

Understanding the Role of Peers in Adolescent Females'  
Marital and Family-Related Choices

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## INTRODUCTION

The transition from late adolescence to early adulthood is an important decision-making time in adolescent females' lives. These adolescents are making a variety of educational, career, and family-related plans for their futures and vary with respect to the marital and familial choices they make. Some marry right out of high school and yet others postpone marriage. Some plan on being full-time mothers, others plan on being full-time career workers, and still others choose to combine both work and family roles. The goal of this paper is to examine the role peers play in predicting why adolescent females vary with respect to the gender-role traditionality of their marriage and family plans.

### **An Expectancy-Value Approach to Understanding Adolescent Females' Choices**

The overarching goal of the present study is to understand why adolescent females vary with respect to the gender-role traditionality of their marriage and family plans with regard specifically to expected age of marriage and maternity, daycare plans, and plans regarding the division of household chores. We have used Eccles and colleagues' expectancy-value model of achievement-related choices (Eccles, 1983) to guide our specific research questions (see Figure One).

This model suggests that individuals' expectations for success combined with their valuing of success for a particular domain are the crucial psychological factors underlying a variety of choices. Additionally, Eccles suggests that individuals' perceptions of socializer's beliefs influence individuals' subjective task value and expectations for success (Eccles, 1987b). This model suggests that contextual factors, such as peers, play an important role in understanding adolescents' choices. Peers are likely to be a particularly important socializing influence on family plans since it is from one's peer group that adolescent females will select their marital and parenting partners if they choose to take on the roles at all.

### **The Role of Peers**

Theoretical Overview. Eccles and Bryan (1978, in press) have proposed a theory of gender-role identity development that emphasizes the importance of socio-cultural factors on identity change and support for identity change. For example, peers can play a crucial role in adolescents' movement towards or away from gender-role transcendence depending on the messages they convey and the behaviors they reinforce. Gender-role transcendence is characterized by the integration of masculinity and femininity, independent thinking, and the ability to behave in a manner that meets the principles and values of the individual. It is considered to be the most mature outcome of the gender-identity development process. This process includes periods of wanting to conform to peer group norms and adopt strong, gender-role stereotypic characteristics but also includes periods of critical thinking and questioning of the legitimacy of gender-role prescriptions.

In late adolescence, individuals focus on making life plans and discovering who they are, what they want, and where they are going. Since this is a time when adolescents continue to have the cognitive ability to question their own values in relationship to societal prescriptions and have made few clear commitments to particular social roles, the possibility of achieving gender-role transcendence is at its highest. According to Eccles and Bryan (1978, in press), this shift depends on socio-cultural milieu. Adolescents exposed to androgynous role-models, gender counter stereotypic information, and new ideas have a higher chance of achieving a gender-role transcendent identity than adolescents who are in a more traditional environment.

Previous Research. Holland and Eisenhart's (1990) ethnographic study offers interesting qualitative information regarding the role peers play in adolescent females' achievement. They find that peers influence college adolescent females to focus on romantic partnerships. This romantic focus takes adolescent females' attention away from academic success and usually results in minimizing a career identity but maximizing a family identity.

Stattin and Magnusson (1990) have investigated the effects of maturational timing on psychological characteristics. They found that the earlier girls matured (e.g., age at menarche), the more likely it was they would pursue traditional gender roles. However, this finding was only true for those girls who associated with an older peer group. Stattin and Magnusson (1990) suggested that associating with older males who are ready to begin a family influences adolescent females to move towards a domestic path of achievement and away from a career path of achievement. These findings provide support for Eccles and Bryan's (1978, in press) contention that social context (in this case, the peer group) is an important factor in whether adolescents adopt traditional or non-traditional gender-role identities.

Recently, Gustafson, Stattin, and Magnusson (1992) conducted a longitudinal study of a broad range of Scandinavian women. They looked at adolescent factors that predicted women's career vs. family outcomes. They also found that peers played an important role during adolescence in predicting women's career vs. homemaking achievement trajectories. Those women who associated with younger peers were more likely to stay in school and pursue careers. However, those women who associated with older peers and had boyfriends during adolescence were more likely to have children by the age of 26 and be homemakers.

In summary, there is some evidence to suggest that peers establish norms of what behaviors and goals are important or unimportant. Group members learn these norms and may modify their behavior accordingly. Clearly, not all peer groups are the same, however. What kinds of peer characteristics relate to adolescent females' career and family values? Are peers who are academically oriented influencing their friends to pursue a college education and a career? Are peers who are already involved in steady romantic relationships and/or motherhood influencing their friends to take on those "adult" roles and put less emphasis on career goals?

