

Objects in Play: Rhetoric, Gender, and Scientific Toys

Jordynn Jack

Abstract: *In the last 25 years, feminist scholars have worked tirelessly to recover women's rhetorical theories, productions, and actions that were historically excluded from histories of rhetoric. Rhetoric scholars, many of them feminist scholars, have also worked to address others who have been excluded from the rhetorical traditions. Here, I argue that children have also been largely excluded from rhetorical study. As the next step in the search for more inclusive rhetorical histories, I call here for feminist rhetors to consider rhetoric by children, rhetoric about children, and rhetoric for children. This article examines, in particular, how gendered identities develop in childhood. By studying childhood, we can see how gender and other hegemonic systems that constitute identities work, and we can identify potential disruptions and fissures in them. Since these systems are multivalent, to study them means to examine not only discourse and language but also material, temporal, and spatial arrangements. In this webtext, I conduct a comparative analysis of scientific toys and their marketing. I examine how these toys seek to inculcate a gendered habitus (visual, manual, or bodily ways of doing and being that are typically associated with a particular sex/gender), how marketing materials offer particular gendered roles for boys and girls playing with toys, and how toy makers have sought to develop social networks for boys and girls to participate in as users of the toy. I argue that, insofar as boys and girls are encouraged to play with different types of toys based on assumptions about their sexed abilities and gendered interests, they develop different kinds of knowledge, different ways of perceiving the world, and different kinds of skills. Yet, children's material compositions offer evidence of how children at play have the potential to disrupt, reproduce, or reconfigure a gendered habitus even as they are first learning them.*

Keywords: *rhetoric, gender, technology, objects, toys*



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Jordynn Jack is professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where she directs the Writing Program and teaches courses in rhetorical theory, rhetoric of science, women's rhetorics, writing in the natural sciences, and composition. Her scholarly work focuses on the rhetoric of science, women's rhetorics, and genre. She is the author of Science on the Home Front: American Women Scientists in World War II (University of Illinois Press, 2009) and Autism and Gender: From Refrigerator Mothers to Computer Geeks (University of Illinois Press, 2014), How Writing Works (Oxford, 2016), and an edited collection, Neurorhetorics (Routledge, 2012). Her articles have appeared in College English, College Composition and Communication, Rhetoric Society Quarterly, Rhetoric Review, Quarterly Journal of Speech, and Women's Studies in Communication.