



## The Construction of the Female Identity in Pre-Adolescence; A Phenomenological Study of the Experience of Girls and their Mothers

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### Abstract

In the context of the post-modern theory of gender this study investigates how the gender identity of pre-adolescent girls is constructed through the components of ethno-cultural origin and socio-economic status with respect to the experiences of 15 tweens girls and their mothers in Thessaloniki. The research was qualitative. The focus groups, the phenomenological method of Betensky and semi-structured interviews were used for data collection while the thematic method was used for the analysis. The results indicate that, through the experience of tweens girls and their mothers, gender identity in pre-adolescence is influenced from popular culture and the relationship between mother and daughter as well as ethno-cultural background and socioeconomic status which constitute as optical components in the construction of the female identity. This article concentrates on the second objective of the research which is the relationship between mother and daughter in the pre-adolescent period.

**Keywords:** Pre-adolescence; Girls; Gender identity; Popular culture

### Introduction

Over the last two decades the research conducted abroad around the pre-adolescent period in girls pullulates. Contemporary studies indicate that tweens are not passive receivers regarding the construction of their identities, but they themselves actively participate in this process [1-4]. More recent studies highlight the strong bond between mother and daughter in pre-adolescence [5-8]. The very construction of gender identity is related to the set of social experiences and expectations of the tween girl which is primarily contributed to the domestic sphere, given that the relationship between the tween and her mother is strong as indicated by contemporary studies, but also in the public sphere as well [9-19].

### The relationship between mother and daughter

The socio-cultural analysis revised the notion that women are confined to the uterine function "Tota mulier in utero". In fact this representation of women was the result of ideologies that prevailed in different periods where intrinsic features were considered to be inheriting to women's nature. The dynamic/psychoanalytic theory was the one who was mostly involved in dealing with the relationship between mother and daughter and those who were critical about this theory (Jung and the feminist movement). According to the feminist psychodynamic perspective, because a mother relates to her daughter more than she relates with her son, a different psychological and sociological development is created and as a result girls orient relationally [20].

What is the process I must follow to transform a girl into becoming a woman? This is the main concern that guides the behavior of the mother from the birth to the behavioral movement she emulates when feeding the girl, to the way she talks to her and generally her whole behavior towards her. The sociological studies analyze and interpret family relations through the perspective of social conditions and how those conditions shape women's lives. Those studies were criticized on the basis that they do not take into account the effect of ethno-cultural origin, socioeconomic status and religious origin. On the other hand psychological studies focus on the psychoanalytic approach, and link motherhood to the female substance thus equalizing the gender identity of the mother's with that of the daughter's without taking into account human diversity. They also examine the relationship between

mother and daughter only through the perspective of the mother. Beauvoir argues that one is not born a woman but becomes one, and because every mother realizes the responsibility she has in this process of becoming she worries. The role the mother has in the construction of gender in girls is catalytic [21].

Every mother has her own definition of what a woman should be according to the referent standards that have been established and the way she perceives the values contributed by culture in each of the two sexes. Thus, attitudes on gender are defined as the disposition towards a specific, cognitive, emotional or behavioral reaction to a person, an object, a group, a situation or action [22]. Stereotypes are the values, the ideas that determine the lifestyle and thought towards sex [23]. Prejudices refer to self-image; to the information network linking knowledge with the beliefs a person has about them self [24]. Moreover, social representations are the experiences the mother had as a girl, and the legacy of generations that has gone through her [5,25]. Parental acceptance refers to the conscious choice and acceptance of the role of parent as a parent [26]. Meanwhile, the self-perception of parental acceptance, which refers to the human system performances of a person for them self which they base by building mutual relations with their fellowmen and by the stance they take towards them, composes the psychological hodgepodge of the dynamic relationship of a mother with her daughter. It is evident, according to Sygkollitou et al. (2007) that on girls, as part of their socialization, is exerted more pressure on developing their interpersonal communication. It is possible then, that this pressure creates confusion to them because of the socially mixed messages they are given [27]. Essentially the study of the mother-daughter relationship includes the consistency of the relationship, interdependence, compliance, a process of collective

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problem solving and decision making [28]. In summary, the mother affects the development of the gendered self of her daughter through her expectations, desires, principles, beliefs, perceptions but also through her socioeconomic position, cultural level, occupation, education, lifestyle values and standards [27].

