

NONTRADITIONAL MALE: MEN WITH PRIMARY CHILDCARE/HOUSEHOLD RESPONSIBILITIES

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Interview, sex role, and personality test data were obtained from 16 nontraditional men who met the following criteria: a) they were married, b) their wives were employed outside the home, and c) they had over 50% of the responsibility for childrearing and household tasks. Ten of the men reported that their mothers had worked when they were growing up, and 11 said that parental roles had influenced their current lifestyle. The men stated that the best aspect of their nontraditional role was their increased involvement with the children, whereas the worst aspect was housework. Most men indicated that they were happy with their lives. Within the sample, 36% of the men were sex-typed androgynous on the Bem Sex Role Inventory and scored significantly differently than the norm on 9 out of 18 subscales of the California Psychological Inventory. Implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: sex role, personality, nontraditional male, househusband, childcare, childrearing, household responsibilities.

The work and household roles of men and women are changing, bringing the end of the traditional structure of the family with the husband/father as provider and the wife/mother as housewife, which lasted from the 1830s to 1980 (Bernard, 1981). From 1940 to 1980, the percentage of mothers with children under 18 who were employed rose from 8.6% to 56.6% (Hoffman, 1983).

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As women (re)enter the workforce, their husbands are beginning to help with more childcare and household duties. Numerous investigators (Beckett & Smith, 1981; Beckman & Houser, 1979; Gold & Andres, 1980; Hoffman, 1963; Pleck, 1979) have found that husbands of working wives help more at home than husbands with unemployed wives. Usually, however, the increase in helping is marginal (Hoffman, 1983), and women still carry the major burden of childcare/household responsibilities.

Lein (1979) conducted interviews with 25 Boston-area families and found that men had different social networks than women, resulting in men receiving little support for their helping with household tasks. In fact, some males were ribbed by their male peers for helping. In addition, Lein reported that men perceived their primary contribution to the family in terms of their jobs, and were hesitant to acknowledge that they needed help in this area. Perhaps their reluctance to help with housework was at least partially a function of their defining their familial contribution in terms of the provider role. More support for this explanation of men's reluctance to do housework comes from a sample of 650 women in the Detroit metropolitan area (Model, 1981): the greater the comparative gap in the wages of the husband versus the wife, the less he was likely to contribute to housework duties. Others (Beckman & Houser, 1979; Perrucci, Potter, & Rhoads, 1978; Russell, 1982) have found that men's sex role ideology is a determinant of their household/childcare activities.

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Although some men may be helping more around the house when their wives are employed, men who are willing to assume the role of househusband, taking primary responsibility for childcare and household duties, are very rare indeed. Few studies have been published that included such men in the sample. Lamb and colleagues have published several articles, chronologizing a study of 51 nontraditional and traditional families in Sweden that included 17 fathers who were primary caretakers of infants for at least 1 month (Lamb, Frodi, Frodi, & Hwang, 1982; Lamb, Frodi, Hwang, & Frodi, 1982; Lamb, Frodi, Hwang, Frodi, & Steinberg, 1982). Russell (1982) studied 50 shared caregiving families in Australia, with fathers having sole responsibility for children for at least 15 hours per week. Finally, Sagi (1982) surveyed 15 Israeli families in which the father was more involved in childcare than the mother was.

One of the few studies of househusbands in the United States was performed by Beer (1983); however, in this investigation 38 of the 56 househusbands did less than half of the housework. Field (1978) included 12 primary caretaker fathers in her sample, and Radin (1982) included a group of 20 primary caretaker fathers who were responsible for their preschool children approximately 58% of the time. Pruett (1983) studied 17 infants of primary caretaker fathers, and Levine (1976) and Holcomb (1982) interviewed men with major household/childcare responsibilities.

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Although in most of these samples men with the primary childcare/household duties were in the minority, the fact that there were any men assuming this nontraditional role may be indicative of a gradual change in and expansion of the male sex role. Who are these nontraditional men? What are they like? Some, but not all, of the above investigators included analyses of the men, their backgrounds, reasons for assuming the caretaker role, problems, and satisfactions with their lives.

