APPROPRIATE AGE-RELATED BEHAVIOR FOR MALE AND FEMALE ADOLESCENTS
Adult Perceptions

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It is commonly assumed that there are significant differentials in the amount of behavioral autonomy that adults consider to be appropriate for males and females during adolescence. Cernkovich and Giordano (1979), for example, point out that this has been the primary theme found in research focused on gender differences in delinquent behavior (see the discussion of Gibbons, 1982: 383-384). Surprisingly, however, the adult standards of behavior during adolescence have rarely been examined empirically. In fact, Scanzoni and Fox (1980: 77) note that relatively little is actually known about the socialization of children into sex roles after infancy and argue that

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such studies should be given a high research priority (also see Norland et al., 1978). Given the central role that such expectations play in theories of sex role specialization, we feel that it is important to have a more grounded understanding of these gender norms than is currently available. This article represents an attempt to provide some initial evidence concerning this issue.

BEHAVIORAL EXPECTATIONS AND ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

As Douvan and Adelson (1966) have argued, the overt behavioral activities of adolescents are highly salient markers of the transition from child to adult. Because a youth's involvement in certain activities tends to be much more visible than subtler indicators of an adolescent's growing independence from the family (which may be intentionally underplayed in adolescent-adult interactions), these behaviors may become symbolic of the entire developmental process. That is, the decision to grant permission to engage in certain activities associated with adolescence is often contingent on the perception of a youth's ability to make responsible personal decisions.

Such decisions reflect complex interactions between the youth and adult socializers, grounded not only in their own beliefs but also in their perceptions of what other adolescents and adults consider to be normative. Yet, the expectations of adults have largely been ignored in adolescent development research. Rather, the most common sources of data used to support the assumption of gender differentials are the reports of adolescents, such as those presented by Weller and Luchterland (1977). Maccoby and Jacklin (1974: 313) argue that such reports are an incomplete data base in themselves in that it is impossible to separate the selective perceptions of autonomy by gender from actual differences in the actions or beliefs of

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adults. This argument has been strongly supported by Jessop's (1981) study of a large sample of high school students and their parents, which indicated that the level of congruence between child and parent reports of family processes is "uniformly low." Thus the dangers of inferring gender differences in socialization on the basis of adolescent responses alone are very real (see also Larson, 1974).

These dangers are underscored by a growing body of psychological literature indicating that gender differences in childhood socialization may not be as pronounced as we have believed. For example, on the basis of their extensive review of such studies, Maccoby and Jacklin (1974: 319) conclude that, although findings are not consistent across studies, "the bulk of evidence is that there is little or no difference in the socialization of boys and girls when it comes to independence granting." More recently, a series of sociological publications (Duncan et al., 1973; Duncan and Duncan, 1978; Duncan, 1979) has argued that if boys are expected to master a task at an earlier age than girls, one might "infer that boys receive earlier and more consistent training for independence and autonomy than girls" (Duncan and Duncan, 1978: 256). However, this research also discloses a general similarity in the socialization of boys and girls concerning the taking of responsibility for certain household chores.

It is possible, of course, that differential expectations of autonomous behavior first manifest themselves with the onset of puberty, when the potential costs of "poor judgment" may be perceived as much more serious for girls than for boys. Yet it is also possible that such similarities generally persist through this stage of life and that gender differentials are much less pronounced than commonly assumed. We feel that empirical evidence is especially important in this area given recent work that documents a growing convergence of sex role expectations in general (Cherlin and Walters, 1981). In this article, we examine the extent to which adult normative differences concerning the behavior of male and female adolescents exist

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in a predominantly white-collar, suburban community located near a large midwestern city.

THE DATA

As part of a larger study focused on the dynamics of deviance during early adolescence, the data analyzed here were collected during 1981 in a telephone survey of 430 community adults (18 years of age or older) in an effort to determine the community's boundaries of approved and disapproved behaviors for its youth.[1] A series of fifteen behaviors were described and the respondents were asked to report the age at which each behavior would be appropriate for boys and girls.[2]

Due to the length of the questionnaire, half of the respondents were asked questions pertaining to adolescent girls in the community, the other half boys. Although it would have been ideal had each adult been able to evaluate both boys and girls, the split-sample format does have the great advantage of providing independent estimates of gender expectations; that is, responses for one gender are not confounded by what has already been reported for the other. Although these are not matched subsamples, gender assignment was done randomly and the two groups of respondents do not significantly differ in their composition.

