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Perceptions of Gender Stereotypes amongst Chinese Children in Middle Childhood: A

Qualitative Study

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### **Abstract**

Gender stereotypes have been a popular topic since our childhood but little has been done regarding how Chinese children in their middle childhood differentiate and represent gender. The current study explored the perceptions of gender stereotypes among middle childhood children from age 9 to 12 years of both genders through the implementation of autobiographical and narrative approach. The central question for this study is: How do children in middle-childhood perceive gender-role stereotypes and schemas in a Chinese socio-cultural context? Eight participants were recruited and semi-structured interviews and the Collage Life-story Elicitation Technique (CLET; Van Schalkwyk, 2013) were used for data collection. A post-structural framework and thematic analysis was used for the interpretation. In both the collage and narratives, children represented the genders as a binary opposition between “boys-related characteristics” and “girls-related features.” There is also a tendency of objectifying of girls, while boys are represented in a more personalised manner. The current study confirmed that gender stereotypes developed early in children’s childhood and that family and the media tend to perpetuate gender differences rather than equality throughout childhood.

## Introduction

Multifarious parts of humans' life are influenced by the differentiation of gender roles. At some points in our life, we may ask ourselves questions about what the specific gender roles are that we must adhere to, or what is the consequence if one breaches the gender stereotypes prescribed by the socio-cultural context. Previous studies have shown that children are already aware of gender differences in toy and activity preferences as early as 3 years old (Tobin et al., 2010). These featured sex-role stereotypes are acquired through children's interactions with the surrounding environment and the social context constantly contributing to the overall development of their gender identities.

The acquisition and perceptions of culturally constructed sex-role stereotypes, along with the subsequent development of gender identity, plays a role in children's overall growth and development. Previous research has shown that there is a relationship between gender identity development and children's self-esteem (e.g., Mclean & Breen, 2009; Weeks & Pasupathi, 2010). Egan and Perry (2001) also posed that the pressure of gender conformity may be harmful to children. Different western researches have investigated the topics of gender stereotypes in a western setting. However, the western theories (e.g., Multifactorial gender theory) may not be applicable in a Chinese setting. In addition, although there are some studies investigating the descriptive nature of the gender issues in Chinese settings such as Hong Kong and Beijing (e.g., Lobel, David, Grueber, Lau, & Bat-tal, 2000; Knobloch, Callison, Chen, Fritzsche & Zillmann, 2005), they mostly adopted a quantitative method and reported simple gender differences without further exploring the perceptions of children's gender stereotypes or adopting a theoretical framework in the interpretation (Cheung, 1996).

Therefore, the current study aimed to explore the perception of gender stereotypes because it will be beneficial for children who have problems in getting accustomed to their gender roles and have a low self-esteem accordingly. Besides, the implementation of a

narrative approach in this study, rather than the quantitative methods as in most previous research, will provide some new insights in the process. Consequently, the present study hopes to fill the gap of the relative few studies in investigating how children perceive gender stereotypes in middle childhood in a Chinese setting.

The current study intends to explore and describe the perceptions of sex-role stereotypes among middle childhood children from age 9 to 12 years of both genders through the implementation of autobiographical and narrative approach. The central question for this study is: How do children in middle-childhood perceive gender-role stereotypes and schemas in a Chinese socio-cultural context? Specifically, the study explored how the middle-childhood children perceive their gender-role stereotypes through the interaction with the environment and society. For example, are there any central themes emerged in children's perceptions of different genders? What social-cultural influences are evident in the development of gender stereotypes in childhood? What role does family play in the development of sex-role stereotypes?

### **Literature review**

Being the central concepts in this research, it is essential to distinguish between gender stereotypes and gender identity. On one hand, researchers define gender stereotypes as the culturally constructed traits that traditionally link to maleness or femaleness (Tobin et al., 2010). Gender identity, on the other hand, refers to a more general concept. Tobin et al. (2010) described it as the evaluations of one person clearly defining one's thoughts about his or her belongingness to one gender category. In the current study, the focus is on children's perception of gender stereotypes in middle childhood instead of the development of the gender identity.

