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Women and Their Many Roles

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About the Author

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Abstract

Some think that multiple roles for women are new and that the strain they impose may be dangerous. But careful study shows that women always have assumed many roles and have learned to do so throughout girlhood. Further, they have developed coping techniques and personality styles that enable them to move with relative ease among roles and to incorporate diverse activities into a constructive, healthy pattern of living. Having a longstanding history of working outside the home, Black women have evolved coping strategies and attitudes toward work that might well be learned by others. There are many pressures for women to imitate men as they move into new work and leadership roles. New views of women's psychology, however, underscore the differences between women's and men's experience and suggest that women's unique strengths can be employed to restructure workplace and family systems for the benefit of all.

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In recent years, many people have begun to write and speak and worry about women playing multiple roles. What has not been recognized is that women have had more than one role for a long time. Moreover, there is good reason to believe that the multiple roles are beneficial rather than dangerous.

Closely allied with the topic of roles is the issue of responsibilities. Here, too, women have long assumed multiple responsibilities. While these points may seem obvious, they are often overlooked. What has not been obvious, however, is the complexity of the activity which goes into fulfilling the multiple roles and responsibilities -- not to mention their significance for the total society.

An important implication is that the prevalent notion of the roles people can play may be limited and oversimplified. It has probably emerged from the prescriptions held out to guide men's lives and may not represent

the realities of women's lives. (These prescriptions may not reflect men's actual lives, in fact, or even their wishes about how they would like to live their lives.) They may reflect even less the underlying values to be accepted as guides and measures for all lives.

These statements stem from the findings of a study I made of roles and of their development in the lives of Black and white women of all social classes.¹ In general, the study revealed that almost all the women play a variety of roles and carry a variety of responsibilities. In addition, it revealed the ways in which development for girls and women is a process of training or "education" for incorporating a variety of roles.

A second implication suggested by that work is that we may now be ready to move on from the old categories in which roles and development have been discussed. For example, recent literature has suggested that a key factor in modern men's development is learning to be a "member of the team." The question is then posed: Can women learn to be good team players *like men*? But there may be more important questions, such as: What kind of team player do we deem valuable? What have been the premises on which teams operate -- i.e., what is ruled "in" or "out" as good teamwork? What kinds of characteristics do the rules encourage? As we shall see, women have been part of many kinds of teams, but perhaps not the ones most noticed, like prestigious professional football teams. In one sense women may be the quintessential team players if "a cooperative working unit" is used as a definition for a team, or if the person who has the background and desire to work for the good of the group is the definition of a desirable team member.

A reworking of the study resulted in my book,² and it begins with the chapter "Superwoman vs. Little Woman." My general conclusion was that neither is an accurate description of most women. Certainly, neither would be a desirable or possible prescription for all women.

The fact that public debate and discussion has been cast in such terms probably reflects outdated conceptions about women. It reflects, too, the media's emphasis on a very small and nonrepresentative group of women. The media tends to highlight the affluent woman who has many advantages and therefore some possibility for individual advancement. It also assumes that her goals are identical to those of men who share her social class and background. As my data revealed, very few women are superwomen, and very few women are "little" in terms of the number and the variety of roles they play. What is little is the amount of women's influence on public policy and public understanding.

One might point to a third implication of my study: A close examination of women's lives suggests the definition of a "multiple-role person" which is more valuable for the future development of both sexes than some of today's limited role concepts. It may also suggest the kind of education which leads to the development of this many-sided person -- in contrast to the "one-dimensional man."

Recent changes for women

If multiple roles always have been a part of women's lives, why are they seen as a problem now? I think that the answer is that there has been a significant dislocation our society. The changes over the past 20 years affecting the economic structure and labor force have changed the ways in which women are needed as workers and women's expectations of what should happen in the labor force. The women's movement extended the ideology of the civil rights movement to include all women, not just Blacks and other people of color. The tactics of the civil rights movement were adopted and continued what the women's rights movement of the 1920's had begun.

The changes in women's behavior and expectations have led to the current tensions. Women, as a group, have begun to play a more important role in the economic and social life of the country. Their educational level has increased. As a group, more women, particularly middle class women, are more concerned about self-fulfillment and have placed a greater emphasis on their own potential and the meaning of self-actualization.

