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Conference Paper

Gender Identity in Early Childhood

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Abstract

Background. Some authors indicate that the origin of gender identity in children is between two and three years old. This research report presents evidence against this affirmation based on Cultural–historical Psychology about the acquisition of consciousness through language as a process that begins from early childhood and ends in adolescence. **Objective.** (1) Characterize concepts about gender identity that have children in early childhood. (2) To compare differences and similarities of the concept of gender identity in children of different ages. **Design.** The procedure used was the classifying pictures method adapted for this study. We evaluated 32 children from one to five years old about the acquisition of gender identity through a qualitative analysis of data. **Results.** It was found that children of two and three years old group images by gender stereotypes, while those of four and five are incorporating other criteria such as shape and color. **Conclusion.** This happens for two reasons: first, the incorporation of the gender culture is a complex process and second, the school promotes a classification system that allows to order the world based on criteria other than gender.

Keywords: concepts, gender identity, early childhood, cultural–historical psychology, Mexico

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1. Introduction

In previous paper [2], there was questioning about the psychological theories that explain gender identity during childhood – Psychoanalysis, Cognitive Development, Social Learning, Gender Scheme Theory – and argue in favor of the necessity of more research from the historical–cultural approach which will allow a much precise explanation of the subject.

This work is a continuation of those ideas and corresponds to a qualitative research report that took place on the city of Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, during 2015 and 2016. The main objective was to search for evidences about the origin of gender identity in the early childhood from the historical–cultural approach, testing the assumption in various

psychological theories that the gender identity is formed between the ages of 3 and 5 years old.

The questions are based in Vygotski's research (1993) about the development of concepts and the findings that in the ages previously mentioned, concepts are still in an incipient state. This added to the fact that identity is settle down on the self-concept, meaning that at least proper concept formation is required. From this we infer that gender identity depends on the process of language acquisition and the development of verbal thinking.

Taking this into account we elaborate the following research hypothesis, that there is not a proper gender identity in the early childhood because concepts haven't developed yet, so this would be a false identity.

Vygotski (1996) pointed out the difficulty of establish a periodization of the childhood from the psychological point of view due that the criteria regularly used is based only in the manifestation and not in the search of the functioning and internal meaning in the infants. Confirming this, Elkonin (2009) says that is necessary to approach the development in its complexity avoiding to adopt any simplify and linear Vision. In consequence, this research pretend to approach the gender identity from the logic of the infant thinking and not from typify behaviors that can be mistaken with signals of finished processes.

The focus attention is centered on infants from 3 to 5 years old (range that would be taken here as early childhood) because this is the age in which gender identity is formed according to some psychological theories ([1], Kohlberg in [15]; [4, 10]; Mischel in [8]), but we also added earlier & posterior ages as a referential framework.

The way this article is presented begins with a conceptual introduction where we define gender identity, next we pose the relation between daily concepts and gender. Later we describe the methodology used to check the conceptual development (establish by Vygotski) from the gender component and also the complementation with an approach about the exposition to gender stereotypes in early ages. Subsequently we present the results and finally some conclusions about the theoretical and methodology implications in relation to the gender approach from the historical–cultural psychology.

2. Methodology

Under the assumption that in order to form an identity is required a minimum of conceptualization that allows the development of certain awareness about oneself and

others in terms of being a boy or girl, the purpose here was to locate the development of daily gender concepts in the early childhood.

For this, we needed a method that would overcome the simple solution of tasks without mediation of the words and also avoid the mere verbalization that left out the logic of thought [19]. These characteristics are provided by the classification method proposed by Luria (1995), which consists of grouping images and explaining the reasons for such groupings.

The choice of words that could be represented in images of the concrete reality was relevant, because it allowed to evaluate a wide range of ages but also of complexities in the conceptualization that the studied subjects did on their reasonings.

In this case, we designed a classification test adapted to identify the gender component. All images used were familiar objects within the reach of the knowledge and experience of subjects of any age. In addition, they intentionally reflected gender stereotypes because it wanted to detect how much influence they had on the groupings.

