

Patterns of Development of Autonomy and Mature Interpersonal Relationships in Black and White Undergraduate Women

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Abstract:

Differences were found by class level in measures of autonomy and mature interpersonal relationships and by race in a measurement of intimacy.

Article:

Although Chickering's model (1969) of psycho-social development has been widely accepted and applied by student affairs professionals (Widick, Parker, & Knefelkamp, 1978), recent research has suggested that Chickering's model may not describe well the development of women (Greeley & Tinsley, 1988; Pollard, Benton, & Hinz, 1983; Stonewater, 1987; Straub, 1987; Straub & Rodgers, 1986; Winston & Polkosnik, 1986) and of members of visible racial or ethnic groups (Itzkowitz & Petrie, 1986; Jordan-Cox, 1987).

The vectors of Developing Autonomy and Freeing Interpersonal Relationships (Chickering, 1969) have been of particular interest to researchers investigating sex differences. In two studies (Greeley & Tinsley, 1988; Pollard et al., 1983) it was found that women scored higher than did men on the Mature Interpersonal Relationships task. Higher scores on the Mature Interpersonal Relationships task than on the Autonomy task—a reversal of the pattern Chickering (1969) described—were observed in two studies (Greeley & Tinsley, 1988; Straub & Rodgers, 1986). Questions about the content and process of women's development of autonomy and mature interpersonal relationships were raised by Greeley and Tinsley (1988), Stonewater (1987), and Straub (1987).

Just as generalizations cannot be made about development across sex, so also can generalizations not be made about all women. Wright (1987) has pointed out that student development theory has ignored the issues of development for visible racial or ethnic groups and has identified a number of important developmental issues for students who are members of visible racial or ethnic groups, including establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships and developing healthy gender roles and sexual identity. Wright considered the latter to be important to the development of autonomy and self-identity for students who are members of visible racial or ethnic groups.

Although little research has been published that investigates the psychosocial development of Black students in the context of Chickering's (1969) theory and none that focuses specifically on Black women, two studies (Itzkowitz & Petrie, 1986; Jordan-Cox, 1987) have explored the development of Black students using the Student Developmental Task Inventory, second edition (SDTI-2; Winston, Miller, & Prince, 1979). Jordan-Cox's (1987) findings of significantly higher scores on Mature Interpersonal Relationships for Black women than for Black men are consistent with much of the research on sex differences using predominantly White samples. Her findings, however, of significantly higher scores on Developing Autonomy for Black women than

for Black men are unlike the findings of virtually all of the studies of sex differences in development using predominantly White samples.

The purpose of this study was to examine the patterns of psychosocial development for both White and Black traditional-age undergraduate female college students. Specifically investigated was the pattern of the development of the tasks of autonomy and interpersonal relationships as described by Chickering (1969) and whether development in these tasks differed by class level and by race.

METHOD

Sample

Participants for this study were undergraduate female students enrolled at a large, public, mid-Atlantic university; their participation was solicited in two ways. First, a random sample of 320 Black and White undergraduate women living on campus (40 from each class level for both Black and White women) was obtained. Second, volunteer participants were solicited from gender studies and African American studies classes.

Packets containing a cover letter, instruments, and a return envelope were mailed to the random sample of 320 women. Reminder postcards were mailed to those who had not returned their completed instruments 1 week and 2 ½ weeks later. Packets were also distributed to undergraduate female volunteers in four gender studies classes and one African American studies class; completed packets were collected from participants at a subsequent class meeting.

Of the sample of 320, 3 names were duplicates and 1 packet was returned as undeliverable; 174 women returned packets for a 55.1% response rate of usable returns. From the five classes 63 women returned packets (58 from gender studies classes for a response rate of 58.6%, and 5 from the African American studies class for a response rate of 35.7%). Because the research questions in this study were concerned specifically with Black and White traditional-age (17-24) undergraduate women, respondents not fitting those categories ($n = 19$) were dropped from the analysis (11 participants were races other than White or Black and 9 were older than age 24).