## Methodology

This research is qualitative. The first reason for choosing the qualitative method is the opportunity it affords for an in depth analysis of complex phenomena [29]. The second reason is the possibility it provides for the production of a theoretical knowledge that arises in induction. The third reason the qualitative method is chosen is the importance that it is given to the point of view of the participants. It is possible, with this qualitative way of analysis, for new theoretical frameworks to arise, since the methodology of collecting and analyzing the data does not examine whether the participants' opinions correspond to the ones of the researcher's, but it heads towards the creation of new patterns. Choosing the qualitative method allows the focus to be concentrated on the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of the participants.

The present study sought to highlight the experience and views of tweens girls. The main aim of the research is to describe the meanings of pre-adolescents, how they interpret, construct and reconstruct objective realities [30].

## Sample

The sample of the research consists of 15 tweens girls and their mothers. The sample is advisable, meaning that it has been selected with specific criteria, to respond to specific features that allows the investigation of the research's objectives [31]. The sample is homogeneous in terms of the gender and age of the girls; however it is not homogeneous in terms of socioeconomic status and ethno-cultural origin. Regarding demographics, all the girls and their mothers reside in Thessaloniki. In the sample at least one of the parents of girls originates from another country, but all the girls speak the Greek language. Ten of the girls are second-generation immigrants and five are third-generation immigrants.

Regarding religion, 14 girls are Orthodox Christians and one is Muslim. Regarding ethnicity, three girls are of Greek-origin, one girl is Bulgarian-born, one girl is Albanian, 2 girls are of Greek-Bulgarian origin, 3 girls are of Greek-Russian origin, one girl is of Greek-English origin, 2 girls are of Greek-German origin, one girl is of Greek-French origin, and one girl is of Greek-Israeli origin. All girls are preadolescents (9-12 years). The sample was taken from two schools in central Thessaloniki, one in Kordelio and Menemeni, and the other a private school at Panorama, under the licensed permission of the Pedagogical Institute.

## Research tools

The tools used in this research were the focus groups, the artistic investigation of Bentesky, and the semi-structured interviews conducted to the mothers. The final study plan was performed after conducting the first piloted focus group.

## Procedure

I had meetings only with the pre-adolescent girls whose consensual letter was signed and created focus groups in which were formed in two periodic hours of teaching. The focus groups had an average time of 65 minutes which corresponded to two training periods. The semi structured interviews conducted to the mothers had an average duration of 40 minutes. The interviews were video recorded with the consent of the participants.

## Results

The thematic analysis was used for the analysis of the data. This method emphasizes the organization and rich description of all of the data. In this study, the first step that was taken, after the collection of the data from the focus groups, was the transcription, word for word, of the participants' recordings. Once the recordings from the participants were transcribed, the researcher repeatedly read all the recorder data, in order to understand them, meaning to be able to gain a complete understanding as to what the participants say or do. It was a word- by-word analysis. After a comparison was conducted, the codes were placed and formed into thematic units which constitute the concentrated holistic descriptions and interpretations of the concepts explored in this research. Finally there were three tables created were all the thematic units were concentrated and where featured excerpts from the survey data were noted. From the analysis of the data of the focus groups emerged two thematic categories of gender identity construction (Table 1).

### Mother-daughter relationship (from the point of view of the tween daughter)

In this thematic category, the references are made to the dynamic of the relationship between the daughter and the mother from the point of view of the daughter. The relationship of mother and daughter includes the avocation of the mother with the daughter as a concept, which is constituted by communication and guidance, to the priority given to exercise maternity constituted by how involved the mother is with her daughter's life and to the commitment of the mother constituted by the care the mother shows towards the daughter. The proximity the mother has with her daughter can be explained by four participants based on whether the mother is present or not, by four girls based on the communication of the mother with the daughter and by five girls based on the care the mother shows to her daughter.

