

Sex and Age Differences in Attitude Toward the Opposite Sex

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Abstract

This study examined fantasies about the opposite sex expressed by 116 children, adolescents, and adults responding to the Drawing from Imagination task of the Silver Drawing Test of Cognition and Emotion. Response drawings and their titles were scored on a 5-point scale ranging from negative to positive portrayals. Results indicated that both males and females expressed more negative than positive feelings toward subjects of the opposite sex. Males were more negative than females. Both male and female scores peaked at the 2-point level, portraying opposite-sex subjects as unfortunate or ridiculous. An analysis of variance found male responses significantly more negative than female responses. Implications for clinical discussion and intervention are discussed.

In two previous studies, it was found that most children and adults drew fantasies about subjects the same gender as themselves when responding to a stimulus drawing task (Silver, 1992; 1993). A few, however, drew fantasies about subjects of the opposite sex, portraying them as menacing or unfortunate. Why did they associate these subjects with negative feelings? Did their responses reflect preoccupation with troubling experiences, and if so, opportunities for clinical intervention? The finding suggested that examining the responses of larger samples of children and adults might be worthwhile.

Background

For almost 50 years clinicians have used drawings as projective instruments to assess emotional and cognitive needs (Buck, 1948; Goodenough-Harris, 1963; Hammer, 1967; Koppitz, 1968). Theorizing that human figure drawings portrayed unconscious self-images, Machover (1971) devised the Draw-A-Person test, which includes two tasks: the first, draw a person; the second, draw a person of the opposite sex. She observed different treatments of male and female figures. Infantile, sexually immature males tended to draw kindly representations of the male figure in profile, whereas the female figure, "an obvious, mother-image is drawn in front view with virility and hostility constituting

the dominant graphic features" (p. 100). Machover also observed that most responses to the first task depicted subjects the same gender as the individuals who drew them.

Since then, it has often been assumed that children and adults represent themselves, directly or indirectly, when responding to projective drawing tasks. In search of quantitative information about the assumption, drawings by 261 children were examined comparing their genders with genders of the subjects they portrayed and taking into account verbal clues, such as the use of pronouns and the subjects of sentences (Silver, 1992). Results indicated that most of the boys drew pictures about male subjects: most of the girls drew female subjects. A chi square analysis found that those who drew human subjects, drew subjects the same gender as themselves to a degree significant at the $p < .001$ level of probability.

A few children, however, drew fantasies about menacing adults of the opposite sex. To illustrate, a 10-year-old girl selected stimulus drawings of an older man, a mouse, and a refrigerator, and then drew Figure 1, "The Mad Scientist!" An 8-year-old boy chose stimulus drawings of a bride, knife, snake, and dog, and then drew Figure 2, "The lad' getting married to a dog who wants to kill him." Even though it is unclear who the murderer or the victim might be, it is clear that the stimulus-drawing bride triggered strongly negative associations.

The study also found that, in general, both girls and boys had positive associations with autonomous subjects, showing them engaged in pleasurable activities. Boys outnumbered girls four to one in drawings about assaultive relationships: no gender differences were found in drawings about friendly or loving relationships.

A subsequent study included adolescents and adults as well as children (Silver, 1993). A chi square analysis also found the number of same-gender subjects significant at the $p < .001$ level, supporting the assumption that responses to the drawing task tend to be self-images.

Once again, a few respondents drew subjects of the opposite sex, expressing negative feelings about the subjects they portrayed. This study also found that males tended to express positive attitudes toward solitary subjects and negative attitudes toward relationships, to significant degrees. Females also expressed positive attitudes toward solitary subjects and both positive and negative attitudes toward relationships. Once again.



Figure 1 "The mad scientist!" by a girl age 10



Figure 2 "The lady getting married to a dog who wants to kill him," by a boy age 8

males showed a higher frequency in drawings about assaultive relationships, and no gender differences were found in drawings about caring relationships.

Glick and Fiske (1996) investigated verbal expressions of male ambivalence toward females, noting protective paternalism, gender differentiation, and heterosexuality. They developed an inventory to tap hostile and benevolent sexism, asking whether respondents agreed or disagreed with various stereotypes about women, such as "women like to keep men on a tight leash." Their findings provided support for the theory that sexism tends to be ambivalent, often serving as a veiled wish to dominate.

Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of the present study was to examine the portrayal of opposite-sex subjects by both females and males who responded to stimulus drawing tasks, and to consider the implications for diagnosis and therapy. It was theorized that the subjects chosen and the ways they are portrayed are extensions of how respondents think and feel about the individuals their subjects represent.

Method

Responses to the drawing task by 222 males and 258 females were examined. Participants included children, adolescents, and adults. Those who portrayed opposite-sex subjects were identified, and their responses compared and analyzed. The children, ages 8 to 11, included students in grades two through five in five public schools and one private school in New Jersey and New York. The adolescents, ages 12 to 19, included students in grades 7 through 12 in 10 public elementary and high schools in Nebraska, New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Also included were the younger students of a class of college freshmen in Nebraska. Adults, ages 20 to 50, included the older college students together with adult participants in Nebraska, New York, and Wisconsin. The older adults, age 65 and older, lived independently in their communities and attended recreational programs or social occasions in New York and Florida.

Participants

Participants in the study included 116 of the original 450 respondents: the 46 males and 70 females who drew pictures about subjects of the opposite sex.

The Test Instrument

The participants responded to the Drawing from Imagination subtest of the Silver Drawing Test of Cognition and Emotion (Silver, 1990; 1996). The subtest asks respondents to choose two from an array of 15 stimulus drawings, imagine something happening between the subjects chosen, then draw a picture about what they imagined. They are encouraged to change the stimulus drawings as they wish and to add their own ideas. Finally, they are asked to give their drawings titles or stories.

The stimulus drawings include human subjects (man, boy, woman, girl, and bride), animals (dog, cat, mouse, snake, and bug), and things (soda, knife, bed, tv, and refrigerator).

Two of the older adult groups responded to a second instrument, Stimulus Drawings and Techniques (Silver, 1991) which uses the same drawing task but presents a different set of stimulus drawings. As reported in the test manual, its relationship to the Silver Drawing Test was examined as part of a study of inter-scoring reliability. Twelve of the 24 drawings scored were responses to the stimulus drawings in one instrument; the other 12 were responses to the other instrument. No significant differences in mean scores were found; thus, there appeared to be consistency between the two instruments.

To assess representations of the opposite-sex, a rating scale was adapted from the Self-image and Emotional Content scales

of the Silver Drawing Test (SDT, 1996) which range between strongly negative (1 point) and strongly positive (5 points). The scoring definitions were modified, as shown in Table 1. The score of 1 point is used to characterize strongly negative representations, such as murderous (1a) or victimized (1b) subjects of the opposite sex. The 2-point score is used to characterize frustrating (2a) or ridiculous (2b) subjects. The neutral 3-point score is used for unemotional (3a), ambivalent (3b), or ambiguous (3c) subjects; 4 points, for fortunate (4a) or friendly (4b) subjects; and 5 points, for generous (5a) or loving (5b) subjects.

Procedures

The opposite-sex drawings were separated by age and gender, then scored and analyzed. After mean scores were analyzed using an analysis of variance, proportions of test performances were compared and individual differences were examined.

Results

The analysis of variance found males significantly more negative than the females (male mean of 2.35 versus female mean of 2.94 ($F[1,112]=6.92, p < .01$). There was also a borderline significant age difference. Responses by children and adolescents were more negative than responses by adults ($17[1,112]=2.77, p < .10$). There was no V interaction.

Several age and gender trends emerged. About one in four of the 480 respondents (24.2%) chose stimulus drawings of the opposite sex, with the percentages increasing with age from 29% of the children to 44% of the adolescents to 77% of the adults. The remaining respondents chose animal or same-sex subjects. More females than males drew opposite-sex subjects. (27.1% females, 20.7% males). Among adults, however, more men drew women and girls (41%) than women drew men and boys (36%).

