NEWS | POSTED NOVEMBER 14, 2017

Study Documents Ethnic and Gender Differences in Youths' Developing Gender Identity

PRESS RELEASE / CHILD DEVELOPMENT: Embargoed for Release on November 14, 2017

PRESS RELEASE

Published
Tuesday, November 14, 2017
12:01am

Development of Gender Typicality and Felt Pressure in European French and North African French Adolescents

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The extent to which youths feel typical of their gender and the pressure they feel to conform to traditional gender roles are related to adolescents' well-being. Because many genderrelated expectations are culturally based, a new longitudinal study examined how French middle school adolescents' feelings about the development of gender identity differed across groups of teens from different ethnicities, cultures, and genders.

The study was conducted by researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Nîmes University, Montpellier University, Université Savoie Mont Blanc, and AixMarseille Université. It appears in the journal *Child Development*.

"Our study—one of the first to examine these issues longitudinally and outside of the United States—shows that boys experience greater pressure than girls to conform to gender expectations, which most likely places nonconforming adolescent boys at higher risk than girls for psychological distress," according to Adam J. Hoffman, a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Michigan who coauthored the study when he was at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Researchers examined youths' developing gender identity in survey responses from French adolescents over four years, starting in sixth grade and following them each year until ninth grade. Surveys were collected from 570 students of European origin ("European French") and 534 students of North African origin ("North African French"). Youths were asked in the surveys about their feelings related to "gender typicality" (how much they felt typical of their gender) and "felt pressure," the pressure they felt from parents, peers, or themselves to conform to traditional gender roles. All the European French youths were born in France, while the North African French youths were of Algerian, Moroccan, or Tunisian ancestry, with 78% born in France. Most adolescents were from low-income households and attended urban schools.

In sixth grade, girls in both the European French and North African French groups reported lower levels of gender typicality and felt pressure than boys; contrary to expectations, the two ethnic groups did not differ in this respect at the beginning of middle school. Over the four years of middle school, European French girls and boys, and North African French girls reported a decrease in how much they felt typical for their gender, while North African French boys did not change in this respect.

Girls in both groups reported declining pressure to conform to gender norms over the four years, European French boys did not change on this measure, and North African French boys reported increasing felt pressure.

“Cultural differences in gender norms provide North African French boys less freedom to deviate from traditional gender roles and norms than that experienced by European French boys,” explains Isabelle Régner, professor of psychology at Aix-Marseille Université and the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), who coauthored the study. “The greater pressure to conform to gender roles that North African French boys feel may be a response to contrasting messages about social status they are exposed to—one from their ethnic and cultural groups that says masculinity has greater power and prestige, the other from the broader social context that says their ethnic and cultural groups have lower status and are discriminated against.”

Given the important role of culture in shaping the development of aspects of gender identity, the authors point to the need for parents, teachers, and others who interact with youths to be aware of cultural differences in gender norms. For example, teachers should talk with parents to gain a better understanding of how individuals from different cultural backgrounds think about gender and the importance of gender to different cultures.

The study was supported by the Inspection Académique de la Haute-Garonne and the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) in France, as well as the National Science Foundation through its Graduate Research Opportunities Worldwide program.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Development of Gender Typicality and Felt Pressure in European French and North African French Adolescents by Hoffman, AJ (formerly at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, now at the University of Michigan), Dumas, F (Nîmes University), Loose, F (Montpellier

University), Smeding, A (Université Savoie Mont Blanc), Kurtz-Costes, B (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), and Régner, I (Aix-Marseille Université and National Center for Scientific Research). Copyright 2017 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.