For this purpose, 24 color photographs of 15x10 cm were used, which could be categorized in six groups: (a) people [woman, man, girl and boy]; (b) accessories [pink headband, blue baseball cap, red lipstick and blue razor];(c) domestic animals [black kitten, gray kitten with pink bow, black English greyhound with red bandanna at the neck and white Afghan hound greyhound]; (d) toys [red car, doll dressed in pink, colored ball and soccer ball]; (e) clothing and footwear [pink dress, black pants, black shoe, red slipper]; and (f) elements of the plant kingdom [flower, tree, banana and apple].

The hypothesis was that in early childhood the clusters would obey a complex relationship, as explained earlier, and would put the woman and objects related to what is labeled as female. The same thing would happen for the man, the girl and the child, because in everyday life this is presented as normality, remembering that these are daily concepts. Knowing that children are governed by experience and this is concrete, gender groups would be apparent, because of the perception of the stereotype and not of a concept of gender as such; This would be verified when asking the subject the reason of its grouping. Following the Historical–cultural theory [19], it was assumed that they would form groups by complex, but would not be able to form a concept of gender identity, since it requires a stable generalization, something outside of its possibilities.

In relation to the sample related to early childhood, 29 infants – 12 boys and 19 girls – whose ages ranged from three to five years participated. Three subjects younger than

TABLE 1: General characteristics of the sample.

Stage	Amount	Sex	Age Range
Babies	3	2 girls 1 boy	From 1 year 3 months to 2 years 8 months
Early Childhood	29	17 girls 12 boys	From 3 to 5 years old
Total of children	32	19 females 13 males	Between 1 and 5 years old

three years were included because in the bibliographic review some research indicates that from the first year girls and boys are able to incorporate gender stereotypes in their comprehensive language before the expressive where the first words are formulated (Serbin, et al. [13]) and we were interested in corroborating it.

All the minors came from the middle socioeconomic stratum. Girls and boys aged one to three were attending a surrogate day care center and children aged four to six attended a pre-school public school. In all cases, the willingness to participate of the infants was respected, as suggested by the ethical investigation procedure in this age group. [3]
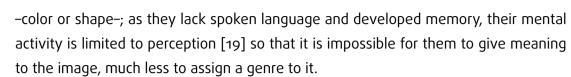
Although the interest was to locate the emergence of the gender identity in early childhood, the sample was expanded to other ages as a follow-up of its development. That is why subjects between six and 60 years of both sexes were included. The following table shows the synthesized characteristics of the total sample.

3. Results

One of the main regularities was that at a younger age infants not only cannot make categories, but precisely in early childhood, their groupings respond to a thought in complexes as aptly established by the Historical–cultural approach [19]. Moreover, the fact that the images to be classified corresponded to daily concepts could not be ignored, so that the connections between objects were made in terms of the personal experience, where the use of gender stereotypes is already observed.

3.1. Early childhood (1 and 2 years)

In the case of one-year-old infants, they could not group objects like the other age groups did. Their world is governed by impressions, in this case visual, which direct their attention without stability, cannot make a choice because it depends on conditions such as the proximity of the object with his hand or the intensity of the stimulus

–color or shape–; as they lack spoken language and developed memory, their mental activity is limited to perception [19] so that it is impossible for them to give meaning to the image, much less to assign a genre to it.

Even the small two-year-old barely managed to finish the task because her attention span is short. His knowledge of language allowed her to make a preferential selection. It is precisely language that influences the structure of visual-direct perception, so infants at this age already distinguish the function of each object [21]; from this it follows that the choices of the girl are related to the objects that have an active role in their everyday experience. She chose all the 'feminine' images and could be supposed to have a gendered identity, but considering that her conceptual development has only just begun, her preferences are more likely to be due to the exposure of stereotypes and self-labeling that she already made about herself.

3.2. Early childhood (3- to 5-years old)

Of 29 boys and girls of this age, except one case, the others were not able to label their groupings, showing as expected, a thought in complexes mainly associative, of collection and diffuse. Only a 5-year-old girl did all her color classification naming each category, although the identification of the attribute was not stable, thus proving that her conceptualization was in transition to pseudo-concepts.

