İstanbul Üniversitesi Kadın Araştırmaları Dergisi
Istanbul University Journal of Women's Studies

REVIEW ARTICLE / DERLEME MAKALESİ

A Poststructural Feminist Approach to the Acquisition of Gender Roles in Early Childhood

Erken Çocukluk Döneminde Toplumsal Cinsiyet Rollerinin Kazanımına Postyapısalcı Feminizm Yaklaşım

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Abstract

Early childhood is the period during which the child's identity is constructed. The perspectives children acquire regarding the phenomenon of gender and the identities they develop during this period are important in terms of them being anti-discriminatory individuals in future periods. This study attempts to explain how gender is constructed socially, culturally, historically, and politically by considering the theoretical approaches developed in this direction instead of justifying gender construction biologically. The literature contains various studies on poststructural feminism, sexism, and gender acquisition in early childhood. This study discusses gender role acquisition, criticisms of gender acquisition theories, and the factors affecting gender acquisition using the poststructural feminist approach toward gender acquisition.

Keywords

Early Childhood, Gender, Gender Acquisition, Feminism, Poststructuralist Theory

Öz

Erken çocukluk dönemi çocukların kimlik inşasının oluştuğu bir dönemdir. Bu dönemde çocukların cinsiyet olgusuna dair kazandıkları bakış açıları ve geliştirdikleri kimlikler eşitlik ve kapsayıcılık bağlamında önem taşımaktadır. Birçok alanda sağlanmaya çalışılan eşitlik ve kapsayıcılık konusu toplumsal cinsiyet olgusunu da içermektedir. Çocukların erken dönemlerden itibaren inşa edilen toplumsal cinsiyetine birçok faktör etki etmektedir. Bu çalışmada toplumsal cinsiyet inşasının yalnızca biyolojik bağlamda temellendirilmesi yerine toplumsal cinsiyetin sosyal ve kültürel faktörlerle nasıl inşa edildiğine dair geliştirilen teorik yaklaşımlar ele alınarak açıklanmaya çalışılmıştır. Alanyazında erken çocukluk döneminde postyapısalcı feminizm, cinsiyetçilik, toplumsal cinsiyet kazanımı üzerine çeşitli araştırmalar bulunmaktadır. Bu çalışmada toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri kazanımı, toplumsal cinsiyet kazanımı kuramlarına getirilen eleştiriler, toplumsal cinsiyet kazanımına etki eden faktörler ve toplumsal cinsiyet kazanımına postyapısalcı feminizm yaklaşımı ele alınmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Erken Çocukluk, Toplumsal Cinsiyet, Toplumsal Cinsiyet Edinimi, Feminizm, Postyapısalcı Kuram

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Background

Gender is the word used to describe how people differ as being male or female in terms of biological characteristics. The division of gender according to determined criteria forms a biological determination by creating categorizations (Butler, 2016). Biological determinism has been criticized in terms of the hierarchical superiority of one of the sexes (male) to the other (female) and the observance of this hierarchy by the sovereign (Boyer et al., 2009; Foucault, 2016). Apart from femininity and masculinity being emphasized as biological characteristics, these concepts are mostly used to indicate gender roles. Social roles involve the behaviors, duties, and obligations society expects from the women and men living there (Dökmen, 2010). Individuals learn these social roles that shape life, and hence the distribution of roles according to gender through experiences (e.g., at school, in the media, in their families, and from their surroundings) starts from the moment of birth (Akın & Demirel, 2003). The acquisition of social roles is realized through socialization. Meanwhile, socialization takes place within an important dimension of gender positions that are defined by male-female relations and form the identity (Hançer, 2018). In this context, this study will firstly discuss the acquisition of gender roles and criticisms on this and then attempt to address how the acquisition of gender roles is achieved in early childhood and how children are affected by gender role acquisition within the cultural and social contexts of the poststructural feminist discourse.

