Cultural Sex-Role Expectations and Children's Sex-Role Concepts

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Middle-class children between the ages of 4 and 8 were interviewed about their sex-role attitudes, in order to determine the extent to which recently changing cultural mores have influenced children's sex-role concepts. The children were asked about their career goals; the careers they would choose if they were the opposite sex; the reasons why they like being a boy or girl; and their opinions regarding the appropriateness of men and women participating in 14 sex-stereotypic occupations and activities. The children's parents provided demographic information. The children expressed very nonstereotypic attitudes towards the 14 occupations and activities, compared to children in recent studies; but they chose very ˅traditional careers for their own choices and opposite-sex career choices, and often gave stereotypic reasons for preferring their own sex. Parents' education, mothers' employment status, fathers' nontraditional careers, and the children's gender predict responses to several of the sex-role-related questions. Implications for research are discussed.

Research on children's sex-role acquisition has been based on the assumption that the development of sex-typed preferences and awareness is a necessary and inevitable process. However, during the past decade sex-role attitudes and expectations in our society have changed dramatically, particularly among college-educated men and women (Zuckerman, 1981). Since traditional sex roles are being questioned by adults, one would expect children's sex-role concepts and attitudes to also change. Nevertheless, research has demonstrated that young children continue to express extremely traditional attitudes regarding appropriate sex-role behavior. In her study of preschool childen, Beuf (1974) reported that her sample of children born between 1967 and 1970 was surprisingly stereotypic; however, Shepherd and Hess (1975) found that although the kindergarten-

ers in their study expressed stereotypic sex-role attitudes, the eighth graders were much more tolerant of men and women in nontraditional roles. Shepherd and Hess concluded that stereotypic attitudes toward occupational segregation break down as children mature and become exposed to the public debate regarding these issues.

Since sex-role expectations continued to change during the 1970s, even the data reported in these recent studies may not reflect the sex-role attitudes of to-day's young children. The purpose of the present study is to determine whether young children's sex-role concepts are changing, by evaluating the attitudes of children born in the 1970s. Middle-class children aged 4-8 were selected because previous studies have demonstrated that this age group is aware of cultural sex-role expectations and is able to articulate its views (Schlossberg & Goodman, 1972; Williams, Bennett, & Best, 1975). The study replicates, updates, and goes beyond previous research by including a variety of sex-role-related questions, and by evaluating a sample of children born since the rebirth of the feminist move-ment.

METHOD

Sample

Consent forms and demographic questionnaires were distributed to the parents of 60 children participating in a summer day camp program in 1978. These children represented all campers who were to be enrolled in kindergarten, first, or second grade the following September. Forty-nine (82%) children re-turned consent forms signed by their parents, although 2 of these children were not interviewed because of absence from camp.

Twenty of the children are male and 27 are female. The mean age is 6 years. Most of the children live in middle-class suburbs of New Haven, Connecti-cut; 60% of the mothers and 64% of the fathers have bachelor's degrees or grad-uate/professional degrees.

Demographic Data

The parents answered questions regarding the child's age, grade, the num-ber and ages of the child's siblings, and the parents' educational levels and occu-pations. The child's birth order was coded as first, middle, or last; only children were omitted for this variable. The number of siblings was coded for all children. Mothers' occupations were coded two ways: (1) whether or not the mother was employed outside the home and (2) whether the mother's employment was in a

female-dominated field (a field in which at least two-thirds of those employed are women) or in a nontraditional field (less than two-thirds of those employed are women). Fathers' occupations were coded as traditional (male dominated) or nontraditional. These coding criteria are similar to those used in previous studies (e.g., Almquist & Angrist, 1970), and are based on recent work force statistics (Garfinkle, 1975).

Interviews

Each child was individually interviewed for approximately five minutes by a camp staff member who was familiar to all the children in the study. The first part of the interview consisted of open-ended questions, including "What do you want to be when you grow up?", "If you were the opposite sex, what would you want to be when you grew up?", and "Do you like being a boy/girl? Why?"

Although the children's career choices were not expected to be predictive of adult goals, these questions were included as a measure of sex-role attitudes. Career choices were coded as traditional or nontraditional, based on the same criteria used to code their parents' occupations. The careers that the children would choose if they were the opposite sex were coded three ways: (1) whether or not the child answered the question, (2) whether the career field was traditional or nontraditional, and (3) whether or not the career was identical to or related to their own career choice (e.g., nurse and doctor).

