

#### 14. Jonathan Winkle (Prof. Kirsten Condry) Psychology

In Jonathan's brief paper he provides a cogent critique of a basic experiment in psychology. Written in perfect APA-style, Jon's paper could serve as a demonstration of how to carefully examine empirical research. In his paper, Jon begins by placing the research in its larger theoretical context and explaining what motivated the study, which examines how children's sense of gender-appropriate play is affected by the commercials they see on television. He describes the variables, methods and results of the study clearly and objectively before offering a critical analysis of how the study was operationalized. In his critique Jon does more than explain that there *were* problems in the research, he explains what impact they may have had on the results, and how to fix them. Jon's paper is an excellent example of an in-depth critique of basic research in psychology.

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Childhood & Adolescence  
Gender Stereotyping  
2/5/08

One area of childhood development research involves the effects of exposure to television programming and advertising. Pike and Jennings (2005) performed an experiment to assess the effects of TV advertising content on children's gender assignments of different toys. The inspiration for the study stemmed from the doubling of children's exposure to TV commercials from the 70s to the 90s. With a greater number of commercials being observed by children, it was important to understand how toy advertisements stereotype the roles of boys and girls and how they influenced children's ideas of gender roles. This is even more important when understood alongside social learning theory which posits that children can learn social norms and behaviors by observing models (whether they be real or filmed).

Some of the gender stereotypes shown in toy advertisements include boys exhibiting more antisocial and aggressive behavior than girls, boys' commercials being more action oriented while girls' commercials often have a softer tone to them, and showing gender stereotype-specific behaviors such as girls shopping. The gender slants in various toy commercials are viewed as indicators of which gender the toy is appropriate for.

Pike and Jennings (2005) designed their experiment so that one group of children would observe traditional commercials (those advertisements for gender neutral toys that only contained boys in them), another group would observe nontraditional commercials (those in which boys' faces would be digitally replaced with girls' faces), and a final control group which observed gender equal non-toy commercials. All of these children (first and second graders) would then be presented with the toys that were in the commercials and asked who they thought the toys were meant for: boys only, girls only, or boys and girls. The toys used were Harry

Potter Legos and a Playmobil Airport Set. Pike and Jennings (2005) hypothesized that the traditional condition would make more children report that the toys were for boys only, whereas the nontraditional condition would make more children report that the toys were for boys and girls. They also predicted that girls would be more likely to respond that the toys presented to them were for boys and girls to play with. Finally, they anticipated that children who had prior experience seeing the commercials or playing with the toys would be less affected by the nontraditional condition.

The results of the study reinforced their hypotheses that children in the traditional condition were more likely to view the toys in the commercials as being only for boys whereas a majority of children in the nontraditional condition reported the toys as being for boys and girls. Pike and Jennings (2005) gave the exact percentages of children who viewed the toys as being for boys and girls rather than only boys as 17.7% more for the Harry Potter Legos and 36.9% more for the Playmobil Airport Set. The data contradicted their second hypothesis in that boys were actually more likely to report the toys as being for boys and girls in the nontraditional condition. They also found that the data supported their third hypothesis that those children who had prior experience with the toys were less affected by the nontraditional condition.

The authors were able to conclude that gender roles portrayed in TV advertisements did in fact have an impact on children's perceptions of the gender appropriateness of the toys in those commercials. Given that children's beliefs were changed by the nontraditional condition in this one short experiment, the authors implied that there could be much greater effects with prolonged exposure to nontraditional or traditional gender roles. The authors also speculated that boys may be affected by the nontraditional images because boys are normally under more pressure to engage in gender appropriate play. They also believed that children would benefit

from more commercials featuring nontraditional play because it would make them less restricted to specific gender orientations.

While the experiment yielded valuable results, it could have been improved in several aspects. One item that could have possibly increased error in the procedure was the use of digitally manipulated commercials. The authors mention that the female heads placed on boys' bodies were unable to express emotions fluidly and this could have been a source of confusion for the children. I imagine that the result of placing a girl's head on a boys body could be slightly unnatural however I cannot be sure of the quality of the digital mash-up without seeing it. Nonetheless, the experiment would most likely benefit from using commercials shot and designed specifically for the experiment to control for differences in style of the traditional and nontraditional commercials for different toys that were taken from TV. If the styles of the commercials were identical, experimenters would be more likely to observe a greater effect from the nontraditional images.

Children's prior experience with the target toys and commercials is another issue that the authors admit mitigates the effect of viewing nontraditional images. If they want to show a greater effect due to exposure to nontraditional gender roles, then they should create their own commercials and use novel toys designed specifically for the experiment so there is no chance that the children participating in the experiment will have any prior leanings about the gender appropriateness of the target toy. If the investigators controlled for this variable then the effect of viewing nontraditional images would be much greater.

Pike and Jennings' (2005) study is very important in identifying the extent to which TV commercials have an effect on children. Their research could, however, benefit from controlling for the children's prior experience with the toys and commercials and controlling for different

styles of commercials inherent in advertisements taken from television. By limiting these two variables, the authors would observe an increase in the extent to which children's beliefs are affected by viewing nontraditional gender play.