Fragmentation, Fluidity, and Transformation

Nonlinear Development in Middle Childhood

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The results of a small group of children studied through ages six through eleven suggest that latency is no longer an accurate term to describe middle childhood and preadolescence. This longitudinal research suggests a more nonlinear process than has previously been documented in psychoanalytic research and supports a dynamic systems approach to development. Self structures break down and remain in an ongoing state of nonlinear development. Without stable structural organization, sexual and aggressive thoughts and feelings are less contained and less differentiated throughout this period of development. Gender role identity is in a continuous state of fluidity during middle childhood. While both boys and girls experience gender role fluidity, the meaning of male and female gender identifications and the expression of sexual and aggressive feelings differ for boys and girls.

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This research paper is the second report on the findings of a clinical longitudinal study of ten normal children who were evaluated yearly from the ages six through eleven. These years are commonly described as the latency phase of development. The results reported in this paper and in Knight (2005) demonstrate that the term does not do justice to the complexity of this period of development. The first section of this paper briefly describes the methodology used in this study.\footnote{For a complete description of the research methodology and instruments see Knight, 2005.} The second section describes the latest findings that have emerged from the study, focusing on the development of gender role identifications and sexual and aggressive feelings in the six- to eleven-year-old child. The last section organizes these findings in a way that demonstrates the usefulness of applying nonlinear thinking to fully comprehend the data and supports a dynamic systems approach to thinking about development.

**Research Method**

**Subjects:** Four boys and six girls participated in this study. Some children were evaluated at age five and some at age six. Each child was followed from age six through age eleven, for a total of six years for each child. Only children who fell within the normal range of psychological functioning at age six were chosen.\footnote{See Knight, 2005, for a fuller description of the subject selection and how normal functioning was determined.}

Children were selected from the suburban Boston area and were in the middle to upper-middle, white socioeconomic class. The children who participated in the study were extremely bright and verbally expressive. Their average I.Q. was 134 at age six. A small, homogeneous group of children was specifically chosen so that they could be studied in depth as well as provide internal validity within the subject group. They all had one or more siblings. Their families remained stable throughout the study. Their teachers reported that these children were well adjusted, did well in school, and had good friendships with their peers. The children are now in their late twenties and early thirties. All are living independently, some pursued graduate education, all are working—some have reached high levels in their fields, some have married while others are either in co-habiting relationships or dating.

**Instruments:** A multiple measures design was chosen to measure in-depth conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings between chil-
dren and within each child for each age as well as over the entire six year period studied.

*Psychological Testing.* A battery of psychological tests, including the Rorschach, Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children—Revised Edition (WISC-R), Bender-Gestalt, and House-Tree-Person Drawings, was used to assess each child’s personality profile annually for six years. Interrater reliability using the Pearson correlation coefficient ranged from 0.81 to 0.93 for all measures and was 0.83 for the gender measures, .89 for the sexuality analysis, and .91 for the aggression analysis discussed in this paper. None of the data was scored or evaluated until the study was completed.

The Rorschach and TAT tests were used because they tap into unconscious fantasies and processes (Schafer, 1954). The Rorschach was scored using the Klopfer (Klopfer & Davidson, 1962) scoring system. Two gender role identification measures were used: one which was adapted from the Tuber and Coates study of gender identity disordered boys (1985) and one that used Schafer’s (1954) methods of dynamic scoring and sequence analysis of the Rorschach and TAT. Sexual and aggressive feelings and defenses were scored using Klopfer (1962) and Schafer scoring methods. In Tuber and Coates’s research, overt gender confusion manifested in three ways: “First, some responses combined female and male elements into a single response. Second, in some single percepts of people, gender changed or transformed from one to the other. Third, some subjects showed a marked inability to decide whether a single percept was exclusively female or male.” They considered such responses as indicating “the fluidity, permeability, and confusion of boundaries between male and female identifications . . . ” (pp. 260–261) Table I shows the gender role identification scoring method adapted from Tuber and Coates.

Each child was administered a semi-structured clinical interview, developed for this research. Every four to six months the parents of each child were asked to complete a 16-page parent questionnaire developed for this research (Knight, 2005). Each child was observed annually in free play with a friend in the child’s house. The principal investigator videotaped the play for a period of one to two hours. Two thirds of the way through each school year, every child’s teacher was asked to complete a questionnaire about the child. The teacher questionnaire elicited the teacher’s evaluation of the child’s general mood, school performance, and behavior and relatedness to peers, using a five-point rating scale.

3. A more complete description of the testing procedure and scoring methods can be found in Knight, 2005.
TABLE I
Rorschach Gender Representation Scoring

STABLE GENDER REPRESENTATIONS
Card III: Two girls holding a basket
Card VII: Two Indian girls with feathers
Card II: Two boys doing a clapping game

FLUID GENDER REPRESENTATIONS
Card VII: A pair of Indians, one is a boy and one is a girl
Card IV: A monster; one side is a girl and one side is a boy
Card III: Two people. It could be either sex; it doesn't matter
Card X: A very sexual robot; it's got a dick and a bra
Card III: Seeing both male and female percepts using the same form:
Two ladies, two wizards
Two Indian girls with feather, two boys with bananas on their heads

Procedure: The above measures were administered each year to each child and their parents and teachers for the six year period that each child was studied.

Results

When the projective testing was scored, numerous responses indicated unconscious, fluid gender identifications and wishes. Some of these responses seemed to be related to the development of separation, autonomy, and aggression in latency (Knight, 2005). Some seemed to be related to gender differences in the expression of sexual and aggressive feelings, and others seemed to be related to how boys and girls both perceive and interact differently with their mothers and fathers.

Ages Six to Eight Years

At age six years in the boys, and at age seven years in the girls, the children began to develop an unconscious sense of being separate from their parents in a way that they had not experienced previously. This sense of separation was related to their feeling either pushed out or pulled into the world outside their home. Along with this new sense of separateness came feelings of disconnection, sadness, and anger. Al-
though both sexes experienced this development, they had different
timetables—the boys entered this phase one year earlier than the girls
(Knight, 2005).

Boys—Age Six

Concurrent with feeling separated and fragmented (Knight, 2005), at
age six, two of the boys showed more fluidity in their gender identity.
When tested at age five (to determine their appropriateness for inclu-
sion in the study) all the boys had strong masculine identities. At age
six, two out of the four boys had mainly masculine identities and two
showed a fluid gender identity. All of the boys at age six had a sense of
themselves as small and damaged and were concerned with their body
integrity.

