

WHAT INFLUENCE DO GENDER ROLES HAVE  
ON ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT?

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### Introduction to the Topic of Choice

This question is of particular interest to me due to my desire to become a high school guidance counselor. I will have to deal with boys and girls equally, but I feel as though I would be better qualified if I understood some of the major components of their individual growth. A large factor in this period of change is the role that their own gender will play upon their upbringing and the decisions that they will make. Society has set ideals that are expected of both boys and girls and these pressures take their toll on young and impressionable minds. By having stronger background knowledge of these issues, I will be better prepared to fulfill the duties of my position.

The question is really asking what are the consequences of being a boy or of being a girl? How does one deal with being one gender or the other? How is my own development partially determined simply by the sex that I am? Am I really the way that I am simply because I am a boy or a girl? Could I have done anything differently to be another type of person? All of these come into play when considering the overall purpose of this paper. Boys do behave unlike girls and there are reasons for this happening. Educators can facilitate increased success by accommodating these issues.

During the time that I was a teacher, I was amazed at the similarities and variances that existed between the male and female students. You will find many of both genders who want to excel at school and work very hard to do so. At the same time, there are many of both sexes who present themselves as “trouble” students. However, I would have to state that I found the characteristics that were not common for both genders to be more noticeable. Some of the reasons for this I knew already, but many of the others I am hoping to have learned by completing this psychology-related assignment.

Some key terms to consider while reading this paper: 1) *adolescence* – the period of life between childhood and adulthood, 2) *affiliation* – the establishment and maintenance of relationships with others, 3) *autonomy* – having a sense of control regarding the things one does and the direction that one’s life takes, 4) *flexibility* – the ability to allow one’s mind to reinterpret situations to develop a new perspective, 5) *gender role* – non-physical aspects of being male or female, including cultural expectations for femininity or masculinity [DeHass, class notes, 9/14], 6) *sex* – biological maleness or femaleness [DeHass, class notes, 9/14], 7) *stereotypes* – rigid, simplistic, and erroneous caricatures of a particular group of people, 8) *subculture* – a group that resists the ways of the dominant culture and adopts its own norms for behavior, and 9) *vulnerability* – the state of suffering from emotional or psychological insecurity.

I have chosen five articles that I believe cover a fair range of thought on the role of gender in adolescence. The first paper deals with the way that young people view themselves and others, in relation to society, based on their gender. This sets the foundation for the roles that most of us naturally assume. The second article then continues this by discussing the relationships that we develop with others. Many of our friendships are greatly affected by the gender of the other. The third journal topic explores the privileges and allowances that are granted to adolescents by their parents.

The fourth article analyzes the effect of conflict between parents and children and how that negatively influences their susceptibility to maladjustment. There is mixed research that is inconclusive as to how consistent this pattern may be. The last paper focuses on depression and how one gender may be more vulnerable to its onset. This study tries to narrow down the time frame when the earliest symptoms begin to appear.

Alfieri, T., Ruble, D. & Higgins, E. (1996). Gender stereotypes during adolescence:

Developmental changes and the transition to junior high school. *Developmental Psychology*, 32 (6), 1129 – 1137.

From previous research, it is believed that as adolescents get older that gender stereotyping becomes less flexible. Alfieri, Ruble, and Higgins (1996) conducted this study in two adjacent school districts in a suburb of New York City. Grades included were 4-11, with over 95% of the students being White and with median family incomes between \$52 – 56,000. The purpose of this study was to determine if gender stereotyping does become more flexible, and if it does, to discover when it occurs.

#### Methodology

About 25% of the eligible students brought back signed consent forms. The two school districts chosen had different transitions to junior high school, with one system starting in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and the other beginning in 8<sup>th</sup>. They also had varying breakdown for high school, with one being 9-12 and the other being 10-12 grades. From the first district, there were 195 students taking part (91 girls and 104 boys). From the second district, there were 132 students participating from grades 4, 5, 7, 8, and 9. The measure given was a list of 12 trait-related terms, half of which were masculine and half of which were feminine. The students were then asked to classify the terms as to whether they pertained to a male or a female or both. For terms described as both, they were represented and asked to choose between only male or female. The items on the measure were shown to be highly associated with only one sex from previous research. The 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders were tested individually and asked to pick a labeled card. The older students were tested in groups and they responded in a questionnaire format.

## Results

As predicted, the first year of junior high school was associated with an increase in gender stereotype flexibility. This was found to be true whether the first year was in 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade, depending on the school district breakup. Students who were tested in years following the change of schools were found to have decreasing flexibility in their gender stereotyping. In the first year of the study, boys were found to have less flexibility with the masculine stereotype than were the girls.

