Gender Role Flexibility: An Account of Its Effects on Career Role Projections

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Abstract

Role congruity theory posits that men and women will remain in traditional roles to avoid societal sanctions (Diekman & Eagly, 2008). The present research examines how men and women react to being told they possess role flexibility (the ability to occupy both stereotypical and counterstereotypical roles). Participants received false feedback about possible future career roles and then answered a battery of questionnaires designed to measure affect as well as comfort in displaying role flexibility. Results showed that both men and women predicted more happiness, comfort, efficacy, and acceptance in traditional gender roles as opposed to nontraditional gender roles. I will discuss possible motives for preferring to remain in traditional roles as opposed to moving into nontraditional roles.
Approval

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Introduction

Gender roles make up a pervasive and influential part of a person’s self schema (Wood & Eagly, 2010). As with most social roles, gender roles provide direction and regulation for the actions of males and females. They provide instruction on how to act in ambiguous circumstances and what men and women should strive to be. Men often take on roles that emphasize agency (e.g., assertiveness, dominance), whereas women often take on roles that emphasize communion (e.g., nurturance, caring). Women often take on more supportive positions that exemplify caring or nurturing (i.e., nurse or social worker) than men (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). This division of labor exemplifies the societal expectations for men and women; it creates distinct roles for men and women to occupy. However, when a person can inhabit both traditional and nontraditional roles, but prefers one, he/she is considered to possess role flexibility. This research will examine if men and women prefer adhering to traditional gender roles or will accept nontraditional gender roles. The study expects to demonstrate that both men and women prefer to occupy traditional gender roles.

The Female Role and Perceived Flexibility

Role congruity theory (Diekman & Eagly, 2008) suggests that people are motivated to act in congruence with their societal roles to avoid sanctioning (e.g., derision, ostracism). With the female role dramatically changing over the past fifty years, people perceive women stepping outside traditionally communal roles into agentic roles as more acceptable (Diekman & Eagly, 2000). However society motivates people with rewards (e.g., acceptance) to remain in traditional roles. That is, as this research posits, women and men will prefer to remain in communal and agentic roles respectively.
Women have no doubt taken on more masculine, nontraditional roles (i.e., paid workforce) in the past fifty years, though (Diekman & Eagly, 2000). In an attempt to measure how people react to people occupying traditional and nontraditional roles Johnston, Diekman, and Lanter (2008) asked participants to rate positivity and negativity towards men and women in traditional and nontraditional career and family roles. They found that women received more positive ratings than men whether they were occupying traditional or nontraditional career or family roles.

Additionally, the female stereotype encompasses traditional and nontraditional roles and traits (Lenton et al., 2009). This stereotype breadth may inform why individual women are equally associated with traditional and nontraditional roles. However, women are positively regarded for their communal traits (i.e., traditional roles; Eagly & Mladnic, 1989). This may motivate them to remain in traditional roles over nontraditional roles.

**The Male Role and Congruity**

The perception of the male role has remained static, in contrast to the female role. In fact, the term man and dad are more associated with career realm than the realm of family (Park et al., 2008). The male role includes the male norms of antifemininity (the desire to not appear feminine), status, and toughness (Thomson, 1986). Traditionally communal roles hold lower status and are considered weaker than agentic roles (Thomson, 1986). Males may in fact avoid female roles because they violate the male norm of antifemininity, high status, and toughness. Additionally, men are more likely than females to hold both hostile and benevolent, or ambivalent, sexist beliefs (Glick et al., 1996). These negative or patronizing views of femininity may also contribute to men’s desires to not appear feminine and shy away from any roles deemed counter stereotypic.
This narrowness may motivate men to adhere to their traditional gender role and gender identity rather than attempt to possess role flexibility. Additional research by Bosson supports this male avoidance of femininity. In multiple studies, men reported significantly more discomfort than women when told to imagine performing a role violation (Bosson et al., 2005, 2006). Research by Vandello and colleagues (2008) also supports that the male role is precarious. They indicated that manhood is a social construct that can be gained or lost through counterstereotypical (i.e., feminine) action. The possibility of losing one’s manhood may motivate men to adhere to traditional roles. With such various motivations to adhere to masculine norms, men will show strong preferences for traditional gender roles.