One antecedent of men's assuming primary household responsibilities may be the relationship with their own father. Sagi (1982) suggested two ways to interpret possible effects of the fathering received by these men: the *compensatory hypothesis*, which focuses on an inadequate relationship with their own fathers and suggests that these men are, through their own involvement, attempting to compensate for their own lack of fathering, and the *alternative hypothesis*, which emphasizes the modeling of the positive involvement of their own fathers. Although Pruett (1983) did not present a statistical analysis of his data, he reported finding a prevalence of absent fathers, and suggested that his primary caretaker fathers may have been attempting to overcome or repair their poor fathering experience. Pruett further suggested that the men's involvement was also positively related to identification with their nurturing mothers. Sagi (1982), however, found that fathers' involvement in childcare was positively related to the perceived involvement of their own fathers. Thus, either process may lead to enhanced involvement of the son with his own family (Sagi, 1982).

The femininity-masculinity of nontraditional men has been explored by several investigators. Russell (1982) found that fathers' femininity scores, and mothers' and fathers' classification as androgynous were significantly higher in Australian shared caregiving families than in traditional families. Radin (1982) reported that fathers' masculinity scores were negatively correlated with their involvement in the physical caretaking of their children; however, no significant differences were found in relation to the masculinity and femininity of primary caretaking and traditional fathers.

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Some evidence has emerged from these studies that work and parenting may be valued somewhat differently in nontraditional versus traditional families. Lamb (1982) conducted prenatal interviews with women and found that those in nontraditional families valued work more and parenthood less than their husbands, whereas the opposite pattern was found in traditional families. Russell (1982) listed the mother's career as one of the most common reasons for a shared caregiving lifestyle.

Regarding men's reactions to their lifestyles, Russell (1982) reported that an enhanced father-child relationship was the most frequently mentioned benefit by the shared caregiving men. Radin (1982) also found that being closer to children was a commonly mentioned advantage by

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primary caretaker fathers, and Sagi (1982) found in an Israeli sample that satisfaction was significantly associated with paternal involvement.

However, fathers also mentioned some problems and difficulties with their lives and roles. Lamb (1982) found that, for nontraditional fathers, paternal caretaking and paternal involvement were correlated with resentment. Problems experienced by Russell's (1982) shared caregiving fathers were constant demands, the boredom of the role, lack of adult company, dealing with the mother's problems and exhaustion, and pressure from fellow men.

In the scanty existing literature on men assuming nontraditional roles, then, many issues are unresolved. Are these men more likely to be feminine or androgynous compared to traditional men? Does greater paternal involvement lead to satisfaction or resentment? How do these men differ from other more traditional men? Thus, we explored these as well as other issues through interviews with men with primary childcare/household responsibilities. The motives of these men, their hardships and joys, the reactions of others to their nontraditional role, personality characteristics that might differentiate them from more traditional men, and their overall satisfaction with their life and role were examined.

Method

Participants

Male participants ($N = 16$) were recruited through word of mouth newspaper advertisements; letters to pediatricians, dentists, and nursery schools; and notices in a women's center newsletter. Men included in the study had over 50% of the responsibility for childbearing and household tasks, and were married to women who were employed outside the home. Most men were White and from a middle class background, with 80% having completed at least 2 years of college. Ages ranged from 21 to 46 years ($M = 31.5$) and the mean number of children was 1.75 (range = 0–5).

Materials and Procedure

The men were interviewed individually by the second author, and their responses were tape recorded. Structured interview questions covered background variables that might have influenced the assumption of their current nontraditional role; reactions of their wives, male peers, parents, and in-laws to their nontraditional role; what effects they thought their role would have on their children; and satisfaction with their current lifestyle.

Participants also completed forms estimating the hours per week they worked, the hours per week their wives worked, the importance of work in their lives and in their wives' lives, and performance by themselves and their wives of household and childcare tasks. Regarding the latter, men

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gave percentages of total household and total childcare tasks performed by themselves, their wives, and others (e.g., maids or babysitters). In addition, 26 specific household childcare tasks were listed, comprising 14 feminine tasks (e.g., cooking meals and dusting the house), six masculine tasks (e.g., care maintenance and mowing the lawn), and six neutral tasks (e.g., paying bills). Participants were asked to estimate they percentages of time they (vs. their spouses or others) did each of these tasks. Finally, the men were also asked to take the California Psychological Inventory (CPI; Gough, 1975) and the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974, 1977). Fourteen men returned completed test forms.

Results

Division of Work and Household Duties

The men and their lives worked a mean of 36.1 and 41.8 hours outside the home. When asked to rate the importance of work in their lives on a 10-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all important* to 10 = *very important*), men's average ratings for themselves and their lives were 7.19 and 7.44.

