

## Baby X

### The Effect of Gender Labels on Adult Responses to Infants<sup>1</sup>

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*The present study investigated adult behavior while interacting with a three-month-old infant under conditions in which the child was introduced as a boy, as a girl, or with no gender information given. Gender labels did not elicit simple effects, but rather interacted significantly with the sex of the subject on both toy usage and physical contact measures. There was a stronger tendency for both male and female adults to utilize sex-stereotyped toys when the child was introduced as a girl. Most of the findings, however, reflected a differential response of men and women to the absence of gender information. In this condition, male subjects employed a neutral toy most frequently and handled the child least; in contrast, females used more stereotyped toys and handled the child more. All subjects attempted to guess the gender of the child (with "boy" guesses more frequent, although the child was actually female) and all justified their guess on the basis of stereotyped behavioral or physical cues like strength or softness.*

A child's gender significantly affects interacting adults along many dimensions. Substantial evidence exists in both the psychological and popular literature that boys and girls are responded to in different ways, ranging from the particular types of personality traits and skills which are encouraged or discouraged, to the kinds of play and reading materials that are provided by parents and teachers (Bandura, 1960; Sears, Rau & Alpert, 1965; Mischel, 1970). The most common interpretation of such differences is that they reflect differential societal expectations as to what constitutes appropriate masculine and feminine behavior.

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Much of the data documenting differential treatment of girls and boys is based upon nursery school and school age samples, where adult teaching of appropriate sex-role behavior is frequently conscious and deliberate. Some recent evidence suggests, however, that differential handling may occur in early infancy, as well, but at a more subtle level, and typically without parental awareness (Lewis, 1972; Moss, 1967). Lewis found, for example, that mothers initially touch male infants more, but verbalize more frequently to female infants. Moreover, this behavior pattern reverses itself by six months of age, when female infants are handled with greater frequency.

The determinants underlying these behavioral patterns remain to be unraveled, since adult expectations and attitudes are but one possible factor. Another frequently espoused position which attempts to account for differential treatment of boys and girls suggests that adult responses are attributable to differences in children's behavior. This view receives support from studies which have found sex differences, even at the neonatal level, in such areas as activity level and reactivity (Weller & Bell, 1965; Bell & Darling, 1965; Baumel & Lewis, 1971). Thus, this view is that parents behave differently toward boys and girls not because of preconceived expectations, but because children are, in fact, behaviorally different.

Disentangling the effects of variations in baby behaviors from parental expectations in an ongoing, natural relationship is almost impossible. The purpose of the present investigation was to assess how adults (nonparents) interact with an infant in an experimental setting in which adults' gender information about the same infant varies. In one condition, the child was introduced as a girl; in another, as a boy; and in a third, no gender information was given. Inclusion of the third condition was prompted in part by a children's story appearing in *Ms.* magazine about "Baby X" (Gould, 1972). In this story, the author whimsically depicts the adventures and frustrations experienced by a family who refuse to divulge the gender of their child. Although the story was a science fiction fantasy, the question of how adults would actually respond to a child in the absence of such information appeared to merit investigation. Thus, the purpose of the present study was twofold: (1) to examine whether a brief interaction with an infant differs as a function of whether the interacter was told it was male or female and (2) to assess whether behavior is affected by not having gender information.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

The subjects were 42 nonparent volunteers who were selected from the academic, business, and secretarial populations of the Graduate Center of the

City University of New York. Subjects were asked if they wished to participate in a study involving infants' responses to strangers. The degree of participation was 75%. The sample was half male, half female, and predominantly white and middle-class. The majority were graduate students. The sample was restricted to nonparents in order to avoid already established behavioral sets in interacting with children. The sample ranged in age from 21 to 48, with most subjects in their middle 20s.

### Procedure

Subjects were observed individually in a small laboratory room which was equipped with a one-way mirror and an adjacent observation room containing audio- and videotape equipment. A three-month-old white female infant, dressed in a yellow jumpsuit, served as the social stimulus. At the start of the session, she was placed on a quilt in one corner of the room. Three toys were placed on the floor above the baby's head — a small rubber football, a Raggedy Ann doll, and a flexible plastic ring.

