

# *Close Relationships*

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## Roles and Gender

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We often describe a close relationship by depicting its characteristic interaction patterns. One young man portrayed his dating relationship this way:

I play the reassuring, protective father. She is the faithful, dependent child. Her faith and dependency are a form of reassurance and support for me. But there are days when I would like to come to her, as she comes to me, . . . to tell her that I was hurt because my roommate didn't ask if I'd made Phi Bet . . . or that I didn't think that my professor liked me anymore—but I could never bring myself to talk about such sentimental drivel even though I wanted to. (Cited in Komarovsky, 1976, p. 165)

This description highlights regularities in the interaction patterns of the two partners.

Other descriptions of relationships emphasize consistencies in the individual actions of the partners. Thus, a married woman described her husband's activities and her own in their marriage in these terms:

[His] life is a lot easier; there's no doubt about it. He gets up in the morning; he gets dressed; he goes to work; he comes home in the evening; and he does whatever he

wants after that. As for me, I get up . . . get dressed . . . fix everybody's breakfast; . . . clean up the kitchen; . . . get the children ready for school; . . . take [the baby] to the babysitter. Then I first go to work. I work all day; I pick up the baby; I come home. . . . Everybody wants me for something but I can't pay them any mind because I first have to fix dinner. Then I do the dishes; I clean up; I get the kids ready for bed. After the kids are finally asleep, I get to worry about the money because I pay all the bills and keep the checking account. (Cited in L. Rubin, 1976, p. 101)

These two examples illustrate consistent patterns that recur over time within a particular couple.

It is also apparent that the same consistent patterns occur across many couples as well. On any given Saturday night, thousands of young American couples can be found on a date, interacting in somewhat similar ways. In many couples, for example, the boyfriend will pick up his girlfriend in his car, take her to a movie and pay for her ticket, hold her hand during the show, talk about recent events at school or work, and initiate greater physical intimacy on the way home. There will be variations in this pattern across couples, but enough commonality to identify a social pattern.

An important task for close relationship researchers is to describe and explain both consistency and variation in relationship patterns such as these. As Biddle (1979) noted:

It is a fact that human beings behave in ways that are to some extent predictable and consistent and that their behaviors are similar to the behaviors of others who share identities with them and appear in similar contexts. To study and explain these behavior patterns (or roles) is a key problem of the social sciences. (p. 334)

This chapter examines relationship patterns in couples and families. The term most commonly used by social scientists to refer to consistent relationship patterns has been "role." Like power, commitment, and other basic concepts analyzed in this volume, the role concept has been used in a variety of different and contradictory ways. Despite this problem, however, we find it preferable to use the familiar term *role* rather than to resort to a neologism.

This chapter has two major parts. In the first, we analyze the concept of role and contrast our conceptualization with previous uses of the term. We conclude our general discussion of roles with an examination of the types of causal conditions affecting these patterns.

The second part of the chapter examines sex roles in heterosexual relationships. Gender is one of the most basic social categories around which roles are organized. In American society, girlfriends and boyfriends, wives and husbands, and fathers and mothers behave in somewhat different and characteristic ways. No analysis of heterosexual close relationships can be complete without a discussion of gender-linked patterns. Separate sections briefly review research on gender patterns in dating and marriage; present some of

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the current explanations for gender specialization in marriage; and consider the consequences of gender specialization for the couple, the individual spouses, and their children.

## THE DESCRIPTION OF ROLES IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

The analytic framework put forth in Chapter 2 underlies our analysis of the role concept. This framework emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between the description of regularities in intrachain and interchain patterns and the analysis of the causal conditions that produce these regularities. We use the term *role* in a descriptive way to refer to consistent patterns of individual activity (e.g., behavior, cognition or affect) within a relationship. The causal conditions affecting roles include personal expectations, shared dyadic goals, cultural norms, and other individual, relational, or environmental factors that create, maintain, and change role patterns.

Although the distinction between the *description* of roles and the *explanation* of the causal conditions affecting roles follows logically from our conceptual framework, this distinction has not typically been emphasized by previous role theorists. It has been common, for example, to define roles as shared expectations for behavior, rather than as the behavior itself. A major issue tending to blur the distinction between the description and the causal analysis of roles is the identification of the dividing line between the phenomena that constitute a role and the proximal causal conditions that are intimately associated with the role. Suppose, for example, that a husband regularly brings home his paycheck to support his family and that both he and his wife believe that the husband should be the family breadwinner. The husband's behavior is clearly part of his marital role. But, should the spouses' expectations about the husband's behavior be considered part of the role or a causal condition producing the regularity in the husband's behavior? To emphasize the distinction between description and explanation, we will consider expectations to be a causal condition, not a part of the role itself. But it should be recognized that many role theorists have not followed our course. Indeed, it is common in both lay and scientific thinking to identify a relationship phenomenon by pointing to a presumed causal condition, for example, to define roles in terms of social rules for behavior or other hypothesized causal conditions. We wish to avoid this confusion of description and causal explanation.

### The Nature of Roles in Close Relationships

We use the term *role* to refer to a consistent pattern of individual activity that is directly or indirectly interdependent with the partner. Two aspects of this definition require explanation: what it means for a person's activities to be

"consistent" and what it means for such activities to be "directly or indirectly interdependent with a partner."

### Consistency of role patterns

Having said that roles are consistent patterns of individual activity, we need to specify the nature of this consistency or regularity. The first and perhaps most obvious type of consistency is the *repetition* over time of the same activity. For example, we may observe that day after day a mother feeds, plays with, and talks to her child, and we may conclude that these behaviors are part of her maternal role. However, the consistency of a role does not depend exclusively on the temporal recurrence of similar behaviors. Unique or infrequent events can also be part of a role. For example, giving birth or rushing an injured child to the emergency room can be components of the maternal role. Here, role consistency derives from *cognitive conceptions* (a causal condition) that provide meaning and coherence to diverse behavioral events. Thus, birth might be construed as the key event in initiating the mother-child relationship, and seeking medical help might be seen as symbolic of the mother's continuing love and concern for her child. One's conception (either lay or scientific) of the mother-child relationship and one's beliefs about the mother's motives give coherence to these acts and link them to other recurrent patterns. Role consistency can derive either from temporal repetition or from cognitive conceptions of a role. An implication is that the identification of role patterns may require both repeated observations over time and knowledge about important causal conditions, most specifically people's cognitive conception of their roles.

### Direct and indirect interdependence

Not all consistent patterns of individual activity constitute a role. In the case of marital roles, for example, we might intuitively suggest that neither a husband's typical way of brushing his teeth nor a wife's interactions with her bowling league partners are part of their marital roles. Our analytic framework provides a clear criterion for determining which consistent individual activities are part of a particular role—namely, that the individual's activities be interdependent with the partner, either directly or indirectly. Thus, roles involve mutual influence between two or more people.

Perhaps most obvious are roles in which each partner influences the other directly through face-to-face interaction. In Chapter 2, we describe this kind of direct influence as *direct interdependence*. Couples commonly develop characteristic patterns in many domains of interaction—typical greeting rituals, particular styles of fighting, coordinated household routines, and so on. In the example cited at the beginning of this chapter, one couple developed a pattern of interaction in which the boyfriend had the role of "protective father" and the girlfriend had the role of "dependent child."

Figure 6.1 illustrates direct interdependence. In this schematic representation, P's role activities (e.g., being the "protective father") include P's intrachain events and connections (e.g., P's thinking about his girlfriend and wondering what to say next), P's actions toward O (e.g., P's giving advice to his girlfriend), and P's responses to O's actions (e.g., P's answer to O's question). The roles of P and O are comprised of the individual things the persons do, think, and feel. It should be obvious that this figure simplifies the nature of roles in several important ways. Although most roles in close relationships involve lengthy and repeated interactions, the figure presents only part of one interaction. Further, the consistency of P's and O's activities is assumed but not illustrated. The main point of the figure is to show that P's and O's activities are directly interdependent as indicated by the interchain connections in the figure.

In addition, Figure 6.1 also shows that any given interaction may itself influence the causal conditions affecting the dyad. For example, today's interaction may influence the partners' expectations about their future interactions or reinforce a shared habit pattern. Links from the specific

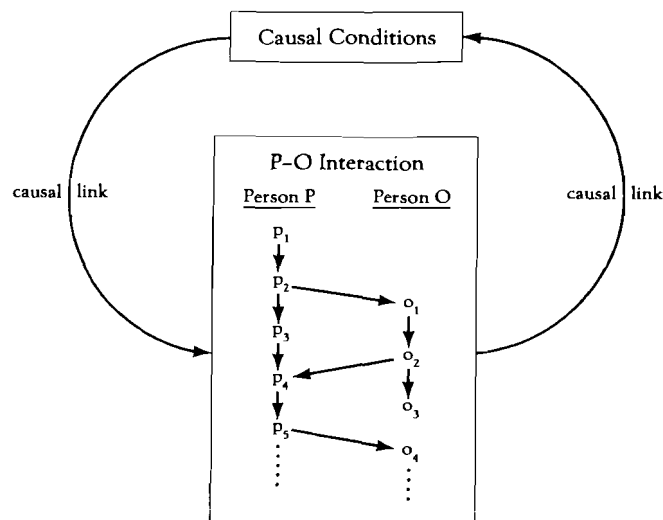


FIGURE 6.1

*Direct interdependence. In this interaction sequence, P and O are directly interdependent, as shown by the P-to-O and O-to-P interchain connections. The elements of P's role shown here include P's intrachain events and connections, P's actions toward O, and P's responses to O. As the causal links indicate, the activities of P and O affect and are affected by the causal conditions of the dyad.*

interaction sequence to various causal conditions indicate ways in which a particular occurrence of an interaction pattern may have more enduring influence on the individual partners or on other causal conditions affecting the dyad. It is often through such causal links that consistent activity patterns or roles are established in a relationship. Figure 6.1 further shows that the occurrence of a particular interaction sequence is itself affected by the causal context of the dyad. For example, P's perception of his partner (e.g., as weak and helpless) and P's personal dispositions (e.g., to be assertive) may affect his role. Figure 6.1 thus shows the reciprocal links between roles and causal conditions.

