

## **Influences and Challenges of Male Gender Construct**

Larry Barnes, Assistant Professor, West Texas A&M University, [lbarnes@mail.wtamu.edu](mailto:lbarnes@mail.wtamu.edu)

### **Abstract**

Adolescent males face a variety of challenges and influences regarding male identity. Environments and activities that suppress the testing of various roles complicate negotiating conflicting messages about what it means to be a man. Positive and negative influences on male construct identified by current research are discussed. Specifically, influences of peer groups, leisure activities, and the classroom are examined. The experimental process of identity construct for males is identified. Challenges to role experimentation are recognized and a theory of diverse experience is established as guidance for caregivers in helping adolescent males through the identity crisis.

### **Introduction**

Identity development is a critical and complicated process for adolescents. Erikson (1959) maintained that the formation of a healthy sense of identity was crucial in transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. This important step in maturing is challenged from many sources. Prior research has identified both psychological stress and anti-social behavior as adversaries to identity development (Wires, Barocas, & Hollenbeck, 1994). However, new research has implicated lifestyle, classroom dynamics, peer interactions, and parental influences to be associated with identity development as well. In addition, public image as transmitted through media services plays a role in determining an adolescent's acceptance of gender roles and expressions (Shaw, Kleiber, & Caldwell, 1995). With the increasing understanding of multi-factorial influences on identity development, how are adolescents coping with the deluge? The problem is adolescents are struggling with managing the myriad of identity contradictions resulting in increased violence (Goodey, 1997), harassment (Murnen & Smolak, 2000), sexual deviance (Bogaret, 2003), and self-destructive acts (Beautrais, 2003). Understanding the people, places, and associations related to identity development will assist caregivers to distinguish healthy approaches for adolescent development.

Gender identity differences are considered to be interpersonally and environmentally influenced (Pollack, 1995). This is attested to, in part, by the questioning of the meaning of masculinity that typically occurs during periods of social and economic tensions (Kimmel, 2005). Because gender identity is significantly influenced by environmental factors, seeking combinations of diverse experiences would provide an adolescent male with the opportunity to find himself, given time. The purpose of this research article is to discourage the formulation of a complicated psyche for purposes of identity construct and encourage a carefully and individually planned activity schedule that maximizes the opportunity for healthy construct. The theory is that given appropriate diversity in social engagements the adolescent male will discover himself with fewer complications or stereo typical behaviors. This article will attempt to provide the reader with a framework from which to contribute proactively to adolescent male gender identity.

### **Exploring Identities**

In an attempt to clarify the process of identity development, Marcia (1980, p.156) identified three periods of transition: identity diffusion; moratorium; and foreclosure. During the identity diffusion stage an adolescent begins confronting their identity predicament and becomes confused with little or no examination of alternatives and no commitment to a particular identity. The moratorium stage is characterized by an exploration of alternatives without any commitment about self. Foreclosure is marked by a premature commitment to an unsatisfactory identity without any prior consideration of alternatives. True identity is only achieved when alternatives have been fully explored and a commitment made to a particular role and image. It is important to note, however, that adolescents may go through multiple

stages of development, switch from one developmental period to another, and even get trapped in a particular period of growth (Waterman, 1985, p. 73). Each of the periods identified allow adolescents to experiment with different skills, evaluate different outlooks and test different identities in a variety of contexts (Kleiber & Kirshnit, 1991). Multi-factorial influences shape the process and responses to experimentation often determine the next step in discovery (Bracken & Lamprecht, 2003). These influences and responses warrant closer consideration and deeper understanding if caregivers are to identify methods of coping during these sensitive periods.

Continuing research further defines the social contexts most beneficial to identity experimentation. Diverse gender interactions involving structured activity, non-sports related competition, and language rich interactions provide some of the most beneficial opportunities for experimentation (Sommers, 2000, p.128). However, such diverse contexts require careful review and planning in order to progressively build on previous self discoveries.