Women were seen as strong while men were seen as less able. Affec-
tively they were all feeling rejected by their mothers, and they all had
feelings of not being sufficiently nurtured. They were sad and angry
about their sense of rejection and unconsciously expressed their depres-
sion in explosive discharge. On the Rorschach, almost all the six-year-
old boys experienced their aggression as volatile, killing, or capable of
getting out of control. They were able to hold their aggressive feelings
at bay during school hours and at social situations, although parents
reported that the boys’ behavior at home was often aggressive and dif-
ficult to manage.

Most of the boys’ dreams had a phallic aggressive quality to them
that may have been part projection, and part fear of oedipal retaliation.
On clinical interview they reported dreams of bees and snakes
chasing or biting them, dogs running after them to bite them, alligators
eating them up, being hit with a laser beam. One boy’s interesting gen-
der bending dream was about a man with balls going around his head
and a face full of make-up. Another boy reported a dream of sticking
up his middle finger and God giving him a punishment of two years
in bed.

Mothers reported that their sons were very affectionate toward them,
but they all noted that the boys were “stubborn” and had “control is-
ues.” The boys talked with their mothers about their feelings related
to family, friends, and school, and they did craft projects, cooking, and
homework with them. They were equally affectionate toward their fa-
thers and had similar conflicts around issues of control. They did more
vigorous activities with their dads such as playing ball games, bike rid-
ing, heavy gardening, woodworking, but they also spent time reading
and playing chess and checkers with them. They talked with their fa-
thers about things related to the outside world, sports, how things work.
Unlike the girls, the boys did not talk about their dreams, nightmares, or fantasies with their parents.

Boys—Age Seven

Three boys showed a predominance of a fluid gender identity on the Rorschach and TAT, and one boy still showed a masculine identity at age seven. On the projective testing, aggressive impulses were still expressed in explosive discharge. They all evidenced an oppositional quality to their aggressive affect, and they all showed attempts to avoid strong feelings. Oedipal feelings evolved into a begrudging acceptance of getting second place and making do. Phallic striving was present in their dreams about buying bigger motorcycles and driving big cars. Dreams about being stung or bitten by insects continued into this year. Nurturance needs became strong at this age, demonstrated by a high degree of oral responses to the Rorschach and dreams about eating candy. One boy dreamt that people were throwing candy at him and when he ate it he got taller instead of fatter, combining both his phallic striving and nurturance needs.

The boys started to see their fathers as very human, capable of making mistakes, but also able to help and/or protect their sons from danger. One boy’s TAT story at age seven describes this: “A boy is sitting there with nothing to do. . . . He goes bird watching and gets lost. Then his father was coming home and he found him and brang him home. The boy felt scared when he was lost and good when his father found him.”

At seven years the boys played board games, walked the dog, read, cooked, and watched T.V. with their mothers, and they also discussed with them their worries and their feelings about their friends, family and school issues. They did more motorically active activities with their fathers such as wrestling, ball playing, going to ball games, kite flying, computer game playing, painting and repairing around the house, and “tinkering in the basement.” They continued to talk with their fathers about outside issues concerning school or about movies and sports.

Boys—Age Eight

At age eight, as the boys now felt more separated, the six-year-old pattern of male gender role identification returned, with the same two boys showing a predominantly male identity, and the other two showing a predominantly male gender identity with some femininity. However, at this age, femininity was experienced as scary and distressing and could lead to getting injured. They still experienced themselves as small and

damaged and were preoccupied with getting hurt. Oedipal feelings continued to be present and castration anxiety was high.

They all exhibited an increase in aggression which they experienced as very strong and very conflicted. A significant number of TAT stories at this age were concerned with violence and death. Rorschach responses also had a significant amount of aggressive content that was conflictual. One boy’s response to Rorschach card II shows the degree of aggression: “It looks like two people on their tip toes and they’re splattering their hands in tomato juice or fire is coming out of them.” They were concerned that aggression would lead to death and they replaced their phallic striving of the year before with explosive aggression. Illustrative of this was one boy’s TAT story to card 16: “A man went to war and dropped a bomb; and everything went away. (Examiner: What will happen?) He dropped a bomb on the other people and then he went home.” This type of aggression was also seen in their object relations along with a strong sense of deprivation and neediness. At this age their parents reported their sons exhibiting a great deal of testiness, lability, oppositional behavior, and clinging. Many of the parents reported feelings of reaching their limits of patience and experienced intense rage toward their sons.

Dreams of being stung by bees and bitten by spiders continued into this year. Dreams of being high up and falling, jumping up and down, and body parts growing were prevalent, suggesting possible sexual themes. The following dreams are typical representations of these issues. One boy’s dream: “Somebody’s teeth grew very long. A queen bee was flying around the house. I was scared and woke up my mom.” Another’s dream: “I was at a fair with my friend and we were going up and down on a trampoline with a large hole in it. It was scary.”

They still discussed their feelings mainly with their mothers, as well as issues that are related to friends, school, and family members. They discussed sports, school, and homework with their dads, with some fathers reporting that their sons at times discussed feelings with them but with some embarrassment. Their activities with their parents remained the same as the year before.

**Girls—Age Six**

The girls were not yet as separated from their parents as were the boys of the same age. One girl showed a predominant female sexual identification, three had mixed gender identifications that were predominantly female, and two had mixed identifications that had a strong masculine

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or phallic component. Their Rorschach responses included a sense of body damage. Their typical Rorschach responses were: two Pinnochios without their noses grown long, birds with one leg, halves of animals, animals with their tails missing. All of the girls had very strong aggressive impulses that they experienced as needing to keep in tight control and inhibit, to prevent their anger and sadistic impulses from getting out of hand. They voiced their dislike of their temper in the clinical interview. Oedipal feelings were still very much in evidence, with depressive affect attached to their experience.

While most of their dreams had to do with themes of separation, some of the girls’ dreams could be seen to have a sexual theme. One girl reported the following dream: “Me and my sister were taking a walk and I found a monkey and he climbed up on me and my sister said, ’what’s that monkey doing on you?’ And I said, ’I don’t know.’ And the monkey said, ’Me, too.’ I felt happy, I liked the monkey.” Another girl’s dream: “There is a man following me and wants to take me away from my mother.” Sexual exploration with other girls was reported by some of the girls, and most mothers reported that their daughters masturbated.

