

Traditional Gender Roles: Do They Make, and Then Break, our Relationships?

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Despite societal pressure for change in traditional gender roles, the coevolution of genes and culture may still lead us to be attracted to potential mates whose appearance and behavior is stereotypically masculine or feminine. This attraction is ironic in light of a growing body of research evidence indicating that the relationships of men and women with traditional gender roles are far from optimal—and are generally worse than those of androgynous men and women. These seemingly paradoxical findings may reflect the conflict between what our genes and past culture dispose us to do and what our present culture prescribes.

When men and women play out in their own behavior the respective masculine and feminine gender roles that have traditionally been prescribed by their culture, do their close relationships benefit or suffer? In this article, I propose that, in this period of changing gender role expectations, both types of effects occur. When men and women first meet, their enactment of traditional gender roles may benefit their relationship by promoting mutual attraction and facilitating the mutual perception that the other is a potentially desirable mate. Ironically, however, the seeds of these relationships may contain their own poison. From even their earliest encounters, the partners' respective enactment of their traditional gender roles may begin to undermine their relationship by fostering the kind of female/male miscommunication that has recently been documented by writers such as Henley and Kramarae (1991), Maltz and Borker (1982), and Tannen (1987, 1990). Perhaps as a consequence of this miscommunication, men and women with traditional gender roles will also tend to describe their relation-

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ships as relatively unsatisfying (e.g., Antill, 1983; Ickes & Barnes, 1978; Lamke, 1989).

The goal of this article, then, is to explore what seems to be a fundamental paradox: that despite an apparently strong initial attraction to each other, men and women with traditional gender roles have relationships that are far from optimal—and are generally worse than those of androgynous men and women. After describing a number of research findings that lead us to this paradox, I offer some speculation about how this paradox might be explained, if not resolved.

The Fundamental Paradox

During the past 15 years, the research literature has clearly documented what I will refer to as *the fundamental paradox*: that traditionally masculine men and traditionally feminine women have relationships that are far from optimal. This empirical finding is paradoxical, or at least counterintuitive, with respect to the seemingly logical assumption that one's society prescribes and encourages the adoption of traditional gender role orientations because of their time-tested utility in promoting the effective socialization and social integration of its members. Implicit in our gender role socialization is the belief that males ought to adopt a traditionally masculine gender role and females a traditionally feminine one because everyone will get along much better that way (Ickes, 1981, 1985; Ickes & Barnes, 1978). In fact, however, various research findings suggest that problems evident in the initial interactions of masculine men and feminine women become even more dramatically apparent in their cohabitation and marriage relationships (e.g., Antill, 1983; Lamke, 1989; Shaver, Pullis, & Olds, 1980).

Early Studies

Ickes and Barnes (1978). A study by Ickes and Barnes (1978) was perhaps the first to reveal that traditionally masculine men and traditionally feminine women have interactions that are far from optimal. In this study, the dyadic interaction paradigm (Ickes, 1982; Ickes, Bissonnette, Garcia, & Stinson, 1990) was used to examine the *initial interactions* of systematically matched dyads composed of men and women with either traditional (masculine, feminine) or nontraditional (androgynous) gender role orientations, as defined by the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974). Analyses of the resulting behavioral and self-report data revealed that the most traditional dyad type—the one in which a masculine man was paired with a feminine woman—had interactions that were less involving and less rewarding than those occurring in dyads in which one or both participants were androgynous. The men and women in the “masculine man/feminine woman” dyads not only talked, looked, gestured, and smiled at

each other significantly less than the men and women in the remaining dyad types, but expressed considerably less liking for each other as well.

Shaver, Pullis, and Olds (1980). If the Ickes and Barnes study revealed that couples with traditional gender roles may get off to a bad start, a subsequent study by Shaver and his colleagues revealed that these relationships may then go from bad to worse. Shaver et al. (1980) conducted a magazine survey in which more than 30,000 readers of the November 1979 issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal* completed and returned a 55-item Intimacy Questionnaire. From these data, the researchers selected a random sample of 2100 female respondents who provided (1) assessments of their own and their male partners' gender role orientations (as rated on the Personal Attributes Questionnaire; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975), and (2) self-ratings of satisfaction with various aspects of their lives and their intimate relationships.

