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Daniels, EA

Leaper, C

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Gender Issues

E A Daniels, University of Oregon, Bend, OR, USA

C Leaper, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA, USA

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Glossary

Ambivalent sexism model: Gender-related prejudice includes a combination of hostile sexism (negative attitudes toward women who violate traditional gender roles) and benevolent sexism (valuing feminine-stereotyped attributes in women and a paternalistic belief that men need to protect women).

Expectancy-value model of achievement: Achievement motivation in a particular domain is highest when individuals expect success and value the domain.

Gender schema theory: People pay attention to information relevant to their own gender and to

recall information consistent with their existing beliefs.

Social cognitive theory: Learning occurs through observing role models and inferring incentives for particular behaviors; when behaviors are practiced and mastered, self-efficacy ensues.

Social identity theory: People value characteristics associated with their ingroup and encourage assimilation to ingroup norms in others.

Social role theory: The gendered division of roles in the larger society shapes people's expectations about their own gender roles.

Introduction

During adolescence, girls and boys undergo important changes related to their gender that can shape their self-concepts, beliefs, goals, and social relationships. For example, with the onset of puberty, girls and boys undergo physical transformations that can affect their self-image and how others treat them. This is a period when girls and boys become increasingly interested in their sexual attractiveness to one another (or possibly to the same sex). Adolescence is also a period when more flexible and egalitarian conceptions of gender might emerge or when adherence to conventional gender roles may strengthen. Adolescent girls' and boys' gender-related beliefs can guide their motivation to pursue particular activities, such as sports, or certain academic subjects. In dating relationships, adolescents may rely on traditional gender scripts as they navigate first romantic relationships. With dramatic increases in gender equality during the last half century, however, adolescents in the United States and other Western societies are increasingly able to transcend many gender-role restrictions.

The following gender-related issues during adolescence are reviewed in the present article: self-concept and attitudes, academic achievement, athletic participation, body image,

sexuality and sexual orientation, friendship intimacy, and aggression and violence. Before addressing each of these topics, factors that influence the salience of gender during adolescence are reviewed.

Factors Influencing the Salience of Gender During Adolescence

A combination of cultural, interpersonal, cognitive-motivational, and biological factors influence many of the gender-related issues that youth face during adolescence. Like many other topics in psychology, much of the research on gender-related issues that youth face during adolescence is based on ethnic majority youth in Western cultures including the United States, Canada, Northern Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. As a result, much of the research reported on in this article is based on these youth. Less research has been done with ethnic minority groups in Western cultures and with cultural groups in other parts of the world. It is important to note that cultural context is a crucial factor in understanding adolescents' experiences in general as well as in understanding gender-related issues.

Cultural Factors

The relative division of labor and roles among women and men in a given society is an important cultural factor in adolescents' gender-related experiences. As articulated in social role theory, the gendered division of roles in a society shapes the kinds of expectations about gender roles that individuals formulate for themselves and about others. For example, men are still more likely than women to hold positions of power (e.g., US Presidents, corporate CEOs), whereas women are still more likely than men to be responsible for childcare and housework. These societal patterns can shape how adolescents think about the kinds of roles that they will adopt. Consistent with the social role theory, cross-cultural research suggests that gender socialization practices are less rigid in more gender-egalitarian societies.

The extent that a society organizes roles and behaviors according to gender affects the salience that gender will have as a social category organizing individuals' thinking. Being a member of one's gender group – that is, being a girl or a boy – is perhaps the most fundamental group identity that individuals experience during childhood and adolescence. The beliefs and knowledge that individuals form about gender are known as gender schemas. According to gender schema theory, individuals tend to pay more attention to information relevant to their own gender, and they store information in memory in ways to make it consistent with their existing gender schemas.

Interpersonal and Cognitive-Motivational Factors

People learn about the cultural norms regarding gender roles from various social agents, including family members, teachers, peers, and the media. Although contemporary adolescents living with their mother and father will typically observe both parents working outside of the home in Western contexts, fathers may be more likely than mothers to hold high-prestige occupations. It is even more likely that a gendered division of labor occurs inside the home of dual-career parents with most mothers still being primarily responsible for childcare and housework. Thus, as adolescents approach adulthood themselves, their ideas about family roles may be partly influenced by what they have observed in their home.

The importance of gender as a social category is also emphasized in social identity theory, which further addresses the impact of one's gender-group identity on motivation. According to social identity theory, people tend to value characteristics associated with their ingroup and they tend to encourage ingroup members to assimilate to the group's norms. Throughout childhood, girls and boys primarily affiliate with same-gender peers. Although cross-gender contacts increase during adolescence, friendships usually are mostly with same-gender peers. In these peer groups, gender-stereotyped social norms are often enforced among peers.

