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ABSTRACT

In this speech delivered to the annual meeting of the National Council on Family Relations, the author reviews five papers presented for discussion, and integrates them into treatment of the family, gender role and sexuality. She further indicates theoretical flaws and weaknesses, as well as problems in the fieldwork on data accumulation. (MML)

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FAMILY AND SEX ROLES: A THEORETICAL INTEGRATION

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FAMILY AND SEX ROLES: A THEORETICAL INTEGRATION

Introduction

The purpose of this paper, and of the others in this session¹, is to provide an overview or context within which to assess the significance for family and sex roles of several papers given earlier at other Research and Theory sessions during these meetings. When Professor Safilios-Rothschild, the convener of this session, first contacted me about participating I was most enthusiastic about her ideas for this session. It seemed a good way to go beyond the traditional information giving functions of most sessions and to move us toward reflection, assessment and integration of at least some of the ideas and research findings that have been presented to us during the course of these meetings.

Despite the fact that I have received only half of my allotment of assigned papers for review, I nevertheless support fully the intent of this session and hope that we will see more like it in future NCFR programs.

Also by way of openers let me confess that the title of my discussion was chosen in June while I was vacationing in Kentucky. Upon my return to a more sober academic environment I was aghast at the rather grandiose and all-encompassing title that I had stuck myself with. In the spirit of truth-in-advertising laws, I say now that the title is a misnomer. For one thing there is no overall theory of the family. For another, there is no overall theory of sex roles. To propose an integration of the two is suicidal. Now, having gotten the disclaimers on the table, let's see what

¹Research and Theory Session: "Enrichment of Family Theory Through Sex Role Theories."

we can do with the task at hand.

Linkages between Family and Sex Roles

All of the papers I received for review in one way or another touch, either directly or indirectly, on the linkage between family and sex roles, most specifically within the substantive area of human sexuality. Because it touches directly on all three areas let me start with the paper by Orthner and Mancini on the preferences of husbands and wives for sex as recreational activity.² The authors were interested in the extent to which married men and women would choose sexual activity over other forms of leisure to fill their discretionary time. To find out they presented a list of 96 leisure activities to a sample of upper-middle class Southerners and asked them to choose and rank order five activities they enjoyed the most. Sexual and affectional activity was the most frequent choice of husbands while for wives sex barely beat out sewing and ran a poor second to reading books, which was the most preferred leisure activity of all.

Orthner and Mancini then looked at activity preferences by sex and by number of years married and found that the preference for sex declined among those who had been married for longer periods of time. In answer to the obvious question, "If they don't choose sex, what do they like to do instead?", the authors first categorized all the other activities as either joint (ie, activities requiring interaction with others) or Independent³

²Dennis K. Orthner and Jay A. Mancini, "Sex as Play: Recreational Sexuality as a Preference among Husbands and Wives." Paper presented at the annual meetings, NCFR. New York, October 1976.

³"Independent" is my term for the combination of "parallel" and "individual" activities, analyzed in combination by the authors.

(ie, activities that required little or no involvement with others) and then plotted the preferences for these sorts of activities by sex and duration of marriage. I found the results extremely interesting, for what emerged from the data were two distinct pictures for husbands and wives. For husbands, the preference plot for joint activities was an almost mirror reflection of the plot for sex; while for wives, the preference plot for independent activities was a mirror image of the plot for sex. In other words, men prefer to take up the slack in leisure time with activities that involve others, while women prefer to fill the gap left by the decline in preference for sex with activities they can do alone by themselves.

The authors interpret their findings as reflective of the differential socialization of men and women relative to sex as a playful or recreational activity, such that men view marital sex as an opportunity for fun while women see it as an obligation. The authors also suggest, in part from the senior author's earlier work, that the amount of time wives actually spend in activities matches their preferences more closely than for husbands, leading them to suggest that it is the wife's declining preference for sex that produces the often-noted pattern of decreasing marital sex with increasing marital duration and that the husband's preferences for sex of necessity fall accordingly. At the same time, and in contradiction to the above, they present data from this study suggesting a much closer correlation for husbands than for wives between reported sexual activity the weekend prior to the interview and the stated preference for leisure-time sexual activity, which suggests to me that the sexual behavior of wives follow their husbands' preferences more closely than their own.

