

A DETAILED REVIEW OF THE THEORIES AND RESEARCH ON FEMALE IDENTITY[#]

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The literature of psychology and philosophy had extensively dealt with the concept of identity. However, most of the existing theories did not consider gender as an important phenomenon in identity development. It has been noted that relatively little attention has been paid to female identity development and/or considered it as a separate phenomenon. A few authors have invited the attention of the researchers to this bias in behavioural research and presented new theories of female identity development. These theories are significant, but have some limitations too. This paper first discusses the theories of female identity and then presents an analysis of the existing literature and research conducted in this regard.

The importance of the process of identity formation during adolescence has been recognized by many theorists (Blos, 1979; Erikson, 1968; Kohlberg, 1984; Marcia, 1980). Adolescence is considered to be the most important stage when substantial changes in the self occur. It has been emphasized that social context of individuals is important in this regard. Identity is conceptualized as an internalized, self-selected regulatory system, which represents an organized and integrated psychic structure. This also requires the developmental distinction between the inner self and outer social world (Adams, 1992). Erikson (1968) argued that adolescence is the usual time for identity crisis, which is also associated with a wide range of existential problems.

The construct of identity generally described by different authors (Blos, 1962; Erikson, 1968; Kagan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1984; Loevinger & Wesler, 1970; Marcia, 1980) did not take gender into account. To be more specific, female identity development has been largely neglected or ignored. Erikson showed some concern for sex differences and devoted one chapter to it towards the end of his book which is consisted

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of eight chapters on identity development. He ended up giving an anatomically based description of female identity in line with traditional psychoanalytic theory. Feminine psychodynamic theorists (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Miller, 1986) criticized the man bias in theory and research, and proposed a theory of self-in-relation which drew attention towards women's unique capacities of nurturance and caring which play a significant role in their development of self and identity. These theories will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

Inner Bodily Space

Erikson (1951) reported an experiment in which he studied sex differences in the play construction of pre-adolescents aged 11, 12, and 13 years. According to him the results of this play configuration study were the expression of biological sex differences. The toys that he gave them to play which included dolls, toy furniture, blocks, and a few others. The children were asked to choose from the toys available and make something exciting. According to Erikson, most of the boys chose to build towers, structures, building, streets, and moving objects outside enclosures. Girls, on the other hand, built enclosures more than boys and used more objects and people in these enclosures. In Erikson's (1968) opinion, the results of this play configuration are an expression of their biological differences.

The male and female spaces, then, were dominated, respectively, by height and downfall and by strong motion and its channeling or arrest; and by static interiors which were open or simply closed, and peaceful or intruded upon. It may come as a surprise to some and seem a matter of course to others that here sexual differences in the organization of a play space seem to parallel the morphology of genital differentiation itself (p. 271).

Erikson analyzed these results and suggested that girls in the process of growing up observe evidence of the fact that an inner bodily space exists in them, which has productive as well as dangerous potentials. He referred to the inner space or womb as the basis for positive potential for the girl's identity. Because of that, they indulge in passive and more peaceful play activities that are marked by harmony and union. Boys on the other hand emphasize outer space' and are predominantly inclined toward more independent, assertive, and

aggressive activities. So, the manner in which a sense of identity develops differs between the sexes. The main concern for the best adolescent is 'who he is' so, he tests his potentials to accomplish an independent position in the outer world. In contrast for the female adolescent, the main concern is to determine 'with whom' she will share her life and bear children. This will fill the inner space and her search for an identity will be completed. This is the only psychosexual aspect of her identity. He explains women's identity to be the result of their experience of living in a women's body and with the gender-based role assignments of the culture. Their anatomy determines their destiny. The issues of ideology and occupation are of minor importance to them, though, she may get trained and develop herself as worker and a citizen in the meantime, within the framework of the role assignments from the society at large. In other words he suggested that: (a) identity achievement may take longer among girls than boys, (b) girls do not go through the hierarchy of the stages of identity development the way boys do, and (c) they achieve it concurrently through the experience of marriage and motherhood.

