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## Gender Role and Future Orientation In a Canadian University Population

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### Abstract

This study examines the relationship between sex, gender role, and future orientation in a Canadian university undergraduate population. Based on the previous research of Bem (1977) and colleagues, the predictive validity of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) was specifically explored in terms of whether subjects' gender role classifications would be related to post-university career plans and life orientations. Also considered was the sex of the subject and whether the subjects were involved in romantic relationships at the time of testing. Bem's gender role classifications, of masculine, feminine, and undifferentiated subjects, did not strongly predict undergraduates' perceived future orientations in terms of preferences for a professional career as opposed to home and family involvement. Subjects generally emphasized their own career plans ahead of those of their romantic partners. Females, however, emphasized the importance of their romantic partners' careers more than males emphasized their partners' careers. Females emphasized home and family concerns more than did males. Subjects were relatively optimistic about their own personal futures, but not optimistic about the future of the country. Several implications of the findings are outlined with regard to gender role theory and counselling activities, with particular reference to women and to recent discussions about the goal of "sex role transcendence" (e.g., Stark-Adamec, Graham & Pyke, 1980).

### Résumé

L'étude suivante, qui a été menée auprès de la population étudiante d'une université canadienne, vise à établir la relation entre le sexe, les rôles attribués à chacun des sexes et les préférences quant aux orientations futures. Se fondant sur une recherche effectuée antérieurement par Bem (1977) et ses collègues, l'objet de recherche consistait à explorer le "Bem Sex Role Inventory" (BSRI) dans le dessein spécifique de déterminer si les classifications des sujets par rôles des sexes ne sont pas reliées aux plans de carrière post-universitaires et aux orientations de la vie. Ces instruments d'analyse furent utilisés en tenant compte du sexe du sujet, et de l'engagement ou du non-engagement de celui-ci dans une relation amoureuse au moment de subir le test. En général, les classifications de Bem des rôles des sexes, soit de sujets masculins, féminins ou non différenciés, n'a pas prédit de façon manifeste les orientations futures perçues des étudiants en termes de préférences pour la poursuite d'une carrière professionnelle par opposition à l'implication à la maison et à la vie de famille. Pour la plupart des sujets, leurs propres plans de carrière comptent davantage que ceux du partenaire. Les femmes, toutefois, reconnaissent davantage l'importance des objectifs de carrière du partenaire qu'elles fréquentent, contrairement aux hommes qui s'en soucient peu. Les sujets de sexe féminin démontrent plus d'intérêt au fait de la famille que les sujets de sexe masculin. Tous sont relativement optimistes face à leurs perspectives personnelles d'avenir, mais ne sont nullement confiants à l'égard de l'avenir du pays. Plusieurs implications des découvertes ont été traitées en corrélation avec la théorie du rôle des sexes et les fonctions de consultant, avec un regard particulier sur les femmes et sur les discussions récentes à propos de la finalité de la "transcendance des rôles attribués au sexe" (par ex., Stark-Adamec, Graham & Pyke, 1980).

Ever since the work of Rose (1951), who discussed the relative ambivalence and inconsistency in female college students' future aspirations, attention in counselling has been increasingly drawn to the issues of sexism, sex biases among therapists and counsellors, personal values,

and generally to variables affecting different conceptions of mental health and adjustment in male and female clients (e.g., Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson & Rosenkrantz, 1970; Buczek, 1981; Hyde, 1985; Johnston, 1986; Page, 1987). The classic study of Broverman et al., for example, continues to elicit the controversy about whether a double standard of mental health and adjustment exists in the perceptions of clinicians vis à vis male versus female clients. Broverman et al. had found that professional clinicians (both male and female), using a rating scale questionnaire, profiled the "normal healthy adult" and "normal healthy male" as highly similar, whereas the "normal healthy female" was seen less positively, and as unlike the normal healthy adult. Current research concerning sexism in the mental health field focuses on more specific issues, such as the tendency for counsellors and therapists to view the same symptoms differently according to whether they are found in a male or a female client. Another issue has questioned the congruence or incongruence of symptoms with prevailing male and female gender role stereotypes (Page, 1985; 1987; Rosenfield, 1982).