Mothers reported that the girls talked with them about school-related issues, issues with friends, conflicts with siblings, fantasies and worries about clothes, hair, and body image. Fathers reported that they talked with them about questions of general, factual information—how things work and larger world issues. The girls were more affectionate toward their fathers than toward their mothers. Their activities with their parents tended to conform with typical gender role behavior. With their mothers they played board games, shopped, cooked, set and cleared the table, and went out to lunch together. With their fathers they helped with yard work, ran errands, fixed things, built things as well as playing catch, riding bikes, and reading. While the boys were focused on being proud of their physical abilities, the girls were proud of their mastery over reading, writing, and drawing.

**Girls—Age Seven**

As another phase of separation started to occur at age seven: the girls’ gender identification began to shift. A mixed gender identification with a strong masculine tilt appeared in five of the girls’ protocols. The sixth girl showed a predominant feminine gender identification. The girls’ responses on projective testing suggested that they felt they were leaving their mothers behind to go out into the world that their fathers represented. They saw their fathers as competent in the outside world. While the boys felt they could depend on their fathers to help them in the outside world, the girls did not. Nor did the girls feel they could
depend on their mothers for such help, even though all of the mothers worked part or full time in professional roles.

Their sense of themselves was that of being damaged. Like the boys, they felt little in a big world. Their unconscious body image was felt to be fragmented and frequently distorted, as the boys had felt a year earlier. The seven-year-old girls were frequently preoccupied with pervasive loss, deprivation, and a need for nurturance. They looked to their mothers for their increased nurturance needs. Oedipal defeat added to the girls’ sense of loss.

The anger that the girls felt about their loss took the forms of oppositional behavior at home and aggression turned against the self and siblings. Despite strong aggressive feelings, the girls did not have the sense of these impulses getting as out of control as the boys did at this age. As they turned their anger on themselves and felt a conflict over good and bad, they felt the need to punish themselves in ways that the boys did not feel.

Sexuality was very present in their testing and dreams. Their concerns about sexual behavior frequently involved being physically intruded on. One girl’s dream at this age shows the conflict over their aggression and sexuality: “Certain people go to a man’s mansion. He wants them to leave. He throws a young girl out on a bed that lands atop a tall tree that has a ghost living on top. The ghost sticks needles into the girl. Then she is in a dungeon and an older girl comes to get her. She puts her hands on the little girl and the little girl is blind and can’t see her and gets scared and screams.” Another girl’s dream demonstrates their sexual excitement: “I am riding up and down in an elevator with my friend and my friend is pushing the buttons so that it goes faster and faster and it feels exciting and funny.” Their fears at age seven were of biting snakes and things piercing their bodies.

They continued the same gender role activities and discussions with each parent that had existed the year before. In their daily lives they talked with their fathers about morality, real life issues with friends and family, laws, rules, taxes, government—how it all works. With their mothers they continued to discuss relationship issues and the events of the day. Mothers reported that their daughters were still masturbating in their beds at night.

**Girls—Age Eight**

As the girls felt more separated at age eight, they showed a strong bi-gender identity on projective testing. They were happy being girls but
wanted to be boys and have what boys have. Some of them even told TAT stories from a boy’s point of view; phallic drives and male identifications were so strong. Suggestive of this is one girl’s response to a TAT picture (card 13B) of a boy sitting on a back door step: “I’m sitting on the steps. I am watching my father feed the horses. I wonder why they can’t feed themselves. This step is right by the barn door and my father pushes by me every once in a while to get the food for the horses. I have bare feet, blond hair, and I’m wearing OshKosh. Someday I’m going to be like my Dad and own a farm and feed my horses. But for now I am just going to have to watch Papa do it.” At this age, five of the girls had male protagonists in their stories to the blank TAT card. The sixth girl told a story of a girl who yearned for a male puppy.

Oedipal concerns were still very present on projective testing. The girls were also strongly conflicted about aggressive and libidinal drives. Parents reported little discussion about sexual issues and became less aware of the masturbation activity of their daughters. On projective testing, sexuality and sexual excitement were experienced as very dangerous and could lead to catastrophe. They were excited by their sexual feelings but also felt guilty about having such feelings and acting on them. Also apparent was their inner body sense of holes, tunnels, and penetration.

Their concerns, anxieties, guilt, and excitement about sexuality were very present in their dreams. Exciting elevator dreams continued in this year. One girl’s dream demonstrates her internal sense of her body, her sexuality, her excitement and fear of sexual catastrophe, and her fantasy about pregnancy: “There was this weird toy store and we had to climb these walls and there were holes in the walls and we had to climb up the holes. And we were 60 feet above the ground climbing with our backs to the ground and it was curvy. And if you wanted to go to a special toy department you had to climb through the hole. I climbed in one and the toys started to move around, and I was really scared. I got friendly with a doll and wasn’t scared anymore. Then these toy soldiers were about to crash, and me and this doll ran to help them. They were huge dolls the size of a human mother and father, so it would have been a huge catastrophe if they crashed. I fell back through the hole and when I got down I couldn’t believe what I saw.”

In their clinical interviews they identified more with their fathers and their fathers reported feeling closer to their daughters at this age. Many girls reported: “I am more like my father than my mother.” When asked to describe her father one girl said, “He’s nice and he’s comforting; I take after him.” Mothers were perceived as tired, angry, and irritable, while fathers were perceived as calm. Their activities and discussions with their parents remained the same as the year before.
AGE NINE YEARS

The separation process converged for both the boys and the girls at age nine. Both genders felt an external push to grow up from their parents and an internal push to grow up. The boys and the girls were made extremely anxious by their newfound separateness. Projective tests at this age showed a breakdown of defenses. The high degree of anxiety and emotional disturbance seen on the Rorschach was not manifested in the children's typical functioning as described by teachers and in the clinical interview. Mothers of the boys, however, did describe more fighting with their siblings during this age.

Boys

At age nine, three of the boys had an unconscious mixed gender identity. The fourth boy's male identity appeared forced—he was short for his age, and he wished to become a professional wrestler, intensifying his masculinity to compensate for his height.

