

ATTITUDES TOWARD SEX-ROLES

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The role played by a male and female in society have been clearly delineated. The present study explored the attitudes of college students toward sex-roles with the help of a questionnaire. The findings indicate that college women are more egalitarian than college men in their attitudes towards sex-roles. It would seem that a college student with non-traditional sex-role attitudes is likely to have had English as the medium of instruction in school, comes from a nuclear family with an income higher than Rs. 1000 per month and is not very religious. In addition women students with non-traditional sex-role attitudes are likely to be in professional or career-oriented disciplines and have educated mothers.

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Introduction

In his book "Everyone was brave" William O'Neill (1971) asserts, "The lesson of history so far is that women cannot gain equality regardless of the methods used to obtain". This argues for the persistence of the sex-role system. However, though sex-roles are deeply entrenched across cultures and across time, it does not imply that they are natural and inherent. Events such as world wars, major social movements and governmental policy have facilitated changing of sex-roles, more specifically the female role.

Several authors have summarized the descriptions of male and female sex-roles in the following way: Females are supposed to inhibit both aggressive and sexual urges. They are to be nurturant and passive, to cultivate attractiveness and to maintain an emotionally responsive, socially poised, friendly posture with others. In sharp contrast men are to be aggressive, independent, and suppressive of strong emotions (Weitz, 1977 Parson and Bales, 1955). According to the National Committee on the Status of Women in India (1975) a woman is primarily associated with the home, responsible for domestic chores and her typical roles are those of a housewife and mother. The role of men is seen as primarily outside of home.

It is quite clear from the literature that traditionally personality differences are posited for both the sexes. In addition, the arena for action is the home for women and the world for men. A shift away from stereotyped thinking about masculinity and femininity, a greater participation of women in the public sphere accompanied by men's orientation towards the domestic sphere can be taken as indicating changes in sex-roles.

The purpose of the present study was to explore attitudes towards sex-roles and to see if there are any systematic differences between the backgrounds of subjects with traditional and non-traditional attitudes.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 193 male and 286 female college students. They were drawn from nine different colleges and represented the disciplines of arts, commerce, engineering, law, medicine, home science, and pure sciences. The mean age of the subjects was 22.0 years. The mean number of years of formal education was 13.9 years.

Procedure

The subjects were administered a questionnaire part of which dealt with

perception of sex-roles and family and educational background. The questionnaire was adapted from the one originally developed and used in a cross cultural study at Rutgers University.* The mean score on twenty-one Likert type items with a minimum score of 1 indicating a traditional position and a maximum score of 4 indicating a non-traditional position formed an index of overall sex-role modernity. The items were further classified into 3 broad classes measuring attitudes towards different spheres of sex-role behaviour. These spheres were job situation (5 items) personality traits (8 items), and household work (8 items). The classification of items was done on the basis of agreement of two judges out of three.

For purposes of sex-role modernity, the data obtained from the total sample has been analysed and discussed. In order to relate sex-role modernity to family and educational background, the total sample was divided into three groups of approximately 160 each. Those with scores above 2.63 were classified as non-traditional whereas those below 2.34 were classified as traditional. The remaining subjects (with scores between 2.34 and 2.63) were dropped in order to emphasize differences between the traditional and non-traditional subjects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sex-Role Modernity

The mean overall sex-role modernity of the total sample was 2.61 (Table 1). This score represents a considerable shift in the attitudes of college students from the stereotyped pattern to a more egalitarian one. The scores of the sample in the three areas indicate that this shift is largely due

to their changing ideas about women at work. Women may not only work but even excel at it. The ideas have also changed in the sphere of household responsibilities. The modernity in these two areas viz., job situations and household responsibilities was higher than in the realm of personality characteristics. Though the woman is being granted greater concessions she is still seen as possessing a different personality make up. Women's two roles — one at work and one at home are interconnected such that changes in one will have impact on the other. Her greater participation outside the home is bound to be accompanied with a decrease in household responsibilities.

Comparing the scores of the two sexes, one observes a difference in the attitudes of men and women towards sex-roles (Table 1). Women are significantly more egalitarian than men. The findings confirm to the commonly held view that men are more traditional and less flexible than women on the issue of sex-roles. Findings of a study on attitudes towards women's role in society indicate that college men hold more traditional attitudes towards women's role in society than do college women (Hawley, 1971). In trying to assess attitudes towards marriage roles among Indian college students it was found that women expect to play a more egalitarian role within marriage viz. participating with her husband in decision-making and pursuing economic activities outside the home. The college men were more dominant and authoritarian (Ghadially, 1977). A greater shared role attitude on the part of women as compared to men may be due to several reasons. The traditional role being too restricted, she seeks greater freedom and a broadened life style. More positively, women would be

* See Appendix.

aspiring to activities, not necessarily related to the home, which would give them greater fulfilment. It is also a vote against subordination to men and a culturally inherited secondary status. Men on the other hand are unwilling to concede much freedom to women as it may present a threat to their superior status.

