

EARLY ADOLESCENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH, AND VIEWS OF, BARBIE

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ABSTRACT

There has been a great deal of debate over the influence of Barbie dolls on girls' developing self-concept and body image. Two qualitative studies were conducted to gather information about early adolescents' experiences with, and perspectives on, the controversial toy. In Study 1, focus groups with twenty 6th-grade girls suggested that they have ambiguous feelings toward the doll and the feminine sexualized image it represents. Study 2 gathered essay responses from fifty 7th- and 8th-grade boys and girls regarding their experiences with, and opinions on, Barbie dolls. Participants reported both positive and negative feelings toward the doll and its influence on girls' development.

Developmental psychologists have long recognized the importance of play to children's development (Huizinga, 1950; Sutton-Smith, 1986, 1997). During play, children converse with their world and internalize elements of society, such as norms, values, and adult roles (Huizinga, 1950; Kline, 1995; Koste, 1995; Singer, 1995; Fein, 1995). Children's toys are influential in the development of self-concept (Koste, 1995; Sutton-Smith, 1986, 1997), one of the fundamental tasks of childhood and adolescence. Typically, children choose favorite toys, and Sutton-Smith (1986) has argued that "particular toys enter into the lives of some children and become, as it were, central to their identity" (Sutton-Smith, 1986, p. 205). Toys present messages about gender, adult roles, and values that children internalize.

The Barbie doll is one of the most successful toys of the 20th century and, arguably, the icon of female beauty and the American dream (Rogers, 1999; Turkel, 1998). According to the manufacturer, every three seconds a Barbie doll is purchased. Barbie has been said to touch every girl's life (Rogers, 1999). There continues to be disagreement over the messages the Barbie doll sends and the toy's place in the lives of young girls. The extant literature about Barbie dolls tends to be

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opinionated and based on essays and popular media articles ("Barbie's Missing Accessory: Food," 1994; La Ferle, 1997; Lord, 1994; McDough, 1999; Suhay, 2000; Mulrine, 1997). Some claim that the toy represents the paradigm of adult female beauty to which young girls learn to aspire (Freedman, 1986; Turkel, 1998). It has been argued that Barbie dolls reflect a highly sexualized image and circumscribe girls' play by emphasizing prescribed roles and patterns of interaction. It is feared that by dramatizing stereotypical feminine roles during play, girls will internalize and later embody such roles (Freedman, 1986).

Despite the vocal opinions that abound about the influence of Barbie dolls on girls' development, there is a paucity of empirical research examining the impact of Barbie dolls on the lives of girls. Surveys have suggested that Barbie dolls are among girls' first or second "most favorite toys" between ages eight and twelve (Sutton-Smith, 1986). Sociobiological research with adults has indicated that the Barbie doll's body shape is perceived as attractive, perhaps because it represents health and fertility, from an evolutionary perspective, despite its physical impossibility (Margo, 1997).

Recently, and most pertinent to the present study, Rogers (1999) explored individuals' experiences with Barbie dolls. She gathered writing samples from male and female junior high school students, college students, and adults. Each group was asked to write about their experiences with Barbie dolls. All of the participants had knowledge of Barbie dolls, but mixed views about the doll's influence on girls prevailed. The majority of adolescent girls felt positively about Barbie, while boys distanced themselves from "play" with Barbie dolls, and instead reported disfiguring the dolls through a variety of methods. The college students and adults tended to acknowledge that Barbie dolls impact girls' ideals, but disagreed as to whether the influence was beneficial or detrimental to girls' development.

The study by Rogers (1999) suggests that young adolescents are unaware of the ways in which exposure to sexualized images and toys, such as Barbie dolls, may influence them. In light of the limited data, the present research examines young adolescents' experiences with, and views of, Barbie dolls.

STUDY 1

Given the mixed perspectives on the value to children of playing with Barbie dolls, focus groups were conducted to gather broad information about adolescent girls' views of the influence and value of Barbie dolls.

Method

Participants

Twenty 6th-grade girls (age range = 10 to 13 years) at a suburban middle school in Connecticut participated. The majority were White/non-Hispanic and middle class, similar to the overall population of students at the school. They were volunteers who participated in either of two 10-week support groups that met once a week during lunch to talk about issues important to them, and to promote self-esteem and a positive outlook.

