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Social Role Theory of Sex Differences and Similarities *Implications for the Partner Preferences of Women and Men*

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Why do human females and males behave differently in some circumstances and similarly in others? Social role theory provides a comprehensive answer to this question by encompassing several types of causes. Among these causes, social role theorists call special attention to the impact of the distribution of men and women into social roles within societies (Eagly, 1987; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). The more ultimate causes responsible for these sex differences in roles are the inherent, physical sex differences that cause certain activities to be accomplished more efficiently by one sex or the other, depending on a society's circumstances and culture (Wood & Eagly, 2002). The benefits of each sex efficiently performing certain tasks emerge because women and men are allied in societies and engage in a division of labor. As this chapter explains, sex is therefore an important organizing feature in all known societies, yet many of the specific behaviors typical of men and women vary greatly from society to society.

The social roles of women and men cause sex differences in behavior through the mediation of social and psychological processes. One such process is the formation of gender roles, by which people are expected to have characteristics that equip them for the activities typical of their sex. For example, in industrialized societies, husbands are more likely than wives to be the main family provider and head of the household, and in workplaces, men are more likely than women to hold positions of authority. Given these sex differences in typical family and occupational roles, gender roles include the expectation that men possess directive leadership qualities (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Gender roles, along with the specific roles occupied by men and women (e.g., occupational and marital roles), then guide social behavior. This guidance is in turn mediated by various developmental and socialization processes, as well as by processes involved in social interaction (e.g., expectancy confirmation) and self-regulation. In addition, biological processes, including hormonal changes, orient men and women to certain social roles and facilitate role performance. In brief, social role theory presents a set of interconnected causes that range from more proximal, or immediate, to more distal, or ultimate (see Figure 12.1). This chapter reviews this theory and then applies it to illuminate a specific area of sex-differentiated behavior, namely, the preferences that men and women have for mates.

ORIGINS OF DIVISION OF LABOR AND GENDER HIERARCHY

The question of why men and women are differently positioned in the social structure is profoundly important for understanding sex differences in behavior. The best answer to this question emerges from the study of sex-typed social roles in a wide range of societies. Wood and Eagly (2002) reviewed this cross-cultural evidence, produced primarily by anthropologists, to provide a framework for a theory of the origins of sex differences in behavior. Their review distinguished between sex differences that are universally evident across cultures and those that emerge less consistently. Universal sex differences indicate essential features of humans that may derive from innate attributes inherent in the human species or from cultural conventions that emerge similarly across societies (e.g., women carrying infants in a sling or papoose). Sex differences that are not consistent across cultures reflect more variable aspects of human functioning that are dependent on societies' external environments.

One cross-cultural universal is that societies have a division of labor between the sexes. Murdock and Provost's (1973) classic analysis of 185

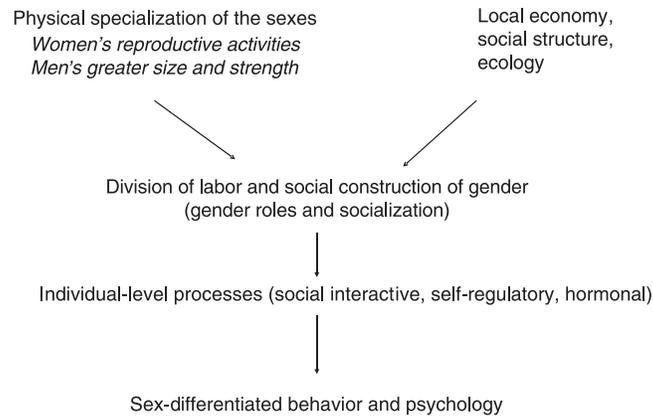


FIGURE 12.1. Social role theory of sex differences and similarities.

nonindustrial societies revealed that, within societies, the majority of productive activities were carried out solely or typically by men or women, and not by both sexes jointly. Even in industrialized societies, women are more likely than men to assume domestic roles of homemaker and primary caretaker of children, whereas men are more likely than women to assume roles in the paid economy and the domestic role of primary family provider (Shelton & John, 1996). Although the majority of women are employed in the paid workforce in many industrialized societies, the sexes tend to be concentrated in different paid occupations, with more men than women in most occupations that yield high levels of income and power (e.g., U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001).

Despite this universal pattern of a division of labor, Murdock & Provost (1973) found considerable flexibility across societies in the specific tasks allocated to men or women; that is, the majority of tasks were not uniquely performed by men or women across societies. In some societies, men performed tasks such as planting and tending crops, milking, or preparing skins; in other societies, women performed these tasks. Yet a minority of activities were consistently associated with one sex across societies. For example, only men smelted ores and worked metals, and women cooked and prepared foods from plant sources.

Another universal pattern across societies concerns status and power. Although the existence of some egalitarian societies illustrates that sex differences in status and power do not occur in all societies, all the gender hierarchies that exist favor men (Whyte, 1978). Gender hierarchies take different specific forms across societies: In some societies, women possess fewer resources than men; in others, less value is placed

on women's lives; in still others, greater restrictions are placed on women's marital and sexual behavior.

