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SEX ROLE DEVELOPMENT IN GIRLS: A COGNITIVE THEORY

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P R E F A C E A N D
A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

Freud once said that his concern for family dynamics owed much to his unusual status as first son of a second marriage, with nephews older than he. The concern of this study for rather neglected areas: the development of girls, sibling interaction and peer influence, also owes much to the situation of its author. To have had a daughter and a son (the FM constellation) was to be faced with the issue of sex difference, in a way which prior experience as MN2M in my family of origin did not prepare me for. Therefore the influence of my own children (as well as their tolerance in a father-absent situation during the writing of this study) is acknowledged. My wife contributed both the close support, and the objective questioning of sex role assumptions, to be expected of an FM. Dr Stewart Houston (M1F with an FPM family) lent his genial criticism and his deep acquaintance with the field, in its long gestation.

Dr Robert Stewart has supervised it with the added and valuable insights of an experienced editor and a cross-cultural specialist; and the sympathy of one who has recently slaved through an infinitely more demanding investigation.

ABSTRACT

This study reviews current theory and research relevant to the sex role development of girls. It starts with some examination of the explanation of motive in identification, and then looks at the way in which theories of identification typically account for sex differences in personality and development. This argues that all conventional theories of identification are tied, in one way or another, to drive-reduction theory: if an intrinsic motivation theory is assumed, then "identification" as a consequence of secondary reward value need not be adduced. Some difficulties of explaining sex role development in girls on conventional theory are examined before moving to the social context. Society is assumed to be typically seen as according male status more reward. This has consequences for sex role preference theory and research, which are examined. Data on sex differences (both cognitive and personality) are reviewed in order to elucidate the nature of any theoretical account of the differences. Two significant related theories are reviewed and evaluated: those of Lynn and Kohlberg. The latter providing a theory of sex role learning on a Piagetian basis. However, both theories are argued to be defective in omitting or understanding the role of siblings and peers in sex role learning; theory and research in these fields is noted. A specific (and somewhat new) sequence is proposed for important peer-interaction differences between boys and girls. Included in some more explicit hypotheses is one (on sex differences in intelligence-test behaviours) of interest to educators.

A NOTE ON
ABBREVIATIONS USED

It will often be necessary to refer to "masculinity" and "femininity" scales, especially in the latter sections. "M" for masculinity and "F" for femininity are customary. M/F scales are those which measure on both dimensions.

It will also be necessary to discuss ordinal position studies in some detail, and family constellation patterns. It saves much verbiage to use what is now the accepted practice and abbreviate thus:

F1M: a girl with a younger brother, in a two child family.

MM2: a boy with an older brother, in a two child family.

MF2M: a girl in a three child family, with both an older and a younger brother.

That is: M is a male sibling; F a female sibling; the number denotes the ordinal position of the child referred to, and is placed after the symbol.

CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Preface and acknowledgments	i.
Abstract	ii.
A note on abbreviations used	iii.
Tables of contents	iv.
PART I: GENERAL BACKGROUND AND THEORY
Chapter 1. Introduction	1.
2. On motivation	10.
3. Comment on some theories of identification	13.
4. The identification process and sex differences	33.
5. Identification as social learning	47.
- Bandura and his collaborators	47.
- Brim	54.
PART II: THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF DEVELOPMENT FOR GIRLS
Chapter 6. Women as "the second sex"; social values and their consequences	59.
7. Sex differences as role expectations	72.
8. Sex differences: some data	90.
PART III: TWO THEORIES OF SEX ROLE LEARNING
Chapter 9. A critique of Lynn	106.
10. Kohlberg's theory	120.
PART IV: THE ADDED ELEMENTS
Chapter 11. Introduction: a note on salience	139.
12. The salience of siblings	141.
The salience of peers	158.
PART V: TOWARD A SYNTHESIS
Chapter 13. The development of girls: a synthesis	166.
14. Toward operationalising some hypotheses	183.
Appendix One: On motivation; a fuller statement	188.
Bibliography	208.

PART ONE

GENERAL BACKGROUND AND THEORY

The aim of this study is to clarify some of the issues involved in understanding and exploring the sex role development of girls.

In part, it is consciously designed to complement Dr Stewart Houston's recent empirical study on the sex role development of boys, and therefore to clear the ground for a parallel empirical analysis with girls. For this reason, the present study does not retrace some of the more detailed examination of concepts and methods which was included by Houston in his longer doctoral dissertation (Houston, 1968).

The genesis of some of the ideas here contained lay to an extent in early discussions with him, particularly through 1964-66. It shares his awareness that there has too long been too little attempt to elucidate sex role development as differential processes for boys and girls.

While this is not, therefore, a contribution to the Millett or Friedan Womens' Liberation Movement, it should serve to highlight some of the theoretical and empirical issues often obscured by polemic, prejudice, or neglect.

