

## **Children's Perceptions of Occupational Sex Stereotypes<sup>1</sup>**

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*Female and male children ranging in age from 2½ to 8 years were asked to indicate for each of 10 occupations whether a male or a female adult would be most likely to engage in the occupation. Five traditionally male and five traditionally female occupations were presented in random orders. The results indicated that the children at each age level made a significant distinction between the two occupational groupings, with the extent of the distinction increasing with age level. There were no significant effects involving the sex of the children. The results were interpreted as indicating the learning of adult stereotypes concerning the sex appropriateness of occupations by children as young as 2½ years old. The potential implications of this sex stereotype for actual career decisions and aspirations were discussed.*

Despite recent progress in challenging the barriers to entry into previously male-dominated professions, women still face many significant obstacles in achieving success in nontraditional fields (O'Leary, 1974). One underlying basis for these obstacles seems apparent in the evidence that continues to accumulate suggesting that certain occupations are perceived as appropriate only for males or for females. Panek, Rush, and Greenawalt (1977) presented college undergraduates with a list of 25 occupations and asked them to judge whether the occupation was male, female, or neutral. They found that 15 of the 25 were associated with either males (8) or with females (7), rather than neutral. The distinctions revealed were in line with traditional stereotypes concerning professions (e.g.,

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Women on Words and Images, 1975c). The male occupations included lawyer, police officer, medical doctor, and office manager, while the female occupations included elementary school teacher, typist, librarian, and nurse. In a related study, Albrecht, Bahr, and Chadwick (1977) report a similar pattern in a large-sample survey of Utah residents. A list of 15 occupations was presented to respondents; nine were judged as only or more suitable for men (e.g., doctor, scientist, lawyer, congressman), and only three were viewed as only or more suitable for women (secretary, nurse, housekeeper). Although the lists employed in these studies were limited, and possibly biased toward commonly male-dominated professions, they do clearly indicate a pattern in which many occupations are sex typed as either male- or female-appropriate by adults.

Since adult models are presumed to be responsible for many of the behaviors and attitudes children develop (e.g., Mischel, 1970), children might be expected to evidence similar occupational stereotypes. Research on related behaviors indicates that highly sex-typed stereotypes are apparently effectively communicated to young children. A considerable body of evidence demonstrates that children develop highly sex-typed activity preferences and behaviors as early as age 3 (see Maccoby & Jacklin, 1975, for a review). While most of the research has involved activities which are appropriate for the age child being tested, other research does indicate a considerable degree of awareness of adult stereotypes. Verner and Snyder (1966) found that children as young as 30 months operated well above chance levels in identifying the sex linkage of "cultural artifacts." Five-year-olds made very few errors on this task. Similarly, Williams, Bennet, and Best (1975) report that kindergarten-age children seem aware of adult sex stereotypes concerning behavioral styles. When children answered questions about matched pairs of male and female adult story characters, they selected reactions for the characters that fit traditional stereotypes. For example, males were more likely to be selected in response to "which person gets into fights?," while female characters were picked more often in response to "which person is soft-hearted?"

Occupational sex stereotyping in children has been examined primarily with respect to the children's own choices of preferred or expected professions. Looft (1971) questioned first and second graders concerning their occupational goals as adults. Boys indicated a larger variety of potential occupations than girls, and they selected traditionally male professions (football player, policeman, doctor, pilot, etc.). Girls' selections were dominated by two occupations: nurse and teacher. Siegel (1973) reported similar results when second graders were asked to indicate the type of work they would most like to do when they "grew up." Boys again produced a longer list of occupations, with the list almost exclusively composed of stereotypically male occupations. Girls again selected teacher or nurse in the vast majority of cases.

A more recent study (Kriedberg, Butcher, & White, 1978) provides some evidence that the sex difference may be weakening. These researchers attempted a replication of Looft's (1971) procedure using second and sixth graders. They reported no sex differences in the number of occupations nominated at either age group. They did find, however, that the majority of the children selected traditional sex-appropriate occupations. The only indication of a variation from this pattern was in the sixth-grade females, where only half of the girls nominated traditional occupations.

