

Parents' attitudes and expectations about children's cross-gender behavior.

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Gender contributes to the initial context within which adults respond to a child (Berndt & Heller, 1986; Vogel, Lake, Evans & Hildebrand Karraker, 1991). Research would suggest that gender role socialization begins at the time of an infant's birth (Seavey, Catz, & Zalk, 1975; Birns, 1976). 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 consistent with beliefs about gender-role-appropriate traits (Rubin, Provenzano & Luria, 1974; Wiberg, 1988). These category-based beliefs about gender-appropriate traits are called gender-role stereotypes. Adults' stereotypes of young children include personality traits as well as interests, and few characteristics are not gender-typed (Martin, 1995).

Parents generally prefer that their children adhere to traditional gender-roles, and are concerned when they do not (Martin, 1990). The extent to which cross-gender behavior in children is discouraged has been found to be dependent upon the sex of the child. Studies have shown that boys who engage in traditionally feminine activities are viewed more negatively than girls who engage in masculine activities (Feinman, 1974, 1981; Martin, 1990). Women have been found to be more accepting of children's cross-gender behavior than men (Martin, 1990).

Several explanations have been proposed to account for differential evaluations given to cross-gender behavior of boys and girls. One explanation concerns the different status levels associated with masculine and feminine roles (Feinman, 1981). According to Feinman, a female's movement into the more highly valued male role is more acceptable than a male's movement toward the less valued female role. Two other explanations involve expectations about the child's future. Green (1975) suggested that differing evaluations are due to the belief that girls, but not boys, will "grow out" of their cross-gender behavior; in other words, boys are predicted to continue to show cross-gender behavior into adulthood. According to Green (1975), a third explanation may be that parents fear that feminine boys will grow up to be either gay or transsexual. Martin (1990) found that concerns about future outcomes, at least in part, account for more negative attitudes toward cross-gender boys. Anthill (1987) found that parents believe that cross-gender play in boys, more than in girls, is an indicator of later same-gender sexual

behavior.

The purpose of this study was to explore parents' attitudes toward cross-gender boys (boys who adopt traditionally feminine characteristics) and cross-gender girls (girls who adopt traditionally masculine characteristics) in a Finnish sample and to explore the possible reasons for different perceptions of cross-gender girls and boys. This was done using a scale designed for this particular purpose by Martin (1990). Another objective was to discuss the results based on a Finnish population compared with Martin's (1990) North American findings.

The present study essentially replicates Martin's study, but uses a different sample; Martin used college students while this study examined Finnish parents. This means that the people who rated their perceptions of children's gender roles had children of their own. Finland, a member country of the European Union (EU), is a Nordic country, with well-organized social security and day-care systems. The education level in Finland is quite high. Parents of both sexes can choose between staying at home with their children and getting paid for it, or getting a job knowing that the state is obliged to arrange day-care for their children. This guarantees a rather high level of gender equality, and it can be assumed that these circumstances affect people's perceptions of children's gender-roles to some extent.

Another difference between the present study and Martin's study is that the original scale uses the terms "sissy" and "tomboy," while the translated version of the present study uses terms equivalent to "girlish" and "boyish." There are no equivalent words for "sissy" and "tomboy" in the Finnish language. This may mean that some of the results may not be directly comparable with Martin's results.

METHOD

Subjects

The participants of this study were 94 fathers and 130 mothers of five-year-old children. All participants were White. The mean age of the fathers was 35.2 years (range = 26-50 years) and the mean age of the mothers was 33.2 years (range = 21-50 years). Of the respondents, 14.7% (33) were single parents, of which 12.1% (4) were men.

Most of the participants (54.3%) lived in families with two children. Almost a quarter of families (24.2%) had three children and 16.4% of families had only one child. Of the fathers, 25 (26.6%) had only sons and 23 (24.5%) only daughters. Of the mothers, 34 (26.1%) had only sons and 33 (25.4%) only daughters. Of the fathers, 46 (48.9%) had children of both sexes. Of the mothers, 63 (48.5%) had children of both sexes.