Procedure

During the 10-week support group, two focus group sessions were devoted to discussing the participants' experiences with, and feelings about, Barbie dolls. The participants were encouraged to discuss their experiences with Barbie and opinions about the toy as well as their views of the impact of playing with Barbie dolls on girls' development. During the session, the participants were provided with Barbie dolls to help them illustrate their feelings and to enable the focus group leader (first author) to observe their behavior. Each session was audio-taped and transcribed.

Results

All of the girls reported owning at least two Barbie dolls, though most owned many more (one owned nearly fifty Barbie dolls). When the topic of Barbie dolls was introduced, the girls reported no longer playing with Barbie dolls; however, when the group facilitator produced several Barbie dolls for use in their focus group session, many of the girls exclaimed, "Barbie!" and all expressed the desire to hold one of the dolls.

Play Activities

When asked whether they currently play with Barbie dolls, many reported that their only play activities include dressing up the doll and styling its hair.

I don't like playing with them, but I like dressing them up.

Sometimes I just cut their hair.

Although the participants did not currently play with Barbie dolls often, all reported having played with Barbie dolls in the past, as chil-

dren. The girls' reported patterns of play fell into three general categories: imaginative play, torture play, and anger play.

Imaginative play. All of the girls reported engaging in make-believe or imaginative play with Barbie dolls as children. Many described creating intricate and extended play scripts, illustrating family life, imagined adolescent life (e.g., attending high school proms), and glamorous events (e.g., fashion shows).

We used to make . . . [Barbie dolls] talk. One day we had a wedding for Barbie and Ken. So I went and got all the [stuffed] animals from my room [as an audience].

I used to put their dresses on them and pretend that they were going to a prom or a dance or something.

Torture play. A surprisingly common form of Barbie-related play reported by the participants was torture play. All reported damaging their dolls by cutting off the hair, painting them, or even removing appendages.

I used to switch heads on Barbie and Ken. And then take the little pink dress and me and my brother used to put him [Ken] in it.

I stripped them and threw them in the snow. When it became spring and they all thawed, I picked them up and my brother and my sister and I, because they didn't like Barbie either, took my mom's [chicken] bones scissors she used to cut bones and so we cut them in half.

Most of the torture play reported by the girls occurred in older childhood and in the presence of boys. Often boys initiated torture play, but the girls reported joining them and supporting their torture-related Barbie play.

This was in the summer and we [my brother and I] were really bored and we took my nail polish and we all painted their hair. And we cut their hair and one Ken had real hair and we cut it like a Mohawk. It was purple.

I used to take Barbie's car and put Ken and Barbie in it and then find the closest wall and go "pow" [crashing the car].

Overall, the girls reported perceiving torture play with Barbie as humorous. Many reported still engaging in this form of play when the opportunity arises, as evidenced by one of the participants removing the head from a Barbie during the session. When asked whether they "torture" other dolls, all of the girls responded that torture play oc-

curred "just [with] Barbie." One participant's response to why torture play is fun with Barbie illustrates the overall consensus among the girls: "because she is the only one that looks perfect."

Anger play. Many of the girls reported playing with Barbie dolls when they were angry, as a means of releasing contained emotions.

I used to get mad at someone if they called me a name or something in school. I used to come home and then I would stab my Barbie and pretend that [Barbie was] that person and then I would say that they got it back. . . . But I would never really do that to a person.

And then I had this doll that was a Ken doll and pretend it was my brother and I used to get mad at my brother a lot and I would take the Ken doll and throw it at the wall.

In these examples, the girls turned their anger from individuals to their Barbie dolls. Anger-related play was surprisingly common, suggesting that girls may feel comfortable expressing hostile feelings through play.

Girls' Views of Barbie

Given the controversy in the literature over the influence of Barbie dolls on girls, we asked the participants what they thought of Barbie. The general consensus was that Barbie's body is unrealistic.

They should make a fat one.

They are all so skinny and that's mean to fat people.

They are all perfect. They never do anything real in all the books [about Barbie dolls]. I think she does too much. Yeah, they are all perfect [and] it's just too much.

I always thought Barbie was so cool; [as] I got older, I learned that it's impossible to be Barbie. She's been everywhere, [even] in outer space. She's the perfect blonde. She has the perfect blue eyes. She's like everything! If she was a real person she wouldn't be able to walk.

Perfection was the major theme that emerged from each of the focus groups. The girls viewed Barbie as the image of perfection, and perhaps too perfect, yet she defines physical beauty.