Aggressive and sexual feelings felt out of control and intense at age nine. Mothers reported their boys were fighting a lot with their siblings. The boys' sexual feelings became more prominent at this age. One boy's nine-year-old TAT story sequence shows this: (6BM) “A man and his wife were going to have a baby. The day that they did, the husband took her to the hospital then he called his mother and told her to come to the hospital. When she got there, they were very anxious. Finally they had a baby girl.” His response to the next card presented (7BM) was about a boy daydreaming throughout his class but he would not talk about what he was daydreaming. He then had this next response to card 3BM: “One night a woman decided to have a party. She invited all her friends over and got drunk and she fell over, leaning against a couch, and she blacked out. Her friends tried to help her wake up but they knew she was drunk and decided to leave her there till the next morning.” Drinking and getting drunk with women were themes many of the boys described in their TAT stories.

They worried about their bodies and being able to function sexually. One boy’s dream suggests their worry: “I was in a band and I was the announcer and one of the band members that played the recorder got sick and I had to take over and I did it and I screwed up the whole concert. And they kicked me out and I never lived happily ever after.”

7. See Knight, 2005 for a fuller description of this internal and external separation experience.
The nine-year-old-boys continued the same activities and discussions with their mothers as the year before, though mothers started helping them more with their homework. They continued the same activities with their fathers that were present at age eight, with two fathers reporting that the boys talked more about their feelings with them in addition to outside events and sports.

**Girls**

All the girls had fluid gender identities at age nine. Three girls still had boy protagonists in their blank card TAT stories. The nine-year-old girls’ strong aggressive and sexual feelings often broke through their weakened defenses. One girl’s dream illustrates their neediness mixed with sexuality: “A girl is crying because she couldn’t get a new silk nightgown because they didn’t have enough money. And then she was wishing and wishing and she didn’t get that silk nightgown. And I like say ‘don’t worry, if you wish hard enough someday you’ll get enough money and you’ll have enough help that you’ll find that beautiful silk nightgown that you want.’ That’s funny.” One girl’s dream shows the mix of aggression and sexuality: “One night I dreamt that I made this really beautiful house and some of us we made them in class. And I was like dreaming that I’m battling them to see whose house is the most beautiful. And John comes with this sword on with these two little like things you put on the back of it and he goes like this (waves imaginary sword in her hand) but he doesn’t touch me. And he has this knife and I like knock the knife away with the side of my hand. Then I hit him in the stomach and I take his arm and I flipped him over my shoulder and I take the knife. And then he says ‘all right, you won.’ And I won ’cause my house was the prettiest.” Dreams about going on roller coaster rides and up and down rides were also reported.

Parents reported that the girls showed little interest in talking about sexuality and were embarrassed when the subject came up. Mothers were less aware of their daughters’ masturbating. Their relationship activities and discussions with their parents remained the same as the previous year. Three of the girls complained that their bodies were too fat and had negative concerns about their noses and hair. The girls reported that their mothers were tired a lot, and their fathers worked too much and were irritable.

**PREADOLESCENCE**

At ages ten and eleven another phase of separation and autonomy began to develop. This sense of separation is related to the hormonal/
biological and cognitive changes occurring in preadolescence as well as being attributable to the continued development of the children's feelings and experiences of attachment and separation experienced with their family and their peers. In this next phase, the boys and girls diverged significantly, with the girls taking the lead in the developmental process this time. (Knight, 2005)

**Girls—Ages Ten and Eleven Years**

At ages ten through eleven concerns about connection and separation re-occurred as the now middle childhood/preadolescent girls began to experience the beginning of the adolescent separation-individuation phase described by Blos (1967). Conflicts fused with anxiety about growing up were exceptionally strong at ages ten and eleven. While change and separation were experienced as scary, these girls had a sense that they would survive it and even fare well in the world.

At age ten and eleven, all the girls had fluid gender identities as judged by their projective testing responses. Women and girls were seen as weak, and men and boys were seen as powerful, aggressive, and capable. Gender role identity desires can be seen in one eleven-year-old girl's story to TAT card 7GF: “There was once a girl that would much rather be a boy than a girl. She was sure it would be more exciting to wear pants and play sports than stay inside and read books and play with dolls. Her mother didn't help the problem. She had been brought up as a perfect little girl and she wanted her daughter to be the same. Her mother read her stories about princesses and gave her tons of dolls. She grew more and more unhappy and finally decided that she would have to ask her mother. When she told her mother she looked unhappy for a moment and then told her daughter that she could do what she wanted. She decided that she would play sports every other day and stay inside and play dolls and read with her mother on the other days because she had seen the unhappy look on her mother when she had first told her.”

Based on mothers’ reports, five of the six girls were at level two of Tanner’s pubertal staging (1962) by age eleven, and one girl had reached menarche at age ten years. The ten- and eleven-year-old girls were very concerned about their bodies and unhappy about the way they looked. They thought they were too fat and that their noses were too long. Those with breast development were worried about the lumps and pains in their breasts. They wondered if what was happening to them was normal and often felt alien as they confronted their changing bodies.

Oedipal concerns were more present again. The girls also experienced strong of aggressive and sexual feelings that at times would break
through their defenses and overwhelm them as their sexual thoughts and feelings became more conscious. At ten they were not interested in discussing sex with their parents and some even pointedly blocked out any information about it. Dreams in which the girls were going up and down trees and elevators were common at ten and eleven. At age eleven the girl who had begun menstruating reported the following dream: “I was late for camp. I said, ‘Elsa, you have to take me to camp now, I’m late, I’ve missed first period.’ And I was thinking that I would get there just in time to change for swimming. And I said, ‘Elsa, come on,’ and she looked at me accusingly and said, ‘Did you read my diary last year?’ And I said, ‘Come on!’ And we got into the car and she stopped at a coffee shop. Three ladies came by and started singing. They were really pretty and people took their picture. I said, ‘We should be going now!’ And they started singing ‘Buy this make-up it will make you prettier.’ I said, ‘Elsa, I will be late for camp, we have to get out of here.’ Then Dad was there and I yelled ‘Dad! Take me to camp now! Elsa’s being a jerk!’ When I woke up I was worried about being late for camp.” This dream demonstrates her concerns about her period, her appearance, her anxiety about being somehow transgressive, her concern about having a lack of control over her life and her sense that her father will help her get out into the world.