To explain the characteristic sex-typed patterns of behavior in human societies, Wood and Eagly (2002) have argued that the division of labor and the male-advantaged gender hierarchy stem from physical sex differences, particularly women's capacity for reproduction and men's size and strength, in interaction with the demands of socioeconomic systems and local ecologies. Especially critical to the division of labor are women's reproductive activities. Because women are responsible for gestating, nursing, and caring for infants, they perform child care roles across societies. In addition, these activities limit women's ability to perform other activities that require speed, uninterrupted periods of activity and training, or long-distance travel away from home. Therefore, women's reproductive activities lead them generally to eschew tasks such as hunting large animals, plowing, and conducting warfare, in favor of activities more compatible with child care. Yet reproductive activities have less impact on women's roles in societies with low birthrates, less reliance on lactation for feeding infants, and more nonmaternal care of young children. These conditions have become more common in postindustrial societies than in societies that, for example, rely on agriculture for subsistence.

Another determinant of the social roles of men and women is men's larger size and greater strength and speed. Because of these physical differences, the average man is more likely than the average woman to be able to perform with efficiency tasks that demand brief bursts of force and upper-body strength. In foraging, horticultural, and agricultural societies, these tasks include hunting large animals, plowing, and conducting warfare. However, some anthropologists have questioned whether men's size and strength are critical to societies' division of labor given the strength-intensive nature of some of the tasks usually performed by women, which include fetching water, carrying children, and doing laundry (Mukhopadhyay & Higgins, 1988). Regardless of the overall impact of men's size and strength, this aspect of physical differences has a much weaker effect on role performance in postindustrial and other societies in which few occupational roles demand these attributes.

The question of why some societies have a gender hierarchy and others do not also can be answered by considering the sexes' physical attributes in conjunction with societal and ecological conditions (Wood & Eagly, 2002). One underlying principle is that men have more status and power than women in societies in which their greater upper-body strength and speed enable them to perform certain physically demanding activities, such as warfare, that can lead to decision-making power, authority, and access to resources. Another underlying principle is that men

have more status and power than women in societies in which women's reproductive activities impair their ability to perform the activities that yield status and power. Typically, this lowering of women's status occurs when their reproductive responsibilities limit their participation in roles that require intensive specialized training, skills acquisition, and task performance outside of the household (e.g., scribe, warrior). Then women have only limited participation in the activities that produce influence outside of the household and yield resources to be traded in the broader economy. Consistent with this argument, relatively egalitarian relations between the sexes are often found in decentralized societies that lack more complex technologies, especially in very simple economies in which people subsist by foraging (Hayden, Deal, Cannon, & Casey, 1986; Salzman, 1999; Sanday, 1981). Such societies generally lack the specialized roles that give some subgroups power over others and, in particular, give men power over women. In contrast, in more socioeconomically complex societies that have specialized roles, men's power and status are enhanced by the relations that develop between the physical attributes of women and men, and the exploitation of technological and economic developments (e.g., the plow, ownership of private property).

In summary, sex-typed social roles involving gender hierarchy and a division of labor emerge from a set of socioeconomic and ecological factors that interact with the physical sex differences inherent in female reproductive activity and male size and strength (Wood & Eagly, 2002). These biosocial interactions provide the "big picture" set of causes that accounts for sex differences in roles across human societies. Although physical sex differences have more limited consequences for role performance in postindustrial societies, even these societies retain some degree of male-female division of labor and aspects of patriarchy. As we explain in the remainder of the chapter, these sex-typed social roles in turn produce sex differences in social behavior, including people's preferences for their long-term partners.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER THROUGH GENDER ROLES

Gender roles consist of shared expectations about behavior that apply to people on the basis of their socially identified sex (Eagly, 1987). This definition derives from the general concept of *social role*, which refers to the shared expectations that apply to people who occupy a certain social position or are members of a particular social category (e.g., Biddle, 1979). At an individual level, roles exist in people's minds as *schemas*, or

abstract knowledge structures about groups of people. Because they are to a great extent consensual, role schemas exist at the societal level as shared ideologies communicated among society members. As we detail in the next section of this chapter, these gender roles are the products of sex-typed social roles.

Gender roles are diffuse because they apply to the general social categories of male and female. These roles, like other diffuse roles based on age, race, and social class, are broadly relevant across situations. In contrast, more specific roles based on factors such as family relationships (e.g., mother, son) and occupation (e.g., bank teller, firefighter) are mainly relevant to behavior in a particular group or context. Gender roles can work with specific roles to structure interaction (Ridgeway, 2001). In particular, because gender roles are relevant in the workplace, people have somewhat different expectations for women and men employed in the same work role (Eagly & Karau, 2002). For example, male managers, more than female managers, are expected to be self-confident, assertive, firm, and analytical (Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989).

Evidence that gender roles exist comes mainly from research on gender stereotypes, which has consistently found that people have differing beliefs about the typical characteristics of men and women (e.g., Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Newport, 2001). The majority of these beliefs about the sexes pertain to *communal* and *agentic* attributes. Communal characteristics, which are typical of women, reflect a concern with the welfare of others and involve affection, kindness, interpersonal sensitivity, and nurturance. In contrast, agentic characteristics, which are typical of men, involve assertion, control, and confidence. Gender roles also encompass beliefs about many other aspects of men and women, including their physical characteristics, cognitive abilities, skills, and emotional dispositions (Deaux & Lewis, 1984).

