Issues in Interdisciplinarity 2018-19/Imperialism in the study of children’s toy preferences

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This piece will discuss the legacy of {{w:imperialism}} within the interdisciplinary field of [gender studies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_studies), using research into children’s toy preferences as a case study. The majority of research in this area focuses on early child development in [Western countries](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_world); little material from non-Western countries exists, or any cross-cultural comparison[[1]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-:0-1). It can be argued that this gap in research across disciplines is a result of {{w:imperialism}} and that the geographical factors that influence the biological and social determinants of children’s toy preferences are a legacy of imperialism.

Research into children's toy preferences is used here as a case study because it illustrates how [gender](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender) differences present themselves before the influence of social factors, and how these social factors then interact with existing biological factors. Although there is an argument that as biological factors influence gender development, and therefore geographical differences will be insignificant in terms of this, the current consensus is that gender is a product of the interrelation between biological and social factors. However, this cannot be seen as universally conclusive when only Western societies have been investigated. Thus, a re-evaluation of the influence of Western bias in this area, and in all disciplines, is required so that the possible effects of geography on biological and social factors can be taken into consideration in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of children’s toy preferences globally.

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## Imperialism’s influence on research

Sociological and psychological research has, thus far, primarily focused on Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) societies[[2]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-2)[[3]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-3), despite members of these societies not representing humankind as a whole[[4]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-:1-4). Consequently, if the possibility that culturally specific findings might be misattributed as universal traits is not considered, this will adversely affect the scientific defensibility and reliability of theories[[4]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-:1-4).

Why does research conducted in the West primarily focus on WEIRD societies? Though early forms of higher-education emerged in the Arab world, science flourished in the West after the twelfth century[[5]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-5). During the economic growth of cities in the 13th century, universities were founded across Europe by emperors who were seeking to expand their influence and rival other universities’ influence[[6]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-:2-6).

European universities began to expand globally in the 16th century, with the intention to provide Western education for the [colonists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Settler). In the 19th century, more European-style universities were founded in non-Western societies, often funded by non-Western societies in order to educate their own people in [Western scientific methods](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/The_Scientific_Method)[[6]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-:2-6). Therefore, it can be argued that the current Western bias in global science is caused by the imperialist history of knowledge production.

While academia proliferated in Europe, Eastern countries continued to focus education on government-centred aims. For example, the [imperial examination (keju)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_examination) in ancient China was a civil service examination system designed to select the best potential candidates to serve as administrative officials[[7]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-7). Scientific research and innovation existed within governmental organisations only, meaning there was limited dissemination of knowledge. During the colonised era (1840-1949) in China, universities and independent academic research centres including Tsinghua University were founded, largely influenced by imperialism[[8]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-8).

## Biological basis for gender difference

Towards the end of the 20th century, there was an emergence of research into the biology of gender and gendered behaviours, separate from previous research which did not distinguish gender from sex. The volume of research in this area has increased over time, and now, the understanding of the biological basis for gender is established. However, questions remain as to the extent of this influence, and how it relates to social factors during childhood development.

Research in [neuroendocrinology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neuroendocrinology) suggests that levels of [prenatal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prenatal_development) and [neonatal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Infant) exposure to [testosterone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Testosterone) are responsible for the development of the brain as either ‘male-typical’ or ‘female-typical’ through ‘permanent neural changes’[[9]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-9). The prevalence of prenatal and neonatal testosterone has been linked to children's toy preferences; young girls with [congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congenital_adrenal_hyperplasia), who therefore produce more testosterone beginning in utero than unaffected girls, spent ‘significantly more time’ playing with ‘boy’s toys’ than unaffected girls. This suggests that the early presence of higher levels of [androgens](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Androgen) (including testosterone) leads to gender differences in behaviours[[10]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-10). A 2017 paper by Todd et al. collates research into children’s toy preferences and concludes that gender difference in children’s toy preferences *does exist*. Though this appears to be a result of biological and social factors, the biological basis for gendered behaviour cannot be dismissed because of the consistency in finding gender differences in toy preference across many different studies[[1]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-:0-1).

The majority of research in this area is conducted in Western societies on Western children, a limitation that Todd et al. acknowledge. It can be argued that geographical difference in this instance should not matter, as biologically all humans are fundamentally the same, and suggesting differently could risk veering into the imperial legacy of [eugenics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eugenics). However, with the increase in research into [epigenetics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epigenetics), it is known that environmental factors do influence gene expression, which may lead to gender differences in behaviours. Therefore, interdisciplinary research into differences in the sociology of Western and non-Western countries, and to what extent, if any, this has on the biology of gender differences is required.

## Social basis for gender difference

Social sciences arose from philosophy and science[[11]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-11), and so the influence of imperialism was still present: these new disciplines aimed to solve problems in the West such as those around capitalism and urbanisation. Psychological and sociological studies on children’s toy preferences acknowledge the existence of biological factors in gender but do not explore them[[12]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-12), staying within disciplinary boundaries instead of initiating interdisciplinary research. Considering both close environmental influences and representation of toys the most relevant factors in children’s toy preferences are parents, peers, exposure to toys, and verbal and visual messages. These factors vary cross-culturally with variation in family structure, parenting principles, and media exposure.

Parental influence mainly consists of the toys chosen for the children - parental encouragement or discouragement does not have a significant influence[[13]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-13). For example, 12-month-old infants primarily showed interest in gender-stereotyped toys, then, secondarily, in toys which they were familiar with[[14]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-14). Social learning theory[[15]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-15) suggests that parents can also create a bias by rewarding the ‘right’ toy choice, which is usually the gender-stereotyped one. Children’s peers have a greater influence on their toy preference than surrounding adults; in nurseries, peer influence may cause children to choose more gender-stereotyped toys[[16]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-16). Therefore, the importance of peer influence makes the difference between Western and non-Western socialisation customs more significant. Exposure to counter-stereotyped images[[17]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-17) and models[[18]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Imperialism_in_the_study_of_children%E2%80%99s_toy_preferences#cite_note-18), such as TV shows and cartoons, was effective in encouraging children to be more open-minded in toy preference, and geographic variation in media should, therefore, be accounted for.

## Conclusion

The historical legacy of imperialism on knowledge production *and* imperialist influence on geographical factors, responsible for the misattribution of Western characteristics to all people, have impacted the study of children’s toy preferences across disciplines. The bias of all research into children’s toy preferences, carried out in WEIRD countries, must be deconstructed to better fit in with our post-colonial world. This could be achieved by viewing research critically: questioning the history of the geographical context in which it was carried out, and investigating the influence of these geographical factors on the biological and social determinants of children’s toy preferences.

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