Social cognitive theory is another approach that is helpful for understanding gender development. According to this theory, many aspects of gender development occur through observing role models and perceiving incentives for particular kinds of behavior. In turn, by practicing a behavior, individuals develop a sense of self-efficacy (a feeling of

personal competence and agency) that increases motivation to continue the behavior. For example, if children observe in their environments that mostly women take care of babies, they are likely to infer that caretaking is associated with the female role. This may lead girls to play with dolls in childhood and to seek out babysitting jobs in adolescence. As a consequence, girls may be more likely than boys to develop competence and feelings of self-efficacy regarding caregiving.

Biological Factors

Biological factors related to pubertal maturation contribute to the salience of certain gender-related issues during adolescence. These include changes in cognitive development during adolescence. For example, youth may develop more abstract thinking abilities, especially if they attend secondary schooling, that allow them to better understand certain aspects of gender roles (discussed later). Furthermore, with the onset of puberty, youth experience major changes to their anatomy, physiology, and physical appearance. Puberty leads to the development of secondary sex characteristics in girls (e.g., breasts, increased body fat) and boys (e.g., facial hair, greater muscle mass and height). However, there is a high degree of within-gender variability and between-gender overlap in many of these physical changes (e.g., the height difference between the tallest and shortest males is larger than the difference between the average female and male).

On average, girls enter puberty 2 years before boys do. The timing of maturation can be especially important for girls and boys. Early-maturing girls are at risk for poor body image (described later in the article) as well as substance use, delinquency, and early sexual activity due to contact with older peer networks. Early-maturing boys tend to have increased body image, but are also at risk for substance use, delinquency, and early sexual activity because of older peers. Late maturation for boys (but not girls) tends to be especially negative. These boys are at risk for teasing and bullying. They tend to have higher rates of alcohol use and delinquency as well as lower grades in school than boys who develop 'on time'. Finally, puberty is associated with increased sexual interest and sexual behavior. As addressed later in the article, physical changes and sexual interest affect how adolescents view themselves and one another.

Gender-Related Beliefs

Self-Concepts and Attitudes

Gender-related self-concepts refer to people's self-perceived personality traits, abilities, and interests, whereas gender-related attitudes refer to their views about the kinds of behaviors that other females and males should adopt. Gender-related self-concepts and attitudes are not always consistent with one another. For example, an adolescent may endorse gender-egalitarian attitudes but personally have gender-stereotypical interests. As reviewed in the course of this article, many adolescents hold gender-stereotyped beliefs regarding certain academic subjects, sports, body image, sexuality, and interpersonal relationships.

The emergence of abstract thinking can set the stage for some adolescents to reflect upon the social origins of gender roles. This awareness may lead some adolescents to reject these social conventions and to explore and to adopt more flexible views of gender roles. Accordingly, adolescence is a period when gender-role transcendence is possible. However, many youth internalize traditional gender norms as personal values. For them, adolescence can be a period of continued (or possibly increased) gender-role rigidity.

Research suggests that gender-role flexibility is more likely if youth perceive support for gender-egalitarian roles from family members, peers, teachers, and the media. For example, parents' encouragement may facilitate greater willingness to disclose personal feelings (a feminine-stereotyped behavior) in boys or more interest in athletic participation (a masculine-stereotyped behavior) in girls.

On average, gender-role flexibility in beliefs and behavior is more likely among girls than boys. Correspondingly, gender-role conformity pressures in the family and peer group are usually stronger for boys than girls. Social scientists attribute these patterns to men's greater status and dominance in society. The attributes associated with the dominant group can enhance one's status, whereas the characteristics related to the subordinate group can diminish one's status. Hence, when girls adopt masculine-stereotyped qualities, it may enhance their status; but when boys adopt feminine-stereotyped qualities, it may diminish their status.

During the course of identity exploration, adolescents commonly judge themselves according to how well they meet cultural gender expectations. Social change in cultural attitudes about appropriate behavior for females over the last several decades has made it far more acceptable today in many Western contexts for girls to be ambitious, independent, athletic, and have other masculine-stereotyped (i.e., self-assertive) characteristics. In contrast, boys continue to be sanctioned for being gentle, nurturing, or displaying other feminine-stereotyped (i.e., affiliative) qualities. In Western societies, both self-image and peer acceptance tend to be highest for highly self-assertive boys and girls who display a mixture of self-assertive and affiliative behaviors.

Sexism

Gender stereotypes often lead to sexist views and behaviors. Gender-based prejudice and discrimination are the cognitive and behavioral components of sexism, respectively. According to the ambivalent sexism model, gender-based prejudice includes both hostile and benevolent forms. Hostile sexism refers to negative views toward individuals who violate traditional gender roles. For example, some people disparage girls who enter traditionally masculine domains such as science or sports. Benevolent sexism includes valuing feminine-stereotyped attributes in females (e.g., nurturance) and a belief that traditional gender roles are necessary to complement one another. Benevolent sexism also includes the view known as paternalism that females need to be protected by males. Benevolent sexism contributes to gender inequality by limiting women's roles. Thus, in the ambivalent sexism model, girls and women are punished for violating traditional gender norms (hostile sexism) and are reinforced for adopting

traditional roles (benevolent sexism). Only a few studies have examined sexist attitudes in adolescent samples; among these, the suggestion is that both hostile and benevolent sexism may increase in prevalence from early to late adolescence.