**Summary**

As detailed here, when men and women adhere to traditional roles, they garner benefits and avoid the sanctions of society (Diekman & Eagly, 2008). Most prior research has focused on group level perceptions of role flexibility. This study will examine how *individual* men and women react to possessing career role flexibility; that is, the ability to perform well in either agentic or communal careers. People will show preference for roles considered traditional for their gender. This may be especially true for men, as they have a much narrower gender role.

**Method**

*Participants and Design*

The study utilized male and female undergraduates (n = 54; 19 male; mean age: 18.55 years; \(SD\ .54\) years) from the Introduction to Psychology participant pool. Participants were primarily European Americans (93%) from a midwestern university. Participants completed the procedure for partial credit in their psychology course. Participants completed the surveys (described below) using MediaLab software (Empirsoft, 2008). The study was designed
as a 2 (sex: male/female) x 2 (domain: agentic/communal) mixed design with career domain as a within subjects variable and sex as a between subjects variable.

**Procedure**

Participants completed the study using MediaLab software (Empirsoft, 2008). After participants granted consent, they completed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1999).

Participants then engaged in the career feedback task. The screen instructed participants to then enter five separate goals they have for their lives in the next ten to fifteen years, prompting them with “In the next 10 – 15 years I hope to:” with space for them to input their goals. The computer displayed a loading screen for a fixed amount of time before displaying false feedback. The false feedback displayed:

> Your goals indicate that you will most likely take on either stereotypically masculine or stereotypically feminine career roles ten to fifteen years from now. You will do well in careers that emphasize assertiveness or nurturing. You would excel in such careers as business or nursing.

After receiving this feedback participants completed a battery of surveys and an experimenter performed a suspicion check, after which participants were debriefed and thanked.

**Materials**

_Ambivalent Sexism Inventory_

The ASI (Glick & Fiske, 1996) consists of 22 questions using a 6 point likert scale (1-strongly disagree and 6 strongly agree) that measures two subscales: hostile and benevolent sexism. The hostile sexism subscales (α=.82) measures the extent to which a participant endorses traditional gender norms and emphasizing that women have ulterior motives designed
to bring down men (i.e., Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist). The benevolent sexism subscale ($\alpha=.75$), though, measures the extent to which participants endorse women being worthy of cherishing but consequently weak and needing of protection (i.e., Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess).

**Goals**

Participants were instructed to enter five goals in an open response format. They were prompted with “In ten to fifteen years I hope to:” and instructed to fill in the blank with a clear, succinct goal they have for their future. Only the first goal, considered the most salient, was then coded by the author as being masculine, neutral, or feminine. Masculine goals included actions such as “supporting my family,” or “owning a home;” feminine goals included actions such as “have children,” or “get married.” Goals were coded as neutral included such items as “be happy,” or “travel the world.”

**Feedback**

The feedback questionnaire measured feelings about the feedback participants received. Embedded among other questions were 4 key questions asking about feedback assessing two different constructs: please and anxiety (i.e., “How pleased(anxious) are you with your feedback indicating your caring/nurturing (dominant/assertive) nature”). Participants responded on 7 point likert scales ranging from 1 – Not at All to 7- Very.

**Career Interest**

Participants rated interest on a scale in 15 careers from 1(not at all interested) to 7 (very interested); 5 careers were meant to appear as masculine typed domains (engineer, CEO, detective, accountant, chemist; $\alpha=.61$), 5 were meant to appear gender neutral (pediatrician, physical therapist, pharmacist, editor, professor of English; $\alpha=.10$), and 5 were meant to appear
as feminine careers (dental hygienist, administrative assistant, elementary school teacher, registered nurse, social worker; α=.42).

*Positive and Negative Affect Schedule*

The PANAS (Mackinnon, 1999) uses ten questions to measure global affect. Five questions measure positive affect (e.g., inspired, alert and five negative affect (e.g., afraid, upset). The questionnaire asks how the participant feels at the moment on a scale from 1 (very slightly) to 5 (extremely). A composite positive affect score (α=.83) and a negative affect score (α=.82) were created by averaging the scores of the five positive and five negative emotions.

