

# **THE LIMITS OF “THE MALE SEX ROLE” An Analysis of the Men’s Liberation and Men’s Rights Movements’ Discourse**

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*Some feminists have seen sex role theory as limited, even dangerous; others see it as useful mid-range theory. This article sheds light on this debate through an examination of the discourse of the men’s liberation movement of the 1970s. Men’s liberation leaders grappled with the paradox of simultaneously acknowledging men’s institutional privileges and the costs of masculinity to men. The language of sex roles was the currency through which they negotiated this paradox. By the late 1970s, men’s liberation had disappeared. The conservative and moderate wings of men’s liberation became an anti-feminist men’s rights movement, facilitated by the language of sex roles. The progressive wing of men’s liberation abandoned sex role language and formed a profeminist movement premised on a language of gender relations and power. The article ends with a discussion of the implications of this case for debates about sex role theory, and urges the study of contemporary organizations whose discourse is based on the language of sex roles.*

Male liberation seeks to aid in destroying the sex role stereotypes that regard “being a man” and “being a woman” as statuses that must be achieved through proper behavior. . . . If men cannot play freely, neither can they freely cry, be gentle, nor show weakness—because these are “feminine,” not “masculine.” But a fuller concept of humanity recognizes that all men and women are potentially both strong and weak, both active and passive, and that these human characteristics are not the province of one sex.

Sawyer (1970, p. 1)

The liberation of the female has freed her almost totally to pursue and indulge in any of what was once considered traditionally masculine behavior or style. The male,

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however, is still role-rigid, afraid to give expression to the female component in him. Role rigidity makes life precarious. In a changing world where women are increasingly taking traditionally male jobs it leaves him with few alternatives.

*Goldberg (1976, pp. 54-55)*

Most men responded with either hostility or stunned silence to the women's liberation movement in its early years. At the same time during the first half of the 1970s, some men, mostly centered around colleges and universities, were starting to consciously engage with feminist ideas and politics, and to ask a potentially subversive question: What does this all have to do with us? One of the first organized responses by U.S. men to the reemergence of feminism was the organization of "men's liberation" consciousness-raising groups, workshops, and newsletters. As early as 1970, women's liberation gatherings such as the March 8 teach-in at Northeastern University were including workshops on "The Male Liberation Movement" (Sawyer 1970). The first book-length texts that appeared—Warren Farrell's *The Liberated Man* (1974), Marc Feigen Fasteau's *The Male Machine* (1974), and Jack Nichols' *Men's Liberation* (1975)—optimistically posited men's liberation as the logical flip side of women's liberation.

Men's liberation discourse walked a tightrope from the very beginning. First, movement leaders acknowledged that sexism had been a problem for women and that feminism was a necessary social movement to address gender inequities. But they also stressed the equal importance of the high costs of the male sex role to men's health, emotional lives, and relationships. In short, they attempted to attract men to feminism by constructing a discourse that stressed how the "male role" was "impoverished," "unhealthy," and even "lethal" for men (Jourard 1971). Thus, from the outset, there were obvious strains and tensions from the movement's attempt to focus simultaneously on men's institutional power and the "costs of masculinity" to men. By the mid- to late 1970s, men's liberation had split directly along this fissure. On one hand, an overtly anti-feminist men's rights movement developed. Men's rights organizations stressed the costs of narrow conceptions of masculinity to men and either downplayed or angrily disputed feminist claims that patriarchy benefited men at women's expense. On the other hand, a pro-feminist (sometimes called "antisexist") men's movement developed. This movement tended to emphasize the primary importance of joining with women to confront patriarchy, with the goal of doing away with men's institutionalized privileges. Patriarchy may dehumanize men, pro-feminists argued, but the costs of masculinity are linked to men's power.

The brief appearance—and then virtual disappearance—of men's liberation discourse and practice gives us a window into the limits, dangers, and possibilities of a politics of masculinities in the United States (Messner 1997). It also provides us with a recent historical example that sheds light on a theoretical debate within sociology about the possibilities and limits of the language of sex role theory. After briefly describing sociological debates about sex role theory over the past three

decades, I will critically examine the language and themes of the major men's liberation texts of the early 1970s, the major men's rights movement texts from the mid-1970s through the 1980s, and more recently, the Web page of the major men's rights organization, the National Coalition of Free Men.<sup>1</sup> I will first describe how men's liberation premised itself on a liberal language of sex roles that contributed to both its promise as a movement and to its eventual demise. Next, I will show how the men's rights movement adopted a more narrowly conservative language of sex roles, while the pro-feminist men's movement largely rejected the language of sex roles in favor of a more radical language of gender relations. In the conclusion, I return to a discussion of the continued need to sociologically analyze contemporary organizations for which sex role theory remains ideologically central.

### THE PROMISE AND LIMITS OF SEX ROLE THEORY

In the post-World War II years, functionalist analyses of the family (e.g., Parsons and Bales 1955) described a socialization process that channeled men into instrumental roles and women into expressive roles. In the functionalist view, the social reproduction of men's and women's reciprocal roles were important keys to the maintenance of the social system of the family, and thus of the broader society. In this same era, some early feminist scholars took up the language of role theory to begin to illuminate the limits and pressures that narrowly defined sex roles placed on women and on men (e.g., Hacker 1957; Hartley 1959; Komarovsky 1946). One of the key pioneers in the study of the male sex role, Ruth E. Hartley, was among the first to examine the "costs" of the male sex role to boys and men in her 1959 article, "Sex-Role Pressures and the Socialization of the Male Child." Hartley identified "the conflict in role demands" imposed on a boy:

On the one hand, he is told that he is supposed to be rugged, independent, able to take care of himself, and to disdain "sissies." On the other, he is forced into close contact with the epitome of all sissy-things—women—for most of his day and he is commanded to obey and learn from them. In other words, he is compelled to knuckle under to that which he has been taught to despise. ([1959] 1974, 9)

