French Men’s and Women’s Sex Role Attitudes

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EVERYWHERE ONE HEARS of a change in the position of women and an undermining of traditional values, usually accompanied by the emergency of a new breed of women. There is no need to go further than the recent burgeoning literature on women’s and men’s changing sex roles to become aware of this trend. Much of this literature, however, is limited to the American society with the cultural perspective largely neglected. It is this concern that stimulated the pursuit of the present investigation in France with a special focus on the correlates of selected sex role attitudes.

One of the most striking aspects of the changing position of women in France, as in other western European countries, is the increasing proportion of women who are working. They constitute almost two-fifths of the labor force (Sellerot, 1976: 94, Silver, 1977: 259). It is, however, by examining women’s position at the highest occupational levels that women’s changed status can be assessed since the Civil Service in France has a long tradition of female employment. Based on the 1962 census, Sellerot (1976) reports that in France the proportion of professional women is greater than that of most Western European countries. Nevertheless, this important stratum of professional women coexists with an exploited female category at the lower levels of the class structure, i.e., in agriculture, industry and in the service activities.

Concomitantly, France has the highest percentage of women graduates who continue to work after the age of 25 with a decline during family formation years and an increase in the proportion of working women in their forties. However, the gains in occupation and education have not paralleled gains in the political sphere where French women are under-represented and where anti-feminism is strongest. Women, therefore, have had an insignificant impact on national politics. Perhaps this is related to a historical fact in that no other western culture has developed more elaborate and intricate ideas about women and their connection with ‘‘high culture’’ (fads, fashion, styles) than the French society. This image of women’s role in society together with the ideology of the ‘‘mère du foyer’’ associated with transmitting social and cultural ideals are factors that hinder the real advancement of women (Silver, 1973, 1977). There are, however, a few groups who raise the issue of women’s roles as such, but they are neither widely heard nor sufficiently controversial at the present time. In fact, the French women’s liberation movement, ‘‘Le
Mouvement de La Liberation de La Femme," is a small left-wing group, basically French Marxist and Socialist writers who do not subscribe to the traditional view. Wheaton (1980) in his review of the history of the French family notes that one cause of the slowness in the development of a strong women’s rights movement is the fact that there are too many regional and social differences in the conditions under which married women live. Thus, it has been difficult to generate much feminist interest in France.

The French government, however, has taken the lead in bringing about legislative changes directed toward a more effective application of the principle of equal rights for women’s statues (Lefcaucheur, 1980; Baeyens, 1981; Silver, 1977). The decade of the 1970s marks the strategic importance of these laws because they touch on what has been considered for centuries the basis of family organization. These new policies which tend to liberalize the family are likely to encourage the development of greater flexibility in adult role assignments which many contemporary societies seem to require. The cultural context of the French society may provide an explanation for some of our results.

The theoretical framework for this analysis is Scanzoni’s (1978; Scanzoni and Fox, 1980; Scanzoni and Palonko, 1980) model of gender-based decision-making which emphasizes the dynamic relationships between the sexes. The model treats sex roles as preferences which individuals hold regarding behavior assignments. These preferences both separate the sexes and generate decision-making processes which may involve conflict and negotiations. A discrepancy in the views of men and women regarding their roles suggests the lack of mutually satisfactory decision-making. In contrast, when men and women share similar sex role preferences this is suggestive that their roles have been successfully negotiated.

Given the above conceptualization of sex roles, the issue becomes how to use this model in the French society. It is argued that if the examined sex role attitudes are different for French men and women, the sex role differential is likely to act to undermine the likelihood of mutually satisfactory decision-making. On the other hand, if sex role views are similar in the nontraditional sense for both sexes, their sex role outlook may reflect a well-negotiated decision based on flexibility in the relationship between them. This theoretical perspective, however, is limited to a changing family in a western society where decision-making and negotiations are part of family interaction. Hence, Scanzoni’s theoretical model and the cultural conditions of the French society may provide a fruitful approach to the study of sex role attitudes.

Methodology

Sample and Data Collection

The data were collected by a questionnaire from college students enrolled full-time in four French universities in Nantes, Paris, Tours and Toulouse. The present sample consists of 415 students in various fields and classes who