An Exploratory Study of Early Childhood Teachers' Attitudes Toward Gender Roles[1]

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This study explored the relationship between early childhood teachers' adult gender role beliefs and their attitudes about children's gender role behavior. The teachers, most of whom were women, expressed nontraditional beliefs regarding gender roles for adults. This feminist orientation appeared to be related to perceptions about child rearing in that teachers who espoused nontraditional gender role beliefs for adults also did for children. In addition, it was found that teachers were more accepting of cross-gender role behaviors and aspirations from girls than boys, and that this difference was related to homophobia. There were strong relationships found between child rearing gender role beliefs and attitudes toward gay men and lesbians.

Approximately 10 million children younger than five years of age receive some form of extrafamilial caregiving while their parents work (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1991). Of these children, 38 percent are being cared for by teachers in early childhood settings. Although the home environment is studied and perceived as the most salient agent of gender role learning, early childhood teachers play a role in the early socialization of young children.

The majority of studies looking at the gender role socialization practices of teachers have measured teacher behavior toward boys and girls (Best, 1983; Biber, Miller, & Dyer, 1972; Cherry, 1975; Fagot, 1974, 1984; Fagot & Hagan, 1985; Honig & Wittmer, 1982; Serbin, 1978; Serbin,

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O'Leary, Kent, & Tonick, 1973). Delamont (1990) suggested that there were large gaps in the literature concerning teachers' beliefs about gender roles. In addition, Delamont believed that the gender role beliefs of early childhood teachers may be predictive of teacher behaviors that would then shape children's gender role perceptions and behaviors.

There is empirical support for the concept that people have expectations about female and male characteristics, and this support has been found primarily in the literature on gender stereotypes (Bem, 1974; Eagly, 1987; Martin, 1990; Ruble, 1987; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). Fagot (1984) found that early childhood teachers used gender role stereotypes to guide their behavior with children, particularly when they did not know a child well, or if the child was pre-verbal.

The literature in this area indicates that teachers prefer that boys and girls adhere to conventional gender roles (Arndt, 1991; Fagot, 1977). When children behave in ways that conflict with teacher gender expectations then there may be concern over the meaning of nonconventional behaviors. Boys who cry easily and play in the housekeeping corner, and girls who shove their peers and prefer to play football may challenge a teacher's comfort with gender expectations.

Honig (1983) suggested that many people have confused the process by which children develop a gender identity with how children accept a gender role. Developing a gender identity is the process by which children come to believe they are either male or female (Lewis, 1987), whereas a gender role is a set of expectations regarding which behaviors are appropriate for persons of one sex. A gender role has many components including activity choices, interests, skills, dress, and sexual partner (Kessler and McKenna, 1978). When a person accepts a gender role they are accepting the proscriptions designated by society for specific behaviors for their gender. Gender roles differ in each culture far more than gender identity.

A major part of learning gender roles is the socialization process. Socialization is the process by which children learn the values and behaviors accepted in their society. There are four predominant models to explain the socialization or gender role acquisition process: (a) psychoanalytic (Chodorow, 1978; Freud, 1940), (b) social learning (Bandura, 1969), (c) cognitive-development (Kohlberg, 1966), and (d) gender schematic (Bem, 1983). In all the models the common process is that adults pass their beliefs about gender roles for adult behavior onto children in the form of gender roles for children. Thus, while gender roles for children and adults are overlapping constructs, they should be examined separately. There has been very little research in this area (Burge, 1981).

Lloyd and Duveen (1992) suggested that children who have constructed a gender identity outside the prescribed roles have introduced

teachers to a new theme—the relationship between biological sex, gender roles, and sexuality. Lloyd and Duveen stated that most people assume that boys are masculine and girls are feminine in their construction of a gender role. When a child's behavior calls into question this assumption, the issue of the child's sexual identity may emerge. For example, boys who cry and play with dolls may be perceived by teachers as unmasculine in their development and perhaps homosexual, or soon to develop into an adult homosexual. Martin (1990) found that adults believed that boys who engaged in nontraditional gender behaviors might grow up to be homosexual and psychologically ill-adjusted. Nontraditional girls, however, appeared to arouse little concern as "tomboyishness" seemed to be more accepted by parents and society (Green, 1974). Thus the question of deviance and concern for the child may be applied differentially depending on the gender of the child.

