

Toward Gender Sensitive Approaches with Adolescents

Transition Conference
October 19, 2011



Objectives

- Research on Sex/Gender differences
 - Bio-psychosocial perspective
- New paradigm for looking at adolescents
- Ideas for re-tooling our prevention, intervention and treatment approaches

What makes us who we are?

Human Development:

Genetics

- + Brain Biology
- + Environment
- = Individual



- Each person is a unique individual
- Biology: Sex
- Environment: Gender roles - culture



Brain, Sex and Gender

■ To Create New Paradigms:

- Open-mindedness
- Creative thinking
 - Good science research is telling us to:
 - Enhance existing services
 - Create more target-specific services to our audiences
 - Development of gender sensitive approaches in treatment crucial for improving outcomes.



- 2001 Report: National Academy of Sciences
- “Sex, that is being male or female, is an important basic human variable that should be considered when designing and analyzing studies in all areas and at all levels of biomedical and health-related research” (IOM Report, April 2001)

Brain Development and Gender

- Males and females differ, not only physically...
- But also in the way they approach and solve problems and view their worlds.



Brain, Sex & Gender

- Just environmental?
- Scientists say No!
 - Also effects of sex hormones on brain organization and processing.
 - From the start, environment is acting on differently “wired” brains in males and females.



Brain Development and Sex Differences

- Estrogen (female hormones).
- Testosterone (male hormones).
- Starts in utero. Continues after birth.



Brain Development and Sex Differences

Universal differences in the male and female brain:

1. Structurally
2. Processing
3. Maturation Trajectories & Sequences

(Landsdell 1964; McGlone 1980; Sandstrom 1998; Gur 1999; McClure 2000; Kersker 2003; Wager 2003)

Certain Brain and Gender Differences

- Can be pronounced in Adolescence



Consequences of Ignoring Differences



Transitioning to Adulthood

Adolescent Development Research

Two important tasks:

Finding Stable Identity

Form Connections



There is a need to look at gender differences in how these connections and paths toward identity are sought and achieved.

Research on Sex Differences

Male/female brain organizes/responds differently in a number of ways:

- Cognitive-emotive integration
- Task completion
- Stress response
- Hearing
- Language acquisition and speech

Sex Differences and Cognitive-Emotional Memory

Amygdala: long-term memory associated with negative emotional events.

Males: stronger activity in right hemisphere

Females: stronger activity in left hemisphere

(Shors 1998; Cahill 2001; Cahill 2004)

Memory Research

Females: retain more detailed memories with stronger emotional context.



Males: retain more global memory of event with less emotional context.

(Seidlitz & Diener, 1998; Canli 2002)

Sex Differences and Stress

- Oxytocin
 - Both males and females
 - “Tend and Befriend”
 - Regulates bonding motivation, mood, behavior
 - Spikes during/after childbirth
- Opposite of “fight or flight”

Gender and Stress

- Dr. Shelly Taylor (UCLA 2000):

- During stressful times:



In Females



In Males

Gender and Stress

- Behaviors associated with--
- Rise in Oxytocin:
 - Connection seeking; bonding behaviors
- Fall in Oxytocin:
 - Isolating, emotional cutoff and/or anger



Brain Maturation

- **Developmental**
 - **Male and Female Brains:**
 - Mature in different sequences & timelines

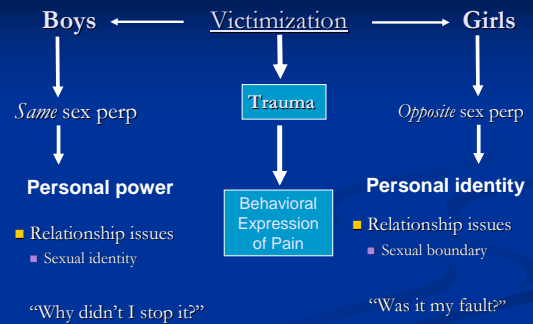
■ (Gur, R. & Turetsky, B., *J of Neuroscience* 1999; Giedd, J. of *Adol H*, 2008)