The demographic characteristics of the sample closely resembled those of the population of the city of Turku, Finland, in general. Most of the participants (57.5%) had college or university degrees. Of the fathers 28.0% had industrial occupations, 26.9% worked in the service sector, 17.2% as white-collar workers in an office or in administration, 7.5% worked in education, 6.5% in health care and 5.3% in the building sector. The rest were unemployed or students.

Of the mothers 31.8% worked in the service sector, 25.6% in health care and 21.7% as white collar workers in an office or in administration, 7.8% worked in education, 4.7% were industrial workers and 3.1% housewives. The rest were unemployed or students.

Procedure

Questionnaires (N = 450) were distributed through the children's health care system at all 20 health care centers in Turku, Finland, in connection with the obligatory five-year check-up of children. Health care personnel distributed the questionnaires to parents, who completed them at home. The personnel was instructed to give only one questionnaire per family and to inform parents that they should fill in the questionnaires alone, without any help or assistance. The questionnaires were arranged such that every other family would get a questionnaire intended for fathers (N = 225) and every other family a questionnaire intended for mothers (N = 225). Ninety-four fathers (41.8 %) and 130 mothers (57.8 %) completed and returned the questionnaire. The total response rate was 49.8 %.

Measures

As part of a larger study on parental gender stereotypes and attitudes, the parents filled out a 24-item questionnaire designed by Martin (1990). Six questions dealt with the participants' beliefs about the acceptability in our society of various aspects of cross-gender behavior. As there are no equivalent expressions to "tomboys" and "sissies" in the Finnish language, these terms were translated as "girlish" and "boyish." Two of the six questions concerned the acceptability of young boys (girls) being girlish (boyish), two concerned the acceptability of young boys (girls) playing with girls' (boys') toys, and two questions concerned the acceptability of young boys (girls) having feminine (masculine) personality characteristics. Each of the six societal acceptability questions was rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all acceptable to 7 = very acceptable). Two additional questions assessed how participants thought they would feel if their own boy (girl) was girlish (boyish). These questions were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = very bad to 7 = very good).

Another group of 16 questions concerned the participants' expectations about

the future of typical boys, typical girls, girlish boys and boyish girls. Four questions were posed for each group of children: a) perceived likelihood of the children growing up to be masculine, b) perceived likelihood of the children growing up to be feminine, c) perceived likelihood of the children growing up to be psychologically well-adjusted, and d) perceived likelihood of the children growing up to be gay. These questions were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all likely to 7 = very likely).

RESULTS

Acceptability in Society

Responses concerning participants' perceptions of societal acceptance of children's cross-gender behavior and their feelings about having cross-gender children were analyzed using repeated measures ANOVAs with two between-subject factors (sex of participant, sex of participant's children - only boys, only girls or both sexes) and one within-subject factor (sex of target children). After that, direct comparisons of scores using t-tests were done.

As expected, the sex of the target children played a significant role in perceived societal acceptability of cross-gender behavior $F(1,213) = 165.22$, p [less than] .0001, $[\eta^2] = .437$. The main effect for sex of participant was $F(1,213) = 9.85$, p [less than] .002, $[\eta^2] = .044$. These effects were subsumed by the significant sex of target child by sex of participant interaction $F(1,213) = 7.68$, p [less than] .006, $[\eta^2] = .035$. Girls who were labeled "boyish" ($M = 5.07$) were rated as being much more acceptable in our society than boys labeled as "girlish" ($M = 3.70$; $t(218) = 13.87$, p [less than] .0001) (Table I).