Theorists viewed the development of gender identity in middle childhood as a progressive process. Most researchers observed that children's gender differentiated

behaviors began to appear at around 2 years of age or sooner (e.g., Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002). Gradually children began to understand gender labeling, nonverbal gender identity, gender-typed behaviors and so on. In addition, according to multi-factorial gender theory (Tobin et al., 2010), multiple factors such as social and cognitive ones will influence children's acquisition and perception of gender stereotypes. For instance, in one of the research that explored the relationship between gender stereotypes' development and family characteristics, Weinraub et al. (1984) found out that mothers' employment, fathers' personality attitudes toward women, and sex-typed activities in the home were predictors of sex-role developments.

There are two additional phenomena that are particular interesting. At first, some research suggests an in-group/ out-group bias among children, which means that children have more positive feelings toward their own sex and negative attitude toward the opposite sex (Martin & Ruble, 2010), although the out-group negativity remains to be controversial. Secondly, some researches drew on the issue of children's perception of gender inequality and they found out "a notable increase between 7 and 15 years of age in beliefs that males are granted more power and respect than females" (Neff, Cooper, & Woodruff, 2007, pp. 682).

One of the most recent frameworks considering the construction of people's identities is the social constructionist theory. Unlike the other theories, social constructionism views the development of gender stereotypes and gender identity as a more dynamic and flexible process. These researchers argue that identity is constructed through the constant interaction between individuals and the different groups of people they encounter (Volman & Dam, 1998). A social constructionist approach considers gender as a layered concept: it is not only a domain of individual identity, but also of "symbolic constructions and a dimension of social relations" (Volman & Dam, 1998, pp. 532). As a result, the concepts of feminine and masculine are historical and cultural specific definitions, in other words, a social construction

that is subject to change and conflicts (Volman & Dam, 1998).

In addition, Gergen (1985), in particular, emphasized the central role of language discourses in the development of gender stereotypes. In traditional personality theories like psychoanalysis, they believed that our experience and understanding of ourselves originate from our emotions and internal drives. However, social constructionist viewed that our internal experiences and consciousness are structured by the languages we use (Burr, 2003). The way that people talk about themselves and the world determines their experiences. What's more, languages and discourses have an impact on people's social actions. In other words, "how we describe ourselves, other people, and events have consequences on our action, either as individuals, or societies" (Burr, 2003, p. 62). To conclude, this framework underscores the dynamic processes among different elements and highlights the crucial role of language in the development of gender stereotypes.

Based on the previous theories of gender stereotypes (e.g. gender schema theory), a theoretical framework, which combines Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and the social constructionism were developed in order to facilitate the study. Particularly, it includes several dimensions. At first, within the microsystem, the interaction between the children and family, school, was examined. At this level, processes that involve parents and peers' behaviors, languages, and their attitudes toward gender issues may have a direct effect on the development of children's gender stereotypes. Secondly, the influence of the exosystem and macrosystem on the formation of gender stereotypes was researched. For example, the prescribed cultural norms and media may draw a crucial role in this process. To summarize, through the adoption of this theoretical model, the current research explored the development of children's gender stereotypes by investigating the interactive and dynamic relationship between the children and their surrounding environment.



## Method

The current study explored the development of gender stereotypes in middle childhood by utilizing an autobiographical and narrative approach and the Collage Life-story Elicitation Technique (CLET; Van Schalkwyk, 2013) for data collection. The CLET is especially helpful in scaffolding participants' recollection of their autobiography memory because experiences are rendered meaningful, interweaving cognitive, affective changes with psychosocial consequences to present our identities (Van Schalkwyk, 2010). Furthermore, the narrative approach fits well with the framework of social constructionism because theorists have suggested that language and storytelling provide understanding about the dynamic interaction within the individual and between the individual and his or her micro- and macro-environment (McLean & Pasupathi, 2010, p. xxiii). Therefore, the narrative approach and the CLET allowed for the exploration of the dynamic process of children's perceptions' of gender stereotypes

