Adult Interpretations of Child Behavior

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This study extends an earlier study (Meyer & Sobieszek, 1972) of the effects of the sex of a child on adult interpretations of its behavior. Videotapes of two 17-month-old children were shown to a sample of 69 adults, who were asked to rate each child's behavior on a number of sex-linked adjectives. Half of the time the sex of the child was wrongly misdescribed. Results from the present study support most findings of the earlier research. Female subjects, especially those reporting high contact with children, described children as possessing fewer stereotypical characteristics of their attributed sex than did male subjects. In addition, males and females attributed more of any qualities to same-sex children and also liked same-sex children more. Males also are more confident in rating same-sex children, while females are somewhat likelier to express more confidence in their ratings of male children.

Interest in the development of sex differences and in the acquisition of sex-linked behavior has increased during the past several years. This article reports results of an extension of an earlier study testing two competing hypotheses about adult interpretations of child behavior as a function of perceived sex of the child. The previous study and other recent experiments are reviewed and the modified hypotheses drawn from them are presented and evaluated with new data.

In the earlier study, Meyer and Sobieszek (1972) investigated the effects of the perceived sex of a child on adult ratings of child behavior. The authors considered two contrasting views of sex-role development presented in Maccoby (1966). One of these views is essentially a stereotyping view: Adults are more likely to rate a child’s behavior as masculine if the child is perceived as male,
and as feminine if the child is perceived as female (see, for example, Mead, 1934). The other view is derived from a social learning framework: Adults respond to child behavior in terms of the situated social identity attributed to the child, reinforcing appropriate behavior and restricting inappropriate behavior (see Mischel, 1966). Hence a behavior may be seen as present in the child only if it is inappropriate. The authors argued that this line of reasoning leads to adults seeing child behavior as less distinctive of sex-role qualities if the child occupies that role.

To test these ideas, videotapes of two 17-month-old children playing were shown to a sample of middle-class adults, who were asked to rate the children on a set of adjectives. Half the time the sex of the child was misdescribed to the subjects. Subjects were 85 adults, 44 males and 41 females. About half of each sex were recruited from parents of children in a university nursery school, and half from unmarried college students. Parents were defined as having high contact with children, and unmarried students as having low contact. Two sorts of analysis were performed on the data. To test the stereotyping versus social learning viewpoint, the authors examined differences in masculine ratings between each of the contact and sex groups. The data were not significant under an analysis of variance; however, the findings were fairly regular. Males and those with low contact with children were more likely to stereotype child behavior, attributing male qualities such as aggression or sturdiness to male children and female qualities such as receptivity or cooperativeness to female children. Females and those with high contact with children showed the opposite tendency. They saw child behavior as having fewer sex-role qualities if the child was perceived to occupy that sex role.

The second analysis explored the possibility that adults attribute more of any qualities, masculine or feminine, to same-sex children. This unanticipated finding showed a significant effect of subject's sex and a significant interaction effect between subject's sex and child description. Males were more likely to attribute any quality to male children than to female children; females attributed more qualities to both sexes than did males; and females attributed more qualities to female children than to male children.

These findings suggest that males and females behave differently in their roles as sex-role socializers. Even males with low contact with children behave differently from females with low contact with children, so that degree of contact alone does not account for the differences. The data also suggest that the sex of the child interacts with the sex of the adult to produce differences in the interpretation of child behavior and possibly in the behavior of the adult towards the child.

Evidence that males and females interpret child behavior differently no matter what the degree of contact with children may also be found in a study conducted by Fagot (1973). She asked 45 childless men and 57 childless women aged 20 to 25 (comparable to Meyer and Sobieszek's low contact groups) to rate a list of 38 toddler behaviors as appropriate to 2-year-old boys or 2-year-