Bracken and Lamprecht (2003) determined that self-identity is progressive in the sense that behaviors and self-perspectives become increasingly refined within individual domains and differentiated between spheres of influence with age. They cite an infant as an example of limited experiential history or environmental exposure and thus expected to have no definitive self-concept. However, as children are exposed to a variety of settings and experiences they become more adept at differentially evaluating their individual characteristics and behaviors within those settings. Such an evaluation leads to a commitment of identity. However, Simmons, Rosenberg, and Rosenberg (1973) discovered consistent outcomes within similar environmental contexts and somewhat consistent outcomes across different environmental contexts are crucial in adopting an identity. They concluded that self-image diminishes at adolescence because of the mixed messages received during this age resulting from limited diversity in social engagements. Consistent and inconsistent response patterns among domains must then be considered when looking for ways to guide the self-discovery process.

According to Josselson (1980, p.12), exploring identities involves both individuation and social relatedness. Individuation refers to the need to separate self from others and social relatedness refers to the need of belonging to a group. Both needs are influenced by the unique gender roles explored by adolescents (Poole, 1986). In relation to both needs, Goodey (1997) discovered that the uniquely male "fearless façade" is largely responsible for a male adolescent's denial of vulnerability and the display of aggressive acts toward others. The popular understanding of 'maleness' is often reduced to that which is not feminine. As a result, Ghail (1994, p.40) concluded a stable male identity has traditionally fallen into a stereotype of the strong, rational, and sometimes aggressive man and the contexts for experimentation traditionally promote these stereotypes. Boys experimenting with acts of recklessness (denial of vulnerability) or aggression towards others and receive consistent, positive responses are more likely to accept this identity and become part of a group with similar identities (Goodey, 1997). The dynamics of social influence are two-way, meaning the individual persuades the group and the group persuades the individual in identity development.

Goodey (1997) provides a specific example of the two-way sphere of influence on identity development by illustrating a young adolescent male avoiding confrontation with a rowdy group of his peers by crossing the road. The risk-avoidance individual will assign meaning to his action of crossing the road in the context of his own personal history of avoidance and fear assessment. The group will consciously and subconsciously interpret his action in relation to the influence their own masculine status and action as a group and as individuals who make up the group. Of course 'fearlessness' is a difficult task and just one of many roles an adolescent will attempt to play out in his young life. However, its focus on emotional expression gets to the heart of what so many adolescent boys struggle with in their search for identity. Emotional disconnect and the subsequent lack of language for emotional self expression is the result of separation from primary love objects (mothers) during adolescence (Pollack, 1995). This places many adolescent boys in a vulnerable developmental phase.

Following his interviews with boys, Ghail (1994, p. 38) found two themes repeatedly surfacing: first, that boys perceived no safe space in which they could talk about their feelings of vulnerability and, second, boys lacked the emotional language necessary for expressing their feelings. As a result, boys adopt their

own “macho script of cynicism” in order to hide their feelings. Research conducted by Broderick and Korteland (2002) suggested not only are boys hiding their feelings, rather they are expected to avoid such issues. The researchers distributed questionnaires to 205 school age girls and 191 school age boys. A significant number from both genders stated in their answers that males should not direct their attention inwardly toward negative feelings but should distract themselves from emotional problems. Further research suggests boys are doing just that. Studying gendered reminiscence practices, Thorne and McLean (2002) discovered gender differences in the emotional construction of life-threatening events. Evaluation of male narratives of threatening events showed prevalence in expressing tough, action-packed descriptions that were noticeably lacking in compassionate language. Goodey (1997) stated, “herein lies the problem of the hegemonic masculine ideal...boys don’t cry, or at least, they shouldn’t be seen to.” Suppressing emotional expression can have a profound negative effect on discovery of identity. The impact of emotional suppression becomes pointed when examining peer group influences of the male gender.

