THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER ROLE ATTITUDES ON LIFE EXPECTATIONS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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During their adult lives most college students will marry, have children, and participate in the labor force. However, a recent study of expectations of students from six colleges around the country (Catalyst, 1987) indicates that both females and males are unaware of the complex interdependence of family and work roles and of the realities involved in coordinating the activities demanded by both.

The research presented here is based on "life expectation" essays in which 272 undergraduates composed paragraphs describing an ordinary day in their life for two time periods—age 25 and age 50.[1] How similar are expectations of marriage and employment for the men and women in this sample? How realistic are their views of combining work and family? What is the impact of gender role attitudes on these expectations? Do women and men with egalitarian gender role attitudes differ from those with more traditional attitudes with regard to employment and shared work in the home?

Initially the essays are screened for mention of marriage, children or grandchildren, household tasks, child care, and labor force

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participation. After a comparison by gender for these various life events, the impact of gender role attitudes is examined. Other independent variables, in addition to gender and gender role attitudes, include age, current marital status, and employment of the mother while the respondent was growing up.

A demographic analysis of the sample reveals that the majority of the students are age 20 or younger (67.5% are 18-20; 29.2% are 21-23) and have never been married (93.7%). The ethnic composition of the sample is 79.4% white, 13.6% black, 4.8% American Indian, and 2.2% other. The sample is also predominantly female (80.1% female; 19.9% male).

FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the percentage of the total sample who mention various life events for ages 25 and 50, while Table 2 presents a breakdown by gender. Included are expectations for marriage, children, doing household tasks, participating in the labor force, and combining household tasks and child care with work outside the home.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY EXPECTATIONS

Marriage is expected eventually by most of the respondents. For age 25, 64.7% mention marriage at age 25 but for age 50, 84.6% mention marriage in their essays. For both ages a slightly higher percentage of females than males wrote of marriage, but the difference is not statistically significant. Although two-thirds of the respondents expect marriage at age 25, less than one-fourth (23.2%) mention children. Again there is no significant gender difference. In total, 70% of the respondents mention children or grandchildren for age 50. For this age there is a significant gender difference, with females (74.2%) more likely than males (53.7%) to write of children in their essays. The percentages mentioned by our respondents are somewhat below those found in the Catalyst (1987) study in

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TABLE 1
Total Sample Expectations for Various Life Events for Ages 25 and 50

	FOR AGE 25	FOR AGE 50
Marriage		
No	35.3%	15.4%
Yes	64.7%	84.6%
	(N=272)	(N=272)
Children		
No	76.8%	29.9%
Yes	23.2%	70.1%
	(N=272)	(N=271)
Size of Family		
One child	58.5%	19.7%
Two children	34.1%	47.5%
Three children	4.9%	24.6%
Four Children	0.0%	3.3%
Six children	2.4%	4.9%
	(N=41)	(N=61)
Doing Household Tasks		
No	46.7%	76.8%
Yes	53.3%	23.2%
	(N=272)	(N=272)
Sharing Household Tasks with Spouse		
Segregated D of L	49.5%	70.9%
Shared D of L	50.5%	29.1%
	(N=109)	(N=55)
Sharing Child Care with Spouse		
Segregated D of L	52.9%	66.7%
Shared D of L	47.1%	33.3%
	(N=34)	(N=6)
Combining Housework and Work Outside the Home		
Housework only	3.3%	14.3%
Housework & outside work	52.9%	47.4%
Outside work only	41.2%	24.3%
No mention of work	2.6%	2.2%
Retired	-	11.8%
	(N=272)	(N=272)
Part-Time or Full Time Work Outside the Home		
Part-time	5.3%	16.8%
Full time	94.7%	83.2%
	(N=246)	(N=190)

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TABLE 2
Expectations of Females and Male Respondents for Various Life Events for Ages 25 and 50