Gender roles represent the characteristics that are descriptively normative for the sexes, that is, the qualities that differentiate men from women. These *descriptive norms* (also called *descriptive stereotypes*) are guides to the behaviors that are likely to be effective in a given situation (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Especially when a situation is ambiguous or confusing, people can follow these guides by acting in ways that are typical for their sex. For example, teenagers who are just beginning to date may act in sex-stereotypical ways when they are uncertain what to do next. However, gender role beliefs are not limited to descriptions of male and female behavior; they also include *injunctive norms* (also called *prescriptive stereotypes*), which specify the desirable, admirable behaviors for each sex (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Injunctive norms indicate which behaviors are likely to elicit approval from others and to yield personal

feelings of pride or shame. In general, people desire and approve of communal qualities in women and agentic qualities in men, as demonstrated in research on (1) the differing beliefs that people hold about ideal women and men (e.g., Spence & Helmreich, 1978; Williams & Best, 1990b), (2) the differing beliefs that women and men hold about their ideal selves (Wood, Christensen, Hebl, & Rothgerber, 1997), and (3) the attitudes and prescriptive beliefs that people hold about the roles and responsibilities of women and men (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 1996; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). For example, to the extent that dating partners follow injunctive norms for male and female behavior, women may act nurturant and warm on dates and men may act dominant and chivalrous. Thus, men are more likely to hold doors open for women in a dating situation than in other everyday contexts (Yoder, Hogue, Newman, Metz, & LaVigne, 2002).

The injunctive and descriptive aspects of gender role norms are likely to be closely linked. Hall and Carter (1999b) showed that behaviors are judged appropriate for one sex to the extent that they are believed to be performed more by that sex. In general, people seem to think that women and men ought to differ especially in those behaviors associated with larger sex differences. Furthermore, the typical attributes of a group can be especially desirable in certain situations, such as when the attributes differentiate between an ingroup and an outgroup (Christensen, Rothgerber, Wood, & Matz, 2002). Thus, in contexts that highlight distinctions between the sexes, people may experience pride in possessing and displaying typical, sex-typed attributes.

Despite some individual differences in beliefs about typical and appropriate male and female behavior (e.g., Spence & Buckner, 2000), these beliefs appear to be widely shared by men and women, students and older adults, and people who differ in social class and income (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Hall & Carter, 1999a). It seems that virtually everyone cognitively represents stereotypical beliefs about the sexes (e.g., Zenmore, Fiske, & Kim, 2000). Although stereotypes can be automatically activated and serve as baseline judgments of men and women, they are nonetheless moderated in their impact by various contextual, informational, and motivational factors (Blair, 2002; Zenmore et al., 2000). These consensual beliefs about groups are likely to develop and to be shared through social interaction when group members regularly cooperate with one another in the tasks of daily living, as do men and women (Ridgeway, 2001).

Gender roles form an important part of the culture of every society (see Best & Thomas, Chapter 13, this volume). In an analysis of gender stereotypes among university students in 25 nations, Williams and Best (1990a) found considerable cross-cultural similarity in the beliefs people

held about the communal and agentic characteristics of women and men. However, the tendency for people to perceive men as more active and stronger than women was less pronounced in more economically developed nations, in which literacy and the percentage of women attending universities were high. Thus, in countries in which the sexes have greater social and political equality, gender stereotypes and roles may become less traditional.

In summary, gender roles represent the typical and desirable behavior of the sexes within a society. As we explain in the next section, these gender role beliefs emerge from the social roles of men and women.

RELATION OF GENDER ROLES TO THE SOCIAL POSITION OF WOMEN AND MEN

Gender roles emerge from the typical social roles of the sexes because perceivers infer that people's actions tend to correspond to their inner dispositions (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). This cognitive process constitutes a basic principle of social psychology labeled *correspondent inference*, or *correspondence bias* (Gilbert, 1998). To demonstrate this principle, research has shown that people fail to give much weight to the constraints of social roles in inferring role players' dispositions (e.g., Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz, 1977). Thus, the communal, nurturing behaviors required by women's domestic and child care roles and by many female-dominated occupational roles favor inferences that women possess communal traits. Similarly, the assertive, task-oriented activities required by many male-dominated occupations produce expectations that men are agentic.

Given the greater power and status more typical of men's than women's roles in patriarchal societies, gender roles also encompass expectations about traits of dominance and submission (e.g., Conway, Pizzamiglio, & Mount, 1996; Eagly, 1983; Wood & Karten, 1986). People in more powerful roles behave in a more dominant style than do people in less powerful roles. Thus, men are believed to be more dominant, controlling, and assertive, and women are believed to be more subordinate and cooperative, compliant to social influence, and less overtly aggressive.

The principle of correspondence bias suggests that gender stereotypes can develop in the absence of any true dispositional differences between the sexes. To test this idea experimentally, Hoffman and Hurst (1990) informed participants that members of two occupational groups, city workers and child raisers, were comparable in their communal and agentic traits. Nonetheless, participants ascribed role-consistent traits to both occupational groups, specifically, agentic traits to city workers and

communal traits to child raisers. These findings show that instructions to consider the groups equivalent in their traits were not sufficient to overcome the correspondent inference from roles to underlying dispositions.

