art materials. Girls of the same age category spent the most time with educational and art materials, but dolls were a close runner up with a mean 2,1 hours per week spent with them.

A child's environment has gotten a lot of attention in early theories on gender development. Within the social cognitive learning approach, the child is seen as an active agent in their environment, not just modeling their behavior after the examples they see around them, but using those observed patterns to come up with their own explanation and reasoning about how a certain gender role should be expressed. Children also actively shape their environment by selecting who they want to play with, already showing a preference for same-sex peers around their third year (Maccoby 2002). Children select what activities they want to do, facilitated by caregivers providing access to toys and activities in line with a child's preferences, whether they are gender-typed or not (Martin et al. 2002). The active role of children in their gender development also becomes apparent from an inventory made by Robinson and Morris (1986). They analyzed which toys were requested by children for Christmas, and it was found that children themselves ask for more stereotyped toys than the ones that parents provide for them. Whether or not the parents have other plans, children themselves take actions on many different levels that eventually contribute towards gender segregation.

## 4    Socialization factors

The early work by Piaget (1959), where children's egocentrism plays a central role, seems to be at odds with the importance given to the child's environment in their development in later literature. He reported that daycare-aged children mostly talk about themselves, even in a social setting. This egocentric speech later turns into a child's inner speech, around the same time that social speech develops. If children interact with others in their environment in an egocentric way, not integrating the viewpoint of others into their play, how much importance should be given to the child's environment? According to Vygotsky et al. (2012), even during egocentric phases, the child unwittingly uses elements of their environment - the reality that they perceive - to shape their thoughts and the topics that they talk about. Even if speech between a child and its environment is egocentric, their point of view and values that they bring up during this egocentric speech has a strong function in relationships between peers. Within friendships, there is a tendency to synchronize topics that are talked about (Dishion et al. 1996). Eventually there are mutual changes occurring between two children's egocentric speeches, purely because the speech happens in the same environment, where they are able

to hear each other. Other factors in a child's environment can similarly be included in egocentric speech topics. Just because prosocial behavior (showing empathy, caring and cooperation) is missing or not always apparent, doesn't mean children exist in isolation from their environment.

## 4.1    The role of parents

Parents play a very important role in the socialization of a child, early on in the development process. Before a child is even born, their future physical environment and clothing is already arranged along gendered standards, with the help of relatives. A classic study by Rubin et al. (1974) showed that fathers would attribute significantly different labels to their newborn infant based on their gender, when they hadn't yet had the opportunity to physically interact with their newborn. The newborns from the sample had similar weight and length, but were described as bigger if they were male, or little if they were female. While parents may view young children differently based on their gender, Hetherington and Frankie (1967) showed that children are more likely to imitate a parent showing warmth in the affectionate sense - a decidedly feminine attribute - regardless of whether that parent is the mother or father. In a large meta-analysis, Lytton and Romney (1991) show that parents actively shape stereotypically gendered behavior through playing and through the child's participation in the different roles in the household. Mothers and fathers bring different gendered themes forward in how they interact with their children. Mothers play along feminine themes both with sons and daughters, more so than fathers play along the same themes (Jacklin et al. 1984). Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) bring up an important caveat by writing that young children of both genders are treated equally by parents when it comes to warmth, responsiveness or restricting their activities. So children of different genders are treated and socialized differently, but seemingly only with regards to the types of play and activities they are involved in, receiving similar amounts of nurturing that young children need.

What could the rationale of parents be to actively adjust the direction in which a child grows up? Firstly, in order to protect their child from being perceived in a negative way by others, mothers in particular report to feel a sense of being responsible for their child to fulfill heterosexual societal norms (Kane 2006, Martin 2009). Through this heteronormativity, heterosexuality is seen as the default norm for sexuality. As a social construct, adhering to this norm grants an individual a higher social power position than those that deviate from this norm (Surtees 2008). John D'Emilio (1983) further proposed that capitalist societies have macroeconomic forces at play that push people towards a nuclear family and promote heteronormativity, although in Finland the contributions of both genders as a typical household's breadwinners and caregivers are recognized (Pfau-Effinger 1998). Secondly, it has also been shown that traditional roles are not perpetuated simply because they are tradition. In

the case of men, traditions come from their perception on what role they play in their household, and whether or not their partner is considered to be an equal member in that household. These perceptions come from the man's experience of societal pressures with regards to stereotypes concerning, for example, being successful (Mintz and Mahalik 1996). But even if parents do not have conservative views about gender, their expectations and fears about the way society will view their child makes them more likely to socialize their children according to existing gender norms. And this preparing of children for being competent actors in society does have a positive effect on children's well-being. According to the cognitive evaluation theory, negative events - for example when a person's behavior turns out to be unacceptable in a social setting - likewise have a negative effect on feelings of competence (Cameron and Pierce 1994).

When it comes to aggressive behavior, parents will be more likely to discourage such socially undesirable qualities in girls, although this gender socialization seems to take time to have an effect, since two year old girls actually show an increased likelihood to act in violent ways compared to boys of the same age (Baillargeon et al. 2007). It seems that among young children society's expectations and stereotypes are not reflected by the situation in reality. Differences in parenting techniques can also play a role in the child's socialization processes, for example in the ways a parent exercises power and control over their children. Baumrind (2012) makes the distinction between coercive and confrontive use of parental power, in which coercion asserts the parent as the authority, with the child playing a submissive role. Conflicts that occur are suppressed in order to preserve the status quo, because the parent knows best. Confrontive use of parental authority means that there is room for negotiation, with space for a dialogue between parent and child, with indirect maneuvers being used to adjust the child's behavior, such as allowing them to choose between alternatives provided by the parent. Baumrind posits that confrontive use of authority contributes more to the child's socialization process, since reason is used to integrate the child's own will with the parent's long term goal of helping the child to develop into a socially accountable individual. Most theories involving a bipolar scale of trait differences are perhaps overly simplistic, but the above example can be applied to ways parents might respond to their child's gender nonconformity. Situations where nonconformity occurs can be used to contribute to the child's ongoing socialization processes, or to suppress a child from straying outside the boundaries of gender norms. However, controlling events, as well as negative events, have a negative impact on a person's intrinsic motivation (Cameron and Pierce 1994), a person's innate curiosity to explore and use their own capabilities to meet challenges, even if there doesn't seem to be an immediate reward for doing so (Ryan and Deci 2000), which is arguably an important quality to foster in children.

Other ways for parents to positively contribute to a child's development of gender identity come from research involving same-sex parents. Bos and Sandfort (2009, 120) have shown that children with lesbian parents "feel less parental pressure to conform to gender stereotypes". If we go beyond the study's focus on same-sex parents, a parent being simply aware about issues around gender conformity and sexual identity, they are equipped to notice situations where pressure is exerted on their children, and avoid that when deemed necessary. Same-sex parents might be more sensitive to the ways in which parents and society in general might unconsciously or effortfully nudge children towards certain gender roles, and work to remedy that in the case of their own child. But gender socialization by same-sex parents can also go the other way, as noted by Kane (2006). Same-sex parents from her sample felt like they were living under society's microscope - other people are already more likely to believe that their children are going to be different, so they experience more pressure to avoid their children from straying outside gender norms. It is possible that parents from different cultural backgrounds might experience similar societal pressure when raising a child in mainstream culture.