While relatively little empirical research on such variables has been completed, an emerging issue is that of how the personal concerns, aspirations, and values of female as opposed to male clients are addressed, of how male and female clients may conceptualize their future orientations differently, and also of how these orientations may be affected by clients' gender role classifications. These variables in the counselling process are important, as demonstrated in a study by Buczek (1981), who found that counsellors did not retain or recall the counselling concerns of females as well as they did for male clients. Buczek also found that counsellors tended to perceive female clients as more likely to have "social" than professional or vocational concerns. Schmidt, Lamm and Trommsdorff (1978) found that, in listing hopes and fears for the future, males listed more "public" and females more "private" events, and that females were more oriented toward family concerns and toward more immediate occupational concerns, than were males. Stein and Bailey (1973), upon reviewing available literature on achievement motivation in females, concluded that child-rearing practices in North America generally reinforced traditional feminine sex typing and de-emphasized "achievement-oriented" behaviour. Similarly, Fitzgerald and Crites (1980) concluded that counsellors working with female clients were influenced considerably by outdated, stereotypic conceptions about "acceptable" female roles and behaviour, and also that counsellors had poorly developed notions about female clients' cognitions and future aspirations.

*Gender Role Classifications*

In addition to examining sex differences in future orientation, the present study also investigated the relationship between gender role classifications (Bem, 1974) and the future orientations of Canadian university undergraduates. This study examines both the relationship between sex differences and future orientation and that of gender role classification and future orientation. Using undergraduate students as her standardization samples, Bem (see also Bem, Martyna & Watson, 1976) has classified the gender roles of such subjects as sex-typed, sex-reversed, or androgynous, based on their scores on the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). The BSRI requires subjects to rate themselves on 60 personality dimensions, including several viewed as traditionally characteristic of males and several traditionally characteristic of females. Sex-typed individuals (i.e., masculine males and feminine females) describe themselves as possessing high levels of characteristics generally associated with their own sex. Sex-reversed individuals (masculine females and feminine males) generally endorse characteristics seen as more appropriate for the “opposite” sex. “Androgynous” individuals generally endorse high levels of both traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine characteristics. Bem et al. also identify the category of “undifferentiated” individuals, that is, subjects who endorse low levels of both masculine and feminine characteristics.

In line with the general findings of Bem’s research on androgyny and her descriptions of the above gender role orientations (see also Allgeier, 1975), and in the context of investigating the construct validity of gender role theory, the hypothesis was tested that future orientation — that is, whether subjects saw their personal future plans more in terms of vocational/professional or of social/family concerns — would be related to gender role orientation. Subjects were asked to describe what their life would be like in 5 years’ time and in 15 years’ time. Another measure was included in an attempt to explore further the possibility of sex differences in future orientation regarding romantic partners. If subjects were currently involved in a romantic relationship, they also were asked to describe what their partners’ lives would be like after 5 and after 15 years. Philliber and Hiller (1978) found, for example, that the prestige levels of married females were correlated with their husbands’ occupations, even when these occupations were of lower social status than those of the females. The husbands’ prestige levels were unaffected by their wives’ occupational status.

Relationships were thus explored between sex, gender role orientation, and future orientation, and in terms of concern for one’s own future plans as opposed to those of one’s partner. It is noted that these relationships have particular relevance to an understanding of female career development, especially considering the underrepresentation of females in high status positions within the Canadian labour force.

### *Personal Optimism and Future Orientation*

A final concern was to extend, in a Canadian university context, the related research that Levine (1981) conducted in the United States. Bringing together personal observations and the results of survey studies conducted recently on American campuses, Levine described today's undergraduates as individuals whose future aspirations are inward, personal, and individualistic, rather than social and humanitarian. Of particular interest, was more current information on Levine's characterization of present day undergraduates as regarding themselves as passengers on the *Titanic*. In such a view, according to Levine, students express optimism about their own personal futures, yet express fatalism and pessimism about the future of their country and of the world.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

The present volunteer subjects were 223 undergraduate students at the University of Windsor. Of these subjects, 86 were male and 137 were female. Subjects' ages ranged from 18 to 25, with a mean age of 20 years. Thirty seven males (43%) indicated present involvement in a significant romantic relationship, as did 68 females (50%); mean length of such relationships was 19.16 months. As well, subjects received two course credits for participation.

### *Instruments and Procedure*

Due to limitations upon available testing facilities, subjects were tested, under supervision of the first author, in five separate groups. Subjects were informed that the purpose of testing was to determine how people think about their personal futures as well as to assist in development of career counselling services within university settings. Subjects also provided demographic information such age, sex, year in university, faculty, citizenship, hobbies, and interests.