Acquisition of Gender Roles

Various theories exist that are used to explain acquisition of gender and gender differences, one of these being the psychoanalytic theory associated with Sigmund Freud known as Freudianism. According to Freud, children are psychologically bisexual at birth. Children acquire these bisexual identities as they resolve conflicting feelings of love and jealousy in their relationships with their parents. While boys are on the path of giving up their erotic love for their mothers and identifying with their fathers, girls are on a path toward gaining their sexual identity when they similarly start to identify with their mothers (Freud, as cited in Onur, 1995, p. 109).

According to another theory known as social learning theory, gender differences are shaped by observing other people's behaviors, by taking role models, and by imitating, reinforcement, and/or punishment (Bandura, 1977). Children learn gender role behaviors as a result of the punishments and rewards applied toward behaviors in accordance with their gender. If a girl who wants to help her father fix her car is dismissed because she is told it is an unsuitable job, she will be unwilling to help her father in the future. However, if her desire to help her mother in the kitchen is reinforced, she will want to help her mother again (Dökmen, 2010).

Another theory used to explain gender acquisition is cognitive development theory, which accordingly explains gender role acquisition through the cognitive processes of the child. According to Kohlberg (Kohlberg, 1966, p. 82-173) as the developer of the theory, children's gender role development is completed over three periods: the period of gender labeling observed between the ages of about two to three-and-a-half years (when the child can label their own gender correctly and others with some degree of accuracy), the period of gender stability between the ages of three-and-a-half to four-and-a-half years (when the possess partial awareness of the fact that gender does not change), and the period of invariance of gender between the ages of four-and-a-half to seven (Dökmen, 2010; Onur, 1995).

The last theory developed regarding gender acquisition is gender schema theory. Bem (1981) developed the theory, which states that children also take into account language and analogies as well as anatomical differences, division of labor, and personality traits while learning the definitions of femininity and masculinity in their society. Children evaluate and assimilate this particular gender-related information with each new piece of information based on gender. In other words, children learn to code their acquired knowledge through an evolving gender schema. In cognitive theory, children over the age of five have completed their gender role schemas and enter the period of belief in the invariance of gender. When compared with children aged five and over, children four years old and younger are seen to believe and trust more in the gender schema images that are presented (Bayramoğlu, 2015).

Criticisms on Gender Acquisition Theories

Social learning theory, cognitive theory, gender schema theory, and psychoanalytic theory are the ones used to explain gender acquisition. However, various criticisms have been brought toward these theories. Researchers have questioned girls' so-called penis envy and boys' so-called castration anxiety regarding Freud's psychoanalytic perspective on gender acquisition, which interprets psychological phenomena generally within a sexual framework (Dökmen, 2010; Freud, 2009; Keles, 2008).

Freud has been criticized due to how he based the explanations in his approaches on a biological basis with the understanding that anatomy is destiny while adhering to traditional culture in his explanations (Fromm, 1990). Freud's approach toward female psychology with a masculine sexuality from a male point of view has also been argued, especially for how he placed men in the center of his famous phallic theory (Habip, 2014). Meanwhile, social learning theory emphasizes the importance of rewards, punishments, and observations regarding gender role acquisition. However, studies are found to have not confirmed the hypothesis that children always resemble their parents of the same gender. Children instead choose dominant models, taking them as examples (Dökmen, 2010). Cognitive development theory, on the other hand,

has been criticized for how it neglects the role of culture and society, and the theory's assumption that cognition affects behavior is not always valid. Studies are also found to have shown the gender stability and constancy period to occur earlier than the ages Kohlberg suggests, as well as factors other than the gender constancy principle to affect gender development. Bussey and Bandura stated the connection between gender-related behaviors in children and gender schema (e.g., dolls are for girls, I am a girl, therefore dolls are for me) to not be fully demonstratable (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Gender role acquisition is multifaceted, and despite the different criticisms, more than one theory should be considered together to explain this acquisition (Levy et al., 1998).