## 4.2    Cultural backgrounds

For practical considerations, keeping in mind the great cultural diversity of my observational group, and also in order to better safeguard the privacy of the children, cultural factors of the individual children that might have a role in their gender socialization were ignored, and instead some broader cultural patterns that could be applicable were examined. Individualistic cultures, as Western countries are considered to be, attach importance to concepts of independence and having space to express personality differences (Lobel et al. 2001). Western, Latino and Afro-American cultures currently have quite liberal sex roles, with roughly half of respondents of both genders in a study by De Leon (1993) showing an androgynous balance of masculine and feminine attributes according to the Bem Sex Role Inventory, although these results may not be an accurate representation of the cultures as a whole, since the respondents were young adult college students. Collectivist cultures, such as present in some Asian countries, put a greater emphasis on how individuals connected together form society. Individuals in collectivist cultures will experience greater pressure to act according to societal norms, since who you are does not come from expressing different qualities present in an individual, but from how a person acts in social interactions (Markus and Kitayama 1991). To further illustrate this fundamental difference of how a person's identity is constructed, the Japanese word for "self", *jibun*, doesn't refer to one person's consciousness, but something that exists between two people (Esyun et al. 1985).

Shaffer and Kipp (2010) refer to a classic anthropological study by Margaret Mead dating back to 1935, where she found that different New Guinean tribes exhibited types of gendered be-

havior dramatically different to Western norms. Both male and female members of the Arapesh tribe showed cooperative and sensitive qualities that from a Western standpoint would be associated with feminine behavior. Both sexes were perceived as gentle and kindhearted. The members of the Mundugumor tribe, by contrast, would show aggressive and ruthless behavior equally across both sexes. Lastly, the Chambri tribe showed an inverted version of Western gender roles, where the women were more dominant and the men showing more feminine qualities. Mead's study has been quite influential, with over 2500 citations of this particular work (Google Scholar 2016). It almost sounds too good to be true that one anthropologist has found such great variation among New Guinea tribal people to conveniently support multiple views on culture's role in shaping our gender identity. And in fact, later research shows that the Chambri men and women don't act strictly according to their gender roles as described by Mead, but change their behavior according to the context of the situation (Gewertz 1981).

Perhaps the most self-evident impression to take from the above examples is the fluidity of gender roles. Over the course of a certain time period, a single person may exhibit behavior that can be placed on various degrees of masculinity and femininity. Constantinople (1973) shows that using a bipolar scale to measure masculinity and femininity is inherently flawed, and that it is more accurate to use a multidimensional scale to measure gender differences, which makes sense if we look at how people observed at different times and in different situations may exhibit differing degrees of gendered behavior.

Feingold (1994) proposed that before the industrial revolution, gender roles may have developed because physical differences between the sexes, such as physical strength and reproductive functions, had a more significant effect on our lives than currently. Nowadays, many cultures see womanhood as a feature that a person is born with, but men must prove their manhood before they can qualify as a man (Gutmann 1997). This is reflected strongly by how different genders are socialized. If a girl shows gender nonconformity with regards to clothing, parents tend to honor it by offering their daughters sports-themed clothing, or masculine toys such as cars and building toys. Girls that don't conform to stereotypes are not seen as less popular (Lobel et al. 2001). However, if boys veer towards gender nonconformity, this behavior is more likely to invoke a negative reaction from the parents, who take steps to discourage the nonconformity and encourage more appropriate toys and clothing, even for dress-up pretend play. Boys showing feminine qualities are generally discouraged from doing this by their parents. They are afraid that if their child is perceived as gay, they will experience negative consequences from this later on in life (Kane 2006). Male children experience greater pressure from parents and peers to conform to their gender role, and likewise are subjected to greater peer pressure to conform to their roles.

When comparing different cultures, there are some finer points in how masculinity or femininity is comprised. A lot of gender role inventories rely on grading adjectives and traits based on how desirable those qualities are for either a man or woman, and naturally with cultural differences there are different emphases when it comes to how those traits are interpreted (Harris 1994). The country or society in which you are situated determines how much wiggle room you have in deviating from the norm associated with your gender role (Davidson et al. 1979). Generally speaking, gender stereotypes have some similarities across the world, although there are differences in intensity based on how strict a country's social norms are, or how much tolerance there is from straying from the norm (Löckenhoff et al. 2014).

## 4.3 The teacher's role

Daycare teachers form an important part of the child's early development, since they are responsible for the environment in which the child spends a significant portion of the day. The teacher's own values, the curriculum brought into a classroom, the way the teacher responds to different situations, and even the way in which the group in a daycare is physically arranged all can have an effect on a child's gender development. Modern child-centered teaching has an emergent curriculum, focusing on making the children's daily schedule reflect their interests in one form or the other. The children's interests are observed by kindergarten teachers and used to create relevant activities and learning experiences (Cassidy et al. 2003). If gender identity is not a topic that children bring up naturally, it might be considered inappropriate for the teachers to add this topic to the emerging curriculum. In a study by Surtees (2008), teachers expressed discomfort when having to deal with topics related to sexuality when it is brought up by their pupils. When gender is marginalized through this selective silence, the heteronormative roles children might pick up from their parents and their environment stay predominant in their views and play. Creating a simplified, binary world for the children to learn in, by placing gender outside of children's learning experiences, prevents the acknowledgement of diversity.

Some topics are avoided because children aren't considered to be ready or prepared yet to talk about such things, but while waiting for this preparedness to occur there may be many learning opportunities that pass by. From my own experience in early childhood education settings, there have been occasions where I was unprepared for dealing with topics related to gender or sexuality whenever they came up. There have been situations for example where two girls during a pretend play session would express their wish to marry each other when they grow up. Instead of opening up the topic and discussing same sex marriage and registered partnerships, I mostly ignored it and just replied that it might be possible by the time they grow up. There have also been occasions where children are asking about whether a snail is a boy or a girl, or a child mislabels their own gender when talking about themselves

(which seems like a fairly harmless mistake to make), but these situations would also have provided an opportunity to learn about gender differences.

Beyond the ways in which teachers themselves affect the children's gender socialization through the teacher's own personality, the implications of same-sex cliques and playing preferences have a direct effect on the child's individual development. A child's sex determines whether or not they are more likely to engage in certain types of activities, when they are part of a group of same-sex peers, as has been shown for science and math-related activities by Fabes et al. (2003). To make sure that the development of pupils of different genders can be supported appropriately, it is good to be aware of these kinds of mechanisms. When a boy's peer group makes it more likely for their mathematical skills to be practiced more often, it might be a good idea for teachers and caregivers to support girls more in this aspect. Likewise, girls were seen to be more active in language activities when they were part of a same-sex peer group, which means that in turn boys could be supported more in this aspect in order for both sexes to develop competencies equally.