A less obvious type of interdependence occurs when the activities of one partner influence the other only indirectly. In Chapter 2, we refer to this kind of indirect influence as *indirect interdependence*. In describing the roles of husband and wife, for example, people often refer to *solitary* activities that are elements of marital roles. One spouse's homemaking activities (e.g., cleaning the house, doing the laundry) or breadwinning activities (e.g., driving to work, balancing the checkbook) are usually construed as part of marital roles because these activities affect the other spouse. In such cases, the influence is not through face-to-face interaction, but rather through changes in the causal conditions affecting the dyad. Thus, one person's homemaking activities may influence the family by affecting their physical environment (e.g., by providing a clean, safe and congenial setting for interaction) or their social environment (e.g., by writing letters to friends who invite the couple to dinner). Similarly, marital roles may also include interactions with *third parties* that affect the causal conditions of the couple. Thus, the husband's visits with relatives and the wife's interactions with business clients may influence the causal context of their marital relationship.

Figure 6.2 illustrates indirect interdependence. The figure shows situations in which the solitary and social activities of the partners do not have immediate interchain causal connections. Rather, P's activities alone and O's interactions with Q affect the causal conditions of the P-O dyad, which in turn influence the partners individually or jointly or both. When people comment that one person's behavior is done "on behalf" of another or is "functional for" the other partner, they are often referring to situations such as these. Finally, Figure 6.2 also shows that these role activities not only influence causal conditions, but are themselves affected by the causal context of the relationship. Thus, the married couple's financial need may prompt the wife's return to paid employment and set the stage for her interactions with clients.

We have seen that an essential feature of roles is that these patterns of individual activity involve either direct or indirect interdependence with a partner. It should be emphasized that most roles in close relationships involve both types of interdependence. For example, marital roles typically include

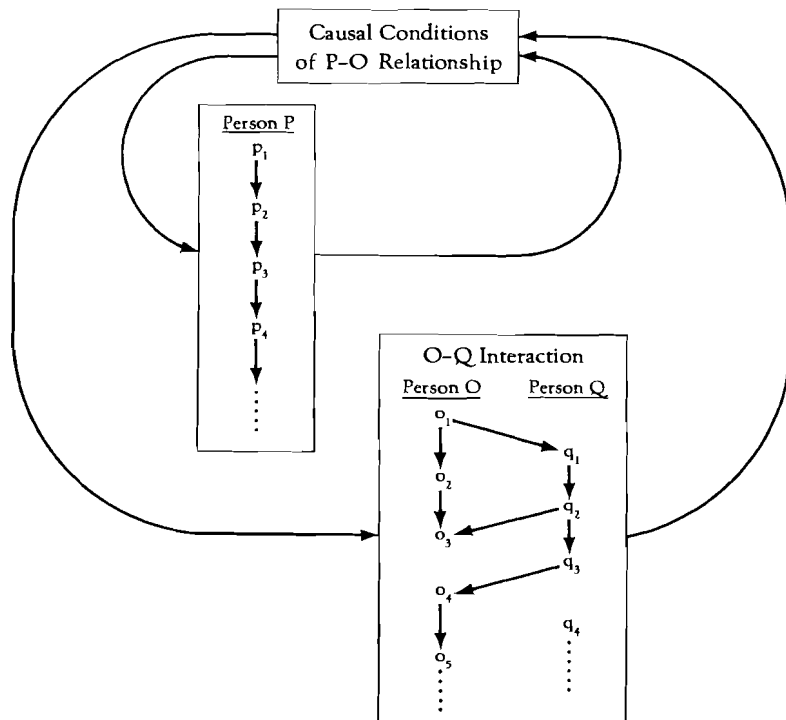


FIGURE 6.2

*Indirect interdependence.* Two types of indirect interdependence are illustrated. P's solitary activities (e.g., mowing the lawn) affect the causal conditions of the P-O relationship, which in turn influence partner O. The interaction between O and Q does not directly include P, but influences P by affecting the causal conditions of the P-O relationship.

face-to-face interaction between the spouses (direct interdependence) and both solitary activities and interactions with third parties that affect the causal conditions of the relationship (indirect interdependence).

### The Phenomena of Roles: Behavioral, Cognitive, and Affective Elements

Roles are comprised of patterns of behavior, cognition, and affect. The connections between behavior, cognition, and affect are often subtle and different to disentangle. We can conceptually distinguish a mother's feelings of love for her child, her thoughts about the child's welfare, and her nurturant behavior, but, in the stream of experience, such components are

closely interwoven. So, too, are the elements of roles. As noted in Chapter 2, the important point from our perspective is that intrachain and interchain sequences can include multiple strands of activity. Although individual researchers may decide to focus on a single type of event, such as behavior or cognition, our conception of roles does not preclude investigation of any particular element.

### Behavior

Behavioral patterns are the most obvious and visible elements of roles. Behavioral patterns have two major features. The first concerns the *kinds of events* that occur in a relationship—the content of what partners do and say. For example, whereas friendship roles may largely involve conversation and recreational activities, marital roles may include a more diverse range of behaviors, including sexual activities, homemaking tasks, and shared involvement in childrearing. As noted earlier, the content of role behavior is not necessarily directly interpersonal. Cooking meals and washing clothes are part of a marital role if these activities influence a spouse at least indirectly. Second, behavioral patterns also involve the *distribution or division of activities* in a relationship. In friendship, for example, both partners may typically perform similar activities but take turns in doing them. In traditional marriage, spouses often adopt a pattern of greater specialization in which the partners engage in different but coordinated activities.

### Cognition

Cognitive processes are part of the specific events and activity sequences that comprise a role. As R. H. Turner (unpublished manuscript) has noted:

The unity of a role cannot consist . . . simply of the bracketing of a set of specific behaviors, since the same behavior can be indicative of different roles under different circumstances. The unifying element is to be found in some assignment of purpose or sentiment to the actor. (pp. 32–33)

For example, baking a cake can be a part of a parent role if the cake is intended for a child's birthday party or part of a worker role if the cake is intended for a bake sale at the office. Role phenomena include the actors' moment-to-moment cognitions—interpretations of behavior, thoughts about goals, and so on.

In planning or thinking about their activities, people often take a partner into account. For example, as a husband drives to work, he may think, "I mustn't forget our wedding anniversary. I hope I get the new raise so we can afford the trip Susan wants so badly." Meanwhile his wife may be deciding to make chocolate mousse for dessert "because it's Peter's favorite." Cognitive processes are also important in interpreting and reacting to the actions of a

partner. Watching her husband do household chores that he dislikes, a wife may think, "He's doing it for me; he really cares about making our marriage work." Partners often seek to make causal attributions about the thoughts and feelings behind a particular action. Dyadic behavior has symbolic importance to participants. What partners do and say cannot be totally separated from their perception and interpretation of these actions. Cognitions are thus an important part of the phenomena of a role. It should be noted, however, that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the momentary cognitions that are part of a role from the more enduring cognitive causal conditions (e.g., attitudes or values) that influence role patterns.

### Affect

Emotional experiences are also an important part of the roles in close relationships. We know intuitively that feelings of love or obligation can motivate our behavior toward a partner, and that specific actions can lead us to feel anger, pride, or guilt. Chapter 4, "Emotion," suggests that intrachain event sequences that are causally connected to the partner are the basis for a person's emotional investment in a relationship. Thus, roles—consistent patterns of individual activity in a relationship—can be sources of emotional investment and so can set the stage for emotional experiences based on interruption.

Other analyses of emotion have suggested several ways in which affect may be connected to specific activity patterns. In *emotional testing* (S. L. Gordon, 1979), people try to gauge their own feelings and those of a partner. For example, knowing that intense emotional arousal is not continuous in close relationships, people may use infrequent events as indices of their underlying feelings. Thus, sorrow at being separated from a partner or renewed sexual passion on a vacation may be interpreted as signs that passionate love is really still alive. Similarly, partners may scrutinize each other's behavior for signs of feelings toward each other. In *emotion management* (Hochschild, 1979), people strive deliberately to evoke, modify, or suppress their feelings. Parents may attempt to heighten feelings of affection for their newborn, and try to put negative feelings out of mind. In *display management* (S. L. Gordon, 1981), gestures are designed to express or conceal particular feelings. We may show gratitude by writing a thank-you letter or conceal anger behind a pleasant smile. In these and other ways, affect comprises an essential component of roles.

### Features of Roles: Diversity, Specialization, and Complementarity

Having discussed in a general way the core phenomena that comprise a role, we will consider three properties in which roles may vary. These are diversity, specialization, and complementarity.

### Diversity

Roles vary in the diversity and complexity of the activity patterns that they encompass. The smallest unit comprising a role is a single consistent or regular action sequence in a relationship. Benne and Sheats (1948) used this fairly narrow conception of role in describing what they called "functional roles" in groups, including such roles as opinion seeker, harmonizer, and aggressor. Folk conceptions also include simple roles of this sort, as when parents tell their children not to be a "cry baby," "tattle tale," or "bully."

Somewhat more comprehensive roles consist of a cluster of related behavior sequences. For example, in an analysis of interaction patterns in families, Zelditch (1955) offered these contrasting descriptions of the roles of task specialist and socio-emotional specialist. The task specialist is the "boss-manager . . . the final court of appeals, final judge and executor of punishments, discipline and control over the children of the family" (p. 318). The socio-emotional specialist is the "mediator, conciliator of the family [who] . . . soothes over disputes, . . . is affectionate, solicitous, warm, emotional to the children, . . . is the 'comforter,' the 'consoler,' is relatively indulgent" (p. 318). Thus, task and social roles are comprised of clusters of related behavioral patterns.