## **HYPOTHESES**

In light of previous findings from expectancy-value models and peer research, we make several predictions. We expect to find that self-concept of ability for masculine tasks and perceptions of peer academic characteristics will be negatively associated with gender-role traditional marriage and parenting plans. However, we expect to find that self-concept of ability for feminine tasks, gender-role traditional attitudes about work and family, and perceptions of peers having high family-related characteristics will be positively associated with gender-role traditional family plans. High value placed on careers and independence before marriage is expected to be negatively related to the traditionality of family plans. High value placed on family is expected to be positively associated with traditionality of family plans.

## **METHODS**

### **Design Overview**

The Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transitions (MSALT) is a longitudinal study focusing on adolescent development, and more specifically, the transitions into junior high school, high school, and adulthood. Presently, seven waves of data exist for MSALT participants. The first two waves took place at the beginning and end of the 6th grade (in 1984); the third and fourth waves occurred at the beginning and end of the 7th grade (in 1985). The fifth and sixth waves of data collection were conducted when subjects were in the 10th (in 1988) and 12th grades (1990). The most recent wave of data collection occurred when subjects were approximately 20 - 21 years old (1992 - 1993).

### **Subjects**

The sample for the present study is comprised of the 760 female subjects who participated in wave 6. These adolescent females came from ten working to middle class urban/suburban communities in southeastern Michigan. The overwhelming majority of the sample is white.

### **Procedure**

In the spring of 1990, adolescents completed questionnaires at school. There was a phone survey for people who had moved and/or for those who did not want to complete the full survey. Drop-outs were also contacted by mail or phone.

## Measures

### Male Stereotyped Self-Concept of Ability (alpha = .80)

- Supervising others <sup>a</sup>.
- Being a leader <sup>a</sup>.
- Logical, analytical thinking <sup>a</sup>.
- Intelligence <sup>a</sup>.
- Independence <sup>a</sup>
- Self-Confidence <sup>a</sup>
- Decisiveness <sup>a</sup>
- Owner of a small business (like restaurant owner, shop owner) <sup>b</sup>.
- Business manager or administrator, stock broker <sup>a</sup>.
- Science or math related field (like engineer, architect, CPA, science teacher) <sup>b</sup>.
- Science (like scientist with a Ph.D.) <sup>b</sup>.
- Lawyer <sup>b</sup>.

<sup>a</sup> Compared to others, how good are you at each of the following:  
1 = a lot worse, 7 = a lot better

<sup>b</sup> Rate how well you think you would do in each of the following types of jobs:  
1 = I would not do well at all, 4 = I would do average, 7 = I would do very well

### Female Stereotyped Self-Concept of Ability (alpha = .75)

- Taking care of children <sup>a</sup>.
- Listening to and understanding others <sup>a</sup>.
- Teaching and explaining to others <sup>a</sup>.
- Helping others solve problems <sup>a</sup>.
- Patience <sup>a</sup>.
- Full-time homemaker <sup>b</sup>
- Child care/day care worker <sup>b</sup>
- Human services (like librarian, architect, social worker, counselor, teacher) <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Compared to others, how good are you at each of the following:  
1 = a lot worse, 7 = a lot better

<sup>b</sup> Rate how well you think you would do in each of the following types of jobs:  
1 = I would not do well at all, 4 = I would do average, 7 = I would do very well

Gender-Role Traditional Attitudes Towards Work and Family (alpha=.77)

How much do you agree with the following statements about the roles or abilities of men and women?

1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree

Having a career takes away from a woman's relationship with her husband.  
It is much harder for a woman to be a success at her career if she has children.

A wife's relationship with her husband is better if she doesn't place too much importance on her job.

If someone's career needs to suffer for the good of the family, it should be the wife's and not the husband's.

A woman's career suffers when she has children.

The best that a man can do for his family is to be successful in his career.

If a husband and wife both work full-time, the husband should do half of the housework and child care. (*Response scale is flipped.*)

It is usually better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family.

A preschool child is likely to suffer if the mother works.

A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work. (*Response scale is flipped.*)

Having a job gives a wife a better chance to develop herself as a person than staying at home. (*Response scale is flipped.*)

Perception of Peer Academic Characteristics (alpha=.75)

What percentage of your friends are each of the following?