As shown in Figure 3 and Table 2, both males and females expressed more negative than positive feelings toward the oppo-

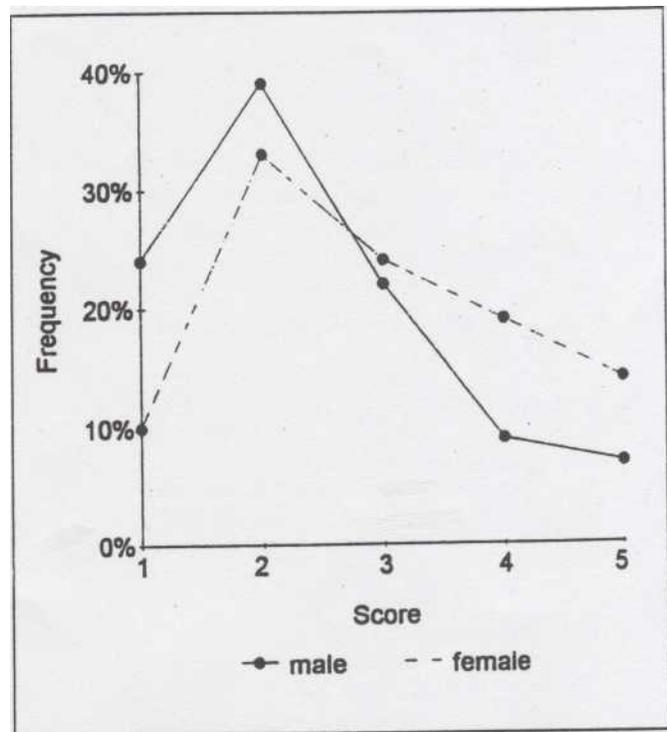


Figure 3 Portrayals of the opposite sex ranging from negative to positive

Table 2
Sex Differences in Portrayals of the Opposite Sex

Score	46 Males		70 Females	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
1a. menacing	5	10.9%	5	7.1%
1b. victim	6	13.0%	2	2.9%
	11	23.9%	7	10%
		63%		43%
2a. powerful	6	13.0%	5	5.7%
2b. ridiculous	12	26.1%	19	27.1%
	18	39.1%	23	32.8%
3a. unemotional	3	6.5%	0	0
3b. ambivalent	3	6.5%	7	10.0%
3c. unclear	4	8.7%	10	14.3%
	10	21.7%	17	24.3%
4a. fortunate	3	6.5%	8	11.4%
4b. friendly	1	2.2%	5	7.1%
	4	8.7%	13	18.5%
		15.2%		33.0%
5a. effective	0	0	2	2.9%
5b. loving	3	6.5%	8	11.4%
	3	6.5%	10	14.3%
	46		70	

Table 1

Scale for Assessing Portrayals of Opposite Sex Subjects

- 1 point. Strongly negative. Subject is portrayed as
 - a. murderous or threatening
 - b. victimized or helpless
- 2 points. Moderately negative. Subject is portrayed as
 - a. frustrating or unsympathetic
 - b. unfortunate or ridiculous
- 3 points. Neutral. Subject is portrayed as
 - a. neither negative nor positive
 - b. both negative and positive (ambivalent)
 - c. meaning is unclear (ambiguous)
- 4 points. Moderately positive. Subject is portrayed as
 - a. fortunate
 - b. friendly or kindly
- 5 points. Strongly positive. Subject is portrayed as
 - a. generous or effective
 - b. loving or romantic

site sex. Males were more negative than females (63% males, 43% females); females were more positive than males (33% females, 15% males). Both genders peaked at the 2-point level, drawing moderately negative portrayals of opposite-sex subjects, most often ridiculous or unfortunate.

Examples of negative associations with the opposite sex are shown in Figures 4 through 7. "Panic in a church," (Figure 4) and "Do not marry a refrigerator," (Figure 5) are by males ridiculing brides. Figure 6, "Fairy tales can come true," and Figure 7 (untitled) are by females ridiculing bridegroom/mice.

An example of positive associations with the opposite sex is shown in Figure 8, "I came from the refrigerator then I went to

bed." The fortunate subject appears to be a girl, and the title uses the pronoun "I." Nevertheless, the drawing was made by a 9-year-old boy who apparently identified with his subject.

Discussion

Although this study found that males expressed significantly more negative feelings toward females than females expressed toward males, the finding is not necessarily evidence of male misogyny. It is also consistent with the finding of previous studies that males produced significantly more fantasies about assaultive relationships than females.