Analyses of these data revealed the pronounced dissatisfaction of traditionally feminine women who perceived their partners to be traditionally masculine men. Compared with women in the entire sample, the women in these masculine man/feminine woman dyads were significantly *more* likely to report such stress symptoms as feeling fat, tiring easily, feeling sad or depressed, feeling worthless, feeling shy, and feeling that "you just can't go on." In addition, on all measures of general happiness or satisfaction with their lives, these women were significantly *less* likely to report (1) being satisfied with life as a whole, (2) feeling responsible for the way things turn out, (3) feeling control over the important events in their lives, and (4) expecting to be happy in the future.

The dissatisfaction of these women was further evidenced in their ratings of the quality of their relationships. Feminine women with partners whom they perceived to be masculine men were significantly less likely than women in the total sample to rate either their love relationships or their sex lives as satisfactory. These women were also the most likely to report feeling "underloved"—that is, to say that they loved their male partners more than they were loved in return. Only the women's suffering in these relationships is documented, however, since ratings of the male partners' happiness and satisfaction were not obtained.

In contrast to the pervasive dissatisfaction expressed by the women in the masculine man/feminine woman dyads, the women in dyads in which one or both partners were rated as androgynous tended to be quite satisfied with the quality of their lives and their intimate relationships. In particular, androgynous women paired with androgynous men reported considerable success in communicating and solving problems with their partners. In addition, they reported high levels of (1) satisfaction with their lives as a whole, (2) responsibility for their outcomes, (3) control over important life events, and (4) optimism for the future. Of more specific relevance for the theme of this article, their ratings of satisfaction with their sex lives and intimate relationships were also quite high.

Antill (1983). Some important evidence for the cross-cultural generality of these effects was later reported by Antill (1983). After recruiting potential subjects at various shopping centers in the metropolitan area of Sydney, Australia, Antill's research assistants conducted in-home interviews with 108 married couples. During these interviews, both spouses independently completed the BSRI (Bem, 1974) and the Spanier Dyadic Adjustment Scale—a widely used measure of marital satisfaction and adjustment (Spanier, 1976).

Replicating Shaver et al. (1980), Antill found that marital satisfaction and adjustment were significantly greater in dyads in which both husband and wife were androgynous than in dyads in which a traditionally masculine man was paired with a traditionally feminine woman. However, beyond its value of providing a cross-cultural replication of this basic finding, Antill's study clearly demonstrated that marital satisfaction is directly related to the *femininity* of one's marriage partner. According to Antill,

Males appear to be happiest when paired with androgynous and feminine females (both high-femininity groups) and relatively less happy when paired with masculine and undifferentiated females (both low-femininity groups). . . . As with the males, females also appear to be happier when paired with androgynous and feminine partners and relatively less happy when paired with masculine and undifferentiated partners (p. 149). . . . The present study has provided evidence for the overwhelming importance of femininity to married relationships. Androgynous partners were only an asset in terms of happiness in that such individuals are by definition high on femininity. (p. 152)

The conclusion that "happiness is a feminine marriage partner" was supported not only in the correlation between the husbands' satisfaction and the wives' femininity ($r = .28, p < .005$), but also in the correlation between the wives' satisfaction and the husbands' femininity ($r = .31, p < .001$). Moreover, as Antill noted later in his paper,

As if to emphasize the point that femininity is critical to marital happiness, the overall happiness of both husband and wife was even more highly related to [their own perceptions of] their spouse's femininity. . . . Thus, the husband's happiness is correlated ($r = .48, p < .001$) with his assessment of his wife's femininity. . . . Similarly, the wife's happiness is correlated with her assessment of her husband's femininity ($r = .61, p < .001$). (p. 154)

On the basis of correlations as strong as these, one is certainly tempted to conclude that "happiness is a feminine marriage partner," a conclusion that is also supported in Shaver et al.'s (1980) data. Indeed, perhaps the most surprising finding in both of these data sets was that even wives with *gender role reversed* (that is, low masculine/high feminine) husbands were highly satisfied with their relationships. A cultural stereotype holds that although such "low masculine/high feminine" men may be kind, nurturant, and emotionally supportive, they are likely to be unsatisfactory as husbands because they lack the strength and decisiveness needed to play this role effectively. In other words, despite being "loving, kind, and considerate guys," such men may also be perceived as "ineffectual wimps."

