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The development of family size
and sex composition norms
among U.S. children

by Gerald E. Markle and Robert F. Wait

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HONOLULU HAWAII

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AUTHORS' PREFACE

This paper is a revision of one read at the Population Socialization Conference sponsored by the East-West Population Institute in Honolulu, Hawaii, 16 - 21 December 1974. We would like to thank the Grand Rapids Public Schools - Western Michigan University Center for Educational Studies for supporting the study it describes. We further thank Susan Gustavus of the University of Cincinnati and Nancy Williamson of Brown University for their helpful criticism of an earlier draft of the paper.

ABSTRACT *The socialization of adult family size and sex preference norms is investigated in this study. Data come from a questionnaire that was group-administered to all third, sixth, ninth, and twelfth graders in a community of about 9,000 people in the North-Central United States. The study indicates that girls acquire normative family size preferences of two to four children before boys and earlier than previously believed. Whereas adults and adolescents prefer that their first child be a male, young children prefer first offspring of their own sex. The data indicate the existence of a critical period in early adolescence when many girls shift their offspring preferences from female to male. The development of family sex preferences is interpreted in the light of more general patterns of sex-role socialization.*

During the past fifteen years, many studies have examined ideal family size and preferred family sex composition among adults. These studies indicate a broad consensus among American men and women regarding the preferred structure of nuclear families. Contained within this "folk demography" are desires for families with two to four children and preferences for male children.

Although norms concerning family size and offspring sex preference are widely shared by American adults, little is known about the socialization of these preferences. It seems likely that these family preference norms are learned as children anticipate filling adult parental roles, and that males and females exhibit different patterns in the acquisition of these norms. The present study will investigate the development of four family preference norms among children: (1) that parents should have between two and four children, (2) that the first child in a family should be male, (3) that a couple should have at least one child of each sex, and (4) that when they have more children of one sex than the other, there should be more boys.

PREVIOUS LITERATURE

There is strong empirical evidence that American adults prefer two to four children in their ideal families. For example, Blake (1966) has shown that, over a twenty-five year period, Americans overwhelmingly chose two, three, or four children as their ideal family. The National Fertility Study found that 92 percent of ever-married

women of childbearing age preferred two to four children in their ideal families; only 7 percent chose families larger than four, while less than 1 percent chose families of one child or no children (Ryder and Westoff, 1971). Recent data (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975) suggest that family size preferences among adults are becoming smaller and that "the two-child family will be the wave of the future" (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1974). For a dissenting view, however, see Blake (1974).

With a sample of U.S. men and women, Griffith (1973) has demonstrated the existence of limits to acceptable family sizes and, particularly at the lower limits, the anticipation of sanctions to punish unacceptable family sizes. For example, more than three-quarters of all men and women would expect parental sanctions if they desired no children; generally women anticipated sanctions from family and friends more than men did.

Compared with all the studies of adult family preferences, there is a paucity of literature on the development of family size ideals among children (for a review see Gustavus, 1975). Studying school children in two Southern counties, Gustavus and Nam (1970) found that students had family size expectations similar to those of adults. Approximately 80 percent of all sixth, ninth, and twelfth grade students chose two to four children as the ideal family for themselves. Regardless of grade, male students chose an ideal family of approximately three children; female students in the sixth and ninth grades chose 2.85 and 2.98 children, respectively; in the twelfth grade female students chose 3.34 children. These choices were not influenced by the size of the student's own family, for correlations between size of own family and size of ideal family were very small.

Having thought about preferred family size was related to school grade and sex: fewer than two-thirds of the sixth grade boys, and three-quarters of the twelfth grade boys, had thought about their future family intentions; but 87 percent of the sixth grade girls, and fully 96 percent of the twelfth grade girls, had thought about the question. In a follow-up study three years later, Gustavus (1973) found that the number of children in an ideal family had declined from 3.00 to 2.70 for males, and from 2.92 to 2.80 for females. The largest change was for the oldest females: in 1965 twelfth grade girls wanted 3.09 children; in 1971 the same group, now three years older, chose 2.51 children. Although preference for the two-child family increased, some 84.7 percent of all students preferred their future family within the normative range of two to four children.

There is a considerable literature showing that people have preferences about the sex composition, as well as the size, of their future families. Williamson (1973), summarizing data from many cross-cultural studies, demonstrated that there is a preference for male babies in virtually all societies around the world. In India, for example, there is a well-documented strong preference for male babies (May and Heer, 1968; Mamdani, 1972; Pohlman, 1969).

