Research Note

"She can't be Baby Spice...Because She's got Black Hair!" Young Children Talking Television

Margaret Brennan
Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa/Childcare Association

ABSTRACT: *This paper discusses the partial findings of a qualitative study carried out in one early childhood centre. The investigation examined the influence of television messages on young children's learning and development. A sociocultural approach was used to analyse and interpret findings. According to sociocultural perspectives, development occurs as young children participate in the valued activities of their culture. This means that children will use what is immediately available to them, including cultural tools such as television, to understand and make sense of their world. The focus of this discussion is how television, specifically television scripts, allows young children to access rules and information about future adult roles. Findings suggest that young children's television play and talk is constrained by rules, reflecting stereotypical societal expectations about adult roles, especially in relation to gender.*

INTRODUCTION

A sociocultural approach seeks to understand the relationship between children's learning processes and the cultural and historical context. According to Vygotsky the task of every new generation is to internalise and extend the understandings of past generations. Higher mental functioning requires individuals to take current cultural tools and materials that have been previously shaped by prior human practice, and to extend these tools and materials through current action (Cole & Wertsch, 1996). In this way past and present human understandings are combined, shared and extended. Vygotsky claimed that all mental functioning occurs through the individual's use of cultural artifacts. This suggests that knowledge is socially distributed and transformed through the individual's use of tools. For Vygotsky, cultural tools link the individual to their historical cultural context and play a central role in cognition and learning.

This study views television as a 'contemporary' cultural tool and examines the place of this tool in children's learning processes. Vygotsky maintained that pretend play provides opportunities for children to enact and express their understanding of social roles through their appropriation of sociocultural

material. Children's appropriation of television scripts, for example, demonstrates how language is a primary mediational tool (Vygotsky, 1978) that allows children access into adult worlds.

Other studies have viewed children's appropriation of play scripts as having both a social and developmental component. Nelson and Gruendel's study (1986) found that children use contemporary, informal language like television scripts, to elicit information about socially constructed roles such as gender. Cole (1991) maintains that scripts are part of a social process that extend beyond an intra-personal event because they allow for children to examine the links between the broader context and the micro interactions that influence social play.

Katz's (1991) review supports this notion and draws attention to the importance of cultural scripts in assisting children to transfer home knowledge to other settings like school. She claims that children develop scripts from birth in collaboration with their caregivers (Cazden, 1988; Katz, 1991); prior cultural scripting, therefore, influences children's understanding of future adult roles.

Weis and Worobey (1991) interviewed children to examine their use of scripts and how they had contributed to children's sex-role development. Findings showed that children appropriated androgynous and traditional sex-role scripts, to form family scripts that recognised familial roles and relationships. Results suggested children build social scripts around complex combinations of beliefs, values, and behaviours all of which assist them in identifying with own and other-sex gender roles.

Levy and Boston's (1994) study investigated preschoolers' recall of own-sex and other-sex gender scripts. Children were read event components of their own and other gender scripts then asked to recall as many parts of the script that they could. Findings showed that boys and girls demonstrated different patterns of recall and sequencing and displayed more accurate recall of the scripts that related to their own-sex scripts.

Farrar and Goodman (1990) propose there is a developmental component to children's ability to use and access scripts. Children develop a script schema according to their age and as part of their emerging understanding of general event knowledge. Younger children, therefore, are less able than older children to establish a script that might provide them with clues or rules about future roles, due to qualitative cognitive differences.

These findings supported Collin-Stanley, Gan, Yu and Zillman's (1996) study claiming that gender differences and preferences became more pronounced with the participant's increased chronological age. Their study used fairy tales to examine young children's preference of story book tales. Findings showed the

emergence of gender-specific genre preferences as the result of both constitutional and environmental factors.

MacNaughton (1996) maintains that the theoretical base permeating much of the literature about children's gender development is based upon the belief that children passively internalise societal messages regarding future gender roles. However, this perspective fails to acknowledge the child's active role in his/her own socialisation processes and identity formation. MacNaughton supports Vygotsky's claim that children will actively appropriate cultural tools according to their own understandings and experiences, and concludes that children use considerable agency to construct gender roles that are congruent with their own time and place.

