



Manifestations of Social Gender Stereotypes in Preschool Children

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Gender stereotypes are societal generalizations about behaviors, roles, and traits expected from individuals based on gender. Preschool children start internalizing these stereotypes early through their observations and social interactions. This study examined preschool children's gender stereotypes regarding professions, colors, and emotions. Using a phenomenological qualitative design, the research included 91 preschool children from a large city in Turkey. Data were gathered through face-to-face interviews where preschool children were shown images of gender-neutral animal figures and asked related questions. The collected data were analyzed descriptively. Results showed that preschool children have embraced gender stereotypes, linking professions, colors, and emotions to gender. Family members, teachers, and environmental observations were the most influential factors in shaping these associations. For example, professions like police officer and driver were primarily associated with boys, doctor with girls, and teaching with both genders. Preschool children connected pink and purple with girls, while blue and green were linked to boys. Emotional attributions also reflected gender differences: boys were associated with courage, anger, and fun, while girls were linked to fear, sadness, and love of nature. These findings highlight the need to raise awareness of gender stereotypes early on. Educational efforts promoting gender-neutral understanding can positively support preschool children's social and emotional development.

Introduction

Gender stereotypes begin to develop in early childhood and play a crucial role in shaping how children perceive social roles, behaviors, and emotions. During the preschool period, children are particularly sensitive to social messages conveyed through family interactions, peer relationships, educational settings, and media representations. These early experiences contribute to the formation of gender-based expectations that may influence children's social, emotional, and educational development over time. Therefore, examining gender stereotypes during the preschool years is essential for understanding the foundations of gender-related perceptions.

In social life, certain attitudes, behaviors, and interests are commonly associated with gender

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and are often perceived as natural characteristics of women and men. These socially constructed expectations become embedded in daily interactions through gender stereotypes, which are transmitted across generations (Zeyneloğlu, 2008). Gender role stereotypes reflect shared beliefs about how women and men are expected to think, feel, and behave. For example, girls and women are frequently described as compassionate and emotional, whereas boys and men are often characterized as assertive and dominant (Imhoff & Hoffmann, 2023). Such stereotypes influence individuals' perceptions of themselves and others and reinforce socially accepted gender norms.

Sex refers to the biological, genetic, and physiological characteristics that classify individuals as female or male (Dökmen, 2021). Gender, by contrast, encompasses the roles, behaviors, and expectations constructed through social and cultural processes (Wood, 1995). While sex is grounded in biological differences, gender reflects the influence of societal norms and cultural practices on individual behavior (Sabuncuoğlu, 2006). From early childhood, individuals learn gender roles through interactions with family members, educational institutions, and the broader social environment, leading to the formation of gender identities shaped by social experiences (Powell & Greenhause, 2010).

Gender stereotypes prescribe characteristics and behaviors considered appropriate for women and men and often give rise to prejudices that reinforce gender inequality (Saraç, 2013). Rosenkrantz et al. (1968) defined prejudice based on sexual categorization as sexism. In this context, gender stereotypes affect not only how individuals are perceived by others but also how they understand themselves and their social environment.

Although biological and hormonal factors play a role in development, learning is considered the primary mechanism through which gender roles are acquired. During early childhood, children begin to internalize gender-related expectations by observing and interpreting the behaviors, attitudes, and norms modeled by significant others, particularly family members and teachers (Dökmen, 2021). As children engage with their social environments, they gradually differentiate behaviors, play preferences, and aspirations based on gender-related cues (Ünal, et al., 2017). Through toys, games, and everyday interactions, children learn which roles and behaviors are considered appropriate for their gender and develop attitudes aligned with these expectations over time (Zeybekoğlu, 2013).

