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The relationship between the first-born child's gender and parents' selection of infant room contents

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**The relationship between the first-born child's gender and
parents' selection of infant room contents**

Vincent, Diane Rose, M.A.

San Jose State University, 1991

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FIRST-BORN CHILD'S GENDER
AND PARENTS' SELECTION OF INFANT ROOM CONTENTS

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of Psychology

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

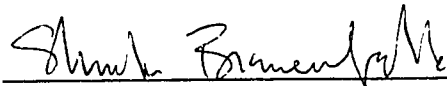
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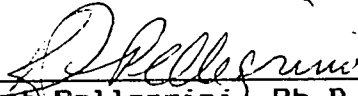
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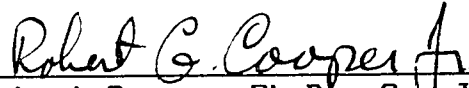
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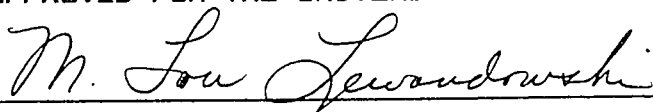


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ABSTRACT

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FIRST-BORN CHILD'S GENDER AND PARENTS' SELECTION OF INFANT ROOM CONTENTS

by Diane Rose Vincent

Thirty sets of parents of six to nine month-old, first-born infants participated in a study investigating the relationship between parental attitudes and parental behaviors, regarding gender-stereotyping. Attitudinal measures included mothers' and fathers' views on the appropriateness of traditionally masculine and feminine activities for boys and girls. Behavioral measures were based on the amount of traditional feminine and masculine items in their infants' rooms. Both parents' attitudes toward boys and girls, combined and individually, were found to be positively related to items chosen for the girls' rooms. There was no significant relationship discovered between either of the parents views and the environments in the boys' rooms. The results are discussed in terms of their implications for the gender-role socialization of young children.

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The Relationship Between the First-Born Child's Gender
and Parents' Selection of Infant Room Contents

Diane Rose Vincent

San Jose State University

Running Head: PARENTAL SELECTIONS BASED ON GENDER OF CHILD

Abstract

Thirty sets of parents of six to nine month-old, first-born infants participated in a study investigating the relationship between parental attitudes and parental behaviors, regarding gender-stereotyping. Attitudinal measures included mothers' and fathers' views on the appropriateness of traditionally masculine and feminine activities for boys and girls. Behavioral measures were based on the amount of traditional feminine and masculine items in their infants' rooms. Both parents' attitudes toward boys and girls, combined and individually, were found to be positively related to items chosen for the girls' rooms. There was no significant relationship discovered between either of the parents views and the environments in the boys' rooms. The results are discussed in terms of their implications for the gender-role socialization of young children.

The Relationship of the First-Born Child's Gender

On Parents' Selection of Infant Room Contents

Much evidence has shown that adults are predisposed to respond differently to boys and girls, and therefore play a substantial role in shaping gender-related differences in the child's behavior, an influence which begins in infancy (Seavey, Katz, & Zalk, 1975; Smith & Lloyd, 1978; Will, Self, & Datan, 1976). Some researchers think that adult perceptions and reactions are determined to a large extent by the child's behavior (Bell & Carver, 1980; Fagot, 1974), whereas others have found mothers' responses to be based more on their own predispositions than the infants' cues (Will et al., 1976). Evidence suggests that parents are not fully aware of the differential contingencies they use to socialize their young children. Parents view and treat their newborn children differently, depending on the gender of the child. Girls are described as soft, fine-featured, little, awkward, and weak. Boys are rated as well-coordinated, large-featured, firm, big, and strong (Fagot, 1978).

Play with gender-typed toys is related to development of differential cognitive (verbal/spatial) or social (nurturance/aggression) skills in girls and boys (Miller, 1987). Play with stereotypical boys' toys

(especially blocks) has been related to higher scores of spatial ability, whereas play with stereotypical girls' toys has been related to higher verbal scores (Connor & Serbin, 1977). A number of investigators have shown that by age three, girls and boys learn gender-typed discrimination and display a preference for toys and activities which adults consider gender-appropriate (Barry & Barry, 1976; Fling & Manosevitz, 1972; Nadelmen, 1974).

