Sex-Role Development in Late Adolescence and Adulthood

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The present study investigated associations between age and sex roles in a cross-sectional analysis of people varying in age from late adolescence to middle adulthood. People in the androgynous sex role were older than sex-typed men and women. Cross-sex characteristics tended to be greater among older people, while same-sex characteristics were uncorrelated with age. Sex-role development appears to continue into adulthood, a view more in keeping with a transcendent model than a traditional model of sex-role development.

Recent theorists have proposed models of sex-role development that extend development beyond the conventional or stereotyped level (Hefner, Rebecca, & Oleshansky, 1975; Pleck, 1975; Rebecca, Hefner, & Oleshansky, 1976). Sex-role development begins with an undifferentiated stage, in which masculinity and femininity and maleness and femaleness are not very important to the child. In later development the child forms rigid sex-role stereotypes associated with gender. Males are masculine, females are feminine, and these stereotypes are applied to oneself as well as others.

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Beyond adolescence there may be some relaxing of this rigidity, but the linking of sex role to gender remains a powerful influence on a person's self-conception and behavior.

However, it has been suggested that in adulthood these sex roles may be transcended (Pleck, 1975; Rebecca et al., 1976). The androgynous person enjoys a sex-role repertoire of both masculine and feminine characteristics and uses each or both according to the situation (Bem, 1974, 1975, 1977). Bem has estimated that a third of college-age people are androgy nous. But if androgyny is a later sex-role development emerging in adulthood, then the average age of androgynous people would be greater than that of people in other sex roles. This association has remained unexplored in the research of Bem, but is the focus of the present study.

Traditional theories of sex-role development, such as identification and cognitive theories, are concerned with the sequencing and processes which socialize the growing individual into culturally defined appropriate sex roles. The sex-role development these theories explain is the acquisition of feminine characteristics by women and masculine characteristics by men (e.g., Kohlberg, 1966). Traditional theories suggest relatively complete sex-role acquisition by late adolescence, and this successful development involves sex-stereotyped roles (cf. the review by Stein, 1976).

In the sex-role transcendent model of Hefner, Rebecca, Oleshansky, and Nordin (1977) there are two stages beyond the conventional stereotyped stage identified by the traditional theories. The androgynous stage, in which the individual has both masculine and feminine characteristics is the first movement beyond the conventional, termed IIC in Rebecca et al.'s (1977) framework. Stage III is a transcendent stage, in which behaviors are appropriate to the situation regardless of sex-role expectations. Since the latter is a hypothetical stage at present, androgyny becomes the appropriate focus for consideration of postadolescent sex-role development.

If sex-typed roles are acquired by adolescence, the further development of sex roles toward androgyny would require the acquisition of cross-sex characteristics. Therefore, age would be positively associated with cross-sex characteristics, but would be unrelated to same-sex characteristics after adolescence.

A number of studies have investigated age-related sex-role stereotyping, that is, the respondent's view of appropriate or ideal behavior for men and women (Block, 1973; Neugarten, 1968; Urberg & Labouvie-Vief, 1976). These studies have provided mixed support for the view that sex-role stereotypes become less rigid with age. Neugarten (1968) found that men and women became more accepting of opposite-sex or cross-sex characteristics in their own sex as they became older. Greater acceptance in oneself of cross-sex characteristics with increased age has not