
Shaping Gender: The Role of Family in Children's Identity Construction

Mayra Margarito Gaspar

University of Guadalajara

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Abstract:

The document examines how gender stereotypes influence identity construction in children aged 9 to 12. Stereotypes act as normative frameworks that shape the perception of masculine and feminine roles, which children internalize from an early age. Using gender schema theory, the study investigated how children represent these roles in activities and narratives, aiming to understand how the family serves as both a reference and an agent in socializing and forming stereotypes. To do this, family representations in idea-completion exercises and creative productions of 186 children were analyzed, providing insights into the perpetuation or questioning of these cultural norms. The results show a strong association with traditional roles in parental figures: the father as provider and protector, and the mother as caregiver, reflecting conventional stereotypes. However, modest changes are also observed, with an emerging participation of the father in domestic roles. In contrast, siblings and cousins have less rigid and more diverse roles, especially in recreational activities, suggesting a more flexible space for gender identity exploration. Grandparents and uncles, on the other hand, often appear as extensions of parental roles, reinforcing the transmission of traditional norms. This exposes the need for educational interventions that promote a more equitable view, allowing children to explore their gender identities authentically and without rigid cultural constraints.

Keywords: Gender roles, Family, Stereotypes, Representations, Identity construction

Introduction:

Stereotypes play an important role in identity construction by providing frameworks, though limiting and often reductive, that people use to understand and define who they are in relation to others. Whether based on gender, race or social class, stereotypes influence how a person perceives himself or herself and how he or she expects others to perceive him or her. In the case of gender, they provide normative figures to which individuals are exposed from an early age. Through static features, society dictates what is expected of a “man” or “woman,” establishing behaviors, attitudes, and

roles that influence how individuals construct their gender identity. These expectations are internalized and can shape the way people act and relate to others.

This paper will study stereotypes within the family construct, emphasizing how they influence the perspective of what is identified as feminine and masculine. According to Giddens (1991), identity is a reflective project that develops through interaction with social contexts, such as the family, where stereotypes play a crucial role. This analysis will examine how gender stereotypes shape

expectations and behaviors that children internalize or question in their self-identification process. For this purpose, the work of 186 children aged 9 to 12 was analyzed, using gender schema theory and cultural roles. This developmental stage is crucial, as children begin to build their gender identity more consciously in interaction with their social environment.

During this stage, children have already internalized various gender representations from family, school, and the media, but they are also in a process of questioning and negotiating these norms based on their social experiences. Studying gender construction in this age group is relevant because it is a time when children face new social dynamics, such as peer pressure and the search for acceptance in their school environment. These factors can reinforce or challenge the stereotypes they have already acquired. Investigating how they interact with these influences allows for the design of more effective strategies to promote a more equitable development that fosters an environment where gender identities can be explored and expressed more authentically.

The representations of family members in the participants' productions have been analyzed, as the family is one of the first and most influential contexts in which children internalize social norms and values. Through these representations, children reflect and, at the same time, reconstruct the gender expectations, roles, and behaviors they observe in their family environment. These productions have made it possible to identify how stereotypes are adopted, reinterpreted, or deconstructed from an early age. Additionally, they provide insight into how cultural narratives about gender and family roles are perpetuated or transformed, offering a foundation for pedagogical intervention in promoting a more equitable and critical view of family and social dynamics.

Theoretical-Methodological Approach:

The analysis of gender stereotypes and their impact on identity formation requires a theoretical approach that considers the interaction between cognitive development and cultural influences.

Gender schema theory and the cultural role perspective provide a foundation to explore how children aged 9 to 12 represent and process gender roles in their creative productions. These theories help unravel how mental schemas and cultural norms influence children's perceptions and behaviors, as well as how they internalize or challenge the stereotypes observed in their environment.

Gender schema theory posits that individuals organize gender-related information through cognitive schemas formed in early childhood (Martin & Halverson, 1983). Martin & Ruble (2004) reinforce this idea, highlighting how children use these schemas to interpret and categorize behaviors and roles, developing an understanding of the world that reinforces gender stereotypes. This perspective is crucial for understanding how children represent family members in their productions, reflecting and perpetuating learned gender roles.

