

Barbie could dampen a young girl's career dreams

March 5 2014

Although the marketing slogan suggests that Barbie can "Be Anything," girls who play with this extremely popular doll see fewer career options available to themselves compared to boys. So say Aurora Sherman of Oregon State University and Eileen Zurbriggen of the University of California, Santa Cruz, who conducted one of the first experiments on how playing with fashion dolls influences girls' perceptions about their future occupational options. The findings, which the psychologists describe as "sobering," are published in Springer's journal *Sex Roles*.

Sherman and Zurbriggen conducted their study in light of various occupations still being highly gender-segregated, and the worldwide prevalence of inequality in employment and earnings between genders. They used [girls'](#) dolls play to study the impact of gender role socialization, a process through which children learn to abide by culturally prescribed norms and which perpetuates gender stereotypical behavior.

Thirty-seven girls from the US Pacific Northwest, aged between four to seven years old, were randomly assigned to play for five minutes with either a sexualized Doctor Barbie or Fashion Barbie doll, or with more a more neutral Mrs. Potato Head doll. The girls were then shown photographs of ten occupations and asked how many they themselves or boys could do in the future.

The girls who played with a Barbie doll – irrespective of whether it was dressed as a fashion model or a doctor – saw themselves in fewer

occupations than are possible for boys. Those girls who played with Mrs. Potato Head reported nearly as many career options available for themselves as for boys.

The two Barbie dolls were identical except for clothing, with unrealistic bodies, extremely youthful and attractive faces, and long full hair. The researchers therefore believe that the doll itself trumps the role or [career aspirations](#) suggested by its costume. This could be because of the well-defined Barbie perception that most young girls have about the doll's appearance and her sexually mature body shape. Sherman and Zurbriggen found the girls' response to be consistent with objectification theory according to which there is a restriction to women's sense of what is possible. The results are also line with a growing body of research showing that the possibility of being female and not sexy or objectified is becoming extremely difficult for adult women.

"Perhaps Barbie can 'Be Anything' as the advertising for this doll suggests, but girls who play with her may not apply these possibilities to themselves," says Sherman, who suggests that Barbie and similar dolls are part of the burden of early and inappropriate sexuality placed on girls. "Something about the type of doll, not characteristics of the participants, causes the difference in career aspirations."

More information: *Sex Roles* [DOI: 10.1007/s11199-014-0347-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-014-0347-y)

Provided by Springer

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