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Exploring Parent-Adolescent Communication About Gender: Results from Adolescent and Emerging Adult Samples

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Abstract

Although parents are assumed to be children's primary models of socialization when it comes to gender, little is known about direct communication of gendered values in the family. Accordingly, this study assessed the amount and content of recalled parental gender socialization messages using data from 291 U.S. college undergraduates attending a large Midwestern university and 259 U.S. adolescents enrolled in public high schools in the Midwest. The study examined the amount and content of parental communications of five gendered discourses and then tested for connections to current gender beliefs. Findings indicate that gender socialization may be quite similar for sons and daughters, with some evidence of gender typing in patterns of communication. No significant age differences emerged in the patterns of socialization, although high school students reported receiving greater amounts of communication than college students on two of the five discourses. In general, receiving messages promoting traditional gender roles was associated with more traditional gender beliefs (and vice versa), although interpretation of some messages appeared to vary by gender.

Keywords

Gender socialization; Parental communication; Gender roles; Sex roles; Adolescence; Emerging adulthood; Gender beliefs; Adolescent development

Introduction

Defining, measuring, and capturing a concept as elusive as gender socialization, loosely defined as the process of instructing youth in the core expectations of the male and female gender roles, has challenged developmental researchers for decades (e.g., Galambos 2004). Studies in this area have traditionally focused on early gender socialization by parents, often through nonverbal cues, and examinations of direct communication about gender are rare. The current study employed close-ended survey methodology to examine the extent to which early and late adolescents recollect receiving each of five overarching messages about gender from their parents. This work extends existing knowledge about parental communication about gender in the U.S. and introduces a novel approach to the study of gender socialization that can be expanded to other samples in future research.

Although multiple forces contribute to the process of gender socialization, including friends, siblings, religious institutions, and the mass media, much attention has focused on the role of parents, who are the earliest and often the foundational gender socializers (for review see Ruble et al. 2006). Parents are believed to affect their children's gender development in four general ways. First, parents shape their children's gender-related attributes and behaviors via the gender-typed toys, chores, and activities they provide (Blakemore et al. 2008; Witt 1997). Second, parents interact with and respond to their sons and daughters differently, including engaging in more rough-and-tumble play with their sons and more conversation with their daughters, thereby reinforcing gender-typed behavior (Leaper et al. 1998; McHale et al. 2003). Third, parents serve as children's primary gender models, demonstrating the typical behavior of men and women, as well as male–female interactions within the family (Martin et al. 2002; Mischel 1966). Finally, parents pass on gender ideals and expectations via direct, verbal messages (e.g., “boys don't cry;” “girls don't hit”) or implicit communications that convey these expectations without verbalizing them explicitly (e.g., criticizing another person's gendered behavior).

Previous efforts to assess parents' role in teaching gender norms have primarily centered on the first three mechanisms. For example, a substantial body of literature has documented the role of North American and other Western parents in gender-typing through toy choice and room décor as well as through monitoring of children's play and compliance with gender-typed behavior (Lytton and Romney 1991; McHale et al. 2003). With young children in the U.S. (all empirical studies used in this review are based on U.S. samples unless otherwise specified), these processes are often assessed through observations of family interactions either in the home or laboratory (e.g., Langlois and Downs 1980; Leve and Fagot 1997; Raag and Rackliff 1998). For example, Jacklin, DiPietro and Maccoby (1984) provided sex-typed toys (e.g., helmet, bridal veil) to parents and toddlers and observed unstructured play time in the home. The authors examined children's initiation of play with sex-typed toys as well as parental engagement in play depending on the sex-typing of the toy. For older children and adolescents in U.S. (e.g., McHale et al. 1999) and Canada (e.g., Peters 1994), the majority of studies have focused on differential treatment with regards to division of household chores and car and curfew privileges. Such studies generally rely on parent and child self-report measures to examine differences in parental practices toward sons and daughters. Alternatively, others have examined correspondence between parents' and children's gender beliefs, without a specific assessment of the mechanism (e.g., Booth and Amato 1994; McHale et al. 2003). Indeed, a recent multinational meta-analysis of 43 studies (Tenenbaum and Leaper 2002) found a small but consistent positive association between parents' and children's gender attitudes ($r=.16$), indicating that somehow parental values and expectations are being transmitted and received.

Because existing research documenting parental gender socialization has focused largely on the provision of gender-typed activities and differential treatment of sons and daughters, little is known about the fourth mechanism of gender socialization – direct communications. Although verbal communication (direct or indirect) has been widely acknowledged to be an important avenue by which parents pass on gender norms and expectations to their children (e.g., Blakemore et al. 2008; McHale et al. 2003), the content of such communication has remained largely unexplored (for exception, see Gelman et al. 2004).

