

## A Field Study of Sex-role Attitude Change in College Women

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Two field studies are presented which examine to what extent women's studies courses are effective in changing sex-role attitudes in college women. Factor analyses were performed on the questionnaire data to produce summary variables for the change analysis and to examine the structure of sex-role ideology. The results, consistent in both studies, showed the women's sex-role beliefs are comprised of definable areas and that awareness of sex discrimination and traditional beliefs regarding the proper roles for men and women are more susceptible to influence than are other types of variables.

Despite the increased publicity given to the Women's Liberation Movement, statistics imply that the movement's influence upon the traditional, sex-typed divisions of labor has been relatively small, both in the job market (U.S. Department of Labor, 1972) and in the home (Tavris, 1972). Recent efforts to specify the factors responsible for the failure of women to fulfill their achievement potentials have focused in part on psychological factors such as sex-role attitudes (Frieze, Parsons, & Ruble, 1972; Lipman-Blumen, 1972). According to Bem and Bem (1970), such attitudes form a nonconscious ideology and operate at a subtle and effective level to keep a woman "in her place."

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Given the apparent power of this nonconscious ideology, it is interesting to note that one impact of the women's movement has been the proliferation of various consciousness-raising experiences for women, such as women's studies courses. Do such courses change sex-role attitudes; and, if so, which kinds of attitudes are most susceptible to change? This report presents two field studies that address these questions.

### METHOD

#### *Subjects*

The subjects for Study I were 65 undergraduate women, 46 from three women's studies classes<sup>5</sup> and 19, used as a comparison group, from a developmental psychology class.

For Study II, the subjects were 113 undergraduate women, 60 from two women's studies classes and 53 from a developmental psychology class.

The subjects used were nonrandom subsamples of the approximately 200 women who took the pretest of each study. The samples are comprised of all subjects who were present for and completed both tests and for whom the investigators were able to maintain anonymity through number coding and to match pre- and posttests.

#### *Procedure*

Pretest questionnaires were distributed during the first week of classes, and posttest questionnaires were given during the last week of classes for both studies. The questionnaires consisted of sex-role attitude items plus basic demographics. Most items contained a 5-point disagree-to-agree scale, though a few items deviated from this format because of the nature of the item. The Study I pretest was quite long (over 200 items), but both posttests and the Study II pretest were shorter (approximately 50 items).

### RESULTS

To reduce the variables to a more manageable number, factor analyses, using the varimax rotation procedure, were performed on the pretest responses of each study. All women who completed the pretest (approximately 200 in each sample) were included in the analyses to examine factors that were present before exposure to the classes. There were five interpretable factors in Study I and six in Study II. Across the two studies, the meaning of the factors is similar and breaks down into five general areas.

<sup>5</sup>A list of topics included in the classes will be sent upon request.

TABLE 1  
SUMMARY OF VARIABLE MEANS FOR STUDY I

Variable	Type of class				Significance level			
	Comparison		Women's studies		Change inter-action	Pretest difference		
	Pre-test	Post-test	Change	Pre-test	Post-test	Change		
Future plans	3.39	3.17	-.22	3.76	3.84	.08	NS	$p < .05$
Dislike and distrust of women	2.08	2.32	.24	2.01	2.20	.19	NS	NS
Traditional roles of women	2.54	2.64	.10	2.29	1.86	-.43	$p < .01$	NS
Nonstereotypic beliefs	4.07	4.06	-.01	4.07	4.50	.43	$p < .10$	NS
Perception of sex discrimination	2.91	2.80	-.11	3.49	3.87	.38	$p < .05$	$p < .01$

Note.—Range of possible scores is from 1, disagree strongly, to 5, agree strongly.  
NS = not significant.

TABLE 2  
SUMMARY OF VARIABLE MEANS FOR STUDY II

Variable	Type of class				Significance level			
	Comparison		Women's studies		Change inter-action	Pretest difference		
	Pre-test	Post-test	Change	Pre-test	Post-test	Change		
Career plans	3.27	3.28	.01	3.60	3.73	.13	NS	$p < .05$
Delay of family plans	3.01	2.93	-.08	3.60	3.56	-.04	NS	$p < .01$
Dislike and distrust of women	2.08	2.10	.02	2.12	2.00	-.12	NS	NS
Traditional maternal role	2.68	2.62	-.06	2.02	1.73	-.29	$p < .05$	$p < .01$
Rejection of traditional female supportive role	3.17	3.05	-.12	4.11	4.17	.06	$p < .10$	$p < .01$
Perception of sex discrimination	2.37	2.19	-.18	3.01	3.20	.19	$p < .10$	$p < .01$

Note.—Range of possible scores is from 1, disagree strongly, to 5, agree strongly.  
NS = not significant.

*Future plans.* This factor refers to the subject's personal expectations regarding a career (e.g., higher education goals) and a family (e.g., "Ideally, when would you like to marry or remarry?"). In Study I this idea formed one factor; whereas in Study II, two separate factors were formed, Career plans and Delay of family plans.

*Distrust and dislike of women.* This factor refers to the belief that women dislike and distrust other women (e.g., "In general, women don't basically like one another.").

*Traditional roles of women.* This factor refers to beliefs concerning a woman's proper role as a wife and mother. While there was only one such factor in Study I, there were two factors in Study II, Traditional maternal role (e.g., "Young children need their mothers around all day.") and Rejection of traditional female supportive role (e.g., "The responsibility for child care and housekeeping should rest equally with the husband and wife.").