When it comes to performance on certain tasks, it seems gender stereotypes can also play a role. A clever experiment by Ambady et al. (2001) shows how children's exposure to positive or negative stereotypes relative to them, before performing a math test, can have an effect on their performance in that test. Children would first be asked to color a picture related to their ethnicity or gender (for example a picture of a girl holding a doll), and then perform the test. While the youngest subjects in Ambady et al.'s study's sample were already 5 years old, this study can have very concrete implications for kindergarten teaching. Ambady et al. found that if an individual has an alternative identity beyond their gender identity, for example the membership to an ethnic group, activating the alternative identity when the gender or ethnic identity is associated with lesser performance would help to circumvent the negative stereo-typing and provide a better performance. In a kindergarten setting, this would mean that an alternative identity can be established, for example membership to a certain group of pupils or peer group. If this identity is only associated with positive traits through parents, peers and teachers, activating this alternate, positive identity would help in situations where nega-tive connotations around someone's ethnic or gender identity would stand in the way of per-formance. Even if these negative stereotyping effects don't occur yet at ages below 5, main-taining a positive alternate identity surely can be achieved alongside other identities that develop at an earlier age. Stereotypes that would be relevant to children's self-assessment of their skills don't seem to play a big role in the child's self-perception, unlike the opinions of caregivers or teachers. For example, if a child knows of a gender stereotype supposing that girls are bad at sports, they will not think they are bad at performing those sports because they are a girl. But if their parent or teacher would say they are bad at sports, they would be more likely to perceive their own skills as bad (Jacobs and Eccles 1992).

4.4   Peer relations

When a child starts to interact with peers of both sexes in a daycare setting, another important socialization factor is introduced in their lives. La Freniere et al. (1984), in an in depth observational study, found that children starting from around 13 months begin to show an increased preference in associating with same-sex peers, based on a collection of data about positive contact with other children. This preference becomes stronger over time, with significant segregation beginning to occur when the child is between 2 and 6 years old, confirming that there is a tendency for children to form same-sex cliques as their gender identity develops. This in turn leads to a vicious cycle in strengthening the child's gender typing (Martin et al. 2002). During the children's free play sessions, they might emulate family roles, or play along masculine or feminine themes. Boys are more likely than girls to include heroic fantasy elements in their free play, with the girls' pretend play elements being closer to reality (Flannery and Watson 1993). Girl's play centers around domestic themes and often involves two children interacting with related roles, such as a mother caring for their baby (Maccoby 1998).

Children as individuals start to find that interacting with peers can cause all kinds of conflicts, whether they arise through dialogue, physical altercations or through play. Unsurprisingly, the size of a peer group is a factor in how much conflict occurs in the group. Female peer groups are more likely to get subdivided into multiple pairs by participants in the group. When interacting just in pairs, it is important for a positive rapport to be established - conflicts need to be worked out, otherwise the pair cannot function together. Male peer groups tend to be larger, where competition is a persistent element, for example getting the time to talk while other group members listen, or getting attention from a teacher in a daycare setting. The size of the group removes the need to settle disagreements and conflicts (Benenson et al. 2001), including conflicts related to behaving according to gender roles. Competition among different groups, for example groups of friends in a daycare, also creates antagonistic relationships towards other groups, meaning an ethnocentric effect occurs, strengthening a group's ideals and attitudes. An individual's own values are put on hold, instead giving the group's shared values space in interactions (Tajfel and Turner 1979). When this occurs between groups of different genders, the gender norms in turn are reinforced.

Benenson's results seem to be at odds with my earlier description that girls show relatively more aggressive behavior at a young age, with further evidence suggesting that small groups with predominantly girls tend to have more conflicts (Caplan et al. 1991). However, since some studies, including the one by Caplan et al., cover groups of children who have never met before, the conflict-reducing effect Benenson described as mentioned above, of girls

creating pairs within larger groups, perhaps has not yet had a chance to occur. Aggressive behavior during later ages tends to evolve from overt to social aggression in girls (Crick and Grotpeter 1995). As their peers are socialized according to their gender, suppressing overt aggression, this socialization effect might be expected to cause girls showing aggressive behavior at a later age to suffer some negative consequences in their relationships with peers, but it appears this is not the case, at least not with adolescents (Cairns et al. 1989).

If a boy's perceived gender nonconformity leads to teasing by their peers, this can be a factor in developing a negative self-image, possibly leading to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders in adult life (Strong et al. 2000). An environment where children can be themselves on the full scale of the gender spectrum is important in providing a positive self-image. If children of both sexes are encouraged to engage in free play according to their own interests, and caregivers avoid nudging children towards more gender-appropriate play, there is less chance for behavior that falls outside of what is considered to be gender-appropriate to stand out as abnormal. As demonstrated by children's preference in toy selection (Robinson and Morris 1986), individual children or their peers might nevertheless prefer to engage solely in gender-appropriate play, which leaves space to offer alternatives in a non-coercive way.

## 5    Objectives

The main objective of the study was to determine whether the degree to which two-year old children in one group at the daycare had been socialized according to their gender would be observable in a classroom. Besides just witnessing processes described in theory, the study went a step further, by examining if children that had been strongly socialized according to stereotypical gender roles would have different behavior in a situation where a conflict occurred with those gender roles.

### 5.1    Target group

The daycare that was cooperated with consists of four groups of children in age categories ranging from 1 to 5 years old. The different age groups meant there was an interesting opportunity present to see different stages of gender development and stereotypes. At this particular daycare, two other groups had been worked with a lot previously, so for the sake of neutrality it was best to observe a group that was clear of strong prior knowledge and preconceived opinions. Furthermore, after deliberating with my supervisor, to get a clearer focus for the study it was good to limit the scope of the thesis to one group. In deliberation with the working life partner, the study focused on the age group with children around 3 years old, consisting of 13 children, with six boys and seven girls in total. Parental consent was acquired

for six girls and two boys, with an average age of 35 months, the youngest being 31 months old, and the eldest 38 months. Parental consent for one additional boy was acquired after the implementation had already occurred, so naturally the results for that child have not been included.

The observed group consisted of mostly two-year-olds, with a handful of three-year-olds, from many different nationalities. Even though the age range was not very large, within this group there was still the possibility for differences in development that would affect the degree to which the children's gender had been socialized. Children might have noticeably more segregated behavior based purely on their personal preferences. If a child is very socially active, they are more exposed to the views of others, and have experienced gender socialization for a longer time, while at the same time selecting same-sex playing mates for a longer period (Maccoby 2002). Slightly older or securely attached children could possess better coping mechanisms for dealing with the contrived situation that would be introduced during the participant observation.