### **Peer Group Influences**

Examining the impact of the peer group on childhood behavior, Csikszentmihayli, Larson, and Prescott (1977) discovered adolescents spend more time with friends and classmates than with their families or other adults. According to the findings of Sprinthall and Collins (1988, p. 277) peer groups are not randomly assembled but are composed of individuals who share similar values, backgrounds, and interests. Thus, adolescents are most influenced by peers who are experiencing similar identity issues. Deutsch and Gerald (1955) suggested peer groups provide two powerful influences on adolescent thought: informational influence and normative influence. Informational influence refers to knowledge of attitudes, behaviors, and values and the consequences of each in different situations. Normative influence refers to the pressure placed on adolescents to behave in like manner of the group. As a result, peer groups provide instruction, advice, and policing of its members. Implicit rules for behaving within and without the group are typically established. Exploring identities through various roles becomes limited when the group establishes such boundaries. Sociologists refer to this as ‘peer pressure’ and encourage adolescents to break away from negative outcome governance. This provides a strong argument for varied peer group involvement rather than limiting involvement with groups of similar value systems. The perspectives of the peers within a group often prove strong and stereotyped. It is the exposure to restricted stereotypical attitudes that narrows the opportunity for experimentation of individual roles.

Blakemore (2003) examined the influence of collective peer perspective. Children’s beliefs about violating gender norms were studied. Although evaluation of norm violations were not consistently related to age, boys assuming feminine postures in use of toys, hairstyles, and clothing were more negatively looked upon by the peer group. Bogaret (2003) discovered similar beliefs were projected by the smaller peer group entity of siblings. Homosexual men typically have a larger number of older brothers, on average, than do heterosexual men. Bogaret (2003) argues that in these situations an interaction between older bothers and “sex-typing” will occur. When a boy is high in femininity, a number of older brothers may strongly predict a homosexual orientation and react to it. The reaction can make the younger sibling feel even more out of place and influence gravitation toward the predicted orientation. Such studies reinforce the power male-to-male interactions have over identity exploration. Interestingly enough, the influence of peer group on identity does not seem to change when the group contains female members.

Studying the importance of social context in the emotional expression in males, Gray and Heatherington (2003) found there is a significant impact of peer groups on the display of sadness by males. In their trials, males expressed more sadness verbally when their turn followed someone who had expressed sadness than when they followed someone who withheld expression of sadness. This suggested that the expressiveness of others was disinhibiting of the male’s tendency to withhold emotional expression. However, males did not tend to express more sadness in the presence of females than they did in the presence of males. The findings further indicated that for some types of emotional expression it was more important for males to have a male model of expression, emphasizing a stronger emotional identity with the same gender. Nevertheless, such findings highlight the potency of peer group influence on gender construct. Additional research suggests the type of activities groups participate in may influence a male’s exploration of alternative identities as well.

## **Influence of Leisure Activities**

Following their study of adolescent leisure events, Kleiber, Larson, and Csikszentmihayli (1986) determined that activities involving challenge, effort, and concentration are more beneficial to adolescent development than other types. Sommers (2000, p.128) acknowledges these developmental activities as support driven traits characteristic of adolescent males. Shaw, Kleiber, and Caldwell (1995) suggest activities involving challenge, effort, and concentration represent important transitional situations for adolescents that developmentally bridge the gap between childhood play and adult work. The concept of challenge may also imply, through personal involvement, the testing of alternatives. However, traditional leisure activities involving challenge, such as sports, may not provide the varied context necessary for identity exploration.

For some, sports may be perceived as an important transitional activity for adolescents. Sports involve mental and physical challenges, as well as provide an identity based on competence and identification with a peer group (Klieber & Kirshnit, 1991). The identity of 'jock' (dominant, aggressive, win at all costs) for a male is a traditional alternative for some adolescents. However, research findings suggest sports activities play a limited role, at best, in the development of identity for adolescent males. Using a survey and interview data, Kleiber, Larson, and Csikszentmihayli (1986) analyzed the influence of sports on 73 adolescents. For the young men who participated in the study sports and other physical activities did not have an overall beneficial effect on identity development. Eder and Parker (1987) suggest this is so because sports for adolescent males tend to reinforce traditional male gender roles. As a result, sports narrow rather than expand the possibilities for exploration of alternative identities. Adolescents often feel they have to prove themselves to be fearless, dominant, aggressive individuals through sports, rather than feel the freedom to use sports as an exploration of alternative identities (Kleiber, Larson, and Csikszentmihayli, 1986). Sporting activity may be popular among adolescent males because of the greater amount of time available for leisure activities with compared to female counterparts.