Analyses were performed on a total sample of 218 participants. Of this group, 50 (22.9%) were freshmen, 44 (20.2%) sophomores, 63 (28.9%) juniors, and 61 (28.0%) seniors. Eighty-three (38.1%) of the women were Black and 135 (61.9%) were White. The mean ages were 20.1 ($SD = 1.3$) for White participants and 20.0 ($SD = 1.3$) for Black participants. Sixty-nine different majors were represented in the sample. A comparison to the distribution of undergraduate women in these majors at this university showed a strong similarity.

Instrumentation

The Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory (SDTLI; Winston & Miller, 1987) was selected to measure the development of the tasks of autonomy and mature interpersonal relationships: autonomy was also measured by the Developing Autonomy (AUT) scale of the SDTI-2 (Winston et al., 1970). Because the SDTLI, a major revision of the SDTI-2, involved the elimination of the general Autonomy scale, and because previous studies had used the SDTI-2, it was recommended by Winston (personal communication, 1088) that autonomy be measured both by the AUT scale of the SDTI-2 and by the Academic Autonomy (AA) scale of the SDTLI.

Developing Autonomy Scale, SDTI-2. The AUT scale measures Chickering's (1969) constructs of emotional autonomy (disengagement from parents, freedom from "continual and pressing needs for reassurance, affection or approval" [Chickering, 1969, p. 58]), instrumental autonomy (the abilities to "carry on activities and to cope with problems without seeking help, and ... to be mobile in relation to one's own needs and desires" [Chickering, 1969, p. 58]), and interdependence. Two-week test-retest reliability of ALIT ($N = .18$) is reported as .91; Cronbach's coefficient alpha for AUT ($N = 234$) was .78 (Winston et al., 1979).

The Student Development Task and Lifestyle Inventory, SDTLI. Autonomy also was measured using the Academic Autonomy (AA) scale of the SDTLI: developing mature interpersonal relationships was measured

using both the developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships (MIR) task and the Intimacy (INT) scale of the SDTLI (Winston & Miller, 1987).

MIR is made up of three subtasks, Peer Relationships, Tolerance, and Emotional Autonomy. Students with high scores on MIR “are free from the need for continuous reassurance and approval from others and have minimal dependence on parents for direction in decision making” (Winston & Miller, 1987, p. 9), AA measures “the capacity to deal well with ambiguity and to monitor and control [one's] behavior in ways that allow [one] to attain personal goals and fulfill responsibilities” (Winston & Miller, 1987, p. 10). INT is an experimental scale that measures the degree to which a student has “established a relationship with another person based on high levels of mutual respect, honesty, and trust” (Winston & Miller, 1987, p. 10).

Test-retest reliability coefficients for AA, MIR, and INT ranged from .80 to .84 for a 2-week interval ($N = 27$) and from .78 to .84 for a 4-week interval ($N = 42$; Winston & Miller, 1987). Internal consistency estimates for these scales were .76 for MIR ($N = 1,200$), .70 for AA ($N = 1,200$), and .70 for INT ($N = 954$; Winston & Miller, 1987).

RESULTS

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with race and class level as independent variables and the MIR, AA, and AUT scores as dependent variables. The analysis showed significant results by class for AA, AUT, and MIR, Wilks' lambda = .90, $F(12, 545.32) = 1.81$, $p < .05$. Because students who had not been involved in an intimate relationship during the previous 12 months were instructed not to respond to the items on the INT scale, a separate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted for INT. A two-way ANOVA by race and class showed a significant effect by race for INT, $F(1, 185) = 3.76$, $p < .05$.

Univariate analyses conducted for significant MANOVA results indicated significant differences by class levels on both measures of autonomy (for AA, $F[3, 213] = 4.07$, $p < .01$; for AUT, $F[3, 214] = 4.36$, $p < .01$) and on one measure of interpersonal relationships (MIR). $F(3, 213) = 3.90$, $p < .01$: no differences by race were found on AA, AUT, or MIR. No interaction effects were found on any measure. To identify significant between-class differences. Student-Newman-Keuls procedures were used to compare the means for the four class levels on AA, AUT, and MIR (Table 1).