Rheingold and Cook (1975) conducted a study, which proposed that how parents furnish the rooms of their sons and daughters, including the toys they supply, provides an index to their ideas about appropriateness by gender. Because items in the rooms offer children different experiences, the contents may instruct boys and girls in what is proper for their gender. Therefore, the environment is seen as a subtle cue of differential treatment that can encourage gender-stereotyped behavior in children. Boys are provided objects that encourage activities directed away from the home (i.e., sports, vehicles, military) and girls are provided objects that encourage activities directed toward the home (i.e., dolls, soft toys, dance).

Although Rheingold & Cook (1975) examined the gender-preferred behaviors of parents, they merely assumed these actions were exemplary of their gender-stereotypical

views. Fagot (1974, 1978) and Smith & Daglish (1977) studied parents' gender-preferred behaviors, via observations of child/parent interactions, followed by questionnaires designed to indicate levels of gender-stereotypical beliefs.

The present study is a modification, partial replication, and extension of these three studies. Parents' gender-preferred behaviors were measured via room content classification lists. Parents' stereotypical gender-role views were measured by questionnaires. The purpose of this study was to compare the relationship between parents' child-related behaviors and their child-related attitudes. Questions of primary interest were: "What are parents' views toward gender-role socialization?" and "Are these attitudes being reflected in parents' behaviors toward their children?" It was hypothesized that parents who maintain traditional gender-role attitudes will furnish their children's rooms in a traditional manner, and parents who have non-traditional gender-role attitudes will furnish their children's rooms in a non-traditional style. This was expected to be reflected by a positive correlation of attitude and behavior scores.

Method

Subjects

Parents of young children were obtained from the record of births in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties and referrals. Parents were contacted by phone and asked to participate in the study, until there were thirty families. These families consisted of a mother, a father, and their first-born child. The purpose of the study was explained to the parents in terms of interest in children's home environments (see Appendix B). Possible risks to subjects were no greater than encountered in daily life. The children were fifteen boys and fifteen girls, with their own rooms, between six and nine months of age. The first-born status and young age of the children were expected to increase the probability that any detected differences in gender-role behaviors and stereotypes would originate from the parents.

Materials

The gender-stereotypical items of the infants' rooms (i.e., toys, furnishings) were recorded on a classification checklist similar to the system used by Rheingold & Cook (1975). Selected items matched activities that evidenced significance for males or females in studies by Fagot (1974, 1978) and Smith and Daglish (1977). The

classification of items checklist (see Appendix C) was comprised of: female and baby dolls, soft toys and stuffed animals, female stuffed animals, and traditional female themes on furnishings and toys (i.e., dance, domestic, passive, hearts, flowers, ruffles, pink) for gender-typed girls' items; blocks, objects to manipulate, transportation toys, male stuffed animals, and traditional male themes in furnishings and toys (i.e., sports, aggression, active, animals, vehicles, blue) for gender-typed boys' items. A Polaroid Impulse with color film was used to photograph the room contents.

Each parent individually rated a set of twelve behaviors, derived from the questionnaire used originally by Fagot (1974, 1978). The selected questions included activities that were found to be significantly stereotyped in either female or male gender-role orientation, in two or more of the following test categories: behavior of child, parent reaction to child behavior, and parent view of child behavior (Fagot, 1974, 1978; Smith & Daglish, 1977). The twelve resultant child activities (see Appendix D) were: block play, (M); play with transportation toys, (M); doll play, (F); manipulating objects, (M); play with soft toys/stuffed animals, (F); dance, (F); ask for help, (F); dress-up, (F); "rough-and-tumble" play, (M); aggression,

(M); running, jumping, and climbing, (M); and help adult, (F).

Design and Procedure

The survey was carried out between March and August 1990. After the observer answered all questions and explained the procedure, when agreeable, both parents signed a consent form. The contents of the rooms were recorded in their entirety. In addition, color photographs were taken of the rooms, to supplement the written lists. Children's toys and objects located elsewhere in the homes were not recorded. But it was noted how many of the infants' rooms did not contain the major part of the children's items.