METHOD

This study used an emergent research design and multi-method approach to data collection. The emergent, reflexive design resulted in the original focus of the study being extended to allow for the inclusion of additional, insightful data. Participants included children aged three years and over attending the centre during the time of the data collection. Data collection occurred in phases with each phase reflecting my changing role and involvement in the research setting. Participant and direct observation produced the bulk of the data but I also used stimulus material (a locket and cards containing pictures of television characters). The use of the locket and prompt cards depicting television characters, resulted in this study employing stimulated recall as a method of data collection. The stimulated recall method was originally developed by Bloom (1954) to identify the participant's thought processes and levels of attention without unduly interrupting their thought processes. This study used the method to similar effect with participant children initiating both when, and where, they wished to see the stimulus material. The cards and locket undoubtedly provoked children's discussions and perhaps even interest in television, yet the use of the prompts remained child-initiated throughout the study. The 'stimulated recall' method of data collection enabled me to talk with children with minimum disruption to other children and to the centre curriculum; and allowed me to meet the ethical and practical requirements of this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

French and Pena (1991) maintain that television is replacing parents, family and peer's place in informing children about their future societal roles. I found that television play and talk tended to reflect, rather than inform, children of societal

dilemmas and tensions regarding societal roles. This play provided them with a platform to experiment with social roles and investigate conflicting messages about how to be in the world. Television play acted as a zone for societal tensions to be 'played out', 'tried out' and then mediated by children in terms of their emerging understanding of their own and others' societal roles.

My findings suggested that the influence of television-related themes in children's play and talk encouraged children to talk and think about roles or experiences beyond their own life experiences. Some would query whether this extended exposure to others' situations is always desirable or beneficial for young children. Yet my findings showed that children's talk revealed an emerging awareness of 'societal rules' regarding their future roles (especially in relation to gender) and this play allowed them opportunities for further exploration.

An example can be seen in the following episode when Nicky demonstrates her internalisation of rules about gendered behaviour.

> Nicky is standing beside me and says; *"I can be a Spice Girl...stop right now...love me very much..."* She wiggles her hips and pouts her mouth. Nicky flicks her hair over her shoulder as she speaks. Her voice has an adult-like quaver and she pronounces the words using an exaggerated American accent. Her actions represent overtly stereotypical female movements.

Nicky is mimicking gender stereotyped actions and words long before she has had the life experience, or even opportunity, to develop a cognitive understanding of the meaning of the messages underpinning her play. Her actions and words are indicative of gendered behaviour and signal her early socialisation into gender roles.

Children used television material as a means of finding out the rules about gender roles.

> Laura, Susan and Rachel are discussing if Luke can be a Spice Girl and continue to participate in their play (the play has evolved from mother and father play into Spice Girl play after Susan entered the group).
>
> Susan: "Luke you can't be a Spice boy you know."
> Rachel: "Yes he can, my Daddy was a Spice boy at a party."
> Laura: "Your Dad can't be a Spice Girl...he's a Dad."
> Rachel: "He wasn't a Spice girl...he was a Spice boy...so Luke can be one...you just be one Luke...and we will play...ok?"

> Luke: "But I don't want to be a Spice boy...I'll just be Batman...look here is my Batman cape...(he picks up piece of fabric from the dress-ups).
> Susan: "See I told you he couldn't be a Spice boy."
> Rachel: "He can so...but he's just going to be Batman...eh Luke?"
> Laura to Rachel: "Did your Mum help your Dad be a Spice boy...?"

The children's discussion is an example of the group attempting to accommodate their understandings of gender roles to fit Rachel's. The dominant group belief and subsequent rule was *if you want to play Spice Girls then you must be female*. However Rachel's personal experience (her father's party antics) sees her challenging the others' rule about this play and gives evidence of the influence of life/home experiences in children's emerging thinking processes. Rachel tries to extend her peers' beliefs by introducing a new rule, *boys can be Spice Girls*. At first the other children appear to reject Rachel's interpretation of this rule, yet Laura's final comment to Rachel suggests that she is revisiting her original thinking and giving this amendment to the rule some credence.

In the following situation a child offers her play partner advice about a television identity and he seeks further guidance.

