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ABSTRACT

This study examined gender and race differences in children's interactions with infants. Subjects were 53 black and white children between 8 and 10 years of age. An experimenter of the same race as the children presented them with a 6-week to 12-month-old infant of the same race. Children were photographed with the infant; while playing the role of the parent to the infant; and with a peer of the same race. Measures taken from the photographs were those of proximity, or the distance the child stood from the infant or peer; and expressions of attraction, such as smiling. Results indicated that black children stood closer to peers and infants than did white children. All children stood further from peers than from infants, and closer to infants in the parent condition than otherwise. Children exhibited more attraction behavior in the parent role condition than the other conditions. There were gender differences between white girls and boys, but not black girls and boys. Results are compared to results of an earlier study of preschool children's interactions with infants. A list of 20 references is included. (BC)

Children's Self-Presentations with Infants: Age, Gender, and Race Comparisons

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Children's Self-Presentations with Infants: Age, Gender, and Race Comparisons

Cross-cultural and cross-sectional comparisons were conducted to examine

Goffman's explication of self-presentation provided a framework for examining the possible route through which culture affects gendered responses to infants. Based upon differential socialization experiences, it was hypothesized that African American children would be less stereotyped in their responses to infants than White children. This study of fifty-three 8 to 10 year-old children from African American and White American working-to-middle class families supported the hypothesis. The children were photographed with a peer, an infant, and with an infant while acting the parent role. All children stood significantly closer to the infant in the role condition and exhibited more attraction behavior. As predicted, gender differences were evident between White girls and boys, but not between Black girls and boys. Findings suggested that social preferences for infants cannot be necessarily linked to gender. Comparisons to data from an earlier study with younger children supported this conclusion.

Children's Self-Presentations with Infants: Age, Gender, and Race Comparisons

In recent reviews of the literature on gender-linked responsiveness to infants (Berman, 1980; Edwards, 1991), both "nature" and "nurture" explanations have been suggested to account for real and imagined sex differences. While little evidence supports the hormonal explanations of the apparantly greater responsiveness of girls and women to infants, few researchers have systematically examined the possible impact of early socialization experiences resulting from differing cultural and/or social contexts. Berman suggested that early experiences make significant contributions to the interpretation which children and adults give to a number of social interactions, particularly those activities related to childcare.

Goffman's (1959, 1979) explication of the dramaturgical perspective of social interactions provides a useful framework for examining the possible route through which culture affects gendered responses to infants. He describes a process through which participants in an encounter actively convey an impression of themselves in order to influence the definition of the situation which others formulate. This "self-presentation" necessarily will vary based on what the individual perceives as an acceptable image of her/his self. Thus, in situations

involving childcare women and girls may wish to enact a scene of domestic competence and nurturance. Men and boys, on the other hand, may attempt to present an image of detachment and insouciance. Or will they? To what extent is this suggestion bound to the domestic expectations and contexts of White American culture?

In activities involving childcare, White Americans have frequently exhibited significant sex differences in the amount of interaction with infants and young children (Berman, Smith & Goodman, 1983; Nash & Feldman, 1980). Theoretical explanations for this phenomena have focused on the role of the female in society viz a viz childcare responsibilities, and on early and persistent socialization for the caregiver role. The question must be raised about the generalizability of this perspective to other communities. While this has been addressed to some extent with respect to cultures outside of the United States (Whiting & Edwards, 1988), attention is also needed to increase normative data base and understanding of the various cultures within this country. Acknowledgement of the possibility of socialization differences between African Americans and White Americans, for example, has been discussed in theory, however, this recognition has not typically been followed by attempts at empirical verification. Of the various investigations examining the differential responses of Amercian children to infants, only two (Berman, Goodman, Sloan, & Fernander, 1978; Reid, Tate & Berman,

1988) included analyses of different racial/cultural groups.

In the Berman et al. study (1978) children's preferences were measured by comparing infant to adult photographs. No race differences were found. However, our earlier investigation (Reid et al.,1988) which examined self-presentations of children with same-race infants demonstrated that racial differences may indeed be operative in gendered expectations. In the comparison based on gender, children generally behaved consistently with the expectations for girls and boys. Girls stood closer to the baby and smiled more at the baby than boys did. Counter to expectations aroused by reports of early female socialization for childcare roles among African American families (e.g.,Ladner, 1971), we found that four to six year-old White children demonstrated more proximity behaviors to the infant than did Black children. White girls and boys stood closer, looked more, and touched the baby more than Black girls and boys when asked to present themselves for a photograph with the infant under two conditions, as themselves and in the role of a parent.