As women have moved into the economic and political arena, some have developed a greater competitiveness with men and an emphasis on being like and behaving like men. Some people -- those on the conservative edge -- are unsettled by changing definitions and would like women's roles to revert to those of 30 years ago. However, many women now are trying to develop a new set of definitions of women's roles and to deal with those aspects of women's lives which are unique. In contrast to the definitions of a generation ago, there now are various definitions of wife, mother, worker, and career women.

Many of the traditional ideas and stereotypes of women and their roles were designed to obscure and belittle the basic worth and value of women. The notions tend to perpetuate ideas that women are incompetent, stupid, disorganized, and uninterested in their environment. Such generalizations undermine humanity and dignity, whoever is the object of the stereotype. Providing the believer with a false sense of security, the myths and stereotypes about women provide a false sense of superiority to men while diminishing both sexes. Some of the spokeswomen for women's rights have attempted to counter the stereotypes not only by denying them but also by attacking valuable activities and characteristics of women. They have denied much because they want to right the wrongs inflicted on women and to insure that women will be granted equity and equality. In doing so, they have tended to deny that women are different in any way from men.

One of the problems that seems to follow is that a dichotomy still is presented to women -- that is, to be either career women or housewives. (In my terms, "superwomen or little women.") What concerns me is that we need not say that a woman has to choose between pursuing a career or caring for a family. That notion is an exaggeration and not a valid concept for women to use as a guide for their lives. Women do not need to and should not give up the diversity which is possible for them.

Women's ability, flexibility, and compatibility

Most women are able to combine many parts of their lives with competence but also with some stress. However, they do not experience as much stress as the media would have us believe, and I think that there is an explanation.

Now, if women are able to carry on multiple roles and fulfill multiple responsibilities with stress, but without undue stress, how do they do it? As I discovered in my research, women have been able to do it because of (1) their particular training and (2) strategies that they have learned and refined over the years. Women know how to handle multiple roles as a matter of course, as a natural part of their lives because they have *learned* to do so as girls, merely adding and changing roles as they mature.

Women assume multiple roles and responsibilities because they have grown into being managers of complex roles. One of the advantages of being an American female is learning how to handle more than one or two tasks at the same time. Since there has been little examination of ways in which women live their lives, there has been little discussion of this learned strength.

Many women I have interviewed could not ever remember "doing nothing." They have always been busy and active, and their level of activity increased as they got older. I would posit that with each increase of activity, women became more and more proficient at handling many responsibilities, moving from role to role with ease, without excessive stress.

In fact, when I asked hundreds of women how or when they began a pattern of carrying on lots of activities, most of them had difficulty in remembering. When they began to examine their lives, they realized that they had learned, with family encouragement -- from parents and grandparents, from examples in their home circle and neighborhood -- watching what women did. They began as Brownies and Blue Birds, at Sunday School, in religious activities, in elementary school groups. Without even thinking about it, they learned how to take on many different responsibilities.

In talking to hundreds of women, one of the most valuable things I found was that our discussion became very sterile if we focused only on the individual woman and the ways she handled the complexities of her life. Not a single one of the women whom I interviewed described her life or accomplishments as a solitary venture. They all talked about themselves as part of a group, whether family group or community. This is very much an integral part of the way in which women function in all phases of their lives. They are not alone. They fulfill their desires and ambitions and needs along with others. They are pulled by commitments to loved ones and to others to whom they feel a sense of responsibility. Jean Baker Miller³ and Carol Gilligan⁴ note that as women mature, they are more concerned with relationships than with power -- contrary to the way in which men function. Women are concerned with interdependency and providing care for others.

Indeed, relationships flow from the family bound together by blood and mutual need rather than force.

The women who manage multiple roles do so not in a vacuum, but in a context of those who taught them to care *and* to be competent. The context includes those who *need them*. They have learned to provide for those needs in a variety of ways while attempting to define their own sense of personhood. Within themselves, many women have moved beyond superficial conformity to the stereotypes of what a woman is supposed to be and do. They act out their own faith and values with a sense of self-confidence and the belief that they can make choices and fulfill their own definition of destiny. They make the choices because they value themselves. They are convinced that they can contribute to the sphere in which they operate, whether family, job, neighborhood, or profession. They are convinced that they find meaning as they carry out activities fulfilling personal goals.

