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# Sex segregation in friendships and normative contexts across the life span

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### ABSTRACT

Sex segregation (the separation of boys and girls into same-sex groups in their friendships and casual encounters; [Thorne, B., & Luria, Z. (1986). Sexuality and gender in children's daily worlds. *Social Problems*, 33, 176–190]), has typically been viewed as a childhood phenomenon. In the present paper, we review research that suggests the phenomenon of sex segregation persists across the life span. We draw from a social-constructionist model to synthesize literature documenting sex segregation in friendships and aspects of individuals' socio-cultural contexts in childhood, adolescence, and early and later adulthood. We consider developmental continuities in mechanisms that may be associated with sex segregation, including behavioral compatibility, communication styles, third-party resistance to other-sex relationships, and institutional barriers to other-sex relationships. We discuss how these factors may, through a reciprocal process, contribute to and result from sex segregation. Finally, we offer recommendations for future research.

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### Introduction

This review examines sex segregation across the life span. Sex segregation, the separation of boys and girls into same-sex groups in their friendships and casual encounters (Thorne & Luria, 1986), is well documented (Hoffman & Powlishta, 2001; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987; Thorne, 1986). Indeed, sex segregation has been referred to as one of the most persistent and reliable of developmental phenomena (Ruble, Martin, & Berenbaum, 2006). Yet an integrated understanding of sex segregation across the life span does not exist. Investigations of sex segregation typically focus on young children. Moreover, sex segregation is typically examined as a feature of social groups such as friendships. The primary

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purpose of our review is to demonstrate that sex segregation persists across the life span and occurs not only in friendships, but also in other aspects of normative developmental contexts such as classrooms and workplaces.

It is important to develop an integrated understanding of sex segregation because of its wide-ranging consequences. Broadly speaking, the study of sex segregation is important because same-sex peers may act as active agents in the socialization of gender-stereotyped attitudes, interests, personality traits, and skills. Gender-stereotyped attitudes, interests, traits, and skills are thought to lead to power asymmetries in male and female relationships where males are afforded greater power and status (Leaper, 1994; Maccoby, 1998). As such, theorists suggest socialization in same-sex peer groups may be associated with the inequality of men and women in society (Leaper, 1994).

In addition to this broad social consequence, a variety of other consequences of sex segregation—both positive and negative—exist during different periods of the life span. For example, in childhood, sex segregation may have positive consequences for girls' academic success. Skills that girls learn in their same-sex peer groups (e.g., turn-taking, listening) may facilitate classroom performance. For boys, however, sex segregation might have negative consequences for academic success. Boys' same-sex peer groups encourage boisterousness, a potential hindrance in classrooms where students are expected to sit still and listen to the teacher (Connolly, 2004). During adolescence, sex segregation may have positive consequences for girls by protecting girls from risky behavior; girls with primarily other-sex friends are more likely than girls with primarily same-sex friends to engage in substance use (Arndorfer & Stormshak, 2008; Stattin, Kerr, Mahoney, Persson, & Magnusson, 2005). For boys, sex-segregated friendships may have negative consequences by increasing the likelihood of risky behavior. Boys with primarily same-sex friends engage in risk behaviors to a greater extent than boys with primarily other-sex friends (Arndorfer & Stormshak, 2008). Rose and Rudolph (2006) suggest that relationship processes occurring within sex-segregated peer groups have consequences for boys' and girls' mental health. For example, the greater prevalence of externalizing behaviors (aggression, anti-social behavior) among boys and the greater prevalence of internalizing behaviors (depression and anxiety) among girls may emerge in part from interpersonal processes occurring within sex-segregated peer groups.

During adolescence and adulthood, sex segregation is thought to have implications for the quality of heterosexual romantic relationships. Both popular media and empirical research suggest that romantic relationships between men and women are sometimes strained by gendered interaction styles learned in same-sex peer groups (Aries, 1996; Gray, 1992; Maccoby, 1998; Underwood & Rosen, 2009). When men and women enter the workforce, sex segregation in occupations (Reskin, 1993) may have negative consequences, especially for women. Jobs traditionally held by men typically have higher wages than jobs traditionally held by women (Gibelman, 2003; Guy & Newman, 2004). Finally, in later adulthood, sex segregation may have implications for men's well being (e.g., loneliness, depression). Social norms that discourage friendships with other-sex peers along with sex differences in longevity may prevent men from establishing friendships within an already limited pool of same-age peers (O'Connor, 1993). Together, the above examples illustrate that sex segregation has both positive and negative consequences that differ by age. As such, it is important to consider both sex segregation and its consequences from a life span perspective.

Researchers typically focus on sex segregation as a phenomenon of childhood (e.g., Martin & Fabes, 2001; Powlishta, 1995; Shirley & Campbell, 2000). Martin, Fabes, Hanish, and Hollenstein (2005) discuss children's sex segregation as an exemplar of homophily, or selective affiliation with similar others (Dijkstra, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2007; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Rose, 1985). The terms "gender cleavage" (Smith, Davidson, & Ball, 2001) and "sex cleavage" (LaFreniere, Strayer, & Gauthier, 1984) are used to describe the segregation of peer groups by sex in childhood. Very few studies have considered that sex segregation persists in adolescence (cf., Strough & Covatto, 2002). Instead, research on adolescents focuses on the transition to heterosexual romantic relationships (e.g., Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004; Dunphy, 1963; Kuttler & La Greca, 2004). A similar focus pervades research on younger and older adults' interpersonal relationships (see Monsour, 2002; Rawlins, 1992, for reviews).

To demonstrate that sex segregation persists across the life span and is evident in many of the normative contexts of development, we first outline the theoretical approach that guides our consideration of sex segregation. Second, we review literature demonstrating that sex segregation occurs in

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