

A Study on the Influence of Family Environment on Adolescents' Gender Identity

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Abstract. Young people in today's gender phenomenon demonstrate a tendency for diversity, as gender is becoming seen to be more complex than a binary system of male or female today. At the same time, especially in China, more and more adolescents are facing a gender identity crisis, which may lead to life struggles and mental health problems. Speaking of influential factors, family environment plays a crucial role in adolescents' gender development. Therefore, the article is founded on existing studies and makes an analysis of the influential factors in terms of subjective family environment on adolescents' gender identity. According to the analysis, parental gender stereotypes, parenting styles, and the role of fathers are three main factors affecting adolescents' gender identity. Based on the results, three suggestions, including bisexual education, sufficient understanding and support and a healthy family relationship, are given as follows. Parents should take some active actions to promote their children's gender awareness.

Keywords: Gender identity, family environment, adolescent, bisexual education.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the subject of 'gender' has been more and more popular and has sparked a lot of discussion. Boys with femininity and girls with masculinity can be seen more frequently both on social media and in real life, which also gains much attention among adolescents. When it comes to gender, there are many terms today, for instance, male, female, transgender, and genderqueer.

According to Erikson's psychosocial developmental theory of personality, self-identification is an important sign of adolescent personality maturity. If an individual's self-identity crisis in this period is not solved, he or she will be lost and stagnate on the path of growth. Therefore, self-identification is the main task of adolescent psychological development, and gender identity is an important part of adolescents' self-identity.

Gender has always been a complicated topic. Lots of research has been conducted on gender identity from home and abroad and from past to present. Most of the studies analyze and integrate various factors on adolescents' gender identity, including biological factors, family environment and social environment, while fewer studies focus solely on the family environment. However, family plays a vital role in the development of adolescents. The family context is crucial for gender development, providing the first gender-related experiences that children incorporate into their gender concepts (Bem, 1981). Additionally, compared to biological and social factors, the family environment is the easiest one for researchers to appeal to parents to make improvements.

Therefore, this article will be based on previous studies and make an analysis of the influential factors in terms of family environment on adolescents' gender identity, thus contributing to further gender studies and providing some suggestions for parents to better understand and support their children.

2. Definitions

2.1. Gender Identity

Compared to sex identity, gender identity has social attributes. Sex refers to the anatomical physical differences of an organism, while gender refers to the socio-culturally constructed

understanding of the differences between men and women, as well as the socio-culturally constructed characteristics and behaviors that belong to the male and female groups [1].

According to Joanna Martin and Julie A. Hadwin, gender identity reflects a socially constructed expectation that can vary across development, cultures, and communities. It captures a person's inherent sense of being a boy/man or masculine, being a girl/woman or feminine, or a gender experience that may change over time or fall outside of the binary (e.g., agender, gender fluid or non-binary) [2].

To sum up, gender identity includes individual comprehension and whether he/she accepts or not to be a traditional male or female in society.

2.2. Family Environment

According to Chinese researchers, the family environment is divided into subjective and objective. The former include parent-child relationships, levels of family happiness, parent-child communication, etc. The latter includes some objective elements, such as parents' jobs, levels of education and financial condition. According to the author's research methodology and present studies, this article will mainly focus on the subjective family environment.

2.3. Adolescence

From the perspective of Biology, adolescence refers to the period of initial reproductive capacity marked by the maturation of the reproductive organs and the development of secondary sexual characteristics. At the same time, adolescence also refers to the transition from childhood to adulthood, which is a key stage in the rapid growth and development of the human body, as well as the second peak of growth and development in life after infancy. The exact age of adolescence varies according to time and place, and the general range is from 10 to 20 years old [3].

3. Analysis

3.1. Parental Gender Stereotypes

Parents' attitudes and perceptions of gender roles subtly influence their children's perceptions of gender roles [4], thus affecting children's gender identity further. It is acknowledged that favoring boys over girls still exists in today's Chinese society. In Wang Jin's research regarding female adolescents' gender identity, each interviewee addressed the topic of patriarchy to varying degrees [5].