The data clearly indicate, however, that “loving, kind, and considerate” may be all that women need to make them happy in their marriages. In both Antill’s (1983) study and in Shaver et al.’s (1980) study, the women’s marital satisfaction was a direct function of their husband’s traditionally feminine traits but was generally uncorrelated with their husband’s traditionally masculine traits. In fact, in Antill’s data the *highest* level of marital satisfaction was reported in dyads with “low masculine/high feminine” husbands.

More Recent Studies

Several more recent studies have, like Shaver et al. (1980) and Antill (1983), examined the relationship between husbands’ and wives’ gender role orientations and their marital satisfaction (Baucom & Aiken, 1984; Davidson & Sollie, 1987; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Lamke, 1989; Murstein & Williams, 1983; Zammichieli, Gilroy, & Sherman, 1988). Most of these findings have been summarized by Lamke (1989, p. 580), who has noted that

The most consistent finding for both husbands and wives is that a high level of marital adjustment is associated with the categories of androgyny and feminine, and not with the categories of masculine and undifferentiated. This finding has led some researchers to conclude that it is [femininity] alone, as opposed to either [masculinity] or some combination of [femininity and masculinity], that is important for high levels of marital adjustment (Antill, 1983; Ickes, 1985; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986).

Antill’s (1983) conclusion that marital satisfaction depends on the degree to which one’s partner displays communal or *linking* traits (“nurturance, caring, being affectionate, devoting oneself to others, being sympathetic, gentle, kind, etc.”; Sidanius, Cling, & Pratto, 1991, p. 134), was strongly supported in Lamke’s (1989) data. In a multiple regression model, the wives’ marital satisfaction—as measured by the total score on Spanier’s Dyadic Adjustment Scale—was uniquely predicted by their husbands’ femininity ($r = .43, p < .0001$). Similarly, the husbands’ marital satisfaction was uniquely predicted by their wives’ femininity ($r = .51, p < .0001$). On the other hand, the husbands’ and wives’ masculinity scores were not significantly related to their partners’ marital satisfaction and adjustment ($r_s = .05$ and $.10, ns$).

Accounting for the Paradox

How might one account for the apparent paradox of a society that promotes the socialization of its members into traditional gender roles that—when enacted in adult, heterosexual relationships—result in the nonoptimal functioning of those relationships? Addressing this question will require that we first seek a clearer understanding of the nature and origin of gender role differences. We will then be in a better position to suggest why traditional gender roles might persist despite their obvious limitations in promoting satisfying heterosexual relationships.

On the Nature of Gender Role Differences

In essence, the traditional feminine gender role is a social orientation that emphasizes closeness and solidarity, whereas the traditional masculine gender role is a social orientation that emphasizes power and status (Tannen, 1987, 1990). As Tannen has been careful to note, it is not that traditionally masculine men are unconcerned about their degree of closeness or connection to others; nor is it the case that traditionally feminine women are unconcerned about their level of power or status relative to others. Rather, the difference is one of emphasis and priority: The masculine disposition is to attend to the status and power implications of a social exchange before considering its implications for solidarity and closeness, whereas the feminine disposition is to do the reverse.

According to Sidanius et al. (1991), the difference between the traditional masculine and feminine gender roles has also been expressed as the difference between a *communal* vs. an *agentic* orientation (e.g., Bakan, 1966; Bem, 1974; Eagly, 1987), or between a *linking* vs. a *ranking* orientation (Eisler & Loyc, 1983).

In shorthand terms, the communal or linking domain is conceived of as capturing the "feminine principle," while the ranking domain is conceived of as expressing the "masculine principle." The linking domain includes characteristics such as nurturance, caring, being affectionate, devoting oneself to others, being sympathetic, gentle, kind, etc. . . . The agentic or ranking domain includes characteristics such as assertiveness, aggressiveness, dominance orientation, being forceful, controlling, power oriented, independent, and directive. (Sidanius et al., 1991, pp. 134-135)

This essential distinction—between a communal or linking orientation on the one hand and an agentic or ranking orientation on the other—has generally been supported by the results of various factor-analytic studies in which masculinity and femininity have been conceived of and measured as independent dimensions of personality (e.g., Bem, 1974; Gaudreau, 1977; Gross, Batlis, Small, & Erdwins, 1979; Heilbrun, 1976; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). For example, the scale items that describe the traditionally feminine woman emphasize the linking traits of relating well to others and being kind, affectionate, and caring, whereas the scale items that describe the traditionally masculine man emphasize the ranking traits of taking charge, acting independently, and being assertive, forceful, and decisive.

