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ABSTRACT

This study addressed the question of developmental processes underlying gender differences in aggression. Specifically, the study examined stories young children tell about nice or mean social interactions. A total of 100 middle-class 3-year-olds participated in storytelling sessions with trained experimenters. Subjects also completed the Peer Nice and Mean story sequence. The results suggest that enjoyment of and superior performance on stories involving aggression is the developmental norm for 3-year-olds. Although age is the most common source of socialization-induced change, girls appear to appropriate social prohibitions against aggression earlier than boys. Shy, inhibited children may also appropriate these prohibitions at an earlier age than more outgoing children. (MDM)

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You're Mean! Differences Between Three-year-old Boys and Girls in Narratives About Nice and Mean Social Interactions.

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Aggressive play is ubiquitous among American children. Gender differences in aggressive behavior have been documented among both schoolchildren and adults (Maccoby, 1990). The frequency, duration, and intensity of aggressive episodes have been found to decrease throughout the preschool years for both genders. At the present time, however, there is a paucity of evidence concerning the relationship of age and gender in shaping the developmental processes responsible for these differences (Cummings, et al, 1989).

The present study addresses the question of developmental processes underlying gender differences in aggression by examining stories young children tell about nice or mean social interactions. Such stories have been shown to be related to levels of observed aggression (Cummings, et al, 1989), and offer a potent new tool for examining individual differences in children's handling of aggression. By examining individual differences in such stories in relationship to developmental history, we have the opportunity to clarify the nature of the interaction between child and environment which underlies the socialization of aggression in our culture.

Method

Participants

One hundred middle-class children in Boston and Denver (N=53 & N=47, respectively) participated in story telling sessions with

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trained experimenters. Background information concerning SES, # siblings, family structure, etc was obtained for all children. Because the Boston children had been participants in a longitudinal study of temperament since infancy, there were a series of measurements of behavioral inhibition at different ages which were available to us for them.

Measures

All children were administered the Peer Nice & Mean story sequence (Fischer, Hencke, and Hand, 1991), using the elicited imitation technique (Watson and Fischer, 1977), between 40 and 44 months of age. These stories form a Guttman-scalable sequence (Hencke, 1991) and can be used to assess level of social understanding as well as variation in levels of expressed aggression. Because stories of different content (nice or mean) are carefully matched for cognitive complexity, length, and number of interactions, it is possible to discern individual differences in handling of aggressive and prosocial themes.