Further, women generally are flexible. This has probably followed from their relationships within the family. Because women focus on attending to many family members and feel the responsibility to be responsive to the change and growth of each of them, they learn to adapt to change.

The women whom I interviewed talked about the importance of relationships with others, particularly children, but also with others in their families and with women friends. They all talked about what those relationships meant to them, the sharing. Even those women who are sole support of the family depend very much upon their children. It is these relationships which alleviate the sense of isolation and loneliness and provide continuity. The relationships with women friends offer relief, because they mean acceptance on a noncompetitive, nondemanding level. Women talked about how they truly learned from one another how to handle stress, how to cope -- lessons taught by other women.

Girlhood learning

I think that one way in which this whole process gets started in girls' development is that girls are kept in the home longer and around adults while boys are pushed outside "to play." Consequently, girls are exposed to and learn to imitate activities of their mothers and other women. This is not the only setting in which little girls are involved. One criticism of schools is that they are too oriented to girls. While there are complex issues involved in the effects of schools on both girls and boys, some of what goes on in those classrooms can often provide other examples, not only of role models but of types of activities for girls to incorporate in their lives and behaviors.

Oriented to relationships with others, girls enjoy the extension of those relationships in other settings. Studies show that girls spend considerable time discussing personal relationships rather than only the rules and the correct way to play games. They also learn how to be the team member or leader in the process of examining all of those relationships along with the rules.

Many women had girlhood experiences with musical groups and athletics, and they learned some of the valuable characteristics required for being a member of a musical group or an athletic team. Contrary to what is often said, women have been team members if they were in an orchestra or a chorus; they have learned how to work with other people. This is also true of athletic teams. However, those sports in which girls are involved are not valued. So dodgeball, volleyball, or softball are not considered often when team sports are discussed. They are not as prized as the gladiator sports of boys. Girls certainly set standards for accomplishment. They learn what it means to work with others to accomplish a goal, and they also learn the satisfaction of achieving those goals.

Many of the women were active in school clubs and activities, so again they learned how to plan, how to work with other people, and how to accomplish things. These experiences, in a very meaningful way, really prepared them for multiple roles in later life. I think that we all need to reassess those experiences of girlhood -- learn to understand and build on those experiences -- so that we can fully appreciate and use what may be a particularly female style of learning.

Juggling the hours and the tasks

I want to go back for a minute to the idea of women's work. Women approach their obligations similarly whether they are employed inside or outside the home. In fact, there are many similarities in the nature of the jobs which women do for wages or not. Since many women fill positions in service industries and provide service to customers and clients rather than work in production industries, their work has a similarity to many traditional home roles. In many other industries women often are considered support staff for those in decisionmaking positions, and many aspects of women's jobs are repetitious and routine. They seem to involve easily taught tasks, but there is a wide range of quality in how those tasks are done. This usually is not appreciated, although the woman doing the work is aware of the quality of the effort she has exerted. Support positions, like housework, are not highly valued by the people who set the norms for our society. Perhaps it is because historically and presently what men do on the job and at home are at variance, and what has been done at home is not valued.

One of the things that we might consider is that it is the women who keep life on schedule; they are the timekeepers of America. At work, the secretaries plan the schedules and keep their bosses to that schedule. At home, the women plan the social calendars for the family, get the children to school on time, and get the husbands and themselves off to work on time. Now this is contrary to the jokes that we hear about women always being late, never on time, or dawdling. How does it happen that women are the timekeepers, since it contradicts what usually is said about them? I think that this, again, goes back to girlhood. Perhaps it evolves in the process of learning to get many things done, even as a child.

There are women who have learned to do many more far-reaching

things for themselves. I remember women who said that they didn't have time to wait for repairmen. One said that she had learned how to fix the washing machine. At the end of one frustrating wait for the repairman she asked him to tell her what was wrong and what she could do; she then learned how to fix the refrigerator and the dishwasher. Other women reported learning how to take care of their cars, how to change tires, how to do all the "handyman" things that would give them freedom from repairmen.