In rating the acceptability of cross-gender boys in society, male participants ($M = 4.23$) rated them as being more acceptable than women subjects did ($M = 3.33$; $t(218) = 4.27$, p [less than] .0001). In rating the acceptability of [TABULAR DATA FOR TABLE I OMITTED] cross-gender girls, there was a trend towards male participants ($M = 5.26$) rating them as more acceptable ($t(218) = 1.76$, p [less than] .079) than women participants did ($M = 4.91$).

Regarding personality characteristics, the main effects for sex of the target child $F(1,214) = 85.47$, p [less than] .0001, $[\eta^2] = .285$ and sex of participant $F(1, 214) = 6.81$, p [less than] .010, $[\eta^2] = .031$ were significant. These effects were subsumed by the significant sex of target child by sex of participant interaction $F(1,214) = 9.81$, p [less than] .002, $[\eta^2] = .044$. Boys with feminine personality ($M = 4.06$) were less positively regarded than girls with masculine personality ($M = 5.00$; $t(218) = 10.03$, p [less than] .0001). Men perceived more acceptance in society of boys having feminine personality characteristics ($M = 4.52$) than women did ($M = 3.74$; $t(218) = 3.69$, p [less than] .0001). In rating the acceptability of

girls having masculine personality characteristics men ($M = 5.13$) and women ($M = 4.91$) did not differ significantly.

With regard to cross-gender toy preferences, the main effects of sex of target child $F(1,214) = 86.96$, p [less than] $.0001$, $[\eta.sup.2] = .289$ and sex of participant $F(1,214) = 5.46$, p [less than] $.020$, $[\eta.sup.2] = .025$ were significant. These effects were subsumed by the significant sex of target child by sex of participant interaction $F(1,214) = 6.30$, p [less than] $.013$, $[\eta.sup.2] = .029$. Cross-gender toy preferences were more acceptable for girls ($M = 5.83$) than for boys ($M = 4.83$; $t(218) = 10.28$, p [less than] $.0001$). Again, men perceived more acceptance in society of boys playing with girls' toys ($M = 5.20$) than women did ($M = 4.57$; $t(218) = 2.66$, p [less than] $.008$). Concerning girls playing with boys' toys men ($M = 5.94$) and women ($M = 5.74$) did not differ significantly. Interestingly, the sex of participants' own children did not have any significant effect on any of the acceptability measures.

Feelings About Having Cross-Gender Children

In rating feelings about having cross-gender children, the main effect for sex of target child was significant $F(1,214) = 85.62$, p [less than] $.0001$, $[\eta.sup.2] = .286$. Participants rated themselves as feeling worse if their sons were girlish ($M = 4.61$) than if their daughters were boyish ($M = 5.48$; $t(218) = 10.38$, p [less than] $.0001$). Men and women did not differ significantly in their ratings. Cross-gender boys and cross-gender girls taken together, men ($M = 5.05$) and women ($M = 5.03$) did not indicate significant differences in how they would feel about having cross-gender children.

Predictions of Future Masculinity and Femininity

The future outcome variables were analyzed using repeated measures ANOVAs with two between-subject factors (sex of participant, sex of participant's children - only boys, only girls or both sexes) and two within-subject factors (sex of target children, type of label - "typical" and "cross-gender"). Again, t-tests were used to make direct comparisons of scores. When predicting future masculinity, the main effects for sex of target $F(1, 208) = 200.21$, p [less than] $.0001$, $[\eta.sup.2] = .490$ for type of label $F(1,208) = 19.48$, p [less than] $.0001$, $[\eta.sup.2] = .086$ for sex of participant $F(1,208) = 5.75$, p [less than] $.017$, $[\eta.sup.2] = .027$ and sex of participant's children $F(1,208) = 4.83$, p [less than] $.009$, $[\eta.sup.2] = .044$ were significant. These effects were subsumed by the significant sex of target group by type of label interaction $F(1, 208) = 36.84$, p [less than] $.0001$, $[\eta.sup.2] = .150$ and the significant sex of target group by type of label by sex of participant interaction $F(1,208) = 10.59$, p [less than] $.001$, $[\eta.sup.2] = .048$. As can be seen in Fig. 1a, "typical" boys ($M = 5.13$) were predicted to become more masculine in adulthood than "typical" girls ($M = 2.86$; $t(215) =$

