

Gender Differences in Adolescent Identity Formation[#]

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The objective of the present research was to study gender differences in adolescent identity formation process. For this purpose, a sample of 600 adolescents (300 boys and 300 girls) of age-range 13-21 years, were divided into three groups i.e., early, middle, and late adolescents sample. The sample belonged to various schools and colleges of Amritsar city (India). Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status -2 (EOMEIS-2; Bennion & Adams, 1986) was used in the study. The scores of four identity statuses, that is, of identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion were compared to study gender differences in the three age groups. *t*-test analyses and identity status classifications revealed that in all the three age groups, girls were higher than boys on identity achievement and moratorium, and were lower than boys on diffusion. Girls seem to be outperforming boys even in traditionally male-dominated areas of identity formation.

Keywords: emotional autonomy, identity formation, adolescents, family environment

Adolescence is a pivotal stage for identity formation, as during this stage, for the first time, intellectual, emotional, physical, and societal factors are sufficiently present both to allow and demand that identity issues be dealt with. This identity, in turn functions to provide the structure for understanding who one is, provides meaning and direction through commitments, values, and goals, and enables a meaningful relatedness to the real world.

To achieve an identity, boys and girls face the crisis between identity and role confusion. Erikson (1963) stated that this crisis involves balancing the desire to try out many possible selves and the need to select a single self. Marcia (1966) elaborated Erikson's identity framework and recognized four identity statuses namely identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion, along the dimensions of exploration and commitment. In identity

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achievement status, the individual has experienced a crisis and has made firm, but not rigid, commitments to job, politics, and religion. In contrast, identity diffusion status is characterized by a lack of commitment to the aforementioned areas. Additionally, a diffused person may or may not have experienced a crisis, and is deferring consideration of future decisions. Individuals in the foreclosure status have made commitments, but have not experienced a crisis. Usually these commitments are to parental values. Finally, an individual in the moratorium status is one who is actively involved in a crisis and is struggling to clarify vague commitments to occupation, religion, and politics.

Examination of identity development by gender has received increasing attention as it has produced conflicting and varied results. Much of the controversy has revolved around the salience of various identity content areas and concerns for the two genders. Erikson (1968) was the first one to discriminate against women on identity-when he referred to 'Inner Space' or womb as the basis for a positive potential for girls identity, suggesting that men project themselves into 'Outer Space' to become accomplished in the conquest of geographic space and scientific fields or in the dissemination of ideas.

Authors interested in studying gender differences in identity have tried to explain them on the basis of different domains, suggesting that ideological domain is more relevant for men, while women develop their identity in interpersonal domain and relationships. Male identity development has been described as focusing on such issues as individual competence, knowledge acquisition, and occupational choice, whereas female identity within and revolving around issues of interpersonal processes and relations to others (Branch, 2001; Douvan & Adelson, 1966). The essence of Gilligan's (1988) work is the idea that women tend to define themselves through their relationship with others, while men follow "traditional masculine" lines of self-definition-according to their occupational selves. Nodding (1983) has also concluded that women more frequently use a connected or relationship-oriented self-definition, while men often use a separate/objective self-characterization.

Such differences, as authors suggest, occur largely in societies and cultures, which encourage separateness in men, and where women are reared towards conformity and embeddedness. In a recent research, Alessandria and Nelson (2005) found no significant gender differences in identity development among the American sample. In India, Rao and Rao (1982) report that women are encouraged to believe that they have no needs of their own, non identity outside of

marriage or without reference to a man. Indian psychologists have even remarked that a woman's identity shapes according to such issues as menstruation process, by bearing and feeding a child (Vagrecha, 1999).

Evidence is also available which reflects that there is lesser foreclosure in Indian girls as compared to boys (see, for example, Graf, 2003). Western researches have also suggested that women perform better than men on identity development, and display higher identity achievement and moratorium than boys, even in traditionally male dominated areas (Bartle-Haring, Brucker, & Hock, 2002; Branch, 2001; Schwartz & Montgomery, 2002). Cramer (2000) suggests that girls are encouraged to consider both stereotypically female and male paths of development. Thus, the range of possibilities for establishing an identity is broader for girls than for boys.

