

### Girls, Adolescence and the Impact of Bodily Changes

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Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Flaake, K. (2005). Girls, Adolescence and the Impact of Bodily Changes. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 12(2), 201-212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506805051241>

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# Girls, Adolescence and the Impact of Bodily Changes

## Family Dynamics and Social Definitions of the Female Body

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**ABSTRACT** This article presents the results of a study concerning the impact of physical changes accompanying female puberty. It examines the meanings these changes have for the girls themselves, as well as for their mothers and fathers. The hypothesis, essentially rooted in psychoanalytical theory, is that the reactions of mothers and fathers to the bodily changes of their daughter communicate messages about these changes that, in turn, impact on the girl's perception and experience of her body. These messages are influenced by the often unconscious desires, fantasies and fears of the adults as well as by societal gender images. Depending on how adult care providers confront the psychic issues raised by their daughter's adolescence and, in turn, how they interact with their daughter during her transition to adulthood, these psychic events may either serve to perpetuate societal gender images or offer a means of revising them.

**KEY WORDS** father–daughter relationship ♦ female adolescence ♦ female body ♦ female puberty ♦ menstruation ♦ mother–daughter relationship

Contemporary German-language and Anglo-American discussions in the field of gender studies are dominated by social constructivist perspectives that pay little attention to the inner-psychic dimension in which the symbolic order and social relations are processed. The concept of 'doing gender' in interaction theory, thus, analyses gender vis-a-vis social processes of performance and perception. What is not taken into account, however, are the inner-psychic effects and sources of these processes (e.g. for adolescents, see Thorne, 1993). Discourse theories (especially those drawing on Butler, 1993) work from the perspective of the construction of gendered bodies through discursive strategies without distinctly analysing the processes through which bodily perceptions, experiences

and images are formed in the individual. Thus, there would seem to be, not seldom, an implicit congruence of the symbolic order with the inner structure of specific individuals (see Chodorow, 1999).

A psychoanalytic and sociopsychological perspective strives to account for both existing cultural and social relations and the particular logic of psychic structures. Here, essentially, unconscious desires, fantasies and fears – a dimension of human behaviour and activity beyond intentional and rational considerations – also play a significant role in our understanding. From such a perspective, bodily experiences, images and perceptions are understood as socially formed from the outset, namely through interactions with the primary care providers. There is not, however, a direct correspondence between inner and outer, individual and social, psyche and culture (see Chodorow, 1999).

Unconscious messages from both sides – that of the subject and the social environment – are always an element of the interactions which shape an individual's life-history. Unconscious material is constituted fundamentally by desires and emotions that have been suppressed in the course of individual development; that is, closed out of consciousness because they were experienced as too improper or forbidden and, thus, threatening. Because that which is experienced as improper and forbidden is inextricably tied to social norms and values, unconscious processes are always bound up with cultural and social relations and thus also with the structures of gender relations. Nevertheless, these processes are not one-dimensional replicas of the latter and contain a potential for resistance to the social given.

This article, focusing on the bodily experiences of girls and young women in adolescence, deals with facets of the processes through which bodily perceptions and experiences are formed in the interplay of inner and outer conditions.

## FAMILIAL INTERACTION DURING THE ADOLESCENCE OF GIRLS

Changes during adolescence connected with the body and sexuality – for girls the first menstruation, the breasts and other transformations of the figure and appearance, the new dimension and intensity of sexual desires and excitation – are associated with a variety of social connotations and images of womanhood, which influence the process of psychic assimilation and acceptance of these changes and, thus, in turn girls' experience and perception of their bodies.

Bodily experience and physical perception are in all phases of life influenced by social definitions of femininity (or masculinity) (Pines, 1993). From the very beginning, bodily perceptions are closely tied to the quality

of the relationship between the child and her primary care providers, which is itself always influenced by social norms and values and, thus, societal gender images (Flaake, 1993). Psychic experience – the often unconscious desires, fantasies and fears connected with physical processes – fuses with social connotations communicated initially and chiefly through interaction with the primary care providers (Chodorow, 1999). The adults' unconscious desires, fantasies and fears are as much an element of this interaction as their socially mediated forms.