In randomized order across subjects, the (BSRI) (Bem, 1974; 1977) and a Future Orientation Questionnaire (FOQ) were administered. The BSRI consists of 20 masculine, 20 feminine, and 20 neutral adjectives, each rated by the subject on a 7-point scale, from "never or almost never true" to "always or almost always true" (see Author's Notes). Using procedures described by Bem (1977), subjects were classified on the basis of their scale scores as either masculine, feminine, androgynous, or undifferentiated. These categories were comprised of scores in the direction of the traditional masculine stereotype, the traditional feminine stereotype, both masculine and feminine stereotypes, and low levels of both stereotypes, respectively.

On the FOQ, subjects were asked to write, in as much detail as they desired, how they perceived their lives would be in five years and in fifteen years' time. Subjects were asked to organize their written responses in terms of two areas of principal interest: professional or career concerns, and home or family concerns. In addition to their own personal responses, those subjects who indicated having a current romantic involvement described what they anticipated their romantic partner's future would be like in five and fifteen years' time.

The FOQ scoring system, by which each subject's written responses were assessed was adapted from that used by Schmidt et al. (1978) and is described in detail in Robinson (1984). Each subject's written materials were scored by two blind, independent judges, in terms of the extent they reflected the professional/career and the home/family orientation. Judges derived specific scores, for each future orientation domain, by assessing the degree of complexity, depth, or detail exhibited in the responses. Such a score is referred to by Schmidt et al. as the subject's "level of differentiation." A person showing a low level of differentiation for the professional/career domain, might say "I will be working within the field of law," whereas another might indicate "I will become a highly paid lawyer, hopefully a family lawyer, and plan to work with child custody cases." The latter individual, as described in Robinson (1984), is more differentiated than the former, since a greater number of descriptive dimensions of future orientation are given. Scores could thus range from zero upward; the mean average professional/career differentiation score, obtained over all subjects, was 3.70, and for home/family differentiation, 5.23. As well, each subject received a differentiation score for each of the orientations, and for both the 5- and 15-year periods.

Using five-point Likert rating scales, subjects then indicated the extent of their personal optimism, both for their own future and for that of their country. They also listed, as an additional, exploratory measure of gender orientation, their favourite sports, interests, and hobbies (see below).

The main statistical analysis followed the format of a  $2(\text{Sex}) \times 2(\text{Time Period}) \times 4(\text{Gender Role Orientation})$  design, with time period as a two-level within-subjects factor, and with professional/career and home/family orientation as the two dependent measures.

## RESULTS

The percentages of subjects classified into the four gender role classifications (see Robinson, 1984) were similar to those obtained in Bem's (1974, 1977) standardization samples, though with a somewhat lower percentage of androgynous subjects found in the present sample (16% vs. 20% androgynous males and 25% vs. 29% androgynous females).

TABLE 1  
*Means and Standard Deviations for Professional/Career  
 Differentiation (Self and Partner), and Home/Family  
 Differentiation (Self and Partner)*

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables							
	Career		Partner's Career		Home		Partner's Home	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Sex								
Male	3.77	(1.90)	1.89	(1.28)	4.78	(2.28)	3.87	(1.75)
Female	3.64	(2.01)	2.87	(1.62)	5.58	(2.44)	4.24	(1.89)
Gender								
Androgynous	3.84	(1.93)	2.56	(1.65)	4.85	(2.39)	3.55	(2.05)
Masculine	3.75	(2.06)	2.11	(1.70)	4.88	(2.51)	3.95	(1.63)
Feminine	3.55	(1.82)	2.86	(1.39)	5.83	(2.20)	4.36	(1.61)
Undifferentiated	3.64	(2.11)	1.58	(1.36)	5.43	(2.43)	5.04	(2.05)
Time Period								
Five years	4.26	(2.01)	2.71	(1.62)	4.81	(2.26)	3.93	(1.69)
Fifteen years	3.12	(1.75)	2.32	(1.52)	5.74	(2.47)	4.28	(1.98)

### *Home/Family Differentiation*

A  $2 \times 2 \times 4$  analysis of variance (ANOVA), using the Statistical Analysis System (SAS) General Linear Models (GLM) procedure (SAS, 1982), was performed for the home/family differentiation scores. The main effect for gender role orientation was nonsignificant. A significant effect for the sex of the subject was obtained,  $F(1,215) = 6.60, p < .01$ . Females showed greater differentiation in the home/family domain ( $M = 5.58$ ) compared to males ( $M = 4.78$ ). A significant effect for time period was also obtained,  $F(1,215) = 24.92, p < .001$ , indicating greater differentiation for home/family concerns in fifteen years ( $M = 5.74$ ) compared to five years ( $M = 4.81$ ).