Studies on gender differences based upon Eriksonian based identity development instruments like Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (OMEIS) and Marcia interview classification have produced inconsistent results. Abraham (1984), with a sample of early and middle adolescents, found that girls scored higher on the achievement subscales than did boys of the same age. Grotevant and Adams (1984) reported similar findings from a sample of late adolescents. Mead (1983) with a wide age range sample, also found that girls were more likely to be identity achieved. In contrast, Fregeau and Barker (1986) using a slightly older sample, found girls scoring consistently higher on the moratorium and diffusion subscales, and Jones (1984) reported middle adolescent girls as scoring highest on the foreclosure subscales.

Many of the studies using the OMEIS report non significant gender differences between identity statuses (Abraham, 1983; Adams, Ryan, Hoffman, Dobson, & Neilsen, 1985; Adams, Shea, & Fitch, 1979; Clancy, 1984; O'Neil, 1986; Streitmatter, 1993).

Seemingly, the review of literature suggests an inconsistent picture of the identity formation for two genders. Thus, it seems pertinent to study gender differences in identity, especially in cultures, like India, which are traditionally male-dominated, but where current changes in society and family set-up have made women more visible in areas which were initially not open to girls. The present study has been designed to study gender differences on the ideological and interpersonal identity domains of the four statuses of identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion, against the backdrop of Indian society.

METHOD

Sample

The sample comprised 600 adolescents (300 boys and 300 girls) of age-range 13-21 years. The sample was further divided into following groups:

1. Early adolescents, $N= 200$ (100 boys and 100 girls)
2. Middle adolescents, $N= 200$ (100 boys and 100 girls)
3. Late adolescents, $N= 200$ (100 boys and 100 girls)

A random sample representing all schools and colleges of Amritsar city, of Punjab State of North India, was selected and participants were more or less similar with regard to socioeconomic, cultural-ethnic background. The participants belonged to similar social economic status (i.e., urban middle class, with one parent working) and belonged to Hindu and Sikh religious groups (the two main religions followed in Punjab). To study gender differences in identity formation, the total sample was divided into three groups i.e., early, middle, and late adolescent groups. The mean age was 14.07 years for early adolescent boys, 14.12 years for early adolescent girls, 17.06 years for middle adolescent boys, 17.04 years for middle adolescent girls, 20.14 years for late adolescent boys, and 20.2 years for late adolescent girls.

Instruments

Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status-2

Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status-2 (EOMEIS-2) has been developed by Bennion and Adams (1986). The language of the scale is English and it measures identity formation on two domains, i.e., ideological (which includes areas like occupation, religion, politics, and philosophical life style) and interpersonal (which covers areas like friendship, recreation, dating, and gender roles). Only the areas of friendship and recreation were studied in interpersonal domain. The other two areas were not studied because of their inappropriateness for Indian adolescents. Thus, out of total 64 items, 48 were used in the present study. The participants had to respond to each item on any one of 6 point rating scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". Items were scored by weighing the "strongly agree" response with a value of six, and "strongly disagree" with a value of one. Raw subscale scores are

computed for both the ideological and interpersonal domains, by summing up the items relevant to each of the four statuses (Identity Achievement, Moratorium, Foreclosure, Diffusion). For each domain, an individual's score on identity achievement (A), moratorium (M), foreclosure (F) and diffusion (D) statuses are obtained. Thus, for the two domains, each individual will have 8 subscale scores (4 for ideological domain and 4 for interpersonal). These scores are used for classification of individuals in different identity statuses using the classification rules provided by the authors of the instrument. Test-retest reliability ($N=50$) over a 15 days period of time ranged from 0.73 to 0.91.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To study gender differences in adolescent identity formation process across two domains of the four identity statuses, t analysis was employed. Also, the identity status classifications of boys and girls were done to support the t -analysis. The results of t -test for three groups i.e., early, middle and late adolescents sample are presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3 respectively. Table 4 shows the identity status classifications of various boys and girls sample. The results of gender comparison in all three groups have showed a high amount of similarity.