Gender Socialization via Direct Communication

Most of what we know about U.S. parents' direct communications comes from qualitative studies designed to provide an in-depth analysis of adults' and older adolescents' gender-related communication or socialization experiences, more broadly (e.g., Martin 1996; Phillips 2000; Pollack 1998). Our analysis of these studies and related work revealed that parents do indeed issue specific directives encouraging boys and girls to adopt traditional

gender roles. Women report messages encouraging them to be deferential to the men in their lives, to focus their energies on building romantic relationships, and to curb their sexual urges. One undergraduate woman in an interview study of parental socialization spoke about learning about gender expectations in her family, “I was raised to be the feminine way. I would say to be polite, act like a lady, that kind of stuff” (Averett et al. 2008, p. 336). Parents also convey notions that *not* acting feminine can have long-lasting negative consequences. One young woman recalled her mother’s warning that if she “didn’t act more like a girl, look more like a girl, dress more like a girl, [she] wouldn’t be accepted by society, [and] wouldn’t find a husband” (Carr 2007, p. 443).

Interview data also reveal that adolescent boys receive verbal communications from their parents encouraging the adoption of traditional masculinity. Boys reported messages encouraging manly or “macho” behavior, emotional control, and sexual initiation (Raffaelli and Ontai 2004). Boys in Pollack’s (1998) study reported being encouraged to be tough from an early age. “I should be the ‘big boy’ of the family and tough it out,” one boy said about a time when, as a six-year-old, he became scared while camping (p. 35). “Dad told me not to be such a ‘wimp’ and act like a man.”

At the same time, there are also accounts of parents conveying the opposite message, promoting the breaking down of traditional gender norms. For example, one young woman in Way’s (1995) study stated that her father “always taught me never to let people take advantage of you or take control of you. You should always speak up, talk for yourself” (p. 118). Boys, too, described receiving less traditional communications from their parents. One boy in Pollack’s (1998) work talked about his father who had worked for the FBI and frequently risked his life on the job. The boy felt like he needed to live up to his father’s example, but his mother told him, “You don’t havetobejust like your father and take risks and put your life on the line to be a man. You can be just as much a man by being yourself and doing whatever seems the easiest and the most fun for you” (p. 83).

Additional evidence of the prominence and influence of parental gender communications can be seen in related literatures such as the qualitative research on gendered racial socialization. For example, Thomas and King (2007) posed the following question to 36 Black mother-daughter dyads, “What are the specific messages that your mother gives you on being an African American woman/girl?” The responses fell into several discourses, which included messages of self-determination and assertiveness (e.g., “Stand up for what she believes in at all costs”), the importance of respect (e.g., “Respect men as well as women”), and messages about male–female relationships (e.g., “Sometimes women are stronger than men”). Using both interview data and cultural analysis, King and Mitchell (1990) captured the stories Black mothers tell their sons about manhood and masculinity, stories that frequently highlighted perseverance through difficult situations, and maintaining one’s strength, dignity, and pride.

In sum, research documenting direct communications between parents and children offers support for the existence of this form of parental gender socialization. In retrospective studies of parental communication, adolescents and adults reported a considerable diversity of messages conveyed by parents. However, this research is largely limited to interview or other qualitative data with small samples. Such studies did not set out to provide a methodological investigation of gender-related discourses that parents communicate to their children, but instead reported on a small number of discourses that emerged in the course of a few interviews or focus groups. Accordingly, the current work aims to take a more systematic approach to examining the extent to which parental communication contains both traditional and egalitarian gender messages.

Message Content and Cultural Gender Ideologies

Because most of the existing evidence of parental gender communications is qualitative, clinical, or anecdotal, it is difficult to discern the larger patterns. How do we begin a systematic analysis of the range of gender-related discourses that parents communicate to their children? We believe that one place to start is with the literature on gender ideologies, which documents the breadth of cultural gender messages and directives available for transmission and internalization. According to this literature, dominant Western discourses position femininity as passive, relationship-oriented, emotional, and nurturing (Bem 1974; Mahalik et al. 2005; Tolman and Porche 2000). At the core of femininity is the notion that taking care of others is more important for women than meeting their own goals, and that beauty and modesty are important in attracting a mate. On the other hand, traditional masculinity expects men to be assertive, sexually charged, tough, and emotionally restricted (Eisler and Skidmore 1987; Mahalik et al. 2003; O'Neil et al. 1986). Men must not show emotional weakness, and must compete with same-sex peers to succeed at school, in the workplace, and in the sexual arena.