Virtually all the children expressed a preference for their own sex, so the question regarding why they liked being a boy or girl was coded by whether the reason given reflected traditional sex-role differences. The response was considered sex-role related if it referred to boys' competence, physical superiority, games, or clothes; or girls' friendliness, warmth, games, or clothes. None of the responses were nontraditional (i.e., girls are smarter), so the nonsex-role-related responses were vague or neutral (e.g., "girls are better," "it's fun to be a boy," "I hate boys").

The second part of the interview consisted of a list of 14 careers and activities that most children and adults in a recent study judged to be appropriate for only one sex, rather than either sex (Shepherd & Hess, 1975). The traditional male items included: be a soldier, fly a plane, put out fires, go fishing, be a doctor, be President of the United States, fix a car, and drive a truck. The traditional female items included: wash the dishes, sew, do the laundry, cook dinner, take care of young children, be a nurse. For each item, the child was asked whether it was "all right for a man to do it" and "all right for a woman to do it." The children never selected the nonstereotypic sex exclusively (e.g., all right for a woman to be a soldier, but not a man), so the items were scored in terms of whether the child gave a nonstereotypic response (i.e., appropriate

for either a man or woman) or a stereotypic response. Each item was scored individually, and the number of stereotypic responses given by each child is referred to as the "stereotype score." Stereotype scores were calculated for the traditional male items, the traditional female items, and the total score.

Data Analyses

The demographic and family background variables that predict traditional/ nontraditional responses to each of the sex-role-related items were analyzed with stepwise multiple regressions. Product-moment correlations were used to evaluate the relationships among the sex-role-related items. In addition, correlations evaluated the relationships between mothers' nontraditional careers and children's sex-role responses, since the one-third of the mothers who were not employed would have created a missing data problem in a regression analysis.

RESULTS

Stereotype Scores

Twelve of the 14 items are considered appropriate for either men or women by a majority of the children. The two exceptions are soldier and nurse; 51% of the children give stereotypic responses to these two careers. Male and female items are approximately equally likely to generate stereotypic responses; on the average, 33% of the male items and 23% of the female items are judged to be appropriate for only one sex. These responses are much less stereotypic than the responses of kindergarten children in the Shepherd and Hess study (1975) or elementary school children in another recent study (Scheresky, 1976). Comparisons with the Shepherd and Hess responses are presented in Table I. The children are much more liberal about the traditional occupations than would be expected from the proportion of men and women actually working in these careers; these comparisons are also presented in Table I.

There is a wide range of responses in terms of stereotype scores for each child. Total scores range from zero to the maximum possible score (14). The median and mean score is 4.

Career Choices

In contrast, the children's own career choices are very stereotypic. In response to the question about future goals, 83% of the boys and 68% of the girls

Table I. Children's Attitudes Towards Occupational Sex-Roles (Percent)

	Stereotypic Responses		Work Force
Occupation/activity	Current study	Shepherd and Hess[a]	Women in field
1. Be a soldier	51	100	7
2. Be a nurse	51	95	98
3. Sew	47	93	—
4. Put out fires	41	95	1
5. Fix a car	40	95	3
6. Be president of U.S.	30	100	0
7. Drive a truck	28	85	2
8. Fly an airplane	26	95	1
9. Go fishing	23	68	—
10. Do the laundry	17	85	—
11. Be a doctor	13	85	10
12. Cook dinner	13	80	—
13. Wash dishes	11	85	—
14. Take care of young children	6	52	—

[a]These statistics are based on the responses for kindergarteners in the Shepherd and Hess study (1975).
[b]These statistics are based on Garfinkle (1975); — indicates that comparable statistics were not available for these activities.

choose careers in traditional fields. For the girls, nurse (52%), teacher (16%), dancer (8%), and veterinarian (8%) are the most popular choices. For the boys, athlete (22%), fireman (17%), police officer (17%), and truck driver (11%) are the most popular. These choices are similar to those reported in previous studies (Beuf, 1974; Looft, 1971). In contrast to these earlier studies, none of the girls choose mother or wife as a career. When asked what career they would choose if they were the opposite sex, 62% of the boys and 82% of the girls choose traditional careers. The most popular choice for the girls is doctor (54%), and the most popular choice for the boys is nurse (46%). Only 1 boy chooses housewife/ mother as an opposite-sex career and 2 girls choose father as an opposite sex career. Traditional or nontraditional career choices or opposite-sex career choices are not correlated with one another or with stereotype scores. Forty-three percent of the children list careers in related fields for their own choice and opposite-sex choice. None of the girls report identical careers for their own choice and opposite-sex career choice, but 2 boys list virtually identical careers in response to these two questions; 1 boy lists pilot and lady pilot for his two choices, and 1 boy lists baseball player and softball player. A small proportion of children (18%) are uncomfortable with the question regarding opposite-sex career choice and refuse to answer it.