The Self-in-Relation

Another important theory on female identity was given by a group of feminist psychodynamic theorists (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan et al., 1991; Miller, 1976, 1991). They represent the theory of 'self-in-relation' and 'growth-in-connection' concerning the development of self and identity among women.

As is notable in conventional theories, development of the self was generally considered to be a painful process of separating oneself out from the matrix of others. To develop a sense of separateness and autonomy from others was emphasized as a prerequisite for the development of individuality. However, one also observes that neither men nor women can attain total independence. Both need relationships in order to grow, though the nature of relating to each other at different life stages may differ for men and women. These theorists suggests that women are more relational and empathic than men. It was initiated by Chodorow (1978) who suggested that the reason for this dependency on relationships and empathy is the universally assigned responsibility to 'mother' children. On the basis of this analysis (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan et al., 1991; Miller, 1984), tried to re-conceptualize the dominant theories that emphasized the autonomy of the self. They proposed a more relational view according to which the sense of self begins in the mother-child relationship when the infant starts developing an internal

representation of the self as being in relationship with the mother. This is the beginning of the self which reflects what is happening between people. Miller (1991, p. 13) calls this internal representation of self as a sense of 'being in relationship'. The infant picks up feelings of the other person and has an early sense of what is going on in the other person as well as in him/herself. The child will have feelings of comfort if the other person is also comfortable. They are engaged in an emotional relationship which is important for the well-being of both (the caretaker/mother and the infant). Right from the beginning the internal representation of the self is apparent from the active interchange with other selves. Mother responds to the infant's emotions and the infant also responds to the emotions of the mother. According to Miller (1991) the core of this early mental representation of the self is emotional. Others respond to this emotional self and the infant in turn also learns to attend to and/or respond to others' emotions. Dynamic interactions are inseparable from the self in which the central theme is to attend to each other's mental states and emotions.

This earlier interaction is present both for boys and girls. But the cultural beliefs and norms, which generate sex-specific and stereotypical behaviour among the caretakers and others, make them respond differently to boys and girls. Girls are generally encouraged to develop the capacities to know and 'feel' the emotions of others. Their sense of self is interconnected with the feelings and emotional states of others. Boys on the other hand are encouraged to divert from these feelings states. So, according to this theory, interaction, which involves attending to the other person's emotions and responding to them, is of central importance for the girl child's development of identity. It is also the basis of continuing psychological growth. All growth occurs within emotional connection.

Miller (1991) suggests that for girls, adolescence is the period of shutting down rather than opening up. Boys expands their horizon during this period, but girls 'contract' rather than expanding. In relation to their sexuality they have learned, consciously or unconsciously, that their sexual impulses, desires, perceptions, and sensations should be dependent on boys or men. These should not arise from within themselves, rather, they should be brought forth by others (men). In heterosexual relationships the girl is most likely to face dilemmas, because if she follows her own desires and feelings and wants to bring them into experience, she tends to experience conflicts and guilt. This is because of the messages that she gets during the course of development that she should focus her energies on the well-

being and the growth of men. She internalize these feelings which are conveyed to her directly or indirectly by society. So, she is more likely to feel that her own sexual desires and stirrings are wrong, dirty, evil, and shameful. She still wants to work on these desires within relationships with others and ends up doing it 'for others'. The same problem occurs with other resources that women have. Women are not supposed to use all their powers in all ways. Over time they develop this idea, reinforced by experience, that to do so is wrong and unacceptable. Because of societal influence they have incorporated a sense that they are not allowed to fully and freely use all of their powers. This message is stronger during adolescence. Her sense of self is in the context of being within a relationship and for a relationship. During adolescence this alters to some degree and she develops a sense of self which must defer to others' needs and desires. She deals with the conflict by keeping the relationship through alteration of her internal sense of self as well as in her overt actions. She is likely to loose touch with the definition of herself. As a result her sense of self as 'being within relationship' alters into her sense of 'being in relationship'. Girls are encouraged to be in relationship, though many complications are added to this at almost every stage of life. They do not seek the definition of self and identity the way boys do. Boys are much more preoccupied with the development of their independent identity. They have also learned that girls should adapt to them and they do not have to make an effort to adapt to girls.