Men completed 58.9% of the total childcare tasks, with the remaining 41.1% completed by their spouses, and also reported doing a larger percentage of household tasks compared to that completed by their spouse (59.4% vs. 35.3%, $p < .01$). (Because some household chores were performed by other outside help, not all percentages add up to 100%.) Further, men reported doing an average of 53.7% of the feminine tasks (45.1% for wives) and 80.9% of the masculine tasks (15.1% for wives). For the masculine tasks, this difference was significant at $p < .001$.

Men had held the majority of the responsibility for childcare and household tasks for between 2 months and 22 years, with 75% having held their current nontraditional role for 1 year or longer.

Background Factors

When asked what factors led to their current lifestyles, the most frequently given answers were that their wives went to work, the economy changed, or they decided to go back to school. Regarding the familial background of these men, 10 of their mothers worked when they were growing up, but in none of their families had their fathers been the primary caretaker. Eleven of the men reported that their parents' roles or attitudes influenced their present lifestyle, although three of these were in the opposite direction from the roles modeled by their parents.

Reactions of Others

The reactions of most, but not all, wives to the change in roles was positive. Comments ranged from her feeling somewhat guilty to liking

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being able to say her husband helps at home. According to the husbands, seven wives love their work, four do not like their jobs, and five have mixed feelings (e.g., enjoying working but would rather be home herself).

Regarding male peer reactions, the most frequently given answer was that they had received no feedback. Four men reported some ribbing, four men reported a positive reaction, and one man mentioned that perhaps other males were a little bit jealous. In addition, more positive than negative reactions from parents and in-laws were reported. Only one of the 16 men reported any negative comments from their parents, and three reported receiving negative feedback from their in-laws.

Role Evaluation

When asked what things they liked best about their nontraditional role, the men most frequently mentioned being with children and having input into their development. Regarding the effects of their roles on their children, 50% reported feeling closer to their children and stated their children would tend not to have preset roles.

Unsurprisingly, the most frequently mentioned worst thing about the househusband role was the housework. Other hardships mentioned included boredom, worrying about not moving ahead in life, not having enough time for hobbies and/or themselves, not having much privacy, finding it harder to keep secrets because the family is closer, and one man reported a wife who tended to scatter her belongings around the house.

When asked if they would want to continue the arrangement on a relatively permanent basis, nine said yes, five said no, and two said they wanted more of a 50/50 arrangement. Further, 15 would recommend their lifestyle to other couples. Regarding their satisfaction with their current lifestyle, as rated on a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *very unhappy* to 10 = *very happy*, the mean was 7.96 (range = 5–10).

Personality Characteristics

In scoring the BSRI, Hyde and Phillis' (1979) medians for 21- to 40-year-old men were utilized. Men who scored above the masculinity (4.91) and the femininity (4.95) medians were considered androgynous, men who scored at or below both medians were considered undifferentiated, and men who scored above on one median and at or below the median on the other were sex-typed masculine or feminine. In our sample, five men were androgynous, five were masculine, one was feminine, and three were undifferentiated. The mean masculinity score of the men was 5.20 and the mean femininity score was 4.48. In Hyde and Phillis' (1979) sample, 4% of the men were categorized as androgynous compared to 36% of the present sample. A Fisher's exact probability test was calculated to contrast these proportions, and this was found to be significant at $p < .05$.

We computed z scores to compare our participants to the norm sample for 18 subscales of the CPI (Gough, 1975). Nontraditional males scored significantly higher than the male norm sample on the dominance ($p < .01$), social presence ($p < .01$), self-acceptance ($p < .01$), and flexibility ($p < .01$) subscales, and significantly lower on the sense of well-being ($p < .05$), responsibility ($p < .01$), socialization ($p < .01$), self-control ($p < .01$), and good impression ($p < .01$) subscales.

Data Relationships

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A number of significant Spearman's rho correlations emerged from the data. The age of the men was positively correlated ($r = .47, p < .05$) with the importance of work outside the home for the wife. Further, the wife's educational level was positively correlated with the number of hours worked by the man outside the home ($r = .48, p < .05$), negatively correlated with the average number of masculine tasks the men performed ($r = -.51, p < .05$), and positively correlated with the average number of masculine tasks the wives performed ($r = .52, p < .05$).