## Participants

The target group of the current study is children from middle childhood. The goal of a qualitative research is not to make generalizations, but to get insights into a phenomenon or people's lived experiences (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Therefore, the current study used the non-probability purposive sampling strategy to recruit eight children whose ages ranged from 7 to 12 years old ( $M = 9.75$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ) including four male and four female children. The participants all have Chinese ethnicity and speak Mandarin as their native language, and no one had any diagnosis of mental disorder.

Considering the easiness of communication through native language and familiarity with the cultural setting, I used the snowball technique to recruit participants in Beijing, China. Specifically, I found children in a primary school by asking teachers I know in this school to help me to recruit the prospective participants. Subsequent to identifying



participants, parents were informed about the research and the CLET approach, and only participants for whom I have obtained written parental consent were included. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis process, and the parents and participants were assured of their privacy rights. Debriefing was provided after each interview in case of the child experiences conflicts or distress that may result from her or his participation.

Most of the participants are still in Grade 3 in primary school at the time when they participated in the interviews. In their daily life, they enjoy taking part in activities such as drawing, playing games, travelling, and so on. In terms of their family structure, five of them live with their parents and grandparents while two (Dianne and Andy) of them live with their parents. Leslie lives with his father only. Living with both parents and grandparents is a very unique phenomenon in China. Normally, the three generations will live together and take care of each other. For example, during the interview, Ben said that he enjoyed living with both his parents and grandparents although the house is only about 40 square meters. The phenomenon of intergenerational coresidence is part of Chinese culture and “adult children in East Asia are expected to take care of their aging parents by living together” (Yasuda, Iwai, Yi, & Xie, 2011). With regards to Ben, who comes from single-parent family, his mother went abroad so he lives with his father now. Also, he keeps good relationship with his uncle, who referred him for the interview.

### **Data collection**

Because the current study explored the perceptions of gender stereotypes among children (aged 9 to 12), I used a semi-structured interview and the Collage Life-story Elicitation Technique (CLET; Van Schalkwyk, 2013) for data collection. After making appointment with each participant, I conducted the interviews in a room that was quiet and separate. Voice recording was used throughout the interview. The CLET comprises five

sequential steps including collage making (step 1), “storytelling” (step 2), positioning of the dialogical self (step 3), juxtaposition (step 4), and self-reflection (step 5). In the first step (collage making), participants were required to create their own life stories by answering questions like “How does this picture tell a story about girls and boys?” They used around 10 to 12 pictures cut from a selection of magazines provided. The magazines were collected from local shops. Considering the target population, comic books were chosen to tailor to their interests. In addition, fashion magazines and sports magazines were chosen because they contain typical gender stereotype images. Similar materials were distributed to all the participants to ensure the sufficient scope of selection of pictures (5 magazines for each child).

After making the collage, the individual narrated stories about each image. Images on the collage were numbered consecutively in order to facilitate later interpretation. The children were asked several questions during the interviews (e.g., How does this image tell a story about girls and boys?). The autobiographical remembering continued by asking the participant to put him/herself in the collage at a specific spot and then explain the reason why he/she choose the specific spot. The next step (Juxtaposition) required the participants to select two pictures with similar meanings and one picture with an opposing meaning as well as give their reasons for the differences and similarities. Finally, the individual was asked to reflect on the whole process of the collage making and add further information that she or he thought were relevant to the topic.

### **Reflexivity**

Being a researcher who wants to investigate gender stereotypes, I tried to adopt a critical reflective position when conducting the interviews. Several factors were considered in order to minimize the potential biases. At first, being in the position of an “adult” and “researcher”, I was playing an authoritative role in the process. This may bring an effect on the children because they may be less open because of my higher position in the power

relationship. Also, being a female, I may encounter the difficulties when interviewing a male child. The boy may feel uncomfortable to talk to an opposite sex especially for some specific topics. In order to avoid this possible effect, I built rapport with the child at the beginning and made them feel that they can talk freely to me.