Discussion

Study 1 examined girls' views of Barbie dolls through focus groups with twenty early adolescent girls. Most notably, Barbie dolls were

pervasive in the girls' experiences. All of the girls reported having at least two Barbie dolls, and often many more. Although the girls reported no longer playing with Barbie dolls, when the dolls were introduced into the focus group session, all expressed interest in holding and playing with them. The pervasiveness of Barbie dolls that we observed in this study concurs with prior findings suggesting that Barbie is a favorite toy of eight- to twelve-year-old females (Sutton-Smith, 1986).

All of the girls reported playing imaginatively with Barbie dolls during childhood. Imaginative play included acting out scripts of family life, fashion shows, dating, prom night, and weddings. Play is the imitation of life, a way for children to study and learn about life (Koste, 1995). During play, children begin to internalize societal values and construct a personal identity, or view of the self (Koste, 1995). Play with Barbie dolls may influence gender role development, as most of the girls reported play scripts entailing decidedly feminine and sexualized roles. Perhaps girls explore the feminine gender role through play.

Particularly surprising was the frequency of torture-related play reported by the girls. Torture-related play occurred during late childhood and early adolescence. Given the feminine stereotype that the doll embodies, torture-related play may reflect girls' ambivalence about their female status and the societal notions of femininity and beauty. During late childhood and early adolescence, girls often feel pressured to comply with societal notions of physical beauty (Freedman, 1986). The present sample of girls explained that Barbie dolls represent perfection; many noted a simultaneous striving for, and dislike of, perfection. Torture play, entailing the damaging of toys, is a common way of expressing hostility and aggressive feelings during childhood (Turkel, 1998), and for these girls, may be a way of expressing their ambivalence about becoming women and adopting a feminine gender role.

The present conclusions are limited given the small sample size. However, an important strength of the present study is the candid nature of the girls' revelations, which occurred within the context of a weekly support group. The results suggest that Barbie dolls are pervasive within girls' experience and may influence their developing self-concept.

STUDY 2

The results of Study 1 demonstrated that girls have a great deal of experience with Barbie dolls and report varying forms of play with the

dolls. Most notably, girls reported ambivalence toward Barbie dolls, simultaneously liking and disliking the dolls. Study 2 examined adolescent girls' and boys' experiences with, and views of, Barbie dolls through their responses to two open-ended essay questions.

Method

Participants

Fifty 7th- and 8th-grade students (age range = 12 to 14 years; 42% female) from a private parochial school in Connecticut participated. Similar to Study 1, the suburban school drew from a population that was predominantly White/non-Hispanic and middle class.

Procedure

Each student was presented with an index card with an item typed on the front of the card and a second item typed on the back. The first item stated, "Write about your experiences with Barbie. What do you play with her? How do you play with her?" The second item stated, "Write about your thoughts and feelings of Barbie." A researcher (the first author) read the questions to the students and asked them to respond in regard to their personal experiences. The students recorded their sex and age, but not name, on the card, and were informed that all of their responses would remain confidential.

Results

The responses were organized by the participants' self-reported sex. The content was analyzed to extrapolate themes. Both the first and second author independently categorized the responses by theme; there was 95% agreement across the two items. The responses revealed that Barbie was a familiar toy for both the boys and girls in this sample.

Girls' Experiences with Barbie Dolls

Similar to Study 1, nearly all of the girls reported spending a great deal of time in childhood playing with Barbie dolls. Imaginative play incorporated elaborate scripts entailing feminine roles and situations (e.g., weddings, proms, fashion shows).

I played with Barbie all the time. I made complex plots for my Barbies and would have a continuing Barbie game for about a week. I would dress my Barbies as fairy-tale characters or as modern people. I would even bring my Barbies in the bathtub.

I would get a whole bunch of them together and pretend they were superstars. I had this huge Barbie house so they would be rich. Sometimes I would pretend they had magic. I played with them like they were rich, everyone liked her, and she had all the guys.

Similar to the findings of Study 1, much of the play described by the girls suggested ambivalence toward Barbie dolls and the feminine image the toys represent. Nearly all of the girls reported engaging in imaginative play; however, they also reported engaging in destructive and aggressive play (i.e., torture play).

I liked to play and pretend that [Barbie] was my best friend, and that we were going on a trip together. Once, I popped my Barbie's head off. I thought it was funny because I didn't like her anyway.

