

The formation of gender discrimination in childhood

Efstratios Papanis,

Permanent Assistant Professor, University of the Aegean

Andromachi Bouna,

Postdoctoral Researcher, University of the Aegean

Abstract

Children's gender socialization in the family and at school involves values, perceptions, stereotypes, etc. that contribute to "producing" / shaping and reproducing of hierarchical gender discrimination. This paper examines how the family and the school contribute to forming the child's gender identity and reproducing gendered discrimination. The questionnaire was used as a means of collecting the data, adding standardized vignettes, which concerned everyday family and school practices. The results of the research show that students in the family and at school carry out daily activities that incorporate gender-based characteristics, thus contributing both to performing gender identity and (re-) producing gender discrimination. As legitimized and physicalized, gendered stereotypes are reproduced daily in all aspects of the social life.

Key words: gender identity, gender discrimination, family, school, stereotypes, childhood

Introduction

In recent decades, the question of gender identity has been the subject of research into several scientific fields, such as anthropology, sociology, political science, sociology, etc. According to Carlson & Heth (2010, p. 20), gendered identity is defined as all those elements that give the individual the sense and perception of belonging to a particular gender category, with specific characteristics, behaviors, emotions, roles. Gender identity includes all meanings used for people themselves on the basis of gender recognition (Burke, 1980). In most people, gender identity and sex coincide. Typically, boys (men) ultimately adopt behaviors that are considered "masculine" by society, and girls adopt "feminine" behaviors (Hughes & Kroehler, 2007).

In most societies, the basic segregation of gendered behaviors is about men and women, (Carlson et al, 2009). It is a gender polarization imposing compliance with the perception of masculinity or femininity in all forms of gender, such as sex, gender identity, and gender expression (Eller, 2015). There are also perceptions that involve gender stereotypes are reproduced, legitimized and "physicalized" daily with the context of a multitude of discussions, evaluative judgments and practices, thus transferring dominant discourses and images, and are difficult to be recognized and

deconstructed (Panagiotopoulos in Boudieu, 2007). Indeed, both gender stereotypes and hegemonic “truth regimes” have failed to be deconstructed and continue, even today, to make women more subordinate than men (Mendick, 2006). Gender discrimination is reproduced daily through informal and formal behavior in social institutions such as the family and the school.

The role of the family and the school in identity formation

Gender is the first element of identity that is attributed to the person immediately after birth, and is considered to be of major importance (Butler, 1990). More particularly, the process of identifying the child with his/her sex and learning the gender-appropriate behavior begins very early in childhood, from the family (Maragoudaki, 1995). The family is the most important institution of socialization, and its impact on the formation of the child's gender identity is very important (Tatsis, 1999). This significance can be seen in the preparation for the "reception" of this identity (boy - girl) before the child is born, when parents are informed about his/her sex. Parents with the child's sex announcement begin the preparation, which starts from his / her room. If it is a boy or a girl, the walls are painted in blue or pink respectively, curtains of the same color are also chosen, together with the respective toys, such as cars, balls, etc.). If it is a girl, the walls are painted in pink with girls' designs, together with respective toys, such as dolls, flowers, etc. (Kongidou, 2004). Parents hesitate and avoid choosing toys that do not fall within the stereotype of the child's sex. The infant toy-object has a “sex” (Kongidou, 2004). Through playing and other family behaviors and practices the child at the age of two knows whether he is a boy or she is a girl, and he or she can usually rank others in the category of men or women (Giddens, 2002). Even if the socialization of the child in the family consciously does not rely on reproducing sexist stereotypes, it often runs contrary to the messages emanating from other socialization actors, such as school (Deligianni-Kouimtzi, 2005).

Although the school is the second important institution for the child's socializing after the family, it is a key institution in the constructing and legalizing the social identity of the gender (Freiderikou, 1995), through informal (e.g., break, hidden curriculum, etc.) and typical forms of education (Thanos & Bouna, 2016). During the child's schooling - at all levels of education – the “inscriptions” of the family are strengthened, and a more complete socialization and shaping of gender identity takes place. Several researches have dealt with the role of the school in the formation of gender identity and the reproduction of gender discrimination (Walkerdine, 2003; Walden & Walkerdine, 1985; Arnot, 2006; Delamont, 1990, and others). For example, schoolbooks are agencies of ideological and epistemological messages (Brugeilles & Cromer, 2008; Collèse, 2006; Chassapis, 1997), and agencies of gender roles and the socially acceptable aspects of masculinity and femininity (Hardalia & Ioannidou, 2008). Research into this field - both internationally and in Greece (though much more limited) - highlights both the man-centered nature of our daily practices in the family and the school (Connell, 2005).

