CHARACTER PROCESSES IN ADOLESCENCE*

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The topic of my paper is character processes in adolescence. In particular I shall consider sex differences in character processes during this critical period of growth. I will describe some recent research on this problem and my thoughts about their implication for personality theory, especially the theory of feminine personality development.

According to psychoanalytic theory, adolescence represents a recapitulation of the Oedipus conflict. The relative calm and control achieved during latency suffers a disruption at this point because of the re-emergence of intense sexual impulses, and the child is plunged again into Oedipal conflict.

Several critical new factors mark this re-enactment of the Oedipal drama, and distinguish it from its earlier counterpart: the ego of the pubertal child--enriched and articulated during latency--is in a more advantageous relation to the impulses than it was in the Oedipal period. The ego has gained an ally for its struggle with impulses in the agency of the super-ego. And the fact of genital capability opens for the child new possibilities for resolving conflict. The child need not simply repress his love for the mother and gain mastery of his ambivalence and fears through identification. He may now seek substitutes for the mother, substitutes who are suitable love objects. Though he may identify with the father in a more or less differentiated fashion, he need not use

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identification as a global defense against overpowering fear of the rival father, since the father is no longer his rival in the same crucial way.

Part of the outcome of the adolescent struggle is the re-negotiation of the ego- super-ego compact; that is, a change in character. Accompanying the dispersal of the original identification, we expect that the child will establish a set of values and controls which are more internal and personal than earlier ones, and which reflect his new reality situation as an adult.

This is the developmental task and context facing the adolescent boy. But what of the task confronting the girl at this period? With what resources and what history does she enter adolescence? Analytic theory, though wanting in specificity, gives us some broad clues about this development; about its unique characteristics and differences from the development of the male child.

First we expect that super-ego is less developed in women (and in adolescent girls). Since the little girl has not the decisive motive force that the boy has in castration anxiety, she does not turn peremptorily against her own instinctual wishes nor form the same critical and definite identification with the parent. Her motives for internalizing the wishes of important adults are fear of loss of love, a sense of shame, and of loss (Fenichel). According to Deutsch, an important step in the socialization of girls occurs when the father enters an agreement with the little girl whereby he exchanges a promise of love for her forfeiture of any direct expression of aggressive impulses.

A significant difference may be noted at this point: the boy who has accomplished the Oedipal resolution now has an <u>internal</u> representative of the parents which he must placate and which serves as a source of

reinforcement for his acts. The little girl, on the other hand, continues to look to the parents as the source of reward and punishment, since her identifications are only partial and primitive.

At adolescence this difference has a critical significance: the boy enters the adolescent contest with an ego that is reinforced by a strong ally; that is, a vigorous super-ego. And in reworking the relation between the ego and the impulses, there is an internal criterion by which the boy judges the new arrangement. His new values and controls are an individual accomplishment and are judged, at least in part, by individual standards.

The girl meets the re-aroused instincts of adolescence with an ego only poorly supported by partial identifications and introjects. She still needs to rely heavily on externally imposed standards to help in her struggle with impulses.

With this formulation as a starting point, we made a number of predictions about sex differences in character development, and looked at data from two national sample surveys (of the 14 to 16 year age group) for tests of our predictions. Specifically, we explored the following hypotheses:

1) that adolescent girls will show less concern with values and with developing behavior controls than boys; that is, that character will show rapid development in boys during adolescence, while girls will be less preocupied with establishing personal, individual standards and values.
2) that personal integration around moral values, though crucial in the adjustment of adolescent boys, will not predict adjustment in girls. Rather, sensitivity and skill in interpersonal relationships will be critical integrative variables in adolescent girls, and will predict personal adjustment.

Our studies yield substantial support for the first speculation. Girls are consciously less concerned about developing independent controls than are boys. They are more likely to show an unquestioned identification with and acceptance of parental regulation. They less often distinguish parents' standards from their own--and they do not view the parents' rules as external or inhibiting as often as boys do. Boys more often tell us they worry about controls--particularly controls on aggression; when we ask what they would like to change about themselves, this issue again emerges as an important source of concern. More important, perhaps, as evidence of their greater involvement in forging controls, we find that boys more often conceive parental rules to be distinctly external, and, to some extent, opposed to their own interests. So when we ask why parents make rules, boys underscore the need to control children (to keep them out of trouble). Girls reveal an identification with the parents when they say that parents make rules to teach their children how to behave, to give them standards to live by, to let children know what is expected of them. Boys think of rules as a means of restricting areas of negative behavior, while girls more often see them as a means of directing and channeling energy.

In answer to the entire series of questions about parental rules, boys repeatedly reveal greater differentiation between their own and their parents' standards.

One of the most impressive indications of the difference between boys and girls in their attitude toward authority comes from a series of projective picture-story questions. At one point in this series a boy or girl is shown with his parents, and the parents are setting a limit for the child. We asked respondents to tell what the child would say. A quarter of the boys questioned the parental restriction--not with hostility or any

sign of real conflict, but with a freedom that implies a right to question--while only 4 percent of the girls in the same age group react in this manner. On the other hand, a third of the girls reassure the parents with phrases like "don't worry," or "you know I'll behave, I'll act like a lady," and boys almost never answer this way.

Both of these response types reveal a respect for one's own opinions. They both indicate autonomy, but very different attitudes toward parental rules: the boy openly opposes; the girl not only acquiesces to, but reinforces the parents' regulation.

Girls are more authority-reliant than boys in their attitudes toward adults other than their parents. We also find lower inter-correlations among internalization items for girls, indicating less coherence in the area for them than for boys.