Hartley noted that there are clear privileges attached to the male sex role: "[I]n the family, [men] are the boss; they have authority." But still, she wondered

whether the compensations are enough to balance the weight of the burdens that boys see themselves as assuming in order to fulfill the male role adequately. Looked at from this point of view, the question is not why boys have difficulty with this role, but why they try as hard as they do to fulfill it. ([1959] 1974, 11)

Hartley answered this question by noting the negative social stereotypes of women's personalities and activities, such as "they are indecisive; they are afraid

of many things; they make a fuss over things, they get tired alot, they need someone to help them, they stay home most of the time, they are not as strong as men." She concluded by asking,

What boy in his right senses would not give his all to escape this alternative to the male role? For many, unfortunately, the scramble to escape takes on all the aspects of panic, and the outward semblance of non-femininity is achieved at a tremendous cost of anxiety and self-alienation. ([1959] 1974, 12)

In the context of the prefeminist 1950s and 1960s, this sort of thinking was especially subversive. The language of sex role theory facilitated a partial break from biological essentialism. It connected personality formation and social structure and suggested principles for a politics of reform, especially emphasizing the need for less sex role stereotypical socialization processes (Connell 1987, 48-49). But despite the virtues of sex role theory, by the late 1970s and into the 1980s, many feminist sociologists were arguing for an abandonment of the language of sex roles in favor of the development of a language of "gender relations."

A general summary of the critiques of sex role theory reveals five common points: (1) The language of sex roles tends to dissolve into individualistic, voluntaristic levels of analysis, rather than institutional analyses of relations of power between groups; (2) the language of sex roles implies a false symmetry between the male role and the female role, thus masking the oppressive relations between women and men; (3) the language of sex roles smuggles in normalizing tendencies in such a way that any difference from the male sex role appears as deviance from a falsely universalized (middle-class, white, heterosexual) norm; (4) sex role analysis tends ultimately to fall back on categorical dichotomization of men and women, based on unexamined biologically essentialist assumptions about male and female sex categories; and (5) while it might be useful in explaining some of the ways that society is reproduced, the static nature of sex role theory makes it inadequate in examining resistance, change, and history (Connell 1983; Lopata and Thorne 1978; Stacey and Thorne 1985).

Feminist critics of sex role theory also drew parallels to the language sociologists employed when analyzing other forms of social inequality, especially race and class. "It is significant," Lopata and Thorne wrote, "that sociologists do not use the terms 'race roles' or 'class roles'" (1978, 719). We may speak of race or class *identities*, but we do so within the context of an understanding of the historical dynamics of race and class *relations*. Similarly, they argued, sociologists might rightly examine gender identities, but we should do so within the context of an examination of the historical construction of gender relations. By the mid-1980s, this historicized and politicized concept of gender relations had almost entirely supplanted the language of sex role theory within sociology (although not within psychology, education, social work, or other disciplines). The "Sex Roles" section of the American Sociological Association, begun in 1973, had by 1976 already officially changed its name to "Sex and Gender." And the official journal of the

Sociologists for Women in Society began in 1986 with the title *Gender & Society*. In addition to a language of gender relations, feminist scholars of the 1980s insisted on transcending the universalizing tendency built into the concept of the male sex role by adopting instead the concept of multiple masculinities (e.g., Brod 1987; Connell 1987; Kimmel 1987).

The shift from sex role theory to gender relations in sociology is commonly viewed in retrospect as an indicator of a paradigm shift from structural functionalism to feminism in the study of relations between women and men. In 1992, however, Mirra Komarovsky revisited and defended "the concept of social role" in the pages of *Gender & Society*. Drawing on her own and others' research, Komarovsky disputed the claims of the critics and argued that "role analysis affords an exceptionally productive link between macro- and micro-level perspectives" (1992, 306). She suggests that the critics have tended to falsely blur the feminist use and development of sex role theory with its conservative Parsonian roots. For example, she notes that

[f]or a number of sociologists interested in contemporary women's problems, myself included, the concept of social role, far from being tied to "consensus, stability, and continuity," proved to be an important construct for locating dissensus, discontinuity, and change. The macrosociological background of my analysis was the glacial pace at which patriarchy was weakening in American society and the slow improvement in the status of women in economic, legal, familial, and other social institutions and contexts. (1992, 303)

The apparent silence that greeted Komarovsky's 1992 defense of sex role theory is perhaps an indicator of the extent to which a generation of feminist sociologists considers the book to be closed on sex role theory. Nevertheless, analysis of the use of sex role language should be considered a live issue for empirical investigation, especially in those instances in which it has become the accepted currency of various groups and institutions. The language of sex role symmetry is still flourishing in men's rights organizations and is very common currency in the general public and the media. It tends, for instance, to be used to discuss and inform debates about affirmative action and can be employed to fuel backlash against "special treatment" for women. R. W. Connell, one of the main critics of role theory, has argued,

[T]he obviousness of role theory is the obviousness of ideology, not of truth. A full demonstration of this would require not only a conceptual critique, but *an exploration of the way that the role perspective operates in various fields of social practice*. (Connell 1983, 194, emphasis added)

My aim in this article is to supply just such an analysis of the practical operation of the language of sex role theory in one context: the men's liberation movement of the 1970s. I ask two questions that neither the critics nor the advocates of sex role theory ever grapple with: What results when the language of sex roles is used

as a foundation for the discourse of organizations that are attempting to bring about social and interpersonal changes? What are the practical and political implications of the language of sex roles? These questions clearly cannot be answered with one empirical example, but in what follows I will suggest that an examination of the discourse and eventual fate of the men's liberation movement of the 1970s, which actively took up the language of sex roles as the basis of its discourse, sheds light on this theoretical debate.

