Gender, toys and learning

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In spite of continuing patterning of curriculum subject preference and choice by gender, there has been little recent attention to the argument developed in the 1970s that children play with different toys according to their gender, and that these provide girls and boys with (different) curriculum-related skills. The article describes a small-scale empirical study that asked parents of 3–5 year old children to identify their child's favourite toys and viewing material, and analysed responses according to children's gender. The most frequently identified toys and viewing materials were subjected to content and discourse analysis, with the intention of identifying both educative aspects of content, and the gender discourses reflected. The article explores conceptual issues around categorisations of 'education' within toys and entertainment resources, positing the notion of 'didactic information' to delineate between overtly educational content and other social discourses. Analysis reveals toy preferences to be highly gendered, with boys' toys and resources concentrated on technology and action, and girls' on care and stereotypically feminine interests. Didactic information, and aspects developing construction and literacy skills, were identified in the selected toys and resources for boys, and were lacking in those for girls. All the toys and resources could be read as implicated in 'gendering': the various gender discourses, and other discourses around aspects of social identity reflected in the toys and resources are identified and analysed. The analysis presented suggests the value of reinvigorated attention to children's toys and entertainment resources in terms both of the education they afford, and their role in the production of social identities.

Introduction

Curriculum subject preference and choice remains strongly gender-differentiated, in spite of the introduction of the National Curriculum (Arnot *et al.*, 1999; Francis, 2000, 2002; EOC, 2001, 2004). Although girls have largely caught up with boys in terms of achievement at maths and science during compulsory education, science remains unpopular among girls (Francis, 2000; Francis *et al.*, 2003; Calabrese Barton & Brickhouse, 2006), girls are more likely than boys to take generalised Double Science than specialist subjects, and girls are less likely to be among the highest-achieving at maths and science (Boaler, 2002; OECD, 2007). They are also far less

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likely to take up 'hard' science subjects at 'A' level and beyond (EOC, 2004). Conversely, there is a profound gender gap favouring girls for literacy.[1] Girls tend to outperform boys in humanities subjects, and continue to dominate uptake in these subjects in post-compulsory education (Francis & Skelton, 2005).

There are many explanations for these gendered patterns of curriculum preference and uptake (Paechter, 2000). However, one aspect, identified by feminist educational researchers in the 1970s and early 1980s, has received little recent attention. This is the impact of children's toys and play. Early research showed how children were directed towards certain types of play, and provided with certain kinds of toys, which afford opportunities for girls to develop communication skills and 'emotional literacy', and for boys to develop technical knowledge and skills (see, e.g. Hart, 1979; Delamont, 1980; Block, 1982; Miller, 1987; Dixon, 1990; Lloyd & Duveen, 1992). Research showed how young children do not initially understand toys as gendered, but that they rapidly learn that certain toys are 'for boys' and others 'for girls' (Fagot, 1974; Miller, 1987; Lloyd & Duveen, 1992)—and hence that some toys are out of bounds to them (Francis, 1998).

Later research has moved away from 'role theory' perspectives that conceive children 'learning' their gender roles through play with gender typed toys. Instead, there has been attention to the ways in which children actively use toys and other play resources to delineate their gender identities (Davies, 1989; Kirkham, 1996). Bronwyn Davies's (1989) important poststructuralist study of children's readings of 'feminist fairy tales' influenced a move away from analysis of the straightforward content of children's resources to a focus on the discursive constructions produced by these resources, and the ways in which these may be drawn upon by children to perform themselves as feminine or masculine. Such poststructuralist accounts have further moved to understandings of materials such as toys as technologies via which gender and other aspects of social identity may be performed, and hence subjectivities brought into being (Butler, 1997; Davies, 2006; Nayak & Kehily, 2006).

In this sense, the notion that toys and children's resources might be 'teaching' them gendered lessons has perhaps become rather unfashionable. However, I would argue that a revisiting of such ideas is timely—especially given that children's toys, clothes and resources now appear to be more gender-delineated than ever (Delamont, 2001). There has been a great deal of media commentary on aspects of this trend: for example, the way in which pink, sparkly clothes have become ubiquitous for girls (*Guardian*, 2008); and the sexualisation of clothes and toys marketed at girls (*Guardian*, 2005; *Daily Mail*, 2006; BBC News 2008). Toy companies are aware of gendered consumer preferences, and develop and market their toys to these trends, hence closing down broader (non-gendered) options and perpetuating the gendered toy market (Williams, 2006). Contemporary feminist work recognises the ways in which discursive constructions produced by children's resources may inculcate gender identities, foreclosing some possible 'ways of being' and opening others. And there has been attention to the educational aspects of computer gaming and other non school-based IT resources (e.g. Buckingham, 1993; Plowman, 1996; Buckingham & Scanlon, 2003). However, there is a lack of contemporary research on educational aspects of young children's

toys, and the potential impact on girls'/boys' learning and future curriculum subject preferences.

Addressing hypotheses concerning links between children's play resources and school curriculum preferences are beyond the scope of the small-scale study reported here, which rather sought to begin by identifying which toys are most popular among young children, and to analyse these choices according to gender. A post-structuralist theoretical framework is maintained, whereby the toys and resources identified are viewed as texts (Burman & Parker, 1993), and gender (and other aspects of subjectivity such as 'race' and social class) are seen as constructed, ascribed and performed through discourse (e.g. Butler, 1990, 1997). Hence I share the view of Davies (1989) and others that toys are used by children as an aspect of what she calls 'gender category maintenance'. But following Butler's (1993) discussion of the performance of 'girling', I am also interested in the ways in which the toys and resources themselves interpolate children as gendered (and 'raced' and 'classed'), and in the nature of the information discursively provided by such toys. Hence, on identification of favourite toys and resources among young children, these were analysed to discover a) what content is specifically educational; b) what broad activities/subjects they address; and c) what social discourses they perpetuate. These endeavours are innovative in the sense that poststructuralists have not been closely engaged with notions of pedagogy and/or learning (except to deconstruct them). They have attended to the ways in which discourses produce, position and interpolate subjects,[2] rather than the subject as processing and gaining knowledge (learning). I seek to apply a discourse analytic position that develops Butler's notion of 'girling' (and 'boying'), but also incorporates analysis of the 'educative' aspects of toy texts. Hence one of the aims of this article is to discuss how far such analyses may be convincing and/or useful.

