Children in grades 2–10 (200 of each sex) assigned desirable and undesirable traits to girls or boys. Half the subjects had an additional option of both sexes. Children in all grades assigned more desirable traits to their own sex and more undesirable traits to the opposite sex, in line with Smith (1939). Both sexes became less positive toward their own sex and more positive toward the opposite sex with increasing age. This pattern also had characterized girls in Smith's study, whereas, boys had shown the opposite pattern. Beginning in the sixth grade, girls were more apt than boys to assign desirable traits to their own sex. Availability of the “both sexes” option decreased stereotyping, especially in girls.

In a study which still is cited frequently (Baruch & Barnett, 1975; O'Leary, 1977; Weitzman, 1979), Smith (1939) found that children between the ages of 8–14 years viewed their own sex more positively than the opposite sex. With increasing age, however, both sexes increasingly attributed desirable traits to boys and undesirable traits to girls. Despite extensive examination of sex-role stereotypes and preferences in the past few years, Smith's 45-year-old study of the development of sex biases appears not to have been replicated. Two recent studies (Silvern, 1977; Zalk & Katz, 1978) confirmed Smith's finding that children perceive their own sex more positively than the opposite sex. Neither study, however, examined the course of development of sex biases throughout middle childhood and early adolescence, as Smith did (Silvern's subjects were fourth and
sixth graders; Zalk and Katz tested second and fifth graders). Does increasing devaluation of females during childhood still occur despite the more egalitarian social climate of recent years? In order to investigate this question, this study re-examined the development of sex biases in middle childhood and adolescence. As in Smith's (1939) study, sex biases were assessed by asking children to attribute desirable and undesirable traits to girls or boys.

Researchers measuring sex-role stereotypes or preferences frequently have required subjects to ascribe traits either to males or to females. This forced-choice approach may yield an inflated impression of stereotyping or preference because there is no provision for traits to be ascribed equally to both sexes (see Brush et al., Note 1). While a few recent studies have provided a third alternative of "both sexes" or "same" along with the male and female options (Edelbrock & Sugawara, 1978; Flrex et al., 1976; Silvern, 1977; Brush et al., Note 1), direct comparisons between the two-choice and three-choice approaches appear to be lacking. Thus, a second purpose of this study was to examine how children's attributions of traits to girls and boys are influenced by adding a neutral, i.e., "both sexes," option to the female and male options.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 400 white middle-class public school students from the second, fourth, sixth, eighth, and tenth grades of a public school district in a small central Illinois city. Mean ages ranged from 7.7–15.6 years. Forty males and 40 females were tested at each grade level. The second, fourth, and sixth graders were drawn from three elementary schools. The eighth and tenth graders were drawn, respectively, from the one junior high school and the one high school which serve the school district.

Sex Bias Measure

Sex biases were measured by means of a questionnaire that tapped beliefs about the applicability of 29 traits, 15 desirable and 14 undesirable, to males and females (see Table I). These traits were selected from the 33 traits used by Smith (1939). The desirability or undesirability of the traits had been determined by the unanimous agreement of 17 experienced teachers. Four desirable traits were eliminated because they either were synonyms or antonyms of other traits used in the study, and would have resulted in pairs of items with nearly identical wording. Two of these traits had been attributed to girls by both sexes