How Is Developing the Sense of Belonging in Iranian Adolescent Girls? A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

BACKGROUND: Communicating with adolescents is associated with many challenges for parents and healthcare providers.

AIM: This qualitative study was conducted for exploring the sense of belonging in Iranian adolescent girls.

METHODS: In this study, deep semi-structured interviews were carried out with 27 adolescent girls, 10 experts, and 10 parents. Purposeful sampling was used and continued until data saturation. The data were coded and categorised through a conventional content analysis method by MAXQDA 10.

RESULTS: Three main categories were obtained from the analysis of the participants' descriptions: "family; a haven of tranquillity", "dominated by peers", and "concerns about differences in gender socialization". According to our results, most of the girls achieved calmness through being emotionally accepted by their families. But this sense of belonging and tranquillity was shaken by their peers' showing off, in a way that adolescent girls were always struggling to gain acceptance among their peers. Also for fear of being rejected by their peers' group, they sometimes began to make friends with the opposite sex. Meanwhile, traditional attitudes towards gender roles and adolescent girls' feelings about their lower social participation as compared to that of boys had also led to their concern about differences in gender socialization and a lower sense of community belonging among some adolescent girls.

CONCLUSION: Adequate parental education and the proper management of girls' interactions with the family and society can play an important role in the development of a sense of belonging among adolescent girls.

Introduction

The transition from childhood to adolescence is associated with social, behavioural, and environmental pressures and challenges for the adolescent [1]. Adolescence is a stage of human growth, during which adolescents experience puberty, and in addition to biological changes, they undergo cognitive behavioural changes [2] [3] [4]. Adolescence is one of the longest developmental stages, which lasts at least 10 years, and typically occurs between the ages of 11 and 22 [5]. One of the most important and effective meanings, which has always been considered in the relationship between the adolescent and the world around them, is the sense of belonging. Belonging is defined as "deep mutual understanding and identification" between individuals or groups. It is one of the essential components of successful interaction and behaviour among individuals. Some of the important aspects of belonging include family solidarity, practical and emotional support, family culture, common norms, values, and aspirations, which in fact lead to individual and social self-confidence in the adolescent [6]. The results of a

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qualitative study in the United States suggested the need for the conceptualisation of belonging at schools, based on school-centred interventions [7]. In a study on the immigrant population of Canada, the disintegration of ethnic identity and the absence of citizenship belonging had led to adolescents' tendency toward high-risk groups [8].

Healthcare providers need to know the effects of the family and peers on the development of adolescents through the stages of early (11-14 years of age), mid (15-17 years of age), and late adolescence (18-21 years of age) [5]. Since understanding the identity and social roles begins from adolescence, scrutiny on the challenge of belonging can be important in this group. Also, the need for further studies to explain the sense of belonging is felt more than ever before [9].

Whereas the Qualitative studies are appropriate for a deep understanding [10], this study was designed for exploring the sense of belonging with a qualitative approach.

Methods

This study was conducted in 2017 through deep semi-structured interviews with the participation of 27 Iranian adolescent girls, 10 experts, and 10 parents in the urban population of Isfahan. Purposeful sampling with maximum variation was used and continued until data saturation. The participants in this study were apparently healthy adolescent girls ranging in age from 11 to 21 years, who were invited to participate in the study and asked to sign an informed consent. About girls aged 11 to 18 years, their family's consent was also obtained to participate in the study. The time and place of interviews were determined according to the participants' opinions. And the participants were asked for permission to digitally record their voices. The duration of each interview was 30 to 60 minutes long. The interview began by asking the following questions: How do you feel about being a girl? How and when did this feeling begin? What things and which people were effective in your thoughts? To facilitate the communication of the participants in the study with the researcher, the researcher's phone number and email address were put at their disposal. They were also asked at the end of the interview, to complete a personal data form containing questions about age, birth order, and family education.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed on the paper word for word. Before transcribing the audio file, the researcher carefully listened to the interview several times, so that she could choose the main ideas out of the participant's words. Then the interview was converted into a text file. After initial analysis of the text of each interview, the next interview was planned and scheduled.

