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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15535/gender/v01/GCB-01

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Female-headed Single Parent Families: The Mother's Sex Role Orientation as a Predictor of Children's Level of Influence in the Family Decision Making Process

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INTRODUCTION

According to Buss and Schaninger (1984), a woman's sex role orientation affects her household task allocation behavior, finance handling, and influence in the family decision making process. Green and Cunningham (1975) found that a wife's sex role orientation affects the family's decision making process and purchasing behavior.

The purpose of this research was to determine if the sex role orientation of a woman heading a family alone affects her perceptions of her children's level of influence in the family decision making process. It is relevant to investigate the single mother's sex role orientation and attempt to determine if it affects her life style with respect to the children's influence in the decision making process.

The sex role orientations of mothers in two parent family structures have been well researched; however, very little is known about the single mother's sex role orientation and its effect on her perceptions of her children's level of influence in the family decision making process. As the sole parent, the single mother experiences significant changes in her life style due to the break-up of the family unit. Since never-married mothers would not experience changes in sex role orientations due to the loss of the husband, this group was not included in this study. Therefore, this study included only single mother households formed by divorce, separation, or widowhood.

GROWTH IN FEMALE-HEADED SINGLE PARENT HOUSEHOLDS

It has been estimated that the 1990 census will show that there are 94 million households in the United States, with 66 million or 71 percent considered family households and 27 million or 29 percent considered nonfamily households (Waldrop and Exter 1990). Of the 66 million family households, approximately 12 percent will be females heading families alone, compared to 5 percent in 1970 (Statistical Abstract 1984). Female-headed single parent families represent the fastest growing family type, up 36 percent since 1980 (Waldrop and Exter 1990).

Another way to observe changes in the family structure in the United States is to consider the changes in the living arrangements of children under 18. It has been estimated that over half of all children born today will spend some time in a mother only family before reaching age 18 (McLanahan and Garfinkel 1989). In 1960, 88 percent of all children under 18 lived in a two parent family, and only 9 percent lived in a one parent family. By 1988, only 73 percent lived in an intact family household, and 24 percent lived in a one parent family. In 1988, of those children that lived in a one parent household, 88 percent lived with their mother and 12 percent lived with their father (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1989). One group of researchers observed that the national trend toward divorce and single parenting may become the modal adult life style by the turn of the century (Guidubaldi et al. 1986). Since the family is the basic purchase and consumption unit, marketers need to continuously study changes in family structure as they relate to changes in market behaviors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ahuja (1991) presented a detailed review of the demographic, sociological, economic, and psychological literature on the female-headed single parent family. Ahuja, Capella, and Taylor (1990) provided an extensive content and methodological review of the marketing literature on this family type. Given these past reviews, this review will concentrate only on research regarding the single mother's sex role orientation.
Single Parent’s Sex Role Attitudes and Behaviors

Single parents by necessity will perform a large number of behaviors typically stereotyped as both masculine and feminine (Richmond-Abbott 1984). Mitchell (1983), in a review of the literature that considered both the strengths and opportunities of single parenthood, noted that divorced mothers may experience a heightened sense of competency derived largely from newly-acquired capabilities such as making household repairs, maintaining a car, and caring for a yard. It may be that the single mother is quite able to adjust her attitudes and behaviors to her new situation as head of the household.

Some researchers have suggested that adult sex role attitudes and sex role self-concepts are situationally specific. Abrahams, Feldman, and Nash (1978) found that adult men and women modify their sex role self-concepts and sex role attitudes as a function of the life situations in which they are involved.

Kurdek and Siesky (1980) expanded on Abrahams, Feldman, and Nash’s research by incorporating divorce as a major life change that may affect a single parent’s sex role self-concept. They also studied the effect divorce has on the children’s self-concept. Using the Bem Sex Role Inventory for adults and an adapted version for the children, they concluded that the single parents tended to describe themselves in androgynous terms. Children in these families also described themselves in more androgynous terms than children in a matched sample of two parent families.

There is consistency in the findings regarding variables that are not related to either the mother’s or children’s sex role orientations. Kurdek and Siesky (1980) found that the single parent’s tendency toward androgyous sex role self-concepts were uncorrelated to the length of separation; both for the parents and children. Richmond-Abbott (1984) noted that the mother’s age, income level, number of children, and years divorced did not influence her reported sex role attitude.

Children’s Sex Role Attitudes

Richmond-Abbott (1984) tested the hypotheses that divorced single mothers will have relatively liberal sex role attitudes and that their children will absorb the more flexible norms. She also measured whether sex role attitudes of both groups corresponded to their reported behavior patterns. Using the Traditional Family Ideology Scale for the mothers and an adapted version for their children, she found that the sex role attitude scores of both the mothers and children differed according to the content of the area being measured. For instance, the sex role attitudes of both mothers and children were more liberal regarding household roles but more conservative regarding societal roles. However, in all areas tested, boys had more traditional attitude scores than girls.