## Implications

This study did find that gender stereotypes may become flexible for a short period of time for new junior high school students. This flexibility is attributed to the transition period where the adolescents go from being the oldest in the school to the youngest. To accommodate a wider range of peers their views become temporarily unstable and they are open to new interpretations. It is during this period of time that educators may take advantage of opportunities to present varying views on gender roles in society. If ever there was a chance to do this, the first year of junior high school appears to be it.

Wong, M. & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1991). Affiliation motivation and daily experience: Some issues on gender differences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60 (1), 154 – 164.

In past research, it has been shown that highly affiliative individuals have a stronger desire to be around others and they will make efforts to put themselves into comfortable social settings. Wong and Csikszentmihalyi (1991) conducted a week long study where teachers from two suburban high schools in Chicago were asked to nominate freshman and sophomore students who had particular talents in selected areas. The purpose of the study was to clarify the relationship between affiliation motivation and day-to-day experience and to discern if strength of the motives vary by gender difference.

#### Methodology

This was a four-year longitudinal study. Letters were sent to parents and students to explain the purpose. They were told the study was designed to learn about activities, thoughts, and feelings of adolescents. There were 228 students who agreed to participate and 170 of those were selected (68 boys and 102 girls). All of them had excellent grades in the relevant subject areas and they were all active in extra curricular activities. The majority were Caucasians from middle-class families. They were each asked to complete a Personality Research Form consisting of 16 questions related to affiliation. They were also instructed to complete an Experience Sampling Form at random times of the day when they were signaled by pager. These consisted of open-ended questions that were coded by three researchers with an interrater agreement of 90 – 95%. The students met with researchers 3-4 times during the week in an office. A background questionnaire about demographic information and family relationships was also completed.

## Results

As far as gender was concerned, there was found to be no relationship with or effect on the strengths of affiliation motivation. Those with a higher affiliation motive wished to be with friends more. In regard to companions, it was found that girls spent less time alone than did boys. As far as social activities, highly affiliative girls reported more social interactions, but the opposite was found for boys. The less affiliative boys had more reported social interactions making the findings somewhat puzzling. Female subjects reported more interpersonal thoughts than did boys. When highly affiliative boys were alone, they were found to have lower motivation than the other boys.

## Implications

By educators knowing the social orientation of students, they will be better able to construct social or group settings within the classroom that may dramatically improve academic performance. For some students, interaction with others and teamwork will produce more much positive results than for others. The trick is to figure out which members of the class are in need of this type of socialization. With an understanding of the personal motivations of students, teachers will be able to take advantage of these needs and put them to productive use in the classroom.

Bumpus, M., Crouter, A., & McHale, S. (2001). Parental autonomy granting during adolescence : Exploring gender differences in context. *Developmental Psychology*, 37 (2), 163 – 173.

In the past, research has been conducted on the autonomy that has been granted adolescents as they get older. This study conducted by Bumpus, Crouter, and McHale (2001) was an extension of this information. They compared the differences in families who had older and younger siblings with varying genders to see if this had any effect. This report is the result of the first phase of a three year longitudinal study.

#### Methodology

The various participants were drawn from various eligible families located in 18 local school districts. Letters describing the study were sent out to families with a student in the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, or 10<sup>th</sup> grade and a younger sibling within 1-4 years younger. The parents had to both be biological and still married to each other and they both had to work at least part-time. The final sample included 194 families drawn most from working and middle class families located in small towns and rural areas. Due to financial restrictions, the response rate for eligible families was not able to be determined.

The sample was broken down as such: 45 older sister/younger sister pairs, 45 older sister/younger brother pairs, 50 older brother/younger sister pairs, and 54 older brother/younger brother pairs. All families were white, except for four biracial families. Data was collected during two different types of interviews. In the first, the family members were interviewed separately in the home about their relationships and attitudes. In the weeks following, there were seven telephone interviews that were conducted to record daily activities and to track parents' knowledge of their children's whereabouts.

## Results

It was found that parents believed their children to have less decision making ability than the adolescents believed themselves to have. As predicted, fathers believed their children to have less input-providing opportunities than did the mothers. Mothers were found to be more knowledgeable about children's whereabouts than were the fathers. The younger sibling was perceived to have less decision-making opportunities and parents were also more knowledgeable about their daily activities. It was found that the most noticeable differences were incorporated in families that had a female as the older sibling and a boy as the younger sibling.