At a still greater level of complexity or comprehensiveness, some roles refer to many diverse types of activity patterns performed by a single person. For example, when one speaks of the roles of husband and wife, one implicitly refers to the wide range of behavior patterns that each spouse engages in as part of the marital relationship. Thus, the wife's role might include being a socio-emotional specialist, a homemaker, a companion, a sexual partner, and so on; the wife role is a composite of many distinct activity patterns.

### Specialization

Role specialization refers to the existence of consistent differences or asymmetries in the roles of individuals in a dyad or group. This property can be illustrated by comparing two families. One family has a high degree of specialization: The husband always makes the decisions, initiates love-making, and is the sole provider; the wife always follows her husband's decisions, responds to his sexual overtures, and is the sole homemaker. In contrast, a second family accomplishes similar tasks with little specialization: Husband and wife share decision making and alternate initiating sex, both have paid jobs, and both do homemaking chores. In the second family, diverse behavior patterns occur, but are not consistently associated with one particular actor. Similarly, in one work group, particular members might specialize in the roles of task and socio-emotional leaders, whereas, in another group, individuals might alternate performing these roles. It is also

useful to recognize that roles may be specialized in some areas and not in others. For example, one study of married couples (Toomey, 1971) found that specialization in the performance of domestic tasks was unrelated to specialization in decision making. Roles can be arrayed on a continuum from highly specialized to unspecialized, depending on the extent to which specific activities are consistently associated with one actor rather than another.

### *Complementarity*

Role complementarity refers to the coordination of roles in a dyad or group. Our distinction between roles based on direct and indirect interdependence suggests that there are two distinct types of complementarity. One type refers to the meshing of individual activity sequences in face-to-face interaction and is similar to the notion of mutual facilitation discussed in Chapter 2. The gracefully coordinated movements of experienced dance partners illustrate this form of complementarity. A second type of complementarity concerns coordination in accomplishing shared goals or functions or in "managing" the causal conditions influencing a relationship. Traditional marital roles, in which the husband specializes as provider and the wife as homemaker, are complementary in this sense because both spouses contribute in essential ways to the well-being of the dyad. In most close relationships, both types of complementarity are likely to occur.

The most obvious examples of complementarity may be instances in which specialized roles mesh in some beneficial way. However, specialization is not a prerequisite for either type of complementarity. For example, two tennis partners have complementary roles in that their actions must be coordinated for a game to proceed smoothly, yet both partners may engage in nearly identical behaviors during a game. Similarly, in a marital relationship, husband and wife may engage in the complementary roles of sick person and nurse, but alternate who performs each role depending on fluctuations in their health. Complementarity can occur either through specialization or through temporal alternation.

We use the term *complementarity* to refer to the meshing of individuals' roles. It should be noted, however, that the same term is sometimes used quite differently. Some role theorists use complementarity to refer to the normative expectations or rules affecting roles. In this sense, complementarity concerns reciprocity in the rights and obligations of role partners. For example, in traditional marriage, the wife is expected to perform housekeeping tasks and is entitled to receive financial support; the husband is expected to provide financial support and is entitled to receive housekeeping services. One partner's obligations are the other's rights and vice versa. From our perspective, this usage describes a causal condition influencing roles, rather than a feature of the roles themselves. Chapter 8, "Development and

Change," discusses another use of complementarity in describing the meshing of the personality needs of partners in a close relationship.

### *Previous Perspectives on Roles*

The framework of Chapter 2 leads to a perspective on roles that differs in two major ways from perspectives prevalent in the social science literature. First, we are eclectic in our view that roles consist of diverse types of activities, such as behavior, cognition, and affect. Traditional role conceptions have often defined roles more narrowly in terms of either behavior or cognition. Second, we employ the concept of role in a descriptive way to refer to consistent activity patterns in relationships. Although we are interested in understanding the causal conditions that influence roles, our definition of role does not include an explanation of the origins of these patterns. In contrast, most previous role definitions incorporate assumptions about the causal conditions affecting relationship patterns. We have attempted to avoid this merging of description and explanation, preferring to regard the two as important and separate aspects in an analysis of interaction patterns. In this section, we briefly describe three major role perspectives and relate them to our framework. (See extensive reviews of role concepts in Banton, 1965; Biddle, 1979; Biddle & Thomas, 1966; N. Gross, Mason, & McEachern, 1966; Heiss, 1976, 1981; J. H. Turner, 1978; R. H. Turner, 1962, 1970.)

### *Structuralism*

The key idea in the structuralist perspective is that societies recognize certain social categories or positions, such as wife and father, and have norms (i.e., rules or prescriptions) about how individuals in these positions should behave (e.g., Heiss, 1981; Linton, 1936; T. Parsons, 1951). Roles are thus defined as culturally based norms for the behavior and characteristics of people in a given position in the social structure. Roles are relatively standardized and impersonal, applying to all occupants of a particular position. Roles exist prior to and separate from individuals. The process of socialization ensures the perpetuation of these cultural patterns across generations; individuals learn and conform to conventional roles created by society. Structuralists have also called attention to the fact that roles are interconnected. The family, for example, can be seen as a social system composed of positions including husband/father, wife/mother, son/brother, and daughter/sister—each with its own rights and obligations. Roles involve reciprocal sets of norms for members of a given social system.

Our framework leads to several observations about the structuralist perspective. First, structuralists define roles as norms for social conduct. Roles thus tell people what they should do and feel, but roles are not in themselves

behavioral or affective. From the structuralist perspective, behavior is construed in terms of role performance, and the focus is on evaluating the match between roles (i.e., expectations for behavior) and actual performance. Second, structuralists do not use the role concept to describe actual patterns of behavior but rather as a causal explanation for the existence of such patterns. The structuralist explanation defines roles as a component of the culture, a feature of the social environment ( $E_{\text{soc}}$ ) that gives rise to observable consistency in behavior. It is not surprising that anthropologists and sociologists concerned with issues of social order should take a feature of the culture as their focus. Essentially, structuralists ask why there is consistency in the relationship patterns of many people within a culture and variation in patterns across different cultures. Their answer is that each culture creates its own distinctive norms for relationships. These norms influence actual behavior through such processes as socialization, conformity, and internalization.

The structuralist perspective is useful in calling attention to an important causal condition influencing roles and in highlighting the interconnectedness of roles in a social system or group. From our framework, however, structuralism has two major limitations. By focusing on norms, it fails to describe actual activity patterns. Equally important, structuralism provides an incomplete analysis of the origins of relationship patterns. Cultural norms are only one of many factors producing consistency in roles. Our own analysis includes a broader range of causal conditions.

#### *Interactionism*

The interactionist perspective proposes that people create and negotiate roles in the course of social interaction rather than merely playing out predetermined cultural scripts (e.g., McCall & Simmons, 1978; Shibutani, 1961; Stryker, 1980; J. H. Turner, 1978; R. H. Turner, 1962, 1970). Interactionists recognize the existence of cultural norms for behavior but note that these norms are often vague or inconsistent and so cannot provide an adequate guide for smooth interaction. For example, there are many possible ways of being a wife or husband, and each couple arrives at its own unique pattern. Interactionists thus focus on the active process of "role-making" rather than on the passive adoption of cultural scripts or "role-taking" (R. H. Turner, 1962).

Interactionists emphasize the cognitive meanings and understandings that evolve from and organize social interaction. During interaction, individuals develop a conception of the self as actor and of the other people involved. Such conceptions enable individuals to develop a "plausible line of action" for the self and to predict how the partner is likely to behave (McCall & Simmons, 1978). In addition, members of a dyad develop unique shared

norms for their interaction, which are only partially influenced by cultural norms (Shibutani, 1961).

Interactionists focus on the process by which roles are developed, rather than on a more static conception of roles, and thus have seldom given a precise textbook definition of roles. Two interrelated ideas can be detected, however: (1) Roles are fairly broad conceptions that each participant holds about the nature of their interaction. In this sense, roles are an individual ( $P$  or  $O$ ) causal condition that influences actual behavior. (2) Roles are shared dyadic norms that emerge from the process of interaction; roles are thus a dyadic ( $P \times O$ ) causal condition that determines individual behavior. Interactionism shares with structuralism the view of roles as normative expectations, although interactionism sees norms as situationally negotiated rather than culturally determined (Hilbert, 1981). The association of these two ideas about roles (i.e., as cognitive conceptions and as norms) in interactionist writing is understandable. In the course of interaction, knowledge about how a person is likely to act takes on a normative quality of legitimate expectation (R. H. Turner, 1968). People believe that others should continue to act in the future as they have acted in the past.

The interactionist perspective offers useful insights about roles, most notably in emphasizing the active part that partners play in shaping activity patterns in their relationship. From our framework, however, interactionism has two limitations. First, the emphasis is largely cognitive; the description of roles focuses on role conceptions and shared norms to the relative neglect of actual behavior or affect. Second, interactionism tends to blur the distinction between describing interaction patterns and explaining their causal origins.

#### *Behavioral approaches*

A third perspective equates roles with observable behavior patterns: Roles are what people typically do and say (e.g., K. Davis, 1949). A recent proponent of this position is Biddle (1979), who defined roles as "those behavior patterns characteristic of one or more persons in a context" (p. 58; cf. R. H. Turner, 1970, p. 214). Biddle justified his behavioral approach by arguing that a focus on observable behavior patterns permits greater conceptual rigor and avoids the common problem of incorporating assumptions about causality into the definition of roles. Biddle proposed that behavior patterns are the phenomena of interest and relegated cognition and affect to the realm of causal factors accounting for behavioral regularities.

