



GENDER IDENTITY, SELF ACCEPTANCE AND SEXUALITY AMONG ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a period of major biological and psychological developments. An adolescent develops a gender identity of being a male or a female. Gender identity is a fundamental identity which refers to the extent, a person experience oneself to be like others of one's gender. Male and female adolescent experience their gender identity differently due to differences in rearing and socializing practices. An adolescent require some effort to establish personal identity. By evaluating one's personal assets and liabilities and using them to achieve a clearer concept of who one is and who one wants to be and become, is required. Gender and sexuality are key aspects of identity. Puberty is reached during adolescence, which is a landmark for sexuality. Genetic factors determine the biological sex and endocrinal factors that produce sexual hormones in the body are responsible for interest in sexual relationship. The personality and temperament of an adolescent is responsible for the sexual attitude. Today, media has a significant role in deciding the attitude and perception of sexuality among adolescents.

Key words : Adolescence, Gender, Identity, Self, Puberty, Sexuality.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence, derived from the Latin word 'adolescere' means 'to grow up'. It is a critical period of growth and development. An adolescent is supposed to be a trapeze artist in the circus, experiencing a vigorous motion between two landings, one representing childhood



and the other adulthood. In between these two, lies the period of adolescence which still bears some resemblance to childhood but is beginning to approach maturity. Adolescents, at this stage, do not feel the same way about themselves as they used to feel earlier. So, they question their identity, by asking themselves, 'who am I?' They feel that it is important to have a sense of self that is stable even through it experiences change. Identity formation is a lifelong process, largely unconscious to the individual. The identity formation process continues through selection and assimilation of childhood identifications, which depend upon parental, peer and societal identification of children, as important persons. The community both nods and give recognition to newly emerging individuals.

Developmental psychologists like, Erikson (1968), Marcia (1966), Marcia et al (1993) have demonstrated that adolescence is an important period for personal identity formation. Personal identity includes values, principles and roles an individual has adopted as his or her own. The variation in styles through which this process evolves, leads to differences in identity development and identity outcome. Recently, the focus on identity development has been expanded and directed to the role of context (Adams & Marshall, 1996 ; Yoder, 2000). Here, identity development is seen as an individual as well as a social process at which identity shapes and is shaped by the surrounding milieu. Also, the role of gender and possible gender differences regarding identity structure, the importance of identity domains and the process of identity formation, have been examined (Kroger, 1997). Little evidence for gender differences was observed (Kroger, 1997). Adolescence is seen as a period of normative crisis, increased conflict and fluctuation in ego strength. Thus an adolescent become the victim of an identity consciousness which is basic to self consciousness of youth. Establishing a sense of personal identity is much helpful in avoiding the dangers of role diffusion and identity diffusion. An adolescent can establish personal identity by making some serious effort. Evaluative personal assets and liabilities and learning to use them to achieve a clearer concept of who one is and what one wants to be and become is helpful in this direction. During adolescence, there must be an integration of all converging identity elements and a resolution of all major conflicts in order to attain a firm personal identity. When an adolescent do not question his or her identity and has subordinated childhood identity, a new self identity emerges (Erikson, 1950) Erikson acknowledges that finding an



acceptable identity is much more difficult during adolescence because most of the time the older generation is no longer able to provide adequate role models for the younger generation.

Adolescents, while introspecting, experimenting and discussing through their developmental period, sometimes feel self-doubt and ask questions like, 'Where am I going?' 'What is my status?', 'What will I become?' Though this stage of self-doubt is a temporary one but it marks a turning point. An adolescent who fails in the search of identity, experiences self-doubt, role diffusion and role-confusion. Such an adolescent may indulge in a self-destructive, one-sided preoccupation or activity. Other people opinions may matter a lot to the person or he or she may turn to the other extreme of no longer caring what others think. Such person may turn to alcoholism or drug addiction in order to relieve anxiety created by role-diffusion. Erikson (1959) emphasized that whereas the identity crisis is most pronounced at adolescence, other periods of life may demand redefining of one's ego identity. As, leaving home, getting married, becoming parents or change in occupations. If a person has managed adolescent identity crisis successfully, he would be able to cope with these identity changes. An adolescent's relations with parents are extremely important, since, they serve as roles models for identification. A healthy ego identity is developed through warm concern and interest on the part of parents, through loving, firm and consistent discipline and through induction rather than coercion.

