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The Effects of Parental Occupation on Role-Playing in Children

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between the mother's occupational status and the type of play behaviors children engage in. There were 50 children (25 same-sex pairs) examined for this study. They were 5 years of age. The children were timed according to how much time they spent with "girl toys" along with the time they spent mutually interacting with one another. The findings suggest that there are gender differences in toy preferences. However, there are not significant differences between children who have stay-at-home moms and those whose moms work outside the home.

Children are influenced a great deal by the people who surround them. They often imitate what is seen through their eyes in the form of role playing. Play can be viewed as a method for studying family roles, sibling rivalry & other phenomena (Fein, 1981). However, many factors may contribute to the individual differences seen among children. For instance, the home environment, the quality of preschool and daycare, as well as the number of hours young children spend watching television, could all contribute to these individual differences among children (Berk, 1996). The parents' socioeconomic status (SES) and occupation are factors that should be considered as well.

Play can be defined by a variety of terms and although these terms may have slightly different meanings, they all tend to be used interchangeably. Some of these terms are imaginative play, make-believe play, fantasy play, dramatic play, pretense & social pretend play. Although there are a number of terms used to describe play, researchers still struggle with a lack of a precise behavioral definition and a vagueness about the concept of play (Garvey, 1974; Weisler & McCall, 1976 as cited in Fein, 1981). As cited in the research of Fein (1981), Garvey (1977) & Reynolds (1976) define pretense as a "theoretical construct defined as behavior in a simulative, nonliteral, or 'as if mode" (p. 1096).

Now to discuss the developmental purpose of play. According to the research of Rubin (1980), many theorists believe that play is an essential mechanism for normal development. First, play can be used for helping children to improve their cognitive skills, such as perspective taking. For instance, pretend play allows the child to use imaginal processes in coping with either positive or negative real life events (Sherrod & Singer, 1977 as cited in Fein, 1981).

Second, according to Berk (1996), make-believe play also strengthens a wide variety of mental abilities such as memory, language, logical reasoning, imagination and

creativity. According to Levin & Turgeon (1957 as cited in Fein, 1981), it may also allow children to vent feelings that cannot be expressed in real life.

Third, Flannery & Watson (1993), believe that play may also help to increase children's social skills, such as sharing and cooperating. According to Fein (1981), sociodramatic play is a type of play that combines fantasy and reality in play interaction.

Children progress through various stages of play. According to Fein & Apfel et al. (1979 as cited in Fein, 1981), self-referenced solitary play appears at roughly 12 months. The child at the age of 1 comments only on actual objects or events directly in front of him or her.

The next stage is referred to as other-referenced solitary play and appears by 18-20 months of age. Although as early as 12-15 months children can be seen imitating the actions of others by substituting their toys for the objects adults use. They then imitate adults' actions with gestures of their own (as cited in Rubin & Wolf, 1979). When children do play with a peer, as reported by Berk (1996), in a toddler play group, they usually imitate the other child's actions such as jumping, chasing, or banging a toy after the other playmate did so.

There are three types of play that are evident during childhood. The first type of play is FUNCTIONAL PLAY. This can be defined as simple repetitive motor movements with or without objects. Functional play is especially common during the first two years of life (as cited in Berk, 1996).

The second type of play is INTERACTIVE SOCIAL PLAY with peers. It emerges during the second year of life. At this stage, children begin to include symbolic elements in their interactions with peers (Finkelstein et al., 1977; as cited in Howes et al., 1989).

The third type of play is known as MAKE-BELIEVE PLAY. This type of play generally begins around two years of age and may occur throughout childhood.

Make-believe play can be defined as acting out everyday & imaginary roles (as cited in Berk, 1996). Rubin & Wolf (1979), state that this type of play as an ordinary childhood activity tends to be a complex challenge for children. First, they must know something about the roles and relationships of people in the real world around them. Second, children must learn the rules and roles required in the particular game they want to play. Finally, they must coordinate their roles with those of their peers.

