
The Effect of Peer Groups on Gender Identity and Expression

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines theoretical and empirical research on how peers teach each other about gender, gender relations, and gender roles. This research is supplemented with vignettes from students, from upper division classes at two public universities, about their childhoods. These reflections on early peer group reveal the ways that peers reinforce normative gender identities and expressions and perpetuate gender stereotypes, male privilege, and gender inequality and oppression.

Keywords: sexism, gender stereotypes, gender roles, peer influence on gender, socialization

INTRODUCTION

Many have argued that the family exerts the most powerful influence on the development of a child's conception of gender, their gender identity and how they express gender (Kaplan, 1991; Lauer & Lauer, 1994; Santrock, 1994; Davidson et al. 2015). However, the peer group becomes consequential as a child's social world extends beyond the immediate family. We shall not for present purposes distinguish between formal groups (like a fraternity, or a freshman class) and informal ones (like a loosely defined set of students who, in a given dormitory in a given year, share a couple of classes and an interest in folk music). We use the term "peer group" to mean two or more individuals whose relationship to one another appears to influence the individuals involved, as used by Newcomb (1962).

Baumeister & Leary, 1995 have argued that humans have a fundamental need to feel connected with others. For children, like adults, this need stimulates friendship and peer group formation. Social identity theory further suggests that peer group membership plays a critical role in self-appraisal, such that the individual is motivated to create and maintain the norms of the group in order to achieve a positive identity (Tajfel, 1972; Tarrant, 2002). It has been posited that this process of socialization leads to a high level conformity amongst peer groups and may be a prominent factor in adolescent risk-taking behavior (Harris, 1995; Stewart-Knox et al., 2005; Ellis & Zabatany, 2007). Social influence has been examined in a number of ways. Friedkin and Cook's (1990) research supports the work of French (1956), both emphasizing the importance of measuring interpersonal influence with the mean opinion of an individual's set of peers. Peer influence as an analytical construction needs to be empirically examined for its effect to be understood. This paper analyzes the peer efforts to influence each other through the reports provided by students.

METHODS

Sixty-five students from two upper division classes (Dhillon, Rabow, Han, Maltz, Moore, 2015) at two different public universities were asked to post their daily experiences with racism, sexism and homophobia to an online class forum. In an effort to promote student dialogue and space for sharing openly, neither the professor nor the class facilitators monitored or moderated the forum. Additional written assignments required students to apply readings to their personal lives. Student web posts and written assignments about on gender and peers form the basis of the reported findings. At the end of the class, after grades had been posted, students were contacted individually to obtain permission for the use of their vignettes. This paper uses twenty-two vignettes that were coded into five categories: peer influence in play activities, the impact of "popularity," race, and sexual identity, and the evaluation of non-conforming behavior as deviant.

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FINDINGS

Peer group influence becomes apparent in preschool when children typically begin separating along gender lines and developing their interests, identities and behavior accordingly. Martin et al. (2013) found "children reinforced each other to exhibit similar levels of engagement in gender-typed activities, thereby amplifying children's tendencies to segregate by sex" (p. 932). In this way children are themselves primary agents in promoting gender-typical play and behavior. Furthermore, the peer group impact on individual definitions of "success," or the desire to achieve and gain positive appraisal from others, tends to follow conventional gender roles.

PLAY ACTIVITIES: EARLY YEARS

Etaugh and Liss (1992) highlight children's gender-typed play activities and the reinforcement of same-gender play partners. A young man describes strong preferences among peer groups for regarding for gender-conforming play activities amongst peers..

Each gender had a set of rules. Girls wore pink and red, bright colors, while boys wore black and blue, dark colors. Girls played house, colored, and did their hair, while boys played sports, had action figures, and loved cars and trucks... We would think that girls are weak and bad at sports, so when we played in recess we would not let them play with us. We never allowed the girls to play tether ball or kickball.

Another young man confirms the strict "rule" status of preferences in schoolyard play.

In elementary school, when playing soccer during recess, I remember always selecting the boys to be on my team, and stating 'girls cannot run as fast', thus supporting the mentality and ideology that women are weaker when it comes to playing sports.

Both young men appear to have internalized gender-differences in play to the extent that they enact what they believe to be appropriate behavior for their identified gender, and also enforce others' adherence. In this way, gender-segregated play supports a binary conception of gender roles and belief schemas (Chase, 2008).

A young woman recalls her play activities at school and in her neighborhood.