Gender Identity

Young people are both the creators and casualties of changing times, including issue of gender and sexuality. Gender and sexuality are not biologically fixed categories of identity for all time and place, rather, their meaning and expression constantly change depending on the context (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). An infant is not aware about gender, but, as early as 3 yrs. of age, the child acknowledges its gender. Self-awareness about sexuality (gender identity), evolves during the childhood (Brown, 2000) Adolescence is a phase of transition during which major development of sexuality takes place. Puberty is a major landmark in the development of sexuality. Puberty changes differ in both genders-male & female. On an average, females experience, these changes 12-18 months earlier than males. Time of



attaining maturity can have a different effect on adolescent development. Boys, who attain early maturity, seem to be more confident and independent but are more aggressive too due to surge in hormones. Moreover, they are more likely to be sexually active and participate in risky behaviour. (Garn, 1992 ; Susman Dorn & Schiefelbein, 2003). Girls who attain early maturity become very conscious, insecure and may develop eating disorders. A research conducted in U.S., reveals that during childhood, boys as compared to girls face negative health outcome as aggressive behaviour and depression whereas, the girls are more likely to face the higher risk of negative health outcomes. (Mangrulkar et. al, 2001). Moreover, adolescent, girls who face more gender discrimination, poverty and abuse, become more vulnerable to the adverse outcomes. Differences in male and female personalities and identities in different culture are due to differences in rearing and socialization processes.

A very fundamental identity, however is one's gender identity. Gender identity refers to the extent to which a person experiences oneself to be like others of one's gender. One's sense of being male or female largely determines, how people view them and this provides an important basis for their interaction with others. Over the years, the term gender identity and gender roles have been used in different ways. Gender role refers to behaviours, attitudes and personality traits which within a given society and historical period are typically attributed to, expected from or preferred by persons of one gender. Money (1994) introduced the dual concept of gender identity and gender role. He considered gender identity to be the private manifestation of gender role, and gender role, the public manifestation of gender identity. Gender identity, has been widely researched clinically, so as to discover the disorders of sex development and gender dysphoria. Disorders of sex are congenital conditions in which the development of chromosomal, gonadal or anatomical sex is atypical (Huges et al, 2006). Gender dysphoria refers to the incongruence between experienced or expressed gender and assigned gender. Here a gender identity may develop that does not match with sex chromosome, gonads and genitalia, although the physical sex characteristics all correspond with each other. Cognitive components of gender identity have also been investigated (Fagot & Leinbach, 1985 ; Kohlberg, 1966 ; Ruble & Martin 1998). Recently researchers are giving more attention to affective components of gender



identity, such as feelings of contentment with one's gender (Egan & Perry, 2001) and they have started studying its relationship with mental health. Although, there are indications that gendered personality qualities and interests tend to change during adolescence, but, for the majority of adolescents, gender identity is in concordance with the assigned gender and seems to be fairly fixed from early childhood (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008).

Sexuality in Adolescence

Adolescence is a period of rapid growth and development which bring changes in an adolescent; every moment. Mainly, physical, cognitive, emotional and social changes are witnessed. Adolescents develop abstract thinking and reasoning, a sense of identity as well as social involvement and sexual interest. Development of sexuality is an important bio psycho - social development which takes an adult shape during adolescence. Numerous changes that occur in adolescents, put them under stress which may have some adverse physical and psychological consequences.

Developing countries, carry a burden of nearly 70% of world adolescent population (Hindin & Fatusi, 2009; UNFPA World Population Report, 2008). These countries in recent years, are going through a rapid change due to urbanization, migration, education and mixing of cultures, which are having a definite impact on the attitude towards sexuality among adolescents. Adolescence is a phase of transition during which major development of sexuality takes place. Puberty is reached during adolescence which is a landmark for sexuality. Biologically the hypothalamo-pituitary-gonadal axis function is highly essential for the sexual development during puberty. Puberty is the period in which male and female brains increasingly diverge (Lenroot & Giedd, 2010). Pubertal sex hormones are associated with development of the brain. Changes in cortical thickness are related to testosterone levels (Nguyen et al, 2012), increased levels of estradiol with gray matter development in girls (Peper et al, 2009), and functional polymorphism of the androgen receptor moderates the effect of testosterone on relative white and gray matter volumes in boys (Paus et al, 2010). Biological research evidences are suggestive of the definite role of androgens in deciding the gender sensitive roles and gender specific behaviours (Brown, 2000)



