The Modern History of Pink and Blue in America: My last word on the subject, from a weary scholar

Jo B. Paoletti

Introduction

It was a sunny day in early spring, 1976. A group of graduate students sat around a table outside the Student Union at the University of Rhode Island (United States). The conversation had turned to the effect of feminism on academic disciplines. Women's history. Art and Literature by women. 'What about fashion history?', I wondered aloud. Men's clothing disappeared from the syllabi after the business suit was adopted in the nineteenth century. A friend scoffed, 'Who would want to study men's clothing? It's boring'.

Clothing is as significant a cultural artifact as painting or architecture and, like the 'fine arts', more attention is often paid to unusual and beautiful examples. In fashion history as it was practiced fifty years ago, aesthetic and structural analysis frequently overshadowed studies that explored social history and meaning. Of course, in that context, modern men's clothing was 'boring'; who would want to study that? I would. And so, I embarked on a doctoral thesis about how men's clothing became boring (University of Maryland, 1980).[1] Believing in the significance of the everyday, I chose to spend my career studying the seemingly dull and trivial aspects of the clothing we take for granted. In this article, I aim not only to relate the history of how pink and blue acquired their gendered meanings, but also to explain why this history matters.

Soon after I finished my dissertation, I began to focus on the contrast between men's and boys' fashions in the 1880s and 90s. American men had swiftly adopted the business suit – plain, semi-fitted, uniform – while their young sons were being dressed in Little Lord Fauntleroy suits: velvet suits with lace collars. My mind jumped to photographs of my father (b. 1921) in frilly white dresses. Eventually, the question popped into my head, 'When did we start using pink and blue for babies?' I thought it was a simple question; surely someone had researched the origin of this tradition, and all I had to do was look it up. Several days in the library told me otherwise.

[1] For a more readable summary of my dissertation, see J.B. Paoletti, 'Ridicule and Role Models as Factors in American Men's Fashion Change, 1880-1910', *Costume* 19.1 (1985) 121-134.

I turned to popular newspapers and magazines of the time and read everything I could find about baby clothing. Then, in the June 1918 issue of *The Infants' Department*, an industry periodical, I read the following:

> Pink, being a more decided and stronger color, is more suitable for the boy; while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl.[2]

I have been researching pink and blue for over forty years since then, and sharing my work in presentations, articles, interviews, and – finally – a book.[3] Recently, I have started to feel like a broken record, repeating myself over and over, with seemingly no one listening. Everyone asks questions about the history of gendered colors, but rarely does the conversation move on to the 'Why?' and the 'So what?', which I believe are the more important ones. I hope to share my final thoughts on this matter. I intend to produce an accessible, plain English text, practically devoid of academic jargon. My informal voice may seem jarring in this volume of erudition. But in this final effort, it is important that I tell the entire story and tell it clearly. The 'entire' story of pink and blue includes (1) my research and my findings, (2) my conclusions, based on the evidence, (3) what I believe but cannot prove (including questions I think are unanswerable), and (4) why the story of pink and blue is neither boring nor trivial, but crucial to resolving some of the current arguments about sex, sexuality, and gender identity.

Just the facts: The history of pink and blue gender coding[4]

My journey took over twenty years (from 1985 to the completion of *Pink and Blue* in 2010), and drew upon a huge variety of sources, from fashion news to parenting manuals and from paper dolls to the 'baby books' kept by mothers, which often included lists of gifts. The latter sources were particularly useful because they represented the clothing of one specific individual of known

[2] The Infants' Department, 'Pink or Blue?', June 1918, 161.

[3] J.B. Paoletti, *Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys from the Girls in America* (Indiana 2012).

[4] This history is limited to the United States of America since the end of the nineteenth century. My research into other countries and cultures is limited to the influence they may have had on American practices.

sex, and they were nearly always very detailed, because the lists were used when writing thank you notes to the gift-giver.