Surrey (1991, p. 61) explains the term relationship as 'an experience of emotional and cognitive inter-subjectivity: the on-going intrinsic inner awareness and responsiveness to the continuous existence of the other or others and the expectation of mutuality in this regard'. According to her, relationships represent a unit larger than the single self. When one is in relationship with others one represents that larger unit and develops the capacity to identify with it. This also helps in generating the motivation to care for this unit. It is like being a part of a unit which is larger than the individual and this 'whole' is experienced greater than the sum of its parts. It is an experience of knowing oneself through mutual interaction and relationship with others. Surrey (1991, p. 62) calls it an 'emotional-cognitive dialogue', which continues over time and space. This experience of being in relation and feeling of connectedness does not threaten the existence of self or identity, rather it gains vitality and enhancement in this process. Relationships and identity develop simultaneously. The growing child whose responses are based purely on emotions, gradually through experience of relating to others and identifying with the larger unit,

develops conscious adult responsibility. The early experience of mutual empathy of the child with the caretaker is internalized and a continuous empathic responsiveness on part of the caretaker/mother contributes to the capacity for later relational mutuality. For girls, the experience of self is bound to relationship and development proceeds through relational differentiation and elaboration rather than through disengagement and separation.

Gilligan (1977, 1982) suggested that conceptions of self and morality seemed to be linked in a very complicated way. In her view there are two distinct modes of moral judgement for men and women, which are gender related. These are justice and care. These modes of moral judgement might be related to modes of self-definition. In contrast to Kohlberg's emphasis on the self defined through separation and autonomy, in which responsible actions are judged on the bases of abstract moral principles, she stresses the importance of connection and relationships in women's sense of self as well as in moral reasoning. In her view, women evaluate moral or responsible actions differently than men. They define and resolve moral conflicts in a way that differ from those described in established theories of moral development as well as in the measures for its assessment. Gilligan clarified an alternative approach to moral decision making which was based on the principles of interdependence, love, and care. Relationships, attachment, and interdependence are the context for women through which they define themselves and their moral behaviour. Gilligan (1982) had described the centrality of the concepts of responsibility and care in women's construction of the moral domain and indicated the close ties in women's thinking between conceptions of the self and conceptions of morality. She argued that there is a need for an expanded developmental theory that would include the difference in the feminine voice rather than excluding it from developmental consideration. In her view, this inclusion is essential, not only for explaining the development of women, but also for understanding of the characteristics and precursors of an adult moral conception.

Theories of self-in-relation emphasize the importance of relationships and connectedness in women's lives and its impact on their development of self and a sense of identity. They also focus on the mutually enhancing dimension of connection through which women seek validity and confirmation of their own selves by relating to others.

Overview of Theories of Female Identity Development

As stated earlier, Erikson suggested that identity develops within the frame work of autonomy in which history and the processes of personality development play a significant role. But when the issue of female identity development needed to be trickled, he decided to use an anatomical concept and explained development in biological terms, quite similar to Freud. He described the girl's urge for an identity in terms of a sense of 'inner bodily space' which is dependent on men to be 'filled' or completed. It is another way of saying that girls are born deficient and inferior and develop complexes because of this deficiency. The resolution of their identity crisis is predicted through their relationship with men and qualities of nurturance and caring.

Erikson's theory could be considered important because he invites attention to the biological capacities of women that play a significant role in the development of the qualities of nurturance and caring. But an overemphasis on anatomy and generalization of these differences to other important spheres of life reveal a lack of scientific objectivity. The denial of social experiences in females' lives and a focus on anatomy as their destiny is far from appealing. The notion that women seek gratification from giving, nurturance, or lactation seems to imply that they are only suited for service roles. Erikson's formulation would predict that women's sense of self and personal identity ought to be at their peak at the time of child-bearing and in the process of rearing them, but that is not supported by research. Off and on researchers have raised the issue of differences in developmental processes and their impact on the formation of identity of boys and girls (Gallatin, 1975; Marcia & Friedman, 1970; Matterson, 1975; Schenkel & Marcia, 1972; Toder & Marcia, 1973). Also the importance of socio-political, social psychological and cultural variables were generally ignored in his theory.