One of the central themes of adolescent conflict is the family, the relationship between mother and daughter as well as father – or possibly stepfather – and daughter (Dalsimer, 1986; Kaplan, 1984; Pipher, 1995). The processes of adolescent transformation trigger insecurities and shocks not only to the psychic balance of girls – for adults, they are also associated with frustration, confusion and conflict. Signals of the impending separation process, the confrontation with their own ageing, sexual desires and fantasies and the resuscitation of earlier emotions and conflicts, thus play an equal role in this period of transformation and entangle not only the girls themselves in a whirlpool of emotions but the adults around them as well.

The social images of the female body and sexuality, as well as the transmission of prohibitions experienced by adults earlier in life, may play a role in their attempts to stabilize this whirlpool of emotions. At the same time, they perform specific functions in the process of coping with feelings triggered by the daughter's adolescence and take on greater significance in this context.

In the following, I present the results of an empirical study in which interviews with girls between the ages of 13 and 19, as well as with their mothers and fathers, or stepfathers, are psychoanalytically interpreted.<sup>1</sup> The study is focused predominantly on familial interactions connected with the body and sexuality and the dynamics and messages contained in this interaction: the desires, wishes and fears of girls associated with the body and sexuality, the emotions and fantasies of the mother and father (or stepfather) triggered by the daughter's puberty, the emotional dynamic between daughter and mother, daughter and father (or stepfather) as well as in the adult couple's relationship (see Flaake, 2001).

The especially confusing and threatening difficulties triggered by the daughter's adolescence always differ for mothers and fathers and influence their respective relationships to the daughter. For fathers, the daughter's adolescence foregrounds their own insecurities brought about by sexual wishes, fantasies and desires related to the daughter. For mothers, the developing generational gap, clearly signalled by the daughter's adolescence, is intensely unsettling. The daughter has her adult life ahead of her and the opportunity to realize the hopes and dreams belonging to it, while the mother is confronted with boundaries

established by advancing age and the unfulfilled desires and hopes of her life so far. The resultant envy towards the daughter and her young body and feelings of rivalry – also related to the partner – can prevent her from giving her daughter the inner permission to live a better life than she did, to permit a difference between mother and daughter work to the daughter's advantage.

#### DYNAMICS IN THE FATHER–DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP

The accounts of fathers make clear how confusing the daughter's bodily changes are for them. Physical contact experienced in the daughter's childhood as an expression of mutual affection, hugging, for example, takes on a new dimension. The womanliness of the daughter's body grows evident, physical changes become visible and can be associated with erotic desires and fantasies experienced now as threatening. Closeness to the daughter takes on a sexual quality that is at once more arousing and more threatening than in earlier phases of the father–daughter relationship, since genital contact on an adult level now becomes possible. For girls, sexual desires and fantasies also introduce a new dimension to the relationship with the father: the new and stronger expression of sexual desire developing during adolescence is initially directed towards those closest to her during childhood. The actual structure taken by the relationship between fathers and their adolescent daughters, however, is largely dependent upon the degree to which fathers are able to admit the strongly tabooed feelings towards their daughter and to process these feelings for themselves in a psychic space independent of the daughter. In this context, it is especially important to renew the establishment of generational boundaries and to focus on the relationship with an adult partner, which also offers space for this sexual desire. Since the adult relationship also enters a turbulent phase during the daughter's adolescence, achieving stabilization through a satisfying partnership is not easy for many. If the father succeeds in conveying to the daughter that the adult love relationship is the place for sexuality, but maintains a close, loving relationship with the daughter on the basis of clearly drawn boundaries, the girls are given signals to relinquish sexual desires towards the father and transfer them to love relationships outside the family.

When the emotions triggered in the father by the daughter's advance towards womanhood cannot be regulated through expression in adult relationships and by processing these emotions independently of the daughter, there is a temptation to project these threatening feelings onto the daughter and, in turn, to see her as someone to resist and repulse. Sexual desires and fantasies will then be displaced onto the daughter's

body and kept in check there. Such efforts at stabilization may draw upon societal images of the female body and sexuality.

Interviews indicate that one strategy of dealing with the daughter's seductive and threatening physical changes often practised by fathers consists in the use of ironic commentary on the daughter's bodily transformations – a behaviour described as an 'amusing', 'humorous' approach to her puberty, understood as an element of a 'relaxed' family communication. Comments recounted by the fathers themselves relate directly to the daughter's body, primarily her breasts. One father describes, 'We kid around sometimes in the family, now you're getting breasts, we'll have to get you a bra.' Interviews with the young woman make it clear, however, that she experienced these comments as embarrassing and hurtful.