On the Origin of Gender Role Differences

In contrast to the strong consensus regarding the nature of the difference between the masculine and the feminine orientation, there is a great deal of controversy regarding the origin and social implications of this difference (Sidanius et al., 1991). On the one hand are evolutionary accounts based on

innate, biological differences between men and women (e.g., Buss, 1989; Daly & Wilson, 1983; Wilson, 1975, 1978); on the other are cultural determinist models based on the principles of social learning theory (e.g., Chodorow, 1978; Eagly, 1987; Henley, 1977; Lipset, 1960; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Promising to bridge both the evolutionary and the cultural perspectives is *biocultural interactionism*, "which focuses upon the interaction of these two 'main effects'" (Sidanius et al., 1991, p. 132).

Evolutionary accounts. In general, evolutionary and sociobiological accounts focus on the adaptive and exaptive features that are respectively associated with traditional masculine and feminine gender roles (Buss, 1989; Daly & Wilson, 1983; Gould, 1991). Features that increase the reproductive fitness of males and females within their social organization (i.e., "culture") should be selected for in the Darwinian sense, whether those features arose as adaptations for their present functions or were instead co-opted or "exapted" (Gould, 1991) for these functions. Such features should not only be represented with greater frequency in successive generations but should also leave their mark on the culture that supported them. That is, as the members of the culture recognize the adaptive or exaptive value of the feature, cultural beliefs and institutions should also change over time in ways that further reinforce the feature's adaptive or exaptive value.

This coevolution of genes and culture offers one explanation of why traditional gender roles might favor a linking (closeness and solidarity) orientation for females and a ranking (power and status) orientation for males. Because mothers could nurse their children but fathers could not, women in early human societies were the logical candidates for child care. For them, reproductive fitness should have been enhanced to the extent that they could successfully enact the role of their children's (or their close relatives' children's) primary caretaker. Assuming that women with a strong communal/linking orientation were better able to elicit, interpret, and respond appropriately to the expressed needs of their family members, they should have had a reproductive advantage over other women in (a) keeping the father invested in the family's welfare, and (b) nurturing the children in ways that ensured their survival and ability to reproduce (Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Kenrick & Trost, 1989).

In contrast to women, whose investment in their offspring is direct and begins at conception, men's investment in their offspring is more indirect and depends on the men's ability to provide resources such as food, protection, and security. As in other primate species, the dominance, power, and status of human males should have increased their reproductive fitness because of the assumed preference of human females for men who possess these characteristics. Men who displayed evidence of power, status, and wealth were presumably viewed as (1) better able to provide resources that contribute to their offspring's survival and reproductive

success, and (2) more likely to pass on genetic characteristics that would enable their offspring to achieve a similar level of power and status in the social hierarchy (Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Kenrick & Trost, 1989).

An evolutionary account of traditional gender roles suggests that they may exert a generally *positive* influence on adult heterosexual relationships during their earliest stage—the one at which the members of the couple are first attracted to each other (Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990). Women should be attracted to men who appear to be stereotypically masculine (i.e., assertive, dominant, wealthy, high in status) because a masculine appearance is associated with the men's capacity to contribute those genetic and "external" resources that help guarantee their offspring's survival and reproduction. By the same token, men should be attracted to women who appear to be stereotypically feminine, because a feminine appearance is associated with those communal/linking traits that signal the woman's "potential nurturance toward offspring" (Kenrick et al., 1990, p. 99).¹

If individuals' gender role orientations are evident in both the form (Henley, 1977; Lippa, 1978) and the content (Bem, 1975; Bem & Lenney, 1976) of their behavior, the coevolution of genes and culture should result in women being attracted to men who present themselves as stereotypically masculine, and in men being attracted to women who present themselves as stereotypically feminine. Evidence for this proposition has recently been accumulating. For example, in a series of four experiments, Sadalla, Kenrick, and Vershure (1987) found consistent evidence that dominance behavior enhanced the perceived sexual attractiveness of men but not of women. Similarly, in unpublished data my students and I recently collected, we found that perceived dominance (based on physical appearance and overt behavioral cues) was substantially correlated with the rated attractiveness of men ($r = .65$), but was essentially uncorrelated with the rated attractiveness of women ($r = .13$). This differential correlation was found for both male and female raters. Assuming that dominance signals the man's ability to provide resources such as food, protection, and security for his wife and children, these findings are consistent with the idea that men who present themselves as traditionally masculine are perceived as more attractive.

