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PARENTS' SEX ROLE ATTITUDES AND CHILDREN'S  
CONCEPTS OF FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY\*

The title of the workshop to which this paper is presented asks whether parents', teachers', and children's attitudes toward sex roles are changing. Most likely, the organizers of this symposium were moved to ask this question because of the secular changes taking place in the countries represented at this conference. The fact that this issue of changing sex role attitudes is being raised implies that such changes may have important psychological implications. From a developmental-clinical perspective, the most obvious implication of such a question is that changes in parents', teachers', and children's sex role attitudes may result in altered socialization patterns. In this paper, we will briefly review the available evidence regarding changes in sex role standards and attitudes, then discuss the development of children's concepts of masculinity and femininity, and how this might be influenced by parents' sex role attitudes and children's friendship choices. Finally, the implications of changes in parents' and peers' sex role attitudes on the developing child's concepts of masculinity and femininity will be explored. Our general aims are: (1) to delineate some conceptual and methodological issues in the study of how sex role concepts evolve, and (2) to suggest some directions for future research. It seems appropriate, prior to reviewing the psychological research literature on changes in sex role attitudes, to define one's terms. In this paper, a distinction is made between the terms "sex role standards" and "sex role attitudes." The former is used in referring to the societal norms regarding appropriate characteristics and behaviors for men and for women. In contrast, the latter term is employed to mean a person's point of view or feeling about a given set of sex role standards. Thus, sex role standards refer to a society's belief system about the distinctions between men and women whereas sex role attitudes refer to whether or not an individual considers those beliefs valid, as well as the degree of flexibility associated with the implementation of such beliefs. Both terms may be further differentiated from "sex role preference" which refers to the extent to which an individual accepts, values, and incorporates those behaviors and characteristics society considers appropriate for his/her gender. Sex role attitudes and sex role preference are predicated on an awareness of sex role standards. The term "sex role concepts" is used here to refer to an individual's knowledge about sex role standards or norms for men (concept of masculinity) and women (concept of femininity).

CHANGING SEX ROLES?

Given the recent attention to the limitations rigid adherence to traditional sex role imposes on children and adults, it is quite often assumed that sex role



and mother, while concomitantly pursuing careers. However, since many of the women in the study were planning to have families and most were pursuing careers traditional for women, Gump concluded that the subjects were not proposing radical alternatives to the traditional view.

Thus, it *does* appear that sex role attitudes may be undergoing some change. Nevertheless, as indicated by the Ruble et al. (1975) and Gump (1972) studies, attitude change was not accompanied by a concomitant change in personal sex role preferences. Most of the women were still in agreement with the marriage and motherhood aspects of the traditional female role, preferring it for themselves. The effect of changing sex role attitudes on males' sex role preferences, however, has not been established.

In summary, based on these reports, recent secular trends have not made a significant impact on sex role standards and preferences. Although it is possible that traditional sex role differentiations are breaking down, most of the changes seem to be affecting attitudes rather than preferences or standards. Even so, changes in the belief systems are occurring slowly and are primarily in response to specific conditions such as taking a women's studies course (Ruble et al., 1975). Furthermore, certain sex role beliefs are more amenable to change than others. As Emmerich (1973) has noted, "secular changes in sex roles are not all of one piece; they selectively influence different aspects of sex role behavior and do so differentially among subpopulations." (p. 125)

#### CONCEPTS OF MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY

The multifaceted nature of sex role development is now generally acknowledged by scientific investigators with differing theoretical orientations. A complete account of sex role development must include: (1) the developmental sequence for each aspect, (2) the relationships between the various aspects at different levels of development, and (3) the variables which influence developmental trends and the mechanisms involved. The focus of this paper is on concepts of masculinity and femininity, i.e., sex role concepts. These concepts reflect the individual's knowledge and understanding about the sex role standard which prevail in his/her particular society. It is our contention that these concepts involve more than just a memory bank consisting of information about sex role standards learned by a person in the course of growing up. Rather they are organized conceptual systems whose forms change as a function of cognitive development.

Among theories of sex role development, Kohlberg's (1966) cognitive-developmental formulation seems most useful as a basis for understanding the evolution of sex role concepts. Kohlberg (1966) has proposed that sex role development occurs in the following sequence. First, the young child becomes aware that humans come in two sexes and that he/she falls into one of these groups. Out of this awareness emerges the child's gender identity, i.e., cognitive categorization of self as "boy" or "girl." Kohlberg suggests further that this

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