Results

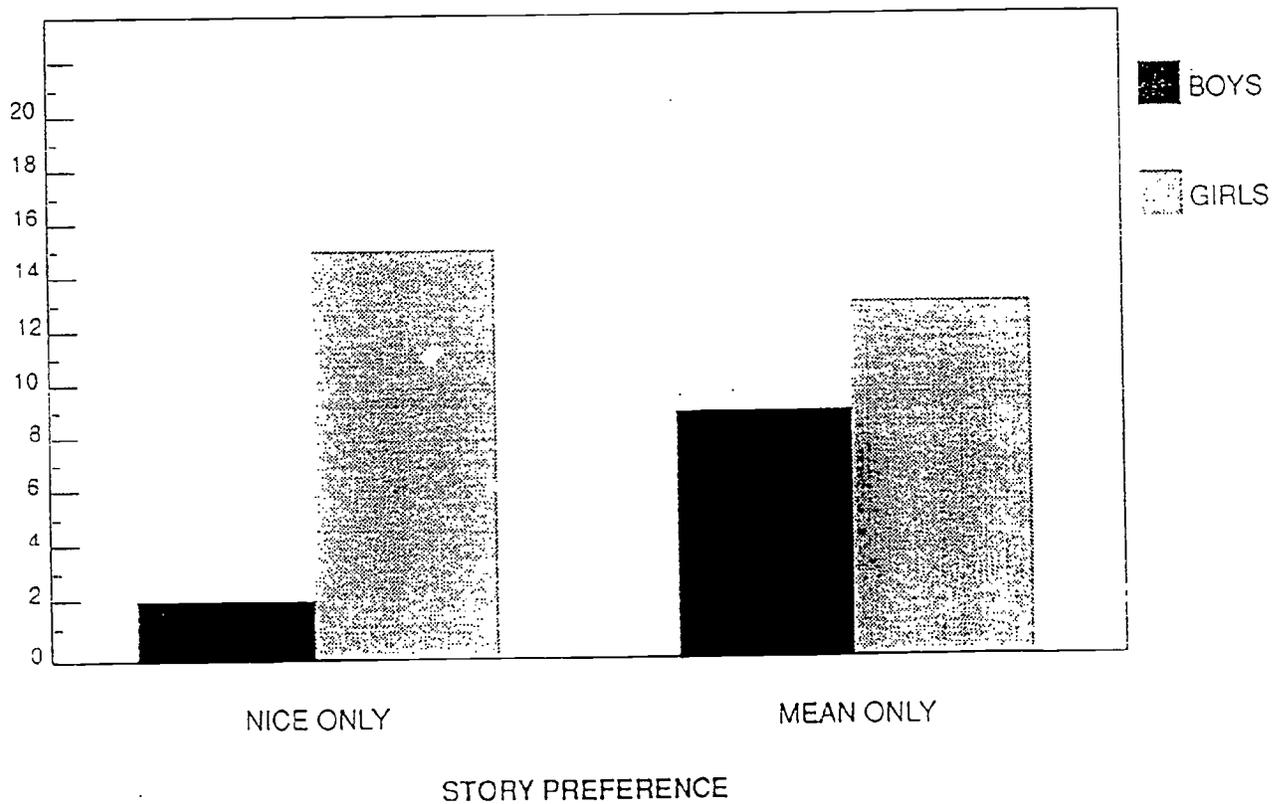
Chi-square analysis of the numbers of boys and girls passing the first Nice and the first Mean tasks (scaled to be developmentally appropriate for this age) (Hand, 1981), revealed that both boys and girls of this age were more likely to pass the only the Mean stories than either only the Nice or Nice and Mean equally. Boys were significantly more likely to show this pattern than girls ($\chi^2(100) = 4.02, p < .05$). The magnitude of this difference can be seen in the relative odds for boys and girls to

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pass the Mean and Nice stories. While boys were 7.5 times as likely to pass only the Mean as to pass the Nice story alone or in combination with the Mean, girls were only 1.45 times as likely to show the bias toward superior performance on the Mean story. Boys were thus five times as likely to show the mean bias as were girls.