### **Interpretation of data**

The whole interview was transcribed into Chinese first and then translated into English. In order to make sure that the translation was close enough to the original words, two independent collaborators who are proficient both in English and Chinese were asked to do the checking. The collaborators agreed that the translations were, for the most part, consistent with the Chinese transcriptions despite challenges in finding appropriate English words for some of the Chinese concepts.

The CLET data were summarized into a single-case template consisting of three embedded units of analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Van Schalkwyk, 2013), namely, the collage, the stories, and the story gird. The analysis of each protocol proceeded according to three phases. The first phase involved the coding of the non-verbal collage while bracketing the verbal narratives. Specifically, the collages were analyzed according to several categories, namely, the nature of the images, the proximity, the narrative tone, the construction, coherence, and self-positioning. In terms of the nature of images, because they usually have symbolic meanings that will reflect children's perceptions of gender stereotypes, several catalogues such as human characters, settings and events, objects were created and those that contained gender-related meaning were specified. Proximity reflected the overall sense of self perceived closeness to either human-related or object-related images through calculating the percentage of pictures that related to humans (1= all are human-related images, 0= all are object-related pictures). Narrative tone referred to the overall emotional content for narrative part will be evaluated (0= neutral emotive tone, 1= positive narrative tone, 2= negative

narrative tone). Construction was defined as the overall sense of structure in the collage depicting the underlying cognitive organization of the child in which 1 represents chronological narratives and 2 represents ambiguous narratives. Finally, coherence referred to the overall sense that the images were related to the topic will be measured (1= related to the topic, 2= unrelated to the topic).

The second phase involved analysis of the verbal micro-narratives. Because the thematic analysis in qualitative research is a subjective process that involves complexities of data collection and different perspectives, trustworthy trustworthiness and credibility should be ensured (Van Schalkwyk, 2010). Therefore, two collaborators and I finished the analysis independently. After the initial analysis, we discussed the interpretations and only codes/themes on which we reach consensus were included in this final report. In this phase, we considered things like the “substance of the individual’s stories, the meanings of the stories, and the symbolic meanings and metaphors embedded in the narratives. Finally, in order to create the story grid, we read the texts and figure out the symbolic meanings of the words, adjectives, and description terms. Particularly, the positioning of self was analyzed through using the representation of self.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The research aimed to investigate how children from 9 to 12 years old perceived gender stereotypes through utilization of the Collage Life-story Elicitation Technique (CLET; Van Schalkwyk, 2013). The CLET utilized in the current research proved to be especially useful because children’s perceptions appeared “in relation to the multiple voices of the social and the private self” (Van Schalkwyk, 2013, p. 420), which facilitated our understanding of how children perceive gender stereotypes in their middle childhood. After analyzing both the collages as well as the narratives of the eight participants, several central themes emerge.

Before analyzing at participants' collages and verbal stories, it is very intriguing to first look at how children behaved in the interviews. For example, Sarah was relatively talkative during the interview; while Lily and Dianne were introverted and talked less during the interview. I still remembered the time when I had the interview with Dianne. She seemed to be afraid of talking to me at first. She sat nervously in the chair and talked in a low voice. I tried to make her relaxed by explaining to her the whole process in details. Later in the interview, she was less reticent and represented her stories more vividly. Boys, in general, loved the collage-making and were more open during the interview process. Except for Leslie who was reluctant to talk much, all the other three boys enjoyed the process. Compared to the girls, boys were much more relaxed and sat in a casual way. Also, they were willing to chat with me while making the collage. Especially, Andy loved reading the magazines and cutting many pictures as a result. After the interview, he said to me that it was a very fascinating experience to search for pictures that he liked. Speculating from the eight interviews, the interviewee's ways of behaving may reflect the general gender stereotypes. Girls are expected to be meek and shy while boys should be talkative and active. Not only the children's performance during interviews reflect gender stereotypes, when analyzing their collages, the similar result was found.