Of the fifteen behaviors, four were eliminated from the analysis[3] because a majority of the respondents indicated that such activities were inappropriate for adolescents of either gender until they were at least 18 years of age. In addition, an exploratory factor analysis of the remaining eleven behaviors indicated that four other activities[4] were not considered to be part of a general adolescent development process. Therefore, the analysis focuses on the remaining seven behaviors that appear to form "core" indicators of adolescent behavioral autonomy in the eyes of adults: the age at which it is considered appropriate to

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(a) stay out with friends until midnight (MIDNIGHT);
(b) ride in a car with other youths (CAR);
(c) have same-gender friends to one's home with no adults present (FRIEND);
(d) go on an unchaperoned date (DATE);
(e) be left at home alone during the afternoon (ALONE-AFT);
(f) be left at home alone during the evening (ALONE-EVE); and
(g) participate in organized activities (ORG).

FINDINGS

The most obvious reflection of differential expectations is whether these activities are considered to be appropriate for one gender at an earlier age than for the other. As shown in Table 1, there is not a consistent tendency on the part of adults in this community to approve of these behaviors at an earlier age for boys than girls. For example, although boys are expected to engage in four of the activities at a significantly younger age, girls are trusted to have friends over to their homes in unsupervised situations before boys are. In addition, for two activities that might especially reflect a need to "protect" adolescent girls more than boys (staying out until midnight and riding around in cars with friends), there are very similar age norms.

This general similarity is highlighted by the fact that even for the five activities in which there is evidence of significantly different behavioral norms, the absolute differences in the expected ages are relatively small, averaging just over half a year. Thus differential gender expectations during adolescence in this community are neither consistent nor especially pronounced. However, differentials in age expectations may be more subtle than are reflected by such simple comparisons. If, for example, the dimensions that underlie these expectations differ by gender, this would have the important implication that adults attach very different meanings to a behavior depending on the gender of the person engaging in it.

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TABLE 1
Tests of Gender Differences in 7 Age Expectations[a]

Activity	Mean Age	Standard Deviation	t-value
MIDNIGHT			
Boys	16.523	1.133	0.49
Girls	16.575	1.049	
CAR			
Boys	16.185	1.045	1.38
Girls	16.327	1.090	
FRIEND			
Boys	14.256	2.406	2.09*
Girls	13.784	2.261	
DATE			
Boys	15.477	1.297	3.58***
Girls	15.879	1.014	
ALONE-AFT			
Boys	12.662	1.888	3.26***
Girls	13.290	2.099	
ALONE-EVE			
Boys	13.458	1.791	3.75***
Girls	14.126	1.901	
ORG			
Boys	12.116	2.314	3.99***
Girls	13.009	2.306	

a. N = 216 for boys, 214 for girls.
*$p < .05$.
***$p < .001$.

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TABLE 2
Intercorrelations of the 7 Activities[a]

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. MIDNIGHT	1.000	0.355	0.329	0.451	0.178	0.250	0.295
2. CAR	0.423	1.000	0.402	0.441	0.223	0.314	0.283
3. FRIEND	0.368	0.410	1.000	0.452	0.497	0.441	0.436
4. DATE	0.546	0.483	0.466	1.000	0.295	0.308	0.328
5. ALONE-AFT	0.376	0.270	0.413	0.448	1.000	0.795	0.615
6. ALONE-EVE	0.364	0.381	0.401	0.463	0.790	1.000	0.548
7. ORG	0.338	0.233	0.356	0.432	0.636	0.597	1.000

a. The correlations for boys are above the diagonal; girls below.

Therefore, we examined the gender-specific factor structures underlying these activities using the maximum likelihood confirmatory factor model developed by Joreskog (1971) for the comparison of two or more groups (see also Alwin and Jackson, 1981).

The initial step in this procedure is a test of the hypothesis that the two matrices of intercorrelations (Table 2) are statistically equal. If this hypothesis cannot be rejected, there is a pooled correlation matrix common to both groups and, therefore, no significant differences in the underlying structure of these activity expectations are reported by our adult respondents. The test of this hypothesis indicates that in this community, the assumption of similar factor structures is warranted (χ^2 = 19.57, df = 28, p = .880). Thus the adult perceptions of the underlying dimensions of behavioral autonomy are the same for boys and girls.

