

AN EMPIRICAL TEST OF THE THEORY OF SEXUAL SYMBOLISM

H. J. EYSENCK

AND

M. SOUEIF

University of London

University of Cairo

Summary.—A theory was tested according to which rounded figures (female symbols) would be preferred by males, elongated figures (male symbols) by females. Preference judgments obtained from 451 male and 445 female students failed to bear out this prediction.

It has been known for a very long time that rounded shapes may represent the female genital organs and pointed shapes the male; this sexual symbolism was already explicitly recognized by the ancient Greek and Roman writers, and Eysenck (1972) has referred to mediaeval English writings discussing the priapic significance of church steeples and similar structures. For reasons unknown to us, this theory is often ascribed to Freud; thus Kline (1972) in a recent book on empirical tests of Freudian theories, states that: "On the Freudian hypothesis that rounded shapes represent the female genital organs and pointed shapes the male, McElroy presented a 12-item test (each item consisting of one rounded and one pointed shape) to 380 boys and 399 girls. . . . As predicted from the Freudian theory, males preferred female shapes and females preferred male shapes, a preference which increased with age" (p. 210). McElroy's (1954) study with Scottish children was followed by Jahoda's (1956) study of Ghanian children, which gave rather similar results. There is thus some evidence for the proposition that penis-like shapes are preferred by females, vagina-like shapes by males, although the relevance of Freud to this interpretation (other than in the nature of a popularizer of widely known facts) is not clear. Kline accepts these data as evidence for the theory of symbolism, but it should be noted that, in addition, we have the hypothesis that males and females will prefer symbols referring to the other sex; only if both these hypotheses are true will the predicted cross-preference judgments actually be found. A negative result would be more likely to reflect on the second of these hypotheses, in view of the widespread acceptance, over several thousand years, of the symbolic nature of pointed and rounded shapes. This second hypothesis accepted by Kline and others is not actually stated by Freud; it may or may not represent the spirit of his theory.

A replication study was undertaken by us, using Egyptian students (451 male, 445 female; *M* age = 20 yr.) studying either fine arts or more general subjects on the arts side. Stimuli were chosen from Birkhoff's (1933) set of 90 polygons. Polygons 14, 71 and 75 were chosen as penis symbols; the first of these is elongated and pointed, and the two latter were found to have a high loading on a factor characterized by "elongated projections" (Eysenck, 1968; Eysenck & Castle, 1970). Polygons 16 and 30 were chosen as female symbols because they were rounded, having high loadings on Eysenck's "circle" factor. Polygons 32 and 63 were also chosen as female symbols, being oval or elliptical; in many ways an oval shape resembles the vagina better than does a circle, and such common terms as "fig" (in Italian) to refer to the female sex organs suggest an oval rather than a round shape. All 90 polygons were administered to *Ss* for rating on a 7-point scale, with 7 being the most liked, and 1 being the least liked category; the method of administration has been described elsewhere (Soueif & Eysenck, 1972).

Means scores for the 7 polygons in question, as well as *SDs* and significance levels (*t* tests), are given in Table 1. It will be seen that the male symbols are significantly preferred by the males in every case, contrary to prediction. For the female symbols,

TABLE 1
MEAN RATINGS OF POLYGONS FOR MEN AND WOMEN

Symbols		Men	Women	P
Male	14	2.54±1.82	2.28±1.66	.05
	71	3.05±1.84	2.45±1.61	.001
	75	4.26±1.74	3.91±1.78	.01
Female	16	3.36±1.84	3.62±1.85	.05
	30	2.38±1.59	2.48±1.57	N.S.
	32	3.53±1.85	3.42±1.83	N.S.
	63	3.24±1.76	2.78±1.70	.001

two show no significant difference between males and females; of the other two, one is preferred by the men, the other by the women. Insofar as these data go, therefore, they do not support the theory attributed to Freud, and in good part support the opposite view (at least for the male symbols), i.e., that males (and possibly females) tend to prefer shapes symbolic of their own sex. We would be inclined to attribute little importance to the data one way or the other; even where differences are significant, they are quite small, and statistically significant only because of the large numbers of subjects employed. The (non-Freudian) theory of symbolism is not impugned by these results; we would suggest that for shapes of any kind to be symbolic of sexual parts requires a special setting and that in the absence of such a setting (in the theatre, or at a party, etc.) shapes are not interpreted symbolically. We suggest that the whole notion of testing the theory of symbolism in this manner is mistaken, and that this mistake may indeed be attributed to the uncritical acceptance of Freudian notions of "pan-sexuality" and unconscious mental processes.

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