From our framework, this perspective has the advantages of including behavior as a component of roles and of carefully separating description from explanation. However, the behavioral perspective's exclusion of affect and cognition as components of roles is a serious limitation. As we noted earlier, the consistency of roles is not merely a statistical matter of repetitive



behavioral sequences but is also a social construction based on cognitive interpretations of behavior.

Our framework suggests several ways in which previous role perspectives have been limited. They have often blurred the distinction between describing the phenomena of roles and explaining the causal conditions affecting roles. They have defined roles in fairly narrow ways (e.g., as only behavioral or only cognitive). They have explained consistent patterns of activity in terms of a limited set of causal conditions (e.g., cultural norms or shared dyadic norms or individual cognitive conceptions). Our framework permits a more comprehensive description and causal analysis of roles.

### THE CAUSAL ANALYSIS OF ROLES IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

The basic questions for a causal analysis of roles are how consistent activity patterns arise in relationships and why they take the particular form that they do. This section sketches in a general way the types of causal conditions that can create, maintain, and change roles. A detailed analysis of all factors influencing roles in close relationships is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, we attempt to sensitize the reader to the full range of causal factors affecting roles. Following the framework laid out in Chapter 2, we give separate consideration to environmental, personal, and relational conditions.

#### Environmental Conditions

Roles are influenced by a variety of factors in the social and physical environment. Clear examples of social influences are provided by dramatic cross-cultural differences in relationship patterns (e.g., Brain, 1976) and by historical changes in relationships in our own society (e.g., Degler, 1980). Two basic questions raised by such evidence are why regularities are found among members of a given culture and why differences occur between members of different cultures.

Anthropologists and sociologists interested in such matters have pointed to the influence on roles of cultural attitudes about relationships. Particular emphasis has been given to social norms for role behavior, for example, to widespread *cultural norms* about such relationships as marriage and parenthood. Indeed, as noted earlier, structuralist analysis equates roles with these cultural norms. It has also been suggested that *cultural stereotypes* (i.e., widespread beliefs about the typical behaviors and characteristics of people in a particular social position, such as husbands or doctors) and *cultural values* (e.g., about the importance or usefulness of marriage and children) affect role

patterns. The basic idea is that cultures develop unique guidelines for relationships that create consistency in the relationships of members of that culture.

The specific mechanisms through which social and cultural factors affect roles in a particular dyad have seldom been analyzed explicitly (see J. H. Turner, 1978, pp. 353–358). The presumption has been that these generalized social attitudes are communicated to individuals through a process of socialization involving parents, peers, schools, the mass media, and other social institutions. Individuals learn these social attitudes and to some extent adopt, internalize, and conform to these social patterns. Thus, elements of culture become part of the individual's personality (Bates & Harvey, 1975). For example, prior to marriage, boys and girls learn attitudes and values about marriage from their culture and acquire those skills and traits that are considered "appropriate" for their sex. As a result, individuals entering marriage have congruent expectations about the nature of marriage and have specialized skills and interests. Although some individual differences in exposure to cultural beliefs occur, the process of socialization is thought to perpetuate general cultural patterns across generations. One implication is that regular patterns should appear right from the start of a relationship since partners bring a "blueprint" with them and have only to put it into practice.

Although the social environment has profound influence on relationship patterns, several limitations of social influences have been noted. First, although some relationships, such as those in the military, are strongly governed by norms, other relationships, such as friendship, are not. For many kinds of relationships, cultural norms are fairly vague, rather than literal or explicit. Thus, as interactionists emphasize, partners in a relationship may have to create their own norms for conduct. Second, the presumed widespread cultural consensus about norms may not always exist. Especially in times of social change, divergent and contradictory social norms may coexist in a society. Third, the mere existence of cultural norms and attitudes does not prove that they actually cause observed interaction patterns. In a recent critique, Hilbert (1981) suggested that cultural norms are typically invoked after the fact as justifications of behavior "to clear up confusion, sanction troublemakers, instruct others in the ways of the world, and so forth" (p. 217). That actors are aware of cultural norms does not mean that such norms actually control their behavior. (Nor does lack of awareness of social norms necessarily indicate that norms do not affect behavior.)

The physical environment can also influence roles by determining the tasks that individuals must accomplish and by affecting the conditions under which social interaction occurs. Marital roles are often shaped by the necessity of providing food, shelter, and clothing. The degree of privacy available to young lovers can influence their interaction. Another illustration is the impact of technology: Anthropological studies suggest that there is less

male–female role specialization in cultures based on hunting and gathering or on horticulture than in societies based on farming or industry (Basow, 1980).

### Personal Conditions

Roles are shaped by the individual characteristics that partners bring to a relationship and that develop as a result of interaction. In the sociological literature on roles, much emphasis has been given to individuals' role conceptions—their generalized and relatively enduring impressions or summary beliefs about the nature of their relationship. Role theorists postulate a basic tendency for people to shape and organize their experience into coherent cognitive portraits:

A concept such as the father role is not primarily a category devised by an investigator to describe the order he observes. Rather, it is a conception which the subjects of his investigation hold and which organize their behavior in situations involving fathers. (R. H. Turner, 1957, p. 131)

R. H. Turner (1979/1980) has used the term *working role conception* to refer to individuals' understanding of their own roles and those of others. Turner emphasized that actors conceive of the self and others not simply in terms of a catalog of typical behaviors, but rather in terms of characteristic goals and means. Thus, a role conception consists of a person's perception of the relationship and beliefs about the characteristics and motives of the self and the partner.

Role conceptions give meaning to interaction and help individuals to appraise their own behavior and their partner's behavior. Thus, a man might believe that working hard at his job, taking care of his health, saving money, helping his children with schoolwork, and spending weekends at home are all important parts of his father role because all contribute to the welfare of his children. The unifying theme among these diverse activities derives from the motives of the actor. Another illustration of how a cognitive conception might affect role behavior is provided by an expert on childcare in a discussion of crying behavior:

If you pick up the baby when it cries and it stops crying, you can view the baby either as "socially responsive" (it made a demand and was satisfied when it was answered) or you can see it as "exploitative and spoiled." There is a tendency to construct a fantasy about [a baby] from the way that you perceive the crying and then to handle the baby accordingly. (Hotchner, 1979, p. 61)

Cognitive schemas provide a guide for interpreting and evaluating roles in close relationships.

Other relatively stable personality characteristics can also create and maintain consistent activity patterns. The impact of such personal characteristics is perhaps most obvious in considering differences among couples who share a common social and physical environment. For example, to explain why variation occurs among white middle-class American couples with similar social backgrounds, investigators might look to the more unique qualities of the individuals involved.

The conceptualization of individual characteristics depends in large part on the theoretical orientation of the researcher. For example, social exchange theorists might conceptualize diverse personal attributes in terms of "interpersonal resources" (see Chapter 5, "Power"). A more psychodynamically oriented investigator might emphasize individual needs or motives. A nonexhaustive list of possible individual characteristics that can affect interactive roles would include

abilities	perceptions
age	physical attributes
attitudes	physiological capacities
cognitive schemas	psychological needs or motives
expectations	role conceptions
gender	self-concept
goals	self-esteem
interests	skills
knowledge	traits

Such factors are invoked to account for the fact that partners have relatively stable preferences or dispositions that provide a motivational underpinning for their interaction. As Chapter 5 indicates, partners often influence the course of their interaction both deliberately and unintentionally; partners try with varying degrees of success to structure interaction in accord with their own preferences. The partners' repertoires of abilities, skills, and knowledge also influence the nature of their roles. For example, children's friendships are influenced by the maturity of the children's mental and physical abilities (Z. Rubin, 1980).

Although there is much agreement that individual differences in personal characteristics influence roles, there is considerably more controversy about the origins of these personal characteristics. The issue here concerns tracing the chain of causality further back to locate the more historical causes of individual differences. In this instance, causal analyses depend heavily on prevailing theories about the origins of individual behavior and dispositions—

on theories of personality development. Most social science work has emphasized processes of socialization and the extent to which individual differences result from the person's learning history. There can be little doubt that many personal characteristics influencing dyadic interaction are heavily affected by socialization. At the same time, there is also clear evidence of biological influences on dyadic interaction. For example, certain basic sex differences in reproduction and lactation can have important effects on heterosexual roles, especially in cultures in which birth control and bottle feeding are not available. Current thinking has outgrown simplistic debates about whether behavior is caused exclusively by learning or by biology. Our own framework is neutral with regard to the relative causal importance of nature and nurture.

Our framework does, however, suggest several observations about individual causal factors. Although we have discussed personal characteristics as a cause of interaction patterns, it should be clear that the direction of causation is reciprocal. Experience in close relationships can shape and change attitudes, values, and other personal characteristics—sometimes further increasing the consistency of role patterns. Second, as with environmental factors, there is a need for better demonstrations that specific personal characteristics actually do influence relationship patterns; plausible assumptions in this area need to be subjected to empirical test. Third, there is a need to bring greater order to the current plethora of concepts for personal characteristics. Our understanding of the origins of roles will be enhanced by advances in personality theory.

### Relational Conditions

As discussed in Chapter 2, relational conditions arise from the conjunction or relation between the partners' characteristics, such as their similarity in attitudes, difference in level of education, shared values, or complementary personality patterns. Some relational conditions are based on preexisting personal characteristics that partners bring to a relationship; other relational conditions emerge from joint interaction. Relational factors may be most obvious when we try to explain why an individual behaves quite differently in different relationships. Thus, Susan's dating relationship patterns with John and Steve may be quite different, even though she presumably remains the "same person" with both partners in the "same" overall social environment. The distinctiveness of these two relationships presumably results from the unique match between Susan and each of her two boyfriends. Two examples illustrate possible relational influences on roles. These concern the effects of shared interpersonal norms and the development of interpersonal habit patterns.