In this way, the shame, insecurity and helplessness felt by fathers with regard to their sexual fantasies and feelings are transformed into a position of superiority in their relationship to the daughter, and the feelings of shame, insecurity and helplessness are passed on to her. The daughter is now the one who is ashamed – of her body – who feels insecure and helpless in the face of ironic comments, rather than the confused, helpless and possibly sexually aroused man and father faced with a maturing daughter. Such paternal behaviour patterns reveal a strategy for dealing with insecurities triggered by the daughter's puberty similar to those observable in societal images of female corporeality: namely, objectifying the female body, making it an object of one's own sexualizing gaze and of demeaning commentary. Erotic fantasies associated with the daughter as well as the attempt to proscribe them through the disparagement of the female body can be seen here.

Another facet of the collective fantasies of female sexuality concerns the image of woman as seductress and man as victim. Elements of this fantasy can also be found in the descriptions from fathers. For example, fathers who abruptly distanced themselves from their daughters with the commencement of menstruation have described their reaction as having 'rejected' the daughter or 'demonstratively turned away' from her. These formulations contain latent accusations, insinuating that the daughter has made advances that had to be 'rejected', that she had done something improper from which the father must 'demonstratively' turn away. In such patterns, the daughter becomes a seductress, the father a victim without his own active desires who must protect himself from his daughter. The erotic desires and fantasies of the father are, thus, obscured and the 'guilt' for his desire, now seen as something to which he is passively subjected, is assigned to the daughter.

For several fathers, the desires and fantasies they project onto their daughters are so threatening that – especially with the arrival of the first period – they abruptly break off their relationship with her. This is especially the case for fathers who have had a very close physical

relationship with their daughter before the onset of puberty. This close relationship then becomes so anxiety ridden that fleeing it appears to be the only solution. The unconscious message thereby sent to the daughter might read: 'Your female corporeality is so seductive that I can only save myself by turning away from you entirely'. The fantasy of the great and dangerous power of the female body becomes apparent. At the same time, the daughter is assigned the blame for the father's feelings: her female body is responsible for his withdrawal.

Not all fathers of daughters in adolescence behave in the way just described. Beyond the various possible individual responses, however, gender structures made available by society present fathers with the temptation to turn the helplessness and insecurity they feel with respect to their developing daughter into superiority. This superiority is rooted in societal images of female corporeality and sexuality (Brumberg, 1997), and it occurs at the cost of respect for the daughter's femininity and sexuality. On the part of the young woman, not only pride in her body but also an active sexual desire can be thereby inhibited: the shame of the father for his feelings is then transformed into shame on the part of the daughter for her own body and the wishes and fantasies directed towards the father.

A ritual in an African tribal culture makes clear how the incestuous desires of the father can be made conscious and at the same time banished. On the occasion of the girl's first menstruation, this social ritual acts out, symbolically, that which fathers in the industrialized West must experience as an individual psychological process: the acknowledgement that the daughter is 'out of bounds' and the elimination of sexual desire from the relationship with her.

After the onset of the first period, the girl goes into the bush and collects a bundle of firewood, which she places before the hut of an aunt on her father's side of the family. She then enters the hut and, in front of her aunt, rips off the string (often a string of pearls) that she has worn around her abdomen, and hands it to her aunt. The aunt leads the girl to her parents' house and first calls out for the father. Directly in front of the entrance, she lays the torn string of pearls and a pestle from the largest mortar. The father walks over these symbols with the words: 'With this belt I bind all the sexual desires I feel for you' (Burek, 1998: 236ff.).

In this ritual, this social enactment, the father's desire is acknowledged, under the protection of a mother figure – the aunt on the father's side of the family – and at the same time relinquished: the father 'binds' his sexual desires for his daughter and thus frees her for her own life.

