

Gender Role Preference and Family Food Chores

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To learn how couples stratified by gender role preference (GRP) manage food chores.

Design: One-time, individual semistructured qualitative interview with each partner in a couple representing 1 of 3 GRP pairings.

Subjects/Settings: Volunteers were recruited using advertising and snowball sampling and met the criteria of (1) both parents living at home, (2) wife no older than 40, and (3) at least one child under age 6 and, if present, all others under age 18. Both partners in volunteer couples completed a 31-item GRP scale, and the scores of each partner were categorized as traditional (lowest 25% of possible scores), transitional (middle 50%), or egalitarian (top 25%). No traditional couples volunteered. A purposeful sample of 10 transitional and 10 egalitarian wives representing 20 couples were interviewed.

Variables Measured: Each partner was asked to describe their current food chore responsibility, their opinion of the balance of responsibility, and how this role assignment had changed since first married.

Analysis Methods Used: Thematic content analysis, constant comparison, and consensus produced the final thematic analysis.

Results: Couples in which both partners were transitional assigned food chore responsibility primarily to accommodate the breadwinner's role. Couples in which both partners were egalitarian used three different strategies to handle food chores.

Implications: Educators should consider the differences found when designing interventions for recently married couples and parents of young children.

KEY WORDS: gender role preference, food chores, qualitative methods, egalitarian, transitional

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INTRODUCTION

In the last 15 years, married women have increasingly entered the workforce, but no corresponding increase in husbands' responsibility for housework has occurred.¹ Housework includes food chores, and in 1994, women still reported doing the majority of meal planning, shopping, and preparation.² Blair and Lichter³ reported that education, income, and gender role preferences (GRPs) were associated with differences in who performed household tasks. Gender role preference represents the "actor's" degree of preference for the rewards and costs that arise out of the gender stratification and division of household labor. In couples they identified as having egalitarian GRP (ie, household roles are interchangeable between the sexes), husbands performed more feminine household chores than husbands in couples identified as traditional (ie, the woman is assumed to be responsible for housework), who were more likely to perform traditional male tasks. Subsequently, Greenstein⁴ found that the GRP of both the husband and wife influenced the balance of responsibility for domestic labor. Egalitarian men married to egalitarian women did the largest percentage of female tasks, whereas egalitarian men married to traditional women did much less or amounts similar to those in households where both partners held traditional views of gender roles. Thus, the GRPs of both spouses affected the degree of shared housework. However, these studies did not delineate the specific effect on food chore responsibility.

Scanzoni and Polonko⁵ linked GRP to couple decision-making processes. Godwin and Scanzoni developed and tested a model for understanding couple decision making about family issues including household tasks in which GRP was 1 of 5 context variables.^{6,7} They established this model's ability to predict the degree of couple consensus on decision making, finding that it explained 53% of the variance for decisions about the wife's activities relative to work and family but did not examine food chores specifically.⁷

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Gender role preference can influence couple decision-making processes by affecting the underlying assumptions of how decisions are to be carried out.⁸ Couple joint decision making about gender-based responsibility for household chores could lead to conflict if partners were more egalitarian in contrast to situations where the couple shared a traditional GRP or the husband was more traditional than the wife. Among egalitarian couples, female self-interest might intrude and change the fundamental assumptions of decision making in contrast to couples with shared traditional values where such self-interest would be submerged in deference to the family's or husband's interest. Scanzoni and Fox also predicted that egalitarian wives married to traditional husbands would be more likely to avoid conflict and defer to the husband's expectations because of possible negative consequences to the overall relationship.⁸ Studies have confirmed that couples with shared egalitarian views reported more conflict about the division of household labor and roles compared with couples sharing traditional values or couples in which the husband was traditional who were more likely to avoid conflict over roles.^{9,10}