After the observations were completed, parents were independently asked to rate each of the twelve child behaviors on the gender-stereotypical view questionnaire as to the degree of appropriateness for girls and boys. The activities were ordered on the questionnaire by random selection. A final question inquired as to who chooses the majority of items for the children's rooms; the mother, father, both, or other. In debriefing, when observations and questionnaires were completed, a full explanation regarding gender-role differences and the infants' bedroom environment was given (see Appendix E).

After collecting all of the information from the thirty homes, the items in the rooms were rated for gender-stereotyping. Since the researcher had been in contact with the parents, and was not blind to the purpose of the study, a rater who was blind to the characteristics of the parents and to the purpose was recruited to do the rating. The blind rater coded the items determined to be gender-stereotypical on the classification list, by viewing photographs and complete lists of items in the bedrooms. In order to further provide for reliability on the coding, inter-rater reliability was calculated for the rating of six of the rooms by the researcher and the blind rater. The agreement between the codings of the two raters was significant.

The data for the gender-preferred behaviors was the percentage of gender-stereotypical items in the children's rooms. Traditional boys' items were counted as positive, while traditional girls' items were summed as negative. The total number of all items in the infants' rooms was noted. Scores were computed by dividing the sum of positive and negative class list items by the total of all items in each of the children's rooms. On the gender-stereotype behavior continuum: in the girls' rooms, parents' traditional behavior approached -1, egalitarian behavior approached 0,

and non-traditional behavior approached +1; in the boys' rooms, parents' traditional behavior approached +1, egalitarian behavior approached 0, and non-traditional behavior approached -1.

On the gender-stereotype attitude questionnaire, activities were rated on a scale of appropriateness for each sex as: 0, never appropriate; 1, usually not appropriate; 2, occasionally appropriate; 3, often appropriate; 4, almost always appropriate; and 5, always appropriate. Scores were calculated by summing up the total number of positive male-rated activities and negative female-rated activities. A separate score was computed for mothers regarding girls, mothers regarding boys, fathers regarding girls, fathers regarding boys, both parents regarding girls, and both parents regarding boys. On the gender-stereotype attitude continuum: for girls, parents' traditional attitudes were negative, egalitarian attitudes approached 0, and non-traditional attitudes were positive; for boys, parents' traditional attitudes were positive, egalitarian attitudes approached 0, and non-traditional attitudes were negative.

In order to evaluate the magnitude of the quantity of traditional behavior for girls' rooms on a comparable basis with the traditional behavior for boys' rooms, the final

negative and positive scores in the girls' rooms were reversed. As a result, in both boys' and girls' rooms, parents' traditional behavior approached +1, egalitarian behavior approached 0, and non-traditional behavior approached -1.

Similar to the adjusted scoring of behavior for the girls' rooms, for the purpose of evaluating the magnitude of the quantity of traditional attitude by both parents toward both boys and girls on a comparable basis, the final negative and positive scores for girls were reversed. The sum total of attitudes of mothers regarding girls, mothers regarding boys, fathers regarding girls, and fathers regarding boys was then calculated.

Results

In order to determine the degree of relationship between parents' gender-preferred behavior (as demonstrated by the choice of items for their children's rooms) and parental gender-role views (as revealed by the questionnaires), the sum total of both parents' gender attitudes towards boys and girls was correlated with the gender-behavior score for girls' rooms and for boys' rooms. A problem with the study is that the small sample size measures only moderate and strong correlations as significant.

Then the six individual parent-attitude scores in the boys' rooms were correlated with the parent-behavior scores in the boys' rooms. Likewise, the six individual parent-attitude scores in the girls' rooms were correlated with the parent-behavior scores in the girls' rooms.

The comparison between both parents' attitudes toward both sexes of children and the parents' behavior in the boys' rooms indicated no relationship ($r=.01$, $p=.98$). The correlation of both parents views toward both boys and girls and items chosen in the girls' rooms was not significant ($p=.15$), but at $r=.39$ suggested there may be a relationship.