In elementary school, girls were friends and played with girls and boys were friends and played with boys. We played games like jacks or hopscotch and did dances and cheerleading routines. Boys played basketball or kickball and sports like that. Outside of school in the neighborhood I lived in, the boys all had BMX bikes and would race them. I remember that seeming like a very 'boy' thing to do. The girls would say 'ready, set, go' for the boys to race, just like the girls would do in the movie 'Grease'. It seemed like something a pretty girl would do for boys.

This vignette highlights a pattern that continues into adolescence and beyond. Girls take on supportive roles and remain on the sidelines, while boys are involved in the main action of play activity.

In the following a young woman describes her self-socialization. She is keenly aware of the impact her peers changing expectations have had on her choice in music, television shows, and play activities, despite her actual preferences which remained non-normative.

If I wanted to be a good girl and be seen as a good girl by others then I had to dress a certain way. I had to be, act, and even listen to certain music and even play with others a certain way. Towards the end of the third grade, I no longer watched wrestling shows, I no longer chased my friends and played in the dirt. If I played outside, I played picnic or Barbies with my neighbor on my front lawn, or we would ride our bikes to the park and back. I was somewhat upset that I could no longer play the way I wanted to. Other girls at my school still played and chased each other in the dirt. I told them I couldn't play anymore. So we changed our way of playing, we still wrestled just not in the dirt. It was either in the grass or bark. I still had to be careful not to stain my clothes and it just wasn't as fun as before. Eventually the school changed its school ground policies and the kids could not play so "rough" because they would get hurt. I guess the institution stepping in helped ease my playing transition from "rough" and "boy-like" to playing like an actual "lady" with Barbies and picnics.

Her desire to be a "good girl" motivates self-socialization, which Harris (1995) describes as a common source of conformity among young women.

HIGH SCHOOL YEARS

Play, especially sex-segregated play continues in high school. One student recalls how extracurricular activities at her high school were assigned masculine and feminine properties restricting participation to those of the "appropriate" gender.

My peers also taught me what activities were acceptable for girls to participate in and which ones were not. High contact sports such as football, basketball, soccer, were predominantly played by boys. Girls predominately played sports such as track & field and swimming.

Formal social clubs also emphasized segregation. .

I ran track but I also participated in several different clubs at school. The clubs had a gender preference. The modeling and book clubs were for females and clubs which required intense physical exertion like the weightlifting club were for boys.

College

Peers continue to influence on gender behavior in college. A young woman describes her friends' reaction to her choice of sporting activity.

In my freshman and sophomore years, I was heavily involved in the UCLA Taekwondo sports club. I went to practices two to three times a week. At practices, I was either doing high intensity drills or participating in sparring matches, both of which required a lot of leg activity. As a result of my taekwondo training, my body became more toned and muscular, particularly my legs. Even though my weight increased as a result of the increased muscle mass, I was pretty proud of my athletic physique then. It made me feel strong and independent. However, I didn't always feel comfortable in clothes... On top of my insecurity with my outfits, my friends started to call me "Jude the Dude" once they found out that I was involved in taekwondo. At first, I flaunted it, laughing and going along with the joke. In fact, I bolstered that image of myself by jokingly threatening to beat up my guy friends. Inadvertently, I perpetuated the tough girl image, but my friends did not realize that the more I heard the nickname, the harder the blow to my self-esteem. The nickname eventually got to me because others exaggerated my "manliness" which wasn't really how I saw myself. I saw myself as a strong-willed person with a purpose, and I wanted others to perceive me in the same way. Instead, when they called me "Jude the Dude," I felt that they only saw me as a girl whose appetite and competitiveness rivals that of a guy, and I became a source of amusement and ridicule.

She clearly describes how negative attention from her peers led her to give up an activity she enjoyed as her participation and the impact it had on her body became the focus of peer "amusement and ridicule." She concludes that this experience set in motion a pattern of critiquing her self and being self-conscious about her appearance.

In my junior year, I had completely quit taekwondo. At that time, I lived with about eight other Korean girls, and they would discuss the parts of their bodies there were unsatisfied with. Amongst the ideal parts they desired included a narrow waist, slender arms, a bigger butt, larger breasts (or sometimes smaller breasts if they were too large), rounder eyes, plumper lips, flawless skin, and on and on and on. They brought up these topics often enough that I started to question whether my body fit this ideal image. And naturally, I started to fret about these things along with them.

