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The insidious apartheid of thinking pink

Monica Dux

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BLUE for boys and pink for girls has long been a theme in baby clothes, but in recent years there has been a change in this convention. The colour coding of infants now seems to cut only one way.

Recently I conducted an experiment, walking my baby up and down a busy shopping strip. She was dressed in a lime-green hoodie and pink pants but before I set out I covered her pants with a grey blanket. The immediate assumption from all those who cooed at my infant was that she was a boy.

I then removed the blanket to reveal her pink pants and we walked up the other side of the street. This time everyone assumed that my daughter was a girl.

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It appears that the link between pink and girls is stronger than ever, while the link between boys and blue has weakened. No matter what colour a baby wears, the infant will typically be taken to be a boy, unless the ensemble includes some pink.

Walk into the baby section of most department stores and you'll be confronted by a wall of pink on one side, but no blue onslaught on the other. And this colour branding of girl children goes far beyond clothes. Many toyshops boast girls' sections that are virtually monochromatic.

It is no surprise that all the princess and fairy gear is pink and frilly, but this colour apartheid also extends to other toys - the toy washing machines, vacuum cleaners and toasters are also mostly pink, just in case you missed the point that domestic drudgery is for girls. Boys' toys come in virtually any colour except pink.

When I complain about this I'm sagely warned that one day my daughter will demand pink things, and I too will dress her like a stick of fairy floss. Because that's just what little girls like, isn't it? I don't doubt that at some stage my daughter will want to pinkify herself. But the idea that this is "natural" is ludicrous. The gender branding of girls in pink is cultural, not biological.

In her recent book *Delusions of Gender*, Cordelia Fine debunks most of the science purporting to show that male and female brains are hardwired differently, and that behavioural gender differences are therefore innate. Fine reveals how this science is so often flawed, inaccurate or exaggerated; trading on unwarranted assumptions and poor methodology.

The idea that girls innately prefer pink is just such a dubious scientific "fact", supported by a study that didn't prove any such thing, but was widely and uncritically reported as if it had.

Popular acceptance of such arguments, or "neurosexism", as Fine labels it, provides a powerful justification for the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and inequality. If we assume innate gender differences, then treat our female children accordingly from birth, it will have a profound impact on how they see themselves.

But is pinkification really likely to have such an impact? It's only a colour, after all.

We all know what pink stands for. It's not neutral, but is laden with sexist baggage, implying passivity, sweetness and hyper-femininity, not adventure, action and industry. When my daughter was born I was given a baby dress that had pink sequins sewn into it. Astonishingly, the label said "Not to be worn while sleeping", even though newborns do little else. Would any sane person put a baby boy in such a garment? People typically dress boy babies and toddlers for practicality and comfort, in clothes that are suited to rough and tumble; that are easy to wash and won't show stains.

So why isn't the same sensible policy extended to girls?

During my shopping trip experiment, I made another observation. When people thought my baby was a boy they said a variety of things about her - big, chubby, cute, alert, smiley. When they knew she was a girl there was one word that dominated: pretty. I suspect that the pinker, the frillier, the more sequinned her clothes, the more her prettiness would have been praised and emphasised. And perhaps this is exactly what parents are after when they dress their little girls, whether they are conscious of it or not.

Even if you reject these arguments, ask yourself this: isn't there something disquieting about the sheer ubiquity of pinkification? Isn't it odd that we are increasingly dressing our baby girls in a gender uniform when there is no similar uniform for boys?

If a custom becomes near universal there is a danger that we stop noticing it, so we never consider whether there might be an alternative. The colour coding of baby girls and toddlers is becoming such a custom; one that says a great deal about the way we socialise our children and what we teach them about gender.

Monica Dux is the co-author of *The Great Feminist Denial*.

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Christina Stead began writing *The Man Who Loved Children* towards the end of 1938. She was 36 years old and living in a dreary New York apartment with her partner, Bill Blake. In the 10 years since she had left Australia, most of which were spent in London and Paris, she had published four books of fiction that ranged in style and substance from baroque fabulism to a convoluted novel about banking.

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Lately I've been plagued by the creeping suspicion that everything that can be cooked has been cooked before. I've been busy brainstorming ideas for new recipes and whenever I come up with something novel or inspired (such as duck with a soy, Sichuan pepper and maple glaze), I will invariably discover that someone else has already had the same idea. Now I know my limitations. I'm no Heston Blumenthal and I don't see myself as much of a pioneer in the kitchen. But I can't help but feel a bit miffed that someone else always seems to have gotten there first.

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