

# A Stage in Female Development

**Girls at Puberty.** Biological and Psychosocial Perspectives. JEANNE BROOKS-GUNN and ANNE C. PETERSEN, Eds. Plenum, New York, 1983. xxxi, 341 pp., illus. \$32.50. From a conference.

The concept of interaction between biological and psychosocial variables seems to be one of the most frequently praised ideas in psychology and at the same time one of the most frequently ignored in the actual conduct of research. This collection of papers from a symposium on puberty—as distinguished from the more socially defined period of adolescence—is a hopeful step in the direction of an exchange of ideas between scholars with a physiological or medical focus and those with a more psychological or sociological perspective. It represents a later stage in scholarship focusing on females. Rather than simply describing sex-related differences or pointing to biases or omissions in the data, many of the contributors have attempted to develop theoretical formulations and explanatory mechanisms for the phenomena observed. The focus of the papers—on reproductive events specific to one sex and on the individual and societal responses to them—makes interactive analysis appear inevitable.

The book is divided into three sections: on biological, psychological, and sociocultural aspects of puberty. In the first section researchers discuss problems in the definition and measurement of puberty (Warren), the physiological bases of reproductive readiness (Frisch), and the physical growth patterns of adolescents in relation to their cognitive and emotional development (Daniel). Other chapters in this section discuss disorders beginning at or associated with puberty, such as dysmenorrhea (Klein and Litt) and idiopathic precocious puberty (Cutler *et al.*), and their medical management. The first two chapters are probably the most interesting for the reader with an interdisciplinary perspective. Warren, for example, discusses recent data on the role of the hypothalamus in anorexia as well as older information on demographic and psychodynamic factors. He notes potential interactions between physiological and psychological factors throughout the course of the disorder. The work of Frisch on the role of fat in the initiation and maintenance of pubertal changes may be familiar to

readers from other sources. However, in a volume with a biopsychological focus it is well to be reminded that activities under the voluntary control of an individual, such as exercise and food intake patterns, can dramatically alter biologically programmed metabolic timetables.

In the first chapter of the section on psychological aspects Faust reviews her earlier work on the psychological correlates of early and late maturation in girls and attempts to explain why the psychological implications appear to be different for the two sexes. Early maturation in boys is associated with high self-esteem whereas the opposite appears to be true for girls. Faust points to the role of the media in constructing prepubertal standards for female attractiveness—for example the “lean lithe look”—and cites recent research indicating the existence of stereotypic assumptions about the characteristics of early- versus late-maturing girls. In a similar vein, Tobin-Richards and her associates discuss the effect of social norms regarding puberty (not only what things should happen but when they should happen) on the self-evaluations of particular girls. Being off-time may produce personal crises because of socially mediated judgments about female body image, attractiveness, ideal weight, and the like. The researchers point to data indicating that the relationship between developmental maturity and psychological satisfaction is less linear for girls than for boys because their experience of puberty is more ambivalent. These researchers’ focus on external appearance as an aspect of individual development is welcome.

Brooks-Gunn and Ruble explore the aspect of puberty that appears to be the most problematic for girls—menarche. In a large-scale longitudinal study they charted the developmental course of menstrual distress in relation to various social cognitive factors such as premenarcheal and postmenarcheal expectations and the individual’s sources of information about menstruation. Interestingly, premenarcheal girls expect more menstrual distress than postmenarcheal girls regardless of age. Combined with evidence of amnesia concerning menarche, these data suggest that menarche is a less acceptable and more negative maturational event in our culture than has generally been recognized.

Both Petersen’s chapter and that by

Hill and Lynch in the third section of the book focus on mechanisms by which cognitive and social changes associated with puberty may be induced. Petersen reviews various theories of biological causality attempting to explain purported sex differences in cognitive skills that intensify at adolescence and offers alternative explanations based on social psychological mechanisms. She also notes inconsistencies in evidence for sex-related differences in cognition during adolescence and points out that such differences as do appear to exist emerge as soon as the constructs can be measured in young children. Both Petersen and Hill and Lynch in their review of sex differences in social behaviors in early adolescence stress the increase of gender salience for girls during this period as a possible response to others’ awareness of their increasingly sexualized bodies and to parental and peer behaviors that reinforce gender intensification.

The section of the book on sociocultural factors may most profitably be read for suggestions of useful areas for future research. These include changes in the lives of adolescents due to the overlap during this period of institutional and somatic change (Simmons *et al.*) and differences in biological and psychosexual maturity between black and white adolescents (Westney *et al.*). In the single anthropological contribution to the book, Karen Paige discusses her bargaining theory of responses to menarche in preindustrial cultures. A combination of her theoretical framework with an analysis of specific subcultural attitudes about and methods for monitoring daughters’ reproductive activities in the United States might be particularly rewarding.

In sum, this book reminds us that, though biological processes determine the extent and timing of somatic change, the individual’s reactions to such changes do not occur in a social vacuum. Broadening consideration of the reproductive events in women’s lives to include social norms and cultural regulatory mechanisms as well as the interactive processes of the behavior of significant others and self-perception is an important contribution. One can only hope for additional symposiums in which the multidisciplinary perspectives exemplified in this volume are utilized to build a greater understanding of the relationship between biological universals and the individual and society.

RHODA K. UNGER

*Department of Psychology,  
Montclair State College,  
Montclair, New Jersey 07043*