Pogrebin (1980) theorized that there was an assumed relationship between gender roles and sexuality in young children. Pogrebin listed three assumptions that have inhibited adults from allowing children greater latitude in gender role expression. First, there has been a belief that gender roles determine sexuality, thus parents raise their daughters and sons differently so that they will attract the opposite sex. Second, there has been the belief that something (hormones, home environment, attachment to mother, etc.) has made a child homosexual. And third, there is a cultural standard of homophobia — fear and intolerance of homosexuality.

The consequence of the three assumptions has been that if, for example, a boy participated in nonconventional gender behaviors (i.e., cried a lot and was easily frightened) then he may be considered a "sissy" or "faggot." The use of epithets such as "faggot" and "dyke" to describe people who do not fit designated gender roles provides further indication of the assumed relationship between gender roles and homophobia (Pharr, 1988). These assumptions are widely held despite the research which has suggested that gender role behavior does not determine sexual orientation (Bell, Weinberg, & Hammersmith, 1981). In addition there is no consistent evidence to point to a single cause of homosexuality (Bell et al.).

What is missing in the literature on teacher gender beliefs and attitudes is the recognition that the cultural standard of homophobia may influence teachers' conceptual understanding of gender role behaviors, particularly cross-gender interests and behaviors of the children (Lloyd & Duveen, 1992). Negative attitudes concerning lesbians and gay men may be related to teacher beliefs regarding appropriate gender roles for boys and girls in the early years.

The purpose of this study was to examine: (a) teacher gender role beliefs, (b) how teacher adult gender role beliefs related to teacher con-

ceptualization of young children's gender role behaviors, (c) if teachers had differing socialization beliefs for boys and girls, and (d) the relationship between teacher gender role beliefs for adults and children, and their attitudes toward homosexuals.

RESEARCH METHODS

Participants

The survey group for the present research was comprised of 103 early childhood teachers working with children; birth through eight years of age in preschools, full-day child care centers, and elementary schools in northern Ohio. Two hundred and twenty five surveys were mailed to directors and principals for distribution to the teacher subjects and 103 usable surveys were returned, producing at least a 46% return rate. This was a minimum possible return, as the exact number or surveys actually distributed by the principals and directors was unknown.

The vast majority of the teacher sample was female (96.1%). The sample group was representative of the profession as ninety six percent of early childhood teachers in Ohio are women (Ohio Association for the Education of Young Children, 1993). The racial distribution for the sample was six percent African-American, two percent Asian-American, 60 percent European-American, and twenty nine percent "other." Accurate racial demographic information was unavailable due to the supposition that some participants misunderstood the categories on the information sheet.

The average age range of the teacher sample was 30-39 years with a full range of ages from 20-69 years. All educational levels were well represented: high school degree or Graduate Equivalency Degree certificate (16.5%), Associate degree (15.5%), Bachelor's degree (43.8%), Master's degree (19.4%), and "other" (4.8%). The majority of the teachers were employed in a child care center (78.6%). There were 14 teachers from elementary schools (13.6%) working in the early grades (kindergarten through third grade). In addition, most of the participants had been teaching for less than 11 years (72.8%). The most common category indicated was for the teachers who had been teaching between 3-5 years (29.1%).

Instruments

Adult Gender Roles. Adult gender role beliefs were measured by Kalin and Tilby's (1978) Sex-Role Ideology Scale which was constructed to meas-

ure people's prescriptions of gender role, or their attitudes about what traits and behaviors are appropriate for men and women (Beere, 1979). Participants were asked to respond to 30 attitudinal statements utilizing a six point scale, with total scores ranging from 30 points (traditional) to 180 points (nontraditional/feminist). Items covered five broad content areas: work roles, parental responsibilities, personal responsibilities, the special roles for women, and the social issues of motherhood, abortion, and homosexuality. An example of a scale item is, "The best thing a mother can teach her daughter is what it means to be a girl." Previous reliability data on this scale ranged from .79 to .94. In this study the internal consistency of the scale was .89.

Children's Gender Roles. Gender role attitudes related to children and child rearing practices were measured by a 28 item summated rating scale (Burge, 1981) utilizing a five point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Childrearing Sex Role Attitude Scale (CRSRAS) was based on a traditional/nontraditional continuum and measured adult attitudes about emotional expression, gender appropriate activities, and career goals for girls and boys, e.g., "Girls should be encouraged to play with building blocks and toy trucks." Item scores were summed to yield a total score that could range from 28 (very traditional) to 140 (very egalitarian). Thus, there was one overall score indicating a respondent's attitude about children's gender roles, without separating out attitudes toward boy's gender roles and girl's gender roles. Construct validity was established when the CRSRAS was found to be significantly correlated with the Osmond-Martin Sex-Role Attitude scale (Osmond & Martin, 1975) with a coefficient of .69 (Burge, 1981). Previous reliability data on this scale ranged from .83 to .92. For this study the internal consistency reliability coefficient was .87.

