

Sex Differences in Gender-Related Childhood Memories¹

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Based on theories of gender development, especially the one proposed by Nancy Chodorow, it was predicted that boys' gender-related childhood memories will be different from girls' on five dimensions related to activity, emotionality, and sex appropriateness. Forty-five men and 45 women were asked to describe their earliest gender-related childhood memories. The memories were analyzed by two judges. The data document a significant sex difference in the activity and emotionality of the memories. Men's memories were more active and women's more emotional. The predictions that men's memories of sex-appropriate behavior will be more positive, will have fewer deviations from sex-appropriate behavior, and when such deviations occur, they will be associated with more negative emotions were not confirmed. It is suggested that childhood memories can be seen as reflecting actual differences between the sexes in childhood experiences, or as the result of a process of memory selection that reflects men's and women's different gender-related experiences as adults.

What is your earliest gender-related childhood memory, a memory that has something to do with your being a boy or a girl? Based on theories of

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gender development (e.g., Block, 1984; Gilligan, 1982; Parsons & Bryan, 1978), it can be expected that since boys and girls have different childhood experiences, they will have different gender-related childhood memories. One gender development theory that seems especially relevant was proposed by Nancy Chodorow (1971, 1978). In a chapter entitled "Being and Doing" (1971), Chodorow argues that because boys need to actively shift their early identification with Mother to a sex role-appropriate identification with Father, their primary mode is an active one of "doing." Since girls develop a gender identity based on their early attachment to Mother, they do not need to make this shift. Consequently, their primary mode is a passive one of "being." Based on this theory, it can be predicted that boys' gender-related childhood memories will be more active than girls'.

Chodorow also theorizes that because boys have to negate their early attachment to Mother, they tend to suppress their emotions. Since girls do not need to deny their early attachment to Mother, they are freer to express their emotions. Based on this part of the theory, it can be expected that girls' gender related childhood memories will have more direct expression of emotions than boys'.

Chodorow further theorizes that boys discover during the socialization process that the masculine role has high value and are pressured to behave in strict accordance with that role. Girls, on the other hand, discover that the feminine role has low status and is devalued. Consequently, it can be expected that boys' gender-related childhood memories will have fewer deviations from sex-appropriate behavior and when such deviations do occur, they will be associated with more negative emotions. It is also expected that girls' memories of sex-appropriate behavior will be more negative than boys'.

In summary, the study examined five hypotheses:

1. Men's gender-related childhood memories will be more active than women's.
2. Women's gender-related childhood memories will have more direct expression of emotions than men's.
3. Men's gender-related childhood memories will have fewer deviations from sex-appropriate behavior than women's.
4. When deviations from sex-appropriate behavior occur, they will be associated with more negative emotions in boys than in girls.
5. Women's memories of sex-appropriate behavior will be more negative than men's.

METHOD

Subjects

Forty-five Israeli men and 45 Israeli women participated in the study. The mean age of the men was 28, ranging from 20 to 48. The mean age of the women was 26, ranging from 20 to 47. The majority of the participants (70%) were college students (age 20–28); the rest were college educated.

Procedure

Subjects were approached individually and asked to respond in writing to the following question: “Please describe your earliest childhood memory that is related to the fact that you were a boy/girl or that people related to you as a boy/girl.” Men were only presented with the question as it pertained to being a boy. Women were only presented with the question as it pertained to being a girl.

The memories were content analyzed by two judges: a man and a woman. The man was a psychologist, the woman a psychology student. Interjudge reliability was very high, ranging from 85% to 90% on different dimensions. Only responses on which there was an agreement between the two judges were included in the data analysis.

The judges rated the memories on the following dimensions:

- (a) Active/passive: Was the subject active or passive in the story recounted in the memory? (active/passive/neutral)
- (b) Expression of emotion: Did the memory include an explicit expression of emotion? (yes/no)
- (c) Sex typing: Was the behavior of the person in the memory sex typed or cross sex-typed? (yes/no/irrelevant)
- (d) Attitude towards sex typing: Was the sex-typed or cross-sex behavior described in positive or negative terms? (positive/negative/neutral)
- (e) Emotional context: The memories were analyzed as to the main emotion expressed or implied in the story.

In addition, the data were analyzed to determine sex differences in the age in which the memory occurred and its length (number of words).