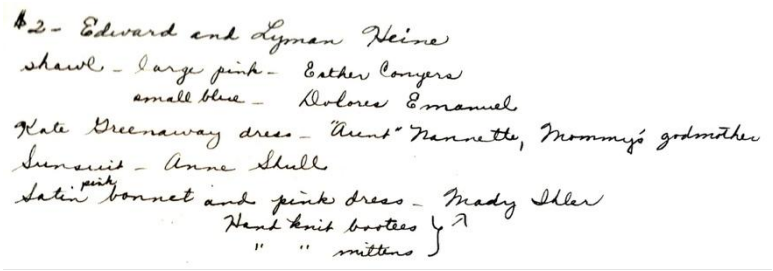
#2 - Edward and Lyman Heine
shawl - large pink - Esther Conyers
small blue - Dolores Emanuel
Kate Greenaway dress - "Aunt" Nannette, Mommy's godmother
Surprise - Anne Shull
Satin pink bonnet and pink dress - Mady Ihler
Hand knit booties
" " mittens

Fig. 1: A portion of the list my mother recorded in my 1949 baby book. Note the shawls (one pink, one blue) and the pink bonnet and dress from my French 'aunt' Mady Ihler.

I kept looking and finding more evidence that the gendered symbolism of pink and blue was hardly what anyone would consider 'traditional'. Pink and blue did not suddenly become gender symbols. Their adoption was very gradual and inconsistent. For centuries, babies in Europe and North America (the European colonies, that is) wore white. Not just white, but white dresses. All the babies. They wore white dresses until they were several years old. At the end of the nineteenth century, clothing for girls and boys under five began to go their separate ways, very gradually. The introduction of pink and blue to signify sex was part of this trend.

So, who wore pink? Who wore blue? And did the choice always signify sex? In most of Europe and America in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, pastel colors were considered 'youthful' and were used more often to flatter the complexion, not to denote sex. Pink was considered more flattering for brown-eyed, brown-haired people and blue for blue-eyed people. When pink or blue were used in gendered ways, it seemed to be a matter of fashion - a temporary trend – not a tradition.[5] Nor were they used consistently the way we do today: pink equals girls, blue equals boys. In parts

[5] Women's magazine would occasionally announce pink/blue accents as a 'new' trend. In Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women*, when Meg has twins, sister Amy, who had traveled to Europe, 'put a blue ribbon on the boy and a pink on the girl, French fashion, so you can always tell. Besides, one has blue eyes and one brown.' L.M. Alcott, *Little Women* (Boston 1880) 349.

of Catholic Europe, blue was the color meant for girls, because it was associated with the Virgin Mary. Elsewhere, first-born sons and daughters were dressed in blue.

Between roughly 1900 and 1940, there was a movement towards more gender distinction in clothing, first for toddlers and then for babies, including more frequent use of pink and blue. This was evident in every source I used: paper dolls, mail-order catalogs, and baby books. There was apparently quite a bit of confusion among clothing manufacturers and retailers about which was which. They tried for decades to settle on one rule for the entire country.

In fact, even in the late 1930s, 78% of American consumers considered pink 'the girl color': not 100%, as would eventually be the case.[6] This might reflect the diversity of the American population, with so many recent immigrants from all over Europe, where the colors had different symbolic meanings. European Catholics' tradition of using blue for girls to symbolize the Virgin Mary could be found in German Catholic communities in the midwestern state of Nebraska as late as the 1980s.[7]

Between the 1940s and the mid-1980s, the pink equals girl, blue equals boy convention became nearly uniform, but not completely so. This still varied by region in the United States. I have seen pink clothes for boys from the 1970s in the Valentine Museum in Richmond, Virginia and in Sears catalogs. Pink was an option for girls during this time, but it was quite possible to avoid it. I seldom wore pink or pastels as a little girl growing up in Nebraska in the 1950s; my mother preferred to dress me in deeper colors, especially shades of blue. Pink was by far the most common color used for first birthday cakes, regardless of the gender or sex of the child, and pink and blue were both used together in baby announcements for blankets, toys and clothing for boys and girls.