17.09, p [less than] .0001) while cross-gender boys ($M = 4.35$) were predicted to become more masculine than cross-gender girls ($M = 2.91$; $t(215) = 9.36$, p [less than] .0001). Parents who had only male children predicted typical boys to be more masculine as adults ($M = 5.69$) than parents who had only female children ($M = 4.92$; $t(112) = 3.32$, p [less than] .001) and parents who had children of both sexes ($M = 4.99$; $t(152) = 2.74$, p [less than] .007).

When predicting future femininity, the sex of target group influenced ratings $F(1,206) = 178.39$, p [less than] .0001, $[\eta^2] = .464$. The effect for type of label did not reach significance $F(1,206) = 2.43$, p [less than] .121, $[\eta^2] = .012$. These effects were subsumed by the sex of target group by type of label interaction $F(1, 206) = 38.74$, p [less than] .0001, $[\eta^2] = .158$. As can be seen in Fig. 1b, "typical" girls ($M = 4.86$) were predicted to become more feminine in adulthood than "typical" boys ($M = 2.58$; $t(215) = 15.75$, p [less than] .0001) and cross-gender girls ($M = 4.19$) were predicted to become more feminine than cross-gender boys ($M = 2.95$; $t(213) = 8.34$, p [less than] .0001). Parents, who had only female children, predicted boyish girls to be less feminine as adults ($M = 3.89$) than parents who had only male children ($M = 4.59$); $t(115) = 2.36$, p [less than] .020).

The participants' predictions about future masculinity and femininity of the group labeled "typical boys" correlated negatively $r(216) = -.28$, p [less than] .0001. For the other groups of children there were no significant correlations between predicted masculinity and femininity; for cross-gender boys this correlation was $r(216) = -.11$, p [less than] .117, for "typical girls" $r(216) = -.016$, p [less than] .821 and for cross-gender girls $r(216) = .003$, p [less than] .960.

To determine whether cross-gender children were believed to grow out of their roles by adulthood, comparisons of masculine and feminine scores were made [ILLUSTRATION FOR FIGURE 1A AND FIGURE 1B OMITTED]. "Typical" boys ($M = 5.13$) were predicted to become more masculine as adults than cross-gender boys ($M = 4.35$; $t(213) = 7.39$, p [less than] .0001), and girls labeled "typical" ($M = 4.86$) were predicted to become significantly more feminine than girls labeled "cross-gender" ($M = 4.17$; $t(213) = 5.56$, p [less than] .0001). Boys labeled "cross-gender" ($M = 2.95$) were predicted to become significantly more feminine as adults than boys labeled "typical" ($M = 2.58$; $t(211) = 3.93$, p [less than] .0001), but cross-gender girls ($M = 2.89$) were not expected to become more masculine as adults than typical girls ($M = 2.86$).

Women predicted "typical" children to show more cross-gender behavior than men did (Table II). Women predicted "typical" girls ($M = 3.18$) to be more masculine as adults than men did ($M = 2.40$; $t(214) = 4.91$, p [less than] .0001) and "typical" boys to be slightly more feminine as adults ($M =$

2.71) than men did ($M = 2.39$, $t(214) = 2.04$, p [less than] .043).