### *Interpersonal norms*

A major explanation for the regularity of interaction in dyads is provided by the concept of norms. In a detailed discussion, Thibaut and Kelley (1959) defined a norm as a "behavioral rule that is accepted to some degree by both members of a dyad" (p. 147). Norms can arise in two major ways. First, norms emerge in the process of interaction over time, a point stressed by interactionists. Explicit and implicit norms may result either from trial and error or from negotiation. Norms are thus products of interaction that then influence the character of subsequent interaction. Because norms result from the process of interaction, they can be idiosyncratic to the particular couple involved. An implication of emergent interpersonal norms is that the regularity of role patterns should increase over time as partners evolve their own norms for interaction. Second, norms may be imported into a relationship from the larger social environment. For example, in growing up, people learn many cultural norms about proper behavior in marriage; if these social norms are accepted by both partners, they may provide the basis for dyadic norms.

Several explanations have been offered for the existence of norms in dyads and groups. Most emphasize that norms improve effective dyadic functioning. Typical is the comment of Maclver and Page (cited in Thibaut & Kelley, 1959, p. 134) that, without norms, "the burden of decision would be intolerable and the vagaries of conduct utterly distracting." Thibaut and Kelley proposed that norms are a solution to problems of interdependence that arise in dyads, and, thus, the content of norms reflects the nature of these problems. So, for example, in marriage, norms may develop about how spouses provide for the economic security of the family, divide domestic responsibilities, and spend joint leisure time. Norms are not necessarily the best possible solution to relationship problems, but are presumably an adequate solution. Norms increase the predictability of interaction and so minimize uncertainty about what to expect from one's partner. According to Thibaut and Kelley (1959), one of the most important functions of norms is to reduce the necessity for the exercise of direct interpersonal influence. "Norms provide a means of controlling behavior without entailing the costs, uncertainties, resistance, conflicts and power losses involved in the unrestrained, *ad hoc* use of interpersonal power" (p. 147). Further, norms reduce the costs of interaction and increase dyadic cohesiveness by fostering facilitative interactions, cutting the costs of communication, and ensuring that important tasks are accomplished.

From this perspective, the consistency of activity patterns in a particular couple is based on the existence of fairly stable dyadic norms. The similarity of patterns across couples requires a somewhat different explanation. Two possibilities may occur. First, some types of couples (e.g., newlyweds, college

roommates) may face similar problems of interdependence and so develop similar norms spontaneously. Second, external factors, such as cultural norms for relationships, may affect members of many dyads, producing cross-couple regularities.

The concept of shared norms is not without its critics. Bates and Harvey (1975) suggested that "the concept of norm sharing . . . can and does lead to the notion that norms exist and operate external to the actors who possess them. Some sociologists talk about the norms of a group as though they exist in social space apart from the members of the group" (p. 55). Bates and Harvey are thus arguing against the reification of norms as a third party in a relationship. Instead, they propose that all norms are behavioral rules located within a person. Two people may be said to "share" a norm if they agree about the norms that apply in a particular situation; sharing is thus a synonym for consensus about norms. Sharing presumes some degree of communication between partners to establish the existence of consensus. We also note that, although the existence of interpersonal norms encourages consistent patterns of individual activities in a relationship, roles can exist without partners agreeing about the norms for their relationship. In such cases, individuals might act on the basis of their own personal expectations or dispositions. It seems likely, however, that lack of normative consensus usually leads to conflict in a relationship, and that pressures exist for partners to reach some minimal "working consensus" about their roles.

#### *Interpersonal habits*

Whereas norms are a form of cognitive control of activity in a relationship, interpersonal habits develop from reinforcement contingencies that may not be consciously recognized by those involved. Waller and Hill (1951) described dyadic habit patterns as follows:

The nexus of interaction which is a family may be viewed as a set of intermeshing, mutually facilitating habits. The married pair start with their separate systems of habit. . . . After a time they form interlocking habit systems by modifying old habits and forming new ones; the interlocked habit systems are a great deal more stable than the habit systems of the individual could ever be and rest on a different set of psychological mechanisms . . . [specifically] the habit of adjusting to the situation created by the real or imaginary demands and expectations of others. (p. 328)

Waller and Hill also emphasized that spouses' habits are mutually beneficial. This may often be the case, as in a married couple's efficient morning routine of who gets up first, who uses the bathroom when, who makes coffee, and so on. But other dyadic habits can be dysfunctional. An illustration is the "rejection-intrusion" pattern in some distressed couples (Napier, 1978). One

partner, typically the woman, seeks closeness and reassurance, whereas the other, typically the man, desires greater separateness and independence. When the woman's repeated bids for affection are rebuffed, she feels hurt, rejected, and misunderstood. As a result of the woman's behaviors to increase closeness, the man feels intruded upon and engulfed and withdraws from interaction. Such a dyadic pattern can repeat itself habitually in a couple. Couples who develop such upsetting patterns often feel confused about the habit and wonder why they act as they do. One goal of therapy may be to help couples to understand and break out of such habitual dyadic cycles (see Chapter 10, "Intervention").

In summary, we have briefly surveyed several classes of causal conditions that can influence roles. Our discussion has been illustrative rather than definitive. Three issues in the development of roles deserve note. First, in many analyses of roles, causal explanations have been offered post hoc without a clear demonstration that the hypothesized causal link does in fact exist. In future research, the identification of potential causal conditions needs to be augmented by empirical verification.

Second, we have treated various causal conditions separately. In fact, causal links are more complex than we have suggested. For example, cultural norms influence roles, but the reverse can also occur. When role patterns change among many couples, as in the recent increase in American mothers working for pay, general cultural norms about maternal employment also change. Any particular relationship pattern is usually sustained by a web of interconnected causal factors. Isolating the effect of any one causal condition is often difficult.

Finally, our discussion has presented a rather static image of roles. Individual activity patterns are seldom rigidly scripted; variations occur within broad patterns of consistency. Nor are established roles set in concrete. Changes in any single causal condition can produce changes in a role. Such events as the arrival of a new baby, a wife's entry into the paid labor force, a husband's serious illness, or the family's starting therapy can change role patterns.

#### GENDER PATTERNS IN DATING AND MARRIAGE

We turn now from a general discussion of roles to a more focused examination of sex-linked roles in dating and marriage. Gender is one of the most basic elements affecting the patterning of activity in close relationships. We begin by reviewing research findings about sex differences in relationships and then discuss efforts to create composite portraits of role patterns through the development of marital role typologies.

### Gender Differences in Dating and Marriage

Sex difference research has examined both the nature of interaction patterns in relationships and individual characteristics of partners that may influence their interaction. Empirical findings thus provide information about the nature of gender-based roles and about some of the causal conditions influencing these roles. Although we will highlight the description of sex-linked roles, we will also refer to relevant causal conditions as it seems appropriate. (For a more detailed literature review, see Peplau & Gordon, in press; Deaux, 1976.)

#### *Falling in love*

College men and women appear to differ in their beliefs or ideologies about the nature of love (Peplau & Gordon, in press; Z. Rubin, Peplau, & Hill, 1981). Men are more likely to endorse "romantic" beliefs, such as that true love lasts forever, comes but once, is strange and incomprehensible, and conquers barriers of custom or social class. Women are more likely to be "pragmatists" who say that we can each love many people, that economic security is as important as passion, and that some disillusionment usually accompanies long-term relationships. When it comes to actual experiences in love, however, the pattern changes. On standardized measures of the intensity of feelings of love, young men and women appear to love their partners equally (Z. Rubin et al., 1981). But, in dating relationships, women are more likely than men to report emotional symptoms of love, such as feeling euphoric, having trouble concentrating, or feeling as though they are "floating on a cloud" (e.g., K. K. Dion & Dion, 1975). It is unclear whether these findings represent actual sex differences in the experience of love or women's greater willingness to reveal such symptoms to researchers.

#### *Self-disclosure*

The sharing of personal feelings and information is often considered the hallmark of an intimate relationship. Folk wisdom suggests that men are less expressive than women, but empirical studies reveal a more complex picture (see review by Peplau & Gordon, in press). It is useful to distinguish preferences about disclosure from the level and content of actual disclosure. There is considerable evidence that women *prefer* greater self-disclosure in relationships than men. In actual interaction, however, a norm of reciprocity often encourages similar levels of disclosure between partners; the *amount* of actual disclosure may thus represent a compromise between the preferences of both partners. In marriage, equal disclosure between spouses is common. However, when asymmetries in disclosure do occur, it is typically the wife who discloses more (e.g., Hendrick, 1981). Recent studies of college dating

couples (e.g., Z. Rubin, Hill, Peplau, & Dunkel-Schetter, 1980) have found few overall sex differences in level of disclosure, suggesting that younger educated couples may be moving away from the traditional pattern of silent men and talkative women. Finally, even when men and women disclose equal amounts, sex differences have been observed in the *content* of their self-disclosures. For example, men are more likely than women to reveal their strengths and conceal their weaknesses (e.g., Hacker, 1981).

#### *Language and nonverbal communication*

Sex differences in communication are evident not only in what the sexes reveal verbally to each other but, perhaps more importantly, in how they interact nonverbally. Research (see Deaux, 1976; Henley, 1977) has found consistent sex differences in the use of language and nonverbal behavior. For example, men do more verbal interrupting, claim greater personal space, initiate more touching, and are poorer at decoding nonverbal communication. Unfortunately, few of the studies in this area have explicitly investigated close relationships. Two exceptions are noteworthy. Fishman (1978) analyzed spontaneous conversations in heterosexual couples. Women appeared to be more supportive of male speakers than vice versa. Women asked three times as many questions as men and were more skilled at using "mm's" and "oh's" to indicate interest and attention. Noller (1980) found that wives were better at encoding nonverbal messages than were husbands.

