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ABSTRACT

Although both men and women usually name same-sex role models, women are more likely than men to choose models of the opposite sex. The operation of role models and women's achievement patterns has received increased attention from researchers who have assumed that certain groups, i.e., mothers, teachers, operate as role models when attributes of the "model" and women's achievements are related. Questionnaires were completed by male and female subjects, ranging in age from young children to older adults, to indicate their role model choice. Females and males predominantly chose same-sex models. However, females were more likely than males to make cross-sex choices; the respondent's age did not affect this finding. Females' most frequent choice was no role model at all, followed by female entertainers, mothers, famous women, male nonrelatives, and female teachers. (Author/JAC)

Role Model Choice:

Who Do Women Say Their Models Are?

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Role Model Choice: Who Do Women Say Their Models Are?

The achievement motivation and behavior of women has been and continues to be an active area of research and theory (Mednick, Tangri, & Hoffman, 1975; O'Leary, 1974). In an attempt to understand why women do not attain levels of success frequently attained by men, why traditional measures of achievement motivation and behavior are unrelated for women, and how to motivate women to enter previously all-male areas, research has focused on child-rearing and socialization practices (Hoffman, 1972; Kipnis, 1974; Stein & Bailey, 1973), aspects of women's personalities (e.g., Horner, 1972), women's attributions for success and failure (e.g., Frieze, 1975), how women define success (Stein & Bailey, 1973; Veroff, 1977), and institutional discrimination against women (e.g., Rosen & Jerdee, 1974; Ladd & Lipsett, 1976).

The operation of role models on women's achievement has been receiving increased attention. Unfortunately, at this point there is little agreement as to how to define a role model. Kemper (1968) defined a role model as one who provides technical information on how to do something, whereas Douvan (1976) stressed the importance of a role model defining possibilities of what a person can do. Bell (1970) suggested that interaction between the actor and the model is needed for one to function as a role model, and Goldstein's (1979) research suggests sustained, intense interaction is necessary, while other researchers have assumed that mere visual exposure to a person (e.g., via film) is sufficient for that person to function as a role model (e.g., Plost & Rosen, 1974). A recent investigation (Basow & Howe, 1980) defined a role model as "someone whose life and activities influenced the respondent in specific life decisions" (p. 559). According to this definition, an uncle, who gave his niece a large sum of money contingent upon her attending nursing school, would be his niece's role model if the money was a factor influencing her to attend nursing school.

Not only is the definition of a role model unclear, but in practice investigators have determined who functions as a role model through an attributional process: Variables pertaining to a class of people (e.g., mothers, female teachers) and the behavior of a group of women (e.g., career choice, mathematics interest) are examined. If a relationship exists between the variables measured and the behavior examined, the class of people is assumed to function as a role model (Almquist & Angrist, 1971; Goldstein, 1979; Stake & Granger, 1978; Tangri, 1972; White, 1967).

Rather than starting from the assumption that mothers, female teachers, or any other group of people do act as role models, we decided to first ascertain who women say their role models are, and to see whether role model choice changed with age. While not denying that people are sometimes not fully conscious of who their role models might be, autobiographical accounts suggest that frequently people are aware of who provides them with information and defines possibilities for them (cf. Douvan, 1976). We hoped that such an approach might bring about more order to the area and ultimately lead to more systematic investigation of the effects of role models on achievement.

Because of the conceptual confusion surrounding the definition of a role model, and because we wished to look at whom women chose as their role models as a function of age, we had a difficult time arriving at the proper way to ask people about their role models. We finally decided to simply ask women whom they wanted to be like or model themselves after. We hoped to determine whether these choices fell into meaningful categories, whether these categories were similar to those chosen by past investigators, whether categories changed with age, and whether women chose the same models as men.

Method

Questionnaires were constructed which asked for age, sex, employment status,

and the following question to be answered in an open-ended fashion: "Who, if anyone, are the people (or person) you would most like to be like? That is, who are the people you try to model yourself after? If the persons are not widely known, describe who they are. If there is no such person, write 'no one'."

These questionnaires were distributed to the eighteen students enrolled in a Psychology of Women extension course in a small Iowa town. As part of a class project, each student was asked to distribute the questionnaire to a minimum of five females and five males, with no restriction on age. Students were instructed not to actually pass out the forms to young children, but to ask each child, "Who would you most like to be like when you grow up?"