1 = none, 3 = half, 5 = all

Know what kind of job they want to have as adults.

Very ambitious.

Very hard working.

Planning to go to college.

Doing very well in school.

Perception of Peer Adult/Familial Characteristics (alpha=.73)

What percentage of your friends are each of the following?

1 = none, 3 = half, 5 = all

Married.

Have kids.

More than one year older than you.

More than two years older than you.

Family Values (alpha = .82)

Getting married  $\alpha$ .

Having a successful, happy marriage  $\alpha$ .

Having children  $\alpha$ .

Being a successful parent (raising healthy, happy, well-adjusted children) <sup>a</sup>.

The pleasure one gets from children makes it worth the trouble <sup>b</sup>.

Children are more trouble than they are worth <sup>b</sup>. (*Response scales is flipped.*)

<sup>a</sup> How important will each of the following be to you in your adult life?

1 = not at all, 7 = very important

<sup>b</sup> How much do you agree with the following statements about the roles or abilities of men and women? 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree

#### Career Values (alpha = .68)

How important will each of the following be to you in your adult life?

1 = not at all, 7 = very important

Being very successful in your line of work.

Being able to find steady work.

Being able to support yourself (being financially independent).

#### Values of Independence Before Marriage (alpha = .72)

Before you get married, how important is it to you to:

1 = not at all, 7 = extremely important

Live on your own.

Save a lot of money.

Have a secure job.

Finish college.

#### Day Care Plans (alpha = .83)

When you think of the future, how likely do you think each of the following will be:

1 = not at all likely, 7 = very likely.

You will place your infant (0-2 years old) in full-time day care.

You will place your preschool age child (2-5 years old) in full-time day care.

#### Divisions of Household Chores (alpha = .66)

As you think of the many demands involved in being a worker, a spouse, and a parent, how do you think you and your partner will share those responsibilities?

1 = I would do it all, 2 = I would do most of it, 3 = I would do a bit more than half, 4 = We would share equally, 6 = My spouse would do a bit more than half, 7 = My spouse would do it all.

Providing an income for the family.

Taking care of your children when they are infants. (*Response scale is flipped.*)

Taking care of household tasks. (*Response scale is flipped.*)

#### Expected Age at First Child

If you'd like to have children, at what age would you like to start having them? \_\_\_\_

#### Expected Age at Marriage

If you'd like to get married, at what age would you like to marry? \_\_\_\_



## RESULTS

TABLE 1  
Means and Standard Deviations for Measures <sup>a</sup>

	Mean	SD
Self-Concept of Ability for Masculine Tasks	4.62	1.02
Self-Concept of Ability for Feminine Tasks	5.21	1.02
Gender-Role Traditional Attitudes re: Work & Family	2.98	0.98
Perception of Peer Academic Characteristics <sup>b</sup>	3.56	0.64
Perception of Peer Familial Characteristics <sup>b</sup>	2.04	0.66
Family Values	5.96	1.36
Career Values	6.55	0.67
Values for Independence before Marriage	6.03	1.07
Daycare Plans	2.65	1.57
Plans for Traditional Division of Household Chores	4.66	0.65
Expected Age at Marriage	24.37	2.81
Expected Age at First Child	26.33	2.91

- <sup>a</sup> Range of scale is 1 - 7. 7 denotes high self-concepts of ability, high gender-role traditionality, high values for family, career, and independence, high likelihood of putting children in daycare, high likelihood of having a traditional division of household chores.
- <sup>b</sup> Range of scale is 1 - 5. 5 denotes more peer academic characteristics and more peer familial characteristics.

TABLE 2.  
Zero-Order Correlations Among Measures.

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
1. Perception of Peer Academic Characteristics	1.00										
2. Perception of Peer Familial Characteristics	-.14**	1.00									
3. Traditional Attitudes re: Work & Family	-.08*	.02	1.00								
4. Self-Concept of Ability for Male Tasks	.33**	-.04	-.19**	1.00							
5. Self-Concept of Ability for Female Tasks	.11**	.11**	.04	.18**	1.00						
6. Family Values	.03	-.03	.03	-.02	.44**	1.00					
7. Career Values	.16**	-.05	-.25**	.24**	.03	-.01	1.00				
8. Values of Independence	.15**	-.10**	-.20**	.19**	-.03	-.11**	.43**	1.00			
9. Plans to put Kids in Daycare	.06	.01	-.24**	.12**	-.12**	-.16**	.11**	.13**	1.00		
10. Plans to have traditional division of chores	-.18**	.07	.42**	-.26**	.18**	.25**	-.20**	-.16**	-.25**	1.00	
11. Expected Age at Marriage	.09*	-.21**	-.09*	.13**	-.16**	-.36**	.18**	.44**	.17**	-.14**	1.00
11. Expected Age at First Child	.13**	-.26**	-.12**	.18**	-.17**	-.33**	.22**	.36**	.15**	-.18**	.76**

