

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome to the Student Hub Live. This is our induction for childhood and youth studies. This session is called "Growing Up with Gender." And I'm joined by Naomi Holford and lots and lots of toys.

Naomi, I'm so pleased you've come along. You're a sociologist, and you study children and young people's gender identities and relationships. Fascinating, very, very topical. So I've got some questions that I wanted to talk to you about, and one of them actually was something I was reading the other day, which is this Googlegate thing--

**NAOMI
HOLFORD:**

KAREN FOLEY: --which was about coding and this whole idea about how girls can do this, boys can do this. And yet there's been a lot of change in terms of time. Steve was talking before about some of the issues that impact on gender and how things are really situated in a time and a place, and it's really important to bear that in mind. So I'm hoping we can introduce those ideas and have a discussion around this topic.

**NAOMI
HOLFORD:** Absolutely. Yeah. So I don't know how many people have followed this story about Google in the news. So this engineer, James Damore, wrote an internal memo which is basically saying that women aren't really suitable for working in tech. They may be a little bit too anxious, not really interested in that kind of area, and so a lot of the work that companies like Google are doing to bring women-- to get more women into science, engineering, computer science is basically a waste of time.

And it's trying to be maybe just politically correct. It's really denying a lot of what he said was real scientific fact. But I think what's quite interesting about that is really the range of scientific discussion. And also, just looking at the last, say, 50 years, computer programming actually used to be a very female-dominated field.

So there was there was a programme- sorry, a film- that came out quite recently, *Hidden Figures*, which was about black women's participation in the space programme. Great film. You should go and see it.

KAREN FOLEY: I've heard, yeah.

NAOMI
HOLFORD: What that really shows, I think, is that ideas of what work is suited to men, what work is suited to women can really change over time quite quickly. And also, that was at a time when computer programming was seen as quite a low-status job. It wasn't very well paid. And over the years, as it's become a bit more professionalised, a bit more highly regarded, higher paid, it's shifted very much to this idea that technology and computing is maybe a place that men are more suited for. But as we can see from the history, that's not necessarily how it is.

KAREN FOLEY: So there's question, then, about the extent to which gender is socially constructed and what's happening over time and trends that are happening over time. So we've asked you at home what you think. Gender preferences are innate- so is this something that we're born with?-- or is it social constructed, something that we shape over time? Where do you feel that you fit in terms of that scale?

We've also asked about portrayal of gender and roles in the media and whether that reinforces stereotypes. There's been a thing about the ASA recently and how they're trying to say, actually, in cleaning adverts, it shouldn't just be the women doing the cleaning. So the extent to which we're using gender in portrayals of roles in the media.

Also, we'd like to know your demographics, not that we're going to relate that together, but just because Steve mentioned that a lot of students studying on this pathway are female. So we'd like to know what your gender is, male, female, or other, and which category of age do you fit into. So please do fill those in when you can.

OK. So we've asked you that, and we've already had some results. You've been following them in very diligently. Let's see where you fit in terms of the gendered preferences scale.

So a lot of people are saying that it's socially constructed. There's quite a lot going on around the middle, and somebody also thinks- some students think that it's innate. Would you agree, then, this whole idea about gender being socially constructed is more current?

NAOMI I'm not saying correct, because I think it is very contested.

HOLFORD:

KAREN FOLEY: Right. Right.

NAOMI That's an interesting question. I think ideas about gender really do change over time. But it's

HOLFORD: not necessarily in a linear way, in a sense that we used to think that they were completely natural and now we think that they're entirely socially constructed. I think in some ways there's a lot of discussion around now that's maybe focusing on differences in the brain, neural imaging, that kind of thing, which I think is maybe shifting the ideas back to that idea of it being more innate, more inborn. So I don't think that it's necessarily a question of social construction as an idea of being the newest thing, if you know what I mean.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, no. You've brought some props along here, and right from day one, you've got these greeting cards. And actually, it wasn't quite as obvious before, but when you start thinking about it, we're labelling things right from day one in terms of greeting someone based on their gender as opposed to many other categories that we could be looking at.

NAOMI
HOLFORD: Yeah. So we've got here a couple of cards, which- Everyone knows you go into a shop, any kind of shop for children, you're going to see a section that's blue. Even if it's not labelled necessarily for boys, you kind of know what's going on there.

And that's maybe- in terms of toys, we've got a few examples around here. We've got maybe that are to do with construction, that are to do with fighting, that are to do with combat, toughness, that kind of idea, ideas that we have in society around masculinity. And then in the more pink section, we've got maybe more stuff related to beauty, stuff related to being more nurturing, being more nice, toy kitchens, that kind of thing- although I think one of the things I was talking with some of my colleagues about earlier is that something that's actually quite similar can be seen quite differently in terms of what gender it's for. So for instance, we've got here a Barbie.

KAREN FOLEY: All the dolls are available.

NAOMI
HOLFORD: Beautiful, yes. Yes, they certainly are. And so she's definitely a doll, and I think we all have ideas about who plays with Barbies, and it's mostly girls.

But here we've got a combat figure who you could say- it's a figure of a human. You can pose him. You can play with him. But you don't go around saying he's a doll. So it's just one of those areas where we have really quite strong ideas.

And I think what's interesting about a lot of these differences in preferences for toys is obviously, when you see children- everybody has stories about what their children enjoy to play with. If you go into- it's not as if adults are forcing these things on their children. A lot of

the time, it's things that children are really interested in themselves.

