Gender and Relationships: Beyond the Peer Group

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Maccoby (April 1990) cogently described important social-interaction effects of gender in childhood, supplanting the traditional approach to gender socialization grounded in the study of individual differences. Arguing that the peer group provides the primary setting for differential socialization of boys and girls, Maccoby cited research that indicates that boys and girls behave differently depending on the gender composition of a dyad or group. Boys in all-boy groups increasingly display competitiveness, dominance, and assertiveness. Girls however, only display the passivity commonly attributed to them when they are in the presence of boys. In mixed-sex dyads, boys dominate and girls increasingly find these male strategies aversive. Maccoby asserted that reliable sex differences become entrenched in peer interactions and extend into adult relationships.

Although her description of the importance of social interaction in the developmental process is compelling, we are troubled by Maccoby's denial of other meaningful influences on the development of gender-distinct styles of interaction. Her developmental account implies that the peer group operates in a social vacuum and constitutes a sexist culture unto itself.

However, available research indicates that virtually all of the major sources and agents of socialization promote significant differences in behavior beginning in infancy. Moreover, there are at least three major contributors to the gender-differentiated peer relations described by Maccoby: (a) Mothers and fathers behave quite differently toward boys and girls, (b) children in two-parent families observe parental interaction that reflects the way most men and women relate to each other in mixed-sex dyads or groups, and (c) the culture conveys distinct messages to children about the differential expectations for male and female behavior.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence for differences in parents' behavior toward boys and girls comes from Jean Block (1984). Her work reveals consistent sex-of-child differences in child rearing that begin in infancy and extend throughout childhood. These distinctions are found along a variety of dimensions and are plausibly related to differences in power and assertiveness observed in boys and girls.

Parents respond more often to their infant sons' vocalizations, whereas they reinforce daughters for being quiet. Parents continue to reinforce sex-role-congruent behavior with toddlers in the form of play and toy selection. In general, boys' toys and play encourage activity and involvement with the world outside the home, providing objective, contingent feedback. In contrast, girls' toys and play foster engagement with the social world, providing subjective, noncontingent feedback. Moreover, in contrast with girls, learn that the world responds to them more often and more contingently, that what they do invokes a response from those around them, and that their needs will be met. It is not surprising then, that a sense of "entitlement" (Birns & Leo, 1989) may lead to boys' increasing assertiveness when they don't get what they want. Girls are responded to less often and only when in close proximity to an adult, and thus it seems logical that they would have an aversive reaction to boys who are more assertive and dominating, and whom they cannot influence politely.

Apart from boys' and girls' differential treatment by parents, Maccoby (1990) also downplayed and idealized what they observe from parents. She presented a quixotic image of the American family that changed little over the last 50 years. In contrast, contrary to her rosy depictions, 50% of marriages end in divorce, and violence within the family is epidemic. Maccoby claimed that couples "don't need to argue about turf" (p. 518), that they "develop a relationship based on communality rather than exchange bargaining" (p. 518), and that "both members of the pair strive to avoid conflict" (p. 518). We would argue however (Murphy & Meyer, in press), that most marriages (and male–female relationships in general) are profoundly influenced by the differential power of men and women in this culture. Husbands, as compared with wives, earn more, have more influence in important decisions, interrupt more, do less housework, and more often resort to violence to maintain a position of dominance. Maccoby is correct that the nuclear family has been given too much credit or too much blame—not however, because the family is unimportant, but because the family reflects the culture at large.

Even if the family didn't influence the development of gender-differentiated behavior in children, the media would suffice. Television purveys cultural norms and is a potent socializing agent; it has been well documented that young children spend more time watching television than in any other single activity except sleep, and that their beliefs and behaviors are directly influenced by what they watch. The highly sex-stereotypic roles in children's programming is a likely influence on the sex segregation and power-assertive behavior described by Maccoby (1990). Studies have consistently documented traditional gender-role stereotypes in the personality traits of television characters. In children's shows, male characters outnumber females at a ratio of two to one, and are significantly more likely to be portrayed as aggressive, constructive, and rewarded for their actions. On the other hand, female characters are depicted as deferent and more likely to be punished for displaying high levels of activity (Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974). Television character's use of language is demonstrably gender-distinct as well. In Barbatsis, Wong, and Herek's (1983) analysis of children's programming, males were responsible for an overwhelming majority of the messages produced, accounting for 81% of all speakers. The most pervasive message was one of dominance in an attempt to control an interpersonal interaction, and of all messages produced, 41% were male-generated dominance messages.

In conclusion, the peer group may be one of the best places in which to observe gender differences in social interaction, particularly in power-assertive behavior. However, the peer group is not a sexist culture unto itself. It merely reflects the socializing influences of the family and the culture at large that reproduce and promote sexual segregation and inequality.

REFERENCES


