Culture plays role in children's acceptance of gender-diverse peers

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"I thought this would be interesting ... because of this difference between Thai society and many other societies, where there isn't as much visibility and tolerance of gender diversity," says VanderLaan, the study's principal investigator and study site leader in Thailand.

"Specifically, I was curious about whether children from Thailand show the same biases against gender non-conformity that have been observed in the U.S., Canada, Netherlands, and now China. And the answer was no, they don't."

The research—co-authored by one of VanderLaan's former graduate students, as well as collaborators from China and research assistants at VanderLaan's field site in Thailand—included Chinese and Thai children between the ages of four and nine. VanderLaan and his colleagues also found that children from China preferred to be friends with other children of the same gender at a much earlier age, while Thai four-to-five year-olds showed no clear gender-related preferences.

However, VanderLaan says that Thai children between six and nine years-old preferred children who were of the same gender or who displayed same gender-typed toy play. Specifically, he says boys liked the boy playing with cars and trucks, or to a somewhat lesser extent, the girl who was playing with the cars and trucks. Meanwhile, girls in this age group liked the girl playing with the Barbie and dollhouse.

"I was surprised that the four- and five-year-olds in Thailand didn't show any gender-related peer preferences whatsoever," he says. "This is something that's often repeated in the literature and textbooks. When I teach my second-year course in developmental psychology and we talk about gender, the textbook says children very early on form gender-related peer preferences and they..."
often gender segregate when they play, but all that work had been done in a limited set of cultures. I would've expected that to replicate in Thailand, but it didn't," he says.

VanderLaan says he wanted to research this topic because he has previously studied children's gender expressions and mental health within western countries.

He says those studies consistently showed him that children whose behavior doesn't align with gender stereotypes for their culture tend to experience poorer peer relations, which correlated with mental health risk.

"It occurred to me that maybe understanding a little bit more about how children think about their peers' gender and their appraisal of peers' gender expression might be a way where we can start to think of possible roots for improving peer relations among kids of varying gender expressions, and that might help to ameliorate some of these mental health issues we're observing in these studies," he says, adding that the research also suggests that greater societal acceptance is related to how children think about gender diversity in their peers.

VanderLaan hopes the study will show the importance of our cultural values and beliefs about gender—and the importance of accepting gender-diverse people and making them more visible, which could create an environment where children will grow to be more accepting of their gender-diverse peers.

"Maybe somehow, (that would) contribute to ameliorating mental health risk for gender-diverse individuals," he says. "Children observe a lot about their world, and they're constantly observing and they have agency. Children are making sense of things on their own, drawing their own conclusions, and that's partly guiding their behavior."