As reviewed later in this article, reported experiences with sexist discrimination, such as gender bias and sexual harassment, tend to increase during adolescence. The trend may be due both to increased rates of sexist events with age and to increases in the cognitive ability to recognize a sexist event when it occurs. Also, studies suggest that learning about feminism and the women's movement may help increase girls' ability to detect sexist events.

Academic Achievement

Overall Achievement

In North America, Australia, and many parts of Europe, girls on average get better grades in school than boys do, although this difference is small. Girls are also less likely than boys to repeat a grade, and girls are more likely to achieve higher rankings, earn more academic awards, and take college preparatory classes. Finally, related to their stronger academic performance, girls are somewhat more likely than boys to finish high school. Socioeconomic status is an important factor in these patterns. Boys and girls from middle and upper socioeconomic backgrounds perform similarly in academics and are equally likely to finish high school and enroll in college. Girls from working-class and low-income backgrounds may perform more poorly in school than their middle-class peers, but they are likely to complete high school and enroll in college. In contrast, working class and poor boys, who are more apt to be ethnic minorities, are more likely to perform poorly in school, drop out of high school, and disengage from academics. Therefore, socioeconomic status *and* gender are important factors in understanding academic achievement.

Traditional gender roles may be related to average gender differences in overall academic performance and success. In the socialization of girls, there is often greater emphasis on compliance to adult authority. In contrast, many boys experience pressure among their male peers to maintain an image of masculinity based on appearing tough that can include opposition to teacher authority. Researchers have found that agreeableness and social dominance goals are positively and negatively related, respectively, to academic achievement during adolescence.

Achievement in Specific Academic Subjects

Gender-stereotyped beliefs can affect girls' and boys' attitudes toward achievement in particular academic subjects. In turn, gender-related variations in academic achievement are related to the kinds of occupations that women and men later choose. Gender-related differences in achievement, therefore, can perpetuate the gendered division of labor in adulthood. One of the many strides toward gender equality in the United States and other Western nations has been the narrowing of the gender gap in many academic domains such as mathematics and the biological sciences. Only a few decades ago in the United States, boys were outperforming girls in these subjects.

However, recent reports indicate negligible average differences between girls and boys in high school math and biology grades and test scores. A small average gender gap remains, however, in test scores in the physical sciences (favoring boys) and in reading and writing (favoring girls).

In addition to historical changes within the United States in girls' and boys' math and science achievement, there are also cultural variations. A recent cross-cultural analysis of math and science standardized test scores indicated considerable variability in the pattern of gender difference across nations. In some countries, there was no average difference; in other nations, there was an average difference that favored boys; and in some countries, there was an average difference that favored girls. Thus, there is an emerging consensus among developmental researchers that a large portion of the variation in academic achievement is attributable to social and cognitive-motivational factors.

Parents, teachers, and peers may hold gender-stereotyped beliefs about adolescents' interests and abilities. Consequently, they may differentially encourage girls' and boys' achievement in different academic subjects. For example, longitudinal research in the United States has found that many parents tended to hold higher expectations for boys than girls in math, and that parents' expectations predicted later math motivation even after controlling for initial math performance: Girls of parents with low expectations became less interested in math and took fewer advanced math courses in high school. Other studies have highlighted the potential impact of peers. Conformity pressures can undermine boys' and girls' achievement in certain areas. For example, many boys may avoid feminine-stereotyped subjects such as reading to maintain an image of masculinity. Conversely, peer support may help to sustain interest in cross-gender-typed subjects. For example, girls who perceived peer support for science were more likely to maintain their own interest in science over time.

Despite significant advances over the years, women remain underrepresented in many fields related to science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) in the United States and other Western nations. When considering gender disparities in STEM-related careers, it is therefore important to consider factors related to school achievement as well as occupational aspirations. Among girls who do well in math and science during high school, many are not motivated to pursue occupations related to these subjects. The expectancy-value model of achievement helps explain these patterns. According to the model, individuals are motivated to pursue domains in which they feel competent (expect success) and find interesting (value). When certain subjects are stereotyped for the other gender, it may undermine the personal value that an individual may attach to that domain. In this regard, many adolescents associate math, science, and computers with males and associate reading and writing with females. Therefore, girls may devalue math, science, and computers and boys may devalue reading and writing. The potential impact of gender stereotypes on adolescents' academic self-concepts is implicated in other studies finding corresponding average gender differences in self-perceived competence and interest in these subjects. To the extent that youth feel less confident or less interested in certain subjects, they are less likely to pursue those fields. However, studies also point to possible ways to foster adolescents'

interest in particular academic subjects. For example, one study in Germany found that high school girls' interest in physics increased when practical applications were highlighted in the curriculum.