The tendency that dominates both in the family and at school is the attempt to achieve absolute “harmonization” of biological sex and social gender. Children have to show

their “masculinity” and/or “femininity” every day, as trained since their birth, to harmonize the social gender with the biological sex without necessarily coinciding one with the other (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Theories of “gender performativity” (Butler) and *Masculine domination* (or *La domination masculine*) (Bourdieu)

The theory of “gender performativity”, which was introduced by the American gender philosopher J. Butler (1988, 1990), has been the most well-known postmodern feminist generic narrative for both sexes and how they are perceived through a complex social process until today. Butler is opposed to the limiting ways in which sex is “physically” built into “masculinity” and “femininity”. Gender is an “arbitrary” cultural convention, a culturally defined construction, which through this delimitation becomes a “norm”. The imposed and regulatory gender performativity (Butler, 1993, p. 55) can thus be understood as a “confirmatory” (standard) matching practice with the “regulatory model” through which “the reason generates the results it denotes, that is, it materializes the sex, performs the practical marking, circulation, crafting and use of the body in the normative heterosexual model”.

According to Athanasiou (Butler, 2006), gender is “physicalized” to confirm what is socially “intelligible”. Gender, according to Butler (1990), is fluid, and does not precede social expression but is a “construct” that is produced and reshaped. Therefore, the features of being “a woman” and of being “a man” are neither defined by nature nor imposed by external factors, “norms” of a “hegemony”, but that the same people constitute themselves man or woman through their everyday practices.

In his work *Masculine domination* (or *La domination masculine*), Bourdieu (2007) deals exclusively with gendered identities and attempts to explain how a regime of masculine domination is established and reproduced in modern western societies. Bourdieu’s approach highlights the importance of classifications at the symbolic level so that masculine domination can be consolidated, consisting of both the subordination of women to men and, more generally, the “feminine” to the “masculine”. According to Bourdieu, masculine domination is established through the “complicity” of the oppressed in their subordinate position. Complicity is neither conscious nor voluntary, but is a result of an arbitrary system of symbolic classifications that are recorded in the cognitive structures and the classes of subjects, men and women, as well as in objective structures.

More particularly, starting from the ethnographic description of “Algeria’s Kabyle society”, in which he observed gendered “dominant” social relations, Bourdieu concludes that “masculine domination is primarily a sort of symbolic domination; that is, it is not imposed in terms of direct coercion and physical violence” (Bourdieu, 2007). N. Panagiotopoulos (in Bourdieu, 2007, pp. 9-24), states that Bourdieu considers masculine domination as a relation of domination that “rests on the one hand on objective structures / conditions and, on the other hand, on the cognitive structures and the habits of the subjects – men and women “.

According to Bourdieu (2007), masculine domination is established through the “complicity” of the oppressed, women, in their “submissive” position. Complicity is not conscious, but it comes up as a “result of an arbitrary system of symbolic classifications that are recorded in the cognitive structures and the classes of the subjects, men and women, as well as in the objective structures”. The man is often considered to be “robust”, “aggressive”, “insolent”, “independent”, “supplier” (Askew & Ross, 1994), depending on the location and environment and the social and cultural factors prevailing in them (Mikkola, 2011).

Research Methodology

The aim of the paper is to examine the impact of family and school have on the formation of gender identity and the reproduction of gender discrimination at school. The research objectives are the effect of:

- everyday family work as gender “representative performative acts” in forming the child’s gendered identity;
- diversified everyday family work on the reproduction of gender discriminations;
- day-to-day schooling as gender “representative performative acts” in shaping the child’s gender identity; and
- the effect of diversified daily school activities on the reproduction of gender discriminations

The sample of the survey is 200 pupils (100 male pupils and 100 female pupils) of the fifth grade (46.5%) and the sixth grade (53.5%) of four elementary schools of the Municipality of Ioannina. The research was conducted in the higher classes of elementary schools where the age of children ranges from 11 to 12 years of age, during which the children’s socialization process has progressed, and the children themselves have already understood the different behaviors that adults expect them to display according to their gender (Freiderikou, 1995). The sampling of convenience was used to select the sample. During the sampling of convenience, the so-called convenience sample, which consists of individuals who are available or easily accessible (Darviri, 2009), is obtained and utilized.