In the United States various behavioral and social psychological data show that adults value male children more highly than female children. Dawes (1970), studying a 5 percent sample of women with completed families from the 1960 census, found a differential prevalence of all-boy versus all-girl families. For all parity levels, there were more all-boy families than all-girl families. In other words, more couples stopped having children after the birth of a boy than after the birth of a girl. And Westoff, Sagi, and Mishler (1961) found that, when the first child was a boy, the interval before a second child was conceived averaged three months longer than when the first child was a girl. There are attitudinal correlates to these behavioral data. For example, Sears et al. (1957) found that women expressed greater satisfaction with their second pregnancy if their first child was a girl rather than a boy.

There is an especially strong preference that the first child be a boy. Studying adults in a small Southern standard metropolitan statistical area, Markle (1974) found that only four of 147 respondents at zero parity would choose a girl for their first child. When the "no preference" choices were excluded, the zero parity group chose almost 20 boys for every girl. Even respondents with completed families would prefer a boy for their first child "if they could have their families again." Of those who actually had boys for their first children, only a few percent would switch to girls; but of those men and women who had first girls, more would switch to boys than choose a first girl again. The strong preference for first male children among American adults has been elaborated by the 1970 National Fertility Study (Westoff and Rindfuss, 1974) as well as several small studies (Markle and Nam, 1971); Dinitz et al., 1964; Goodenough, 1957).

In addition to their preference for first boys, couples seem to desire at least one child of each sex. Major demographic studies have shown that women are more likely to want an additional child (Freedman et al., 1960), and actually have an additional child (Westoff, Potter, and Sagi, 1963) if they have all boys or all girls, rather than at least one child of each sex. According to Westoff,

Potter, and Sagi (1963: 206), "sex preference operates to affect family size if the desired composition is not readily achieved."

Finally, there seems to be a preference for an excess of boys in completed families. Etzioni (1968), summarizing several studies, predicted that people would choose 133 boys for every 100 girls if they could choose the sex of their future children. Markle (1974) found that zero parity respondents chose a sex ratio of 116 for completed family, a deviation from the natural sex ratio that is demographically quite significant. Completed family sex ratio showed little variance within the sample, and no subgroup of the population wanted more girls than boys.

There are only a few studies in the literature on future family sex preferences among children. Hartley et al. (1962) elicited sex preferences from 120 eight- and eleven-year-old children by asking them directly which they would rather have, boys or girls. Some 55 percent of the boys and girls wanted children of their own sex, while only 5 percent chose the opposite sex. Children also imputed same-sex choices to the potential parents of an adopted child. Some 78 percent of the mothers, according to the children, would choose girls; the same percentage of fathers would choose boys. Sex preferences showed little variance across standard population subgroups. However, controlling for maternal work status showed that girls with nonworking mothers attributed preferences for male children to the father figure more often than girls whose mothers worked.

In further work, Hartley (1969) found that there was no "sex-ocentrism" among eight- and eleven-year-old children from Hawaii and New Zealand. Completing an adoption story, both boys and girls preferred a child of the opposite sex as often as they preferred one of their own sex. Using the same method to study East Indian children, Khatri (1974) found that eight-year-old boys and girls favored a first child of their own sex, but — interestingly — most eleven-year-old children favored a first boy.

DATA

The data to be analyzed in this study were gathered in Coldwater, Michigan. Located about 100 miles west of Detroit, Coldwater is a diversified, predominately white, middle-class community of about 9,000 people. (Nonwhites comprise only 0.3 percent of the population and median income equals \$9,000.) According to the 1970 census, the population increase from 1960 to 1970 was only 2.5 percent. In 1973 a questionnaire was group-administered to the entire popula-

tion of third ($N = 119$), sixth ($N = 107$), ninth ($N = 122$), and twelfth grade ($N = 79$) students – all from one elementary school, one intermediate school, and one high school – for a total of 427 students. There were no refusals or unusable questionnaires.

RESULTS

The first question raised in this study concerns the development of normative family size preferences by school children. Table 1 is a summary of responses to the question “When you get married how many children would you want in your family?” Twelfth graders revealed preferences similar to national adult norms: 95 percent of the boys and 88 percent of the girls preferred between two and four children.