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: Male, Female, or Neutral. Those in the Male and Female conditions were told that there was a three-month-old baby *boy* or baby *girl* (with a typical male or female name) to play with, while those in the Neutral condition were told there was a three-month-old *baby* with no mention of its sex or name. Subjects were told that the experimenters were investigating infants' responses to strangers and were asked simply to play naturally with the infant.

The observation session lasted for three minutes. During this time, twelve observations were made at 15-second intervals. The following behaviors were recorded and rated: choice of toy; touching, holding, kissing, and smiling at baby.

Following the three-minute observation, two female graduate student observers in an adjacent observation room (who were not aware of the experimental condition) rated each subject's interaction with the infant as to degree of comfort, responsiveness, friendliness, verbalness, degree of physical contact, and

Table I. Mean Frequency of Toy Usage

Sex of subject	Condition	Toy		
		Football	Doll	Teething ring
Male	Boy label	.33	.72	.61
	Girl label	.50	1.61	.94
	No label	.85	.71	1.42
Female	Boy label	.57	.71	1.00
	Girl label	.50	1.27	1.05
	No label	.40	1.23	.70

warmth. At the conclusion of the play session, the subject was taken to another adjacent room and asked to rate the baby as to degree of passivity, happiness, friendliness, precocity, responsiveness, physical attractiveness, and warmth. The adult was also asked to rate him- or herself in terms of comfort with the baby. In each case, a five-point rating scale was used. Those in the Neutral condition were further asked to indicate which sex they thought the baby was.

## RESULTS

### *Toy Usage*

A repeated-measures analysis of variance (Condition  $\times$  Sex of Subject  $\times$  Toy  $\times$  Minute of Observation) was conducted on the average frequencies of toy usage over the three-minute observation period. This analysis revealed the main effects of Toy and Minute of Observation and the interaction of Condition  $\times$  Sex of Subject  $\times$  Toy to be significant:  $F(2, 289) = 4.56, p < .05$ ;  $F(4, 289) = 2.87, p < .05$ , respectively. The main effect of Toy revealed that the doll was used most frequently, the plastic teething ring next most frequently, and the football least. The Minute of Observation effect revealed that toy usage in general decreased as the interaction continued. The mean toy usage for the first, second, and third minutes were .95, .94, and .61, respectively. The means involved in the significant interaction are presented in Table I.

As can be seen in Table I, the interaction is a complex one. Contrary to expectation, the small plastic football was not utilized more in the male-name condition, although this may be partially attributable to the relative unpopularity of that particular toy for the age of the child used. With regard to doll usage, however, toy choices appear to be more stereotypical. Both the male and female subjects employed the doll with greatest frequency when the infant was introduced as a girl baby. This trend is more pronounced for the males, since the females also used the doll frequently in the no-name condition. Choices of the neutral toy also appeared to be related to sex of subject, particularly for the no-name condition. The male subjects appear to take the "safest" course in choosing the neutral toy more frequently for the "neuter" condition, whereas the female adults tend to choose either the football or the doll more frequently for the no-gender-information condition. Thus, it would appear that both the sex of the subject and the gender label affect toy choices.

### *Physical Contact*

The mean number of times contact was made with the infant in each condition is shown in Table II. Since the maximum score possible was 12, it can be seen that the adults interacted physically quite a bit with the infant. An analysis

Table II. Mean Frequency of Physical Contact

Sex of subject	Condition	Physical contacts during 12 observations
Male	Boy label	10.67
	Girl label	9.00
	No label	7.86
Female	Boy label	10.00
	Girl label	9.67
	No label	11.70

of variance of these scores revealed a significant Sex of Subject  $\times$  Experimental Condition interaction,  $F(2, 36) = 3.52, p < .05$ . As can be seen in the means of the interaction in Table II, this Sex of Subject interaction is primarily attributable to the differential responses of males and females to the neutral condition. In the absence of gender information, female adults make more contact with the baby, whereas male adults make less contact. Thus, it appears that the absence of a gender label is a stronger determinant of physical contact than the particular label used, and operates in reverse ways for male and female adults.

#### *Rating Scales*

No significant differences emerged in either the observers' or the subjects' ratings. Thus, subjects did not consciously evaluate the infants differently under the various conditions, nor did raters evaluate the affective tone of their interaction differentially. There was, however, a nonsignificant tendency for female adults to be rated as warmer, more verbal, and more comfortable with the infant.