Data analysis was carried out through the Graneheim and Lundman content analysis using the MAXQDA software Version 10 [11]. Transcripts were reviewed, and the main concepts were extracted in the form of initial codes. The codes were grouped into six subcategories and the subcategories, together, formed three main categories. By maximum variation in the selection of adolescent participants, continuous and prolonged involvement of the researcher for 11 months, peer review, and the participants' review, we tried to enhance the credibility of data. To strengthen confirmability, several codes and categories were assessed through member check, and external check and a good deal of agreement were obtained.

To assess the transferability of the data, the results were presented to some adolescent girls and specialists who had not participated in the study, which was requested to compare the results with their own experiences of the matter. The ethical principles of the study including voluntary participation, obtaining written informed consent from the subjects to involve them in the research and to record their conversations, explaining the research objectives, inviting the subjects to attend the interviews, voluntary withdrawal of the study at any time and ensuring confidentiality were observed.

Results

Deep semi-structured interviews were carried out with 27 adolescent girls. The age range of the Iranian female adolescents was from 11 to 21 years old (Table1). According to adolescents' statements, we interviewed with 10 parents including 5 fathers and 5 mothers, and 10 experts in psychiatry and sociology who could help us to clarify our data. Three main categories were obtained from the analysis of the participants' descriptions: "family; haven of tranquility", "dominated by peers", and "concerns about differences in gender socialization" (Table 2).

Table 1: Characteristics of participating adolescent girls

Age	Number	Percent
11-14	7	26
15-17	14	52
18-21	6	22
Birth Rate in the family		
1	10	37
2	10	37
3	5	18.5
>3	2	7
Fathers' education level		
Under Diploma	8	30
Diploma	10	37
Academic Degree	9	33
Mothers' education level		
Under Diploma	5	18.5
Diploma	7	26
Academic Degree	15	55.5

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Analyzing the viewpoint of the adolescent girls showed that "the adolescent girl's assurance about parents' satisfaction with her sex" and "the adolescent girl's tranquility in case of her emotional acceptance in the family" were the two main dimensions of the family's role in the acceptance of female children, especially their sex, which is known as the main category: "Family; haven of tranquility".

Table 2: Main Categories and Sub-categories for a sense of belonging in Iranian adolescent girls

Sub-categories	Main categories
- The adolescent girl's assurance about parents' satisfaction with her sex - The adolescent girl's tranquillity in case of her emotional acceptance in the family	Family; a haven of tranquillity
- The instability of the foundations of belonging to the family due to the peers' showing off - Friendship with the opposite sex for fear of being rejected by their peers	Dominated by peers
- The adolescent girls' feelings about their limited social participation in society - Traditional attitudes towards gender roles	Concerns about differences in gender socialization

The interviews carried out with adolescent girls and their parents showed that one of the adolescent girls' serious needs was their need for their parents to express their satisfaction with their sex. Most participating girls wanted to make sure that their parents were satisfied with having a girl in the family. And to them, this assurance alone was not sufficient. They wanted their parents to express this satisfaction repeatedly. The adolescent girls would feel relaxed if their sex was accepted by their parents. And this feeling needed to be repeatedly strengthened by their parents' verbal expression.

"My mom was very happy in her pregnancy when she knew I was a girl. My parents always say this to me. That's why, since the very beginning, I've been very happy with my being a girl. And I know that they love me a lot." (An 11-year-old girl; the first child of the family)

Participating parents also stated that adolescent girls were in doubt as to whether their parents love them or not and frequently needed parental confirmation about their sex.

"Many times my daughter asked me if I liked my first child to be a girl. I told her I always liked my first child to be a girl, and as for the second, if the child were a girl, she would be a sister for the first one, and if the child were a boy, I would have both a girl and a boy. And now they constantly ask me if I am satisfied with their being girls or not." (A mother of two adolescent girls who are 11 and 14 years old)

In addition to their need to be assured about their parents' satisfaction with their sex, the adolescent girls repeated many times in their interviews that they needed their parents to express their love to them.

