

Running head: INFANT'S PERCEIVED GENDER AND ADOLESCENTS' RATINGS

Effect of Infant's Perceived Gender on Adolescents' Ratings of the Infant

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Abstract

To explore the role of the perceived gender of an infant and the gender of adolescents on ratings of the infant, thirty-six junior high students (18 boys and 18 girls) will view a photograph of a 3-month-old infant. Written instructions accompanying the photograph will identify the infant as "Laurie," "Larry," or "this infant." Each student will rate the infant on 6 bipolar adjective scales (firm/soft, big/little, strong/weak, hardy/delicate, well coordinated/awkward, and beautiful/plain). The hypotheses are that both the name assigned to the infant and the students' gender will affect ratings. The predicted results have implications both for parenting and for future research.

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Many researchers agree that gender role socialization begins at the time of an infant's birth (Haugh, Hoffman, & Cowan, 1980; Honig, 1983). Most parents are extremely interested in learning whether their newborn infant is a boy or a girl, and intentionally or not, this knowledge elicits in them a set of expectations about sex role appropriate traits (Rubin, Provenzano, & Luria, 1974). Empirical research suggests that these initial expectations, which form the basis of gender schemas (Leone & Robertson, 1989), can have a powerful impact on parents' perceptions of and behavior toward infants (Fagot, 1978; Lewis, 1972). Gender contributes to the initial context within which adults respond to an infant and may become an influential agent in the socializing process and the development of the child's sense of self (Berndt & Heller, 1986).

Stereotyped expectations may influence gender role socialization and the acquisition of sex-typed behavior through a self-fulfilling prophecy process (Darley & Fazio, 1980).

Preconceived gender-based expectations may cause the parent to elicit expected behavior from the infant and to reinforce expected behavior when it occurs, thus confirming the parents' initial expectations.

Several studies (Condry & Condry, 1976; Culp, Cook, & Housley, 1983; Delk, Madden, Livingston, & Ryan, 1986; Rubin et al., 1974) have explored the effects of infant gender on adult assignment of sex-typed labels and have demonstrated that adults sex-type infants. These studies have examined a variety of subject populations and included infants of varying ages. Parents in one study, for example, rated and described their newborns shortly after birth, when the primary source of information about the baby was his or her gender (Rubin et al., 1974). Although the infants did not differ on any objective measures, parents rated girls as smaller, softer, more fine-featured, and more inattentive than boys. Other studies have revealed that parents treat male and

female infants differently. Culp et al. (1983) found that both male and female parents behave differently toward unfamiliar infants on the basis of perceived sex. This study suggests that adults are inclined to perceive traits in an infant that are consistent with an infant's gender label. Also, Fagot (1978) observed that parents of toddlers reacted differently to boys' and girls' behavior. Parents responded more positively to girls than boys when the toddlers played with dolls, and more critically to girls than boys when the toddlers engaged in large motor activity.

As a group, these studies suggest that adult responses coincide with culturally specified sex stereotypes associated with the gender label assigned to an infant and independent of actual infant gender differences. These studies have addressed how expectations associated with the gender label assigned to the infant might affect both perceptions and behaviors.

Although many studies have examined sex stereotyping of infants by adults, particularly parents, very few studies have examined children's or adolescents' sex-typing of infants (Haugh et al., 1980; Vogel, Lake, Evans, & Karraker, 1991). Stern and Karraker (1989) reviewed available studies of sex-biased perceptions of infants who were labeled either male or female, and concluded that knowledge of an infant's sex often did not influence adults' perceptions; however, young children were found to rate infants in a sex-stereotyped fashion much more frequently than were adults. None of the studies included in the review examined sex stereotyping of infants by older children and adolescents. One question motivating this study, therefore, was how sex-stereotyped perceptions of infants change during the early adolescent period, particularly junior high (middle school) age.

Although few studies have investigated adolescents' sex-stereotyped perception of infants, a number of studies have examined adolescents' sex stereotyping of older individuals. Many of these studies, using varied methods, have found that sex stereotyping increases with age between

3 and 14 years (Berndt & Heller, 1986; Martin, 1987; Scanzoni & Fox, 1980; Skrypnek & Snyder, 1982). Some studies have found a curvilinear relationship between age and sex stereotyping, with younger subjects and adolescents using sex stereotypes less than other children (Stern & Karraker, 1989). However, most of these studies suggest a consistent increase in sex stereotyping from preschool through middle childhood, a plateau, and then a decrease through adolescence.

The purpose of this present study is to systematically examine the effects of gender of adolescents and infants' perceived gender on adolescents' ratings of the infant. Several studies suggest that differences in the ratings of a perceived male or perceived female infant are a function of the gender of the observer (Condry & Condry, 1976; Vogel et al., 1991). For example, when there is a choice between the adjectives *plain* and *beautiful*, girls tend to rate infants as more beautiful than boys do. Bell and Carver (1980) found that older women, particularly mothers, tend to give more positive ratings than others.