#### *Postexperimental Conceptions of Neutral-Group Subjects*

Fifty-seven percent of the male subjects and seventy percent of the female subjects in the no-name condition thought the infant was a boy. No behavioral differences emerged, however, when subjects who guessed boy were compared with those who guessed girl, although this may be due to the small number of subjects. Moreover, it is not clear whether the subjects were actually operating on their assumption from the beginning of the experimental session. It is interesting to note that subjects were easily able to find cues which supported their gender guess. Thus, those who believed the baby to be a boy noted the strength of the grasp response or the lack of hair, whereas those who believed the infant was female remarked about the baby's roundness, softness, and fragility.

## DISCUSSION

The most salient finding of the present investigation is that adults interact differently with the same infant as a function of the gender label used or its absence. These effects were evident on both toy choice and physical handling indices. The effects obtained, however, were not simple ones, since they frequently varied with the sex of the adult subject. The only condition that elicited a relatively straightforward effect was the one in which the infant was introduced as female. Within that condition, both males and females utilized the doll most frequently. Under the no-name condition, however, men and women exhibited differential toy choice and contact behavior. Male subjects responded to the "genderless" child by using the neutral toy and handling the child less; females, on the other hand, chose sex-stereotyped toys more, and made more physical contact with the child.

A point to keep in mind with regard to these results is that the subjects used were all relatively sophisticated. It may well be that a less educated population would show stronger sex stereotyping behavior in all areas as a function of the gender label used. Although the adults appeared to accept the investigator's rationale for the study (i.e., to investigate a baby's reactions to strangers), it is possible that their high awareness of Women's Liberation issues influenced their interaction with the infant under the male- and female-label conditions, i.e., they may well have been trying to demonstrate their liberalness. Use of a similar experimental paradigm with other types of populations would yield important data concerning the effects of sex-role issues on adult behavior.

Despite the degree of sophistication of the present subjects, however, subtle behavioral differences were obtained, although verbal ones were not. It is the belief of the present investigators that these results can be most parsimoniously explained by considering the no-name condition a somewhat stressful one for adults. Many of the subjects did, in fact, inquire as to the baby's sex, to which the experimenter replied that she was not certain which baby was being run. In response to the stress of not having gender information available (a condition that differs quite a bit from nonlaboratory circumstances), males responded by distancing themselves from the stimulus infant and females responded by increasing closeness. The finding that subjects did, in fact, make sex attributions in the Baby X condition (interestingly, more guessed male), and justified these choices on the basis of stereotypical cues (e.g., strength of baby, fragility, etc.) suggests that gender labels and their associated expectations are deeply ingrained, even in individuals who try hard to be liberated. The findings suggest further that variations in baby behavior may be less important than adult expectations in determining interactions, at least at very early developmental levels.

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## **Baby X Revisited**

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*The present study is a replication of a study reported by Seavy, Katz, and Zalk (1975) in which subjects interacted with a 3-month-old female infant who was either introduced as a boy, a girl, or without any specific gender information. In the present study infants of both genders were used as stimuli, and 60 college undergraduates served as subjects. The results of the present study are similar to the findings of the original investigators. The gender labels provided to the subject resulted in highly sex-stereotyped behavior concerning toy choice.*

From the moment of gender assignment at birth, the social world interacts differentially with the developing individual, depending on her or his gender. This has been documented in numerous empirical studies. For example, several studies have shown that parents give boys of preschool and elementary school age much more freedom to roam in the physical environment without special permission or adult accompaniment than is the case for girls of the same age (Landy, 1965; Nerlove, Munroe, & Munroe, 1971; Saegert & Hart, 1977). Rheingold and Cook (1975), in examining the rooms of children from age 1 month to 6 years, found boys had more categories of toys. Both Rheingold and Cook, and Rosenfeld (1975) found that boys were given toys which elicit more competence behavior than toys given girls. Several studies (Bronson, 1971; Gesell, 1942; Goldberg & Lewis, 1969; Jacklin, Maccoby, & Dick, 1973; Liebert, McCall, & Hanratty, 1971; Montemayer, 1976; Stein, Pohly, & Mueller, 1971) show that after being presented with "gender appropriate" toys, children spend more time playing with them, develop competence in their use, and gradually perform better, in general, at tasks and play labeled as gender appropriate.



