

## **Developmental differences in attitudes towards women's roles in Australian Society: Critical periods for Afeminist@ socialisation.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Gender role attitudes of adolescent girls have not been widely studied, nor have the mechanisms by which attitudes towards women's roles develop. The present study focussed on adolescent girls' gender role attitudes. Specifically it focussed on developmental differences in gender role attitudes of adolescent girls (n=642). The results indicated that Year 9 girls had significantly more positive attitudes towards feminism than Year 11 girls. These findings have important implications for girls' career development. Results suggest that there is a critical period between Years 9 and 11 which accounts for girls' increased conservatism towards feminism. The integral involvement of socialisation processes is necessarily implicated in this critical period.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Group identification has been strongly associated with an individual's level of group consciousness (Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994). Tajfel (1978; 1982) specified that the two important components of group identification were the *awareness* of one's group membership and the *evaluative* stance towards one's membership in that group. Given that sex is biologically determined (Quadrio, 1994) females' identification as female in terms of awareness should be unproblematic. However, the evaluative component of identification with female is more complex and possibly relates more to gender, which is socially and historically constructed (Quadrio, 1994).

The aim of this study is to examine the evaluative aspect of females' identification with their group by examining their attitudes to aspects of the feminist movement. Specifically, the focus examines adolescent females' attitudes to women's roles and feminism as these factors represent political consciousness for females as a group. Moreover, attitudes towards women's roles may serve as environmental or intrapersonal antecedents of adolescent females' career planning (Seigner, Karayanni & Mari (1990).

Traditionally female subordination has characterised Western culture throughout recorded history and femaleness has been fashioned in that context. For instance Eve as the derivative of Adam predates Freud (Quadrio, 1994). Moreover, socially and historically, females have defined themselves by their relationships with men. Consequently low levels of group identification as women have been attributed to the high levels of contact and close relationships that females have with men (Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994). Moreover, because a female's social and personal

identity are so enmeshed, females may rely less on group identification (Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994) and prefer to identify themselves at an individual level.

For instance, Heaven (1999) found that in his Australian sample, men had higher levels of social dominance orientation than did the women. Social dominance orientation (SDO) refers to the extent to which individuals wish to maintain or establish their group superiority. In the context of social dominance theory, SDO reflects the status of the group (the higher the SDO, the higher the status of the group), so that Heaven's results reinforce the existing social and group based hierarchy of male superiority in Australia.

Furthermore widespread cultural practices of sexually objectifying women's bodies function to socialise girls to internalise perceptions of others' evaluations of the physical self (Huebner and Fredrickson, 1999). This becomes especially salient in adolescent girls who are often pre-occupied with their physical appearance. The interaction of physical maturation and the evaluations and interactions from significant others is pivotal to the development of adolescent females' self esteem (Lackovic-Grgin, Dekovic & Opacic, 1994). Consequently, for females, evaluations of the self are affected substantially by identification with the female gender. Research has very often reported that adolescent girls' self esteem is lower than that of adolescent boys (Marsh, 1989).

Furthermore, the subordinative role that women occupy in society has resulted in pervasive feelings of inferiority across a number of psychological domains including lower expectancies of performance, underestimation of ability (Beyer & Bowden, 1997; Phillips & Imhoff, 1997), lower self-esteem (Horrihan, Poole & Nielson, 1996) particularly after negative feedback from males (Beyer & Bowden, 1997; Cohen & Swim, 1995), higher levels of negative affect (Sheldon, Ryan & Ries (1997) and greater occupational tedium (Geller & Hobfoll, 1994). Accounts for such feelings of inferiority have been explained by a number of researchers and have focussed on the relational orientation of women (Geller & Hobfoll, 1994; Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994; Quadrio, 1994), the desire (on the part of women) to conform to the stereotype of "femaleness" (Geller & Hobfall, 1994; Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994; Yodel & Schleicher, 1996) and most importantly, the discrimination that occurs when women don't behave in a manner congruent with the female stereotype (Cohen & Swim, 1995; Geller & Hobfall, 1994; Yodel & Schleicher, 1996) which acts as a deterrent for women to transgress boundaries of "femaleness" into "maleness". In fact, research often asserts that gifted or clever females both at the school and work levels underplay their skills so as to conform to the female stereotype. By behaving in a stereotypical fashion, it is perceived that males will evaluate them more favourably.