#### *Instrumental activities*

Close relationships involve not only the exchange of confidences, but also the accomplishment of instrumental tasks. For a dating couple, instrumental tasks may include planning a picnic or organizing a party. For married couples, instrumental tasks typically include providing for the economic welfare of the family, maintaining a joint household, and raising children. Pleck (1981a) has distinguished between paid employment and family work (i.e., housework and childcare). We will consider each type of work separately.

In recent years, women's participation in *paid employment* has increased dramatically, decreasing men's exclusive role as the family wage earner. In 1950, only 25 percent of married women worked for pay; by 1978, that figure had risen to 48 percent (U.S. Census, 1979). Today, more than half of all married women work outside the home, including many mothers of small children, and this percentage rises annually. Among unmarried younger adults, a dual-worker pattern is often preferred in marriage to the traditional male breadwinner pattern. For example, Peplau and Rook (1978) found that 65 percent of college women and 48 percent of college men said they preferred a marriage in which the wife worked full-time; another 25 percent

of students preferred that the wife work part-time. The causes and consequences of this change in marital roles have been the topic of much debate.

There is also clear evidence that husbands and wives perform different types and amounts of *family work*. For example, Blood and Wolfe (1960) found that husbands usually specialized in mowing the lawn, shoveling snow, and doing household repairs; wives usually did the dishes, straightened up the living room, and made the husband's breakfast. The most detailed information about family work patterns comes from time-budget studies (e.g., R. A. Berk & Berk, 1979; S. F. Berk, 1980; Pleck & Rustad, 1980; Robinson, 1977; Walker, 1970; Walker & Woods, 1976). Results of these investigations support two conclusions: First, wives do the bulk of household work and childcare. Second, this pattern of family work is not dramatically altered if the wife also has full-time employment outside the home.

In an illustrative study, Robinson (1977) found that the husbands' total family work averaged about 11.2 hours per week. The amount of time a husband spent on family chores was *not* related to whether his wife worked outside the home. In contrast, wives who were full-time homemakers spent about 53.2 hours per week on family work, and wives employed full-time spent 28.1 hours per week on family work. Thus, employed wives spent more than twice as many hours on family work as did their employed husbands. The consequence is that employed wives have significantly less free time than either full-time homemakers or employed husbands. Another study (Robinson, Yerby, Fieweger, & Somerick, 1977) found that, in a family with an employed wife and a preschool child, the husband had roughly 339 minutes of "free time" per day compared to only about 221 minutes for the wife—a difference of two hours each day. Women perform the bulk of homemaking and childcare activities, regardless of whether they have a paid job outside the home.

There is some indication that these sex differences in family work may be decreasing. In a recent review, Pleck (1981a) argued that, in the 1970s, women's contribution to family work decreased and men's increased; estimates of the amount of change range from 5 percent to 20 percent for each sex. Pleck suggested that this trend signals an increased convergence in the patterns of paid work and family work for both sexes and that it has reduced the role overload previously experienced by some employed wives. Whether Pleck's view of recent trends will be corroborated by future studies is an important unanswered question. Nevertheless, gender-based specialization in family work remains typical in American marriages.

#### *Decision making and influence strategies*

Research on power and decision making in dating and married couples (see Chapter 5, "Power"; Peplau & Gordon, in press) leads to three general conclusions. First, in many couples, men and women specialize in different

areas of decision making. In marriage, for example, husbands are more likely to make decisions about the family car and insurance; wives are more likely to decide about meals and home decorating (e.g., Centers, Raven, & Rodrigues, 1971). In dating, boyfriends may have greater say about recreational activities, and girlfriends may have more say about sexual intimacy in the relationship (Peplau, 1979).

Second, attempts to assess the overall balance of power or the dominance structure in relationships (see Chapter 5; Peplau & Gordon, in press) find that many American couples perceive their relationships as egalitarian; these partners report that decision making is mutual or divided equally. When dating and marriage are not seen as egalitarian, however, it is much more often the man rather than the woman who is dominant.

Third, the sexes may use somewhat different tactics to try to influence each other. In one study (Raven, Centers, & Rodrigues, 1975), wives were more likely to attribute "expert" power to their husband than vice versa; husbands said their wives more often used "referent" power, appealing to the fact that they were all part of the same family and should see eye to eye. In a study of dating couples (Falbo & Peplau, 1980), men were more likely than women to report using direct and mutual power strategies, such as bargaining or logical arguments. In contrast, women were more likely to report using indirect and unilateral strategies, such as withdrawing or pouting.

#### *Conflict and aggression*

A few studies (see review by Peplau & Gordon, in press) suggest that men and women may respond differently in couple conflict situations. For example, Raush, Barry, and Hertel (1974) reported that in role-play situations husbands more often acted to resolve conflict and restore harmony; wives more often were cold and rejecting or used appeals to fairness and guilt. The researchers speculated that "women, as a low power group, may learn a diplomacy of psychological pressure to influence male partners' behavior" (p. 153). Kelley, Cunningham, Grisham, Lefebvre, Sink, and Yablon (1978) found that both members of young couples expected women to react to conflict by crying, sulking, and criticizing the boyfriend's insensitivity; both sexes expected men to show anger, reject the woman's tears, call for a logical approach to the problem, and try to delay the discussion. In actual dating relationships, partners reported that their own conflict interactions were consistent with these stereotypes. Kelley et al. suggested that men are conflict-avoidant people who find the display of emotion uncomfortable and upsetting, and that women are conflict-confronting people who are frustrated by avoidance and ask that problems be discussed and feelings be considered.

Although Americans like to think of their close relationships in sentimental terms, much physical violence occurs in heterosexual couples (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Steinmetz (1978) estimated that

roughly 3.3 million American wives and over a quarter million American husbands have experienced severe beatings from their spouse. Although wives are considerably more likely to be the victims of physical abuse, the rates of homicide, the most extreme form of spousal violence, are remarkably similar for husbands and wives.

#### *Reactions to relationship dissolution*

The ending of a love relationship is often a difficult and stressful experience. Evidence suggests, however, that men tend to react more negatively to breakups than do women. Summarizing research on the effects of marital disruption on mental and physical health, Bloom, White, and Asher (1979) concluded that "the link between marital disruption and a variety of illnesses and disorders is stronger for men than for women" (p. 192). Divorce is associated with significantly greater increases in the rates of admission to mental hospitals, suicide, alcoholism, and mortality for men than for women. There is also evidence that men may react more severely than women to the ending of a dating relationship. Z. Rubin, Peplau, and Hill (1981) found that boyfriends were less sensitive to problems in their relationship, less likely to foresee a breakup, less likely to initiate a breakup, and tended to have more severe emotional reactions to the ending of the relationship. They concluded that "women tend to fall out of love more readily than men" (p. 825).

#### *Personal attitudes and values about relationships*

Much of the current research on sex differences has focused on individual attitudes rather than on actual behavior in dyads. From our perspective, such studies provide information about individual causal conditions affecting roles in relationships. Research (reviewed by Peplau & Gordon, in press) indicates much commonality in what Americans want in close relationships, regardless of their gender. Most people express a desire for a permanent relationship, regardless of their gender. Both sexes value companionship and affection and give relatively less importance to economic security and social status in a relationship. In actual relationships, male-female similarity is usually further enhanced by the selection of a partner who shares compatible attitudes and who is similar in background.

Several sex differences have been found, however. In general, men have more conservative attitudes about roles in dating and marriage; men favor traditional sex-role specialization to a great extent than do women (e.g., J. Scanzoni & Fox, 1980). Women view verbal self-disclosure as more important in a relationship than do men. Among educated young adults, women also show greater concern than do men about maintaining personal independence outside their love relationships by having their own friends or career (e.g., Cochran & Peplau, 1983). Finally, there is some evidence that

men and women prize somewhat different qualities in an ideal love partner (Deaux, 1976). Women more often value men's experience, intelligence, and occupational achievements; men more often seek partners who are youthful and sexually attractive. Thus, men and women are likely to enter dating and marital relationships with somewhat different personal values and preferences. These, in turn, may account for some of the gender-based role differences that occur in dating and marriage.

#### *Typologies of Marital Roles*

The identification of sex differences provides a starting point for understanding gender-linked roles. But a full analysis must go beyond a simple list of differences to understand the patterning and internal organization of boyfriend-girlfriend and husband-wife roles. The task is thus to identify packages of consistent intrachain activities and their interchain connections. Several issues are important: First, we have seen that there are variations between close relationships in the existence of sex-linked differences; for example, in some couples, both partners disclose equally, and, in others, women reveal more than men. How are we to account for such between-couple variations? A second issue concerns the patterning of different aspects of interaction within a close relationship. How are self-disclosure, power, and the division of labor interrelated—if at all? Finally, how do the actions of each partner—for example, his involvement in work and her involvement in childcare, his verbal inexpressiveness and her talkativeness—mesh or interrelate? The development of role typologies has been one approach to answering these questions.

Typology construction has commonly proceeded on a somewhat intuitive basis, drawing on both empirical findings and the investigator's own understanding of relationship patterns. Typologies usually combine the description of role patterns with assumptions about major causal conditions influencing the patterns. Typologies represent "ideal types" or abstractions that are not perfectly represented in any one unique relationship. Most typologies of marital roles have not been subjected to systematic empirical testing; such testing would be a useful direction for future research. The value of typologies lies in the effort to conceptualize both the diversity of relationship patterns that coexist in contemporary society and the internal consistency of role patterns in a particular relationship.

