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Gender identity development in the shadow of socialization: a grounded theory approach

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Abstract

Gender identity is one of the basic forms of identity which has a key role in the mental health during adolescence. The present study was conducted to determine the process of gender identity development among Iranian female adolescents. In this grounded theory study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 55 purposefully and theoretical selected participants including 30 female adolescents and 25 key informants who lived in urban society of Isfahan, Iran, in 2016–2018. Data were analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's mode of analysis (2008), through constant comparative method, applying levels of open, axial, and selective coding with MAXQDA software. Development of gender identity in the shadow of socialization was presented as the core category extracted from the data in this study. Female adolescents would use "sexual self-expression during puberty," "attachment to parents and peers," "tendency towards the opposite sex," and "effort for social acceptance" as the main strategies in the development of gender identity until achieving "stabilized gender identity." "Girls' communicational skills" and "parents' empowerment" were the causal conditions in this process. "Gender differences" and "sociocultural texture of the society" were the contextual conditions and the influence of "peers" and "media" was the interventional conditions in the development of gender identity in female adolescents. Improving girls' communicational skills, empowering parents for managing their interactions with their daughters, adjusting gender roles in the society, and creating appropriate content by the media could have an important role in helping female adolescents achieving stabilized gender identity.

Keywords Female adolescents · Gender identity · Grounded theory

Introduction

Adolescence is associated with the important question of "who am I" which is asked by the adolescents. The answer

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to this question that would last for a few years would lead to an essential awareness and recognition. Formation of a healthy and developed identity is an important part of the individual's mental health (Becht et al. 2016; French et al. 2006). Identity is a key variable in adolescent's evolution (Meeus 2011). One of the important aspects of identity that would be developed throughout life is gender identity which is defined as each individual's deep and inner feelings of being a man, a woman, or an interstitial type. Theoretical understanding of gender identity has significantly been changed during the recent century. At first, studies were only focused on the physiological aspect of the gender, while nowadays, more emphasis is on its social aspects (Risman and Davis 2013). Based on the social structuralism viewpoints, individual's gender identity would be formed under the influence of their society's structure. This approach would contain gender identity, mental-sexual growth, acquired social roles, and gender preferences (Lorber and Farrell 1991). In a study in Australia about determining gender identity development in men, they had put on a masculine mask. In this study, men expressed the conflicts of

gender roles (Edwards and Jones 2009). Iranian culture supports different views of men and women. Compared with the older generation of women, young Iranian women have more opportunities and tend to be less restricted by traditional female socialization, but they also face more challenges (Cheraghi et al. 2015). By understanding the process of gender identity development, gaining inappropriate gender identity could be prevented at any stage of its evolution. The main question is that how this identification would be performed and what processes and stages should be conducted. So this qualitative research with grounded theory method was conducted to determine the process of gender identity development among Iranian female adolescents with the Strauss and Corbin's approach (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Grounded theory is a suitable methodology when the researcher is keen to know the basic psychosocial process which occurs over time (Polit-O'Hara and Beck 2006).

Methods

In this grounded theory study, sampling was started using purposeful method and then continued by maximum variety and also theoretical sampling until data saturation. Participants were apparently healthy female adolescents of 11–22 years old who were invited to the study after obtaining written informed consent from them and explaining the goals of the study to their parents. Participants did not have diseases with serious impact on the process of gender identity development such as borderline personality disorder, major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, substance abuse disorder, and chronic psychosomatic disorder. These criteria were determined by counseling a psychiatrist and adolescents suffering from the mentioned disorders were excluded from the study. Data were gathered through individual in-depth semi-structured interviews, field noting, and focused group discussions with the 55 participants including 30 Iranian female adolescents and 25 key informants such as teachers, parents, psychiatrists, sociologists, psychologists, and pediatricians from May 2016 to January 2018 in urban society of Isfahan, Iran. Interviews with female adolescents contained guiding questions such as "when and how the feeling of being a girl was started in you?," "what were the effective factors in your feeling toward your gender?," and "what are the differences between you as a girl and someone else as a boy?." Each interview was recorded and transcribed on a paper word for word. Before transcribing the interviews, the researcher repeatedly listened to the interviews to be able to select the main ideas from the participants' statements. After completing the transcriptions, they were again compared to the interviews and necessary modifications were made. Facial expressions such as pause, smile, short laugh, long laugh, sorrow, cry, and regret were recorded in parenthesis. After accurate reviewing and primary analysis

of the transcriptions, plans were made for the next interviews. Data were analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's mode of analysis (2008) through constant comparative method, applying levels of open, axial, and selective coding with MAXQDA software. We tried to enhance the credibility of data through selecting adolescent participants with maximum variety, researcher's prolonged engagement, reviewing the interviews' transcriptions, peer review, and member check. To assess the transferability of the data, results were given to a number of female adolescents and experts who were not involved in the study and had similar characteristics to the participants to judge about the similarity of the results to their own experiences. Ethical considerations including voluntary participation in the study, obtaining written informed consent for participation and recording the interviews, explaining the goals of the study, voluntary withdrawal of the study at any time, and assuring participants of the confidentiality of their information were regarded.

