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Expected correlates and outcomes of childhood gender nonconformity

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Expected Correlates and Outcomes of Childhood Gender Nonconformity

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Abstract

Participants were presented with one of ten vignettes describing a male or female child character who varied in gender-related interests and behaviors from strongly masculine to strongly feminine. Participants thought masculine and feminine children would be masculine and feminine in adulthood, respectively, and that masculinity would be related to externalizing and femininity to internalizing. They thought that gender-nonconforming children would experience more pressure to change their behavior, and that they would be less likely to be exclusively heterosexual in adulthood.

Method

Participants. 518 (337 F; 181 M) undergraduates completed an online survey about one of the vignettes described below.

Vignettes. There were 10 vignettes, in which a child named either Michael or Emily was described with characteristics, behaviors, and interests previously rated as being only for boys to only for girls (Blakemore & Centers, 2005; Liben & Bigler, 2002). The boys' vignettes are below; the girls' were identical except for the name and pronouns.

Strongly Masculine

Michael is a 6-year-old first grader. Michael is very strong and aggressive. He has many friends, most of whom are boys. He enjoys many activities, especially building models and sports on television. Michael's favorite toys are his Lincoln Logs and his dinosaurs. When he grows up, he would like to be a fire fighter.

Moderately Masculine

Michael is a 6-year-old first grader. Michael is very independent, but sometimes he can be quiet. He has many friends, some of whom are boys, some of whom are girls. He enjoys many activities with his friends, especially playing dodge ball and watching sports on television. Michael's favorite toys are his G.I. Joes and his tool kit. When he grows up, he would like to be a firefighter.

Neutral

Michael is a 6-year-old first grader. Michael is very independent, but sometimes he can be quiet. He has many friends, some of whom are boys, and about half of whom are girls. He enjoys many activities with his friends, especially practicing his guitar and singing. Michael's favorite toys are his Karaoke Machine and his Legos. When he grows up, he would like to be a writer.

Moderately Feminine

Michael is a 6-year-old first grader. Michael is very affectionate, but he tends to be emotional. He has many friends, all of whom are girls. He enjoys many activities with his friends, especially practicing cheerleading and playing hop scotch. Michael's favorite toys are his baby doll and his dollhouse. When he grows up, he would like to be a nurse.

Strongly Feminine

Michael is a 6-year-old first grader. Michael is very affectionate, but he tends to be emotional. He has many friends, all of whom are girls. He enjoys many activities with his friends, especially practicing cheerleading and playing hop scotch. Michael's favorite toys are his baby doll and his dollhouse. When he grows up, he would like to be a nurse.

Measures. Measures included demographics, and ratings of masculinity-femininity, expected gender-attractiveness, and predicted sexual orientation.

Results

Dependent measures were analyzed with 2 (child character sex) X 5 (child gender-role interests and behavior) X 2 (participant sex) ANOVAs. When necessary, post hoc tests were conducted using Scheffé.

Predictions about adult internalizing and externalizing were similar, although SF boys were thought the most likely to internalize as adults. Impact of AWS and Participant Sex

For the most part, the responses of men and women were similar. Participant sex was not a significant main effect in any analysis, and there was one 3-way interaction involving it (childhood internalizing). Gender-related attitudes, as measured by the AWS, were not related to any outcomes.

Conclusions

Participants found our descriptions to be associated with masculinity and femininity as expected. They expected masculinity and femininity to be reasonably stable to adulthood.

Participants thought that gender-nonconforming children would experience more pressure to change their behavior than would gender-conforming children.

Participants thought that masculine children (whether boys or girls) would tend to engage in externalizing more than others in both childhood and adulthood. Conversely, they thought that feminine children would be more likely to experience internalizing symptoms, but also that SF boys would be most likely to have problems of internalization as adults.

Childhood gender nonconformity was thought predictive of adult sexual orientation. This was a linear relationship for both sexes, but exaggerated for boys.


Introduction

Children who are gender nonconforming, especially boys, often have poorer relationships with parents and peers, attachment difficulties, more anxiety, and report pressure to change in line with gender-normative behavior (Alanko et al., 2009; Carver, Jungner, & Perry, 2003). Gender nonconformity in childhood is also associated with greater probability of a non-heterosexual orientation in adulthood.

If parents, other adults, and peers reject such children, it’s not surprising that attachment difficulties, anxiety, or other problems of adjustment would be a result. It may well be that either nonheterosexuality or gender nonconformity (or both) are at the core of social rejection (Hegarty, 2009).

In this study we measured relationships between varying degrees of childhood gender nonconformity and predictions about 1) the continuation of such behavior in adulthood; 2) pressure to change; 3) internalizing and externalizing in childhood and adulthood; and 4) predictions about sexuality as measured by attraction, behavior, and orientation.