Several theoretical approaches explain how gender stereotypes emerge in early childhood. Gender Schema Theory proposes that children organize gender-related information into cognitive schemas that guide their perceptions and behaviors, emphasizing the role of cultural and social influences in gender development (Bem, 1983; Starr & Zurbriggen, 2017). According to this perspective, children actively construct meaning from gendered information encountered in their environment. In contrast, Social Learning Theory emphasizes the role of observation and imitation, suggesting that children learn gendered behaviors and attitudes by observing models and receiving reinforcement within their social context (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Together, these theoretical frameworks provide a comprehensive explanation for the development of gender-based perceptions in early childhood.

Empirical studies have demonstrated that preschool children are exposed to gender stereotypes across multiple domains, including professions, colors, and emotions. Research with children aged 3–6 has shown that children associate certain professions and emotional traits with gender and apply these stereotypes in daily interactions (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; King et al., 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2022). Importantly, these associations are typically expressed in terms of

professions attributed to women or men, rather than as professions inherently belonging to one gender. Preschool-focused studies have largely examined gender representations in educational programs, picture books, and classroom practices, revealing that gendered messages are frequently conveyed through early educational materials and interactions (Fitzpatrick & McPherson, 2010; Meland & Kaltvedt, 2017; Chung & Huang, 2021; Nordmo, 2024; Stoppa, Molina, & Hache, 2024; Van Lombergen et al., 2024). However, fewer studies have directly investigated preschool children's own gender stereotypes across multiple domains.

In contrast, research conducted with elementary school children has consistently shown that gender stereotypes influence children's behaviors, academic interests, and future aspirations. Studies indicate that gender-based associations become more explicit and stable with age, highlighting the importance of examining their emergence during the preschool period (Kostas, 2014; Lucchini & Dodman, 2015; Hamilton & Roberts, 2017; Gilchrist & Zhang, 2024; Ağgül & Yılmaz, 2024).

Taken together, findings from previous studies suggest that gender stereotypes constitute a foundational mechanism through which gender inequality is reproduced in social life. Since these stereotypes begin to form in early childhood, examining preschool children's gender-based perceptions is essential for understanding the roots of gender inequality. This link between early gender stereotyping and later inequality provides the conceptual rationale for focusing on gender stereotypes in the preschool period.

Despite the growing body of international research, limited studies have examined preschool children's gender stereotypes within the Turkish context, particularly by focusing directly on children's own perceptions rather than educational materials or adult practices. Therefore, the present study aims to examine gender stereotypes among preschool children attending early childhood education institutions in a metropolitan city in Turkey, with specific attention to children's associations related to professions, colors, and emotions.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

- How do preschool children associate professions with gender?
- How do preschool children associate colors with gender?
- How do preschool children associate emotions with gender?

Method

Research Model

This study employed a qualitative research approach to examine gender stereotypes among preschool children. Qualitative research focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of a phenomenon through their experiences and interpretations (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). This approach was considered appropriate for exploring preschool children's perceptions of gender-related concepts.

Phenomenology was adopted as the research design. Phenomenology aims to explore participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to a particular phenomenon (Patton, 2014). In the present study, gender stereotypes were conceptualized as the phenomenon



of interest, and preschool children's perceptions and expressions of these stereotypes were examined. Visual stimuli were used to elicit children's perceptions related to professions, colors, and emotions, enabling an in-depth understanding of how gender-related meanings are constructed in early childhood. In phenomenological research, significant statements derived from interviews are analyzed to identify common experiences, which are then supported by direct quotations (Ceylan Çapar & Ceylan, 2022).

Study Group

The study group consisted of 91 preschool children (50 girls and 41 boys) attending public preschools in a metropolitan city located in western Turkey. Maximum variation sampling, a type of purposive sampling, was used to ensure diversity within the study group. In this process, attention was paid to including children from different socioeconomic backgrounds and achieving a balanced gender distribution. The primary aim of maximum variation sampling is to represent diverse characteristics related to the research topic within a relatively small sample (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). The inclusion criteria for the study were that children were enrolled in public preschools, were between 5 and 6 years old, and were able to verbally express their thoughts. Schools were selected based on accessibility and willingness to participate, and children were included with parental consent.