Table 1

Difference Between of Groups of Early Adolescent Boys and Girls on Different Identity Statuses of Two Domains (N = 200)

Domains	Identity Statuses	Early Boys (13-15 years)		Early Girls (13-15 years)		t
		M	SD	M	SD	
Ideological	Achievement	17.53	7.81	20.51	9.49	2.4*
	Moratorium	20.43	8.95	23.74	9.95	2.52*
	Diffusion	24.19	9.81	21.13	9.58	2.17
	Foreclosure	25.28	9.02	25.44	9.35	0.12
Interpersonal	Achievement	8.87	4.39	10.84	5.04	3.05**
	Moratorium	9.67	4.52	11.27	5.12	2.39*
	Diffusion	11.58	4.28	10.08	4.05	2.64**
	Foreclosure	12.58	4.99	12.53	5.03	0.07

* $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$

Table 1 suggests that in the middle adolescents sample, girls score significantly higher on achievement and moratorium, while boys score higher on diffusion, on both the domains.

Table 2

Difference between Group of Middle Adolescent Boys and Girls on Different Identity Statuses of Two Domains (N = 200)

Domains	Identity Statuses	Middle Boys (16-18 years)		Middle Girls (16-18 years)		<i>t</i>
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Ideological	Achievement	20.02	8.76	22.82	10.49	2.22*
	Moratorium	22.82	9.27	26.11	10.01	2.65**
	Diffusion	25.15	10.08	19.42	9.59	4.28**
	Foreclosure	22.08	8.25	23.30	9.13	0.44
Interpersonal	Achievement	10.56	4.88	12.76	5.35	3.22**
	Moratorium	10.89	4.80	12.97	5.08	3.02**
	Diffusion	12.44	4.48	8.99	4.15	6.01**
	Foreclosure	10.37	4.81	10.95	4.77	0.94

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 2 shows that in the middle adolescents sample, girls score significantly higher on achievement and moratorium, while boys score higher on diffusion, on both the domains.

Table 3

Difference between Groups of Late Adolescent Boys and Girls on Different Identity Statuses of Two Domains (N = 200)

Domains	Identity Statuses	Early Boys (13-15 years)		Early Girls (13-15 years)		<i>t</i>
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Ideological	Achievement	23.11	10.19	26.47	11.39	2.10*
	Moratorium	25.25	9.66	28.17	9.87	1.98*
	Diffusion	26.05	10.81	17.19	9.25	5.88**
	Foreclosure	19.20	6.74	20.42	8.27	1.14
Interpersonal	Achievement	12.76	5.64	15.21	5.49	2.96**
	Moratorium	12.13	5.06	14.15	5.18	2.68**
	Diffusion	13.17	4.92	7.80	3.94	8.47**
	Foreclosure	7.87	3.83	9.15	4.30	2.15*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 3 suggests that in the late adolescents sample, girls score significantly higher than boys on achievement and moratorium, while boys score higher on diffusion across both domains. Girls also score higher than boys on foreclosure in the interpersonal domain.

The overall pattern that emerges is that females are significantly higher than males on identity achievement and moratorium (ideological as well as interpersonal) whereas males in all the three age group score significantly higher than females on identity diffusion (ideological as well as interpersonal). Thus, we may suggest that females are better than males on identity formation process, as depicted by their higher representation in the higher identity statuses i.e. identity achievement and moratorium. The girls, in comparison to boys, are high in exploring issues pertaining to various spheres of life, and have committed themselves after trying out various options, more in proportion as compared to boys.

The trend shows that the girls are excelling boys on higher identity statuses, not only on interpersonal domain, but on ideological as well, which was once proposed to be male dominated. Although traditionally, Indian girls have been encouraged to seek their identity in their husbands and within their families, but modern day set-up has opened entry for girls in various careers, politics etc. which attract them to establish their identity in areas which were once not welcoming of girls. Also, emerging female heroes in Indian society in different spheres of life may be a source of inspiration to the adolescent Indian girls.