Predictions of Future Adjustment

When predicting the future adjustment of the child, sex of the target group $F(1, 205) = 7.06$, p [less than] .009, $[\eta^2] = .033$ and type of label $F(1, 205) = 27.58$, p [less than] .0001, $[\eta^2] = .119$ influenced ratings [ILLUSTRATION FOR FIGURE 2A OMITTED]. These effects were subsumed by the significant sex of target group by type of label interaction $F(1, 205) = 8.53$, p [less than] .004, $[\eta^2] = .040$. Cross-gender boys ($M = 5.33$) were predicted to be significantly less well-adjusted as adults than cross-gender girls ($M = 5.55$; $t(213) = 3.42$, p [less than] .001). Cross-gender girls ($M = 5.55$) were predicted to be less psychologically well-adjusted [TABULAR DATA FOR TABLE II OMITTED] than "typical" girls ($M = 5.81$; $t(213) = 3.34$, p [less than] .001), and cross-gender boys ($M = 5.33$) were predicted to be less psychologically well-adjusted than "typical" boys ($M = 5.79$; $t(213) = 5.76$, p [less than] .0001). "Typical" boys ($M = 5.79$) and "typical" girls ($M = 5.81$) did not differ significantly from one another in the ratings.

Predictions of Future Sexual Orientation

The mean ratings of predicted sexual orientation are presented in Fig. 2b. When predicting future likelihood of same-gender sexual behavior, the main effect for sex of target child $F(1, 204) = 14.37$, p [less than] .0001, $[\eta^2] = .066$ was significant. The effect of sex of participant $F(1, 204) = 3.62$, p [less than] .58, $[\eta^2] = .017$ almost reached significance. The sex of target child by type of label interaction $F(1, 204) = 14.64$, p [less than] .0001, $[\eta^2] = .067$ was significant and the sex of target group by type of label by sex of participant interaction almost reached significance $F(1, 204) = 3.47$, p [less than] .064, $[\eta^2] = .017$.

When predicting future sexual orientation men expected cross-gender boys ($M = 2.15$) to have a greater likelihood of being gay in adulthood than "typical" boys ($M = 1.91$; $t(86) = 2.15$, p [less than] .035). Surprisingly, women predicted "typical" girls ($M = 2.31$) to have a greater likelihood of being lesbian in adulthood than cross-gender girls ($M = 1.99$; $t(124) = 2.60$, p [less than] .010).

Women predicted a greater likelihood than men for "typical" children to become gay or lesbian as adults (Table II). Women expected "typical" girls ($M = 2.28$) to have a greater likelihood of becoming lesbian than men did ($M = 1.83$; $t(210) = 3.20$, p [less than] .002) and "typical" boys ($M = 2.21$) to have a greater likelihood of becoming gay than men did ($M = 1.91$; $t(208) = 2.11$, p [less than] .036). "Typical" boys ($M = 2.10$) and "typical" girls ($M = 2.09$) did not differ significantly from one another in this regard.

Relations Between Future Expectation Measures

Table III presents the correlations between perceived future masculinity and femininity with perceived future adjustment and likelihood of same-gender sexual behavior for each group of children.

Predicted adjustment was positively related to the degree to which participants believed that children would adopt a traditional gender identity in adulthood. On the other hand, prognosticated adjustment was negatively related to the degree to which subjects believed that children would adopt cross-gender characteristics. Predicted femininity in boys displayed a higher negative correlation with predicted adjustment than predicted masculinity in girls did. When predicting the likelihood of children being gay or lesbian as adults, the prognosticated degree of adopting cross-gender characteristics was related to the likelihood of being gay or lesbian in adulthood.

Table III. Relations Among Future Expectation Measures(a)

	Likelihood of Predicted Same-Gender Adjustment	Sexual Behavior
Typical boy		
Predicted masculinity	.47(***)	-.05
Predicted femininity	-.24(***)	.41(***)
Typical girl		
Predicted masculinity	-.16(*)	.35(***)
Predicted femininity	.44(***)	-.06
Girlish boy		
Predicted masculinity	.41(***)	-.11(****)
Predicted femininity	-.24(***)	.56(***)
Boyish girl		
Predicted masculinity	-.15(*)	.39(***)
Predicted femininity	.36(***)	-.10

a Note: p [less than] .10(****), p [less than] .05(*), p [less than] .01(**), p [less than] .001(***)

DISCUSSION The total response rate of the present study was negatively affected by the lower response rate of fathers compared to mothers. This was, however, expected, since fathers, due to cultural expectations, have traditionally had a minor role in child-rearing issues. It seems that, for this kind of research, fathers should be recruited in a more encouraging manner.

