A Gender Eye for Children’s Fashion

A review of

Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys From the Girls in America
by Jo B. Paoletti

Reviewed by
Marianne LaFrance

The idea that fashions change with the times is hardly remarkable. Nonetheless, it might be surprising to learn that the association of pink with girls and blue with boys is a relatively recent sartorial convention. Drawing on archival sources such as fashion periodicals, museum collections, and retail catalogues, American studies professor Jo B. Paoletti demonstrates in her book, Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys From the Girls in America, that early on it was boys, not girls, who dressed in pink.

The prescribed clothing color for boys younger than six was pink well into the 20th century. The author quotes from one 1918 commentator, who justified what turns out to be an arbitrary gender association by noting that “pink, being a more decided and stronger color, is more suitable for a boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl” (p. 85).

This short monograph, written by a scholar of material culture, describes the role that children’s clothing has played and continues to play in marking gender. Paoletti describes
changes in the attire of U.S. female and male infants and young children from the late 1800s to the present. Gender differentiation in clothing for the very young did not really begin until the late 19th century, about the same time that the concept of the toddler was making its presence felt in the public at large. Previously, babies were seen as basically genderless.

The detailed description of bloomers and rompers, overalls and creepers, knickers and Little Lord Fauntleroy suits shows that children’s clothing was and is more complicated than stipulating which sex is more likely to wear which color. Should tunics be bifurcated, and, if so, how high or low should the divide be? Should there be pockets and trim, the fabric soft or rough, the buttons placed on the front, back, or side? These are just a few of the features that signal whether a particular item of clothing is to be worn by girls rather than boys and vice versa.

We also discover in this cultural analysis that the degree of gender differentiation in children’s clothing has fluctuated over time. Rather than a straight line from a presumably more rigid past that imposed sharp, gendered sartorial arrangements to current flexibility in clothing choices, sex-typed children’s garb has waxed and waned in line with prevailing social and political attitudes.

A hundred and twenty-five years ago, long white dresses were standard issue for both boys and girls until about the age of three, at least for those in the middle and upper-middle classes. Not until a boy reached the age of seven was he “breeched,” or put into his first pair of trousers. By the late 1920s, dresses came to be worn only by infants and girls. Before that, age mattered more than their sex in what babies wore.

The late 19th century was not to be the last time that boys and girls dressed alike. Unisex clothing for children was pervasive again between 1965 and 1985. The author cites several factors as responsible for that relatively short-lived moratorium on gender-differentiated clothing. On the political front, second-wave feminists were rejecting strongly differentiated gender roles, and psychologists were hard at work to show empirically that gendered behavior is acquired through social learning and imitation.

The pendulum has now swung back one more time. Since the late 1980s, there has been a renewed focus on dressing babies and children in clothes that clearly signal their gender. In fact, Paoletti argues that gender distinctions in babies’ wear are sharper today (circa 2012) than they have ever been. Indeed, it is not uncommon to see newborn girls sporting stretchy pink headbands around their bald heads to make the baby’s gender absolutely unambiguous to any observer.

What psychologists will find interesting in Pink and Blue is its description of the shifting societal and psychological ideas and attitudes about gender and sexuality that have made their appearance felt on fashions for children. Paoletti contends that the developing field of child psychology helped shape ideas about the factors affecting gender identity of children. That, along with the concurrent growth of the children’s clothing industry, combined to invent the symbolic baby. Clothing was newly envisioned as having the capacity to educate, support, and, if necessary, correct misguided gendered behavior.
Masculine-looking clothing, carrying such indicators as sports, military, and machinery motifs, was prescribed for boys to foster and support their development as males. For boys to wear anything else had begun to be perceived not only as wrong but probably also as harmful. Department stores collaborated in that development by placing infant, toddler, and girls’ clothing near the ladies department and situating the boys’ department some distance away next to the men’s department.

In the late 19th century, psychologists were making the case to the public as well as within the profession that early experiences are crucial and formative. The American Psychological Association’s first president, G. Stanley Hall, wrote extensively in the 1880s that because gender differentiation is indicative of advanced civilization, sharp gender distinctions should be implemented.

This meant that gender markers in clothing needed to be imposed early and with specificity. This was especially true for the clothes worn by boys. The underlying assumption, that nurture plays a large role in the acquisition of gender, represented a sea change from the previous view that gender is attained, the result of a natural developmental progression beyond infancy.

Clothing is a significant and reliable gender indicator that is imposed early and continuously. We know, for example, that observers are over 96 percent accurate in guessing an adult person’s sex when they view only upper body images without faces (Li, Lian, & Lu, 2012). Observers also use a person’s attire to infer not only their sex but also their gender attitudes and sexual orientation.

Less obviously, gender-differentiated fashion may also indirectly confirm existing ideas about the contribution of nature and nurture to gendered and sexual behavior. In 2007, a study appeared in the journal *Current Biology* that reported a “robust, cross-cultural sex difference in color preference” (Hurlbert & Ling, 2007, para. 1). The actual finding was that women preferred reddish-purple hues to those in the greenish-yellow end of the spectrum. No reference to anything pink is made in the article itself. Nonetheless, the article was widely referenced in the media as indicating that there is biological evidence that women prefer pink (Wainwright, 2007).

In *Pink and Blue*, Paoletti presents an interesting portrayal of an important gendered system—a historical perspective that psychologists might otherwise underestimate and undervalue. There is much to look at and think about here, especially by psychologists interested in the acquisition of gender.

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**References**