<b>Mother-daughter relationship</b>  (Point of view of the Pre-teen daughter)	<i>communication of the mother with the daughter</i>	«we have the best communication, she is a very good mum, we discuss everything together, we talk a lot».
	<i>The caring of the mother (Towards the daughter)</i>	«my mummy takes care of me very well. She cooks and irons my clothes».
	<i>how present is the mother</i>	«I adore my mother, she is always there when I need her».
<b>Expectations the mother has for her tween daughter (the point of view of the daughter)</b>	<i>school performance</i>	«to be an excellent student so that I to achieve my goals and enter a good university of my choosing».
	<i>creating a family</i>	«to get married with a good man».
	<i>good behavior</i>	«to be good students, be prude and not embarrass them, isn't it girls?».
	<i>personal happiness</i>	«to love and respect myself and to have my own dreams».

Table 1: Gender identity construction, mother-daughter relationship.

The presence of the mother is intertwined with the security the daughter feels. This is also confirmed literary by the study of Le Nestour [32]. Concerning the presence or not of the mother one participant mentions that her mother is always there when she needs her and that makes her feel secure:

“My mother is always there for me, she is there when I need her, and that makes me feel secure”

Yet another participant refers to the non-presence of her own mother:

“My mother is always absent, I don't see her often, and we talk with post-its”

The relationship between the mother and the daughter is build, as stated above by the presence of the mother which creates security for the girls.

The communication of the mother with the daughter is another of the issues that the pre-teens refer to:

“I communicate perfectly with my mum, she understands me, we speak the same language”

Contrary to the view of the previous participant, another participant mentions this:

“Em, there is no communication with my mother, it is very difficult to discuss about anything”

The communication between mother and daughter again determines the relationship of both.

The issue of care is raised by another participant who states:

“My mother cares very much about me, my food, my clothes, she takes care of everything”

Caring also plays a key role in the mother-daughter relationship.

In conclusion on this thematic category, the tweens girls discussed issues regarding the domestic sphere. The family is referred in comparison to other families based on socioeconomic status, parental education and the basis of nationality. There is mention of the relationship of mother and daughter from the point of view of the pre-teenager regarding the communication with each other, the care the mother shows for her daughter and for the presence or absence of the mother in the life of her daughter. Finally, a reference is made to parents' expectations about their tweens daughters. Their expectations revolve around their school performance, with the creation of their own family, with their good behavior and personal happiness, which is seen through the perspective of the pre-teens themselves. Although the tweens have not submitted any personal experiences, some conclusions emerged for the construction of identity of the girls, such as the parental educating mien and the relationship of mother and daughter which plays a vital role in the formation of a girl's gender identity.

### **The parents' expectations for the pre-adolescent (from the point of view of the pre-adolescent)**

This thematic category discusses the expectations parents have for their pre-teen daughters, the way they are perceived by the tweens themselves. Table 1 indicates that eight tweens report parental expectations regarding their school performance, three report parental expectations regarding good behavior, six tweens refer to expectations regarding personal happiness and six girls refer to expectations regarding the creation of a family.

The majority of girls refer to parental expectations for school performance. One participant referred to the gendered parental expectations of the same-sex parent. The pre-teenager comments that, to her mother, girls should be excellent students. In essence she speaks of stereotypes around gender. Specifically another participant stated:

“My mum wants me to be an excellent student; she is very demanding and strict, because girls should be good students”

Another participant focusing on parental expectations refers to the desire the parents have for her to excel. The participant refers to the expectations of her parents regarding her school performance and the identification of their daughter's school performance with their professional capacity. In this case it appears that the profession but also the educational level of the parents is interwoven with parental expectations. The participant specifically mentions that her father's profession requires from her to perform well at school and also to study at a university. She characteristically states:

“My parents want me to always excel, and since my father is a school principle I have to excel and because I am a girl I have to study”

Therefore the primary expectation of the parents, according to what was reported by most girls, is considered to be their school performance. These stereotypical perceptions around these gendered performances are confirmed by the bibliography of Stogiannidou, et al. [27].