Parents reported that at age eleven the girls started to have more nightmares. One girl’s dream, reported by her mother, shows the high level of aggression: “She dreamed that she cut up our dog Suzie because the dog was sick or hurt and she didn’t want it to suffer so she killed the dog by cutting her into little pieces. She woke up sobbing and got into bed with her sister because she was so scared.” At this age aggressive feelings are no longer represented as monsters, and now are firmly placed on the self or others.

Mothers also reported that their daughters’ daydreams were about boys, dating, and becoming famous people. When asked to report her child’s daydreams, one mother wrote: “Being a millionaire. Riding in a limousine showered with jewels, lots of money, living in a mansion. Being very famous.” Some girls were still not willing to talk about sex and some who were more developed did ask questions about pre-marital sex, contraception, and AIDS. Generally they had the same discussions and activities with their parents as the year before.

Boys—Ages Ten and Eleven Years

Three of the ten-year-old boys showed no evidence of entering another phase of separation and autonomy. These boys had no fragmentation responses and there was no common theme concerning separation.
Based on their mothers’ reports, these boys were predominantly in Tanner’s Stage I. Only one ten-year-old boy had entered a new phase of separation. While he had fragmentation responses on the Rorschach, he did not have the connected responses that were characteristic of the girls who had fragmentation responses at this age. At ten, this boy was clearly in Tanner’s Stage II of early puberty, suggesting that this next phase and process of attachment and separation may have a biological clock that is set later in boys than in girls. At age eleven images of both connection and separation appeared in all the boy’s Rorschach responses, despite their still early Tanner staging (Knight, 2005).

**Boys—Ten Years**

The same pattern of gender fluidity found at age nine continued when the boys were ten years old. Oedipal striving became more apparent again. Their aggressive and sexual feelings also felt strong and out of control. The boys’ responses also showed aggressive attacks toward females. The intensity and mixture of their aggressive and sexual feelings are exemplified by one boy’s consecutive TAT stories: (13MF) “This guy he just killed his wife by mistake. He dropped the lamp and it broke on her and killed her. He’s feeling bad, but the police didn’t arrest him because they know he didn’t mean to do it. But he gets put on parole anyway.” (8BM) “He shot this guy with the shot gun—no rifle—and he thought he had killed him because he was hired to kill him. The guy didn’t die. And he feels so angry that the guy didn’t die that he turns off the life support system and the guy dies. Then the guy that killed him got into a car accident and died. (Examiner: Why did he have to shoot him?) He was a witness to a murder.” Another boy’s response to TAT card 3BM also demonstrates the aggression felt toward females: “This lady came home from work. Somebody was sneaking into her house. He saw her so he hit her on the head with his gun and ran out of the house. She had a concussion but was all right. The guy was found by the police (Examiner: How does he feel?) He’s mad ’cause he got caught.”

The ten-year-old boys tended not to share their dreams with their parents. What dreams they did report showed their aggression and a desire to be rich. One boy reported this dream to his mother: “He dreamt that he killed two of his friends with his ‘factory.’ He wouldn’t tell me more about the dream though I asked.” Another reported this dream on clinical interview: “I got a Lamborghini and money started raining down all over my room. Also I won the Mega Bucks.”

The boys continued the same activities and discussions from the year before with both parents. The one addition was that some par-
ents reported their sons started asking more about sexuality and talked about girls they liked. On clinical interview most of the boys talked about being aware of boy-girl relationships they knew about in school, with two boys revealing that they liked a certain girl.

Boys—Eleven Years

Two of the boys had a predominantly male identity with feminine identifications used as a defense against their aggressive feelings, one had a mixed identity that was predominantly male, and one boy still had a mixed gender identity at age eleven. At this age the boys’ phallic aggression and sexuality were intertwined and intense. These combined sexual and aggressive feelings were conflictual for them and made them anxious. They typically used femininity, constriction, fantasy, and intellectualization to defend against their aggression, sadism, and sexuality. When these defenses did not hold and the feelings became conscious, the boys felt overwhelmed and bad about having them, leading them to become concerned about being punished for their thoughts.

However, they were more comfortable when they experienced just their sexual feelings. One boy’s TAT story to card 13MF suggests the degree of touching and excitement they were feeling: “This is a mannequin. This guy made her, and he’s hot because he’s been working all night so he’s wiping off his forehead in the picture. He has worked all night cause he had to make it by the next day. (Examiner: How does he feel?) He feels relieved that he finished it but tired because he didn’t get much sleep.” Another boy’s story to TAT card 13MF also represents the boys’ preoccupation with sexuality: “They just met and she just made a pass at him and he feels confused. (Examiner: How does she feel?) She feels excited and wants to make out with him. (Examiner: What will happen?) They are going to make out and it will feel good.”

Their activities and discussions with their parents generally remained the same as the year before. Mothers reported that their sons were fantasizing about girls liking them. One mother reported that her son told her he was “going out” with the same girl for the last two years and another mother reported that her son was frequently talking on the phone with girls. On clinical interview, all the boys reported being interested in girls at this age. The boys’ fantasies of becoming rich were also reported by the boys’ mothers this year.

Only one of the four boys was beginning to approach stage two of Tanner’s pubertal staging, based on parent reports. However, like the girls at age eleven, most of the boys were also conflicted about their bodies changing and growing up. These feelings were clearly stated on the clinical interviews and nicely expressed by one boy:
RK: Has your body been changing?
Boy: I don’t think so.
RK: I mean you haven’t started developing and going into puberty.
Boy: Not yet, thank God.
RK: Why thank God?
Boy: I don’t want to change yet.
RK: Why not?
Boy: I don’t know. I want to be young.

**Discussion**

The middle years of childhood are a period of fragmentation, fluidity, and the experimentation and trying on of different self states that influence gender role identifications, sexual and aggressive drives and fantasies, and one’s sense of oneself in the world beyond the sphere of the family. Such states cannot be understood by tracing linear progressions forward and backward, but only by recognizing that they are complex products of biology intersecting with the environment, often yielding surprising transformational products. This period of childhood is best described as nonlinear, discontinuous, fluid development. The research findings discussed below use the concepts of fluidity and fragmentation as they became apparent in the analysis of the longitudinal data.