### MEN'S LIBERATION CONFRONTS THE MALE SEX ROLE

Many of the first advocates of men's liberation in the early 1970s were psychologists, who were drawing on the sex role theory that had developed in the three previous decades. By the mid-1970s, when the first men's liberation anthologies were published, Ruth Hartley's 1959 "Sex Role Pressures and the Socialization of the Male Child" was canonized as a foundational work (e.g., Pleck and Sawyer 1974). The ideas that socially created symmetrical (but unequal) sex roles trapped men into alienating, unhealthy, and unfulfilling lives, and that the devaluation of "the feminine" was the main way through which boys and men learned to discipline themselves to stay within the confines of this narrow sex role, became a foundation in men's liberation discourse and practice (e.g., Farrell 1974; Fasteau 1974; Nichols 1975), as well as within the scholarly work that began to emerge in the wake of men's liberation (e.g., Balswick and Peek 1971; Pleck 1976; Pleck and Brannon 1978).

Working from the strengths of sex role theory, these early scholar/activists began to demonstrate that masculinity and femininity were socially scripted behaviors, rather than biologically based male and female essences. For instance, psychologist Robert Brannon's highly influential 1976 article, "The Male Sex Role: Our Culture's Blueprint of Manhood and What It's Done for Us Lately," summarized the four main rules of the male script: "No Sissy Stuff, Be a Big Wheel, Be a Sturdy Oak, and Give 'em Hell." Not only did Brannon demonstrate how this script is socially constructed, he also argued that the male sex role was both oppressive to women and harmful to men. In the 1970s, many men's consciousness-raising groups found Brannon's concepts to be extremely useful starting points for discussions of male socialization, as did many of the first teachers of college "sex roles" courses.

Psychologist Joseph Pleck arguably took sex role theory to its most subversive and progressive limits (Pleck 1976, 1982; Pleck and Sawyer 1974). His [1974] 1995 article, "Men's Power with Women, Other Men, and in Society," still stands as one of the most insightful and often reprinted contributions to understanding the social construction of masculinity in the United States. In this article, Pleck attempted to come to grips with a paradoxical reality: Men hold institutional power in patriarchal societies, but most men do not feel very powerful. Pleck argued that the male sex



role that was necessary for men to compete and win in public life was emotionally and psychologically impoverished, leading men to feel that women had “expressive power” and “masculinity-validating power” over them. As Pleck explained it,

Men’s dependence on women’s power to express men’s emotions and to validate men’s masculinity has placed heavy burdens on women. By and large, these are not powers over men than women have wanted to hold. These are powers that men have handed over to women, by defining the male role as being emotionally cool and inexpressive, and as being ultimately validated by heterosexual success. ([1974] 1995, 7)

Despite the subversive intentions of its most sophisticated adherents like Brannon and Pleck, the language of men’s liberation had built-in limitations and dangers that were grounded in its attempt to criticize the existence of men’s power over women while simultaneously pointing to the ways that men are hurt and limited by the male sex role. Although the more scholarly activists like Pleck and Brannon finessed this contradiction as smoothly as might have been possible, many activists—especially those trying to convince men to join consciousness-raising groups or men’s liberation organizations—increasingly faced the pragmatic question of how to appeal to a broad range of men. Leaders reasoned that a men’s liberation program that played up its potential gains for men might expect to draw much more interest than a program that positioned men as oppressors whose only morally correct action would be self-flagellation.

The language of sex roles appeared to be an ideal means by which to package liberal feminist ideas for men in a way that lessened the guilt and maximized the potential gain that men might expect from liberation. In particular, the idea of sex role symmetry was central to this approach. Eventually, the idea that reciprocal roles (with men taking on the instrumental tasks and women taking on the expressive tasks) are limiting to the full human development of both sexes allowed some men’s liberationists by the mid-1970s to argue that men and women were equally oppressed by sexism. In this usage, the concept of *oppression* was depoliticized and seemed to refer only to a general condition faced by everyone in a sexist society. The language of sex role theory allowed men’s liberationists to sidestep a politicized language of gender relations, in favor of a falsely symmetrical call for women’s and men’s liberation from oppressive sex roles. In short, early men’s liberationists tended to give equal analytic weight to the “costs” and “privileges” attached to the male sex role.

The resulting sense of gender symmetry—the belief that sex roles hurt both women and men, and thus that “there’s something in feminism for men too”—was one of the major draws of men’s liberation for many men. Indeed, this sense of gender symmetry in men’s liberation resulted in the enlistment of some men as allies in liberal struggles such as the attempt to pass the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). But gender symmetry also constituted one of men’s liberation’s major limitations and dangers, and the case of Warren Farrell is perhaps the best single example.

In the mid-1970s, Farrell was known as the most public “male feminist” in the United States. He was an early member of the National Organization for Women (NOW), an outspoken advocate of the ERA, and his workshops in the early 1970s included activities such as beauty contests for men, which were aimed at raising men’s consciousness about the oppressive ways that sexual objectification turned women into “pieces of meat” to be consumed by men.

Like all early men’s liberationists, Farrell highlighted the ways that women had been limited and hurt by sexism, and he challenged men to end their complicity in women’s oppression. He also attempted to illustrate linkages between the existence of men’s power and the costs of masculinity, thus building a case for the idea that, when viewed broadly, women’s liberation and men’s liberation were mutually supporting, symmetrical movements. This was an idea applauded by many feminist women—especially many of the early leaders of NOW. But others were wary—even openly critical—of Farrell’s tendency to downplay the institutionalized privileges that men still enjoyed at women’s expense. A look at Farrell’s 1974 book *The Liberated Man* (a book that was used as a sort of bible by many men’s consciousness-raising groups in the mid- to late 1970s) illustrates these tensions and contradictions.

