

Behind the long-hair effect

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Choices of 164 kindergarten and elementary school children were tested by a special dress-me-dolls set to gain facts about hair preferences. With two dolls, nine different clothes and nine different hair-style five turns of dressing were asked for. The examination showed that children's decision follow rigorously the gender schema while the majority of the girls hurt it definitely by wearing short hair. The correlation between the hair-length and the age of the girls suggest that the hair-cut depends on parental (maternal) will and developing capacity to take care for the own body. The author offers some sociobiological and psychoanalytical explanations of the long-hair effects.

In our recent study it has been shown that long-haired girls are far more popular and successful in their community than short-haired girls or boys (Baktay-Korsós, 1999a, 1999c). This fact gained by sociometric investigations arises some questions both in the framework of gender schema theory (Bem 1989, 1993) and from a sociobiological point of view (Bereczkei, 1992, 1998).

Bem's theory gives a good explanation of the difference between short- and long-haired girls: long-haired girls fit better to the gender schema than their short-haired mates. But what about the difference between long-haired girls and boys? In this framework they both represent their gender schema equally if the other features remain constant, so this fact can hardly be explained in gender schema theory.

The sociobiological explanation could be based on the quantity of investment which is equal if the hair is short no matter whether boys or girls. It could have been an interesting verification if we would have had long-haired boys in our sample, but – bad luck – nowadays boys' long hair is out of fashion. Nevertheless, letting the hair grow long proved to be successful strategy so why do at least half of the little girls wear short hair (Baktay-Korsós, 1999b, 2000a, 2000b)?

Do they give up the advantages of long hair deliberately? If so, why? Is it possible that they do not find girls' long hair nice? If so, why? Is it only their own hair they do not want to let grow long? If so, why? What do boys think

about it? What is parents' opinion about their children's hair?

The goal of this study is to answer the above mentioned questions.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 164 kindergarten and elementary school children, 80 girls and 84 boys (95% of the boys were short-haired and 5% middle; 38% of the girls had long hair, 32% middle and 30% short¹). There was significant gender difference between girls and boys in the length of hair. As for hair-colour there was no difference between them (62% brown, 29% blond, 6% black and 3% red).

Apparatus

A dress-me-doll set² was prepared for the examination. The elements of the set were the following:

1. Two bald dress-me-dolls (one girl and one boy, gender differences were shown by the face, body shape and underwear) reflecting the body proportions of 10-12-year-old children.

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¹ Long-haired children's hair hanged behind their shoulders. Short-haired children's hair was up to six cm. The average hair-growth is twelve cm per year (Morris 1990), so short-haired children had to wait at least two years to become long-haired while medium-haired one year.

² Special thanks to Prof. Emöke Bagdy for the idea of dress-me-doll and her enlightening advises.

2. Different clothing and hair-style sets:

- nine hair-style sets: short, middle and long hair, each in three colours: blond, brown and black,
- nine clothes: three dresses ("girl"), three pairs of jeans with T-shirts ("boy") and three pairs of trousers with pullovers ("uni") each coloured in a pair of complementary colours (green-red, violet-yellow, orange-blue).

The elements of the set were presented in a constant arrangement (Baktay-Korsós, 2000c).

Procedure

In face to face situation (in presence of parent or teacher if demanded) the set was presented to the child: "I would like to know something about the taste of kindergarten/school children. So I wonder what kind of clothing and hair-styles do you like?"

Five turns of dressing were asked for. The instructions were the following:

1. "Dress both dolls as you like them most!" (First and second turn)

2. "Dress the girl/boy as you want to look like!" (Third turn – depending on the gender of the child, accordingly)

3. "Dress both dolls as your parents look like!" (Fourth and fifth turn)

The turns of dressing were protocolled, the conversations were recorded.

In the first third of the examination we avoided questions like "Why do you... / why this...?". We asked the children to put the clothing and hair back after each turn³.

After the third turn we started talking with the children about their habits of dressing, their favourite hair-styles and asked them to tell stories about their own hair.

At the end of the examination children were asked to show the points where they had ever been wounded – on the same sex doll – and to tell us the story of the injury too⁴.

³ First of all we were looking for emotional decisions and not for cognitive-rational ones. On the one hand the method of questioning helped us to fulfil this goal, on the other hand the above mentioned complementary-coloured clothes.

⁴ Questions about injuries had nothing to do with the investigated hypotheses but they did a good job for at least two reasons. First of all children usually remembered the second story because the hair-stories were told in an emotionally overloaded disposition at the middle of the examination while injury-stories came at the end without any inhibition. So whenever children were asked about the conversation they preferred to tell the last story. The second reason of asking about injuries was to suggest confusing ideas to the adult participants – nurses or parents who insisted on being present – about our goals. So they created funny theories and thought we were investigating the cognitive status, the eye-hand coordination, the manual skills or something similar. (At the end of the research they were of course informed about the results.)