> Rachel and Tom are cutting out pictures from catalogues and magazines at the art table.
>
> Tom: *"Do you want that Barbie one?"*
> Rachel: *"That's not Barbie."*
> Tom: *"Yes it is look."* (points to a pink border).
> Rachel: *"No that's just a doll...it's not Barbie...she* [the doll] *you have to have all the Barbie stuff..."*
> Tom: *"Oh...ok. Is this one Barbie?"* (points to a picture)

Rachel informs Tom about who is, and more importantly who is not, Barbie. In addition she offers him a guide for detecting pseudo Barbies in the future (if Barbie doesn't come with accessories then it's not Barbie). Tom appears to accept Rachel's guidance and authority on the subject and this is indicated when he seeks further advice 'Is this one Barbie?'. One explanation for Tom's unquestioning acceptance of Rachel's rules may be to do with the overtly gendered nature of the toy. Barbie is predominantly portrayed in advertisements as a toy for girls not boys. For this reason Tom may have felt secure in exposing his lack of knowledge about the toy because boys aren't expected to know about such things. According to gender schema theory, for young children with limited life experience gender stereotypes and schemas are often heavily depended upon

to assist with assumptions and predictions of other children's interests and areas of knowledge (Albers, 1998).

Children frequently offered information about the roles of television characters and how to play them.

> Nicky is with a group of children singing *"Stop Right Now"* (a Spice Girl's song). As she sings she wiggles her hips. This action causes her skirt to swing out from her legs. She appears to be enjoying the sensation, indicated by her laughter and multiple repetition of the action. She turns to the group and announces: "I'm wearing my Spice Girl's dress today. Stop right now thank you very much." Mike along with the rest of the group is carefully observing Nicky's actions. He asks her to do it again. Nicky obliges willingly. Nicky says *"And you go like this...* (wiggles her hips)*...and like this...* (repeats the action)*... Thank you very much* (sings this phrase)*... And then you go like this...*(places her arms out in front of her body in a dancing type movement).

Nicky demonstrates step-by-step, the actions and words of the Spice Girl's song to Mike and a group of on-looking children. Her explicit demonstration and explanation of the actions provides the children with a scaffold for future Spice Girl play in terms of format and script. It was interesting to note however that Mike even after specifically requesting that Nicky repeat her actions, continued to 'observe' rather than 'participate' in the play (although two other girls joined in). Research shows that children consistently display a same-sex preference when asked to choose play activities or their favourite toys (Alexander & Hines, 1994; Martin et al., 1995) and perhaps this explains Mike's reluctance to 'try out' the Spice Girl's actions and script.

Children were unwilling to transgress the stereotypical gender roles during television-related play.

> Lance runs inside and calls out to a group of nearby children, *"Let's go to Batman's house."* Bianca says *"I'm not Batman. I'm a Barbie girl in a Barbie world.* (She sings the last two words).

Bianca responds to Lance's invitation to go to Batman's house by dissociating herself from Batman and identifying herself instead as 'a Barbie girl'. These children identified with 'same sex' television characters. My data repeatedly showed boys identifying with Superhero roles, and girls identifying with Spice Girl roles. My findings were consistent with Martin, Eisenbud and Rose's (1995) study which suggested that children under eight years of age displayed 'gender-centric' behaviour and preferences. Children primarily identified with characters that were able to provide them with clear, unambiguous guidelines

about their own sex roles. My data repeatedly showed that children stayed strictly within the stereotypical television roles of their 'own sex' during play. There was virtually no exploration of 'other sex' gender roles.

Davies (1990) concludes that in spite of the freedom or release from social rules that pretend play allows, when children attempt to change the rules guiding discursive practices in play they are quickly pulled back into line by other children. My findings revealed many examples of children 'gatekeeping' others adherence to rules that reinforced the stereotypical gendered behaviours of television characters. Only girls pretended to be Spice Girls and only boys pretended to be superheroes.

MacNaughton's (1997) study however found that children of this age are not constrained by social rules or expectations about gender roles during their play. She says that children exercise agency during play to resist stereotypical gender messages of the popular culture.

My data supported other studies (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1995; Cupit, 1989; NAEYC, 1990) in finding that children's superhero scripts and talk predominantly, and at times exclusively, focused on the physical attributes, actions and abilities of the superheroes. Children's discussions about these characters would always begin by drawing others' attention to these aspects.