Cramer (2000) has suggested that girls today are encouraged to consider both stereotypically female plus male paths of development. The range of possibilities for establishing an identity is thus broader for females than for males. Lytle, Bakken, and Roming (1997) indicated that the female identity pattern departs from the traditional pattern suggested by Erikson, to include both intrapersonal and interpersonal domains of identity. Also, higher moratorium and higher identity achievement in girls has been reported in a number of studies (see, for example, Bartle-Haring et al., 2002; Lacombe & Gay, 1998).

The Table 4 shows the number of subjects lying in different identity statuses of ideological and interpersonal domains. The gender differences also indicate that boys in all the age groups show more indifference to identity issues in both domains, wherein neither exploration nor commitment towards important issues is present (i.e., diffusion). Boys outnumber girls in diffusion status in all the three age groups. Higher diffusion in boys than girls has already been reported by Cramer (2000), Branch (2001), and Sandhu (2004).

Table 4

Frequency of participants falling in four different statuses of domains of identity formation (N = 600)

Groups	Identity Achievement	Moratorium	Diffusion	Foreclosure
Ideological				
Early adolescent boys	18	17	37	38
Early adolescent girls	14	23	29	34
Middle adolescent boys	12	23	40	25
Middle adolescent girls	20	27	24	29
Late adolescent girls	20	28	39	15
Late adolescent boys	30	32	20	22
Interpersonal				
Early adolescent boys	8	16	36	40
Early adolescent girls	14	23	29	34
Middle adolescent boys	12	22	40	26
Middle adolescent girls	20	27	23	30
Late adolescent girls	22	26	40	12
Late adolescent boys	30	31	18	21

Note. $n = 100$ for each group

Noteworthy here is that across age, diffusion in girls seems to decrease, however it rises in case of boys. But the other three statuses (i.e., achievement, moratorium, and foreclosure) follow the identity status development hypothesis (i.e., decrease in lower statuses (foreclosure) and increase in higher statuses (achievement and moratorium) with age) and show progressive development trends. So, the pattern of evolution of identity, in boys can be inferred as mixed, as suggested by Meeus (1996) whose review of literature reveals that reverse trends may also be possible. However, girls show a progressive trend in identity formation. Some significant contextual factors may pose as potential barriers to healthy psychosocial development. Disillusionment with the socio-economic set up, political apathy, and changing pace of life, or a lack of role models may encourage diffusion. Adams and Fitch (1983) ascribe a significant role of academic departments' environment in adolescent diffusion. Diffusion seems to rise in departments that place least emphasis on expanding students thinking and awareness about social issues such as national and world events. Probably, here also, academic institutions of boys are not proactive in the identity process, whereas women's institutions are catering to the all-round development of students.

Results of the present study also point out that late adolescent girls score higher than boys on interpersonal foreclosure. Evidently, girls in their late adolescent years are deciding about issues of friendship and recreation, according to their parental choices and expectations, more in comparison to boys. A look at identity status classification points out that in the early adolescent years, lesser number of girls are foreclosed in comparison to boys, but during the middle and late adolescent years, the foreclosure status is over represented by girls than by boys; however the difference between means of two groups is significant only in the interpersonal domain in late adolescent years. Similarly, higher foreclosure in girls than in boys has been found by Campbell, Adams, and Dobson (1984). In a similar vein, Meeus (1996) Meeus and Dekovic (1995), and Waterman (1993), have also reported females to be slightly higher in closed commitment status.

Overall, it can be concluded that girls are somewhat further along than boys in identity formation across all age groups, as evident from their better performance on higher identity statuses i.e., identity achievement and moratorium, and the boys outscore girls on diffusion. Another important finding which emerges is that girls are surpassing boys on both the ideological and interpersonal domains. This suggests that issues of career, political views, religion, and relationships are more important to girls than to boys in the adolescent years. These results seem very relevant in the present day scenario of Indian society, as today girls seem to outnumber boys in medical colleges, engineering institutes, universities, and also seem to be outshining boys in other significant avenues of life.

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