POPULARITY

Popularity "contests" among peers has become a well-known phenomenon during the high school years. Gender roles and stereotypes play a key role in determining a student's status among their peers; both boys and girls believe that popularity is central to being likeable and successful individuals. However there appear distinct differences in how popularity is achieved and expressed by male and female students. While Adler, Kless & Adler (1992) note for young men, success and social

standing are heavily determined by "coolness", "toughness", "athletic ability", "social skills" and "success in cross-gender relationships", while for young women, "parents socio-economic status and their own physical appearance, social skills, and academic success" are crucial (p. 169). One female student recalls the importance of physical attractiveness,

I was taught all the acceptable and unacceptable ways to be a girl. According to my peers, being an acceptable girl meant always having your hair done, wearing makeup at all times, hiking your skirt up so the boys in class noticed you, and not being academically successful in the classroom. Being admired and looked at by boys was much more important than getting good grades.

While Adler, Kless and Adler found that academic success was related to popularity among girls, we find many female students perceived academic success as a liability. Previous work by Kamorovsky (1946; 1973) documented a practice of self-limiting among young women, whereby they did not disclose their GPA, and would intentionally lose to their male dates at games such as pool. The following vignette illustrates a more contemporary censure and suggests that this practice is still motivated by a desire for male approval.

I didn't feel comfortable showing them that I was smart and capable. The boys in high school didn't ask the nerds out on dates, they asked the popular girls. I sought so desperately to be the girl they wanted me to be.

Teacher's assumptions about gender-differences in academic capability also shape how gender plays out in the classroom, and likely has a significant impact on student learning (Payne & Rabow, 2015). The following vignette reveals how a teacher's belief that this female student was inherently less capable than male students when it came to math impacts the student.

"When I was 15 years old, in my math class, I did not understand a problem. My teacher was helping me at my desk. There was this kid that was sitting in back of me and I heard him say "it's because she's a girl." From that point on I knew there was a difference and I knew that boys knew there was a difference. What was more heartbreaking was that after the boys said that, the teacher, who was a male, turned to the boy and said, "It's not her fault and mind your own business!"

Another young woman sums up this double standard when she describes men being rewarded for being "active" while women must be physically appealing and remain "passive" to be appreciated.

A man must do, but a woman must be. If you want to make a woman like you, you have to show off the things you have done or are doing or know. That's how you impress a girl. If I want to impress a guy, I just have to look pretty. Nothing I do matters.

Clothing

Clothing plays an important role in gender expression amongst peers. Perceptions of appropriate masculine or feminine styles of dress and notions of what certain items reveal about an individual's gender identity individual choices and dictate how one is seen by peers. Particular colors, patterns, styles are often one of the first ways that a child's gender is signified to the world. Beyond the traditional pink and blues in early childhood, as children grow into adolescence dress is increasingly perceived as a form of self-expression. In this sense clothing is often considered a primary source of gender expression. Gender-conforming standards of dress dictate what kind of male or female a person is, and such, as one student explains, how a person should be perceived and treated by their peers.

I used to think what almost every guy I've ever known has thought: that girls wearing skimpy clothes are just doing it so they can get attention from guys, attention meaning sexual advances or groping. I used to hi-five my friends when they would perform some of these acts. This gave them support to actually perform groping, catcalls, and other inappropriate behavior. It was a common occurrence among my male friends to "cop-a-feel," meaning quickly grope a woman, at concerts, clubs, and other places where it could be done anonymously. I didn't think about the women at all. They were just objects.

Those who do not conform to prescribed standards of dress are frequently deemed deviants by their peers. A young man provides his reaction when a male peer comes to school wearing a shirt that his classmates consider inappropriate for his gender.

I spent most of my time with my older brother and male cousins who were always saying that a man should not care too much for his outer appearance. I do not remember anything specific that they said to me, but I know now that that I must have had strong beliefs of how boys should dress. In high school when a male classmate wore a pink shirt to school, I joined in with my friends and called him a fag.

Bodies

Concern about how one's body is perceived by peers of the same or different gender begins early on. Parents and the media also play important roles in shaping beauty standards but peers often play a crucial role in enforcing them. The impact of how peers respond to body shapes and sizes can lead individuals to develop lifelong impressions of themselves, patterns of self-evaluation and behavioral responses that significantly influence identity and expression.

Feeling insecure about my body has been an on-going struggle for decades. [T]he dissatisfaction that I had with the size of my stomach began when I was a little girl. I remember being in the 3rd grade comparing my body size to my best girlfriend who was much skinnier than I. I remember in the 4th grade always wearing a t-shirt in the pool with friends. I remember in the 5th grade I began sucking in my stomach all day at school so that no one would think that I had a pudgy stomach. I remember in the 6th grade I began wearing pants that I could pull up high over my waist to conceal my stomach or would hold in my tummy.