In the individual analyses, both parents' views toward boys was most highly related to items chosen in the girls' rooms ($r=.75$, $p=.001$). The other significant relationship was between fathers' views toward boys and items chosen in the girls' rooms ($r=.64$, $p=.01$). Although not reaching the .05 level of significance, both parents' views toward girls appeared to be related to items chosen in the girls' rooms ($r=.49$, $p=.06$). There was a weaker non-significant correlation between fathers' views toward girls and items chosen in the girls' rooms ($r=.44$, $p=.10$), and mothers' views toward girls and items chosen in the boys' rooms ($r=.38$, $p=.17$). Table 1 presents the correlations for these analyses.

TABLE 1

Correlations Between Parent-Behaviors and Parent-Attitudes
in Children's Rooms

	Girls' Rooms		Boys' Rooms	
Mother/Girl	$r=.29$	$p=.30$	$r=.38$	$p=.17$
Mother/Boy	$r=.35$	$p=.21$	$r=.09$	$p=.75$
Father/Girl	$r=.44$	$p=.10$	$r=-.30$	$p=.28$
Father/Boy	$r=.64$	$p=.01$	$r=.15$	$p=.59$
Both/Girl	$r=.49$	$p=.06$	$r=.19$	$p=.49$
Both/Boy	$r=.75$	$p=.001$	$r=.13$	$p=.65$
Both/Both	$r=.39$	$p=.15$	$r=.01$	$p=.98$

In the fifteen girls' rooms, ten sets of parents agreed that the mother had chosen the majority of items, three sets of parents agreed that they had both chosen most of the items, one father stated that both parents had selected items while the mother chose herself as the primary selector, and one mother answered that both parents had selected items while the father chose the mother as the primary selector. These totals indicate that the mothers did the majority of choosing items for the girls' rooms.

In the fifteen boys' rooms, four sets of parents agreed that the mother had chosen the majority of items, four sets of parents agreed that most items were chosen by both parents, four fathers stated that both parents had selected items while the mother chose herself as the primary selector, and three mothers answered that both parents had selected items while the father chose the mother as the primary selector. According to these groupings, it appears that the fathers participated to some extent, along with the mothers, in choosing the majority of items for the boys' rooms. Table 2 presents the totals of who the parents believe chose most of the items in the children's rooms.

None of the parents, in either the boys' or the girls' rooms, indicated that the father or any other person had selected the majority of items. Most of the parents

TABLE 2

Person Designated as Primary Selector of Items for
Children's Rooms

	15 Boys' Rooms	15 Girls' Rooms
Both Parents Say Mother	4	10
Both Parents Say Both	4	3
Father Says Both Mother Says Mother	4	1
Mother Says Both Father Says Mother	3	1

mentioned that many of the items in their children's rooms had been gifts.

Out of the fifteen girls' rooms, nine rooms contained most of the children's items, while six homes had many of the infants' items outside of the rooms. Out of the fifteen boys' rooms, eight rooms contained most of the infants' items, while seven homes had many of the children's items outside of the rooms. Five of the six girls' homes, with many items outside of the rooms, rated as highly negative (traditional, feminine). Three of the seven boys' homes, with many items outside of the rooms, rated as negative (non-traditional, feminine). In the cases of homes where many of the items were outside the children's rooms, these items were primarily manipulative objects, blocks, and transportation toys (traditional, masculine items).

Discussion

Several of the above findings are noteworthy. The girls' parents' attitudes had much greater predictive value than the boys' parents' attitudes, in relation to the actual behavior of the parents. In fact, both parents' views taken together and fathers' views alone, toward boys, were highly predictive of the manner in which the girls' rooms would be decorated. Similarly, both parents' views toward girls had

a strong predictive value in relation to the style in which the girls' rooms were decorated. Unexpectedly, the boys' parents' views did not demonstrate any significant predictions in their children's rooms.