The dynamics between husbands and wives in the negotiation of whose preferences are to be translated into actual behavior involves power as much as sexual socialization and could probably be analyzed more adequately from that vantage point.

This study raises some valuable questions about the place of sex in the lives of married men and women, but it highlights also some poignant mismatches between husbands and wives in their preferences for companionship. While the authors attribute the differential preference for discretionary sex to sex-differential sexual socialization, I would suggest that a plausible alternative explanation would be found in the daily activity patterns that distinguish men from women. I was struck by their findings that the wives' preference for independent leisure activities shows its sharpest increase during the years of intensive child care activities, while men's preference for joint activities rise sharply during periods of intensive career building and then again after the work career has peaked and is beginning to wane prior to retirement. This may suggest that women seek some respite in their leisure from their otherwise intensively-"peopled" lives, replete with demands for attention from children and spouses. Men's daily lives, by contrast, may be rather barren in terms of affective contacts with co-workers and associates, a barrenness which they may seek to alleviate through their preference for joint leisure activities. The mismatching of husband-wife activity preferences indicates a potential source of strain within marriages that arises out of gender role differentiation. One might expect a rather different pattern of leisure preferences where the non-leisure activities of men and women were more similar.

The next three papers deal in different ways with the same question: do gender role orientations affect one's orientation to sex, love, and intimacy? The answer, by the way, is yes. The paper by Lyness and Narus,⁴ compared the degree of intimacy in relationships among high androgynous (as measured by the Bem Sex Role Inventory scored according to the Spence method) low androgynous, and sex-typed persons and found that the high androgynous and sex-typed people were able to sustain more intimate relationships with others than were the low androgynes. The one significant difference between high androgynous and masculine men was in the much greater intimacy level of the androgynous men in relationships with other men. The authors conclude that feminine women have no monopoly on the achievement of intimate relationships, in contrast to traditional gender role ideology. Their study also suggests to me that brotherhood is possible, but that it requires apparently the kind of gender role flexibility that is measured by the BSRI.

The paper by Walsh and his colleagues⁵ sought to establish among other things a relationship between sex role equalitarianism and sexual permissiveness among male and female college Freshmen and their parents. Although their data are generally unconvincing they did find some support to link an equalitarian ideology with sexual permissiveness among both the female

⁴Judith Fischer Lyness and L. R. Narus, Jr. "Androgyny, Sexuality, and Intimacy." Paper presented at the annual meetings of NCFR. New York, October 1976.

⁵Robert H. Walsh, Mary Ferrell, William Tolone, and Ollie Pocs. "Gender, Sex Role Equalitarianism, and Sexuality in Student and Parent Samples." Paper presented at the annual meetings of the NCFR. New York City, October, 1976.

and male students. Moreover, they found that mothers and college-educated fathers were more permissive relative to their daughters behavior when the parents held a sex-equalitarian ideology; ideology was not related however to parental permissiveness re premarital sexuality for their sons.

The authors account for the finding among the students by reference to Reiss's Autonomy Theory (1974) but proffer no explanation of the parental findings. My impatience with their lack of discussion is less than my impatience with their claim that they are opening up a new area of inquiry (ie, the relationship between sex roles and sexuality). Let me say only that there has for a long time existed a cluster of sociologists who traffic heavily in the sexual behavior of Americans; they are demographers; social demography and the sociology of fertility are rich with research and theory about sexual behavior, most pertinent in this regard about the relationships between adult sex roles and sexuality. The present paper could benefit from greater exposure to that literature.