Two subscales of the Childrearing Sex Role Attitude Scale (CRSRAS) were developed for the study. The CRSRAS subscales consisted of 18 attitudinal statements that focused on each gender separately thereby reflecting differing gender beliefs for boys (CRSRAS-Boys) and girls (CRSRAS-Girls). The items were developed by taking an original CRSRAS item and rewriting a similar statement by changing the gender and the behavior of the child. For example, "Boys who exhibit sissy behaviors will never be well adjusted" (original CRSRAS item) was paired with a new item, "Girls who exhibit tomboy behaviors will never be well adjusted" (added CRSRAS-Girls item). The CRSRAS-Boys consisted of nine items that measured the gender beliefs for boys. The CRSRAS-Girls consisted of nine items that measured the gender beliefs for girls.

The development of the subscales, CRSRAS-Girls and CRSRAS-Boys, included submitting the items to five judges knowledgeable about the socialization of children and gender issues. Criteria for final item selection

were based on whether or not the items selected represented the gender socialization biases in American society. This review and revision process established, to some extent, the face validity of the additional items. The CRSRAS-Girls and CRSRAS-Boys were embedded in the original CRSRAS, creating a total of 37 items. By analyzing the differences between the 2 subscales for each subject, the differential socialization beliefs could be measured. This differential score was called the CRSRAS-Differential. In the present study the reliability alphas were .61 for the CRSRAS-Girls scale, and .70 for the CRSRAS-Boys scale.

Attitudes Toward Homosexuality. Attitudes toward homosexuality were measured using the 20-item Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men scale (Herek,1988). Ten items referred to attitudes toward lesbians, e.g., "Lesbians just can't fit into our society," and ten items referred to attitudes toward gay men, e.g., "Male homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle that should not be condemned." The scale scores ranged from 20 (positive attitudes) to 180 (negative attitudes). The reliability values for the teacher sample were .97 for the entire measure, .94 for the lesbian subscale, and .95 gay male subscale.

RESULTS

A preliminary analysis was performed in order to compare the teacher sample from this study with another sample of females (Adams, 1988) on the Sex Role Ideology Scale. This other sample was used as the most current normative data available on the Sex Role Ideology Scale. This comparison sample consisted of 157 undergraduate female college students enrolled in an Introductory Psychology course during the 1987-88 academic year. The average age of the participants was 19 and the vast majority were European Americans. Table I presents the results of a t-test analysis. Early childhood educators indicated a stronger adherence to feminist or nontraditional sex-role beliefs (N = 103, M = 129.87) than did the sample group (N = 157, M = 105.84).

Table I. *t* Test for Sample Comparison on Sex Role Ideology (SRI) Scores

	N	M	SD	df	t
Adams	157	105.84	16.11	258	10.78[a]
Cahill	103	129.87	18.49		

[a]p < .001.

Table II. Differing Socialization Beliefs: Dependent t Test for Comparison of Scores on the CRSRAS-Girls and CRSRAAS-Boys Subscales

	N	M	SD	df	t
CRSRAS-Girls	103	39.20	3.69	102	4.35[a]
CRSRAS-Boys	103	37.67	4.33	—	—

[a] $p < .001$.

Table II depicts the differences of subjects' responses to child rearing attitudes toward boys versus child rearing attitudes toward girls. A dependent t-test was performed on the CRSRAS-Girls scale and CRSRAS-Boys scale. A difference was found between the two subscales with nontraditional attitudes toward girls being significantly higher than nontraditional attitudes toward boys ($t = 4.35$, $p < .001$). Specifically, teachers accepted more nonconventional or cross-gender role behaviors and aspirations from girls ($M = 39.20$) than from boys ($M = 37.67$).