There are many types of roles that children adopt while engaging in play behaviors. Role enactment (or role playing) as cited in Fein (1981), is defined as, "behavior in which the child simulates the identity or characteristic of another person" (p. 1101). Rubin & Wolf (1979) believe that there are roles even in the simplest social exchanges. However, children's understanding of roles that are obtained from early social interaction are quite restrictive. When roles first appear, they are often general positions toward or within an action. Therefore, they simply suggest a mode of behavior within a situation rather a fixed action pattern.

According to Rubin & Wolf (1979), the study of role play between 3 and 5 years of age revealed that family relationships were the most frequent at all ages. For the youngest group (3 years), relationship roles were always self-referenced (i.e., the child's relation to mother or father). The play activities associated with these roles were closely related to real-life expectations (Fein, 1981). For example, the roles of sociodramatic play reflect complementary social relationships, such as parent-child, server-eater, or doctor-patient. Social relationships may also be behavioral in nature. Therefore, the activity related to the role does not derive its meaning from a particular kind of partner, but rather, the behavior of that partner (e.g., a fireman putting out a fire).

Boys and girls differ in their type of play. Girls tend to engage in imaginary and communicative roles. They are more likely to adopt stereotypically feminine roles that are not very physical, such as roles associated with domestic activities and marriage.

Boys, however tend to engage in the material props. They are more likely than girls to adopt fantasy or aggressive roles such as monsters, spacemen, or play fighting (McLoyd, 1980; & Matthews, 1977; as cited in Fein, 1981).

However, individual children may differ with respect to the age at which a particular play behavior appears. Some of these differences may be attributed to a variety of factors. Among them are the socio-economic status (SES) of the parents, the home environment, the quality of their education in school, the number of hours they watch television, etc. (as cited in Berk, 1996). However, for the purpose of this study, the factor that will be concentrated on is the SES of the parents, but more specifically, the mother's parental occupation.

As cited in Bowey (1995), lower SES children were those whose parents were unemployed or who held clerical, blue collar, or unskilled positions. SES is commonly believed to predict the quality of the learning environment encountered by the child. In this sense, SES can be a good indicator of how the environment influences the child (Tabary, 1974; as cited in Dudek, 1993). Michael & Dudek (1991, as cited in Dudek et al., 1993) confirmed that mothers of more creative children had a significantly higher occupational level than mothers of less creative children.

Teaching strategies used by mothers with young children have been related to maternal socioeconomic level and educational background (Brophy, 1970 & Laosa, 1978; as cited in Dudek et al., 1993). Likewise, children who have considerable contact with parents and have parents who encourage conversation and varied experiences are more likely to engage in pretend behavior. Therefore, cognitive development is strongly influenced by the quality of stimulation in the home environment.

Creative potential is a function of hereditary factors and experience. However, the exact contributions of each are not known precisely (Guilford, 1962; as cited in Dudek et al., 1993). Guilford (1962) states that educating children can do a great deal to

promote the development of individuals in the way of preparing them to perform creatively.

Likewise, many others have pointed to the quality of the learning environment as a major determining factor of the development of creative abilities (Albert & Runco et al., 1986; as cited in Dudek et al., 1993). However, there is additional evidence for indirect influences on child-rearing. Some of these indirect influences are generated by parents who use physical punishment as a disciplinary method. Another indirect influence comes from homes with turmoil, such as marital problems. According to Hetherington et al., (1979; as cited in Fein, 1981) these factors are influential in the low levels of imaginativeness children reflect in their play.

As evident in the previous studies, many factors influence the play behaviors of children. They tend to naturally progress through various stages of development. They also adopt more complex types of play behaviors as they mature, such as make-believe play. Along with these play behaviors certain roles are often times established. It is believed that girls tend to take on feminine stereotypically roles while boys take on the more aggressive roles.

Although the previous findings occur quite naturally, there are other factors which may contribute to the child's play behaviors. For instance, the SES of their parents, but more specifically their moms. It is believed by some that moms who work outside the home are better equipped to educate their children in ways which are influential to their creativity- that their educational level and occupational status will indeed make a difference.