The groupings of objects obeyed a practical and affective relationship, referring to their concrete experience, that is, the nexuses they made were due more to memories of experiences than to the identification of attributes; According to Vygotski, this is because at this age, dominates the memory: 'The child perceives rather than remembers' (1996, p. 125). Consequently, when asked why their decisions were made, the answers were referred to their memories as 'the tree is in the street', 'I have a dog' or 'I ate one of those [bananas]'.

Another feature is that they mainly grouped by action bonds between people or objects: 'Dad buys carts', 'With the shoe to kick the ball', 'Apple grows on the tree', 'Dogs chase cats' The girl lives with her father and mother '; Or to the belonging of objects to people: 'the dress is for the girl', 'this is for mom [pointing to the lips]' or 'the flower for mom'.

It also prevailed the identification they made of themselves with the girl or the boy and invariably called the woman 'mom' and 'dad' to the man; This tendency did not change in the infants of 3 years, rarely appearing in the ones of four and five, who named them man/woman or possibly sr. or miss. A three-year-old girl says that the

boy looks like Kenneth his brother, the woman to his mom and the man to his dad. A little 3 ½ years old, she makes the following relations of meaning: she is the girl, the child is her cousin, the man and the woman are her parents, her mother has lipstick and slippers, her daddy pants, shoes and razor, there is a flower in his house, etc.

To make the groupings at this age, they collected images only after they had made the connection they were looking for, expressing it verbally before performing it, as described by Vygotski (1993). Another child also of three years ended up doing an associative complex whose base was the image of the man who called 'daddy', adding elements that in his daily life relates to him.

At age 4, infants begin to observe attributes on objects as color or shape, but they are not stable and are easily lost to the weight of the object contextualization. At 5 years old they already perceive criteria of color, shape or similarity, but they remain unstable and confused, they can relate an image to the color even if it is not the same – for example, pink and red, black and navy blue – or look at any detail that is not the dominate one. To illustrate this, a 5-year-old girl joins the dogs 'because one is yellow and one white' and adds to the man and woman 'because they have white' [card frame]; A 4-year-old boy says that the soccer ball and the banana go together 'because they have spots', then takes the shoe saying that it is black but it matches it with the man 'because he wears shoes'.

A regularity of importance for this study is the apparition of groups that distinguish the images between the masculine and feminine. A girl expresses it like this: 'my mom uses paintings' [the woman with the lipstick], the girl goes with her mommy, the kitten and the doll go with the girl, the diadem and the ball, the shoe, the flower And the dress with my mother '. A child says: 'The ball with the child because the children play football and the girls play with their cat', the girl and the dress 'because he wear it', adds the diadem 'because she also use it', adds the ball to the boy's group because he plays with it; When asked if girls don't play with balls he said no.

Although these could be considered a grouping by gender, it is not because, first, the subject has not conceptualized the term boy/girl – man/woman; And second, because it is not a fixed criterion of association, it obeys the reality experienced as a daily situation. Example of this is a 5 year old boy who puts the man and the razor together because '[the man] is always shaving his beard', he adds the pants because 'he [the man] has to wear pants'; the shoe because 'also use shoes'; And the cap because 'he sunburns his head'. Note in this example that there is a subtle signal in the male mandate of wearing pants, but that is as normal as wearing shoes and a cap for the sun.

Sample of this is a 3 year old girl who says: 'the boy plays with cars' and gathers them, then when he sees the lipstick says, 'this is not going with dad, goes with mom'. Another 4-year-old pairs the car with the child 'because boys play with cars', when asked if boys play with dolls he responds a resounding no; Then put the shoe together with the man because 'he wears shoes' as well as the razor; The slipper puts it with the woman because 'they wear those shoes'.

The stereotypes expressed by minors are far from being internalized as simplifying labels and even less as means of discrimination, segregation or hierarchy. Rather they use them because it is the usual, it is an adult proposal that serves to interact in a world that is like this since they were born.