TABLE 1 Percentage of male and female respondents preferring between two and four children, by school grade

Number of children preferred	Percentage preferring, by school grade			
	3rd	6th	9th	12th
Male respondents	($N = 63$)	($N = 35$)	($N = 69$)	($N = 39$)
2	31.7	31.4	40.6	69.2
3	19.0	20.0	21.7	15.4
4	9.5	17.1	15.9	10.3
2–4	60.3	68.6	78.3	94.9
Female respondents	($N = 56$)	($N = 72$)	($N = 53$)	($N = 40$)
2	44.6	62.5	50.9	47.5
3	14.3	12.5	9.4	22.5
4	17.8	16.7	32.1	17.5
2–4	76.8	91.7	88.7	87.5

NOTE: Mean number of preferred children for each group is: third grade boys, 2.35; sixth grade boys, 2.86; ninth grade boys, 2.56; twelfth grade boys, 2.28; third grade girls, 2.55; sixth grade girls, 2.42; ninth grade girls, 2.81; twelfth grade girls, 2.95.

Looking at family size preferences across grades, we find an interesting developmental pattern. Girls show preferences within the normative range at an early age: fully three-quarters of all third grade girls chose normatively; at grades six, nine, and twelve, this figure increases to approximately 90 percent. Boys are slower to develop family size preferences within the normative range: from third to twelfth grade, the percentage choosing two to four children increases gradually from 60.3 percent to 94.9 percent.

The number of siblings in the student's own family hardly influenced his or her family size preferences, explaining only 3.2 percent of the variation ($r = .18$). Family size of the student's best friend was also a poor predictor ($r = .22$) of the respondent's desired family size. An indication of why girls develop normative family size orientations earlier than boys is provided by an analysis of answers to the question "Have you ever thought about how many children you would like to have when you get married?" Most girls had thought about this topic, the proportion ranging from 86 percent of the third graders to all of the twelfth graders. Among males, only half of the third graders had thought about family size, with this proportion increasing to three-quarters at the twelfth grade. Thinking about family size is linked to giving normative replies to questions about it. Of male third graders who had thought about family size, 72.7 percent preferred between two and four children; of the third grade boys who had not thought about their future family size, normative preferences were given by fewer than half (46.7 percent).

Table 2 presents data on first-child sex preferences by grade for boys and girls. The questionnaire used in this study permitted children to express first-child preferences for "boy," "girl," or "either." All boys showed a strong preference for male first children, with about two-thirds at each grade level choosing first-born boys. Preferences for first-born daughters are quite uncommon. Responses of twelfth graders are comparable to what Markle (1974) found for young adults at zero parity.

The pattern is strikingly different for female respondents. Third and sixth grade girls indicated greater preferences for first daughters than for first sons, but ninth and twelfth grade girls preferred a boy over a girl for their first child by a ratio of 4:1. Results for the younger children in this study are consistent with the Hartley et al. (1962) finding that eight and eleven year olds show preferences for first children of their own sex, although methodological differences between the two studies make direct comparison impossible.

TABLE 2 Percentage distribution of first-child sex preferences of male and female respondents, by school grade

Preferred sex of first child	Percentage preferring, by school grade			
	3rd	6th	9th	12th
All respondents	(<i>N</i> = 119)	(<i>N</i> = 107)	(<i>N</i> = 122)	(<i>N</i> = 79)
Male	38.9	40.4	55.2	55.3
Female	27.4	26.9	8.8	7.9
Either sex	33.6	32.7	36.0	36.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Male respondents	(<i>N</i> = 63)	(<i>N</i> = 35)	(<i>N</i> = 69)	(<i>N</i> = 39)
Male	61.4	68.6	66.1	63.9
Female	7.0	8.6	6.5	2.8
Either sex	31.6	22.8	27.4	33.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Female respondents	(<i>N</i> = 56)	(<i>N</i> = 72)	(<i>N</i> = 53)	(<i>N</i> = 40)
Male	16.0	26.1	42.3	47.5
Female	48.2	36.2	11.5	12.5
Either sex	35.7	37.7	46.2	40.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

While boys almost uniformly chose boys for first children, there is considerable variation in the first-child preferences of girls. We hypothesized that girls differ in their first-child preferences in relation to their own sex-role definitions, reasoning that strongly feminine sex-typed girls might prefer female children while less traditionally oriented girls might show no preference or higher preferences for male offspring. Although the present study had no direct measure of degree of sex typing or feminine orientation, it gathered information on the working status of mothers of all students. Previous research suggests that the daughters of working mothers are less traditional in their sex-role orientations than the daughters of nonemployed mothers. Hartley (1959) found that daughters of working mothers are less likely to give "housewife" as their future aspiration and see

fewer negative aspects of women's employment than the daughters of nonworking mothers. They are also more likely to aspire to non-traditional female occupations and to desire a combination of marriage and career. College-age daughters of employed mothers perceive fewer differences between adult men and women and perceive women as being more competent than do the college-age daughters of non-working women (Vogel et al., 1970).

