

Malleability of Gender Role Attitudes: Gendered Messages in Relationship Education

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Introduction & Purpose

- Theoretically, gender role attitudes are made up of enduring schemas and roles taught and modeled in childhood that create a foundation for engaging in peer, occupational, and intimate relationships (Martin, 1995; Martin & Halverson, 1981).
 - Thus, gender role attitudes are often conceptualized as stable constructions in adulthood.
 - Yet, role theory suggests that role development is a *continuous process* of evaluating and redefining self and others based on interpersonal interactions and/or intrapersonal changes in perception (Thornton & Nardi, 1975). Life events are opportunities for development, growth, and possibly change in role sets and role-related attitudes, thus gender role attitudes may be malleable.
- Research suggests that there is both *stability* and *malleability* in gender role attitudes to be determined as a function of “specific socializing experiences” the individual undergoes (Fan & Marini, 2000, p. 277). Gender role attitudes are relatively stable, but may be altered in the context of meaningful life experiences such as college, marriage/remarriage, birth of a child, and transitions into/out of the workplace (Bryant, 2003; Lucier-Greer & Adler-Baeder, 2011).
- This study attempts to substantiate and expand the current literature on gender role attitude malleability by examining whether relationship education (RE) serves as a “specific socializing experience” that alters the gender role attitudes of participants.
 - RE is meant to promote relational skill-building and education, not to intentionally alter gender role attitudes. Yet, qualitative reviews of the content of different RE curricula raised questions about gendered messages presented. This led the authors to hypothesize that RE programs may be intentionally or unintentionally altering gender role attitudes.
- We examine the change in gendered attitudes from pre- to post-test for two RE curricula:
 - Mastering the Mysteries of Love (MML)** (MML; Guernsey & Ortwein, 2004) focuses on skills such as showing understanding, problem solving, and deepening communication with one’s partner. These appear to be non-gendered (i.e., universal) messages which are hypothesized to be related to changes toward more egalitarian attitudes.
 - Basic Training for Couples (BTC)** (BTC; Slack & Muhammad, 2005) focuses on such topics as surrendering to the marriage, communication, sexual intimacy, and responsibilities of each partner within the relationship suggesting that spouses have unique and distinct roles which are hypothesized to be related to changes towards more traditional attitudes.
- Because one’s racial background has been found to influence gender role attitudes (Hill, 2002; Lawrence-Webb et al., 2004), we also examine whether European and African American participants report similar changes in their gendered attitudes by curricula.

Method

Procedure

RE classes were implemented throughout a Southeastern state. Participants voluntarily signed up for either an MML or a BTC class. Data and demographic information were collected at pre-test before participants engaged in the class and at post-test after finishing the class.

Analytic Sample

$N = 853$ adult participants (MML, $n = 361$; BTC, $n = 492$). The sample consisted of 61.5% females and 57.3% African American participants. 52.8% attended the class with their partner.

Variables of Interest

Gender Role Traditionalism. A 7-point scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree) was used to report personal attitudes towards gender roles on 3 items (Larsen & Long, 1988; e.g., “Ultimately a woman should submit to her husband’s decision”). Higher scores indicated higher levels of traditionalism and greater tendency to view men as leaders (pre $\alpha = .839$; post $\alpha = .848$).

Difficulty Understanding the Opposite Sex. Participants indicated beliefs about the differences between men and women using a 6-point scale to specify the degree to which they strongly believed a statement was false (1) or strongly believed the statement was true (6) (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; e.g., “You can’t really understand someone of the opposite sex”). Higher scores indicated beliefs that men and women are different from each other (pre $\alpha = .731$; post $\alpha = .768$).

Research Questions

Research Question 1: Do couple and relationship education (CRE) classes alter the gender role attitudes of participants, and does this change vary by curriculum?

Research Question 2: Does the change in gender role attitudes by curricula vary systematically by the race of the participant?

Results

Table 1. Mean Scores of Participants Before and After RE Program Completion ($N = 853$).

Group	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender Role Traditionalism Scale				
MML	3.311	1.592	3.202*	1.601
European American	3.114	1.533	2.968*	1.611
African American	3.556	1.635	3.493	1.545
BTC	3.786	1.513	3.934*	1.155
European American	3.317	1.494	3.416†	1.524
African American	4.113	1.442	4.296†	1.402
Difficulty Understanding the Opposite Sex Scale				
MML	3.319	1.108	3.197*	1.155
European American	3.241	1.048	3.070*	1.069
African American	3.422	1.180	3.365	1.245
BTC	3.082	1.124	3.146*	1.145
European American	3.334	1.069	3.090†	1.039
African American	2.952	1.132	3.176***	1.198

Note: The *Gender Role Traditionalism* scale ranges from 1 to 7 with higher numbers indicating more traditional attitudes. The *Difficulty Understanding the Opposite Sex* scale ranges from 1 to 6 with higher scores indicating a belief that the sexes are different. MML = Mastering the Mysteries of Love curriculum. BTC = Basic Training for Couples curriculum. † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

Summary of Findings

RQ1 – Do RE Classes Alter The Gender Role Attitudes of Participants?