The unisex period from the late 1960s through the early 1980s represents an interesting anomaly. Clothing for children and adults featured some defiance of gender rules, such as pant suits for females and floral shirts and longer hair for males. For very young children, the pastels of the previous decades were replaced with primary colors and earth tones, and pink was seldom used for little girls. Not until the mid-1980s did pink re-emerge as a consistently feminine color for babies. This happened concurrently with an increase in ear-piercing for newborn girls and the introduction of pink and

[6] Parents' Magazine, 'What Color for Your Baby?', March 1939.

[7] Personal interview, Jane Funderburk, 1982.

blue disposable diapers. The reasons for changing cultural patterns such as this are complex, but I strongly suspect that prenatal screenings are part of the explanation. The twenty-week sonogram was quickly popularized as the 'gender sonogram', even though sex identification was a side benefit, not its main purpose.[8] This opened the door for pink or blue baby showers and gender reveal parties. Since the beginning of the twentieth century there has been a bit of a backlash, with some parents choosing not to find out the sex of their baby, or not revealing it, if they do find out.

What has changed since the 1980s? First, pink has become so strongly associated with femininity that when a boy or man wears it, it is no longer 'just a color', but an act of defiance or personal expression beyond the aesthetic. Just as I was writing this, the American clothing company J. Crew featured a pink sweater for men, and the conservative media was filled with negative commentary.[9]

Second, pink has crowded out other colors in the options for female babies and little girls. Neutral options such as yellow or green are far rarer, indicating that most consumers prefer gendered fashion for the youngest children. There has been a small reactive trend from parents who dress their babies in ambiguous or even cross-gendered ways, but it is too early to tell how far it will spread.

The next question: Why?

So, I had the answer to my 'simple' question about the origin of pink and blue as gender symbols. However, knowing what happened in the past is only the first step in writing history. The next question is more complicated: 'Why?' Why did parents start to trade neutral baby clothes for pink and blue over a century ago? Perhaps other changes in children's fashions might offer a clue. I began by looking at other features of dress and realized that little boys didn't just start wearing colors instead of white. Instead of wearing dresses until they entered school at age five or six, they also began wearing

[8] American Pregnancy Association, 'Ultrasound: Sonogram'. Https://www.americanpregnancy.org/prenataltesting/ultrasound.html.

[9] J. Ornedo, 'MAGA Melts Down Over 'Emasculating' J. Crew Sweater'. Https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/maga-melts-down-over-emasculating-030555537.html.

trousers earlier on. Eventually, only christening dresses remained in boys' wardrobes, and by the late 1950s, they also had the option of wearing tiny fancy white suits instead. Instead of delaying their first haircut for several years, boys were taken to the barbers around their first birthday. Their clothes became plainer. Ruffles, lace, and floral patterns disappeared from their clothing by the end of the 1920s. In short, decade by decade, little boys began to dress more like men. Apparently, something had changed in the way that the boys themselves were perceived – something to do with their masculine identities. Again, I wondered, 'why?'

This time, my question led me into unfamiliar territory: the history of psychology, sexology, and gender studies. I was especially interested in theories, findings, and advice that made it into popular literature: parenting books and advice columns. Prior to the twentieth century, the prevailing beliefs and advice cautioned parents against pushing their children into adulthood, especially when it came to matters of sex. Babies were believed to be innocent of sexual awareness; one of the main reasons given for delaying adult clothing was to protect them from 'precocity'. Dressing children as little men and women would make them curious about differences that they were considered too young to understand. Fashion writers offered schedules for dressing babies, toddlers, and older children, expressing the conviction that masculine and feminine traits were dormant in babies and very young children. As they grew older, a child's wardrobe should follow their development; a boy should not give up his baby dresses until he was 'well-grown' and behaved in a more masculine manner. Violating these rules would result in an unnatural premature interest in sex – and possibly lead to a host of undesirable behaviors and traits, homosexuality being the most frightening to parents. The Mellin's baby food advertisement shown below underscores the popular attitude toward gender ambiguity in babies: it was amusing, not threatening.

Fig. 2: Mellin's baby food ad, February 1905. Ladies' Home Journal.