In general, the two dimensions underlying these activities have fairly straightforward interpretations (Table 3).[5] The behaviors loading most strongly on the first factor reflect the expectations that the adolescent is at an age that he or she can take care of him- or herself and can make decisions concerning

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TABLE 3
Factor Structure of the Pooled Correlation Matrix[a]

Indicator	Factor 1	Factor 2	Unique Variance
MIDNIGHT	0.0*	0.632	0.601
CAR	0.0*	0.608	0.630
FRIEND	0.244	0.481	0.597
DATE	0.0*	0.777	0.397
ALONE-AFT	0.951	0.0*	0.097
ALONE-EVE	0.790	0.101	0.295
ORG	0.558	0.213	0.530

Correlation Between Factors = .477

Correlation Between the Unique Variances for CAR and ALONE-EVE = .078

Chi-squared = 7.84 d.f. = 9 p = .550

a. All effects are at least twice the size of their standard errors.
*Constrained to these values by the program.

the use of free time within an organized context. This can be called the "personal responsibility" dimension of adult expectations. The second dimension clearly reflects the development of peer relationships, which is perceived by adults to be related to the development of personal responsibility, given the significant correlation between the two factors (.477).

The factor structure provides a degree of coherence to the gender differences presented in Table 1. Although there are not consistent differentials in the age expectations concerning the development of peer relationships, the three behaviors loading most highly on the personal responsibility dimension are all considered to be appropriate for girls at a slightly later age than for boys. Thus, although the same dimensions underlie adult

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expectations concerning the behavior of male and female adolescents, there are differences in the perceived ability of the genders to handle personal responsibility, although these differences are not especially striking.

Although these findings suggest that the similarity that Maccoby and Jacklin noted in childhood socialization may persist to a great degree through adolescence, such a conclusion is premature. Douvan and Adelson have suggested that the inconsistent and seemingly contradictory expectations often experienced during adolescence may reflect a fear on the part of some adults that certain youths may not be ready for growing responsibility. If we assume that these fears are randomly distributed throughout the population, then the results that have been presented are adequate descriptions of gender norms in the community. On the other hand, if they are not distributed randomly, the expectations of Table 1 represent a confounding of significantly different processes of sex role socialization.

Two potential sources of such confounding have important implications for the consistency of the expectations imposed on adolescents. First, although adolescents are exposed to behavioral expectations from the adult community at large, parents generally have a much more intimate role in shaping the behavior of their children than do other adults. The day-to-day involvement with their children as well as the responsibilities and pressures of parenthood may result in a different definition of appropriate gender-related behavior than found in the wider community.

A second important potential source of variation reflects an interaction between the gender of the adult reporting the expectation and the gender of the adolescent in question. For example, assume that male adults feel that boys should be allowed to engage in a certain activity at age 15, girls at age 17. Further assume that female adults report just the opposite pattern. The mean expectation for both adolescent genders is age 16, but this figure masks an important source of incon-

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sistency within the community that operates differently for males and females.

To address this issue, a three-way analysis of variance was conducted for each of the seven activities using parental status, the gender of the adult, and the gender of the adolescent as the independent variables; the dependent variables are the ages at which these behaviors are considered to be appropriate. Our attention is focused on three interactions: (1) parental status × adolescent gender, (2) adult gender × adolescent gender, and (3) parental status × adult gender × adolescent gender. The existence of such effects would imply, respectively, that parents have different gender-related expectations than other adults, that the gender-specific expectations are contingent on the gender of the adult respondent, and that this second relationship is further specified by the adult's parental status.

The first and third interactions were not significant for any of the activities. Thus the gender-related expectations are fairly consistent between those who are parents and the rest of the adult community. However, for six of the seven activities, a significant adult gender by adolescent gender interaction was observed. The mean expectations for these activities are presented in Table 4.

A consideration of these interactions presents a very different picture of the context of adolescent development in this community. Although the normative standards of behavior are fairly similar for boys and girls when adults are considered as a whole, female adolescents are much more likely to be exposed to inconsistent expectations concerning the development of personal responsibility. Female adults indicate that girls should take such responsibility at about the same age as boys—the average difference in these expectations is only .28 years. However, there are very pronounced gender differentials in the attitudes of adult males—in their opinion, boys can be trusted in such activities more than a year earlier than girls can. Thus there are two important sources of inconsistency along this dimension of behavioral autonomy in the socialization of girls.

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TABLE 4
Mean Expectations for the Significant Adult Gender × Adolescent Gender Interactions

		CAR	
		ADULTS	
		Males	Females
ADOLESCENTS	Males	16.04	16.32
	Females	16.42	16.25
		FRIEND	
		ADULTS	
		Males	Females
ADOLESCENTS	Males	13.54	14.91
	Females	13.99	13.64
		DATE	
		ADULTS	
		Males	Females
ADOLESCENTS	Males	15.20	15.70
	Females	16.06	15.75
		ALONE-AFT	
		ADULTS	
		Males	Females
ADOLESCENTS	Males	12.75	12.71
	Females	13.90	12.89
		ALONE-EVE	
		ADULTS	
		Males	Females
ADOLESCENTS	Males	13.37	13.60
	Females	14.60	13.80

(continued)

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TABLE 4 Continued

		ORG	
		ADULTS	
		Males	Females
ADOLESCENTS	Males	12.23	12.13
	Females	13.63	12.58

First, girls are considered to be responsible at a much earlier age by female adults than by male adults. Relatedly, female adults generally consider girls able to accept this responsibility at the same age as boys; adult males report a very strong differential. It is important to emphasize that given the lack of a significant interaction involving the parental status variable, this difference is reflected not only in the community as a whole but also within family situations.

