Women Returning to School: The Consequences of Multiple Roles

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Previous research suggests that strain is a predominant consequence of multiple-role incumbency. The likelihood of negative outcomes is increased when the role combination is non-normative. The validity of these assertions is tested for a group of women who have returned to school at midlife, comparing them to a group of their neighbors who are primarily housewives. Findings demonstrate that the students experienced significantly greater positive outcomes or gratifications from their multiple roles than the housewives experienced from their relatively unitary roles. However, the students also reported significantly more negative consequences or strain than did the housewives. Though the students had a net positive gain, the difference was not significant. Moreover, role strain was negatively correlated with high levels of involvement in leisure and volunteer activities for both subsamples. Finally, feminist ideology varied directly with gratification for both students and housewives. The mix of positive and negative corollaries of multiple roles challenges the assumption in the literature that strain is an ubiquitous outcome. The implications of these results are discussed in terms of sexual division of labor and strategies for enhancing net gratification.
of these investigations indicate that women suffer more than men from the existing systems of gender relations. Implicit in these findings is the solution that if women were to act more like men, the negative outcomes would be diminished. More recently, this formulation has been revised. The newer version argues that women ought to maintain their feminine qualities while simultaneously developing masculine traits as well. ³

The optimism implicit in the above proposal stands in contrast to research on the sexual division of labor and on role theory. Studies in both of these domains have shown that there are negative consequences for women working in the marketplace and at home and for people adding roles to their existing repertoires. For women working both inside and outside the home, there is a net increase in the total number of hours worked. If these women are married, time-budget studies show that their husbands' contribution to housework remains insignificant (Hartmann, 1981). These investigations tell us little, however, about the actual consequences of this sexual division of labor. In addition, studies of multiple-role incumbency are problematic. Usually these studies assume multiple roles are bound to lead to stress and thus examine only the negative outcomes, overlooking any potential positive corollaries.

This paper is intended as a response to this oversight. The investigation reported below was designed to ascertain the potential positive and negative outcomes of multiple roles for a group of middle-aged women who had returned to school at midlife. These women are compared to a group of their neighbors who are primarily housewives. The research results, moreover, help specify some of the dynamics of the sexual division of labor for women. We briefly review the literature on multiple roles and gender-role conflict, the theoretical framework for this investigation, before moving to a discussion of the research design and results.

MULTIPLE ROLES AND GENDER-ROLE CONFLICT

Much of the theoretical and empirical literature on multiple roles delineates the resultant mechanisms of strain or conflict. Parsons (1951) analyzes role conflict as a problem of uncertainty and malintegration, while Merton (1957) formulates the problem as disarticulation in the role set. Toby (1952) has modified these definitions, maintaining that role conflict results only when institutional solutions fail to reconcile competing

³This type of proposal is embedded in the writing of liberal feminism (cf. Friedan, 1963, 1981). Moreover, the idea of a "superwoman" is a prime example of this latter phenomenon. Finally, research on androgyny illustrates this second scenario (cf. Bem, 1974; Laws, 1979; Vetterling-Braggin, 1982).