### **The collages**

In terms of the collages (Figure 1), children, on average, selected around nine pictures and they included images ranging from human characters to non-human objects. Because of their ages, they tended to select a range of cartoon-related human images such as Mickey Mouse and Japanese figures. In addition, the collages included a range of images that are gender-related. For example, some of them contained objects that bare female characteristics such as beauty products and jewelry. After calculating the proximity of the collage, it seemed that boys have a closer self-to-human relationship (0.77) compared to girls (0.37).



1. Sarah, female, 9 years old



2. Ben, male, 10 years old



3. Lily, female, 10 years old



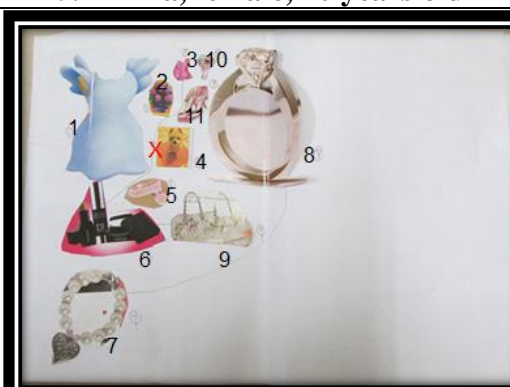
4. Desmond, male, 10 years old



5. Anna, female, 10 years old



6. Andy, male, 7 years old



7. Dianne, female, 10 years old



8. Leslie, male, 12 years old

Figure 1: Collages by girls (left hand column) and collages by boys (right hand column)

Regarding the construction (1.75) of the collages, most children are still in the concrete operational stage. As a result, both of their collages and narratives are random to some extent. Especially, they still lack of the ability to think in an abstract way. For instance, when narrating a story for each of the collages, most of the children randomly chose pictures instead of telling stories in a specific order.

When examining the self-positioning of these eight participants, a general distinction can be found between girls and boys. Ben, Desmond, and Leslie put themselves in the middle of the collages, all next to authoritative male figures. Andy, although putting himself in the relative peripheral area, made the cross in the middle of the castle, which also symbolizes male authority. It seems that the four boys relate themselves to the typical male stereotypes such as power and authority (Figure 1, right hand column). The four girls (Figure 1, left hand column), on the other hand, either put themselves in the peripheral areas or positioned them next to small delicate animals such as a mouse. In a way, they represented the female gender themselves as powerless, subordinate, and in need for protection, which are characteristic female stereotypes in our society. Combining the collages, it seems that, the eight children, as a whole, have relative clear gender stereotypes consistent with theories related with children's development of gender identity in middle childhood. They seemingly understand gender labeling, gender-typed behaviors and especially, they have noticed gender inequality between boys and girls (Neff, Cooper, & Woodruff, 2007).

### **Binary opposition**

A theme emerging in this study is the binary opposition between girls and boys. This binary opposition is not only manifested in their interview performances, but also in their collages as well as stories. To be more specific, there is a distinction between girls' tendency to be external and boys' tendency to be internal. When calculating the collage catalogue of "objects", most of them are related with girls' beauty products, clothes, and jewelry. One of



the extreme examples in the study is Dianne who has 90 percent of her pictures that were related with beauty products. This externalization is not only manifested in the collages, but also in children's narratives. Taking my interview with Anna as an example: (A for Anna, R for researcher)

[Extract 1]

*A: This is cosmetics.*

*R: Why you choose this?*

*A: This symbolizes girls. Girls all like to use them.*

*R: What about you?*

*A: These items also symbolize beautiful girls.*

*R: Do you like to be beautiful?*

*A: Obviously.*

*R: What about girls in your class?*

*A: Yes."*

[Extract 2]

*These are the sunglasses. Girls like to wear them, boys may also wear them, but not so many. Many teachers in our classes like to wear sunglasses. And they usually buy a lot of pairs to wear. Wearing sunglasses can make girls more beautiful.*

In these two extracts, Anna used the word "symbolize" to depict her reason of choosing cosmetics. From her perception, the cosmetics are the symbolization of females and she also repeated the word "beautiful" several times. This is a typical example of how girls in this study turned to associate females with external characteristics such as "beauty".