For subjects indicating a current romantic involvement, a significant Sex  $\times$  Gender  $\times$  Time interaction was found for partner differentiation in the home/family domain,  $F(3,96) = 3.11, p < .03$ . Within this interaction, simple effects  $t$  tests (SAS, 1982) showed that feminine-typed subjects were significantly more differentiated than androgynous subjects in both time periods. Undifferentiated subjects, of either sex, showed significantly higher partner home/family scores than either masculine-typed or androgynous subjects. Subjects were less differentiated about partners' home/family concerns in 5 than in 15 years. Males in general were less differentiated in this domain than were females. Androgynous females were significantly more differentiated

than androgynous males in both time periods. While undifferentiated females showed higher home/family scores for the 5-year period as compared to undifferentiated males, this was reversed for the 15-year period, for which undifferentiated males had higher scores.

Separate ANOVAs, by relationship, showed that female subjects, if involved in a romantic relationship, showed greater differentiation in home/family concerns than did male subjects involved in a relationship,  $F(1,97) = 5.40, p < .02$ . A significant gender role effect was obtained for subjects involved in a relationship, with feminine-typed subjects and androgynous subjects showing highest and lowest levels of home/family differentiation, respectively.

### *Professional/Career Differentiation*

For professional/career differentiation, the  $2 \times 2 \times 4$  ANOVA was performed, using the SAS GLM procedure. A significant effect for time period was found,  $F(1,215) = 44.37, p < .001$ . Subjects indicated greater differentiation for their own career plans in five years ( $M = 4.26$ ) than in fifteen years ( $M = 3.12$ ). Considering subjects in a romantic relationship, higher partner differentiation scores in the professional/career domain were also found for the five- ( $M = 2.71$ ) as opposed to the fifteen- ( $M = 2.32$ ) year period,  $F(1,215) = 31.65, p < .001$ . A significant effect for sex was found for partners' level of differentiation; males ( $M = 1.89$ ) showed less differentiation than females ( $M = 2.87$ ),  $F(1,97) = 6.59, p < .01$ , in the professional/career domain. Thus, while male and female subjects did not differ in professional/career differentiation for themselves, male subjects showed less concern for partners' plans in this domain than did female subjects. The nonsignificant main effect for gender role orientation indicated, as with the home/family domain, that this variable, was not a strong predictor of future orientation scores.

### *Personal Optimism*

Subjects were significantly more optimistic about their own personal futures than about the future of their country,  $t(222) = 8.33, p < .001$ .

Based largely on studies reported by Rohrbaugh (1979) and others, concerning relationships between gender role orientation and participation in various sports and hobbies, the present subjects had been asked to list favourite hobbies and interests. This data was categorized as representing essentially masculine, feminine, or neutral hobbies in terms of traditional gender stereotypes. Using these categories as exploratory measures of gender role orientation, it was found that subjects with more masculine hobbies indeed showed greater professional/career differentiation than did subjects with fewer masculine hobbies,  $F(2,216) = 2.68, p < .03$ . Also, having more feminine hobbies was significantly related to greater home/family differentiation,  $F(2,216) = 2.82, p < .03$ .

## DISCUSSION

In summary, the results of the present study did not uniformly support the construct validity of the BSRI as a measure of gender role orientation and as a specific predictor of future orientation. Sex differences did emerge, however, in terms of these basic orientations. Females were more oriented than males toward home and family concerns. Feminine-typed and androgynous subjects generally showed the highest levels of home/family concern with regard to partners in a current relationship. Subjects were more differentiated about their own futures in the home/family domain in 15 than in 5 years' time. Although male and female subjects both showed greater differentiation for their own as opposed to their partners' professional/career plans, it is noted that females emphasized their partners' career plans much more than males emphasized their partners' career plans. In the professional/career domain, unlike the home/family domain, subjects were more differentiated about both their own and their partners' plans in 5 years than in 15 years. In general, it appeared that females' career concerns seemed more germane to the immediate future, whereas males seemed to indicate longer-term occupational plans.