Repeated measures analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) tests were conducted to examine gender role attitude change over time from pre-test to post-test by curriculum (MML or BTC), controlling for sex and partner attendance. Controlling for partner attendance is meant to remove dependence in the dataset for couples who attended the RE classes with their spouse (52.8%). First, we examined gender role attitudes using the *Gender Role Traditionalism* scale. A statistically significant time X curricula effect was found [Wilks’s Lambda = .989, $F(1, 669) = 7.462, p = .006$], such that participants taking MML reported declines in gender role traditionalism (i.e., men are the leaders in the couple relationship) and those taking BTC reported increases in gender role traditionalism (see Table 2).

The second measure of gender role attitudes was the *Difficulty Understanding the Opposite Sex* scale. We examined attitudinal change over time by curriculum. There was a significant time X curricula effect [Wilks’s Lambda = .991, $F(1, 544) = 4.774, p = .029$], such that participants taking MML reported declines in the belief that the sexes are different and those taking BTC reported increases in the belief that the sexes are different.

RQ2 – Do Changes In Gender Role Attitudes Vary Systematically By Race?

To address research question two, we first examined if European and African American participants began the class with similar gendered attitudes using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) tests with pre-test scores, and then conducted repeated measures analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) tests with pre- and post-test scores separately for each curriculum.

Mastering the Mysteries of Love (MML). For the *Gender Role Traditionalism* scale, European and African American participants differed on their initial level of traditionalism [$F(1, 348) = 6.194, p = .013$], such that African American participants endorsed more traditional gendered attitudes. Yet, there was not a statistically significant time X race effect found [Wilks’s Lambda = .998, $F(1, 315) = .455, p = ns$], indicating that European and African American participants changed similarly toward more egalitarian attitudes when taking MML. Our second measure of gender role attitudes was the *Difficulty Understanding the Opposite Sex* scale. European and African American participants began the program at similar levels [$F(1, 298) = 1.346, p = ns$], and there was not a significant time X race effect found [Wilks’s Lambda = .998, $F(1, 265) = .512, p = ns$], again suggesting that European and African American participants changed similarly when taking MML towards a belief that men and women are more similar than different.

Basic Training for Couples (BTC). For the *Gender Role Traditionalism* scale, European and African Americans differed on initial levels of traditionalism upon entering the RE class [$F(1, 478) = 37.411, p < .001$], such that African American participants began the program with a significantly higher level of traditionalism. There was not a statistically significant time X race effect found [Wilks’s Lambda = .998, $F(1, 352) = .356, p = ns$], indicating that European and African American participants changed similarly towards more traditional attitudes when taking BTC. For the *Difficulty Understanding the Opposite Sex* scale, European and African Americans differed on their initial level of this measure upon entering the RE class [$F(1, 390) = 8.830, p = .003$], such that European American participants reported a belief that the sexes are different at higher levels than African American participants. There was a statistically significant time X race effect found [Wilks’s Lambda = .946, $F(1, 277) = 15.671, p < .001$], such that European Americans reported a decline in the belief that the sexes are different (i.e., men and women are more similar than different). African Americans reported an increase in the belief that the sexes are different. Further investigation is needed to better understand this difference by race.

Discussion

It appears that RE serves as a “specific socializing experience” in altering gender role attitudes as participants are exposed to novel influences in their social environment. RE provides individuals and couples an opportunity to explore aspects of healthy relationship functioning, which has been related to increases in couple communication and relationship satisfaction (Hawkins et al., 2008). The directionality of the gender role attitude change appears to be related to the curriculum in which the participant was exposed. Gendered messages presented in the MML (i.e., common ground and universal relationship principles) and BTC (i.e., emphasis on unique roles of partners) may be inviting participants the opportunity to reconsider or reconceptualize gender particularly in the context of their romantic relationship. In general, there were similar change patterns for European and African American participants who engaged in the same RE class. This provides some evidence that the proximal experience of the RE class may have more of an influence on gender role attitude change than one’s race.

While the authors acknowledge that many of these changes are small (average Cohen’s $d = .10$), these are meaningful findings that further the evidence that gender role attitudes are malleable in adulthood. In terms of RE, intentional and, particularly, unintentional gendered messages need to be carefully examined and their ramifications considered in the context of the gender roles literature as curricula endorse specific gendered messages. At this point, it is unclear whether these observed shifts in gender role attitudes enhance relationship quality.

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