Richmond-Abbott (1984) reported that the more education the mother or absent father had the more liberal were the children’s sex role attitudes. She noted that girls who spent more time with their noncustodial fathers also tended to have less traditional sex role attitudes. Apparently boys who spent more time with their fathers were not influenced in the same way; they maintained their traditional orientations. In her study, boys were more sex-stereotyped in their sex role attitudes and in their behaviors such as household chores, sport activities, and career ambitions.

Richmond-Abbott’s (1984) research provides evidence that there exist inconsistencies between the reported nontraditional sex role attitudes of single parent mothers and their actions involving the children. Apparently mothers communicate a liberal sex role philosophy to their children that does not necessarily carry over into action. Children of liberal attitude mothers are still assigned tasks according to their sex, and engage in sports and activities appropriate to their sex. It appears that there does not exist a link between the mother’s and children’s sex role attitudes and their reported behavior patterns.

Kurdek and Siesky (1980) found that the majority of children in their study had either androgynous or undifferentiated sex role attitudes. Unlike Richmond-Abbott (1984), they found there was no tendency for the sex role self-concepts of the parents to be reflected in the sex role self-concepts of the children. Kurdek and Siesky (1980) commented (p. 258):

The findings from matched pairs of divorced/nondivorced children further support the
suggestion that children whose parents are divorced may themselves be faced with a life situation unique enough to warrant developmental changes in the nature of their sex role self-concepts, and the involved process may be different for boys and girls.

According to Kurdek and Siesky (1980), it appears that both single parent and child sex role attitudes and sex role self-concepts are flexible relative to the situation. However, while Richmond-Abbott (1984) found several parental demographic variables (education and occupation) that were correlated with the children's scores, Kurdek and Siesky (1980) indicated that it was the situation children found themselves in that affected their own sex role values.

It can be concluded that children in single parent families, especially girls in mother-only ones, are not acquiring their more liberal or androgynous sex role orientations from within the home. Richmond-Abbott's (1984) research has shown the single parent mother's expressed desires for more androgynous household sex roles for her children are not exhibited in her behavior patterns toward her male and female children. Kurdek and Siesky (1980) have indicated that there is no correlation between the sex role self-concepts and sex role attitudes of the parents and children.

If the children's sex role values are not related to the custodial parents sex role orientations or do not appear to be formed within the task structure of the household, from what other sources do the children arrive at their reported self-concepts? Potential sources include non-custodial parents (Kurdek and Siesky 1980) and the children's peers (Kurdek and Siesky 1980; Richmond-Abbott 1984). Kurdek and Siesky (1980) provide insight on this issue when they observed (p. 259):

"Given the lack of any relationship between the sex role self-concept of custodial parents and their children, we may need to turn to other socializing agents for some insight into how children whose parents are divorced develop androgynous sex role self-concepts."

Peters (1985) investigated the relationship between sex role patterns and the time spent on household tasks performed by school age children in one parent and two parent households. Children in mother-only families spent more time on food preparation, dishwashing, housecleaning, care of clothing and household linens, physical care of family members and management tasks. Management tasks included responsibilities involving decision making, planning, considering alternative purchases, and seeking information on family activities. For several of the tasks, such as shopping, maintenance, and nonphysical care, children in the mother-only home spent a great deal more time than children in two parent family structures.

Peters also found that differences existed in task allocation to male and female children in the two family types. Boys in two parent families were found to be less segregated on the performance of household tasks than boys in mother-only homes. In other words, boys in mother-only families were more traditional in their sex role behavior regarding the type of household work they did. Boys in two parent families were more likely to share the various household duties with the girls in the family, and to spend more time on a greater number of tasks than boys from mother-only families.

Devall, Stoneman, and Brody (1986) also found gender effects regarding task allocation. In their study, single parent mothers reported that the girls in the family had more responsibility than boys for their own personal care, meal preparation, housecleaning, and childcare activities such as babysitting and taking care of the younger children. Mothers reported boys had more responsibilities for outside chores such as mowing the lawn. However, since most single parent respondents in their study lived in rental housing, where the landlord was responsible for yard upkeep, the boys responsibility did not necessarily transfer into actual work. Boys were also reported to spend more time on extracurricular activities than girls in the single parent homes.

Reasons for the tendency of women heading families to overwork their daughters and underwork their sons were proposed by Peters (1985). Several of her ideas lend insight into the life styles and transition process the mother-only family undergoes as it attempts to adjust to its new family form. Given the absence of a male role model in the female-headed household, the mother may have decided not to "feminize" her male child by asking him to perform tasks traditionally considered female oriented. The mother's worries may not be warranted on this issue. Kurdek and Siesky (1980) found that boys in mother-only homes are less masculine in their sex roles.
sex role self concept than boys from intact homes; however, nonmasculinity was found not to be equated with a trend toward femininity, but with a trend toward androgyne.

