

PINK, BLUE, AND YOU

An Investigation into the Effects of Forcing Gender-Coded Colors and the Binary System onto
Children

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Pledged.

Professor David Robb, Ph.D., opened his unit of the first-year Humanities course at Davidson College by introducing the concept of paradigms, which can interchangeably be referred to as conceptual schemes.¹ The three qualifiers for something to be a paradigm are for it to be (1) a widely accepted belief, (2) testable and reproducible, and (3) incommensurable. The last measure of paradigms is important: paradigms cannot be layered. Although paradigms cannot “understand” each other, it is easy to acknowledge the paradigms others cling to without changing one’s own. Humans operate under conceptual schemes to make sense of pre-existing beliefs. Paradigm shifts, therefore, are not to be taken lightly. They occur over a long period of time and consist of many small modifications to belief systems. Professor Robb’s guest speaker, Professor Kristen Thompson, Ph.D., used the Scientific Revolution as an example of a paradigm shift.² She proposed that the true Scientific Revolution spanned across centuries. Pieces of previously accepted knowledge, such as Ptolemy’s geocentric model of outer space, were chipped away and slowly replaced by new information, like Copernicus’s heliocentric model of outer space. The shift took a long period of time and was difficult to fully implement, but it was necessary and improved society’s understanding of science. Her example of conceptual schemes can be extended into the construction of the gender binary and the subsequent gendering of colors: pink for girls and blue for boys.

The color-coded gender binary as it exists today was slowly crafted throughout the years, much like the Scientific Revolution was shaped over centuries. Dr. Kathy Merlock Jackson, a scholar of communication, analyzed a book written by Jo Paoletti that delves into gender-specific

¹ Kristen Thompson and David Robb, “From Observation to Theory: Revolution in Science,” (lecture, Davidson College, Davidson, NC, September 19, 2019).

² Thompson et al., “Observation to Theory.”

coloring and its development between 1885 and 2012. According to the book and its extensive research, in the late nineteenth century most children wore exclusively white clothing because it was easy to bleach and represented the purity of childhood.³ Until the mid-twentieth century, color largely remained genderless. At the peak of the Baby Boom, however, pink was highly feminized; Jackson points out that this gendering was a marketing scheme, noting that “the more gendered the clothing, the more likely parents to eschew hand-me-downs and buy new attire for subsequent children.”⁴ A surge in unisex clothing in the 1970s reflected the social revolution of the time that promoted gender-variance, with popular brands including Garanimals. American baby boomers as a whole adopted the technique of raising children without the same gender connotations that they were brought up under.⁵ Nonetheless, the children of the baby boomers fell back into the marketing cycle as they grew older and became targeted as a consumer base, buying into gender-coded products and perpetuating the color-supported binary paradigm.

Gender-coded colors persist within the West and their influence spreads far and wide. Many toy companies, retailers, and producers profit off the unnecessary gendering of products. Drs. Lisa Dinella and Erica Weisgram keenly address the issue, writing that, “adults are specifically labeling toys with explicit verbal labels, but also with implicit color labels.”⁶ A 2018 study demonstrated that Chinese children believe pink is a symbol for girls and blue is a symbol

³ Kathy Merlock Jackson, “Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys from the Girls in America,” in *The Journal of American Culture; Malden* 35, no. 3 (September 2012), 280-281.

⁴ Jackson, “Pink and Blue,” 281.

⁵ Jackson, “Pink and Blue,” 281.

⁶ Lisa M. Dinella and Erica S. Weisgram, “Gender-Typing of Children’s Toys: Causes, Consequences, and Correlates,” *Sex Roles; New York* 79, no. 5–6 (September 2018): 254.

for boys due to the implicit code from Western society and its products.⁷ The study went on to gender-code neutral colors, like green and yellow, and revealed that “after learning the new stereotype, the children’s interest in toys were congruent with ‘color coded’ message[s] given by adults.”⁸ These findings reinforce the belief that a “false dichotomy” of gender is being perpetuated by the marketing of gender-coded toys and clothing to adults, who then project the dichotomy onto their children.⁹ Naysayers believe that there is a biological leaning in preference towards pink for girls and blue for boys, but Drs. Vanessa LoBue and Judy DeLoache conducted a series of experiments to refute this conclusion. Their data found that at about the same time that girls began to prefer pink, boys began to avoid pink.¹⁰ It is important to note that the boys did not simply prefer blue, but rather actively avoided choosing pink in the study. These preferences emerged between the ages of two and three – “around the same time that children begin to understand and talk about gender.”¹¹ These choices were largely motivated by stereotypes presented to the children as they began to align themselves with perceived gender-related information that matched their gender identity.¹² The conceptual scheme that colors are gendered and that gender is binary clearly have an effect on children in their developmental years, which can lead to Gender Dysphoria and general discomfort for gender-variant people.