Gender Preference

Forty-one percent of the children give a sex-role-related reason for liking being a boy or girl. The most popular response for the boys is the enjoyment of boys' games, particularly sports (31%); the girls tend to respond in a vague or uncertain way (e.g., "I just like it") or give no reason (38%). The most popular girls' sex-role-related response is the preference for wearing girls' clothes, which is mentioned by only 2 girls. Giving a sex-role-related reason for liking being a boy or girl is not significantly correlated with stereotype scores or career choices.

Demographic Predictors of Sex-Role Responses

Stepwise multiple regressions evaluate the extent to which age, grade, sex, birth order, number of siblings, and parents' educational levels and occupations predict the sex-role-related variables (stereotype scores, career choices, sex-role-related reasons for preferring one's own gender).

Stereotypic responses to the 8 "male items" is significantly predicted by fathers' educational attainment and is unrelated to the other background variables. Children with more highly educated fathers tend to express less stereotypic attitudes toward the traditionally male careers and activities; this predictor accounts for 12% of the variance. In contrast, mothers' educational level and employment status predict responses to the 6 "female items." Girls with highly educated mothers or homemaker mothers tend to express less stereotypic attitudes. In order to better understand these results, 14 individual multiple regression were used to evaluated the predictors for the 14 items. Mothers' higher educational attainment predicts nonstereotypic responses to 3 items: wash dishes, fly an airplane, and do the laundry. Fathers' higher educational attainment predicts nonstereotypic responses to 3 items: be a soldier, put out fires, and take care of young children. Mothers' homemaker status predicts nonstereotypic responses to 2 items (go fishing and be a nurse). Mothers' homemaker status and fathers' nontraditional careers predict nonstereotypic responses to 1 item (cook dinner). Responses to 5 items — be a doctor, be President of the U.S., fix a car, drive a truck, and sew — are not significantly predicted by any background variables. In the regression for the total stereotype score, fathers' education is the only significant predictor, accounting for 13% of the variance. These regression statistics are presented in Table II.

Traditional/nontraditional career goals are not significantly predicted by any background variables. However, refusing to answer the question regarding opposite-sex career choice is significantly predicted by sex and mothers' employment status. Almost all (83%) of the children who refuse to answer this question are boys, and all have mothers who are full-time homemakers; these two variables account for 32% of the variance ($F(2, 39) = 9.18$, $p < .0005$). The sex dif-

Table II. Demographic Variables Predictive of Children's Occuaptional Stereotypes

Variable	Source	df	F	p	Percent of variance
Total stereotype scores	Fathers education	1,41	5.97	.025	13
Traditional male items	Fathers' education	1,41	5.33	.05	12
Traditional female items	Mothers' education	2,40	9.07	.005	22
	Mothers' homemaker status		4.97	.05	
Individual Items					
Do the laundry	Mothers' education	1,40	13.97	.001	26
Fly an airplane	Mothers' education	1,40	11.20	.005	22
Cook dinner	Mother is full-time homemaker	2,39	5.91	.025	16
	Fathers' nontraditional career		4.48	.05	
Be a soldier	Fathers' education	1,40	5.72	.025	13
Take care of young children	Fathers' education	1,40	5.86	.025	13
Be a nurse	Mother full-time homemaker	1,40	5.13	.05	11
Wash dishes	Mothers' education	1,40	4.52	.05	10
Put out fires	Father's education	1,39	3.97	.05	9
Go fishing	Mother full-time homemaker	1,40	4.14	.05	9

ference is consistent with Beuf's data (1974). Predictors of nontraditional opposite-sex career choices were not evaluated in the regression, because many children did not answer this question.

Sex is the only demographic variable that significantly predicts whether the children give sex-role-related responses to why they like being a boy or girl. Fifty-five percent of the boys give a sex-role-related reason, compared to 29% of the girls; sex accounts for 11% of the variance ($F(1, 45) = 5.78$, $p < .025$). The girls tend not to answer the question, or to give vague or global responses.

Birth order, number of siblings, and mothers' nontraditional careers are unrelated to any sex-role responses.

DISCUSSION

The children's responses reflect a surprisingly nonstereotypic view of activities and occupations that have generated very stereotypic responses in recent years. In dramatic contrast, the children report extremely traditional career choices, and apparently assume that these goals would automatically change if they were the opposite sex. The data suggest that these young children's perceptions of occupational roles are consistent with the relatively liberal attitudes held by young adults in recent studies, but these sex-role attitudes apparently do not influence the children's expectations regarding their own futures. Many of the

occupations and activities included among the stereotype items (especially the homemaking activities) are not relevant to the children's career choices. However, for some children, responses to the stereotype items directly conflict with career choices. For example, four girls who state that it is appropriate for either men or women to be doctors or nurses list nurse as their occupational choice and doctor as the career they would choose if they were boys.

