## Contribution of fairly tales to the socialization of sex/gender identity in children aged of kindergarten / Irina Yavorsky

## **ABSTRACT**

This research deals with the contribution of classical and modern fairy tales to the formation of gender identity in children aged from four to six. A process of socialization into gender roles takes place during the period when children attend kindergarten and influences the development of the personality a great deal. That is the reason why this issue is interesting and should be examined from the point of view of how the fairy tale can help this important process.

A fairy tale has unique characteristics, such as polarity, simplicity, fantasy and one-sidedness, which make it a helpful tool in the process of formation of gender identity. Classical fairy tales represent a clear cut distinction between the roles the different genders take on, including sexual stereotypes and power differences between males and females. Modern fairy tales eliminate the distinction between gender roles and introduce some other possibilities. These aspects might lead to an understanding of the norms and values which have to do with different sexual/gender roles.

The main goal of this research is to examine the contribution of classical and modern fairy tales to the formation of sexual/gender identity of the child at kindergarten age (i.e, from 4 to 6 years of age).

In order to understand this contribution, several processes of the formation of the sexual identity have been explored through three developmental theories. The contribution of fairy tales to the formation of gender roles has then been examined by analysing the contents of the fairy tales.

This research task has three main questions:

- 1. What are the main aspects that appear in the classical and modern fairy tales and have to do with the formation of sexual/gender identity at the age of compulsory kindergarten?
- 2. To what extent can these issues contribute to the development of the sexual/gender identity of the children in compulsory kindergarten?
- 3. What changes in the gender identity have occurred in modern fairy tales?

The research project uses the qualitative method based on an analysis of texts. Six fairy tales have been analyzed: three classical: Cinderella, Snow White and Little Red Riding-hood and three modern The Modern Fairy Tale, The Princess and the Horse and The King who Threw his Daughter to the Sea. The analysis of the contents of the fairy tales is examined in the light of aspects which are central to the formation of gender identity during the process of socialization at the age of compulsory kindergarten. These motives

find expression in various theories, such as psycho-social and developmental theories (Erikson, Bandura and Freud) and feminist theories (Butler and Millet) that discuss the distribution of the gender roles.

The findings of this research show that, through fairy tales, children are exposed to the conflicts at the centre of psychoanalytical theories, such as sibling rivalry, Oedipus/Electra conflicts and the reality principle versus the pleasure principle. Children experience these conflicts at the age of compulsory kindergarten. The results show that those conflicts very frequently appear against a background of gender issues and have a great deal of influence on the formation of gender identity in children. Children identify with the characters and events, experience the conflict and, in this way, learn how to deal with their own conflicts. According to psychoanalytical theory, the fairy tale helps to solve conflicts that have to do with sexual identity.

The classical fairy tales reflect the "initiative vs. guilt" conflict dealt with by Erikson's psycho-social theory, and which children aged 4 to 6 have to face. The classical fairy tales support the norm, according to which the initiative is a male characteristic by rewarding the hero who has taken the initiative. When a female hero takes the initiative she is usually punished. So the fairy tale contributes to the development of initiative as a variable that helps to define gender identity.

In addition the heroes of fairy tales provide "role models" for children, and are the central issue of the social-cognitive learning theory suggested by Bandura. Concerning this matter the findings of this research show that the fairy tale contributes to child development by enabling him or her to identify with socially accepted gender roles. In this context it is also important to bring to mind the claim of the feminist thinker Judith Butler (2001), according to which gender behavior is always a consequence of imitation. So the children imitate the desirable social behavior by comprehending the reinforcement or punishment that the heroes in the fairy tales get from their surroundings. Bandura's theory also points out that the fairy tale contributes to the improvement of self-efficacy of the children and their self-regulation. Feminist theories criticize classical fairy tales and show that many of them divide the types of behavior according to clear, blatant and inflexible gender (male, female) categories. They also point out that in modern fairy tales there is a division into gender roles, but it is more flexible.

This research shows that in the modern fairy tales some changes in *the roles of men and women* have indeed been made. The modern fairy tales break the stereotype of the classical division into gender roles, according to which the male hero is brave, strong and has the initiative; in contrast they also represent the female characters as strong, stubborn, wise and active. And, more than that, they enable the female characters to take on male gender roles, such as going out to fight the dragon, going out fishing, riding on horses and taking care of them. Those shifts are encouraged and become legitimized in the framework of modern fairy tales, and this enables children to have a

different perspective on gender roles, as an opportunity for imitation in the future.

The research also points to the fact that modern fairy tales have gone through changes that have to do with the formation of gender identity:

- Character against beauty.
- A change in female power and the social attitude to it.
- Changes in the relationships between parents and children.
- A change in the importance and the status of the institution of marriage in fairy tales.

Modern fairy tales eliminate gender roles as they appear in classical fairy tales. But if children are meant to understand or feel this elimination they have to know the classical fairy tales. The modern fairy tales represent a world in which the hero is legitimized to be "himself', never mind his or her gender or social status, which enables the children to reflect on the gender and stereotype values that can be found in the classical fairy tales.

It is important to highlight that the world of the classical fairy tale is much richer than its reflection through "Cinderella", "Snow White" or "Little Red Riding-hood"; many classical fairy tales represent strong heroines and weak heroes, and frequently we face situations in which ideals change from one tale to another and one culture to another. Classical fairy tales are very popular among children till this day, thanks to their ability to tap into many of their fears and conflicts. The main innovation of the modern fairy tale is in the creation of modern role models that can be imitated and of a unique way of life.

This research contributes to a better understanding of how children are helped in their processes of socialization into gender roles through fairy tales. Alongside the contribution of this research there are also several limitations. The main limitation derives from the absence of field studies, which would have enabled me to examine the children's reactions to the fairy tales in real life. It is possible to use this research as a basis for other research and field studies.

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