On AUT seniors scored significantly higher than did freshmen, sophomores, and juniors, with the freshmen, sophomores, and juniors not significantly different from one another ($p < .01$). On AA seniors scored significantly higher than did both freshmen and juniors ($p < .01$), but not sophomores. On the MIR task seniors scored significantly higher than did freshmen ($p < .01$); sophomores and juniors, however, were not significantly different from either freshmen or seniors. Although there were no significant differences by class level for INT, the means reflected a pattern of gradual increase from freshmen to seniors (Table 1).

Significant differences by race were found for only one measure of development of interpersonal relationships—INT. White women scored significantly higher ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 3.9$, $n = 118$) than did Black women ($M = 12.3$, $SD = 4.0$, $n = 75$) on INT ($n < .05$).

TABLE 1
Developmental Task Scores by Class Level

Developmental Task	Freshman (n = 50)		Sophomore (n = 43)		Junior (n = 63)		Senior (n = 61)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Autonomy (AUT) ^a	27.8	4.9	28.9 ^b	5.7	28.5	6.4	31.3	5.1
Academic Autonomy (AA) ^c	5.2	2.8	5.7	2.4	5.1	2.8	6.6	2.5
Mature Interpersonal Relationships (MIR) ^d	18.4	5.3	20.6	4.4	19.4	5.2	21.4	4.7
Intimacy (INT) ^e	12.0 ^f	4.2	13.3 ^g	3.8	13.4 ^h	3.7	13.4 ⁱ	4.1

^aF(3, 214) = 4.36, p < .01. ^bn = 44. ^cF(3, 213) = 4.07, p < .01. ^dF(3, 213) = 3.90, p < .01. ^eF(3, 185) = 1.33, p = .27. ^fn = 46. ^gn = 34. ^hn = 55. ⁱn = 58.

DISCUSSION

Pattern of Psychosocial Development by Class Level

Autonomy. In this study two measures of autonomy were used. Autonomy as defined by AUT deals with issues of separation, self-sufficiency, risk taking, problem solving, and interdependence (Winston et al., 1979). On AUT seniors scored significantly higher than did freshmen, sophomores, and juniors, with none of the latter significantly different from one another. Such a pattern suggests dramatic development in the area of autonomy in the senior year. Although according to Chickering (1969) freshmen and sophomores are concerned with autonomy, with the developmental task of autonomy basically resolved by the junior year, a number of other researchers have found a similar pattern of delayed autonomy for women (Greeley & Tinsley, 1988; Jordan-Cox, 1987; Straub & Rodgers, 1986).

The work of Gilligan (1982) also supports the idea of delayed development of autonomy for women. Autonomy, as defined by Chickering (1969), is concerned with issues of separation. Women's development, however, according to Gilligan, is concerned with connections and relationships. For example, because women's development emphasizes connectedness to others, the ability to function separately and freedom from reassurance or approval may occur later or may seem less desirable for women, whereas developing mature relationships may occur earlier for women (Stonewater, 1987). Gilligan (1982) theorized that women, in later stages of their development, develop a sense of separateness.

The content or quality of autonomy development may be different for women and men (Stonewater, 1987; Straub, 1987). Straub (1987), investigating the ways in which women develop autonomy, found that 27% of the critical incidents in the development of autonomy reported by the women in her study did not fit Chickering's (1969) description of autonomy development but were more similar to his description of freeing interpersonal relationships. If the content of autonomy development is, in fact, different for women from Chickering's (1969) description, then the items used to measure autonomy development in the SDTI-2 in this study may not actually have tapped autonomy development properly.

The timing of the study during the second half of the spring semester might also have been a factor in this finding of dramatic development in autonomy in the senior year. Because senior women are confronted with autonomy issues related to moving on from college, they may have resolved the autonomy task.