Instead of examining *how* these discourses are socialized, this literature typically focuses on identifying the range of discourses present in a culture, and assessing which gender beliefs are endorsed. Endorsement of these ideologies is almost entirely assessed by self-report questionnaires whereby participants indicate their level of agreement with individual statements such as "Women are naturally more nurturing than men" and "Men should not touch other men." These measures discriminate between different gendered discourses, which makes examining this literature useful in identifying the set of gendered themes and specific messages that parents are likely to be conveying to their children. However, such measures do not address where gender beliefs were learned. At the same time, studies that do examine family socialization, as noted earlier, rarely systematically examine specific messages parents directly convey to their children. Therefore, we argue that combining this discourse-based analysis of gender ideology with a focus on family communication would be a powerful tool for examining a wider range of parental communications that affect children's gender learning and development. We attempt to do that here.

Gender Socialization During Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

Although parental communications about gender likely begin in infancy and continue well into adulthood, we chose to focus on adolescence and emerging adulthood for several reasons. In the U.S. and other Western countries, adolescence is considered to be a time of identity exploration and consolidation of belief systems, including beliefs about gender. At the same time, little is known about the development of these processes throughout the course of adolescence, including the transition to college. By focusing our investigation on high school and college students, we hope to provide a cross-sectional insight into perceptions of parental gender socialization at two critical time points. Arnett (2000) has shown that there are a number of theoretical frameworks that distinguish adolescence, usually defined as ages 12–17, from the period he called emerging adulthood, defined to last from 18 to 24. Whereas adolescence is generally marked by puberty, secondary-school attendance, and residence in the family of origin, emerging adulthood represents a time of identity consolidation and great personal, educational, and economic change (Arnett 2000). In his study of subjective conceptions of adulthood, Arnett (2001) showed that these developmental periods discriminated adolescent and emerging adult participants on their perceptions about reaching adulthood. When asked whether they considered themselves to be adults, a third of teens but only 4% of 20–29 year olds answered "no," suggesting a clear shift in their subjective perceptions from adolescence to emerging adulthood.

The shift to emerging adulthood is particularly noticeable for those youth attending a traditional residential university because it represents a clearly marked transition from the parental home to a college environment. Compared to their high school counterparts, college students are exposed to new peers as well as to new ideas through their course of study, and there is some evidence that undergraduates begin to reevaluate the beliefs systems passed down from their parents, including those pertaining to religion and sexuality (Arnett 2000; Lefkowitz 2005). Further, examination of gender socialization among college students offers a retrospective (but not distant) snapshot of parental socialization during childhood and adolescence. Findings from college students could then be contrasted to those of high school students who, due to proximity with parents, are likely currently receiving socialization messages. Thus, the advantage of such a comparison is an opportunity to examine the degree of concordance between retrospective and (mostly) present-day reports of parental socialization. A high degree of agreement between recollections of socialization between these two groups would add validity to this methodology. Such a comparison may also offer an insight into the changes in gender development during the transition to college when college students may begin recollection of parental socialization within a larger context of a gendered value system.

Accordingly, our goal was to investigate parental gender socialization reported by high school and college-age youth that takes the form of direct communication, and examine (a) the types of gender socialization messages undergraduates and younger adolescents recall their parents emphasizing most often; (b) potential gender differences in the content of parental messages the two groups recall receiving; and (c) the extent to which such communication is associated with their own beliefs about gender.

Approach of the Current Study

Our first step was to determine how to measure the specific messages about gender that adolescents recall receiving from their parents. The “message” approach has been utilized in other areas of socialization research, such as racial socialization (e.g., Barr and Neville 2008; Lesane-Brown et al. 2005), sexual socialization (e.g., Darling and Hicks 1982; Epstein and Ward 2008), and work socialization (e.g., Knapp et al. 1981; Medved et al. 2006). Because it would be nearly impossible to capture every socialization message a child has heard, the goal of this approach is to use a cued-recall format, which is more effective than open recall, to capture salient or memorable messages. Here, a “message” refers to a specific communication that is generally received during the formative years and has a lasting effect on how individuals interpret their world (Medved et al. 2006). Such messages may be explicit, such as being told that “boys don’t cry,” or implicit, such as hearing parents comment on a girl who has “let herself go” and will never catch a man. Because the aim of this approach is usually to examine what messages are internalized by children and may be guiding their beliefs, studies tend to focus on adolescents’ own memories of parental communication, rather than on the messages parents *thought* they had conveyed (Barr and Neville 2008).