Two hundred fifty-four questionnaires were returned. In addition, because of the small number of college-aged persons in this sample, the questionnaires were distributed to students in a summer session class in Abnormal Psychology. This second sample yielded an additional 26 usable questionnaires.[1]

A scanning of a random sample of the questionnaires revealed that responses could be coded into ten categories: Female Relative-a specific female relative was named, e.g., my mother, Auntie Em; Female Nonrelative-a specific female was named, but there was no indication that the person was related to the respondent, e.g., Betty Ford, my teacher Ms. Smith; Male Relative-a specific male relative was named, e.g., my father, Uncle George; Male Nonrelative-a specific male was named, but there was no indication the person was related to the respondent, e.g., Harry Truman, my minister Mr. Jones; Female Occupation-no person was named, but a traditionally female occupation was stated, e.g., I want to be a nurse, I want to be a secretary; Feminine Adjectives-no person or occupation was named, but feminine traits were indicated (cf. Broverman, et al., 1970; Spence & Helmreich, 1978), I would like to be warm and more open with my friends; Male Occupation-no person was named, but a traditionally male occupation was stated,

e.g., I want to be a truck driver, I want to be a baseball player with the Yankees; Masculine Adjectives-no person or occupation was named, but masculine traits were indicated (cf. Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1970; Spence & Helmreich, 1978), e.g., I want to be independent and important; Me-the respondent named themselves; No One-the person wrote the words "no one."

The 280 respondents generated 355 responses. Each subjects' responses were independently categorized by two of the authors. If a respondent gave more than one model, each model was recorded. A third author reviewed the categorizations and resolved the few differences that existed between the coders.

Examination of the data yielded by the above process revealed that the following categories were too sparsely populated to be analyzed: Male Occupations, Female Occupations, Me, No One. Since the occupations categories were similar to the Adjectives categories in that specific persons were not named, but sex-typing was indicated, Male Adjectives were combined with Masculine Occupations and called Masculine Characteristics, and Female Adjectives and Feminine Occupations were likewise combined into Feminine Characteristics. Using a similar rationale, the Me and No One categories were combined.

Finally, it was noted that 133 of the 355 responses were generated by 56 subjects who indicated role models in two or more categories. Since the appropriate analysis of these data required that each subject fall into only one category, only the first role model listed by each of these subjects was used in the data analysis to follow. Two respondents were dropped from the analysis because the sex of the role model could not be determined (e.g., "parents"). Thus, the analyses were performed on 278 responses yielded by 278 respondents.

Independent variables. The independent variables were sex of respondent and respondent age. Age was defined as six ad hoc groups: Early Childhood- 4 to 8; Late Childhood- 9 to 11; Adolescence- 12 to 17; Early Adulthood- 18 to

25; Middle Adulthood- 26-39; and Late Adulthood- 40 or older. Table 1 presents the age and sex distribution of the sample.

Insert Table 1 about here

Dependent measure. Role model choice was the dependent variable, which was expressed as one of the following seven categories (defined above): Female Relative, Male Relative, Female Nonrelative, Male Nonrelative, Feminine Characteristics, Masculine Characteristics, and Me/No One.

Results

A 6 (Age) x 2 (Sex of Subject) x 7 (Role Model Choice) multivariate Chi-square analysis showed that role model choice was dependent upon age and/or sex, $\underline{X}^2(65) = 283.78$, $\underline{p} < .001$. Therefore, a series of two-way Chi-square analyses were performed to investigate the specific effects of sex and age on role model selection.

Sex Effects

Table 2 shows the data for role model choice as a function of subject sex, which revealed a statistically significant effect, $\underline{X}^2(6) = 123.46$, $\underline{p} < .0001$. Same-sex nonrelatives and me/no one were the most frequently chosen categories, followed by same-sex relatives. Female subjects overchose female relatives and female nonrelatives and underchose male relatives and nonrelatives. Male subjects overchose male relatives, male nonrelatives, and masculine characteristics, and underchose female relatives and female nonrelatives.