Factors Affecting Gender Acquisition

Gender is used a political approach that addresses the distribution of dominant power in society while offering a way of thinking about how identities are formed. Therefore, gender involves society, law, politics, and culture and is related to features such as class, ethnic identity, age, and physical ability (Kıymaz-Bahçeci, 2014). The idea in this context is that one's family and social environment in particular have a stronger effect on gender acquisition than genetic factors (Knafo et al., 2005). In addition to the family, factors such as peers, siblings, school environment, media, books, songs, cartoons, and toys have been stated to also contribute to this effect, build societal expectations, and cause these expectations to be internalized by converting them into rules for children (Carlson & Knoester, 2011; Hawkins et al., 2006; Köseler, 2009; Menekşe, 2019; Rust, 2006; Şivgin & Deniz, 2017; Yağan-Güder, 2017). The approach children internalize by modeling adults' roles is explained with role theory (Kıymaz-Bahçeci, 2014). Social role theory involves gender differences and similarities regarding social behavior. Its basic principle is that interpersonal differences and similarities primarily arise from the social roles men and women have in their societies (Eagly & Wood, 2016).

Yağan-Güder and Güler-Yıldız's (2016) study aimed to determine parents role in preschool children's gender perceptions and observed factors such as a child's mother not working, a child being exposed to or witnessing violence, and a child having a traditional structure regarding shared responsibilities within the family to affect how children express opinions in line with the gender stereotypes they form regarding women and men. Children whose mothers and fathers take responsibility for fulfilling household chores were determined to possess fewer stereotypical views about domestic responsibilities compared to children whose fathers did not help out with household chores. Children who do not experience pressure from their fathers, who have siblings of the opposite sex, and who are bought toys that are considered to be for the opposite sex were observed to make less stereotypical choices regarding their choice of games and toys.

The literature has stated parents' behaviors toward and interests in their children differ according to the children's gender and this to possibly affect children's perceptions toward gender (Freeman, 2007; Murray, 2004; Yağan-Güder & Güler-Yıldız, 2016). In one study (Freeman, 2007), five- and three-year-old children were asked to describe toys for boys and toys for girls and to predict how their parents would respond to their gender-specific toy preferences. The research was carried out with 13 three-year-old children, 13 five-year-old children, and their parents. At the end of the research, the three-year-old children were seen to have distinguished girls' toys from boys' toys using gender-specific stereotypes at a rate of 92%, while the five-year-old children distinguishing between toys more strictly using gender-specific stereotypes compared to the three year olds. While three-year-old girls had described toys as "for girls" or as "for boys" with slightly more stereotypical lines than the boys, the girls were more likely to be of the opinion that their parents would approve when they played with girls' toys. The results from that research showed children to have internalized stereotypical definitions of gender based on their responses to each set of questions, the way they ranked toys for boys and girls, the support they received for their gender-specific choices, and their parents' estimation of their between-gender toy selection approval.

A child's world is not neutral in terms of gender. The child's social environment includes both the physical environments to which the child is exposed as well as the social interactions the child has with others. Gender role patterns are evident in the decor of children's rooms, with clothes and toys that fit traditional color schemes in relation to physical environments, such as pink for girls and blue for boys (Pomerleau et al., 1990). However, gender stereotypes are also thought to have a dynamic structure able to create a distinction between practice and perception and to provide a transition between categories (Wood et al., 2002). Wood et al.'s (2002) study in which a total of 48 children and 144 adults took part examined gender role patterns through an activity where the children and their parents played together. The child participants consisted of 24 girls and 24 boys aged 24-72 months, while the adults were separated into three groups consisting of parents, other parents, and non-parents. The toys in the play sessions were presented as girls', boys', and neutral toys. After the game sessions, two questionnaires were administered to the adults. Their research findings showed the adults' classification of toys to not represent their perception of gender. The adults considered the neutral gender toys as a flexible category and included some toys for girls and some for boys in it. This flexibility was thought to have been caused by the perceived gender roles changing with social conditions over time.

