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Gender role attitudes and attitudes to abortion: Are there gender differences?

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Abstract

This study examines gender differences in gender role attitudes and attitudes to abortion in a sample of 141 undergraduate students. Religion and religiosity were treated as covariates. Using the short version of Spence and Helmreich's (1978) Attitudes to Women Scale (AWS) taken from Spence and Hahn [Spence, J. T., & Hahn, E. D. (1997). The Attitudes Toward Women Scale and attitude to change in college students. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21, 17–34] and the abortion attitudes scale developed by Stets and Leik [Stets, J. E., & Leik, R. K. (1993). Attitudes about abortion and varying attitude structures. *Social Science Research*, 22, 265–282], we found that females have more liberal attitudes to women and show stronger approval for women's autonomy in abortion decision-making. Given the low internal consistency of this three-item subscale, responses to the individual items were analyzed. More males than females feel that the father should have the right to prevent the mother from having an abortion. Most of the students indicate that the woman should have to tell the father before having an abortion and most disagree that the abortion is entirely a woman's decision. There were no gender differences on the moral acceptability and availability subscales. The overall results reflect somewhat conservative attitudes to women, and seemingly contradictory findings on the abortion issue in this sample of university students. Although they endorse the availability of abortion, at the same time they find it morally unacceptable and show weak support for women's autonomy in this decision. The implications of these findings for the advancement of women's rights in this country are discussed.

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Large scale surveys (Rule, 2004), smaller investigations (Patel & Kooverjee, in press; Patel & Myeni, 2008) and reports by Harrison, Montgomery, Lurie, and Wilkinson (2000) and Varga (2002) indicate that South Africans, in general, have negative attitudes to abortion. At the same time, South Africa is one of the most progressive countries in the world in terms of the legal recognition of sexual and reproductive rights (Cooper et al., 2004). Although women's rights were accorded high priority in the country's transformation from apartheid to democracy, very little research has been done on the public's attitude towards women and their reproductive rights. The present study examines gender differences in gender role attitudes and attitudes to abortion in a sample of young South African students taken from a historically disadvantaged university campus. Religiosity and religion were statistically controlled in the study.

1. Gender role attitudes

Although considerable progress has been made with regard to women's rights in South Africa, Albertyn (2003) observes that these developments are mainly at the level of legal reform, while attention to cultural attitudes and values are not given priority. It means, therefore, that until women's organizations as well as the government engage in attempts at social reform, patriarchal attitudes about reproductive freedom, sexuality and gender will continue to prevail in this country. The study of gender roles is important since it aids our understanding of society's beliefs about a range of issues that affect women (Berkel, 2004).

That females in general have more egalitarian attitudes than males is a consistent finding in the literature on gender role attitudes (Berkel, 2004; Jones & McNamara, 1991; Knio & Elasmara, 1998; Kremer & Curry, 1987; Lottes & Kuriloff, 1992; Öngen, 2006; Toller, Suter, & Trautman, 2004). In their comparison of student cohorts of 1972, 1976, 1980 and 1992, Spence and Hahn (1997) found that there was a general increase in egalitarian attitudes over the years. However, in all groups the males were always more traditional than the females. Similar findings were recorded by Loo and Thorpe (1998) in their 20-year replication study. Twenge (1997) provides further support for the gender gap in their meta-analysis of studies conducted from 1970 to 1995. Although there has been limited research on gender and gender roles in South Africa, a consistent pattern of conservative attitudes towards women seems to be emerging: Fifty-five percent of the police officers used in the Stephanus (2006) study hold negative attitudes to women; male and female patients at a STI clinic in Cape Town endorse traditional attitudes to gender roles and relations (Kalichman et al., 2005); male community members were found to hold hostile attitudes to women (Kalichman et al., 2007). In Harper's (2001) South African student sample female respondents reported more liberal attitudes than males.

2. Attitudes to abortion

Studies on gender differences in abortion attitudes yield diverse results. Although Bailey's (1993) study did not reveal differences between feminists and non-feminists on abortion

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