Adults' attitudes toward cross-gender boys and cross-gender girls were found to differ significantly. In agreement with earlier studies (Feinman, 1981; Martin, 1990), boys who do not adhere to traditional gender-roles were more negatively regarded than girls who adopt cross-gender characteristics. Cross-gender girls were expected to have grown out of masculine characteristics by adulthood, although they were predicted to be less feminine than girls labeled "typical." For boys the picture was somewhat different; cross-gender boys were expected to remain both more feminine and less masculine than their peers labeled as "typical." Both men and women predicted cross-gender boys

to be less psychologically well-adjusted as adults than cross-gender girls and men predicted cross-gender boys to be more likely to grow up to be gay than "typical" boys. Predicted psychological adjustment and likelihood of same-gender sexual behavior in adulthood were found to be related to the degree to which children were believed to adopt cross-gender characteristics. In other words, evidence suggesting that the reason for cross-gender boys being more negatively regarded than cross-gender girls would be due to fear for their future development was found (Green, 1975; Anthill, 1987; Martin, 1990).

Gender Differences in Attitudes and Perceptions

Earlier, women have been found to be more accepting of children's cross-gender behavior than men (Martin, 1990). In this study, however, we found that men perceived society as more accepting of cross-gender behavior in boys than women did. The ratings differed quite clearly. It can only be speculated why women perceive society as more intolerant than men do and how this affects women's child rearing practices in relation to boys. Could it be that women, who still bear the primary responsibility for rearing children, are more anxious to make men of boys? On the other hand, women predicted a greater amount of cross-gender behaviour in "typical" boys and girls when they would become adults, and a greater likelihood same-gender sexual behavior in "typical" children in adulthood. In answering the questions regarding how they would feel if their own child adopted cross-gender characteristics, men and women did not demonstrate a significant difference. The results are, in other words, somewhat ambiguous. It could be hypothesized that women are not affected to the same extent by homophobia (Thompson, Grisanti & Pleck, 1985; Badinter, 1992) as men, but are still more concerned with bringing up boys in a traditional manner.

An interesting feature of women's beliefs about children's gender roles was that "typical" girls were predicted to have a greater likelihood of being lesbian in adulthood than cross-gender girls. Surprising at first, this result is however quite consistent with modern beliefs about sexual identity as socially constructed (Hart, 1985). It seems that same-gender sexual behavior in females is more easily accepted as a personal choice, rather than something that has to do with biology, genes, or a masculine gender role in women.

Comparisons with North American Studies

When the results are compared with the results from earlier studies (Feinman, 1981; Martin, 1990), both similarities and differences can be found. This can be due to time, but also cultural differences, and the fact that our subjects were parents of five-year children. Since there are no equivalent words for "sissy" and "tomboy" some of the results may not be comparable. It is, however, clear that cross-gender behavior is more acceptable for girls than for boys in both the North American and the Finnish cultures. The reasons for this

seem to be the same in both cultures: fear of future outcome. The striking difference between the results of the American sample and the Finnish sample is that Finnish men appear to be more acceptant of boys' cross-gender behavior than women, while in North America women have been found to be more acceptant of such behavior. In addition, the Finnish sample predicted less masculinity in "typical" boys and less femininity in "typical" girls than the American sample did.

Conclusions

The present study showed that Finnish parents have more traditional views of maleness than femaleness when children are concerned. Girls are allowed to adopt traditionally masculine behaviors while boys to a large extent are confronted with values and attitudes about how boys and men should be. Efforts should be made to make parents aware of this subtle form of gender discrimination, and of their responsibility to redefine femininity and masculinity.

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