These results appear to be inconsistent with the parents' beliefs regarding who chose the majority of items for the rooms. Most of the girls' parents assert that it was the mothers who primarily decorated the rooms. Yet the girls' fathers' views are highly related to the decorating style. One possible explanation, proposed by previous researchers, could be that parents tend to agree on toys' appropriateness to one sex or the other (Schau, Kahn, Diepold, & Cherry, 1980). So that, even when one parent was designated to create the child's environment, as the mother was in the girls' rooms, perhaps there was actually a great deal of influence from the father, and a tendency for both parents to have very similar ideas and desires for the room.

Another issue of concern was how many of the homes had the majority of items in the children's rooms. Since both the boys' rooms and the girls' rooms had a similar distribution of items inside or outside of the rooms, this possible confound did not seem to have an effect at first glance. It should be noted however, that some of the homes with many items outside of the children's rooms, had a

higher feminine rating of items in the rooms. This possible effect could be explained by the observance that most of the items left outside of the infants' rooms were those which would have probably been rated as masculine.

In the girls' homes, a higher feminization in the rating occurred in most of the homes in which many items were outside of the rooms. In the boys' homes, three out of the seven rooms with many items outside, received a negative rating, indicating non-traditional environments (more feminine items selected). This might have been considered a serious confound, especially in the results for the boys' rooms. But the other four boys' homes, with many items outside of the rooms, had more masculine ratings than four of the boys' homes with most of the items inside the rooms. Overall, the boys' rooms were rated as somewhat egalitarian in comparison to the ratings of the girls' rooms.

It is questionable whether this problem may have actually adversely affected the results. If this effect did occur, it could possibly explain the very strong correlations in the girls' rooms in contrast to the lack of correlations in the boys' rooms. In order to eliminate this problem as a possible threat to the internal validity of any future study, it would be advisable to account for the other toys in the home with which the child interacts.

In the home, parents exert influence over their young children's play primarily via their selections of available toys (Block, 1979). Yet, in examining parents' behavior with their two year-olds, Fagot (1987) found different responses to boys and girls, and that the parents were unaware of this differential treatment. In the present study, the parents' attitudes and behaviors toward their daughters appear to match. But the parents of the boys seem to have quite dissimilar views, compared to the style in which they actually decorated their sons' rooms. The boys' rooms were decorated in somewhat gender-neutral styles. Yet, many of the boys' parents had fairly strong traditional views, as revealed by these questionnaires. Also, most of the boys' parents stated that the fathers participated to some extent in decorating their sons' rooms.

One reason for this discrepancy might be the children's very young age. Many of the decorations in the infant boys' rooms (i.e., lace, bows, hearts, stuffed animals) become less acceptable for boys and deemed more appropriate for girls, with increased age. The gender-stereotype attitude questionnaire referred to many activities that children would engage in at an older age (i.e., run, jump, climb, dress-up). Apparently, the parents of boys are willing to allow a wider range of items in their child's environment at

this young age, which does not necessarily coincide with their actual views toward appropriate gender-related activities for boys.

Evidence has shown that when boys adapt gender-specific choices, they usually interpret them in terms of a narrower scope and greater social value of the male role. Females may adapt masculine behavior with relative impunity, but males who adapt feminine behavior are readily stigmatized. These pressures toward gender-appropriate behavior become stronger for boys (Muller & Goldberg). The results of this study indicate an opposite trend for infant boys and girls. A longitudinal study would be advisable to assess how and when the wide scope of acceptable items for the infant boys becomes constrained, and conversely, how and when the narrower range of acceptable items for the infant girls expands.

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To: Diane Rose Vincent, Psychology
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Sunnyvale, CA, 94087

From: Charles R. Bolz
Office of Graduate Studies and Research

Date: March 22, 1990

The Human Subjects Institutional Review Board has approved your request to use human subjects in the study entitled:

"The Influence of Sex of Child on Parental Choices for Infant's Room Contents"

This approval is contingent upon the subjects participating in your research project being appropriately protected from risk. This includes the protection of the anonymity of the subjects' identity when they participate in your research project, and with regard to any and all data that may be collected from the subjects. The Board's approval includes continued monitoring of your research by the Board to assure that the subjects are being adequately and properly protected from such risks. If at any time a subject becomes injured or complains of injury, you must notify Dr. Serena Stanford immediately. Injury includes but is not limited to bodily harm, psychological trauma and release of potentially damaging personal information.