## DYNAMICS IN THE MOTHER–DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP

Adolescence raises the question on both sides of the generational divide – for the daughter and the mother – how strongly the two lives and, thus, their relationships to the body and sexuality can be differentiated: whether the girl is subject to the same limitations as her mother, or if she is allowed more freedom, and whether the mother can give the daughter the inner permission to have a more fulfilling relationship to the body and sexuality than she herself has thus far been able to experience. Possible maternal behavioural responses are thus tied to the complexity of psychic events associated with the daughter's adolescence. Through their daughters, women once again confront their own adolescent desires and fears and, thus, also the feelings, usually disappointment, produced by their own mother's behaviour. Whether the mother is able to convey greater confirmation and fulfilment to her daughter than she herself received, however, is largely dependent upon how the mother deals with the current circumstances of her life, especially the realization that the daughter now has her adult life before her and that she herself is confronted with the limitations of ageing (de Kanter, 1993; de Waal, 1993; Nielsen and Rudberg, 1993; Sayers, 1993).

This confrontation with one's life circumstances, which also include the inevitable separation from the daughter, can be dealt with in various ways. It can be used as an opportunity to reflect upon life up to this point, achieved and unfulfilled dreams and the still possible, and, in turn, lead to a restructuring of the mother's life through which the daughter is released from maternal bonds. However, envy of the daughter and rivalry – also related to the partner – can be so dominating that prohibitions outweigh signals of confirmation. The daughter's body – often despite conscious intentions to the contrary – is more frequently subject to a critical rather than a confirming maternal gaze. An active, sexual desire on the part of the daughter is more likely to be restricted than encouraged, and identification between mother and daughter with respect to the body will be established through the mutually suffered, and negatively experienced, periodic bleeding. Societal images of beauty and definitions of menstruation (Lee and Sasser-Coen, 1996) are found in such patterns as well as images of female sexuality; they retain their significance, however, through the specific dynamics of the mother–daughter relationship.

I would like to illustrate such dynamics by examining the processes set into motion with the advent of the daughter's menstruation. The daughter's first period is for the mother an event that wakes to a certain degree her own earlier feelings and the emotions she connects with her own mother. Nearly all of the mothers we interviewed have vivid memories of their own first period and of their mothers' reaction to it.



Though further back in time, some of these memories are more lucid than their memories of their daughters' first periods. One mother begins her depiction with, 'I remember that as if it were yesterday'. Her memories of her daughter's first period, by contrast, are much less certain, beginning with 'I think . . .'. When asked how old their daughters were when their periods began, some mothers, moreover, responded by giving their own age at their first period instead.

There is a striking similarity between the women's descriptions of their mothers' reactions to their first period – which were generally not positive – and those of their reactions to their own daughters' first periods. One woman reports that her mother responded by giving her a short and snappy lesson about the necessity of using sanitary pads, which she experienced as not very supportive or helpful. Regarding her own daughter, however, she describes – despite her intention to react differently from her mother – a similar reaction: her conversation with her own daughter also centred on the use of sanitary pads and tampons.

The desire to handle the situation better than their own mothers had done was expressed by nearly all of the mothers we interviewed. Yet, this desire is associated with difficulties, particularly with inner-psychic dynamics that complicate the wish for the daughter to have a better relationship to her own body than the mother herself has yet enjoyed. With the start of menstruation, the issues of distancing, jealousy and rivalry become particularly critical in the emotional relationship between mother and daughter: for the daughter, the first period is a signal that her adult life is beginning; the mother, by contrast, is confronted by the boundaries of advancing age. This constellation is especially clear within one family: shortly after the daughter's first period the mother's menstruation stops, marking the beginning of menopause, an event experienced as one of the distressing signals for the loss of sexuality and the loss of opportunity to lead a satisfying life.

For the daughters, the new situation arising from the advent of menstruation is conveyed in the descriptions of one 15-year-old who reported announcing the event first in her mother's bedroom with the words, 'Momma, I'm a woman now too' and then in her father's, 'Papa, I'm a woman now too'. This scene can be interpreted as the declaration of a new rivalry with the mother over the father. 'I'm a woman now too' signals to the father the potential for a new level to their relationship – like the one he has with the mother. In respect to the mother, the announcement 'I'm a woman now too' can be supplemented with, 'and can now use my erotic presence to arouse men, e.g. father'. The problematic of the mother's jealousy and rivalry towards the daughter centred around the first period is a motive in some mother–daughter constellations – despite the intention to do otherwise – for the mother to hand down her own negative experiences of menstruation.

