

Gender identities disrupted—and reinforced

September 6 2018

New Northwestern University research analyzing the ways children's gender narratives reinforce or disrupt gender inequality found that older children—and girls—are more likely to tell alternative narratives that disrupted the gender status quo.

In the study, a racially diverse group of more than 230 [children](#), ages 7 to 12 years old, told four types of narratives about their [gender](#) identities. The analysis revealed two "master narratives" (difference and genderblind), which are shared cultural stories defined as those that reinforce the existing gender hierarchy and "alternative narratives" (incongruent and counternarrative) as those that disrupt it.

"To date, master narratives have only been used with emerging adults," said Onnie Rogers, author of the study and assistant professor of psychology in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern. "But by middle childhood, children are capable of narrating stories about their own lives and about gendered experiences."

Rogers said a surprising result was the consistency of the use of the "difference" narrative across age and racial groups. Younger and older children, black and white children were equally likely to tell this narrative, which speaks to the ubiquity of the master narrative.

Children who told "difference" narratives spoke about gender in ways that emphasized the differences between boys and girls.

For example, a third-grader defined what being a boy means to him in

one word: "Sports." Girls in the "difference" narrative similarly relied on stereotypes and group comparisons. Being a girl is important, according to one fifth-grader, "because I don't really like boys' clothes...I like being a girl because [girls](#) are pretty."

When asked to imagine how things would be different if he was not a boy, one fifth-grader said: "It would be a lot different because you wouldn't be able to play football or anything."

The "difference" narrative was the primary version of the master narrative, capturing 61 percent of the sample.

"The idea of not being able to play or be anything if navigating the world as a different gender exemplifies an ideology of difference," said Rogers, also a faculty fellow at Northwestern's Institute for Policy Research.

In a second master narrative, "genderblind" children characterized gender as inconsequential: "It [gender] doesn't really matter because you're still a human being," said a fourth-grade girl.

Very few children, 3 percent, were coded in this narrative type.

Rogers said it's conceivable to interpret these genderblind narratives as children who do not want to discuss gender or held egalitarian values, and thus more representative of an alternative narrative.

"But, given that 'blindness' and 'silence' exacerbates rather than attenuates social inequality, it seems compelling that this narrative may function to reinforce rather than disrupt the master narrative," she said.

The "incongruent" narrative was one of the two alternative narratives, capturing 22 percent of the sample.

Incongruent narratives characterized children whose gender stories seemed to express conflict or discordance, as they espoused one of the master narratives but also questioned it.

For example, a second-grade girl, when asked what she likes about being a girl, said: "I like everything about being a girl!" Yet, when asked if there is anything hard about being a girl, said: "I don't like being a girl and being treated like—sometimes people treat me like trash."

Rogers said the incongruent narrative was the most interesting pattern they discovered.

"As we analyzed the data, we discovered that children were speaking in two voices—a voice of society, what they are 'supposed to say' and a more authentic voice that seemed to represent their own experiences," she said.

The final alternative narrative type, the "counternarrative," which was 13 percent of the sample, more explicitly challenged the master narrative.

When asked how important being a girl is, a fourth-grader answered: "A lot, because some people think that boys are better, and I just want to change that." A sixth-grade girl explained how it was unfair that boys did not let her join their "boy game" at recess.

"Children who told counternarratives stood apart because they explicitly stated that there are inequalities related to gender," Rogers said. "We mostly discuss the ways in which children reinforce gender stereotypes or align themselves with gender norms, but children also question and resist these gender scripts."

"If we had not intentionally considered the ways in which children might challenge gender master narratives, we might have missed the

'incongruent' children because through one lens, they were reinforcing gender norms. But, they were also disrupting it, and this may be a developmental moment to intervene and support healthy resistance to gender norms that are unhealthy for society," Rogers said.

"'I'm Kind of a Feminist': Using Master Narratives to Analyze Gender Identity in Middle Childhood" published this week in the journal *Child Development*.

Provided by Northwestern University

Citation: Gender identities disrupted—and reinforced (2018, September 6) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-09-gender-identities-disruptedand.html>

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