Note. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

TABLE 3.  
Standardized Regression Coefficients from Hierarchical Multiple Regression for  
Plans to Put Children in Day Care

Predictors	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	r
1. Perceived Peer Academic Characteristics	.04	.02	.02	.02	.06
2. Perceived Peer Familial Characteristics	.01	.02	.04	.03	.01
3. Traditional Attitudes RE: Work & Fam		-.23***	-.21***	-.19***	-.24**
4. Self-Concept of Ability for Male Tasks			.11**	.08a	.12***
5. Self-Concept of Ability for Female Tasks			-.17***	-.11***	-.12***
6. Family Values				-.12**	-.16***
7. Career Values				.02	.11**
8. Values for Independence				.05	.13***
R <sup>2</sup> of Step:	.00	.06	.09	.10	
R <sup>2</sup> Change of Step:	.00	.05	.03	.02	
F of Step:	.50	12.78***	12.08***	9.05***	
F Change of Step:	.50	37.29***	10.47***	3.74**	

Note. a p < .10, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001.

TABLE 4.  
Standardized Regression Coefficients from Hierarchical Multiple Regression for  
Plans to Have a Traditional Division of Household Chores

Predictors	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	r
1. Perceived Peer Academic Characteristics	-.09*	-.06 <sup>a</sup>	-.05	-.04	-.12***
2. Perceived Peer Familial Characteristics	.03	.02	.00	.01	.07
3. Traditional Attitudes RE: Work & Farm		.44***	.40***	.39***	.42***
4. Self-Concept of Ability for Male Tasks			-.15***	-.13***	-.26***
5. Self-Concept of Ability for Female Tasks			.22***	.12***	.18***
6. Family Values				.19***	.25***
7. Career Values				-.04	-.20***
8. Values for Independence				-.01	-.16***
R <sup>2</sup> of Step:	.01	.20	.26	.29	
R <sup>2</sup> Change of Step:	.01	.19	.06	.03	
F of Step:	3.53*	57.01***	46.73***	33.95***	
F Change of Step:	3.53*	162.29***	25.16***	9.63***	

Note. <sup>a</sup> p < .10, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001.

TABLE 5.  
Standardized Regression Coefficients from Hierarchical Multiple Regression for  
Expected Age at Marriage

Predictors	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	r
1. Perceived Peer Academic Characteristics	.03	.02	-.00	-.05	.09**
2. Perceived Peer Familial Characteristics	-.20***	-.19***	-.17***	-.16***	-.21***
3. Traditional Attitudes RE: Work & Fam		-.10**	-.06a	-.00	-.09**
4. Self-Concept of Ability for Male Tasks			.17***	.09*	.13***
5. Self-Concept of Ability for Female Tasks			-.19***	-.03	-.16***
6. Family Values				-.32***	-.36***
7. Career Values				.02	.18***
8. Values for Independence				.38***	.44***
R <sup>2</sup> of Step:	.04	.05	.10	.34	
R <sup>2</sup> Change of Step:	.04	.01	.05	.24	
F of Step:	13.80***	11.72***	14.28***	40.51***	
F Change of Step:	13.80***	7.31**	17.23***	75.95***	

Note. a p < .10, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001.

TABLE 6.  
Standardized Regression Coefficients from Hierarchical Multiple Regression for  
Expected Age at Motherhood

Predictors	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	r
1. Perceived Peer Academic Characteristics	.08*	.08*	.05	.02	.13***
2. Perceived Peer Familial Characteristics	-.27***	-.26***	-.24***	-.24***	-.26***
3. Traditional Attitudes RE: Work & Farm		-.13***	-.08***	-.03	-.12***
4. Self-Concept of Ability for Male Tasks			.20***	.12**	.18***
5. Self-Concept of Ability for Female Tasks			-.22***	-.09*	-.17***
6. Family Values					-.32***
7. Career Values					.22***
8. Values for Independence					.24***
R <sup>2</sup> of Step:	.08	.10	.16	.30	
R <sup>2</sup> Change of Step:	.08	.02	.06	.14	
F of Step:	28.23***	22.83***	24.16***	32.92***	
F Change of Step:	28.23***	11.10***	23.62***	39.87***	

Note. <sup>a</sup> p < .10, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001.