Figure 4 "Panic in a church," by a boy age 13



Figure 5 "Do not marry a refrigerator-it won't be any fun and it's probably not legal anyway," by a young man



Figure 6 "Fairy tales can come true," by a young woman

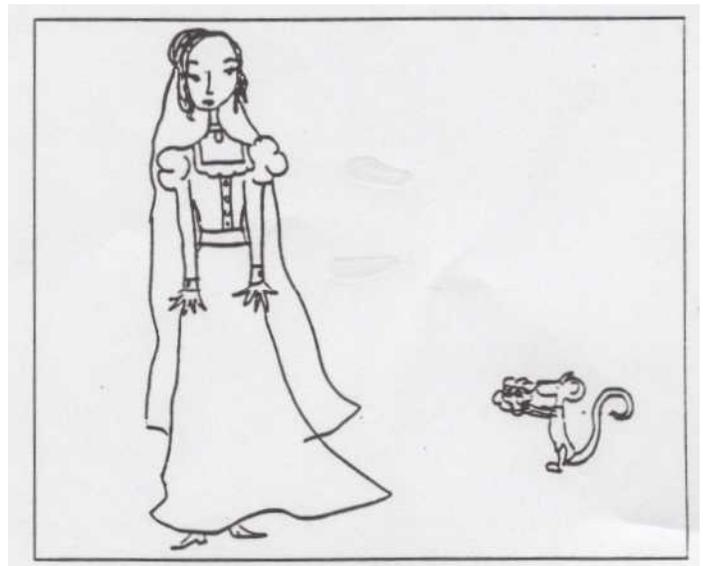


Figure 7 Untitled, by a girl age 11

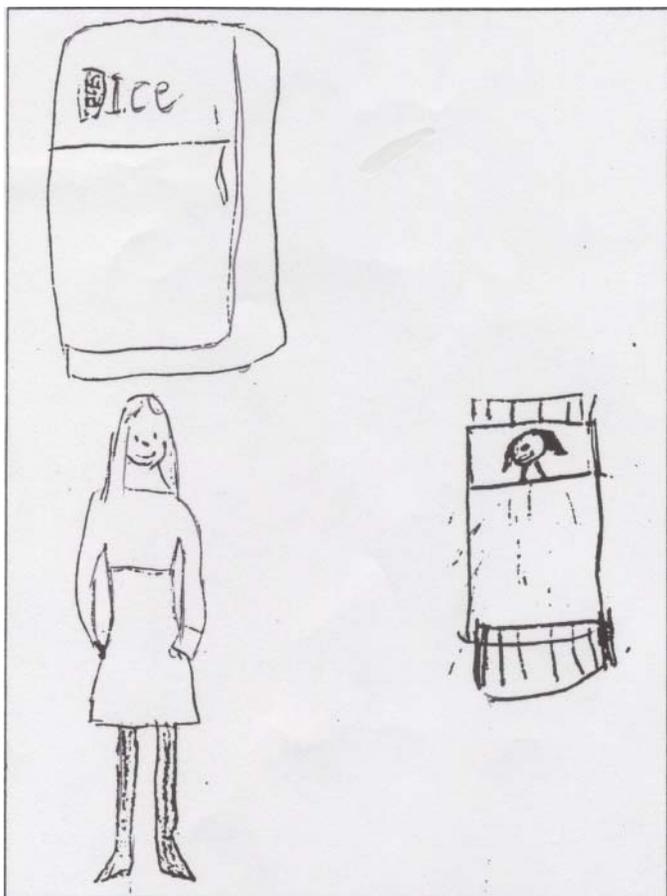


Figure 8 "I came from the refrigerator then I went to bed," by a boy age 9

If it is typical to project self-images, then heterosexual drawings about opposite-sex subjects are likely to be images of the other, "not me," or "not one of us." If it is typical to express positive feelings about self-images, as found in the previous studies, then the reverse could be expected in drawings about others, particularly in drawings by males.

It was surprising to find feelings of disgust and contempt toward subjects of the opposite sex so prevalent among both genders. A possible explanation may be the observation by Miller (1997) that disgust serves to protect selfhood against a variety of

intruders and the challenge of different opinions and value systems. As Miller points out, disgust also marks the boundaries of one's culture and sense of identity. It follows that feelings of disgust and superiority could be expected in drawings about others, just as drawings about self tended to elicit positive associations. Our antipathies define us as surely as our sympathies.

It is important to note that only 21% of the males and 27% of the females chose opposite-sex subjects. It may be that unhappy experiences with members of the opposite sex were triggered by the stimulus drawings they chose and associated with their fantasies. The findings of this study suggest that opposite-sex fantasies expressed in response to the drawing task could provide access to conflicts or troubling relationships, and thereby, opportunities for clinical discussion and intervention.

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