Another woman recalls an early memory of a female friend who was teased for having larger breasts than her peers.

I remember in the fourth grade there was this girl named Jessica. Jessica was not called a 'slut' because she was a cheerleader but because she had fully developed bust. How do fourth grade boys come up with these ideas to put down girls? Why is it that something that is unique to women seen as something unnatural? Why should this young girl be picked on for her body type? She was accused of stuffing her bra; I suppose that was the root of the negative connotation, even though I do not believe she did so. Truth be told, starting in the sixth grade I knew at least one girl every year at school that stuffed their bras. One incident specifically, there was this girl named Christine who got caught by a classmate stuffing. To defend herself, she began telling the whole class that she had to put toilet paper in her bra because her nipples bled. It is crazy the pressure that women go through that they feel the need to do things like this.

Though bodies are developing at different rates, comparisons can be acutely painful at this stage and result in harmful attempts to achieve acceptance. One young woman shares her personal struggle with an eating disorder that developed after peers made negative remarks about her "curves."

I grew up in Colorado. The suburb was predominately a "white neighborhood." I actually just looked at the stats and 90% of the people who live there are white. 5% are Hispanic and 1% are black. Even though I'm Armenian, I look nothing like it and just look like the typical "white girl." Well in 7th grade, I started realizing that I didn't look like a typical white girl. All the other girls were very tiny and at the time and had no curves. C'mon, were 12/13 years old, majority of girls that age don't. Well, my Armenian genes kicked into gear and BAM, I had suddenly had the body of a grown woman. I HATED it. I started wear huge sweaters to try to cover myself. I hated that all the other white girls had small bodies. I hated that I stood out. I'd walk into a class and comments would get thrown at my face for my body. Even though that was ten years ago, I still remember the name of the guy who kept commenting on my figure. I hated my body so much that I developed an eating disorder. I lost close to thirty pounds and weighed around 100 pounds. Being almost five foot and three inches, that is a bit low. It took me awhile to overcome that.

While female bodies are often explicitly the subject of critique and praise, young men also experience concerns about their bodies and are sensitive to how they are perceived by their peers.

When I was younger I often recall being ridiculed because I was overweight. An instant that stands out to me is during Christmas season, when I was nine-years old, my cousin teased me for being fat. As the night was coming to an end and we were getting ready to go to sleep, I decided to take off my [shirt]. I like sleeping shirtless. However, instead of going to be right

away, I decided to go out of my room, and into the kitchen, where all of the older cousins were at. As I went into the kitchen, I will never forget one of my girl cousins laugh at me and say "look how fat he is." It has contributed to making me insecure about my body image. Even as I have gotten older, I am still insecure about my body, which is why I try to go to the gym every day. Even though I exercise daily, I am not happy with my body image. I always feel like there is room for improvement.

While all the peer influences that we have described probably endure into adulthood, it would seem body image can be the most consequential.

Race

As the young Armenian woman observed, gendered standards of beauty are often also racialized. While Craig (2006) has argued that there should be more than one standard of beauty, other than the single paradigm of Western beauty, our student's vignettes reveal persistent standards that allow for very little variation. This paradigm emphasizes that perceived beauty not only facilitates recognition, especially when the beauty is associated with Whiteness (Cross, Cross & Daly, 1971).

So how does race enter into peer group dynamics and interactions? Tatum (2003) found that prejudicial treatment by white peers and teachers brought African-American peers together. In this study, an African-American student describes how a white-dominated peer group led to her social withdrawal.

When I left my mixed racial school and entered a predominantly white school, I realized what was considered to be attractive as a woman was to be blonde, with lots of hair, and thin. As an African-American, I knew I wouldn't fit into this mold so I did not really even try. I felt defeated.

This young woman's experience clearly illustrates the powerful impact peers can have on one's view of oneself, and suggests that the effect may be heightened by other factors such as race.

LGBTQ Youth

While some LGBTQ youth may be evaluated as potential members of the "peer group," those who display behavior or clothing that sets them apart are negatively sanctioned. Furthermore, another form of negative reinforcement includes peers calling other male peers homophobic epithets. Poteat, O'Dwyer & Mereish (2012) describe this name-calling as a common form of maltreatment for LGBTQ youth as well as heterosexual youth.