The tool used to collect survey data is the questionnaire with the addition of vignettes, that is, some short descriptions of hypothetical people or situations. The conditions for the use of vignettes were fulfilled: a consequence of male and female pupils’ answers and the same way of perceiving the intensity of the situation described in each vignette.

The questionnaires were distributed equally to 100 male pupils and 100 female pupils, so that there are no big differences in the results for which gender is responsible. The questionnaire is divided into two parts. The first part refers to the pupil’s demographics: sex, class, and the level of his/her father’s and mother’s education. The second part includes vignettes. The second part is divided into two sections: the first section deals with hypothetical stories about the family and the gender roles of its

members, whereas the second section contains hypothetical stories about the school environment and the gender discriminations in it.

Discussion of outcomes – Concluding remarks

Family and school are the main agencies of socialization which through informal and formal processes contribute to forming / shaping the child's gendered identity (Thanos & Buna, 2015). The distribution of housework seems to children to be a role that is identified with "female nature" and is "physicalized" (Bourdieu, 2007). Indeed, as far as which of the two parents did the preparations for food and sweets is concerned, the highest percentage of both girls (80%) and boys (88%) of the sample chose the mother. From the analysis of the content of the pupils' explanations of their answers, it becomes conspicuous that children's perceptions are the objective conditions - structures that have already been formed under a regime of masculine domination in which children grow and acquire experience, i.e. both women and men are socialized (Butler, 2006). These perceptions are the result of the living experiences they have got from their home and family: *"my mom usually cooks"* (Girl, 5th grade) and from their parents' perceptions: *"[mom] is the housewife of the house and she wants to do it"* (Boy 6th grade). The family environment seems to be the primary framework where this youthful male and female identity (self-image) is constructed: *"she is a woman and makes these preparations"* (Boy, 5th grade).

Social gender is constructed through processes in which dominant perceptions on what is male and female are of primary importance. Thus, in the distribution of roles in two to doing housework, serving the guests and washing dishes, 70% of the girls and 67% of the boys responded that the girl would serve, and then 46% of the girls and 53% boys answered that the girl should wash the dishes. Within the context of the house and the distribution of roles within it, the child understands what the division of labor is based on gender, i.e. the distinction between male and female forms of work (Butler, 2006). Having all these living experiences the boys refuse to participate in household chores (serving and washing dishes), which can be interpreted as a refusal to succumb to tactics of "feminization", through which they believe that their male identity and substance are threatened: *"boys do not do such thing; [these are] for the girls"* (Boy, 6th grade). We have generally observed a boys' reaction when they encounter performative acts of female identity; that is, they refuse to identify with some expressions of the "female" identity: *"there is no way that the boy washes the dishes"* (Boy, 6th grade). It was observed that in taking up the dishwashing, 29% of the girls and the boys in the sample replied that a boy should do it. According to the analysis of the contents of the pupils' justifications who answered "a boy", it appears that this work was not entrusted to the boy but as a helping hand to the girl. Because, in this percentage of the sample, "main" obligation to wash the dishes is that of the girl, whereas the boy will help her but he will not take up this type of housework, *"even if he is a boy and wants to help his sister"* (Girl, 5th grade).

This segregation of housework between the two sexes becomes even more poignant in the party. On the one hand, it was confirmed that men continue to dominate the public space and in the field of power and, more specifically, in the power of economic production, as in the expression: *"He will finance the party"*. On the other hand,

women remain in the private space, in the housework, as in the statement: *“she will cook, serve, make drinks for the elderly and the children”* (Boy, 6th grade) - the various tasks that fit women are an extension of the domestic functions (care, services, etc.) (Thanos & Buna, 2016).