However, this raises an immediate challenge with regard to the conceptual foundations for the data analysis, in articulating the different kinds (if 'kinds' there are) of educational content. Buckingham and Scanlon (2003) remark on the dilemma of what 'counts' as education, noting how distinction between 'education' and 'entertainment' has become increasingly problematic.[3] However, my study sought to go even further, identifying 'educational moments' in toys and resources geared primarily to entertainment. Works published in the wave of attention to toys, curriculum materials and learning in the 1970s and early 1980s tended to distinguish between development of social and cognitive skills (see e.g. Miller, 1987 for a review), but such distinctions are deconstructed by discourse analytic approaches, which expose discourses as producing subjects in a range of ways: from this perspective all toys constitute text, via which discourses work to produce objects in different ways. All these discourses may then be seen as 'educative', or involving 'knowledge transfer,' in the information and 'truths' they convey. Within such an approach it becomes difficult to distinguish between 'formal' and 'informal' education; and yet one of my aims was to look at the ways in which these toys and resources could directly educate or develop their users' skills in ways that might relate to aspects of the school curriculum. Moreover, as Buckingham and Scanlon (2003) assert, there is a 'significant

difference' between what they term 'everyday learning' and 'learning that arises from explicit instruction' (p. 9).

Toys and DVDs may be more or less 'authorial', as we shall see, but debates in reader response theory around the limits of authorial intention and/or construction of text by the reader/consumer[4] are somewhat tangential to my purpose: it is not intentionality that I seek to identify, but more to delineate the educative content. For example, the gift of a Meccano box to a little boy may be highly educative in terms of the gendered discourses to which he is being inculcated, yet I wish to distinguish these generalised gender discourses from, say, instructions that directly inform how to construct vehicles (and hence which may develop skills of literacy and construction relevant to, and beneficial for, the school curriculum). For this reason I have opted to apply and develop the notion of 'didactic information'. 'Didactic' is taken to mean *explicitly instructive*—as the Concise Oxford English Dictionary puts it, 'Meant to instruct; having the manner of a teacher' (1964, p. 339). In this sense I am using the notion of 'didactic information' to allude to overt instructions or explanations that may be identified within my analysis (as in the latter example of Meccano instructions), as distinguished from less overtly pedagogic discourse. Further, my application of the term 'didactic information' relates specifically to content which has potential connection to the school curriculum.

Methodology

The article draws on data from a small-scale study, funded by the Froebel Research Institute. The study focused on 3–5 year old children (nursery and reception class). According to Davies (1989), these children are undergoing a heightened period of gender category maintenance, wherein they increasingly understand the social importance of gender differentiation and hence seek to find ways to demonstrate their gender identification (see also Lloyd & Duveen, 1992). Children in this group will also be beginning to distinguish toys as gendered (Lloyd & Duveen, 1992).

The first stage of the study involved distributing a brief questionnaire to parents of children in full-time nursery and reception classes at a socially diverse, urban case-study primary school (that incorporated a nursery). There were 17 children attending nursery full-time, and 51 in reception, totalling 68 children. There were 32 questionnaire responses. Parents were asked the sex of their child, their child's favourite toy, and their child's favourite DVD/video. DVDs (reflecting either television series or film) were included as well as toys as they have become such an ubiquitous feature of children's leisure, and often overlap with toys; with toys increasingly based on television/movie characters, and sometimes television shows derived from best-selling toys (Williams, 2006). Clearly the questionnaire data comprise parents' *constructions* of which are their children's favourite toys, although some parents informed me that they had directly asked their children what their favourites were, in order to respond.

Once the most popular toys and DVD/television programmes for boys and for girls were identified, the three most popular toys were identified for each gender group, and the two most popular DVDs. Examples of these items were then purchased and

closely studied in order to apply the content and discourse analysis. DVDs were each viewed repeatedly and observation notes taken at each viewing. Discourse analysis (Burman & Parker, 1993) identified the various discourses produced around gender and other facets of social identity, and content analysis was applied to identify the various instances of 'didactic information'.

Choices of favourite toys

Tables 1 and 2 set out the responses concerning children's favourite toys and DVD/ television programmes. A few trends are immediately identifiable from the tables. First, how very gender-differentiated the toy preferences are. The vast majority of these toys are clearly delineated 'girls' or 'boys' toys, and chosen as preferred by a child of the gender to which the various toys are marketed. The exceptions are the Spiderman identified for a girl, and the Little People identified for a boy.[5] Otherwise, the choices for boys are characterised stereotypically by action, construction and machinery; for girls by nurture, and other stereotypically 'feminine' interests (ponies, hairdressing etc). This appears to confound findings in the late 1980s of an emerging trend towards gender-neutral toy choice (Freeman, 1995).

