

Background

- Societal ideologies (e.g., gender stereotypes) are part of a broader, macrosystemic context influencing youth development.¹
- Empirical research demonstrates that young people both accommodate to and resist harmful ideologies, thereby playing an active role in constructing their own identities.²
- U.S. gender stereotypes associate “hard” qualities with masculinity and “soft” qualities with femininity, with society privileging the “hard” over the “soft”.³
- Prior research⁴ on identity development suggests that adolescents construct their identities in resistance to negative racial/ethnic stereotypes (i.e., in terms of who they are *not*) but, to our knowledge, a possible extension of this framework to include gender stereotypes has yet to be explored.

Purpose of the Present Study

- Examine how adolescents may accommodate to societal gender stereotypes in their identity construction by assessing differences between males’ and females’ use of “hard” and “soft” words to describe who they are and who they are not.
- Examine possible gender differences in the proportion of words adolescents provide that are “hard” and “soft”, separate by valence and across descriptions of who they are and are not.

Methods

Participants

- 346 seventh-grade students across 4 New York City middle schools (61.3% female) participated.
- The sample was racially/ethnically diverse: White (33.8%), African American/Black (22.8%), Latinx (19.4%), Asian (11.8%), Native American (0.3%), Bi- or Multi-Racial (4.0%), Not Listed (3.8%).

Procedure

- This study used pre-intervention data from an observational study of the Listening Project.
- As a part of a larger survey administered using Qualtrics, participants were asked to provide 3 words in response to:
 - Who are you?
 - Who are you *not*?

Data Coding

- A Hard/Soft coding scheme was developed for the identity words based on the ratings and input from 10 independent coders.

- All identity words were assigned a code for Hard/Soft [0 = Hard; 1 = Soft; 2 = Neutral] and a code for Valence [0 = Negative; 1 = Positive; 2 = Neutral]. Examples are provided in Table 1.
- 2 independent coders assigned Hard/Soft ($\kappa = .62$) and Valence codes ($\kappa = .78$) to the entire dataset. All discrepancies were resolved via consensus coding.

Results

Table 1. Example identity words coded as hard, soft, or neutral, by valence.

	Valence	Sample Words
Hard	Positive	strong; smart; independent; hardworking; brave
	Negative	stubborn; aggressive; careless; rude; bully
Soft	Positive	kind; careful; helpful; patient; flexible
	Negative	weak; naïve; dumb; dependent; childish
Neutral	Positive	funny; energetic; curious; talented; happy
	Negative	boring; ugly; fake; liar; pessimistic

Figure 1. Percentage of all identity words coded as hard and soft, across genders and in response to each prompt (N = 963 and N = 935, respectively)