**Gender Fluidity**

Core gender identity is a child’s understanding that he is biologically a boy or a girl. All the children in this study showed no conflict or confusion about their core gender identity. Gender role identity is how boys and girls and men and women behave, think, and feel. It is thought to be an ongoing process that starts in infancy and continues throughout childhood and adolescence. Various influences impact gender role identity. Cross-gender identifications with caring figures are one influence on gender role identity. The social environment of the growing child is another. Another impact on gender role development is the continual changing of self and other structures throughout development.

The disequilibrium of self structures in middle childhood gives children the opportunity to try on different possibilities of gender role identity. As structures remain fluid and discontinuous, so gender identification also becomes fluid. In her study of normal children’s Rorschach responses, Ames and her co-authors (1974) also found gender confusion and either-or gender responses within this age group. This study suggests that boys and girls make different uses of and have different
meanings attached to gender role identity at different ages. Some manifest trends did emerge.

Boys experienced their masculine identity as very aggressive and feared their aggression would get out of control or explode, while they continued to express it outwardly toward their family and friends. They used feminine identifications to help them manage their aggressive impulses. This may be the boys’ identification with their perception of their mothers’ relational role and strategies for dealing with aggression. However, they sometimes experienced their femininity as scary and distressing and feared it would lead to them getting hurt. As previously reported, girls in this study also found their aggression scary and at age seven turned their aggression inward against themselves. This dynamic defense led to a drop in their self esteem at age seven. At age eight, when they felt separated from their parents and more on their own, the girls developed strong male identifications, as they perceived their fathers as more capable and competent in the outside world. This may be the girls’ identification with their perception of their fathers as they continue to develop a more mature sense of personal will, intention and agency. Following this strong male identification at age eight and nine, the ten- and eleven-year-old girls were more hopeful about their futures.

Many writers (Balsam, 2001; Bassin, 1996; Benjamin, 1995; Aron, 1995; Sweetnam, 1996; Dimen, 1991; Goldner, 1991; and Harris, 1991; Chodorow, 1996; Kirkpatrick, 2003) have proposed that the ability to continually elaborate opposite sex feelings and behavior continues past the oedipal period through the child’s ongoing capacity for flexible cross-gender identifications. The gender role fluidity found in these normal children supports that theoretical position and suggests that gender role fluidity is a normal process that is not just found in children with gender identity disorder (Tuber & Coates, 1985). While previous writers have noted that children in treatment can use gender for defensive purposes (Olesker, 1998; Yanof, 2000; Chodorow, 1996; Knight, 2003; Kulish, 2003; Zients, 2003), this research suggests that gender can also be used for both nondefensive and defensive purposes in normal children. Children’s literature is replete with examples of children with fluid gender role identities. Typical examples of this are Scout in To Kill a Mockingbird, Pippi Longstocking who is full of phallic exuberance, and Smidge, the sensitive boy with strong maternal instincts, in Lindgren’s “Karlsson” series.

The results of this study also support the socialization of gender role behavior previously found in infant and toddler research. That body of

8. For a fuller discussion of the results see Knight, 2005.
research has shown that boys and girls are treated differently by their parents: mothers encourage boys toward more independent behavior while girls are encouraged to remain close (Olesker, 1984). Boys are encouraged to control social interchanges more than girls while girls are encouraged to find pleasure in closeness and the interactive regulation of relationships (Biringen, Robinson, Emde, 1994). Robinson and Biringen (1995), studying gender and autonomy in infants and toddlers, found that mothers encouraged sons to become effective in independent, self initiated activities while encouraging daughters to become effective in relationship regulation.

The topics of discussion that mothers and fathers had with their children—as well as how those conversations shifted and changed over the years—suggest that the same early socialization patterns continue into middle childhood. Mothers predominantly focus on feelings, relationships, and activities within the home, while fathers largely focus on world events, morality, and activities outside of the home. The questionnaires and the children’s responses suggested that nothing had changed much from the 1950s with regard to gender roles inside the home.

Contemporary gender theorists (Elise, 2000 a and b; Benjamin, 1995) have posited that children see fathers as possessing power, agency, activity and the ability to move into the outside world while mothers are perceived as lacking those qualities. As the six- to eleven-year-old child moves out more into the world of his/her peers, they continue to identify their mothers as tied to the home and thus devalue her strength and power, while fathers are seen as representing the outside world. The girls’ testing responses expressed their conflict over wanting to move to arenas outside the home in their developmental pull forward and the pressure they felt, internally and externally, to remain inside the home like they perceived their mothers doing. Typical of this was the girl’s story about her wish to go out and play sports and her concern about disappointing her mother, who she perceived as wanting her to play with dolls.

**LIBIDINAL AND AGGRESSIVE DEVELOPMENT**

The disequilibrium of the self structures in this period of childhood is a challenge to the flexibility and ability of children to tolerate and manage their sexual and aggressive feelings. At the beginning of middle childhood as children experience a greater sense of separation, they lose self cohesion and their sense of self fragments. At age nine, as they begin to feel more separated, their defenses are not sufficient to contain the strength of their drives, causing them to experience their feelings as out of control. That such a breakdown of defenses at age nine occurs
after consolidation of separation and more autonomous self and ego structures at age eight is consistent with the idea that the most recently developed functions are the first to show vulnerability during a maturation-rational change that also includes a surge of strong feelings (A. Freud, 1966 a and b; Piaget, 1967). It is also compatible with Blos’s (1967) description of adolescent separation in which ego impoverishment follows the sense of internal object loss. As they move into preadolescence they experience another period of separation and fragmentation, suggesting a period of continuous fluidity and transformation during the entire period of middle childhood and preadolescence as children must cope with their changing sense of self, their very strong feelings, their relationships with family and peers, and their maturing cognitive and biological/hormonal growth.

These results found that oedipal feelings remain throughout this period for both boys and girls. While there is a begrudging and angry acceptance of the actual family dynamic in the beginning of middle childhood as the children’s cognition develops and they better understand family dynamics, preadolescent children are still struggling with oedipal wishes. Libidinal desires and aggression from earlier periods were continually reworked throughout the children’s six years in this study. The reworking of thoughts and feelings from earlier periods is not a regression to earlier phases; it is a variation of these feelings at a more mature developmental level.