  The choices of viewing material however show a rather different pattern. While the choices for boys remain stereotypically gendered masculine, there is far greater diversity among girls' choices, many of which might be considered 'androgynous' choices in that they are marketed at girls and boys alike (for example, *Shrek*, *Tom and Jerry*, *Home Alone*, *A Bug's Life*, *Jungle Book*). It is, however, notable that while virtually all of the viewing materials on the list for boys have males as the central character, or

Table 1. Favourite toys

GIRLS	BOYS
Cuddly toy (6)	Toy cars (5)
(bunny x2; cow; monkey; cat; elephant)	
Bratz dolls (3)	Power Rangers models (3)
Toy doll (baby) (3)	Thomas the Tank Engine engines and set (2)
Princess books (2)	Thunderbirds models (2)
Skipping rope	Star Wars lego
Rag doll ('Mrs Queenie')	Toy jet plane (HMS Belfast)
High School Musical microphone	Mario DS Lite (Nintendo game console)
Dora the Explora computer	A football
Barbie horse	Light sabre
Hairdresser's kit	Building bricks
My Little Pony	'Little People' (any figure)
Spiderman figure	Transformers
	Ben 10 figures
	Barney the Dinosaur
	Lego

Table 2.   Favourite television programmes/films

GIRLS	BOYS
Mary Poppins (3)	Power Rangers (5)
Tom & Jerry (2)	Ben 10 (2)
Bambi	Spiderman (2)
Surf's Up	Thomas the Tank Engine (2)
Shrek 2	Harry Potter
Jungle Book	Cars
Home Alone 2	Star Wars
High School Musical	Superman
Barney the Dinosaur	The Princess and the Goblin
Barbie: The Twelve Dancing Princesses	Thunderbirds
Beatrix Potter ballet	Scooby Doo
Scooby Doo	Barney the Dinosaur
A Bug's Life	'Tall Boy'
Going on a Bear Hunt	Dr Who
Fifi Forget-me-not	Motor racing
Dora the Explora	
Sponge Bob	
Charlie and Lola	(never watches television/films [2])

preponderance of central characters, the majority of the girls' choices do so also. Girls' preferences as represented on Table 2 are far broader than those of boys in terms of genre: the choices for boys are almost entirely focused on action, and characterised by the 'hero' genre and technical wizardry (by contrast, such technology is absent as content in girls' viewing preferences).

I turn now to qualitative analysis of the discourses and didactic information conveyed by some of these toys and resources that facilitate the reproduction of gender difference, and other aspects of social distinction. But in order to do so I first provide a brief description of the various resources (and their packaging) selected, to familiarise the reader with those analysed here.

The toys and DVDs analysed

Cuddly toy: Self explanatory. Cuddly toys are usually sold as they are, without packaging.

Baby doll: The baby dolls on sale in the high street vendor from which I purchased the toys were all White, female, and characterised by pastel pink packaging. The enduringly popular 'Baby Annabell' was selected. Baby Annabell has a white playsuit and hat, the playsuit embellished with a pink sheep holding a heart, among pink flowers, on the front. As accessories (sold together) she has a pink, flower-shaped dummy, a pastel blue packet of tissues with pink flower decoration, and an elaborately patterned

feeding bottle. Baby Annabell looks like a real baby, and much is made of this 'realism' on the packaging: 'Baby Annabell is like a real baby with realistic features.' The pictures on the box show a (White, blonde, female) child nurturing Baby Annabell. A feature of 'Baby Annabell' is that she 'responds to your voice' (as advertised on the box), emitting gurgles, chuckles and cries.

Bratz doll: Bratz dolls represent a contemporary alternative to Barbie and Cindy dolls, but with a greater emphasis on fashionability and 'urban cool', and arguably (in their ostentatious makeup and 'bling' jewellery) sexualised hyper-femininity. Pinks and pastel colours, glitz and sparkle, mark out Bratz packaging. Like their Barbie competitor, Bratz are divided into a range of genres: examples at the time of writing include 'Pop Divas', 'Rock Stars', 'Beach Bash', 'Fashion Stylists', and 'Passion 4 Fashion'. And as in the case of Barbie's 'Ken', there are a small minority of male Bratz (with 'bling' accessories such as necklace and shades). The majority are White; Black and other minority ethnic Bratz are available, but no evidently minority ethnic Bratz was on sale in the outlet concerned at the time of purchase.

  A Bratz 'Passion for Fashion 2 Pack' containing two Bratz dolls ('FiannaTM' and 'DanaTM') was selected for study, as indicatively representative. These two dolls are White, with copious make-up and long, highlighted hair. They are extremely slender but with curves for hips and breasts, and outlandishly large heads. Their faces have huge be-lashed eyes, lipsticked mouths and tiny noses. Fianna and Dana wear denim jeans, belly tops and jackets, all with glittering trim. Both wear high-heeled shoes and large detachable earrings. Additionally, an extra outfit (party dress and bracelet) is provided for each.

Toy cars: Packaging for toy cars is generally very 'busy', denoting action and speed, with strong primary colours; flames or explosions are a common motif. Packaging often includes pictures of vehicles hurtling at speed, and any weaponry or technical features of the toy concerned being operated with blasting action. Vehicle names conjure both action and machismo, including for example 'Speed Racer', 'Rapid Assault', 'Roadmaster', 'Rapid Reaction Team', and often evoke the action to which they are to be put to use, such as 'Crossroad Crash'. Their frequent multiple functions are listed on the packaging (often with exclamation marks to convey the excitement), as are onomatopaeic words such as 'Crrraaassh!' (e.g. Hotwheels Bumper Buster, 2008).

Power Rangers models: There are multiple different models, as well as Power Rangers accessories. In all cases boys are featured on the packaging, either modelling the 'dress up' clothes and accessories, or operating the models. Two 'Power Rangers, Operation Overdrive' packs are selected as indicatively representative of the action figures available. The packs contain a Power Rangers figure, along with various vehicle parts that can 'morph' (according to the packaging) from Ranger armour to Ranger vehicle. They also contain additional weaponry for the Ranger to hold. The sex of those Rangers available is indicated male via their bulging muscles and 'six

packs', and the colours of their costumes as representing male Power Rangers in the television series. Significantly, the Power Rangers photographed on the packaging are all male in the television series (red, blue and black suits): the female Power Rangers from the series are not represented. They are shown in martial arts stances, with the closest (Red, 'alpha' Ranger) wielding a gun.