However, when we study the differences between the sexes in each area a clearer picture emerges (Table 1). In the area of personality traits women are significantly more modern than men. This could be interpreted in two ways. Traditional feminine traits such as dependency, passivity are being rejected as they have a low social value, or women think that these traits are distributed more or less equally among the two sexes. Men continue to adhere to the position that there are personality traits which are "typically male" and "typically female". In a study with college students it was found that both males and females perceived ideal men and women as possessing many of the traits presently valued for the opposite sex (Elman *et al* 1970). Their findings suggest a shift by individuals towards more flexible sex-typing. As far as household responsibilities are concerned women have a significantly more egalitarian attitude than men. According to women domestic chores and child

care, are responsibilities to be shared by both the sexes. It is interesting to note that the areas where women are becoming more modern are exactly where men want less change. This could be a source of tension between the sexes. Only in the area of job situation, both men and women have similar attitudes. The reason why women are not significantly more egalitarian than men in this area of job would be that competition and success at work presents a threat to their femininity. The higher scores for personality traits and household responsibilities for women indicate that this demand for change is spurred more by the inferior personality attributed to them and their constricted role at home rather than any positive need for self-expression or fulfilment. These needs may become salient once they have been granted equality.

The overall picture that emerges for college women is one of greater equality in every walk of life. The picture that emerges for the college male is that he has moved away from his traditional position but not to the same extent as women have. This can mean that college women are more conscious of the double standard than men and consequently in their attitudes reflect a stronger desire to change.

Background Factors

The percentage of college men and women who are traditional and liberal are as follows: 40.3 per cent of women and 64.7 per cent of men are traditional 59.7 per cent of women and 35.3 per cent of men are liberal.

Of those who had English as medium of instruction in school 54.1 per cent were non-traditional whereas only 39.0 per cent of others were non-traditional (Table 2). This could be seen as a consequence of the Women's Movement in the West. Most of the literature and information about the

TABLE 1
MEAN SCORES ON ATTITUDES TOWARDS
SEX-ROLES

Spheres of Sex-Role Behaviour	Male	Female	t-ratio	Total sample
Overall Modernity	2.50	2.67	4.71*	2:61
Personality traits	2.32	2.71	7.12*	2.55
Household work	2.57	2.68	2.84*	2.63
Job situation	2.68	2.64	0.77	2.65

*P 0.01

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGE OF LIBERAL AND TRADITIONAL SUBJECTS WITH ENGLISH AND OTHER LANGUAGES AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN SCHOOL

	Percentage of subjects with English as medium of instruction in school	Percentage of subjects with other languages as medium of instruction in school
Non-traditional	54.1	39.0
Traditional	45.9	61.0

Chi-Square: 5.69 (P .05)

movement filters in through English magazines and books; the influence understandably is stronger on the students who actively use the language. To take a specific case the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India is now being translated into major regional languages (Programme of Women's Studies, 1977). The medium of instruction in school can be considered of special significance for changing traditional sex roles in non-English speaking countries.

Of the subjects with a joint family background 37.9 per cent were non-traditional whereas 52.7 per cent of those coming from nuclear families were non-traditional and this difference was found to be significant (Table 3). A nuclear family is more exposed to the pressures of a changing society. Adjustments can be made only by re-allocating responsibilities between the sexes and traditional role expectations dis-

TABLE 3

PERCENTAGE OF LIBERAL AND TRADITIONAL SUBJECTS FROM JOINT AND NUCLEAR FAMILIES

	Percentage of subjects from joint families	Percentage of subjects from nuclear families
Non-traditional	37.9	52.1
Traditional	62.1	47.9

Chi-Square: 4.83 (P 0.05)

integrate. This could account for the greater modernity demonstrated by students from nuclear families. Joint families have more clearly differentiated roles for the two sexes. The need for any change in these role definitions seldom arises as there is always a member of the same sex to fill in for an absent individual.

The percentage of non-traditional respondents was found to increase in higher income groups, though not significantly (Table 4). A striking difference was noticed in the percentage of non-traditional respondents in income groups below and above Rs. 1,000 per month. Though its a matter of observation that the lower class does break sex-roles norms for economic survival, the attitudes to sex-roles remain conventional. Therefore there are fewer non-traditional respondents in the lower income groups. At the same time, the higher income group have a greater percentage of non-traditional respondents as most of them are

TABLE 4

PERCENTAGE OF LIBERAL AND TRADITIONAL SUBJECTS IN EACH INCOME GROUP

	0-500	500-1000	1000-2000	2000-3500	Above 3500
Non-traditional	39.6	41.4	56.6	56.9	57.1
Traditional	60.5	58.6	43.4	43.1	42.9

Chi-Square: 5.66 (Not significant)

not so hard-pressed with the basic issues of survival and thus, have greater opportunity to be exposed to and act as agents of social change.