Data Collection Tools

Data were collected using visual stimuli designed to reveal preschool children's gender stereotypes and open-ended interview questions related to these visuals. The images used in the study were adapted from visual materials developed by Hacin Beyazoğlu, Komac, and Fekonja (2024) and were revised based on expert opinions. All visuals depicted a bear character intentionally designed without explicit gender markers to prevent direct gender attribution.

A total of 16 visual stimuli were used, representing three main categories: colors, professions, and emotions. The visuals were designed to reflect common gender-related cues that children may encounter in everyday life. An overview of the visual stimuli and their categories is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Visual Stimuli Used in the Study

Image No	Category	Description of the Visual Stimulus
1	Color	Bear wearing a pink scarf
7	Color	Bear wearing a blue scarf
8	Color	Bear sleeping with a purple pillow and pink blanket
9	Color	Bear sleeping with a green pillow and blue blanket
3	Profession	Bear depicted as a doctor
4	Profession	Bear depicted as a teacher
6	Profession	Bear depicted as a cashier
15	Profession	Bear depicted as a police officer
16	Profession	Bear depicted as a driver
2	Emotion	Bear displaying fear
5	Emotion	Bear caring for children (compassion)
10	Emotion	Bear climbing a tree to save a cat
11	Emotion	Bear working in the garden
12	Emotion	Bear crying (sadness)
13	Emotion	Bear dancing (joy)
14	Emotion	Bear expressing anger

In the colors category, visuals included gender-associated colors such as pink, blue, purple, and

green. The professions category consisted of images portraying occupations commonly associated with gender stereotypes, including doctor, teacher, cashier, police officer, and driver. The emotions category included visuals representing emotional states such as fear, sadness, anger, compassion, joy, and care for nature, conveyed through body language and facial expressions.

The suitability and content validity of the visuals and interview questions were evaluated through expert review. Based on the feedback received, necessary revisions were made, and the final versions of the materials were determined. In addition, a pilot study was conducted with three preschool children who were not included in the main study group. The pilot interviews indicated that the visuals and questions were clear, understandable, and appropriate for the developmental level of preschool children.

The visual stimuli were presented to the children in a structured manner according to thematic categories. First, visuals related to colors were shown, followed by visuals representing professions, and finally visuals depicting emotions. Themes were not mixed during the presentation to avoid confusion and to ensure that children focused on a single dimension at a time. Sample visuals representing the occupation and color themes are provided in Figures 1 and 2 to illustrate the characteristics of the stimuli used in the study.



Figure 1. Bear wearing a pink scarf

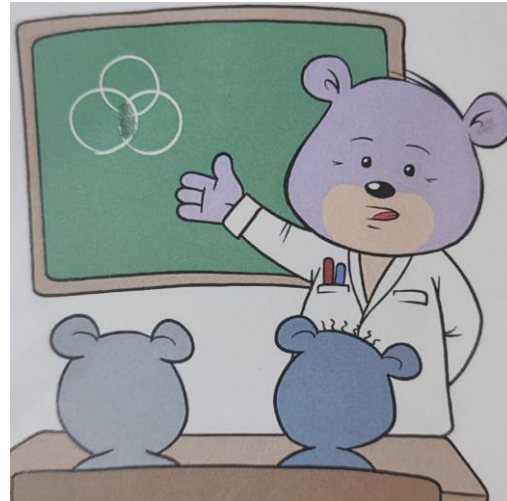


Figure 2. Bear depicted as a teacher

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data were collected through face-to-face, individual interviews with 91 preschool children attending public preschools in a metropolitan city in Turkey during the first semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. The interviews were conducted one-on-one in the classroom environment under the supervision of the classroom teacher to ensure that the children felt comfortable and secure. Throughout the interviews, simple and age-appropriate language was used, and children were encouraged to express their thoughts freely.

Each visual stimulus was presented to the children individually. For each visual, open-ended questions such as “Is this character a woman or a man?” and “Why do you think so?” were asked to explore children’s gender-based perceptions. The children’s verbal responses were recorded in written form by the researchers during the interviews. Each interview lasted

approximately 10–12 minutes.

