The Eye of the Very Young Beholder: Sex Typing of Infants by Young Children

Susan Sterkel Haugh, Charles D. Hoffman, and Gloria Cowan
California State College, San Bernardino

HAUGH, SUSAN STEHKEL; HOFFMAN, CHARLES D.; and COWAN, GLORIA. The Eye of the Very Young Beholder: Sex Typing of Infants by Young Children. CHILD DEVELOPMENT, 1980, 51, 598-600. This study was designed to examine the effects of gender labeling on young children by determining the extent to which the qualities they attribute to an infant depend on whether that infant is identified as a girl or as a boy. 20 boys and 20 girls from each of 3- and 5-year-old age groups were shown a 5-min videotape of a boy and a girl infant engaged in a variety of activities. One of the infants was labeled a “boy” and the other a “girl,” with the labels reversed for half of the subjects. Each child was then asked to respond to a series of 12 bipolar adjectives, 9 representing sex-stereotypic dimensions, in a forced-choice manner. The major findings indicate that both 3- and 5-year-old children responded in a significantly stereotypic manner based on the gender labels provided for the infants, regardless of the infant’s actual gender. A simple concept-formation paradigm is proposed to account for these findings.

The age at which sex stereotypes are first learned, an issue of considerable importance to theories of sex-role development, is empirically unclear. Kuhn, Nash, and Brucken (1978), in a study of 2- and 3-year-olds, showed evidence of gender-role differentiation in many beliefs about roles and behaviors. These children, however, did not attribute such traditional gender-trait stereotypes as strength, intelligence, fear, kindness, speed, or quietness to one sex more often than the other. If 3-year-olds and/or 5-year-olds can use the concept of gender with its associated learned attributes to label infants in a stereotyped direction, strong evidence is provided for early learning of the concept of gender and its generalizability to concrete stimuli (e.g., babies)—not only for activities and role behaviors but also for more abstract trait categories.

Several studies (Condry & Condry 1976; Meyer & Sobieszek 1972; Rubin, Provenzano, & Luria 1974) have explored the effects of infant (or toddler) gender on adult assignment of sex-typed labels and have demonstrated that adults sex type infants. With adaptation of a forced-choice measure to study young children, the present study investigated the effects of assigned infant gender on 3- and 5-year-old children’s gender-trait attributions.

Eighty children, 20 boys and 20 girls from each of 3- and 5-year-old age groups, participated in the study. Three-year-olds ranged in age from 36 to 47 months ($M = 41$ months), and 5-year-olds ranged from 60 to 71 months ($M = 65$ months). The children were from two private preschools in San Bernardino, California, and represented varied racial, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

A videotape was created using a boy and a girl infant who were each 12 months old and selected on the basis of their similarity in overall appearance. Each infant was videotaped separately for 50 min, wearing the same terrycloth playsuit, playing with a specified assortment of toys, and displaying a wide variety of behaviors. The toys were seven non-sex-typed objects: a xylophone, picture books, a stuffed animal, nested cups, a puzzleball, a bowl with a lid, and a rubber mouse. The two videotapes were then edited into one 5-min tape composed of seven consecutive paired behavioral sequences, with each paired sequence depicting the infants each playing with the same toy for the same amount of time. The sequences were edited so as to match the behavioral activity and emotional expressions displayed by each infant when playing with each toy. The camera angle and distance were also

This article is based on a thesis submitted by Susan Sterkel Haugh to the Department of Psychology, California State College, San Bernardino, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the M.A. degree. Requests for reprints should be sent to Charles D. Hoffman, Department of Psychology, California State College, San Bernardino, California 92407.

taken into account to assure that each infant have the same number of close-up, distance, frontal, and angle poses. In a preexperimental test, pilot children who viewed the final videotape could not correctly identify the sex of the infant, choosing each infant as either the girl or the boy about equally often.

Half of the children within each age and sex group were randomly assigned to one of two control conditions in which either baby A was labeled the “boy” (Bobby) and baby B was labeled the “girl” (Lisa), or vice versa. Children viewed the videotape individually with the experimenter on a 16-inch TV monitor located in a room at their preschool. Before viewing the tape each child was told that she or he was going to view a short film of two babies, that one of the babies was a boy named Bobby and the other a girl named Lisa, and to watch very closely as they were going to be asked some questions about Lisa and Bobby later. As the child watched the first sequences of the videotape the experimenter identified the infants appropriately according to the condition to which the child was assigned. As the tape continued, the child was asked to identify each infant as Bobby or Lisa using a correction procedure. Children found this an easy task, and all children were able to label photographs of the infants appropriately after watching the entire 5 min.