In summary, beliefs about the actual and ideal attributes of the sexes emerge because people assume correspondence between each sex's personal attributes and its typical role behaviors in a society. Although these beliefs emerge in large part from individuals' observations of behaviors, their communication contributes to their consensual character. These stereotypical beliefs have their roots in (1) the division of labor in the sexes' performance of family and occupational roles, and (2) the gender hierarchy by which men are more likely than women to occupy roles of higher power and status. Through a variety of proximal mechanisms discussed in the next section, the resulting gender role expectations influence behavior in many domains, including mate preferences.

GENDER ROLES' INFLUENCE ON BEHAVIOR

How do gender roles influence behavior? In terms of the broader, distal causes for sex differences, men's physical attributes and women's reproductive activities frame the effects of gender role beliefs. These attributes and activities establish the perceived costs and benefits of behaviors for each sex within particular societal structures and ecologies. In terms of more proximal, immediate causes, gender roles have an effect because they convey the costs and benefits of behaviors for men and women. Because communal behaviors often appear to have greater utility for women and agentic behaviors for men, both sexes then engage in sex-typed behaviors that in turn foster their preferences for and performance of sex-typical family and occupational roles. This personal participation in sex-typical roles that ensues throughout the life cycle is critical to the socialization and maintenance of sex differences. Insofar as they occupy different specific roles, women and men behave differently, learn different skill sets, and orient themselves toward different life goals. Moreover, based on their experience in specific sex-typed roles, women and men develop general behavioral tendencies that extend beyond these roles. These tendencies emerge as men and women confirm others' gender-stereotypic expectancies, regulate their own behavior based on gender-stereotypic self-concepts, and experience hormonal changes that accompany role performance.

People conform to gender-appropriate behavior in part because others expect them to do so. Other people can deliver penalties for deviation from gender roles and rewards for role-congruent behaviors. Re-

search on sex-stereotypical expectations has yielded some of the clearest demonstrations of such behavioral confirmation (see Deaux & LaFrance, 1998; Geis, 1993), even though the link between expectancies and behavior is contingent on various conditions (Olson, Roese, & Zanna, 1996). The sanctions against role-inconsistent behavior may be overt (e.g., losing a job) or subtle (e.g., being ignored, disapproving looks). People communicate these expectations through verbal and non-verbal behaviors, although they are not necessarily aware of these processes because such communication can operate at a relatively implicit or automatic level (Blair, 2002; Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001). It is important to recognize, too, that there are likely to be circumstances in which the benefits of gender nonconformity outweigh its possible social costs; therefore, people act in ways that counter gender stereotypes.

Much evidence indicates that people react negatively to deviations from gender roles. For example, in a meta-analytic review of 61 studies of evaluations of male and female leaders, Eagly, Makhijani, and Klonsky (1992) showed that women who adopt a male-stereotypical, assertive, and directive leadership style are evaluated more negatively than men who adopt this style. Also, in small-group interaction, women tend to lose likability and influence when they behave in a dominant or extremely competent manner (see Carli, 2001). Additional evidence indicates that men may be penalized for behaving passively, unassertively, and negatively (e.g., Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Costrich, Feinstein, Kidder, Marecek, & Pascale, 1975).

Evidence that people are rewarded for acting in ways that are congruent with gender role expectations derives from studies of socialization practices across nonindustrial societies. Parents use both rewards and punishments to inculcate nurturance in girls, and achievement and self-reliance in boys, although the strength of these socialization pressures also varies with societal attributes (e.g., Barry, Bacon, & Child, 1957). Socialization research in North America and other Western nations has produced less evidence of parents' delivery of differential rewards and punishments for boys and girls, with the important exception of parents' encouragement of gender-typed activities and interests—for example, toys, games, and chores (Lytton & Romney, 1991). Nonetheless, sex-typed expectations are also communicated through more subtle processes, such as the modeling of behaviors (see Bussey & Bandura, Chapter 5, this volume).

Differential rewards for gender-consistent behaviors are also evident in adult social interaction. For example, in a study of college organizations, Cotes and Feldman (1996) found that in female groups, women were better liked to the extent that they could display happiness, an emotion useful in relations characterized by support and understand-

ing. In contrast, in male groups, men were better liked to the extent that they effectively displayed anger, an emotion useful in competitive interactions within a hierarchy. Finally, evidence of approval of sex-appropriate attributes comes from the research on preferences for long-term partners, which we discuss in the final section of this chapter. As we explain, preferences for sex-typed mates vary with both the attributes valued in men and women within a society and individual society members' gender role ideologies.

Gender roles can produce sex differences in behavior not only through behavioral confirmation of expectancies but also by affecting people's self-concepts. The idea that gender roles influence people's perceptions of themselves is supported by research findings that self-concepts, on average, tend to be gender-stereotypical (e.g., Spence & Buckner, 2000; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). Specifically, women's identities are oriented toward interdependence, in the sense that representations of others are treated as part of the self (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997). Thus, women's self-concepts tend to be relational and to include others who are important to them, especially in close, dyadic relationships. Although some researchers have argued that men's self-concepts are oriented toward independence and separation from others (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997), instead, it appears that men have an interdependent self-concept that focuses on hierarchical relationships within larger groups (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997; Gabriel & Gardner, 1999; Gardner & Gabriel, Chapter 8, this volume). Men's construal of themselves in terms of competition for power and status in larger collectives is compatible with the social role theory principle that the male gender role follows in part from men's greater access to status and power.