## Implications

Parents can play a major role in the education and study patterns of their children. If adolescents believe that they are contributing more to the decisions about their schooling, then they are more likely to take an active and productive role. Parents can guide this direction but allow teenagers to attempt to make judicious choices. Same can be said in the classroom. If students perceive themselves as having more opportunities for choice, then they are more likely to be highly involved with their own progress and success. This all goes back to intrinsic motivation having an internal locus of control. Fathers need to be included more in the overall appraisal of their children.

Davies, P. & Lindsay, L. (2004). Interparental conflict and adolescent adjustment : Why does gender moderate early adolescent vulnerability? *Journal of Family Psychology*, 18 (1), 160 -170.

In previous studies, there has been inconclusive evidence of the effect of interparental conflict on adolescent children. Davies and Lindsay (2004) conducted this study of 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade students and their mothers from a public middle school near a metropolitan area. This aim of this research was to test a model of gender and related mechanisms as possible indicators of interparental conflict and adolescent maladjustment.

#### Methodology

A final sample of 924 students was created after those eligible didn't participate either do to lack of parental consent, no student interest, or being absent the day of the study. These subjects reported having both a mother and father figure and had completed all the necessary data for the focal points. The sample had a median age of 12.57 years and was divided almost evenly in regard to gender with 466 boys and 458 girls. The ethnic composition was 82% non-Hispanic White, 9% African American, 5% Hispanic, 2% Asian-Pacific Islander, and 2% Native American.

Surveys were mailed to parents for completion and small incentives were included in the form of coupons. 23% of the parents with middle school children returned the surveys, consisting of 172 mothers. Median family income was around \$40,000 and parents were less ethnically diverse. The subjects were asked to complete scales on interparental conflict and adolescent maladjustment. Children only were also instructed to complete a 10 item measure on communion. Internal consistency coefficients for all adjustment scales exceeded .85.

## Results

It was found that girls did have a greater tendency toward communion than did boys. As a result, they were more likely to internalize symptoms that were brought on by marital conflict. Ironically, there was no connection found between adolescent's gender and the externalizing of symptoms due to parental conflict. In concluding, the researchers determined that girls were more susceptible to vulnerability due to their higher levels of communion with parents.

## Implications

In a school setting, teachers should always try to be aware of the major family happenings that occur in the lives of their students. By knowing when a pupil is going through a troublesome period, educators can modify their assessments of the child. If an adolescent is experiencing a high level of interparental conflict, the teacher may be able to refer the student to a counselor to ensure that academic performance is not negatively affected. Teachers would know to look for signs of disturbance more intently as these results indicate that internalizing is more common for females than for males.

Ge, X., Conger, R., & Elder Jr., G. (2001). Pubertal transition, stressful life events, and the emergence of gender differences in adolescent depressive symptoms.

*Developmental Psychology*, 37 (3), 404 – 417.

Previous research has concluded that females are far more likely to experience depression than are males. This begins around the period of 13 – 15 years of age and continues through adulthood, where women has 2 to 3 times the rate of depression than to men (Culbertson, 1997). Using six-year longitudinal data, Ge, Conger, and Elder (2001) consider the implications of gender on depressive symptoms during adolescence.

#### Methodology

Information came from the Iowa Youth and Families Project, with 451 families contributing data. The breakdown was 236 families with girls and 215 with boys who were recruited in 1989. The sample consisted of 7<sup>th</sup> grade classes of 34 public and private schools in an eight-county area. Families were eligible if the 7<sup>th</sup> grader was living with both biological parents and had a sibling within 4 years of age. Initial letters were sent out explaining the study and follow-up phone calls were made asking if families were willing to participate. 78% of the eligible families agreed, and of those, 90% (406) were still involved with the project six years later.

These were middle to lower class White families living on farms or in small towns. Family size ranged from 4 to 13 with the median size being 5. About 65% of the adolescents switched to high school after 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Each year researchers would visit each home twice for two hours each to conduct interviews. Measures were completed that assessed adolescent depressive symptoms, stressful life events, pubertal transition, and girls' pubertal timing classification. This data was collected at yearly intervals.

## Results

It was found that girls do tend to experience depression at an earlier stage and that it increase constantly over the duration of high school. Girls start to show symptoms after 7<sup>th</sup> grade whereas boys don't tend to exhibit such characteristics until 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Boys tended to have decreasing levels of depression from 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grades. Also found was the fact that early-maturing females become depressed earlier than other females, due to the additional life changes taking place. When coupling this with significant life events, it was noted that girls are particularly vulnerable to depressive symptoms.