"I love my father a lot. See what short messages he sent to me. He wrote: «My dear, how much God loved me that granted me a daughter, and I love you very much. » I'm glad and feel relaxed to see my father adores me." (A 13-year-old girl; the only child of the family)

The instability of the foundations of belonging to the family due to the peers' showing off, and friendship with the opposite sex for fear of being rejected by their peers was known as the main category: "Dominated by peers ".

By entering adolescence, tendencies toward peers were more outstanding, and adolescent girls thought that the family no longer met their emotional needs like in previous years.

"When I compare myself today with two or three years ago, I realize that my family don't understand me as they did in the past. Now, I would only like to chat with one of my intimate friends, to share with her what I cannot tell my family." (A 17-year-old girl; the first child of a family)

One of the participating mothers said about her daughter's relationship with her same-sex peers:

"My daughter is constantly trying to find friends from among her peers. Whatever I tell her these relationships are not worthy of our family, she doesn't listen. I have told my daughter many times that if she wants love, her father and I are here. But she says that we do not understand her. I don't know how to manage her relationships with friends." (The mother of a 16-year-old girl)

One of the areas of belonging to the peer group was about making friends with the opposite sex. By modelling their same-sex peers, most of the participants attempted to make friends with the opposite sex. They also stated that by having a friend of the opposite sex, in addition to not being labelled among their peers, they also increased their acceptance among their same-sex friends. Whereas according to their families and the governing sociocultural context, it is not accepted for adolescents of this age to make friends with the opposite sex.

"If I don't have a boyfriend, I will be labelled as ugly by my friends. In our intimate chats, we have a general rule: If a girl does not have a boyfriend, she is not beautiful, and if a boy does not have a girlfriend, he is clumsy." (A 17-year-old girl; the second child of a family)

It also seemed that a sense of belonging to the same-sex peer group showed up more than anything else in obtaining sexual information. Also, most of the adolescent girls stated that they mainly received their sexual information from their same-sex peers than anybody else.

"The school staff and consultants try to provide us with a lot of information about adolescence and issues related to puberty. But we mainly obtain our sexual information from our friends during break

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time at school." (An 18-year-old girl; the first child of a family)

The peers' temptation of girls uninterested in sexual issues could also be effective in choosing friends of the opposite sex. They stated that even in girls who don't like to find friends, peers' temptation makes them change their behaviour.

"I had no interest in finding boyfriend until last year. But since I changed my school and found new friends, they have always been talking to me about themselves going out and enjoying with their boyfriends." (A 15-year-old girl; the only child of the family)

The adolescent girls' feelings about their limited social participation in society and traditional attitudes towards gender roles were the main dimensions of the category: "Concerns about differences in gender socialization".

Most of the participating girls were happy with their gender and considered being a girl as an advantage to them. But they stated that their participation in society was not as great as boys', and felt a difference between themselves and boys as they passed through puberty. In fact, in their words, they expressed their belief in the existence of gender differences as follows:

"As you know, it's not important to be a boy or a girl. Because a girl also can play a role in society to the extent that a boy can. But the balance of advantages is in favour of boys. When I compare myself with a boy at my age, I see that he has more freedoms than I do. Of course, I'm free too, but not as much as he is. They can become independent of the family very soon. They can travel and have fun with their friends. In my opinion, we rarely have enough recreational sporting places in a way that is suitable for girls." (A 15-year-old girl; the second child of the family)

According to experts participating in the study, the belief in gender differences is, in fact, different from gender discrimination.

"Believing in the existence of gender differences has many reasons, most of which primarily refers to the family and how the family acts toward the institutionalisation of gender roles. Different parental strategies to differ between girls and boys transmit this belief into society." (Specialist in psychiatry)

Also, according to another expert, the way the family and society look at gender roles for girls and boys can play an important role in believing in the existence of gender differences for girls, and make it a concern for them.