We would smash Ken's head on a wall and it would break off. I would make Ken go bungee jumping but would hit the ground and die. I would swing her [Barbie] around by her hair and I would chew on her hands. I threw her [Barbie] at my brothers.

I started to practice cutting the hair on all the Barbie dolls I had and dress them up. I'd cut off all of Barbie's hair and burned the clothes because she kept talking too much.

I would play Barbie with my friends, make her have sisters married to Ken and have a daughter. We would make them have divorces and we cut Barbie's hair off and set her on fire. We busted Ken's head off.

Boys' Experiences with Barbie Dolls

Most of the boys' responses began by denying any experience with Barbie dolls, but then indicated that, indeed, they had some experience playing with Barbie dolls. Very few boys reported engaging in imaginative play with Barbie dolls, and all who did explained that they were either complying with a request of a female sibling or pretending to harm the doll.

My sister had and still has Barbie. When she was little I was asked to play Barbie with her and I did. I was not very interested but I did it for my sister.

When I was younger I would take my sister's Barbie and make up different ways she got hurt. Sometimes I would take balls and throw them at her, pretending it was a meteor shower. I would also make her get hit by her Barbie convertible.

[We] used to see how many ways she could . . . kick the bucket in one day.

The boys often simultaneously professed indifference and curiosity about the doll. Many reported that they were "not allowed" to play with the dolls because they were not gender appropriate.

I dislike Barbie because I [am] a boy. My sister has about a million, though. Sometimes I look at them to see what kind they are, what year they are, or what country they are supposed to represent. I never touched one when I was little. Mostly because I wasn't allowed to.

Other boys expressed the desire to play with the dolls.

I'm one of five boys so I didn't have any Barbies. If I did I would play like a family thing and how she has to take care of the family. I would have played with her by like having the guy go to work and the mom staying home and taking care of the kids and the house. I would have got a big house too.

Torture play with Barbie dolls was commonly reported by the boys. The dolls subject to such play were not personal possessions but belonged to sisters, cousins, or female playmates.

I have had many experiences with Barbie as I have a six-year-old sister. I have done experiments with Barbie. Can she fly out of a second story window? Is her hair flammable? And at Boy Scout camp every scout brought a Barbie, and we had a Barbie torture session. My job was to fuse Barbie and Ken together. We also burned her at the stake, upside down. I would attach the explosives to Barbie and watch what effects more explosives would do. I also launched them into the air and shot it with a slingshot.

Well, once I lit one on fire, tore off a head. I also would make her dress up as a GI Joe. I cut off her hair and drowned her and sent one to sea. I used to throw them out the window and at a wall and stuff. I melted her to a wall.

I just melted one in a microwave.

Young Adolescents' Views of Barbie

Many of the boys and girls reported believing that Barbie has an impact on girls' self-concept. Similar to others (La Ferle, 1997; Lord, 1995; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2000; Suhay, 2000; Turkel, 1998), participants disagreed on the influence of Barbie dolls on girls. Some reported the perception that Barbie dolls offer positive role models for girls. For example, one boy stated: "I think Barbie was a good role model for girls even though she was fake. She was pretty, lovable, could do any profession. Even though she was kind of anorexic. Barbie

gave girls a chance to imagine things and a chance to be anything they wanted to."

Some of the girls also reported perceiving Barbie as a positive role model because she exemplifies perfection.

I think Barbie is one of those things that never goes out of style. Barbie is a great doll for girls to play with when they are little. And even older women collect them. She is like the perfect person when you are little that everyone wants to be like. And girls want to dress her up and she is something that can be brought places and not worried about being broke. I don't think Barbie will ever be discontinued because it brings so much joy to so many small kids.

More commonly, the participants, boys and girls alike, reported perceiving Barbie dolls as poor role models for girls. Several of the boys, for example, mentioned that Barbie dolls might negatively influence girls' body image and health.

Barbie is not the best toy for girls because . . . Barbie has . . . the perfect style, and body, so that other girls would feel they want that too. When really girls would just try to lose weight and everything and forget about the importance of life.

Barbie dolls provide a false stereotype for people, as it is physically impossible to attain the same body size as a Barbie doll. There wouldn't be enough room for organs and other necessary things.

