**Introduction**

- Despite attempts to equalize opportunities for men and women, disparities are still widely documented across many areas. For example,
  - Although 57% of women participate in the workforce, they comprise only 20% of computer engineers, 27% of high-power executives, and 38% of doctors.
  - On average, women are compensated only 81% of what men are for the same jobs (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017; Dept. of Labor, 2016).
  - Only 16% of stay-at-home parents are fathers. Over 50% of the public believe that children are better off if their mother stays at home, whereas only 8% think the same of fathers (Pew Research Center, 2013).
  - Although children do not understand gender until about two-and-a-half years of age, parents begin socializing them in gender-normative ways even before they are born (Kane, 2006; Martin & Ruble, 2004).
  - Deeply-rooted societal beliefs about gender continue to dictate parental choices and influence behavioral expectations throughout the child’s life (Martin & Ruble, 2004).
  - Modern-day parents attempt to engage in non gender-normative parenting.
  - However, societal gender stereotypes persist and normative gender beliefs might be transmitted through the language used about and with children in everyday interactions (Beukeboom, 2014; Freeman, 2007).
  - For toddlers who are just beginning to undergo the process of gender-identification, the communication of gender-based stereotypes can limit their early gender expression and inhibit their future behaviors as they attempt to correctly perform their newfound gender (Freeman, 2007).

**The Current Study**

- This study investigated:
  1. The extent to which parents implicitly construct gender through the language used to describe their infant children, as well variations by gender of child and parents;
  2. The explicit beliefs about gender and variations by gender of child and parents;
  3. The relation between descriptive language and explicit beliefs about gender.

**Participants**

- Data were collected as a part of the New Fathers and Mothers Study, a longitudinal study examining parental attachment, child executive functioning, and other possible predictors of disruptive childhood behaviors.
- Participants were recruited from hospitals and prenatal classes and have were followed from mothers’ late pregnancy until their child’s second birthday.
- N = 257 first-time parents in heterosexual partnerships in the New York City area.
- Mothers were 34 years old on average, and fathers averaged 35.7 years old.
- The mean family income was $180,000+ and 96% of parents had a Bachelor’s degree or higher.
- Data sources for this study included 4-month and 24-month visits.

**Method**

**Gender Construction Score Coding**

- Both parents were asked to describe their child’s personality for 5 minutes.
- 307 descriptors (i.e., adjectives) were extracted and rated for femininity/masculinity by independent informants (n = 220) using a 7-point Likert scale from very feminine to very masculine.
- Descriptors were then recoded to a 5-point scale (below) from -2 to 2.
- Each speech sample was assigned a Gender Normative Description score based on a sum of the amount of strong/weak gendered words multiplied by their respective value, divided by the total number of adjectives used.

**Explicit Gender Socialization Measure**

- At the 24-month visit, 168 parents (47% moms) completed a 28-item measure of explicit gender-based parenting beliefs (The Child Gender Socialization Scale, Blakemore & Hill, 2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>How would you feel about your child participating in these activities/playing with these toys?</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hyper-feminine</td>
<td>Ballet, Barbies, baby dolls, toy jewelry</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyper-masculine</td>
<td>Football, G.I. Joe, toy guns, military toys</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic play</td>
<td>Hops/switch, toy nurse kit, toy trucks, toy cars, toy tool kit, by kitchen set, toy dish set</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping at home</td>
<td>Taking out trash, moving lawn, washing dishes, cleaning room, setting table, doing laundry, sweeping floor</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education for family</td>
<td>Education prepares for childcare, education prepares for marriage</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education for money</td>
<td>Go to college, education prepares for higher salary</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discouraging cross-gender behavior</td>
<td>Acting like a boy/girl, playing with boys/girls toys or games</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Results: Descriptive Language**

- Over 60% of descriptors were identified as neutral, 24% as feminine, and 14% as masculine.
- The five most commonly used descriptors in each category (ranging from strong feminine to strong masculine) are displayed to the left.
- Parents were much more likely to describe their sons with feminine words than they were to describe their daughters with masculine words.
- Fathers described their daughters as more feminine and their sons as less feminine than did mothers.
- On average, four-month olds were described with more feminine descriptors. This suggests a possible “baby girl” bias, in which infant characteristics (e.g., cute, sweet, little) are considered feminine in adulthood.

**Results: Explicit Gender Beliefs**

- Mothers endorsed more generic play and pursuing education for higher salary than did fathers.
- Fathers more strongly endorsed hyper-masculine activities and more strongly discouraged cross-gender behavior than did mothers.
- Parents who describe their sons as more masculine at four months are more likely to explicitly discourage their sons from acting like a girl or playing with girls’ toys at 24 months.
- No similar correlation was found for parents of girls.

**Discussion**

- Results showed that there is greater variability in society’s conceptualization of what constitutes femininity, whereas ideas of masculinity remain more restrictive.
- Consistent with previous literature, fathers were more likely to subscribe to gender-normative beliefs than were mothers, and even more so for their sons—both implicitly and explicitly (Freeman, 2007; Martin & Ruble, 2004).
- Results of explicit gender beliefs were largely consistent with those of Blakemore and Hill (2008). Parents, particularly mothers, attempt to counteract stereotypical gender roles in their child-rearing practices (e.g., encouraging sons ‘helping around the house and daughters’ pursuing higher salary jobs’).
- However, results also suggest that those who would discourage their sons from exhibiting feminine behaviors might implicitly hold, and thus might communicate these beliefs even when their son is four months old.
- Additional research is needed to understand whether the individual differences in the ways parents describe their young children are stable over time, and whether they are related to later child gender-normative behaviors.

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