

1986

## Sex role inequality and marital stress

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### Recommended Citation

Thomas, Joyce A., "Sex role inequality and marital stress" (1986). *Graduate Research Papers*. 3470.  
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## Sex role inequality and marital stress

### Abstract

As the once clear definitions of marital roles become increasingly blurred by the new options available to women and as the incidence of divorce continues to rise, the relationship between sex role behavior and marital dissatisfaction has become an area of mounting concern. Many women today who find themselves in more traditional type marital roles are beginning to question if, in fact, their unequal role status within their marriage is truly satisfying.

SEX ROLE INEQUALITY  
AND MARITAL STRESS

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A Research Paper  
Presented to  
The Department of Educational Administration  
and Counseling  
University of Northern Iowa

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by  
Joyce A. Thomas  
May 1986

This Research paper by: Joyce A. Thomas

Entitled: Sex Role Inequality and Marital Stress

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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## Sex Role Inequality and Marital Stress

As the once clear definitions of marital roles become increasingly blurred by the new options available to women and as the incidence of divorce continues to rise, the relationship between sex role behavior and marital dissatisfaction has become an area of mounting concern. Many women today who find themselves in more traditional type marital roles are beginning to question if, in fact, their unequal role status within their marriage is truly satisfying.

One major contributing factor in the dissatisfaction of women in their marriage is due to the unequal role status assignments negotiated by couples. In an effort to better understand the unique factors which contribute to marital stress and dissolution, the relationship between stereotyped marital sex roles and its negative consequences must be examined.

### Marital Roles

Marriage is seen as one of the most significant and meaningful of all human relationships. However, some sociologist and theologians believe that the concept of marriage as we have traditionally known it to be is heading towards a total and irreconcilable collapse. Mott (1978) reported during the period 1900

and 1965, the divorce rate rose from 0.7 to 2.5 per 1,000 population. However, during the following ten year period the rate virtually doubled from 2.4 to 4.9 per 1,000 population. Perhaps the most dramatic changes in marital disruption patterns are occurring today. The Census Bureau estimated that about 1/3 of the marriages of young women now between the ages of 25 and 34 will ultimately end in divorce as compared with about 20% of those women currently in their fifties (Mott, 1978).

To comprehend the impact of these startling statistics it is important to discuss the role of marriage in this society. If we take a short walk back in history to the pioneer days of American life where individualism was discouraged through bachelor taxes, we find that belonging to a family unit was a matter of sheer\* physical necessity. A man in the wilderness needed a wife to cook, sew, clean and provide offspring to help him. In turn, the wife was totally dependent on her husband for protection and livelihood.

Since that time many factors have altered the role relationships between husbands and wives in this society; wars, education and employment for women, feminism and contraception to name a few. Regardless of the causes, the fact remains that marriages are

different today from the way they once were; except that married women continue to operate in unequal role assignments. One predominant reason that women continue to take on and openly accept their "second class" status in marriage is due to the socialization process. Socialization is viewed as the culprit which influences women to accept themselves as inferior to men. Over and over again women have been told that they can desire no greater destiny than to "glory in their own femininity".

Friedan (1963) coined the term "feminine mystique" in 1957 when she concluded that something was very, very wrong with the way American women were trying to live their lives. There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of their lives as women and the image to which they were trying to conform. Women learned that their husbands and families came first and that they were put on earth for the sole purpose of making their lives easier. Women regrettably sacrificed other dreams to get married and raise a family. Today, it is this sense of regret and the dissatisfaction with this false sense of self which has brought on feelings of low self esteem, depression and marital discord.

Jackson (1965) asserted that there were two dichotomizing marital role relationships, those which

are complementary and those which are symmetrical. Complementary relationships are those in which couples are different in ways which fit together; i.e., one is dominant, the other submissive; one is logical, the other emotional. Complementary marital roles are not equal nor are they meant to be. The marriage is structured on the basis that one partner will play the role that the other chooses not to play. The symmetrical relationship, on the other, is based on equality and similarity. The roles are shared and many activities are carried out by the husband and wife together; or each separately and at different times. The household tasks are shared and are based on preferences and negotiation rather than on the sex of the individuals involved. Decisions are joint and the marriage is seen as a partnership.

#### Complementary

The complementary marital relationship is the most commonly practiced marital role relationship in the United States. Where complementary roles exist the distribution of labor, power and responsibility is based on sexual differences. In this type of relationship the balance of power belongs to the husband.