*Projections about Roles*

Participants answered several questions about careers in the future; of particular interest are these 8 that focused on happiness, comfort, efficacy and acceptance. Specific questions asked “how happy would you be in a career that emphasized caring/nurturance (dominance/assertiveness),” “how comfortable would you be in a career that emphasized caring/nurturance (dominance/assertiveness)” “how well would you perform in a career that emphasized caring/nurturance (dominance/assertiveness)” and “how accepted by others would you be in a career that emphasized caring/nurturance (dominance/assertiveness)?” Participants indicated various projections about careers that emphasized caring or assertiveness on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very).

*Demographics*

Participants were asked to indicate their age, race, sex, ethnicity, political orientation and expected education.

*Results*
Results indicated a sex difference in feelings about the feedback, but more importantly a clear and repeated pattern showing a preference for the participants’ traditional gender roles. All data were first analyzed in a 2 (sex; male/female) × 2 (domain; assertive/caring) mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) before decomposing to examine simple effects.

I will also show a supplementary set of analyses that utilizes the participants’ most salient goal as predictor for role congruity. After a semantic analysis of the participants’ first goal, the data were analyzed in a 2 (sex; male/female) × 3 (goal; masculine/feminine/neutral) ANOVA.

Additionally, all tests concerning the PANAS and career interest revealed no significant interactions; these measures will not be discussed further.

Role Congruity Based on Participant Sex

Responses to Feedback

When asked how pleased participants were with the feedback, a mixed model ANOVA revealed an interaction of Domain × Sex, $F(1, 50)=7.90, p<.01$. Male participants felt more pleased than female participants to receive feedback that they would succeed at assertive/dominant careers, $F(1, 50)=6.23, p=.01$. There was no sex difference, though, on how pleased participants were with the feedback concerning their success in caring/nurturing careers (see Figure 1). However, this pattern was not replicated in other questions about the feedback. Sex differences did not emerge in anxiety about feedback concerning assertive roles, $p=.47$, caring roles, $p=.69$, accuracy of the feedback, $p=1.00$. 
The Sex × Domain (caring v. assertive) interaction on projected happiness in specific roles, $F(1,52)=15.22, p<.01$, reflected a crossover pattern (see Figure 2). Men projected more happiness in assertive career roles than in caring career roles, $p=.01$, whereas women projected more happiness in caring career roles than in assertive career roles, $p=.03$. In addition, women thought they would be happier in a role emphasizing caring/nurturing traits than men, $F(1,53)=10.88, p<.01$, whereas no significant sex difference concerning happiness in an assertive/dominant role emerged.

Additionally, the Sex × Domain interaction on perceived performance in specific roles, $F(1,51)=9.64, p<.01$, indicated a similar pattern (see Figure 3). Women felt they would perform better in a career emphasizing caring and nurturing, $F(1,52)=4.6, p=.03$, and there was no effect of sex on predicted performance in a career emphasizing assertiveness/dominance. As well, women they would perform better in caring careers roles than in assertive career roles, $p < .01$, and men believed, marginally, they would perform better in assertive career roles than caring career roles, $p = .12$. 

**Figure 1**

*Projections about Roles*

The Sex × Domain (caring v. assertive) interaction on projected happiness in specific roles, $F(1,52)=15.22, p<.01$, reflected a crossover pattern (see Figure 2). Men projected more happiness in assertive career roles than in caring career roles, $p=.01$, whereas women projected more happiness in caring career roles than in assertive career roles, $p=.03$. In addition, women thought they would be happier in a role emphasizing caring/nurturing traits than men, $F(1,53)=10.88, p<.01$, whereas no significant sex difference concerning happiness in an assertive/dominant role emerged.

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**Figure 1**

*Projections about Roles*
Additionally, the Sex × Domain crossover interaction emerged in projected acceptance in a career emphasizing either caring or assertive traits, $F(1,51)=12.70, p<.01$ (see Figure 4). Women felt they would be marginally more accepted in a caring/nurturing career role than men did, $F(1,52)=2.93, p=.09$; however, men felt they would be more accepted by others than in an assertive/dominant career role than women did, $F(1,52)=8.58, p<.01$. Furthermore, men projected marginally more acceptance in assertive career roles than in caring career roles, $p=.08$, while women projected more acceptance in caring career roles than assertive career roles, $p < .01$.