Thomas the Tank Engine train set: Thomas packaging is all regulation 'Thomas Blue'. The official Thomas merchandise wooden train set includes jigsaw-like pieces of track to assemble; and individual wooden engines with plastic smiling faces and a magnetic 'coupling' at front and back for potentially linking other engines or carriages. The engines are gendered: most are male, having male-appropriate names (Thomas, Percy, Gordon, etc. For those who might not know the names from reading the books or watching the DVDs, the appropriate name is painted on the bottom of each engine). There are a few female engines (e.g. Emily, Daisy, Lady), and of course Thomas's coaches Annie and Clarabel. These are delineated as distinct from the male engines in the television series by their having eyelashes, but are not easily identifiable as female in the form of wooden models, except via their names.

DVDs: Those purchased were: Power Rangers *The Ultimate Rangers* (an anthology of different Power Ranger episodes); Thomas the Tank Engine *The Chocolate Crunch* (an anthology of different episodes from *Thomas and Friends*); *Mary Poppins* (the Disney film); and *Tom & Jerry, Collection Volume 2* (a collection of Tom and Jerry cartoons).

Didactic information provided (potentially related to the official school curriculum)

Of the choices from the 'girls' list', I could identify little potential learning/skills development that relates to the official curriculum. Neither the cuddly toy nor Bratz dolls appear to offer any such information or skills, didactic or otherwise. The film *Mary Poppins* is fantastical, and offers virtually no information as related to official curricula (though is saturated with moral discourses, see Kenschaft, 1999). It includes tenuous information on the operation of a bank, and on the state of British society in the early part of the twentieth century, but this (scant) information might be argued to be misleading. And the Tom & Jerry collection is likewise fantastical. On the other hand, analysis of the Tom & Jerry cartoons did identify instances of information provision: this information was often relatively 'adult', and hence potentially intriguing for an early-years audience. For example, that if one drinks copious quantities of cider one will become drunk, and this drunkenness will alter one's usual behaviour ('Part Time Pal'); and precisely how to light a match—and that matches can cause a fire ('The Invisible Mouse'). These instances are fleeting, and limited to visual presentation, but nevertheless analysis does reveal information conveyed that potentially relates to a science curriculum. For example, if you shake a fizzy drinks bottle it may explode from the top ('Salt Water Tabby'); putting a match to gas will cause an explosion ('A Mouse in the House'); and the power of magnetic force ('Old Rockin Chair Tom'),

although arguably there is also provision of false information (e.g. that invisible ink makes items covered in it disappear: 'The Invisible Mouse').

However, while opportunities for curriculum-related learning appeared absent or tenuous in a majority of those resources analysed from the girls' list, the exception was provided by the Baby Annabell doll. Interaction with Baby Annabell provides well-developed information on the needs of a baby, and how to meet these needs. Such information is communicated by the accessories provided (bottle, dummy, wipes), the 'life-likeness' of the baby, and of course the response of the baby when she is cared for or neglected (gurgles or cries respectively). This latter—the 'interactive' responses of the baby to the treatment conferred by the child-owner—provides an opportunity for 'learning by doing' for the child-owner. Such pedagogy is of course quite distinct from the notion of 'didactic information' developed above.

In contrast to the resources targeted to girls, of the resources selected from the list for boys, didactic information and opportunity for curriculum-related skills development was only absent from one item; the Power Rangers DVD. Most of the information concerned was of a technical nature, providing knowledge and skills development around construction and technology. Some of this was very basic: an example would include the construction skills required for building track and manipulating the trains in the Thomas Trainset (although some of the optional accessories for the train sets are more technical). The skill involved in playing with toy cars depends both on the model of car and the purpose to which it is put. Many of the vehicles on sale do have movable or removable parts (aside from wheels), operable features, or construction elements, which demand technical skills of construction and manipulation, and sometimes require the following of written or pictorial instructions (hence involving literacy skills). This also applies to the Power Rangers models and accessories. Although clearly geared to creative play, these toys further require extensive manual dexterity in constructing and manipulating the various vehicle/armour parts, and some literacy and numeracy skills in following the instructions for construction.

These technological themes were often represented too in the DVDs identified from the list for boys. Arguably the very premise of Thomas the Tank Engine (focused on trains and their operations and functions) illustrates a technological focus, but beyond this there are some very specific explanations in the DVD compilation concerning the workings of technical mechanisms, vehicle or mechanical functions, and the operation of health and safety. For example, in 'The World's Strongest Engine' the viewer is taught about the methods and mechanics of moving trucks and their loads, via both oral and visual explanations. In 'Dunkin' Duncan' the nature and mechanism of an 'incline railway' is similarly visually and orally explained. A particularly vivid example is provided in 'Thomas the Jet Engine', where the principles of jet engine function are explained to viewers (indicatively 2–5 year old boys):

> 'What's a jet engine?' asked Percy. 'A jet engine goes forward by pushing hot air out of its back' the Fat Controller said. 'Just like when you blow up a balloon and let it go', added Thomas. 'It's very fast'.

In addition to such scientific explanation, we are frequently reminded about health and safety when working with mechanics and technology (e.g. 'Percy was not allowed to cross the loading ramp until the tipper had been turned off' ['Middle Engine']; 'We can't move without a whistle, it would be too dangerous' ['Faulty Whistles']). And the narration is peppered with technical terms for engine and railway parts, as well as the names of different types of railway line.