Borrowing from the language of Betty Friedan, Farrell argues that men are trapped in a “masculine mystique” that narrowly positions them as breadwinners and protectors, and leaves them “emotionally constipated.” He connects the effect of the pressure on men to achieve to the fact that women are economically dependent on them. Thus, he argues, when men are supportive of women’s movement into the workforce on an equal footing with men, they are benefiting by releasing themselves from the burdens of the breadwinner role. Not only are the benefits of feminism potentially symmetrical for women and for men, but apparently the continued existence of barriers to equality were posited as equally the responsibility of women and men:

The unliberated woman, who has internalized her need to live through her children and her husband, has unwittingly contributed her half to the strength of the cage the man has built around himself. The man contributes the other half. Living vicariously has become a two-sex problem. (Farrell 1974, 73)

Farrell’s analysis continues to argue for support for women’s liberation, but largely in a way that is decontextualized from an analysis of institutionalized relations of power and that allows for the conceptual framework in which a man may blame women for his own lack of freedom. Farrell’s level of analysis is primarily individualistic and conducted within the language of symmetrical sex roles. For instance, in response to feminist criticisms of the effects on women being constructed as “sex objects,” Farrell posited an equally negative effect on men being constructed as “success objects.”

Women become objects not only of the male sex drive but of a man’s need to use women to prove himself a man to other men. . . . However, the more a man has to “produce pussy” the more he molds himself into the object he thinks will attract the



woman. . . . A woman becomes a sex object as a man becomes a success object. (Farrell 1974, 48-49)

When he examines the media, Farrell suggests that perhaps men are even worse off than women:

The counterpart of the media's housebound-mother-wife-maid-mistress is the infallibly successful, accomplished, virile male. Men may be even more restricted in their identity as *human* beings. Men can climb to the top of a wide range of occupations to fulfill their image; but they are even more restricted than women in the contempt they receive should they deviate into a feminine role or fail in the masculine one. . . . Women can smoke a Marlboro, but no man dares smoke an Eve; women can wear pantsuits, yet no American male wears a dress. (Farrell 1974, 98)

Although Farrell's text leans pragmatically toward emphasizing the costs of the male role to men, and thus the potential gain in giving it up, his continued emphasis on men's institutional privileges ("men can climb to the top") maintains a tension in his analysis, a tension that he increasingly manages with a sort of slight of hand that explains away men's institutional privileges as a sort of illusion. For example, after reporting on the political program of the NOW Task Force on the Masculine Mystique (on which he served)—which included calls for a breakdown in job segregation by sex; workplace and state policies that supported men's sharing of child care equally with women; changes in education and media to undermine sex role stereotyping; research into male birth control technologies; and an end to the glorification of war, crime, and violence on television—Farrell directly confronted any fears that men might have that these changes might require them to lose or give up something. In fact, Farrell attempted to build a case that supporting these changes is entirely congruent with men's interests. Liberated men with liberated female partners, Farrell promised, would enjoy reduced sex-role-related anxieties, greater personal freedom due to less-controlling female partners, more and better sex, a more balanced ego released from the responsibility of always having to initiate sex, less pressure to be a success object, more time to spend with one's children, the ability to choose a job on the basis of satisfaction rather than on how much money it pays, and freedom from the legal burdens such as alimony payments that discriminate against men (Farrell 1974, 162-77), a precursor of his later men's rights concerns.

What's not to like in this program? After having read this, should any men still harbor a fear that men's liberation might ask them to give up something or to take on work or responsibilities they would rather not do, Farrell is reassuring. Will feminism cause men to lose their economic control in public life? "The advent of women into the market of 'men's jobs' can be seen not as competition, but as the lessening of the need to compete" (Farrell 1974, 169). More housework for men in domestic life? "The responsibilities of the man within the home, while in some situations becoming greater, will in other situations be lessened" (Farrell 1974, 172). Men will be "released" from the "narrowness of role definition" that assumes

they must be the ones to paint the house, repair cabinets, mow the lawn. Instead, liberated couples will find that they can now do these tasks together, "which will draw them together, rather than farther apart" (Farrell 1974, 172).

Not surprisingly, some feminist women greeted the arrival of the men's liberation movement with critical skepticism. For instance, Nancy Henley wrote in a 1970 newsletter that men's liberation groups often focus on

the bitchiness, rather than the oppression of women: under the present system, women are taught to be bitches, manipulating men, etc. If we off the system, women will be tolerable, and men will therefore be liberated. Such discussions are not only inadequate and misleading, but also dangerous, since they ignore the political context which is necessary to understand women's oppression. (Henley 1970, 1)

Similarly, in the 1975 collection *Feminist Revolution*, edited by the radical feminist *Redstockings* collective, Carol Hanisch warned of the "anti-woman, anti-women's liberation" impulse in men's liberation.

What [the men's liberation movement] really amounts to is just more of the same old male supremacist complaint that women are really nags and bitches—the power behind the throne—henpecking their men into subservience. The new twist is their attack, sometimes subtle and sometimes not, on the women's liberation movement they usually claim to support. (1975, 72)

In a prophetic observation, Hanisch asserted that the purely psychological (rather than institutional) focus of the analysis, as well as the positing of a false symmetry between the oppression of women and men by socially imposed sex roles, held the danger of defusing the radical potential of feminism and turning sensitive men into antifeminist advocates of men's rights. This is precisely what happened to Warren Farrell in the 1980s and 1990s.

In addition to positing a false symmetry between women's and men's liberation, a symmetry that was facilitated by the language of sex role theory, men's liberation had another limitation: a tendency to falsely universalize the experiences of white, middle-class, college-educated heterosexual men as those of all men. Most of the early men's liberation texts were written by heterosexual men who recognized the ways that homophobia hurt all men, but they rarely focused on the experiences and lives of gay men (Nardi 1994). Moreover, mirroring problems inherent in liberal feminists' false universalization of women (Baca Zinn et al. 1986), men's liberationist texts such as Marc Gerzon's (1982) *A Choice of Heroes* tended unblinkingly to speak of men's problems with work, success, relationships, and health as though all men were white, college-educated professionals.