## 5.2    Thesis goals

The main goal was to explore current literature on gender development, and find out to which degree there would be observable links between theory and a field situation. Additionally, better understanding on the process of gender socialization was to be developed, to find out which processes would be more pronounced at certain ages, and see if the children's well-being would be affected by these processes. Based on existing literature, limited but comprehensive means  to observe children's gender roles in a practical setting were developed, and the strength of any observed gender roles would be attempted to link with the children's reaction to a situation conflicting with stereotypes associated with those roles, by creating a situation in which they would use an item that is of a color opposite to what their stereotypical preferences would be. Throughout the process of theoretical research, there was a contribution to professional development, and new ways to continuously improve the daycare service's quality were found, even though this was not a primary goal.

## 6    Observational study

The sample group consisted of six girls and two boys. Because of time constraints, a contrived participant observation was chosen. For this, a multifaceted observation sheet was created, containing relevant snippets from existing personality trait indices and other elements from different studies that would show heterosexual conformity. There would be one observer in the classroom, and in addition to observing the children's normal routines, an abnormal situa-

tion would be created during the observation. While the validity of the study would benefit from observing children's behavior in moments where gender role conflicts occur naturally during the course of a day, there would be no way to predict that events like this would happen. For this reason the conflict was artificially created, with the hope for a natural reaction from the children. To avoid any undue discomfort, a very mild manipulation of the children's daily routine was chosen. During the children's regular snack time, the group's teachers usually have a stack of drinking cups of different colors, and let the children choose a color by themselves. This freedom of choice might have already helped develop color preferences among the children that are in line with their gender norms. The element of choice would be removed from this situation, instead the children would just quietly and quickly be handed a cup with a color that didn't match gender stereotypes. The boys would receive a pink cup, and the girls a blue cup, and based on any negative reaction or other indication from the child, their cup would be changed immediately according to their preference.

## 6.1    Preparation

To prepare for the observation, gender neutral colored clothing was worn by the observer on the observation day, in addition to making sure that there were enough clean cups of the colors that were needed. The table in the observation sheet was modified in such a way that it could be printed with a reduced scale, and fit in the palm of a hand. If it would be less apparent to the children that notes were being taken during their free play time, it would increase the likelihood of their free play being natural and less affected by the presence of an observer.

In preparation for the actual observation, the time in which it would take place would have to both include a free play situation, so that the children would be able to show their own preferences and personality in a natural way, as well as a scheduled snack time, so that the contrived situation of a conflict with gender stereotypes could be implemented. This limited the possibilities on when the implementation was possible, but it was agreed with the group's teachers that the observation would take place one day after the children's nap time. During this time, they would have a 45 minute period of free play, followed up by having an afternoon snack. One of the group's teachers expressed whether half an hour or 45 minutes of observation would be enough. The accuracy of the observations would be improved if the children would be observed for a longer time, but since a key element was also the observation paired with the contrived setting, it meant that the observation could not be repeated. The observation process would also be quite labor-intensive, since there was one observer keeping track of all the children for whom parental consent was given. A longer observational period might be fatiguing and lead to inaccurate or missed observations. In the end, the sample

group consisted of eight children, which would be a manageable amount to observe during a 45 minute period.

## 6.2    Methodology

The children's behavior was observed in multiple ways: personality traits that would come forward in their play or their interaction with peers, their choice of toys or activity and choice of playing partner. Many personality indexes use self-report methods that are unsuitable for the age group that I was working with. Rather than ask individual children questions about points on this inventory, traits from Bem's Sex Role Inventory (1974) were used that had been established as feminine or masculine to assess the behavior of the children themselves. Some of these traits were condensed into an observation sheet that could be used with a group of children.

For the observation sheet, two masculine and two feminine traits were selected to be observed. Based on several studies (Fernández and Coelleo 2010, Moreland et al. 1978, Boldizar 1991) "Warm" and "Sensitive to needs of others" were chosen as the female personality traits, then "Dominant" and "Defends own beliefs" as the male personality traits. The traits from both categories become most apparent in peer interactions. For observable toy preferences during free play, play with dolls or vehicles was observed, based on research on gendered playing preferences (Giddings and Halverson 1981). Two categories were included on the observation sheet to mark children's interaction with same-sex peers and opposite sex peers. The children's reaction to the contrived situation was coded in a simple way. When a cup of a color opposite to their gender stereotype was placed in front of them, it was noted whether they had a positive, neutral, or negative reaction to the situation.

## 6.3    Implementation

The parental consent form went through several drafts before being handed out to the parents. The initial version was so verbose that there were concerns whether it was ever going to be read, and the working life partner mentioned that it looked too formal and serious. The teachers from the group that would be observed were kind enough to hand out the final consent forms in person to the parents on April the 3rd, with the return deadline being on Friday the 8th of April. Being handed the parental consent forms in person by a familiar teacher would help to achieve a higher response rate. A response time of one week after the parental consent forms were handed out was planned, after which a discussion was held with the teachers from the group to be observed, about which date would be suitable for the observation to be carried out.

By the time the deadline written on the consent forms had passed, consent was acquired of six parents. One of the parents who hadn't returned the consent form yet by the deadline gave verbal consent afterwards. In order to stick to the promise written on the consent forms about not observing children whose forms have not been returned, this parent's child was excluded from the observation, also to be able to make a clear distinction between what constitutes consent being given and what not. Having the written and signed consent forms made the cooperation with the working life partner easier. When the observation was finished, the consent forms were handed over so that they could be filed, and offered insight into the draft of the thesis, so that the working life partner could make sure that the identity of the children was not compromised in any way, and also that the study did not include more subjects than had been given consent for. On the day when the observation was implemented, it became apparent that two more parents had given written consent, bringing the total number of children included in the observation to eight. The different colored cups were prepared based on the initial six children for whom consent had been given, so the results for two girls responding to the situation conflicting with gender stereotypes were not included, since they did not have similar colored cups as the other children. The observation in practice ended up to be a quite hectic half an hour. Fortunately, the focus of the observation sheet was such that the observation could be limited quite efficiently. Knowing precisely what to look for helped in maintaining an overview of the situation in the classroom.