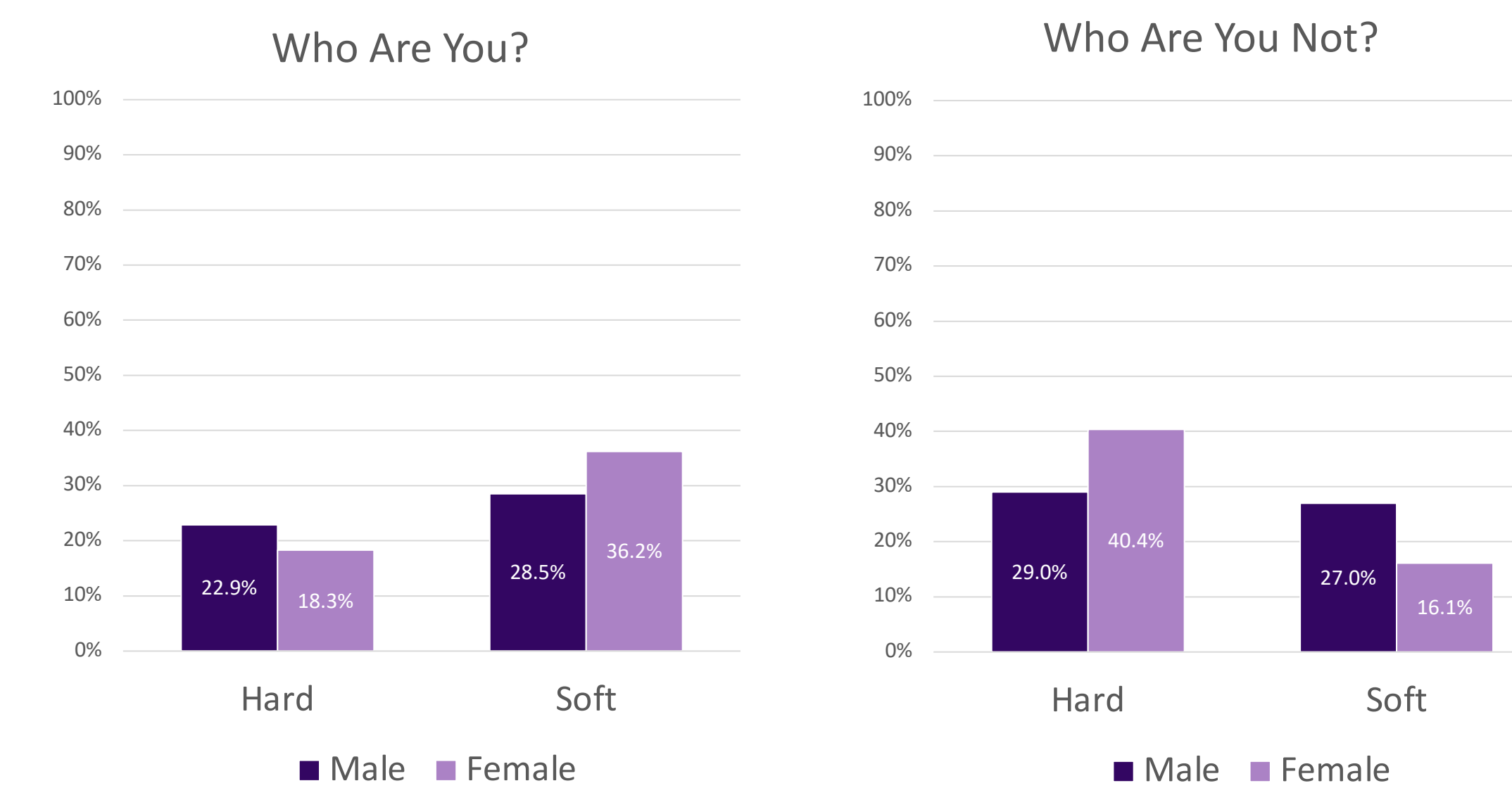


Table 2. Results from Mann-Whitney U tests assessing possible gender differences in the number of hard and soft words [from 0-3] participants provided in response to each prompt.

		N	Mean Rank	U	Z	p	r
Who Are You?							
Hard	Male	113	163.05	9712.50	1.69	.092	.097
	Female	192	154.04				
Soft	Male	113	137.64	9112.00	2.46	.014*	.141
	Female	192	162.04				
Who Are You Not?							
Hard	Male	109	129.80	8153.50	3.15	.002**	.182
	Female	189	160.86				
Soft	Male	109	170.95	7962.00	3.66	<.001***	.212
	Female	189	137.13				

Table 3. Results from chi-square analyses assessing possible gender differences in the proportion of respondents who provided 1 or more words classified as hard/soft, separate by valence and prompt.

		Male	Female	Total	χ^2	p	d
Who Are You?							
Hard	Positive	45%	39%	41%	1.579	.209	.138
	Negative	3%	5%	4%	1.583	.208	.138
Soft	Positive	45%	56%	52%	3.396	.065	.203
	Negative	16%	22%	20%	1.077	.299	.114
Who Are You Not?							
Hard	Positive	23%	19%	20%	1.463	.226	.134
	Negative	47%	61%	56%	6.919	.009**	.294
Soft	Positive	10%	10%	10%	0.012	.913	.001
	Negative	48%	29%	35%	10.626	.001**	.367

Discussion

- In describing who they are, females used significantly more soft words than males, but there were no gender differences in the number of hard words provided (see Table 2). When considering the proportions of males and females who provided at least 1 hard/soft word, separated by valence, there were no gender differences (see Table 3).
- To say who they are *not*, males used significantly more soft words and females used significantly more hard words (see Table 2). Males were also more likely than females to answer with at least 1 negative soft word, while females were more likely to answer with at least 1 negative hard word (see Table 3).
- Observed gender differences are consistent with findings from prior research demonstrating that adolescents accommodate to societal ideologies when constructing their personal identities.
- The fact that gender differences were more pronounced in response to the “Who are you not?” prompt suggests that accommodation to gender stereotypes may occur in part through attempts to distance oneself from the negative stereotypes that are projected onto another gender.

References

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- Way, N., Santos, C., Niwa, E. Y., & Kim-Gervey, C. (2008). To be or not to be: An exploration of ethnic identity development in context. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2008(120), 61–79. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cd.216>