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Interaction with a Baby by Young Adults: A Comparison of Traditional and Feminist Men and Women[1]

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Recently, researchers have examined college students' interactions with unfamiliar babies. Most of the studies have reported that men and women show equal level of interest in these babies. However, one researcher reported a sex difference, with women interacting with a baby more than men did. Perhaps the subjects in the discrepant study were a more conservative or traditional group. In order to examine this possibility, this study compared traditional and feminist young adults. The Attitudes Toward Women Scale was used to preselect feminist and traditional men and women who were videotaped during a period of interaction with a baby. It was predicted that a sex difference would be found among the more traditional subjects only. However, women interacted with the baby more than men did in both groups.

Women have been credited with having a greater interest in babies and greater skill in interacting with them (e.g., Hutt, 1972). Only recently have researchers explored this question in order to determine if women do interact more with babies who are unfamiliar to them than do men and whether women seem to have more overall interest in babies.

Feldman and Nash (1978; 1979; Nash & Feldman, 1980, 1981) have examined the question of a sex difference in this behavior during the adult

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years. They have reported sex differences during early parenthood and grandparenthood, but not generally at other times during adulthood. They have always found young men and women of college age who are not yet parents to be equally interested in babies. They interpret the pattern of sex differences that they have found as reflecting the demands that exist for sex-role behaviors at certain times during adulthood, such as when people are the parents of a young infant (Nash & Feldman, 1981). They believe that sex-role-related behaviors, such as interest in babies, fluctuate during the adult years as the circumstances of one's life change.

Other researchers have only partially confirmed Feldman and Nash's findings. Using subjects who were themselves parents of an infant, Culp, Cook, and Housley (1983) found young mothers to interact more with unfamiliar babies than did young fathers, consistent with Feldman and Nash's findings. However, Blakemore (1981) found a sex difference among nonparent college students. This discrepant finding is important because it both differs from the findings of Feldman and Nash and contradicts their explanation for their findings.

The subjects studied by Blakemore (1981) were students at a midwestern state university and perhaps represented a more conservative group than the subjects typically studied by Feldman and Nash in California. Maybe more traditional young people feel compelled to engage in traditional sex-role behavior at time when less traditional young people do not find it necessary. If this is the case, the basic premises of Feldman and Nash would still be tenable, even though some groups of young adult nonparents show sex differences in interest in babies. That is, it would still be reasonable to assume that sex-role behavior will be demonstrated only at the times during adulthood when the circumstances demand it.

The present study compared interactions with a baby on the part of traditional and feminist college students. The Attitudes Toward Women Scale was used to select these students, who then interacted with a baby. A sex difference was predicted for the traditional students, but not the feminists.

METHOD

Subjects

Students in introductory psychology classes at a midwestern state university served as subjects and received extra credit for participation. The short version of The Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS; Spence,

Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973) was given to more than 300 students. Scores on this scale range from 0 to 74, with higher scores being more feminist in attitude. From the students who completed the AWS, 10 feminist women ($\bar{X}$ AWS score = 67.9, SD = 8.25), 10 feminist men ($\bar{X}$ = 61.2, SD = 7.74), 10 traditional women ($\bar{X}$ = 47.0, SD = 6.62), and 10 traditional men ($\bar{X}$ = 41.8, SD = 5.3) were selected to interact with a baby.

Procedure

Each of the 40 students who interacted with the baby came individually to the laboratory and was given the following instructions by a female research assistant:

> There is a baby in the next room. His name is _____. We are interested in how babies like him interact with strangers and new people. What I would like you to do is stay in the room with the baby for a few minutes. You and the baby will be videotaped so that the tape can be studied later. You can interact with the baby in any way you choose. You don't have to interact with the baby, just stay in the room with him. There are magazines on the table if you would like to look at them.

The student was then taken to a small room containing a baby in a playpen several toys, and a table with magazines on it. A White male baby served as stimulus infant for all subjects. He ranged in age from 10 to 14 months during the course of the study.

After leaving the experimental room and shutting the door, the experimenter entered an adjacent room and began videotaping the subject and the baby through a one-way observation window. After a seven-minute period, the experimenter reentered the experimental room and told the subject he/she could leave. While it was intended that any sessions during which the infant was distressed would be terminated, this was not necessary.

A number of behaviors shown by the college students to the baby were recorded from the videotapes using a modified time-sampling procedure. The behaviors were organized into three categores: vocalizations, play, and proximity behaviors. Vocalizations included talking, laughing, singing, and nonsense vocalizations. Play included playing with toys, retrieving fallen or requested toys, and playing in some other way, such as peek-a-boo. Proximity included picking the baby up, touching him, tickling him, and kissing him. The seven-minute period was divided into 10-second intervals. If a behavior occurred during an interval, it was recorded. Each behavior was recorded only once per 10-second interval. However, any other behavior that occurred during that interval was also recorded. For example, if a subject talked, laughed, tickled the baby, and picked up a toy for him during a particular 10-second interval, all these would be recorded once

during that interval. If, however, the subject talked three times during the interval, talking was recorded only once during the interval. If the talking continued into the next interval, it was recorded during that interval. Since there are 42 10-second intervals in seven minutes, the maximum score for any of the behaviors would be 42. The scores for all the behaviors in a category were summed to obtain a total for the category. For example, the vocalization score would be the combined scores of laughing, singing, talking, and nonsense vocalizations.