## 7    Results

The eight children were observed during their normally scheduled free playing time in the afternoon. The observer tried to stay neutral by not actively interacting with the children when they would approach. If eye contact was made, the reaction would be to just smile back, and if a toy or a book to read was brought, or a question asked, it would be deflected to the other teachers. It felt quite unnatural to go outside of the normal role in a classroom, but it was important not to actively or unwittingly steer the children's activities into any direction. If a child was interacting with a teacher, this was not recorded on the observation sheet, since the focus was on behavior of the children among peers. One child seemed quite attached to one of the group's teachers, and therefore did not participate much in the free play session. Initially it was hard to see personality traits becoming apparent through the children's actions, perhaps due to the limited time of the observation, or the tendency for some children to engage solely in independent play. During the observation period, the children for which personality traits emerged, at the moment they were recorded, were often playing with other children.

|  | 1 Boy | 2 Boy | 3 Girl | 4 Girl | 5 Girl | 6 Girl | 7 Girl | 8 Girl |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Warm |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Sensitive | II | I | I |  |  | I | I |  |
| Dominant | I | I |  | I |  | I |  |  |
| Defends |  |  |  |  |  | I |  |  |
| Vehicles |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Doll |  |  | I |  |  |  | I |  |
| Opposite |  |  | I |  |  | III |  |  |
| Same-sex | IIII | III |  | II | I | II | I |  |
| Response | N | N | N | N | N | n/a | N | n/a |

Table 1: the results from the observation. Each "I" marks one occurrence of the observed behavior or action. Warm: The child shows warmth towards another child. Sensitive: The child is sensitive to the needs of others, and helps another child when the need arises. Dominant: The child shows ways in which it controls another child. Defends: The child stands up for what they believe in (Boldizar 1991, 509). Vehicles: The child is playing with any type of vehicle, such as toy cars, trucks, trains or buses. Doll: The child is playing with a doll. Opposite: The child is engaged in a social action with or otherwise involving another child of the opposite sex into their playing or activity. Same-sex: The child engages another child of the same sex into their playing or activity, through social actions or otherwise. Response: During the beginning of the child's snack time, they respond to the situation where a cup of a color opposite to stereotypical gender preferences is placed in front of them. The children's responses to the contrived situation are coded as follows: (+) Positive, (N) No or neutral reaction, (-) Negative. A marking of n/a means that the response was not recorded for technical reasons.

The overall observed result of the personality traits was surprisingly balanced. Sensitivity to the needs of others was the trait that was the most observed across both genders, with six recorded instances among five children. This sensitivity to the needs of others expressed itself through a child sharing toys with others and helping other children to tidy up, not because a teacher encouraged them to do so, but occurring spontaneously throughout their playing session out of their own volition. If a teacher would ask a child to tidy something up, it would not be recorded on my observation sheet. Dominant behavior was apparent in both girls and boys equally, with four recorded instances among four children. This dominance was expressed through ordering another child to do something, or playing with animals by growling in a menacing way towards others. There was one instance of a girl defending her own beliefs. It was one of the trickier personality traits to observe because it was highly situation-

dependent. In the one recorded case, a girl was not necessarily telling another child how to behave, but explaining how she was playing with the kitchen set in a corroborative way. There were no recorded instances of the "Warmth" trait, which could be again due to the limited time of the observation, but also because it is a highly situational trait. For one child to show warmth to another would for example require a situation where someone is visibly upset, which fortunately was not the case during my observation period.

Because the different groups cycle and exchange their toys throughout the weeks, there were no toy vehicles present in the observed group's classroom that the children would have free access to. For that reason, there were no observations of girls or boys playing with vehicles. Introducing cars to the classroom before the observation period could have meant that children playing with cars would be observed purely for the sake of them being a novelty item in the classroom. There were two instances of different girls playing with dolls, with an additional instance of a girl playing with a doll not recorded since the doll was not the main focus of the play, just being moved aside.

Playing partner selection was the category in my observations where the biggest gender differences became apparent. It was also one of the easiest categories to observe from a practical standpoint. Children would seek each other out in the classroom, mimic each others' behavior, or otherwise actively involve another child in their playing. Multiple instances of two children playing together were not reported. If a pair of children would have some social interactions with each other, or play with each other for some time, and then move on to do something else, their interaction would be recorded again as a new one if they sought each other out again at a later point. With the exception of one girl who seemed equally apt to include boys and girls in her playing, and another girl who had exclusively involved one boy in her playing, the children mainly sought the attention and company of same-sex peers. For one of the boys four instances of involving another boy in his playing were recorded, which was also reciprocated by the other boy, who in turn involved the first boy in his activities three times. One girl was almost exclusively seeking out the company of her teacher, so this was not recorded on the observation sheet. There were three girls who among them had four instances of involving a same-sex peer in their play.

Since there were some children present in the group for whom parental consent had not been given, the group's teachers were asked if they could give drinking cups to those children normally, while the others would receive cups according to the opposite of their related gender stereotypes. Since initial preparations were made for six subjects, and there were no additional cups available, there were no cups of a conflicting color available anymore for two girls whose consent forms were received right before the observation was implemented. As a result, their responses were not recorded. It was a pleasant surprise to see absolutely no reac-

tion from the children to the disturbance of their normal routine. The contingency to change, for example, a cup given to a girl from blue back to pink in order to prevent any signs of distress was not needed, the response of the entire group was just neutral. Perhaps the quality of the snack was a large enough distraction, or the manipulation that was introduced was not causing a significant enough conflict. As mentioned earlier, the children usually have freedom of choice which colored cups they would like to drink from during snack time. It was expected that if not the fact that someone puts a cup of a color conflicting with their gender stereo-type in front of them, then definitely the fact that they could not choose their own cups this time would elicit a reaction. But this was not the case. The group was observed until snack time ended, since there might be a change in the children's opinion about the current situation over time, and one girl did actually make an ugly face after getting the blue cup. However, as the snack time went on it appeared that her discomfort was for other reasons.

It was considered to conduct the observation again in order to gather more data, but based on the balanced results of the first observation period, it would be unlikely for there to be any significant differences emerging from observing the same group again. More importantly, repeating the contrived situation would just mean the situation would become more familiar, making it less likely for the children's response to be significantly different.

## 8  Ethical considerations

From the onset of the thesis process, it was a goal to conduct the observation in the group while disrupting the children's daily routines as little as possible. The same group of children had been worked with occasionally in the past, and positive relationships had been established with most of them, so the children themselves were expected to be perfectly happy to have an observer in their classroom for some time. Working with children in a practical setting related to the thesis meant that the children's well-being should come first. The children's eagerness to interact with the observer during the observation period was a clear sign that they were comfortable with the observation, even when actively trying to deflect any interactions towards the other teachers and be minimally responsive to any contact. The contrived situation had been planned in such a way that it would be unlikely to cause any discomfort. After all, if a child would show unhappiness about having a cup placed in front of them, within seconds they would be able to change the situation to their liking. The change in their routine that was introduced with regards to not being able to choose a cup themselves, and having a cup placed in front of them, was such that it could have occurred on a normal day as well. If there is no variety of different colors available for the children to choose from themselves because the other cups are in the dishwasher, it is essentially the same situation where there is limited choice available.

