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Thank you for participating in my study “Children’s Reasoning about Human Similarities: Categories, Appearance, and Social Relations”. The first step in the study is now complete and the results have been analyzed.

The purpose of this project was to investigate young children’s reasoning about social categories and social relationships. We examined 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds’ ideas about which characteristics of people tend to be associated with each other. Children were shown a pair of pictures. Each pair contained a boy and a girl differing in appearance. Children were taught a biological characteristic or behavioral characteristic for each individual in the pair. For instance, on a biological trial, children were told that a boy had fibro in his blood and a girl had neutros in her blood. On a behavioral trial, children were told that a girl always worked hard on puzzles and a boy cleans up toys at school. Children were shown a third picture: either a boy who resembled the girl or a girl who resembled the boy. Children were asked whether the third child had the same characteristic as the boy or the girl in the first pair. Children could generalize the characteristic on the basis of gender or appearance, or respond randomly. There were four biological trials and four behavioral trials. Based on the results of previous studies, we expected that children of all ages would generalize biological traits on the basis of gender. That is, we predicted that children would say that two boys have the same biological traits, or that two girls have the same biological traits, even if the two children do not look similar. We were particularly interested in finding out if children would show the same pattern for behavioral traits. That is, we wanted to determine at what age children would assume that two children of the same gender are similar in behavior, as well as being similar biologically.

Overall, children attributed characteristics on the basis of gender and appearance about equally often. Thus, contrary to our expectations, information about gender did not seem to have special status in children’s reasoning about people at this age. Children’s performance was essentially random at all ages for questions about both biological and behavioral traits. These results call into questions claims that have been made about young children’s categorical reasoning and young children’s thinking about biology. Currently, we are working on additional studies to examine if there are conditions under which children may emphasize gender more or may emphasize appearance more in their thinking. The results of this study were presented at a conference – The Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development. Thank you for your participation in this study. Your cooperation and help are greatly appreciated.