The other prominent theory about female identity development, i.e., the theory of 'self-in-relation' focused on the maturity of empathy and interconnection between the self and the other. The authors stressed the centrality of relationships in women's lives, and suggested that they are crucial to their experiences in the process of development of personal identity. They suggested that an inner sense of connection with others is a central organizing feature of women's development and psychological crises in women's lives stem from disconnection. This theory could be considered an important alternative to the dominant models of the self that emphasized the self as an autonomous and individualistic entity. In contrast, it focuses on the

centrality of collectivity and togetherness in the development of self and identity.

Some of the research findings supported this view and suggested that there were different profiles of identity status ratings among male and female adolescents. In their opinion, issues concerning sex differences should no longer be ignored (Grotevant, Thorbecke, & Meyer, 1982; Marcia, 1980). However, some limited research refuted the claims of the proponents of this view and suggested that men and women both include relational components in their self-description (though, to differential degrees) and emphasize some form of interconnection and relatedness to others in their self-definition (Lyons, 1983). Colby and Damon (1987) particularly criticized Gilligan's theory as well as her research on women's moral development. Methodologically they faulted Gilligan for only quoting examples that suited her theory and not presenting any empirical data of her interviews. In their view portrayal of general sex-linked life orientation is appealing but so far research evidence does not support such a generalized distinction. Also there is no evidence that these differences (if they exist) are due to early irreversible emotional experiences between mother and child. They cautioned about the reinforcement of gender stereotypes in feminine theories, that could be contributive to the maintenance of women's oppression.

Vasudev (1988) also evaluated Gilligan's research and pointed to some methodological problems in her work. She criticized the small size of the sample on the basis of which she had tried to take a variety of issues that were crucial to her theory. For example, the relationship between orientation, state, and age was not a research question but was central to her theory which was developed from that research. In her view, Gilligan was successful in stimulating a serious inquiry of sex bias in Kohlberg's theory as well as his research findings, but research does not support Gilligan's view. She mentioned some of the research that was based on Kohlberg's theory of moral development which supported his claim that if the samples were controlled in terms of education, socioeconomic status and occupation, no differences were found in the moral orientations of males and females. Vasudev (1988) stressed the importance of theory-driven research to substantiate Gilligan's theory, because in her view, 'good ideas can shine by their own light, but when coupled with weak data they risk being dismissed as trivial' (p.243).

The criticism on the theory of self-in-relation and growth-in-connection stresses the need to assess its strength or weakness in

empirical work. There is a strong need for theory based research with different age groups and in different social settings. This theory emphasized the relationship of the mother and the child, but did not consider the socio-historical context of this and other relationships. Also, it seems that this theory was proposed without keeping in perspective the specific organization of material life and the social totality in which the relationships are grounded.

Some Empirical Evidence

Research has provided inconsistent findings concerning the development of female identity based on the Eriksonian model. For example, Cramer and Hogan (1975) replicated Erikson's original experiment by using two groups of girls and boys with the average age of five and a half, and eleven and a half years. They reported similar results as Erikson. In the older group, boys showed a predominance in the tower building games compared to the younger group. However, they did not find any sex difference in the construction of enclosures. They concluded that the use of blocks to construct spatial configuration is a reflection of their differences in sexual autonomy. Caplan (1979) on the other hand questioned the validity and reliability of Erikson's theory on methodological grounds. In her view, conducting the experiment with pre-pubertal children who were attended by an adult experimenter was itself a methodological error. Their exposure to socialization practices and sex-roles expectations may have led them to choose sex-appropriate toys (i.e., blocks for boys and dolls and furniture for girls). In order to avoid those problems she conducted the same experiment with very young subjects i.e., from two years and ten months to four years and eight months old. She did not find any sex differences in the frequency of construction of enclosures or towers. She also criticized the significance of Erikson's incomplete and unsatisfactory reporting of the results and questioned the generalizability of his findings. In order to clarify physiological facts concerning the theory of inner space she states that:

The most important physiological factor to take into account is that there is no inner space. The walls of the uterus touch each other, as do the walls of the vagina. They are open only when separated by and filled with substances, as in intercourse or pregnancy. If girls' play constructions were to represent their uteri, they should look more like folded flapjacks than enclosures. Further, although the penis is

external and erectable, so is the clitoris, although to a lesser degree. The movement of the ovum is as important for fertilization as that of the sperm, and although not as highly mobile as the sperm, both ovum and uterus move (the uterus contracts often in orgasm and delivery and certainly expands in pregnancy). So differences in play construction should, if biologically based, be different in degree rather than in kind (Caplan, 1979, pp. 101-102).

According to Caplan, sex differences in play emerge as children grow older and this sequence of events describe at best a sex-differential socialization model. Hodgeson and Fisher (1979) noted that men were more advanced in outer space or male pathway identity issues (i.e., occupation, religion, and politics), whereas women were more advanced in the inner space or interpersonal and female pathway identity issues (i.e., sexuality and sex-roles). On the other hand, Matterson (1977) suggested that the area of interpersonal relationships is important for both men and women. Hopkins (1982) constructed the inner space interview for women in which the interpersonal issues were emphasized. He found that these areas have no predictive value over the outer space interview for women.

Keeping in view Erikson's claim that marriage and motherhood generate a strong sense of identity among women, O'Connell (1976) conducted her research with traditional, neo-traditional and non-traditional women. She found that women with continuous careers had a strong and personally defined sense of identity at all stages of their lives. She also made an important distinction between a personal and a reflected sense of identity. In her view a personal identity was characterized by introspection and self-knowledge, whereas reflected identity referred to the need to know and value oneself through the eyes of others. She found that unemployed mothers and those who postponed their employment or career goals for taking care of children, exhibited a reflected sense of identity until their children reached school-going age. During the school-going period most of the women exhibited a strong sense of personal identity. These results refuted Erikson's claim that women have a positive sense of identity when they have children. It seems that the process of identity formation is as critical for girls during adolescence as it is for boys. Those who follow nontraditional roles have to resolve the issues of identity achievement versus identity confusion during this period. However, for others this task of having a personal sense of identity may wait until they have the

responsibility of younger children. This allows them time to think, choose, and follow their own commitments.

Some researchers have directly or indirectly supported the idea that relationships are of greater salience for young women. It was noticed that in the domains of social and interpersonal skills girls showed a stronger need to achieve (Stein & Bailey, 1973). Josselson (1980) noted that compared to high maturity males, high maturity females used interpersonal relationships for identity resolution and were less focused on career goals as a source of self-esteem. Females who were identity seekers wanted to discover who they were and who they wanted to be in relation to others. Hodgeson and Fisher (1979) stated that identity paths are different for college men and women. Men were more developmentally advanced in the domains of occupation, religion, and politics. By comparison, women were more advanced in the area of interpersonal identity formation and sex-roles conceptualization. Men defined themselves with respect to the issues of competence, while women focused on who they were in relation to other people. In their opinion the issue of intimacy is intervened with female identity development, something not recognized by Erikson.

Some of the findings suggest that female identity formation is closely associated with their relational patterns within the family. For example, Kirsch, Shore, and Kyle (1976) stated that the same-sex parent plays an important role in the identity development of children. They found that the relationship with the mother is more critical for women's identity formation than with the father. Josselson (1973, 1982) discovered that identity achieved women who had invested more toward their goals in life were relatively less concerned with the approval of their parents. They tended to trust their own abilities and capacities more and chose life partners who would be cooperative companions. They were more concerned about who might be their life partners instead of by whom they (women) will be loved. Moratorium women were confused about their social roles and were struggling to resolve their Oedipal ties with their mothers and were identifying with their fathers. On the other hand, Foreclosed women were trying to recreate their closeness with their parents in other interpersonal relationships. Identity Diffused women were fearful and exhibited lack of self-esteem. They described their parents as 'not there' for them. They also had little or no planning for the future.