> Sarah, Jacob, Tom and Tim are looking at the picture of Spiderman in my locket. Sarah: "...yeah that's Spiderman and he flies around...and chases and climbs and saves people." Tom contributes: "...and so do Superman and Batman. They can fly and do stuff...and they are so strong to carry people." Jacob replies: "...and Robin can too...but he's smaller than Batman."

In contrast, when the Spice Girls featured in children's play or talk, discussions focused solely on the women's physical appearance with children giving the most attention to their hair length and colour, and skin colouring. Children (girls) were told by peers that they 'could' or 'could not be' a chosen Spice Girl character on the basis of how closely their physical appearance mirrored that of the character they had chosen to play. Tania, for example, was informed by a peer during a Spice Girl play episode that she had to be Posh Spice (the woman portraying Posh Spice has dark hair and an olive complexion). When I asked why Tania had to play this particular Spice Girl character, both Tania and her partner answered in an incredulous tone:

> *"She can't be Baby Spice... because she's got black hair!"* (Tania is Samoan).

MacNaughton (1997) sees the girls' reply as being the product of societal messages that are delivered to children in a complexity of ways. She maintains that a significant proportion of children's play worlds are about perceived gender roles and the related role expectations. This phenomena results in play that mirrors the inequities within our society. Dyson (1996) however sees scripts (including gendered scripts) as 'enabling tools' that allow children access to future masculine and feminine roles. Children curious about adult worlds are given a preview of what to expect and how to act.

Boys on the other hand neither participated nor expressed interest in Spice Girl's play. In this interaction Charlie displays some discomfort in even having to admit, let alone demonstrate, his knowledge of the Spice Girls.

> Charlie asks to see my locket and I open it. Charlie says*" I want to see your other pictures."* I hand him the cards. He looks at each card briefly but pauses when he comes to a very small, computer-generated picture of the Spice Girls. I am surprised that he is able to identify the characters. Charlie says, *"Spice Girls!"*. I ask *How did you know that?"*. He replies, *"Oh you know*...(looks down*)*... *girls... they dance... you know* (looks away). *Yeah and they go like this."* (wiggles his hips and blushes - he giggles and blushes again apparently embarrassed at modelling the action).

Charlie's comment *"oh you know... girls...they dance"* shows that he associates girls with dancing, except that in this case the 'girls' he is referring to are actually 'women.' Charlie demonstrated the dancing action by wiggling his hips in an effeminate manner, but appeared extremely uncomfortable at portraying this feminine action.

I found it very difficult to engage children in any form of conversation that extended their perception of the superheroes, or the Spice Girls, beyond the gendered packages presented to them in television programmes or advertisements. Spice Girl scripts, for example, were limited to the words of the Spice Girls' songs and these included messages about femininity that were communicated to children through a series of non-verbal gestures and movements that served to reinforce stereotypical behaviour and attitudes. The song most frequently sung by girls during play episodes was 'Stop Right Now,' a song all about 'needing love and wanting to be loved.' Boys, on the other hand, received messages via Superhero scripts about 'masculinity' involving physical proweress, superior abilities and an attitude of being the 'saviour' rather than the 'saved' or the 'needed rather than the needy.' As many others before have noted children are socialised into these roles of 'independence' and 'dependence' from a very young age via multiple, complex and intersecting societal messages. Rogoff (1998) says children will continue to elaborate the

possibilities made available to them through cultural tools, even when their application of the tool's message does not move in the directions that are considered by educationalists, parents and teachers, as being the most desirable.

A significant finding of this study was that although television scripts contained differing genres and conflicting discourses, as a 'play tool' they presented children with uniform, pre-scripted guidelines for play. In this way television scripts became a 'user friendly tool' accessible to most children. Young children like television and like to talk about it so they were highly motivated to participate in this form of play and learn the rules if need be.