In studies comparing different methods of acquiring parental consent, the active method that was used has been shown to get low response rates, where some societal groups are underrepresented (Ellickson and Hawes 1989). Parents giving consent tend to be from socially advantaged groups (Anderman et al. 1995), which likely has something to do with a parent's tendency to protect their children from negative evaluations from society (Kane 2006). Parents whose children are in a private daycare could be considered to be from socially advantaged groups to begin with, which means the results of the observation cannot be easily generalized. For ethical reasons the active method was preferred over the alternative passive method of acquiring parental consent, where parents are assumed to approve the observational study taking place unless they indicate otherwise. It would be better to have a misrepresented, small amount of subjects, or no subjects at all, than potentially damage relations with some of the children's parents.

Considering that the observation was performed at my current workplace, neutrality was a key issue to pay attention to. The working life partner did not suggest the thesis topic or have any involvement in the outcome of the study or the written parts of the thesis, but was allowed insight into the draft version of the thesis. The anonymity of the children and the daycare itself ensured that the business interests of the working life partner and the privacy of the children would not be at risk in any way. Additionally, for the thesis there was no need to achieve a result concerning the children that needed to be presented in a more positive light, since there was a mere observation of naturally occurring processes, with no value judgments about the children's development being made.

8.1    Trustworthiness of the study

There was the risk of attention being drawn to situations and behavior that would reaffirm the ideas behind the thesis. The real situation in the classroom might be less stereotypical than it would appear, if there was an active search for signs of gender typing. Using elements from other studies would help to add to the credibility of the study, but since there was still one observer making the markings on the observation sheets, there was the risk that even the mildest expressions of gender typing were enough to put a checkmark in the appropriate box. Not putting a tick in a box would provide some information by itself. Also, witnessed behavior might not necessarily reflect a child's personality accurately. If during a 30-minute observation a child would help their peer with something once, it could show that the child is intrinsically motivated to help others, but it could just as well be a coincidence that the child chooses to do that at a certain moment, just because they felt like it.

There were several weaknesses involved with the contrived situation. Firstly, there is the assumption that presenting a differently colored cup to the child is seen as a significant enough conflict with their gender norm. For children between two and three years old, color might not necessarily represent a major pillar of their gender identity. Bem and Lenney (1976) found that people avoid actions that could be associated with the other sex. Drinking water from a pink cup could arguably be seen as an activity for girls, but likely not as strongly as asking a boy to play with a doll, for example. The children may simply have different color preferences that are at work, developed through the usual situation where they are allowed to choose which cup they drink from. Preferences that were observed might not necessarily make up a part of their gender schema. Even if the situation would be interpreted as negative, it might not be noticed if one of the children gave a brief reaction to it, since there was only one observer. Additionally, since the children are used to being allowed to choose the color of the cups themselves, any observed reaction to the contrived situation might just be a result of the children being upset that they could not choose a cup by themselves initially. The presence of an observer in the group might also be enough of a disruption of the children's routine, influencing their behavior and responses to any situation the observer was involved in. One way this could manifest is the lack of authority an observer has with the group, so that the children might test out where the limits are to the rules in the contrived situation. During the contrived situation, once one child would notice that asking for a different colored cup would mean that they actually get it; it could set off a wave of similar demands from their peers, so that the end result is that everyone requests, and gets, the cup that they want. Besides the worst case scenario of causing a negative experience, everyone could also request a cup of their preference, except some children that might be too shy to speak up about it.

Based on the work of Constantinople (1973) and others on the multidimensionality of gender, the lack of validity that can be given to simple binary divisions of masculine and feminine traits related to a gender category, brings an important caveat forward. When it comes to my observational study, just because a certain type of behavior is witnessed, doesn't necessarily mean that it is a valid conclusion to then say that a person is more masculine or feminine, rather that at the particular moment when the observation occurred, they were simply showing behavior that is considered more gendered according to Western stereotypes. Additionally, the studies that were used to compile my observation sheet handled the items that were included much more in depth. This lack of depth in order to achieve a more holistic view on the children's gender stereotypes could contribute to an observation that is shallow and not a truly accurate representation of the children's personality or preferences.

9    Discussion

My objective was to observe the degree of gender socialization in a classroom setting. For this I found varied measures that would be suitable, but using these methods I didn't find evidence of strict gender norms being present. As a logical result, the children's reaction to the contrived setting was also neutral. My other objective was to develop professionally, and throughout the thesis process I did encounter several ways in which gender is established, and in turn how it affects children's well-being, that can be used in practice, for example by preventing children from being seated together in same-sex cliques.

I felt it was important to be able to link the degree of observable gender socialization with the observations from the contrived setting, so I planned to have the observation and the contrived setting on the same day. At the same time, considering a lot of literature on the subject is international, I wondered if I would be able to notice any differences with respect to how Finnish culture affects children's socialization. Considering its history of women's suffrage, I would like to think that Finland is more emancipated than most Western countries, while at the same time having quite cemented gender roles and strong national traditions. The observed classroom situation only reflected children's preferential selection of same-sex playing partners. If I would have used more items from the BSRI, or used the items not as personality traits to be observed, but as questionnaire items, the children's knowledge about gender stereotypes might have painted a different picture, based on a broader view or children's eagerness to show their knowledge. Based on theoretical sources about how different aspects of personality can appear emphasized based on a person's gender, the observed situation showed no clear signs of segregation with regards to stereotypical personality traits. This could be because the age group is simply too young to have been strongly affected by gender socialization. The classroom setting might also bring forward traits that are considered to be more desirable by the teachers and peers, and as such more reinforced and rewarded in the classroom setting, such as the helpfulness that I observed.

According to O'Neil et al. (1986), deviations from gender norms in a public setting can play a part in experiencing gender role conflicts through feelings of embarrassment, at least in adulthood. I expected that, even if initially a child might not exhibit discomfort from the contrived setting in the observational study, this might change once they notice how peers react to the situation. But since there was no observed embarrassment, either the children haven't yet been socialized according to stereotypical norms in order to experience the situation as embarrassing, or the positive general atmosphere in the group is such that public embarrassment is less likely to occur.

For the purposes of my participant observational study, based on the differences in socialization based on gender, I would imagine that boys are more likely to show a negative reaction to a situation conflicting with their gender roles. The results with my observational group were neutral across both genders, however. Perhaps with a larger amount of boys in my sample group there would have been more peer pressure, and I would have been able to observe different reactions. But considering girls' earlier development of social skills, I might have then already observed some reactions from the girls in my sample group. The lack of reaction could also have something to do with the manipulation of the normal situation not being strong enough.

Based on my focus with the relevant literature, in the worst case scenario, I had imagined that children would experience stress as part of their socialization in accordance to their gender roles, and that this stress would come to the surface in situations conflicting with those roles. But fortunately, what I found was a group of children who, although it showed that same-sex peers were their first choice for social interactions, possessed balanced personality traits, both masculine and feminine, that helped to create a positive mood among their peers. A contrived situation that was the diametrical opposite of their stereotypical gender preference just breezed by the children without the least effect on their wellbeing. Coming back to my initial example about the boy who showed distress about his "Cars" franchise pencil case being missing, perhaps signs of distress shown by children during problematic situations, whether the situation can be linked to gender norms or not, are just highly situational and depending on the child's mood.