Learning to relax

Many women have learned to integrate relaxation and recreation in a way that gives perspective and enables them to continue carrying out a very busy life. In reality, many of these measures are ways of preventing stress. Here again, their methods are very varied. And they seem different from the more rigid "work or play" divisions which are often talked about. Some must have time alone, without other people, in order to gain perspective on what they are doing. Relaxation can vary from meditation, taking naps, or dancing, to vacations away from work and/or family. Some women have found that they *need to learn* new things, whether it is auto mechanics, the piano, cooking, photography, ceramics, or anything that would provide new ways or opportunities to use their minds or bodies. Others have found that they must exercise. They talked about tennis, squash, taking walks. Still others find relaxation in the traditional so-called frivolous things that women have always done such as quilting, needlework, and other handicrafts. Again, sometimes women do these things because they can never "do nothing." But I believe that this variety of activities serves the purposes of both preventing stress and promoting satisfaction. It is not contradictory that while engaging in such a variety of activities, women simultaneously have found ways to conserve energy. This is particularly true as women grow older so that by conserving their personal energy, they learn to use it in a way that is more productive.

It is important to note that often these seemingly "simple" matters are not so simple in their implications. I found that many women gain a sense of pleasure from the simple things in their lives; this leads them to develop a perspective of their own so that they are able to look at their accomplishments and appreciate them. I also found that many women whom I interviewed were not satisfied with the appraisals of others. Instead, they used a self-evaluation based on their own standards. They set the standards, often very high, but they derived satisfaction from measuring what they had done against what they wanted to do.

As women mature, it is easier for them to set priorities. Often without full awareness, many began to separate out those things which are important. For all these reasons, we need to spend more time talking to older women about their experiences, their insights, their techniques. We need to gain an appreciation of the pioneering that some of them have done, the set of values which they have used, how they have paced themselves, and how they have

accomplished much while remaining true to the core of their being. This would be helpful, particularly to younger women starting out with work and family, unsure about how to set priorities or under what circumstances.

Characteristics of Black women

Of the survey group, about 1/3 of the group were Black women. There are some real differences and there are some imagined differences between Black and white women and the ways they handle their lives. The historical and cultural differences between white and Black women are profound, and there is an African legacy which Black women have. Also Black women always have had to be in the economic structure. Along with that, during the period of slavery women worked in the fields and in the house with little leisure. There is also the legacy of low-level, low-paying, low-status jobs in industry and now in the service industries. There are the patterns of welfare and dependency, with a higher percentage of Black women on government assistance than white women. However, despite discrimination and subordination, Black women have provided continuity, solidity, and stability in the family and the community. They have developed effective patterns of coping, they have provided family links, and they have given their children a realistic view of American life -- probably imparting healthier perspectives and expectations for their daughters than white mothers have done for their daughters. Black girls grow up knowing and expecting that they will work outside the home, that they must do so, and that paid work is a necessary part of life. There is no expectation of being a "Cinderella," because they know that there will be no prince to come and rescue them. Until the recent past, white girls grew up with almost a disability, not expecting that they will do paid work, or need to do so, or that such work is a necessity of life. Black women also grow up learning how to do a lot with little, that frugality is a part of life. They are concerned not only with making a lot out of little but also with creating a good "front," showing that they are not beaten by the world but can survive and survive well.

Within the Black community, a variety of organizations bolster the women. The family, the church, and clubs provide protection from the hostile outside environment. The church has provided comfort for Black women from the era of slavery through the years of poverty and oppression in this country. It has also provided an opportunity for Black women to be leaders and to take responsibility for a major community institution.

Black women, for many generations, have worked at the lowest level in economic and social life so that they have had a view of the underside of the American society. Frequently they are not seen by the majority, but they can observe. They have been inside the homes of the majority society and have a sense of the weaknesses and strengths therein.

How Black women cope

Black women have developed strategies which are helpful and could well be adapted and adopted by white women who want to function better.

Black women tend to choose friends apart from the work setting. Part of this results from segregated work places with few Blacks in a particular work setting, so closest friends are people who are outside. This means that they do not always focus their lives and their friends around their job. Black women tend to choose leisure time consciously, making a clear separation between work and the other parts of life. They tend to choose leisure activities which keep them in touch with their ethnic group -- usually a different group from those in most work settings.