Both social learning and cognitive development theories' explanations of how the behavior of gaining and displaying a gender role develop support the view that children may be affected by the presence of same or other sex siblings in the family (Bussey & Bandura, 1984). Based on this view, Rust et al.'s (2000) study examined the effect

of older sibling's gender on younger sibling's gender role, in which 1,027 three-year-old girls had one older sibling (527 had an older sister and 500 had an older brother), 1,143 three-year-old boys had one older sibling (561 had an older brother and 582 had an older sister), and another group consisting of 1,707 boys and 1,665 girls who were all only children. The study applied a questionnaire to mothers and caregivers and developed the gender characteristics in the questionnaire specifically to describe differences in gender role behaviors for each gender by allowing the boys and girls in the normal population sample of preschoolers to differ in terms of their masculinity and femininity. The research findings revealed the gender of the older sibling to be associated with the gender role behavior of the younger sibling. Having an older brother was associated with more masculine behavior and less feminine behavior in both boys and girls, while boys with an older sister exhibited more feminine behaviors, and girls with an older sister displayed less masculine behaviors.

Gender is an important component of socialization for children. Gender roles are presented in the literature on children as contributing to a socialized gender understanding of children. Despite the awareness of changing gender roles, much of the literature on children continues to present traditional gender stereotypes (Roberts & Hill, 2003). Köseler (2009) conducted an analytical study to examine the gender phenomenon in the story and fairy tale books used during the preschool period, examining 200 stories and 50 fairy tale books that were used in the Gaziantep city center. According to the study's findings, the characters in the story and fairy tale books had been formed according to traditional gender perceptions, with the female characters in the books having limited work lives and professional roles. The male characters were portrayed as more active, while the female characters were portrayed as more passive and weaker. The female characters had the role of the mother at home, while the male characters had the role of the father and as the figure who provide the livelihood of the house. Çatalcalı-Soyer's (2009) similarly saw male and female characters to have been formed in stories according to traditional gender roles (e.g., occupation, role in the family). In the examined stories, girls made friends with so-called passive and weak animals such as cats and fish at home, while the boys mostly made friends with so-called strong dogs outside the home.

Gender and the Poststructural Feminist Approach

The concept of gender is perceived in different ways by various cultures in different parts of the world and is determined in accordance with the roles of males and females (Tuncer & Şen, 2018). Gender studies conducted since the 1970s have shown biological gender differences (male-female) to be emphasized first followed by learned gender roles and socialization and gender to lastly have a central role in all social systems (Ecevit, 2011).

Two categories of people are formed through gender relations: male and female, with women and men making up the exclusionary categories. At the same time, this dual categorization creates dominance in gender relations (Flax, 1987), and importance is had in considering the concept of gender within the framework of gender equality (Tuncer & Şen, 2018). Not ignoring the gender distinction at this point seems to take place in the context of the poststructuralist approach. Poststructuralist theories refuse to examine society from the perspective of reductive and generalizing theoretical principles (Kaplan, 2018). As in the poststructuralist approach, feminism has attempted to develop a new paradigm of social criticism (Sarup, 1997). Understanding how individuals deal with sexist discourses tied to particular historical contexts by resisting or participating in cultural practices lies at the heart of feminism and poststructuralism (Azzarito et al., 2006).

Poststructural feminist theory (Toye, 2010) allows for ethics, politics, and aesthetics to be studied together as a set of related discourses and has caused various conceptual debates. Poststructural feminism problematizes what being a woman means by deconstructing the privatization of positions in society according to men and the categories of opposite genders. In this way, the concepts of gender-based subjectivity are constantly being scrutinized (Berbary, 2019), with poststructural feminist theory using the concepts of discourse, language, and power to shed light on the complexity of gendered play in the field of early childhood. The prevalent dominant understanding uses discourse as a practice that has been historically produced within a specific sociocultural context, structured by assumptions, and generates power. While some discourses shape the status of truth, alternative discourses are marginalized, with both the individuals themselves and their social world being redefined and organized in this way (Foucault, 1980).

