

An Examination of Traditional Gender Roles Among Men and Women in Mexico and the United States

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This study examined the cultural and gender differences between men and women in Mexico and the United States. Previous research has demonstrated that the Mexican culture tends to have more traditional and strictly defined gender roles than those found in the United States. Previously documented cultural differences were expected. 50 American undergraduate college students and 49 Mexican undergraduate college students completed a questionnaire which measured gender traits, aspirations and gender roles. As expected, Mexicans were found to have more traditional gender role expectations than Americans. Additionally, Mexicans were found to have higher masculinity scores on the BSRI than Americans.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the current research was to examine the relationship between gender and the concept of masculinity and femininity in men and women in both Mexico and the United States. Countries that encompass very traditional gender values tend to suppress the educational and career aspirations of their cultural members (Morinaga, Frieze, & Ferligoj, 1993). In countries with more liberal gender values, society tends to encourage both men and women to pursue a wider variety of educational and career aspirations. To study this issue, we assessed differences among the participants' ratings on a sex role inventory scale, a gender role attitude scale and measured how those ratings correlated with self-perceptions of individual and societal educational and career ideals.

The literature on the topic of gender roles suggests an overwhelming amount of evidence supporting the influence of society on gender roles and identities. For example, Long (1991), examined U.S. culture and found that U.S. society showed a pattern of viewing "competency-oriented" masculine traits as more positive and more revered than "passive" feminine traits. Some of the typical masculine traits that were viewed favorably were independence, competitiveness, rationality and objectivity whereas some of the typical feminine traits that were viewed negatively were intuition, submissiveness, dependence and emotionality. As a result of society's differential portrayal of each gender, Long found that women tend to undermine their abilities, to expect less of themselves concerning their futures and to mentally diminish the significance of the roles that they played which contributed to their individual successes. She found that society believed that women who possess traditional feminine traits were incapable of success. Although the American society generally viewed masculine traits more positively, Long suggested that people who possess androgynous traits actually retain greater general well-being. Therefore, a high correlation exists between women with masculine and androgynous traits and high levels of motivation.

In examining the Mexican culture, the researchers have found that, in general, very traditional sex roles and stereotypes have been ingrained within the society (Chia, Wuensch, Childers, Chuang, Cheng, Cesar-Romero & Nava, 1994; Gibbons, Stiles, & Shkodriani, 1991; Lara-Cantu, 1989). For example, male-to-male relationships have been characterized by "machismo" which entails extreme aggressiveness and stubbornness whereas in male-to-female relationships "machismo" has been characterized by sexual aggression and contempt. In contrast, Mexican women have been viewed as "self-sacrificing" as they have been thought to possess dependent, submissive and passive traits (Lara-Cantu, 1989). For example, within the family setting, although males' and females' roles have been considered to be of equal importance, more authority has generally been given to the husband. Mothers have been expected to make ultimate sacrifices for their families, especially for the children whereas fathers have been expected to earn the income for the family yet to play a minimal role in the functioning of the family. These great sacrifices that women have had to make encompass the spectrum of education, careers and a social life outside the family (Martin, 1989).

In previous research, great differences have been found between Mexican and American attitudes towards gender roles. For instance, one study found that Mexican college students attached greater significance to family, acted more "macho", believed less in sexual equality and were less independent than American and Taiwanese university students (Chia et al., 1994). Instead of sexual equality and independence, Mexicans were more concerned with family solidarity. Although, in general, Americans were found to be more in favor of sexual equality, men from both Mexico and the United States were shown to have more traditional gender attitudes and to believe less in sexual equality than their female counterparts. For example, many believed that men should play the roles of the decision makers while women should play the roles of homemakers and family caretakers. Despite these parallel attitudes, Mexican men showed a greater difference in their ideal perceptions of gender roles as they believed that the men were in complete control of the family and were expected to control the women whereas the American men were more in favor of sexual equity (Chia et al., 1994).

The anticipated outcomes for this research project were to discover whether masculinity and femininity scores vary by gender and/or country. We expected that both Mexican and American males would score higher on the masculine scale than their respective female counterparts. Additionally, it was expected that a more profound difference would be found between the Mexican males' masculinity scores as compared to the Mexican females' masculinity scores than would be found between the same scores of American males and females. We also predicted that the Mexicans would feel more constrained by their society's expectations of them due to its collectivistic nature which tends to suppress individualistic goals. On the contrary, Americans would feel that their individualistic goals would be more in harmony with those of their society. Overall, the researchers expected to find that the Mexican participants would conform more to traditional gender roles than would the American participants.

METHOD

The researchers administered three different measurement scales to 99 university students. One of the researchers administered 49 of the surveys to Mexican college students enrolled in an introductory writing class at the University of the Americas in

Puebla, Mexico while the other researcher administered the remaining 50 surveys to general psychology students at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. In Mexico, 20 females and 29 males participated in the study while in the United States, 26 females and 24 males participated.

