The Development of The Distinction Between The Gender’s Appearance and Reality: A Study on Romanian Preschoolers

Rodica Tocu*

“Dunarea de Jos” University of Galati, Garii Street, 63-65, 800003, Galați, Romania

Abstract

The present study concerns the process of forming and developing the gender identity at preschool age children in Romania through the investigation of gender identity particularities related to the ability of children to distinguish between the appearance and reality of the gender (AR). 261 children aged 2;8 to 6;11 years have been tested in two categories of AR gender tasks: the reality of the gender (“what really is”) and the appearance of the gender (“what it looks like”). Depending on the promoting or non-promoting of the tasks, children were grouped as "gender-realist" vs. "gender-nonrealist". The study emphasized that the development of the ability of appearance-reality gender (AR) distinction is not related to the gender of the subjects and that, with the increase in age, more and more children acquire the ability to differentiate real gender from the apparent one. It has been observed that participants made more fenomenism errors compared to those of the realism, illustrating a decrease in the frequency of occurrence, with the subjects’ increase in age, only in the case of the fenomenism error. Referring to the ability of AR gender distinction, the influence of the age upon its development was evidenced by the increase of the comprehension level, along with the age of the children, of their own affiliation and of the others’ to a particular category of the gender, of the invariable character of the gender, regardless of the situation or the activity the individual is involved in.

Keywords: gender identity, appearance-reality gender distinction, gender consistency

1. Introduction

The development of the ability to differentiate between the apparent gender and the real one is related with the concept of gender consistency from the theory of gender’s cognitive development (Kohlberg, 1966), both concepts...
illustrating, in fact, the child's ability to capture and understand the invariable character of the gender, regardless of the tasks or situations in which the individual is involved. According to Kohlberg’s theory, “gender consistency” is characteristic to children aged 4½ and 7 years old or even more. The child’s level of knowledge and understanding is much more developed, reason to which he notices the gender’s invariance despite the changes in the look and/or the activities developed, so he can appreciate in a correct and complete way the permanence of the gender over the time and situations (Banerjee, 2005 p. 160). Kohlberg stated that "the child’s gender identity may be a stable organizer of psychosexual attitudes of the child only when he is absolutely sure about his unchangebility” (Kohlberg, 1966, p.95), this aspect is possible only after the age of about 6 years old when children begin to appreciate themselves as unalterable from the point of view of the gender development. Only then they will present a consistent behavior appropriate to the gender category to which they belong (Birch, 2000; Beal, 1989, p.226). Trautner’s (2003) and Kenyon’s (1994) studies have proved that the appearance–reality distinction (intensively studied by Flavell, 1983) is related to the understanding of the gender’s invariable character, similar mechanisms is being relating to experiencing and to perception of gender’s (superficial) changing under certain conditions.

2. Methodology

The present study concerns the process of forming and developing the gender identity at preschool age children in Romania through the investigation of gender identity particularities related to the ability of children to distinguish between the appearance and reality of the gender (AR). The hypothesis of the research consisted of: the level of the development of the ability to differentiate between the apparent and real gender is dependent upon the age of the participants. The research was attended by 261 children aged between 2 years, 8 months old and 6 years, 11 months old with an average age of 60.69 months (SD = 13.58): 128 girls (m = 60.20, st.dev. = 13.56), 133 boys (m = 61.20, st.dev. = 13.64) from the kindergartens in Romania The test developed to assess this concept was adapted according to the procedures of the appearance-reality distinction paradigm (Abelev & Markman, 2006; Flavell et al., 1983). The gender’s apparence-reality test (ARG; Kenyon, 1994) contains two sets of colour photos sized 10 x 15 cm which present two children of about the same age, a boy who is dressed with feminine gender specific clothes and a girl who is dressed with male gender-specific clothes. The tasks highlights the reality of the gender („what is true”) and the appearance of the gender („what it looks like”), a question being addressed about the perception of similarity (identity) among the children with proper gender specific clothes and the ones with the opposite gender’s specific clothes. The participant has accomplished his task if he answered correctly the two questions regarding the appearance and the reality for each item-category (boy or girl). The maximum score that can be achieved is 6 points. There will also be analyzed the types of errors that can a child make, answering the test’s questions: the realism’s error and the fenomenism’s error. The fenomenism’s error is due to offering some answers based on the appearance at the questions related to the reality (e.g. “the boy looks like a girl and he really is a girl”), while the answers based on the reality at the questions which search to highlight the appearance (e.g. “the boy really looks like a boy and he really is a boy”) the questions are part of the realism. Both errors can occur in the same set of photos, or separately.

3. Results

According to the study carried out by Kenyon (1994) the level of development of the ability to distinguish between the gender’s appearance and reality will be assessed through the performance obtained at ARG test’s tasks and analyzed from four perspectives: individual photos, combining photographs, the errors’ pattern and the similarity’s pattern, each of them offering different information about this dimension of gender identity. The coefficient α = .74 of internal consistency achieved for ARG test represents a significant value from a statistical point of view.