Researchers use feminist and poststructuralist theories to analyze how elements of gender are constructed, how children comprehend the meaning of gender, and how they are actively involved in thinking about their own sexual identity (Broom, 1990; MacNaughton, 2000). Blaise's (2009) study analyzed qualitative data on gender and sexuality in a kindergarten classroom to examine how the children understood the concept of gender and sexuality in the classroom with their teachers by witnessing the behaviors of 5- and 6-year-old female students who sang and danced a song containing sexual expressions for adults. Class observation notes from the research show that children simultaneously do not know what they want or what they need. They accept heterosexual desires, and these desires are manifested in their speech and actions. For the most part, all girls believe that they want and need a boyfriend and that often a certain way exists to get a boyfriend. These beliefs about gender and sexuality limit the different possibilities for both girls and boys, clearly showing that heteronormative norms are part of the early childhood class of the binary gender regime (*Kaos GL*,

2013), where only relationships with the opposite sex are approved between men and women. Development is generally used to attempt to understand the relationship among biological sex, gender, and sexuality. This point of view is based on the fact that children are born with a biological sex first, then learn their gender before eventually acquiring their sexuality. Heteronormative norms in children are supported by assumptions that they are best, most accurate, or normal in relation to social stimuli. Heteronormative norms are seen as regulators because they encourage children to maintain stereotypical gender roles. Poststructural feminist theory takes a critical stance toward limiting the ways of understanding biological gender and sexuality. Poststructural feminism places gender at the center of inquiry and views it as a dynamic political and social construct that defines specific actions that are understood to be appropriate for one gender, rather than conceptualizing it as a characteristic of individuals (Blaise, 2009; Ecevit, 2011).

Another study (Taguchi, 2005) examined how teacher candidates and educators interact using feminist-oriented practices in teacher trainings in the context of Swedish early childhood teacher education. Education there is understood as a complex context of gendered cultural, social, scientific, and academic practices. Having different genders, races, sexualities, social statuses, abilities, religions, and ethnicities in the education system requires the differences to be explained to the students. However, the question arises to what extent the conditions created by today's educational discourses enable different kinds of explanations. Established curricula and oral narratives organized accordingly include already accepted and embodied practices. Differentiating among discourses is very difficult in the face of educational programs whose contents have drawn borders. Teachers inevitably will think that they are unlikely to implement strategies that promote healthy sexual development in their classrooms, programs, and schools such as gender equality and respect for sexual diversity. Teachers working in such schools may feel pressured to ignore the needs of children and parents who do not conform to strict gender and sexual expectations (Duke & McCarthy, 2009).

MacNaughton (1997) conducted a study claiming that traditional/conservative approaches to gender influence children's understanding of gender relations in early childhood by restructuring teachers' perspectives with a feminist approach. The target of her study was to observe the feminist approach (Taş, 2016), which supports gender equality in early childhood education, opposes discrimination between men and wo-men, and advocates all kinds of economic, political, sociocultural, and social equality between the opposite sexes. The study specifically examined what happens when small groups of children and their teachers challenged traditional gender role stereotypes at the early childhood center. Her study analyzed and interpreted the story of Nellie, a teacher of 4- and 5-year-old children, using a poststructural feminist approach. While participating in the study, the teacher Nellie began to carefully observe the children during the activities during school hours and recorded her observations on video. She

observed that boys mostly preferred to play with boys in the playground and excluded girls who want to be included in the game, with the excluded girls then playing with other girls. Next, the teacher started to interfere with the children's play. With this intervention, girls were encouraged to play more on the playground and to play with boys. Nellie stated that, with this intervention, the boys who'd traditionally positioned themselves as masculine would then use a series of strategies such as throwing water at the girls or chasing them to show that they own the space. Another of the teacher's interventions occurred when one of the boys told a girl on the playground that she couldn't play there. She responded by telling the boy that the girl could play wherever she wants, that she doesn't have to ask him if she wants to play with blocks there, and that she is free to come and play. After a while, relationships were seen to have been established between the boys and girls and the children to have moved away from sexist practices. The teacher's intervention with a feminist approach had obscured the construction of gender-based power relations between children by preventing gender differences in the children's play preferences. At the end of the study, the teacher stated that the children will already learn the subjects in the curriculum such as mathematics in some way; however, she also stated that gender and human rights issues should be taught as a priority and that the sexist curriculum should be updated.