We hypothesized that traditional and egalitarian couples might differ in the process of establishing responsibility for and in completing food chores and possibly in the degree of satisfaction with these roles. Little is known about how *both* spouses perceive the process of handling food chores, especially in families in which the GRP of the wife is no longer traditional. Thus, examining the relationship of GRP to food chore performance could clarify aspects of the "social framework" in the Food Choice Model¹¹ and help educators plan more effective interventions. If the process of food choice decision making is embedded in the family food chore system, as suggested by Devault,¹² and if those involved in food chores differ between egalitarian and traditional couples, then the process of making food choices may also differ between these families, as suggested by Jansson.¹³

Because the relationship of GRP to food chores was unknown, we conducted an exploratory study using qualitative research methods to generate more in-depth data from both partners.¹⁴ The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory study was to learn how the GRP of husbands and wives might influence the process of handling food chores. In this article, we compare the process these couples used by focusing on husbands' and wives' perceptions of their own, their spouse's, and their children's roles; how the roles had evolved; and how satisfied they were with their roles.

METHODS

Volunteer couples in stage I of the family life cycle¹⁵ were recruited by a combination of advertisement distribution and snowball sampling.¹⁶ Flyers with a business reply postcard were distributed at cooperating community locations (daycare centers, libraries, businesses, community centers, and campus locations). Those returning the postcard were

screened by telephone to verify that they met the criteria of (a) both parents living at home and willing to be interviewed, (b) a wife no older than 40, and (c) at least 1 child under age 6 and, if present, all others under 18. Those who responded were asked to nominate other potential participants. Those meeting the criteria were sent 2 copies each of the role preference scale (RPS)¹⁷ and informed consent forms with instructions to complete these individually. When returned by mail, informed consent was assumed, and each scale was scored. A total of 20 couples were ultimately interviewed, representing a combination of GRP scores.

We used the 31-item RPS of Voelz¹⁷ to stratify the couples. No GRP scale is considered the gold standard in the literature. Often researchers use 4 to 6 questions in a national survey to determine GRP, a practice with many shortcomings,¹⁸ or they may construct a new scale relevant to their population.⁹ We chose this scale because 24 of the items were identical to and comprised the GRP scale used in the decision-making research of Godwin and Scanzoni.⁷ That 24-item scale, with 4 constructs (role of wife, mother, husband, father), had a Cronbach alpha reliability of .88 for husbands and .90 for wives in their thirties with children. Voelz¹⁷ added 7 statements to the Godwin and Scanzoni scale that enriched the constructs of the wife's and the husband's role while not altering the statements for mother's and father's roles. Using her scale, she verified aspects of the Godwin and Scanzoni model with college students considering housework decisions (Cronbach alpha for males, .91, and for females, .89).

In the RPS, the reader rated 31 statements using a Likert scale where 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree. Traditional preferences represent agreement with statements suggesting regulation of family roles by gender, whereas egalitarian preferences represent agreement with those suggesting interchangeability of family roles between the sexes. Total score possible ranged from 31 (extremely traditional preferences) to 155 (extremely egalitarian preferences). As suggested by Voelz, the lower 25% of scores were defined as traditional (31-62), the middle 50% as transitional (63-124), and the top 25% as egalitarian (125-155). Scoring revealed that most volunteer couples were transitional. No traditional couples volunteered within the 3-month recruitment period. Because the wife's GRP appeared most critical in predicting the division of household labor⁴ and to ensure distinction of transitionals from egalitarians, couples were considered only if the wife's score was 73 to 115 or 135 and above, respectively. Ultimately, we found 16 egalitarian and 23 transitional wives meeting these criteria. Ten wives, representing 10 couples, were purposefully selected from each pool to represent as many recruitment sources (daycare, business, campus, etc) as possible, producing a final sample of 20 couples. To check correct assignment to GRP type, the scores of those to be interviewed were recalculated using just the 24 embedded statements of Godwin and Scanzoni.⁷ Gender role preference typing remained the same.

The initial interview script of open-ended questions with probes was produced through an iterative process of testing,

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