Athletic Participation

Girls' and Boys' Participation in Organized Sports

Sports are an important activity context in many adolescents' lives. According to a nationally representative study in the United States of 12–18-year-olds' time use, these youth spent more time per week (~4 h) in sport activities than in all other organized activities combined. Girls' involvement in organized sport in the United States is higher today than ever before. This is largely due to historic increases in girls' athletic participation since the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which required equal opportunity for girls and boys in all school programs receiving federal financial support. During the last 40 years, girls' involvement in high school sports in the United States has increased from approximately 3% to approximately 40%. Boys' participation in high school sports has remained approximately 50% during this period.

There are both similarities and differences in the kinds of sports that are popular for girls and boys in the United States. Basketball, track and field, baseball/softball, and soccer are among the top five most popular high school sports for both girls and boys. However, football is the most popular among boys and is rarely played among girls. In contrast, cheerleading squads are popular among girls and are pursued relatively infrequently among boys (98% female). Boys' and girls' differential involvement in these two sports reflects traditional gender roles, with males being more physically aggressive (in football) and females being more supportive (in cheerleading).

Despite increased sport opportunities for girls and women, sports remain a highly gendered activity context. As previously noted, proportionally more boys (50%) than girls (40%) in the United States participate in high school sports. Also, whereas participation in organized sports declines during the course of adolescence for boys and girls, the trend is stronger for girls. According to the World Health Organization, these trends are seen across the world. Finally, within the United States, gender disparities in physical activity and sport participation are even more pronounced for girls of color and low-income girls.

Girls are more likely than boys to report barriers to participating in sports and physical activities. Some cited barriers include time pressures (e.g., too much homework, responsibilities at home), structural limitations (e.g., problems obtaining transportation, facilities, and equipment), interpersonal impediments (e.g., parental belief that sport is not as important for girls as for boys), and psychological factors (e.g., low confidence in their physical abilities or knowledge about how to play). A United Nations report on women, gender equality, and sport found that physical barriers to females' participation in sport, including a lack of access to facilities and resources, are a worldwide problem. In addition in many parts of the world, sports are considered to be more important for males and in some regions, female sport participation directly

violates social norms for appropriate female behavior. Lack of access to sport facilities and prohibitive social attitudes jointly limit girls' opportunities to participate in sport activities.

Benefits and Costs of Sport Participation for Girls and Boys

There are several positive outcomes associated with sport participation. For example, sport involvement has been linked to positive academic performance, school engagement, and future educational aspirations. Research has also found a positive longitudinal relationship between high school sport involvement and psychological adjustment. This pattern may be likely because sport participation is highly valued in US high schools, and athletes often hold high status positions in their peer groups.

Some benefits associated with athletic participation are especially likely among adolescent girls. Research shows that girls' involvement in sports and physical activities is related to increased self-esteem, self-efficacy, and feeling self-reliant. In addition, several studies show that adolescent girls and college women who play sports are more likely than nonathletes to report more satisfaction with their bodies. In addition, female high school athletes are less likely than nonathletes to report eating disorders. Adolescent girls who are involved in sports also show a number of positive behaviors related to sexuality. Female athletes engage in fewer risky sexual behaviors and do more to protect their sexual health than do their nonathletic peers.

Despite the various psychological, social, and physical benefits associated with involvement in sports, positive outcomes are not an automatic byproduct of participation. There are negative attitudes and behaviors that may increase with athletic involvement. For example, some research in the United States suggests that high school athletes are more likely than nonathletes to drink alcohol. However, this pattern may vary across ethnic groups or communities; for example, it appears more likely for European American than African American athletes. For girls, there is evidence that participation in lean sports (in which being slender is believed to be an advantage, such as distance running) is related to self-objectification, which involves focusing on how one's body appears rather than what it can do. Further, some female athletes are at risk for developing disordered eating problems. This includes dancers, girls and women who play aesthetic (in which bodies are judged as part of the competition, such as figure skating) and lean sports, and elite athletes (who play in professional leagues or compete at national or international events).

For boys, sport fields have historically been a place to learn about and prove one's masculinity, and boys achieve status among their peers based on their athletic ability. For many male athletes, there is a locker room culture that promotes misogyny and homophobia. Those who are less athletically skilled tend to be lower on the dominance hierarchy in US high schools, and can be targets for bullying and homophobic taunts. High status male athletes at the top of the social hierarchy in some communities are more likely to hold rape-tolerant attitudes and to commit sexual violence against females.

In an effort to cultivate positive sport environments, researchers and youth sport advocates have created models for optimal sport contexts as well as specific sport programs with a positive youth development focus. These programs focus on teaching

sports skills along with life skills in a safe, fun, supportive, and challenging environment that involves caring relationships, well-trained adult leaders, facilitated and experiential learning, and moderate-to-vigorous physical activity.