In the past decade, gender has started to be widely considered more nuanced than the strict binary scheme society has long abided by. People who are transgender, intersex, nonbinary,

⁷ Dinella et al., “Gender-Typing,” 255.

⁸ Dinella et al., “Gender-Typing,” 255.

⁹ Dinella et al., “Gender-Typing,” 257.

¹⁰ Vanessa LoBue and Judy S. DeLoache, “Pretty in Pink: The Early Development of Gender-Stereotyped Colour Preferences,” *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 29, no. 3 (September 2011): 663.

¹¹ LoBue et al., “Pretty in Pink,” 661.

¹² LoBue et al., “Pretty in Pink,” 663.

and gender-variant cisgender are gaining visibility, and conversations about gender stereotypes in media and products are more prevalent than ever. The White House held a conference on April 6, 2016 to break down gender stereotypes in media and toys because children's subjects they prefer in school and jobs they aspire towards can be swayed by biased media consumption and playtime with stereotyped toys.¹³ Various big names, such as Netflix, Girl Scouts, *FamilyFun* magazine, and The Toy Industry Association, Inc., committed to consider whether gender stereotypes were perpetuated by what they distribute and to take proactive action to prevent biases.¹⁴ Furthermore, the United Kingdom's Advertising Standards Authority, Committee of Advertising Practice, and Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice worked in conjunction to place a ban on gender stereotypes that are "likely to cause harm or serious or widespread [offense]."¹⁵ These same regulatory agencies also previously took the initiative to ban sexual imagery of children, body image critiques, and objectification in advertisements.¹⁶ Big-box chain Target removed explicit gender labels from the toys section of their stores in August 2015.¹⁷ Though the toy sections are still clearly divided by gendered colors, the tide is beginning to turn towards a less biased culture in the West in which children can craft their own gender identity independent of societal pressures.

¹³ Tina Tchen, "Breaking Down Gender Stereotypes in Media and Toys so That Our Children Can Explore, Learn, and Dream Without Limits" (Washington, D.C.: White House, April 6, 2016), Office of the Press Secretary, par. 2.

¹⁴ Tchen, "Breaking Down," par. 7-14.

¹⁵ Guy Parker and Ella Smillie, "Advertising Guidance on Depicting Gender Stereotypes Likely to Cause Harm or Serious or Widespread Offence" (London, UK: Advertising Standards Authority, Committee of Advertising Practice, December 14, 2018), 3.

¹⁶ Parker et al., "Advertising Guidance," 4.

¹⁷ Dinella et al., "Gender-Typing," 253.

Although mass producers of children's clothing and toys perpetuate the gender binary by distributing gender-coded goods, parents facilitate and ultimately impose the scheme onto their children by purchasing the stereotypical products. The children internalize the subliminal messages that their parents are compliant with and further facilitate the gender binary, despite any feelings of conflict within, and continue to do so until taught about gender fluidity. Jean Malpas, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and Mental Health Counselor, has noticed an uptick in the number of adamantly gender-variant children and parents who want to support their identity.¹⁸ Malpas believes that his field of therapy is in part the measurement of well-being, and he takes particular interest in "how much that wellness hinges on genders that coincide with normative expectation."¹⁹ The conversation about gender variance is very important to Malpas, as he has observed that it can be a major source of disconnection and conflict within families.²⁰ The opposing conceptual schemes cause friction among all parties, even between children and their parents who want to help but are not sure how to best go about it. For this reason, these cases are treated with extreme care and intention. Malpas has found that parents are the mainstay of a protective, accepting, adaptive, and nurturing therapeutic model and their reactions to their children are of the utmost importance.²¹ Parents are often capable of taking pride in and accepting their children, but these feelings are easily muddled with the parents' internalized turmoil, shame, and even sense of loss because their child is not growing up to be the person they had expected.²² Malpas works hard to make it clear to parents that their role is not to cure or

¹⁸ Jean Malpas, "Between Pink and Blue: A Multi-Dimensional Family Approach to Gender Nonconforming Children and Their Families," *Family Process* 50, no. 4 (December 2011): 453–454.