Blood & Wolfe, (1960) studied married Detroit



couples to determine the relative balance of power. Eight important questions which nearly all couples have to face at some point in time were asked. It was determined the aggregate balance of power fell slightly in the husband's direction. Interestingly, however, it was found that two decisions were primarily the wife's responsibility; her work and the food. The wife's decision to work turned out to be more of a joint one; leaving only the food in the wife's hands.

In the traditional type marriage there are few things in which the woman has any true power, and those things such as the home and children in which the woman generally has assumed power over are not highly valued in this society.

Ross, Mirowsky, & Huber, (1983) using data from a national sample of 680 couples interviewed, found that the complementary marriage may be psychologically beneficial to both husband and wife, but more so for the husband since he has the power and prestige associated with economic resources. The wife is assigned the lower prestige, invisible and less rewarding chores.

Bernard, (1981) argued that the social status given to household work including the care of children is low and considered as such by those who do it.

Most housewives are likely to devalue themselves as being "only a housewife" when comparing themselves to their husbands or to their working counterparts.

Women in the traditionally marital female role feel less of themselves and become dependent upon the approval of their husbands and others to feel valued. When a woman becomes financially and emotionally dependent upon someone else, she has given up the power to be in charge of herself and her own life. Dependency in this state brings on feelings of powerlessness because one's ability to act is controlled by someone else. In this helpless state women do not dare take risks for fear of losing their security.

Studies done since World War II consistently found that married women have higher levels of psychological distress than married men (Gove & Tudor, 1973). Findings applied to the social status of women have suggested that the low status, legal and economic discrimination and internalization of stereotyped role expectations can lead to a state of dependency and learned helplessness (Seligman, 1974). Low self-esteem, low aspirations and ultimately clinical depression are the result. Classic "femininity" values are viewed as a variable of the "learned helplessness"

characteristic of depression.

Gove (1972) researched the rates of mental illness among married persons. He found that being married protected men against mental illness. For women, however, marriage produced difficulties which promoted mental illness. The married woman's role was usually more stressful since it involved only one major source of gratification, the homelife.

In a matched study Weissman, Klerman, Paykel, Prusoff, & Hanson (1974) observed that depressed women were extremely impaired in their roles as spouse, mother and participant in close family relationships.

Paykel, Meyers, Dienthal, Klerman, Lindenthal & Pepper (1969) found that in the previous six months marital discord was the most common event reported by depressed patients. Weissman & Paykel (1974) reported that acutely depressed women compared to a matched normal group reported considerable more problems in marital intimacy, especially in their ability to communicate with their spouses. Moreover, these marital problems often were enduring and did not completely subside with symptomatic remission of acute depression.

The data showing that married women experience higher rates of mental illness than married men is

evidenced in part by the conflicts generated by the complementary (traditional) type female role assignments.

### Symmetrical

There is one thing which there is little disagreement over and that is the fact that marriages are different from what they once were.

The reality of the situation is that very few American families actually fit the antiquated definition of man as sole bread winner and decision maker, and wife as full-time homemaker and ornament. Young and Wilmott (1975) in their book Symmetrical Families found that the relationship of women and men had changed from patriarchal to more egalitarian. In the egalitarian relationship tasks are flexible and not based solely on gender. If a man likes to cook, and his wife doesn't, he cooks. Since they both use the toilet, she is not the only one to clean it. Power within the symmetrical relationship is flexible, not based on a rigid hierarchy of dominance (Young & Wilmott, 1975). The core of the philosophy which underlies the symmetrical relationship is that women and men are partners and of equal value in the relationship.

There are two issues which catapulted this shift

towards more symmetrical marriages; education and employment for women. For the first time in history there are as many female college students as there are males and women are earning more college degrees today than ever before. The movement of women into the labor force was the one of most significant social changes in the twentieth century. Kimball (1983) reported that in the majority of marriages today, both spouses are wage earners and 54% of the children under eighteen (including almost half of the children under six) have working mothers. Harragan (1977) reported that there were nearly 40 million women in the workforce in the United States. For many women their role within the marriage does not shift to accommodate them as they take employment outside of the home. They find that they must continue their household and employment responsibilities simultaneously. A 1980 Harris poll of 1,503 U.S. adult family members found that 90% thought that child rearing should be shared by both parents, but only 36% reported sharing it equally in practice (Kimball, 1983).

