Sex Roles Among Married and Unmarried Couples

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This article investigates sex roles among married and cohabiting couples. Male career precedence was more firmly entrenched both attitudinally and behaviorally among the former. Cohabiting women in couples planning to marry generally gave attitudinal support to their partner's career precedence, but were delaying the translation of these attitudes into concrete actions until after marriage. Cohabitors not planning to marry were essentially equalitarian, but the males in these couples were also less successful in career attainment than the other males. Male career precedence, the decision to marry, conventional allocation of household tasks, and male career success were all concomitant, although the exact causality could not be confidently established.

Since World War II the expanding labor market and women's decreased fertility have both encouraged and enabled increasing numbers of married women to enter the labor force (Huber, 1976; Oppenheimer, 1973). By 1978, over 50% of all married women were employed in the labor market (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979). The recent acquisition of occupational roles by married women has created considerable debate over their impact on marital decision making, career precedence, and domestic duties (Willmott & Young, 1973; Scanzoni, 1972; Pleck, 1977; Paloma & Garland, 1971; Oakley, 1974). This article investigates the emergence of these conventional sex roles in the institutionalized and noninstitutionalized relationships of marriage and cohabitation, respectively.

Factors within and outside the family have perpetuated both the husband's career precedence and the wife's domestic responsibility. A discriminatory and
sexually segregated labor market has curtailed women's career achievements and their thereby reinforced male career precedence within marriage. Moreover, married women with professional or managerial occupations still assume primary responsibility for child care and domestic maintenance (Miller, 1971; Scanzoni, 1972; Hochschild, 1976; Oppenheimer, 1973). Married men, perhaps despite "equalitarian attitudes," are pressured by their careers to demand sacrifices that severely limit their wives' career attainment (Paloma & Garland, 1971).

While descriptive, most research neither analytically explicates the dynamics of conventionally prescribed role allocations, nor relates their emergence to the decision to marry. To accomplish these tasks, two preliminary issues must be considered: (1) the relevant literature on cohabitation and (2) theoretical rationales for distinguishing cohabitational and marital sex roles.

Although reliable estimates of the prevalence of cohabitation are difficult to ascertain, Glick (1970) and Clayton and Voss (1973) detected considerable increases in the numbers of cohabitating couples in the United States in the 1970s. Unfortunately, most research on cohabitation is limited theoretically and methodologically. Analysis of sex roles has often been ignored or sketchy at best. Moreover, findings have rarely been contrasted with either married or conventionally dating couples.

Whitehurst (1974) argued that cohabitation's potential of "freeing women from the more constraining roles of marriage" is rarely actualized, and that cohabiting couples eventually lapse into conventionality. Unfortunately, he offered no data to support his conjecture, nor did he include career variables or plans for marriage in his discussion.

Stafford, Backman, and diBona (1977) offered a more empirical contrast of sex roles in cohabitation and marriage. They found married couples to be more conventional in performance of household tasks, but no more conventional in allocation of responsibility for these tasks. Although Stafford et al. employed comparisons of individuals, not couples, their results indicate a relationship between marital status and sex roles.

A theoretical explication used for distinguishing marital and cohabitational sex-roles can be found in the works of Levi-Strauss (1976) and Berger and Kellner (1964). Levi-Strauss, in his cross-cultural analysis of the family, found in all societies clear-cut distinctions between marital and nonmarital unions. Furthermore, society mandates a division of labor between the sexes which, although often "arbitrary," maintains mutual dependence between the sexes. Since marital role performance and successful mate selection are needed for societal stability, marital role performance is more carefully prescribed and supervised than other, noninstitutionalized relationships, according to Levi-Strauss.

Berger and Kellner (1964) asserted that institutions provide stable structures that determine individual definitions of social environments; although flex-