

Relation Between Sex-Role Orientation and Marital Satisfaction

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This study investigated the reported marital satisfaction of couples as it related to their sex-role orientations. One hundred eighty-five couples living in Columbia, MD, completed Bem Sex-Role Inventories and Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Tests. The results suggest that couples in which both partners are androgynous report higher marital satisfaction than both sex-typed (traditional role) couples and incongruent (sex-typed spouse with non-sex-typed spouse) couples. These results were discussed in a framework of cognitive balance.

Cognitive balance has been recognized as an important factor in interpersonal attraction and relationship satisfaction (Heider, 1958). We tend to like people who share our beliefs and values in areas such as politics, religion, and art (Huston, 1974). This finding has been demonstrated with both platonic relationships (Byrne, 1971) and romantic involvement (Coombs, 1966).

Because marriage can be viewed as both a friendship and a romantic relationship, one might assume that attitude congruency and cognitive balance enhance satisfaction of the partners, whereas incongruence places strain on the relationship. Murstein (1970) posits that individuals considering marriage tend to show greater than chance similarity with regard to their hierarchy of values concerning marriage. Similarly, Matthews and Clark (1982) found that individuals who felt validated by their spouses reported more relationship satisfaction and greater relationship stability than did persons who did not feel validated by their spouses.

One factor that makes up a person's value system that may have an effect on marital relationships is belief about sex roles and one's own sex-role orientation.

AUTHORS' NOTE: This investigation was conducted by the first author under the second author's supervision and is based in part on a thesis submitted to Loyola College in Maryland, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the M.A. degree. We are grateful to two anonymous reviewers, whose insightful critiques provided clarity and focus to this article. Requests for reprints should be sent to Faith D. Gilroy, Department of Psychology, Loyola College in Maryland, Baltimore, Maryland 21210.

Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, Vol. 14 No. 4, December 1988, 747-754
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Offir (1982) defines *sex-role orientation* as "the possession of a collective body of attributes that most people in our culture consider appropriate for either a male or female" (p. 518). Many forces, including the changing status of women in our society, the changes in the family structure, and the publicity given to sex-role issues by the press, have contributed to the salience and importance of sex roles in our society (Mason, Czajka, & Arber, 1976). Bem (1974) devised an instrument, the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI), that is now viewed as measuring the uncorrelated traits of instrumentality and expressiveness that tend to be associated with masculine and feminine stereotypes, respectively (Spence, Deaux, & Helmreich, 1985).

A study that supports the cognitive balance theory as applied to sex-role orientation was performed by Orlofsky (1982). Using the BSRI, he found that sex-typed subjects endorsed a greater discrepancy between their own and their ideal dating partner's sex-role orientation than did androgynous subjects. Bem (1974) defines *androgyny* as being non-sex typed or possessing both traditionally male and traditionally female attributes. In Orlofsky's study, if a male tended to characterize himself as high-masculine (traditional sex-role orientation), his ideal dating partner tended to possess high-feminine characteristics (again, traditional sex-role orientation). He found the same to be true of high-feminine women choosing their ideal dating partner. However, if a subject was shown as having non-sex-typed ideals, he or she tended to select a similarly androgynous mate, again supporting the cognitive balance theory. Similar results were reported by Kimlicka, Wakefield, and Goad (1982) in their study of sex roles and ideal opposite-sex persons.

Despite the impact of sex-role issues in intimate relationships, such as dating, the connection between sex-role orientation and marital quality is not yet clearly understood. Previous studies of this relationship have tended to operationalize the predictor variable, sex-role orientation, by focusing on the power distribution of the husband and wife (e.g., Centers, Raven, & Rodrigues, 1971; Gray-Little & Burks, 1983), their sex-role attitudes (e.g., Bowen & Orthner, 1983; Wilson, 1982), or their employment structure (e.g., Burke & Weir, 1976; Hiller & Philliber, 1982; Rotheram & Weiner, 1983). Most of these studies not only have shown support of the cognitive balance theory, but seem to show that those couples who have egalitarian relationships report higher marital satisfaction than traditional couples. This may be evidence for Bem's hypothesis (1975) that psychologically androgynous individuals are more likely than traditional persons to display adaptability and engagement in situationally effective behaviors.