On the other hand, when boys talked about their perceptions of males, they involved more internal characteristics. Although boys or girls also talked about boys to be handsome, they, in general, emphasized more of boys' internal features. The following is a dialogue between Ben and me (B for Ben, R for researcher)

*"B: I think this is similar to picture 5, he is very elated.*

*R: What you mean is that boys will also be very elated?*

*B: I think in comics, yes.*

*R: What about in real life?*

*B: It is possible. I've seen this from our school. Yeah, during one break, I've heard some sounds and I knew it was the flint. Boys all ran into the toilet and saw it. In fact, the flint could not really set up fire, but only make sounds. All the others were quite surprised and didn't know what it was. The one who held the flint said "you didn't know this? It was the flint."*

Ben used multiple adjectives in this story to describe boys such as “*elated*”, “*surprising*”. The end of the story also indicated boys’ arrogance and self-satisfaction. Comparing to the single adjectives “*beautiful*” for girls, when children described boys, they included more internal and dynamic words for boys. In a way, there is a relative clear distinction between girls “externality” and boys “internality”, no matter is from the collage, or children’s stories.

### **Objectification of females**

Related with the first theme is the general tendency for the participants to objectify females. As discussed earlier, from the proximity of the collage, it can be found that boys have a closer self-to-human relationship (0.77) comparing to girls (0.37). Except for that, girls also tend to be associated more with objects. One extreme example can be found in one boy’s collage. In his four pictures, the boy chose one human-related picture and one internal feature to describe boys while used two objects (cosmetics) to depict girls.

When combining this with the narratives that children have, it seems that girls are objectified to a greater extent that involve beauty products. The following is an extract from Sarah’s narratives: (S for Sarah and R for researcher)

*S: This picture shows that girls like to dress up very much.*

*R: How can you figure out that the girl in the picture likes to dress up?*

*S: Because you can see from her eyes, she dresses up obviously. And also, she has jewelry and she wears lipstick.*

*R: So, do you know how to dress up?*

*S: My older sister always likes to help me to dress up because I like to dress up very much. I can become more beautiful after dressing up.”*

From this extract, it seems that in Sarah’s perceptions, girls are associated only with “*jewelry*” and “*lipstick*”. They are treated as beautiful dolls that need to be “decorated” in order to be beautiful. While boys, in general, have a more human-oriented perception of gender. The following is a story told by Andy: (A for the Andy and R for the researcher)

*A: Because I like boats.*

*R: So do you like to row boats?*

*A: Yes. I like to take the launch very much. I once drove it.*

*R: Is it that your parents take you to play it?*

*A: Yes.*

*R: Are there any other friends around you who also like to play boats?*

*A: Yes. Some boys enjoy this activity. I like to take boats because it makes me feel very fresh, I can eat ice-creams and sleep on the boat."*

In this narrative, Andy explained his experience when he rowed boat with his family. Especially, he mentioned "*it makes me feel very fresh; I can eat ice-creams and sleep on the boat*". Obviously, this is a more personalized description involving human actions and feelings. Similar descriptions can be seen in other boys' stories regarding boys. But in stories related with girls, no matter the narrators' genders, they usually lack of this kind of human characteristics, reducing the female gender to objectified features. To summarize, the gender stereotype of objectifying women is prevalent in the eight participants.