Several mothers and daughters describe a similar experience of their first period and similar symptoms. For daughters, the blurring of generational lines becomes clear in the words of one 14-year-old, who depicts the mutual suffering in menstruation with the words, 'her pain, like mine'. The young woman appears to have no pain of her own, but rather to take on that of her mother. Perhaps, at one level, this identification is an imaginative offer of support to the mother who is in a difficult situation in life and an attempt at reconciliation after her own strong tendency during puberty to distance herself from her mother.

From these shared negative experiences a closeness arises between mothers and daughters. It creates unity, even when the daughter is, in other respects, heavily distancing herself from the mother. In some mother–daughter relationships, it is evident that closeness through suffering and moodiness due to menstruation serves to prevent open aggression and rivalry. Thus, the pain accompanying menstruation allows the daughter to sustain a closeness experienced by both mother and daughter as positive at the level of the mother–child relationship, which at the same time obscures the rivalry between the two women in regard to the father that is so clear in the interviews. Thus, the unconscious meaning of mutual suffering between mother and daughter during menstruation (the clearest sign of their mutual womanhood) can serve to check open rivalry and aggressiveness. These active, outwardly focused and distancing impulses are turned inward and redirected, transformed into physical pain and discomfort, which re-establish a closeness between the two women, albeit not a positive one.

It is a mother–daughter relationship in which the mother is able to admit her regret at growing older and at the same time come to terms with the generational gap in which not only the daughter but the mother as well are able to admit differences in their experiences of periodic bleeding. There is space in the relationship for differences between mother and daughter: it is allowed that the daughter can 'have it better' than the mother did, and both judge this difference positively. Such behavioural patterns require that both parties – the mother and the daughter – undergo the psychic processes of separation and the establishment of boundaries. These processes enable both to take steps towards lives independent of one another and allow the daughter a means of assimilating her new physicality and sexuality defined less by prohibition.

## SUMMARY

Physical experiences in all stages of life are tied to the complex interplay of fantasies, desires and fears connected to the body and messages from the social sphere, which ascribe social significance to bodily perceptions

and ways of experiencing. The transmission of these social messages occurs, primarily, in the interaction between children and their primary care providers, especially mothers and fathers. Each intensive relationship to children and adolescents confronts adults with their own repressed aspirations and can indicate a threat to their psychic balance through the return of earlier emotions, desires and fears. Children's adolescence in particular can trigger such a weakening of psychic balance in adults. Central themes of adolescence are the adult female corporeality and sexuality of the daughter, which confront the mother and father again with corresponding fantasies, desires and fears of their own. In this phase of great insecurity – which often upsets established patterns in the adult partnership – adults may seek to stabilize their inner turmoil by calling on societal images of female corporeality and sexuality or by passing on to the daughter the restrictions they experienced earlier in their own lives. All of the impulses and desires experienced as unbearable are repulsed and projected onto the daughter. In this way, facets of social images and fantasies centring on the female body and sexuality become anchored in the girls' experience of their bodies. Societal gender images are inscribed on the body of the girl. In relation to family interaction, then, the possibility for change lies in not perpetuating the pattern of projection and rejection, but to process these feelings in a new way that creates space for revising traditional gender images.

#### NOTE

1. The interviews were carried out in 1998 with families largely from socially privileged backgrounds in western, urban Germany. Other cultural contexts and experiences of immigration were not taken into consideration. We interviewed girls, mothers and fathers separately. The interviews were structured thematically, and encouraged subjects to report the changes, experiences, feelings, desires and fears associated with the body and sexuality. The interpretation employs a psychoanalytical method of textual interpretation through which it is possible to uncover unconscious content. The primary means of understanding the latent content of texts using this method is the reflection on the subject's own reactions to the text – in the interpretation in groups the reflection on the dynamic within the group – which are seen and processed as counter-transference; that is, feelings having to do with the unconscious content of the text. Interactions between the interviewer and interviewee are also taken into consideration. Additionally, irritations associated with notable features of the text, such as conspicuous formulations, misspoken words, contradictions, omissions, a certain connection of themes, interruptions in the presentation, also provide a way into latent content. Concluding interpretations must always refer to specific textual content and thus be plausible and understandable (see Klein, 2000).

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