Researchers have proposed numerous typologies of family roles, typically in an attempt to characterize gender-based role specialization in marriage. In an early work, E. W. Burgess and Locke (1960) contrasted the family as an institution and as companionship. In the institutional pattern, the family is an economic production unit headed by a strong patriarch and based on social norms and laws. In the companionship pattern, the family is based on

mutual love and affection, is run by democratic consensus, and has lost its economic function. More recently, M. Young and Willmott (1973) contrasted the patriarchal family and the "symmetrical" family. L. Scanzoni and Scanzoni (1976) identified four patterns in which the relations between husband and wife are that of "owner and property," "head to complement," "senior partner and junior partner," and "equal partners."

Although these typologies represent somewhat different attempts to characterize marital roles, they consistently point to the importance of two basic dimensions: The first concerns the power relations between the sexes, the extent to which the husband is more dominant than the wife. The second dimension concerns the extent of role specialization between the spouses. This includes both activities internal to the couple, such as self-disclosure and housework, and activities external to the couple, such as participation in the paid work force.

We find it useful to distinguish three contemporary patterns of marital roles. Our typology represents a synthesis of existing typologies and draws heavily on Pleck's (1976) analysis of male sex roles. Our typology contrasts traditional, modern, and egalitarian marital roles.

#### *Traditional marriage*

In traditional couples, the husband is more dominant than the wife, and there is considerable male-female role specialization. Descriptions of traditional marriages are provided in the work of Bott (1971), Gans (1962), Komarovsky (1967), LeMasters (1975), and L. Rubin (1976). Most of these studies focus on working-class families, and traditionalists may be more common in this group. But traditional marriage is not confined to any one social class.

A happily married British couple interviewed by Bott (1971) illustrates the traditional pattern:

Mr. and Mrs. Newbolt took it for granted that men had male interests and women had female interests and that there were few leisure activities that they would naturally share. In their view, a good husband was generous with the housekeeping allowance, did not waste money selfishly on himself, helped his wife with the housework if she got ill, and took an interest in the children. A good wife was a good manager, an affectionate mother, a woman who . . . got along well with her own and her husband's relatives. A good conjugal relationship was one with a harmonious division of labor, but the Newbolts placed little stress on the importance of joint activities and shared interests. (p. 73)

In this family, the husband controlled the money; Mrs. Newbolt did not even know how much her husband earned. The Newbolts had separate circles of friends; she socialized with women neighbors and relatives, and he spent time

with male friends who enjoyed cycling and cricket. Although Bott tells us little about emotional expressiveness in this couple, it appears to have been limited.

In the traditional marriage, partners believe that the husband should have greater authority than his wife; deference is important, both pragmatically and symbolically. But actual decision-making patterns are often complex, with the wife making decisions about home management and childcare and both partners discussing major family decisions. Nonetheless, the husband retains ultimate control of family decisions. L. Scanzoni and Scanzoni (1976) likened the husband's position to that of a president in a democracy, in which certain powers can be delegated but the chief executive has final responsibility.

Partners in a traditional marriage believe that the sexes should have specialized roles in marriage. This belief is often justified in terms of religious teachings or presumed biological differences between the sexes. The traditional wife does not work outside the home for pay. Prior to marriage, she is supported by her father; following marriage, she is supported by her husband. The wife does not enter paid employment, in part because such activity would reflect negatively on her husband's ability as provider and breadwinner, indeed on his very manhood. It would also be incompatible with the wife's major role as homemaker and mother; wives who want to have a job may be viewed as selfish people who neglect family duties for their own personal benefit. In traditional marriage, the husband does not participate much in homemaking or childcare, since such activities are "women's work." The husband satisfies his main obligation to his family by being the breadwinner; indeed, for some men, duty to family may be a more important motivation for work than the intrinsic interest of the job. Men's and women's work are seen as separate, often incompatible spheres.

Emotional expressiveness tends to be limited in traditional marriages. American society in general emphasizes the importance of marital love and companionship, and few couples are untouched by these cultural themes. Yet, in traditional marriage, many factors hinder open communication and companionship. The widely divergent interests and activities of the sexes may hamper communication. He may not be interested in her talk about baby's teething or new recipes; she may be equally bored by his enthusiasm for sports or politics. Further, traditional men typically believe that men should conceal their tender feelings; masculinity is defined in part by being "tough" and presenting a strong impression to others. Traditional men may not learn how to disclose feelings nor believe that they should. For both men and women, relations with same-sex friends and relatives may be a more important source of companionship than marriage.

Traditional marriage undoubtedly takes many different forms. R. H. Turner (1970) identified three possible elaborations of the traditional role of



wife: In the "homemaker role," a wife develops technical expertise in home management and childrearing that permits her to exert influence over her husband's behavior. In the "companion role," a wife cultivates "social graces, personal attractiveness, and personal and sexual responsiveness to her husband, so that she may serve as hostess to his friends and relaxer and refresher to him" (p. 269). In the "humanist role," a wife becomes active in community and volunteer work. Turner noted that the adoption of these roles is affected by social class and education, and that some women adopt combinations.

#### *Modern marriage*

In modern marriage, male dominance is muted and role specialization is less extensive (e.g., Blood & Wolfe, 1960; L. Scanzoni & Scanzoni, 1976; M. Young & Willmott, 1973). The Carsons illustrate the modern pattern:

Jill and Charlie met in a college drama class 22 years ago. They quickly discovered that they both loved hiking and camping, an interest they have shared throughout their marriage. They spent long hours talking about their feelings and planning a future together. Jill respected Charlie's intelligence and logical arguments, and found herself going along with his ideas in most matters. At graduation, the Carsons were married, and Jill worked as a nurse to put Charlie through graduate school. After Charlie got his first teaching job, they started a family and were surprised by the arrival of twins. Jill quit her job to care for the girls. She enjoyed being a full-time homemaker for a while, but went back to work once the children started school. Although the family moved several times to advance Charlie's career, Jill was always able to find new jobs. The Carsons feel that their marriage has improved over the years, and they continue to enjoy many joint activities.

In the modern marriage, the husband's dominance is less evident. Modern couples believe that both spouses should share in decision making, and wives often have considerable influence in some areas. Nonetheless, husbands still tend to take the lead.

Role specialization is less pervasive. The wife has major responsibility for housekeeping and childcare, but the husband is able and willing to help at home. In modern marriage, the wife's paid employment is tolerated or even approved and encouraged, but it is understood that the wife's work is secondary to that of her husband. If a conflict arises between their jobs, the man's career comes first. It is also understood that the wife's work must not interfere with her responsibilities at home. Thus, modern wives typically work for pay before having children and after children enter school. Modern roles blur but do not eradicate the principle that the husband is the major breadwinner and the wife is the major homemaker.

Modern roles emphasize togetherness and companionship. Pleck (1976) suggested that, in the modern marriage, men want emotional support rather

than deference from their wives. In their leisure time, modern couples typically prefer couple activities over same-sex socializing with friends. Bott (1971) noted that, among the "joint conjugal" marriages in her study, compatibility was stressed and couples felt that their relationship with each other should be more important than any separate relations with outsiders. Pleck (1976) added that, since modern men do not have close friendships with other men, they channel their desires for companionship into marriage.

Partners in modern marriages recognize that they are, in some measure, redefining conventional marital roles. Bott (1971) reported that her "joint conjugal couples" frequently discussed sex differences, rather than taking them for granted as traditionalists might do. The modern pattern departs in important ways from the traditional pattern, but role specialization is still clearly evident.

#### *Egalitarian marriage*

The egalitarian marriage (e.g., Stapleton & Bright, 1976) is best understood as an ideal that some couples are striving for, rather than a common pattern in American life today. At its core, this pattern rejects the basic tenets of traditional marriage: male dominance and role specialization by gender. In an egalitarian marriage, both partners share equally in power, and gender-based role specialization is absent both inside and outside the marriage. M. Young and Willmott (1973) consider this type of marriage "symmetrical" because gender does not determine the division of labor and because the bases of interdependence are similar rather than complementary.

The egalitarian marriage is an attempt to alter the traditional structure of the American family (L. Scanzoni & Scanzoni, 1976). Joint responsibility extends to housekeeping, childcare, and the financial support of the family. The modern idea that husbands "help" their wives with domestic chores is replaced by the concept of equally shared responsibility. Similarly, both spouses typically engage in paid work. A salient value is that both partners' work be considered equally "important"; the wife is no longer the junior partner. Among those contemporary American couples striving for an egalitarian relationship, an emphasis on companionship and sharing is typically important. There is an effort to overcome traditional sex differences in emotional expressiveness.

The central theme in egalitarian marriages is a rejection of the culture's traditional model for marriage. In its place, many alternative patterns for the conduct of married life are possible. Some couples may do housekeeping tasks together, others may take turns, and still others may divide tasks according to personal interests. Similarly, in supporting the family financially, partners may alternate holding paid jobs, experiment with sharing one job, or prefer that both partners have full-time jobs. L. Scanzoni and Scanzoni (1976) view

the egalitarian marriage as "an emerging form—a life-style that may very well represent the wave of the future" (p. 237).

Currently, the couples who may come closest to the egalitarian model are dual-career marriages in which both spouses have major commitments to a full-time professional career. Studies of such couples (e.g., Bryson, Bryson, Licht, & Licht, 1976; Holmstrom, 1972; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1976; Yogeve, 1981) indicate, however, that, although these marriages are often happy, they seldom achieve a truly egalitarian relationship. For example, Poloma and Garland (1971) concluded that only one of the 53 dual-career couples they interviewed was actually egalitarian. In all the others, the wife was responsible for domestic tasks and the husband's job was seen as more important. Even for couples who intellectually endorse an ideal of equality in male-female relationships, this goal is not often attained. Some of the reasons why partners who want an egalitarian marriage may have difficulty in eliminating gender-based role specialization are discussed in the next section.

