The Relation of Ego Development to Sex-Stereotyped Expectations for Adolescents

Susan Frank, Janet Athey, Susan Coulston, and Mary Parsons

Received November 19, 1982

The investigators tested the hypothesis that the direction of the relationship between the level of ego development of adult caretakers and the degree of sex-stereotyping in their expectations for adolescents would vary as a function of the adolescents’ level of ego maturity. Two groups of caretakers (counselors of an “immature group” of disturbed adolescents and parents of a “mature group” of undergraduates) participated in the study. In comparison to their conformist counterparts, the postconformist counselors were expected to make more sex-stereotyped goals for the disturbed adolescents; postconformist parents were expected to make less sex-stereotyped goals for the undergraduates. Hypotheses were confirmed for the counselors, but not for the parents. Both groups of caretakers seemed to consider developmental or life task factors in formulating goals for adolescents.
INTRODUCTION

The role of socialization experiences in determining sex differences is well documented. Children are "exhorted to accomplish goals formulated for them by adults" (Baumrind, 1980); and, at an early age, they discover that caretakers expect different behaviors from males and females (Fauls and Smith, 1956; Serbin and O'Leary, 1975). Nonetheless, a clear bifurcation in sex-role behaviors does not occur until the teenage years. Correspondingly, parental pressures for sons to be more "masculine" (i.e., assertive, dominant, and achievement oriented) and daughters to be more "feminine" (i.e., sociable, submissive, and nurturant) greatly increase as children approach adolescence—and these expectations are reinforced by teachers, counselors, and peers (Baumrind, 1980; Schaffer, 1980).

Psychologists previously viewed the consolidation of a traditional sex-role identity as a major developmental task for adolescents, and as a precursor of psychological adjustment in the adult years to follow (Mussen, 1969). But more recent evidence suggests that "androgynous" adolescents (i.e., those who combine both masculine and feminine traits) may experience greater psychological well-being than their sex-typed college or high school peers (Heilbrun, 1976; Spence et al., 1975; Wells, 1980). At the same time, researchers continue to find that the average adult caretaker endorses more traditional views. For example, mothers and fathers still ascribe to and model traditional familial roles (Baumrind, 1980), and high school students generally report that their parents encourage "gender-appropriate" role behaviors (Spence and Helmreich, 1978; J. Block et al., 1973). Moreover, high school or college counselors not only discourage female students from pursuing career goals that deviate from traditional sex-role norms but also are likely to regard such goals as symptoms of underlying psychopathology (Schlossberg and Pietrofesa, 1973; Thomas and Stewart, 1971).

Social scientists have cited these research findings as evidence of the need for programs to make parents, educators, and mental health workers more aware of their "biases" and more willing to engage in "non-sexist" or "androgynous" socialization practices (Schaffer, 1980). But others suggest that the issue requires more careful consideration (Maides, 1979). Blanket prescriptions for socialization practices that encourage children (irrespective of age) to be androgynous ignore evidence that androgyny emerges from a developmental process and requires a higher degree of personal maturity (J. H. Block, 1973). Little is known of what adult caretakers consider in formulating goals and expectations for children and adolescents, and to what extent they perceive age and maturity as important considerations.

In the present research, we used a developmental framework to consider ways in which the caretaker's and the adolescent's personality...