Self-concepts guide the behavior of men and women through a variety of cognitive and motivational mechanisms (Hannover, 2000; Bussey & Bandura, Chapter 5, this volume). In one such process, gender role norms are internalized and adopted as personal standards against which people judge their own behavior. Men and women tend to evaluate themselves favorably to the extent that they conform to these standards, and unfavorably to the extent that they deviate from them. In a demonstration of such processes, Wood et al. (1997) investigated normative beliefs that men are powerful, dominant, and self-assertive, and that women are caring, intimate with others, and emotionally expressive. Participants who had internalized gender role norms felt good about themselves when their behavior was consistent with these norms; that is, dominant experiences for men and communal experiences for women had the effect of shifting participants' actual self-concepts closer to their standards about how they wished to behave and believed they should behave. Alternatively, when people fail to live up to these sex-typed normative standards, they may experience de-

pression and lowered self-esteem (e.g., Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Thus, gender roles can affect behavior when people incorporate them into their self-concepts and use them as personal standards against which to evaluate their own behavior.

Consideration of self-construals helps to explain individual differences in the extent to which people engage in behavior consistent with the gender roles of their culture. Although many people think of themselves in conventional masculine or feminine terms, many other people are not highly gender-identified. People influenced by culturally atypical environments may not internalize conventional gender role norms and may thus have self-concepts that are not typical of their gender. In support of this idea, only about half of Wood et al.'s (1997) student participants reported that their desired behaviors were congruent with the sex-appropriate standard. Furthermore, research relating self-report personality measures of masculinity and femininity to behavior has demonstrated that people vary in the degree to which their self-concepts are sex-typed, and that nontypical people are less likely to show traditionally sex-typed behavior (Taylor & Hall, 1982). In addition, the differing self-concepts of men and women may become cognitively accessible only in some social contexts, with some situations evoking a stronger awareness of oneself as male or female (Deaux & Major, 1987).

Biological processes, especially hormonal changes, provide another mechanism through which gender role norms influence behavior. A direct link between hormonal processes and the demands of social roles has been demonstrated by studies showing that testosterone levels in males rise in anticipation of athletic and other competition, and in response to insults, presumably to energize and direct their physical and cognitive performance (e.g., Booth, Shelley, Mazur, Tharp, & Kittok, 1989; Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwarz, 1996). Hormonal changes, particularly increases in cortisol, also occur with mothers' initiation of their parental role at childbirth and evidently stimulate nurturing behavior (Corter & Fleming, 1995; Fleming, Ruble, Krieger, & Wong, 1997). Although some of these hormonal effects are likely sex-specific, other hormonal changes are common to both sexes. Especially compelling evidence that hormonal mechanisms can mediate the effects of roles on behavior was provided by the finding that fathers anticipating childbirth experienced hormonal changes parallel to the changes that occurred in mothers (i.e., involving estradiol, cortisol, and prolactin) and, in addition, experienced a drop in testosterone (Berg & Wynne-Edwards, 2001; Storey, Walsh, Quinton, & Wynne-Edwards, 2000). To facilitate the role performance of women and men, such biological processes work in concert with psychological processes involving sex-typed social expectations and self-concepts.

Gender roles are not the only influence on behavior; they coexist with specific roles based on factors such as family relationships (e.g., father, daughter) and occupation (e.g., secretary, electrician). In workplace settings, for example, a manager has a role defined by occupation and, simultaneously, a gender role of being a man or woman. Expectations for specific roles and those for more diffuse gender roles are typically combined to give greater weight to expectations that are relevant to the task at hand (Hembroff, 1982). Because specific roles have more direct implications for behavior in many settings, they may often be more important than gender roles. This conclusion was foreshadowed by experimental demonstrations that stereotypical sex differences can be eliminated by providing information that specifically counters gender-based expectations (e.g., Wood & Karten, 1986). In employment settings, occupational roles no doubt have primary influence on how men and women accomplish the tasks required by their jobs. However, gender roles may “spill over” to influence discretionary behaviors, such as the style in which an occupational role is carried out (e.g., in leadership roles, women tend to be more democratic than men; Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Thus, gender roles influence behavior, even if they assume secondary status in settings in which specific roles are of primary importance.

Although a general review of research on sex differences and similarities is beyond the scope of this chapter, much evidence suggests that actual differences are, in general, gender-stereotypical, just as social role theory predicts. Furthermore, people are relatively accurate in their beliefs about men’s and women’s behavior. This accuracy is not surprising given that these beliefs emerge from the social roles of men and women and in turn foster role-appropriate sex differences. Hall and Carter (1999a) provided evidence of this accuracy in their research on perceptions of sex differences and similarities in 77 traits, abilities, and behaviors. They reported that student judges’ mean estimates of these differences and similarities correlated .70 with the actual research findings (as meta-analytically summarized). The judges understood which differences tended to be larger and which smaller; they also understood the direction of the difference, meaning whether males or females were more likely to possess the attribute or perform the behavior.

Despite the evidence of accuracy in gender-stereotypical beliefs, some systematic biases in judgments lessen the accuracy of perceptions of men and women (e.g., Boldry, Wood, & Kashy, 2001; Diekmann, Eagly, & Kulesa, 2002). Furthermore, accurate perceptions of men and women in general do not imply accuracy in perceptions of an individual man or woman. Instead, when categorized into groups, people tend to be perceived as similar to one another; therefore, predictions of individ-

ual behavior from group membership tend to be overly homogeneous. Even given these limitations, however, people's ideas about men and women generally are congruent with behavioral evidence of sex differences.