This tendency to assume professional class status as the norm was mirrored in much of the early academic writing on masculinity. For instance, the section on men and work in Pleck and Sawyer's groundbreaking collection, *Men and Masculinity* (1974), contained articles about stockbrokers, doctors, academics, and executives, but nothing on blue-collar or unemployed men. As Clatterbaugh points out,

“the owning/professional/managerial class” (1990, 113) constitutes only about 15 percent of the population, so this focus on the experience of class-privileged men leaves out the experiences of the great majority. By ignoring the institutionalized racial and class constraints faced by Black, Latino, Asian, working-class, and poor men, men’s liberationists preoccupied themselves with the “lethal aspects of the male role” and the “burden of the breadwinner role,” while avoiding the issue of their own positions of privilege within race, class, and gendered hierarchies. As a result, calls for changing masculinity were reduced to simplistic arguments for greater lifestyle choices, a wider range of acceptable emotional expression, and opportunities for self-actualization for (relatively privileged) men. As Ehrenreich (1983) observed, this men’s liberationist focus on self-actualization was articulated in the individualist language of an ascendant middle-class human potential movement that gave middle-class men “permission” to abandon the responsibilities of the male breadwinner role. Liberated men, it seemed, could now “get in touch with their feelings” and still feel good about their status, power, and privilege over others.

### THE RISE OF THE MEN’S RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Although the dominant tendency within early men’s liberation discourse was to attempt to give equal weight to the limitations and oppressions imposed on women and men, some early men’s liberationists tended to lean their analysis heavily in the direction of an emphasis on the costs of masculinity to men. Herb Goldberg’s *The Hazards of Being Male: Surviving the Myth of Masculine Privilege* was first published in 1976 (and can still be found today, somewhat revised, in many bookstores). Goldberg’s book was similar to other early men’s liberationist texts, in that it tended to employ a language of symmetrical sex roles that implied that both women and men have been hurt by sexism. In fact, the differences between Goldberg’s *The Hazards of Being Male* and works of the same era by Warren Farrell and Jack Nichols are not differences of basic ideology or analysis, but rather of emphasis and focus.

As Goldberg’s title suggests, his work tended to place much greater emphasis on the costs of masculinity than on the problems faced by women. Goldberg faced the same challenge that Farrell confronted in using the language of sex role symmetry to attract men to a movement. But where Farrell used slight of hand to explain away men’s institutional power and privilege, Goldberg directly asserted that male privilege is a myth. Men actually have it worse than women, Goldberg argued, because the male role is far more rigid than the female role, and women have created a movement through which they can now transcend the limits of culturally imposed femininity:

Unlike some of the problems of women, the problems of men are not readily changeable through legislation. The male has no apparent and clearly defined targets against which he can vent his rage. Yet he is oppressed by the cultural pressures that

have denied him his feelings. . . . He has responded to feminist assertions by donning sack cloth, sprinkling himself with ashes, and flagellating himself, accusing himself of the very things she is accusing him of. . . . [He] is buying the myth that the male is culturally favored—a notion that is clung to despite the fact that every critical statistic in the area of longevity, disease, suicide, crime, accidents, childhood emotional disorders, alcoholism, and drug addiction shows a disproportionately higher male rate. (Goldberg 1976, 4-5)

In our “largely matriarchal” society, Goldberg asserts, the social organization of sexuality, marriage, and divorce laws keep men stuck in a bind that does not benefit them and seems more to benefit women:

He knows that if he loses status, power or money he stands to lose sexual attractiveness as well. The male thus finds himself in an impossible bind. If he continues to pursue success vigorously he has less capacity for involvement in his love relationship. If he does not pursue success vigorously, he becomes less desirable. (Goldberg 1976, 30)

Although Goldberg’s early work fell short of overt anti-feminist backlash, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, Goldberg and others had broken from the men’s liberation movement’s gender symmetry and pro-feminism, and had begun to articulate their own distinct “men’s rights” discourse that increasingly expressed an overt and angry anti-feminist backlash. Feminism came to be viewed as women’s plot to cover up the reality that it is actually women who have the power and men who are most oppressed by current gender arrangements. Men’s lower life span, health problems, military conscription, and divorce and custody laws were used as evidence of men’s oppression. From this point of view, women’s liberation was a movement that was forcing men to receive “the worst of both worlds” (Goldberg 1979, 153).

Men’s rights discourse began to take form in various organizations. In 1977, Men’s Rights, Inc., an organization that focused on legal and policy reform was formed; three years later, the Coalition of Free Men, an organization inspired by Herb Goldberg, with a wide agenda of change, took shape. Also in 1980, these two organizations joined with several fathers’ rights organizations to start an umbrella organization, the National Congress for Men. In those years, men’s rights advocates were claiming that men are the true victims of prostitution, pornography, dating rituals, sexist media conventions, divorce settlements, false rape accusations, sexual harassment, and even domestic violence. Whereas men’s liberation discourse—despite its limits—often relied on solid social-scientific research, men’s rights discourse most often displayed a blatant disregard for widely accepted sociological, economic, and psychological studies. Instead, men’s rights discourse tended to rely on anecdotal stories, combined with a few highly questionable studies, that provided an emotionally charged basis for the development of an ideology of male victimization. This practice continues throughout the 1990s.

The issue of spousal violence is one such instance. Men's rights activists have argued that feminist ideology and men's shame have combined to cover up massive numbers of men in families who are physically abused by women (Logan 1985) and murdered by women (Panghorn 1985). The current Free Men Website asserts that "[e]very study that has used random sampling techniques to look at the issue of spouse abuse has concluded that men are at least 50 percent (or higher) of the battered spouses in America" (Free Men 1997). But in a recent survey of the research on this topic, Jack Straton (1994) concluded that the much-touted "battered husband syndrome" is a myth. U.S. National Crime Survey data show that only between 3 percent and 4 percent of interspousal violence involves attacks on men by their female partners, and 92 percent of those who seek medical care from a private physician for injuries received in a spousal assault are women (Schwartz 1987). For every 46 women hospitalized for injuries received in a spousal assault, only 1 man is hospitalized (Saunders 1988). Many of the studies that compare spousal violence rates do not include violence that occurs after spousal separation and divorce, yet "these account for 76 percent of spouse-on-spouse assaults, with a male perpetrator 93 percent of the time" (Straton 1994). This is an especially noteworthy fact in the context of this discussion, since men's rights advocates are often angrily preoccupied with the ways that they believe divorced fathers are victimized by the law.

