Pink Frilly Dresses (PFD) and Early Gender Identity

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The color pink has a clear and compelling connotation in contemporary American culture. It symbolizes females and femininity. But why would little girls refuse to wear anything but pink, not only dresses, but also hats, gloves, jackets, raincoats, socks, and even underwear? That baby girls are swaddled in pink blankets and often dressed in pink "onesies" is well-known to everyone. Of particular interest to us, however, is a kind of rigid adherence to the color code in children 3-4 years of age. As researchers in the field of developmental psychology who study gender development, we have noticed that a large proportion of girls pass through a stage when they virtually refuse to go out of the house unless they are wearing a dress, often pink and frilly. The intensity of these desires and the extremity with which they are expressed has piqued our research interest. One young mother reported that her 3-year-old daughter could only be convinced to wear something other than pink when she was physically shown that all of her pink clothing was in the laundry. What is the driving force behind this phenomenon, which we call PFD?

To many, the answer to this question seems obvious. Current cultural norms support a gendered color distinction, and little girls no doubt receive many compliments when they appear in PFD apparel. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that PFD is a product of more than just socialization. Indeed, many parents are puzzled and dismayed by this behavior, especially those who believe that girls should be raised in an egalitarian manner such that they are not limited in their interests, opportunities, and abilities. Such parents feel that they have somehow failed when their
daughters enter the PFD stage. Even parents who are more traditional in their gender attitudes are astonished by the extreme nature of this behavior. Moreover, girls will often insist on wearing a PFD garment in the most inappropriate circumstances: hiking, horse back riding, and so on. One friend reported that her young daughter really wanted to help her father build a snowman, but would not go outside without wearing a dress. Parents often resolve such conflicts by putting leggings or even jeans underneath their girls’ dresses. But, it is clear that in many cases, PFD sparks family battles rather than drawing only smiles and praise, prompting some researchers to argue that PFD is biologically driven and related to preparedness for future gender roles.

A recent argument even proposes that girls’ preferences for the color pink has a biological basis, connected to evolved sex differences in specialized visual pathways that allow females to better discriminate red wavelengths (Alexander, 2003). Such proposals are intriguing and worth further research, but their relevance to PFD must be evaluated within a cultural/historical context. Pink and blue have not always been markers of young girls and boys, respectively. Before the 1920s, parents dressed infants and toddlers, girls and boys alike, in white dresses, suggesting that color and dresses were not used to distinguish between girls and boys (Chiu et al., 2006; Paoletti, 1997). When sex-differentiated colors became popular, the “pink-blue” dichotomy was used in ways opposite to current practices. In fact, according to a magazine article published in 1918, pink was considered to be a stronger color, more suitable for boys, whereas blue was deemed more delicate and dainty, prettier for girls (Paoletti, 1997). Furthermore, biological explanations only help to explain why girls become obsessed with pink and not some other color. They do little to explain the obsession itself.

In short, although PFD is likely to be influenced by multiple factors, it cannot be attributed solely to external pressures or to biological factors. Recently, in collaboration with Carol Martin at Arizona State University, we have argued that a different interpretation is needed to explain aspects of early gender development like PFD (e.g., Martin & Ruble, 2004). Specifically, we posit a more cognitive or “self-socialization” approach, based in the idea that children actively construct their own interpretation of what gender means and how it applies to them, from multiple social cues and contexts. A central tenet of this approach is that once children recognize that there are two gender groups and that they belong to one of them, information about their own gender and about differences between boys and girls becomes extremely important to them. This is, in part, so that they can master the rules associated with their developing identity. Findings from our research support this. Specifically, our data show that children's understanding of gender categories typically begins before the age of 2 and is associated with increased interest in sex-typed play (Zosuls, Ruble et al, 2007). It is not surprising, then, that some mothers in our studies said their daughters started showing an intense interest in pink or dresses as soon as they could verbally express a preference, around 28 months of age.
Three aspects of this self-socialization perspective are particularly relevant to understanding PFD. First, children's search for information about gender is an active, intense constructive process. In our research, we have referred to preschool children as "gender detectives" (Martin & Ruble, 2004). This investigative activity is perhaps most obvious when they come to idiosyncratic conclusions. For example, one child believed that men drank tea and women drank coffee, because that was the way it was in his house. He was thus perplexed when a male visitor requested coffee. Another child, dangling his legs with his father in a very cold lake, announced "only boys like cold water, right Dad?". Such examples suggest that children are actively seeking and "chewing" on information about gender, rather than passively absorbing it from the environment. Such a self-directed process seems like a reasonable driver of PFD. It requires little detective work for children to notice some of the most blatant physical characteristics associated with females: pink, frilly, and dresses. Our research indicates that when asked "What are girls like?", the most frequent response among preschoolers concerns some aspects of appearance, like dresses and jewelry (Miller, Lurye, Zosuls, & Ruble, 2007).