This study suggests that boys’ and girls’ sexual fantasies begin to take shape as a new emergence in this period of childhood. At age six, both the boys and the girls had dreams about being intruded upon. The boys’ sense of intrusion had more of a pointed phallic aggressive quality like being stung by bees, while the girls’ dreams were more about whole people or animals intruding on them. At seven years both the boys and the girls still were concerned with phallic intrusion. The girls’ dreams were more elaborated and richly symbolic, while the boys’ dreams were short and to the point. By age eight they all had dreams of riding up and down and dreams about holes and phallic symbols, indicating a better sense of sexual anatomy and excitation that may be penile, vaginal, and anal. While the girls’ mothers were aware of their daughters masturbating in early latency, the boys were more hidden about it. As they became preadolescent children, the boys were much more vocal about their sexuality in an assertive way, while the girls became more embarrassed talking about it both with me and with their parents. This difference in behavior may be the result of the older children’s unconscious conflation of sexuality and aggression in this age group and their more conscious sense of gender role behavior in which girls are encouraged.
to be more relational and less aggressive while boys are encouraged to be more aggressive and assertive about their sexuality.\(^9\)

The degree to which their sexual dreams and fantasies are influenced by their dual gender identity and their consequent assumption of both roles is a question that modern gender studies would answer in the affirmative, as cited above. I would also suggest that the homosexual play that is typical of children in middle childhood involves the children’s ability to take both gender sides in their fantasy play with each other and sets the stage for adolescent and adult sensual and cross-gender empathy.

Aggressive feelings were strongly felt at all ages for all children. While the girls turned their aggression on themselves, the boys used their feminine identifications to try to control their angry feelings. Neither of these defensive strategies worked very well. By age eight, the boys were so aggressive at home that their mothers reported reaching their limits of patience and felt murderous rage at their sons. While the girls were not so concerned with their aggressive feelings at eight, by nine, when their defensive functioning broke down, they felt them just as intensely as the boys did. By ten and eleven the girls were concerned with and felt bad about their inability to control their meanness and voiced this on the clinical interview. The boys were concerned about their angry feelings getting out of control and physically hurting someone, as was evident in the testing but not talked about on the clinical interview. The boys had continual physical outlets for their aggression in their rough and tumble peer play. The girls’ peer play was rarely physical, with most play being pretend, board games, or talking about school and other girls. However, some boys and girls participated in afterschool sports, which provided some physical outlet for some of their aggression.

**Developmental Theory**

Every psychoanalytic theory must have a developmental theory at its base. Freud (1905) postulated a psychosexual theory that essentially thought of development as a staged process, and many analysts understood his proposal to mean that each stage came directly out of the one before in a linear progression.\(^10\) Other early developmental and psychoanalytic theories (Klein, 1975, and Gesell, 1945, for example) similarly conceptualized development as continuous and linear, emphasizing critical phases with traces of older phases within them. Mayes

\(^9\) A more complete discussion of the gender differences as they relate to post modern gender theory requires a separate paper.

\(^10\) See Tyson & Tyson, 1990, for a discussion of this early developmental theory.

Anna Freud proposed a concept of developmental lines (1963) that are distinctively separate, while weaving together a complex intermingling of id, ego, superego, self and object structures, the inherent biological, and the environmental influences at each advanced stage of development. Despite calling her concept “lines,” she provided the first complex framework for psychoanalytic thinking about progressive hierarchical development and paved the way for more modern, integrated thinking about children’s development.

Development, as we currently understand it, is both continuous and discontinuous (Abrams & Solnit, 1998). Children take in bits of information (Miller, 1956) from all sensory pathways, both conscious and unconscious (Freud, 1905; Bucci, 2001), and assimilate and accommodate the disequilibrating changes (Piaget, 1967) introduced by the complexity of program and circumstance to already existing and newly arising biological structures and systems inherent in both the brain and the body (Hofer, 1981). This new sensory input effects change in the developing structures. Having to accommodate to the new information, antecedent and ongoing elements are slowly transformed into new structures. In this manner, the infant and child begin to make order out of the chaos of incoming sensory stimuli through the continuing changing and developing neuro-biological systems that were genetically programmed to establish organizational and regulatory structures and systems. This dynamic systems approach to development (Thelen & Smith, 1994; Sander, 2002; Mayes, 2001; Galatzer-Levy, 1995; Tyson, 2002) informs our understanding of linear and nonlinear human development as well as individual differences in development. Linda Mayes (2001) has written a well thought-out integration of these ideas and suggests that we “study the symphony as an orchestrated whole as well as the behavior of its individual parts, for when the individual parts are brought together, their behavior as a whole might be different.” (p. 153) In any good orchestral work the final achievement is always something more than merely the sum of its parts.

Contemporary developmental theorists continue the study of the many complex factors that contribute to a child’s development. Psychoanalysts working in development (Sander, 1980, 2002; Mayes, 2001; Abrams & Solnit, 1998; Tyson & Tyson, 1990; Galatzer-Levy, 2004; and others) have begun to think of developmental discontinuities “occurring within a series of progressively differentiated hierarchical psychological organizations that arise over time” (Abrams, 2003, p. 175). This systemic view of development requires an understanding of the indi-
Fragmentation, Fluidity, and Transformation

individual psycho/social/biological contributions as well as the continuous interweaving of the many different structures of the mind. With the idea of structures always changing we can begin to study the ways in which the development of internal objects, drives, ego and superego structures both change and interweave during every phase of development. This modern-day view of development requires that we give up our idea of stable structures that last for long periods of time and that progress in a step-wise fashion.

The results of the study of separation and attachment in the six- to eleven-year-old child (Knight, 2005) and the results of the current study present psychoanalytically informed data that confirms our modern-day theory of development. This longitudinal study suggests that development in middle childhood and preadolescence is predominantly in a state of constant, fluid, nonlinear transformation. These results indicate that the term “latency” is an inaccurate description of psychological processes occurring in middle childhood and preadolescence. Major nonlinear cognitive and biological growth changes are continually transforming the child’s mind and body (Shapiro & Perry, 1976) from the beginning of this developmental period. Their environment changes from a home-based setting to one that focuses more and more on school and peer milieus. The children in this study entered middle childhood demonstrating a fragmentation of their self concept as they traversed a more developed sense of separation and individuation. Their higher levels of autonomous and internalized defense functioning and their newly developed cognitive functions were not yet sufficiently established to protect them from their strong feelings, which were more powerful than their defenses at this point, resulting in the breakdown of defense functioning and the considerable distress that can be seen on their Rorschach protocols.