But I think what's really worth remembering is that kids at that age, especially at quite young ages, they're really keen on fitting into particular groups. They really overcategorise stuff. So there are studies that say that if you tell children a toy is for girls or for boys, then they're more likely to play with that toy. And that becomes even more strict if they know that other children are around.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, exactly. So it is this idea. We asked our audience what they thought about the portrayal of gender roles in the media. 88% of them agree that the media roles do reinforce stereotypes.

And I'm just mindful of the way that you're talking about where these toys are positioned in shops. We've talked about the cards and how you can get these categories, and there are the white categories. But equally, a lot of these toys will be positioned in different sections, even though arguably dolls are a category, but the way that we use those dolls can be very different.

John Lewis have recently announced that they're going to be a little bit more- well, they're not going to separate the gender identities in terms of girls' clothes and boys' clothes, which is a very bold move and one that actually, when you sit back and think about it, you think, well, why hasn't anyone done that before? Why are we still in this age where even though there are jeans, why do there have to be girls' jeans and boys' jeans when arguably they could be different cuts? So tell us about that and how that's shaping the way that maybe we're moving away from the stereotype. Is it possible that if we try to stop having the women doing the cleaning and the girls' jeans and the girls' department, will that ultimately have a shift in terms of how we view gender identities?

**NAOMI
HOLFORD:** I think it certainly can do. I think the John Lewis stuff is really interesting, because it's had such mixed reactions, some people saying this is really, really positive and some people saying, well, this is trying to force people into roles that they don't belong in, when it seems to me that it's exactly the opposite. The fact that you do often go into play schools, for instance, and see young children who are reluctant to openly play with toys or engage in things that are for the other gender. There's this whole range of things that they might be interested in, they might want to explore, and they're somehow restricted from doing that.

And I think one thing I wanted to discuss as well, really, is how these kind of things get shaped

by adults as well. And I think even the most liberal of us who think that we're not- we don't have any expectations, we want to bring up our children equally- I think everybody's got really strong implicit ideas about what gender should be, and that can really impact on how we treat our children. So for instance, if you ask parents to estimate-- so say that their infant is- before- they can kind of crawl, but they can't get around much more than that. If you give them a slope and you ask them to estimate how likely they are to be able to climb up the slope, basically they overestimate how strong, how adventurous their boy child is going to be, versus if they have a girl, they underestimate how- that's obviously despite any actual differences in there.

And there's a whole range of studies like this. So parents are more likely to talk a little bit more to girl infants, and adults, if they think that a baby is a boy, they're more likely to overestimate how strong it is, how tough it is.

KAREN FOLEY: So in the womb, from very early on, we're forming these perceptions, which inadvertently, I guess, will start shaping behaviour, because we have this epigenetic effect in terms of the gene-environment interaction. So to some extent, I guess people thinking those things-- that yes, a boy will be stronger, et cetera- will be shaping things, even, as you say, if we think that we aren't actually reinforcing those stereotypes. Naomi, you've sparked a lot of conversation. I want to take a quick trip to HJ on the hot desk.

NAOMI Absolutely.

HOLFORD:

HJ: Yeah, there's lots of great conversation. There's loads of different threads here. We've been having a bit of a chat about marketing and the role of media as well, and Laura says, "It's the adverts that drive me mad. It's insidious." And she also mentioned that there was a good PBC programme she recommended, "No More Boys and Girls," and apparently that's really interesting. So we'll have to bookmark that and check that out.

And Madeline said in her work they were advertising clothes sale and had a picture of a polo shirt on the guys' bathroom door and a dress on the girls' bathroom door to promote the sale, and she swapped it around, because the stereotypes just annoyed her as well. We've had a great question.

CLAUDIA: Yes. So Sam wanted to know what Naomi thought about your thoughts on gendered clothing, when you have like girls like planets and-- sorry, boys like planet clothes and girls like pink

stuff, and there's no crossover at all. So what did you think about that?

NAOMI

HOLFORD:

Yeah. I think that it would be great to have more dresses with dinosaurs on and for everybody to really be able to choose what they want. I think one of the issues is not that there are these different ways of expressing gender, but they're so polarised. And it does sometimes- not all the time, but it can be that clothes which are designed for boys are sometimes more comfortable, easier to get around in, maybe built for more active pursuits, whereas some of the girls' stuff is maybe more designed to look nice. And there's nothing wrong with looking nice.

KAREN FOLEY:

[INTERPOSING VOICES] So again, reinforcing these ideas.

NAOMI

Yeah.

HOLFORD:

KAREN FOLEY:

Yeah. Excellent. Naomi, you've sparked a great discussion, and unfortunately that's all we've got time for. But you've given us a wonderful flavour of some of these issues here and shown us about the different ways that we can look at things from the very obvious social constructions and highlighted how things can be a lot more subtle and nuanced. Insidious, I love that word, Laura. It's brilliant, absolutely fantastic. So thank you very much, Naomi Holford, for coming and talking to us about this today.

And we're going to talk about another very interesting issue, which is about children's digital lives, with Mimi Tatlow-Golden. And to give you some food for thought beforehand, we're going to play a short video about how children's phones are junk food marketers. So join us back in that next session after this short video break to talk to me about children's digital lives.

[MUSIC PLAYING]