In keeping with the message framework, we chose to assess a range of potential gender role discourses that youth might recall receiving, drawing direction from the discourses discussed in the socialization literatures and existing measures of gender ideologies. As a first step, we examined the discourses reflected by the subscales of six commonly-used gender ideology scales (Adolescent Femininity Ideology Scale, Tolman and Porche 2000; Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory, Mahalik et al. 2005; Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory, Mahalik et al. 2003; Feminine Gender Role Stress Scale, Gillespie and Eisler 1992; Gender Role Conflict Scale, O’Neil et al. 1986; Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale, Eisler and Skidmore 1987). Guided by the content of the subscales of these measures, we created five overarching discourses to capture gender socialization messages that parents

are likely to convey: traditional gender roles, egalitarian gender roles, toughness, being nice, and body consciousness. We aimed for discourses to reflect the full range of themes from both masculinity (e.g., toughness) and femininity (e.g., being nice) literature. We also sought to represent the messages in such a way that they could be relevant to both men and women, making it possible to examine the relative frequency with which each gender received both traditional and non-traditional messages and to make direct cross-gender comparisons.

Our investigation was guided by the following two overarching questions:

1. Which are the salient messages that young women and men report receiving from their parents? To what degree do recollections of communicated discourses vary by gender and age? We hypothesized that, consistent with traditional gender ideologies, participants would report receiving communication promoting both traditional and egalitarian gender norms. Because some of the discourses are innately gendered, we hypothesized that women-specific discourses (being nice, body consciousness) would be recalled more by women and vice versa for male-specific discourse (toughness). Consistent with previous findings (e.g., Twenge 1997), we also expected that female participants in both groups would report more egalitarian communication as well as more egalitarian gender beliefs than male participants. Regarding age differences, we hypothesized that, due to their proximity to their parents, high school participants would report receiving more parental communication than college undergraduates, for whom the recollection is more retrospective.
2. What is the relation between gender socialization messages young men and women report receiving from their parents and their current gender beliefs? We hypothesized that parental socialization would have moderate associations with children's beliefs about gender. Parents are primary sources of socialization of their children, which postulates that at least some of the socialization messages would become internalized as beliefs. We expected only moderate associations, both because all of the participants in our study are likely to still be in the process of negotiating their identities and beliefs, and because parents are likely to be only one source of information. We used two measures of gender beliefs, one focused on femininity and the other on masculinity, to capture associations between gender-specific messages and beliefs that are both gender-corresponding (e.g., messages about masculinity and masculine beliefs) and opposite-gender (e.g., messages about femininity and beliefs about masculinity).

Method

Participants

Emerging adults were 291 undergraduates (46% female) enrolled in an Introductory Psychology course at a large Midwestern university. Participants were mostly in their freshman (49%) or sophomore (43%) year in college, and were predominately Caucasian (76%; 4% were African American, 1% Latino, and 15% Asian). The majority came from middle to upper-middle class families, as indicated by parental education (75% of parents had obtained at least a BA), and most (86%) lived with both parents while growing up. Participants were invited to complete an online survey related to attitudes about gender, and experiences with dating and sexuality. The survey, which took up to an hour to complete, included demographic variables, two measures of gender ideology, and the five gender socialization discourses. All procedures were conducted with IRB approval, and participants received course credit in return for their participation.

A second sample of 259 adolescents (62% female) ranging in age from 14 to 19 ($M=15.6$) was drawn from three public high schools in the same Midwestern state. Participants were mostly Caucasian (84.5%; 5.8% were African American, 3.1% Asian, 1.6% Latino, and 3.1% Multiracial), from middle-class (53% of fathers and 62% of mothers had obtained at least a BA) two-parent families (72.1%). Participants were recruited during regular class time and received paper-and-pencil questionnaires to be completed at home. Written consent from parents or guardians and written assent from participants were obtained to participate in a study about messages about men and women, experience with friends, and dating relationships. As payment for completing the survey packet, each student received a movie voucher (worth 1 movie ticket) to a local movie theater.

Measures

Demographics—Participants indicated their age (for high school sample) or year in college, ethnic group affiliation, and level of parental education (1 *some high school* to 6 *postgraduate degree*). Participants also used a 1–5 scale to indicate how often they attended religious services and how often they prayed (2-item religiosity score $\alpha = .83$ for college and $.74$ for high school samples). Identifying as either African American or Asian American was dummy coded for controls (Latino background was not controlled for because of low representation).

Gender Ideology—The Attitudes toward Women Scale for Adolescents (AWSA; Galambos et al. 1985) assessed attitudes toward traditional gender role expectations and gender equality. This scale contained 12 items scored on a 4-point scale anchored by *strongly disagree* at 1 and *strongly agree* at 4. The internal consistency α was $.85$ both samples. Items examined beliefs about how men and women should behave and included items such as “Swearing is worse for a girl than for a guy,” and “Men are better leaders than women.” Reverse-scale items were recoded such that a higher score indicated more traditional beliefs endorsing male superiority and were summed for an overall score.

