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In the brief time since the topics of sex roles and aging became important to psychologists, to researchers, and to the general public, considerable work on theory, measurement, and data collection has been completed. The purpose of this book is to consolidate this recent work on sex roles and aging, and to interpret what has been done. A further purpose is to suggest ways in which advances in other fields - fields as divergent as sociobiology, systems theory, cognitive psychology, and the so-called 'new' physics - can assist in the understanding of sex-role development in later life. This book, then, represents an attempt to bridge disciplines and areas within psychology and to suggest new directions in which we might proceed.

This book is written for students and teachers of human development, for researchers in development and aging, and for those who work with older adults and their families. The survey of recent work and the distillation of a set of 'ten commandments' for future research will be especially useful for the student or teacher who is attempting to become familiar with this knowledge area. Very little has been consolidated in this field, and sex-role development in adulthood is seldom discussed in general texts. The researcher (or potential researcher) can make use of the rich and varied theoretical perspectives described in the book and can be guided by those 'ten commandments'. He or she can also attend to
the methodological issues raised in later chapters, a discussion which will help inform the interpretation made of sex-role development data. Those who work with older adults and their families will be most interested in the several perspectives on the measuring of roles in later life. The possibility that roles are also manifestations of cognitive ability (as one theory would suggest) opens the possibility that role-related behavior could be developed into an assessment device for cognitive processes. The diverse views discussed also offer a rich source of ideas on roles for the general reader who will see support, in many places, for the social activist’s stance that both types of sex-role behaviors should be valued and used by both sexes.

This book is unusual in providing a consolidation of recent work in mature adult sex-role development. It also reports details of a major study of sex-role development in older adults aged 60 and over. This book represents a first attempt to apply some new and complex models of life-span change over time to one area of development, sex-role development. Such new models include dialectics, ‘new’ physics paradigms, general systems theory paradigms, and ideas of biological adaptation. This book addresses the following topics: adaptation, adult development, aging, adrogyne, cognitive development, health, life experiences, mental health, methodology, problem solving, role conflict, sex roles, sociobiology, and systems theory.

One of the disappointments encountered by the author while preparing this work was the dearth of information on certain questions central to any understanding of sex-role development in late years. One of these questions, for example, concerned behavioral validation of reported roles. Longitudinal data were also lacking, but are essential to any understanding of behavioral development, i.e. behavioral change over time. Many other examples of gaps in knowledge can be found. Clearly any survey is limited by what other investigators have been able to do, but also must go beyond the information in hand to draw some conclusions and point the way toward future efforts. In this book there is an attempt - the reader is warned when this occurs - to stretch beyond references in hand and over gaps in information for the purpose of deriving larger concepts and theoretical points of departure.

The following is a brief outline of what is discussed in this book. The first focus of attention (chapter 1) is the historical background of studies in sex-role development in later adulthood and aging. The field appears to have been created as a result of interest in role development in general, interest in aging, focus on social change related to sex roles, creation of instruments to measure attitudes, and awareness of the dialectical interplay...
of social, biological, psychological, and behavioral forces in any single life story. These all played a part in the genesis of the field of lifespan sex roles. Social-learning theory and cognitive-development theory are explored, along with biologically based approaches and anthropological information. The main ideas of the emerging life-span models are described; these include work by Gutmann, Loevinger, Hefner, Garnets and Pleck. The measurement of sex roles has gone from bipolar to bidimensional, with impact on theory. Bem has made important contributions here.

This brings us to the second section (chapter 2), which is focused on theories of sex-role development in later life. In it the most common approaches, mentioned above, are outlined and extended to late-life development. New approaches pertinent to late-life development are also described. These include: postformal, adult cognitive abilities which could underlie complex roles; general systems theory, which views roles as a process of handling information and energy within and between living systems which change over time; and dialectics, which treats roles as means of synthesizing various developmental dimensions.

Chapter 3 is focused on conceptualization of late-life sex-role development as an adaptation over time. This chapter was prepared by Joan Rabin of Towson State University, Maryland, who is responsible for much innovative thinking in this area. Adaptation and dependency are discussed, as are the value for survival of agency (stereotypical masculinity) and communion (stereotypical femininity).

Potential theoretical underpinnings are drawn from cognitive psychology, models of dynamic change, systems theory, general models of aging, sociobiology, physics, clinical psychology, humanistic personality theory, and theories of sex differences in chapter 4. That chapter, however, is entitled ‘What Little We’ve Learned so Far’ because, compared with what’s needed, so little understanding has been developed. Studies discussed in this chapter address sex roles and the nature of masculinity and femininity, the influence of situational factors, well-being, self-concept, and models of change over time.

In chapter 5 data from several important studies of roles and aging of the last 5 years are presented. Some are published; others represent work underway. These studies focus on androgyny, its prevalence and correlates; sex-role learning and life events; well-being in old age; and age differences or age changes. The studies sometimes have conflicting results but overall suggest that developmental role changes might be occurring and that the context of roles and role responses matters. This chapter ends with ten important conclusions for sex-role research:
We must not jump to conclusions that responses on a scale will be predictive of behavior. Responses to sex-role instruments do mean something. Masculinity, femininity, and androgyny have been shown to be adaptive. Sex roles are meaningful in terms of social expectations.