One hypothesis which was suggested to account for the unexpected direction of race differences in the children's responsiveness to the infants was that Black children may develop an attractiveness to infants at a later age than do White children. Given previous suggestions that children in non-Western cultures proceed more slowly through socialization

stages (Monroe, Shimmin, & Monroe,1984), the hypothesis that gender-role socialization could occur at a later age for Black American children seems reasonable to consider. Support for this hypothesis is based upon two key socialization factors which have been demonstrated to vary for African American compared to White American families, family gender-role differentiation and parental work patterns.

Female-male roles in African American families have been found more egalatarian relative to White Americans in a number of studies (Mack, 1974; Reid, 1979, 1981). This differential in gender status may serve to present a more blended parental image for African American children leading to a more difficult discrimination task. Further, African American women have among the highest participation rates in the workforce of any group of women. This participation is historic not recent, and several researchers have suggested that the result is a non-traditional socialization experience for Black children, particularly girls (Lewis, 1975; Lightfoot, 1976). It also seems logical to expect that the resulting patterns of parental childcare necessarily involves the father more than the typical White American family (Wilson, Tolson, Kiernan, & Hinton, 1990). The prediction that responsiveness to infants may develop differently in the African American families than in White American families was, therefore, suggested. Specifically, for Black children, we expected that they would have socialization experiences in a

community which may not have rigidly segregated childcare duties. We hypothesized, then, that gender would not play as strong a role as it does for White children, especially for working to middle-class Black children (Romer & Cherry, 1980). We also expected to find age differences which indicate a greater change in responsiveness to infants among Black children from the preschool to preadolescent years.

In this study the research paradigm developed in our earlier study with preschool children (Reid et al., 1989) was extended to children in the preadolescent period, ages eight to ten years. Children at this age have been shown to have the ability to take the role of the other and to see themselves as others do more than younger children (Elliott, 1982). Additionally, several researchers have suggested that age is an important factor in responsiveness towards infants, with the preadolescent period serving as a key transitional period in gender role behavior (Berman & Goodman, 1984; Feldman, Nash, & Cutrona, 1977; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1975). We, therefore, addressed the major part of this investigation on the self-presentation of children to the preadolescent years. Given the dearth of data on working and middle class African American children, however, we felt compelled to reassess the earlier data set as well. Together the two samples of children, 8 to 10 year-olds and 4 to 6 year-olds, provided an opportunity for cross-sectional, as well as cross-cultural, comparisons on responses towards infants in a much understudied population.

Method

Participants. Fifty-three children, aged eight to ten years (mean age was 9.4 years), were recruited from various after-school care programs in Chattanooga, Tennessee (a mid-sized city). There were 12 Black boys, 14 White boys, 14 Black girls, and 13 White girls. All children were from middle-to-working class families (defined in terms of parental reports of economic and educational status).

Infants aged 6 weeks to 12 months, both Black and White, male and female, were also recruited to act as stimuli for the children's behavior. None of the infant participants was yet able to talk or to walk unaided; thus they were limited in their ability to initiate interactions with the children. The infants were assigned randomly and based on availabilty to the children; however, White infants were exclusively used for interactions with White children, Black infants with Black children.

Setting and materials. The setting for the interaction between the child and infant was a room located within the child's after-school program center. These centers included a YMCA, church programs, and a Girls' Club facility. It should be noted that the programs were not racially integrated in either faculty or student body. The familiarity of the setting, however, was a stable factor for all children observed. The setting was prepared in a standard manner at each location to facilitate comparsions. This involved hanging a striped sheet

on the wall to serve as a backdrop and as an index of distance; masking tape on the floor marked the initial placement positions for the child and the peer or the infant. Chairs for use by the examiner and child during the "warm-up" period were placed on the side of the room about 4 feet to one side of the sheet. The baby (in a walker or an infant seat) was placed on the other side of the sheet (opposite side from the two chairs). Finally, a Polaroid camera was positioned on a table facing the striped sheet at a distance of approximately 12 feet.

The experimenter was provided with "dress-up" clothes for the child (a man's shirt, a woman's blouse, a clip-on necktie, and a necklace) and toys (a child's book and a small toy bus). The book was considered neutral with respect to sex-typing and the bus neutral or masculine. Stereotypic girls' toys were deliberately avoided to prevent any possible perception of inappropriateness that boys might have in the play situation.