In their literature review of decision-making power and satisfaction, Gray-Little and Burks (1983) found that the majority of studies on power have demonstrated that marriages in which the wife appears dominant are most likely to be unhappy. The highest levels of marital satisfaction were more often to be found in egalitarian couples.

Bowen and Orthner (1983) studied the sex-role attitudes of Air Force couples. By utilizing a questionnaire upon which subjects stated the extent of

their agreement or disagreement with "traditional" or "modern" sex-role statements, they found that couples that were made up of a traditional husband and modern wife reported the least amount of marital satisfaction. The questionnaire's traditional statements suggested that a woman's primary purpose is to be responsible for the household and child-care tasks, whereas men should be the head of the household and make the major decisions within the family. Modern statements, on the other hand, stressed equality between the sexes, each spouse having the right to pursue an occupation, household responsibilities, or both. In his survey of married women, Wilson (1982) reported similar findings. He discovered that the woman most likely to be unhappy in a marriage is one who holds feminist ideals and is frustrated by her traditional role.

Using a 20-page questionnaire, Burke and Weir (1976) found that working wives were more satisfied with their marriages and performed more efficiently than nonworking wives. Hiller and Philliber (1982) reviewed the literature and posited that the sex-role orientations of the couple are critical variables when the wife's career achievements are greater than the husband's. If both partners are androgynous, they will be more comfortable with this situation and will feel more satisfied in their marriage. However, if the couple possesses traditional sex-role orientations, they will have a lowered tendency to achieve marital satisfaction when the wife's attainments are greater, and there will be pressure for change. Supporting this theory, Rotheram and Weiner (1983) found that androgynous, dual-career couples reported higher *personal* satisfaction than did dual-career, sex-typed couples and sex-typed, single-career couples.

To date, there have been no American studies published that directly relate sex-role orientation and marital satisfaction. Antill (1983), however, using a sample of 108 married Australian couples and a short form of the BSRI, reported that androgyny was positively related to marital satisfaction only to the extent that it indicated the presence of feminine traits in each partner. Because his androgynous couples were merely a subset of "similar" ones and not the focus of the study, his sample included only 10 instances in which both partners were androgynous. The present study concentrated specifically on the relationship between sex-role orientation and marital satisfaction, and it attempted to establish a more accurate picture of how an individual perceives his or her own sex-role attributes and characteristics rather than focusing on power, attitudes, or employment status. It also broadened previous research efforts by examining both the husband's and the wife's satisfaction, combining their scores to obtain one measure, and by looking at a larger sample of American couples that should contain various employment and power structures.

Drawing upon cognitive balance theory, we made the following predictions:

- (1) Couples in which both the husband and wife are androgynous would report greater marital satisfaction than couples in which both partners are sex typed.
- (2) Couples with congruent sex-role orientations (i.e., both androgynous or both sex typed) would report greater marital satisfaction than couples

with incongruent sex-role orientations (i.e., sex-typed husband with non-sex-typed wife or sex-typed wife with non-sex-typed husband).

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 185 volunteer married couples living in the city of Columbia, Maryland. Columbia was chosen because it is a planned city; therefore, the investigation would contain responses from persons from diverse socioeconomic, racial, religious, and ethnic groups. Demographics gathered on the sample revealed that most of the males (41%) and females (37%) reported that they were in the 31- to 40-year-old bracket; 70% of the males and 71% of the females reported that their current marriage was their first; 44% of the couples had been married between 6 and 15 years. Most of the husbands (44%) reported a personal income in the \$20,000-\$35,000 bracket, whereas 36% of the wives reported a personal income in the \$5,000-\$20,000 bracket.