## Implications

This knowledge could greatly benefit educators in the assisting of adolescent females. Knowing that girls are much more susceptible to depression would alert teachers and counselors to be more on the lookout for such symptoms. Freshmen instructors would know to take extra care when dealing with the new student population. The stress of changing schools is enough to deal with, let alone being biologically pre-destined to such physical and mental reactions. Support groups could be developed that would allow for more peer counseling from fellow female students dealing with the same types of life experiences. As a male counselor, I would find this to be a major challenge.

### Conclusion and Analysis of the Research

Gender roles have been found to provide certain contributing factors to the relevant events in the lives of adolescents. To some extent these influences aren't really that dramatic, but in other cases there are clear-cut situations where one gender is greatly affected more than the other simply due to their gender. The purpose of my analyzing this material was for me to come out of it with a greater understanding of the role that gender plays in the lives of adolescents. This will have great implications for my future profession as a high school guidance counselor.

The researchers presented came up with various discussions as to the relevance of gender and its role on adolescent development. Alfieri, Ruble, and Higgins (1996) came to the findings that gender stereotyping can be flexible depending on the type of situations that the young people were placed. Once they transitioned to a new school their existing beliefs were suspended in order to collect new information. This left them without solid guides for gender role typing and allowed for the temporary flexibility. Gender roles tend to be set by society, but during the formative periods of adolescence there are times when new perspectives may be gained. In response to the research question, young people have expectations put upon them by peers and others. But the trend seems to be that masculine characteristics have a stronger hold on young boys.

Results from the second study conclude that there are inherent differences in the ways that males and females bond with others. Due to this fact, it makes females more susceptible to being affected negatively by not having close relationships. Males tend to be more solitary in nature and this prevents them from being as dependent upon others for feelings of acceptance and belonging. Wong and Csikszentmihalyi (1991) found that

even highly affiliative boys and girls had significant differences in the amount of time that they would spend with friends. This was concluded to be based solely on gender. In relation to this paper's main question, this effect has the direct result of having girls becoming more socialized than boys. With this also comes more positive feelings and a sense of having dominance in directing and influencing other people.

Findings from the third study reveal that parents are much more permissive with adolescents who are female and afford them greater opportunity for decision-making contributions. Bumpus, Crouter, and McHale (2001) believe this to be due to the faster physical maturation rates that are experienced by girls. With boys tending to act more immature and presenting more behavior issues, it is likely that parents don't consider them capable of making worthy and proper decisions for themselves. It would be natural for parents to know less about the older sibling's daily activities as adolescence is a time period where teenagers spend less time around their parents. Drawn from this paper's main focus, it has been shown that being a female can have significant implications on the maturity development and sense of autonomy experienced in early adulthood.

The fourth study was looking to determine the vulnerability levels between boys and girls when experiencing interparental conflict. It was shown that females were much more likely to internalize symptoms of distress in the form of anxiety, dysphoria, and social withdrawal. Davies and Lindsay (2004) determined that this was largely due to the fact that girls experience societal pressure to experience higher levels of communion and interpersonal concern in close relationships. By not having these demands placed upon them, boys are not as vulnerable to conflict in their lives. With regard to the research question, it can be deduced that females are placed at a disadvantage for emotional and

mental stability. By experiencing this trauma to such a significant degree, the mental well being of young adolescent females may be negatively affected for some time.

Findings drawn from the last study made note of the fact that females tended to experience depression at a relatively young age and the intensity of such increases as they got older. Ge, Conger, and Elder (2001) also found that females who experienced menarche at an earlier age were more likely to exhibit depressive symptoms. This discovery was also extended to say that females experiencing early menarche were also far more likely to suffer from depressed episodes at a later age than were their peers of either gender. In relation to the research paper posed by this paper, there is unequivocal evidence that gender has an effect of adolescent development. Simply by the mere fact of being a female, girls have negative experiences that are not shared by boys. This puts them in a position of vulnerability that requires extra sensitivity when dealing with them.

#### Personal Opinion

After having read all of this material, I have to admit that I have gained some new insights into the mental development of the female population. I would have to say that this was particularly useful for me because I grew up in a household with three boys. I do have a 21 year old sister, but I was gone long before she ever had to deal with any of these issues. These are findings that I need to keep in mind, both when dealing with a student population as a guidance counselor and as a potential father of girls in the future. We all have differences and challenges in our lives that we have to contend with, but I really had no idea how much more so this applied to females. I have a beautiful friend who is taking medication for depression and I have never understood why. This leads me to believe that it was onset long before she became the person whom I now know today.

## References

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