Using these two photographs, the experimenter then questioned each child using the 12 bipolar adjective pairs chosen for the study. Nine of these adjective pairs were derived from and represent, in a simplified form for these young children, common attributes indicated as sex stereotyped by adults and by children in previous literature: big/little, mad/scared, fast/slow, strong/weak, nice/mean, quiet/loud, smart/dumb, awake/sleepy, soft/hard. The remaining three adjective pairs were selected to assess same-sex preferences and value judgments: happy/sad, fun to play with/not fun to play with, good/bad. Each child was asked, “Show me which baby is big [or small] by pointing to one of the pictures,” and immediately after choosing, the child was asked, “and which is small [or big]?” thus creating a forced-choice situation. Two separate random orders for presenting the adjective-pair list were utilized, and the presenting order for each adjective within a pair was randomized.

Across gender-label conditions the actual sex of the infant was found not to have significantly affected children’s choices on the nine sex-stereotypic bipolar adjectives. A three-factor between-groups analysis of variance on the number of sex-stereotypic choices, of nine possible, made by each child revealed no significant effects of age, sex, or control condition and no interactions.

An overall analysis of the number of sex-stereotypic and nonstereotypic choices made on the nine adjective pairs indicated that children made adjective choices in a sex-stereotypic manner based on the gender label of the infant, $\chi^2(1) = 92.45, p < .001$. Highly significant $\chi^2$ values ($df = 1, p < .001$, for each analysis) indicating sex-stereotyped responding were also obtained separately for each age and sex group. Across age and sex of the child, eight of the nine bipolar adjectives were responded to in a sex-stereotypic direction ($\chi^2$ values significant at or beyond the .05 level): big/little, mad/scared, fast/slow, strong/weak, nice/mean, quiet/loud, smart/dumb, soft/hard. Only two exceptions were noted: first, 3-year-old boys and girls chose the girl-labeled infant as stereotypically “quiet” significantly more often, $\chi^2(1) = 6.4, p < .025$, but 5-year-olds did not; second, boys chose their same-sex-labeled infant as stereotypically “smart” significantly more frequently, $\chi^2(1) = 6.4, p < .025$, and girls did not.

Choices were also examined for the three remaining non-sextyped bipolar adjective pairs. Three-year-old boys and girls chose the infant labeled with their own sex as “happy” rather than “sad,” $\chi^2(1) = 10.0, p < .005$, but 5-year-old boys and girls tended to choose the boy-labeled infant as “happy,” $\chi^2 = 3.6, p < .10$. Only 3-year-old girls made choices that differed from chance on the good/bad pair, choosing the girl-labeled infant as “good” more frequently, $\chi^2(1) = 12.8, p < .001$. Finally, across age, boys and girls both chose the infant labeled with the same sex as their own as “fun to play with” rather than “not fun to play with,” $\chi^2(1) = 18.05, p < .001$.

Children as young as 3 are sex stereotyping infants—"ascribing personal attributes on the basis of a target’s perceived membership in a gender-based social category” (Ashmore & Del Boca 1979, p. 236). Further, no developmental differences were found; these stereotypes are as well learned and elicited at age 3 as at 5. These findings extend the work of Kuhn et al. (1978), who found stereotyping as early as 2 and 3 but did not find significant stereotyping on a number of the more dispo-
tional, rather than role- or activity-based, dimensions, which were significant in this study.

The simple act of labeling infants with gender-typed first names elicits responses of learned attributes associated with gender-category labels. Thus, early sex stereotyping may represent a fairly direct concept-formation task: attributes are attached to the gender categories, and any stimulus that elicits the gender category, such as physical features, clothing, a genderized first name, designation “boy” or “girl,” elicits a potentially broad set of associated attributes. Stereotype acquisition is one component of sex-role acquisition, and it is as yet unclear how acquisition and stimulus generalization of stereotypes directly enter into the larger process of sex-role learning. The learning of dispositional stereotypes by 3 years of age supports those theorists attempting to build cognitive models of early sex-role acquisition (e.g., Constantinople 1979). For simple concept learning, a fully developed sense of self or gender identity (or constancy) would not be a necessary condition for sex typing. In any case, gender saliency has a basis in early development.

References


Constantinople, A. Sex-role acquisition: in search of the elephant. *Sex Roles, 1979, 5*, 121–133.


This document is a scanned copy of a printed document. No warranty is given about the accuracy of the copy. Users should refer to the original published version of the material.