Sex Role Development as a Function of Parent Models and Oedipal Fixation

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ABSTRACT. Sex role development is analyzed from the psychoanalytic and social learning perspectives. The process according to Freudian theory is seen as deriving from an internalization of characteristics of the same-sex parent, coupled with an effort to contrast oneself from the opposite-sex parent. These dynamics for sex-role differentiation are prominent mainly during the oedipal phase and are effected through the mechanism of identification. Social learning theory posits that modeling parents' behavior is the primary source of sex role development. This study investigated the correlations between sex role and the hypothesized precursors of parents' sex roles and oedipal fixation by asking 49 men and 81 women, who had taken the Rorschach, to complete the Bem Sex Role Inventory and also to use the inventory to describe their fathers and mothers. The Rorschachs were then content scored for psychosexual fixation areas. Results confirmed the psychoanalytic contingency of sex role and oedipal fixation for women only, while the modeling hypothesis linking sex role to parents' characteristics was confirmed for men and women.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF GENDER IDENTITY AND SEX ROLE has been examined from a variety of perspectives. In a comprehensive review of the literature, O'Connell (1979) contrasts Freudian and modeling theories, both of which stress the importance of parental and family influence, yet yield different formulations for sex role development. According to Freudian theory, the development of gender takes place in a predetermined manner by means of a series of stages: oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital. Each stage is characterized by

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a concentration of libidinal (sexual) energy in a specific body zone. The psychosexual development of females and males, while similar during the first two stages, diverges during the third or phallic stage (Freud, 1924/1961; 1933/1964; 1934/1961). The child enters this stage of gender identity between the ages of 3 and 5, when libidinal energy focuses on the genitals.

The Freudian sequence of sex role development is as follows: Boys begin with a desire for mother which results in fear of father’s retaliation and is resolved by identification with father (identification with the aggressor); girls begin with a desire for father which results in fear of loss of mother’s love and is resolved by identification with mother (anaclitic identification). Fixation at this stage (resulting from undue anxiety during the period) may be expected to exacerbate the conflict and intensify such identification. The view according to social learning theory, by contrast, is that attachment forms early to the same-sex parent as a major rewarder, resulting in identification through modeling of behavior.

The differential implications of these two perspectives become clear when they are charted in the context of personality theory. In a metatheoretical analysis of personality, Maddi (1980) offers a delineation between two distinct spheres: the core personality refers to inherent attributes of human beings which do not change much in the course of living and exert an extensive pervasive influence on behavior; the periphery personality centers on learned attributes which have circumscribed influences on behavior. It is the initial expressions of core tendencies in interactions with family and social institutions that result in experiences such as reward, punishment, and knowledge which congeal into peripheral characteristics. Imposing this model onto the Freudian and social learning perspectives, we find that, although both provide contingencies linking the child’s traits to the parents’, the spheres of the process are not congruent. The overt sex-role behavior of the parent or the child is definitely within the realm of periphery, while the intrapsychic oedipal development of the child is within the core. In the Freudian system, there is a direct causal link between the parents’ (peripheral) sex role behavior and the child’s (core) oedipal development, while oedipal development in the child translates itself into future (peripheral) behavior only via environmental interaction in the process of maturation. Social learning theory, by contrast, posits a direct linkage between the same-sex parent’s (peripheral) sex role and that of the child’s ultimate sex role via behavioral modeling, and no intermediary effect is relegated to the dynamic (core) aspect of personality.

Another clear difference emerges when the two alternate theories are compared. In the modeling theory, each parent provides a stimulus for modeling behavior by the child, and the stimuli presented by the parents are merely additive. The dynamic formulation of identification, on the other hand, results from the triangular competitive oedipal position where the child identifies with the same-sex parent while disidentifying (or contrasting) from the opposite-sex
parent (Greenson, 1968). Thus, dynamic theory stresses the perceived superiority of father and inferiority of mother as prerequisite for the male’s oedipal resolution (Chodorow, 1978) and the juxtaosition of female passivity and father’s active inhibitory activities (Deutsch, 1944) as crucial for the child’s identification with the same-sex parent and contrast from the opposite-sex parent. Modeling theory, however, can well accommodate direct identification with behaviors of both parents. Furthermore, it appears that what is central in the Freudian conceptualization of identification with the aggressor (for the boy) versus anaclitic identification (for the girl) is the parental sex-role difference which represents less the biologic and more the generalized difference in femininity-masculinity as a contrast between aggressiveness and passivity. The latter view is consonant with the delineation of the male sex role for the boy as involving “not being feminine” (Hartley, 1959; Stockard & Johnson, 1979), and with the anthropological data correlating sex identity conflicts with sex role delineation (Whiting, 1965).

