



Review

Research in developmental psychology on gender and relationships: Reflections on the past and looking into the future

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Recent historical trends and current directions in the study of children's gender and relationships are reviewed using Maccoby and Jacklin's (1974) *The Psychology of Sex Differences* as a reference point. Since the publication of Maccoby and Jacklin's review, researchers have questioned the extent and the magnitude of gender differences in social behaviour as well as the degree to which parents play a primary role in gender development. More attention is now paid to the impact of gender-segregated peer groups and other social relationships (e.g., friendships, romantic relationships) as well as cognitive-motivational and biological processes. Furthermore, the role of the larger social-structural context is addressed in studies of sexism and gender bias during childhood and adolescence. Recommendations for future research are offered.

An important turning point in the developmental psychology of gender occurred in the 1970s with the publication of Eleanor Maccoby and Carol Jacklin's (1974) *The Psychology of Sex Differences*. The authors compiled a landmark summary of over 1,600 research studies testing for gender differences in various behaviours and psychological characteristics. Maccoby and Jacklin's (1974) book challenged and inspired developmental psychologists to think about children's gender development in new ways (Blakemore, Berenbaum, & Liben, 2009). The authors' comprehensive review called into question some prevailing assumptions about the extent of average gender differences and the role of parents in gender socialization. At the same time, Maccoby and Jacklin pointed to the potential influences of peer relationships and personal factors on gender development. Many of these ideas were elaborated two decades later in Maccoby's (1998) *The Two Sexes: Growing Up Apart, Coming Together*. In acknowledgement of Eleanor Maccoby's contributions, I shall use her 1974 book with Carol Jacklin as a reference point to review some historical trends and current directions for this special issue of the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* on children's gender and relationships.

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Questioning the extent of gender differences

After reviewing studies testing for average gender differences, Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) found that there were relatively few attributes and behaviours associated with reliable differences. Whereas researchers tended to report consistent differences in a few areas such as aggression (boys higher) and verbal ability (girls higher), there were many areas in which either no differences or contradictory patterns were indicated. The review foreshadowed a recurring refrain in the psychology of gender in the ensuing decades: In many respects, girls and boys are more similar than different (see Hyde, 2005).

At the time of their review, Maccoby and Jacklin's (1974) ability to synthesize findings across studies in a quantitative manner was limited. The advent of meta-analysis in the 1980s led to two key advances in our understanding (e.g., Hyde & Linn, 1986). First, it was possible to compute the average probability value and effect size across all studies while controlling for the sample size of each study. The ability to infer the average effect size (and the overall statistical significance level) led many researchers to rethink some of their assumptions about the degree that girls and boys (and women and men) differ on certain psychological and behavioural characteristics (see Hyde, 2005). Second, meta-analysis allows testing for moderators of gender differences in particular behaviours. Of particular relevance to this special issue on children's gender and relationships, meta-analyses have been able to highlight how certain gender-related patterns may vary depending on the social relationship (e.g., see Leaper & Smith, 2004).

Questioning the role of parents in children's gender socialization

Until the 1970s, psychoanalytic theory (e.g., Freud, 1927) and social learning theory (e.g., Mischel, 1966) were the two dominant theories in developmental psychology that were invoked to explain children's gender development. Both theories stressed the importance of children's relationship with their parents with particular emphasis on children's identification with or modelling of same-gender parents (in psychoanalytic theory and social learning theory) and parents' differential treatment of girls and boys (in social learning theory). In contrast, very little research prior to the 1970s considered children's gender development in the context of their peer relationships. Following Maccoby and Jacklin's (1974) review, many developmental psychologists began to rethink their views about the degree and the manner by which parents play a role in children's gender socialization. The studies that the authors reviewed generally did not strongly support the premise that children tend to imitate same-gender parents as suggested by psychoanalytic and social learning theories. In addition, the review also called into question the role of parents' differential treatment of girls and boys in gender socialization as stressed in social learning theory. Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) observed that the existing research literature pointed to a 'surprising degree of similarity in the rearing of boys and girls' (p. 362). Nearly two decades later, Lytton and Romney (1991) reported a similar pattern in a meta-analysis.

Maccoby and Jacklin's (1974) review called into question the primacy of parent-child relationships in gender development. In a similar manner, some reviewers have invoked findings from behaviour genetic studies to argue that parents play little role in the socialization of their children once genetic similarity is controlled (e.g., Harris, 1995). However, other developmental psychologists have rebutted the argument that parents don't matter in children's gender development (e.g., Block, 1983; Leaper, 2002; McHale,

Crouter, & Whiteman, 2003). Once various contextual and methodological factors are taken into account, researchers countered that it is possible to identify some ways that parent-child relationships may shape children's gender development.