The tendency of female's objectification is not a unique phenomenon in Eastern society. In fact, it had a long history in the western world. In 1997, US psychologists Fredrickson and Roberts declared that there was an objectifying culture prevailing in the US, focusing on the bodies of girls and women through a wide variety of conduits. This external objectification, then, further led to female's self-objectification, in other words, they "come to see their bodies through the eyes of the objectifying gaze, and in doing so their sense of self and ontological security is eroded and replaced by a range of psychological and physical maladies" (Hawkes & Dune, 2013, pp. 626). Other researches such as Fredrickson and Roberts also considered that the objectification facilitate girls passive, objects for another's use and diminished autonomy and subjectivity (Hawkes & Dune, 2013). These previous theories have been proved in the current study. Girls in this study, for most of the time, perceive themselves based on objects and their self-identity, which should consists of more dynamic and multiple facets, is reduced to passive objects. This objectification is particularly evidence when taking boys into consideration also. The relative clear binary opposition between boys personalized and girls' impersonal features reflect this general tendency of

objectification towards females.

In addition, when taking the social constructionist perspective into consideration, the role of our daily languages, especially the gender specific language, adjectives, and representations/ actions is evident in children's perception of gender stereotypes. Language provides us the means through which we talk about others and allow others to talk about us. What's more, our identity is in constant constructing and reconstructing when we involve in the exchange with the surrounding environment. Therefore, when the children talked with their parents about how to be beautiful; when they saw glamorous celebrities endorsed beauty products; when they witnessed how other females behave in an objectified ways, they engage in the communication with others, either through verbal or non-verbal, and this helps them construct their identity of being a "female" or "male". In other words, it is the using of their gendered languages that facilitate children's tendency to objectify females and draw a clear boundary between what is to be a girl or a boy.

### **Mechanisms responsible for children's perception of gender stereotypes**

The current study revealed the mechanisms that facilitate children's perception of gender stereotypes, consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and social constructionism. Basically, children receive information from their family, peers, and media. Family, obviously, is one of the most crucial and fundamental sources for children to develop gender stereotypes. Children may be influenced by their mother's attitude towards girls. For instance, when Sarah talked about her experience of dancing, she told me:

"R: What about the third picture?

S: I think this picture makes me feel that girls are very lively and girls are very beautiful when they dance. My mom always told me that girls should dance because this can make girls have a good body shape.

R: Do you dance?

S: I learnt dance before. But my mom forced to not dance anymore because I cannot dance very well.

R: So do you like dancing?

S: Yes, I like it."

It seems that Sarah was influenced by her mother's attitude about being a good girl, which is to keep a good body shape. This is a very typical stereotype about female. Other participants learnt that girls have to be beautiful by dressing up because mom dressed up.

For children in middle childhood, peers' languages and behaviors are also important sources for them to develop perceptions about different genders. There is a general trend for both genders to talk negatively regarding the opposite sex. For example, Sarah considered male (e.g. his father in particular) to be bad-tempered sometimes. Correspondingly, boys perceived girls to be bad-tempered and arrogant. Here is one of the stories told by Ben: “

“B: Girls will be rampant and arrogant when they are very exultant.

R: Can you give me an example?

B: For example, when the girl fights with another one furtively, and then the girl tells this to the teacher... No, say it in this way. The girl did not fight with another one but she told the teacher how the other one behave inappropriately. When the teacher criticizes the other child, the girl will laugh and mock on him.

R: Do you think girls always like this?

B: Well, in our class, girls are all like this.”

Ben narrated a range of stories that happened when he was at school. From his observation, he got a rough picture of how girls and boys look like. For example, he had relative negative perception for girls and he used words such as “arrogant”, and “mock” for girls. This is in consistent with some previous research regarding the in-group/ out-group bias, in which children perceive opposite negatively (Martin & Ruble, 2010). Peers, therefore, plays an essential role in shaping children's gender stereotypes.