While it can be argued that the specific traits which comprise the stereotypical feminine character type are not tautologically antithetical to those of masculinity, it is nonetheless necessary to treat them as contrasts when analyzing the development of gender identity as a gestalt unit. Certainly the stereotype of femininity includes not only the presence of feminine traits but also the absence of masculine traits, while the converse is true for the masculine stereotype. Hence, in operationalizing a measure of gender-consonant role, it is imperative that the traits from both clusters be considered. Specifically, gender-appropriate role can be defined as the magnitude of typical same-sex traits minus the degree of opposite-sex traits.

An instrument which operationalizes the masculinity-femininity contrast to yield a single quantified index of sex role is Bem’s Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1981). Although the instrument produces separate values for masculinity and femininity, the authors suggest that optimal use results from contrasting the two measures. A common strategy in sex-role research has been to avoid a direct computation of the difference between masculinity and femininity—a method originally preferred by Bem—as this approach highlights only the degree of discrepancy between the two opposing sex roles while failing to differentiate between androgynous and undifferentiated individuals, who score high or low on both sex roles respectively (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975). The present study focuses precisely on masculinity and femininity differences while the distinction between androgyny and undifferentiation is moot. The mathematical masculinity-femininity difference score on the Bem scale is thus the proper measure of the concept studied.

Unger and Denmark (1975) chart two psychometric options in measuring a child’s identification with parents. Behavioral similarity is measured by having the child and parent each fill out similar personality tests which are then compared, while perceived similarity is measured by having the child respond twice
to a questionnaire, once as self and once as parent. Although the former approach yields a more objective assessment of similarity, it is clear that the latter method is more congruent with the dynamics of identification since the very measurement process is a function of the child’s identification with his or her subjective image of the parent.

A recent advance in the psychometric approach in measuring psychosexual development involves the use of the lexical method in content scoring of projective protocols. Specifically, Schafer’s (1954) categories have been adapted to yield a concise scoring index for oral, anal, sadistic, and phallic fixation, with the rationale that projective tests tap repressed unresolved, unconscious materials which are derived from fixation in psychosexual development. A host of psychoanalytic hypotheses have been tested using this algorithm, yielding verification of hypotheses about obesity (Masling, Rabie, & Blondheim, 1967; Weiss & Masling, 1970), conformity (Masling, Weiss, & Rothschild, 1968), remembering names of other (Feldman, 1979), interpersonal perception (Juni & Semel, 1982; Masling, Johnson, & Saturansky, 1974; Masling, Schiffer, & Schenfeld, 1980), alcoholism (Bertrand & Masling, 1969), career choice (Juni, 1981a), requesting feedback (Juni, 1981b), interpersonal touching (Juni, Masling, & Brannon, 1979), hurrying to complete assigned tasks (Juni et al., 1979; Masling, O’Neill, & Jayne, 1981), decreased anxiety in the company of others (Masling, Price, Goldband, & Katkin, 1981), perceptual defense (Juni & Frenz, 1981), religiosity (Juni & Fischer, in press), and humor appreciation (Juni, 1982), as well as in elucidating the disgust reaction (Juni, 1984a; Juni & Yanshin). Typological predictions based on either core or peripheral personality constructs are limited in their explanation of variance in behavior because behavior is determined by a combination of various factors rather than resulting from one single source. Thus, in contrast to the direct theoretical contingency of oedipal development on identification with the same-sex parent, the child’s ultimate sex-role behavior is overdetermined by oedipal resolution (in the dynamic sphere) as it translates itself via environmental interaction into adult behavior, and also through modeling the behavior of various others including the same-sex parent and that of other societal figures.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the differential implications of dynamic and modeling theories with respect to sex-role development. The specific hypotheses follow:

1. As a direct consequence of dynamic identification theory, it is expected that oedipal fixation will correlate with the degree of father’s masculinity and mother’s femininity.

2. In accordance with modeling theory, it follows that (a) for the male, masculinity will correlate positively with the degree of masculinity of father and (possibly) negatively with the degree of femininity of mother;
(b) for the female, femininity will correlate positively with the degree of femininity of mother and (possibly) negatively with the degree of masculinity of father.

3. In relating sex-role behavior to dynamic origins, it is reasonable to expect that one’s sex role will correlate with degree of oedipal fixation.