Insert Table 2 about here

Inspection of Table 2 suggested that while both women and men chose predominantly models of the same sex, females may be more likely to choose cross-sex models than males. A significant 2(sex of subject) x 2 (same versus cross-sex model choice Chi-square analysis, $\underline{X}^2(1) = 11.13$, $\underline{p} < .001$, revealed that this was indeed the case. These data are presented in Table 3. Additionally, a 2 (same versus cross-sex role model choice) x 6 (role model category) revealed a significant effect, $\underline{X}^2(5) = 11.29$, $\underline{p} < .05$, showing that male nonrelatives and masculine characteristics were females most frequently chosen cross-sex role model choices. These data are presented in Table 4. Nearly ten percent of the females designated a cross-sex model, while only one percent of the males did so.

Insert Tables 3 and 4 about here

Age Effects

Table 5 shows the distribution of role model choices by age. A 6 (Age) x 7 (Role Model Category) Chi-square analysis revealed that role model choice did not vary as a function of respondent age, $\underline{X}^2(30) = 39.95$, $\underline{p} < .11$. Despite the nonsignificance, examination of Table 5 suggests age differences in the use of the Me/No and relative categories. Chi-square analyses performed on each of these categories separately failed to find significant effects.

Insert Table 5 about here

Although the danger of obtaining spuriously significant results was increased, three more Chi-square analyses were carried out in an attempt to identify a relationship between age and role model designation. A 2 (same versus cross-sex role model choice) x 6 (Age) Chi-square did not attain significance,

nor did additional analyses for each sex of respondent separately.

Descriptive Analysis of Female Role Model Choices

Table 6 presents a more detailed description of the role model choices made by females. Interestingly, mothers and female teachers, the most frequently studied role models, were not the most frequently mentioned choices. In fact, these two categories accounted for only 17% of the choices. Rarely studied, but more frequently listed, are female entertainers (22) and famous women (12) who were chosen by nearly one-quarter (24.1%) of the women in this sample. Two additional aspects of Table 6 merit mention. Women most frequently either listed no one as their role model or listed themselves (36.2%). When we add to them the women who listed occupations or characteristics, these modelless women comprise 44% of our sample. Finally, eleven subjects (8%) listed a specific male as their role model.

Insert Table 6 about here

Discussion

The present investigation resulted in four main findings: (1) females and males each chose predominantly same-sex models, but (2) females were more likely than males to make cross-sex choices, and (3) these findings were unaffected by the age of the respondent. The fourth result is that females' predominant choice was no role model at all, followed by female entertainers, mothers, famous women, male nonrelatives, and female teachers.

That individuals chose primarily role models of the same sex is not surprising; Basow and Howe (1980) reported that individuals indicate they are more influenced by same-sex than cross-sex others. Likewise, we were not startled to learn that females made more cross-sex choices than males given the higher

status of males in our society and their greater visibility in the media (cf. Unger, 1979). Using very different methods, Basow and Howe found that females reported being more influenced by males than males reported being influenced by females. Whether cross-sex/role models are as effective as same-sex models is open to question. In the present study we were not able to obtain data on our respondents' achievement goals or actual accomplishments. Goldstein (1979), using a measure of productivity, found that female Ph.D.s who had a female major professor were more productive than those who had male major professors; however, Goldstein did not determine whether her respondents saw their major professors as role models. Thus, it is impossible to determine whether her results are due to role modeling or a difference in the way the students were treated as a function of sex of major professor.

The stability of role model choice across the age span is noteworthy. Despite repeated attempts (and repeated violations of independence of analysis and hence inflated alpha error) no significant relationship with age was uncovered. Examination of the individual responses indicates that the content changed as a function of age, but not the category itself. For example, under entertainers, the most frequent choice for young girls was Cheryl Tiege, while young women listed Barbara Streisand. For other categories such as mother and female teachers, no effect due to age was apparent. It would be interesting for future research to examine the extent to which individuals do maintain the same role model or same role model category across the life span, and the relationship of role model stability to achievement behaviors.

In comparison with past research which has focused attention almost solely on mothers and female teachers as role models, the present study revealed that role model choices are far more varied. While women do mention mothers and female teachers, they also list politicians, movie stars, friends, colleagues, rock

stars, and men. The next step is to determine the effects of role model choice on actual achievement goals and achievement behavior.