## 9.1    Planning and evaluating the observation

Based on the greater socialization pressure towards boys, I anticipated that the parents of boys might be less willing to opt their child into the study, perhaps leading to an overrepresentation of girls in the sample. This ended up being the case, but this could have been a coincidence, since there had been a few cases of illness in the daycare that could inadvertently shift the balance of the participating children more towards the girls. However, it could also be a result of the processes mentioned earlier, where girls are permitted more space to be outside of strict gender norms. Since the parents were informed about the topic of gender socialization, it is possible that the parents of boys would be more hesitant about giving consent, since boys' gender related norms are more strict.

One hurdle that I encountered was that during the week in which the consent forms were supposed to be handed out to the parents, there were some cases of illness among the staff and the children, which meant that not all the parents were able to receive the consent forms in a timely fashion. This made the written deadline on returning the consent forms

sound a bit more rude to my ear. If I would be a parent, receiving a consent form on a Wednesday, with a written instruction that it should be returned basically the day after, I would just ignore it, since it doesn't really allow for much flexibility or time to think about the issue. I figured that this would perhaps cause at least a slight decline in the response rate, but considering more than half of the group's children were opted in, this didn't seem to be the case.

Since I planned to do the observation by myself, and the other teachers present in the groups had to be made aware of the purpose for the observation, I could not use a blind observer - someone who doesn't know the purpose of the study, but is just observing what needs to be observed (Mook and Parker 2001). The advantage of using a blind observer would be that they would not subconsciously be looking for things that support the ideas behind the study, reducing observer bias. Another disadvantage of doing the study alone meant that I couldn't use extensive scales covering many different aspects of masculinity and femininity, such as Bem's widely used 60-point Sex-Role Inventory or BSRI (1977). Many personality indexes use self-report methods that are unsuitable for the age group that I was working with. Adults are already more likely to respond in ways that are more socially accepted (Feingold 1994), and I would expect that would be the case with children as well, perhaps even more so. Young children might see questions as a chance to prove their knowledge, and by doing so give answers more in line with their view on society's expectations than their own personal views (Shaffer and Kipp 2010). Instead of asking individual children questions about points on this inventory, I used traits from the BSRI with high variance to observe behavior associated with those traits. Using concrete characteristics based on BSRI would somewhat reduce the risk of observer bias, since I would not assess children based on how masculine or feminine I perceived them to be, but rather use traits over which pre-existing consensus has been established (Mook and Parker 2001). Alan Bryman (2008) refers to a book by Ditton where he describes the practical difficulties of taking notes in a field situation. This further solidified my idea that any observation sheet that was used would have to be concise enough to mark items on discreetly, so as not to disturb the natural situation in the classroom any further than absolutely necessary.

Considering the different cultural backgrounds of the children in the observation group, I figured it was important to pay attention to the cross-cultural validity of the items of the BSRI that I wanted to use. Depending on a person's cultural background, personality traits such as "nurturing" might be considered an equally desirable quality for men as well as women. If a child would then be gender-appropriately socialized to be a nurturant male, I could mistakenly observe that to be a boy who has acquired feminine traits through socialization. While generally speaking there might be some similarities in gender roles across the world, I needed to go into specifics for this observation. Harris (1994) found that there are significant differ-

ences in how people from different cultures view some traits as more desirable to one gender, with little common ground. Once I started looking more closely at the cross-cultural validity of the BSRI, I came to the conclusion that the inventory is simply not suitable for a multicultural environment due to the cultural differences in grading an attribute as either masculine or feminine (Ward and Sethi 1986, Zhang et al. 2001). Any observations I would make based on personality attributes that are gauged simply according to Western standards, would not be a valid indicator of a child being masculine or feminine. Adaptations of the BSRI, for example a more condensed version, the Gender Trait Index, have also been examined for cross-cultural validity. While Schertzer et al. (2008) found that some traits were valid across cultures, they also mention in an important side note that the personality traits will only be accurately describing femininity or masculinity in cultures that are similar. This posed a significant problem to the observation and one of the starting ideas of the thesis. After all, I wouldn't be able to determine how strongly the children themselves are gender typed, since their cultural variation would also bring a variation in how their gender typing could be expressed through personality traits. As a result of that, I would also not be able to attach any conclusions about how strongly they would react to a situation conflicting with their gender stereotypes.

Instead of not observing the children's personality traits at all, I decided to take a theoretical step forward and continue based on several assumptions. Focusing on cultural dissimilarities between gender typing of personality traits might take the attention away from ways in which different cultures have similar gender typing. While it is important to be aware of cultural differences between how gender stereotypes are defined, there are still many different factors at play in the children's environment that even out the balance. Firstly the international aspect of the daycare itself, as well as the families involved. Different households may have different emphases on how strongly parents would like to socialize their children according to their own cultural background. Parents and children living in Finland are not just exposed to mainstream Western ideals and culture, but affected in small ways by the many facets of our current multicultural society through peers and their living environment. It could be argued that through all of that, there is still a predominant amount of exposure to Western cultures in Finland to at least make the elements on the BSRI mildly relevant. Additionally, since the personality traits were not the only aspect of the children's gender socialization that I wanted to observe, the combination of using the BSRI, playing partner preferences and toy preferences would, I hope, combined lead to a more cross-culturally valid picture of the children's gender socialization.

Rather than selecting the personality traits to observe randomly, I looked at a study examining which factors create the most variance in the statistical sense (Fernández and Coelleo 2010, Moreland et al. 1978). Personality traits with a lot of variance tend to exclusively be-

long to either the masculine or feminine end of the spectrum, making them really defining characteristics of a certain category. There is quite a bit of overlap in the personality traits with high variance: the feminine "Warm, Tender, Affectionate, Gentle, Sympathetic" are, from an observational standpoint, almost indistinguishable from each other. The masculine traits had similar overlap when it comes to the behavior to be observed. The Children's Sex Role Inventory provided a good adaptation of the BSRI traits to be more suitable for children, and also helped with the problems of overlapping traits (Boldizar 1991).

The two types of toys that emerged as being preferred by opposite genders in Giddings and Halverson's study (1981) are present at the group at the daycare I was observing, so I wanted to include these categories to my observation sheet as well, to see if the playing preferences are in accordance to these. The study by La Freniere et al. (1984) about playing partner preferences used a four-step process of classifying whether a social action should be included as a full social interaction. For the limited scope of the observational study, a social interaction that qualified to be marked would include any verbal or non-verbal action taken by an individual child, which to me as an observer gave the impression that this particular child wanted to involve another in their playing experience. I didn't want to take a similar in-depth approach when observing the children's preferences for playing partners in the different groups at the daycare, but it at least gave a good starting point as to what should be observed. I felt that with three categories to observe, personality, toy preference, and playing partner preference, I would be able to get a limited, but holistic view on the group's gender socialization.