Body Image

The US National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) identifies four components that define body image:

1. how you see yourself when you look in the mirror or picture yourself in your mind;
2. what you believe about your own appearance;
3. how you feel about your body, including your height, shape, and weight; and
4. how you sense and control your body as you move, which includes how you feel in your body, not just your thoughts about your body.

NEDA characterizes a positive body image as having an accurate perception of and appreciating one's shape as well as feeling proud of and comfortable in one's body. Individuals with a positive body image also understand that physical appearance does not dictate one's value as a person, and these individuals refuse to spend excessive time worrying about food and weight. In contrast, a negative body image is characterized as having a distorted perception of one's shape, feeling ashamed, self-conscious, and anxious about one's body, viewing one's body as a personal failure, and feeling uncomfortable in one's body. People with negative body image are at an increased risk for developing an eating disorder, suffering from depression, low self-esteem, and obsessions with weight loss.

Pubertal Timing and Body Image

Girls who mature earlier tend to be shorter and heavier in appearance relative to their female peers, which is inconsistent with Western cultures' value on thinness in females. This can cause negative body image, eating disorders, and depressed mood. Late-maturing girls might experience teasing and negative body image in early adolescence because of their lack of physical development. By late adolescence, however, they tend to have more positive body image than other girls because they generally have a lean body build that is favored in many Western groups. Early-maturing boys grow and put on muscle earlier than their male peers, giving them an advantage in sport activities, which also gives them more status among their peers. These boys tend to be more popular than other boys and more attractive to girls because of their advanced development of facial hair, deeper voice, and other secondary sex characteristics.

Body Image Concerns Among Girls

Concern with body shape and size starts very early among girls and primarily centers on attaining a thin ideal body shape emphasized in many Western societies. One study found that at age 10, approximately 81% of American girls were afraid of being fat. To attain the thin body ideal, approximately 40–60% of US high school girls are on diets.

However, there are differences among ethnic groups within the United States. On average, African Americans are more accepting as a group of a range of female body shapes and sizes, whereas European Americans tend to highly value female thinness. Recent research, however, has found body dissatisfaction, weight dissatisfaction, perceived overweight, low body pride, and disordered eating in all ethnic groups in the United States.

Body image is a central concern among many adolescent girls in the United States, and a basis for self-evaluation as well as evaluation by others. During puberty, rapid physical maturation occurs, including hormonal and physical changes. For girls, body fat increases which is incompatible with cultural standards of beauty (i.e., a thin ideal body shape). Dissatisfaction with physical appearance is particularly concerning because physical appearance satisfaction is the most significant predictor of global self-esteem among adolescents. Therefore, dissatisfaction with appearance has implications for adolescents' overall psychological adjustment, and this is especially true for girls.

Body Image Concerns Among Boys

The cultural ideal for body shape among males in many Western cultures is the athletic, V-shaped body including well-developed pectoral muscles, arms, and shoulders, and a narrow waist. Body image concerns among boys and men often involve gaining more muscle mass in pursuit of the athletic ideal body shape. Weight is also a concern for many males, especially boys who enter puberty late and perceive themselves as being underweight. One American study of teen boys found that about 40% were dissatisfied with their weight and about a third of boys were dissatisfied with their body shape. Further, almost one-third of the normal-weight boys in the study were dissatisfied with their weight, and more than two-thirds of those thought they were underweight. These boys wanted a bigger chest and arms and a smaller stomach. Some boys take anabolic steroids in pursuit of the muscular ideal body shape. In the United States, it is estimated that this occurs among 3–11% of teenage boys. The potential risks of steroid use include serious medical conditions (e.g., cardiac and neuroendocrine problems) and psychological effects (e.g., mood disorders, aggression).

Just as among girls and women, body fat is not a desired body characteristic among boys and men. Yet, the desire to be thin is more pronounced among females as a group than males with notable exceptions. Several sports involve weight restrictions including gymnastics, running, body-building, rowing, swimming, dancing, and being a jockey. Males and females involved in these sports are at heightened risk for eating disorders, although their weight loss behaviors may be tied to a desire for athletic success rather than the mental health problems associated with eating disorders.

Body Image and Popular Media

For both females and males, media constitute an important source of information about physical attractiveness. Societal factors strongly influence the development and maintenance of body image through the construction of an

appearance-oriented culture that values and displays cultural ideals of beauty and body shape. Media images play a key role in shaping and reinforcing societal standards of beauty. They influence individuals' beliefs about ideal body shapes and their assessment of whether their own bodies match the ideal.

Magazines targeted at girls and women heavily emphasize which female bodies are valued and considered sexually attractive. There is a strong message in these magazines that women's bodies should be very slender, and if girls and women do not match this ideal then they should work to achieve it through dieting and fitness routines. Indeed, these magazines contain high volumes of advertisements and articles promoting weight loss. Even girls who are infrequent readers of magazines report that the media affect their concept of the ideal body shape. Media images of men are more lean and muscular today than ever before, and the frequency of seeing men without their shirts on in media seems to be on the rise. Boys and men tend to report more body dissatisfaction after viewing muscular media images of men if they compare themselves to these images.

Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are associated with a negative body image. In the United States, as many as ten million females and one million males struggle with an eating disorder such as anorexia or bulimia; 90% of these individuals are adolescent girls and young women between the ages of 12 and 25. Anorexia is characterized by self-starvation and excessive weight loss. Bulimia involves a cycle of binge eating and compensatory behaviors to undo the effects of eating (e.g., self-induced vomiting). Millions more struggle with binge eating disorder (or compulsive overeating), which involves uncontrolled, impulsive, or continuous eating beyond the point of feeling comfortably full without purging behaviors. People with an eating disorder typically become obsessed with food, body image, and weight. Eating disorders can become chronic and sometimes even life threatening, but they are treatable problems, especially when intervention occurs early on.

Adolescence may be an especially vulnerable period for the development of anorexia among girls. Indeed, the majority of individuals who suffer from anorexia are female. Narrow standards for female beauty that stress a thin-ideal body shape contribute to this problem. While the number of individuals who meet the full clinical standard for anorexia is somewhat modest (~1 in 200 American adolescents), researchers estimate that 40% of newly identified cases of anorexia in the United States are among girls 15–19 years old. Of particular concern is the high mortality rate associated with anorexia, which is higher than any other mental illness. About 10% of teens with anorexia are boys. Boys, however, are less likely to be diagnosed and treated for an eating disorder perhaps because of the stereotype that eating disorders are a female problem. Far more common than full-blown eating disorders are disordered eating practices in which both girls and boys engage. More than one-half of teenage girls and nearly one-third of teenage boys use unhealthy weight control behaviors such as skipping meals, fasting, smoking cigarettes, vomiting, and taking laxatives.

According to the US National Eating Disorders Association, a number of factors can contribute to eating disorders.

Psychological factors include low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy or lack of control in life, depression, anxiety, anger, or loneliness. Interpersonal factors consist of troubled family and personal relationships, difficulty expressing emotions and feelings, a history of experiencing weight-based teasing, or a history of physical or sexual abuse. Social factors include cultural pressures that value thinness and having a 'perfect body,' narrow definitions of beauty that include only women and men of specific body weights and shapes, and cultural norms that value people on the basis of physical appearance and not other qualities. Other factors that can contribute to eating disorders include possible biochemical or biological causes and genetics (i.e., there is some evidence that eating disorders run in families).

Sexuality and Sexual Orientation

Sexual Scripts

Dating and sexual relationships typically begin and increase during adolescence. Girls and boys in the United States have traditionally learned different sexual scripts, which are cognitive frameworks for understanding how sexual experiences should occur. Benevolent sexist attitudes (i.e., the view that women need men's protection) often emerge as adolescents turn to traditional dating scripts. Because many girls internalize traditional gender attitudes, they often endorse benevolent sexism. In general, both girls and boys expect the boy to be the initiator of the sexual behavior, whereas the girl is supposed to set limits on how far the sexual encounter should go. Girls are often taught to recognize and restrict boys' sexual desire, but not taught to recognize or appreciate their own sexual feelings. Whereas boys gain status among their peers for being sexually active and 'scoring,' girls run the risk of being ostracized for the same behavior and labeled a 'slut,' reflecting a double standard in attitudes toward sexual behavior. This double standard is common worldwide.

Sexual Behavior Among Heterosexual Youth

Whereas all adolescents experience similar biological changes in reaching sexual maturity, beliefs about adolescent sexuality vary across cultures and communities within particular societies. Restrictive cultures, including a number of Arab countries, strongly prohibit sexual activity before marriage. To discourage such a possibility, boys and girls are often segregated in schools and other social domains. Strong social norms, and sometimes the threat of physical punishment and public shaming, severely limit girls' and boys' contact with each other. Girls, in particular, may be harshly sanctioned for premarital sexual activity in restrictive cultures. Their virginity is considered a matter of family honor and they risk physical violence and even death for violating this social norm. Boys' virginity is also valued in restrictive cultures, but they are far less likely to be punished for premarital sexual activity. In direct contrast, permissive cultures encourage and expect adolescent sexual activity. The people of the Trobriand Islands in the South Pacific were classified as permissive by anthropologists studying them in the 1950s. More recently, researchers have found that many formerly permissive cultures have become

less permissive with globalization and religious missionary work. Semirestrictive cultures, like the majority culture in the United States, have prohibitions on premarital adolescent sexual activity, but they do not tend to enforce them.