Table 3 probes the relationship between female first-child sex preference and mother's work status. Female respondents were categorized according to their response to the question "Does your mother have another job besides taking care of the house?" The data show that younger girls with nonworking mothers strongly preferred first-born daughters. While more than half chose daughters, fewer than one-tenth chose first-born sons, for a sex ratio of 1:6.5. In contrast, younger girls with working mothers showed an almost equal preference for first-born boys and girls, and older girls with both working and nonworking mothers exhibited strong male preferences for first-born children. But even in the ninth and twelfth grades, daughters of

TABLE 3 Percentage distribution of first-child sex preferences of younger and older female respondents, by mother's employment status

Preferred sex of first child	Percentage preferring, by mother's employment status	
	Working	Not working
3rd and 6th grade female respondents	(N = 77)	(N = 47)
Male	29.9	8.5
Female	33.7	55.3
Either sex	36.4	36.2
Total	100.0	100.0
9th and 12th grade female respondents	(N = 59)	(N = 33)
Male	47.5	39.4
Female	6.7	21.2
Either sex	45.8	39.4
Total	100.0	100.0

nonworking mothers showed greater preferences for first-born daughters and lower preferences for first-born sons than either the secondary school girls with working mothers or adult women sampled in other studies.

In addition to the strong preference for male first children, there develops a norm for at least one child of each sex in future families. Table 4 presents percentages of male and female respondents at each grade level who would prefer families composed of all boys or all girls. Few boys of any age would choose a family with only daughters. Twenty-seven percent of the third grade boys desired a family with only sons, but this figure shows a linear decline to about 15 percent by grade twelve. Families with children of one sex were even less preferred by girls, with older girls showing a strong preference for at

TABLE 4 Percentage of male and female respondents preferring all boys or all girls in their future family, by school grade

Future family composition	Percentage preferring, by school grade			
	3rd	6th	9th	12th
Male respondents	(N = 51)	(N = 35)	(N = 60)	(N = 38)
All girls	1.6	2.9	1.4	0.0
All boys	27.0	22.9	17.4	15.4
Female respondents	(N = 53)	(N = 70)	(N = 52)	(N = 39)
All girls	16.1	8.3	0.0	2.5
All boys	3.6	2.8	5.8	0.0

NOTE: Respondents wanting no children are excluded from these data.

least one child of each sex. As with first-child preference, there was a tendency for younger girls to prefer daughters. Sixteen percent of third graders wanted only girls, but this drops to 8.3 percent for sixth graders and is negligible for older girls. Older girls exhibited the norm more strongly than older boys or younger girls: few preferred families without at least one son and one daughter. These data on older girls are in agreement with those of Westoff, Potter, and Sagi (1963) and D.S. Freedman et al. (1960), who found that national samples of women preferred at least one child of each sex.

The next two tables investigate imbalances in the ratio of sex preferences for future completed family. When they occur, imbalances also appear to be regulated by a norm: if there is an excess of either sex in future families, the extra children should be boys.

Table 5 examines future family sex preferences for all children by school grade. There seems to be little patterned variance in the mean

TABLE 5 Sex composition of preferred future family for male and female respondents, by school grade

Sex of children	Mean number of children preferred, by school grade			
	3rd	6th	9th	12th
Male respondents				
Male	1.56	1.91	1.59	1.38
Female	0.76	1.20	0.90	0.89
Both sexes ^a	2.32	3.13	2.49	2.27
Sex ratio	2.05	1.59	1.77	1.55
Female respondents				
Male	1.12	1.15	1.51	1.65
Female	1.30	1.30	1.28	1.45
Both sexes ^a	2.42	2.45	2.79	3.10
Sex ratio	0.86	0.88	1.18	1.14

a Two students chose families of more than 10 children; in computing means, we assigned them values of 10.