Finally, the Sex × Domain interaction emerged on predicted comfort in roles, $F(1,52)=18.21, p<.01$. Women felt they would be more comfortable in a career role emphasizing caring/nurturing than men, $F(1,52)=14.67, p<.01$, and there was no effect of sex on comfort in a career emphasizing assertiveness/dominance (see Figure 5). Men projected more comfort in assertive career roles than caring career roles, $p =.03$, and women projected more comfort in caring career roles than assertive career roles, $p < .01$. 

![Happy in Role](image1)

![Performance in Role](image2)
Supplementary Analyses: Role Congruity Based on Salient Goals

Role Projections

Using the first (and thus probably most salient) goal for the distant future, participants were categorized as having masculine, feminine, or neutral goals. The effects of salient goals were analyzed using a Sex (male, female) × Goal Endorsed (masculine, feminine, neutral) mixed model ANOVA on particular careers. In projected happiness, comfort, and efficacy a marginal Sex × Goal Endorsed interaction emerged for assertive careers. In all three interactions, men who endorsed masculine goals felt more happiness, comfort and efficacy than men who endorsed feminine goals. There were no effects of goals on projected happiness, comfort, efficacy or acceptance in caring careers. This supports the role congruity hypothesis; men who endorse role congruous goals show more preference for traditional roles.

Analyses including between goal endorsement, sex, and domain of career were performed. However, the number of participants in particular cells (i.e., men endorsing feminine goals) was so low that I cannot offer clear conclusions.
Discussion

These results demonstrate a consistent replication of a preference for men and women to maintain their gender-traditional roles. Additionally, men feel significantly less comfortable, happy, or competent than women in caring roles. The results also support the idea that, despite the high positivity of communal traits, men still prefer agentic roles over communal ones. This certainly informs the previous research in that crossing into a communal role (a incongruent role) for men is less desirable than an agentic role (a congruent role).

Implications

Most importantly, the aforementioned pattern of preference for a traditional role supports the role congruity literature (Diekman & Eagly 2008). Regardless of the possibility of role flexibility, women and men project more happiness, comfort, efficacy, and acceptance in traditional roles. Moreover, the results of the study support the idea that men and women do not predict occupation of a counterstereotypic role to mean more or equal happiness, comfort, efficacy, or acceptance than a stereotypic role.

Previous literature suggests that individuals perceive women as more role flexible than men (Johnston et al., 2008). The current study, though, demonstrated that men and women do not show differential preference for nontraditional roles. This discrepancy gives evidence that perhaps roles are more flexible that originally presumed. Though a strong preference for traditional roles was seen, both men and women did not utterly reject nontraditional roles. This is surprising because Johnston and colleagues showed, for men at least, negativity increased for perceptions of nontraditional careers.

Limitations
The current study may be limited in the multiple ways. Most importantly, this study lacked a control group. While some degree of role congruity was observed, without a control condition there is no way to tell if this is because of the feedback or if this would mirror a baseline projection of happiness, comfort, efficacy, and acceptance in assertive and caring roles.

The design of this study may also limit the interpretation of the preference for traditional roles. In the current manipulation, the false feedback emphasized very positive aspects of communion. These are desirable qualities to many, and therefore, a role known for these traits may be desirable as well (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989). The feedback was positive, after all, and aversion to even a counterstereotypical role may be eliminated.

The Next Step

Future studies should address the apparent disjunction between the perception of role flexibility and the actually possession of role flexibility. Because the study hopes to focus on the perception of men’s role rigidity and their seeming comfort with role flexibility, the presence of others may, as Vandello suggests (2008), may make men more self conscious about feminine actions. This may be especially true if the others are close male friends. Priming the presence of friends, both males and female, may influence the goals entered and reception of role flexibility. Priming male friends may increase the saliency of proscriptive norms of masculinity and create a male aversion of role flexibility. The next study will attempt to find a link between the perception of role rigidity and the males’ slight acceptance of feminine career roles.

This study attempted to demonstrate that men and women feel motivated to remain in traditional roles prescribed by society. In asking participants to project future feelings about nontraditional roles, the data clearly evidenced that men and women prefer to occupy respectively traditional roles instead of occupying nontraditional roles. The research showed
that, despite feedback projecting efficacy in both traditional and nontraditional careers, men and women preferred traditional over nontraditional roles. Despite societal changes, men and women still remain traditional roles.


References