Several qualifications should be made explicit. Hypothesis 3, although based on the translation of the dynamic phallic type into adult roles, is contingent upon the assumption that, following the environmental interactions, the dynamic structure will become manifest in role behavior; it is clear that such a contingency is an abstract formula which occurs only to varying degrees in different individuals, and that the ultimate sex role represents a distortion and moderation of the dynamic typology. Hypothesis 2, similarly, does not take into account environmental influences which bear directly on adult sex roles; it does not address the effects of potential models in the environment other than the parents, despite the fact that the cognitive-developmental theory stresses that gender identity modeling occurs with same-sex persons other than parents (Kohlberg, 1966). Finally, it should be noted that in Hypothesis 2 the modeling of the sex role behaviors of the two parents are not of equal valence since identification may increase the stimulus value of the same-sex parent.

Method

Instruments

The self-administered Rorschach was used where each subject is asked to respond with a fixed number of responses to the cards. The lexical scoring system was then utilized to yield numerical fixation indices for all pregenital stages—orality, anality, sadism, and oedipal (phallic). For this study, it is the phallic count, reflecting the magnitude of repressed oedipal conflict, that is the operationalized index of fixation; as such, it is hypothesized to correlate with the degree of sex-role development.

The instrument measuring sex role development of the subjects, as well as the sex role of the parents (as seen by the subject), is the revised version of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), a widely used questionnaire providing numerical values for masculine and feminine traits of the respondent. The instrument includes ten masculine and ten feminine traits rated on a seven-point Likert scale. The BSRI manual calls for the standardization of each of these scores (according to sample means and standard deviations provided for different populations), and then for subtracting the masculine from the feminine scores to yield a single measure bridging the continuum from masculinity to femininity.
Procedure

Forty-nine men and 81 women participated in the study as a requirement in an undergraduate psychology course.

Each subject first completed the self-administered form of the Rorschach (used in the studies cited earlier) which is designed to yield a uniform protocol of 25 responses of equal length. Each subject then completed the BSRI and also indicated, for each item, the point that best described the subject’s father and mother.

Rorschach protocols were scored by using the lexical guide and methodical word count to arrive at magnitudes of orality, anality, sadism, and oedipal fixation. BSRI's were scored after standardizing student masculinity and femininity scores by using the student norms in the manual, and the parent scores by using the general adult norms. A sex-role score (ranging from masculine to feminine) was then computed for subject, father, and mother by subtracting the standardized masculine score from the feminine score. Pearson product-moment correlations were then computed between the Rorschach fixation scores and the BSRI scores and also between the BSRI self-scores and the parent scores. For the purpose of clarity, the results are presented in terms of masculinity scores for men and femininity scores for women; computationally, one is the converse of the other, so that a negative correlation with masculinity, for example, is equivalent to a positive correlation with femininity.

Results

Some of the BSRI forms were incomplete, primarily because subjects reportedly did not know one of their parents. Thus, the n for the correlations for men ranges from 44 to 49, while that for women ranges from 62 to 81.

In the order of the hypotheses, results were as follows:

1. For men, the oedipal score correlated significantly with the BSRI score for femininity of mother \( r = .27, p = .04 \) but not with that for masculinity of father \( r = .16, p = .16 \). For women, the oedipal score correlated with the BSRI scores for masculinity of father \( r = .61, p < .001 \) and femininity of mother \( r = .62, p < .001 \).

2. In testing the modeling hypothesis linking subjects' sex roles to those of the same-sex parent and possibly also to those of the opposite-sex parent, Pearson product-moment correlations were computed between the BSRI scores for subject and each parent. For men, subjects' BSRI masculinity scores correlated positively with father's BSRI masculinity scores \( r = .43, p = .001 \) and negatively with mother's femininity score \( r = -.27, p = .03 \). For women, subjects' BSRI femininity scores correlated positively with mothers' BSRI femininity scores \( r = .03 \).
.24, \( p = .01 \), but did not correlate with father’s masculinity score (\( r = .06, p = .29 \)).

3. The oedipal fixation score did not correlate with the subjects’ BSRI masculinity score for men (\( r = -.17, p = .13 \)) nor with the subjects’ BSRI femininity score for women (\( r = -.06, p = .30 \)).

Additional significant findings, which were unhypothesized, included:

1. Analitic on the Rorschach correlated with father’s masculinity on the BSRI, for men (\( r = .34, p = .02 \)), and for women (\( r = .95, p < .001 \)), while it correlated with mother’s femininity on the BSRI for women (\( r = .90, p < .001 \)) but not for men (\( r = .09, p = .29 \)).

2. For women only, orality on the Rorschach correlated negatively with father’s masculinity on the BSRI (\( r = -.26, p = .02 \)) and with mother’s femininity (\( r = -.21, p = .04 \)).

