Infant Clothing: Sex Labeling for Strangers

Madeline Shakin  
*State University of New York at Stony Brook*

Debra Shakin  
*Albany Law School*

Sarah Hall Sternglanz  
*State University of New York at Stony Brook*

Labeling an infant as a boy or girl affects behavior toward the infant. While intimates know a baby's sex label and behave consistently to the baby, strangers cannot unless given a cue. Forty-eight infants and their caretakers were observed in suburban malls to see if clothing normally provides such cues; 90% of the infants were dressed in sex-typed clothes. Girls wore or carried pink (75%), yellow, ruffles, puffed sleeves, and/or dresses. Boys wore blue (79%) and/or red. Observers were able to correctly guess the sex of "labeled" infants only. Surprisingly, simultaneous caretaker interviews revealed that parents do not spontaneously mention sex as a factor in clothing choice, nor do they feel they would be very bothered by strangers' mistaking the infant's sex.

It has been well established that the sex label applied to a child affects the treatment of the child by family and strangers, children and adults. This label may be verbal or nonverbal (e.g., clothes). Dressing the infant in sex-typed as opposed to androgynous clothing is the simplest method of sex labeling infants for strangers. It has been reported that parents dress infants in sex-typed clothing in research settings, but how often such labels are used

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2 Correspondence should be sent to Sarah Hall Sternglanz, Psychology Department, State University of New York at Stony Brook, Stony Brook, New York 11794.
in more ordinary situations has not been established. This question and others are answered through a naturalistic observational and interview study, carried out in a public setting.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that adults express different attitudes and expectations about male and female infants. Adults also interact in different ways with boys and girls, even when verbalized attitudes appear similar (e.g., Rothbart & Maccoby, 1966; Goldberg & Lewis, 1969; Rubin, Provenzano, & Luria, 1974; Seavey, Katz, & Zalk, 1975; Will, Self, & Datan, 1976; Frisch, 1977; C. Smith & Lloyd, 1978; Fagot, 1978; Culp, Cook, & Housley, 1983; Condry, Condry, & Pogatshnik, 1983). The attitudinal and behavioral differences seen (e.g., girls are pretty, girls are offered dolls) are consistent with traditional sex roles. This role-traditional treatment of infants occurs even when the sex-role label used is false (e.g., when an experimenter dresses a boy in pink or calls a girl Adam); thus, the sex-differentiated treatment is apparently not determined by unknown differences in the behavior of male and female infants.

K. Smith and Barclay (1979) and Haugh, Hoffman, and Cowan (1980) have demonstrated that adults are not the only ones who sex stereotype behavior toward infants. Descriptive sex stereotyping of an infant was found in children of preschool and kindergarten age. According to Smith and Barclay (1979), "these preconceived ideas [of the children] override the actual physical and behavioral characteristics of the infant in question" (p. 517).

Personal investment in the development of the child or sex-role appropriate behavior by the infant is not necessary. This behavior is seen in strangers, nonparents, new parents (who might be classed as near-strangers), as well as in more experienced parents who are dealing with their own children. We know, then, that when someone interacts with a child and a sex label is available, the label functions to direct the behavior along the lines of traditional sex roles. How often in "real life" is such a label available?

Within the family, the sex label of the child is well known, and in conversation with acquaintances and friends the child's sex may be announced unobtrusively via pronouns or a sex-typed first name. A third form of labeling is required if one wishes to announce sex to strangers. A likely candidate for this role is clothing. Infant clothing has frequently been used by experimenters as one of the clues which elicit adults' sex-typed behavior toward infants (e.g., Frisch, 1977; Condry et al., 1983; Culp et al., 1983). We also know that at least in some situations parents dress their children in sex-typed clothing. Brooks and Lewis (1974) observed that parents of opposite-sex twins dressed them in sex-typed clothing in a research setting. Colors such as pink for girls and blue for boys were especially identified, even though many of the twins wore androgynously styled outfits (e.g., overalls). Brooks and Lewis noted that the difference in clothing between same-sex twins was not as great or frequent. In this special