Although didactic information was absent in the Power Rangers DVD, weaponry, robotics, explosives and vehicles are staple fare of this series. Arguably of even more significance than the actual skills and knowledge developed by watching the Thomas DVD, or constructing and playing with the vehicles, is the message that technical subjects (trains and other vehicles, weaponry etc.) and construction/technical play and knowledge is appropriate for the child concerned. This child, as my responses affirm, is almost always male. This inculcation to a world of machinery and technical detail (including vehicles, weaponry, robotics, explosives and so on) is effected by all the most popular resources identified for study from the boys' list. I shall explore this point further below in relation to gendered discourses perpetuated by the toys.

The gendered discourses evident in toys and film/television

Although the discursive productions discussed in this section did not comprise didactic information, they interpolate children as gendered, and provide strong messages—and resources—for the construction of gender identities. Indeed, from a Butlerian perspective (e.g. Butler, 1993, 2006) these children's subjectivities are brought into being via the signification of gendered technologies such as toys: such technologies render the subject readable, or 'possible'. A key discourse perpetuated by the toys is that of *gender difference*. Many of the resources analysed perpetuate predominant binary social constructions of distinct male and female entities and as different from each another. The suits of the Power Rangers provide an example: there are many different teams of Power Rangers, but in all cases there are just two females, and these two are always dressed in pink and yellow suits respectively. In the anthology episodes from the original 'Mighty Morphin Power Rangers' I was struck that the suits appeared (coincidentally or otherwise) 'raced' – the East Asian female wearing a yellow suit, and the Black male wearing a black suit! However, this pattern is not maintained in other series, where Black male actors sometimes play the Blue Ranger (and in one distinctive case the 'alpha' Red Ranger), and the ethnicity of the female wearing the yellow suit differs. Hence *Power Rangers* explicitly elevates the significance of gender difference over 'race': gender fixity is maintained where racial fixity is not, and there has never been a female Red Ranger (leader). Although the female Rangers are adept at martial arts like their male counterparts, this overt exclusion from Ranger leadership cements their relative marginality and 'supporting' roles. Moreover, their behaviour further genders the female Rangers: they are sometimes shown 'scared' (e.g. Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers: White Light Parts 1 & 2 [MMPRWLP1&2]), and in two discrete episodes on the single anthology analysed, females are shown fainting (MMPRWLP1&2; and Power Rangers Lightspeed

Rescue: Tekeena's Revenge, Parts 1&2 [PRLRTRP1&2]). Whereas male Rangers are not depicted in these ways, they may express anger or frustration (for example, Red Ranger Andros kicks a pillar in frustration at being outnumbered and forced to retreat, while Pink Ranger Ashley is shown sweeping her hair back and looking at him with anxious concern; 'Power Rangers in Space: Countdown to Destruction Parts 1 & 2' [PRSCDP1&2]). Female Rangers are often presented undertaking 'caring acts' (see below), and when not suited, engaging traditional feminine pursuits (such as organising a 'surprise party'; MMPRWLP1&2). The male Rangers, in contrast, engage in activities such as American Football (MMPRWLP1&2).

Kenschaft (1999) maintains that the children in *Mary Poppins* are not overtly gendered beyond their pink and blue dressing-gowns, being rather 'lumped together as "the children"' (p. 237). However, some constructions of gender difference remain: Michael is presented as 'cute rascal' in Jane's wish list song, and, although Jane (older than Michael) is often presented as more knowing, it is Michael and Bert who gallop ahead of Jane and Mary Poppins on the fairground horses, and Michael who holds the money and is pivotal to events in the Bank Scene. Yet *Mary Poppins* contains discourses that are apparently contradictory (Kenschaft, 1999),[6] and such contradictions to some extent extend to gender: for example, Mary is always in control of events, and actually plays sergeant major to the male sweeps in the rooftop scene. Moreover, Mr Banks' criticism of the 'slipshod, sugary female thinking they [the children] get around here' undermines the notion of femininity as trivial and inane even as it invokes it, due to the comic lack of understanding being portrayed by Mr Banks. A few such potentially disruptive narratives are also discernable in Thomas: for example, in 'The World's Strongest Engine' it is Diesel's competitive machismo ('"I'll push you all at the same time", he said …"That's me, the World's Strongest Engine"') that allows him to be tricked into over-extending himself by the Troublesome Trucks. In contrast to Power Rangers, masculine bravado is often explicitly rejected in the rather Lutherian moral ethos of Thomas, where humility and work ethic is prioritised.

These exceptions aside, productions of gender distinction are generally overt in the resources analysed, and many of the resources normalise the centrality of males, maintaining the powerful dualism of Subject (male) and Other (female) in their marginalisation of females. This subjectification and Othering arguably applies to 'race' as well as gender: although it is possible to purchase BME baby dolls and Bratz dolls, their relative scarcity (and lack of availability at the point of purchase in this case, even in a store in an ethnically diverse urban area) produces them as minoritised, for 'specialist' interest; perpetuating the dualism of White-Subject, Black-Other. In terms of gender, marginalisation may be via exclusion (e.g. Power Rangers figures, see above), or via presentation of females as peripheral (*Power Rangers* television series, *Tom & Jerry*, *Thomas the Tank Engine* television series and train set). Clearly this mainly relates to the resources identified from the 'boys' list': in the case of the toys from the list for girls these norms are sometimes reversed (Baby Annabell's packaging represents females and excludes males; 'boy Bratz' comprise a small minority; and Mary Poppins is hero of her film). However, as noted above, *Tom &*

Jerry, and many other DVDs from the list for girls (e.g. *Shrek*, *Home Alone*) have male central characters.