Although men's rights organizations have a broad agenda of change, the issue of fathers' rights has been their most successful rallying point. Arendell's (1992) research suggests why some divorced fathers are attracted to the men's rights agenda. In her study of recently divorced fathers, Arendell found that many of the divorced fathers she studied responded to "the stresses and turmoil of the divorce" by developing a "masculinist discourse on divorce." This discourse included as its main themes (1) the belief that father absence is a viable "strategy of action, the objective of which is to control situations of conflict and tension and emotional states," and (2) the development of "a rhetoric of rights through which relationships, actions and emotions were framed and defined" (Arendell 1992, 582). Many divorced fathers, who may feel additionally that the courts have discriminated against them in child custody rulings simply because they are men, have found men's rights organizations to be powerful vehicles through which to focus their anger and sense of injustice. Men's rights leader Rich Doyle sums up the basis for this anger:

Divorce courts are frequently like slaughter-houses, with about as much compassion and talent. They function as collection agencies for lawyer fees, however outrageous, stealing children and extorting money from men in ways blatantly unconstitutional. . . . Men are regarded as mere guests in their own homes, evictable any time at the whims of wives and judges. Men are driven from home and children against their wills; then when unable to stretch paychecks far enough to support two households are termed "runaway fathers." Contrary to all principles of justice, men

are thrown into prison for inability to pay alimony and support, however unreasonable or unfair the "Obligation." (1985, 166)

Fathers' rights discourse has attempted, with some success, to co-opt the liberal feminist rhetoric of gender "equality" and "rights" to forge a campaign that aims to alter laws related to divorce and child custody. What fathers' rights discourse rarely includes is a discussion of fathers' responsibilities to children before divorces. Fathers' rights activists, who are predominantly white and middle or working class, tend to ignore how work and family institutional relations benefit them, both before and after divorces. Instead, they focus on the economic and emotional costs that are attached to these masculine privileges—among them, the common legal assumption after a divorce, that children are better off spending the majority of their time with their mothers. Although it is likely that very few of these fathers ever contributed anywhere near 50 percent of the child care before the divorce, they passionately argue for the right to joint custody—or, in some cases, sole custody—of their children after the divorce (Coltrane and Hickman 1992). Bertoia and Drakich conclude from their interviews with fathers' rights activists that "the rhetoric of fathers' rights gives the illusion of equality, but, in essence, the demands are to continue the practice of inequality in postdivorce but now with legal sanction" (1995, 252).

It is instructive to examine the slippage in the discourse from the symmetrical mid-1970s men's liberationist language of "equal oppressions" faced by women and men to an angry anti-feminist men's rights language of male victimization in the late 1970s and 1980s. This slippage was, in fact, built into the language of men's liberation from the start, and this is best illustrated by the words of some men's rights leaders—several of whom were early men's liberationists. For instance, M. Adams, writing in 1985, said that in the early 1970s he had been hopeful that feminism might lead to human liberation but was disappointed to find that the women's movement was only interested in "unilateral liberation" for women and did not address the problem of male oppression. To prove his point, he did some "research" on sex role attitudes and the results "showed that men were truly the victims of prejudiced thought, discriminatory attitudes, in general, oppression. I felt that I had won the theoretical argument with feminism." But when nobody would accept his perspective, he laments, "I began to consciously hate women" (Adams 1985, 14). By the end of the 1970s, he had become an outspoken member of the Free Men, and when he told some women at a party that he understood oppression from his own experience, "They didn't have the slightest idea what I meant. I laughed out loud at the expressions on their faces. I didn't bother to explain. The movement was coming . . . they'd understand soon enough" (Adams 1985, 14).

Three themes in Adams's story are repeated in much of the autobiographical discourse of men's rights activists (e.g., Baumli 1985; Farrell 1993). First is the claim of having been an early and ardent supporter of (liberal) feminism in hopes that it would free women and men from the shackles of sexism. Second is the use



of the language of sex role theory that equates sexist thoughts and attitudes with oppression without discussing gendered institutional arrangements and intergroup relations. And last is a sense of hurt and outrage when women do not agree that men's issues are symmetrical with those faced by women, coupled with an enthusiastic embrace of an angry and aggressive anti-feminist men's rights discourse and practice. Former men's liberation leader and current men's rights spokesperson Warren Farrell is the best-known example of a man who has traversed this path, as the shift in tone of the titles of his books indicate: In 1974, it was *The Liberated Man*; by 1993, it was *The Myth of Male Power*. Farrell has helped take men's rights discourse to a new level, now claiming that, in fact, women have the power and men are powerless. For instance, in response to women having fought back against sexual harassment in workplaces, Farrell now claims that, in fact, male employers are disempowered and victimized by their secretaries' "miniskirt power, cleavage power, and flirtation power" (1993, 129).

Although it may be true that some women learn to use their sexuality to manipulate male employers, is this a sign of women's power over men? Of course not, as is clear by a cursory glance at the fact that sexual harassment claims often result in the woman being (formally or informally) forced to leave her job, while the male perpetrator's hand is slapped. A woman who uses sexual manipulation to get by in the workplace has drawn on what she has learned is her one available resource to better her condition, in a context where she had no direct access to political, economic, and legal institutional power. But men's rights leaders like Richard Haddad even seem to have an answer to this point. Haddad states that men really do not have a "monopoly on power" in public life—they are simply "over-represented in decision-making positions in . . . government and industry" (1985, 282).