Sumsion (2005) aimed to examine the gender stereotypes that children in early childhood form regarding their teachers, conducting a study using the poststructuralist approach to analyze children's perceptions about male preschool teachers and to examine the discourses that support the perceptions that were reached. The study included 63 children (average age of 4). The researcher attempted to analyze the children's perceptions of their teacher Bill based on their drawings, their explanations of the drawings, and interviews. With a basis on the poststructural feminist perspective that views gender as socially constructed rather than a biologically determined binary category, the research obtained data from the participant children in a way to show which of the children's perceptions of Bill conform to or challenge traditionally gendered views, which regulate the binary gender category, and which provide information about views on masculinity based on the definitions provided by children. Among the findings the researcher reached based on his analysis of the children's discourses, 47% of the discourses were seen to have been created using a gender discourse, which showed boys to portray Bill in traditionally gendered ways based on shared friendships and commonly perceived masculine interests such as wrestling, block games, and construction toys.

It is thought that gender roles in education are institutionalized with stereotypes about gender (Baykal, 1991; Sayılan, 2012). Şivgin and Deniz (2017) carried out a study on 60- to 72-month-old kindergarten children attending kindergarten aimed at examining the effects of educational activities involving gender roles on gender stereotypes. The study had 80 children, 40 in the experimental group and 40 in the control group. In the

study, the researchers applied the Gender Stereotypes Assessment Tool they'd developed to the children in the pretest/posttest format. The researchers prepared acquisitions and indicators that corresponded to each item on the Gender Stereotypes Measurement Tool, then organized gender roles education activities in line with the Ministry of National Education (MoNE, 2013) preschool education program. The activities were carried out two days a week over 8 weeks, and the research findings showed that the children who'd classified the tasks, occupations, toys, and games according to gender before the activities had broken their gender stereotypes after the education activities.

Conclusion

Many researchers studying in the field of early childhood have taken into account and criticized various issues including ideological and political judgments, cultural understandings, and dominant pedagogical beliefs in order to create a field of application in education (Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). Criticizing the assumptions about how cultural and descriptive judgments that are thought to be developmentally appropriate affect the development of children and how they change between which cultural contexts is thought to be necessary. The gender phenomenon has been examined from different perspectives and has been stated to be able to provide direction for early childhood education for creating new fields of practice and research (Wilmarth & Manning, 2007). Based on the results from the current research, the knowledge that children acquire about gender during the construction of their social emotional identity is seen to be able to affect the abstract rules that initially form about gender. In particular, the influence of the traditionalist understanding seems to have had great influence in forming gender role patterns (Carter & Patterson, 1982). Having children understand how their social identities develop during the period of early childhood development is very important in the current order (Davies & Banks, 1992), and this should also be embedded in the broader discourse of social justice within the context of gender, diversity, and equality in early childhood education. Broad discourses on children's rights should also be reflected in politics and provide practical benefits in the transition to inclusiveness with equal opportunities (Azzarito et al., 2006).

Gender begins to be acquired during early periods. Being the most common environments, both the child's family and the school environment contain elements that impact this achievement. The transfer of heteronormative rigid gender stereotypes to children is currently a widely accepted issue, but its properness has become controversial and should be handled with care. The aspects of sexism that affect cultural values and education curriculum, that appear in every field, and that lead people to discrimination need to be criticized. That this discrimination not be presented as a normalized thing in early childhood education at a time when children's identities are being constructed is considered to be important, and having children become individuals who are opposed

to discrimination is also important and something that can be reflected in other areas of their future lives.

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