During adolescence, many youth in permissive and semirestrictive cultures engage in sexual activities for the first time. These may include kissing, touching genitals, sexual intercourse, oral sex, and anal sex. The average age of first intercourse for American youth is 16.9 years for boys and 17.4 years for girls. According to a nationally representative survey of ninth through twelfth grade students in public and private schools in the United States, the percentage of high school students who reported ever engaging in sexual intercourse has steadily declined over the last two decades from 54% in 1991 to 46% in 2009. Rates of reported sexual intercourse were similar for girls and boys. Although 46% of youth reported ever having had sexual intercourse within the past year in 2009, only 34.2% reported having had sex in the prior 3 months. Thus, incidences of sexual intercourse appear to be sporadic. Also, the incidence of sexual intercourse varies across different ethnic groups and communities. For example, on average, African American youth begin having sex at 15.8 years, followed by European Americans at 16.6 years, Hispanics at 17.0 years, and Asian Americans at 18.1 years.

Sexual Minorities

As tolerance for sexual minorities has increased in many Western cultures, adolescence has become a safer period of 'coming out' for many lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) youth. Coming out involves recognizing one's same-sex attractions and disclosing one's sexual identity to family members, friends, and others. This process can be difficult and painful for youth if they confront homophobia (fear or antipathy toward sexual minorities) and heterosexism (prejudice and discrimination against sexual minorities). As a result, many sexual-minority youth can feel extremely isolated from their family members and heterosexual peers. Also, they may defer exploring and expressing their sexual identity until early adulthood.

Sexual identity trajectories appear to differ for sexual-minority girls and boys. In addition, there is a great deal of diversity in the pathways to sexual-minority identification among sexual-minority youth of different socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, and historical cohorts. Research with US youth has found that sexual-minority boys resemble heterosexual boys in the timing of their first sexual behaviors, which tends to be soon after the onset of puberty. In contrast, sexual-minority girls engage in same-sex sexual behaviors later than boys do. One study found that sexual-minority girls' first sexual behaviors were more likely to occur in a romantic relationship as compared to sexual-minority boys. In the same study, sexual-minority males were more likely to pursue same-sex sexual contact before labeling themselves as nonheterosexual. The opposite pattern was found among sexual-minority females who were more likely to label themselves nonheterosexual before pursuing same-sex sexual contact.

The mental health of LGBT youth has been a concern among psychologists because of heightened rates of depression and suicidal ideation in these youth. A recent study found that

experience with heterosexism was associated with increased rates of symptoms of depression among LGTB boys and girls as well as increased risk of self-harm and suicidal ideation among LGTB males. Thus, peer rejection based on rigid adherence to traditional gender-role beliefs – rather than sexual orientation per se – appears to account for higher rates of emotional distress among sexual-minority youth. Accordingly, some school-based interventions have been successful when they targeted homophobic social norms.

Friendship Intimacy

Affiliation and assertion are two interpersonal goals that underlie social behavior. Affiliation refers to the need to connect with others, whereas assertion refers to the need to exert control and influence over others. Although individuals may favor one goal over the other, affiliation and assertion are not mutually exclusive. Collaboration refers to the joint pursuit of affiliative and assertive goals as seen, for example, when individuals cooperatively build on one another's discussion topic or activity. Average gender differences in affiliative and assertive goals are seen during childhood and adolescence. Girls are more likely than boys to value affiliative goals or a combination of affiliation and assertion. In contrast, boys are more likely than girls to pursue power-assertive goals (i.e., emphasizing assertion while downplaying affiliation).

Affiliative and assertive goals are important factors when considering the development of intimacy during adolescence. The emphasis on power-assertion associated with traditional masculinity norms can impair the development of intimacy in many boys' relationships. By focusing on being dominant and appearing tough, many boys become unwilling to express vulnerable feelings or express affection with same-gender friends. Traditional masculinity norms are also associated with homophobic attitudes that can further impair boys' intimacy because boys learn to suppress their emotions to avoid being labeled gay. In contrast, girls are more likely than boys to offer personal disclosures to friends and parents. Also, females are more likely than males to be recipients of self-disclosure from both girls and boys. That is, adolescents are more likely to disclose to female friends or mothers than to male friends or fathers, respectively.

Research in the United States, Canada, Europe, and similar societies suggests that there may be more variability in the expression of intimacy among boys than girls in same-gender friendships. In most girls' friendships, self-disclosure appears to be the primary pathway toward emotional closeness. Shared disclosure is also a pathway toward emotional closeness in the friendships of many boys. But for other boys, shared activities (e.g., playing sports) appear to be an alternative pathway to friendship closeness.

Self-disclosure is generally associated with positive socioemotional adjustment and relationships satisfaction in friendships and romantic relationships. However, recent research has highlighted how excessive disclosure in friendships can lead to negative outcomes. Corumination occurs when two friends repeatedly dwell on personal problems together. This process may lead to anxiety and depression in adolescents (perhaps especially among girls more than boys).