The stage of development between 9 and 12 years old is critical for the formation of gender identity, because children begin to consolidate it more consciously, using more sophisticated gender schemes (Halim *et al.*, 2016). This process is influenced by culture and family experiences, underscoring the importance of analyzing how these factors manifest in children's representations. From this perspective, gender roles are a social construct influenced by cultural practices and power dynamics (Wood & Eagly, 2012).

Galet & Alzás (2014) expose how families constitute one of the main agents in the internalization and transmission of gender roles. The family plays a central role in gender socialization, as family interactions reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes, influencing the construction of children's identities (Viveros, 2010). The cultural perspective emphasizes how social norms and expectations shape behavior and gender identity. This theory provides a framework to analyze how specific cultural contexts, such as Latin American families, influence children's representations of gender roles.

Shaping Gender: The Role of Family in Children's Identity Construction

Gender representations in childhood are essential to understanding how stereotypes are internalized and manifest in behavior and attitudes (Blakemore & Centers, 2005). Rodríguez-Castrillón & Amador-Baqui (2023) explain how dominant stereotypes and roles are reflected in children's narratives, offering valuable insights into cultural influence on identity formation. Cultural narratives play a crucial role in shaping gender schemas. Analyzing these narratives in children's productions allows us to understand how they are transmitted and transformed across different cultural contexts. This approach is essential for understanding how children's productions not only reflect but also reconfigure traditional gender roles.

Although gender stereotypes are pervasive, children also can question them. Hakelind *et al.* (2022) suggest that through critical reflection and social support, gender stereotypes can be resisted and challenged. Furthermore, creating spaces where children are encouraged to express themselves freely and engage with diverse perspectives allows them to explore alternative narratives beyond traditional stereotypes. Educational interventions that promote open discussions about identity and challenge rigid gender expectations can empower children to develop a more nuanced understanding of gender roles.

Methodological approach:

This study is based on gender schema theory and cultural roles to explore how children represent gender stereotypes through family roles. The research follows a qualitative approach, focusing on the analysis of productions from 186 children aged 9 to 12, from urban and semi-urban areas of Jalisco, Mexico. This sample, though diverse, is representative of a specific sociocultural context; however, it is considered that, following a qualitative design, it is possible to deepen the understanding of the expressions and meanings children attribute to gender roles in their narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

This research builds upon a previous study that analyzed how children assigned subjects –males or

females– to stereotyped actions, revealing a frequent and spontaneous use of family members. This finding motivated the implementation of a third narrative exercise, specifically designed to examine how children integrate gender roles into family dynamics. So, for data collection, three exercises were used: in the first two, children completed action-subject association tasks. In the third, participants were asked to create a story using family members as protagonists, aiming to observe how they represent gender roles within this context.

It is important to note that the first two activities involved assigning subjects to stereotyped actions without specific instructions, while the third required creating a story centered on family members. Narrative was chosen as the main method, as it allows children to express their perceptions and constructions of gender in an accessible and familiar format (Riessman, 2008). Additionally, it was deemed necessary to use multiple instruments to obtain a richer understanding of the phenomena studied (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In this way, it was observed how children, both spontaneously and under specific instructions, represent gender roles.

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, following the model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Recurrent patterns and themes related to gender roles and family dynamics were identified. Thematic analysis allows for a systematic exploration of how gender stereotypes manifest in children's productions, providing insights into the internalization and reproduction of these roles.

The study met ethical standards established for research with minors. Informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians, and participants' confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. As Mirza *et al.* (2023) establish, it is crucial to consider ethical implications in qualitative research, especially when working with vulnerable populations such as children.

Results:

The research on gender stereotypes in children's narratives and tasks reveal significant patterns in

the representation of family roles. From the analysis of the exercises completed by the 186 participants, four main categories were identified, relating to the representations of different family members and how they are perceived and characterized in terms of gender. These categories provide a detailed understanding of how children internalize and reproduce gender stereotypes within the family context, offering an enriched view of gender dynamics in childhood.

The results are divided into the following categories: The Family Provider (focused on the paternal figure), The Heart of the Family (centered on the maternal figure), Playmates (covering relatives of similar age, such as siblings and cousins), and Additional Guardians (referring to older family members other than parents, such as grandparents or uncles). These categories reflect the main gender roles attributed to each family group, showing the influence of traditional stereotypes, although some elements of change can also be observed, as discussed below.