Nevertheless, three girls reported good behavior as part of their parent's expectations:

“My mum wants me to be wise and obedient”

“My mum wants me to listen to her”

From the girls' reports it is apparent that good behavior is consistent by elements of wisdom and obedience.

Expectations about personal happiness were reported by six tweens. Specifically one participant resorted to causal yields regarding the reasons her mother expects her to be happy.

“My mum wants me to be happy, because that is the most important thing in life, to be able to have good moments and enjoy things. It is important especially for a girl to be happy because she can raise happy children”

Finally, six girls report that their parents expect them to start a family. Four girls took a traditional stance for the sexes while two girls took a neoliberal stance about the sexes. One participant said:

“The destination of a girl is to marry and have a family with a rich and successful man, that is what my mom says”

The participant states that starting a family is considered to be a gendered destination. In the same way another participant states:

“Yes, my parents want me to marry Messi (laughter), em yes they want me to start a family that is what girls do”

Parents, according to the girls' reports, expect their children to create a family because that will complete both their children's happiness, and their own happiness.

In the present category the girls talked about parental expectations. The majority of the parents' expectations about their tweens daughters are traditional. Their expectations have to do with school performance, the creation of a family, good behavior and, personal happiness, which is seen through the tweens perspective. Apart from these the family is

<b>self-perception of the interaction between mother and daughter</b>	<i>continuation of the mother's upbringing to the daughter's</i>	«I consciously raise her the way I was raised and I don't have any delusions Since the experiment worked..(laughter), why shouldn't I go on?».
	<i>Differentiation of the mother's Upbringing to the daughter's</i>	«it affected me in such a way that I don't want her to go through what I have been through I don't want to transmit to her negative connotations about herself and her femininity».
		«The fact that I was raised in a patriarchal sexist environment made me realize that a woman is unjustifiably considered to be something different from a man».

**Table 2:** Gender identity construction, self-perception of the interaction between mother-daughter.

referred to in comparison with other families based on socioeconomic status, parental education and the basis of nationality. From data analysis of the visual illustrations a category emerged regarding the self-perception of the interaction of the mother with her daughter (Table 2).

### The self-perception of the interaction of the mother with her daughter

This thematic category refers to two components; the gendered intrusions in the mother-daughter relationship as common beliefs about gender and the independence of the gendered beliefs of the mother in relation to her daughter. Specifically ten mothers realized that they interact with their daughters through the intergenerational transmission of gender roles while five mothers differentiate through the independence of gender beliefs of the mother in relation to her daughter. The gendered intrusions in the mother-daughter relationship concern the continuation of the mother's upbringing to her daughter's upbringing. Below the mother refers to the way she communicated with her mother. This attitude also continued with her daughter. In essence the causal yield she uses in the upbringing of her daughter relies in the belief that communication is the key to a good upbringing. She characteristically stated:

“I discussed everything with my mother and I grew up properly and that is why I discuss everything with my daughter and I leaned how I should from my mother and I have the same attitude with my daughter”

In fact his mother she understands that there is an intergenerational transmission of gender roles. This position is consistent with the literature [33]. The same pattern of intergenerational transmission continues and the following mother seems to understand how her daughter is the continuation of her mother. She characteristically stated:

“What can I say; I believe that I have a balanced relationship with my daughter. Meaning that, we communicate perfectly. My mother told me that a daughter is the continuation of the mother and I believe that. Whether you like it or not you identify yourself with your mother, she is the one that teaches you how to become a woman. The female gender as such forces you to cling to your mother”.

However the maternal inheritance's knowledge can provide freedom to the mother in order to changer the future relationship with her daughter [33]. The independence of the gender beliefs of the mother in relation to her daughter was supported by five mothers. Specifically the mothers reported that their dissidence with the way they were raised impelled them to consciously change their style of upbringing. A mother states:

“My mother was very domineering, a pure lioness, was very strict with me and at the same time unfair. I did not want to act in the same manner that she did. I wanted to be the mother that I dreamed to have. Consciously I acted the way that I wanted her to. I acted out my dream mother. I realized that I have come a long way because my daughter and I have a very good relationship”.