	FOR AGE 25		FOR AGE 50	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Marriage				
No	33.5%	42.6%	14.2%	20.4%
Yes	66.5%	57.4%	85.8%	79.6%
	(N=218)	(N=54)	(N=218)	(N=54)
	X^2=1.20, d.f.=1, p=.27		X^2=.86, d.f.=1, p=.36	
Children				
No	76.1%	79.6%	25.8%	46.3%
Yes	23.9%	20.4%	74.2%	53.7%
	(N=218)	(N=54)	(N=217)	(N=54)
	X^2=1.32, d.f.=1, p=.72		X^2=7.71, d.f.=1, p=.01	
Size of Family				
One child	63.9%	20.0%	20.8%	12.5%
Two children	30.6%	60.0%	50.9%	25.0%
Three children	5.6%	0.0%	20.8%	50.0%
Four children	-	-	3.8%	0.0%
Six children	0.0%	20.0%	3.8%	12.5%
	(N=56)	(N=5)	(N=53)	(N=8)
	X^2=10.04, d.f.=3, p=.02		X^2=5.02, d.f.=4, p=.29	
Doing Household Tasks				
No	42.2%	64.8%	73.9%	88.9%
Yes	57.8%	35.2%	26.1%	11.1%
	(N=218)	(N=54)	(N=218)	(N=54)
	X^2=8.01, d.f.=1, p=.01		X^2=4.69, d.f.=1, p=.03	
Sharing Household Tasks with Spouse				
Segregated D of L	52.7%	31.3%	76.1%	44.4%
Shared D of L	47.3%	68.8%	23.9%	55.6%
	(N=93)	(N=16)	(N=46)	(N=9)
	X^2=1.73, d.f.=1, p=.19		X^2=2.28, d.f.=1, p=.13	
Sharing Child Care with Spouse				
Segregated D of L	58.6%	20.0%	100.0%	33.3%
Shared D of L	41.4%	80.0%	0.0%	66.7%
	(N=29)	(N=5)	(N=3)	(N=3)
	X^2=1.24, d.f.=1, p=.27			
Combining Housework and Work Outside the Home				
Housework only	3.7%	1.9%	17.9%	0.0%
Housework & outside work	61.5%	18.5%	56.4%	11.1%
Outside work only	33.0%	74.1%	14.7%	63.3%
No mention of work	1.8%	5.6%	1.8%	3.7%
Retired	-	-	9.2%	22.2%
	(N=218)	(N=54)	(N=218)	(N=54)
	X^2=35.55, d.f.=3, p=.001		X^2=76.93, d.f.=4, p=.001	
Part-Time or Full Time work Outside the Home				
Part-time	6.1%	2.0%	18.4%	10.5%
Full Time	93.9%	98.0%	81.6%	89.5%
	(N=197)	(N=49)	(N=152)	(N=.38
	X^2=.60, d.f.=1, p=.44		X^2=.85, d.f.=1, p=.36	

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which 83% of the subjects state that they plan to have children, with 75% of their subjects stating that a woman should have her first child between the ages of 22 and 30 (p. 34). The results of our study indicate that most of those first children are expected after age 25.

HOUSEHOLD TASKS

One of the most traditional gender role expectations is that the female will be largely responsible for household tasks, whether she works outside the home or not (Berheide, 1984). For both ages in our sample females are more likely than males to mention household tasks, such as fixing breakfast, cleaning the house, and the like as part of their daily activities (Table 2). At age 25 over half (57.8%) of the females write of household tasks in their essays compared to a little over one-third (35.2%) of the males. By age 50 the number of both females and males who mention household tasks has declined, with only 26.5% of the females and 11.1% of the males giving any thought of household tasks in their essays. Leisure activities are seen as much more salient in the lives of our respondents at age 50 than are household tasks.

A screening of the essays for mention of division of labor between spouses for both household tasks and child care indicates that of the 93 females who mention tasks being shared or segregated approximately half indicate sharing with their husbands at age 25. For only 16 of the male respondents could the classification of household tasks as shared or segregated be ascertained for age 25. Among these 16 males, however, 11 indicate they will share tasks with their spouses. Thus, among the few males who see that household tasks will be part of their daily routine, a large proportion went out of their way to state they will share tasks. There is then bad news and good news. Only one-third of the males even mention household tasks as they write of their daily lives. But among this group, a goodly number expect to share the responsibility for accomplishing this work with their spouses.

For even fewer students could the division of labor be determined for child care (N = 34), but the results are similar to those

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for household tasks. Only 12 females and 4 men perceive that child care responsibilities will be shared with the spouse. The numbers here, while low, indicate that women still see themselves as doing most of the child care and household tasks and men agree.

LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION

Females and males do not differ significantly in their expectations to be participants in the labor force for either ages 25 or 50; 92.6% of the males and 94.5% of the females mention labor force participation in their essay for age 25. The remainder expect to be in school or be full-time homemakers. Again for age 50, the proportion of both females and males who expect to be in the labor force are similar. Of the males, 74.1% expect employment while 71.1% of the females write of work. However, more females than males expect to be employed only part time.

Female respondents are more likely to mention a specific occupation than are males (62% compared to 41% at age 25). Teacher is the occupation most frequently listed (19 respondents), followed by accountant (12), public relations (10), social worker (8), scientist or researcher (8), and manager or department head (8). Quite a few cite health careers including physician (2), pharmacist (3), nurse (4), physical therapist (1), dental hygienist (11), and medical technologist (1). Four females list lawyer as their occupation. Insurance, real estate, and other sales are also mentioned. Although there is a mix of traditional and nontraditional occupations mentioned, all require a commitment of time and energy; those who also expect marriage may experience some degree of overload as they balance the demands of these roles.

For age 50 the occupations listed by females have not changed appreciably. There are fewer teachers (7), but one school administrator. There are more managers (15), physicians (5), lawyers (6), and one judge and one dentist.

Males list fewer specific occupations than females for age 25. Lawyer is most frequently cited (6), followed by accountant (3),

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manager (3), physician (2), pilot (2), pharmacist (2), stock sales (2), and police officer (2). For age 50 the same occupations are given with the exception of police officer. One additional occupation is given (political scientist).

The occupation of a spouse is mentioned infrequently by both sexes, but especially by males. Only one male for age 25 and two males for age 50 mention an occupation for their wife.

Most of the respondents are judged as expecting a modest level of living at age 25 (82.2% of the total sample). More of the males, however, write of a life-style judged to be high (34.2% compared to 9.5% of females). For age 50, however, none of the respondents expects a low standard of living.

GENDER ROLE ATTITUDES

Gender role attitudes are measured by responses (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) to six statements as follows: (1) It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside of the home and the woman takes care of the home and family; (2) It is more important for a wife to help her husband than to have a career herself; (3) A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work outside the home (score reversed); (4) If a wife earns more than her husband the marriage is headed for trouble; (5) Men and women should be paid the same money if they do the same work (score reversed); (6) Women should be considered as seriously as men for jobs as executives or politicians (score reversed). Alpha reliability for the gender role scale is .74. A high score indicates a liberal attitude toward gender roles.

The score for female students is significantly higher (more liberal) on the gender role attitude scale than it is for males (20.07 compared to 17.91, $p = .001$). For female students, gender role attitude is strongly related to whether their mother held a job while they were growing up. A regression analysis including age, race, marital status, and mother's work history indicates mother's work

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history is the only significant predictor of gender role attitude (beta = .34, multiple R = .35, R^2 = .12; not shown). Among males, whether or not their mother worked when they were growing up is not related to their current attitude.

The main theoretical question of this research is the relationship between gender role attitudes and students' anticipated future lives. Using a median split for the gender attitude scale, both similarities and differences are found between low and high categories. Table 3 shows no difference between liberal and traditional women in their expectations to marry, have children, and do household tasks. On the other hand, females with liberal attitudes differ from females with more traditional attitudes in that they are (1) more likely to mention *only* work outside of the home and less likely to mention housework only for age 25 (p = .05); and (2) more likely to state that they will be working full time at age 25 (p = .02). More of the traditional women said they will be working part time; (3) more likely to state that they will be working full-time at age 50 (p = .04). The traditional women see themselves as working part time or as retired; (4) more likely to state that they will have only one child at age 25 (p = .08). More of the traditional women say they will have two children at age 25; (5) more likely to mention sharing household tasks with their husbands at age 25 (p = .01). For age 50 the percentages are lower for both high and low categories but a similar difference is found (p = .07); (6) more likely to mention sharing child care responsibilities at age 25 (p = .13).

Table 4 indicates that males with liberal attitudes are more likely than their traditional counterparts to (1) mention both housework and outside work in their essays for age 50 (p = .06); (2) mention marriage for both age 25 (p = .07) and 50 (p = .04); (3) mention children or grandchildren for age 50 (p = .11); and (4) mention sharing household tasks with their wives for age 25 (p = .05). Males with liberal gender role attitudes are less likely to stress that they will be single for age 25.