To better infer possible causal influences in gender socialization, contemporary models emphasize transactional processes whereby the child and the parent may have reciprocal influences on one another (see Maccoby, 2000, for a review; also see Alanko *et al.*, 2011). To consider reciprocal processes, researchers can employ sequential analysis to test if particular child behaviours increase the subsequent likelihood of particular parent behaviours - or vice-versa (e.g., Tenenbaum & Leaper, 1998). Researchers are also employing the actor-partner interdependence model to test the independent contributions of actor effects, partner effects, and actor \times partner interactions in social interactions (e.g., McIsaac, Connolly, McKenney, Pepler, & Craig, 2008). In an analogous manner, longitudinal research can take into account earlier child and parent behaviours to test if parents' expectations and behaviour predict subsequent changes in children's outcomes (e.g., see Eccles, Freedman-Doan, Frome, Jacobs, & Yoon, 2000). In summary, recent research indicates that parents can influence aspects of children's gender development - but not to the degree originally advanced in psychoanalytic and social learning theories. As reviewed next, other relationships are also influential.

Importance of peer relationships

Another key idea emerging from Maccoby and Jacklin's (1974) book is that peer relationships are an important context for gender development. The authors noted that many average gender differences in social behaviour tended to occur during interactions with peers (e.g., rough play, aggression). In subsequent decades, Maccoby highlighted the impact of gender-segregated peer relationships on children's development in her work (e.g., Maccoby, 1990, 1998; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987). The importance of children's gender-segregated peer interactions in the socialization of gender-typed beliefs and behaviours has been further emphasized in other reviews (e.g., Fabes, Martin, & Hanish, 2004; Leaper, 1994; Mehta & Strough, 2009) and empirical studies (e.g., Martin & Fabes, 2001; Pellegrini, Long, Roseth, Bohn, & Van Ryzin, 2007; Powlishta, Serbin, & Moller, 1993).

The importance of peer relationships in gender development is underscored in the collection of articles included in this special issue. Most of the contributors considered children's gender development in the context of peer relationships. Some of the topics addressed in these studies include gender-related variations in play (Ensor, Hart, Jacobs, & Hughes, 2011; Mathieson & Banerjee, 2011), conflict and aggression (Ensor *et al.*, 2011; Flouri & Panourgia, 2011; Hay *et al.*, 2011; Ewing Lee & Troop-Gordon, 2011; Mathieson & Banerjee, 2011), communication (Psaltis, 2011; Valkenburg, Sumter, & Pete, 2011), and in-group identity (Kurtz-Costes, DeFreitas, Halle, & Kinlaw, 2011; Zosuls *et al.*, 2011).

Related to the increasing attention being paid to gender segregation, another research trend has been the application of intergroup theories to the study of gender development (e.g., Bigler & Liben, 2007; Harris, 1995; Leaper, 2000; Powlishta, 1995). This approach built on earlier work in social psychology documenting how identifying with a group can lead to in-group favouritism, assimilation, and hostility towards out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Researchers noted that these processes help to explain the processes by which gender socialization transpires in the context of same-gender peer relationships. That is, children tend to favour characteristics associated with their own gender group

(e.g., Powlisha, 1995; Robnett & Susskind, 2011; also, see Kurtz-Costes *et al.*, 2011; Zosuls *et al.*, 2011). Also, boys and girls tend to enforce conformity to in-group norms (e.g., Fagot, 1977; also see Ewing Lee & Troop-Gordon, 2011). Similar processes occur with regards to children's racial/ethnic group memberships, and examining the intersection of gender and racial/ethnic identities is another recent trend in the study of children's gender and relationships (e.g., Kurtz-Costes *et al.*, 2011).

As children get older, intergroup processes may contribute to gender-based prejudice and discrimination (Bigler & Liben, 2007; Leaper, 2000). Accordingly, studying youths' experiences with sexism in relationships is another recent advance in the field (e.g., Leaper & Brown, 2008; McMaster, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2002). In addition, recent studies have considered the consequences of sexism and restrictive gender roles on girls' academic achievement (e.g., Brown & Leaper, 2011) and boys' socio-emotional development (e.g., Oransky & Fisher, 2009).

Looking beyond parent and peer relationships

The aforementioned research focused primarily on children's interactions in the context of same-gender peer groups, but other relationships are additionally important during children's gender development. First, the gender-typed expectations of *teachers and coaches* can contribute to children's gender attitudes and self-concepts in academic and athletic domains, respectively (e.g., Jussim, Eccles, & Madon, 1996). Second, some studies suggest that having *sisters or brothers* may affect some aspects of children's gender development (e.g., McHale *et al.*, 2003). Third, *same-gender friendships* can differ from peer groups in their impact on gender development (see Leaper, 2000; Leaper & Bigler, 2011). Friendships are generally considered important for the development of conflict-resolution and intimacy-related skills (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006; also see Ensor *et al.*, 2011; Valkenburg *et al.*, 2011). Fourth, researchers have been exploring the incidence and correlates of adolescents' affiliations in *mixed-gender cliques and cross-gender friendships* (e.g., Poulin & Pedersen, 2007; Zarbatany, McDougall, & Hymel, 2000). Finally, *romantic relationships* are fundamentally important in gender development (see Leaper & Anderson, 1997). Researchers are examining the construction of gender in heterosexual relationships (e.g., Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso, & Porche, 2003) as well as lesbian, gay, and bisexual relationships (e.g., Diamond & Lucas, 2004).