Regarding extra-curricular activities, Shaw (1988) discovered males had more weekend time for leisure and were more likely than females to acknowledge free choice of how they use their time for leisure activities. This seems to indicate the power of gender as a force in the prioritizing of resources for leisure activity participation. Kroska (2003) found this to be true while investigating gender differences in the meaning of household chores. Her findings suggested typically a male's proportion of household chores is less than that assumed by female's extending more 'free' time. Garton and Pratt (1987) found adolescent leisure participation and interest was strongly associated with gender stereotypes. The results were fewer restrictions on males for participating in outside activities, definitive ideas of "boy" versus "girl" activities, and lowered amounts of total constraints for males to participate in leisure activities. The lack of gender equality in leisure activity seems to reinforce the traditional male identity of 'dominance' for many young males (Kleiber, Larson, and Csikszentmihayli, 1986). Dominance is a theme that carries over in the leisure activity of television viewing.

Television watching is a leisure activity that fills much time for adolescent males. In a preliminary examination of leisure activity and identity information, Shaw, Kleiber, and Caldwell (1995) identified that males on average spent more time watching television. Ironically, their findings suggested a negative association between television viewing and identity development for males. The interview data collected in the study suggested males find television watching more boring and less involving than other activities. So why spend so much time watching? The answer may be paradoxal, in that television is inundated with traditional stereotyping (Signorielli, 1989), thus the adolescent male retains some identity with most of the male characters, yet they are satiated with the same action-hero roles. Such satiation rarely involves the mental challenge or effort associated with identity development (Shaw, Kleiber, and Cladwell, 1995). Thus, perhaps the most powerful of media inputs has limited affect on male identity development. This cannot be said; however, for one of the influences that consumes a significant amount of adolescent time: the classroom.

## **Influences of the Classroom**

The classroom affords boys with opportunities to express themselves in a variety of ways and to experiment with gender identity without the traditional constraints noted with other influencing environments. Examining teacher to student interactions in the classroom, Sadker and Sadker (1986) found boys receive more teacher reactions of praise, criticism, and remediation than do girls. Baker (1986) corroborated these findings with a study of classroom interaction that revealed males receive more precise teacher comments in terms of scholarship and conduct. Fennema, Walberg, and Marrett (1985) found teachers perspectives of males to be more positive and reinforcing of expressiveness in the classroom, specifically noting males are assumed by teachers to have the ability to achieve socially and academically.

The classroom sets a stage for male gender construct by allowing boys to discuss and experiment with identity, although dominance once again surfaces even in the classroom. Evaluating gender bias in the classroom, Scrimgeour (1993) found boys to be more assertive and visible, dominating classroom interactions as much as 89% of the time. This same study also noted that history curriculum typically included biographies of diverse male characters and classroom discussions of the characters and their roles dominated teacher time. Interestingly enough, Scrimgeour (1993) noted there was no significant difference whether a male or female teacher directed class activities. Boys were encouraged by both genders to be openly expressive. Such unrestricted interaction has led Sadker and Sadker (1985) to conclude the classroom generally positively impacts the development of male gender identity.

However, more recent attempts at deconstructing the classroom have unearthed a common thread that has pervaded the literature reviewed thus far: the need for diversity to enhance role experimentation. Addressing the difficulty of male construct in the classroom Martino (1995) examined the effect of pedagogical approaches to the problem. Straying away from traditional role play, multiple positionality within discourse was encouraged. It was theorized that allowing adolescent males to hypothetically and through critical thinking assume differing roles in both the classroom and the literature would provide greater exploration of alternative identities. The study concluded that a positioning of oneself in differing roles disrupted the traditional stereotypes that lead to the enforcement of normative rules within the classroom. Breaking the 'norm' barrier ultimately provided for greater role experimentation. This conclusion was supported by a more recent classroom analysis of boy's self-perception as literate.