The number of children in the family was negatively correlated with the percentage of total household tasks performed by the men ($r = -.49, p < .05$), and positively correlated with both the length of time they had been responsible for the childcare/household responsibilities ($r = .70, p < .001$), and the masculinity BSRI subscale ($r = .59, p < .05$). The family's socioeconomic level was positively correlated with the number of hours per week the wife worked outside the home ($r = .57, p < .01$) and the length of time the men had been responsible for the childcare/household responsibilities ($r = .64, p < .01$).

For the 10 men whose mothers worked, their age when their mothers started working was positively correlated ($r = .60, p < .05$) with the average proportion of masculine household tasks they performed and negatively correlated with both the average proportion of masculine tasks their spouse performed ($r = -.56, p < .05$) and scores on the masculinity subscale of the BSRI ($r = -.84, p < .01$).

The number of hours the men worked outside of the home was positively correlated with the total household tasks performed by their wives ($r = .57, p < .05$) but negatively correlated with their rating of the importance of work to their wives ($r = -.62, p < .01$). In addition, the importance of work in the wives' lives was positively correlated with the percentage of total childcare tasks performed by the men ($r = .41, p < .05$).

The length of time the men had been responsible for the childcare/household tasks was positively correlated with scores on the masculinity subscale of the BSRI ($r = .52, p < .05$) and negatively correlated with the total household tasks performed by the men ($r = -.55, p < .05$). Total

childcare tasks performed by the men was negatively correlated with the length of time they expected to continue their lifestyle ($r = -.48, p < .05$).

Degree of happiness with their lifestyle was negatively correlated with the proportion of total household tasks the men performed ($r = -.77, p < .001$) and positively correlated with the proportion of total household tasks performed by their wives ($r = .66, p < .01$). Further, the average proportion of masculine tasks performed by the men was negatively ($r = -.77, p < .001$), and the average number of masculine tasks performed by the wives was positively ($r = .78, p < .001$) correlated with the degree of happiness.

Discussion

All of the men in this sample performed more of the household ($M = 59.4\%$) and childcare ($M = 58.9\%$) tasks than did their spouses. In addition, most men (75%) had held this nontraditional role for at least 1 year. Factors related to their adopting this lifestyle included their wives working, the changing economy, their going back to school, and their childhood background. Ten of the men (62.5%) reported that their mothers worked when they were growing up, which is a somewhat higher percentage than that reported in 1980 (Hoffman, 1983). Further, 11 of the men said that the attitudes and roles of their parents influenced them, although three said this occurred in the opposite direction. This provides some support for Sagi's (1982) suggestion that either modeling or compensation can lead to men's increased involvement in childcare.

Some of the significant data relationships were understandable. The number of hours the men worked outside the home was positively correlated with the total household tasks performed by their wives, whereas the number of children in the family was negatively related to the percentage of household tasks performed by the men. Further, the wife's educational level was positively correlated with the average number of masculine tasks the wives performed. The importance of work for the wives was positively related to the percentage of childcare tasks performed by the men. Men's happiness with their lifestyle was negatively related to the proportion of total household tasks they performed and positively related to the proportion of household tasks performed by the wives. Because household tasks can become mundane, boring, and seemingly endless for both men and women, these relationships are not surprising.

On the other hand, some unexpected correlations emerged. The age of the men was positively correlated with the importance of work for the wife outside the home, possibly implying that older women had careers rather than just jobs. The wife's educational level, though, was positively correlated with the number of hours worked by the man outside the home. The length of time the men had performed major household and childcare

tasks was positively related to the number of children in the family, as well as the family's socioeconomic level. One interpretation of the latter finding is that long-term househusbandry may have permitted the wife more time for involvement and advancement in her career.

Scores on the masculinity subscale of the BSRI were also significantly correlated with the length of time the men had been responsible for the childcare/household tasks, and with the number of children in the family but negatively related to the men's age when their mother started working.

While most men in this study became househusbands owing to economic reasons rather than a conscious role choice, all but one indicated that they would recommend their lifestyle to others, and estimated their happiness at approximately an 8 out of 10. In addition, most of the men reported positive reactions from wives, parents, and in-laws.