In order to observe gender differences in identity development, Grotevant et al. (1982) studied 41 boy and 42 girl adolescents. Subjects were interviewed by using interpersonal domains of identity

development i.e., friendship, dating relationships, and sex-roles. In order to assess the relationship between gender and occupational identity they also administered the Vocational Situation Scale (Holland, Daiger, & Pomer, 1982), and the Work and Family Orientation Scale (WOFO) by Helmreich, Spence, and Holahan, (1978). Patterns of correlation for each sex were examined. Results revealed that young men with an orientation towards mastery tended to explore dating identity as well as friendship commitments. In the researchers' opinion this relationship between competitiveness, mastery, and achievement of interpersonal identity is reflective of their orientation towards instrumental achievement. Girl adolescents who scored high on friendship identity tended to score lower on competitiveness. That is, there was no correlation between interpersonal identity and mastery for girls. Also, the commitment to friendship identity was positively correlated with competitiveness for boy adolescents, but had a negative correlation for girl adolescents. They discussed these results in terms of Gilligan's (1982) theory, which suggested that different achievement styles may be related to gender differences in interpersonal identity formation. In her opinion, women use values that are based on a sense of connectedness with others. Achievement in interpersonal relationships is more important for them which is apparent from their abilities to care for others. Whereas, for young men issues of autonomy and separateness were important for self-definition.

Lyons (1983) also based her research on Gilligan's theory and interviewed 36 male and female subjects ranging in age from 8 to 60 years. She asked questions relating to their perception of themselves, relationships, moral dilemmas, and their sense of right and wrong in resolving those dilemmas. The data was analyzed in terms of : (a) their description of self, (b) consideration of their own real life moral conflicts, and (c) correlation between the two. They also tested the hypothesis that individuals use two distinct modes of defining themselves: (1) separate or objective, and (2) connected (to others). Results indicated that women used characterization of a connected self more frequently, whereas men used characterization of a separate and objective self more often. Although both men and women defined themselves in relation to others with equal frequency, their characterization of the description of self-in-relation was different. The majority of females described a self connected and interdependent on others. They also expressed their concern with doing good for others and described their abilities in terms of their making or sustaining connections. On the other hand, the more frequently found mode in responses of male subjects was their description of self as separate in

relation to other. They also described relationships as part of one's obligations and commitments and stated that these should be evaluated in terms of one's ability and skill in interacting with others. Despite their different modes of defining themselves, both men and women equally included a relational component in their description of self. This study suggested that both women and men emphasize some form of interconnection and relatedness with others as a component of their self-definition. She concluded that psychological theories of self and identity development should consider the relational conception or the theme of self-in-relation to others as central to the definition of self. This concern should be considered as present at all ages and among both men and women. There are differences between men and women in terms of their defining and understanding the relationships with others, but perception of self as related to others is present in both sexes and at all ages. This was similar to Miller's (1976) suggestion that though the sense of self-in-relation is more characteristic of women than it is of men, individual development for both the sexes proceeds only by means of affiliation.

CONCLUSION

The theories and research findings in connection with female identity development reveals that social context, familial environment, and relationship with parents or primary caretakers contribute significantly to the development of self and a sense of identity in children of either sex. It is not appropriate to undermine these elements and overemphasize the anatomical factors in the process of identity development. Neither is it appropriate to neglect anatomy or biology altogether, because the reproductive power of women's bodies does plays an important role in recognizing the value of care and nurturance (Patterson, Sochting, & Marcia, 1992). It is likely that in many societies girls experience relatively more complex tasks in the process of identity formation compared to boys. The number of content domains within which they (girls) have to define themselves is also more than boys as they are to be socialized for both career and family establishment (Archer, 1985, 1992). They also experience lack of societal support in this regard. It is apparent that more theory based, cross-cultural research is needed to have clearer views about the identity development of girls and its impact on their lives in different social surroundings.

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