Role Perceptions: Variations by Sex and Roles

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A Role Perception Scale utilizing a combined projective-objective methodology was developed to assess female and male perceptions of each of three single roles — work, marriage, and parent — and two combined roles — work-marriage and work-parent. Research participants were 134 college students, 88 females and 46 males. Factor analysis of the objective scale, the only part to be scored, resulted in two major orthogonal factors labeled role engagement and competition factors. Sex and role differences for each factor were analyzed using 2 X 5 split block analysis of variance design with repeated measures. On three out of the five single and combined roles women perceived more engagement than men. In general males perceived roles as more competitive. These sex differences and patterns identified in within-sex analyses across roles are discussed.

Greater attention to role flexibility for both sexes in major life roles and role combinations has led to increased interest in the psychological factors underlying and affecting role choices and subsequent role enactment. While choice of major societal roles has been widely recognized as critical in adolescence during the identity stage of development (Erikson, 1968), it is clear that the role socialization process is one that has a continued impact on the adult life cycle as adults enact, modify, and change their life roles (Brim, 1966).

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Despite the interest in the complex interaction of individual growth and development and the role options afforded by society, there is little research on psychological aspects of role (Komarovsky, 1973). Literature available, derived from research on female role choices and behavior, has tended to concentrate on sex-role attitudes viewed on a continuum from traditional to liberal views (Spence & Helmreich, 1972), personal-self definitions in terms of stereotypic masculine and feminine qualities (Bem, 1978), and role-related motivational conflict (Horner, 1972). In a similar vein Veroff and Feld (1970) examined the interaction of individual motivational constructs and the social roles of work, marriage, and family for adult men and women.

A question that remains unanswered in this research is the nature of the perceptions men and women have of the major social roles available to them in adulthood. Social roles exist as part of social structure. Although one can assume some consensus among individuals as to the responsibilities and expectations associated with any role, it is likely that individuals differ in the ways they perceive roles and role occupants. For example, the role of parent may be perceived as an exciting, rewarding one or, as one that is boring and unstimulating. Veroff and Feld discuss role perceptions as a potential mediator between individual personality and social roles but did not study such perceptions in their research. These perceptions may help explain how individuals relate to and experience their enacted roles. This notion is supported by Neugarten and Gutmann’s (1958) research on role perceptions of adults. They conceptualized role broadly in terms of age-sex dimensions (older man and woman, younger man and woman) and found significant shifts in sex-role perceptions with age.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to develop a scale to assess adult role perceptions of young adults. The scale will be developed for young people about to enter but not yet enacting adult roles. Perceptions during this transition period are the focus because of their potential mediating influence on role enactment.

Additionally, variations in role perceptions by sex and across five major roles and role combinations are examined. The roles of interest in this study are: (1) work, (2) marriage, (3) parent, (4) work-marriage, and (5) work-parent. The first three roles are considered broad and general roles that encompass much of an adult’s life activity (Ruddock, 1972). This is in contrast to more specific roles (e.g., commuter or dishwasher) that are clearly limited to a more restricted sphere of activity. It is in relation to broad social roles that one is most likely to find variation in role perceptions. The two role combinations reflect the combination of work and familial roles which have been typical for men and are increasingly common for women. The combined role of “work-parent” is actually a triple role involving work, marriage, and parent roles since most people perceive parenting in the context of marriage.