The second measure was the Male Role Attitudes Scale (MRAS; Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993), an eight-item assessment scored on a 4-point scale (1 *strongly disagree* to 4 *strongly agree*) focusing on traditional male gender expectations. This study’s college sample $\alpha=.63$ and high school sample $\alpha=.63$ are consistent with the relative low internal reliability originally reported by the authors ($.56$). Examples of items on this scale include “A guy will lose respect if he talks about his problems,” and “I don’t think a husband should have to do housework.” The items were summed up such that a higher score indicated greater endorsement of traditional masculinity.

Socialization of Gender Norms Scale—An original set of 29 items for this measure was iteratively piloted and analyzed using both Principal Components Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) in order to determine endorsement levels and factor loadings of individual items. We also conducted a multiple group comparison to ensure the invariability of the items across gender. These analyses are available from the first author upon request. The items most highly loading on the five constructs are reported below.

Participants indicated the extent to which they had received messages from their parents while they were growing up concerning five overarching themes pertaining to gender roles and gender relations. Participants were instructed to consider messages that were explicitly stated as well as those that were implicit, something they “just ‘knew,’ without having to ask.” Items were scored on a four-point scale anchored at 0 *none* and 3 *a lot*.

The *Traditional Gender Roles* subscale (6 items, α s=.85 and .83 for college and high school samples, respectively) reflected the notion that men are in charge and women are secondary in society. Sample items included “A real man gets what he wants” and “A husband’s career is more important than a wife’s.” The *Egalitarian Gender Roles* subscale (4 items, α s=.78, .65) endorsed gender equality. Examples include “Men and women should treat each other as equals at home, school, and work” and “People are people; gender doesn’t matter.” The *Big & Tough* subscale (7 items, α s=.78, .76) encouraged strength and power, with items such as “Quitting is for losers” and “Never show fear.” The *Nice & Pleasant* and *Body Consciousness* discourses were each measured by a single item, “You need to go along with what others want to get along” and “It is important to look good, no matter how much time and energy it takes.”

Results

In accordance with our first hypothesis, we examined patterns of communication participants reported receiving from their parents and compared mean levels by age and gender. First, within-gender patterns of communication were examined via paired t-tests separately for the high school and college samples. The overall pattern of gender socialization, denoted by non-matching superscripts in the columns of Table 1, was similar for women and men in both age groups. Both genders reported receiving communication promoting egalitarian gender roles the most and significantly less promoting traditional gender roles and the importance of being nice and pleasant. Both genders also received moderate encouragement to act tough and to be body conscious.

Next, we examined gender differences in the amount of communication across the five socialization discourses and endorsement of gender ideology using MANOVA (Table 1). First, the five gender socialization discourses were analyzed together, controlling for ethnicity, parental education, age (year in college for the undergraduate sample), and religiosity. With regards to parental socialization messages, outcomes were partially consistent with our hypotheses. Male participants in both groups reported receiving more messages than did women that endorsed being tough, whereas girls and women reported greater exposure to egalitarian gender roles. College aged men also reported receiving greater communication than undergraduate women regarding traditional gender roles. Contrary to our hypothesis, male participants in both groups reported more communication than did female participants regarding being nice and pleasant. Next, the measures of gender ideology were analyzed simultaneously in order to account for shared variance, controlling for the same set of demographic variables. Consistent with our prediction, female participants in both groups scored lower than male participants on both the AWSA and the MRAS, indicating that women generally hold less traditional (more egalitarian) gender roles.

The second part of the first hypothesis concerned age differences in reported amounts of parental communication. We expected that high school participants would recall more communication than undergraduates. To test this, we used MANOVA and controlled for demographics and gender and compared means of each of the five socialization discourses across age groups. In partial support of our hypothesis, significant differences emerged on two of the five discourses, such that high school students reported more communication of egalitarian gender roles (estimated $M_{hs}=2.72$, $M_{college}=1.79$, $F(1, 505)=4.16$, $p<.05$) and toughness (estimated $M_{hs}=1.91$, $M_{college}=.54$, $F(1, 505)=9.57$, $p<.01$).

Our second hypothesis predicted moderate associations between parental gender socialization and participants’ current gender beliefs. Accordingly, we computed partial correlations between participants’ scores on the five subscales of the Socialization of Gender

Norms Scale and the two measures of gender beliefs, controlling for demographics. Because previous results showed differences in the amount of communication men and women received, analyses were conducted separately for each gender and each age group (see Table 2). In general, no gender differences emerged with respect to directionality of findings for either age group. Results for the two gender belief measures were also quite similar, but the pattern of results for MRAS was sparser, yet in the expected direction.