The purpose of this study is to acknowledge the aforementioned findings and to make some assumptions based on those. First of all, it is believed that from a very early age, young children model after adult's behaviors. Therefore, it would seem logical to

assume that they would model after their caregivers' behaviors in a laboratory play setting as well. Therefore, the hypotheses of the present study were:

1. Girls will spend more time than boys playing with kitchen toys and play food.
2. Both boys and especially girls who have stay-at-home moms will spend more time engaging in stereotypically feminine roles.
3. Boys of stay-at-home moms will spend more time with girl toys than their male counterparts whose moms work outside the home.

Method

Subjects. There were fifty children who were observed for this study (25 boys and 25 girls). They were chosen based on their age. As long as the child was tested within one month of his or her fifth birthday then he or she qualified to be tested. The testing took place in a playroom laboratory on campus. All but one of the children were of Caucasian descent (98%). However, their parents varied according to their occupational background, which is imperative to this study. There were 21 stay-at-home moms and 29 moms who worked outside of the home. The mother's occupational status was calculated based on Hollingshead's index (Bonjean, Hill, & McLemore, 1967). Mothers ranged from 1 to 7. A rating of 1 indicated a "more prestigious" position, such as, the president of a bank. A rating of 6 or 7 indicated the occupation of a stay-at-home mom. The mean rating of the mother's occupational status was 4.7 with a standard deviation of 1.67.

Procedure. Children were tested in pairs in a laboratory playroom on campus. They were generally paired up with the same-sex child. However, they did not see the other child until they entered the playroom. Special efforts were taken to ensure that these children were separated from one another until the testing began. For instance, the children arrived at the campus at separate times, both families were greeted separately by

someone from the playroom, and they were kept separated until the testing began in the playroom. Once they both entered the playroom they were informed that they could do or play with anything they wanted for the next 20 minutes. There were a variety of items to choose from in the playroom, including kitchen toys and play food ("girl toys"), a tool workbench & three action figures ("boy toys"), a checker board and checkers, a table and chairs, and two animal puppets. The children were then videotaped through a one-way mirror for the next 20 minutes.

Measures. One child from the pair being tested was randomly chosen to be timed on two kinds of play. The first was the amount of time spent with the kitchen toys and play food. The second was the amount of time spent mutually interacting. The purpose of recording these times is to predict if the influence of stay-at-home moms will be evident in the amount of time children spend with kitchen toys and play food. However, the occupational status of the mothers will not be revealed until after the children have been timed. This is to ensure that observer bias will not be a factor in timing the children.

Results

Girls will spend more time than boys playing with kitchen toys. It was expected that there would be a difference in the total amount of time (total seconds spent) that girls and boys spend playing with kitchen toys and play food. The total number of seconds spent by females with girl toys was 367 seconds. Males spent 77 seconds with girl toys. Therefore, this hypothesis was supported, $t(30.5) = -5.62, p < 0.001$. (See Figure 1.)

Both boys and especially girls who have stay-at-home moms were expected to spend more time with girl toys. This hypothesis was based on whether or not the child's mother worked outside the home or was a stay-at-home mom. Children of stay-at-home moms were expected to spend more time engaging in stereotypically feminine roles, such

as playing with kitchen toys or play food when compared to children whose moms work outside the home. A Pearson's correlation was run on the mother's occupational status and the total number of seconds each child spent with the girl toys using the Pearson product moment correlation. There was no significant relationship between the mother's occupational status and the total time spent with "girl toys" ($r = .22, p = .14$). There was also no significant relationship between the mother's occupational status and the total time spent interacting with another child ($r = .11, p = .46$). A 2X2 Analysis of Variance was run where the two independent variables was the sex of the child and the stay-at-home status of the moms. The dependent variable was the total number of seconds spent with the "girl toys". There was a main effect for sex ($F(1, 48) = .32$). However, there was not a main effect for mom's stay-at home status ($F(1,48) = 32.99, p < .001$). Therefore, there is not a significant interaction.

Boys of stay-at-home moms will spend more time than male counterparts. The boys are still not expected to spend as much time as the girls playing with the girl toys. However, boys with stay-at-home moms are expected to spend more time than boys whose moms work outside the home playing with these toys. This hypothesis was explored by again correlating the mother's occupational status with the total number of seconds the boys spent with the "girl" toys. There was a total of 14 boys whose moms worked outside the home and 11 boys who had stay-at-home moms. This hypothesis was not supported. In other words, the correlation was not significant ($r = -.11, p = .46$). (See Figure 2.)