Discussion

The psychoanalytic contingency of sex role and father’s masculinity versus mother’s femininity was confirmed for women, but only partially for men. This finding is not explainable within the aspects of psychodynamic theory, which are specific to oedipal conflict dynamics. In empirical studies of psychoanalytic hypotheses, however, sex differences are the rule rather than an exception (Masling & Schwartz, 1979).

The rationale of this study is predicated on a basic theoretical bias in the conceptualization of the transition from the phallic to the genital stage of adulthood. There is no doubt that, in terms of autoerotic cathexis, the locus of drive is constant in these two periods, the major difference being whether the primary activity is masturbation or (interpersonal) intercourse (Juni, 1984b). The issue which is not resolved is whether, in terms of drive fixation, one conceptualizes the ideal stage of adult genitality as an oedipal fixation which has merely been sublimated, via latency, to the adoption of a substitute external object, or whether, in fact, adult genitality implies the total absence of any fixation whatever. Thus, in hypothesizing that oedipal fixation (as measured by an index of phallic content on projectives, indicating a corresponding level of repressed material) should correlate with sex-role differentiation, the influence of adult genitality—as a drive locus distinct from the phallic one—is not being considered. If the latter is conceptualized as an absence of fixation in the phallic stage, then phallic fixation is just one of two ways the child is influenced to adopt an appropriate sex role; the other, more ideal way, is through nonfixed development into genitality. The failure of this design to address this possibility may limit the scope of interpreting the fixation findings.

The modeling hypothesis linking sex-role development to the sex roles of both parents was confirmed completely for men, while the contingency was
confirmed only for the link between women’s femininity and that of their mothers. The lack of a negative correlation of women’s femininity with fathers’ masculinity, while the converse was confirmed for men, suggests that women’s identification with mother is stronger than men’s identification with father. This notion, indeed, is a primary theme in Chodorow’s (1978) analysis of the centrality of mother as primary identification object for children of both sexes in the early phases of psychosexual development. The generally positive results for the modeling hypothesis are also noteworthy in view of the conclusion offered by reviewers of literature in the area that modeling plays only a minor role in the development of sex-typed behavior (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974).

The lack of correlation between oedipal fixation and sex role underscores the environmental interaction effects which mediate between an unconscious dynamic and overt adult behavior, as stressed earlier. When this negative finding is contrasted with the confirmation of the contingency between parents’ overt sex role and the resultant oedipal fixation (for women), an algorithm for linking behavioral attributes and unconscious dynamics seems to emerge: While the behavioral styles of parents have relatively direct input into the formation of the child’s dynamics, the expression of those unconscious dynamics and their manifestation as eventual adult behavior is subject to considerable environmental censoring and personal defensive distortions.

The unhypothesized findings which indicated that anal fixation correlates positively with the parents’ gender-appropriate sex role is consonant with the analytic formulation of the anal character as being committed to proper behavior (Fischer & Juni, 1981). It can be argued that having parents who conform to the sex-appropriate roles reinforces anal personality.

It is possible to use the correlation with anality to interpret the negative correlations which appeared for orality by appealing to a similar pattern of findings in an experimental social-psychological study. In an investigation of person perception of authority figures, Juni and Semel (1982) found that orality and anality have opposite valences. It is feasible to expound on those findings and to argue that, for certain facets of personality, orality and anality are dialectic opposites.

It can be argued that parents whose sex roles are not gender appropriate provide a less structured—and hence less secure—developmental environment for the child than do parents who maintain standard sex roles. If we conceptualize oral fixation as an overpowering dependent stance which is caused developmentally by a nonsupportive parental environment (Fenichel, 1945), it follows that the consequences of parental sex role will become manifest in either an anal personality of the child (in a family where parents maintained traditional sex roles) or an oral personality of the child (in families where parents’ sex roles may have disoriented the child and possibly promoted insecurity).

In comparing the degree of prediction offered by the psychoanalytic and social learning hypotheses, it is clear that the variance explained by the latter
exceeds that of the former. This pattern does not pose a threat to psychodynamic theory since overt behavioral traits are admittedly far more subject to social variables than to intrapsychic needs (Mischel, 1973). Indeed, modest correlation coefficients are the norm in empirical studies of psychosexual fixation. Larger effect sizes would imply that the world is populated by people who act out their libidinal needs with no ego control or superego modification. It is clear, nonetheless, that the smaller effect size of the psychodynamic prediction does not minimize its importance. It is suggested that studies which attempt to chart the origins or correlates of characteristics or interpersonal styles can be richer and more enlightening if they incorporate hypotheses based on both dynamic and social factors. All too often, the psychological community is denied a significant source of insight into behavioral dynamics because of researchers' biases which constrict studies to one of these orientations.

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