Essentially this mother goes against the intergenerational transmission of the gender roles. She gains autonomy and tries to

construct a relationship with her daughter that is free from socially gendered stereotypes and beliefs.

It is evident from the descriptions of three mothers that this autonomy they gained, in relation to the gendered beliefs they have for their daughters, contributed in not affecting the decision making of their daughters. This conscious choice of the interaction of the mother with her daughter is supported, according to the mothers' accounts, on the hallmarks of their daughters, such as balance, reflection and intelligence, critical thinking.

“No, I not an influence on her, she finds her own balance, since I changed in relation to my mother”

“No, I do not influence her, she is very intelligent and reflective”

“We discuss but I never impose my opinions on her, I respect her own free will because she is very perceptive”

Essentially here it is demonstrated that the daughter's up from her mother upbringing is in continuation from the mother's upbringing from her mother.

In summary, in this particular category it is revealed that some mothers continued to use their mothers' way of upbringing with their daughters because they were satisfied with it or because they fail to change it. For some mothers that way of upbringing contained traditional elements and for some others contained progressive elements of upbringing. However some mother consciously chose to differentiate from the educating and upbringing style of their mothers. These mothers gained their own autonomy form that style of upbringing and they reported that they consider that they do not affect the decision making of their tweens daughters. However in all the reports of gaining autonomy regarding based on the manner of upbringing the mothers reported that they differentiated from the traditional manner of upbringing. It was also indicated that this autonomy of the mothers in relation to the manner of upbringing did not consciously affect the decision making of their tweens daughters.

### Conclusions

The experiential experiences of the mothers regarding their gender in their pre-adolescence seem to be, in the most part, insinuated in their relationship with their tweens daughters. The dynamic relationship between mother and daughter was investigated by the closeness of the mother- daughter relationship and the quality of their relationship. The perception of the interaction of mother and daughter was investigated by the mother's beliefs on gender, her stereotypes, her mother's involvement, the guidance of her daughter, and the self-image of the mother-which introduces her self-image as a woman and a mother-as well as her perception of her interaction with her daughter. The mothers seemed to be aware of the proximity they have with their daughters.

It is concluded that, the greatest the closeness and the familiarity the relationship between the mother and the daughter has, and the better the socioeconomic status is, the more limited is the effect of the popular culture. However, the different ethno-cultural origin

seems to affect the degree of exposure of the tweens in the popular culture. The implementation of the female identity supervenes in the interdependence of the optical components; ethno-cultural origin, socioeconomic status, popular culture and the close proximity of mother and daughter, where the proximity of the views around the gendered self creates compatibility between the model which is determined by the social environment and their own tween genesis model of their gendered self.

The mothers that have a positive self-perception and are governed by a more liberal stance regarding gender roles they usually transmit the same stance to their daughters. This position which is supported by the bibliography seems to be supported in the present research too. Concerning the kind of memories they have about their pre-adolescence, the parental approval from their parents forms their attitude towards their daughters. In this way it is indicated that the mothers' childhood is different from the way their tween daughters experience pre-adolescence and the attitudes they have. However, parental approval contributes to the closeness of the relationship between mother and daughter. Even if it is different, according to the mothers, the way they experienced their pre-adolescence, the principles and education they received from their parents, contributed to the way they raised their tween daughters. According to the bibliographical data, if a mother internalizes a negative image for herself, then it is indicated that she will also influence her daughter to the gendered roles and the identity of the daughter [5,34,35].

Briefly, by comparing the mothers' accounts with their tweens' accounts it is shown that the gendered social expectations during the mother's childhood correspond with those that the tweens report for themselves. Essentially an intergenerational transmission of expectations is supervened. The mothers reported components that characterized the relation with their mother which are the same with those that the girls reported about their mothers. There is a model of a parental relationship that endorses a common multi-genealogical evolution contributed to the circle of life. In conclusion, the mothers' estimates on the components that construct the gender identity of their daughters (appearance & media, the internet, celebrities) coincide with their tween daughters' reports.

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