Finally, as pointed out earlier, the method of determining role models differed in this research from past studies. We assumed a role model is someone an individual conceptualizes and chooses, rather than an individual designated by the investigator. We suspect that many people, including female teachers and mothers, influence the achievement behaviors of women, but we would prefer to see the term "role model" used only when there is evidence that the respondent conceptualizes another as a person she wishes to be like.

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Footnote

1. Ten questionnaires had to be eliminated from the college sample: Two because no sex was indicated, two because the responses were bizzare and clearly not serious, and six because the students were foreign. No questionnaires were eliminated from the Mason City sample, as students in the class had already omitted those which were illegible or incomplete.

Table 1

Sex, Age, and Source of Sample

Age	Females			Males			
	Mason City	ISU	Female Total	Mason City	ISU	Male Total	Row Total
4-8	13	-	13	13	-	13	26
9-11	25	-	25	33	-	33	58
12-17	29	-	29	27	-	27	56
18-25	14	13	27	14	10	24	51
26-39	24	2	26	24	1	25	51
40+	21	-	21	15	-	15	36
Column Totals	126	15	141	126	11	137	278

Table 2

Frequency of Role Model Choice by Subject Sex

Role Model Category	Females	Males	Row Totals
Female Relatives	19^{+}	0^{-}	19
Male Relatives	1^{-}	19^{+}	20
Female Nonrelatives	49^{+}	1^{-}	50
Male Nonrelatives	10^{-}	54^{+}	64
Feminine Characteristics	7	1	8
Masculine Characteristics	4	16^{+}	20
Me/No One	51	46	97
Column Totals	141	137	278

Note: Cells which contributed substantially to the Chi-square statistic are indicated by a "+" if the observed value was greater than the expected value, and a "-" if the observed value was less than the expected value (cf. Helwig & Council, 1979).

Table 3.

Frequency of Same or Cross-sex Role Model Choice by Subject Sex

Role Model	Females	Males	Row Totals
Same-Sex	75	89	164
Cross-Sex	15^{+}	2^{-}	17
Column Totals	90	91	181

Note: Cells: Cells which contributed substantially to the Chi-square statistic are indicated by a "+" if the observed value was greater than the expected value, and a "-" if the observed value was less than the expected value (c.f. Helwig & Council, 1979).

Table 4

Frequency of Same or Cross-sex Role Model Choice by Role Model Category

Role Model Category	Same-sex	Cross-sex	Row Totals
Female Relatives	19	0	19
Male Relatives	19	1	20
Female Nonrelatives	49	1^{-}	50
Male Nonrelatives	54	10^{+}	64
Feminine Characteristics	7	1	8
Masculine Characteristics	16	4^{+}	20
Column Totals	164	17	181

Note: Cells which contributed substantially to the Chi-square statistic are indicated by a "+" if the observed value was greater than the expected value, and a "-" if the observed value was less than the expected value. (cf. Helwig & Council, 1979).

Table 5

Frequency of Role Model Choice by Age Grouping

Role Model Category	Early childhood	Late childhood	Adolescence	Early adulthood	Middle adulthood	Late adulthood	Row Totals
Female Relatives	5+	2	2	3	5	2	19
Male Relatives	5+	5	5	3	0-	2	20
Female Nonrelatives	4	14	13	7	6	6	50
Male Nonrelatives	7	16	11	12	14	4-	64
Feminine Characteristics	0	1	1	2	3	1	8
Muscaline Characteristics	2	5	4	4	4	1	20
Me/No One	3-	15	20	20	19	20+	97
Column Totals	26	58	56	51	51	36	278

Note: Cells which contributed substantially to the Chi-square statistic are indicated by a "+" if the observed value was larger than the expected value, and a "-" if the observed value was less than the expected value (cf. Helwig & Council, 1979).

Table 6

Role Model Choices of Female Subjects

No Specific Model Named	62
Me/No One	51
Characteristics/Occupations	11
Specific Model Named	79
[a]Female Entertainers	22
Mother	15
[b]Famous Women	12
[c]Male Nonrelatives	10
Female Teachers	9
Peers/Friends	6
Other Female Relatives	4
Father	1
Total	141

[a]Includes Movie & TV Stars, Singers.

[b]Includes public figures, well-known athletes, persons known for their accomplishments.

[c]All times when a man other than a male relative was named.