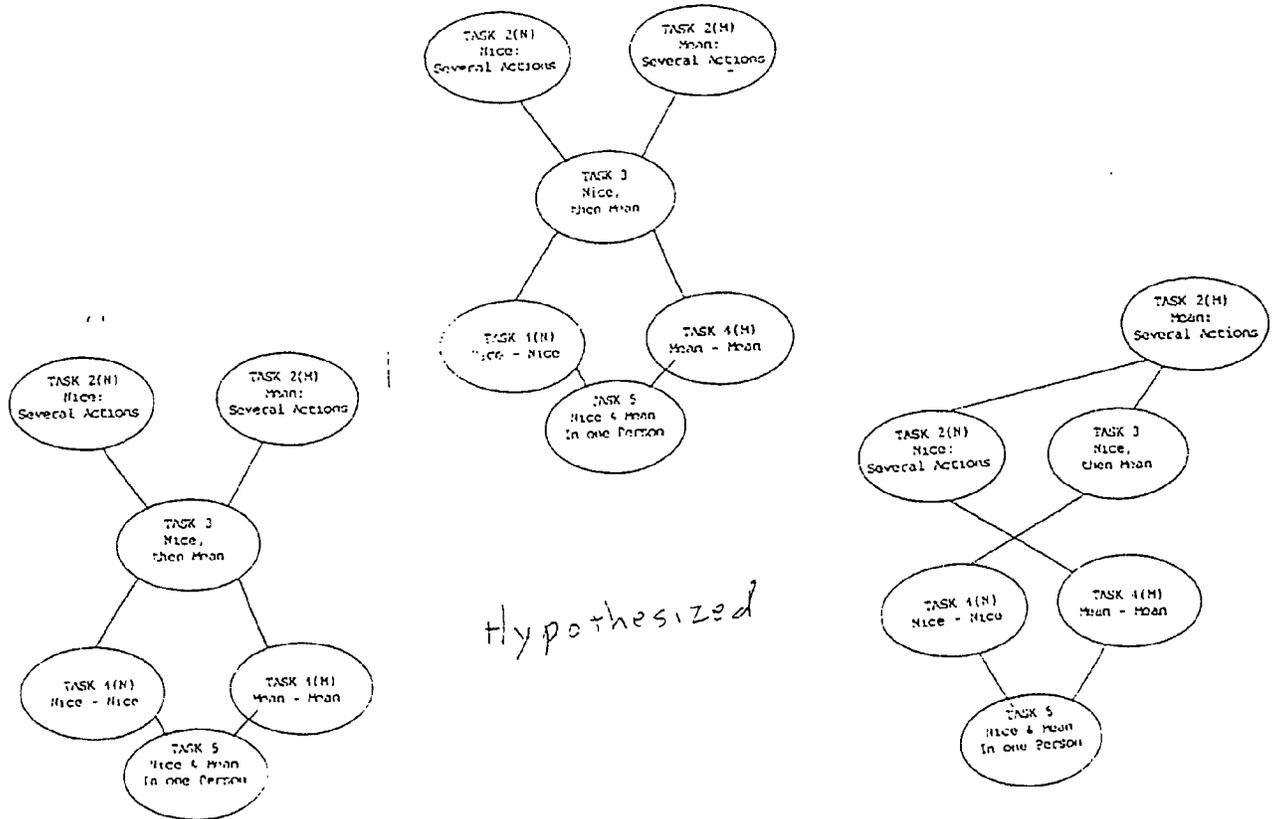
Figure 1

Gender Differences In Story Preference



The differences in performance between boys and girls were next examined using Partially Ordered Scaling of Items (POSI), a computerized analysis of the Guttman scalability of individual stories in the sequence. As shown below, the performance of the girls exactly matched the hypothesized sequencing based solely on level of cognitive complexity, while the performance bias of the boys resulted in their passing the simplest mean story significantly earlier than the nice story of the same complexity.

Figure 2. Hypothesized ordering of nice and mean stories and actual orders for boys and for girls.

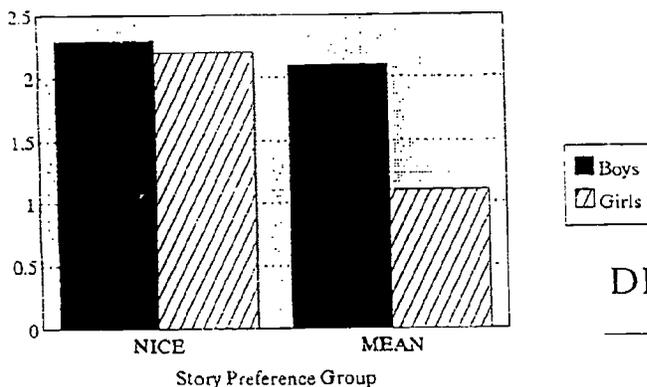


After exploring the performance differences between boys and girls, we next examined their behavioral ratings to determine whether, within story preference groups (Nice or Mean), there were additional behavioral differences between genders. Two behaviors differed significantly ($p < .05$) between genders in each group, as shown in Figure 3 below. These were talkativeness, with mean-prefering girls noticeably more talkative than mean-prefering boys, and shyness, with mean-prefering boys showing more shyness than mean-prefering girls.

Figure 3.