The observation sheet turned out to be an embarrassingly gender-stereotypical part of the observational study, but the simplified scope of the observational study was aimed at finding empirical data about the extremes in the gender spectrum, not necessarily to get a balanced view including more gender neutral aspects of children's personality. If the extremes on the gender spectrum were not predominantly observed in the classroom situation, one conclusion that could be drawn from that is that the children's gender typing is along more neutral lines.

10   Conclusion

From what became apparent from the observation, it could be said that the children in the observed group were not stringently socialized according to stereotypical gender norms. The situation that was observed was quite balanced when it came to the interaction of children with each other. It was especially intriguing to see that sharing toys and helping each other tidy up, even when not prompted by a teacher to do so, was apparent from all children, not more so from girls, as stereotypes might lead one to believe. Sensitivity to the needs of others was one of the items on the BSRI with the highest variance, yet in the group it seemed to

be a shared value. The fact that helping behavior occurred more during the observed period than dominant behavior also bodes well for the general atmosphere and well-being of the children in the group. The children did show a clear preference for selecting same-sex playing partners. It is possible that over the course of the years, this and other socialization factors start to play a bigger role in how the child develops, and that the age group that was observed was simply not yet very segregated in terms of behavior, only in terms of social interactions.

The presuppositions or stigmas society might associate with any identity category a person could be labeled under, can cause self-doubt and other pressures on a person's feeling of self-worth (Aronson et al. 1999). Others expect an individual to behave in ways confirming to a negative stereotype associated with the individual's group. This causes a sense of unease that can negatively impact cognitive tasks (Aronson et al. 1998). This phenomenon of stereotype threat occurs when one person feels like they are representing a larger group and therefore have more at stake than only their personal interests. Countering these stereotypes can contribute to a person's wellbeing. Richman and Shaffer (2000) found that women who participate in sports throughout their childhood experience a more positive body image, have higher self-esteem and view themselves as more physically competent.

There are some factors that could have contributed to the results from the observational study. The children usually have fruit, vegetables or crackers as a snack, but this time the snack consisted of breakfast cereals - a product that is always a great success with the children, based on previous experience. The excitement about the snack could have provided enough of a positivity boost, on top of the already good feeling that the children had after their free playing session, to be able to ignore a minor negative issue such as non-gender appropriate drinking cups. At the beginning of snack time, the observer asked if the group could use some help, then placed the cups in front of the children with aplomb. Perhaps if a bigger deal would have been made out of placing the cups, either through drawing more attention to it with body language or verbally announcing it, it would have become a more pressing issue. But it seems more likely that the change in their normal situation was simply not big enough to cause any reaction. The children were in a familiar environment, among familiar people, which means the children experience less distress (Rutter 1981).

Another factor could be that the children are in a private sector daycare, where due to the international nature of both the staff and children, and high standards of quality, there is an increased awareness and sensitivity to diversity embedded in the working methods of the staff. The diversity in and by itself also helps to diffuse strict gender norms that would emerge from one dominant culture, by having an environment with many different children that could have undergone different emphases on their socialization. The fact that the obser-

vation took place in a daycare environment could also have had an effect on the results. If we take for granted that gendered traits are fluid, emphasized in larger or smaller amounts depending on the situation, and that more balanced gender traits are considered to be more beneficial for the atmosphere and management of the group, it could be that the children are more likely to display these types of traits in a classroom setting, since the teachers are more likely to encourage and reward behavior that benefits the whole group.

The observational study could be replicated in a public daycare, or with different age groups, to see if there are noticeable differences either coming from lower quality education or longer exposure to socialization processes. A longer scheduled period for the observation could make sure that more personality traits of the children have a chance to emerge naturally through play. The less diversity present at the daycare, the more valid conclusions can be drawn about the predominant gender culture. The toy selection aspect that was included in the observation sheet could also be modified to reflect a child's own preferences regardless of what items are present in the classroom. Since most daycares have a day of the week on which children can bring their own toy, these days could also be included in an inventory to determine children's gender typing with regards to toy preferences.

Bem (1974) argues that having a more androgynous personality contributes to people's mental health. People that are heavily gender typed will have to suppress attributes within themselves that are not seen as socially desirable for their gender. Once the defining of some traits as masculine and feminine has been set aside, people can adapt and function flexibly and competently in different situations (Moreland et al. 1978).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Parental consent form first draft

Dear ▇▇▇▇▇ family members,

I'm currently finishing my kindergarten teacher qualification with a bachelor's thesis about gender socialization and how children respond to conflicts related to gender roles. As a part of the thesis, with your permission, I would like to conduct a small scale observation of your child. The purpose for the observation is to first get at least a faint idea about how strongly the children's gender roles have been developed, and then seeing if that has some influence on a situation that conflicts with those gender roles.

Concretely this means that, for about half an hour during free play or an activity, I will collect information about preferences for toys, playing partners and the type of play. I will also look at behavior during play, for example social actions or physical activity. Afterwards, during the group's snack time, when drinking cups are given to the children, I will give the "wrong" color cup to your child: a blue cup for a girl, and a pink cup for a boy. If your child shows any preference for a different colored cup, or is anyhow discomforted by the situation, I will accommodate them right away. This staged situation is not that much different from normal: teachers usually give cups to the children regardless of the cup's color, unless a child asks for a particular color.

The privacy and well-being of the children is very important to me. Your child will not be judged, treated or perceived negatively in any way in this observation, and all information gathered and included in the thesis will be anonymized from the moment any data is collected. The name or location of ▇▇▇▇▇ will also not be mentioned in the thesis. If you would prefer that your child is not included in this observation, you do not have to do anything. I will only include children for whom explicit consent has been given.

If you would like to sign your child up for the observational study, then please write their name on the blank space at the bottom of this page. I will leave this notice up until the 22nd of March, after which I will plan the implementation. And of course, when the thesis is finished, I will provide you with the link to it!

Best regards,
Bart Smallenburg

Appendix 2: Parental consent form second (final) draft

Dear ███████ family members,

I'm currently finishing my kindergarten teacher qualification with a bachelor's thesis about gender socialization and conflicts related to stereotypes. As a part of the thesis, with your permission, I would like to conduct a small scale observation of your child while in the ██ ██████ group. For this there are no rights or wrongs, and your child will not be evaluated in any way. All information gathered will be anonymized. The ███████ teachers have been informed about this observation, so if you would like more detailed information or have other questions, feel free to ask them or me.

If you would like your child to be included in this observation, please write your signature next to their name on the line below, and return this letter to any ███████ teacher or me before the 8th of April. And of course, when the thesis is finished, I will provide you with the link to it!

███████ _____

If you would prefer that your child is NOT included in this observation, you do not have to do anything. I will only gather information about children for whom explicit permission has been given.

Best regards,
Bart Smallenburg