RESULTS

The first hypothesis, predicting that men's gender-related childhood memories will be more active than women's was confirmed ($\chi^2 = 9.98$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$).

The following is an example of a memory, rated as active, recounted by a man (38): "When I was a young boy, I don't remember what age, probably kindergarten or pre-kindergarten, I played "doctor" with a girl. I was the doctor and she was the patient. I checked her everywhere and did all sort of things that only years later I understood their true meaning."

An example of a memory, rated as passive, recounted by a woman (46): "I don't remember at what age this happened, probably kindergarten, I was kept naked at the beach without a bathing suit. I felt a terrible shame but was too embarrassed to say that I felt embarrassed [*sic*]. I remember the incident because of the shame. I remember the pain it caused me. This is why I made sure my children were always dressed, at least in underpants, from a very young age."

The second hypothesis, that women's gender-related childhood memories will have more direct expression of emotions than men's, was also confirmed ($\chi^2 = 4.08$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$).

In the examples presented above, the woman's memory was rated as including an explicit expression of an emotion, the man's as not.

The third hypothesis, that men's gender-related childhood memories will have fewer deviations from sex-appropriate behavior than women's was not confirmed. While boys had fewer deviations than girls (boys 11% vs. girls 16%) the difference was not statistically significant.

Here is an example of a memory that was rated as deviating from sex-appropriate behavior recounted by a man (31): "I had a close relationship with Mother who was a housewife. Because Father was busy in his business, I spent many hours in women's activities: sewing, knitting, embroidery [*sic*]. Despite being a boy, I had to deal with these jobs throughout my childhood."

An example of a memory that was rated as deviation from sex-appropriate behavior recounted by a woman (23) follows: "After a sport contest, when I got first place in the high jump I became popular among the boys in my class."

The man's memory in the above example was rated as passive, the woman's as active, and both as not including an explicit expression of emotion.

The fourth hypothesis, that when deviations from sex-appropriate behavior occur, they will be associated with more negative emotions in boys

than in girls, was also not confirmed. The number of cross-sex-typed behavior described in the memories was too small for statistical analysis. Yet more of the boys' cross-sex-typed stories were negative while more of the girl's cross-sex-typed stories were positive. The examples above demonstrate this: the man's story is negative, the woman's positive.

The fifth hypothesis, that women's memories of sex-appropriate behavior will be more negative than men's, was not confirmed, yet the findings were in the predicted direction. (The percentage of negative sex-appropriate memories for women was 59% vs. 40% for men.) In other words, for men the majority of sex-appropriate memories were positive (60%). For women, the majority of sex-appropriate memories were negative (59%).

The following is an example of a memory of sex-appropriate behavior recounted by a man (29): "When I was about 8, my family went on vacation to a beach town. A cousin of my father took me for a short ride on a racing sailboat. I remember being very proud of myself for not being afraid, not before and not during the boat ride. I felt like 'a little man'." The emotion associated with this memory was rated as positive.

The following is an example of a sex-appropriate behavior recounted by a woman (24): "A memory that relates to the fact that I am a female is from about fourth grade. At that time there were some boys from school who used to beat me up on the way home after school. I felt helpless against them. My parents told me that it's because "they love me" . . . The emotion associated with this memory was rated as negative.

Analysis of the specific emotions *expressed* or *implied* in the memories reveals that for both sexes the negative emotions far outnumbered the positive ones. Fifty-six percent of the women's memories and 42% of the men's memories included negative emotions (pain, sadness, rejection, anger, shame, humiliation, fear, anxiety).

While their numbers are too small for statistical analysis, it may be worth noting that men had twice as many (expressed or implied) memories of anger as women had, while women had twice as many memories of fear and anxiety.

Twenty percent of the women's memories and 20% of the men's memories included positive emotions (happiness, pride, joy, excitement, arousal, passion). While their numbers are again too small for statistical analysis, it is interesting to note that men had four times more memories of passion and arousal than women, while women had twice as many memories of happiness and joy than men.

When only the memories that had an emotional component were included in the analysis, it was clear that the majority of memories

recounted by both men and women include a negative emotion. For both sexes, 68% of the memories with an emotional component expressed or implied included a negative emotion, and only 32% included a positive emotion.