Emotions and Sex Differences

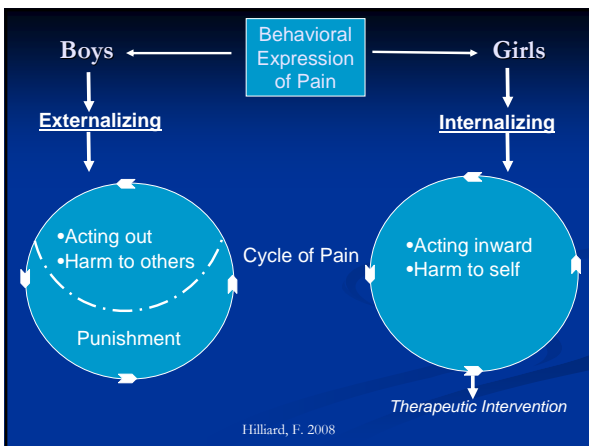
- **Functional:**
- Adolescents: Processing negative emotions:
 - Female – greater activity moving up to cerebral cortex
 - Male – no significant movement to cerebral cortex
 - Stays in amygdala (Neuro-Image, 2003)



Gender and Sexual Trauma



Hilliard, F. 2008



Hilliard, F. 2008

Gender, Brain

- Perhaps Most Documented:
- Potential Threat or Risky Behavior (stress response)
 - Males--mostly Sympathetic Neurosystem
 - Sharpening senses
 - "Thrill" response (fight or flight)
 - Females--mostly Parasympathetic Neurosystem
 - Nauseated and/or dizzy response (Evans, J., *J of Applied Physiology* 2001)

Translate to Behavior

- U.S. and worldwide studies show boys more likely to engage in physically risky activities.

(Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine 2002)

Risky/dangerous activity triggers “flight or fight” that boys find enjoyable.

Risk/danger seen as fun “for its own sake” rather than to achieve goal.



Gender Differences

- Behavior
 - Girls *willing* to take risks
 - If “means justify the end”
 - Boys *seek out* risk-taking behavior
 - Simply for the “rush”
- Evolutionary Theory



Gender and Aggression

- Elementary school boys fight 20 times as often as girls do.
 - Likely to enhance relationship
- Elementary girls fight less often, more likely to use words.
 - Usually involves relational cut off
 - (Lever 1976 & 1978; Simmons 2002)
- The *same* holds true for primates!
 - (Blume 1998)



“Aggressive Play”

- Boys more likely to engage in “rough and tumble” play.
- Same holds true throughout primate species:
 - Males engage in more physically rough play
 - Females engage in “alloparenting”

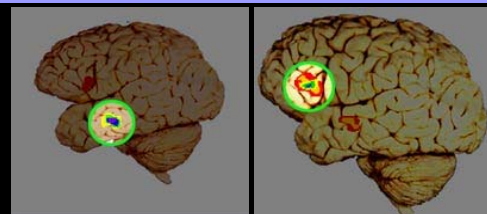


Friendship and Gender Differences

- Female--“face to face” - dyad or small group; intimate sharing central to closeness
- Boys-- “shoulder to shoulder” - small to large groups; shared interest or activity; intimate conversation not the central criteria



Emotions



When reading emotion, teens (**left**) rely more on the amygdala, while adults (**right**) rely more on the frontal cortex.

Deborah Yurgelon-Todd, 2000

Psychosocial Differences

- Adolescent Risk Differences:
 - Peer network stronger influence for substance abuse in girls than boys (Dick 2007)
 - Sports involvement--protective factor for girls; risk factor for boys for substance abuse (Eitle 2003; CASA 2003; Aaron 1995)
 - Suicidality--social isolation (of friends) significant factor for females; did not correlate with males (Am Jr Pub Health 2004)

Alcohol and Drug Pathways

Girls and Physical Violence:

- The Formative Years: Pathways to Substance Abuse Among Girls and Young Women Ages 8-22 (CASA 2003)
 - Binge drinking, current drinking or smoking marijuana;
 - > twice as likely to have been in a physical fight
 - Younger drinking starts--more likely to be in physical fights

Alcohol and Drug Treatment

- Science-Based Prevention Program and Principles (DHHS 2003)
 - Differences in Treatment Profiles
 - Males = lower perceived family support
lower support from friends
lower past treatment episodes
higher arrest rates on all offenses except sexual
 - Females = higher levels of depression
higher levels of self-mutilation
higher sexual abuse histories

■ Project Fresh Light:

Boys and Girls Work Group Summaries Treatment Considerations



Position Paper

The Need for Gender-Sensitive Approaches In Adolescent Treatment

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Boys At Risk Workgroup

Major Conclusions:

- Cultural Attitudes Toward Normal Male Developmental Behavior = Unhealthy to Pathological

Reflected in:

- Language: "disruptive, defiant, immature, aggressive, violent, oppositional, unfeeling"
- Behavior (whether normal or acting out) seen on only one dimension--needing punishment or corrective action

Toward A New Paradigm

■ Action Philosophy

Developmental & Therapeutic Framework

- Defining through “doing”
- Active behavior in young males:
 - Creates connections
 - Forms deep relationships
 - Bring sense of pleasure
 - Avenue for learning about self and others
 - Deepens life experience

Toward a New Paradigm

■ Paradigm Shift

- Aggression ⇔ Physicality ⇔ Not inherently bad
But needs guidance
- Adolescent male brain developmental is sequentially different than the female brain.
- Adolescent males ⇔ process, communicate and resolve emotional pain *differently* than females.