*Nonstereotypic beliefs.* This factor refers to stereotypes concerning the natural capacities and vocations of men and women (e.g., "There is nothing wrong with a man who wants to pursue a career in nursing or teaching kindergarten."). This concept was not a factor in Study II.

*Perception of sex discrimination.* This factor refers to the belief that women are discriminated against in our society just as blacks and other minorities are discriminated against.

Summary scores were created from the items that loaded .40 and above on each factor, and these served as the dependent variables. A  $2 \times 2$  repeated-measures analysis of variance was performed, in which the between-subjects factor was Type of class (women's studies vs. comparison) and the within-subjects factor was pre- and posttest results. Change in attitudes as a function of the women's studies classes was indicated by significant interactions.

The results of the analysis showed consistent attitude change across the two studies (Tables 1 and 2). Women's studies students became less traditional in their attitudes from the pre- to the posttest relative to the students in the comparison classes. There was evidence of attitude change in Traditional roles of women, Nonstereotypic beliefs, and Perception of sex discrimination, but no evidence of attitude change in Future plans or Distrust and dislike of women. There was a significant interaction on Traditional roles of women in Study I ( $p < .01$ ) and on Traditional maternal role ( $p < .05$ ) in Study II. There was a nonsignificant interaction trend in Rejection of the traditional female supportive role ( $p < .10$ ) in Study II, and there was an interaction trend in Nonstereotypic beliefs in Study I ( $p < .10$ ). Finally, there was a significant interaction on Perception of sex discrimination in Study I ( $p < .05$ ) and a trend on this variable in Study II ( $p < .10$ ).

In addition to these interactions, there were several significant pretest differences between the two types of classes, especially in Study II. The women's studies students were initially less traditional than the women in the

comparison class (see Tables 1 and 2). These initial differences indicate that a self-selection factor was probably operating in determining class enrollment and suggest that caution must be used in interpreting the meaning of the interactions. In particular, it could be argued that the women's studies students changed more because they were less traditional and therefore already in the process of change. To explore this possibility, change scores were computed for each subject; and a multiple regression analysis<sup>6</sup> was performed to determine which pretest attitudes and demographic variables best predicted change toward less traditional attitudes within each group. Results indicated that the factors underlying change tended to be the same in both groups. Most notably, there was greater change on most variables for women with initially more traditional attitudes. It is possible, of course, that this result is partially due to regression toward the mean. Nevertheless, this fact should not affect conclusions concerning change, since there is no reason to expect that regression effects were stronger in women's studies classes. The results of the regression analysis, however, do serve to lessen the seriousness of the initial pretest differences, because the less traditional women did not change the most.

Finally, it should be noted that change results on some variables were partially due to women in the comparison class, because they responded in a more traditional manner on the posttest than on the pretest. Although these trends may be merely indicative of sampling error, the results may be symptoms of a larger social phenomenon in upper-division college women. Horner (1971) suggests that fear of success increases during the 4 years of college for many women and that this fear may be related to less supportive attitudes toward women's liberation as well as toward personal careers.

## DISCUSSION

The two studies provided fairly consistent factor analytic and attitude change results. It appears that women's sex-role beliefs are comprised of certain defineable areas and that some of these areas are more susceptible than others to the influence processes of women's studies courses. In particular, Traditional roles of women, Nonstereotypic beliefs, and Perception of sex discrimination were the variables most easily changed. Future plans and Distrust and dislike of women were resistant to change in these classes.

One problem in fully understanding the findings is that it is difficult to determine what aspects of the women's studies courses were most effective in producing change. These courses provided information through lectures, small group discussions, female role models, and an environment supportive of less

<sup>6</sup> A detailed description of the results of these analyses is available from the authors.

traditional attitudes. Each of these factors could be important singly or in interaction with other factors in producing attitude changes. Future research should attempt to control or systematically manipulate these variables.

Nevertheless, guided by theories of attitude change, it is possible to speculate about why some attitudes were more change resistant than others. According to consistency theories, the women may have altered their attitudes to be consistent with the information provided in the classes. Because this information basically refuted the foundations (e.g., stereotypes) of beliefs in discrimination and traditional roles, it is not surprising that change occurred in these areas. The lack of change in Future plans and Dislike and distrust of women may indicate that these factors are more subjective variables and are less affected by an objective, informational approach. Perhaps consciousness-raising groups that stress the more personal and emotional aspects of sex-role socialization would be more likely to reduce negative feelings toward other women.

An alternative explanation for the findings may be derived from Converse's (1964) theory that attitudes less central to the individual are more amenable to change. In this investigation, feelings about other women and personal goals for the future may have been more central to the subjects' beliefs than were perception of sex discrimination and traditional role beliefs.

In summary, the data support the conclusion that consciousness can be raised and sex-role attitudes changed through participation in women's studies classes. However, given that the women's studies classes were successful in producing some changes but not others, it is important to bring the process of women's resocialization back into perspective. An approach that focuses only on attitude change, as did this investigation, is probably as ineffective in changing women's lifestyles as a strategy that focuses only on the elimination of overt institutional discrimination. Both situational and psychological factors must be considered in any comprehensive program of sex-role change.

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