Complementary evidence is available in studies providing comparative rankings of the characteristics men and women prefer in a potential mate. Buss and Barnes (1986) found that women ranked "earning potential" and "college graduate" higher than did men, whereas men ranked physical attractiveness higher than did women. Studies of personal ads, which are arguably more reflective of subjects' actual behavioral preferences than are paper-and-pencil studies

¹These influences on mate selection need not be limited to societies in which men and women choose their own mates. If one can assume that the evolutionary advantages of these selection factors are widely perceived within the culture, their influence should also be evident in societies where arranged marriages are the norm.

that require subjects to rate the desired characteristics of hypothetical partners, reveal the same gender differences in mate preferences (see Rajecki, Bledsoe, & Rasmussen, 1991). These studies have consistently shown that men are more likely to offer status (i.e., evidence of resource acquisition) in exchange for attractiveness (i.e., youth and reproductive fitness), whereas women are more likely to do the reverse. This pattern of results has emerged in virtually every study in which the sample was large and representative of the general population (e.g., Cameron, Oskamp, & Sparks, 1977; Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Hirschman, 1987; Rajecki et al., 1991; Sitton & Rippee, 1986). Indeed, the same pattern has emerged even in studies yielding more mixed results (e.g., Koestner & Wheeler, 1988, p. 157), and particularly for dependent measures that are more behavioral than attitudinal (e.g., requesting a photo as evidence of attractiveness; Bolig, Stein, & McHenry, 1984, p. 589). Moreover, related findings suggest that men and women can use such information strategically, in the service of *deceptive mating strategies* that lead men to exaggerate their resource acquisition ability and lead women to exaggerate their physical attractiveness (Tooke & Camire, 1991).

Cultural determinist accounts. In general, cultural determinist models propose that traditional gender roles have their origin in cultural beliefs, institutions, and practices (Sidanius et al., 1991). Though often begging the question of how those particular beliefs, institutions, and practices emerged in the first place, cultural determinists emphasize the differential socialization of boys and girls into the gender roles prescribed by their culture.

Within the cultural determinist paradigm, four major models have been identified by Sidanius et al. (1991, pp. 135–138). (1) The *gender role socialization* model (e.g., Eagly, 1987; Perry & Bussey, 1979) proposes that individuals observe, imitate, and eventually internalize the specific attitudes and behaviors that the culture defines as gender appropriate by using other males and females as role models. (2) The *situation* model (e.g., Lipset, 1960) “maintains that differences in the sociopolitical attitudes of men and women can be largely accounted for by the different kinds of organizations in which men and women spend most of their time” (p. 136). If cultural practices recruit males into the workplace but keep females at home, males will have more opportunities to learn about status, competition, and power, whereas females will have more opportunities to learn about nurturance and caretaking. (3) The *oppression* model (e.g., Henley, 1977) argues that traditional gender roles are cultural products that both reflect and help to maintain men’s power over women. (4) The *individuation* model, inspired by psychoanalytic theory (Chodorow, 1978), assumes that when women are the primary caretakers, male children will tend to become more autonomous whereas female children will tend to experience more identification with the needs and feelings of others (p. 137).

Research based on the cultural approach has emphasized an important *negative* consequence of adherence to traditional gender roles: female/male miscommunication. This negative consequence of gender role adherence has been the topic of several recent articles and books (e.g., Aries, 1987; Coates, 1986; Henley & Kramarae, 1991; Lakoff, 1975; Maltz & Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1987, 1990; Thorne, Kramarae, & Henley, 1983). Because space does not permit even a cursory review of this work, the following brief characterization is offered instead.

Much of the relevant theory and research on female/male miscommunication has been summarized by Tannen (1987, 1990). Following Bateson (1972), Tannen (1990) has proposed that a communicative act includes both "the *message*—the obvious [semantic, scripted] meaning of the act" and "*metamessages*—that is, information about the relations among the people involved, and their attitudes toward what they are saying and doing and the people they are saying or doing it to" (p. 32). Metamessages are assumed to *frame* a conversation in Goffman's (1974) sense of providing an interpretive context that qualifies the meaning of the expressed message. According to Tannen, female/male miscommunication results when females and males use different frames when speaking and listening to each other.