Gove & Tudor (1973) reported that 88% of the employed women have primary responsibility for the cooking as compared to 99% of their non-employed counterparts, and 92% of employed women have primary

responsibility for the housework. The occurrence of married women entering the paid workforce in great numbers has occurred so recently that the economic partnership has not yet resulted in domestic partnership for most couples.

A truly symmetrical relationship is not typical nor are the individuals which makes up the marital dyad.

Kimball (1983), commenting on a study of dual-career couples, indicated there were patterns which ran consistent in husbands and wives which practiced symmetrical type marital arrangements. Symmetrical women appeared to have formed their attitudes as a result of their mothers. They were either encouraged by having a mother who had a career or developed egalitarian attitudes in reaction to their mother's lack of development. Some women grew up in families where their fathers were actively involved and encouraged them to participate. Many were first borns and parents expected more of them.

The likeliness of having a symmetrical marriage increases with the wife's income and education. Women who work are likely to have more egalitarian attitudes than homemakers. The woman's income is another factor in the development of wives attitudes. Income gives a

woman a sense of identity, confidence, independence and bargaining power. Beckman & Houser (1979) reported that as a wife's income rises relative to her husband's, so does the amount of housework done by her husband.

For men, more than anything else, their having very strong mothers was the single most contributing factor in the development of egalitarian attitudes. Additionally, the egalitarian man seemed to have a strong sense of self and tended not to feel that he needed to control his wife.

As our society continues to change and as more women continue to enter the work force either by choice or necessity, the more the need for symmetrical marital roles. This type of arrangement although awkward for couples at first is psychologically more beneficial to its partners and to their marriage. Studies concurred that egalitarian relationships are more satisfying than traditional relationships, because each spouse has access to two worlds rather than one and the children have access to two parents (Kimball, 1983). Goldberg (1979) concluded couples who perceive equal benefits from their relationships are happiest and the more housework and child care that the husband performs the less likely his wife is to divorce him. Blood & Wolfe (1960) agreed that an authoritarian power structure

decreases marital companionship because it creates psychological distance between the spouses.

#### A New Attitude

The type of marital roles in which couples negotiate is an area of continued interest. Marriages are not made in "heaven" as some would wish to believe. The individuals involved must take the responsibility for negotiating marital roles which are mutually beneficial and satisfying to both parties. Stereotyped marital sex roles have worn out their usefulness and many women are no longer satisfied with their second class status within their marriages.

The literature review of the complementary type marriage substantiated the inference that traditional type marital roles are psychologically distressing to women and can contribute to the eventual breakdown of the marriage. The symmetrical relationship, on the other hand was found to be psychologically beneficial and more satisfying to its partners. As women in this society continue to work outside of the home and assert themselves more in their marriages, the chances that their marital relationship will shift to symmetrical are increased.

In most cases it will be wife who must take the responsibility in shifting the relationship to a



symmetrical one. The husband, however, is the key, for without his understanding and cooperation a symmetrical marriage is impossible to achieve. Many men currently in symmetrical relationships had no particular personal history that directed them towards sharing tasks and power in the home. Rather, they went along with the strong feelings of their wives. Many husbands reported "gritting their teeth" when trying new things, but did so because their wives felt strongly about it (Kimball, 1983).

#### Summary

Equal roles within a marriage do not necessarily mean identical roles. Marriage is a partnership of two individuals pooling their resources to obtain the maximum benefit for both parties involved in the relationship. Individuals bring varied resources to a marriage. Even if one person earns double what the other does, the hours each spends working are considered equally important. The housewife that takes care of the home and children in order that their lives are made easier is not just a "housewife" to herself nor to her husband. Although unpaid she provides a very important function within the family and she is no less equal because her occupation is within the home.

In our society where there has been a distinct

separation of duties and responsibilities between men and women for such a long time, husband and wives must begin to bridge this gap if they are to obtain more satisfying marital relationships. As Chafetz (1974) stated: "as long as our culture maintains two different and unequal sex role stereotypes that enable people to explore a mere half of their human potential, interpersonal relations, and most especially those between males and females, will fall far short of our ideal norms concerning love relationships" (p.166).

In the words of Walt Whitman (1958) the sentiments of the egalitarian attitude are summarized:

"By my side or back of me Eve following,  
or in front and I following her just the same."

Equality, more than anything else is an attitude in which symmetrical relationships are based, a new attitude.

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