Adolescents who are called and hear homophobic epithets at school are often bullied and victimized, resulting in a diminished sense of belonging at school. Poteat et al. suggest that there may be long-term effects for mental health from this kind of bullying.

Social reinforcement applied by peers can ensure that individuals who conform to standards also act to enforce these standards on others more forcefully (Brown, Clasen & Eicher, 1986). A male student describes how being teased for not being masculine enough led him to become homophobic.

I remember I couldn't say I liked coloring when I was a child, because my friends would say that it was for girls. They would tease me and call me names, or think that I was homosexual. My peers, and friends, would not refrain from calling me homosexual if I liked something out of the norm of what males were supposed to like. This would happen with movies, shows, and even colors. If a color I liked wasn't a manly color, a gay joke directed at me was sure to follow. My friends not only helped give me guidelines to gender, they also made me homophobic for most of my adolescent years.

GENDER ATYPICAL BEHAVIOR

Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews & Patterson (1996) coined the term *deviancy training* to explain peers positive reinforcement of delinquent behavior. They found that delinquent friends reacted to rule breaking by laughing, a positive reinforcement, whereas non-delinquent friends were less inclined to respond to rule-breaking, but more inclined to respond positively to prosocial talk. Ewing Lee et al. (2010) describe how children's peers reinforce gender typical behavior through the practice of

exclusion and maltreatment when peers exhibit gender atypical behaviors. This student was taught as a young child that peers did not accept gender atypical interests,

I was the outsider because I wasn't interested in boys. My grandma always emphasized how important education was and how lucky I was to be able to attend a private school and so I focused on my studies. The girls in my class recognized my self-motivation when I raised my hand, took notes, turned in my homework on time, and asked the teacher questions. My dedication to being academically successful led me to be an outcast. I was teased, bullied, and labeled a "loser" by most of the girls in my class.

Another student explains that her peers singled her out for her gender atypical interests,

Throughout grade school I was often referred to as being a "tomboy". I received lots of criticism from the other girls for not being very "lady-like" and I was always told that I couldn't "play." I was a girl who had almost no girl friends, I just could not fit in with them.

Ewing and Lee (2010) found that peer harassment is effective in decreasing gender atypical behavior. In the following vignette a young woman describes feeling pressure from peers beginning in pre-school.

Once I started pre-school, I began to learn the "differences" between boys and girls. I remember playing Mario Brothers with a few of my friends at school. While we didn't have the actual video game console to play on, we would instead act out the characters and pretend we were actually in the video game. Despite my continued protest, I always had to be Princess. I would even cry on some days and demand to be Luigi, or even Bowser. But the kids always said that because I was a girl, I had to play Princess. I was kind of a tomboy and loved to climb trees and the monkey bars, but the other kids would tell me that princess just gets chased and waits for Mario or Luigi to save her and I so even my playing style was criticized as it apparently was not very feminine. When I started kindergarten, I faced the same dilemma.

She continued to feel pressured to conform, but she resists and continues to pursue her interests and engage in gender atypical activities. She appears to have a clear understanding of the double standard that was applied to her and her male peers.

I wanted to run around and play flag football, knock someone out in dodgeball and play fight with swords, not get chased by the boys. I was teased for my forever scraped and bruised knees and shins and told that I wouldn't look very pretty in dresses with scars on my legs. Guess what? I have a story for every scar and dent in my shin and I don't regret a single minute of fun I had getting them...but, sometimes I still can't help but think my legs would look "nicer" if they weren't so scarred up. I know that's just social pressure whispering in my ear because if I was a man, my battle scars would not be a nuisance, they'd just be "cool" instead.

CONCLUSION

The research on the role of peers in shaping gender identity and expression and the student vignettes cited in this paper suggest that peers groups should be considered a primary influence on gender construction among children and adolescents. Peer group influence begins in preschool and continues as children progress through school and expand their social world. This influence reinforces activities involved in play, academic success, popularity, body image, and dress and continues throughout the life cycle. Our research documents the powerful effects of peer groups on gender construction and reinforcing gender roles. Our research also indicates that some individuals can resist the influence of peer group norms and further research by Thorne (1993) has documented how schools can inhibit gender stereotypical behavior and attitudes in their students. The ways in which minority in youth might have their own standards of gender appropriate behavior deserves the attention of researchers

who want to understand the dynamic intersection of race and gender. Given increased public awareness and support for LGBTQ youth, further research should be conducted to determine whether this is having an effect on conceptions of gender more broadly.

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