One other significant source in children's perception of gender stereotypes is the mass media which include magazines, television, and so on. Mass media, nowadays, contributes a lot in the objectification of female images. It is bombarded with beautiful and slim women and shifts children's attention from internal characteristics to only external features. It seems that the only most important thing for girls is to be beautiful. In addition, women are treated as objects in various advertisements. They dressed up gorgeously in cosmetics advisements for audiences to watch. No wonder children also tend to objectify female in general. This is

consistent with previous research in which it found that women were objectified in the media and that exposure to objectified media images of women is related to the experience of self-objectification and body shame among women (Murnen, Smolak, Mills, & Good, 2003).

Consistent with the ecological system theory, the mechanisms responsible for the perception of gender stereotypes are mainly within the microsystem and macrosystem. To be specific, through interaction with the microsystem such as family and peers, children learn about different gender stereotypes. Family and peers' attitude, language, and behaviors may all bring social influence on how children differentiate between genders. For example, in the current study, mother's view of how girls should be like affects children's way of seeing themselves. On the other hand, children's surrounding environment including their culture and media are the so-called macrosystem. This larger context exerts indirect influence on children's perception of gender stereotypes. Examples are magazines that often associate females with beauty products. Being exposed to this kind of information will also change children's ways of seeing gender stereotypes.

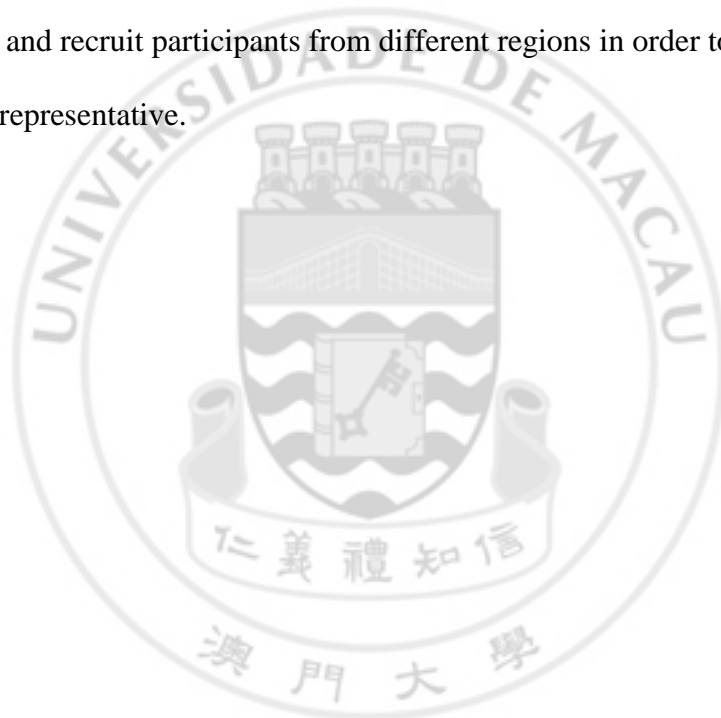
### **Conclusion**

Through utilization of CLET technique, the current study found that children already at an early age perceive a binary opposition between genders and represent a tendency to objectify of female gender. The findings of the current study reveal some issue that calls for attention. Either the clear binary opposition between boys or the girls or the tendency of female objectification does not exert positive influence on children' growth in general. Girls, in specific, are raised up in a way that focuses more on the objects and materials. From instance, Dianne's collages are filled with objects, which may hint to her lack of emotional love and support from her families. In fact, this objectification will not only bring negative effect on girls' general well-beings, but also influences boys as well. Boys such as Leslie may have rather negative feelings towards female and as a result, this may hinder his later

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relationship with female as a whole. In a way, the general negative gender discrimination that was found in the current study has to be paid attention to and corrected in order to create a psychologically healthy upbringing.

Because of the practical constraints, our research had limitations that need to be drawn. Being a pilot study, the current study drew all of its samples from one single area, a major urban area in China, which means that the children in this area may have similar life pattern and cultural backgrounds. In other words, the homogeneity among the participants may induce possible biases in the research. Future study, therefore, should take this problem into consideration and recruit participants from different regions in order to make the participants more representative.





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