Table III depicts the relationships among all the attitudinal variables as measured by the attitudinal scales and subscales. The correlations between the Sex-Role Ideology Scale and the Child Rearing Sex Role Attitude Scale (CRSRAS) suggested that teachers who expressed nontraditional attitudes towards adult gender role behavior on the sex role inventory also espoused nontraditional gender role childrearing beliefs ($r = .60$, $p < .001$). This same relationship was found for the two subscales with higher Sex Role Ideology scores correlating with nontraditional childrearing gender role beliefs for girls ($r = .57$, $p < .001$) and for boys ($r = .57$, $p < .001$).

Table III. Correlations for the Full and Subscales of the CRSRAS, SRI, and ATLG

	CRSRAS-G	CRSRAS-B	CRSRAS-DIFF	SRI	ATGL	ATL	ATG
CRSRAS	.67[c]	.73[c]	−.18	.60[c]	−.43[c]	−.46[c]	−.37[c]
CRSRAS-G	—	.61[c]	.29[b]	.57[c]	−.40[c]	−.40[c]	−.37[c]
CRSRAS-B	—	—	−.58[c]	.57[c]	−.53[c]	−.53[c]	−.49[c]
CRSRAS-DIFF	—	—	—	−.09	.23[a]	.23[a]	.22[a]
SRI	—	—	—	—	−.70[c]	−.71[c]	−.68[c]
ATLG	—	—	—	—	—	.97[c]	.98[c]
ATL	—	—	—	—	—	—	.92[c]

[a] $p < .05$.
[b] $p < .01$.
[c] $p < .001$.

Significant correlations were also found between adult gender role expectations as measured by the Sex Role Inventory and attitudes toward lesbians ($r = -.71$, $p < .01$) and gay men ($r = -.68$, $p < .01$), and both lesbians and gay men ($r = -.70$, $p < .01$). Teachers who espoused more nonconventional gender role beliefs for adult men and women also indicated less homophobic attitudes in general.

The relationship between beliefs about child rearing and attitudes toward homosexuals was also examined. Child rearing sex-role attitudes were significantly negatively correlated with attitudes toward homosexuals. Teachers who expressed more nontraditional beliefs concerning child rearing gender role issues also expressed less homophobic attitudes ($r = -.43$, $p < .001$). Attitudes toward homosexuality were also significantly related to childrearing sex role attitudes toward girls and boys. Teachers who held less negative attitudes toward homosexuality reported more nontraditional attitudes toward raising girls ($r = -.40$, $p < .001$) and boys ($r = -.53$, $p < .001$). Teachers who expressed more acceptance of cross-gender behaviors in girls than in boys (as measured by CRSRAS-Differential) also reported stronger homophobic attitudes ($r = .23$, $p < .05$).

The lesbian and gay men subscales also produced the same pattern of significant correlation with the full scale and subscales of the CRSRAS. First, attitudes toward lesbians are presented. People who espoused less homophobic beliefs toward lesbians also espoused more nontraditional attitudes concerning gender roles beliefs in childrearing ($r = -.46$, $p < .001$). Separating out teacher beliefs for girls and boys, teachers with less negative attitudes towards lesbians also had less traditional gender role beliefs in raising young girls ($r = -.40$, $p < .001$), and less traditional gender role attitudes about boys ($r = -.53$, $p < .001$). Interestingly, teachers who showed greater latitude in their acceptance of nontraditional behavior for girls than for boys, as measured by the differential score, also had more homophobic attitudes toward lesbians ($r = .23$, $p < .05$).

Next, the relationship between gender roles and attitudes toward gay men were examined. A similar pattern of relationship was found. Teachers who expressed less homophobic attitudes toward gay men, also held more nontraditional beliefs about raising children without strict gender role expectations ($r = -.37$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, teachers who held more nontraditional attitudes about boys' gender roles espoused less homophobic beliefs specifically toward gay men ($r = -.49$, $p < .001$). Lastly, correlations between the differential child rearing scores and attitudes toward gay men were examined. Teachers who showed greater latitude with their acceptance of cross-gender behavior in girls as compared to boys, also demonstrated more homophobic attitudes toward gay men ($r = .22$, $p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

This study provides consistent results regarding the four research questions addressed in this study. First, early childhood teachers appeared to have nontraditional, perhaps feminist, beliefs about adult gender roles as compared to a sample of college women. Second, there was a significant relationship between teachers' espousal of more feminist attitudes toward adult gender role behavior and more nontraditional gender role beliefs regarding the socialization of children. Third, teachers of young children appeared to be more lenient in their child rearing attitudes toward cross-gender behaviors of girls than cross-gender behaviors of boys. Finally, teachers' attitudes toward gay men and lesbians were related to beliefs about nonconventional gender behavior in children.