Another strategy, or method, that Black women use which might (and probably should) be adapted by more white women, is that they include their family in domestic chores; in this way Black children and spouses share responsibilities for household tasks. When the children start at an early age to learn how to work, they learn that the value of their work contributes to the total family enterprise. This is not usually seen as a matter of choice or an activity to be paid for or subject to bribery. It is a part of what has to be, and it is a normal way of carrying on life.

The realities of work

I think because of the tenuous economic status of Black women, and Blacks in general in American society, work is placed in a perspective that is much more healthy. Work is seen as something which may not be permanent; that may be transitory; that can vanish. We have a common saying: "We're only one paycheck away from disaster." Recognizing this, one's behavior and expectations of work become very different. Work is only a part of life; it is not all of life. I think many white women could benefit from having that kind of perspective about work.

This point raises an important issue that most women have to face: the fact that most jobs are jobs, not careers. Most jobs do not demand total concentration or dedication and in fact, many have little meaningful content. Women, if one looks at their position in the work force, are primarily at the lowest levels of service jobs, banking, finance, insurance, office work, the hospitality industry, and health care. Real choice about jobs is available only to a select group of women. Millions of women have no choice. They work because of economic necessity. They are either sole support of the family, or their income is needed for the support of the family; the option of working or not working is not available to them. While many of us may want to join in the struggles to create good jobs and conditions of work and better pay for all women (and men), that goal is far from accomplished. Most women have to live with the working conditions just described.

In summary then, millions of women know how to handle multiple roles and responsibilities and have been doing so from their earliest childhood days. I think that this is an advantage that women have and that we learned it as girls.

Acting like a man

Today women are urged, even harangued, to emulate and to imitate a

male model. We're told we need to change ourselves in order to take an equal place alongside the men who are leaders of our society. We are told to dress in similar clothing, and to behave as men do. Some of the current programs to train women to move into traditionally male roles maintain that women must be physically strong, less concerned about details, willing to take risks, more career-minded and more objective in their relationships with others. We're told to be regretful that we've not had the experience in growing up as boys, but we can compensate for this lack by behaving as "one of the boys."

What is a male model? Let's look at examples of research done by two academics. Michael Maccoby⁵ studied men in corporations; in a way, he attempted to update the organizational man studies of the 1950's -- to see how he functioned and what made him tick in the 1970's. Maccoby describes four types of managers who are successes in the American business organization, and these four types share a concern for processing things rather than for people. They concentrate their efforts on making the organization grow while enhancing their own power. Maccoby concludes his study with the observation that the organizations and managers show little concern for people and the environment in which they work.

Daniel Levinson,⁶ a psychologist at Yale School of Medicine, has looked at the developmental stages of American males through interviews and biographies of forty men. Men, like women, have roles, but they tend to be less flexible and move between these roles less easily. Levinson found that men tend to concentrate on one primary developmental task during each stage of their lives, often giving the highest priority to those activities outside the sphere of personal relationships. It seems that in all stages, men show less emphasis on relationships than women do. They report few adult friendships and do not speak of dependence on other people. Perhaps one can say that men are so busy making decisions about money and materials that they have little time for relationships. This is one of the most important ways in which they differ from women.

Acting like a woman

Problems can be approached more productively if women can accept one primary fact of life: that is, they will spend most of their lives working. Even if they take time out to raise children, they will spend more time working than not working. Once women realize this simple fact, many of the other problems will fall into a better perspective. Also women will be able to work on seeking better conditions for themselves.

I believe that women need to bring to the work environment their own characteristics which are distinct and unique, thus beginning to transform organizations and work settings. We need to use those strengths which are ours rather than attempting to adapt those alien to us. Today, a few observers and researchers have begun to be concerned with the quality of women's lives and feminine characteristics in a new way. They are saying that women are different from men in certain important ways. Scholars like Jean Baker

Miller,³ Carol Gilligan,⁴ and Carolyn Heilbrun⁷ are helping women understand and appreciate the ways in which they differ from men and the strengths which they bring to any situation.