Aggression and Violence

Direct and Indirect Aggression

Gender-related variations in various forms of aggressive behavior occur during adolescence. Researchers distinguish between direct and indirect forms of aggression. Direct aggression refers to overt and face-to-face aggression including physical aggression (e.g., hitting, shoving) and verbal aggression (e.g., insults). On average, both physical aggression and verbal aggression are more common among boys than girls during adolescence. Furthermore, cross-cultural research indicates a general pattern for greater physical aggression among males than females, but the magnitude of the difference varies across cultures.

Indirect aggression (also known as relational or social aggression) refers to behaviors such as spreading negative gossip and social exclusion. Contrary to earlier proposals that indirect aggression is more common among girls than boys during adolescence, the research evidence indicates no meaningful gender difference. However, there is an average difference inasmuch that girls' use of aggression is primarily limited to indirect forms, whereas boys' use of aggression is more likely to involve both direct and indirect forms.

Sexual Harassment

During adolescence, many direct and indirect aggressive behaviors may be forms of sexual harassment. Physical sexual harassment includes unwanted touching or sexual coercion. Verbal sexual harassment occurs through the expression of demeaning, homophobic, or unwanted comments with sexual themes. These comments might be made directly to the person or indirectly through negative gossip.

Survey studies in the United States and Canada indicate that most adolescents experience or instigate sexual harassment. According to recent surveys, overall rates of reported sexual harassment are similar for girls and boys; however, girls are more likely than boys to report feeling distressed by these experiences. There are average gender differences in reported incidences of particular forms of sexual harassment. For example, homophobic comments are directed more to boys than girls, whereas unwanted touching is more common for girls than boys. Both girls and boys are more likely to identify cross-gender than same-gender peers as perpetrators of sexual harassment; however, boys are more likely than girls to experience same-gender sexual harassment. Furthermore, sexual-minority youth are especially at risk for sexual harassment.

Romantic relationships are another relationship context in which aggressive behavior can occur. Studies in the United States and other Western cultures find that boys as well as girls may instigate aggression in dating relationships, although it is more common among boys than girls. According to some estimates from studies in the United States, approximately 25% of adolescent dating relationships experience some form of psychological or physical abuse. However, there are variations across communities within the United States in rates of dating violence. Furthermore, cross-cultural research indicates that rates of sexual harassment and sexual violence are inversely related to the degree of gender equality in the society.

Repeated sexual harassment and dating violence can be very stressful for youth and it is associated with adjustment

problems. Possible consequences in girls and boys include increases in emotional distress, suicidal thoughts, substance abuse, externalizing behaviors, and disengagement from school and other activities. In addition, among girls, sexual harassment may lead to negative body image and self-harm. Furthermore, abusive dating experiences may lead some girls to expect demeaning behaviors as normal in heterosexual relationships; and these girls may be at risk for dysfunctional and abusive relationships later in adulthood.

Summary

Gender is an important social category that affects adolescents' lives in multiple ways. Gender identities and gender schemas shape the kinds of ideas and behaviors that adolescents may consider appropriate for themselves and others. Stereotyped beliefs may lead to sexism, including prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory behaviors. Gender-related variations during adolescence occur in academic achievement, athletic participation, sexuality, body image, dating relationships, friendship intimacy, and aggression. Many aspects of gender development are shaped by the kinds of roles allocated to women and men in society.

With increased gender equality, opportunities have broadened for girls in many Western societies. For example, girls' participation in athletics and achievement in math and science have dramatically increased. However, there are some areas, such as body image, where things have become worse in recent decades. These contradictions reflect the complicated set of factors that shape gender development. For example, whereas parents and schools may be doing a good job getting girls to participate in sports, the media is simultaneously bombarding them with unrealistic and hypersexualized ideals of beauty.

Finally, it is worth noting that there has been relatively slower gender-role change among adolescent boys than girls in recent decades. This is partly due to higher status associated with masculine-stereotyped attributes and activities than with

feminine-stereotyped attributes and activities. For example, girls' participation in sports can increase their self-esteem and confidence in competitive settings; also sports are a highly valued activity in our culture. Similarly, doing well in math and science allows girls a wider range of occupational options, including many high-paying and prestigious positions in technology fields. Conversely, boys' demonstration of feminine-stereotyped attributes, such as emotional disclosure, or their pursuit of feminine-stereotyped roles, such as helping with childcare, are often viewed as diminishing their status in the eyes of their peers and family. Whereas gender-role change may be slower among boys than girls, it is occurring. Men are increasingly sharing childcare responsibilities at home. As this occurs, boys are being increasingly exposed to models that may affect how they conceptualize their own gender role.

See also: Academic Achievement; Achievement Motivation; Body Image during Adolescence: A Developmental Perspective; Bully/Victim Problems during Adolescence; Eating Disorders; Gender Roles; Media, Influence of; Peer Influence; Peer Relations; Puberty and Adolescence: An Evolutionary Perspective; Romantic Relationships; Sexual Orientation; Sexuality; Sport Participation.

Further Reading

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