The Attitudes Toward Women Scale for Adolescents (AWSA): A Study of Reliability and Validity

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This study describes the development of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale for Adolescents (AWSA), an instrument based on the short form of the Spence-Helmreich Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS). The AWSA has been tested in four samples of adolescents. Internal consistency estimates and test-retest stability indicated high reliability. Hypotheses formulated to test the construct validity of the scale were largely supported. AWSA permits the examination of how boys' and girls' attitudes toward women influence the life paths that adolescent girls begin to pursue.

Sex roles and sex-role attitudes have stimulated the interest of many researchers concerned with social change and human development. Although all stages of the life span have been the focus of empirical inquiry, adolescence is a particularly interesting developmental phase with respect to sex-role issues. There is heightened awareness of gender differentiation during adolescence (Brooks-Gunn & Matthews, 1979; Hill & Lynch, 1983), with sex-role stereotypes most extreme at this age (Urberg, 1979). Indeed, sexist attitudes are more common among adolescents than any other age group except for those individuals past 50 years of age. Furthermore,

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although males and females across the life span have significantly different attitudes about sex equity, with males more sexist than females, the discrepancy between the sexes is largest at adolescence (Benson & Vincent, 1980).

Although developmental change in sex-role attitudes is inherently interesting, it is particularly important to consider because of the presumed connection between sex-role attitudes and the behavioral standards adopted by adolescents. Social psychological research has long attempted to demonstrate that the interaction between attitudes toward a phenomenon (e.g., attitudes about a political candidate) and other variables with respect to that phenomenon, such as situational factors (e.g., voting in the presence of an audience), influence the actual behavior of the individual. For example, Bandura (1978, 1980) recently developed a model of human behavior that emphasizes the importance of various attitudes and beliefs about the self in determining not only the behavior of the individual but the reaction of the social environment as well. That is, behavior is thought to be the result of continual dynamic interactions among self-perceptions, the environment, and behaviors. Attitudes toward women, then, may play a large role in the behavior of adolescents, especially for young girls who internalize such attitudes into their own self-concepts. In particular, attitudes toward women may be related to such major life decisions as choosing a vocation or beginning a family.

The work of Rosenberg, Simmons, and colleagues provides evidence of the relationship between sex-role attitudes and the development of self-esteem. The investigators (Rosenberg & Simmons, 1975; Simmons, Blyth, Van Cleave, & Bush, 1979; Simmons & Rosenberg, 1975) found that in early adolescence, girls were significantly more likely than boys to have low self-esteem. Moreover, girls with less positive attitudes toward women were lower in self-esteem (Simmons & Rosenberg, 1975). For girls, self-esteem may mediate the relationship of sex-role attitudes to subsequent behavior and life choices.

We note that attitudes toward gender-related roles, in this case those of women, are conceptually distinct from sex-role orientation or identity. One’s identity as masculine, feminine, or androgynous is not necessarily related to attitudes toward sex roles (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975) or to role-related behavior (Spence & Helmreich, 1978). Sex-role identity is, however, related to self-esteem and adjustment among adults (Spence et al., 1975) and adolescents (Lamke, 1982; Massad, 1981).

The purpose of this article is to describe the development and evaluation of a short scale to assess adolescents’ attitudes toward women. The reliability of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale for Adolescents (AWSA) was examined in terms of the internal consistency and test-retest stability of the instrument. Its validity was tested with the following hypotheses.