DISCUSSION

This study focused on the effects of parental occupation on role playing in children. Children imitate adults' behaviors from a very young age. Therefore, it was expected that girls would spend more time with "girl toys" than boys. This hypothesis was supported. More specifically, it was expected that children (both boys and girls) of

stay-at-home moms would engage in stereotypically feminine roles more often than children whose moms worked outside the home. Although there is a difference, it is not significant because the standard deviation is so large. There is sufficient overlap between the two groups which confirms that they were not significantly related. In addition, it was expected that boys of stay-at-home moms would spend more time playing with the "girl toys" than their male counterparts whose moms worked outside the home. However, the exact opposite was found. The boys of stay-at-home moms spent less time playing with "girl toys" than boys whose moms worked outside the home. Although there was a difference found, it was not significant.

In the present study, mom's stay-at-home status was not correlated with children spending more time engaging in stereotypically feminine roles. This was also true for boy's who had stay-at-home moms compared to those whose moms worked outside the home. In fact, the exact opposite was found. The boys whose moms worked outside the home spent more time with the "girl toys" than the boys who had stay-at-home moms. There are a number of possible reasons for these findings. Perhaps the boys whose moms work outside the home attend day care and are more familiar and comfortable with the "girl" toys. They may even be encouraged to try out all the toys. Another possible reason could be that stay-at-home moms are more "stereotypical" in their behaviors than career moms and discourage any type of opposite sex play behaviors.

The findings of this study are very encouraging in respect to parents, especially moms, having a career. Mothers can be reassured that just because they choose to have a career does not mean that their children will follow the "stereotypical" trends of males and females. In fact, children, regardless of their parents occupational level will always progress through various stages of play behaviors. It would be interesting to further this study by examining the amount of time that girls spend engaging in stereotypically

masculine roles. It is often times more accepted in society for girls to engage in male roles than for boys to engage in female roles.

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FIGURE 1.