Within this production of gender duality, toys and resources position children as having different interests and attributes according to gender. One discourse active in such positioning is that of *female care*, which is signed in the resources in a variety of ways. In *Mary Poppins*, Mrs Banks' prioritisation of her work for 'Women's Lib' over her spending more time with her children is implicitly questioned via the ridiculing of her beliefs, and the exposition of the superficiality of her commitment to these beliefs (revealed in Mrs Banks' deference to Mr Banks, see Kenschaft [1999] for elaboration). Mrs Banks' use of her 'Votes for Women' sash for the tail of the children's kite at the film's conclusion specifically symbolically establishes the 'correct' prioritisation of care for her children's needs over 'selfish' (and perhaps 'erroneous') political action for gender equality.

Discourses of female care are maintained in the *Power Rangers* series, wherein the two female Rangers are often shown helping bystanders out of danger while fighting continues (e.g. PRSCDP1&2). Consideration and care for others are exemplified in the concerns of the Pink Power Ranger in 'Takeena's Revenge' (PRLRTRP1&2): 'We can't just storm in there: there are innocent people in there!'[7] Such 'caring' may also be reflected in the frequent choice of a cuddly toy as a favourite toy for girls. The production of the cuddly comforter toy as a point of emotional attachment is likely to be made evident especially to girls by adult providers/observers, and such attachment and/or expression of 'care' understood as 'girl-appropriate behaviour'. It is likely that many of the boys in this study sleep with a cuddly toy, yet crucially they/their parents do not 'hail' this toy as their favourite. It is not an appropriate technology for the production of their subjectivity. The prioritisation of the cuddly toy for many girls and their parents, then, constitutes an aspect of gender category maintenance (Davies, 1989), or 'girling' (Butler, 1993). The same can be said for Baby Annabell: both the doll and her possessor are produced as female via materialised narratives of softness and care (e.g. the cuddly sheep holding a heart embroidered on the baby's suit, and of course the needy baby itself). Information on the packaging explains of Baby Annabell, 'If she is woken by noise she cries—and real tears roll down her cheeks. But singing soon hushes her.' As this text indicates, play with Baby Annabell is expected to involve her being nurtured and cared for (hence the feeding bottle and dummy). Indeed, Zapf Creations' 'Baby Annabell' website asserts, 'The loveable baby doll … demands some basic social requirements, such as love, care and responsibility from her doll mummy.' Hence the girl owner is overtly interpolated as nurturing 'mummy'. Of course, we know that girls do not always play with dolls in the envisaged 'caring' ways (see e.g. Beavis & Charles, 2007). However, arguably even when resisting 'care' in play with dolls, girls are nevertheless aware (via these discourses) that they are *expected* to care. This contradiction is observed by Butler (1997) when she observes how acts of resistance inevitably simultaneously 'presuppose and reinvoke' categories/practices of subordination (p. 12).

Boy consumers, conversely, are propelled via their toys and DVDs into a world of action, as well as of technology. *Power Rangers* are indicative here: the theme tune and

credits for the television series comprise loud rock music underscoring the 'Go, go, Power Rangers!' lyric, and the various Power Rangers performing martial arts moves and stances. In addition to martial arts there is an array of weaponry that the Rangers use, including their 'transformer' robotic vehicle/fighting machines. The battles that feature in all episodes are always frenetic and usually punctuated by huge explosions.

The production of male as Active Subject is particularly overt in *Power Rangers*, which celebrates heroics and machismo. Cries such as 'You guys go, I'll keep 'em busy up here' (White Ranger Dave, in PRSCDP1&2) and 'You got that right, Carter! Ha ha! Let's show this freak what Red's all about! … I've had enough of your big mouth Triskull! Battle-booster, Full Power!' (Red Ranger Leo to Red Ranger Carter, as they kill Triskull, in PRLRTR1&2) are typical.

A further discourse delineating gender difference is *the importance of appearance and aesthetics for girls.* This is of course closely coupled with other discourses around gender and sexuality supporting the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990; Renold, 2006; Renold & Ringrose, 2008), which I elaborate below. Yet, in the resources analysed, the concern with appearance is almost exclusively projected to females. An exception is the Thomas stories: the engines 'love being shiny and clean' ('Percy's Chocolate Crunch';). But where this narrative of the importance of cleanliness and smart presentation appears linked to moral discourses of personal responsibility and 'cleanliness as next to Godliness' when applied to the male engines in Thomas, the application of such narratives around personal presentation to females in other toys/DVDs relates directly to heterosexuality and 'attracting a male'. For example, in the Tom & Jerry story 'Solid Serenade', the female feline object of Tom's affections is presented plucking her eyebrows in the mirror. Seeing Tom serenading her, she hastily takes out her hair rollers and applies more makeup. Wearing bows on her head and collar, red lipstick and blue eye-shadow, she lounges in a feminine pose while Tom continues his serenade. Likewise, Mary Poppins is introduced to us applying powder in a mirror (sitting on a cloud), and the narrative of her care for her appearance and pleasure in male admiration at this is maintained throughout the film. This preoccupation with aesthetics is evident in Baby Annabell's decorous accessories, but is especially evident in Bratz, where their 'passion 4 fashion' and reproduction of hyper-femininity is delineated via their copious make-up, numerous accessories and glitzy, 'sexy' clothes, as well as via the themes by which they are marketed ('Passion 4 Fashion'; 'Fashion Stylists' etc.). This projection of concern for aesthetic presentation and 'mastery of submission' (Butler, 1997) to a male gaze, to females, is clearly an integral aspect of the heterosexual matrix, to which a child audience is interpolated. As Renold (2005, 2006) has pointed out, the production of oneself as a 'normal' girl or boy demands active investment in hegemonic heterosexual identities and relations. I turn next, then, to explore the specific discourses of heterosexuality emerging in the resources analysed.