I will select participants for the present study to represent the adolescent age period (12-14-year-olds). Consistent with the findings of Haugh et al. (1980) and the studies reviewed here, I expect that the act of labeling infants with gender-typed first names will elicit responses of learned attributes associated with the infant gender labels. First, I predict that if adolescents receive minimal information about an infant, they will use gender cues (i.e., name of infant) to make evaluations about the infant. Second, I predict that males and females will rate the infant differently regardless of the name assigned to the infant. Third, I predict that the effect of the infant name label will depend on the adolescents' gender (an interaction effect).

Method

Participants

Participants will include 36 junior high students (12-14-year-olds) attending a public school in West Covina, California. The school is located in a predominantly middle-lower class neighborhood. I will obtain informed consent from parents or legal guardians, and I will use an incentive to motivate students to get the informed consent papers signed.

Design

This study is a 2 (gender of the adolescent) X 3 (infant name condition) between-subjects factorial design. The gender of the adolescents has two levels (male or female), and the infant name condition has three levels ("Laurie," "Larry," and "this infant"). The dependent measures are the adolescents' ratings of the infant on each of six bipolar adjectives.

Materials

I will use a color image (see Figure 1) of a 3-month-old infant for all the conditions. I will photocopy the infant's image on 8.5 X 11 in. (21.6 X 27.9 cm) paper. Below the photo, there will be several bipolar adjective pairs (see Figure 1). I chose the six bipolar adjective pairs (firm/soft, big/little, strong/weak, hardy/delicate, well coordinated/awkward, and beautiful/plain) for this study based on previous studies that used similar adjectives (Haugh et al., 1980; Rubin et al., 1974; Stern & Karraker, 1989; Vogel et al., 1991). Except for the infant name, all materials are exactly the same across conditions. I will assign the infant a gender-typed first name of "Laurie" in one condition, a gender-typed first name of "Larry" in another condition, and refer to the infant as "this infant" in the control condition.

Procedure

I will randomly assign 12 adolescents to each of the three infant gender-typed name conditions. I will balance the gender of the students across the conditions and test students in

groups on three consecutive days. I will tell students and parents that the study's purpose is to see how an infant's traits can be detected from their physical appearance.

I will test each group on a separate day. On that day, I will tell students of the importance of not telling other potential participants about the details of the study. I will also tell them that they will receive additional information when the study is completed.

I will test all students in the same classroom, using study carrels. I will ask the students to be quiet and to not distract other students. I will distribute the materials and will read the directions to the students. I will emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers and that answers should be based on their opinions. I will answer any questions before the students begin rating the materials. After each student is finished and the testing materials are collected, I will thank the student for participating in the research.

Results

The adolescents will rate the six pairs of bipolar adjectives in each condition of the independent variable. Students will rate the infant on each bipolar adjective pair with a number ranging from 1 to 5. For example, on the firm/soft adjective pair, students will rate the infant from 1 (*firm*) to 5 (*soft*). I will analyze scores on each of the bipolar adjectives and obtain the mean and standard deviation of the ratings for each bipolar adjective pair for each condition of the independent variable. I will analyze ratings on each bipolar adjective pair using a 2 (gender of the adolescent) X 3 (infant name condition) between-subjects factorial ANOVA.

Discussion

I will restate the results of this study and evaluate them in light of the initial hypotheses. If the results are as predicted, researchers can extend the generality of sex-stereotyped perceptions of infants to the population of adolescents. I will also discuss how the results relate to previous

research and to the theoretical issues discussed in the introduction. I will also consider practical implications of the results for parenting.

I will identify limitations of the current research, along with suggestions for how future research can build upon the findings of the current study. One limitation to the generalizability of the findings is the use of only one photograph of one infant of a particular age. Future research could utilize photographs of infants of a variety of ages to establish the robustness of the results of the present study.

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Author Notes

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Figure Caption

Figure 1. JPEG image of infant and bipolar adjectives rating scale.



Please rate this infant [Laurie, Larry] on each of the following dimensions, circling a number reflecting your evaluation of the infant on each dimension. For example, if you feel that the infant is “average” on the beautiful/plain dimension, you would circle the “3.” If you feel that the infant is very little, on the big/little dimension, you would circle the “5.”

firm 1 2 3 4 5 soft

big 1 2 3 4 5 little

strong 1 2 3 4 5 weak

hardy 1 2 3 4 5 delicate

well-coordinated 1 2 3 4 5 awkward

beautiful 1 2 3 4 5 plain