The second measure of the development of autonomy used in this study, AA, defines autonomy more specifically in terms of the ability to deal with ambiguity, to be self-disciplined, especially related to academic tasks, and to "require minimal help from others" (Winston & Miller, 1987, p. 10). On AA seniors scored significantly higher than did both freshmen and juniors but not sophomores, with juniors having the lowest mean. It is probable that the seniors, because of their longer experience with academics, would feel more self-confident about their abilities to manage academic tasks.

Although this pattern is similar to the aforementioned pattern with seniors scoring higher than women from the lower class levels, the pattern of development of academic autonomy may be somewhat different from the

pattern of the development of autonomy in the preceding discussion. Instead, the pattern may be one of gains in the sophomore year, then a retreat in the junior, and gains again in the senior year. Because the differences in means between the juniors and the freshmen or the sophomores were not significant, however, the pattern of scores may be merely a chance occurrence.

Once again, the content of the items or the content or quality of the very definition of academic autonomy may be an important issue. The developmental task is described in terms of separateness, which is not as applicable to women's experience (Gilligan, 1982). Also, women's preference for connected knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) may make the SDTLI's conception of academic autonomy less than ideally applicable to all women.

Freeing Interpersonal Relationships. This study employed two measures of development in interpersonal relationships, the Mature Interpersonal Relationships (MIR) task of the SDTLI and the Intimacy (INT) scale from the SDTLI. Differences by class level were found only on the MIR.

Seniors scored significantly higher than did freshmen on the MIR task, although sophomores and juniors were not significantly different from either freshmen or seniors. The pattern of means on INT, although not statistically significant, also reflects a gradual increase from freshmen to seniors. These findings suggest a more gradual development in the area of interpersonal relationships than that seen in the development of autonomy and are more reflective of Chickering's (1969) theory. In Chickering's theory Freeing Interpersonal Relationships is a developmental task of juniors and seniors. The pattern in this study suggests that interpersonal relationships is an important task throughout the college years, with development occurring gradually.

Previous research has offered contradictory findings about this vector. Although some researchers have found fairly consistent levels of development (Greeley & Tinsley, 1988; Straub & Rodgers, 1986), Jordan-Cox (1987) also found seniors scoring significantly higher than freshmen on Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships (using the MIR from the SDTI-2).

Differences in Psychosocial Development Between White Women and Black Women

This study also examined differences between White women and Black women in the development of autonomy and interpersonal relationships. Significant differences by race were found for only one measure of development of interpersonal relationships—Intimacy. The INT scale reflects a nonpossessive, honest, open, mutual relationship with another person (Winston & Miller, 1987, p. 10).

The findings of significantly higher scores for White female students than for Black female students on INT are consistent with the information reported in the SDTLI manual (Winston & Miller, 1987). These findings might reflect the possibility that there are fewer or more limited opportunities for Black women to develop intimate relationships on a predominantly White campus (In contrast to the relatively small number of Black peers. This social isolation has been reported frequently in the literature (Fleming, 1981, 1984; Hughes, 1987; Wright, 1987). In contrast with White students' college experience, which offers "a broader social arena with new opportunities for making friends, dating, and learning and displaying social talents," many Black students confront "a more constricted social life than ever before" (Fleming, 1981, p. 283). Hughes (1987) has noted the common tendency for Black students at predominantly White institutions to defer their social and emotional development during their college years due to the failure of such institutions to respond to their social developmental needs.

It is interesting to note that in this study no differences were found between White women and Black women on the MIR scale. Perhaps the difference in focus of the INT scale—a single significant relationship—from the MIR task accounts for this apparent discrepancy. The effects of social isolation may be more apparent in intimate relationships than in interpersonal relationships in general. The disproportionate ratio of women to men from visible racial or ethnic groups combined with self-imposed or socially imposed stigmas on interracial dating may restrict development of intimate relationships (Wright, 1987).

If the significantly lower scores for Black women on INT reflect the social isolation of Black women on a predominantly White campus, it would be interesting to investigate women's development in these areas on a predominantly Black campus. In Fleming's (1984) study Black students at predominantly Black colleges expressed greater satisfaction with social and extracurricular opportunities than did Black students at predominantly White colleges.