Please also be advised that each subject needs to be fully informed and aware that their participation in your research project is voluntary, and that he or she may withdraw from the project at any time. Further, a subject's participation, refusal to participate or withdrawal will not affect any services the subject is receiving or will receive at the institution in which the research is being conducted.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Stanford or me at (408) 924-2480.

cc: Sheila Bienenfeld, Ph.D.

School of Social Sciences • Department of Psychology
One Washington Square • San Jose, California 95192-0120 • 408/924-5600

April 24, 1990

TO: Diane Vincent
MA in Psychology Candidate

FROM: Robert A. Fox
MA Coordinator



SUBJECT: Thesis Project

This letter is to confirm that you have provided the approval form from the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board and have discussed your project with the reviewer who concurs that you may proceed. Consequently, your proposal is approved and you may begin collecting data on the project.

Congratulations on your progress, and good luck with data collection. Please inform me of the method you chose to satisfy the Comprehensive Examination on your thesis. You may do this by committee examination, presentation of findings at a professional meeting or the SPARC Meeting, or publication of your thesis in a refereed journal. If you have any additional questions regarding progress in your program please contact me.

cc: Bienenfeld
Pellegrini
Wolfson
Cooper
Nishita

Appendix B

Recruitment Script

"Hello, my name is Diane Vincent. I am a graduate student at San Jose State University working on my Masters degree in Psychology. For my thesis I am studying the bedroom environments of 6-9 month old children. I obtained your name from the record of births. If this is your first child, I would appreciate your permission to observe and photograph the contents of his/her room, and for you and your spouse to fill out a short questionnaire regarding children's activities. The entire process will involve about an hour of your time. If this is agreeable to you, we can make an appointment at your convenience. Thank you."

Appendix C

Classification of Items Checkiist

List the total number of each of the following items in the child's room:

1. Blocks _____

2. Objects to manipulate _____

3. Transportation toys _____

4. Male stuffed animals _____

5. Traditional male designs on furnishings and toys (i.e., sports, aggression, active, animals, vehicles, blue) _____

6. Female and baby dolls _____

7. Soft toys and stuffed animals _____

8. Female stuffed animals _____

9. Traditional female designs on furnishings and toys (i.e., dance, domestic, passive, hearts, flowers, ruffles, pink) _____

List the total number of all of the child's items in the room: _____

Appendix D

Activities Questionnaire

Rate each of the following activities as to the appropriateness for girls:

0=never appropriate, 1=usually not appropriate, 2=occasionally appropriate, 3=often appropriate, 4=almost always appropriate, 5=always appropriate

- Manipulating objects_____
- Play with transportation toys_____
- Run/Jump/Climb_____
- Play with soft toys/stuffed animals_____
- Dance_____
- Ask for help_____
- Doll play_____
- Block play_____
- Rough and tumble play_____
- Dress-up_____
- Help adult_____
- Aggression_____

Rate each of the following activities as to the appropriateness for boys:

0=never appropriate, 1=usually not appropriate, 2=occasionally appropriate, 3=often appropriate, 4=almost always appropriate, 5=always appropriate

- Manipulating objects_____
- Play with transportation toys_____
- Run/Jump/Climb_____
- Play with soft toys/stuffed animals_____
- Dance_____
- Ask for help_____
- Doll play_____
- Block play_____
- Rough and tumble play_____
- Dress-up_____
- Help adult_____
- Aggression_____

Who chooses the majority of items for your child's bedroom?

(mother) (father) (both) (other)

Appendix E

Debriefing

The purpose of this study was to determine how parents expectations regarding behavior appropriate for children was expressed in the organization of the children's environments.

It has been hypothesized that parents who maintain traditional attitudes toward boys' and girls' behavior would furnish their children's rooms in a traditional manner. Conversely, it has been expected that parents who have non-traditional attitudes regarding boys' and girls behavior would furnish their children's rooms in a non-traditional style.