Heterosexuality

Although as we have seen there maybe some disruption to dominant gender discourses in *Mary Poppins*, this is certainly not the case for discourses promoting and

normalising heterosexuality, which are at work throughout the film. For example, 'wooing' is done by men, to women, perpetuating the binary of male as active, female as passive (Bert dances and clowns with the penguins for Mary, while she looks passively on. This narrative of male active wooing of a passive female object is also established in the case of Tom & Jerry's 'Solid Serenade').

That 'sexiness' is embodied by females for the gratification of males is affirmed repeatedly in the Tom & Jerry stories (for example, in 'Salt Water Tabby' the sight of the sunbathing female cat distracts Tom sufficiently that he crashes in to a rubbish bin). And at the end of PRLRTRP1&2, a male Power Ranger puts his arm around the two female Galaxy Rangers and jokes 'Y'know, maybe I'll stay for just a little adventure!' (all laugh). 'Sexy' femininity is 'raced' in Tom & Jerry: the attractive female cat who appears in a number of stories is white. She is slim and curvaceous, and wears fashionable 'sexy' clothes and copious makeup. The only other female to appear in the cartoons is Tom's Black female owner, whose face we never see. However, she is portrayed as entirely devoid of glamour or femininity: she wears baggy clothes, darned socks, and a headscarf, and is fat with big hands. Her lack of femininity (masculinity?) is underscored by her 'unladylike' language and physical disciplining of Tom. Hence this text appears to diverge from Western presentations of Black Female sexuality as 'wild' and excessive (see Gilman, 1985; Read, forthcoming) to rather deny the possibility of the Black female as sexually attractive and to locate such attractiveness exclusively in the White Female.

Power Rangers presents numerous examples of 'bad female' sexuality: there are a host of female 'baddies' (all seemingly with names ending in 'a', e.g. Astonoma, Trekeena, Seppentura, Rita Repulsa, Vypra), and these usually wear garb reminiscent of S&M queens: thigh boots, heavy make-up and armour corsets with breast delineation are recurring motifs. Like other female 'baddies' in comic books and cartoons, these women wield great power of the totalitarian kind, but they are always defeated by the Rangers. They are consistently sexualised—for example, my notes on 'Takeena's Revenge' include 'Leo explains how Tekeena has mutated. She is shown: she now looks like a grasshopper with boobs!' Hence overt female sexuality is presented to the (young male) audience as dangerous, bad, but also titillating and potentially seductive.

Themes of heterosexual romance run through various of the resources, and not just those aimed at girls (such as Bratz with their male counterpart): several of the Power Rangers stories include romance narratives, usually involving the Pink Ranger and one of the ('alpha') Red Rangers (e.g. Tommy in MMPRWLP1&2; Andros in PRSCDP1&2). Presumably due to the age of the audience to which Power Rangers is marketed, these couples never get further than hugs and hand-holding, but these are affected with passion. These storylines invariably focus on the emotional commitment and concern of the female, rather than male, Power Ranger. Indeed, in one of the stories heterosexual relations are held up as a point of macho competitive banter by the Red Rangers: Jason asks, "Are you kidding me? *I* was the one doing all the work while *he* was in the juice bar kissing on Kimberley!" (Red Rangers: Wild Force: Forever Red).

And there are frequent representations of, and happy allusions to, heterosexual marriage (see, for example, the performance of the 'Supercallifragilistic' song in *Mary Poppins*). *Mary Poppins* concludes with the Banks family standing together as a tableau, with Michael flying the kite, and Mr Banks with his arm around Mrs Banks and a paternal hand on Michael's shoulder. Nuclear family values are affirmed when Mary Poppins approves that the children's caring for their father more than her is 'as it should be'. Hence assumptions of the normalcy and totality of heterosexuality are deeply embedded within these entertainment resources aimed at young children, facilitating their inculcation into a heterosexual matrix which, as Davies (2006) observes, they may be too young to fully understand, but which is already informing their productions of gendered selfhood. As Alldred and David (2007) have observed, children report learning more about sex and sexuality from resources external to the school and a sex education curriculum, and my findings here highlight how profoundly conservative this 'unofficial' education may be.

Discussion

The analysis presented here facilitates a revisiting of questions raised at the beginning of this article. Overt education in the form of 'didactic information' is relatively scarce within the toys and DVDs analysed, yet does occur (sometimes unexpectedly), and may be located in packaging and instructions as well as within the toys/DVDs themselves. It is not the only overtly pedagogic practice: 'learning by doing' is also provided, both in the case of the Baby Annabell doll, and in the skill development via construction and manipulation of vehicles and so on. Given that the consumption of toys and DVDs is so overwhelmingly gendered (see e.g. the work of Williams, 2006, and Kenway & Bullen, 2001, in addition to the findings presented in this study), it is then likely that such available educational practices will be accessed almost exclusively by either male or female children, depending on the toy/DVD concerned. Findings from this small-scale study suggest that educational information and skills development accessed by boys is likely to relate to technological and scientific knowledge and skill, whereas that accessed by girls may relate to care-giving. Moreover, didactic information was identified exclusively in toys and resources analysed from the list for boys: further work would be needed to explore the emergent hypothesis that girls' toy and DVD preferences tend to contain less didactic information *per se* in comparison with those of boys.

Further work may also be needed to refine or refute my application of delineation between 'didactic information' and less overtly 'teacherly' social discourses; to explore both the theoretical validity of such distinction and the empirical, pragmatic challenges of application. What is clear from the analyses offered here, however, is that elements of children's leisure resources do remain directly 'educative' (this would be even more the case with 'educational toys' which were not identified as children's favourites by parents in this study). Hence hypotheses that see girls and boys being prepared for different school curriculum preferences and trajectories via their dissimilar access to such resources may be lent some credence by these findings. But

the message that emerges even more starkly from the analysis of just a handful of children's toys and DVDs is how distinct children's preferences (or their preferences as perceived by their parents) are, and how these leisure resources themselves actively produce and promote gender difference.