Implicit in Tannen's (1987, 1990) analysis is the notion that gender roles provide the different interpretive frames that are often responsible for female/male miscommunication. The assumption is that males tend to frame communicative acts in terms of power and status, whereas females tend to frame them in terms of closeness and solidarity (Tannen, 1987, pp. 93–109). The reason this difference sets the stage for miscommunication is that although most communicative acts can be meaningfully interpreted within either frame (like the reversible figure of the vase and the faces), an interpretation within one frame tends to preclude, or occur at the expense of, interpretation within the other.

A couple of examples should help to make this point. According to Tannen (1987, p. 128), "a lot of trouble is caused between men and women by, of all things, pronouns. Women often feel hurt when their partners use 'I' or 'me' in a situation in which they would use 'we' or 'us.'" Presumably, men are using these pronouns within a frame that reflects their need for independence, respect, power, and status, whereas women are interpreting these pronouns within a frame in which their need for closeness and solidarity is threatened. A second example concerns the frames applied to such back-channel responses as "uh-huh" or "mhm." Maltz and Borker (1982) suggest that women use such responses at a relatively high rate to signal their involvement and interest (i.e., their closeness and solidarity), and to encourage the other person to keep talking. Men, however, are assumed to use them at a relatively low rate, reserving them for occasions when they grant the other person status by expressing their agreement. As a consequence, men may be surprised and upset when women, who have

been providing a high rate of back-channel responses, express disagreement with their point of view.

The view of female/male miscommunication proposed by writers such as Maltz and Borker (1982) and Tannen (1987, 1990) is certainly a plausible one. It is, however, not the only one. According to Henley and Kramarae (1991), writers such as Maltz and Borker (1982) paint too rosy a picture of female/male miscommunication by regarding it "as an innocent by-product of different socialization patterns and different gender cultures, occurring in interaction between speakers who are ostensibly social equals" (p. 19). In contrast, Henley and Kramarae contend that these patterns of miscommunication "occur within the cultural context of male power and female subordination" (p. 41). They propose a darker view in which female/male miscommunication not only reflects but helps to maintain "the structure of male supremacy" (p. 42).

Despite these differences in interpretation, the work on female/male miscommunication is generally consistent with the earlier reviewed results indicating that men and women who adhere to traditional gender roles may have interactions that are relatively nonoptimal and nonrewarding. Indeed, miscommunication may help explain the dissatisfaction of couples with traditional gender roles, as previously documented by Ickes and Barnes (1978), Antill (1983), Lamke (1989), and others.

On Reconciling the Various Accounts

How might we reconcile these divergent accounts of the manner in which traditional gender roles affect male-female relationships? How is it that the enactment of traditional gender roles can increase mutual attraction and thereby benefit male-female relationships, as the evolutionists have proposed, and also foster miscommunication and impair satisfaction in male-female relationships, as the cultural determinists have proposed? More generally, how can we explain the persistence of traditional gender roles when so much evidence suggests that their enactment produces nonoptimal relationships between women and men?

Henley and Kramarae (1991) offer us one way out of this dilemma. They do so by forcefully *resisting* the assumption that traditional gender roles evolved in response to societal pressures to develop and maintain optimal male-female relationships. In stark contrast to this assumption, Henley and Kramarae assume that traditional gender roles were legitimized and institutionalized by cultures in order to perpetuate a structure of male dominance and female subordination. The major limitation of this view, however, is that it does not attempt to explain *why* the members of one gender would seek to dominate the members of the other in virtually all cultures throughout virtually all of human history. For an explanation of this phenomenon, we must turn instead to the evolutionary approach, which asserts that "dominance is more important for male than for female attractiveness

in a number of other primate species (Sadalla et al., 1987; Trivers, 1985), and has been linked to the hormone testosterone in humans and other species" (Kenrick & Keefe, 1992, pp. 76–77). According to this approach, the essential difference between the masculine and the feminine gender roles—the masculine tendency to attend to the status and power implications of a social exchange before considering its implications for solidarity and closeness, and the feminine tendency to do the reverse—is assumed to reflect a sex-linked, biologically determined difference between men and women.