The authors' effort to look at the link between parents and their children on the issue of sexuality is to be commended. In my view it is this relationship rather than that between sex role ideology and sexual permissiveness that needs greater attention. Given the importance of same-sex and cross-sex parent-child relationships in sex role socialization, it is surprising that we know as little as we do about parent-child transmission structures for the flow of information and values relative to sex, sexual permissiveness, contraception, and so forth. Most of what our literature suggests is that parents and children do not communicate directly or positively

about such matters. At the same time it is quite clear that such parental and familial characteristics as socio-economic status, family composition, work-status of the mother, religiosity and liberalism do make a difference in the sexual and contraceptive behavior of daughters (Libby, 1971; and Kantner and Zelnik, 1972). The Walsh paper itself suggests that parents can be distinguished by sex role ideology in terms of their acceptance of premarital sexual behavior of daughters. That sex role ideology had no relationship to parents' acceptance of sexual behavior among sons is probably attributable to the possibility that there is greater consensus among all kinds of parents as to what is expected and acceptable for sons and also to the fact that a measure of sex role ideology that is constructed entirely of female-focussed items may just not be relevant to parents' attitudes about their sons' behavior. But more importantly we need to look more closely at the types of communication structures about sexuality that exist between parents and children. That they may differ according to parental sex-role ideology is a possibility suggested by the Walsh findings.

The third paper in this general set is that by Hatkoff and Lasswell⁶ on the conceptualization of love. The authors hypothesized and found that men and women love differently, as measured by sex distribution across six types of love (Storge, Agape, Manic, Pragma, Ludis, and Eros). Briefly put, the authors find women's love to be calmer with mutual rapport (Storge), pragmatic

⁶Terry S. Hatkoff and Thomas E. Laswell. "Male/Female Similarities and Differences in Conceptualizing Love." Paper presented at the annual meetings of the NCFR. New York City, October, 1976.

(Pragma), and possessive (Manic) while men's love is self-centered (Ludis) and romantic (Eros). Neither sex was more likely than the other to be self-sacrificial in love (Agape). The authors explain their findings in terms of traditional sex role prescriptions suggesting that women have to marry (Storge) and marry well (Pragma) and dare not let their man escape (Manic), while men are taught to love exuberantly and wildly (Eros) but not to get trapped (Ludus). I think this paper illustrates that if you know what you want to find in your research, you can find it. It also illustrates some conceptual flaws, common to a host of research efforts on men and women, implicit in this paper, for example, is the assumption that it is sex that differentiates their study sample. If nothing else, the previous two papers here suggest that other measures such as the BSRI or a measure of sex role equalitarianism may be more pertinent elements of differentiation than one's sex assignment. Another flaw is to use sex assignment as the explanation for research findings. Structurally the logic is as follows: "The sexes are different (in their attitudes, behavior, conceptualization of love, or whatever) because they are...well, uh...different sexes." Others may disagree, but I think these are fatal flaws; and it is hard to see how work of this sort will contribute to the field except perhaps as an illustration of what is wrong with a good deal of research in this area.

The last paper that I received for review is a study of American norms relative to extramarital sexuality by Davis Weis.⁷ Using data from the N.O.R.C. 1973 General Social Survey, Weis performs some simple bivariate analyses of several standard demographic variables by extramarital sexual attitude (ESA), a measure of the extent to which people disapprove of extramarital sex. The response choices, I should note, range from "it is always

⁷David L. Weis, "An Analysis of American Attitudes Toward Extramarital Sexual Relations: Survey Research Using N.O.R.C. Data." Paper presented to the annual meetings of the NCFR, New York City, October 1976.

wrong" to "it is not wrong at all." I would wonder if different results would be obtained if the choices were affirmatively stated: "it is always right" to "it is not right at all."

