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EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT ON THE SEX-TYPED ATTRIBUTES
OF COLLEGE FEMALES

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Abstract

The study tested the hypothesis that differences in maternal sex-typed behavior as manifested by working outside the home and advanced educational attainment would be related to the sex-typed characteristics of daughters. Subjects were 43 female undergraduates. The amount the mother had worked was positively related to the daughter's masculine personality characteristics, her plans for attending graduate school, plans for working after marriage, and negatively related to some feminine personality characteristics. These relationships did not depend on the amount of identification. Mother's educational attainment was not related to any of the daughter's characteristics. The results were interpreted as showing that it is not the amount of identification with mother, but the types of behavior exhibited by the mother which are important influences on girls' sex role learning.

THE EFFECTS OF MATERNAL EMPLOYMENT AND
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT ON THE SEX-TYPED ATTRIBUTES
OF COLLEGE FEMALES¹

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Research on feminine sex-typing has often been based on the assumption that the child's femininity is a direct function of the strength of identification with the mother. The extent to which the daughter learns femininity through identification should depend, however, on the sex-typed qualities displayed by the mother. In the present study, both the qualities of the maternal model and the strength of identification with the mother were examined as determinants of the daughter's sex-typing.

Variations in the feminine attributes of the mothers were operationally defined by the amount of employment during the child's lifetime and the amount of advanced education received. It was assumed that middle class women who work and attain advanced levels of education would have less traditional feminine personality characteristics than their more domestic and less well educated counterparts.

The daughters' sex-typed personality characteristics, occupational plans, and educational plans were expected to vary as a function of the above maternal characteristics. In an earlier study of adolescent girls, daughters of nonworking women expressed more traditional feminine interests than those of working women (Douván & Adelson, 1966), but there has been little attention to possible differences in motivational patterns or sex-typed personality attributes. A number of studies of younger girls have shown that daughters

of working mothers more often planned to attend college and planned to work after marriage (Banducci, 1967; Nye & Hoffman, 1963). The present study was intended to extend these findings to college females who are closer in time to carrying out such plans.

A measure of identification was also included with the expectation that highly identified girls would have occupational and educational plans which were more similar to those of their mothers than girls with low identification scores.

Method

Subjects were 51 female undergraduates at Cornell University who were approached in their living units by a fellow female student and asked to complete a questionnaire. No student refused, but eight were eliminated because of incomplete responses or absence of one parent, leaving a final $N = 43$. The sample was predominantly white middle and upper-middle class and ranged from freshmen through seniors.

Information on the occupational and educational histories of the parents and on the subject's occupational and educational plans were obtained on the face sheet of the questionnaire. The mother's work history was obtained on a three-point scale: didn't work (0 points), worked part time (1 point), worked full time (2 points), for four periods in S's life: preschool, grade school, high school, college. The range of possible scores was 1-8. The educational levels of mother and father were checked on a 5-point scale: 1) high school only, 2) some college, no degree, 3) Bachelor's degree, 4) some post-graduate work, no degree, 5) graduate or professional degree.

The work plans of the subjects were indicated on a scale similar to that for the mother's work except that the four time periods were: before children, when children are preschool, when children are in grade school, when children are in high school or college. She checked whether she expected to work (no; yes, part time; yes, full time) during each period. Educational plans were scored from the question, "Do you plan to go to graduate school?"

Sex-typed personality characteristics were derived from the Adjective Check List (Gough and Heilbrun, 1965). Of the 15 personality scales on this instrument, college students rated achievement, autonomy, dominance, and endurance as masculine and affiliation, nurturance, succorance, abasement, and deference as feminine (Heilbrun, 1963). The remainder were not viewed as sex-typed.

Identification was measured by the method devised by Heilbrun (1965). The score indicates the extent to which S perceives himself as more similar to one parent than to the other, not the absolute amount of perceived similarity to either parent.

Results and Discussion

The mother's work score and educational attainment were positively correlated ($r = .57, p < .01$). The subjects' personality scores, work plans, and educational plans were not significantly related to one another.

Maternal Employment. It was expected that the more the mother worked, the more masculine and less feminine the girls' personality scores would be. The group was divided into thirds on the basis of mother's work score, and

one-way analysis of variance of each personality characteristic were performed. The results and group means, which appear in Table 1, support the hypothesis.

Insert Table 1 about here.

On three of the four masculine characteristics, the girls' scores were higher the more the mother had worked. The trend was similar on the fourth characteristic, autonomy, but did not approach significance. The largest difference occurred between those girls whose mothers had never worked and the remainder whose mothers had worked with varying frequency.

Three of the feminine characteristics, succorance, abasement, and deference, fell in the predicted pattern; the difference was significant for succorance and approached significance for abasement. The affiliation and nurturance scores did not conform to the predicted pattern. The latter characteristics appear to reflect an active, socially outgoing pattern while succorance, abasement, and deference seem to indicate passivity and dependency. Because opportunities for affiliation and nurturance are available both in jobs and in unpaid volunteer and social activity, working and nonworking women may not differ on these characteristics. They may be more likely to differ on passivity and dependency which appear to conflict with the demands of most jobs.

Maternal employment apparently had more impact on masculine than on feminine characteristics. The effect of the mother performing a masculine role in conjunction with her domestic role appears to be an added dimension of masculinity with a corresponding loss only in the passive, dependent elements of femininity.

As predicted, the amount the mother had worked was related to the daughter's work plans ($r = .35$, $p < .05$) and plans to attend graduate school ($\chi^2 = 7.60$, 2 df , $p < .05$). The hypothesis that the more highly identified girls would be more similar to their mothers, however, was not supported.

Mother's Educational Attainment. There were no significant relations between the mother's educational attainment and any of the personality scores, work plans, or educational plans of the daughters. In view of the high correlation between mother's education and working, it is striking that only employment was related to the characteristics of the daughters. This finding may be due to the fact that the mother's employment is a more salient feature of the child's everyday environment than her educational attainment. It provides direct and repeated exposure to a model engaging in both masculine and feminine activity - a factor which may be more important than the hypothesized maternal personality differences.

Identification. It is possible that the less feminine characteristics of the daughters of working mothers were due to greater identification with their fathers, rather than to identification with less feminine mothers. This interpretation was not supported by the data. The identification scores of the three groups differing in maternal employment were not significantly different ($F = 1.39$).

In brief, the findings demonstrate a relation between maternal employment and daughters' sex-typed personality characteristics. The previously reported relation of maternal employment to girls' occupational and educational plans was extended to the college age level. The effects of maternal employment were fairly specific and apparently not due to more general characteristics associated with maternal education. These findings were restricted, however, to a sample of middle class families in which the mother's job was usually professional or semi-professional. Finally, these results indicate that the differences between daughters of working and non-working mothers are not due to differences in the amount of identification, but to differences in the types of behavior presented by their mothers for them to emulate.

Footnotes

The data were collected when the author was in the Department of Child Development and Family Relationships at Cornell University. The author is grateful to Joan Gottesman Wexler for collecting the data in connection with her senior honors thesis and to Richard Starr for helping in the analysis.

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