Cognitive-motivational factors as mediators

Around the time of Maccoby and Jacklin's (1974) book, cognitive theories were ascendant in psychology. Accordingly, the authors flagged the importance of cognitive-motivational processes in children's adoption of gender-typed behaviour. In subsequent decades, the role of cognitive-motivational factors in gender and relationships was further articulated in gender schema theory (e.g., Liben & Bigler, 2002; Martin & Halverson, 1981), social cognitive theory (e.g., Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Perry, White, & Perry, 1984), and intergroup theory (e.g., Bigler & Liben, 2007; Harris, 1995; Leaper, 2000). Each of these theories emphasizes the idea that gender development ultimately involves self-socialization. That is, once children form a concept of gender, they use their gender schemas to interpret environmental events. Representations of gender are formed through observing others in real life and the media. These gender schemas guide the kinds of behaviours that children exhibit themselves.

Over the years, developmental researchers have documented ways that children's gender-related self-concepts, stereotypes, and attitudes are formed and shape gender-related variations in behaviour. Accordingly, many of the papers in this special issue addressed cognitive factors in children's gender development. These include studies examining aspects of children's gender-related social identities (Kurtz-Costes *et al.*, 2011; Zosuls *et al.*, 2011), adolescents' expectations about future family roles (Fulcher & Coyle, 2011; Sinno & Killen, 2011), and children's attitudes about gender-related social interactions (Zosuls *et al.*, 2011).

Biological factors as mediators

Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) noted that biological factors were implicated in the aetiology of some psychological gender differences. In the subsequent decades, biologically based dispositions in gender development have been postulated in evolutionary psychology (e.g., Bjorklund & Pellegrini, 2002) and behaviour genetics (e.g., Iervolino, Hines, Golombok, Rust, & Plomin, 2005). Neuroscience research has sought to identify specific physiological mechanisms that may affect gender development (e.g., Berenbaum & Hines, 1992). In addition, research on average gender differences in temperament suggests that biologically based dispositions, such as activity level or emotion regulation, may be linked to some gender-related variations in behaviour (e.g., Pellegrini *et al.*, 2007; also see Ensor *et al.*, 2011).

Social-structural factors as moderators

At the time that Maccoby and Jacklin's (1974) book was published, American society was undergoing dramatic social change. The civil rights, anti-poverty, and women's movements were changing society as well as the field of developmental psychology. Researchers have become more conscientious about variations in the ways that gender is expressed in different socio-cultural communities (e.g., Best & Thomas, 2004; also see Kurtz-Costes *et al.*, 2011). This work has helped to highlight some of the ways that social structures shape the form and the function of gender-typed behaviours. Also, feminism has filtered into developmental psychology. Cross-national comparisons reveal that the level of gender equality in a society is associated with the degree of gender typing in its children (see Wood & Eagly, 2002, for a review). As noted earlier, developmental researchers are also studying factors related to sexism in childhood. Furthermore, as gender roles have become more flexible, researchers have examined girls' and boys' achievement in non-traditional academic domains (e.g., Brown & Leaper, 2011; Eccles *et al.*, 2000) and youths' attitudes towards egalitarian family roles (e.g., Fulcher & Coyle, 2011; Sinno & Killen, 2011).

Looking ahead: Bridging theories and applying our knowledge

In reviewing the trends over the last few decades, we see that researchers have gained a better appreciation of the multiple forces that shape children's gender development. Although parents can have an influential role in children's gender development, their impact is not considered as singular as previously emphasized in psychoanalytic and

social learning theories. Peer groups, friends, teachers, and the media are among other social agents that affect children's gender development.

Most developmental psychologists today acknowledge that gender development involves a complex interplay among biological, cognitive-motivational, interpersonal, and social-structural processes (see Blakemore *et al.*, 2009; Leaper & Bigler, 2011). One critical challenge ahead is to gain a better understanding of how these different levels are interrelated. It is a daunting task to keep abreast of the numerous studies that are published within our own specialty areas (e.g., gender and peer relationships). At the same time, we should strive to incorporate ideas and findings from related areas (e.g., neuroscience, social psychology, anthropology). A related task is to seek greater synthesis among some of our theoretical models of gender development (see Leaper, *in press*). There have recently been some efforts at theory bridging that are promising and may help advance our understanding (e.g., Bigler & Liben, 2007; Ostrov & Godleski, 2011; Tobin *et al.*, 2011).

An additional challenge is to apply our understanding of children's gender development to the betterment of children. According to feminist and gender-egalitarian perspectives, traditional gender roles have limited the opportunities for girls and boys. Whereas girls and women obviously suffer, these practices also harm many boys' psychological adjustment. Sexual harassment and other forms of sexism perpetuate gender inequities in status and power in society. Traditional masculinity norms emphasizing emotional control limit both girls' and boys' capacities to enjoy satisfying relationships together. Gender-biased views of particular academic subjects and occupations (e.g., engineering as masculine or reading as feminine) can block potential pathways where girls and boys might find success. Fortunately, developmental researchers have begun to consider ways to address some of these problems through various interventions (e.g., see Bigler & Liben, 2007).

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