Theorizing that encouragement to critically read discourse given gender options rather than assuming the options presented, Davies (1997) demonstrated boys can adopt a non-stereotypical view of gender. With critical social literacy activities gender becomes a dynamic force that changes with context. The construction of 'male' is recognized and made revisable through positioning within various literary contexts. The struggle toward dominant roles as traditional 'male' are broken and the freedom to enter other non-dominant roles can then be explored. Presenting environments that allow for diverse exploration within the classroom is essential to the promotion of male construct.

## **Conclusion**

Traditional male stereotypes of dominance, aggression, and lack of emotional expression are still present and promoted in some environments such as sports and television. Boys typically spend a significant amount of time in both of these activities; however, they offer little opportunity for gender construct secondary to their emphasis on traditional male expression. Activities requiring challenge, effort, and concentration without the expectation of traditional expression seem to provide greater opportunities for male gender construct. Such diversity in social and academic activity will provide the context for the much needed role experimentation that leads to healthy construct.

Additionally, boys are expected to be more competent in dealing with emotions but lack the language and safe environments for such expressions. The classroom appears to be positively encouraging male emotional expression and discussion of various male roles and identities. While negotiating conflicting messages about manly behavior, particularly expression of vulnerable emotions, caretakers would do well to discuss and de-emphasize the traditional stereotypes that bombard adolescent mindsets. Taking the lead from teachers in the classroom, caretakers can help adolescents critically examine multiple

positioning of gender roles in various social contexts they experience on a daily basis. Such exercises will open the door for gender role exploration.

Dominance is a pervasive theme presented to adolescent males in almost every social context. Through the example of older males, adolescents can learn to find identity without adopting a role of supremacy. Peer groups are influential on male identity development and when guided by mature males can provide opportunity for role experimentation without control of environment or peers. However, caution is needed as mentoring alone offers little change without the varied social contexts need for exploration (Kimmel, 2005). Group involvement should include variables such as: 1) peer groups with and without participants of similar identity; 2) breakaway from groups with negative outcome governance; 3) groups with varied gender participation.

Promotion of gender equality in leisure activity will also help to suppress the notion of assuming a dominant role. Downplaying the traditional stereotypes of dominance, aggression, and emotional inexpressiveness through mature male role-modeling in a variety of social contexts will encourage role experimentation and positively effect male gender construct.

Gender identity differences are considered to be interpersonally and environmentally influenced (Pollack, 1995). If gender identity is significantly influenced by environmental factors then seeking combinations of diverse experiences would provide an adolescent male with the opportunity to explore various roles and in time find himself. Encouraging a carefully and individually planned activity schedule that maximizes the opportunity for healthy construct is advised. Given the appropriate diversity in social engagements the adolescent male will discover himself with fewer complications or stereo typical behaviors.

## References

- Baker, D. (1986). Sex differences in classroom interactions in secondary science. *Journal of Classroom Interaction, 22*, 212-218.
- Beautrais, A. (2003). Suicide and serious attempts in youth: A multiple-group comparison study. *The American Journal of Psychiatry, 160*, 1093-2000.
- Blakemore, J. (2003). Children's beliefs about violating gender norms: Boys shouldn't look like girls, and girls shouldn't act like boys. *Sex Roles, 48*, 411-418.
- Bogaret, A. (2003). Interaction of older bothers and sex-typing in the prediction of sexual orientation in men. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 32*, 129.
- Bracken, B., & Lamprecht, S. (2003). Positive self-concept: An equal opportunity construct. *School Psychology Quarterly, 18*, 103-115.
- Broderick, P. & Korteland, C. (2002). Coping style and depression in early adolescence: Relationships to gender, gender role, and implicit beliefs. *Sex Roles, 46*, 201-214.
- Csikszentmihayli, M., Larson, R., & Prescott, S. (1977). The ecology of adolescent activity and experience, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 6*, 281-294.
- Davies, B. (1997). Constructing and deconstructing masculinities through critical literacy. *Gender and Education, 9*, 9-30.
- Deutsch, M., & Gerald, H. (1955). A study of normative and informational social influences upon individual judgment. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 51*, 629-636.
- Eder, D., & Parker, S. (1987). The cultural production and reproduction of gender: The effect of extracurricular activities on peer-group culture. *Sociology of Education, 60*, 200-213.

