Gender Patterns of Psychosocial Development

N. Giesbrecht

Data for 134 female and 135 male Caucasian Protestant college students was used to develop a path model of psychosocial development. For both genders, identity encompassed both personal competence and social connection and intimate relationships served as a bridge between the private and social self. Among men, perspective-taking was a primary motivation for generative involvement whereas among women empathic concern motivated generative involvement which in turn enhanced personal self-worth. Among women, perspective-taking was an outcome of social identity and among men empathic concern followed perspective-taking. The homogeneity of the conservative religious sample restricted the range of moral/faith responses resulting in non-significant associations with moral judgement and faith reasoning.

Developmental theorists have tended to focus their attention almost exclusively on one particular aspect of human maturation, such as psychosocial, ego, social, or moral development. This lack of theoretical concordance across domains has created conceptual and empirical difficulties in our understanding of adult developmental processes (Archer, 1989). In an attempt to address this deficiency, this study explored a gender-sensitive theoretical model that incorporated Erikson’s psychosocial stages of identity, intimacy, and generativity, Kohlberg’s moral reasoning stages, Selman’s concept of perspective-taking, Hoffman’s concept of empathy, and Fowler’s stages of faith-reasoning. The model was evaluated using structural equation modeling techniques with data from a sample of 134 female and 135 male Caucasian conservative Protestant college students.

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2To whom correspondence should be addressed at 210 Jackson Place, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T3B 2V3, email: ndgiesbr@acs.ucalgary.ca
Feminist and self-in-relation theories (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987) have argued that psychosocial development and moral reflection are influenced by gender identity and socialization. Worrel (1981) suggests that “the label of male or female provides a structure around which behavioral expectancies, role prescriptions, and life opportunities are organized” (p. 313). These labels thus influence how women and men respond to psychosocial developmental challenges and resolve moral dilemmas (Gilligan, 1982).

Erikson (1966) proposed that human development proceeds through eight psychosocial stages with each stage distinguished by a specific issue, namely: trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, identity consolidation vs. identity diffusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. self-absorption, and integrity vs. despair. The psychosocial challenges of identity consolidation, interpersonal intimacy, and generative care are paramount during the period from adolescence to late middle-age. These issues follow a developmental progression whereby identity consolidation serves as a prerequisite to intimate interpersonal commitment which in turn fosters generative concern for the broader social community. Gilligan (1979) argues that gender also influences this developmental trajectory such that “while for men, identity precedes intimacy and generativity . . . for women . . . intimacy precedes, or rather goes along with, identity, as the female comes to know herself as she is known through her relationships with others” (p. 437). For both genders, psychosocial development reflects an expanding horizon of social concern and “the strengths which potentially emerge from each developmental crisis in life can also be seen to serve the evolution of a truly ethical sense” (Erikson, 1975, p. 263). The period of early adulthood thus reflects a period in which the psychosocial issues of identity, intimacy, and generativity are addressed and an ethical identity is developed.

Kohlberg (1964, 1973, 1976) has developed a Piagetian-based model of ethical development based on the view that moral reasoning entails the universal and objective application of principles of justice. Kohlberg believes that justice-based moral reasoning is an outcome of perspective-taking abilities developed in social interaction. Fowler (1976) argues that religious faith also influences moral reasoning and that every moral perspective is “anchored in a broader system of belief and loyalties . . . (so that there is) always a faith framework encompassing and supporting the motive to be moral and the exercise of moral logic” (p. 209). Both Fowler and Kohlberg recognize a relationship between morality and faith, but Kohlberg views moral judgement as a necessary but insufficient condition for religious reasoning (Power & Kohlberg, 1980) whereas Fowler (1981) views that faith encompasses moral reasoning. Since Christian theology pro-