The data were analyzed using descriptive analysis. Descriptive analysis involves organizing qualitative data according to predetermined themes aligned with the research questions and presenting the findings through direct quotations (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). This approach aims to minimize researcher interpretation and present participants’ views as objectively as possible (Patton, 2014).

In the first stage of the analysis, the written interview data were organized in line with the purpose of the study. The data were then coded according to the main themes derived from the research questions: professions, colors, and emotions. These themes were further categorized as female-associated and male-associated professions, colors, and emotions. Participant statements were grouped under the relevant themes and described in a meaningful and systematic manner (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Direct quotations were included to enhance the credibility of the findings.

To ensure reliability, the coding process was conducted independently by two researchers. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Miles and Huberman’s (1994) formula [$\text{Agreement} = (\text{Number of Agreements} / (\text{Number of Agreements} + \text{Number of Disagreements})) \times 100$]. The inter-coder agreement rate was found to be 94%, indicating a high level of reliability. In cases of disagreement, consensus was reached through discussion. The findings were presented using tables and supported by numerical frequencies (n).

Results

This section presents the findings related to preschool children’s gender stereotypes concerning occupations, colors, and emotions. The results are organized in line with the research questions and supported by tables and selected sample quotations.

Gender Stereotypes Related to Occupations

In the context of the research question “*How do preschool children associate certain professions with gender?*”, children’s views on gender stereotypes related to occupations and their attributions of these occupations to women and men are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Preschool children’s gender-based attributions of occupations

Profession	Attributed to women (n)	Attributed to men (n)	Sample Student Statements
Doctor	77	14	“My doctor is a woman.”(S2) “Women take good care of patients.” (S15)
Teacher	45	46	“Women take good care of patients.” (S7) “Anyone can be a teacher.” (S26)
Cashier	38	53	“In the markets there, women and men are cashiers, but money is a man’s job.” (S90)
Police officer	24	67	“A man becomes a police officer because he is strong and catches bad people.” (S71) “My mother and father are both police officers, but I think men are better at being a police officer.” (S8)
Driver	31	60	My father drives, men can be drivers.” (S32) “My mother drives, women can be drivers too.” (S84)

As shown in Table 2, most preschool children attributed the professions of police officer, driver, and cashier with men, whereas teaching was perceived as a gender-neutral profession. The

medical profession was predominantly associated with women.

When children were asked to explain their choices, they often referred to characteristics they believed were required for each profession. Policing and driving were frequently associated with physical strength, courage, and control, which were perceived as male characteristics. Although some children reported that both women and men worked as cashiers, handling money was often described as a male responsibility. Teaching was described as suitable for both genders, mainly due to children’s direct experiences with both female and male teachers. The medical profession was largely attributed to women, as many children stated that their own doctors were female.

Overall, children’s perceptions of occupations were shaped not only by observation but also by gendered beliefs about the personal qualities required for specific professions.

Gender Stereotypes Related to Colors

In response to the research question “How do colors play a role in gender perceptions?”, children’s views regarding gender-associated colors are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Preschool children’s gender-based attributed of colors

Color	Attributed to girls (n)	Attributed to boys (n)	Sample Student Statements
Pink	77	14	“Girls like pink because my mother also buys pink.” (S3) “Girls like pink, my toys and my school bag are pink too.” (S45)
Blue	35	56	“My dad’s favorite color is blue; he has a blue car.” (S32) “I am a girl, but I like the color blue.” (S48)
Purple	62	29	“Purple is the color of princesses, girls like it.” (S78) “I am a boy, but I have purple toys, and I like the color purple.” (S54)
Green	30	61	“Boys like blue or green. Because these colors are boys’ colors” (S62) “I like blue, my clothes are blue like my dad.” (S88)

Table 3 shows that pink and purple were predominantly associated with girls, whereas blue and green were mainly associated with boys. Children frequently explained these associations by referring to the colors of clothing, toys, and personal belongings used by family members and peers.