- Erikson, E. (1959). Identity and the life cycle: Selected papers. *Psychological Issues, 1*(1), 5-165.
- Fennema, E., Walberg, H., & Marrett, C. (1985). Explaining sex-related differences in mathematics: Theoretical models. *Educational Studies in Mathematics, 16*, 303-320.
- Garton, A., & Pratt, C. (1987). Participation and interest in leisure activities by adolescent school children. *Journal of Adolescence, 10*, 341-351.
- Ghail, M. (1994). The making of men. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Goodey, J. (1997). Boys don't cry. *The British Journal of Criminology, 37*, 401-419.
- Gray, S., & Heatherington, L. (2003). The importance of social context in the facilitation of emotional expression in men. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 22*, 294-306.
- Josselson, R. (1980). Ego development in adolescence. Handbook of adolescent psychology. New York: Wiley.
- Kimmel, M. (2005). Mentoring masculinities: Race and class in the re-construction of gender in the USA and the UK. *Irish Journal of Sociology, 14*, 213-230.
- Kleiber, D., & Kirshnit, C. (1991). Sport involvement and identity formation. Mind, body, maturity: Psychology of sports, exercise, and fitness. New York: Hemisphere.
- Kleiber, D., Larson, R., & Csikszentmihayli, (1986). The experience of leisure in adolescence, *Journal of Leisure Research, 18*, 164-176.
- Kroska, A. (2003). Investigating gender differences in the meaning of household chores and child care, *Journal of Marriage and Family, 65* (2), 456-473.
- Marcia, J. (1980). Identity in adolescence. Handbook of adolescent psychology. New York: Wiley.
- Martino, W. (1995). Deconstructing masculinity in the English classroom: A site for reconstituting gendered subjectivity. *Gender and Education, 7*, 205-220.
- Murnen, S., & Smolak, L. (2000). The experience of sexual harassment among grade-school student: Early socialization of female subordination? *Sex Roles, 43*, 1-17.
- Pollack, William. (1995) Deconstructing Dis-identification: Rethinking psychoanalytic Concepts of male development. *Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy, 12*, 30-45
- Poole, M. (1986). Adolescent leisure activities: Social class, sex and ethnic differences. *Australian Journal of Social Issues, 21* (1), 42-56.
- Sadker, D. & Sadker, M. (1985). Is the O.K. classroom O.K.? *Phi Delta Kappan, 66*, 358-367.
- Sadker, M., & Sadker, D. (1986). Sexism in the classroom: From grade school to graduate school. *Phi Delta Kappan, 68*, 512.
- Scrimgeour, R. (1993). Gender bias in the classroom. *Research in Education, 52*, 15-18.
- Shaw, S. (1988). Gender differences in the definition and perception of household labor. *Family Relations, 37*, 333-337.
- Shaw, S., Kleiber, D., & Caldwell, L. (1995). Leisure and identity formation in male and female adolescents: A preliminary examination. *Journal of Leisure Research, 27*, 245-267.

- Signorielli, N. (1989). Children, television and gender roles. *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*, December, 1-9.
- Simmons, R., Rosenberg, F., & Rosenberg, M. (1973). Disturbance in the self-image at adolescence. *American Sociological Review*, 38, 553-568.
- Sommers, C. (2000). *The war against boys: How misguided feminism is harming our young men*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Sprinthall, N., & Collins, W. (1988). *Adolescent psychology: A developmental view*. New York: Random House.
- Thorne, A., & McLean, K. (2002). Gendered reminiscence practices and self-definition in late adolescence. *Sex Roles*, 46, 267-278.
- Waterman, A. (1985). *Identity in adolescence: Processes and contents*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Wires, J., Barocas, R., & Hollenbeck, A. (1994). Determinants of adolescent identity development: A cross-sequential study of boarding school boys. *Adolescence*, 29(114), 361-378.