## DISCUSSION

The major goal of this study was to understand predictors of adolescent females' various marital and familial plans. Using Eccles' expectancy-value model for achievement-related decisions, we hypothesized that self-concepts of ability for male and female tasks, traditional gender-role attitudes towards work and the family, and perceptions of peers' academic and familial characteristics would predict adolescent females' various marital and familial plans. Additionally, we predicted that career values and values for independence before marriage would negatively relate to traditionality of family plans while family values would positively relate to traditionality of family plans. Results support Eccles' (1983) expectancy-value model for achievement-related choices.

### **Implications for the Expectancy-Value Model for Achievement-Related Decisions**

The most consistent predictors of plans for the future were self-concepts of ability for both masculine and feminine tasks and family values. In terms of strength of predictability, family values were the strongest predictor followed by self-concept of ability for masculine tasks, and finally, self-concept of ability for feminine tasks. The distinctions between the latter two are minimal. These findings provide substantial support for Eccles' expectancy-value model of achievement-related decisions. However, the findings also suggest that for predicting marital and family plans, family values are more important than career or independence values.

The importance of self-concept of ability deserves to be mentioned. It is related to most of the marital and familial plans that we investigated. In general, the more able adolescent females feel for performing masculine tasks, the more non-traditional their future plans appear. However, the more able adolescent females feel for performing feminine tasks, the more traditional their futures appear. Why is there a connection between self-concept of ability and future plans? Crocker and Major (1989) suggest that in order to protect self-esteem, individuals value the dimensions in which they

excel. Further, Harter (1986) has stated that a person's self-esteem will be diminished if she values an activity in which she does poorly. Eccles (1987b) suggests that girls may value math less than boys because they perceive that their group (i.e., females) do not do as well in math as the out-group. These contentions are easily supported by the data in the present study. For example, while there is no relationship between self-concept of ability for masculine tasks and family values, there is a relationship between it and career values. Similarly, while there is no relationship between self-concept of ability for feminine tasks and career values, there is a relationship between it and family values. As suggested by Eccles (1983) and Harter (1986), adolescent females are valuing those domains in which they excel and those values are playing very important roles in determining adolescent females' futures.

Also in accordance with Eccles' model (1983), the present study shows that both family values and values for independence before marriage are important predictors of the various choices made by adolescent females. Generally speaking, high levels of family values are related to more gender-role traditional plans for the future and low levels of values for independence are related to less gender-role traditional plans. The present study suggests that adolescent females are achieving in those domains they value. We are *cautiously* encouraged by this finding in that it is unclear how much adolescent females' values are motivated by society's gender-role socialization as opposed to adolescent females' independent thinking and questioning of societal prescriptions.

### **Implications for Existing Research on Peers**

According to Eccles and Bryan's theory (1978, in press), movement toward gender-role transcendence occurs, in part, by the messages individuals receive from role models and other potential socializers. The present study found support for this hypothesis in terms of the roles played by peers.



Perceived peer characteristics were related to gender-role traditional plans for the future. More specifically, the relations between perceived peer familial characteristics and expected ages at marriage and motherhood still exist despite controlling for other psychological measures. This is an extremely interesting and important finding. Perceived peer familial characteristics relate to the most proximal decision adolescent females are making in early adulthood: when to get married and have children. We believe that these plans will have profound effects on other areas of achievement and will have implications for adolescent females' future employment and financial opportunities. Although this study cannot confirm causal linkages between peer characteristics and adolescent females' outcomes, we believe that there is preliminary support for Eccles and Bryan's contention that peers may play an important role in adolescent females' movement towards or away from gender-role traditionality.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, we believe that our research has addressed some of the gaps existing in the literature that pertain to adolescent females' choices. We have demonstrated an important link between adolescent females' perceptions of peers and their future plans and outcomes. More importantly, we have focused on a different set of achievement outcomes than what has traditionally been studied. We hope that future research on adolescent females' development will continue to take a broader perspective and acknowledge the value of the various paths taken by adolescent females, both traditional and non-traditional.

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