The findings indicate that children’s gendered color perceptions are largely shaped by social observation and environmental cues. Pink and purple were linked to girls due to their frequent use in products marketed to females and by women in children’s immediate surroundings. Similarly, blue and green were associated with boys because these colors were often connected to fathers or male peers. However, some children stated preferences for colors not traditionally associated with their gender, suggesting that individual experiences may moderate gender-based color stereotypes.

Gender Stereotypes Related to Emotions

To answer the research question “Which emotions do preschool children think are specific to which gender?”, children’s attributions of emotions to women and men are presented in Table 4.



Table 4. Preschool children's gender-based perceptions of emotions

Emotion	Attributed to women (n)	Attributed to men (n)	Sample Student Statements
Fear	55	36	"Fathers are braver." (C62) "My mother is a coward compared to my father." (C55)
Family love	59	32	"Mothers take more care of their children." (C45) "My father takes me and my brother to the park" (C79)
Compassion	38	53	"My father is strong, so he climbs the tree and saves the cat" (C37) "My mother is more helpful." (C85)
Love of Nature	58	33	"My mother loves flowers." (C7) "The garden of our site is tidied by male staff" (C22)
Sadness	69	22	"Mothers cry more." (C32) "My father cries when he gets emotional." (C23)
Fun/Joy	33	58	"Men are more fun." (C11) "My father makes me laugh" (C29)
Anger	26	65	"Fathers are usually angry; they get angry at everything" (C91) "When my mother gets angry, she sometimes shouts" (C66)

As shown in Table 4, emotions such as sadness, fear, family love, and love of nature were more frequently attributed to women, whereas anger, joy/fun, and compassion were more often associated with men. Children's explanations revealed that these associations were strongly influenced by how emotions were expressed through behavior rather than by the emotion itself.

For instance, compassion was attributed to women when linked to nurturing behaviors, but to men when it involved actions requiring courage, such as rescuing an animal. Similarly, joy was associated with men due to fathers' involvement in active play, while sadness was more frequently linked to women because mothers were perceived as crying more often. These findings suggest that children's gendered perceptions of emotions are shaped by their observations of everyday social interactions and the gendered ways emotions are displayed within their environments.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine preschool children's gender stereotypes related to occupations, colors, and emotions based on their interpretations of visual stimuli. The findings indicate that preschool children tend to attribute these domains to gender in ways that reflect commonly observed social patterns. It is important to emphasize that this study did not involve an intervention or educational program; rather, it focused on children's interpretations of visual representations and their explanations of these interpretations. Therefore, the discussion is limited to understanding how children perceive and interpret gender-related cues, not to changing or evaluating the appropriateness of these perceptions.

It should be emphasized that the expressions used in this study, such as "professions attributed to women or men," reflect children's perceptions rather than normative judgments about gender roles. Regarding occupations, the findings show that preschool children frequently attributed professions such as police officer and driver to men, while medicine was often attributed to women and teaching to both genders. These findings are consistent with previous studies conducted with preschool and early school-age children, which indicate that children tend to categorize occupations based on the gender distribution they observe in their immediate environment (Doni, 2021; Karabekmez et al., 2018; Gülçiçek & Tantekin Erden, 2024). Although some studies conducted with elementary school students report similar patterns (e.g.,

Gilchrist & Zhang, 2024), the present study demonstrates that such gendered occupational perceptions emerge already in the preschool period, suggesting that these perceptions develop before formal schooling.

Children's explanations indicate that these perceptions are largely shaped by observation rather than abstract reasoning. Family members, teachers, and other adults serve as salient role models, and children appear to generalize from these observations when categorizing professions. This process is consistent with Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which emphasizes learning through observation and modeling. Importantly, these findings do not suggest that children's perceptions are incorrect or should be eliminated; rather, they illustrate how children make sense of the social world using available cues.