The first finding from this study was that early childhood teachers, the vast majority of whom are women, expressed nontraditional or feminist beliefs regarding gender roles for men and women. The data seemed to indicate a stronger adherence to nontraditional sex-role beliefs than did the sample comparison group. This finding may be due to the age difference in the two samples. The teacher sample was older and had achieved higher educational levels than the comparison sample. They may have had more life experiences where they had actually negotiated such issues as shared responsibilities around the home and with childrearing.

The second finding was that there was a significant correlation between teachers' espousal of more nontraditional attitudes towards adult gender role behavior, and their beliefs about nontraditional gender roles for children. This finding is not surprising as the definition of socialization includes teaching children about what behaviors and expectations are appropriate for persons according to their sex. Thus if a teacher believes that adult women should possess the personal characteristics of independence and assertiveness, then she will, most likely, espouse these qualities as important for young girls to develop.

A third finding was that although teachers appear to have nontraditional gender role beliefs for children, they are more accepting of cross-gender role behaviors and aspirations from girls than boys. An example from the instrument that illustrates this difference in latitude is the paired items, "I would be upset if my daughter wanted to play little league baseball," versus, "I would be troubled if my son wanted to take baton twirling lessons." One explanation for this difference was suggested by Fagot and Littman (1975). They proposed that American society has expanded the cultural standards for girls where the choice of play behavior is irrelevant

to the definition of femininity. The definition of masculinity, on the other hand, has not expanded similarly.

Finally, results of this study suggested that the differences in teachers' attitudes about girls' exploration of a full range of both masculine and feminine roles versus the teachers' attitudes about boys' exploration of the same is related to a homophobic belief system. Specifically, negative attitudes toward gay men and attitudes regarding cross-gender behaviors believed appropriate for young boys were related. This result provides further support to Martin's finding (1990) that adults believed that "sissies" more than "tomboys," would grow up and be homosexual and psychologically ill-adjusted. Young girls who participated in cross gender behavior were not perceived as growing up to be lesbians.

CONCLUSION

The present study found that while early childhood teachers express some openness to children exploring gender roles, they feel more comfortable with girls, rather than boys, exploring male and female gender roles. Specifically, teachers believe it is appropriate to offer young girls greater latitude in the exploration of behaviors and aspirations that have been traditionally defined as "masculine" than they do for boys exploring behaviors and aspirations that have been traditionally defined as "feminine." The study suggests that when teachers do have limiting gender role expectations, it is related to homophobia. This finding is important because it has been repeatedly shown that teachers' personal beliefs affect their attitudes about classroom practice (Benz, Pfeiffer, & Newman, 1981; Bledsoe, 1983; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Teachers may discourage cross-gender play and encourage traditional gender roles, particularly when parents are concerned about their child's future sexual orientation.

The constructs of gender identity formation, gender role development, and sexuality are all foundational in the pursuit of expanding our understanding of child development, yet are rarely discussed in the field of early childhood education. One implication suggested by this study is that teacher preparation programs should include an exploration of the relationships and intersections of these constructs. One reason that these topics are rarely discussed may be that we do not perceive children as sexual beings, or we assume heterosexuality as the expected development unless something occurs such as an observation of nontraditional gender behavior.

Limitations

There are two limitations in this study. The first limitation is a potentially low return rate. It is unknown how this sample differed from the general population of early childhood teachers on the attitudes being measured. The other limitation is the correlational nature of the study. The results do not indicate whether homophobic beliefs actually create more restrictive cross-gender attitudes, or that these homophobic beliefs actually influence teachers' behavior with children.

Future Research

Further investigation of differential gender role socialization beliefs and their relationship to homophobia is warranted, based upon the results of this exploratory correlational study. There seems to be an assumed cause and effect relationship that cross-gender behavior in boys may lead to a homosexual orientation. In addition, research that examines the relationship between gender role attitudes for adult behavior versus children's behavior would help to refine the exact relationship between these two overlapping constructs. Does one's attitudes about gender roles differ as a function of the age of the person whose behavior is being judged? Finally, future research should examine the relationship between teachers' attitudes toward homosexuality and gender role attitudes toward children, and teachers' actual behavior with children who are engaging in cross-gender play. This would extend the findings of both the current study and previous research which has found that preschool teachers reinforce, both consciously and unconsciously, the traditional gender role behaviors of children in the classroom (Serbin, 1978).

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