The questionnaire consisted of several key components. First, the survey included items from a survey entitled "Women and Men: Exploring Sex Roles" (Developing Healthy Relationships, 1991) which measured participants' attitudes towards females. One sample item from the survey was "Women should be expected to make a living for their families". Second, the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), which measures levels of masculinity, femininity and androgyny was administered (Bem, 1981). Third, an aspirations survey measuring participants' perceptions of their personal educational and career ideals was included. Participants also provided their perceptions of their society's educational and career ideals for each gender. A sample item such as "Obtain a high status position in my occupation" was rated for personal importance and society importance. Demographic questions were included at the end of the questionnaires. All of the surveys were translated into Spanish by a native Spanish speaker and then backtranslated into English by a different native Spanish speaker to ensure that the surveys' content meanings were consistent between languages.

In Mexico, the surveys were administered to students in three different sections of an introductory writing class. Before handing out the surveys, the same opening statement was given to each section, briefly explaining the researcher's purpose for doing the study, asking them to first complete the Informed Consent Form, and then to proceed with the surveys. The participants were instructed to turn in their surveys in one pile at the front of the room and their Informed Consent Forms in another pile at the front of the room. In the United States, the surveys were administered to two section of students from a general psychology class who had volunteered to partake in the study in order to earn an extra point towards their grades. For each section, a room was reserved in the Student Union Building on campus where the participants met with the researcher at a pre-arranged time. The same administration procedure was used as in Mexico. After administering the surveys, the researchers then used the SPSS computer program to statistically analyze the interactions between country and gender and the relationship between these two variables and the three measurement scales.

RESULTS

Findings were considered statistically significant at an alpha level of .05 or below. Independent sample t-tests and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used to examine the relationship between the variables. Overall, as predicted, gender had a significant effect on BSRI scores. Males scored higher on the masculinity subscale [$F(3,91) = 11.94, p < .001$] and females scored higher on the femininity subscale [$F(3, 91) = 26.78, p < .001$]. Additionally, the Mexican sample scored higher on the masculinity scale than the American sample [$F(3, 91) = 9.62, p < .01$]. However, there was no cross-cultural differences on femininity and no country by gender interaction effects. It was found that there was not a significant difference between American males and females masculinity scores as was hypothesized. As expected, the Mexican males scored significantly higher on the masculinity scale than did the Mexican females ($t(44) = 3.62, p < .001$). Women in both countries scored higher on the femininity scale than did men, ($t(48) = -5.23, p < .001$ for

American women and $t(43) 2.48, p < .05$ for Mexican women. As predicted, the Mexican participants showed more traditional gender role attitudes than did the Americans $F(3,87) = 34.25, p < .001$ and men showed more tradition than did women $F(3,87) = 7.30, p < .01$. Contrary to our hypothesis, no significant difference was found between Mexican and American individual and societal aspirations.

DISCUSSION

Previous research has found that Americans appear to embrace the importance of sexual egalitarianism and independence whereas Mexicans are less supportive of those non-traditional values. Mexicans appear to be more concerned with more traditional values such as family solidarity (Chia et al., 1994). The present research supports the previous research. For instance, the Mexican sample scored more traditionally on sex role attitudes than their American counterparts. An intriguing finding is that Mexican men scored significantly higher than Mexican females on the masculinity portion of the BSRI whereas no significant differences were found between the masculinity scores of the American men and women. The results imply that American females seem to be comfortable in expressing their masculinity whereas American males are not as willing to express their femininity. The same implication holds true in Mexico as well. Attitudes towards women's roles have been found to be powerful predictors of women's career involvement and women with high career motivation tend to express nontraditional or feminist attitudes towards women's roles (Morinaga, et al., 1993). Even though, in the present study, women in both countries scored more non-traditionally on the sex role survey, no significant differences were found in terms of their motivational levels. A plausible reason for this finding is that the aspirational survey, which measured personal and societal ideals, may not have measured the variables that it was intended to measure.

Several factors may have influenced the lack of significant findings on the aspirational surveys. For example, the surveys were only administered to university populations which limit the generalizability of the results as college populations tend to be more goal oriented. This notion is especially relevant to the Mexican sample as the university at which the surveys were administered is the most exclusive, private university in Mexico. Therefore, in general, only students from more privileged backgrounds are able to attend. In contrast to the United States which has a very encompassing middle class, Mexico is characterized by a very limited middle class and a large contrast between the upper and lower classes. The lower class tends to hold much more traditional values than the upper and middle classes. The current sample contained almost no members of the lower class. Future research should include more diverse socioeconomic populations, expand to incorporate more countries and more encompassing age range. In general, more cross-cultural research should be done dealing with sex role issues as well as other contemporary issues. In terms of foreign relations, the results imply the need to be more culturally sensitive in regards to sex role values. Although value differences may be difficult to understand, avoiding ethnocentric thinking is a must in order to promote better cross-cultural relationships.

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