Although these studies demonstrate that school-age children express sex-typed occupational aspirations, it is not clear that they perceive the occupations as stereotypically male or female. There is an important difference between apparently sex-typed preferences for professions, and the perception of occupations as appropriate for one or the other sex exclusively. The present research seeks to examine more directly children's perceptions of particular occupations. In addition, children younger than those previously tested are included to assess any developmental changes in perceptions. The procedure involved selecting a male or female stimulus person in response to each of 10 occupations. The prediction was that children at each age level would show evidence of a stereotyped perception of traditionally female and male occupations.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

Subjects were 155 preschool and first-grade children ranging in age from 2½ to 8 years. The samples were obtained from two local day-care centers and one elementary school. There were 18 children in the 2½–3-year-old group (nine males and nine females), and 58 children in the 4–5-year-old group (32 males and 26 females). All of these children were obtained at the area day-care centers. The remaining 79 children, all in the 6–8-year-old-group (40 males and 39 females), were first-grade students at the elementary school. An additional two children in the 2½–3-year-old group were eliminated when they preferred not to respond to the questions.

### *Materials*

Two adult dolls, one male and one female, dressed as similarly as possible in slacks and a blouse, were used as the stimuli for the children to indicate their choices. The dolls were placed on a table in front of the child while the occupa-

tions were read aloud by the experimenter. For each child, the relative position of the dolls was randomly determined.

The occupations were listed on data sheets which included space to record the child's age, sex, and choices. Seven different data sheets were employed, each involving a new random order of presentation of the occupations. The use of a particular data sheet was randomly determined, with as many as 36 and as few as 14 subjects exposed to a particular order. The 10 occupations used are shown in Table I.

### *Procedure*

Each child was interviewed individually by a 22-year-old white female (L.G.). The interviews took place in a corner of the child's classroom, or in a hallway outside the classroom. The experimenter took each child to the research area, seated her/him, and gave the following instructions: "We are going to play a game. I am going to call out some jobs that people do, and as I do I want you to point to the person (indicates the dolls) that you think does that job. There are no right or wrong answers." After it was determined that the child understood the task, the experimenter asked the child for his/her age, and then began reading the occupations and recording the child's choices. When the procedure was completed, the child was told not to tell the other children about the game, and then she/he was returned to the class.

**Table I.** Occupations Presented and Percentage of Children Assigning Male Doll to 10 Occupations

Occupation	2- and 3-year-olds	4- and 5-year-olds	6- and 7-year-olds
Male occupations			
Doctor	67	79	84
Police	67	90	92
Mayor	61	79	91
Basketball player	83	90	99
Construction worker	78	98	97
Female occupations			
Secretary	33	34	04
Teacher	22	10	06
Dancer	39	10	09
Model	33	28	34
Librarian	56	16 <sup>a</sup>	03
Total <i>N</i> s	18	58	79

<sup>a</sup>*N* = 38.

Table II. Summary of Analysis of Variance

Effect	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F
Between group				
Sex of Child	0.0475	1	0.047	0.12
Age-level	2.1028	2	1.051	2.61
Sex of child $\times$ Age	0.0401	2	0.021	0.05
Error	60.377	150	0.403	
Within group				
Sex of Occupation	855.565	1	855.565	838.13 <sup>a</sup>
Sex of Occupation $\times$ Age	55.574	2	27.782	27.22 <sup>a</sup>
Sex of Occupation $\times$ Sex of Child	1.601	1	1.601	1.57
Sex of Occupation $\times$ Sex of Child $\times$ Age	3.680	2	1.840	1.80
Error	151.080	148	1.020	

<sup>a</sup> $p < .0001$ .

## RESULTS

The children's responses were scored by assigning a zero (0) when the male doll was selected, and a one (1) when the female doll was chosen. Each child received a separate score for the "female" and the "male" occupations. Since there were five occupations of each type,<sup>3</sup> the range of possible scores was from 0 to 5. For the male occupations, a lower score indicated greater sex typing, while a higher score reflected greater sex typing of the female occupations.

A 2(Sex of Child)  $\times$  3(Age of Child)  $\times$  2(Sex of Occupation) mixed design analysis of variance was performed on these data, with sex of occupation as the within-subject factor. The results of this analysis are presented in Table II. The Occupation main effect and the Age  $\times$  Occupation interaction were both significant. There were no significant Sex of Child effects. The relevant means are displayed in Table III. Overall, the children showed strong evidence of a sex stereotyping of the occupations ( $M = 4.00$  for female occupations,  $M = 0.68$  for the male occupations). The Age  $\times$  Occupation interaction seems to reflect the increasing recognition of the sex stereotypes with increasing age; simple effects tests reveal that the Occupation effect was significant at each level of the Age variable,  $F_s(1,148) = 19.83, 232.67, 632.30, p_s < .01$ .