Results

The age range of the Iranian female adolescents was from 11 to 22 years old. The parents' level of education ranged from under diploma to bachelor's degree (Table 1). A total of 18 main categories formed at the end of open coding. Based on similarities and differences and the paradigmatic pattern, the categories were analyzed and reduced during the axial coding.

Gender identity development in the shadow of socialization was presented as the core category extracted from the data in this study. Analyzing participants' description showed that gender identity in Iranian female adolescents was developed through four stages of (1) sexual self-expression during puberty, (2) attachment to the parents and peers, (3) tendencies towards the opposite sex, and (4) efforts for social acceptance.

Table 1 Characteristics of participating adolescent girls

	N
Age	
11–14	7
15–17	12
18–22	11
Fathers' education level	
Under diploma	11
Diploma	8
Bachelor's degree	11
Mothers' education level	
Under diploma	4
Diploma	15
Bachelor's degree	11

These categories and their interrelationship will be elaborated in this paper.

Sexual self-expression during puberty

Sexual alertness has occurred in most of the female adolescents during puberty in a way that they had considered a kind of body image for themselves which was associated with shame and modesty at the beginning of puberty and gradually, by reaching the end of puberty, they were interested in expressing it.

> When I was in the sixth grade I was ashamed of my breasts' blooming, I would put a shawl on it or wear loose clothes so that it would not be showing. Now that a few years have passed by, I would like to tell everyone that I have a beautiful body. I wear tight clothes to show off my body; this way I would be internally satisfied and feel proud of being a woman. Because I can attract everyone's attention. (Adolescent girl, 16 years old, second child of the family)

Attachment to the parents and peers

Analyzing participants' descriptions showed that female adolescents had doubts about their parents' attachment to them. According to the opinions of the participated parents, girls have expressed their need for the parents' affection and this has increased their attachment to their families.

> I can't talk to my daughter frequently due to my occupational problems. But I try to be aware of her conditions during the day through multiple phone calls. When we talk on the phone she will not hang up until I say I love you. During in-person contacts she would also repeatedly ask me to express my love to her and tell her that I am proud of having a girl like her. (Father of a 10-year-old daughter)

> One of the participated experts about the role of the family in the formation of gender identity stated that:

> Before a girl would enter the society, her family would form her identity. Before the freedoms outside the house would be given to a girl, it must be considered that how she has been treated in her house. If a girl were loved at home, she would not be harmed by the freedoms outside the house. (Psychiatrist)

> The role of a peer showed that being a part of the peer's group was important to them and most of the female adolescents stated that they had found the answer to most of their sexual questions from their peers.

> I have friends that mostly would talk about puberty and sexual matters and what might happen during the relationship between girls and boys in the break times. We would ask our sexual questions of each other in break times. Anyone would share their experiences with others as much as possible. Even if someone had no experiences, they would try to ask their friends. (Adolescent girl, 14 years old, first child of the family)

Tendency towards the opposite sex

On the one hand, female adolescents had the need for being loved by the opposite sex and stated that these friendships would give them peace, and on the other hand, they were worried about being stigmatized or sexually harmed by their boyfriends. This concern was stated in their interviews:

> Any affection you need; you can get it from your boyfriend. At this age, I would like to befriend a boy. Even when I just talk to a boy, I would forget about all of my problems. Someone in my age would like to be among boys. Boys would support you comprehensively. (Adolescent girl, 17 years old, second child of the family)

> It is right that we would feel calm when befriending a boy, but that boy has no concerns. But my concern as a girl is my hymen. (Adolescent girl, 15 years old, second child of the family)

Furthermore, when parents would become aware of their child's befriending behaviors, they would express defensive behaviors from suppression to threats.

> Right now, I do not know how to persuade my daughter that being friends with a boy at this age could be harmful to her. She should know that now, nothing is more important for her than studying. I would not let her continue these behaviors. (Mother of a 14-year-old girl)

> If you need love, your father and I are available. She always says that it is useless talking to you guys. So I have warned my daughter that if she continues this relationship, I would inform her father. (Mother of a 16-year-old girl)

Other than parents' frustration with their daughter's interactions, they were also worried about the resources of their child's sexual information.