The interaction patterns for the peer relationship dimension are not as clear-cut. Male adults still feel that boys can be trusted to engage in these activities before girls, but the age differences are much less extreme; female adults again have similar expectations for boys and girls. A glaring exception to this pattern is reflected in a pronounced distrust on the part of females of boys having friends over to their homes in unsupervised situations. The reasons for this anomaly are not immediately apparent. Nevertheless, because the dating and riding in a car items were shown in Table 3 to be the strongest indicators of the peer relationship dimension, it is fairly safe to conclude that a similar pattern of inconsistency in expectations exists along this dimension although the differentials are not as pronounced as for the development of personal responsibility.

DISCUSSION

Although at the aggregate level this research has shown that the normative expectations of adolescent behavior (as well as

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the dimensions underlying those expectations) are fairly similar for boys and girls in this middle-class community, we have also presented evidence that indicates that there is a great inconsistency in the expectations experienced by girls that makes adolescence a much different phenomenon for females that it is for males.

However, our study should be considered primarily suggestive rather than definitive. What we have documented are attitudes about age expectations. We do not know whether these attitudes are in fact translated into similarly oriented behaviors by adults; neither can we tell if there are gender-related differences in the responses of adults to violations of these expectations.

In addition, although these behaviors were chosen for analysis after intensive ethnographic research in the community, it is not clear how representative these activities are of the entire domain of behaviors that may involve differential expectations. Most notable by their absence are activities reflecting sexual behavior that may lead to the traditional label of "bad girl." As Harris (1977) has argued, there may be adult perceptions of behaviorally defined gender identities concerning the type of person expected to (boys) or not expected to (girls) take part in deviant activities. Therefore, if indicators of some of these activities had been included in the analysis, the differentials may have been more pronounced. Yet it should be noted that most adults in this community felt that it was inappropriate for both boys and girls to have opposite-sex friends in their homes without a chaperone until they were 18 (56% and 58%, respectively). Similarly, two of the activities included in this analysis provide situations conducive to sexual experimentation (riding around in cars and staying out until midnight), yet there were no significant differences in the aggregated age expectations and not even a significant interactive effect for the midnight item.

Finally, we cannot claim that the normative structure for this community is representative of those found throughout the United States. Although we feel that this community is a

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good example of the expanding middle-class suburbs that have been a major ecological phenomenon since World War II, Schwartz et al. (1980) have documented the existence of very strong community-specific normative structures concerning the expectations placed on adolescents. Nevertheless, the patterns presented in this article suggest that we need to make a careful reexamination of many of the assumptions that we have relied upon in our explanations of gender differences in behavior during adolescence.

NOTES

1. Of the eligible respondents, 53% consented to be interviewed and completed interviews were obtained from 81% of these respondents. Although we are concerned that this relatively low completion rate may reflect a nonrandom refusal pattern, we have found that the primary reason for these refusals was the time of day and day of the week in which the respondents were contacted, which does not appear to be an important source of bias. In addition, given that we were dealing with a 55-minute instrument, we feel that it compares favorably with the rates presented by Groves and Kahn (1979) for a 30-minute telephone interview.

2. An upward limit of "18 years of age or older" was placed on this distribution. A danger inherent in the selection of these behaviors was that they might be chosen on an ad hoc basis and have very little relevance to the day-to-day experiences of the adults and adolescents. However, the larger study from which this report is drawn involved an intensive period of fieldwork in the community. Our ethnographers were able to provide detailed observations and interview material regarding activities that were common to the life experiences of adults and adolescents in this community and, therefore, pertinent to the autonomy issue. These observations are reflected in the selection of the fifteen items.

3. Going out without saying where one was going; having opposite-sex friends over to one's home without a chaperone; drinking alcohol in the home; smoking cigarettes in the home.

4. Earning spending money; taking responsibility for school assignments; having full control over spending money; being able to decide whether or not to attend church services.

5. Although a one-factor solution provided a very poor fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 229.72$, df = 14, p = .0000), a two-factor solution was satisfactory ($\chi^2 = 15.46$, df = 8, p = .051).

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