Women have the ability to create, to care, to encourage growth, all in the context of concern for others and with others. We should not give up our abilities to encompass many responsibilities and roles in favor of the more constricted roles of men. In this new era, however, we must continue to find ways to be "our own selves within relationships;" we should neither be consumed by them nor be subservient. We can avoid a centuries-old pattern by recognizing and celebrating this different sense of self, assuring that we delineate attributes of that self so that, along with others, we will be aware of its characteristics and build on it.

What I found (and was delighted to rediscover) as I talked to the women in the "Superwomen" study was that there are millions of women leading ordinary lives who manage to juggle many, many roles and responsibilities. They do so because they take the responsibilities for granted along with the skills and techniques which they use to meet their obligations. They have found ways to understand the nature of their lives, ways to handle stress, and ways to reach the outlets needed to keep them sane. They continually probe and grow so that they can experience a sense of living their lives to the fullest, continually expanding their potential. I would say that there are millions of women who have developed what I call a female model of "success," and, in some respects, what I call a "Super American Woman."

Discussion Summary

A discussion is held after each colloquium presentation. Selected portions of the discussion are summarized here.

Question; Are you saying that women should like and accept things the way they are and not try to change anything?

Wolfman: No -- women should see that they can take on many roles; furthermore, they have a history of handling multiple roles. Women can do well if they recognize their own ways, continue to use them, and build on them. The problem is that sometimes they aim to use other people's methods, which may not be so good. Multiple roles do *not* produce the most stress for women. Indeed, those varied roles can even diminish stress -- particularly as women practice moving among them. It is true that certain work conditions or pressures in some families are too stressful and therefore unhealthy. Certainly we should keep striving for work conditions, pay levels, public policies, and family patterns which reduce the excess stress imposed upon women. The answer, however, is not "one role for women." Also setting up a dichotomy between work and home is not a model that women should accept or believe; they don't have to make an "either-or" choice between the two. Many women have always done both.

Comment: I want to confirm what you have said about women being able to do so many things at once -- especially compared to men. I believe it is one of those things that we always have known but never recognized, and we rarely described ourselves that way. I'm always doing three or four things at once and so was my mother, but my husband and the men I work with just don't seem able to do that.

Question: You said that you believe the ease with multiple roles is linked to the kind of training women have received through girlhood and later. Do you think such training and experience stems from women's traditional obligation to attend to so many different parts of life, including human relationships, at the same time they keep everything going? It seems that men can take on work outside the home and assume that is enough. I know that some men also do things around home, but they *don't* have the sense of self that says they *must do so*. If they're not good at those things, they can just say so, whereas women assume they *must* be good at everything. What do you think?

Wolfman: You're right -- women have incorporated into their identity an obligation to be able to do many tasks, such as all the things that are needed to keep a family going. And we do pick up training to do those things as we are growing up -- at home (from other women) as well as outside in churches, in clubs, on teams, in musical groups, and the like. We don't have to be perfect at everything (although some women have internalized that harmful image), but the truth is that we really are good at doing an enormous number of things. Moreover, for many women, this is not the great strain that it may appear to be (particularly through the eyes of men). The reason is that we gradually added and incorporated the multiple roles as we grew up -- a process that hasn't been noticed much by developmental theorists.

Question: You said that Black women, unlike white women, do not grow up with the expectation that a man will support them, This suggests that Black women do not have the split between work and home in their minds. Does it also mean that Black women do not go through the anguish and guilt that white women seem to experience about going out to work?

Wolfman: Precisely. The work/home dichotomy has not been set up in the minds of Black girls and women. For Blacks, the unquestioned combination of work and family responsibilities has been a matter of basic survival and economic necessity. Note, however, that economic conditions today are creating the same necessity for many white women . Some whites still have vestiges of "anguish and guilt" about going to work, but that is changing.

Comment: I was interested in what you said about most jobs being

routine and not an all-consuming part of life. I believe your comment is a good counterpoint to the current image that is leading many women to expect tremendous success and to believe that kind of success will mean "total happiness." You made the point that, even if it is attained, success can be a onesided way to live, gained at a great price, sometimes leaving a sense of emptiness in life. But you also seem to be saying that kind of success will be available to very few women. After all, it's still available to very few men, and it certainly is still available to more men than women. It's important to hear this, because the supersuccess expectation is widespread, particularly among young women.

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