completed family size preferred by boys of all grades,¹ twelfth grade females preferred larger families than did younger girls, a finding consistent with that of Gustavus (1970). Regardless of grade, boy respondents wanted more boys than girls. Sex ratios for boys range from 2.05 for the third grade to 1.55 for the twelfth grade. For girls,

1 Two measures were used to calculate mean family size – a question from the instrument directly eliciting that information (shown in the note to Table 1) and the preferred number of boys plus the preferred number of girls (shown in Table 5). The mean values for these two measures were almost identical.

however, the sex ratio switches between the sixth and ninth grades: whereas third and sixth grade girls chose more girls than boys, ninth and twelfth grade girls chose sex ratios of 118 and 114, respectively. Again, these data for older female students are in close agreement with the sex ratio of 111 that Markle (1974) found for young women.

Future family sex ratios are partly dependent on the preferences for balanced, as opposed to more-girl or more-boy, families. Table 6 shows the proportion of students from each grade who preferred various ratios of boys to girls in their future families. The data show that few boys, whatever their school grade, wanted more girls than boys in their future family. Rather, they wanted more boys or an equal number of each sex. As school grade increases so does the preference for gender-balanced families.

TABLE 6 Percentage distribution of preferences of male and female respondents for various combinations of boys and girls in their future family, by school grade

Combination preferred	Percentage preferring, by school grade			
	3rd	6th	9th	12th
Male respondents (<i>N</i> = 51)		(<i>N</i> = 35)	(<i>N</i> = 60)	(<i>N</i> = 38)
More boys	54.9	51.4	46.7	31.6
More girls	3.9	5.7	5.0	2.6
Equal number of both	41.2	42.9	48.3	65.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Female respondents (<i>N</i> = 53)		(<i>N</i> = 76)	(<i>N</i> = 52)	(<i>N</i> = 39)
More boys	15.1	10.0	15.4	23.1
More girls	28.3	18.6	1.9	10.2
Equal number of both	56.6	71.4	82.7	66.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

NOTE: Respondents wanting no children are excluded from these data.

Girls at each grade level were more likely to choose gender-balanced families than were boys; in the sixth and ninth grades some 71.4 percent and 82.7 percent, respectively, wanted equal numbers of boys and girls. Where imbalances existed, younger girls chose girl-dominated families; but by ninth and twelfth grades families with more boys were preferred more frequently than families with an excess of girls. Taking girls that chose three-child families, for example, we found that younger girls favored more daughters than sons by a ratio of 12:10, but older girls favored more sons in 10 of 13 instances.

DISCUSSION

This study has investigated the formation and development of family size and sex composition norms among children. These norms relate to parental roles in American society and apply specifically to adult men and women. Our results show that normative family preferences are acquired by children at relatively early ages. Before reaching marriageable age, children attain a fairly high degree of consensus that they should have two to four children. They increasingly believe that at least one child of each sex is desirable, but that boys are preferable to girls as first children and as additional children if there is to be an excess of either sex. However, boys and girls exhibit different developmental patterns in the acquisition of these norms.

The remainder of this paper will seek to interpret the patterns of normative development revealed in the foregoing analysis. Three findings are important to explore. First, while there is little difference in the family size preferences of males and females in adolescence, girls develop preferences within the normative range earlier than do boys. Second, in contrast to the strong preferences of both men and women for first-born boys, young children prefer first children of their own sex. Finally, girls exhibit a marked shift in sex preferences between the sixth and ninth grades; boys, on the other hand, show almost no change in sex preferences throughout the age range covered by this study.

Family size preferences

There has been some speculation in the demographic literature regarding the acquisition of family size preferences among children. In a study of college women, for example, Westoff and Potvin (1966: 496) propose that:

the normative range of family size (e.g., two to four children) is internalized by the girl during the period of late childhood and early adolescence (say 8 to 13) in much the same way as a child learns other values and styles of interaction.

Data presented in this study, however, indicate that a large majority of third grade girls have considered how many children they want and make choices within the normative range. We contend that girls are socialized to family size norms as part of a general pattern of anticipatory socialization to the role of mother, and that this process begins as early as the preschool years. Although Westoff and Potvin do not attempt to specify how family size preferences might be acquired by boys, our study shows that male preferences develop later and are slower to become normative than female preferences. This later adoption of normative preferences by males appears to relate to a generally slower anticipation of the adult role of father by boys.

