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Family Environments and Self-Consciousness in Early Adolescence

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Abstract

Modified versions of Epstein and McPartland's Family Decision-Making Scale were administered to upper elementary and junior high school children to assess their perceptions of the degree to which the child shares power and authority with parents and the degree to which the child participates in making decisions at home. Support was found for the hypothesis that parent-child authority relationships are systematically related to children's self-consciousness in various spheres of experience. Children from highly Authoritarian families reported greater self-consciousness in the math classroom, amongst peers, and in sports settings; they also reported a greater overall tendency to avoid situations in which the self was salient. In contrast children from families offering opportunities for self-direction reported an opposite pattern. Finally children's self-consciousness was differentially related to children's self-esteem and self-concept of ability in math, social, and sports domains. The authors conclude that parent-child authority structures are systematically related to children's self-assessments. Future research is needed to augment our understanding of the parent-child dynamics which contribute to these observed relationships.

Early adolescence is a time when children begin the move from dependence on parents to a definition of their own independent selves. Recent research on the family environments of young adolescents has focused on the process by which family rules and role structures are renegotiated to accommodate to the changing

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needs of the developing child (see Grotevant, 1983). Convergent evidence (e.g., Elder, 1963; Enright, Lapsley, Drivas & Fehr, 1980) now exists that parenting practices which emphasize reason and democracy in decision-making are associated with children's development of autonomy. Such practices have also been linked to moral development and self-esteem. When parents encourage children to express their opinions, listen to and consider the opinions of other family members, an internal elaboration of moral judgment *and* a more positive sense of self-esteem are facilitated (Leahy, 1981). When parents emphasize unilateral respect for authority and inhibit opportunities for role-taking, questioning, and debate, a morality of constraint (Youniss, 1978) and lower self-esteem (Leahy, 1981) result. This paper extends this line of work to the domain of self-consciousness; in particular it addresses the relationship between family decision-making practices and self-consciousness among early adolescents.

Self-Consciousness

While there has been much research on the development of children's identity and self-esteem, no work to date has considered the potential impact of family environments on children's self-consciousness. By self-consciousness, we refer to a heightened awareness of the self, or what Duval and Wicklund (1972) have called "objective self-awareness." Self-consciousness may refer to a heightened attentional focus on one's behaviors or on one's internal thoughts and feelings (Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss, 1975). One is conscious of the self as well as of the other looking at the self, and this divided focus of attention often debilitates performance on various tasks (see Wicklund, 1975). A key element of self-consciousness is a subjective sense of conspicuousness. Attention falls like a spotlight on the self and this attention is assumed to be aversive for some individuals.

Some studies suggest that increases in self-consciousness as well as declines in self-esteem pose special problems for early adolescents, and that girls are particularly vulnerable. In a study comparing ninth and fourth graders, adolescents exhibited relatively more concerns with the self than the external world, and in particular exhibited more negative self-concerns (Kissel, 1975). Another study comparing 4th, 6th, 8th, and 12th graders found that 8th graders were the most self-conscious, with girls consistently more so than boys (Elkind & Bowen, 1979). Finally, in their study of 8- to 15-year-olds, Rosenberg and Simmons (1975) found that girls reported somewhat lower self-esteem but markedly higher self-consciousness than did boys. Although both boys and girls in their study showed an increase in self-consciousness in early adolescence, this increase was much sharper among girls. By late adolescence boys showed a decline in self-consciousness, but girls' self-consciousness continued to rise. These investigators attributed this sharp rise in girls' self-consciousness to a concomitant rise in "people-orientedness" among girls during early adolescence. Further support for the relationship between self-consciousness and concerns about others' evaluations of the self has been offered by Adams and Jones (1981) who found that self-conscious adolescents rated themselves higher on a scale of social desirability and performed better on a task of social sensitivity.

Family Decision-Making Practices and Self-Consciousness

Since studies have shown that children from more democratic families tend to have higher self-esteem, we expect that children from such environments will also rate themselves as less self-conscious than those from more authoritarian families. Family environments characterized by high parental control should foster an attitude of self-evaluation in comparison to others' standards. On the other hand, family environments which offer the child opportunities for self-direction should foster a sense of personal agency and autonomy. To the extent that children are attuned to how they measure up to externally imposed rules and decisions, they should develop a more self-focused orientation (i.e. a focus on the self as an object of external evaluation rather than as an autonomous actor). To the extent that children are encouraged to make their own decisions, their attentional focus should be directed more towards the task at hand, and away from the self's compliance with external authority.