These are a few examples of differences that support the claim that boys are actively struggling with the issue of controls and that they are moving in a process of thrust and counter-thrust toward the construction of personal, individuated control systems more conscious and rational than previous global identications; and that girls, in contrast, are relatively uninvolved in this struggle and maintain a compliant-dependent relationship with their parents.

The second hypothesis mentioned at the beginning of this paper deals with the significance of progress in internalization for the personal integration and adjustment of boys and girls. Having found that girls are less urgently struggling for independent character, we wonder what this signifies for ego development and integration. Are girls relatively undeveloped in these regards as well as in independence of character? Or is the development of character less important in the integration of girls than it is for boys at this period?

The analysis we have done to date indicates that the second alternative is at least a viable hypothesis. We have completed an analysis of extreme groups, on a measure of internalization-externalization. We find that the well-internalized boy is characterized by active achievement strivings, independence of judgement, a high level of energy for use in work and play, and self-confidence combined with realistic self-criticism. He is well developed in the more subtle ego qualities of organization of thought and time-binding. The boy who has not achieved internal, personal controls, and who responds only to external authority is poorly integrated, demoralized, and deficient in all areas of advanced ego functioning.

Again, we ask: what does the relatively common reliance on external controls found among girls mean about their ego-integration? We find when we analyze extreme groups of girls that internalization of individual controls is no guarantee of ego development, and that girls who are dependent on external controls do not show the disintegration and demoralization that marks the non-internalized boy. In short, internalization of independent standards is not an efficient predictor of ego organization or ego strength in girls.

There are several possible explanations for this lack of relation in girls. High internalization in girls may not reflect independence in standards. Helene Deutsch has observed girls' greater capacity for intense identification, compared to boys, and we may have in the girls' apparently well-internalized controls a product of fusion with parental standards rather than a differentiated independent character. Moreover, dependence on external standards is the norm for girls in adolescence. Parents are permitted and encouraged to maintain close supervision of the growing girl's actions. Under these circumstances, compliance with external

authority is less likely to reflect personal pathology or a pathological family structure.

To this point, then, we have seen that girls are less absorbed with the issue of controls, and that the successful internalization of controls is less crucial for their integration at this age than it is for boys.

We speculated that the critical integrating variable for the girl is her progress in developing interpersonal skill and sensitivity. A striking continuity in feminine psychology lies in the means of meeting developmental crises. In childhood, adolescence, and adulthood her central motive is desire for love and her means of handling crisis is to appeal for support and love from important persons in her environment. This contrasts with the greater variety of methods--of mastery and withdrawal--that the male uses in meeting developmental crises. The girl's skill in pleading her cause with others--in attracting and holding affection--is more critical to her successful adaptation.

We designed a test of the importance of interpersonal development in boys and girls. Again, taking extreme groups--those who reveal relatively mature attitudes and skills in the area of friendship, and those who are impressively immature--we compared performance in other areas of ego development. With girls we found clear relationships between interpersonal development and the following ego variables:

Energy level

Self-confidence

Time-perspective and organization of ideas

Positive feminine identification.

Interpersonal skill in boys is not significantly related to activity level, time-binding, self-confidence or self-acceptance. In short, it does not assert the same key influence in the ego integration of boys that it does in feminine development.

What significance do these findings have? What are the sources of the sex differences we have observed and what do they mean about the later settlement of character issues in the two sexes in adulthood?

We feel that differences in character processes in boys and girls reflect both basic constitutional and developmental differences between the sexes, and also variation in the culture's statement of character crises for boys and girls.

The most crucial factor leading to boys' precocity in moral development is probably the more intense and imperious nature of the impulses they must handle. The sexual impulses rearoused at puberty are, in the boy, specific and demanding and push to the forefront the need for personal controls which accommodate his sexual needs. Acceptance of parental standards or maintenance of the early identificatory control would require denial of sexual impulses, and this is simply not possible for the boy after puberty.

The impulses of girls, on the other hand, are both more ambiguous and more subject to primitive repressive defenses. She has abandoned aggressive impulses at an earlier phase of development, and may continue to deny them. Her sexual impulses are more diffuse and can also more readily submit to the control of parents and to the denial this may imply.

The ambiguity of female sexual impulses both permits adherence to earlier forms of control and makes this a comfortable course, since their diffusion and mystery also implies a greater danger of overwhelming the incompletely formed ego at adolescence. Freud noted the wave of repression that occurs in females at puberty, and contrasted it to the psychic state of the boy.

Additional forces leading to postponement of character issues in girls are their greater general passivity, their more common tendency toward intensive identifications in adolescence, and toward fantasy gratification of impulses.

I would like to mention one final point of difference between the sexes during this period which, I feel, is critical in character development in girls. Forging independent standards and controls--i.e., settling an independent character--is part of the broader crisis of defining personal identity. In our culture there is not nearly as much pressure on girls as there is on boys to meet the identity challenge during the adolescent years. In fact, there is a real pressure on the girl not to make any clear settlement in her identity until considerably later. We are all familiar with the neurotic woman who, even in adulthood, staunchly resists any commitment that might lead to self-definition and investment in a personal identity, for fear of restricting the range of men for whom she is a potential marriage choice. It seems to me that this pattern reflects forces that are felt, more or less, by most girls in our culture. They are to remain fluid and malleable in personal identity in order to adapt to the needs of the men they marry. Too clear a self-definition during adolescence may be maladaptive. But when broader identity issues are postponed, the issues that might lead to differentiation of standards and values are also postponed. I do not, then, feel with Pope that most women have no character at all. I do think that in all likelihood feminine character develops later than masculine character, and that adolescence--the period we ordinarily consider par excellence the time for consolidation of character--is a more dramatic time for boys than for girls.