These findings offer support to the idea that boys and girls are being inculcated to different gendered worlds due to their distinctive gendered consumption of toys and leisure resources; indeed, that these entertainment resources facilitate the production and reproduction of gender (difference and inequality). As we have seen, a dominant discourse perpetuated by the resources analysed (though to differing extents in terms of volume and consistency) is one of binary gender distinction. Other discourses are mobilised to support such distinction: those identified include a discourse of male as active subject, of feminine care, of feminine aesthetics and importance of appearance, and of the normalcy and desirability of heterosexuality. I hope to have shown how many of these discourses weave together to reproduce and sustain the heterosexual matrix; as well as the binary dichotomy of Male as Subject, Female as Other (and how this dualism is also retraced with dichotomies of 'race', class and sexuality). Here I would wish to stress both the agentic and determined aspects of 'gendering' in engagement with toys and viewing materials.

Davies's (1989) conception of gender category maintenance emphasises children's activeness in constructing their gendered identities: from this perspective their taking up of particular toys and resources, and their 'hailing' of these as favourites, can be read as an aspect of their expression of gender allegiance; their work to produce themselves as 'viable subjects' (Davies, 2006). Davies's earlier work has been criticised as premised on humanist evocations of agency (Jones, 1997). Certainly Butler's (1993) elaboration of the process of 'girling' emphasises the determinist aspects of discursive production. She argues that the 'girl' is 'compelled to "cite" the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject' (p. 232), hence:

> Femininity is not thus the product of choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex history is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. (Butler, 1993, p. 232)

Yet data from my own previous work shows how children may be acutely aware of the constraints of gender production in self-regulating their own behaviour, and of the consequences of failure to conform (see, for example, my interview with seven-year-old Leke, Francis, 1998). Likewise, Davies maintains that processes of gender category maintenance involve active mutual policing by children. Her recognition of the point later established by Butler (see, for example, Butler, 2004), that 'gender unintelligibility' is potentially destabilising to the binary gender order, and hence ruthlessly surveilled for and transgressions punished, foregrounds the determined aspects of gendering; even though she may conceive a greater awareness of such processes in individual subjects than does Butler. Indeed, Davies discusses this point in her reflections on Butler's work, considering how the achievement of autonomy (however illusory) is necessary for the accomplishment of selfhood—the production of oneself as in intelligible subject (Davies, 2006). She notes that Butler

does conceive subjective agency, albeit 'radically conditioned', given the possibility for subjects to reflexively 'examine their conditions of possibility' (Davies, 2006).

Hence I believe that Davies's term 'gender category maintenance' remains both relevant and effective to capture the ways in which subjects consciously police their own and others' behaviour in order to maintain sex/gender/sexuality binaries. It may be considered, however, that the term does not sufficiently address the perpetual unconscious performances of gender, or indeed the impact of spectators—their impacts in their response to the subject's performances, and in the influence in turn of their own performances on the subject-spectator. In the case of toys, this demands recognition both of the role of toys as a technology in 'doing gender' for children, but also (especially given that it is not usually young children who purchase their own toys) how the provision of different types of toys to children, and the gendered marketing of toys, interpolates children as gendered. This article has illustrated how, once such toys are accessed, the toys themselves provide further information and resources on 'doing gender'—resources that differ dramatically according to the gender of the child.

To conclude, the analysis presented intimates the value of a reinvigoration of attention to children's toys and entertainment resources in terms both of the education they afford, and their role in the production of social identities. In order to facilitate such work conceptual attention will need to be directed at understandings and categorisations of 'educative content', and the processes via which subjects draw on, or are interpolated by, discourse. It is hoped that this article has contributed some ideas to generate such further discussion.

Notes

1. This substantial gender gap at literacy exists for all social groups irrespective of social class and ethnicity, although social class remains the greatest predictor of educational achievement: even at literacy, middle-class boys still outperform working-class girls (Francis & Skelton, 2005).
2. And sometimes, to the possibilities of agency within these discursive constraints, see e.g. Butler, 1997; Davies, 2006).
3. Especially given the rise of what Buckingham and Scanlon (2003) refer to as 'edutainment': out-of-school materials specifically geared to supporting children's education. It was notable that no such toys/materials are chosen as favourites in my study.
4. See e.g. debates engaged by Fish (e.g. 1987) and Eco (1990).
5. It is intriguing to note that in these cases, the girl concerned is from a gay-parent family with two 'mums', and the boy is autistic. To consider that these factors may have facilitated 'non-traditional choices' for different reasons—a family environment that challenges traditional gender-sexuality constructions, and an autistic understanding of the world, respectively—can be no more than speculation, but interesting nonetheless.
6. Such narrative contradictions pertain to 'race' and social class as well as gender: working-class people are often presented as clowning stereotypes, but also show more wisdom, and sometimes lecture the middle-class Bankses. Soot-blackened sweeps are branded 'Hottentots' by the Admiral, and set up against Mr Banks' various smug claims to English colonial superiority. Yet, in spite of narratives that 'trouble' the established order, the conclusion of *Mary Poppins* supports and reasserts the dominant norm: the restoration of the wealthy White bourgeois family as the established ideal works to close down more radical readings (Kenschaft, 1999).

7. The male Red Ranger is twice depicted as 'caring' too in this anthology, as he goes to the aid of a crying child, but his response is jovially pragmatic rather than emotional—'Hey, it can't be all *that* bad: maybe I can help?' (PRLRTRP1&2). Hence Red Ranger Carter's words represent a discourse of 'protection of the vulnerable' without disrupting the construction of his masculinity.

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