- **Combining photographs.** For a participant to pass one of the two stages of the ARG test he must answer correctly to the questions relating to gender’s appearance (how the child in the photo looks like) and to the gender’s reality (what the child in the picture really is). The results obtained by the participants shows a rather high difficulty of this test, the frequency average in point of test passing being very low. Only 7.8 % of children aged 3 years old, 34. 4% of those aged 4 years old, 50.7 % of those aged 5 years old and 54. 4% of the participants aged 6 years old have succeeded to give a correct answer to both tasks, a rising trend
of the test passing can be observed with increasing the children’s age. Comparing the four age groups in terms of passing the ARG test, significant differences were highlighted $\chi^2 (3) = 44.495, p < .005$, of those who passed the test only 5.6% being aged 3 years old, 20.6% being subjects aged 4 years, 33.6% of children were aged 5 years old and 40.2%, 6 years old. The upward trend of the children’s performances indicates that, with the increase in age, more and more children acquire the ability to differentiate between the apparent gender and the real one, proving thus, the understanding of the character’s invariable gender, regardless of the changes that occur at the level of the superficial appearance of another child. By investigating the relationship between the participants’ gender and the number of children that have passed and those who have not passed the test, we can notice that only 33.3% of boys and 40.4% of girls have succeeded to respond adequately to the questions of the ARG test, between the number of male subjects who passed the ARG test and the number of subjects of female gender who offered correct answers was not found any statistically significant difference, $\chi^2 (1) = 1.282, p = .257$. Developing the capacity of differentiation between the apparent gender and the real one is not related to the subjects’ gender, the concept of the gender’s situational conservation being understood and treated as such irrespective of the gender category which the children belong to.

- **Individual photos.** The ARG test contains two item-categories represented by the photos of two children of different gender, the participants’ task being to identify their real or apparent gender based on certain visual indicators. The separate analysis of these items provided information about the presence of a difference relating to the understanding of the gender’s invariable character, depending on the nature of the stimulus presented (masculine/feminine). The individual analysis of the answers did not reveal statistically significant differences, for the boy dressed in a girl’s clothing obtaining a value $\chi^2 (1) = 0, p = .989$, while for the girl dressed in a boy’s clothing the value was $\chi^2 (1) = 3.564, p = .059$. This result, together with the previously obtained one in the overall assessment of the ARG test passage, suggests the absence of the influences of the "character-sex stimuli" factor about the development level of the ability to differentiate between the apparent gender and the real one, assessed by the ARG test rating. As in the case of the combined analysis of the photos, in this situation the influence of age factor upon the level of understanding of the gender’s situational invariability character was assessed as well, observing that at the boy-item 16.9% of the children aged 3 years old, 43.8% of those aged 4 years old, 62% of those aged 5 years old and 60.8% of those aged 6 years old answered correctly to the ARG test’s questions. For the category formed by the girl’s dressed in a little boy’s clothing, the rating percentages depending on the age were 14.3%, 40.6%, 62% and 60.8%. The assessment of the statistical significance of the difference between the number of subjects who have passed the two parts of the ARG test according to their age confirmed, as in the case of the combined analysis of the two items, the age effect on the rate of success in solving the ARG test. The upward trend, according to age, the frequency of answers which highlight the formation and the development of the ability to differentiate between the apparent gender and the real one is reflected by the significant differences in terms of statistics between the four age categories (for the boy dressed in a girl’s clothing item: $\chi^2 (3) = 46.115, p < .005$, for the girl dressed in a boy’s clothing item: $\chi^2 (3) = 40.660, p < .005$).