A social context

A fundamental starting point for this study is that the nature of the separate process by which girls develop into a feminine sex role, or into sex appropriate behaviour, cannot be understood except in the social context which determines sex role expectations. The social nature of such role expectations

is only briefly indicated here, supported by some key studies. More to the point, and discussed in more detail, is work such as that of Kagan and Moss (1962) in which psychological development is seen to be meaningful only insofar as certain key personality factors are consonant or dissonant with the appropriate sex role prescriptions, and where psychological conflict is demonstrably the consequence of dissonance.

Therefore, the present analysis, while primarily psychological, lies within a particular social context. To this extent, it is an ethnocentric view.

Mead's classic studies of the Arapesh and Tchambuli have long lent support to the view that masculinity/femininity are at least very largely a matter of social definition rather than fixed verity. Her arguments may have tended to obscure the point that even if such definitions have no necessary or inevitable quality about them, there is a great deal of commonality about the way in which most societies, throughout most of history, have defined differential sex role expectations. It is not necessary to agree with Parson's argument that the proper course of psychological development and social stability requires that children perceive a high degree of sex differentiation; it is sufficient to agree rather with Simone de Beauvoir that vested interest, and the inertia of social habit or conditioning, sufficiently explain such common differentiation.

So that, although this study may be ethnocentric, the social assumptions which (it is argued) underlie sex role learning in New Zealand as in other western societies are not so dissimilar from those of other societies - or of this society at other times. While Hartley mildly disputes the point (and her case must therefore be examined later) this study assumes that western societies are or tend to be male-oriented, and adduces some relevant empirical data on sex role learning to support the case.

This is not to deny biological or genetically determined differences. More recent work (only some of which is here discussed) clarifies some of these differences. It is certain that within the next generation, further vast strides will be made in our understanding of such biological correlates of behaviour. But it must be remembered that to the extent that they are "determinants" they are necessary rather than sufficient. There is a brief later discussion of relevant research on sexual abnormalities of genetic origin, e.g. Money (1965) and Hampson, in Beach (1965) which paralleling the conclusion reached by Kagan and Moss, above, supports the view that sex-gender behaviour is not to be understood apart from the psychological and social expectations which impinge on the individual. Like argument is adduced (e.g. from Eichorn, 1963) as to the interplay of biological and socially prescribed sex role expectations in adolescence.

It is certain that biologically determined physiological or sensory factors to some extent dispose males and females to perceive, respond, and so develop differently; some such factors are later discussed. Therefore, were the process of sex role learning identical for boys and girls so far as external influences bearing on them could be decided, the outcomes could be wholly different because the processes were phenomenologically different.

But it is a major postulate of this study (following Freud, Mowrer, Sears and others though along diverging lines) that the processes are significantly different as to the external factors, the situation, the timing or phasing, and the outcomes. Therefore (it will be argued) plausible antecedent conditions in the process of sex role learning may be found to explain many of the differential characteristics which have often been explained on biological grounds. But, on the evidence, this study can take neither an extreme hereditarian position, nor one of extreme environmentalism.

A consequence, often ill regarded in both theoretical and empirical material on sex role learning, is that this study does not accept masculinity/femininity as polarities. Too much theory, and too much research, obscures the extent of within-group difference for either sex. Fortunately, (at least in research) this temptation is increasingly resisted, and some of the more useful implications of within-group difference analyses are becoming obvious (e.g. Bieri, 1960, later discussed). However, because Houston has also discussed in more detail the methodological issues involved, this study does not directly discuss operational problems of defining "masculinity" and "femininity" - except again to note that most "M" and "F" scales contain a concealed but implied social-definition factor.

Certainly nothing in this study disputes the point that, in most key factors, differences within either sex may be greater than mean differences between the sexes; on the other hand, it does not dispute the fact that considerable mean differences between the sexes do exist and that they appear to have ascertainably different antecedents, correlates and consequents. Some of the key differences are later discussed, but these are selected for their relevance to the general theory put forward. No exhaustive survey of sex difference is attempted.

The order of argument

On the basis of the foregoing argument, this study will first examine some of the conventional theories (both psychological and sociological, particularly on "identification". This cannot be an exhaustive analysis of identification theory. It should be clear at the outset though, that the study assumes "identification" to be a term past its usefulness, too confused and variable in meaning to be retained; which is why it is avoided in the title of the study

itself. There is no space to support other than a brief case against the term.

The chief reason for starting with an examination of identification and like positions is to analyse their defects, particularly in the light of more recent work on motivation.

Motivation reassessed; identification reassessed

Conventional theory, it will be argued, has been based on a reactive theory of motivation. That is, in behaviourist language, they have assumed some such process as the formation of secondary drives deriving from the association of the model with the reward/gratification of primary drives. They have tended to be both homeostatic and reductionist. The Freudian and neo-Freudian position (it is argued later) is essentially the same even though as with theories like that of Whiting (1960) the language may be different.

It is later argued, however, that some of these theories of identification are unacceptable (e.g. Whiting, 1960) because they do not adequately account for sex differences either in process or outcome; while those which account for both (as, notably, in Freud himself) are unacceptable or unnecessary if we revise our views on motivation.