In addition, unlike previous studies which have looked at global self-consciousness, we examine the impact of family environments on self-consciousness in three activity domains—math, sports, and social—as well as on a general disposition to avoid situations in which one might be conspicuous, which we have called "avoidance of the spotlight."

In light of the growing awareness of the need to differentiate self-perceptions across various experiences (Harter, 1983), another goal of this study is to elaborate on the construct of self-consciousness by exploring its relationship to other self-perceptions. Self-consciousness and self-esteem have already been identified as salient dimensions of one's self-image during early adolescence (Simmons, Rosenberg, and Rosenberg, 1973), and there is evidence that self-consciousness and self-esteem are negatively related (e.g. Elkind & Bowen, 1979). In addition, assessments of one's ability also contribute to self-evaluations (Harter, 1983). While there is research linking self-consciousness to self-esteem, there is less information about how self-consciousness and self-esteem are related to one's ability assessments. Consequently, this study also explores the relationship between self-consciousness, self-esteem, and self-concept of ability in each of the three activity domains—math, sports, and social.

METHODS

Subjects

Subjects were 291 students (128 boys and 163 girls) recruited from fourteen upper elementary (4th–5th grade; mean age = 10.8 yrs.) and junior high school (7th–8th grade; mean age = 13.0 yrs.) classrooms in southeastern Michigan.

Measures

Student surveys, which included a broad array of questions concerning attitudes and beliefs about achievement in academic (primarily math), social, and physical domains were group administered in classrooms. These questionnaires also

included affective items assessing global self-esteem as well as self-consciousness in each of these three domains and avoidance of the spotlight. In addition students were asked about their family environment. Items in the student questionnaire were partialed into one of three forms, with some items common to all forms. Because some items appeared on one form while others were on all forms, the number of students included in an analysis will differ across analyses.

Student Perceptions of the Home Environment. Students' perceptions of the family environment were measured by a modified version of Epstein and McPartland's (1977) Family Decision-Making Scale, reported to have an internal consistency of .71. Although Epstein and McPartland used a dichotomous response format, we used a 4- or 5-point Likert-type scale response format in order to increase variance and better describe the broad range of parent-child authority relationships. Factor analysis[1] revealed a 3-factor model accounting for 30.6% of the variance. An oblique rotation of these 3 factors yielded the most interpretable solution. The first factor appears to reflect a family environment in which parents are mistrustful and maintain control over their children's behavior. We have labeled this factor the Authoritarian Parent factor. The second factor seems to reflect a family environment in which students have input in making family and personal decisions; we have labeled it the Participatory Family factor. The third factor appears to reflect a family environment in which parents think their children are trustworthy and demonstrate respect for their children's independence and autonomy; we have labeled it the Child Autonomy factor. Weighted standardized factor scores were computed for the Authoritarian, Participatory, and Child Autonomy family factors.[2]

General Self-Esteem. Global self-esteem was measured by 7 items developed by Harter (see Harter, 1982, for details). Factor analysis revealed one common factor explaining 29.9 percent of the variance (alpha coefficient = .73).[3] Since students who score high on this factor report self-doubts and self-dissatisfactions, we have labeled this factor Low Self-Esteem.

Student Self-Consciousness. Self-consciousness in each of three settings—math classroom, sports activities, and social settings—was assessed with 5 items tapping students' concerns about others' scrutiny and appraisal of their behaviors in that setting. Students rated each of these 15 items on a scale from 1 (not at all true of me) to 4 (very true of me). Five additional items asked students to rate their general tendency to avoid situations where public focus on the self is salient—hereafter referred to as avoiding the spotlight. Each of these 5 items was rated on a scale from 1 (almost never) to 7 (very often). While most of the twenty items were highly intercorrelated, we decided to maintain them within their *a priori* desig-

[1]All factor analyses reported use a principal components solution and Scree extraction criterion. All factor scores are computed from stardardized data.