- **The error analysis.** In solving the ARG test, children can make two types of errors: of realism or of fenomenism. With regard to the two types of errors, there may be three situations in which they may be made: a type of error to either a single item or both items, or the both errors, the emergence of each of them being related to an item. In general, the results were presented only to confirm the presence of errors (the child has realized fenomenism error and/or realism error) without recording their number, the second situation is taken into account only to investigate the differences related to the type of item. At a quick analysis of the data noted that subjects have made a bigger number of fenomenism errors (126, representing 75% of the total number of errors made by children) compared to those of realism (42, representing 25% of the total number of errors made by children). The ARG test seeks to highlight the development of a specific dimension of children’s gender identity, i.e. the ability to capture and to understand the difference between the apparent and real gender by understanding the invariable character of the gender depending on the circumstances, the failure of the tasks being mainly due to the occurrence of fenomenism error, according
to which children believe that changing the appearance of a child determine a gender modification. The error of fenomenism can be identified in the case of 62.3% of the children aged 3 years old, 42.2% of those aged 4 years old, 39.4% of those aged 5 years old and 29.1% of those aged 6 years old, in this case it can be seen a decrease in the frequency of occurrence of this error with the increase in the age of the subjects, the statistical results highlighting the existence of a significant difference among the four age periods, $\chi^2 (3) = 18.307$, $p < .005$. Although the data obtained from testing the children have shown a predominant effect of fenomenism error on the results of the subjects at ARG test, however, with the age, the frequency of the fenomenism error decreases, the children managing to identify the real gender of a person presented in the picture sequence in terms of changing clothes. This evolution might be due to both normal cognitive developments of the child and of the experiences or situations with which the child comes into contact during his learning experiences. Unlike fenomenism error, the frequency of realism error occurrence has not had a downward trend in point of children’s age, but it is found in the case of 16.9% of children aged 3 years old, 20.3% of those aged 4 years old, 9.9% of the children aged 5 years old and 11.4% of the subjects aged 6 years (figure 4), not being indicated a statistically significant effect of age on the number of realism errors made by the children $\chi^2 (3) = 3.960$, $p = .266$. In the case of the participants in the present research, several fenomenism errors were made, fact pointing the absence of gender situational conservation skills, facing real difficulties of recognizing the real gender in terms of changing his look. As a result of the comparative analysis of the fenomenism and realism errors made by the children according to the type of the presented items (the photo of a boy / the photo of a girl) no significant differences were identified due to this variable, in the case of fenomenism error it was found that 98 (33.7%) of the subjects have made this error in the male gender and 99 (34.0%) at the female gender, while the error was detected at realism 32 (11.0%) respectively 34 (11.7%) of the screened children. The items, by means of the person’s gender shown in the photos, have not influenced the number of errors made by participants at the ARG test. The study of the relationship between the subjects’ gender and the type of error made by them has not shown the presence of significant differences, the fenomenism error being highlighted at 67 (44.7%) of male participants and 59 (41.8%) of female ones, in the case of 19 (12.7%), and 23 (16.3%) remarking realism errors. As it can be seen, the incidence of errors, regardless of their nature, it is not influenced by the participants’ gender in this study, this observation being confirmed by statistical analysis ($\chi^2$ fen (1) = .135, $p = .713; \chi^2$ real (1) = .515, $p = .473$).

- **The similarity pattern.** This dimension of the ARG test emphasizes the idea of recognizing the appearance transformation of the individual's image and the gender’s invariability along the circumstances. Although the ARG test passing is not related, in terms of score calculation, with questions concerning the similarity between the child shown in the first photo and the one presented in the last photo, what it is particularly important is the analysis of children's response to this task. Thus, of the 107 subjects who passed the ARG test only 45 (42.1%) answered correctly, identifying the boy dressed in clothes appropriate to his gender with the boy dressed in a girl’s clothes and the little girl dressed in clothes appropriate to her gender with one wearing boy’s clothing, while 62 (57.9%) have failed to observe the relationship of identity between the two. By analyzing the answers to the question concerning the similarity from the two gender categories’ perspective, it can be highlighted the fact that only 20 boys (13.3%) and 25 girls (17.7%) answered correctly, recognizing the children’s gender from the stimuli presented in the test. The influence of age on the answers provided by the ARG test subjects can be observed in the analysis of the answers to the question about the identity relationship of the children present in the photos of the same item. Although this question is not the object of the previous research, however the results are important viewed from the perspective of identifying the gender in the conditions of its (superficial) transformation. The rate of success at this task from the perspective of the four age categories, 3, 4, 5 and 6 years old, a growth is outlined from 2.6% for children aged from 3 to 12 years old, 5% of those aged 4 years old, to 21.1% of the children aged 5 years old, pointing to 25.3% of all subjects aged 6 years old, a statistically significant difference being identified between the number of subjects who passed the test and those who have not provided a correct answer, according to their age $\chi^2 (3) = 17.789$, $p < .005$).
3. Discussion

The influence of age on the development of the ability to distinguish between the apparent and real gender was stressed by increasing the level of comprehension, with the age of the children, by their own belonging and of the others to a single gender category, by the invariably character of the gender, no matter what is the situation or activity in which the individual is involved. The invariable character of the gender according to the situations is noticed and understood, in the circumstances in which the cognitive development allows that, and in the situation of presenting a sequential real transformation, even at the age of 3 years old. However, it was only after 5 years the ability to differentiate between the apparent and real gender can be noted at most tested children. This dimension of gender identity is independent both of the participant’s gender and of the stimulus-person’s gender as well, the transformation of the superficial appearance (clothing, hair, accessories, and toys) of a boy or a girl is not perceived differently by children. In the case of the participants in the present research, several fenomenism errors were made, fact pointing the absence of gender situational conservation skills, facing real difficulties of recognizing the real gender in terms of changing his look. The absence of significant differences in terms of incidence of errors made by the participants of female and male gender, suggests a similar evolution of the concept of situational conservation of the gender in the case of the two genders. Even by using a concrete perceivable visual support, most children who have passed the ARG test failed to answer correctly to this question. Although they identified the person in the photos-items, however they failed to establish the identity relationship between a child dressed accordingly to his gender and the other wearing clothing appropriate to the opposite gender.

References