Peters also speculated that since girls are more compliant than boys, the mother may have avoided stress by placing more demands where the least resistance was expected. In addition, girls may be modeling the role behavior of the female single parent. Peters observed (p. 144):

The implications of this finding are that it is possible that girls in single parent families are being socialized to fulfill a sex role pattern similar to that of the female single parent, who must assume primary responsibility for both provider and homemaker roles. As adults, these girls may perpetuate the current transitional role of "superwoman" by overloading themselves with role responsibilities rather than adopting a role sharing marital pattern.

HYPOTHESES

A leading marketing researcher on the topic of sex role orientation and its influence in the family decision making process (Qualls 1982, p. 267) observed that:

It is the practice of a person's sex role orientation which provides the dynamic underlying pattern of family decision making processes.

The following hypothesis concerns differences in a group (one factor, SRO, at three levels) mean across sets of dependent variables.

H1: The single mother’s sex role orientation has an effect on the mean scores for child influence in the family decision making process across all 11 products investigated.

There are five hypotheses similar to the one given above, one hypothesis for each stage in the family decision making process. The five decision stages are: (1) the initiation stage, (2) the search for information stage, (3) the evaluation of alternatives stage, (4) the final decision stage, and (5) the purchase stage.

METHODOLOGY

Sex Role Orientation Measures

Arnott’s (1972) scale of feminism autonomy was used to measure a mother’s sex role orientation. Arnott’s scale is a typical scale used in consumer research (Engel, Blackwell 1982). It has been used in studies by Green and Cunningham (1975) and Venkatesh (1980).

The mothers were asked to rate their level of agreement on 10 items using a Likert-type seven-point scale. Individual responses for each of the ten statements were summed. Individual scores could range from 10 to 70. On the basis of the autonomy scores, respondents were divided into three groups: conservatives, moderates, and liberals. Following the procedures used by Arnott (1972) and Green and Cunningham (1975), women with scores in the 10-32 range were called "conservative" in their attitude toward autonomy for women, those with scores 33-54 were labeled "moderate", and those with scores 55-70 were named "liberal."

Child Influence Measures

The mother’s perceptions of her children’s level of influence were measured for each of the five decision making stages considered individually, using all eleven products as the dependent variables. Child influence was measured through the use of a 100 point constant sum scale.

Mothers were asked to allocate 100 points between themselves, their oldest child, and their other children. The calculation involved dividing the points allocated to the children (by summing the points for the oldest child and the other children) by the points allocated to the mother. Children influence numbers above one indicate that the mother assigned more influence to the children than she did to herself. Numbers less than one indicate that the mother assigned more influence to herself than she did to her children. Numbers equal to one indicate that the relative influence was divided evenly between the mother and the children.

Grocery Products Chosen

Grocery shopping is a task every household must perform on a regular basis. The current research
proposes that sex role orientation affects the single mother's perceptions of her children's influence in the family decision making process and this should be reflected in the grocery shopping task.

The types of products studied by family researchers investigating parent-child interactions in the decision making process are numerous. Over 57 different products have been studied (Ahuja 1988). One of the criticisms of research on the parent-child interaction in family decision making concerns the rationale used by various researchers to include and exclude certain products and product categories in their studies. Rossiter (1979) commented (p. 426):

Neglected are content areas where children a priori are known to have a greater role in purchase decision. Without adequate sampling of content we cannot hope to make meaningful generalizations about family decision making.

Detailed research in a specific product category area is needed. The current research adequately sampled the grocery product domain, especially with regards to products that, a priori, children have been shown or are hypothesized to exert discernible levels of influence. Eleven products were chosen for the research to represent the grocery product domain: 1) breakfast cereal, 2) snack foods, 3) candy, 4) soft drinks, 5) hot dogs, 6) luncheon meats, 7) cheese, 8) soups, 9) laundry detergent, 10) housecleaning products, 11) personal grooming aids.

Survey Development

An ex post facto research design with cross-sectional survey data was used for data gathering purposes. Revisions were made to the questionnaire following a pretest of the instrument conducted in a southern state.

Description of the Sample

The sampling frame consisted of single mother households taken from the national membership list of the Market Facts, Incorporated’s Consumer Mail Panel (CMP). The CMP is representative of the geographical divisions in the United States, and it is broken down, within these divisions, according to census data with respect to the characteristics of U.S. households such as age of the panel member, household size, and household income. A random sample was taken from a population consisting of female-headed single parent families formed by divorce, separation, or widowhood, with at least one child 18 years old or younger living with the mother.