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Sex roles are meaningful ways to organize one's sense of self as socially efficacious, to create a sense of personal conformity, and to organize self-concept. The meaning of sex roles depends on age and developmental stage. Models of sex-role changes over time can be of many types. Sex-role complexity and later-life sex-role development may be linked to cognitive abilities such as postformal thought and problem-solving skills. Sex-role developmental theory suggests 'new' physics concepts and might make use of them. Sex-role development theory can make use of ideas in systems theory.

Chapters 6 through 8 include a report on a major study of sex roles in old age conducted by the author and funded by the National Institute on Aging, and incorporating some of the new thinking on roles described earlier in the book. We conducted a study of 364 community-dwelling mature adults, aged 60 and over, to determine: (1) whether they generally describe themselves in androgynous sex-role terms or in nonandrogynous terms; (2) whether current life-experiences, past milestone events, or perceived social expectations about roles might be related to described sex role, and (3) whether sex-role complexity is associated with successful aging. These research questions were embedded in a theoretical view of sex-role development in which the sex role adopted is adapted to the biological, psychological, social, and environmental contingencies experienced by the individual at a given life stage. Measures included the Bern Sex Role Inventory; standard assessments of verbal intelligence and mental health; measures of physical health, morale, and life-event stress; questions on milestone events, decision-making, and demographic data.

We determined that this cohort of older respondents was predominantly androgynous. The androgynous members experienced several recent life circumstances which differed from those of the masculine and feminine groups; some milestone events also seemed specific for the masculine versus feminine groups. Elders most often professed the sex role they believed society expected of them; those who professed a role different from social expectation usually had appropriately sex-typed expectations. On most measures the androgynous respondents aged most 'successfully', although not all the comparisons were significant. Interpretation of these factors is carried out in chapter 9. Adults and
society seem to adapt to each other’s multidimensional systems over time. Five patterns of sex roles are important to consider:

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(1) Androgynous, unconflicted. These women and men, scored androgynous, perceived that society expected them to be androgynous, and generally were not socialized to be stereotyped feminine or stereotyped masculine. Besides enjoying the generally positive aging of the androgynous group, they as a group would not be expected to suffer from conflict about their roles.

(2) Androgynous, conflicted. This group generally saw themselves as possessing a complex role, but experienced conflict about that role due to past milestone events, current life-situations, or perceived social expectations which seemed to reinforce them for displaying only one aspect of their complex role. This group would enjoy the advantages of androgyny (if their behavior matched that role) while possibly suffering from the effects of conflict.

(3) Appropriate sex-type (men masculine; women feminine), no conflict. These individuals appear to be reinforced for a traditional sex role, perceived such a role to be appropriate for them, and identified with that role. While the experience of aging appeared less positive overall for these persons, they did not suffer from conflict.

(4) Masculine/feminine; sex-type inappropriate, conflicted. These individuals described themselves in traditional role terms, but terms that did not match their biological sex. Those experiencing conflict between expectations, reinforcements, and identity would be expected to show the greatest strain, although persons with an inappropriate sex type are at risk of conflict under any circumstances.

(5) Undifferentiated. Apparently this was a group of complex individuals who may be beyond the androgynous stage (at some point of sex-role transcendence) or may never have identified with any sex role. Some appeared to suffer conflict. More work needs to be done to separate the adaptive and maladaptive subgroups here.

Methodological and statistical considerations are discussed in chapter 10 by Michael Windle, who is expert in developmental measurement issues and associated with the Johnson O’Connor Research Foundation in Chicago, Illinois. Questions have been raised as to the appropriateness of the Bern Sex-Role Inventory for older adults. Are the scores of older adults equivalent to those for younger ones? New confirmatory and exploratory factor-analytic techniques are used along with older factor-analytic strategies to obtain several answers to this question. The discussion that follows points out the limits of knowledge prior to the conduct of longitudinal studies. Chapter 11 contains suggestions as to
the next steps we need to take to study sex roles adequately, including: a focus on context; behavior, in addition to reported attitudes; the impact of life events and transitions; gender-linked perceived expectations; role salience; awareness that all roles are implicitly related to some standard; belief systems; models employed; impact of roles on society; adaptivity; reporting style; methodology; and longitudinal research. 14 explicit suggestions are made.

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Finally, many thanks to my friends and to my family, all of whom supported me through this portion of the path of my development. One of my goals in offering this book is to give them, and my larger human family, a greater chance to know and live a richer 'self'. This self may have many more possibilities and a lifetime with potential far more interesting than our current dreams would even suggest. This potential can come to life through greater awareness of how we behave, why we behave, how we change, and how our local behavior might interact with the larger events of which we are a creative part.