<sup>3</sup>The occupation "Newscaster" was used with the first 20 4-5-year-olds. The children seemed overly confused by this occupation, so "Librarian" was substituted. In scoring the data for these children, "Newscaster" was considered a "male" occupation. This represented the more conservative approach since the actual choices were 7 for the male doll and 13 for the female doll.

Table III. Means and Standard Deviations for Summary Scores<sup>a</sup>

	Age level			Totals
	2½ - 3 years old	4 - 5 years old	6 - 8 years old	
Male occupations	1.50 .786 (18)	.862 1.016 (58)	.367 .644 (79)	.68 (155)
Female occupations	3.00 1.084 (18)	3.724 .987 (58)	4.44 .694 (79)	4.01 (155)

<sup>a</sup>The numbers are based on a possible score of 0-5, with a 5 indicating that the female doll was selected for all five occupations. The numbers in parentheses are the sample sizes.

The extent to which sex stereotyping occurred for the individual occupations can be seen in Table I. There was a single case in which the majority of the children in an age group failed to select the doll which represented the traditional sex stereotype. Ten of the children in the youngest group picked the male doll for the occupation "librarian."

## DISCUSSION

The pattern revealed by these data would seem to leave little doubt that young children not only select sex-stereotyped appropriate occupations for themselves, but they also recognize that the occupations are typically filled by males or by females. Children in every age group clearly and accurately distinguished between occupations which according to adult stereotypes or current practices are dominated by one or the other sex. Although there was a significant interaction with the age of the child, this reflected the increasing recognition with increasing age rather than an onset of the effect in older children.

These data are especially impressive for two reasons. First, the strength of the effect in the 2½–3-year-old group indicates that occupational sex stereotypes are learned very early. Apparently the child is exposed to a sufficient variety of occupations and practitioners during his/her first few years that a reliable distinction between "male" and "female" occupations can be made. The most probable sources of these stereotyped views of professions would be the television programs and children's books that have been identified and criticized as highly sex stereotyped (Women on Words and Images, 1975a, 1975b). Thus, very young children seem to have an amazingly clear division of their world into male and female artifacts (Verner & Snyder, 1966) and male and female occupational roles.

A second point worth noting is that the occupations used were not those with which children would necessarily be most familiar. For example, early research (Looft, 1971; Siegel, 1973) found that girls usually indicated nurse, housewife, or teacher as their preferred professions. The inclusion of dancer, model, and librarian presents the children with less-common occupations which are still sex stereotyped by adults. Similarly, the male occupations of mayor and construction worker are likely to be less common in a child's realm of experiences. The data in Table I show quite clearly that even the less typical occupations were, in fact, recognized by the children according to the sex stereotype.

The absence of any sex differences was not unexpected. Previous research has provided no basis for predicting a stronger expression of stereotypes in males or females. Although boys and girls show differences in the expressed preferred professions, these differences merely reflect equivalent recognition of the sex roles involved.

The actual tangible impact on children of this occupational sex stereotyping may be quite difficult to demonstrate; however, the potential for serious implications seems evident. By the time children enter the public school system they apparently are quite skilled in responding according to adult sex stereotypes. If these children are then exposed to textbooks and career guidance materials (Women on Words and Images, 1975b, 1975c) as well as television programming (Women on Words and Images, 1975a) that reinforces these distinctions, they are likely to narrow considerably their professional aspirations to conform to the sex stereotypes they have learned. For there to be a successful shifting of attitudes, so that barriers to nontraditional employment can be crossed by females and males, there must be an effort to insure that children are provided with a clear understanding that occupations are not categorized into male-only and female-only groupings.

That this already may be happening was suggested in the data reported by Kriedberg et al. (1978). They found that in a sample of sixth-grade females, half of the girls indicated a nontraditional profession as their occupational goal. Possibly a more extensive examination of older children will reveal a pattern in which sex stereotypes are diminished through new experiences.

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