Hypotheses

Our first assumption was that – similarly to the examination in 1995 – both girls and boys will prefer long hair for the girl-doll and short for the boy (B. Korsós, 1995). This presupposition included the same preferences for boys and girls regarding their own hair. This follows both from the theoretical background and our previous investigation referred to the preface.

Furthermore, we presume that length and colour of the hair will move separately in the first and third turn. There are two arguments supporting this claim. On the one hand, participants regard the dolls as a toy in the first and the second turn while they are regarded as their own representatives in the third turn. Thus the emotionally loaded but schematic doll-image had to be changed for a deeper, more wishful and reality-closer image. On the other hand, in our opinion the length of the hair is a more complex pattern than the colour. Long hair is not only a visual background of the face but it influences the movement of the whole body⁵.

In addition we suppose that the length of the girls hair correlates with the status of their parents because long hair demands more care, attendance and investment⁶. For the same reason it seems to be evident that girls' hair length correlates with mothers' hair length because the mothers who express their femininity through their long hair will prefer long hair for their daughters too.

RESULTS

In this part the data gained from the dressing turns are analysed. First of all we are interested in choices of hair. The other data are only interesting as far as they explain the choice of hair style or provide us with further information to understand the long-hair effect. So in this stadium of the investigation we do not consider data like colour or style of clothing and the analysis of the interviews is subject of another article too.

These results clearly verify our hypothesis: both girls and boys preferred long hair for the girl-doll and short hair

⁵ The visual field of long-haired persons is narrowed by their hair so they have to turn in a different way toward the objects. Moreover to keep their hair behind the shoulder they have to start a number of movement from the lumbal region of the spinal column. We are preparing an animation to examine the differences of these movement-patterns.

⁶ Parents with high status can afford even this investment (see Bereczkei 1992, 1998).

Table 1

First dressing turn (as you like her)

	All participants N=164	Girls n=80	Boys n=84
Length of hair Chosen for girl-doll	1% short 5% middle 94% long	No difference	No difference
Colour of hair chosen for girl-doll	***	73% blond 20% brown 7% black	56% blond 29% brown 15% black
Type of clothing chosen for girl-doll	5% boy 94% girl 1% uni	No difference	No difference
Colour of clothing chosen for girl-doll	***	20% orange-blue 25% green-red 55% violet-yellow	31% orange-blue 36% green-red 33% violet-yellow

*** $p < .01$

Table 2

Second dressing turn (as you like him)

	All participants N=164	Girls n=80	Boys n=84
Length of hair chosen for boy-doll	92% short 8% middle	No difference	No difference
Colour of hair chosen for boy-doll	19% blond 40% brown 41% black	No difference	No difference
Type of clothing chosen for boy-doll	67% boy 33% uni	No difference	No difference
Colour of clothing chosen for boy-doll	42% orange-blue 36% green-red 21% violet-yellow	No difference	No difference

the for boy-doll. There were only two differences between girls and boys in the first dressing turn. Blond hair for the girl-doll was more favoured by girls (73%) than boys (56%) but even boys preferred blond significantly as compared with the representation of blond children among the participants (29%). For the boy-doll black hair was significantly more frequently chosen (41%) than was represented among the participants (6%). So the distribution of hair-colour patterns shifted towards blond in the case of the girl-doll and towards black in the case of the boy-doll.

Table 3 shows the results of the third dressing turn.

In this turn girls and boys differed significantly in each variable. This is in accordance with both the theoretical

part and the empirical data of the preface. Still there is a significant difference between the chosen hair-colour and the hair colours represented in the examined population but as it has been assumed the difference shifted so there was a significant difference between the data of the first two turns and the third as well. That is, girls still preferred blond hair and boys black but their choices came closer to the reality (the representation of hair colours in the examined population). At the same time there was no difference among the first three turns regarding the length of the hair. This result proves clearly our hypothesis of higher complexity of hair-length especially in the perspective of colour differences.

Table 3

Third dressing turn (as you wish to look like)

	All participants N=164	Girls n=80	Boys n=84
Length of hair chosen for him/herself	***	1% short 10% middle 89% long	94% short 5% middle 1% long
Colour of hair chosen for him/herself	***	44% blond 42% brown 14% black	16% blond 48% brown 36% black
Type of clothing chosen for him/herself	***	17% boy 80% girl 3% uni	74% boy 26% uni
Colour of clothing chosen for him/herself	***	31% orange-blue 32% green-red 37% violet-yellow	41% orange-blue 43% green-red 16% violet-yellow

*** $p < .01$

Table 4

Forth dressing turn (as your mother looks like)

	All participants N=164	Girls n=80	Boys n=84
Length of hair chosen for mother	***	11% short 49% middle 40% long	4% short 32% middle 64% long
Colour of hair chosen for mother	21% blond 58% brown 21% black	No difference	No difference
Type of clothing chosen for mother	14% boy 79% girl 7% uni	No difference	No difference
Colour of clothing chosen for mother	37% orange-blue 28% green-red 35% violet-yellow	No difference	No difference

*** $p < .01$

Another interesting question is the relation of wished and real hair-length in the group of girls. The results show that there was no correlation between desired and real length of girls' hair. There was no difference among short-, middle- and long-haired girls in this regard: all of them wanted to wear long hair. This is exactly one of the main points: why did only 38 percent of the girls have long hair?