That subjects were much more optimistic about their own than about their country's future, seems to support, in a Canadian context, the survey results of Levine (1981), mentioned previously. Many current undergraduates appear motivated in terms of economic and individualistic, rather than collective concerns, although, this seemed somewhat more typical of male than of female students. Some of the present subjects did not even respond to our questionnaire item about the future of the country, commenting instead, for example, that "the declining economy will destroy the country!" or asking "what country — a nuclear war will end it all." Yet, at the same time, many students appear relatively optimistic regarding their personal futures. Levine (1981) described one student who, although pessimistic about the future of the country, stated that he was optimistic about his own life since "I have a high grade point average and I'm going to get a good job, make a lot of money, and live in a nice house" (Levine, 1981; p. 102).

*Implications and Conclusions*

The following points summarize some implications of the present results:

1. The concept of gender role orientation, at least as measured by the BSRI, does not appear to be an effective predictor of future orientation. Future research is suggested which does not depend entirely on conventional "paper and pencil" measures of gender role orientation, but which would instead utilize less direct and less obtrusive



measures. One such measure might be the examination of subjects' current hobbies, preferred sports or interests, etc., as explored with some success in the present study.

2. The general finding that female subjects emphasized their partners' professional/career plans more than did male subjects, and that females were more differentiated in the home/family domain, especially for females involved in a romantic relationship, seems consistent with traditional stereotypes, and with the writings of feminist writers such as Chesler (1973), Gilligan (1984), Schaeff (1981), or Rubin (1983). These authors, in a clinical and counselling context, have described typical male clients as concerned mostly with themselves, and female clients as more concerned with social relationships and with the concerns of other people generally. The present results also seem to confirm the observation of Schaeff (1981), drawn from counselling and psychotherapeutic experience with female clients, that life events happening to males seem to be accorded greater importance than events happening to females.
3. In the authors' opinion, the present results are relevant to the concept of "sex-role transcendence" as advocated by Stark-Adamec, Graham and Pyke (1980) and others. Stark-Adamec et al. criticize the tendency in recent literature to assume that the "androgynous" necessarily represents a healthier or better adjusted individual. They also point out that the androgyny notion remains rooted in traditional sex role stereotypes about appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour, and thus "serves to perpetuate these restrictions rather than to decrease the salience of sex roles" (Stark-Adamec et al., 1980, p. 503). Stark-Adamec et al. point to Bem's "undifferentiated" subjects as apparently having attained sex-role transcendence, since, for the most part, they do not endorse either masculine or feminine traits on the BSRI. Aside from the controversy of sex-role transcendence as an overall goal, questions remain as to its feasibility, adaptiveness, and implementation in current counselling situations. Most subjects in the present study chose to respond to the BSRI in terms of traditional male and female gender role orientations. Questions of how therapists or counsellors might be guided by, and indeed as to how many clients might be helped to realize, the idealized notion of sex-role transcendence arise. Whereas Stark-Adamec et al. believe that behaviour should not be conceptualized or evaluated in terms of gender role concepts, it would appear that most people, at least at the university undergraduate level, do in fact conceptualize both their present and future activities in these very terms. Gender role expectations and concepts remain an important aspect of the personal functioning and general future orientation. While it has perhaps become commonplace to remind therapists and counsellors to be aware of their own

biases and personal values and while it is increasingly fashionable to question the content, value, or even the very existence of gender role expectations, it is also important for clinical workers to examine the extent of congruence between their own personal value orientations and those of their clients. Counsellors whose procedures are based too dogmatically or rigidly on the view that gender role expectations should be irrelevant to one's functioning in society, will still be faced with the fact that strict adherence to such a view will in fact create unrealistic and maladaptive scenarios for some clients in the real world. At the same time, however, counsellors should also be aware of the subtle influence of their own behaviour and its possible role in reinforcing traditional gender role stereotypes, particularly with female clients. The finding that females were relatively more concerned than males with career plans of partners, and also much less oriented toward vocational careers, suggests the need for broadened and more enlightened personal and educational counselling programs for adolescents. These efforts should be undertaken at the elementary, and certainly at the secondary school level. Educational, vocational, and personal counsellors share the task of helping the female student to develop and maximize her own autonomy, academic skills, and self-growth, as well as to exercise choice about her personal and professional future—while, at the same time, not unfairly condemning or denigrating choices or behaviours which happen to be consistent with traditional gender stereotypes.

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#### *Author's Notes*

This study is based in part on a master's thesis submitted by the first author in the Department of Psychology, University of Windsor, 1984. More detailed descriptions of findings, materials, or procedures used, are available from the authors on request.

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