The Family Provider:

The completion exercises show a strong association between the father figure and the role of economic provider. In the two open-response tasks, over 70% of the students identified the father when referring to paid work, even though mentioning a specific family member was not required. This suggests that, although paternal roles are evolving, the role of provider remains central to the social perception of the father.

On the other hand, when it comes to domestic chores or childcare, the father is mentioned much less frequently. In less than 20% of responses, students referred to the father in relation to household chores or caregiving. This outcome demonstrates that, while stereotypes are slowly changing, the traditional division of roles persists, with the paternal figure still predominantly associated with economic provision. Thus, even though more fathers are participating in childcare, the traditional perception of gender roles remains highly influential (Park *et al.*, 2010). However, it is interesting to note that, in a small but significant

portion (around 5%), students mentioned that household responsibilities are shared between both parents. This modest yet noteworthy change may reflect the beginning of a transition toward a more equitable view of family roles.

In the third exercise, the narratives provide a broader perspective on the father's role, highlighting him not only as a provider but also as a protector. More than half of the stories that included the father depicted him as the figure who solves problems or protects children from dangers. This protective aspect of the paternal role remains a fundamental part of the cultural narrative about fatherhood (Dette-Hagenmeyer *et al.*, 2014). Thus, the participants' representations align with the stereotype of the father as a strong, protective figure responsible for the family's safety and well-being.

The narratives also depict the father protecting not only the children but also other family members, such as the mother or grandparents. This broadens the perception of the father's protective role, positioning him as the defender of the family unit as a whole. The portrayal of the father in this protective role may influence how children internalize gender expectations and family relationships.

The results in this category reflect a combination of the persistence of traditional stereotypes and signs of change. While the father figure is still primarily seen as the provider and protector, there are indications of increased participation in caregiving roles and greater equity in family responsibilities. These findings underscore the importance of continuing to explore how children's narratives explore and challenge gender stereotypes.

The Heart of the Family:

The centrality of the maternal figure in students' exercises was evident. In the two open-response tasks, the mother was the most mentioned character, with over 80% of participants associating her with household activities. This finding reflects the persistence of the stereotype that positions the mother as the primary household caretaker,

reinforcing the traditional division of gender roles within the domestic sphere. According to Hochschild and Machung (2012), women's "second shift" at home remains a significant burden, as demonstrated by children's perceptions.

Regarding childcare, the maternal figure was mentioned by approximately 70% of students, consolidating her role as the main family caretaker. This pattern illustrates how children internalize childcare as a predominantly female responsibility, reaffirming the deeply ingrained cultural norm that positions the mother as the caregiver (Park *et al.*, 2010). Only 10% of students mentioned the mother in contexts outside the home, such as paid work or recreational activities. This finding underscores how gender representations still confine the mother figure to the domestic sphere, exposing a traditional view that limits recognition of women's participation in public and work spheres (Gerson, 2010).

The narratives from the third exercise also strengthen this view of the mother through traditional stereotypes and roles. In most stories, the mother appears interacting with her children, either taking care of them or giving instructions. This pattern reinforces the perception of the mother as the emotional and functional center of the home, a figure who supports and organizes family life from within. However, although the mother appears more frequently in narratives than the father (almost 45% of the stories compared to less than 30% for the father), her role tends to be more secondary. This suggests that, while the mother is omnipresent in the family environment, her presence is seen more in terms of a support character rather than a central figure in conflict resolution or active roles.

The mother's secondary role in the narratives could indicate an early internalization of gender roles that position men as primary figures in decision-making and protection, while women are seen as caretakers and sustainers of the home. This gender-based division not only limits women's opportunities but also shapes how future generations understand power and responsibility dynamics within the

family (Martin & Halverson, 1983). This perspective aligns with gender roles that relegate women to support rather than leadership roles. Thus, the results show a persistence of traditional stereotypes regarding the mother's role. Despite social changes, the maternal figure is still predominantly seen as the caregiver and organizer of the household, with limited representation in activities outside this sphere.

Playmates:

The participants' tasks reveal an interesting pattern in the perception of siblings and cousins. In the two open-response exercises, these family members appear less frequently than parents, being mentioned by only about 35% of participants. This difference suggests that, although siblings and cousins are part of the family environment, their role is perceived more in the context of social and recreational interaction rather than the functional structure of the household.