Procedure. Each child was invited to participate in this study after a signed permission note had been obtained from his or her parent. In each case, the child and the experimenter were matched for race to control for possible race effects, particularly since all of the White children were in programs that had only White teachers and the Black children in centers with Black teachers.

The child was brought into the prepared room with the baby present for a "warm-up" period with the experimenter. In

addition to unstructured questions about the child's activities (e.g., "What have you been doing in your group?") and previous experiences with babies ("Do you have a baby brother or sister at your house?" "Do you ever get to play with a real baby at home?"), the child was asked to "show and tell" the experimenter about the two toys. After talking with the child, the experimenter directed the child's attention to the baby and asked the child to "take care of the baby for a few minutes" and to "show and tell the baby" about the toys. Each child was allowed an average of two minutes to present the toys and to interact with the baby. After both toys had been presented, the child's picture was taken with the infant. The experimenter said, "I want to take your picture with the baby." (If the child had walked over to the experimenter, the child was instructed to "go over there with the baby.")

Next in the Parent-Role condition, the child was helped to "dress-up' in play clothes appropriate to oher or his sex and asked, "Do you know how a Mommy/Daddy acts? I want you to pretend you are the baby's Mommy/Daddy and I will take a picture of you being the Mommy/Daddy." The picture of the child dressed in play clothes was taken after the child had positioned him/herself with the baby. Finally, in the Peer condition, the child was asked to stand with a same-sex classmate. The experimenter said "I would like to take a picture of you and [classmate's name]. Please stand with him/her for the picture."

The classmate was positioned on a marked spot in front of the striped sheet and the child was free to stand close to or far from the classmate. The photo was taken after the child positioned her/himself. To control for order effects, half of the children were photographed first in the Peer condition; for the other half, the Baby condition and the Parent-Role condition preceded the Peer condition. The Baby condition always preceded the Parent-Role condition.

To sum up the procedure, a same-race infant was presented by a same-race experimenter to each African American and White American child. Each child was photographed with the infant (Baby Condition), with the infant while playing the role of the same-sex parent (Role Condition), and with a same-race peer (Peer Condition). Measures from the photographs consisted of proximity (distance which the child stood from the peer or baby), and expressions of attraction (smiling, touching, and looking at the peer or infant). Proximity was determined by counting the number of stripes (on the background sheet) that separated the child from either the infant or the peer. Each stripe was approximately 1 inch wide. Attraction was determined by a rater who scored the photo for the presence (or absence) of each behavior: smiling, touching, and looking. The sum score for each photo was divided by total possible points (3). The reliability of these measures was previously established based on the test-retest method. For proximity Pearson's r was .97,

p<.001; for attraction reliability was the percentage of agreement (98.5%).

To assess possible effects of prior experience with an infant, chi-square tests were conducted on the children's responses to questions about living with and playing with a baby. No relationship was found between measures of proximity or attraction with children's reports of experience with a baby.

Results

Three-way ANOVAs, gender x race x condition (2 x 2 x 3), with repeated measures on the condition factor were conducted for the dependent variables of proximity (distance stood from baby) and attraction (sum of looking, smiling, and touching).

Proximity. Significant main effects for both race and condition were found on the proximity measure; $F(1,49) = 3.98$ and $F(2,98) = 20.39$, $p<.05$ and .001, respectively. Black children stood closer than Whites to peers and to the infant. However, both Black and White children stood furthest from their peers and closest to the infant in the Role Condition. There was a trend towards significance for the interaction of race and gender, $F(1,49)=2.96$, $p<.09$. Given our a priori hypothesis about race and gender differences, analyses were conducted on the means for each gender/race group. The analyses on the means using the Tukey b test indicated that White boys stand farther

from the infant across conditions compared to all other children, $p<.05$. The White girls, Black boys, and Black girls are not significantly different from each other on the measure of proximity. (See Table 1 for mean proximity scores by gender, race, and condition.)

Put Table 1 about here.

Attraction. Significant main effects for condition were found for attraction. Children were more likely to smile, touch, and look at the baby in the Role Condition and least likely to smile, touch, and look at their peers, $F(2,98)=26.79$, $p<.001$. In addition, the interaction of race and gender was significant for attraction, $F(1,49) = 4.85$, $p<.05$. White girls and Black boys showed more attraction responses and White boys showed the least. (See Table 2 for means of attraction by gender, race, and condition.)