This ongoing developmental disequilibrium provides the growing child the opportunity to try on different possibilities of gender role development and object choice and to experience their aggressive and sexual feelings in different ways as they go through middle childhood. The results also point to the children's inability to separate nurturance, sexuality, and aggression throughout middle childhood. Their dreams and fantasies conflate their nurturance needs, their sexual impulses, and their aggression. This suggests that there is an intertwining of sexuality, nurturance, and aggression that shapes their psychological development. The influence of an inherent biological program is a reasonable inference, but more difficult to quantify.

Once these feelings are intertwined, middle childhood becomes a more whole-body experience in which the children are less able to
differentiate their bodily needs and feelings because the internal structures that manage them are in a constant state of flux and fragmentation. The latency defenses enumerated by Freud (1905) and Anna Freud (1966 a and b) are there, but they are inadequate to manage the lack of self cohesion and the intensity of the drives. This structure/drive disequilibrium allows the child the opportunity to experience a wide range of intense feelings while relying more heavily on the structures provided them during home, school, and group activities to help them keep their feelings under control.

*Lord of the Flies* is a wonderful novel that describes William Golding’s fantasy of what can happen to children and adolescents when they lose the structures of home and school. Left to their own devices, without any outside structures, the boys’ sexuality and aggression run wild, expressing the very lack of internal impulse control found in this study and that Blos talks about. One can postulate that the overly self critical nature of children in this age group is their superego attempt to contain their sexual and aggressive feelings, which feel too big and too terrible to own. However, superego structure in middle childhood is still in development and is not mature enough to staunch the flow of strong feelings. Outside structures are necessary. As one boy in a group I ran for children with behavioral problems said, “If my parents loved me then they would control me more.”

While this study supports the view of normal development as nonlinear, similar findings can be found in the longitudinal Rorschach studies done by Ames and her coworkers (1974). Ames looked at 29 of her 650 subjects, ages two through ten years of age, to determine the recurrence of identical responses over time. Popular responses were often repeated after five years of age. The only other types of repeated response were original responses that were of particular personal significance for an individual child. She found that children who gave the same popular responses expressed very little individuality while those with repeated original responses “showed a solid core of individuality which does not change markedly in its expression from age to age.” (p. 279) Both of these extremes would indicate a lack of change through a considerable number of years from ages five to ten.

The degree of nonlinear development found in this study and in Ames’ findings, suggests that constant change in development denotes a child’s ability to flexibly respond to biological, psychological, and environmental changes, using a widening range of potential responses. While certain character traits, such as temperament, are more directly influenced by inherent and dispositional features and may proceed continuously thereafter, rigidity of symptom or character structures
over time may be a sign of *pathological* development rather than normal stability. Moving forward in development is the capacity to endure disequilibrium, fluidity, and distress. Blos (1967), in discussing the internal changes accompanying the adolescent phase of development, notes the general instability of the ego in adolescent development and the concomitant adaptive and maladaptive maneuvers that can occur. He makes a point of noting that the so-called maladaptive maneuvers are a part of normal development: “At the time when the adolescent . . . individuation is in its most vigorous season, deviant, i.e. irrational, erratic, turbulent behavior is most prominent.” (p. 184)

Dynamic systems theory suggests that there is a continuously dynamic interaction of biology and environment that produces a complex interplay of systems that are fluid, variable, function driven, flexible and nonlinear — leading to emergent development (Thelen & Smith, 1994). Mayes (2001) makes an elegant and convincing argument for applying dynamic systems theory to our understanding of nonlinear development and is supported by the results of this study. She writes:

One difference in these views of complex dynamic systems is in the focus on variability, not as a signal of regression or dissolution, but rather as a desirable, necessary property of the system. . . . A view of self-ordering systems places the emphasis on periods of disorder and great variability as the nidus for change. The possibility of new form and structure is contained within the disorder. The more variability is built into the complexity of the system, the more opportunity there is for self-organization and self-preservation. The new point of view is that self-organizing processes have an absolute requirement for random fluctuation, for disorder, at points in their developmental history. (p. 158)

Such a dynamic systems approach to development also takes into consideration individual variations in a child’s development that would account for the continued character traits that Ames found. Individual stressors in a child’s environment, biology or gene patterning — such as trauma, cognitive disabilities, and environmental or biological stressors that effect gene turn on/turn off activity— would or could affect a child’s adaptation at all later phases of development and how well he or she is able to handle the continual dramatic transitions in development.

This research supports a nonlinear, dynamic systems approach to development and suggests a less predictable process of development than has been considered before. Development is messy. It is filled with novelty and complexity, with both parallel and interacting processes (Thelen & Smith, 1994). Major cognitive and biological changes are
continually transforming the child’s mind and body. Their environment changes from a home-based setting to one that focuses more and more on school, peers, and a separate sense of self. This study suggests that we might describe the developmental pull forward as the introduction of disequilibria, the capacity to internally adapt to the disequilibration, and the ability to use outside structures and settings constructively in that process. It may now be time to think about normal child development as continuous disequilibrium, when the brain and body are still constantly changing. Adolescence and young adulthood continue the process of nonlinear transformation as biology once again transforms body and mind, pulling development forward into newly emerging organizations.

Viewing normal development using a nonlinear model requires us to give up our long accepted ideas of a relatively stable linear development of stages and phases that follow a programmed process principally determined by earlier phases. What we get in return for that lost theory is the prospect of innovative new views and approaches to dealing with the broadening range of observed difficulties. Confronting ambiguity provides a challenge to discern unrecognized features in development that have been selectively obscured and therefore inadequately tapped in our research and clinical efforts. This perspective opens the door for more extensive research investigation and allows clinicians to address such children with different standards of what constitutes “normal” progression.

Conceptualizing development as nonlinear as well as linear alters the way we work with our child, adolescent, and adult patients. Rather than focus on genetic determinants and think of present-day analytic interactions as “regressive,” I suggest that as analysts we attend to and analyze the observable narrative that includes a sense of self and other in the present that can influence further development and be influenced by further development. Our job then becomes one of helping change the patient’s narrative creations by including unrecognized influences that may be obscured by conventional story-telling about any phase of life. By helping our patients reflect on what is preventing them from adapting to present and future developmental fluidity and reorganization we can co-create a narrative that promotes transformation and a more felicitous development.

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