As a final point in our presentation of social role theory, we note that we have oversimplified our presentation of the distal and proximal causes of sex differences, especially in Figure 12.1, by confining our treatment mainly to a forward causal direction. Yet causation is more complex, and the various causes in the model influence one another in reciprocal fashion. Although our diagram depicts the forward causation from the physical specialization of the sexes and socioeconomic factors to the division of labor and the social construction of gender, and then to individual-level mediating processes that influence patterns of behavior, these causal arrows can be reversed. In particular, to the extent that people exhibit gender-stereotypical behavior, these behavioral differences act back to strengthen gender roles and stereotypes and to channel men and women into different social roles. Thus, the causal sequence of social role theory allows for both forward and backward causal flow. Moreover, to the extent that any causes of sex differences not mentioned in this chapter (e.g., inherited differences in cognitive tendencies or temperament) have some influence, they also act on gender roles and role distributions.

SEX DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES IN PARTNER PREFERENCES

Social role theory explains why men and women desire somewhat different attributes in a long-term partner. To illustrate the utility of this theory, we summarize our research on this topic in the remainder of this chapter. From a social role perspective, the psychology of mate selection reflects people's efforts to maximize their positive outcomes and to minimize their negative ones in an environment in which these outcomes are constrained by both societal gender roles and the more specific expectations associated with marital roles (see also Pratto, 1996). The criteria that women and men use to select mates reflect the divergent responsibilities and obligations inherent in their current and anticipated social roles. An important aspect of these roles in many Western cultures has been (and still is, to some extent) a family system based on a male provider and a female homemaker. Within this division of labor, women typically maximize their outcomes by seeking a mate who is likely to be successful in the wage-earning role—in short, a good provider. In turn, men typically maximize their outcomes by seeking a mate who is likely

to be successful in the domestic role—in short, a skilled homemaker and child caretaker.

This marital system also underlies women's preferences for older husbands and men's preferences for younger wives. With this combination, it is easier for marriage partners to assign to men the relatively powerful position that is normative for this form of marriage. Also, younger women tend to lack independent resources and are therefore more likely to regard their marital role as attractive. In complementary fashion, older men are more likely to have acquired the resources that make them good candidates to be providers. Older men and younger women thus fit the culturally expected pattern of breadwinner and homemaker. In summary, mate preferences are influenced by the division of labor and marital system in a society and in turn become embedded in gender roles and the broader cultural ideology of societies.

To test social role theory's predictions about mate selection, we conducted several studies that relate variation in the social roles of men and women to the characteristics that people desire in mates. This variation in social roles occurs both across societies (because some societies have a stronger division of labor than do others) and within societies (because people occupy homemaker or employee roles). In addition, variation in people's beliefs about social roles emerges across individuals within a society because people differ in the degree to which they endorse traditional gender ideology. The research that we present relates each of these forms of role variation to sex differences in mate selection preferences.

A Cross-Cultural Test

To examine cross-cultural variation in mate preferences of women and men, we reanalyzed data from a well-known study of mate selection (Buss, 1989; Buss et al., 1990). The participants were young adults of 37 diverse, primarily urbanized, cash-economy cultures, with 54% from European and North American cultures. These participants responded to questionnaire measures of the characteristics they desired in mates. In these data, certain sex differences in mate preferences were apparent across cultures. Specifically, men, more than women, preferred mates who were skilled homemakers and cooks, physically attractive, and younger than themselves; whereas women, more than men, preferred mates who were good providers and older than themselves (see also Kenrick & Keefe, 1992).

From a social role perspective, sex differences in mate preferences become smaller as the traditional division of labor weakens in industrial and postindustrial societies. As societies become more egalitarian, men and women become more similarly positioned in the social structure

and, therefore, more similar psychologically in many ways, including in their preferences for long-term partners. To test these predictions, Eagly and Wood (1999) related the mate preferences reported by each culture's women and men to the degree of gender equality in the culture (as reported by the United Nations Development Programme, 1995).

Most relevant to this hypothesis is the *Gender Empowerment Measure* (GEM), which represents the extent to which women participate equally with men in economic, political, and decision-making roles. This index increases as (1) women's share of administrative and managerial jobs and of professional and technical jobs approaches equality with men's share; (2) women's share of parliamentary seats rises; and (3) women's income approaches parity with that of men. Another relevant United Nations index, the *Gender-Related Development Index* (GDI), assesses a society's ability to provide its citizens with greater life expectancy, education and literacy, and income in general, and imposes a penalty when women have lower outcomes on these measures than men.

As predicted, women's preferences for older mates and mates with resources, and men's preferences for younger mates and mates with housekeeping and cooking skills were most pronounced in patriarchal societies; these sex differences became less pronounced as the traditional division of labor weakened and societies became more egalitarian (see Tables 12.1 and 12.2). Providing additional evidence that the preferences of men and women were a common response to a sex-typed division of labor, the sex differences in mate preferences tended to coexist within societies. Specifically, in societies in which women expressed especially strong preferences for mates with resources and older mates, men also expressed especially strong preferences for mates with domestic skills and younger mates.