The statistical analysis did not verify the supposed relation between the hair-length of girls and the status of their parents: we did not find any correlation between the two variables so some more examination is necessary. Furthermore, there was no correlation between girls' and their

mothers' hair length either but we can find some interesting additional data in table 4 and 5 to think over our ideas.

It is noteworthy that the girls judged their mothers' hair significantly shorter and dressed their fathers in a significantly more masculine way than the boys, and vice versa: the boys considered their mothers' hair significantly longer and dressed their fathers in a significantly less masculine way than the girls. A remarkable difference – at least concerning the selection of the dresses and hair-styles of the dolls.

A further notable result is that there was one single variable which correlated ($r(80)=0,261$; $p < 0.01$) with the

Table 5

Fifth dressing turn (as your father looks like)

	All participants N=164	Girls n=80	Boys n=84
Length of hair chosen for father	94% short 6,5% middle 0,5% long	No difference	No difference
Colour of hair chosen for father	6% blond 30% brown 64% black	No difference	No difference
Type of clothing chosen for father	***	71% boy 29% uni	55% boy 45% uni
Colour of clothing chosen for father	52% orange-blue 24% green-red 24% violet-yellow	No difference	No difference

*** $p < .01$

length of examined girls' hair. It was their age! That is the older girls had significantly longer hair.

DISCUSSION

Concerning length of hair chosen for the girl and boy doll, especially in connection with desired hair-length, the questions put in the preface can clearly be answered: both girls and boys preferred long-haired girls and short-haired boys. Therefore girls wish long hair and boys short. The latter group has nothing to complain about as there is no contrariety between their desire and the reality while two third of the previous group is not satisfied at all. This contradicts the notion that adults do reward gender schema consistent appearance and behaviour (Bem, 1993; Fagot, 1978). What is more it suggests that we have to look after other rules to account for the haircut in the case of girls.

Analysing the correlation between girls' age and hair-length the thought arises that these phenomena may be in connection with advancing self-reliance and developing capacity to take care for the own body (Freud, 1965).

Short hair enables girls to reach the capacity of autonomous care for their own body earlier while long-haired girls' mothers still remain involved in washing, drying, combing, braiding, waving and curling their daughters' hair. Thus the physical attachment of long-haired girls remains longer and tighter. In this sense long hair functions as a prolonged and extended tie (B. Korsós, 2000b). To Hermann's view scalp hair is the passive organ to hang on

(Hermann, 1984), so it is the symbol for security and belonging. But it is easy to cut this last physical tie. Therefore haircut may be the last kind of weaning and it is very important how it happens. The fact that girls see their mothers' hair significantly shorter than boys do suggests: cutting girls' hair does not always happen without any problem.

At the same time many sources declare hair-crown as a symbol for sexuality, instinctual power and fertility (Cirlot, 1962; Cooper, 1971; Hoppál, et al, 1990; Koch, 1996; Szőnyi, 1998; Vries, 1974). This may give an opposite meaning to the haircut of girls. Is it possible that mothers want to keep their daughters in childhood, in the age of virginity and try to postpone their maturation by shortening the hair-crown? This question will partly be answered by analysing the interviews recorded during the dressing experiment. Further research seems inevitable.

Results show that colour and length of hair move in two divergent frames: as for personal involvement the colour preference moves toward reality while the length preference remains the same, irrespective of participants' involvement. It seems plausible to map the relation between the visual pattern of the whole body and the hair-length as well.

Regarding the colour of the hair we owe an explanation why the preferences differed from the distribution of the population. In our opinion the blond-hair preference by girls depends not only on the nowadays fashionable Barbie-image. It is much more appropriate to conceive that the creators of Barbie have used the same archetype which is present in several fairy tales (princess, fairy) and myths (Aphrodite, Demeter) but this presupposition have to be

verified (Bettelheim, 1976; Ipolyi, 1929; Kerényi, 1977; Graves, 1970; Bolen, 1997). The dark-hair preference by boys can be explained by the theory of ethology or sociobiology which claims that a dark patch on the top of the head increases authority. Lorenz follows the cultural evolution of it step by step from the erected hair of the mammals to the bower of the city-gentleman (Lorenz, 1972).

The dress-me-doll experiment reinforced our hypothesis that hair-style is iconic and influences are unconscious as with body-language. A cross-cultural investigation as a next step could shed more light on this question.

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