Could homophobia be a significant cause of the trend towards pink and blue color-coding and other fashion changes? While same-sex relations were not new in human society, the nineteenth century witnessed increasing social disapproval, to the point of criminalization. Historian Hanne Blank has provided an excellent history of this concept of heterosexuality and its

historical, cultural, and social implications.[10] She credits Sigmund Freud by introducing the theory that male homosexuality resulted from too much feminine influence in boys' upbringing (domineering mothers, weak fathers). In the United States, Freud influenced one expert who stands out due to the volume and influence of his work: G. Stanley Hall (1846-1927), considered the father of child psychology in the United States. Hall contributed many articles to popular magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* advising that distinguishing between boys and girls would counter that influence, and the earlier the better. Most of these articles warned of dire consequences of clinging to old-fashioned ways: '(...) the first few years of life, which the adult cannot remember, are fateful for health or disease, virtue or vice, success or failure.'[11] Freudian-influenced childcare advice dominated parenting literature through the first half of the twentieth century; small wonder that neutral baby and toddler clothing went out of fashion!

By mid-century, Freud's influence was beginning to fade, as a new generation of behavioral scientists continued to study how sexual identity was formed. In *Freud: His Life and His Mind* (1947), Helen Puner was critical of over-reliance on his theories of childrearing by Hall and others. Child development is more complex than Freudian theory suggested, she argued, adding that too much credit (and blame) had been assigned to mothers for their children's strengths and weaknesses. Another alternative view was taking shape at Baltimore's Johns Hopkins University, where psychologist John Money was beginning his research on behavioral therapy for intersex babies. Doctors had only recently developed techniques to detect and identify the biological causes of what was then called 'hermaphroditism', opening the door to 'cures' including surgery and hormone treatments. Money was interested in the social and cultural influences, mainly the individual's reaction to their assigned sex and their 'sex role' behaviors, acquired socially in early childhood. For the latter, he coined the terms 'gender identity' and 'gender roles', to distinguish the social and cultural factors from the biological traits found in intersex individuals. In common usage, the terms sex and gender are used to describe two separate characteristics, but Money's ideas were more nuanced. He considered biological sex and sex roles related; a person whose biology, including hormonal, chromosomal or physical sex, was

[10] H. Blank, *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality* (Boston 2012).

[11] G.S. Hall, 'How and When to Be Frank with Boys', *Ladies' Home Journal* (1907).

abnormal, would have trouble conforming to cultural norms. Like G. Stanley Hall, Money believed that gender identity was learned in early childhood and was especially malleable within the first two years of life. His practice focused on counseling parents of intersex babies whose genitals had been surgically 'normalized'. In most cases, the babies were surgically assigned as females, as it is a simpler operation. To help them match their gender identity to their new biological sex, Money prescribed hormone therapy, which has already been in use for several decades, and behavioral therapy, based on his conviction that femininity was a learned trait. Surgical reassignment is no longer standard care today, except when the physical anomalies interfere with elimination. Hormone treatment on prepubescent children has been largely rejected, and therapies such as puberty blockers for older children have remained controversial. Money's behavioral approach turned out to be wrong and is no longer recommended.[12]

John Money's history has been largely forgotten, but one legacy remains: his use of the terms 'gender identity' and 'gender role' ended up sticking, as did the Freudian belief that learning those norms in early childhood is possible, desirable, and necessary. He would certainly not approve of the nature-nurture, sex-gender binary that has dominated gender science and popular thinking since the 1970s. Researchers began to challenge that dichotomy in the late twentieth century, arguing that biology and culture probably interact to form individuals' identities.[13]

You may well ask, 'So what? What does this have to do with pink and blue clothing?' I was beginning to wonder the same thing. I realize now that at some point in my journey I was no longer studying fashion through a gendered lens; I was exploring gender through fashion. Maybe it was that

[12] Bruce Reimer, one of a pair of male twins, sustained serious damage to his penis at the age of 8 months. Money convinced the child's parents that the best solution would be surgery, hormone therapy, and behavioral treatment to reassign Bruce as 'Brenda'. When the story was revealed to Brenda at the age of 14, she chose to reverse the process surgically and take the name 'David'. David's unhappy life and eventual suicide were finally revealed in 2000, in John Colapinto's book, *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl*. Up to that time, all the scientific community - and the public - knew about the case was what Money himself wrote, which emphasized the apparently successful transformation of Bruce into Brenda. Colapinto's book created a furor and cast a shadow over Money's entire career.