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TABLE 3
Expectations of Female Respondents with Traditional and Liberal Sex-Role Attitudes for Ages 25 and 50

	FOR AGE 25		FOR AGE 50	
	Traditional Attitude	Liberal Attitude	Traditional Attitude	Liberal Attitude
Marriage				
No	32.9%	34.6%	14.6%	14.0%
Yes	67.1%	65.4%	85.5%	86.0%
	(N=76)	(N=136)	(N=76)	(N=136)
	X^2=.01, d.f.=1, p=.93		X^2=0, d.f.=1, p=.1.0	
Children				
No	75.0%	76.5%	30.7%	22.1%
Yes	25.0%	23.5%	69.3%	77.9%
	(N=76)	(N=136)	(N=75)	(N=136)
	X^2=.01, d.f.=1, P=.94		X^2=1.47, d.f.=1, p=.22	
Size of Family				
One child	43.8%	78.9%	11.8%	25.7%
Two children	50.0%	15.8%	52.9%	51.4%
Three children	6.3%	5.3%	29.4%	14.3%
Four children	-	-	5.9%	2.9%
Six children	-	-	0.0%	5.7%
	(N=16)	(N=19)	(N=17)	(N=35)
	X^2=4.96, d.f.=2, p=.08		X^2=3.66, d.f.=4, p=.45	
Doing Household Tasks				
No	46.1%	41.2%	71.1%	76.5%
Yes	53.9%	58.8%	28.9%	23.5%
	(N=76)	(N=136)	(N=76)	(N=136)
	X^2=.30, d.f.=1, p=.59		X^2=.75, d.f.=1, p=.39	
Sharing Household Tasks with Spouse				
Segregated D of L	68.8%	42.1%	88.9%	65.4%
Shared D of L	31.3%	57.9%	11.1%	34.6%
	(N=32)	(N=57)	(N=18)	(N=26)
	X^2=5.82, d.f.=1, p=.01		X^2=3.13, d.f.=1, p=.07	
Sharing Child Care with Spouse				
Segregated D of L	77.8%	47.4%		
Shared D of L	22.2%	52.6%		
	(N=9)	(N=19)		
	X^2=2.31, d.f.=1, p=.13			
Combining Housework and Work Outside the Home				
Housework only	7.9%	1.5%	22.4%	15.4%
Housework & outside work	60.5%	61.0%	52.6%	58.1%
Outside work only	28.9%	36.0%	10.5%	17.6%
Retired	-	-	10.5%	8.1%
No mention of work	2.6%	7.5%	3.9%	.7%
	(N=76)	(N=136)	(N=76)	(N=136)
	X^2=6.41, d.f.=3, p=.09		X^2=6.19, d.f.=4, p=.19	
Part-time or Full Time Work Outside the Home				
Part-time	12.1%	3.2%	28.9%	14.6%
Full time	87.1%	96.8%	71.1%	85.4%
	(N=66)	(N=125)	(N=45)	(N=103)
	X^2=5.84, d.f.=1, p=.02		X^2=4.19, d.f.=1, p=.04	

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TABLE 4
Expectations of Male Respondents with Traditional and Liberal Sex-Role Attitudes for Ages 25 and 50