A total of 378 surveys were mailed out to mothers heading families alone. A total of 210 surveys were returned from the single mothers, resulting in a 56 percent response rate. A comparison between all sample members and respondents with respect to the age of the panel member, household size, and income indicated that the means of the respondents closely resemble those of the mail out sample members. Therefore the respondents were felt to be representative of all sample members with respect to age, household size, and the distribution of income.

RESULTS

This section presents the results in three parts. The statistically significant findings for two decision stages, the initiation stage and the final decision stage are presented separately, followed by the MANOVA results for the remaining stages that were not statistically significant.

Stage One: Statistical Significance Found. There were statistically significant mean differences with respect to perceived child influence among single mothers categorized as sex role conservative, moderate, and liberal at the multivariate level for the initiation stage. At the univariate level, the significant mean differences were found for two products, housecleaning products and personal grooming aids. The results are presented in Table 1 disser t49.

A descriptive analysis of the univariate F-tests reveals that conservative sex role oriented single mothers attach greater mean levels of influence to their children for housecleaning products in the initiation stage, when compared to mean levels for moderate and liberal sex role oriented single mothers. However, liberal sex role oriented mothers assign greater mean levels of influence to their children for personal grooming aids in the initiation stage compared to conservative and moderate sex role oriented single mothers.

...t.conservatives more home oriented liberal let children make decision on own don’t have to follow mother
Stage Four: Statistical Significance Found. There were statistically significant mean differences with respect to perceived child influence among single mothers categorized as sex role conservative, moderate, and liberal at the multivariate level for the final decision stage. At the univariate level the mean differences were found for two products, laundry detergents and personal grooming aids. The results are presented in Table 2.

A descriptive analysis of the univariate F-tests indicated that conservative sex role oriented mothers assigned greater mean levels of influence to their children for laundry detergents compared to moderate and liberal oriented mothers.

Stage Two, Three and Five: Significance Not Found. No statistically significant differences in the children’s perceived influence were found at the multivariate level among conservative, moderate, and liberal sex role oriented single mothers for the three remaining stages in the family decision making process. It appears that conservative, moderate, and liberal mothers do not differ significantly with respect to their perceptions of their children’s level of influence in the search for information stage, the evaluation of alternatives stage, and in the purchase stage.

CONCLUSIONS

It appears conservative, moderate, and liberal sex role oriented single mothers are only minimally different with respect to their perceptions of their children’s level of influence in the decision making process. Of the five multivariate tests, only two resulted in statistical significance, and of the twenty-two univariate tests conducted, only four were statistically significant.

Conservative sex role oriented single mothers, compared to moderate and liberal sex role oriented single mothers, reported higher levels of child influence in the initiation stage for housecleaning products, and in the final decision stage for laundry products. Liberal sex role oriented single mothers, compared to conservative and moderate sex role oriented single mothers, reported higher levels of influence in the initiation stage for personal grooming aids. The low levels of differentiation among the three sex role oriented single mothers may be due to several factors.

First, some researchers studying the sex role orientations of single parents have found that parents in this family structure tend to be sex role androgynous. Single parents will perform, by necessity, a large number of behaviors stereotyped as both masculine and feminine (Richmond-Abbott 1984). Also, Rasmussen (1974) reported that both male and female single parents used more instrumental than expressive behaviors. One leading researcher on sex role orientations offered this explanation regarding some unexpected findings of his research (Qualls 1984, p. 274):

"It appears that a household’s SRO (sex role orientation) is most likely to affect the family decision variables that deal most directly with the establishment of family member role responsibility, identification, and position, and has less impact on decision acts, household activities, and decision outcomes."

A second factor that may help explain these results concerns the sex role orientation scale used in this study. Arnott’s (1972) sex role scale was designed to measure orientations or beliefs toward appropriate sex roles for women. The scale does not take into consideration behavioral tendencies as they relate to beliefs.

Richmond-Abbott (1984) has shown that a single mother’s sex role orientation and behavior may be inconsistent. She found liberal oriented single mothers still assigned tasks to their children according to sex. She concluded that a liberal sex role attitude does not necessarily carry over into action. A similar conclusion may be reached for this research. It may be that the sex role orientations of the single mothers that responded to the questionnaire used in this research, only minimally carry over into action regarding the children’s influence in the family decision making process.

A third possible explanation for these results may be found when consideration is given to what was actually measured in this research. Sex role orientation is an antecedent determinant of the task allocation process in a household (Roberts and Wortzel 1984) and, the task allocation process within a household directly influences the marketplace behaviors of the individual. However, the current research did not measure task allocation in the single parent household,
rather it measured the mother's perceptions regarding her children's level of influence in the family decision making process. It was concluded that the single mother's sex role orientation minimally affects her perceptions of her children's level of influence in the family decision making process.

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