Men have the monopoly on handling technical articles and machines / tools, which was confirmed by the survey, 98% of girls and 95% of boys in the sample believe that *“only men do the hard work”* (Boy, 5th grade), such as technical work. They biologize man’s ability to handle such jobs from men: *“they are skilled at doing these”* (Girl, 5th grade), *“It’s a man, and he’s been doing these since he was a little kid”* (Girl, 5th grade). The boys attribute features to themselves that socially acceptable and that “must” own a boy: *“he is a boy, and has stronger hands”* (Boy, 5th grade), *“he must become a man”* (Boy, 6th grade). Girls feel like they’re like women, and they cannot think of anything else or do anything to change it: *“she is weak for these things; she will start crying”* (Girl, 6th grade), *“because the girls are preoccupied with cooking, wiping and things like these but with things like these”* (Boy, 5th grade). In this case, we are talking about “symbolic violence,” as Bourdieu mentions, which - with an invisible mechanism- defines things without domination being perceived. When subjective structures (or habitus) and objective structures (family) agree with one another, then symbolic violence works (Bourdieu, 2007).

The role of school institution and the transformation of its function with regard to the reproduction of gender differences is for Bourdieu the most important factor in changing the form of masculine domination observed at school (Panagiotopoulos in Bourdieu, 2007). Boys do their performative act on gender identity by resisting to school: *“I’m a boy, and I’m bored of school”* (Boy, 5th grade). Studying as a process is considered a “feminine” obligation. This is also shown by the fact that 68% of girls and 56% of boys claim that the low-grade paper is written by a boy: *“[He is] a boy, and boys do not pay much attention to studying”* (Girl, 5th grade).

Children show that they choose to play with games (and toys) that are considered appropriate for their gender: 50% of girls chose to play “apples” and 92% of boys, football. The children imitate the behaviors of their own sex: *“[since] my girlfriend plays, so do I”* (Girl, 5th grade), thus illustrating that they have internalized gender-based social expectations and perceptions. The categorization they make to select the game (or the toy) is the stereotypical image for each gender. For example, for boys it is that of a strong and fit, since the *“boys are tough and strong”* (Boy, 5th grade) and *“[they] play violent games”* (Girl, 5th grade), whereas for girls the image is that of a sensitive and muscular weak: *“girls are sensitive and muscular weaker [than boys]”* (Boy, 6th grade).

Girls try to “enter” into the “male” world and gain power by playing games that are considered “boyish”. 41% of the girls in the sample replied that they would play football: *“I know it’s a boy game, but I will play it, I like it”* (Girl, 6th grade). We observe, however, that girls are not always powerless and dependent, but as Walkerdine (2013) says *“they seem to be in a struggle with the boys to read and create situations in which they gain power”*. Indeed, 41% of the girls in the sample replied that they would play

football: *"I know it's a boy game, but I will play it, I like it."* Yet another interpretation of this is that girls are easier to adopt "male" practices than boys to adopt "girls'" ones, due to the fact that the girl is easier to identify with the "dominant" male gender (Thanos & Bouna, 2016).

Finally, it was once again found that some forms of masculinity are in conflict with good academic performance. More particularly, in the subject of "Composition", the majority of children responded that girls are better. When reading the answers, however, we see that most of the boys (50%) responded that boys are better than girls at composition but not because of cognitive skills but because of their high imagination (Thanos & Bouna, 2015). Boys often construct and demonstrate their knowledge of masculinity by adopting attitudes of hegemonic masculinity, which - within the school context - is manifested by being distinguished in sports - especially in highly prestigious sports (e.g. football, basketball). *"Boys, in contrast with girls, spend more time in sports; they have no time to study"* (Boy, 5th grade) and from preference only to "men's" subjects or to no subject.

In conclusion and, based on the aforementioned analysis, we can say that the family and the school shape children's gender identity, inscribing unconsciously gender roles in social subjects (Panagiotopoulos in Bourdieu, 2007). Gender plays an important role in negotiating and managing relationships - hierarchies among children, as subjects have an active role in compliance with or gender resistance to regulatory standards.

The survey focused on the local school and socio-cultural environment of Ioannina region and its findings cannot be generalized, either universally or definitively, as the reproduction of gender discriminations is a fluid concept and depends on the subjects themselves. Future research could focus on exploring more specific research proposals to develop theories of enhancing liberation from gender discrimination or even their abolition. More specifically, future research could explore:

- The effect of specific factors such as social order, cultural capital, race characteristics on power relations in which the gender subject is constructed.
- The conditions under which training programmes for teachers and intervention programmes on gender identities and their discriminations can be implemented.
- Projects that could act as programmes against gender discrimination, pedagogical material that can be used additionally in pre-school education, and the development of anti-sexist programmes from pre-school education, so that deconstruction of gender and gender-based classifications can start as early as possible.

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