One boy argued that Barbie dolls are negative role models for girls, similar to other media standards of female beauty: "I blame Barbie for the Britney Spears and Jennifer Lopez craze. I also blame Barbie for the craze in implants and liposuction to become good looking. I also think that Barbie has made a demand . . . for beauty salons and operations to become beautiful."

Similarly, females perceived the toys as a dangerous influence on girls' perceptions of beauty, body image, and self-concept.

Barbie has this perfect body and now every girl is trying to have her body because they are so unhappy with themselves.

I think she is too thin and does not show the best example for young kids. Sometimes my friends when they were younger wanted to be like her because she was thin, now if they did they would die.

The body of a Barbie might make someone try to have a body of a Barbie which would be impossible.

Many of the girls reported ambivalent feelings toward Barbie dolls, fondly remembering playing with the toy, while simultaneously expressing dislike of the feminine image the doll represents.

When I was little I had the Barbie backpack and all. But as I got older I was embarrassed to tell people I like her. Now I think she is fun for little girls. I would still play with her if I had any but I just don't like the image she gives. No matter what friend she has, they're skinny with, forgive me when I say, biggish breasts. I think she's not as pretty as people make her out to be. Guys on the other hand think she is gorgeous, which is sickening. She's not natural or real in any capacity. Everything she does is so bubbly, no one is really that happy. Plus everything she has is pink. I don't like pink.

The doll's image as "perfect" is what most participants disliked most. Both boys and girls said she was too "fake." Barbie has branched out into different careers (e.g., pilot, astronaut) and maintained a sexualized image. The participants explained that the sheer number of careers and her physique make the doll appear phony.

Discussion

Similar to the findings of Study 1, those of Study 2 demonstrated that Barbie dolls were pervasive in the girls' experiences. Boys also reported experiences with the doll. Again, the girls reported playing imaginatively with Barbie dolls during childhood and enacting scripts of home life, fashion shows, dating, and weddings, as well as torture play, which suggests ambivalence toward the doll and the feminine sexualized image it represents. Boys reported joining female siblings in imaginative play with Barbie dolls, although many mentioned not being allowed to play with the doll. More commonly, the boys reported torture play in which they destroyed the dolls.

Research with adults has shown that there is disagreement on how Barbie dolls influence girls (Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2000; Rogers, 1999). The present results suggest that young adolescents share in the disagreement. The majority of participants argued that Barbie presents an unrealistic image of perfection that may harm girls' developing self-concept and body image. Some reported that Barbie dolls offer positive role models because they allow girls to imagine a variety of careers and practice female adult roles.

Like those of Study 1, the conclusions of Study 2 are limited given the small sample size. However, the present study offers a candid glimpse of young people's views of a controversial toy. The results

suggest that Barbie dolls are pervasive within girls' experience and that young adolescents believe the dolls may influence girls' developing self-concept.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Barbie dolls were pervasive in the experiences of both the young adolescent girls and boys surveyed. While girls generally reported imaginative play with Barbie dolls, boys tended to report destructive play and the disfiguring of Barbie dolls. The girls' reported experiences support the notion that play with Barbie dolls entails enacting adult social scripts, and perhaps shaping girls' developing self-concept through the internalization of stereotyped feminine scripts (Kline, 1993; Koste, 1995).

The girls in these studies reported that during late childhood and early adolescence, imaginative play with Barbie dolls became less appealing, and many reported disfiguring and damaging the dolls. Destructive play has been posited as a means of expressing anger and fantasy deemed inappropriate for public expression (Turkel, 1998). The disfigured Barbie doll may represent girls' views about their developing feminine self. Just as the girls leave behind and ignore their Barbie dolls for other play activities (or outright disfigure the dolls), so too may they forsake or damage their own feminine identity. The devaluation of Barbie dolls may symbolize girls' loss of voice and self, or their "silencing" (Freedman, 1986; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995; Turkel, 1998).

The present studies were exploratory in nature, enabling a qualitative examination of girls' and boys' beliefs about, and experiences with, Barbie dolls. Limitations of these studies include small sample sizes, the small number of questions posed, and the homogeneity of the samples. Further research may extend our understanding of the meaning of Barbie dolls and other gender-stereotyped toys for children's developing self-concept. Observations of young children's play, coupled with open discussions about their play, may yield new insight into how play reflects children's internalization of the adult world. Longitudinal research might examine developmental changes in children's and adolescents' play, and attitudes toward various toys, as well as how such changes are reflected in later gender roles.

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