As a tool, television scripts link children to their cultural-historical context through embodying the cultural norms and societal messages of the day, yet at the same time they connect children to the prior experiences and knowledge of past generations. Historical cultural themes such as gender role expectations and good versus evil are communicated to this generation of children through a contemporary tool that sits in most family's living rooms. Here we see the influence of both the micro and macro setting on children's learning and development.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Children's obvious enjoyment of television viewing revealed an ongoing motivation for participating in related play episodes and discussions. The place motivation plays in children's willingness to participate in activities requires further investigation. Examining motivation and intent also asks us to carefully consider the child's perspective in relation to which cultural tools they choose to appropriate and why.

REFERENCES

Albers, S. M. (1998). The effect of gender-typed clothing on children's social judgements. *Child Study Journal, 28*(2), 137-159.

Alexander, G., & Hines, G. (1994). Gender labels and play styles: Their relative contribution to children's selection of playmates. *Child Development, 65,* 869-879.

Bassett, G. (1991). Ninjas under the bed: The television violence debate. *Delta 45,* 73-83.

Berk. L.E. (1997). *Child Development* (4th ed.). Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon.

Bloom, B. (1954). The thought processes of students in discussion. In J. French (Ed.), *Accent on teaching: Experiments in general education.* New York: Harper & Brothers.

Carlsson-Paige, N., & Levin, D.E. (1995). Can teachers resolve the war-play dilemma? *Young Children, 50*(5), 62-63.

Cazden, C.B. (1988). *Classroom discourse.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Cole, M. (1991). On putting humpty dumpty together again: A discussion of the papers on the socialization of children's cognition and emotion. *Merill-Palmer Quarterly, 37*(1), 199-208.

Cole, M., & Wertsch, J. (1996). Beyond the individual-social antimony in discussions of Piaget and Vygotsky. *Human Development, 39,* 250-256.

Collin-Stanley, T., Gan, S., Yu H., & Zillmann, D. (1996). Choice of romantic, violent, and scary fairy-tale books by preschool girls and boys. *Child Study Journal, 26* (4), 279-301.

Cupit, C.G. (1989). Socializing the Superheroes. *Resource Booklet No. 5.* Canberra: Australian Early Childhood Association.

Davies, B. (1990). Lived and imaginary narratives and their place in taking oneself up as a gendered being. *Australian Psychologist, 25*(3), 318-332.

Dyson, A.H. (1996). Cultural constellations and childhood identities: On Greek gods, cartoon heroes, and the social lives of school children. *Harvard Educational Review, 66*(3), 471-495.

Farrar, M.J., & Goodman, G.S. (1990). Developmental differences in the relation between scripts and episodic memory: do they exist? In R. Fivush and J.A. Hudson (eds.). *Knowing and remembering in young children.* New York: Cambridge.

French, J., & Pena, S. (1991). Children's hero play of the 20th century: Changes resulting from television's influence. *Child Study Journal, 21*(2), 79-94.

Katz, L. (1991). Cultural scripts: the home-school connection. *Early Child Development and Care, 73,* 95-102.

Levy, G.D. & Boston, M.B. (1994). Preschoolers' recall of own-sex and other-sex gender scripts. The *Journal of Genetic Psychology, 155*(3), 369-371.

Martin, C., Eisenbud, L., & Rose, H. (1995). Children's gender-based reasoning about toys. *Child Development, 66,* 1453-1471.

MacNaughton, G. (1997). Is Barbie to blame? Reconsidering how children learn gender. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood, 21*(4), 18-24.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (1990). NAEYC position statement on media violence in children's lives. *Young Children, 45*(5), 18-20.

Nelson, K. (1986). *Event Knowledge: Structure and function in development.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Nelson, K., & Gruendel, J. (1986). Children scripts. In K. Nelson (ed.). *Event knowledge and function in development.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Rogoff, B. (1998). Cognition as a collaborative process. In W. Damon, D. Kuhn & R. Siegler (Eds.). *Handbook of child psychology. Fifth edition, volume two. Cognition, perception and language.* Texas: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Tomasello, M. (1995). Joint attention as social cognition. In C. Moore & P. Dunham (Eds.), *Joint attention: Its origins and role in development.* Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and language.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Weis, D., & Worobey, J. (1991). Sex-roles and family scripts in early childhood. *Early Child Development and Care, 77,* 109-113.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaret Brennan is completing her PhD at Victoria university and currently working as a course writer at Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa/New Zealand Childcare Association. She is interested in all aspects of sociocultural theory including research methodologies.