Procedure

Subjects were randomly recruited door-to-door for this study. A female investigator visited every third apartment, townhouse, or single-family home, unless there was no answer at the door, in which case she approached the very next door on that street. A total of 921 residents were called upon and the residents were asked to volunteer for a study of personality characteristics and marital satisfaction. A total of 400 married couples volunteered for the study and were given a paper-clipped packet containing an information sheet, two consent forms, two demographic data questionnaires, two Bem Sex-Role Inventories (BSRI), and two Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Tests (LWMAT). Each instrument was numbered and labeled "husband" or "wife," so that the investigator was able to score married pairs together. The responses, however, were kept anonymous. Each spouse completed the scales at his or her leisure, and the packets were collected the following week. A total of 192 packets were collected from the couples (the remaining 208 couples either were not home during collection week or declined to participate after reading the questionnaires), of which 185 were fully completed. Upon collection, the investigator reminded the couples that the results of the study would be made available in the Columbia library. She also, at this time, answered any questions the couple had as to the nature of the study.

The major ethical consideration in this study was one of informed consent. The subjects were informed of their rights and were given information regarding their participation in the study.

RESULTS

Subjects were classified as masculine, feminine, androgynous, or undifferentiated according to the median split procedure (Bem, 1977; Spence, Helmreich,

& Stapp, 1975). *Androgynous couples* were defined as those in which both partners were above the group median on both the masculine and feminine items. *Sex-typed couples* were defined as those containing a masculine male and a feminine female. *Incongruent couples* were defined as those in which one spouse was either a masculine male or a feminine female and the other spouse was androgynous. Couples in which one or both partners were cross-sex-typed (10 couples) and those in which one or both spouses were undifferentiated (82 couples) were not used for this study.

The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test scores from each husband and wife pair were analyzed via a $3 \times 2 \times (2)$ repeated measure analysis of variance. The between-subjects factors were (a) type of couple (three factors—Both spouses androgynous and congruent, $N = 26$; Both spouses sex-typed and congruent, $N = 35$; Spouses mismatched, $N = 29$, that is, one spouse was androgynous and the other was sex typed) and (b) employment status of wife (two factors—Wife working $N = 66$; Wife not working, $N = 24$). Employment status of wife was included as an independent variable in order to make certain that type of couple was not confounded by the working status of the wife. Furthermore, couples in which the husband did not work ($N = 6$) were not included in the data analysis. The repeated measure factor was sex of spouse (two—Husband's LWMAT score; Wife's LWMAT score). The correlation between husbands' and wives' scores was significant, $r(88) = .51, p < .001$.

Results of the between-subjects analysis revealed a significant type-of-couple effect, $F(2, 84) = 13.77, p < .001$. Planned comparison tests (using the mean square error term from the ANOVA) indicated that the androgynous couples ($M = 132.29, SD = 11.13$) reported higher marital satisfaction (the couple's average score) than did sex-typed couples ($M = 111.50, SD = 16.60$), $t(84) = 3.77, p < .0005$, one-tailed. In addition, congruent couples (i.e., androgynous/androgynous and sex-typed/sex-typed) differed from the incongruent couples in reported marital satisfaction (the couple's average score). In particular, the congruent couples ($M = 120.36, SD = 17.76$) reported higher couple satisfaction than did the incongruent couples ($M = 112.26, SD = 15.69$), $t(84) = 1.68, p < .05$, one-tailed. However, the mean marital satisfaction score for the congruent sex-typed couples ($M = 111.50$) was essentially identical to the incongruent couples' mean score ($M = 112.26$), indicating that the scores of the androgynous couples were responsible for the higher congruent ratings. It should be pointed out that no other significant effects were found for the between-subjects analysis using the couple's average score. That is, employment status of the wife was not significant as a main effect or involved in an interaction with type of couple.