During adolescence, the physical growth psychological and cognitive development reaches its peak. The genetic and neuro- endocrinal factors determine the biological sex as well as have an impact on psychological sex. The onset of puberty is caused by gonadal hormones, cortisol and many other hormones (Sandberg et al, 2012). An adolescents sexuality is influenced by hormones. Attitude towards sexuality of an adolescent is decided by the psychological factor of personality or temperament. Introvert adolescent face difficulty in responding towards sexuality. Moreover, attitude of parents towards sexuality, parenting style, peer relationship, cultural influence are important social factors which facilitate sexual learning and have a significant effect on the sexual attitude of an adolescent. Some other factors, as political, legal, philosophical, spiritual, ethical and moral values significantly influence sexuality development (Merrick, Tenenbaum & Omar, 2013). Media also influences sexuality in adolescents (Harris, 2011). Media coverage worldwide has seen huge expansion in recent decades. Today adolescents can access literature on sexuality, sexual crimes and violence through media which affects their perception and attitude towards sexuality (Harris, 2011). Moreover, television and internet expose adolescents to literature and movies with content on sexuality, thus influencing their perception about sexuality (Kanuga & Rosenfeld, 2004). The development of an adolescent takes place in the family, society and in a defined culture, which put a significant effect on the sexuality of an adolescent (Ott, 2010). Society's, attitude and cultural perception of sexuality, largely influence the family where an adolescent dwells in and develop.

Adolescence is the age to explore and understand sexuality. Sexual curiosity in adolescents may make them vulnerable to sexual abuse. The attitude of family and society and the cultural influences on the changes that adolescents face, play a major role in adolescent sexual behavior after puberty. Sexual exposure during adolescence increases the risk of sexually transmitted diseases as HIV, teenage pregnancy and adolescent fatherhood. (Ott, 2010, Auslander, Rosenthal and Blythe, 2007). Early marriages lead to early sexual exposure and pregnancy which has adverse consequences on the reproductive health (Hindin & Fatusi, 2009; Dixon, Müller, 2008).

Due to multiple reasons adolescents are exposed to unprotected sex. Lack of awareness and proper sex education is an important reason of unprotected sex, unintended pregnancy and



sexually transmitted diseases. Moreover, in developing and underdeveloped countries, parent- child communication related to sexuality is poor. Adolescents get very little opportunity to discuss about their sexuality related issue and thus could not attain healthy sexual development (Sales, et. al, 2013).

Interpersonal violence which results in physical and sexual abuse is one of the notable concerns in adolescents (Ott, 2010). Understanding adolescent sexuality has important clinical, legal, social, cultural and educational implications. Without understanding, the factors influencing adolescent sexuality, any clinical, educational and health interventions are impossible. By understanding sexuality of adolescents, parents can help their children to solve their sexual difficulties and guide them on the fast track of adolescence.

In a developing nation, like India social differences dominate gender identity, among adolescents. While gender distinction are age old and traditionally upheld in India, there are many variations in the current images of adolescent boys and girls. Such variations are produced by urban, rural and tribal residence, ethnicity and educational level. Adolescents from affluent families are influenced by western life style and thus resemble adolescents in other parts of the world. Girl adolescents of such families face gender discrimination when the issue of marriage arises. Early marriages result in teenage pregnancy and adolescent fatherhood. In most case, females in comparison to males are subjected to early marriage. Family and society usually prepare the adolescent for the same, which develops adolescents, attitude towards sexuality. Some reserved cultures do not discuss sexuality and this it remains an enigma or myth for adolescents which effects in turn their perception of sexuality. Among rural adolescents, gender disparity between boys and girls is greater. Sexuality is a myth for them to talk about. Gender disparity and socio economic differences lead to upset mental state of adolescents and they face identity crisis. Since their general self identity faces confusion so they may exhibit behavioral problems. Male and female experience their adolescence very differently due to gender discrimination and family, society and cultural values. Social differences in India tend to dominate the gender or sex identity of an adolescent. This leads to difficulty in acceptance of self identity. This may result in mental and behavioral problems and restrict adolescents in living their lives with full potential and identity.



CONCLUSIONS

Gender and sexuality are basic to identity that are influenced by race, class, ethnicity and ability to shape life experiences. A number of biological and psychological factors influence gender identity formation. Gender identity development is thus a result of complex interplay between biological, environmental and psychological factors. Hormones and genes can cause differences in morphology and physiology that in turn may lead to different interaction with the environment. The environment and experiences can have permanent effect on brain. Sex related experiences as experienced during adolescence shape the human brain. If biological, environmental and psychological factors are all in concordance with each other, gender identity seems to be fixed early in development and hardly susceptible to change over time. During adolescence, an individual thoughts, perception as well as response gets sexual orientation. Thus understanding sexuality in adolescence is of greater importance to give better direction to adolescents. Sex education must be imparted on growing adolescents to satisfy and direct their sexual curiosities. Gender identity and sexuality among adolescents have wider implications for their lives as well as social life. Parents can understand their children better and help them guide on the cross roads of adolescence. Adolescents today are our future citizens. So, understanding adolescents is the need of time to pave their way for successful lives for themselves as well as society.

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