Another social factor that can deeply influence the development of gender identity is the kind of games and toys that children are given. The new gender divide

When I was very young, I thought I knew how men and women should behave: men were breadwinners and women housewives. But already the world was changing.

Now, 70 per cent of women with children have paid work, and men are taking more responsibility for housework. A survey we carried out for the Child of Our Time series showed most of our parents believe traditional gender roles are now almost irrelevant.

At the same time, we talked with their children and discovered something disturbing. The children were busy constructing new gender roles, influenced less by tradition, parents and school than by the outside world. So, are we really bridging the divide of the sexes? Or, in a culture dominated by marketing, media, and materialism, are our kids giving a different message?

The power of marketing on gender identity is illustrated by an experiment we carried out with the Child of Our Time children, now seven years old. We asked the children which they liked the two identical drinks had different tastes, and they preferred the taste of the one aimed at them. The fact that the colours and design of the packaging influenced children is not cool; influenced, perhaps, by a celebrity culture that underestimates the hard graft needed to get there.

Far from going away, the social construction of genders has remained a relevant topic in recent years. In 2008, Child of Our Time explored the social construction of gender once again. Here is an extract from an article written by the programme’s producer, Dr Tessa Livingstone:

▲ Who decides which is a ‘girls’ toy’ and which is a ‘boys’ toy?

impressional than their elders. They are trusting, and highly attuned to social nuances because they need to feel accepted. It is not surprising that they seek up messages crafted to seduce the population for the benefit of the market…

Other studies show boys are the more materialistic sex, a finding corroborated when we asked the Child of Our Time children about the qualities they most admired. While girls wanted to be kind and healthy, the boys chose wealth, telling us: “Money is more important than anything”, and “I’d like to be rich and buy what I want.”

One might think the desire to be rich would spur boys to get educated, but it doesn’t appear to. Some of the able boys in our cohort told us: “Clever is so boring.” They felt cleverness was not cool; influenced, perhaps, by a celebrity culture that underestimates the hard graft needed to get there.

That may go some way to help explain why boys are falling even further behind girls in school. Again, children split along gender lines, for our seven-year-old girls told us: “If you are clever, everybody likes you more”, and “Clever means that you know what to do quite a lot of the time”. Girls seem to expect to do well in education, and often do so.

Even so, girls’ self-esteem is also under threat. The NCC [National Consumer Council] study demonstrated how the media can magnify materialism to the point where it can substantially damage children’s self-esteem by making them feel inadequate. Girls respond by becoming increasingly perfectionist about their school work and their weight. Oliver James, the study’s author, told me that the rates of depression and anxiety among girls from high-income families had increased from 24 to 38 per cent in just 12 years. It is a high price to pay for having it all.

Questions

1. List the social factors that, according to Tessa Livingstone, influence today’s children.
2. To what extent do you think such factors are determining children’s values and behaviour?
3. Can you find personal examples that either reflect or contradict what Livingstone writes in this article?
4. How do you think contemporary examples relate to Rousseau’s and Marx’s theories?

The construction of gender is just one example of the way society can shape our identity and influence our values and choices. Such an influence is often subtle, yet all-encompassing at the same time, raising serious philosophical questions about the amount of freedom that individuals really possess. Theorists such as Rousseau, Marx, and feminist scholars believe that consciousness-raising is a first step towards greater freedom, because being aware of the influences that shape us can help us detach ourselves from those influences.