Peer relatives are mentioned in recreational or youth-related activities, such as doing homework or attending school. This points out their role as generational companions with whom children share daily experiences and age-appropriate activities. According to Dunn (2015), sibling relationships are essential for children's social and emotional development, providing a space to explore friendship, cooperation, and conflict.

Less than 15% of participants include siblings or cousins in the context of household activities, and when they do, they refer to tasks that benefit themselves, such as "my sister washed her clothes." Notably, in these cases, girls are mentioned more frequently, which may reflect an early internalization of gender stereotypes that assign domestic roles to females, even among the youngest. Thus, it can be observed that gender differences in the assignment of household chores are visible from childhood and are influenced by social and family expectations (Delfin-Ruiz *et al.*, 2021).

In the narratives of the third exercise, young family members emerge as the main protagonists. They

become adventure companions, allies in exploring the world and finding creative solutions to problems. Kramer *et al.* (2019) indicate that sibling relationships are a “laboratory” for developing essential social skills, such as negotiation, compromise, and empathy. The focus on friendship and the cleverness of siblings and cousins underscores the importance of these relationships in the development of social skills and problem-solving abilities.

In contrast, approximately 40% of students who included peer relatives in their narratives presented them as antagonists or as the ones who initiate conflict. This could indicate that, although siblings and cousins are seen as allies, they are also perceived as competitors within the family setting. Sibling conflict is a normal aspect of development and can be an opportunity to learn how to manage disagreements and interpersonal tensions (Borairi *et al.*, 2022). These dynamics are essential for emotional development and identity construction in childhood, providing a space to experiment with different roles and resolve conflicts constructively.

It is interesting to observe how, despite their lesser presence in household activities, peer relatives are central in adventure and conflict narratives. The contrast between their role in recreational activities and their involvement in conflict suggests a complexity in children's perception of family roles that goes beyond traditional stereotypes. These findings emphasize the need to continue exploring how relationships among young relatives contribute to identity formation and family dynamics.

Additional Guardians:

Uncles and grandparents are perceived within the family context as extensions of parental roles. In the two open-response exercises, less than 20% of the students referred to these family members, showing a tendency to associate men with the father and women with the mother. Grünwald *et al.* (2022) observed that grandparents play a crucial role in providing care and emotional support. Accordingly, participants' work equates the roles and functions of grandparents with those of

parents, influenced by traditional expectations of gender and kinship. This explains why, in most cases, grandmothers and aunts are mentioned in domestic and childcare roles, while grandfathers and uncles are mentioned in work-related contexts.

This category is the least used in the narratives of the third exercise, with only about 10% of students including it. This low representation may indicate that uncles and grandparents are not perceived as main figures in children's everyday lives, at least not in common situations. Their role in these narratives tends to be one of provision and guidance, exposing a traditional function in line with their age as authority figures within the family.

The results show how uncles and grandparents hold secondary roles within children's narratives, as extensions of the parents. This situation can be explained by family dynamics in urban and semi-urban sociocultural contexts, where external family support is necessary, especially when both parents work. Although their representation is lower compared to other family members, their role as caregivers and guides remains important, reflecting the continuity of traditional gender and kinship roles in children's perceptions.

Discussion:

Family roles play a crucial role in the construction of gender identity in children, as they provide the first models of behavior and gender expectations. Parents, in particular, influence children's gender attitudes by modeling and reinforcing traditional roles through their daily interactions (Viveros, 2010). As revealed by the results of this study, the roles of mother and father still adhere most evidently to traditional norms. The mother is predominantly seen as the caregiver and household manager, while the father is associated with the role of provider and protector. This distribution of roles reflects early gender socialization, where children learn to categorize responsibilities and behaviors based on gender.

Although the results show a strong persistence of traditional gender roles, some signs of change are also emerging. While still limited, fathers are

beginning to appear in domestic activities, such as caring for children or performing household tasks. This suggests a growing acceptance of their participation in roles traditionally associated with women. This shift reflects a gradual recognition of active fatherhood (Cabrera, Volling & Barr, 2018), where fathers are seen not only as providers but also as involved caregivers.

The representation of mothers in work-related activities is less frequent than that of fathers in domestic roles; only a small percentage of the narratives include mothers in roles outside the home. This indicates greater resistance to challenging female stereotypes, despite the fact that, in urban contexts, women's participation in various labor spheres is common. Although women have achieved higher levels of workforce participation, the cultural perception of their primary role as caregivers continues to limit their representation in children's minds. For this reason, it is evident that cultural and social expectations still impose significant barriers to the full integration of women into the labor market.