[13] The most recent articulation of this theory can be found in A. Fausto-Sterling, *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World* (New York 2012).

question from a second grader when I gave a talk at my son's school about the history of baby clothes. Looking at a picture of a baby boy in a frilly, long white dress, his classmate asked, 'Did he grow up gay?' G. Stanley Hall would probably have said 'Yes'. John Money would probably have said 'No, he grew up feminine'. My answer was, 'We don't know', but I thought to myself 'That's not how it works.' Why did I think that?

The more I learned about the history of gender science, the more I questioned the wisdom of basing parenting advice, education practices, and public policy on scientific knowledge that is so clearly still evolving. Even worse, some of that 'knowledge' has been contradicted and proven wrong. Does the gendering of pink and blue make any sense? Has it ever? Is it meaningless trivia, or does it have an unintended, unforeseen impact?

According to neuroscientist Anne Fausto-Sterling, most children learn that pink is for females and blue is for males before their first birthday. Learning to link pink with girls and blue with boys is one of their first of many lessons about society's rules for how they should not only behave, but also for how they should be.[14] Girls and boys don't learn the rules in the same way. As much as we link them to each other, pink and blue are not equally powerful symbols. My own study of kids' clothing departments in scores of American stores makes it clear: girls can wear blue, but boys can't wear pink. It's not just clothing, of course. A little girl can use a blue pen or school bag, but her brother has learned that taking a pink lunch box to school will get him teased or even bullied. Parents and teachers are not immune from enforcing these unwritten rules either. In short, pink, in particular, is part of a complex system of symbols that teach children the rules of gendered identity and behavior. It is learned early and teaches different lessons to boys and girls.[15]

I think it is ironic that for the last century and a quarter all the variations in gendered clothing for children have apparently been driven by the same underlying principle: because gender roles and identities are learned, they can be taught. For centuries before Freud, babies had come into the world and become adults without pink and blue clothing to help them become men and women. Homosexuality had existed; third sex and intersex

[14] A. Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York 2000).

[15] I interviewed several child psychologists for *Pink and Blue* and they all reported that a boy who liked 'girl things' was many times more likely to be brought in for analysis than a girl who liked 'boy things'.

people had existed, probably at the same frequency as they do today. It is clear from parenting literature that early twentieth century parents wanted less feminine clothing for their sons because they believed it was necessary to teach them to be masculine (and heterosexual). Nor has this belief always supported traditional gender roles. Parents in the 1970s believed that gender was learned and tried to program their children into new gender roles through unisex clothing and popular media like the musical 'Free to Be You and Me'.[16] Today, some parents insist on gendered clothing because they believe gender identity is learned, and they want their children to learn 'traditional' gender roles. Other parents choose ungendered clothing because they believe gendered clothing undermines their children's self-determination. In both cases, the underlying belief is the same: gender identity is learned and can be taught.

I agree, in part. I have no doubt that children in every culture learn how gender identities are defined, how they should be expressed, and what role society expects from them, based on their sex. However, I do not believe that gender identity is 100% nurtured. I am convinced that biology also has a role, which we are only beginning to understand. Evidence that some gendered behaviors are 'hard wired' by nature is coming from zoologists like primatologist Frans De Waal, in his 2022 book, *Different: What Apes Can Teach Us About Gender.*[17] He has found that female chimpanzees and bonobos, our nearest relatives, share female human babies' fascination with faces and with cuddling babies or dolls. Male humans are more likely than females to engage in more energetic and mock-aggressive play, just like their great ape counterparts. However, as in human societies, there are exceptions to this pattern: females with more masculine traits, and vice versa. They are accepted in their societies, as are 'third sex' or 'two spirit' humans in many places around the globe.[18] It is likely, he argues, that cultural gender norms serve the

[16] A history of the musical and the popular album can be found on the Free to Be Foundation website. Author unknown, 'The history of free to be you and me. As remembered by Marlo Thomas, Carole Hart, Stephen Lawrence and Letty Cottin Pogrebin'. Https://www.freetobefoundation.com/interview1.