Studies of childhood have found that the play, home activities, and toy preferences of girls are more related to adult domestic roles than those of boys. Beginning in the preschool years, girls' play activities are more family-oriented than boys'. Girls are more likely to play domestic games, using dolls, dishes, kitchen appliances, and other playthings associated with homemaking and family roles (Brown, 1956; Hartup and Zook, 1960; Kagan, 1964; Minuchin, 1965). Thus, young girls learn and practice adult family roles in their play. Early concentration on adult family concerns parallels the early acquisition of normative family size preferences found in the present study.

The content of the male child's role does not generally focus on domestic activities. Boys' preschool and school-age activities emphasize sports, adventure, aggression, and mechanical play (Kagan, 1964). As boys progress from early to later childhood, they increasingly reject "girlish" domestic play activities (Goodenough, 1957; Hartley and Hardesty, 1964; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974). The male child's role provides him with little basis for anticipation of parenthood. As a consequence, family size preferences are considered and acquired more gradually by boys than by girls.

Sex preferences of younger children

Younger school children have two related future family sex preferences: they desire at least one child of each sex, and they want

a first-born child of their own sex. These preferences appear to be the outcome of two developmental processes — the child's intellectual construction of the "typical" or "ideal" family structure, and the evolution of the child's general preference for maleness or femaleness.

The child's understanding of the concept of family develops in the preschool years as part of a broader conceptualization of his or her immediate environment. The emerging construction of a "typical" family includes adults and children of each sex: father, mother, son(s), and daughter(s) in an age-and-sex-balanced arrangement. Children prefer at least one child of each sex because that is the way families "are supposed to be"; in their view, this is the appropriate composition of a "normal" family. With increasing age, fewer children express desires for families with children of only one sex. Those children who deviate exhibit a preference for only offspring of their own sex, with this preference overriding the normative pattern.

The preference of younger children for offspring of their own sex appears to be related to a more general phenomenon among children, which we will term "gendercentrism." Gendercentrism² refers to the state in which persons place high value on their own sex role and its attributes relative to the role of the other sex. Gendercentric individuals emphasize interests and activities characteristic of their own sex roles, hold more favorable attitudes toward members of their own sex, and tend to interact in same-sex groups.

Adults as well as children may be gendercentric. The concept is intended as the sex-role analogue of ethnocentrism, the tendency of persons to regard their own groups or cultures as superior to others (Sumner, 1906). Indeed, the gendercentrism of adults would seem to provide a psychological basis for the sexism present in American culture.

Gendercentrism has its origins in early childhood, and appears to develop along with the child's sex-role identity. Piaget (1966) has emphasized that younger children are egocentric in their thinking; they can view the world from only their own perspectives and are

2 This term seems preferable to Hartley's (1969) "sexocentrism," since it implies preoccupation with a social role rather than one's biological sex.

unable to take the roles of other persons. Egocentrism generally diminishes with age and social experience. In establishing sex-role identities, children manifest egocentric qualities: they become strongly attached to a particular sex role and are limited in their ability to take the role of the opposite sex. Although gender-centrism is widespread among children, its prevalence and strength are likely to vary with the child's age and sex role, the degree of sex-typing imposed upon the child, and the types of adult role models to which the child has access. Numerous studies document the development of gendercentric attitudes, behaviors, and interaction patterns through the course of childhood.

Male and female children develop preferences for own sex-typed activities, games, and toys before entering school (Brown, 1956, 1957, 1958; Hartup and Zook, 1960; Kagan, 1964). Preschool children also reveal their preoccupation with their own sex in the characterization of original stories that they tell (Brandi and Wait, 1976). Throughout childhood both boys and girls tend to ascribe more favorable characteristics to members of their own sex than to members of the opposite sex (Harris and Tseng, 1957; Smith, 1939). Young girls hold more positive attitudes toward members of their own sex than boys do toward other males. If given a choice, however, many girls would prefer to be male while very few boys would choose to be female (Brown, 1957; Kagan, 1964).

During middle childhood, the typical activities of boys and girls change somewhat but remain sexually differentiated; same-sex friendships become increasingly more common than cross-sex friendships (Koch, 1944; Reese, 1966). Gendercentrism among males tends to increase through the elementary school years as boys internalize the high value that American society places on maleness and continue to avoid behavior associated with the opposite sex (Goodenough, 1957; Hartley and Hardesty, 1964). Compared with boys, girls exhibit greater variation in gender-centrism. The female sex role is defined broadly enough in childhood that it includes a wide range of orientations. Girls may adhere to the norms of traditional femininity or may incorporate more masculine interests and characteristics into their sex-role presentations.