Toward a New Paradigm

■ Challenge

- Change language (and attitude) to reflect basic respect for young males and their development
- Develop methods for adolescent males to resolve emotional conflict other than or in combination with talk therapies
- Create culture of adult males helping to guide young males into healthy adulthood

Girls At Risk Workgroup

■ Major Conclusions:

- Underlying trauma (usually sexual) universal
- Uses sexuality/promiscuity as means of connection
- Enmeshment with mother--
 - As female figure
 - With traumatic life and behaviors

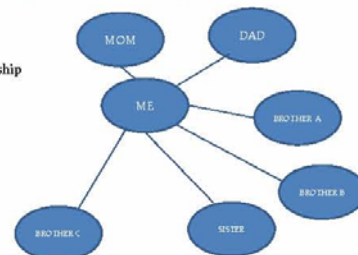
Toward a New Paradigm

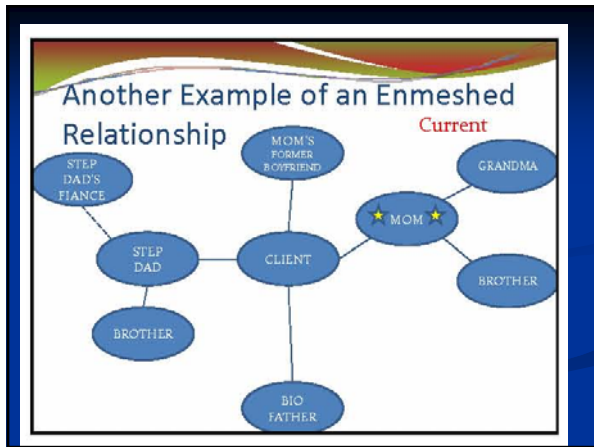
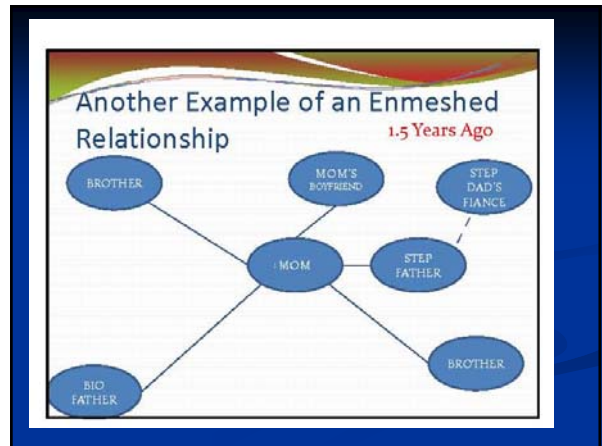
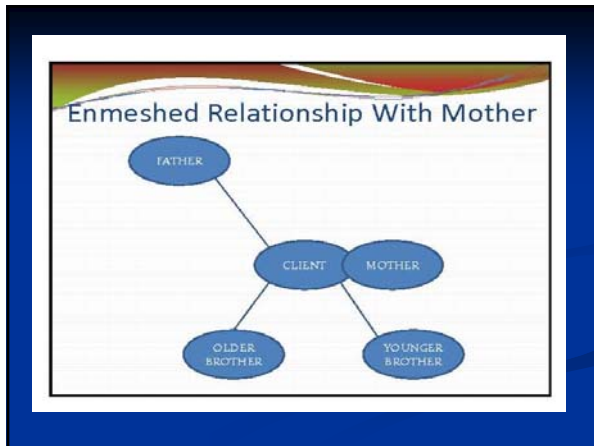
■ Use framework of Self-in-Relation Model

- (Jean Baker Miller, Carol Gilligan)
- Redefine self identity in context of mother/daughter relationship
 - Work with teen and mother simultaneously
- Females as friends and support, not competition
- New sense of sexual identity

Sociogram Examples

Healthy Relationship





- ### Conclusions
- Gender differences for adolescent males and females show themselves in:
 - behavioral expression of trauma,
 - emotional-cognitive integration,
 - risk taking,
 - seeking connection
 - identity formation.