Results were generally consistent with our hypotheses. First, greater exposure to traditional gender messages was indeed associated with stronger endorsement of traditional gender beliefs for both college students *and* high school students, for women *and* men, and across both ideology measures. This was our most consistent finding. Second, greater exposure to egalitarian parental messages produced the opposite effects, and was associated with significantly *lower* levels of traditional gender beliefs as measured by the AWSA only (and a trend for high school boys using the MRAS). This effect emerged for both age groups and both genders. Third, greater exposure to parental messages promoting toughness was associated with more traditional gender beliefs for both genders and age groups, and for both ideology measures (with one exception). Fourth, greater exposure to parental messages promoting body consciousness was related to more traditional gender ideologies, for college women and men and high school boys. The final and least consistent set of associations was for parental messages about being nice and pleasant. Here, greater exposure to this message was associated with more traditional gender beliefs among college and high school males, only.

Discussion

Although gender socialization has been a frequent topic of study in the field of gender development, almost nothing is known about the direct communications that children and adolescents receive from their parents (see Ruble et al. 2006). Findings from qualitative work demonstrate that gender communications are prominent and likely shape youth's perspectives (e.g., Martin 1996; Phillips 2000; Pollack 1998). Quantitative work comparing parents' beliefs to their offsprings' beliefs indicates that the two are linked, suggesting that parental values are somehow communicated (Tenenbaum and Leaper 2002). We sought to marry these approaches by conducting a more systematic, quantitative analysis of parental communications about gender norms. More specifically, we used data from two U.S. samples to investigate young people's exposure to each of five salient discourses, and connected this exposure to their gender beliefs. Results both confirmed and contested our expectations, demonstrating that a range of gendered messages are received and are linked to students' gender beliefs. Together, these findings provide provocative, new insight into the workings of a likely avenue of gender socialization.

We believe the findings presented here offer four central contributions that can be used to guide future research. One contribution of this work is its innovative methodology, which goes beyond previous approaches in several ways. First, we used a discourse approach to capturing socialization experiences, which allowed us to focus on parental communications instead of activities. Second, we looked at a range of possible norms communicated, including both traditional and egalitarian messages. Indeed, our data showed that communication of egalitarian gender norms, which are rarely examined in the gender socialization literature, emerged as a major topic of conversation between parents and children and was strongly linked to gender beliefs. The captured diversity in parental communication allows future research to examine the ways that the cumulative influence of all communicated messages may lead women and men to arrive at different understandings of gender expectations. For example, men who receive messages promoting toughness and traditional gender roles alongside those endorsing egalitarian gender roles may interpret

gender equality as something one should *say*, whereas the traditional male stance is how one should *act*. Future studies also need to address gender socialization in a comprehensive and nuanced way that will capture the changing cultural expectations as well as their meaning.

As our third methodological innovation, we looked at each gender's exposure both to masculine and feminine directives. This approach has a significant advantage over methodologies that focus on gender-specific phenomena by singling out one sex at a time. For example, it is common for studies of gender ideology to use single-sex samples to examine sex-specific themes, such as men's endorsement of toughness and women's drive toward thinness (e.g., Levant et al. 2007; O'Neil et al. 1986; Tolman and Porche 2000). As a result, findings from such investigations create the impression that men only receive communication promoting masculine gender norms and women only receive messages about femininity. Little is learned about potential similarity in patterns of communication and the shared experiences of men and women (see Hyde 2005). In comparison, results from the current work significantly further our understanding of the socialization that sons and daughters receive within the family and allow for comparison of each gender's experience.

A second contribution is our finding that the *pattern* of parental gender communications to girls overlaps greatly with the pattern of communications to boys. Both genders recalled that their parents conveyed the most messages promoting egalitarian gender roles and the least endorsing traditional gender roles. In addition, the second most frequent message for both women and men focused on toughness. Gender differences did emerge in levels of specific discourses, however, with some differences matching expectations and others countering them. As expected, female participants in both age groups reported receiving significantly more communication promoting egalitarian gender roles, and males received more messages endorsing toughness. Contrary to predictions, both high school boys and college-age men reported greater exposure than girls and women to the Nice & Pleasant discourse, which is associated with traditional femininity. As hypothesized earlier, it is possible that these messages might carry different meaning depending on the gender of the recipient. For example, boys might recall encouragement to be nice in response to rough or aggressive behavior, whereas the underlying meaning for women may be that being nice is essential all the time. Because parental practices aimed at promoting good behavior are likely to be most frequent for boys who generally tend to express more externalizing behavior than their female counterparts (e.g. Hyde 2005), it is possible that such admonishments as "be nice to your sister" or "don't be rude to the coach" are most salient for male participants. At the same time, messages to girls regarding femininity and being polite may be more subtle and perceived as less frequent.