Therefore, this study briefly reviews the more recent reassessment of motivational theory e.g. Hunt (1960,1962,1965) in order to examine the consequences of assuming that significant behaviours may be sufficiently accounted for on the basis of intrinsic motivation. It argues that since extrinsic motivation, particularly on a basis of homeostatic drives, is implicitly assumed in all conventional theory, such theories are either deficient or superfluous.

If, after all, there are significant aspects of behaviour which do not have

to be accounted for by the formation of secondary drives, then it is not essential to postulate the same role in the process for the external "source of satisfaction", which then becomes an inadequate or superfluous mediating explanation of sex role learning.

A "cognitive-developmental analysis"

This study uses the analysis put forward by Kohlberg (1967) which superbly develops the argument. It remains the only such argument known at this time to have so consistently expanded on the "cognitive" position. Some statements, like that of Bau (1960) discussed later, use some cognitive language; others, like Parsons (1955) and Maccoby (1959) have analysed role learning. But none has, like Kohlberg, derived a cognitive argument which stands the Freudian theory of identification on its head by asserting that the desire to "identify" precedes rather than succeeds attachment and arises from cognitive or intrinsic motivation.

Application and implications

This study will then go on to amplify these implications with special reference to the development of girls (though naturally, with some necessary contrast with that of boys). Therefore it involves some review of empirical data on sex differences, especially in cognition and cognitive style.

Lynn, whose 1962 article is later to be analysed, has proposed that important cognitive differences between the sexes are explicable as a consequence of the different learning contexts for boys and girls so far as sex role is concerned. This present study agrees with Lynn in emphasising the critical importance of these process differences, and of sex differences in general, to

any adequate explanation of the empirical data. But it differs from him (and is with Kohlberg) in seeing cognitive elements significantly as antecedents rather than only as consequents of the process.

The final section expands on a most important implication both for theory and research of taking this specifically cognitive view of sex role development.

Selectivity needs to be explained

The point of taking a cognitive stance is that it emphasises the active role of the learner in selectively perceiving and attending to stimuli; in this case, in imitating or modelling upon only selected aspects or sectors of the model's behaviour. Too much theory goes no further than seeing identification as "global imitation" or "stimulus generalisation" and gives no adequate account of the factors involved in selection, which must be accounted for. Kohlberg, very explicitly, does so; his case together with other supporting studies (e.g. Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1963) will be reviewed.

But selection may also involve selection of the model as a model; that is, an active choice among models rather than only within the range of behaviours from a given model. This is an aspect which Kohlberg does not adequately consider. The present study therefore goes beyond him, to postulate the importance of other models selectively attended to at different points in the sequence.

Siblings and peers

Houston's study which stresses the salience of siblings is clearly relevant, and is backed with much other work. Here, only certain major studies (e.g. Brim, 1958; Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg, 1964 and 1965) will be considered.

Houston has more extensively reviewed other sibling material.

However, this study goes yet further (and into rather new territory) in positing specific, functionally and sequentially different, roles for peer-groups in the sex role development process. Certain defects in other theories, it is argued, are better accounted for by consideration of peer-group interaction.

Sibling and peer-group interactions are, in effect, added to a general position based on Kohlberg and Lynn, and qualify these cases considerably. Empirical data to support the argument for peer-group interaction, and to differentiate its function for boys and girls, is adduced.

The general theory here postulated may be summed by saying that, in sex role development, the significant and more critical task for boys is learning, and for girls accepting, the sex role; and that siblings and peers perform different functions at different times for the two sexes in those separate tasks. In order to present this amplified theory of sex role development, it is necessary to examine more closely some commonly used terms (such as sex role learning, sex role preference and sex role acceptance).

Such a formulation does something to overcome the long-standing dispute in identification theory between Freudian theory which postulated that the process could be more difficult for girls, and the developmental position which argues that discontinuity in the male process is more disadvantageous. The present study argues that attention should be paid to different "disadvantages" at different points in the learning sequence, and proposes that this formulation also accounts for more recent empirical data (e.g. Mussen and Rutherford 1963), which does in effect support the Freudian view.

Toward operationalising

Finally, the study is aimed toward formulating some operational hypotheses derived from this theory. These should serve to clarify the points at which specific contrast needs to be obtained with data now available for boys, in particular that of Houston.

Necessarily, there are qualifications to be added: for example, there is only a brief indication of obvious socio-economic status variables which demonstrably and differentially affect sex role learning. These are considered to some extent as test-cases, and to some extent as necessary qualifications of the general process proposed.

In sum

This study aims to review both theory and research; to put forward a theory which is partly a synthesis but to some extent novel, and thereby to assist in the long-overdue demise of the exclusive parent-child, one-way-influence paradigm which has continued to dominate theories of identification and sex role learning.

It is designed specifically to clear the field for a part replication of Houston's material aimed - it is hypothesised - to demonstrate that his analysis, while consonant with the present theory as to boys, requires very substantial modification to apply to girls.