Weis found that approximately 80 percent of Americans disapproved, stating that it was always or almost always wrong. Disapproval was associated with being female, old, married or widowed, having children, going to church, having less than a college education, coming from a small town or rural area, and living in Mid-America. Weis interprets these findings in a structural-functional framework, arguing that control of sexual relations outside of marriage is necessary for family order. Further, he suggests that support for the traditional normative prohibition of extramarital sex is located within the family system, the educational system as its lower levels, and the religious system. Persons involved with these systems then manifest the norm with greater frequency than persons who are generally outside these systems, while those persons with opportunities for exposure to values at variance with the traditional norm (ie, those in metropolitan areas, in university systems, and unconnected through marriage with the family system) are less likely to support the traditional norm.

In assessing the Weis paper, it is important to keep in mind, as the author pointed out at the end of his paper, that attitudes toward extramarital sex are not necessarily a reflection of actual behavior. Indeed, the expressed attitudes may rather be a response to the perceived social desirability of voicing support for the normative proscription of extramarital sex. In fact, the finding of a difference between men and women in disapproval may reflect nothing more than their conformity to sex-specific and sex-stereotyped norms about sexuality. That all three areas, family, sex roles, and sexuality,

Toward Theoretical Integration

Let me move now from the specific papers to some more general comments. That all three areas, family sex roles, and sexuality, are closely interlinked is obvious; the task is to begin to specify more clearly some conceptual and propositional linkages. One conceptual element that is shared is the notion of role and the expectations or scripts associated with role. Thus family roles are often specified in terms of the gender roles⁸ of component members of a family unit. Indeed, as others have pointed out, there has been such a close identification of women's gender roles with their family roles that the examination of gender roles in other institutional spheres (economy, polity, religion, eg) has until recently been ignored by sociologists. When viewed cross-culturally it appears that gender role structures in different societies are in large part a function of the family system in terms of the family system's specification of values relative to age at marriage, family size, and residence patterns (Fox, 1975).

Scripts for sexual behavior are differentiated by sex so that one's

⁸Considerable confusion exists about the terms "sex role" and "gender role." Chafetz (1974) and Stoll (1974) are two of many who have attempted to distinguish between the terms. The distinction that is often made is between biological versus socio-cultural and psychological sources of role identity. Thus sex role would refer to one's assignment at birth to male or female sex depending on the appearance of one's external genitalia (sometimes an incomplete and erroneous criterion for sex determination). Gender role would refer to the internalization of norms assigned to male or female sex and to the identification of oneself socially as either male or female. Although for most persons the two vary together, so that if one is defined as male for example, one also takes on the male gender role and acts "masculine," the two are in reality independent. This means that regardless of one's sex role, i.e., assignment to one or the other sex, one's gender role could be more or less masculine or more or less feminine or both (androgynous). The common practice of using the two terms, sex role and gender role, interchangeably merely adds to the confusion, and this paper will be no exception to that practice.

sexual role is often a function of one's gender role. This can be specified still further by taking into account one's family role. Thus, for example, the sexual behavioral scripts of married women differ markedly from the sexual scripts of unmarried men or (increasingly) unmarried women.

The directions of influence among the three, family, sex roles, and sexuality, are most likely reciprocal with continuous feedback loops in terms of the effects of one on the other two. At the same time I think one could argue convincingly for the initial causal priority of the family system in terms of its impact on both gender roles and sexual roles.

I propose that we look at the family both as a social structural unit and as a normative system which provide boundaries (or constraints) within which the learning, the enactment, and the social control of sex roles and sexual behavior take place. Within family units and within the family system as a totality probably a range of gender role and sexual behaviors are acceptable, varying around specifiable normative prescriptions. For example, variations on the theme of husband-wife division of labor relative to economic support, home maintenance, child care, and community contacts can be empirically verified as following a normative prescription of equalitarianism overlain with the norm of husband predominance. Similarly, marital sexual behavior can be seen as organized to varying degrees around normative prescriptions for mutual conjugal sexual access and sexual exclusivity. But the range of acceptable variation in organization of gender roles and sexual behavior is limited by structural imperatives and value premises - in short, the ground rules of the family. Pleck provides as a case in point an excellent description of familial constraints on the extension of female roles to a non-familial sphere

in his analysis of the integration of work and family roles (1975).