A third take-home message is that children's perceptions of parental socialization discourses do relate to their gender beliefs. Consistent with our hypotheses, receiving communication promoting egalitarian gender roles was associated with more liberal views of gender for both age groups. On the other hand, exposure to communication regarding traditional gender roles was associated with more traditional gender beliefs. We also found a link between receiving messages promoting body consciousness and traditional gender beliefs, which is consistent with research linking femininity to beauty and thinness in America (e.g., Tolman and Porche 2000) and masculinity with being lean and muscular in Canada (e.g., McCreary et al. 2005).

Partially consistent with our hypothesis, exposure to messages promoting toughness was related to more traditional gender beliefs for both male and female participants. Similarly, communication encouraging being nice and polite was related to more traditional beliefs for both genders. We hypothesize that these seemingly counterintuitive findings may reflect the contextual nature of both the communications themselves, and women's and men's

interpretation of them. For example, like the young woman in Raffaelli and Ontai's (2004) study, many women may have received encouragement to succeed in the academic arena (e.g., "don't quit," "take charge"), but not necessarily apply the same assertiveness to relationships between the genders. As discussed in the previous paragraph, the association between the Nice & Pleasant discourse and traditional beliefs for men may stem from these messages being given in response to aggressive behavior. Future studies may need to include more context-specific message statements to investigate these possibilities.

Further, the relations reported here between perceived parental *communication* of gendered messages and adolescents' gender beliefs were stronger than those between parent *attitudes* (reported by parents) and child beliefs ($r=.16$) reported in the literature (Tenenbaum and Leaper 2002). This suggests that assessing adolescents' recall of explicit messages may be a more effective methodology for capturing the transmission of gendered values in the family. For both age groups, moderate associations between gender socialization and gender attitudes indicate that adolescents likely internalize parental communication, yet also suggest that there may be other influences (e.g., peers) on their beliefs as well. Future studies may also explore differential socialization adolescents receive from other sources, such as peers, media, teachers, and clergy, as well as possible interactions between such sources of communication (e.g., Whitaker and Miller 2000). In addition, given previous findings suggesting that fathers tend to treat their children in more gender-typed ways than mothers do (Lytton and Romney 1991; McHale et al. 2003), future research will need to examine communication from mothers and fathers separately.

A fourth discovery is that the trends reported above are similar for teens and young adults, with only minor differences. Patterns of recalled socialization messages were largely the same across the two age groups, with both groups reporting that communications promoting egalitarian gender roles and toughness were the most frequent. In addition, levels of communication of three discourses – traditional gender roles, being nice, and body consciousness – were not significantly different for high school and college students. Minor differences did emerge, however. High school students reported receiving more communication promoting egalitarian gender roles and toughness than undergraduates, in partial support of our hypothesis. These two discourses were also recalled as most often communicated by both groups, suggesting a possible immediacy or proximity boost for high school students who likely experience more regular, everyday interactions with their parents. Despite the mean differences between the two age groups, however, no age differences were evident in the pattern of associations between amount of perceived communication and current beliefs. This suggests that although mean amount of recalled socialization may decrease with age, the overall strength of socialization remains relatively stable across adolescence and into emerging adulthood. These findings strengthen the utility of this approach to examining parental gender socialization.

Despite its contribution to the literature, this study has some notable limitations. First, the relatively small and overwhelmingly Caucasian middle-class U.S. samples limit generalizability of the findings to other ethnic, socioeconomic, and international groups. A second limitation pertains to the limited choice of assessed discourses. Although the pilot study originally proposed nine discourses that were derived from the gender ideology literature, only five emerged as stable constructs. The difficulty we encountered in discriminating a wider array of gendered discourses may reflect a similar difficulty in the gender ideology field to define the boundaries of gender roles and the core aspects of masculinity and femininity (for review, see Smiler and Epstein 2010).

A third and related limitation concerns the internal consistency of the individual subscales. Two of the five factors were reduced to a single item because the proposed subscales had

internal consistency alphas of less than the recommended value of .65. It is likely that the individual items selected for these subscales may not have reflected the breadth of socialization messages that parents convey about body image and being nice. Indeed, there is likely to be a great diversity in body-related messages, with some focused on body size and others emphasizing attractiveness, clothes, hair, or neatness. Such diversity may not be easily captured in a single subscale. Future studies may also need to expand the Socialization of Gender Norms Scale to address potential culture-specific socialization messages (e.g., Espiritu 2001; Kallivayalil 2004). Finally, it is possible that notions of traditional and egalitarian gender roles *more generally* are more accessible to participants than more targeted discourses such as being nice and pleasant.