	FOR AGE 25		FOR AGE 50	
	Traditional Attitude	Liberal Attitude	Traditional Attitude	Liberal Attitude
Marriage				
No	51.4%	26.3%	28.6%	5.3%
Yes	48.6%	73.7%	71.4%	94.7%
	(N=35)	(N=19)	(N=35)	(N=19)
	X^2=3.17, d.f.=1, p=.07		X^2=4.12, d.f.=1, p=.04	
Children				
No	80.0%	78.9%	54.3%	31.6%
Yes	20.0%	21.1%	45.7%	68.4%
	(N=35)	(N=19)	(N=35)	(N=19)
	X^2=0, d.f.=1, p=1.0		X^2=2.55, d.f.=1, p=.11	
Size of Family				
One child	50.0%	0.0%	16.7%	0.0%
Two children	50.0%	66.7%	33.3%	0.0%
Three children	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%
Four children	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Six children	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	50.0%
	(N=2)	(N=3)	(N=6)	(N=2)
Doing Household Tasks				
No	71.4%	52.6%	91.4%	84.2%
Yes	28.6%	47.4%	8.6%	15.8%
	(N=35)	(N=19)	(N=35)	(N=19)
	X^2=1.18, d.f.=1, p=.28		X^2=12, d.f.=1, p=.72	
Sharing Household Tasks with Spouse				
Segregated D of L	50.0%	0.0%	66.7%	33.3%
Shared D of L	50.0%	100.0%	33.3%	66.7%
	(N=10)	(N=6)	(N=3)	(N=3)
	Fisher's Exact Test p=.05		Fisher's Exact Test p=.40	
Sharing Child Care with Spouse				
Segregated D of L	25.0%	0.0%	-	33.3%
Shared D of L	75.0%	100.0%	-	66.7%
	(N=4)	(N=1)		(N=3)
Combining Housework and Work Outside the Home				
Housework only	2.9%	0.0%	-	-
Housework & outside work	14.3%	26.3%	2.9%	26.3%
Outside work only	80.0%	63.2%	68.6%	52.6%
Retired	-	-	25.7%	15.8%
No mention of work	2.9%	10.5%	2.9%	5.3%
	(N=35)	(N=19)	(N=35)	(N=19)
	X^2=3.28, d.f.=3, p=.35		X^2=7.33, d.f.=3, p=.06	
Part-Time or Full Time Work				
Part-time	3.0%	0.0%	17.4%	0.0%
Full time	97.0%	100.0%	82.6%	100.0%
	(N=33)	(N=16)	(N=23)	(N=15)
	X^2=0, d.f.=1, p=1.0		X^2=1.36, d.f.=1, p=.24	

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CONCLUSIONS

For the last decade evidence has accumulated documenting a gradual shift toward a more egalitarian role for women and men in the workplace and in the family (Thornton et al., 1983; Gallup, 1987). The similarity in expectations of marriage and employment for both females and males reflects reality, since dual-earner marriages are the dominant pattern in today's society. Culture lag appears, however, when it comes to sharing work inside the home. Despite their higher scores on the gender role attitude scale, the women in our sample still reflect a traditional view of their role in the home. As reflected in their essays, both females and males still see women largely responsible for household tasks and child care. Having an employed mother makes females somewhat more sensitive to the need for sharing these tasks, but the low numbers of women and men who mention a division of labor indicates that most students are not thinking much about it. In this respect the college students in our sample are similar to the ones reported on in the Catalyst study: They demonstrate a lack of awareness of the complexity of combining work and family responsibilities.

Our finding that women as a group score significantly higher (more liberal) on the gender role attitude scale than men is compatible with other reports of attitudes of young people toward gender roles (Herzog and Bachman, 1982; Thornton et al., 1983; Tittle, 1981). That the mother's work history predicts gender role attitudes for women is also consistent with other studies (Hoffman and Nye, 1974; Herzog and Bachman, 1982). Having an employed mother while growing up influences both current attitudes about gender roles and expectations about future work and family roles. What needs to be explored more fully in future studies is the link between equality of opportunity in the workplace and the expectations about the role of wife and mother in the home. As long as both women and men perceive that women will be responsible for the "caring" work in the home, it will be difficult for women to have an equal footing with men in the marketplace.

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Ideological concerns connected with attitudes toward gender roles affect the students in our sample in some interesting ways. Nontraditional men are more likely than traditional men to emphasize family concerns (marriage, sharing household tasks, children and/or grandchildren) while nontraditional women are more likely than traditional women to mention only work outside the home, working full time instead of part time, and limiting the size of their family (age 25).

If we assume that women and men with similar gender role attitudes are attracted to each other, they may experience some problems with being "out of sync" in their dating or marriage relationships. However, in one important way nontraditional women and men are compatible: They both mention sharing household tasks with their spouse. Sociological research has demonstrated the importance of shared involvement in household tasks on psychological well-being among married couples (Ross et al., 1983); this should bode well for the future.

NOTE

1. The sample is composed of undergraduates in a large southwestern university who completed this instrument during the first week of the spring 1987 semester in classes in human development and sociology.

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