The above implies that change or alteration in norms relative to sexuality or gender roles may of necessity have to occur in contexts other than familial, with the resultant problem faced at the individual level of reintegration of new values or behavior within the family. But there is a catch - 22 here. The opportunity structure for exposure to sources of alternative conceptualizations of appropriate sexual behavior or of gender roles differs according to one's family position, which is often defined in terms of and correspondingly limited by traditional age and gender roles.

Such a formulation would make understandable the fact that sexual permissiveness, for instance, is greater among college students who are less involved in a familial context than among their non-collegiate peers, or that approval of extramarital sexuality is greater among singles and divorced persons than among their married counterparts; or that working women see working mothers as less of a threat to young children than do housewives. In other words, variation from familial-prescribed codes re sex and gender roles is more plausible when one's opportunity structure for exposure to alternatives is greater.

This formulation hypothesizes an essential conservatism of the family by suggesting first that the family system imposes limits on the variability of gender and sex behavior, second that the source of change in these areas is external to the family, and third that both structural and interpersonal conflicts are generated by attempts to reorganize the family around alternative norms re gender roles and sexuality. It is precisely these three points that lead me to postulate the causal dominance of the family system in setting

the conditions for organization in the other two areas.

Another source of conceptual linkage between family, gender roles, and sexuality is in terms of stratification, the system for the allocation of goods, resources, power, prestige, and so forth. It is perhaps in this area that the connections between family and sex roles and family and sexuality have been examined most closely. Following Holter's excellent monograph, *Sex Roles and Social Structure* (1970), wherein she posits sex differentiation as the basis for a system of stratification by sex, we can argue that gender roles form a main axis of distribution and evaluation within the family.

The differential distribution of rights and obligations by sex within the context of marital roles is embodied still in the legal codes of many states. Explanations for the differential distribution by sex of resources, that are often translated into a sex-typed familial division of labor and male-dominant power structure, have received less attention from family sociologists than the outcomes of such a distribution; but there is increasing recognition nonetheless of the fact that such a distribution is tied closely with gender role norms.

Sexuality within the context of stratification is generally treated as a good or medium of exchange, traded between families in the form of women, that cements linkages between networks of families. Collins (1971) also uses sex as a material good in exchange relationships between men and women, where sexual access is bargained away by women in exchange for the security of marital status and a familial role.

Contraceptive responsibility is another interaction arena where the sexual behavior of men and women is influenced by sex stratification. Contraception appears generally to be considered a nuisance and worse with contraceptive responsibility defined as a "cost" or "loss" by both sexual partners, such that each partner is interested in having the other assume contraceptive responsibility (Fox, 1974). Both exchange theory and conflict theory suggest that the person with the least to lose will be the one most likely to wield control in a given conflict situation. Men have little to lose by not being the contraceptive. Women stand to lose whether or not they use contraception: if they do, they lose the sexual politics game; if they do not use contraception, they stand to lose at pregnancy roulette. Empirically, marital contraception is handled by the female; non-marital contraception is as often as not handled by neither. In either setting, the responsibility for contraception is allocated to the female,⁹ the less powerful partner in contraceptive bargaining.

Let me close by acknowledging that it would have been helpful for persons hearing this paper to have read the papers discussed herein. An attempt was made to summarize key points and findings previously presented at these meetings and to highlight some general themes that run through these papers. Although they differ in methodology and content they show clearly the importance of gender roles to one's involvement in other societal institutions, most especially the family.

⁹One strategy for altering this situation and forcing spouses into accepting a greater role in contraception was reported by Rodgers and Ziegler (1968). The strategy was simply the wives' refusal of sexual access to their husbands. This strategy is apt to be less useful to women in nonmarital pairs, however, because of the absence of a "marital claim" on the male partner and because the male partner may have greater opportunity to go elsewhere for sexual relations.

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