A logical question that follows, then, is if these men are satisfied and happy with their lives and would recommend it to others, why are not more men becoming househusbands? According to Feinman (1981), males are high-status actors, and when such actors hold low-status positions they receive more disapproval than a low-status actor in the same position. The housewife role could be considered a relatively low-status position. Dworkin (1981) attempted to categorize the housewife role according to a prestige ranking compatible with the Duncan Socioeconomic Index, and found that a sample of 501 women placed housewives, sales clerks, and nurses in the fifth decile. The implication from Feinman's hypothesis is that a man in the housewife position would be valued lower than a female in the same position. Rosenwasser, Gonzales, and Adams (1985), in two studies with college students, found that male housewives were evaluated lower than female housewives on a semantic differential scale. In other words, when a female espouses masculine values and has a career, she becomes upwardly mobile; however, if a man becomes a housewife, he becomes like a woman and gives up his higher status. By doing so, he is challenging one of the basic underlying assumptions of our capitalistic society: that a man will always strive for a better, more prestigious, position in life (Bear, Berger, & Wright, 1979).

Several additional researchers have provided evidence that males in nontraditional roles are devalued. When asked to rate the mental health of 12 stimulus persons, college students indicated that sex-role deviant males (males having feminine careers and interests) were less well-adjusted and more likely to need psychiatric help than were sex-role congruent males or sex-role deviant females (Tilby & Kalin, 1980). Sex-role deviant females, however, were considered as well-adjusted as sex-role congruent females. Similarly, Shaffer and Johnson (1980) found that male stimulus persons portrayed in a feminine occupation (telephone operator) were thought to be a less attractive job candidate than a female operator or a male or

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female telephone installer. Further, in a national survey, Rosen, Jerdee, and Prestwich (1975) found that managers and executives were less likely to approve a month's leave to care for children when the request was made by a male rather than a female accountant.

Support for this hypothesis comes (albeit indirectly) from research indicating earlier and stronger socialization of male than female gender roles. For example, Blakemore, LaRue, and Olejnik (1979) found that boys, but not girls, as young as 2 years of age show sex-role appropriate toy preferences. Connor and Serbin (1978) reported that fourth-, sixth-, and eighth-grade boys preferred stories about males at all ages, and the preference strength increased with grade level. The preference by girls for stories about females was not significant at $p < .05$. Best and colleagues (1977) found that children's knowledge of male stereotypic traits appeared earlier than their knowledge about female stereotypic traits. Other evidence is also available implying that becoming a housewife would be hard for a man (O'Neil, 1981; Tauss, 1976). Skovholt and Morgan (1981) suggested that men's careers are closely tied to their identity, and that men without occupational success might expect problems with self-esteem.

If it is hard in this society for men to assume nontraditional roles, such as that of househusband, what characteristics made the men in this study different enough to assume this role and to be willing to talk about it? Data from the BSRI and CPI may provide some insight to this question. Of the men, 36% were classified as androgynous, which is significantly higher than the 4% reported for 21- to 40-year-old men by Hyde and Phillis (1979). This supports Russell's (1982) finding of more androgynous men in shared caregiving than in traditional families.

According to their responses on the CPI, androgynous men tend to be high in dominance, social presence, self-acceptance, and flexibility. The last three of these traits seem intuitively right in that a man willing to hold such a nontraditional role must be flexible and confident in himself. The high dominance score might partly reflect this needed confidence, as the descriptors for persons scoring high on this subscale include "aggressive, confident, persistent, and planful...self-reliant and independent; and as having leadership potential and initiative" (Gough, 1975, p. 10). In addition, the men scored significantly lower on the sense of well-being, responsibility, socialization, self-control, and good impression subscales. Low scorers on the sense of well-being subscale tend to be seen as "unambitious, leisurely, awkward, cautious, apathetic, and conventional; as being self-defensive and apologetic; and as constricted in thought and action" (Gough, 1975, p. 10). One interpretation is that these men were a little uncomfortable with their role and defensive toward possible negative societal sanctions. Low scores on the responsibility, socialization, and self-control subscales may imply a person who takes responsibility somewhat

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less seriously and is not strongly socialized, at least in traditional ways. Scores on the good impression subscale may imply that these men are less concerned with how others perceive them. However, caution may be in order in interpreting these scores. Some of the significant differences may be due to changes in male cohorts since the establishment of the norms, rather than differences between these males and the 1984 "average" male.

For various reasons, some men, including those in this sample, are assuming major household/childcare responsibilities. Flexibility in the male role is important for several reasons: 1) as more males become househusbands, the housewife role will probably be valued more and be given more prestige, because Touhey (1974) reported that the prestige of an occupation increases if more males enter the field; 2) for women to be able to have both careers and families, men who are interested in sharing housework are essential, and 3) males are given more choices regarding how to spend their adult lives. Ultimately they, as with women, would be free to choose without stigma to have careers, to combine careers and families, or to invest their energies primarily in their home and families.

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