My daughter was really a kid in the sixth grade and had no information about anything. But when she went to the seventh grade she learned some stuff about fertilization in their biology class and asked me how I was made? That was when I realized that they have talked to them about pregnancy at school. In fact, I could not help her that much. (Mother of a 16-year-old girl)

While parents were worried about their children's information resources through school, most of the female adolescents mentioned social media as their source for sexual information rather than school.

Adolescent would gain their information from the social networks. Proxies are available everywhere… (Adolescent girl, 14 years old, second child of the family)

It has been a few days that my daughter does not have access to the telegram. She does not eat, she has dropped 2 kilos and is totally depressed… She says that I wish I would die. Studying is not important. (Mother of a 12-year-old girl)

Efforts for social acceptance in female adolescents

Participated girls were worried about their social roles in the society and were trying to increase their acceptance in the society.

In selecting my university major, my greatest concern is to select a major that I would be able to find a good job afterward. I do not as much freedom as boys in selecting my major and my job. (female adolescents, 17 years old, Third child of the family)

Analyzing the descriptions of the participated experts showed that the society has an important role in forming the gender identity of female adolescents. In fact, cultural texture and gender differences could have a role in gender identity development of female adolescents as contextual conditions.

As long as the stereotyped and cultural view toward women about the activities of this group in the society would not be modified, we would not be able to fully benefit from the capacities and abilities of women for expanding development and progress. (Psychologist)

Eliminating sexism look to women's presence in social and cultural fields requires education from preschool and elementary school. Because sexual stereotypes should be removed from the thoughts of little boys who are going to be the future men of the society and be present in the managerial positions. (Sociologist)

Discussion and conclusions

The present grounded theory study revealed the process of gender identity development among Iranian female adolescents. This process was developed through socialization in the family, peers, opposite sex, and the society (Fig. 1). It would begin with sexual self-expression during puberty in a way that the adolescent considered a kind of body image for themselves that was associated with shame and modesty at the beginning of puberty and gradually, by reaching the end of puberty, they were interested in expressing their body. In fact, over time, not only body changes would not cause shame but by expressing it, they were trying to develop their gender identity. Biologic, cognitive, social, and cultural factors are effective in the perception of body image and dissatisfaction with body image could cause an undesirable impact on body self-esteem and decrease participation in daily physical activities (Sahdra et al. 2015). The study in Australia showed decreased self-esteem and social support from family, friends, and media were related to attitude towards body image (Dohnt and Tiggemann 2006).

In the present study, the process of gender identity development in female adolescents was continued with attachment to their parents. By attachment to their parents, the female adolescents were trying to stabilize their gender identity. In a study that was conducted in Spain on 46,593 female adolescents of 11–18 years old, positive communications between the girls and their parents were associated with increased satisfaction with life (Jiménez-Iglesias et al. 2017).

Following attachment to the family, female adolescents would experience interaction with peers. Peers' influence was observed as a confounding factor in the process of gender identity development in the present study. Boys and girls would first socialize with peers of their own sex and then experience relationship with the opposite sex (Arndorfer and Stormshak 2008). Besides its positive effects on the social mental health of the adolescents, socializing with peers could be a factor for performing risky behaviors in the adolescents (Goldstein et al. 2005). The result of the qualitative study in Iran showed that being dependent on the family equates with not being accepted by friends or "being counted as a kid" (Parvizy et al. 2008).

At the third stage, female adolescents were interested in interacting with the opposite sex. Despite their awareness of