The children's expressed preference for their own gender is consistent with Kohlberg's (1966) theories and with a recent study that found that elementary school children tend to attribute positive characteristics to their own sex (Zalk & Katz, 1978). In the present study, it is interesting that the boys are more likely to give sex-role-related reasons for their preference. In contrast, the girls are unable to think of specific reasons for their preference, or tend to give vague explanations such as "it's better to be a girl" or "girls are better than boys." The responses give the impression that, compared to the girls, the boys' allegiance to their own gender is based on a more salient preference for or pride in their traditional sex role.

In terms of family background, mothers' and fathers' higher educational attainment predict nontraditional sex-role responses on the stereotype items, but do not predict responses to the other sex-role questions. It is interesting that fathers' higher educational attainment tends to predict children's liberal attitudes towards women undertaking traditional male occupations, and mothers' higher attainment tends to predict children's liberal attitudes towards men participating in homemaking tasks. According to social learning theories (e.g., Bandura & Walters, 1963), the data suggest that more highly educated parents express more liberal attitudes toward their own sex roles, and/or present less stereotypic role models for their children. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that men and women who aspire to graduate degrees express more feminist sex-role attitudes (Lipman-Blumen, 1972; Zuckerman, 1981). The data support the major premise of most sex-role acquisition theories, in that they indicate the importance of the parents in children's sex-role development (see Katz, 1979, for a review of this literature).

Although mothers' homemaker status predicts liberal attitudes towards 3 stereotype items, these relationships are rather modest. However, neither mothers' employment status nor mothers' nontraditional careers predict children's nontraditional sex-role attitudes, as would have been predicted from the literature for children (Miller, 1975) and college students (Vogel, Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1970). It certainly seems that the homemaker mothers in this sample are not teaching traditional sex-role attitudes to their children; perhaps these middle-class mothers are relatively career-oriented women who will soon return to the work force. An alternate explanation is that other sources of sex-role information, such as books and television programs, are more influential than the mothers. However, the sons of the full-time homemakers tend to refuse to consider opposite-sex career choices, which suggests

that the role model of the homemaker mother has a negative impact on boys' perceptions of women or women's role options. Although mothers' homemaker status does not influence children's occupational stereotypes in general, boys with homemaker mothers apparently perceive women's career choices as more limited, or are so negative about womanhood that they are unwilling to imagine themselves as female.

Overall, the data suggest that children's sex-role attitudes are changing, reflecting the changes in society as a whole. The emerging pattern is that parents' education, which is probably related to parents' sex-role attitudes and sex-role behaviors, strongly influences the extent to which children embrace these liberal attitudes. Nevertheless, almost all the children report traditional career expectations, regardless of parents' educational levels. The results clearly suggest that society's ambivalence about changing sex roles are being reflected in the children's sex-role attitudes. Most of the children have apparently learned that it is appropriate for men and women to work in the same occupations and to participate in similar household chores, but they have apparently also learned that some careers and activities are *more* appropriate for one sex than the other. Moreover, the boys, especially those with homemaker mothers, appear to have more positive attitudes toward their gender than do the girls. One assumes that at this age children are learning sex-role attitudes from parents, teachers, other children, children's books, and/or television programs. The children are probably not exposed to the arguments presented in magazines, newspapers, and news programs. As a result, there are no age differences in sex-role attitudes for these 4-8-year-olds such as those which Shepherd and Hess (1975) found in comparing kindergarteners with sixth graders. Lack of exposure to the controversy surrounding sex-role behaviors would also help to account for the children's career goals, which are so traditional compared to today's college students (Zuckerman, 1981). It may also be that the children's personal goals are primarily influenced by interpersonal reinforcement or the role models in their immediate environment, while occupational stereotypes are influenced by books and television, in addition to role models and the opinions of parents, teachers, and other children. Although the media have been blamed for presenting stereotypic role models (e.g., McNeil, 1975), some contemporary children's books and television programs may provide more nontraditional role models than do the children's parents or communities. However, it is also important to note that college-educated women who are most interested in nontraditional careers and lifestyles tend to delay marriage and motherhood (Tangri, 1971). As a result, the mothers of today's elementary school children are probably not the women who one would expect to be most strongly influenced by the 1970s Women's Movement (i.e., the women who attended college in the 1970s). It may be that the major influence of the Women's Movement vis-à-vis children will not be assessed until the 1980s, when the career-oriented women who went to college in the 1970s are likely to have school-age children.

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