The anti-feminist backlash tendencies in the discourse of men's rights advocates are clearly evident, but these activists are not arguing for a return to patriarchal arrangements and traditional masculinity. To the contrary, men's rights advocates are critical of the ways masculinity has entrapped, limited, and harmed men, and they want to reconstruct a masculinity that is more healthful, peaceful, and nurturing. More important, they do not see feminism as the way to accomplish this improvement in men's lives. Just the opposite, they disagree with the feminist contention that men enjoy institutionalized privileges. For example, the current Free Men Web page emphasizes that the organization hopes to

free men from the notion which (a) ignores the rigid definition of their roles and (b) insists that they are culturally favored; from divorce laws which presume the *naturally superior* capabilities of women to care for children and which stereotype men as wallets; from the notion that they *oppress* women any more than women as a class oppress them, or than society in general oppresses both sexes through stereotyping. (Free Men 1997)

The Free Men continue today to use the language of sex roles to argue for a social constructionist perspective that positions society abstractly as the oppressor, while

viewing stereotypes as limiting and oppressive to both women and men. The women's movement, they argue, has largely succeeded in getting society to eliminate the stereotypes that hurt women and, in fact, has gone too far in this effort:

For 30 years, the women's movement has gone unchallenged and this has contributed greatly to the breakup of American families and the social ills which follow: high rates of teen pregnancy, high rates of juvenile crime, high rates of teen suicide, depression and poor school performance. (Free Men 1997)

Thus, to men's rights advocates, while the women's movement now allows a woman to "have her cake and eat it too," the continued imposition of a rigidly narrow male sex role results primarily in costs to men (and ultimately to the family, schools, and other institutions). For these men, what is now needed is a movement that will free men, who will then counter these destructive effects of feminism.

### **PRO-FEMINIST REJECTION OF THE LANGUAGE OF SEX ROLES**

By the late 1970s, men's liberation, as a self-conscious liberal feminist movement, was gone. To be sure, some of the ideas of men's liberation—especially the belief that women and men are both hurt and limited by narrow sex roles—eventually filtered into the general culture. But the men's liberation movement had split into two directions. The first, as we have seen, was the men's rights movement, for which liberal feminist sex role theory, with its individualist and falsely symmetrical language, had supplied the conceptual building blocks. The second was a pro-feminist, or antisexist men's movement. I develop the discussion of the rise of men's pro-feminism (and its different radical and socialist tendencies) elsewhere (Messner 1997, forthcoming). For my purposes here I want merely to underline how the pro-feminist shift away from the individualistic (and often therapeutic) discourse of men's liberation involved a clear rejection of the language of sex roles and an adoption of a more politicized language of gender relations and power.

In the mid-1970s, Warren Farrell represented the political center of men's liberation while Herb Goldberg represented the Right, but there were also other, more leftist men's liberationists. These men tended to be less impressed with the liberal, middle-class feminism of Farrell and NOW, and they were far more influenced by the student antiwar movement, the Black power movement, and especially by radical feminism and the radical impulses in the fledgling gay and lesbian liberation movement. Like other early men's liberationists, these pro-feminist men initially focused a great deal on the costs of masculinity, as well as on the institutional privileges afforded to all men under patriarchy (e.g., Men's Consciousness-Raising Group 1971). But by the early to mid-1970s, as feminist women began to criticize men's liberation, these radical men began to move their discourse more clearly in the direction of de-emphasizing the costs of masculinity

and emphasizing the ways that all men derive power and privilege within patriarchal society. This shift did not take place definitively until later in the decade, but it was foreshadowed when in the spring of 1971, a collective of four radical men in Berkeley, California put out the first issue of *Brother: A Male Liberation Newspaper*. By the fall of 1971, the third issue of *Brother* now had a different subtitle: *A Forum for Men against Sexism*. By the mid-1970s, men's pro-feminism had begun to take organizational form, as indicated in the formation of the East Bay Men's Center (EBMC) in Berkeley. An excerpt from the EBMC's "Statement on Rape" illustrates how far the radicals' antipatriarchal discourse had parted from the sex role symmetry of men's liberation discourse: "Sexism is a system where one sex has power and privilege over another. In a society, such as ours, where men dominate women, this system can be called male supremacy" (Snodgrass 1977, 137).

The EBMC's statement contains the themes that came to characterize pro-feminist men's discourse as distinct from men's liberation. First, sexism is seen as a *system* of male supremacy—patriarchy—rather than simply as a set of attitudes, values, or sex roles that can be unlearned. Second, in this system, men as a group dominate women. In other words, men are viewed as a category of people who systematically oppress—and benefit from the oppression of—another category of people, women. This perspective was presented in a clear and analytically sophisticated way for the first time in a 1977 collection called *For Men against Sexism*, edited by Jon Snodgrass. Several articles in the book soundly criticized the men's liberation movement, including one entitled "Warren the Success Object" in which Don Andersen wrote that while reading Warren Farrell's book, *The Liberated Man*, "I sometimes got the feeling that businessmen are finally reacting to the threat of the women's movement, and that Farrell is here to take the bite out of it and to demonstrate how women can be compromised" (1977, 147).

In place of men's liberation, these radical men posited a men's politics of antisexist practice, focused mainly on sexual violence issues. By the beginning of the 1980s, pro-feminist men's organizations (such as the National Organization for Changing Men, later to become the National Organization for Men Against Sexism, or NOMAS), as well as pro-feminist magazines such as *Changing Men*, had clearly positioned themselves in opposition to men's rights organizations (see Brannon 1981-82).

## CONCLUSION

Does the devolution of the conservative wing of the liberal feminist men's liberation movement into the anti-feminist backlash of the men's rights movement "prove" that the language of sex roles is inherently dangerously conservative? And does the pro-feminist men's movement's rejection of the language of sex roles in favor of a politicized language of gender relations lend further proof to this claim? Not necessarily. But these shifts do lend credence to the claim that sex role theory

can provide a conceptual foundation for anti-feminist backlash, especially when a movement appropriates the symmetrical language of sex roles to divorce itself from historical and institutional analyses of power. These dangers may be especially salient when a movement made up for the most part of the dominant group, men, develops a program that is aimed chiefly at the troubles and problems faced by individual members of this group. Under these conditions, the individualist, ahistorical, and falsely symmetrical dangers of the language of sex roles become most clearly apparent.