[2]Tables listing family decision-making items along with their factor loadings are available from the first author.

[3]Tables listing self-esteem items along with their factor loading are available from the first author.

nated groups because we were interested in whether students' perceptions of self-consciousness would differ across domains. Thus separate factor analyses were performed for math self-consciousness (39.1% of variance accounted for, alpha coefficient = .74), sports self-consciousness (43.5% of variance accounted for, alpha coefficient = .75), social self-consciousness (33.9% of variance accounted for, alpha coefficient = .71), and general avoidance of spotlight items (43.2% variance accounted for, alpha coefficient = .79). Weighted standardized factor scores were computed for each factor.[4]

Self-Concept of Ability. Single item indicators were used to assess self-concept of ability in each of the three domains. Students were asked how good they were in math, sports, and making friends. Each item was rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored at the extremes with positive and negative descriptors.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analyses

Low Self-Esteem. Gender had a moderate but nonsignificant relationship to students' self-esteem. Girls generally tended to have lower self-esteem than boys (girls' mean = .15, boys mean = −.22, $t(76) = 1.87$, $p \leq .06$). Consistent with findings of Simmons et al. (1973), grade level was significantly related to student's self-esteem. Junior high school students reported lower self-esteem than elementary school students (jhs students' mean = .12, elem students' mean = −.29, $t(76) = 1.96$, $p \leq .05$).

Student Self-Consciousness. Contrary to findings from other studies about self-consciousness, grade level was not a significant predictor of Math Self-Consciousness, Sports Self-Consciousness, Social Self-Consciousness, or Avoidance of Spotlight. One explanation for these different results may be the use of domain comparisons in this study. Earlier work used global self-consciousness as the construct of interest. In the present study the assessment of self-consciousness in three distinct domains does not yield similar differences as a function of student's age.

In contrast, gender was a significant predictor of Sports Self-Consciousness and Avoidance of Spotlight. Compared to boys, girls reported that they were more self-conscious about sports (girls' mean = .21, boys' mean = −.25, $t(121) = 2.85$, $p \leq .01$), and that they more often avoided the spotlight (girls' mean = .17, boys' mean = −.25 $t(97) = 2.38$, $p \leq .01$). Gender, however, was not a significant predictor of either math or social self-consciousness. The fact that girls do report significantly more self-focus in sports suggests that they may feel particularly "put on the spot" in this domain.

Family Environments. The effects of gender and grade level on children's perceptions of parent-child authority relations were assessed. There was a nonsignificant trend that girls felt that their family environments offered more opportunities

[4]Tables listing self-consciousness items along with their factor loadings are available from the first author.

TABLE 1

Correlations Between Student Perceived Family Environments and Student's Self-Consciousness

Item	Authoritarian	Participatory	Child Autonomy
Math Self-Consciousness	.31[3]	−.10	−.35[2]
Social Self-Consciousness	.22[1]	−.08	−.37[3]
Sports Self-Consciousness	.19[1]	.03	−.27[2]
Avoidance of Spotlight	.46[4]	−.11	−.46[4]

N's range from 91 to 105
†$p \leq .10$
[1]$p \leq .05$
[2]$p \leq .01$
[3]$p \leq .001$
[4]$p \leq .0001$

for participation in family decision-making (girls' mean = .19, boys' mean = −.28, $t(103) = 1.70$, $p \leq .10$) and for self-direction (girls' mean = .24, boys' mean = −.33, $t(103) = 1.73$, $p \leq .10$) than did boys.

Grade level had a significant impact on students' perceptions of their family environments. Junior high school students reported that their family environments were more participatory (jhs students' mean = .48, elem students' mean = −.53, $t(103) = 3.86$, $p \leq .001$) and offered more opportunities for autonomy (jhs students' mean = .33, elem students' mean = −.36, $t(103) = 2.10$, $p \leq .05$) than elementary school students.