¹⁹ Malpas, "Between Pink and Blue," 453.

²⁰ Malpas, "Between Pink and Blue," 454.

²¹ Malpas, "Between Pink and Blue," 457.

²² Malpas, "Between Pink and Blue," 457.

create gender variance, but rather to validate their children's choices; this affirmation allows parents to "make informed decisions about potential medical and social transition or lack thereof" because if the children do not trust their parents, they may make misinformed decisions on their own.²³ Parents can affirm to their children that gender is fluid, that fluidity is normal, and that gender-variant people do not consistently need mental health treatment.²⁴ Therapists like Malpas conduct interventions with parents in a way that "emphasize[s] adjustment to the social difference of the child and promote[s] restoration and flourishing of the parent-child bond."²⁵ By remaining steadfast in their support of their children, parents can become a safe haven for children as they navigate relationships with others who may embrace their identity or, alternatively, bully, isolate, oppress, or commit violence against them for a piece of their selfhood that they cannot change; though these interactions may have a negative impact on the children, their parents' acceptance is a form of protection over their wellbeing.²⁶ Recognition and enthusiastic acceptance of a child's identity can be the difference between the child living a happy life and the child taking their own life.²⁷ Validating the conceptual scheme that their children operate under can result in a happier, healthier family and an improved mental state for the children to grow up within.

A true paradigm shift towards ardent acceptance of gender fluidity and away from the shame that often comes from deviating from the rigid binary lies in the hands of the youth. However, it is important that the next generation has access to information that allows them to

²³ Malpas, "Between Pink and Blue," 458.

²⁴ Malpas, "Between Pink and Blue," 456.

²⁵ Malpas, "Between Pink and Blue," 456.

²⁶ Malpas, "Between Pink and Blue," 454.

²⁷ Jean Malpas, *The Gift of Gender Authenticity*, TEDxAsburyPark (Asbury Park, NJ, 2017): 10:33-10:44.

reach this conclusion on their own. Because paradigms cannot “understand” each other, the majority of society must wholeheartedly believe in the fluid nature of gender for it to become the new norm over the previous paradigm that enforced the belief that biological factors determine gender. Dr. Barbara Risman argues that students need to be engaged with “a more theoretically complex conversation about gender as a social structure that legitimates inequality” at the college level.²⁸ This is currently happening in our society as Gender and Sexuality courses and majors are gaining popularity in colleges and universities, including Davidson College, and so I extend her claim to childrearing and elementary education.

When children are brought up in an environment without any representation of their identity, they are implicitly taught that there is something wrong or negatively different about them. Furthermore, without adamant validation from parents that people have different identities and that that is okay, children can grow up with biases against others that they learn from peers and determine from the way society functions.²⁹ The youth are constantly facing the gender binary, whether it manifests through having two strict options for a bathroom, toys that are marketed to only one gender, or being presented the simple choice between pink or blue. A society in which the paradigm not only acknowledges, but also celebrates, gender variance is needed. This shift could lead to both healthier relationships between gender-variant people and

²⁸ Barbara Risman, “Raising the Visibility of Gender-Nonconformists,” *Contexts: Understanding People in Their Social Worlds; Berkeley* 16, no. 2 (May 2017): 74.

²⁹ This is somewhat of a personal anecdote; growing up, there was a girl in my class whose last name was Gay. My peers treated her name like a dirty and bad word, and they always made fun of her for her name. Because they teased her for it, she vehemently declared that she was in no way gay because gay people were bad. I did not fully grasp what being gay meant or that being gay was not a bad thing until I had full access to the internet and social media in middle school, where representation of LGBTQIA+ people and allies was significantly higher than in my hometown.

others *and* more self-loving relationships with themselves for generations to come. There is nothing wrong with a girl liking pink or a boy preferring blue, but when colors are used to categorize people, what is the best thing that could come out of it? At best, community. At worst, exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination.

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