But what of other less overtly political institutional or organizational contexts in which the language of sex roles has become the dominant currency of discourse on gender? At the beginning of the 1980s, Connell commented on the implications of the fact that role theory had been comfortably and uncritically absorbed into the psychologically oriented helping professions even as it was receding as the major currency of social theory:

It now becomes clearer why role theory is unable to deal with the theoretical problems of resistance. This is because role theory is, in effect, a theoretical ideology developed to cope with the stresses in the cultural order *created* by movements of resistance. At a less abstract level, it is the practical ideology of counselors, social workers, teachers, and personnel officers so far as they are concerned with shaping people and their activity to the requirements of the system, i.e., forestalling resistance. (1983, 204)

Connell's criticism of the adoption of role theory by "the psychological helping professions" should be taken seriously, but as a working hypothesis rather than as the final word on ways that the language of roles has permeated various professional and organizational sites within the gender order. For instance, sociologists should examine the specific ways that the language of sex roles is now used in various workplaces by personnel officers who are grappling with issues related to occupational segregation, affirmative action, or sexual harassment. We should examine the ways that the language of sex roles often operates as the common currency of discourse among teachers and school administrators who are dealing with gender issues in hiring, curriculum, playground violence and harassment, and equity issues in school sports and other activities. In both workplaces and schools, the language of sex roles has been imported by activists who have mounted organizational and legal challenges to male domination, and it has been used by advocates of girls and women to push for equity. However, once the language of sex roles is built into the bureaucratic structure of workplaces and schools, does it lose whatever subversive impulse it began with and become part of the controlling apparatus of conservative organizations? Or does the language of sex roles in these organizations represent a contested discourse that can be harnessed either for progressive or regressive ends?

Similarly, empirical research on the process and outcomes of family therapy could shed light on the question of the current possibilities, limits, and dangers built into the largely uncritical adoption of the language of sex roles within many professional therapeutic communities. Research might find that nonfeminist or

anti-feminist therapists are conservatively employing an individualized, symmetrical language of sex roles to reinforce very unfair and oppressive relational patterns between women and men. If so, this would support Connell's fears about the conservatism of role theory. However, rather than necessarily being a "practical ideology" through which therapists are "forestalling resistance" by "shaping people and their activity to the requirements of the system," some feminist therapists might argue that the symmetrical language of sex roles can be used to empower women to develop more effective gender strategies in their relationships. And, more important, the language of sex roles can be used as a pragmatic therapeutic intervention with individual men to convince them that by changing their behaviors within their relationships, they have something to gain. In effect, this strategy can help to nudge heterosexual families toward greater equality. If this is true, then in heterosexual couples' therapy, especially with a feminist therapist who is aware of the larger context of gender inequality, the potential gains of the language of sex roles may outweigh its limitations. Ultimately, empirical research on this sort of practical and strategic use of the language of sex roles by feminist therapists might support Komarovsky's (1992) argument discussed earlier, that when situated in a macropolitical analysis of power, role theory is a useful tool, not only for analyzing change but for promoting it.

This article has offered one example of the reactionary implications of the language of sex roles as employed by a men's movement, but it does not answer finally or conclusively the more general question facing feminist sociologists: Is the language of sex roles, as it is currently institutionalized in various organizations and professions, now working as a conservative stabilizing influence or as a disruptive, progressive influence in the current gender order? I suspect that the answer to this question, rather than being either/or, is most likely multiple, contradictory, and paradoxical, depending on the specific empirical context one examines.

## NOTE

1. I drew from two major sources to examine the early men's liberation discourse. First, I examined early men's liberation newsletters and magazines; second, I examined the major published books (of which there were very few). My choice to focus my analysis largely on Warren Farrell's 1974 book *The Liberated Man*, and to a lesser extent Jack Nichols's 1975 book *Men's Liberation*, is based on several indicators of their centrality and importance: First, men's liberation newsletters from the mid-1970s all recommend these books as the main texts of men's liberation; second, a small study I conducted of men's consciousness-raising groups in Berkeley and Santa Cruz, California in 1979-80 revealed that most of the groups had used these books as starting points for their discussions; and third, the impact and success of Farrell's book can be measured by the fact that in 1998, it is still in print and widely available in bookstores. As for the academic sources I focus on for early men's liberation literature, Pleck and Sawyer's (1974) *Men and Masculinity* was the first major collection of writings on men and masculinity, and it was widely adopted in many of the first "sex roles" and "men and masculinity" courses. Moreover, the articles that I cite on the male sex role and men's liberation by Joseph Pleck

(1974), Robert Brannon (1976), and Pleck and Brannon (1978) were well known and discussed within mid- to late 1970s men's consciousness-raising circles, and they were widely reprinted in academic books on sex roles.

Similarly, I decided to focus my analysis of men's rights movement discourse largely on Herb Goldberg's 1976 book *The Hazards of Being Male* and on Frances Baumli's 1985 collection, *Men Freeing Men*, on the basis of these texts' centrality to the men's rights movement. Goldberg's book was read and discussed (often critically) by the men I studied in the late 1970s, and it was adopted in some college courses on men and masculinity. And similar to Farrell's *The Liberated Man* (1974), Goldberg's *The Hazards of Being Male* (1976) is still in print and available in bookstores over 20 years after its original publication. Moreover, Goldberg's work is still cited as a foundation within men's rights discourse. Baumli's 1985 book, although not as commercially successful as Goldberg's, is a collection of writings by nearly every men's rights leader of the 1970s and early 1980s, and it thus offers an invaluable look at a range of men's rights discourse. My examination of the current men's rights Web site indicates that the works of Goldberg, Farrell, and the writers in the Baumli volume are still a foundation to men's rights discourse.

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