Despite the fact that women have made extensive inroads to traditionally male oriented professions such as law, medicine and engineering (Cohen & Swim, 1995; Geller & Hobfoll, 1994; Novack & Novack, 1996; Yodel & Schleicher, 1996), controversy exists regarding the actual penetration of women into traditional male dominated occupations. It seems that most women are still occupying service and domestic positions, historically associated with their gender and which offer the lowest wages (Novack & Novack, 1996). This pattern is virtually replicated in the school system, where despite specific interventions to encourage females to participate in traditional "male" subjects such as science, physics and maths, it appears that their selection of subjects and planned career paths are still stereotypically female. What is happening at school then is merely mirroring what occurs within society.

Research indicates that there are gender differences in factors which affect adolescents' subject selections. For instance, Johnston & Mulhern (1997) reported that female subject selection was linked to interest, parental advice and match with personality, while males viewed doing well in a subject and perceived difficulty of the subject as the primary factors affecting their decisions.

Evidence from the workplace and school suggest that women who choose a traditionally male dominated area or subject, do so at a cost to the evaluative component of group identification (i.e. others will negatively evaluate the women's femaleness). Given women's needs for affiliation (Horrigan et al., 1996; Quadrio, 1994) and their other-directedness (Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994; Quadrio, 1994) such prospects are likely to affect females' career choices.

Similarly, negative attributions are made about women who identify themselves as feminists (Griffin, 1989) and this is particularly true for younger women, for whom the label has acquired very negative connotations (Kamen, 1991). Again, such prospects for being negatively evaluated are likely to harness females' enthusiasm for feminist principles, and their willingness to identify with the politicised component of the gender group. Not surprisingly, Scevak and Monfries (1997) found that traditionality of career choice in young girls was negatively associated with attitudes towards feminism. In addition O'Brien and Fassinger's (1993) findings propose that gender role attitudes is one of the factors predicting career choice.

### *Developmental Models of Gender Identification*

Developmental models of gender identification have not generally been researched in the context of female subordination (Quadrio, 1994), nor have the gender roles of adolescents been widely studied (Katz & Ksanskak, 1994). Katz and Ksanskak (1994) investigated the developmental trends in gender-schema flexibility in school children and adolescents and found that gender-schema flexibility increased through middle childhood through to adolescence. Prior to middle childhood, very young children also express more flexibility in gender stereotype acquisition, but this decreases as the gender stereotype is learned (McAninch, Milich, Crumbo & Funtowicz, 1996).

In childhood, favourable evaluations for gender consistent behaviour are similar to adults' evaluations. However, McAninch et al.'s study found that the idea from a "masculine" girl attracted the highest ranking of appraisal for its importance, yet the same girl was also rated the "bossiest" by her female peers. Such findings represent the conflict that adult women face in the work environment where conflicting expectations present an irresolvable dilemma (Geller & Hobfoll, 1994). If women want to retain the approval of people, then they must demonstrate gender stereotypical behaviour such as warmth and expressiveness. Alternatively, if they want to succeed professionally, they must act appropriately according to the male model of professional success (Geller & Hobfoll, 1994).

Generally then, group identification for females is quite a complex process that is complicated primarily by the negative evaluation of others, particularly for gender inconsistent or non-traditional behaviour. Ostensibly this provides a rationale for females not entering male dominated careers as frequently or successfully as they might. Developmentally, it appears that flexibility in evaluating gender inconsistent behaviour is greatest before gender stereotypes have been formed (i.e. at the preschool/ early childhood level) and in adolescence.

The present study examines, whether in the context of a female subordinative culture, females exhibit inhibitions regarding non-traditionality as measured by their attitudes towards the role of women and their attitudes towards feminism. Moreover these views will be examined for their developmental significance and their importance to the politicised or evaluative component of group identification

## METHOD

The data reported in this study are part of the data collected from a larger project examining the career development of adolescent females.

### Participants and Procedure

Participants were 642 adolescent girls enrolled in Year 9 (n=421) and Year 11 (n=221) in co-educational comprehensive high schools. The high schools are located in a metropolitan area in New South Wales, Australia. Participation in the study was voluntary and students were given 1 hour class time to complete the instruments. Upon completion of the surveys, students were invited to express in writing, their views on the survey. The mean age of the Year 9 and Year 11 students was 14.5 years (SD = .51) and 16.5 years (SD = .54) respectively. The students were predominantly white (99.9%) and came from a range of SES backgrounds.

### Instruments

#### *Gender Role Attitudes*

The first measure used to assess gender role attitudes was *Attitude Towards Women's Roles* (O'Brien & Fassinger, 1993). This scale consisted of 20 items and assessed attitudes toward women's vocational, intellectual, and educational roles in society, as well as attitudes toward independence, marital relationships, and obligations. Item responses were obtained and summed on a 4 point Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting more liberal attitudes toward women (maximum score = 80).