Also included in the data analysis were the age at the time of the memory, and the number of words used in describing it. Analysis of the age at the time of the memory (including only those memories that had specific reference to age) reveals that women's memories were of a younger age than men's (women's mean = 6.8, men's mean = 7.5; $p < .05$). Analysis of the number of words women used in writing the memory reveals that men's memories were shorter than women's (men's mean = 31, women's mean = 42; $p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

Analysis of gender-related childhood memories of 45 Israeli men and 45 Israeli women provides support for two out of five predictions based on Nancy Chodorow's theory of gender development.

A significant sex difference was found in the activity of the behavior described in the memories. Men's memories were significantly more active than women's. Based on Chodorow's theory, this finding can be interpreted as reflecting boys' characteristically active mode of "doing," formed by their developmental requisite to shift from early identification with Mother to a sex role-appropriate identification with Father. Since girls are not required as part of their socialization process to make a similar shift, they develop a more passive mode of "being," which is also reflected in their memories.

A significant sex difference was also found in the emotionality of the memories. Women's memories were significantly more emotional than men's. Based on Chodorow's theory, this finding can be interpreted as reflecting men's learned tendency to suppress their emotions, developed together with the suppression of the early attachment to Mother. Since girls are not required to suppress their feelings in a similar way, they are freer to express their emotions as adults — a fact that is reflected in their memories.

The hypotheses that men's gender-related childhood memories will have fewer deviations from sex-appropriate behavior than women's memories, and that when deviations from sex-appropriate behavior occur, they will be associated with more negative emotions in boys than in girls, were not confirmed. Nevertheless, there was a tendency for men to describe fewer deviations from sex-appropriate behavior and for men

to respond to these deviations more negatively. Based on Chodorow's theory, these tendencies may be — cautiously — interpreted as suggestive of the pressure boys feel to behave according to their high-status masculine role.

When Nancy Chodorow writes about the development of gender identity, she describes the problems and struggles both boys and girls encounter. While boys struggle to establish a stable identity, girls struggle to establish a meaningful and valued identity. The process triggers difficult emotions in both sexes. The gender-related childhood memories reflect this difficulty. Of the memories that had an explicit or implied emotional content, two thirds included negative emotions (pain, anger, humiliation, anxiety, etc.) and only one third included positive emotions (happiness, pride, excitement, etc.).

The prediction that women's memories of sex-appropriate behavior will be more negative than men's memories was not confirmed. Still, it may be worth noting that for women the majority of sex-appropriate memories were negative, while for men the majority were positive.

While the results of the present study lend some support to Chodorow's theory of gender development, it is important to consider alternative explanations for the finding of sex differences in activity and emotionality, and the fact that three of the five hypotheses did not reach statistical significance. One such explanation is sociobiologists' notion that sex differences in such characteristics as activity and emotionality evolved not through socialization but through natural selection (e.g., Dawkins, 1976, especially Chap. 6; Symons, 1979, especially Chaps. 4, 6, and 7; Wilson, 1978, especially Chap. 6).

According to sociobiology, as males and females go up the evolutionary scale, they become more and more different — both biologically and behaviorally. Males become more aggressive and intelligent. Females become more nurturing. An organism able to survive and to outreproduce others is an evolutionary "superior" organism. In fighting against each other for possession of the females, the most aggressive and most intelligent males won and thus passed on their characteristics to the next generation. Such men were also the better hunters, so were better able to protect and provide for their women and offspring. For similar reasons, the offspring of the more nurturing mothers had a better chance of surviving and passed on these women's characteristics to the next generation. Activity can be seen as one aspect of male's aggressiveness. Emotionality can be seen as one aspect of female's nurturing.

While such an interpretation is possible, there is nothing in the data to support it.

It is also important to be cautious about assuming that memories reflect reality. Memories are influenced by our current experiences and interaction with the world (Tulving, 1982). Even if certain memories are related to the process of socialization, they are not necessarily a direct reflection of events that actually happened.

Childhood memories can be seen as reflecting actual differences between the sexes in childhood experiences. They can also be seen as the result of a process of memory selection that colors the past, and reflects men's and women's different gender-related experiences as adults. In addition to receiving some research support (see Tulving, 1982), there is a great advantage to viewing childhood experiences as colored by current experiences. While actual experiences cannot be relived, memory selection is, at least potentially, amenable to change.

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