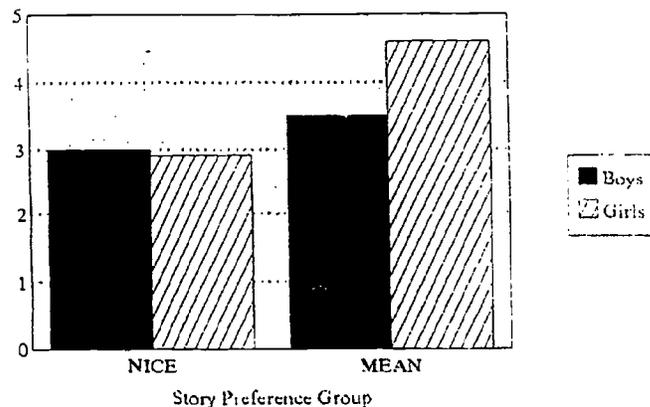
DIFFERENCES IN SHYNESS

By Gender and Story Pref



DIFFERENCES IN TALKATIVENESS

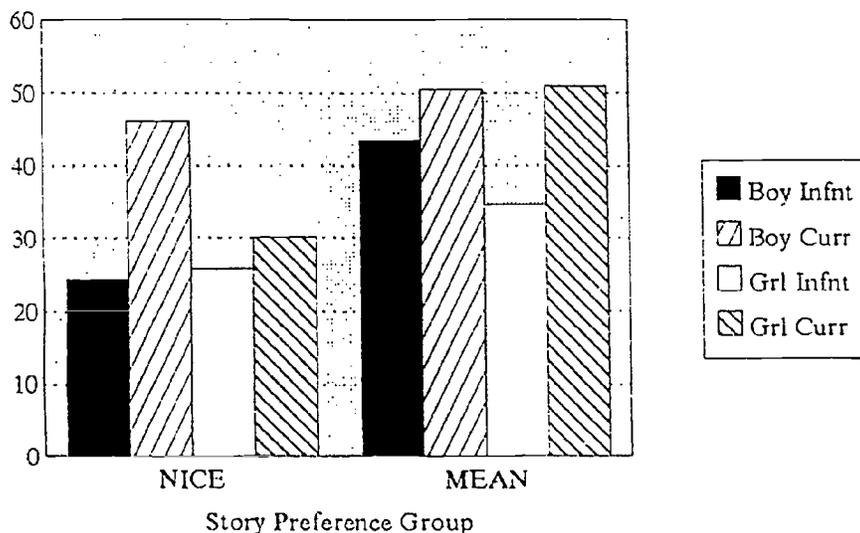
By Gender and Story Pref



Intrigued by this suggestion that there might be temperamental differences between boys and girls who showed the Mean-preferring performance bias, we focused on the data from the Boston cohort, for whom both infant measures of temperament and behavioral measures of temperament taken concurrently with the story session were available. In a Group x Gender x Time repeated measures ANOVA comparing inhibition scores, we found two significant effects. The first was a strong main effect for story-preference Group, with those children preferring nice stories being more inhibited than those preferring Mean ($F(1,28) = , p < .05$). The second was an interaction of Group x Time, with infant measures predicting boys' performance best and concurrent measures best predicting that of girls ($F(1,28) = , p < .05$), see Figure 4 below.

Figure 4

INFANT AND CURRENT LEVELS OF INHIBITION
(Average of ranked scores)



Discussion

These results suggest that enjoyment of and superior performance on stories involving aggression is the developmental norm for three-year-old. While age is the commonest source of socialization-induced change, girls appear to appropriate social prohibitions against aggression at an earlier age than boys. The behavioral differences observed between story preference groups suggest that shy, inhibited children may appropriate these prohibitions at an earlier age than more outgoing ones, perhaps because of their own anxieties around aggression. The fact that infant measures predict boys' performance best and concurrent measures best predict girls' performance suggests that, at age three, innate temperamental influences play a larger role for boys than for girls in their handling of aggressive material. The finding that mean-prefering boys were noticeably more inhibited than mean-prefering girls suggests that the bias toward superior performance on mean stories may reflect outgoing qualities in girls and may represent a defensive stance on the part of some inhibited boys, who manage their anxiety through "defensive aggression".

Clearly these results support the necessity of examining the performance of each gender separately when looking for the effects of temperament on behavior. The differences which emerge begin to create a picture of the responses of children with different temperaments to gender-related socialization pressures.

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