Second, gender is extremely important to preschoolers. Parents have anecdotally reported that their young sons or daughters pass through a period when they want to count all the males and females in a room (including even dogs and cats) or strike up conversations in the elevator with other adults to make sure they have the appropriate genitals. Our research indicates that between 3-4 years, as children learn more about gender category distinctions, they increasingly view their gender as a very important and positive aspect of themselves (Ruble et al., in press). These findings may partly explain why girls maintain a rigid adherence to PFD, despite battles with parents. Pink Frilly Dresses are salient and concrete features of "girlness," allowing girls to display and embrace their new identity when adorning themselves in this way. Their clothing demonstrates to themselves and others that they have mastered their gender role: they are as girly a girl as they can be. Moreover, many children at this age become upset about departures from PFD because they are uncertain about the stability of their gender. Before 5-7 years, children tend to believe that gender is something that can change if a person puts on clothing or makes other superficial changes that are characteristic of the opposite sex. One 3-year-old came home in tears because she thought her mother was a girl, like her, but now she knew that could not be true. Why not? Her mother had short hair. She could only be comforted when her mother agreed to change out of her pants-suit and put on a dress before going out of the house. This is a striking turnabout of the typical parent-to-child direction of socialization pressure. Thus, some PFD girls may feel that they risk their status as girls if they wear anything but pink or dresses.

Third, children's interest in gender information and the rigidity of their gender-related beliefs and behaviors waxes and wanes across development. This is probably due to a variety of changes in
children's general level of cognitive development, such as classification skills, as well as age-related changes in their social experiences. For example, children's stereotypic ideas about gender become quite rigid during the preschool years, expressed in beliefs that only boys or only girls can engage in certain activities. By 5-6 years of age, however, they begin to recognize that both sexes "can" do most activities, and the flexibility of these beliefs continues to increase throughout elementary school (Trautner, Ruble et al., 2005). What this implies for PFD is that, for most girls, it is a time-delimited set of behaviors. It can emerge quite quickly at age 3 and disappear just as quickly a few years later. In fact, although elementary school girls often recall their interest in pink as a child, many of them indicate that currently, they strongly dislike that color and refuse to wear it. Many parents of girls currently in the PFD stage express great relief to learn that it will end.

In conclusion, girls' love of pink, frilly dresses may be viewed as a kind of obsession linked to developing knowledge about social categories. PFD is one example of how children's active interpretations of their social worlds can result in rigid and at times idiosyncratic interpretations of what it means to be a member of a social category, such as a gender. PFD seems to begin once girls learn that gender is an important social distinction that applies to them. The idea that the development of gender identity can have such a driving force in the behaviors and preferences of young children is controversial and has been debated with some frequency in journals and conferences in recent years. But, the obsession is real; whether girls who pass through a PFD stage are different in important ways from girls who do not, and whether boys embrace their gender in comparable ways will be questions for further debate in future years.

References