Gender-differentiated socialization is an ongoing process that begins at home and is reinforced by culture and social institutions (Skinner & McHale, 2022). Thus, the persistence of these traditional roles can be explained by the continuity of cultural norms and social expectations that still assign distinct responsibilities to men and women within the household. This dichotomy not only reinforces gender stereotypes but also limits flexibility in children's gender identity construction, steering them toward specific behaviors and aspirations based on their gender.

In contrast, peer relatives such as siblings and cousins play more diverse roles. Stamson (2024) argues that fictional narratives can reflect not only children's real experiences but also their aspirations and internal conflicts regarding gender norms. In children's narratives, people of similar age are portrayed as playmates and adventure companions, reflecting a more horizontal relationship less structured by traditional gender roles. This offers

children a space to explore and negotiate their gender identities in a more flexible context.

On the other hand, older family members, such as grandparents and uncles, are often presented as extensions of parents. Their role in students' work is primarily one of support, acting as secondary caregivers or guiding figures. Barnett & Connidis (2019) emphasize that grandparents, in particular, are seen as custodians of family traditions and cultural norms. This function reinforces the continuity of traditional roles, as grandparents and uncles tend to perpetuate established family norms and values.

It is important to mention that, while mothers and fathers are the most frequently referenced figures in the open exercises, siblings and cousins appear more often in the narratives. This difference suggests that, while parental roles are perceived as more structured and defined, relationships with peers offer a more dynamic and less rigid space for gender identity exploration.

The greater frequency of peer relatives in the narratives indicates that children view these family members as opportunities to explore gender roles and dynamics more freely and creatively. This flexibility in representation can be crucial for developing a more balanced and less restrictive gender identity. Dunn (2015) emphasizes that sibling relationships are essential for social development, providing an environment where children can experiment with roles and behaviors outside the rigid expectations imposed by adults. This underscores the importance of considering not only parental influences but also peer interactions in analyzing gender socialization.

Peer relationships are a vital space for children to experiment with and negotiate gender expectations, away from direct adult supervision (Golshirazian *et al.*, 2015). The fact that siblings and cousins are used more frequently in the narratives may also reflect children's desire to construct a gender identity more aligned with their own experiences and relationships. These relationships allow children to negotiate and redefine gender norms in a less hierarchical environment.

Conclusions:

Family roles remain a cornerstone in the construction of gender identity in younger generations (Viveros, 2010; Lamb & Lewis, 2013). The family serves as the primary agent of socialization, playing a key role in the transmission of stereotypes. Children internalize gender roles through parental figures, whose representation is strongly tied to traditional elements. Mothers are predominantly seen as caregivers and household organizers, while fathers are perceived as providers and protectors, revealing a pronounced gender divide.

However, certain elements suggest gradual changes in gender perspectives. The emerging participation of fathers in domestic activities indicates a shift in the paternal role and an internalization of their role as caregivers. This evolution is less apparent in the representation of mothers, who are less frequently associated with the workforce, with most of their interactions occurring within the home. This highlights persistent barriers in the perception of their role outside the household and in alternative roles.

Older family members, such as grandparents and uncles, are primarily seen as extensions of parental roles, reinforcing traditional gender norms. Conversely, the roles of siblings and cousins—peer relatives—stand out for being less rigid and more diverse, especially in recreational contexts and outside the home. In this way, young family members offer children a space to explore more flexible gender identities, less conditioned by adult expectations.

Interestingly, while parental roles are the most mentioned in open-response exercises, siblings and cousins appear more frequently in participants' narratives. This difference suggests that parental roles are perceived as structured figures, whereas peers are viewed as providing a more open space for gender identity expression and experimentation.

Despite some shifts toward a culture of gender equity, the persistence of traditional gender roles in

family representations indicates that changes in gender perspectives are gradual and still constrained by cultural and social expectations. This situation not only limits flexibility in gender expectations but also reinforces the dichotomy of masculine and feminine roles that continues to prevail in society. This underscores the need for educational interventions that promote a more equitable view of gender roles, facilitating childhood development that allows for more authentic and liberated exploration of gender identities.

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