As noted previously, dominant, high-status males were presumably sought after as mates in early human cultures because they were perceived as good providers of those *physical resources* (food, money, shelter, protection) that were essential to their children's survival and ability to reproduce. Given high infant mortality rates, inadequate nutrition and health care, and short life expectancies, it is likely that most women in such cultures did not have the luxury of refusing to mate until they found husbands who were also good providers of such *social-emotional resources* as gentleness, kindness, and affection. Because the men's "ranking" behaviors were so essential to the family's survival, their partners (or the agents of their arranged marriages) may not have been in any position to insist that they also be warm, sympathetic, and emotionally supportive.

It is a different world out there today. Today the modal American family is one in which the husband and wife both work outside the home, and can both contribute those physical resources that in the past were contributed mostly by the husband. At the same time, family relations are more challenging than ever. As a consequence, being sensitive to family members' social-emotional needs and being able to meet these needs successfully have become both more difficult and more necessary.

It is possible, then, that traditional gender roles are less optimal to the successful functioning of male–female relationships in contemporary American culture than in other contemporary cultures (cf. Dion & Dion, this issue) or in previous cultures that accept(ed) male dominance as a biological given rather than as political oppression. The "paradox" of traditional gender roles is, in this sense, a product of the opposition between what our genes and past culture dispose us to do and what our present culture now prescribes. This opposition is clearly seen in the tension between the evolutionists' argument that traditional gender roles exert a *positive* influence on initial attraction in male–female relationships and the cultural determinists' argument that traditional gender roles exert a *negative* influence in the form of miscommunication and dissatisfaction.

I propose that, in this period of changing gender role expectations, *both* types of effects occur. On the one hand, we are disposed by both our biological heritage and our past cultural heritage to be attracted to the same gender role stereotyped traits and characteristics that our ancestors found attractive in members of the opposite sex. On the other hand, to the extent that we embrace

contemporary ideals of gender equality, we are likely to react negatively to the asymmetrical power relations and miscommunications that result when men view the world through the lens of power and status and women view the world through the lens of closeness and solidarity. When the issue is one of physical and sexual attraction, we are ruled by instincts that have their roots deep in the past. However, when the issue is one of trying to establish a nonexploitive, equal-partner relationship, we find these old instincts troublesome and aspire to be ruled by our ideals instead.

For this reason, the behavior of men and women in our society may often display the paradoxical quality to which I have been alluding. For example, the woman who reads *Harlequin* romances in the evening and fantasizes about the dominant hero with the piercing gaze may be the same woman who lobbies tirelessly during the day for women's rights. The man who has committed himself intellectually to the equality of women may be the same man who still sees a centerfold more as a sex object than as a person. The woman who vows that she will never have the kind of traditional marriage her mother had may be the same woman who cannot understand why she is fatally attracted to men who dominate and abuse her. And the gentle, compassionate man who reads magazine surveys indicating that his qualities are the very ones that most women prefer in a mate may be the same man who is repeatedly turned down by women who seek the company of more atavistic males.

In summary, the fundamental paradox may best be explained as a conflict within ourselves—a conflict between our biological and cultural heritage on the one hand and our more contemporary aspirations on the other. Perhaps the most direct empirical evidence of this internal conflict can be found in those studies of personal ads that have reported "mixed" findings within the same set of data. For example, although the women in Bolig et al.'s (1984) study seemed "willing to accept attractiveness in men in lieu of other (traditional) characteristics, such as social status" (p. 589), it was also reported that 40% of the men requested a photo of the ad respondents whereas only 15% of the women did so, $\chi^2(1) = 24.86$, $p < .001$. Similarly, the mixed findings in the Koestner and Wheeler (1988) study revealed that, contrary to stereotype, the women were "relatively more likely to offer instrumental or 'male-valued' traits in their ads, and to seek expressive or 'female-valued' ones, while men showed the reverse pattern" (p. 149). The same data set also revealed, however, that "as in previous studies of this sort, women were found to be relatively more likely to offer physical attractiveness and to seek professional status, while men were relatively more likely to offer professional status and to seek attractiveness" (p. 149).

As these mixed findings suggest, the internal conflict between who we have been in the past and who we wish to become in the future is evident in our lives as well as in our data. The same traditional gender roles that facilitate men's and women's attraction to each other may also, in the context of egalitarian social

ideals, impede their ability to communicate and lead to dissatisfaction in their relationships. As much as we might like to eliminate such conflicting elements in our theories about human social behavior, our understanding might be better served by openly acknowledging and confronting them.

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