An investigation of individual items revealed that elementary school students were more likely to report that their parents want them to follow their directions even if they disagree with their reasons (elem students' mean = 3.11, jhs students' mean = 2.74, $t(115) = 2.01$, $p \leq .05$). and that their parents do not like them to disagree with them in front of friends (elem students' mean = 2.60, jhs students' mean = 2.15, $t(113) = 2.31$, $p \leq .05$). In contrast, junior high school students were more likely to report that their parents allow them to make decisions (elem students' mean = 2.06, jhs students' mean = 2.67, $t(107) = 3.06$, $p \leq .01$). Yet they also report that they have more fights with parents about rules and decisions (elem students' mean = 1.63, jhs students' mean = 2.19, $t(112) = 3.76$, $p \leq .001$). Also, there was significantly greater variability among junior high school students in the frequency of parent-child arguments reported (elem students' variance = .46, jhs students' variance = .82, $F(57, 55) = 1.80$, $p \leq .01$). The finding that junior high school students generally report greater opportunities for participation in family decision-making and for self-determination supports the notion that as the child matures parents tend to accommodate to the child's increasing need for self-assertion (Newman & Murray, 1983). However, the finding that there are more fights about decisions and great varability among junior high school students in the extent to which they report parent-child arguments suggests that more attention needs to be directed to the family dynamics which make adolescence a turbulent period for some families but not others (Montemayor, 1983).

TABLE 2

Correlations Between Student Self-Consciousness, Self-Esteem, and Self-Concept of Ability, By Domains

Item	Self-Concept of Ability		
	Math	Social	Sports
Math Self-Consciousness[a]	$-.18^{1}$	$-.17\dagger$	.01
Sports Self-Consciousness[a]	−.04	−.12	−.12
Social Self-Consciousness[a]	.05	$-.19\dagger$	−.00
Avoidance of Spotlight[a]	.08	$-.22^{1}$	$-.20^{1}$
Low Self-Esteem[b]	−.00	$-.39^{3}$	$-.45^{4}$

[a]N's range from 98 to 127
[b]N's range from 68 to 78
$\dagger p \leq .10$
$^{1}p \leq .05$
$^{2}p \leq .01$
$^{3}p \leq .001$
$^{4}p \leq .0001$

Relational Analyses

Family Environments. Correlational analyses revealed a negative relationship between the Authoritarian Parent factor and both Participatory ($r = -.32, p \leq .01$) and Child Autonomy factors ($r = -.61, p \leq .01$), indicating that families characterized by high parent control tend to offer fewer opportunities for child participation in family decision-making and fewer opportunities for child self-determination. There was a positive relationship between Participatory and Autonomy environments ($r = .50, p \leq .01$).

Family Environments and Self-Consciousness. Correlational analyses assessing the relationship between family environments and children's self-consciousness are shown in Table 1. Support was found for the hypothesis that opportunities for self-determination would be inversely related to feelings of self-focus. Students from highly authoritarian family environments were more concerned with others' scrutiny and appraisal of their behaviors in math, sports, and social settings, and also were likely to avoid the spotlight. In contrast, students who perceived opportunities for self-determination within their families were less self-conscious in all three settings and generally did not mind being the center of attention. There was no systematic relationship between participating family environments and student self-consciousness or avoidance of the spotlight.

Correlational analyses were also performed on the self-consciousness measures, self-esteem measures, and self-concept of ability measures in each of the three domains. Low self-esteem was consistently and highly correlated with Math Self-Consciousness ($r = .28, p \leq .01$), Sports Self-Consciousness ($r = .32, p \leq .01$), social self-consciousness ($r = .39, p \leq .001$), and Avoidance of Spotlight ($r = .58, p \leq .0001$). Consistent with our predictions, students who felt self-conscious in each domain and who generally avoided the spotlight also reported greater self-dissatisfaction.

Table 2 contains the correlations of self-concept of ability in each domain to the self-consciousness and self-esteem scales. Students who were highly self-conscious in math rated themselves lower in math ability; similarly those who were highly self-conscious amongst friends rated themselves lower in their ability to make friends. Students' self-consciousness in sports was not at all related to their assessments of their sports ability. Students who avoided the spotlight rated themselves lower in their ability to make friends and to play sports. Similarly, students with low self-esteem also rated themselves lower in their ability to make friends and to play sports.