Speaking of religions, Hindu women have a history of sati and similar practices to account for their traditionality. Muslim women too, have been brought up in seclusion. Christian and Parsee women are considered modern by virtue of their greater economic participation. In the present study, all the non-Hindu religions were grouped into one due to the small sample size of each minority group. It was found that 50.8 per cent of Hindus and 46.3 per cent of the others were non-traditional (Table 5). Due to combining all non-Hindu religious groups, modern and traditional; no clear differences could emerge.

with the fact that most religions assign a secondary status to women and thus have a very conservative influence on their followers. This trend was not significant probably due to decreased importance of religion in today's world.

There was no significant relation between the major subject at College and the percentage of non-traditional and traditional men (Table 7). Any belief that men in male-dominated disciplines are more conservative due to extreme segregational influence, was not supported. It may be noted that male engineering students are exposed to females who are, though less in number far more egalitarian than those in other areas of specialization. This probably offsets the effect of severe segregation of the two sexes.

The percentage of liberal and traditional girls was significantly related to the major subject at college (Table 7). All the girls in Engineering and approximately 65 per cent of the girls in Arts, Law and Medicine were liberal, whereas, only 46 per cent of girls in Home Science, Commerce and Pure Sciences were liberal. Engineering, Medicine and Law being professional fields, the girls in these fields are quite accepting of a working woman. Their choice of male-dominated area of study indicates their will to compete with men and shows a high commitment to a career. This is not the case with girls in Commerce and Pure Sciences. Girls in these fields do not pursue a career with a comparable commitment, thus reducing higher education to an asset in the marriage market. These girls may view their education as an additional qualification to be used for obtaining a job in times of financial need only. Home Science girls consider their education a preparation for the traditional role of a homemaker. One may observe that the disciplines *per se* may or may not make a difference but the fact that a particular kind

TABLE 5

PERCENTAGE OF LIBERAL AND TRADITIONAL HINDUS AND NON-HINDUS _____

	Percentage of Hindus	Percentage of Non-Hindus
Non-traditional	50.8	46.3
Traditional	49.2	53.7

Chi-Square: 0.33 (Not significant)

There was a trend for more religious people to be more traditional in their views on sex-roles (Table 6). This is in accordance

TABLE 6

PERCENTAGE OF LIBERAL AND TRADITIONAL SUBJECTS WITH DIFFERENT DEGREE OF RELIGIOUSNESS

	Percentage of subject who are			
	very religious	moderately religious	less religious	Not religious
Non-traditional	47.1	45.8	48.6	66.7
Traditional	52.9	54.2	51.4	33.3

Chi-Square: 5.87 (Not significant)

TABLE 7

PERCENTAGE OF LIBERAL AND TRADITIONAL SUBJECTS IN VARIOUS DISCIPLINES OF STUDY

	Percentage of subjects in						
	Arts	Commerce	Engineering	Home science	Law	Medicine	Pure science
<i>Males</i>							
Non-traditional	—	32.0	42.3	—	30.3	25.0	46.2
Traditional	—	68.0	57.7	—	69.7	75.0	53.8
	Chi-Square: 4.84		(Not significant)				
<i>Females</i>							
Non-traditional	61.4	48.0	100.0	43.8	66.7	70.6	46.7
Traditional	36.6	52.0	0.0	56.3	33.0	29.4	53.3
	Chi-Square: 13.18		(P 0.05)				

of woman seeks entrance into a particular kind of educational pursuit does.

According to one study (Almquist and Angrist, 1971) mothers of career salient women and the fathers of non-career salient women had slightly higher educational attainment, but in either case the trend was not significant. Other studies (Ghadially, 1977; Seigel and Curtis, 1963) indicate a weak trend that a greater number of career-oriented women have parents who have completed more than high school. The present study shows that the father's education had no significant effect on the subject's sex-role modernity. However, edu-

cated mothers had a liberal influence on their daughters.

To summarize, college women are more egalitarian than college men in their attitudes towards sex-roles. It would seem that a college student with non-traditional sex-role attitudes is likely to have had English as the medium of instruction in school, comes from a nuclear family with an income higher than Rs. 1,000 per month and is not very religious. In addition women students with non-traditional sex-role attitudes are likely to be in professional or career-oriented disciplines and have educated mothers.

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APPENDIX

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