Being exposed to an environment where parents hold the view that males are better than females, children's perceptions of gender will be largely influenced. In *Inferiority and Beyond*, Adler mentions that favoritism and patriarchy in the family will inevitably cause the child to have great doubts about himself and to feel depressed from time to time [5]. Especially for girls, they would be less likely to accept their original gender because, hearing from their parents, boys can bring more benefits to the family than girls.

According to Wang Jin's research, to varying degrees, each of the interviewees addressed the topic of patriarchy. Girls, regardless of the level of gender role differentiation, mentioned the idea of wanting to have more masculine qualities [5], which indicates that they are not satisfied with their gender and are not willing to accept their gender at the moment.

In addition, parents' choices of names, toys, clothing, stories, etc., for their children generally hide traditional gender differences. The gender-specific choices made by parents in the upbringing of their children often leave an indelible imprint on their children's gender formation [6]. For example, parents choose toys for boys that require more hands-on skills, such as cars, airplanes, guns, and other tools and instruments. Parents usually encourage boys to be independent and self-reliant and provide less assistance to boys; on the other hand, girls receive toys such as dolls and utensils, and their parents are more protective of them and provide more assistance to them as they grow up [6].

However, gender formation does not equal gender identity; as long as there exists a conflict between children's perceptions of stereotypical gender and their own feelings of gender, it will bring about confusion and suffering.

3.2. Parenting Styles

According to some existing studies, adolescents' gender identity is associated with parenting ways and parenting styles. Masculinity was positively associated with fathers' emotional warmth and understanding and negatively associated with fathers' overprotectiveness; femininity was positively associated with fathers' over interference, fathers' overprotectiveness, and mothers' favoritism, and negatively associated with mothers' punishments and harshness [7].

Yi-Ching Lin and Robert E Billingham (2014) conducted research on 230 undergraduate students, and they classified parenting styles into authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive types. The result showed that maternal and paternal authoritativeness correlated with participants' femininity, and for both parents, the relationship was observed to be stronger in males than females; paternal authoritativeness was significantly associated with androgyny [8].

3.3. The Important Role of Father

In real life, some fathers do not have enough participation in the process of child-rearing, and the role of fathers is not clear enough, which may lead to the disharmony of the parent-child relationship between fathers and their children. With the in-depth study of parenting education and family system theory, both in the field of research and in the field of practice, fathers have begun to emphasize the function of fathers, that is, the role played by fathers in the process of children's growth and education [5].

Speaking of girls, the father-daughter relationship of bisexual girls is two-way, stable and balanced with a more equal relationship. The father-daughter relationship of girls with masculinity has a lack of communication and interaction [5].

Speaking of boys, in Yang's study regarding gender identity measurement and interpretation phenomenological analysis, one interviewee's father was a man who was not close to family members, old-fashioned, chauvinistic, gambled, and abused her mother, and the interviewee's rejection of her father as a child was accompanied by a rejection of the "masculine upbringing" that her father brought with him, as well as a rejection of the male gender identity [1]. Hence, the father-child relationship serves as an important part of adolescents' self-development and is closely related to children's gender identity.

4. Suggestions

4.1. Bisexual Education

Bem introduced the concept of androgyny in gender base model theory (1974), a concept suggesting that individuals with androgyny are more psychologically healthy than other gender-differentiated individuals [5].

The theory of androgyny emphasizes that an individual combines the best traits of both males and females, making up for his or her own shortcomings and complementing his or her own strengths and that such a high level of integration of the two genders is regarded as the best model of an individual's mental health personality. [9]

Firstly, the theory of androgyny emphasizes that bisexual education is not the same as gender-free education and that it cannot completely ignore or downplay individual gender differences in order to carry out non-discriminatory gender education; rather, it is necessary to carry out discriminatory and targeted gender education on the basis of respecting the individual's own biological gender differences [10].