DISCUSSION

This study addressed two questions: (1) how is self-consciousness related to self-esteem and self-concept of ability, and (2) how are family environments related to adolescents' self-consciousness.

In answer to our first question, we found that students with low self-esteem consistently reported higher self-consciousness in each domain, and said that they avoided situations in which the self is salient. Furthermore, students high in math or social self-consciousness gave lower assessments of their abilities in these arenas. However, there was no association between sports self-consciousness and students' assessments of their sports ability. Students who avoided the spotlight and who felt low self-esteem rated themselves lower in sports and social ability, but not in math ability.

These findings suggest the following conclusions. First, dissatisfaction with the self sensitizes one to others' scrutiny and evaluations of the self and so one's sense of self-worth is diminished. Second, assessment of one's ability is negatively related to self-consciousness in math and social settings, but not in sports; thus it remains to be determined what factors may be related to self-consciousness in sports, especially since girls report greater concerns with self-focus than do boys in this domain. Third, the association between avoidance of the spotlight and math self-concept of ability is weaker than that between avoidance of spotlight and sports or social self-concept of ability perhaps because one may choose to avoid sports or social settings but cannot do so in academic settings at this age.

In answer to the second question, we found that students from highly authoritarian home environments reported that they were more concerned with others' scrutiny and appraisal of their behaviors in the math classroom, amongst peers, and in sports settings; they also reported a greater overall tendency to avoid situations in which the self might be salient. Those from home environments with opportunities for self-determination reported that they were less concerned with others' scrutiny and appraisal of their behaviors in math, sports, and social settings, and that they did not mind being the center of attention.

Three interpretations of these findings are plausible. First, family environments characterized by high parental control may intensify self-consciousness by focussing attention on the self's conformity to external rules and standards. In contrast family environments which offer the child opportunities for independent and auton-

omous behavior and convey to him/her that s/he is worthy of trust may focus attention on the task of independent decision-making, and away from the self's compliance with decisions made by others. An alternative interpretation of these findings is that highly self-conscious children may feel less anxious when there is more structure; thus parents of such children may exert greater control because they are responding to their children's demands for more direction, whether explicit or implicit. Thirdly, these children may simply perceive their parents to be more controlling.

Opportunities to participate in making family decisions had no effect on adolescents' self-consciousness. This suggests that treating the child as an autonomous individual who is capable of independent decision-making and worthy of trust is more important in this dynamic than is inclusion of the child in family discussions if the parent continues to maintain the ultimate power over decisions.

Early adolescence is generally understood as a time when children begin the transition from dependence on parents to a definition of themselves as autonomous individuals. It is in the familiar context of the family that the young adolescent is likely to "test the waters" of self-definition by stating opinions, making decisions, and, in general, establishing a personal style. The way in which the family system responds to the child's attempts at self-assertion will influence both the process of establishing an independent identity and the satisfaction which the child feels with that evolving identity. These data suggest that when families encourage children's self-determination in decision-making, children are less conscious of themselves as an object of others' evaluation. Furthermore, to the extent that children are self-conscious they are less likely to be satisfied with themselves, and, in general, report lower assessments of their ability.

It remains for future longitudinal investigations to determine the causal direction of parent-child dynamics which underlie these observed patterns. Future research should be aimed at understanding both (1) the impact of family environments on children's attempts at individuation and self-definition during this developmental period, and (2) the impact of children's emerging needs for separation and independence on existing parent-child relationships.

Finally, insofar as one's self-feelings affect one's behaviors, future research should also be aimed at (1) understanding the degree to which self-esteem and self-consciousness vary across time and across social contexts, and (2) identifying the intraindividual and environmental antecedents of low self-esteem and high self-consciousness. The interaction between such antecedents may be a particularly critical issue during adolescence, for individuals already high in dispositional self-consciousness may be especially vulnerable to contextual factors (e.g. classroom processes, cross-sex friendships) that enhance the salience of the self.

The family's response to the young adolescent's initiatives towards autonomy is critical in shaping the path that the child's orientation towards the future will take. As Newman and Murray (1983) indicate, the choices which today's adolescents will face as adults are unparalleled in history. An understanding of the family dynamics that enable the child to take hold of the direction of her/his life should, therefore, be a research imperative.

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