The second indicator was the *Attitudes Toward Feminism and the Women's Movement Scale* (O'Brien & Fassinger, 1993) that assessed the participant's beliefs regarding the feminist movement. Participants indicated their level of agreement with 10 items on a 4-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicated more positive attitudes toward feminism.

## RESULTS

Two One-way ANOVAS were conducted on the data for year 9 and year 11 students to examine differences in:

- a) Attitudes Towards Feminism and
- b) Attitudes towards Women's roles.

No significant differences occurred between the two groups for Attitudes Towards Women's Roles. However, Year 9 girls significantly differed from their year 11 counterparts ( $F_{2, 680}=6.56$ ;  $p<.001$ ) indicating that Year 9 girls were more pro-feminist than the older female group. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for each of the two groups.

In light of the above significant differences it was interesting to note some of the comments made by the participants in the study. Girls who wished to express an opinion on any aspect of the study wrote the comments. These responses were entirely voluntary and represented 72 of year 9 girls' and 65 year 11 girls' responses.

**Table 1: Means and standard deviations for Attitudes towards women's roles and Attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement.**

|  | M     | SD   |
|--|-------|------|
| Attitudes towards women's roles                        |       |      |
| Year 9   | 50.13 | 4.51 |
| Year 11  | 49.76 | 3.71 |
| Attitudes towards feminism and<br>the women's movement |       |      |
| Year 9   | 25.78 | 3.60 |
| Year 11  | 24.87 | 3.22 |

Generally, the year 9 girls expressed a more positive response to the study than the year 11 girls did. Comments such as *This gave me the opportunity to appropriately express my views without ridicule* and *This was good so that women can express their feelings* from two year 9 girls demonstrate acknowledgment that the expression of a politicised view can attract negative evaluations from others.

Responses from two year 11 girls reflect a more complex appraisal of the study:

*I think this is good doing a survey on women's career choices. It needed to be done. I think a lot of us are influenced by a lot of things these days and a lot is expected of us*

*I am happy that somebody is now interested in the point of views that Australia's future women hold. This survey was a good thing for us and it shows us that we are not mean just because we want to further our education and careers. It gives me hope that I can do what I want in life rather than doing what people expect of me*

Both these statements acknowledge the multiplicity of females' roles in society and both emphasise the impact of others' views on being noticed and making decisions.

The perceived lack of male inclusion in the study was a focus for some Year 11 girls. For instance a couple of girls were concerned that the surveys were "sexist" and other girls suggested that the views of males should also be elicited:

*....perhaps views from males would also be needed and valuable."*

*It was alright. Maybe boys could do a similar survey to see how they feel*

*It was too "for women". Men are still our equals, we are no better no less than men. I felt that like however I answered I would be putting down one of the sexes. I couldn't seem to answer with my belief that we are full equals. I'm not a feminist but I do believe in women's rights.*

*The survey was too feminist and pushed the point a little too much*

.None of the Year 9 girls commented on including males and some expressed unqualified support for the Women's Movement:

*I think it is great that they are surveying younger women to find out our views of women's rights so maybe we can aim higher in the workforce*

Year 11 responses were at times more pessimistic:

*Women should be treated as equals, but this desire for acception (sic) won't ever be completely true because of the males and their opinions and those women who still believe that a woman's place is in the kitchen.*

In summary then, it appears that Year 9 girls demonstrate a commitment to their identification with women as a group, both in the awareness and evaluative components. However, the Year 11 girls' responses demonstrate awareness identification, but they are less likely to identify with the evaluative aspects of female identification.

## DISCUSSION

The present study sought to examine adolescent females' attitudes towards women's roles and their attitudes towards feminism to ascertain developmental differences in terms of group identification processes. The quantitative analyses of these data showed that there were no significant differences among Year 9 and Year 11 students in their attitudes towards women's roles. However, Year 9 girls demonstrated significantly more favourable attitudes towards feminism than Year 11 students.

Of interest is that these two groups of Australian females exhibited more conservative views towards women's roles and feminism than O'Brien and Fassinger (1993) reported for a group of 17 year old American females. The latter finding could be culturally significant. Australian girls may be more traditional in their attitudes towards females' roles in society than American girls. Alternatively, the Australian adolescent girls' more traditional attitudes may be a result of a lower socio-economic background. The schools used in this study were all public schools, located in a low socio-economic area. Adolescent females in O'Brien and Fassinger's (1993) study were from an all female private Catholic liberal arts high school, who intended to attend university. Seginer et al. (1990) also found that cultural and socio-economic factors affected adolescent females' attitudes towards women's roles. Jewish adolescent females were more liberal in their attitudes towards women's roles than were Arab adolescent females and these differences were accentuated by the lower socio-economic circumstances of the Arab participants. Of interest is that the males in their study had less liberal attitudes than females, but Jewish males were more liberal than Arab males. Female subordination has been linked with the identification of traditional views towards women's roles (Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994). From our study and others, the female's subordinate role seems to be cross-culturally apparent.