Fig. 1 The process of gender identity development
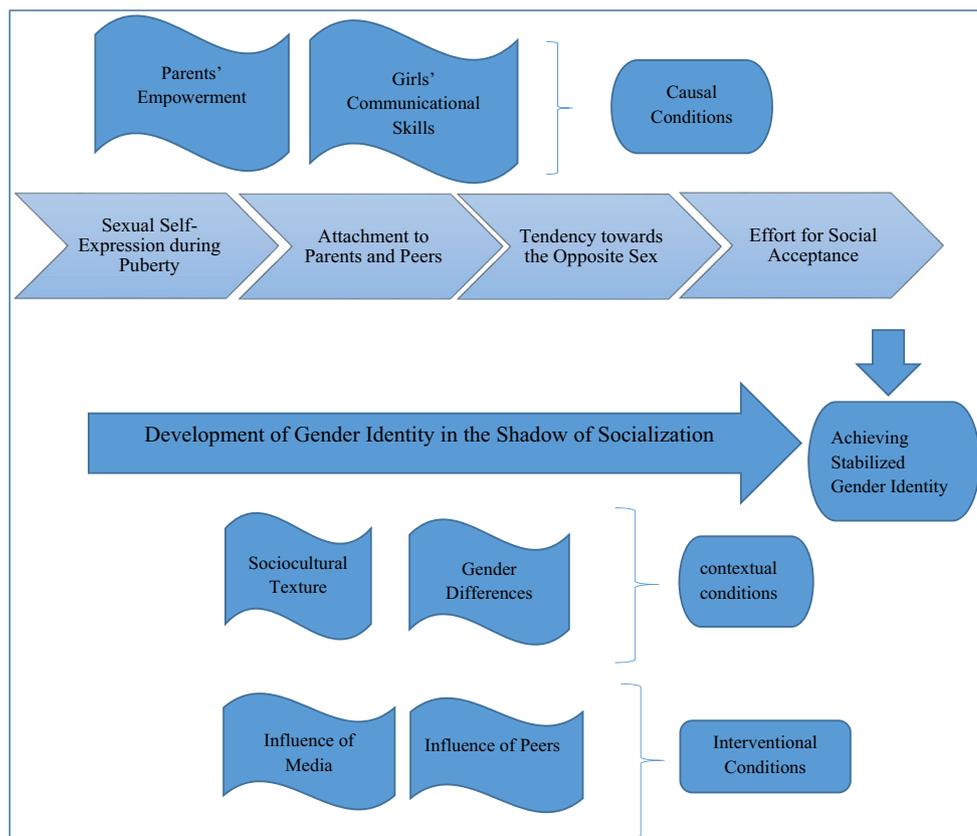
sexual harms, female adolescents were willing to have a relationship with the opposite sex. In the present study, increasing the female adolescents' communicational skills was considered as an effective factor in the process of gender identity development. Results of a longitudinal study showed that from 7500 adolescents who had a relationship with the opposite sex, one third of them had experienced some kinds of violence in the relationship (Halpern et al. 2001).

On the other hand, in the present study, parents would express defensive behaviors in response to their child's befriending behaviors from suppression to threatening. In the present study, parents' empowerment was also an effective factor in gender identity development. In a qualitative study of Iranian families, parent–teenage conflict and difficulty in controlling were the two main parents' concerns (Valizadeh et al. 2018). In a study that was conducted in America, parents would not notify their children of the restriction but however, expected them to respect the norms of the society and the family (Vansteenkiste et al. 2014).

Besides parents' frustration with their adolescent child's interactions, parents were also worried about their child's resources for sexual information. In the present study, the role of social media in completing the sexual information as a confounding factor in the process of gender identity was determined. In a study that was conducted to determine the motivations for using social media among the adolescents, most of the girls mentioned the communicative aspects and the use of the social media for connecting with their peers (Barker 2009). In a study that was conducted on 16–22-year-old Australian adolescents, they used social media for sexual health communications. In their study, researchers revealed that gaining sexual information requires support through continuous adjustments and appropriate content creation (Evers et al. 2013). In another study, to determine the aims of using social media by the adolescents, researchers revealed that about two thirds of the cybercriminals have brought up sexual subjects in their first chat and more than half of them have hidden their identity. Recommendations such as educational programs, using the type of technology that could be helpful in recognizing suspicious online behaviors and also the option of maintaining privacy for protecting online students and adolescents who have been subjected to cyber harassment, could also be helpful (Dowdell et al. 2011).

The fourth stage of the process was the effort for social acceptance in the female adolescents. Gender differences and sociocultural texture of the society were recognized as the contextual factors in the process of gender identity development among female adolescents. In a study to determine the Iranian women's empowerment, besides presence in the society, decision-making power and authority were considered as the fundamental factors in empowering Iranian women; Iranian girls considered these factors in education, appropriate job,

and having control over their lives (Fereidouni et al. 2015). Socialization processes are not necessarily harmful and mostly depend on the accurate definition of how an individual could be well-socialized (Choukas-Bradley et al. 2015).

Conclusion

In the present study, female adolescents would use sexual self-expression during puberty, attachment to the family and peers, tendency towards the opposite sex, and efforts for social acceptance as the main strategies in the process of gender identity development for achieving identity stability. Increased communicational skills in girls, parents' empowerment in managing their daughters' interactions with their peers of the same or opposite sex, modifying gender roles in the society, and appropriate content creation by the media could have an important role in helping female adolescents reaching identity stability. Also, considering the existence of different cultures and ethnicities in Iran, it is recommended to perform more extended studies and also perform a similar study on Iranian adolescent boys.

Compliance with ethical standards

The present study was a Ph.D. thesis in reproductive health and was approved by the ethics committee of the Isfahan University of Medical Sciences under the ethics code IR.MUI.REC.1395.3. 294.

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the ethics committee of the Isfahan University of Medical Sciences.

Informed consent All participants signed a written informed consent form.

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