As a final limitation, we would like to point out that the correlational nature of analyses in this work does not allow for causal inference. Although we found robust associations between adolescents' recall of parental gender communication and their gender beliefs, we cannot infer from this that communication is the cause of beliefs. It is possible that the relationship is bidirectional such that the attitudes participants currently hold about gender color their recollection of their parents' socialization. Youth may recollect their parents' messages as more egalitarian, for example, as a function of their current awareness or social desirability, or as more traditional if there are outstanding conflicts between parents and children over gender norm transgressions. Further, as the content of socialization messages is likely to change over the course of development, recollection of specific messages at specific developmental stages should be interpreted in context. Future studies may want to combine our survey items with interview or focus group approaches to examine interpretation of socialization messages (both conveyed and received) as a function of child age. Longitudinal examination of gender socialization from multiple informants (e.g., mother, father, child, sibling) would help establish temporal order of this association and provide further insight into the development of children's gender beliefs within the family context.

The larger implications of this work point toward expanding the way gender-related constructs are currently presented in the literature. Instead of framing gender attitudes as a single continuum, from "traditional" to "egalitarian," we need to address the complexity and dynamic nature of men's and women's beliefs about gender. Results from this study suggest that adolescents receive – and likely internalize – a variety of gender socialization messages, some of which are more and some are less traditional. It is important to examine both the complexity and possible contradictions of these directives, and their relevance in different contexts. For example, what may be most salient for a woman are messages regarding the cultural standards of beauty when she is shopping for a new outfit, messages about gender equality when she and her date split the dinner check, and directives to not appear too assertive and rude when she makes decisions about inviting her date to her apartment. The degree to which each of these three discourses is salient to her will likely influence both the kind of decision she makes in each situation as well as her satisfaction with her choices. Taking such a multidimensional approach to the study of gender may also help explicate the connections between socialization and behavior as well as between personal beliefs and decision-making.

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Table 1

Descriptives and gender differences of main variables

	Estimated means		Omnib. F [†]	Univ. F [†]	Estimated means		Omnib. F [†]	Univ. F [†]		
	College students				HS students					
	Women M(SD)	Men			Girls M(SD)	Boys				
Gender socialization ^{††}			5.10 ^{***}				3.86 ⁺			
Traditional gender roles	.43(.61) ^a	.64(.61) ^a		8.47 ^{**}	.72(.67) ^a	.84(.92) ^a		1.55		
Egalitarian gender roles	2.13(.73) ^b	1.90 (.72) ^b		6.93 ^{**}	2.53(.56) ^b	2.35(.77) ^b		4.98 [*]		
Nice & pleasant	.57(.85) ^c	.76(.85) ^c		3.46 ⁺	.60(.92) ^a	.87 (1.27) ^a		4.23 [*]		
Big & tough	.81(.60) ^d	1.04(.60) ^d		10.51 ^{**}	1.32(.66) ^c	1.58(.91) ^c		8.26 ^{**}		
Body consciousness	.64(.81) ^e	.67(.81) ^{ac}		.11	.98(.95) ^d	1.24(1.320) ^d		3.78 ⁺		
Gender ideology			41.30 ^{***}				16.38 ^{***}			
AWSA	1.63(.38)	2.03(.38)		82.03 ^{***}	1.62(.39)	2.01(.39)		53.84 ^{***}		
MRAS	2.36(.35)	2.57(.35)		25.83 ^{***}	2.40(.38)	2.59(.38)		14.11 ^{**}		

⁺ $p < .10$,^{*} $p < .05$,^{**} $p < .01$,^{***} $p < .001$ [†] Analyses controlled for ethnicity, parental education, religiosity, and age^{††} Means in the same column that do not share a superscript are different at $p < .01$

Gender Socialization scores range from 0 to 3, with higher scores indicating more of the construct. Gender Ideology measures are on a 1–4 scale; higher scores indicate more traditional beliefs

Table 2Significant associations between parental socialization discourses and gender attitudes^a

	AWSA	MRAS	AWSA	MRAS
College students				
	Women (N=133)		Men (N=158)	
Traditional	.33***	.28**	.41***	.24**
Egalitarian	-.37***		-.23**	
Nice & pleasant	.16 ⁺		.20*	
Big & tough	.18*	.21*	.30**	.26**
Body consciousness	.24**		.28**	.31***
High School Students				
	Girls (N=160)		Boys (N=92)	
Traditional	.48***	.36***	.30**	
Egalitarian	-.30**		-.28*	-.20 ⁺
Nice & pleasant			.26*	
Big & tough	.22*		.25*	.34**
Body consciousness			.23*	

⁺ $p < .10$,* $p < .05$,** $p < .01$,*** $p < .001$ ^a Analyses controlled for ethnicity, parental education, religiosity, and age