Secondly, the theory of androgyny emphasizes that bisexual education is not just about cultivating masculinity in women or femininity in men, which may seem to be an organic combination of

femininity and masculinity, but in essence, it is just a variant of the traditional stereotypes, and it does not bring out the real meaning of "bisexual" education [10].

Therefore, it is vital for parents to cultivate children's androgynous cognition, especially for non-only children with non-only gender families. Parents should cultivate children's comprehensive understanding of their genders rather than exacerbating gender stereotypes; for example, dolls are not only privileged for girls, but boys are free to cry. Nothing is exclusive to one gender, ranging from personal characteristics to career choices.

On this basis, parents should help children to find out their own advantages of their genders, strengthen their self-confidence and encourage children of different sexes to learn from each other, thereby helping them to form a comprehensive cognition of both gender qualities, promoting their androgyny development, as non-binary gender identity is ambiguous, fluid, revolutionary, defiant, pluralistic, and inclusive, and these factors are positive for the mental health of individuals [1].

4.2. Give Sufficient Understanding and Support

In the era of diversity and change, young people experience both traditional and avant-garde gender education. On the one hand, there are deep-rooted notions of the difference between men and women, while on the other hand, there are examples of people who have broken traditional gender norms. This cultural conflict affects the formation of gender identity and gender roles among contemporary young people, and more and more individuals are experiencing gender identity crises and their associated psychological distress, while some minorities are facing serious social exclusion and mental health problems in the midst of this conflict, making it difficult for them to find professional psychological assistance [1]. Therefore, an easier way for them to find support is from family. Although the reason for their gender identity crises may come from the family itself, parents still have a chance to fix the problem. Parents should let children know that every personality they are born with is reasonable, encouraging children to accept themselves rather than blaming them.

Moreover, with the rapid development of the internet, parents should take the initiative to learn gender knowledge online, being more open-minded and creating a harmonious family environment for children for their well-rounded gender development.

4.3. Keep Healthy Family Relationship

The first is to keep a healthy parent-child relationship. The parent-child relationship is inherent and the most important interpersonal relationship in early childhood, and it is of unparalleled importance to children's psychological development [11]. Therefore, keeping regular conversations with children and being more equal and patient makes children realize that they are cared for and understood.

Secondly, pay attention to the father-child relationship. In recent years, a growing body of research has shown that traditional fatherhood overlooks the importance of fathers' active involvement in their children's upbringing, especially with regard to adolescent mental health problems, and an increasing number of studies have begun to reevaluate the place of fathers' roles in the family structure. Moreover, statistics show that in China, fathers spend far less time accompanying their children than mothers. Fathers are absent most of the time during the process of educating their children [5].

Therefore, fathers need to be more involved in participating in children's education processes and learn how to improve and change their education mode as children grow, which requires adapting to different stages of adolescents' development, hearing their inner voice sincerely and establishing a positive impression in children's minds.

5. Conclusion

According to previous studies, parental gender stereotypes, parenting style, and the role of the father will have an influence on adolescents' gender identity. Parents' stereotypical concept of gender, their unbalanced parenting style and the absence of a father lead to adolescents' trouble in identifying

their genders and unhealthy psychological status. However, the reverse is true for adolescents as well. The gender identity problem can be avoided by parents' support, by a closer family relationship and by cultivating adolescents' androgynous cognition.

The author's study focuses on adolescents' gender identity under the family context, integrating three elements affecting adolescents' gender identity from existing studies, therefore providing some possible enlightenment for future researchers.

However, this article is mainly in the context of Chinese society. Therefore, there could be some limitations and specificities, for instance, different cultures and histories. The author hopes future researchers could pay attention to a wide range of regions, thus concluding some general results of the influence of family environment on adolescents' gender identity.

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