[17] F. de Waal, *Different: What Apes Can Teach Us About Gender* (London 2022).

[18] The term 'two spirit' is derived from a word in the Ojibwe people of the Great Lakes region of North America and describes a person combining male and female characteristics. For more information, see Https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/third-gender-gay-rights-equality/

purpose of reinforcing gender identity, but only in cisgender individuals.[19] Based on this, it is probably unnecessary to teach most children to behave according to their sex; social learning will do the job, as was the case for generations of children before Sigmund Freud and G. Stanley Hall told us otherwise.

Conclusions

It is gratifying that forty years, two books, and scores of media interviews later, many people know that pink and blue gender coding is not an ancient tradition, and that it is not universal. I have even been informed of this 'fun fact' by new acquaintances at cocktail parties. That's progress, I guess, but not exactly the outcome I had in mind. Knowing the history of gender-coding babies with pink and blue is interesting, but gains its real importance when we know 'why' and 'so what'. This is especially true in a cultural moment when so many powerful people are insisting that sex is binary (male-female only) and that deviation from gender norms is dangerous or even criminal. So, here is one last attempt to explain why this story matters.

There is so much that even experts still don't know about human development, and the public lags behind most of what *is* known. Consider that gender scholars have argued for years that biological sex, sexuality, and gender identity all occur on a spectrum. *The binaries represented by pink and blue do not exist.* The experts also believe that biological sex, sexuality, and gender identity are probably not separate, but interrelated. There may actually be innate gendered behaviors, as Frans De Waal argues. Culture builds on these, beginning with the 'gender' sonogram and gender reveal parties that set stereotyped expectations and assumption in place long before birth. Numerous studies over the last fifty years have proved that adults handle baby boys more roughly and talk to them less than girl babies. What if the child has an undetected biological variation? What if the 'boy' in question feels uncomfortable in the mold prepared for him? Psychologists describe this 'gender dysphoria' as a condition that involves distress due to a mismatch between a person's gender identity and their sex assigned at birth.[20] It is not

[19] Cisgender means having a gender that corresponds to the sex one has been assigned at birth.

[20] Mayo Clinic Staff, 'Gender dysphoria'. Https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/gender-dysphoria/symptoms-causes/syc-20475255.

considered a mental illness. Yet some people persist in considering it a fad, self-delusion, or sinful.

So, is the use of pink and blue just a harmless modern tradition? At the end of many interviews, I have been asked what we should do about gendered clothing. How can I answer this, as a dress historian? I tell them what I am telling you now. We will never know exactly how much of gender identity is due to nature or nurture. We do not know exactly how gender stereotypes operate at the individual's level. But I suspect that it might be a problem to force children to choose between two rather small boxes before they are born. It might cause anxiety even in children who might be quite content with their biological sex, but reject the strict cultural norms: for example, the 'tomboys' – girls who prefer football to dolls and jeans to ruffled petticoats. It might encourage children to bully their peers who break the rules. It might even produce children who grow up to be misogynistic, homophobic and transphobic adults. Of course, I can't prove any of this; I am just a fashion historian. But as a human, I believe that individuals who do not fit comfortably in an extremely rigid gendered culture should be treated ethically and justly. There is no 'cure', because there is no disease. Punishment makes no sense, because it is not a crime. It cannot be helpful to coax them into 'normal' behavior, even 'for their own good'. In fact, I believe it is harmful.[21]

My final conclusion and recommendations: Breaking the pink and blue rule doesn't hurt anyone. Blue is for everyone; so is pink. Let children wear what they like.

[21] According to the Mayo Clinic, referenced in the previous footnote, 'People with gender dysphoria who don't receive the support and treatment they need are at higher risk of thinking about or attempting suicide.'