Something remarkable is that as these children begin to distinguish common attributes in the objects as similarity, color or form, they seem to leave aside the stereotype, appearing groupings trials distanced from simple concrete experience. While at 3 years all their groups comply with the relationship of direct self-identification, at 4 years there is a combination with attempts to group the images by color and at 5 the proportion is inverse and therefore, less stereotyped relationships are mentioned. This does not affirm that gender stereotypes are disappearing, on the contrary, they are installed in the normality of the subject, but a possible explanation is that as their level of scholarization advances, their categorical thinking is favored, displacing the stereotyped responses to the periphery.

With all this, it is confirmed that there is no capacity for conceptualization in early childhood, so that there cannot exist a gender identity as such; What they show is the experience that minors have in the interaction with their context, which is also expressed in usual gender stereotypes.

4. Conclusions

A baby cannot understand the world around him without meanings and these do not exist without words. Sociocultural reality demands a functional behavior of the baby, certain forms of being in a context, determined by external instruments or signs – colors, clothes, toys, words – that need to be used to communicate with others and the main one of them is the language [20].

With the incorporation of the language the psychic functions evolve to forms more and more complex and this one is not acquired just like another association; On the contrary, according to Vygotsky (Op. Cit.), it is an instrument that requires internalization, it needs to go through a process that requires the combined activity of all

existing psychic functions. Conceptualizing oneself as a member of a genre, that is, assuming a gender identity, has as a prerequisite the development of verbal thinking capable of successive generalizations of daily concepts and the solid installation of existing cultural prescriptions; Something with which it is not counted in the early childhood according to the Historical–cultural Psychology, as was evidenced with the test of classification.

So the actions identified with the genre of the first years will respond largely to the stereotyped expectations of adults and the positive reinforcement by the imitation that the baby does, but once it begins the acquisition of language, along with it will begin the search and construction of the meaning of practices differentiated by gender; then, how such practices will be conceived and assumed will depend on the sociocultural context and individual experience.

This has important theoretical and practical implications. First, the need to rethink the determinism that has been spread about the origin of the gender identity, because in this investigation no evidence was found to support such claims. What resulted evident was that the exposure from birth to stereotypes and their influence on the acquisition of the daily concepts, which manifested itself in the conceptual develop-ment mainly at three years and the adolescence.

Secondly, to reconsider the importance of the school on the conceptual development of gender, because although it may not intentionally promote coeducation, it does foster the development of categorial thinking that manifested the majority of subjects that attend school. 'School instruction produces this kind of generalizing perception and thus plays a decisive role in making the child aware of his or her own mental processes' ([20], p. 169). This makes possible the generalization of daily concepts, which would be a cultural base for the analysis and the questioning of the gender stereotypes.

The practical implications are to focus parental sensitization campaigns for those who demand that the new generations respond to traditional gender models, since the results show the adult influence on the children, intentional or not.

Vygotsky (1993) pointed to an error found in the children's study: The external appearance of the conceptual forms used by the three-year-old child may suggest that he has developed thinking, and recommends taking into account 'the profound difference between connections and Dynamic-causal relations hidden behind this sim-ilar appearance... ' (p. 178). Similarly, those who have studied the formation of the gender identity have made the same mistake by seeing associative signs as already consolidated meanings.

As a result of this research report, other issues related to the gender identity in the childhood are still pending for the future. For example, investigating how the gender identity forms boys and girls with different capacities, because as Vygotskaia (in [5]) demonstrated, these infants develop different characteristics due to the sensory deprivations that affect their psyche. Also, to investigate the role that the 'role play' can play as a Zone of Proximal Development [18] in the transformation of the gender stereotypes of girls and boys that can be formed under an egalitarian approach through didactic strategies designed and directed to such an end.

Finally to close with this report, we need to specify: that the pretension of the findings and reflections presented here are not intended to find generalizations for the whole of the childhood. Rather, as Vygotski points out, '[...] the task of psychology consists precisely in discovering not the eternally childlike, but the historically childish' (1993, 77).

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