In addition, it is possible that the quality of intimacy is different for Black women than it is for White women and that, therefore, the items on the scales were not on target for Black women. For example, the items on the INT scale emphasize one aspect of intimacy—verbal intimacy. Perhaps the content of the vector of freeing interpersonal relationships as described by Chickering (1969) is not applicable to different populations.

Finally, it is important to note that the INT scale is an experimental scale. Moreover, the validity data collected on the scale are limited, and the scale's validity has not been well supported. Winston (1990) cautioned, "Because of the lack of compelling validity data for the INT scale, users should exercise caution in...using it in research studies" (p. 119).

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations to this study should be noted. Although development is by its nature a longitudinal phenomenon, this study is cross-sectional in nature. Sampling problems also limit the ability to generalize the results of the study. Although the majority of the participants were drawn from random sample, not all of the sampling was random. Additionally, participants were drawn from only one institution.

Instrumentation used in this study presents a number of other possible limitations. The autonomy measures (AUT and AA) and the two other interpersonal relationships measures (MIR and INT) were drawn from two separate instruments—AUT from the SDTI-2 and MIR, INT, and AA from the SDTLI. The remainder of the SDTLI was not administered to participants in this study. Also, there was some overlap of item content and, in some cases, overlap of specific items among these four scales.

IMPLICATIONS

A number of implications are suggested by the results of this study. First, practitioners need to exercise caution in the application of Chickering's (1969) theory and the use of Chickering-based instruments to both female students and Black students. The findings suggest that this caution might also need to be extended to members of other racial or ethnic groups.

The timing of developmental interventions may need to be reconsidered. Traditionally, interventions concerned with developing autonomy have been used with freshmen and sophomores, and those concerned with relationships have been used with juniors and seniors, following the framework presented by Chickering (1969). For women such timing may need to be adjusted.

When working with female students, a broader definition of autonomy than that provided by Chickering may need to be adopted. Definitions such as a willingness to "venture off alone" seem less applicable to women than to men. Straub (1987) suggested that for many women the development of autonomy involves tasks more commonly associated with freeing interpersonal relationships. Perhaps women develop autonomy through their relationships with others.

The social isolation of Black women on predominantly White campuses needs to be addressed in terms of their abilities and opportunities to make significant one-on-one contacts and to develop significant one-on-one relationships.

Despite the preceding limitations, the current study is important for a number of reasons. First, women's development is the focus of this study. Second, rather than assuming that the experiences of all women are the same, the differences between White women and Black women were explored. Third, this study employed

multiple measures of development in the areas of autonomy and relationships, rather than relying on a single measure for each construct. Finally, and most important, this study is significant because it challenges assumptions of the applicability to women and to Blacks of theories that student development professionals have taken on faith.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of this study suggest several avenues for future research. First, longitudinal research on traditional-age college women's development is needed (Komives & Evans, 1985).

Black women's development on predominantly Black campuses could be studied and compared with Black women's development on predominantly White campuses. Additionally, Black women's development on qualitatively different campuses could be compared. Such research might help to illuminate the issue of social isolation of Black women on predominantly White campuses and its effects on Black female students' development.

Another area of research suggested by the current study is the refinement of instrumentation used in this study or the use of other instrumentation with the same research questions. The findings of this study that suggest that some item content of the SDTI-2 and the SLDTI-1 may not be appropriate for women indicate that different measures of psychosocial development may be called for.

Predictors of the development of autonomy and interpersonal relationships could also be investigated. The effect of campus climate on women's development could be studied. Within-groups differences could be examined on the basis of factors including racial identity, residence status, and involvement on campus.

Qualitative research looking at the content of women's development in areas of autonomy and relationships could be undertaken. If models such as Chickering's (1969) are inappropriate for examining or describing women's development, rather than continuing to study women within such frameworks, research needs to be done to begin to describe women's development. Interview approaches, such as those used by Straub (1987) and Belenky et al. (1986), would be one approach to such an examination.

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