Voluntary written responses from the Year 9 and Year 11 girls gave some insight into how the developmental differences in attitudes towards feminism might be articulated. However, the relatively small sample of girls who chose to respond tempers interpretations. The responses from the participants indicated that Year 9 girls were generally more positive about their participation in the study and were more supportive of feminist ideals than were Year 11 girls

In addition, a substantial proportion of Year 9 and Year 11 girls felt that participating in the study made them more intrapsychically and interpersonally aware. Similarly, participants in the O'Brien

& Fassinger (1993) study reported positive reactions to the study and reported the facilitation of psychological introspection. It appears then, that when females are asked for their views on issues that tap gender schema, it encourages them to examine in greater depth their values and attitudes (i.e. activates their gender specific schema) which makes them enjoy participating in such a study and encourages metacognitive evaluations of self-schema. It would be interesting to assess whether males report the same beneficial effects. This may indicate whether females are responding to gender specific attention that they perceive to be lacking in their culture.

Year 11 girls expressed concern for the exclusion of their male peers, while Year 9 girls did not. Clearly, the developmental significance of these findings is that opposite sex social relationships may negatively impact on the flexibility of gender schema. These results seemingly contrast with McAninch et al. (1996) who proposed that the flexibility of gender schema increased from middle childhood to adolescence.

An alternative explanation is that Year 11 girls are in a transitional developmental phase, where they are moving from adolescence into adulthood. According to Erikson (1968) these two stages present two types of conflict: identity versus identity confusion and intimacy versus isolation. Therefore it could be that not only are young females trying to work out who they are (a large part of which is female), but they are also beginning to seek intimacy as a long-term prospect (and this is predominantly envisaged with males). Consequently, Year 11 corresponds to the beginning of male-oriented/ other directedness that is associated with the formation of the evaluative aspect of group identification processes. In other words, when women begin to define themselves in their relationships with men, and when their relationships with men take on central importance (c.f. Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994; Quadrio, 1994), they are more likely to conform to their gender stereotype.

Moreover, it is possible that the developmental differences in responses are due to the increased cognitive sophistication of Year 11 girls in comparison to the Year 9 girls (according to Piagetian Developmental Theory). It may be that Year 9 girls' responses can be explained by a more simplified cognitive structure.

Nevertheless, these findings have a number of implications of educational significance for Australian females. Firstly, females need to know more about the Women's Movement, so that they can make a considered response to its aims and tenets. Secondly, these results have ramifications for determining the traditionality of female career selection.

Females continue to show high self-efficacy for female dominated pursuits than less traditional activities (Matsui, 1994), and Phillips and Imhoff (1997) report that female students still appear to be choosing traditional career paths. This is despite the inroads that females have made into non-traditional careers (Cohen & Swim, 1995; Geller & Hobfoll, 1994; Novack & Novack, 1996; Phillips & Imhoff, 1997; Yodel & Schleicher, 1996).

The establishment of a Gender Equity Task Force for Australian schools in 1994, whose purpose was to address the differential outcomes for boys' and girls' education (Gender Equity Taskforce for the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training & Youth Affairs, 1997) and rectify inequities, may need to examine ways in which students' gender schema can be expanded - an area which falls under one of the five stated strategic directions for action (i.e. Understanding the process of construction of gender) (Gender Equity Taskforce for the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training & Youth Affairs, 1997).

Our study seemed to reinforce that young girls from Year 11 on did not identify with the evaluative and politicised component of gender, but that at the Year 9 level, gender role flexibility

was greater. These findings were consistent with research that found females were reticent to identify with politicised elements of their gender for fear of negative evaluations from others (Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994). In turn, these fears are representative of females' other-directedness and male orientation (cf Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994; Phillips & Imhoff, 1997; Quadrio, 1994) which weaken the process of gender identification and reinforce a female subordinative role.

Consequently the Gender Equity Task Force might consider Year 9 as a pivotal time where intervention strategies may best be implemented. The role of teachers in intervention programmes is also critical. Shaman (1977), for example, demonstrated that a programme aimed at reducing gender stereotypes for elementary school teachers produced higher aspirations among male and female pupils. Of interest is that the developmental significance of these findings (i.e. that elementary children were involved) seems to have been underestimated.

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