Mean Seconds Spent with Girl Toys by Sex of Child

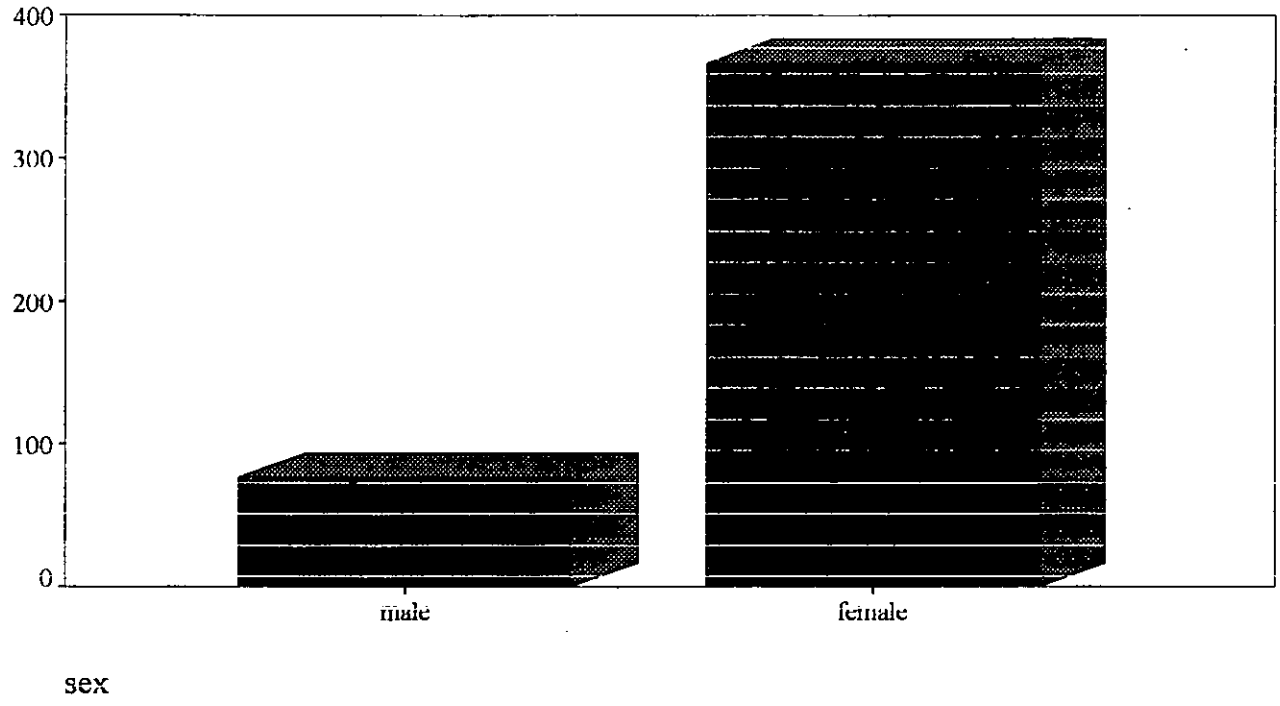
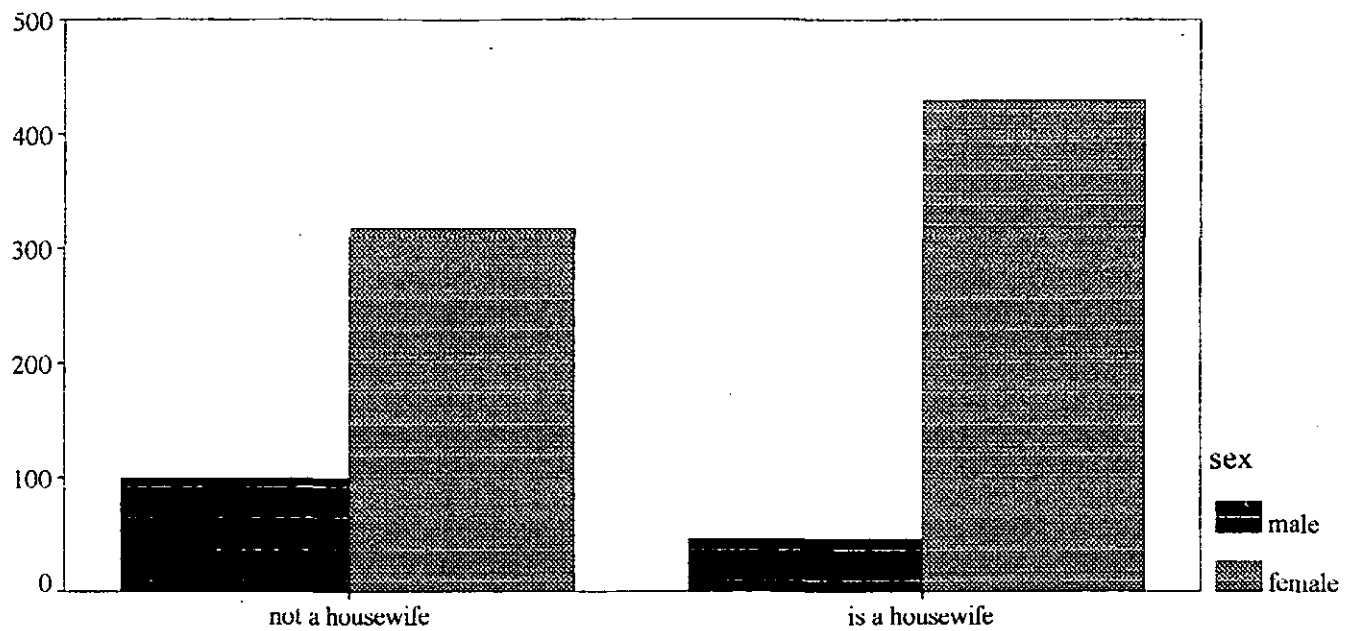


FIGURE 2.

Mean Seconds Spent with Girl Toys by Mother's Stay-At-Home Status



HOUSWIFE