Insert Table 2 about here.

Comparison Data

We wish to compare the present data with the data presented in Reid, et al. (1989). In that study 71 preschool children (21

White boys, 17 Black boys, 15 White girls, 18 Black girls) were recruited from daycare centers in the same locale and from the same population of working to middle-class families as the older children. The identical procedure was used with the four to six-year-olds as described for the eight to ten-year olds. The present study, therefore, offers an opportunity for examining the same hypotheses with an older sample.

Discussion

The hypothesis that preadolescent African American children would exhibit less gender stereotypical behavior than White American children was clearly supported. Only White boys differed significantly in their initial responses towards infants, i.e., both Black girls and boys, together with White girls, stood closer and showed more attraction to babies in their self presentations than did White boys. When instructed to present themselves as parents, White boys again were least responsive when compared to all other groups. However, in the Role Condition they did move closer to the babies and more of the boys smiled, looked at and touched the babies. This "parental response" was indeed true for all of the children in the preadolescent group.

Although we found that the older school age children were more responsive to infants than their younger counterparts, there was a reversal of the effects attributed to race. Among

the younger children Whites were overwhelmingly more responsive to infants. On the other hand, among the older children African Americans were more responsive overall. What is particularly noteworthy is that there was virtually no gender differentiation for either younger or older Black boys and girls in their initial self presentations with the infants (i.e. in the Baby condition). This finding is extraordinary in light of the numerous studies with White children showing strong gender differences. Indeed, it leads us to reject the notion that social preferences for infants are <u>necessarily</u> linked to gender. Instead, there is support for our hypothesis that girls and boys develop this preference through exposure to contexts and social conditions which encourage them differentially. For African American children, we suggest that the encouragement given for responsivenes to infants is less clearly defined as gender specific than it is for White children. Indeed, Black children responded with little gender differentiation across all experimental conditions, whereas White children produced highly gender-typed responses.

The results of these analyses indicate a great need for further investigation of the expectations, assumptions, and experiences of working and middle class African American children. This future research should attempt to establish a normative database, as well as to distinguish the contexts in which gender is impactful in the lives of African American

children. Further, researchers may wish to determine which aspects of the socialization process contribute to the gender-free responses we observed and whether these responses impact later parenting styles and on other interpersonal relationships. Finally, the relative lack of responsiveness in White boys should also be examined to determine if this represents a deficit in affect or in socialization.

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Table 1.

Means for Proximity by Gender, Race, and Condition

Condition		African American		White American	
		Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
	n...	(14)	(12)	(13)	(14)
Peer	Mean	14.71	11.75	13.15	15.14
	s.d.	(2.37)	(1.76)	(4.58)	(3.39)
Baby	Mean	11.07	10.83	11.38	13.50
	s.d.	(4.95)	(3.79)	(1.94)	(3.08)
Role	Mean	7.21	9.00	9.08	11.50
	s.d.	(6.22)	(5.15)	(5.12)	(3 63)
Marginal	Mean	11.00	10.52	11.21	13.38
	s.d.	(4.51)	(3.57)	(3.88)	(3.34)

Table 2.

Means for Attraction Scores by Gender, Race, and Condition

Condition		African American Girls	African American Boys	White American Girls	White American Boys
	n...	(14)	(12)	(13)	(14)
Peer	Mean	.93	1.25	1.08	.64
	s.d.	(.62)	(.87)	(.86)	(.50)
Baby	Mean	1.00	1.42	1.54	.71
	s.d.	(.78)	(1.44)	(1.13)	(.73)
Role	Mean	2.43	2.17	2.54	1.64
	s.d.	(1.28)	(1.47)	(1.27)	(1.15)
Marginal	Mean	1.45	1.61	1.71	1.00
	s.d.	(.89)	(1.26)	(1.08)	(.73)

Table 1.

Means for Proximity by Gender, Race, and Condition

Condition		African American		White American	
		Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
	n...	(14)	(12)	(13)	(14)
Baby	Mean	11.07	10.83	11.38	13.50
	s.d.	(4.95)	(3.79)	(1.94)	(3.08)
Role	Mean	7.21	9.00	9.08	11.50
	s.d.	(6.22)	(5.15)	(5.12)	(3.63)
Marginal	Mean	11.00	10.52	11.21	13.38
	s.d.	(4.51)	(3.57)	(3.88)	(3.34)