Additional evidence that mate preferences reflect social roles comes from Kasser and Sharma's (1999) separate reexamination of the 37 cultures study. They found that women, but not men, were more likely to prefer a good provider to the extent that women in the culture had limited reproductive freedom and educational opportunity. These findings lend additional support to the social role prediction that mate selection preferences reflect societal gender and marital roles.

Experimental Test of Playing Homemaker or Employee Role

To supplement the evidence that mate preferences vary across cultures with the roles of men and women, Johannesen-Schmidt (2003) carried out a role-playing experiment to explore the relation between specific marital roles and mate preferences. In this research, student participants

TABLE 12.1. Correlations of Mean Rankings and Ratings of Mate Selection Criteria with United Nations Indexes of Gender Equality for Buss et al.'s (1990) 37 Cultures Sample

Mate selection criterion and raters	Ranked criteria		Rated criteria	
	Gender Empowerment Measure (<i>n</i> = 33)	Gender-Related Development Index (<i>n</i> = 34)	Gender Empowerment Measure (<i>n</i> = 35)	Gender-Related Development Index (<i>n</i> = 36)
Good earning capacity (financial prospect)				
Sex difference	-.43*	-.33†	-.29†	-.23
Women	-.29	-.18	-.49**	-.42**
Men	.24	.27	-.40*	-.36*
Good housekeeper (and cook)				
Sex difference	-.62***	-.54**	-.61***	-.54**
Women	.04	-.01	.11	-.07
Men	-.46**	-.42*	-.60***	-.61***

Note. The criteria were described slightly differently in the ranking and the rating tasks. The ranking term is given first, with the rating term following in parentheses. Higher values on the gender equality indexes indicate greater equality. For the preferences of women or men, higher values of the mean rankings and ratings of mate selection criteria indicate greater desirability in a mate; therefore, a positive correlation indicates an increase in the desirability of a criterion as gender equality increased, and a negative correlation indicates a decrease. Sex differences in these preferences were calculated as female-minus-male means for good earning capacity and male-minus-female means for good housekeeper. A positive correlation thus indicates an increase in the sex difference as gender equality increased, and a negative correlation indicates a decrease in the sex difference. Copyright 1999 by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted by permission.

†*p* < .10; **p* < .05; ***p* < .01; ****p* < .001.

from a U.S. university imagined that they had the role of primary breadwinner or primary homemaker and reported on their preferences for mates. Individuals assigned to the breadwinner role placed greater emphasis on finding a younger mate with good domestic skills than did those assigned to the domestic role; individuals assigned to the domestic role placed greater emphasis on finding an older mate with good provider skills than did individuals assigned to the breadwinner role. These findings suggest that people seek mates with attributes that complement their marital role.

Although all sex differences in preferences were not eliminated by the role variation, the assigned roles had a similar impact on male and

TABLE 12.2. Correlations of Mean Preferred Age Difference between Self and Spouse with United Nations Indexes of Gender Equality for Buss et al.'s (1990) 37 Cultures Sample

	Gender Empowerment Measure (<i>n</i> = 35)	Gender-Related Developmental Index (<i>n</i> = 36)
Sex difference	-.73***	-.70***
Women	-.64***	-.57***
Men	.70***	.70***

Note. Higher values on the gender equality indexes indicate greater equality. Positive ages indicate preference for an older spouse, and negative ages indicate preference for a younger spouse. Therefore, for the preferences of women, a negative correlation indicates a decrease in the tendency to prefer an older spouse as gender equality increased, whereas for the preferences of men, a positive correlation indicates a decrease in the tendency to prefer a younger spouse. Because the sex difference in preferred age was calculated as female minus male mean preferred spousal age in relation to self, a negative correlation indicates a decrease in the sex difference in preferred age as gender equality increased. From Eagly and Wood (1999). Copyright 1999 by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted by permission.

****p* < .001.

female participants. Thus, this study provides important evidence that expected roles in society are related to preferred mate characteristics.

Tests of Within-Society Individual Differences

Another way to test social role predictions is to examine within a society the mate preferences of people who differ in their personal endorsement of the traditional male–female division of labor. Illustrating this approach, Johannesen-Schmidt and Eagly (2002) explored whether individual differences in gender ideology are associated with mate selection preferences. Because change toward nontraditional gender arrangements has mainly taken the form of women entering the paid labor force rather than men performing a larger proportion of domestic labor (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000), it is attitudes toward change in women's roles that are crucial. People who approve of traditional roles for women or disapprove of nontraditional roles for women should be especially likely to make traditionally sex-differentiated choices of mates.

Glick and Fiske's (1996) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) provides appropriate measures of individual differences to test these predictions because it assesses endorsement of the traditional female role. The ASI includes scales of (1) benevolent sexism, defined as approval of women in traditional roles; and (2) hostile sexism, defined as disap-

proval of women in nontraditional roles. Despite men's generally greater sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), these measures should relate to mate preferences within both sexes. To the extent that men or women favor the traditional female role by manifesting benevolent or hostile sexism, they should show stronger mate preferences that support this division of labor.