The repeated measure part of the analysis revealed a sex-of-spouse main effect, $F(1, 84) = 15.38, p < .001$, and a sex-of-spouse by employment-status-of-wife interaction effect, $F(1, 84) = 7.46, p < .008$. Specifically, it was found that husbands ($M = 121.11, SD = 19.32$) reported greater marital satisfaction than their wives ($M = 114.39, SD = 20.87$). However, this main effect was qualified by the interaction, whereby the husbands ($M = 123.38, SD = 15.79, N = 24$) reported

greater marital satisfaction than their wives ($M = 106.29$, $SD = 21.71$) only when their wives did not work (simple effects test, $F(1, 84) = 18.62$, $p < .001$). There was no significant difference between husbands ($M = 120.29$, $SD = 20.50$, $N = 66$) and their wives ($M = 117.33$, $SD = 19.91$) when the wife worked (simple effects test, $F(1, 84) = 1.53$, n.s.). In addition, it was found that working wives ($M = 117.33$) reported greater marital satisfaction than nonworking wives ($M = 106.29$), $F(1, 84) = 4.59$, $p < .035$ (simple effects test). Finally, type of couple did not interact with any of the independent variables.

DISCUSSION

The results indicated that couples in which both the husband and wife are androgynous report higher marital satisfaction than couples in which both partners are sex typed. It was expected that couples with congruent sex-role orientations would report higher marital satisfaction than couples with incongruent sex roles. However, this hypothesis was only partially supported. It was found that the androgynous couples reported higher marital satisfaction than the incongruent couples, but the sex-typed couples did not. These findings do not fully support the cognitive balance theory, which posits that persons sharing similar values (i.e., traditional or nontraditional) would be more attracted to and more satisfied with their relationships than those who do not share similar attitudes and values. This contention was supported by the androgynous couples who are alike in that both partners incorporate both traditionally "masculine" and "feminine" characteristics in their personalities—they both have an ability to be aggressive and competitive or gentle and nurturing, depending on the nature of the situation (Bem, 1975). However, sex-typed couples, who would appear to complement each other because both partners demonstrate and value traditional sex roles, did not uphold this theory of cognitive balance.

Perhaps it is more important for marital partners to possess the ability to be adaptable and flexible, and engage in situationally effective behaviors, than to simply share common goals or values. In today's complex and changing society, in which more families are dual-career and are having fewer children, it is becoming increasingly necessary for each partner to display both behaviors that are considered traditionally masculine and those that are considered feminine.

One might speculate that the expressiveness characteristic of femininity leads the androgynous partners to be sensitive to each others' needs and take care to nurture the relationship (see Antill, 1983). For the marriage to be truly satisfying, however, this expressiveness might need to be paired with the instrumentality typically associated with masculinity. Jones, Chernovetz, and Hansson (1978) note the relationship of instrumentality to personal adjustment and self-esteem. If both partners demonstrate care and concern for the other at the same time that they feel personally secure and adjusted, it seems reasonable to expect greater satisfaction with the marriage.

The failure to find sex-role complementarity positively related to satisfaction has precedent in the literature. Spence et al. (1985) quote an unpublished study by Shaver, Pullis, and Olds that found least marital satisfaction in couples when both partners were sex typed. Antill (1983) also ruled out complementarity as the basis for marital satisfaction.

That working wives report greater marital satisfaction than do nonworking wives confirms the relationship of employment to satisfaction noted by wives in the Burke and Weir (1976) study. However, in both the between-group and within-group analyses there was no significant interaction between type of couple and wife's employment status. This suggests that androgyny has an effect upon marital satisfaction whether or not the wife is working.

In summary, the present study confirmed the relationship between the possession of both expressive and instrumental characteristics in husband and wife and their combined satisfaction with their marriage. It leads to interesting speculations about the predictive value of BSR1 scores with engaged couples as well as suggesting a search for behavioral correlates, for example, greater equalization of household responsibilities, that might shed light on the relationship.

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