Researchers have consistently found that parents stimulate and respond more to gross motor behavior in infant sons than in infant daughters (Lewis, 1972; Moss, 1967; Tasch, 1952; Yarrow, Rubenstein & Pederson, 1971). Empirical research has also shown that girls are treated as if they were more fragile, both by mothers (Minton, Kagan, & Levine, 1971) and fathers (Pederson & Robson, 1969). Several studies (e.g., Fling & Manosevitz, 1972; Lansky, 1967) show that parents are extremely upset by any sign that their boys are "sissies," while girls are encouraged to be neat and obedient and to be "feminine" in both behavior and dress.

Boys are consistently more likely to be punished by spanking and other forms of physical punishment (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974), while girls generally receive soft-voiced verbal reprimands (Servin, O'Leary, Kent, & Tonick, 1973). Rubin, Provenzano, & Luria (1974) found that parents describe their newborn infant's physical attributes and personality in sex-stereotyped ways within 24 hours of the child's birth. Williams, Bennett, and Best (1975) found that kindergarten children show knowledge of sex-role stereotypes both verbally and behaviorally.

Indeed, even among the general public, there is little disagreement with the suggestion that boys and girls are typically treated differently. A far more controversial question, however, is, Ought they to be? The answer to this question is generally grounded in one of two conflicting assumptions about the essential differences or lack of differences between males and female.

Those who argue that the nature of the developing individual's socialization ought not be dependent on her or his gender usually suggest that except for differential reproductive functions, persons of either gender are essentially similar and that the observable gender-linked differences in attitudes and behavior are the result of differential socialization (e.g., Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Laws & Schwartz, 1977; Lunney, 1978).

Those who urge that society continued differential socialization of males and females typically argue that males and females have distinctly different underlying personalities which are necessary, adaptive, and logically follow from their differing functions in reproductive behavior. Differential socialization, then, is seen as logical and necessary in order to produce in the individual attitudes and behaviors which reflect her or his biological reproductive role within society. This position assumes that males and females are essentially quite different, independent of socialization. For example, Goldberg (1973) states; "the stereotype that sees the male as more logical than the female is unquestionably correct in its observation and probably correct in its assumption that the qualities observed conform to innate sexual limitations analogous to those relevant to physical strength" (p. 204). Nash (1979) also presents this position clearly; stating that "parents have different behaviors *elicited* from them by boys and by girls and these differential responses tend further to augment sex-appropriate behavior" (p. 197).

One study which addresses this issue was conducted by Seavey, Katz, and Zalk (1975). In this study the behavior of adults was investigated while they interacted with a 3-month-old female infant. The infant was introduced either as a boy, a girl, or without any gender information. A football, doll, and teething ring (gender neutral) were available for use during the interaction. Subjects generally made sex-stereotyped choices, especially when the infant was introduced as a female. Overall, the authors of the original study note, "The most salient finding of the present investigation is that adults interact differently with the same infant as a function of the gender label used or its absence" (p. 108).

One shortfall of the original study, however, was the use of only one infant and consequently only one gender as stimulus. It could be hypothesized that while a systematic effect could be obtained by varying the gender label of a female infant, this would not hold true for a male infant. The present study is essentially a replication of the toy choice paradigm used in the original study, using infants of both genders.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

Subjects were 60 undergraduate students at Hunter College of the City University of New York. Thirty-five (58%) female, and 25 (42%) male, subjects were approached in the cafeteria and at other locations on campus and asked to participate in a study concerning "young infants' responses to strangers." Subjects ranged in age from 17 to 45 years, with the mean age being 26, and most (over 80%) being in their 20s. The racial composition of the sample included Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Orientals, but was approximately 50% White.

### *Procedure*

Subjects were brought into the main laboratory room and were instructed to interact with a young infant, who was placed in one corner of the room on a blanket. Subjects were told that the study concerned the responses of infants to strangers and were encouraged to talk with, play with, touch, and pick up the infant. Subjects were then escorted to the area of the room where the infant was located. In this area, but out of reach of the infant, was located a small toy football, a doll, and teething ring (gender neutral).

The entire interaction of each subject with the infant was monitored via a closed-circuit TV camera and recorded on videotape for subsequent analysis. Interactions between subjects and infants ranged from somewhat over 1 minute

to nearly 4 minutes, with a mean of 2 minutes and 37 seconds.<sup>1</sup> The session was terminated shortly after the subject had chosen a toy and started to interact with the infant using the toy selected.