The tapes of all 40 subjects were scored by the research assistant who collected the data. Another research assistant coded the tapes of eight randomly selected subjects, balanced across groups, to assess reliability.

RESULTS

The mean score for each behavioral category and the total can be seen in Table I. The reliability for each category was proximity = .99, vocalizations = .95, play = .87, and total (sum of all the categories) = .98.

Each of the behavioral categories—vocalizations, play, and proximity—was analyzed with a 2 X 2 (Sex X AWS) ANOVA. The total

Table I. Mean Scores of Feminist and Traditional Men and Women in the Categories of Behavior Involved in Interacting with the Baby[a]

	Feminist		Traditional	
Behavioral categores	Men	Women	Men	Women
Vocalizations	29.4	38.5	38.0	45.3
Talking	26.6	29.4	31.8	34.3
Singing	.0	.0	.0	.0
Nonsense vocalizations	1.5	4.3	1.9	5.5
Laughing	1.3	4.8	4.3	5.5
Play	17.4	24.0	18.9	25.3
Playing with a toy	11.2	8.4	8.5	14.3
Playing in other way	5.1	13.5	7.5	8.7
Retrieving a toy	1.1	2.1	2.9	2.3
Proximity	14.6	20.0	12.5	24.3
Touching	13.0	17.5	11.3	21.3
Picking up	1.1	1.6	.4	1.8
Tickling	.5	.6	.8	1.1
Kissing	.0	.3	.0	.1
Total interaction	61.4	82.5	69.4	94.9

[a]Each category's score is the sum of the scores of the behaviors in that category. The score for any of the individual behaviors could range from 0, if it never occurred, to 42, if it was observed during every 10-second interval of the observation period.

score was also analyzed with a 2 X 2 ANOVA, and the three behavioral categories were analyzed with a 2 X 2 MANOVA.

The analysis of the total interaction with the baby produced a significant main effect for sex, $F(1, 36) = 4.80$, $p < .04$. Each separate category had a marginally significant main effect for sex: proximity, $F(1, 36) = 3.08$, $p < .09$; vocalizations, $F(1, 36) = 3.07$, $p < .09$; and play, $F(1, 36) = 3.26$, $p < .08$. No other effects reached statistical significance. In other words, females interacted with the baby in all ways at higher levels than did males. This held true for feminist and traditional subjects. Table I shows that feminists of both sexes had a small but fairly consistent tendency to have lower levels of interaction with the baby than traditional students. At no time did this approach statistical significance.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study do not confirm the hypothesis that feminist men would interact with a baby at levels comparable to feminist women, and that a sex difference would be found only among traditional young adults. Both feminist and traditional men interacted with the baby less than women did. There was a slight, although not significant, tendency for feminist men to interact less with the baby than did traditional men and a similar finding for feminist as compared to traditional women. The present results therefore replicate, but do not explain, the previous report of a sex difference in interaction with a baby among college students.

The report of a sex difference in interaction with a baby among college students (Blakemore, 1981) is replicable. It is therefore important to further clarify the conditions under which males and females show similar degrees of interest in babies and those when a sex difference might be found. Two points might be made here. First, it was difficult during the course of this study to find feminist men, although a group with fairly high scores was eventually located. It is very unlikely, however, that the group of men defined as feminist in this study on the basis of the AWS would use that term to define themselves. Perhaps a group of self-labeled feminist men would interact with babies at levels comparable to women. Such a group of young adult men would be an atypical group, however, and somewhat difficult to find among the average group of college men. There is also reason to believe that a search for such a group of men is unlikely to be a fruitful avenue of research. The feminist men in this study had somewhat, although not significantly, lower levels of interaction with the baby than the traditional men; and the same was true of the feminist as compared to the traditional women. This finding suggests that further search for a group of

feminist men, at least as defined by AWS scores, who would interact with babies at levels comparable to women in situations similar to the one in the present study is probably pointless. In support of this contention, the five most feminist men in this study (mean AWS score = 67.2) had levels of behavioral interaction with the baby essentially identical to the overall mean of the feminist men (total interaction of 61.2 compared to 61.4).

A much more important comparison is likely to be of situational influences on interaction with babies. The procedure used in this study is very similar to that use by Blakemore (1981). In both studies the subject and baby were left alone for a period during which their interaction was to be studied, and in both cases sex differences were found. Feldman and Nash (1978; 1979; Nash & Feldman, 1980, 1981) always use a "waiting room" with the baby's mother also present, and hence are really studying interest in a mother and baby. They have not reported sex differences for young adults. It is possible that being alone with a baby makes a different kind of demand on a person than being in a waiting room with a baby and the baby's mother. It should also be pointed out that the instructions given to the subjects in a waiting room are also quite different than asking subjects to spend time with a baby to see how the baby interacts with strangers. A reviewer of the then-available research on sex differences in interest in babies (Berman, 1980) pointed out how much situational factors seemed to influence whether differences were found. In fact, task, situation, and cultural expectancies seem to be more important than gender in producing most gender-related differences in behavior (Deaux, 1984). Since the behaviors involved in interacting with infants have frequently been seen as an integral part of stereotypic feminine behavior, they deserve further study. One of the most promising avenues for such research seems to be clarifying the ways in which situational expectations influence the presence or absence of gender differences.

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