In terms of color preferences, the findings show that preschool children commonly attributed pink and purple to girls and blue and green to boys. Previous research has similarly demonstrated that children's color-gender attributions are shaped by cultural symbols, media representations, and marketing practices (Uzun, 2022; Weisgram et al., 2014; Arda et al., 2024). In this study, children frequently justified their choices by referring to who uses these colors in their environment, such as parents or peers. These findings support the view that color preferences are not solely individual choices but are influenced by socially shared meanings. However, the presence of children who preferred colors traditionally attributed to the opposite gender also suggests that these associations are not fixed and allow for individual variation.

The findings related to emotions indicate that preschool children tend to attribute emotions such as anger, courage, and fun more frequently to men, whereas fear, sadness, love of nature, and family-related affection were more often attributed to women. These results are consistent with previous studies showing that children link emotions to gender based on observed behavioral patterns rather than on the emotional experience itself (Diener & Lucas, 2004; Widen & Russell, 2002; Ata Doğan et al., 2018). In the present study, children's explanations suggest that they interpret emotions through observable expressions in daily life. For example, compassion was attributed to men when it involved physically demanding actions, whereas nurturing forms of compassion were attributed to women.

It is crucial to clarify that these findings do not imply that emotional expressions should be reshaped or that biological and developmental differences between girls and boys should be ignored. The study does not argue that gender-specific developmental characteristics are irrelevant, nor does it advocate for eliminating gender distinctions. Rather, the findings illustrate how children interpret emotional expressions through socially learned patterns. Recognizing these patterns does not mean denying innate or developmental differences; instead, it allows for a clearer understanding of how social and cultural expectations interact with children's perceptions.

Concerns that gender equality may lead to "genderlessness" are understandable; however, the concept of gender equality, as discussed in the context of this study, does not aim to erase gender differences or alter children's innate characteristics. Instead, it refers to creating environments in which children are not restricted in their interests, expressions, or aspirations solely based on gender. Acknowledging developmental differences while avoiding rigid gender-based limitations is a balanced approach that respects both biological diversity and social fairness.

Overall, the findings suggest that preschool children actively construct gender-related meanings



based on their social environment. These meanings reflect cultural norms rather than deliberate choices or fully developed beliefs. Understanding how these perceptions emerge in early childhood is essential for educators and families, not to change children's nature, but to become aware of the implicit messages conveyed through everyday interactions and representations. Such awareness may help create educational environments that respect individual differences while allowing children to explore roles, emotions, and preferences without unnecessary gender-based constraints.

Conclusions

This study examined preschool children's gender stereotypes related to occupations, colors, and emotions based on their interpretations of visual stimuli. The findings indicate that preschool children tend to attribute these domains to gender in ways that reflect commonly observed social patterns. Children's explanations suggest that these perceptions are shaped through everyday observations of family members, teachers, and their broader social environment. The results show that gender-related perceptions emerge at an early age and are evident across multiple domains. Preschool children classified certain professions, colors, and emotions in gendered ways, often referring to observed behaviors and roles in their immediate surroundings. These findings contribute to the existing literature by demonstrating that gender-related perceptions are already present during the preschool period and are not limited to later stages of schooling.

Overall, the study provides insight into how preschool children interpret gender-related cues in their environment and how these interpretations reflect broader social representations rather than deliberate judgments or fully developed beliefs.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The research was conducted with 91 preschool children attending schools in a metropolitan city in Turkey. Therefore, the findings are limited to a specific regional and cultural context and may not be transferable to different socio-cultural settings. The qualitative research design focused on children's interpretations of visual stimuli and their verbal explanations. While this approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of children's perceptions, it does not permit generalization of the findings to a broader population. The study relied on visual representations to explore gender perceptions. Children's responses may have been influenced by their familiarity with similar images or experiences, which may have shaped their interpretations. Another limitation of the study is that the interviews were conducted in the presence of the classroom teacher. Although this was intended to ensure that children felt safe and comfortable, the teacher's presence may have influenced some children's responses by encouraging socially desirable answers.

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