

What's Wrong with Sex Role Theory

Brooke

The phrase "sex roles" has been around for a long time—mostly in sociology and psychology texts—and has been one way of describing the existing division of labor and social custom along sex lines. Sex roles have been seen as fate and not to be judged. With the advent of the women's movement, this has changed somewhat. Sex roles remain, but they are seen as a problem of society (or "the system" which is never named). Power, that ghost in the wings, is never mentioned (nor male supremacy).

Most of the women's movement is now pushing sex roles as the cause of women's oppression. Gloria Steinem talks of "role reform." Betty Friedan promises us a "sex role revolution." And Anne Koedt redefined radical feminism to mean "the total elimination of sex roles." This theory, which I call sex rolism, absolves men from any but psychological responsibility (if that) for the oppression of women. The idea is that our oppression is thoroughly psychological ("in our heads"), and the way to get out of it is to stop playing those wicked sex roles, and generally "educate to liberate".

Sex rolism, whether conservative or liberal, has been accepted far too uncritically as an explanation for what's been going on. As a theory, it has many problems which its proponents have not yet answered:

Not historical. Male supremacy has been a given throughout recorded history. Sex roles have changed throughout history with changing economic and political conditions.

Classist. Qualities that sex rolists apply to all women really apply more to middle and upper class women. Although a peasant woman cannot be delicate, she is still oppressed as a woman. (Surprisingly, some would-be Marxists deny this, saying that the peasant woman is oppressed only as a peasant.)

Western cultural imperialist. The traits that sex role people list as being assigned to women are in fact those which the white Western (European) culture has ascribed to women. In other places (see Margaret Mead, for example), women are assigned quite different traits. For example, in Iran, women (who are still considered inferior) are considered more practical than men, while men are considered more imaginative and poetic than women. (This holds true to some extent in the U. S. too; depending on which things women are said to be unfit for, we are described as more

practical, down-to-earth, or totally impractical, softheaded, and scatterbrained.)

The brainwash theory. Sex role people hold that women are oppressed because we've been brainwashed into it—usually by a nebulous "society". According to this, women act out the roles mechanically, not knowing what we're doing. This fails to take into account many of the things we do. It does not explain the women who do *not* follow the particular "sex roles" that women are supposed to be brainwashed into, but who are oppressed. How does brainwashing account for lesbians? Feminists? Etc.? It also avoids naming who benefits, and names only the victims. Women's oppression, deprived of origins, is made to seem like "fate."

The Male Ego. The few sex role people who actually talk about men as the oppressor see the major reason for male supremacy to be the male ego, and see economic, political, and social benefits accruing from it as incidental. This accepts the male myth of the powerful yet fragile male ego which must be satisfied at all costs. It also doesn't look very carefully at phenomenon of oppression. The oppressor develops an ego because it helps keep him in control of situations and gets him added benefits. Ego is a result, not a cause of, power.

Blaming women. Power is seen by sex rolists as fulfilling a mainly psychological need, thus as desirable for its own sake, and the concrete benefits resulting from power are never discussed as a reason for wanting it. Since power is psychological, it follows that powerlessness is psychological, too, brought on by the victim's behavior. Sex rolists blame women for *not* stepping out of sex roles, and imply if we were good enough . . .

Humanism. Sex role theorists fall all over each other telling us how Men Are Oppressed Too by sex roles. Both men and women are trapped and deadened in their roles, they say. By making two different power positions semantically equal, they are denying that any oppression exists.

Lifestylism. Sex rolists define the problem as cultural, and therefore see their strategy as changing lifestyles/sex roles, rather than women taking power.

Reformism. Reformism is looking at the symptoms instead of the disease. The disease is male supremacy. If we can speak of sex roles at all, it can only be as symptoms of male supremacy, not as the cause or cure. In short, declaring sex roles to be the basis of women's oppression is shallow analysis, not to mention being very convenient for men (!).