"Traditional attitudes to gender roles among families are another factor for rooting this belief in society. By demarcating expectations and attitudes in girls and boys, families change girls' and boys' attitudes toward gender roles. And from the very

beginning, they bring up girls and boys for their gender-related roles, which can play a role in women's feeling in their inability in society and sense of community belonging." (Specialist in sociology)

Discussion

The present study was designed with the aim of exploring the sense of belonging in Iranian adolescent girls. The findings of this study showed that the family had an important role for adolescent girls to feel a sense of belonging to, as well as their haven of tranquillity. The adolescent girl's need for parental expression of satisfaction with her sex and the emphasis on her parents' verbal satisfaction were among the needs expressed by the adolescent girls. Responding to this category of needs can increase the adolescent's attachment to their parents and family, and assure them about their emotional acceptance in the family.

In a study in Iran with the aim of "The family's role in increasing crimes among children", the lack of love from parents was introduced as one of the factors of children and adolescents' tendency toward crimes [12]. In another study in Canada, the disintegration of family relationships among immigrant adolescents had resulted in the challenge of identity and sense of belonging, as well as increasing their tendency to high-risk criminal groups [8].

In the present study, adolescent girls tried to maintain their acceptability among their peers, with a kind of sense of belonging to them. One of the ways of obtaining and maintaining this acceptability is to make friends with the opposite sex, to which they sometimes resort for fear of being labelled and notoriety among their peers, and sometimes for obtaining sexual information. The family's negligence and inability on the one hand, and the adolescent's intense desire for independence and breaking the family's taboos on the other hand, cause the adolescent to unpreparedly enter complex and sometimes sexual relationships with opposite-sex peers, and resign themselves to any relationships for fear of being rejected by their peers. In this study Fear of the label of ugliness, as a common stigma among peers can easily lead girls towards peers' acceptable identity. Being accepted by peers is one of the adolescents' primary goals, especially at high school ages, which is sometimes more important for adolescents even than their academic goals [7][13]. In the study in Iran the need for belonging attracted adolescents to peer groups [14]. Although the primary focus of peer groups in different studies is on the risks of these relationships, socialization by peers is not necessarily harmful. Peers can help the adolescent in altruistic behaviours, cooperation and participation,

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and achieving academic goals [15]. In a study titled " Peer group membership and a sense of belonging", girls had a greater sense of belonging to the peer group than boys did [16]. Also, friends' role is effective both in choosing the goals and in influencing the adolescent to achieve them [17]. The results of a review study showed that peer education plays an important role in improving adolescents' socio-mental health [18].

The findings of this study also showed that part of the adolescent's sense of belonging was defined as their social acceptability in society, which had led adolescent girls to feel the existence of gender differences among them. In fact, different parental strategies to differ between girls and boys transmit this feeling into society. Most studies refer to the key role of parents in gender socialization. Also, intensification occurs in gender socialization during adolescence, when parents have traditional attitudes to gender. In a study on Spanish-speaking families living in the United States, it was found out that most parents brought up their daughters by traditional roles which were expected by society and mothers encouraged their daughters to gain girls' gender roles more than their fathers did [19]. The socialization process begins at birth. Families behave differently towards their infants depending on their gender [20]. In a study titled "Differences between men and women in gender socialization among Indian youth and its relationship with mental health", it was found that in families where men were preferred to women, the women of those families had more psychological problems than men did. Also, in that study, women expressed that they participated less in decision-making in everyday life, and had more limitations to their independence than men did [21]. In another study, the stress due to gender stereotypes had led to anxiety and depression symptoms among girls [22].

In conclusion, correct parental strategies for the institutionalization of gender roles and Proper management of girls' interactions by the family, school, and society can play an important role in the development of a sense of belonging among adolescent girls in a way that concerns about differences in gender socialization turn into the opportunity to benefit from girls and women's abilities in society.

Acknowledgements

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