As Evolved Mechanisms and Cultural Modeling Affect Child Gender Attribution

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Abstract : Kessler and McKenna in the seventies, and recently Federici and Lepri investigated how an individual attributes gender to a person. By administering nudes of human figures, the scholars have found that the penis more than the vagina and the male sexual characteristics more than the female ones are significantly more salient in the gender attribution process. Federici and Lepri suggested that the asymmetrical salience of sexual characteristics is attributable to evolved decision-making processes for the solution of gender attribution problems to avoid the greatest danger of an (angry) adult male. The present study has observed the behaviour of 60 children, aged between 3 and 6 years, and their parents verifying whether the child gender attribution mechanisms are permeable to cultural stereotypes. The participating children were asked to make a male or a female on a tablet by combining 12 human physical characteristics (long hair, short hair, wide hips, narrow hips, breasts, flat chest, body hair, hairless body, penis, vagina, male face, and female face) and four cloths (male t-shirt, female t-shirt, pants, and skirt) by superimposing one or more of them on a sexually neutral manikin. On the tablet was installed an App, created by authors, to replicate the Kessler and McKenna and Federici and Lepri previous studies. One of the parents of each of the participating children was asked to make a male or a female using the same apparatus used by children. In addition, the participating parents were asked to complete a test, as proposed by Federici and Lepri in their previous study, to compare adult and child processes of gender attribution. The results suggested that children are affected both by evolved mechanisms as adults were (e.g., taking less time to make a male than a female, using the penis more often than the vagina), and by cultural modeling of parental and environmental gender stereotypes (e.g., the genitals were often covered with pants in case the delivery was to make a male and a skirt in the case was to make a female).

Keywords : biological sex, cognitive biases, cultural modeling, gender attribution, evolved decision-making processes

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