To test these predictions within a sample of university students, Johannesen-Schmidt and Eagly (2002) correlated participants' endorsement of traditional female roles on the ASI and the characteristics they preferred in a spouse. In general, people with traditional expectations about women also had sex-typed preferences that enhance the classic division of labor between husbands and wives. For example, for age preferences, the more men supported the traditional female role, the younger the age they preferred in a spouse; the more women supported the traditional female role, the older the age they preferred in a spouse (albeit significant only for the benevolent sexism measure). In summary, the three studies we have presented provide strong converging evidence that partner preferences, like many other social attributes and behaviors, are associated with the social roles of men and women.

Evolutionary Psychology as a Theory of Mate Selection

Social role theory is surely not the only theory of sex differences in mate selection. In particular, evolutionary psychologists have contended that these differences reflect the unique adaptive problems experienced by men and women as they evolved (e.g. Buss, 1989; Kenrick, Trost, & Sundie, Chapter 4, this volume). Thus, the sexes developed different strategies to ensure their survival and to maximize reproductive success. Buss et al. (1990) interpreted the results of the 37 cultures study as providing evidence that sex differences in preferred mate characteristics are universal and, therefore, reflect evolved tendencies that are general to the human species. However, the systematic cross-cultural variation in the magnitude of sex differences raises questions about this interpretation (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Kasser & Sharma, 1999).

Although evolutionary psychologists, in principle, acknowledge the possibility of cultural variation, they have claimed that mate preferences are unrelated to individuals' economic resources and other such role-related factors within a given society (e.g., Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Townsend, 1989). For example, in a well-known study, Wiederman and Allgeier (1992) found that women in our society who themselves anticipated a high income still valued financial resources in their mates. This finding provides a poor test of role variables because achieving a high-paying occupation does not neutralize the impact of broader gender role

expectations. Consistent with these broader norms, most women regard themselves as secondary wage earners (Ferree, 1991) and anticipate being partially dependent on their husband's income during a portion of their lifespan (e.g., while raising a family; Herzog, Bachman, & Johnston, 1983). Furthermore, women who themselves have a higher income are likely to select partners from their own higher level socioeconomic group (e.g., Kalmijn, 1994; Mare, 1991). In general, tests of social role theory predictions should assess the influences of specific role requirements (e.g., actual or anticipated marital roles) and more diffuse role expectations (e.g., gender roles and expectations based on social class and education).

Changes in Gender Roles and Sex Differences over Time

The view that gender roles are rooted in the division of labor and gender hierarchy implies that when these features of social structure change, expectations about men and women change accordingly. Indeed, the employment of women has increased rapidly in the United States and many other nations in recent decades. This change in the occupational structure may reflect declines in the birthrate and increased compatibility of employment and family roles, along with the increasing rarity of occupations that favor male size and strength. Their greatly increased education has qualified women for jobs with more status and income than the jobs they typically held in the past. Even though men's tendency to increase their responsibility for child care and other domestic work is modest (Bianchi et al., 2000), these changes in the division of labor have resulted in decreasing acceptance of the traditional gender roles and a redefinition of the patterns of behavior most appropriate to women and men.

Because women's roles have changed to become more like those of men, some convergence should occur in the behavior of men and women and take the form of changes in women's attributes in masculine domains. Consistent with this idea, analyses of sex differences across time periods in recent decades show some convergence of the attributes of women and men in traditionally masculine domains such as risk-taking and assertiveness (see review by Eagly & Diekmann, in press). These changes presumably reflect women's increasing labor force participation and lessening concentration on child care and other domestic activities.

These shifts in women's roles have also affected both sexes' preferences for mates (Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001). Specifically, in the United States, from 1939 to 1996, men's preference for a good housekeeper and cook decreased and their preference for partners with good financial prospects and similar level of education increased. In

turn, women's preference for a mate with ambition and industriousness decreased. These sex-typed changes reflect societal revisions of marital roles as wives come to share more breadwinning responsibility with their husbands.

Not only does scientific evidence suggest some convergence of the sexes but also people believe that men and women are becoming more similar. Thus, social perceivers tend to believe women and men have converged in their personality, cognitive, and physical characteristics during the past 50 years, and will continue to converge for the next 50 years (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000). This perceived convergence occurs because women increasingly possess qualities typically associated with men. Perceivers function like implicit role theorists by assuming that because the roles of women and men have become more similar, their attributes have become more similar. This demise of many sex differences with increasing gender equality is a prediction of social role theory that will be more adequately tested to the extent that societies produce conditions of equality or near-equality between women and men.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has outlined the basic assumptions of the social role theory of sex differences and similarities. Tests of the model with preferences for long-term partners revealed that, as anticipated, sex differences depend on role differences. Specifically, women tend to prefer an older partner with resources, and men tend to prefer a younger partner with homemaking skills, to the extent that they hold or endorse traditional roles. Furthermore, we have argued that these (and other) relations between social roles and behavior are mediated by proximal causes, including confirmation of others' sex-typed expectancies, self-regulation, and hormonal influences. At a societal level, the concentration of women and men in different roles is a consistent feature of human societies because the sexes cooperate in a division of labor. Moreover, in many societies, the roles of men and women manifest patriarchal relationships whereby men have more power and authority than women. Patriarchy and the division of labor in turn emerge because women's reproductive activities and men's size and strength facilitate performance of certain activities. In more socioeconomically complex societies, activities compatible with women's child care duties tend not to accord especially high levels of status or power. However, in postindustrial societies, with their low birthrates, women have greatly increased their access to roles that yield higher levels of power and authority.

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