The stimulus infants were all similarly dressed in undershirts and diapers so that no gender cues would be provided by their clothing. Two male infants and one female infant were used, ranging from 3 to 11 months in age, with a mean age of 6.6 months. Twenty-two trials were conducted with the female infant, and 38 trials were conducted with the male infants.<sup>2</sup>

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: male label, female label, or neutral (no gender information provided). Those in the male and female conditions were told that they would be interacting with a \_\_\_-month-old baby boy named Johnny or a \_\_\_-month-old baby girl named Jenny. Those in the neutral condition were told that they would be interacting with a \_\_\_-month-old baby. Subjects were provided with the correct age of the particular infant. As in the 1975 study, if a subject in the neutral condition asked the infant's gender, he or she was told by the experimenter: "I'm really not sure which infant we are using today."

At the conclusion of the play session, the subject was taken to another area, debriefed, and told the purpose of the experiment. Those in the gender-neutral condition were also asked to indicate which sex they thought the baby was and then informed of the stimulus infant's actual gender.

## RESULTS

As can be seen in Table I, the gender labels provided to the subject resulted in highly sex-stereotyped behavior concerning toy choice during the interaction. A five-way analysis of variance was carried out for Assigned Gender  $\times$  Real Gender  $\times$  Subject's Sex  $\times$  Subject's Race  $\times$  Subject's Age. Only assigned gender had a significant effect on toy choice,  $F(2, 59) = 5.423, p = .016$ . There were no significant higher order interactions.

In the present study toy choice was highly influenced by gender label. When the infant was designated as male, 50% of male subjects and 80% of female subjects chose the football. The effect for choice of the football in the male gender label conditions was more pronounced in the present study than in the 1975 study. This may be due to the use of undergraduate subjects rather than graduate students. The original study used graduate students, who may have been more sophisticated or more experienced with infants and may have reasoned that a soft Raggedy Ann doll was a more appropriate toy for a young infant,

<sup>1</sup> The variation is the result of a very few shy subjects and, on occasion, the crying or falling asleep of a stimulus infant.

<sup>2</sup> This was the result of differential availability of the stimulus infants.

**Table I.** Toy Choice, by Condition and Subject's Sex  
(to Nearest Whole Percent)

Gender label	Football	Doll	Teething ring
<b>Male</b>			
Male subjects	50	20	30
Female subjects	80	20	0
All subjects	65	20	15
<b>Female</b>			
Male subjects	0	89	11
Female subjects	28	73	0
All subjects	15	80	05
<b>Neutral</b>			
Male subjects	33	50	17
Female subjects	21	36	43
All subjects	25	40	35

regardless of gender, than was a plastic football. Another possible explanation is the older mean age of the stimulus infants in the present study.

When the infant was given the gender label of female, the effect was similar to the 1975 study; that is, this condition elicited the most consistent sex-stereotyped responses. Altogether, 72.7% of the female subjects and 88.8% of the male subjects chose the doll when the infant was identified as female. No male chose the football when the infant was identified as a female.

In the original study males chose the teething ring in the gender-neutral condition, while females most frequently chose either the doll or the teething ring. In the present study, the reverse was found to be true. The reason for this reversal is unclear; it may also be related to the use of an undergraduate rather than a graduate student sample.

One finding which was clearly similar to those of the original investigators was that subjects in the gender-neutral condition invariably asked or tried to guess the infant's gender. When debriefed and asked to guess the infant's actual gender, subjects in this condition showed attributional patterns similar to subjects in the original study. For example, "She is friendly and female infants smile more" (male infant, male subject); "[She is a girl] because girls are more satisfied and accepting" (male infant, female subject); and "He doesn't like strangers" (female infant, female subject).

## DISCUSSION

As was the case in the 1975 study, the present replication found that adults interacted in systematically different and sex-stereotyped ways with the same infant depending on the gender label provided. Perhaps the most

significant finding of the present study is that this was true for both male and female stimulus infants; that is, the actual gender of the infant did not result in differential responses from subjects. Nor was the subject's sex, age, or race a significant factor.

The present study supports the original findings, and our conclusions are the same as those of the original investigators – that gender-linked variations in infants' behavior, if present at all, appear far less important in determining adults' expectancies and behaviors in interaction than does the providing of a gender label.

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