Differences in first-child sex preferences among younger children are related to their general degree of gendercentrism. These preferences are not learned directly from parents, since the preferences of young girls for female children differ from the pref-

erences of most adults and since most children of both sexes exhibit systematic misperceptions of adult sex preferences (Hartley et al., 1962). Rather, it appears that younger children generalize their gendercentric preferences to the specific question of the desired sex of a first child. Younger boys, who are highly sex-typed and gendercentric, are almost unanimous in their desires for male first children. Daughters of nonworking mothers, whom we hypothesize to be gendercentrically oriented toward traditional feminine sex roles, show marked preferences for first-born girls. Daughters of working mothers, who seem least sex-typed of the groups studied, divide their first-born preferences among boys, girls, and "either."

Sex preferences of adolescents

Between sixth and ninth grades, there is a marked shift in the first-child sex preferences of girls. During this period, the percentage of girls preferring first-born girls declines from 36 to 11 percent; this decline is balanced by increased preferences for first boys or children of either sex. At twelfth grade, the percentage of girls preferring first-born boys is still higher than at ninth grade. Meanwhile, boys' overwhelming preference for male first children is stable from childhood through adolescence. We will examine the reasons for these differing patterns of first-child sex preference in relation to the reorganization of the adolescent self-concept, changes in girls' attitudes toward male and female peers, and girls' anticipation of their adult sex roles.

Adolescence is a crucial period in the formation of a child's self-concept. It is a time of major biological changes, shifts in school environment, and reorientation from child to adult roles. A recent study of children in third through twelfth grades points to early adolescence as the period of greatest disruption of the child's self-image (Simmons et al., 1973). Children of ages twelve to fourteen exhibit heightened self-consciousness and instability of self-image. Compared with younger children, early adolescents suffer lowered self-esteem and are increasingly unhappy with their lives. In addition, children in this age group perceive themselves as receiving less favorable evaluations from parents, teachers, and same-sex peers.

While both boys and girls undergo critical changes in their self-conceptions during early adolescence, girls also exhibit changes in their orientations toward sex roles that are not typical of boys. A study by Harris and Tseng (1957) found that during the course of

early adolescence girls' opinions of males became increasingly favorable; during this same period, there was a marked increase in the percentage of girls ascribing unfavorable characteristics to other girls. In contrast, males showed no comparable shift in favorability toward girls; rather, their opinions of girls became slightly more negative between sixth and ninth grades. Across these grade levels, boys' opinions of other boys remained consistently positive.

Harris and Tseng's study implies that early adolescence is a critical period in the sex-role socialization of females. During this time, the positive value that society places on maleness is confronted by girls, resulting in a lowered evaluation by females of their own sex role. Maintaining a positive sex-role image becomes increasingly problematic for females passing through adolescence, because the adult female roles they can enter are evaluated less favorably than adult male roles (Broverman et al., 1972). During this period, the greatest changes in female first-child sex preferences occur. Adolescent girls are more likely to favor male rather than female offspring, exhibiting preferences that are normative among adults in American society.

In spite of the turmoil of adolescence, it appears that boys are able to maintain a favorable view of their own sex from childhood into their adult lives. The gendercentrism of male children requires very little change as it evolves into the male superiority of adulthood. Females, however, undergo a marked discontinuity in their cultural conditioning (Benedict, 1938). Early female gendercentrism must be readjusted to fit the values of adult society, which favors males over females. Young children exhibit first-child sex preferences favoring their own sex; as they learn the norms of adult society, however, it is the females who must typically adapt to a value system that prefers males.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that children's family size and sex preferences develop earlier than previously supposed by demographers. We have suggested that the acquisition of normative family size preferences is related to children's early anticipation of the adult parental roles they will play, with female anticipation occurring earlier than that of males. We have also suggested that children develop future family sex preferences in connection with sex-role learning, extending their general sex preferences to choices of sex of the children they would like to have. The picture that emerges from our study is one of children as

active agents in the socialization process, constructing their future family preferences on the basis of information provided by others and responding to external normative pressures, but also tailoring family preferences to their own individual needs, role definitions, and developing self conceptions.

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