In summary, the three marriage role patterns we have identified represent different mixes of the elements of power and role specialization. Traditional marriage is based on a form of benevolent male dominance coupled with clearly specialized roles. Egalitarian marriage rejects both of these ideas. Modern marriage represents a middle position.

## THE CAUSES OF GENDER SPECIALIZATION IN MARRIAGE

Earlier in this chapter, we discussed general issues in the causal analysis of roles. Studies of gender patterns provide a more detailed examination of causal questions about roles. In this section, we consider several explanations that have been offered for the existence of gender-based role specialization in marriage. Although the discussion focuses on gender, it also illustrates the various types of causal conditions that may produce role specialization in a wide range of close relationships.

### Personal Conditions

The personal characteristics of partners can influence role specialization in two general ways: First, partners may have similar attitudes that promote differences in their roles. For example, both partners may endorse traditional views of marriage in which the husband and wife are expected to behave in sex-typed ways. Agreement about traditional role prescriptions and their adoption as shared dyadic norms would lead to role specialization. It is likely that role specialization is greater when both partners adhere to a belief in its value. Second, differences in the partners' personal characteristics can create asymmetries in their behavioral patterns. For example, in heterosexual relationships, it is common for the boyfriend or husband to be bigger and

older, have more education, know more about cars and finances, have more ambitious career plans, and so on. These asymmetries encourage role specialization. In any relationship in which asymmetries exist—in age, wealth, knowledge, or other personal attributes—role specialization may be more likely. The influence of personal factors is illustrated by discussions of how attitudes and biological dispositions may affect gender specialization in marriage.

### *Personal attitudes*

The degree of gender-role specialization in marriage has been linked to the individual attitudes of the marital partners. Although Americans' sex-role attitudes have become more egalitarian in the past two decades (Mason, Czajka, & Arber, 1976), many people continue to believe that specialized male and female roles should exist in marriage. Evidence linking sex-role attitudes to role behavior comes from two studies (Beckman & Houser, 1979; Perrucci, Potter, & Rhoads, 1978) showing that people with more traditional attitudes report lower levels of husband participation in housework and childcare.

Recently, much interest has been directed toward identifying the specific attitudes that limit men's participation in family work, especially in dual-worker families in which wives have full-time paid jobs. As noted earlier, in dual-worker marriages, husbands typically spend much less time on family work than do their employed wives. Yet, most Americans, including employed wives, report being satisfied with the division of labor in their marriage (Bryson et al., 1976; L. Harris & Associates, 1971; Robinson et al., 1977). A common theme emerging from studies of dual-worker families is the belief that the employed wife's major responsibility should still be as homemaker and that the husband's major responsibility should still be as breadwinner. The comments of a successful woman professor illustrate this view:

Even though my career is clearly secondary, I don't feel cheated in any way because I want it this way. If I didn't want it this way, I think the marriage institution as we know it . . . would be disrupted and that my marriage wouldn't be a successful one. (Cited in Poloma & Garland, 1971, p. 534)

Even when a wife works full-time for pay, her job is often interpreted as less important than her husband's job or than her own family obligations. Robinson et al. (1977) suggested that there may be psychological benefits in maintaining separate "role territories" for men and women. Both sexes may experience psychological rewards from traditional role performance and may fear loss of these benefits if the activities are shared with a partner. It is also possible that husbands and wives have rather different attitudes about housework and childcare. For example, some women may view their homes as a

personal reflection of themselves to a greater extent than do their husbands. Men may be more casual about standards of cleanliness and less disturbed if others observe a "messy" house. Attitudes such as these may contribute to traditional gender-role specialization in marriage.

#### *Biological causes*

Some explanations of gender specialization point to the personal predispositions that men and women bring to the marital relationship. A specific illustration is provided by recent discussions of assumed genetic sex differences in parental investment (e.g., Mellen, 1981; Symons, 1979; Wilson, 1975). Sociobiologists and others argue that females have a "biologically-based heightened maternal investment in the child" (Rossi, 1977, p. 24). Men, in contrast, have a lessened investment in parenting—a biological indisposition toward childcare. Sociobiologists explain this sex difference by arguing that humans evolved in ways that tend to maximize the likelihood that their individual genes will survive by being passed on to their offspring. Whereas men produce many sperm, women typically release only one egg per month and then must invest years in pregnancy and nursing. As a result, the most efficient reproductive strategies for the two sexes differ. For men, reproductive success (the survival of one's genes) is enhanced by impregnating as many women as possible and investing a minimal amount of time and energy in the rearing of any one child. For women, in contrast, reproductive success depends on maximizing the chances that a few children will survive to maturity; investment in childcare is a necessity. The ultimate cause of men's lesser participation in family work is thus seen as genetic and may operate through sex differences in dispositions that in turn influence behavior.

The sociobiological view is quite controversial (e.g., H. E. Gross, 1979), and support for the position is indirect. For example, it is noted that, in most nonhuman primates as well as in humans, females engage in considerably more care of the young than do males (G. Mitchell, 1981). Many biologically oriented researchers (e.g., M. McClintock, 1979) acknowledge that actual behavior is influenced by factors other than biology. Symons (1979) and others believe that evolutionary influences are most evident in psychological predispositions rather than in abilities or actual behavior. The debate about how biology contributes to observed gender specialization in marriage is likely to continue for many years.

#### *Relational Conditions*

Some explanations of role specialization emphasize the importance of dyadic or relational causal conditions. As discussed earlier in the chapter, shared interpersonal norms and interpersonal habits can influence role specialization

in a relationship. Two additional relational explanations for gender specialization in marriage deserve comment: the functional requirements of social systems and the relative power of husbands and wives.

#### *The functional requirements of social systems*

It has been suggested that the very nature of group interaction creates the necessity for role specialization. In this view, specialization arises from factors intrinsic to a relationship, not from external forces. The best-known statement of the perspective is found in the work of T. Parsons and Bales (1955). Even though many of their ideas were later rejected by subsequent researchers, the Parsons and Bales analysis provides a useful illustration of this general approach. Parsons and Bales argued that

the tendency toward differentiation [is] probably not dependent on any gross differences between persons, upon preexisting cultural prescriptions, or upon any particular task demand, although all of these may play their part. The tendency toward differentiation depends basically . . . on the fact that all social systems are confronted with several fundamentally differentiated problems, and with a limitation of resources which makes it difficult to keep them all solved in short time spans. (p. 300)

Role differentiation in the family or in any other group is thus considered as a special case of more general principles of group functioning. Parsons and Bales believed that role differentiation occurs because all groups must simultaneously accomplish two goals: the maintenance of group solidarity or cohesiveness and the performance of instrumental tasks. As a result, there emerge in all groups two different types of leaders: a task leader concerned with solving instrumental problems and a social leader concerned with maintaining relations among members and relieving group tensions.

Parsons and Bales further argued that task and social roles are incompatible and so must be performed by different individuals. They offered several explanations for the hypothesized mutual exclusivity of these two roles (see also Burke, 1967, 1968). For example, when group members coordinate their activities to accomplish task goals, feelings of frustration, anxiety, tension and hostility commonly arise. Conflicts of interest, reactions to taking directions from the task leader, and other aspects of interdependence create socio-emotional problems. Since the task leader is often the source of tension and the target of hostile feelings, she or he cannot ease group tensions effectively. Hence, a separate social leader is needed. In addition, Parsons and Bales believed that the limited flexibility of adult personality necessitates role specialization: "Society . . . requires a higher order of role differentiation than the normal personality is capable of achieving" (p. 385). Hence, individuals tend to specialize in particular types of roles. All of these factors foster the emergence of two specialized but complementary roles in all groups.

To explain the allocation of individuals to specialized roles, Parsons and Bales had to look beyond the universal processes of social interaction to the specific characteristics that people bring to relationships. In discussing roles in the family, they emphasized biological sex differences in reproduction and physical strength, childhood socialization that builds sex-typed personalities and skills, and other aspects of American society that accentuate male-female role specialization.

The attempt by Parsons and Bales to explain role specialization in terms of universal features of social systems is intellectually appealing. They provided a simple and parsimonious explanation based on the functional requirements of group interaction. Unfortunately, research evidence collected over the past 20 years has failed to support their views.

The assumption that task and social roles are a universal feature of social systems has not been substantiated by research on group interaction (see review by Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill, 1977). Many factors, including group size, the nature and complexity of group tasks, and differences in the abilities of group members, influence whether these two roles emerge.

Further, when task and social roles do occur, they are not necessarily specialized (e.g., R. A. Lewis, 1972). Studies of group interaction (e.g., Bales, 1970) suggest that task and social roles are actually independent, rather than mutually exclusive. Cross-cultural studies of family interaction (Crano & Aronoff, 1978) demonstrate that the degrees to which parents participate in expressive activities (e.g., childcare) and instrumental activities (e.g., subsistence work) are unrelated. Levinger (1964) argued on logical grounds that "social" specialization is a meaningless notion when applied to a two-person group. Whereas instrumental tasks can be delegated and are subject to specialization, socio-emotional activities necessarily involved two people and so cannot be delegated. Levinger thus proposed that, in the marital dyad, "both spouses are task specialists and neither spouse is a social-emotional specialist" (p. 435). His original research and that of others (e.g., Rands & Levinger, 1979; Raush, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974) have supported this view. Additional evidence against the necessity of task-social specialization comes from studies of same-sex dyads. For example, empirical research on homosexual couples (reviewed by Peplau & Gordon, 1983) has typically found a pattern of role sharing and turn taking, rather than rigid task-social specialization.

Recent research (e.g., S. L. Bem, 1981; Spence & Helmreich, 1978) has also challenged the assumption that adult personality cannot encompass both instrumental and expressive components. Studies of psychological androgyny suggest that a sizeable number of adults incorporate both "masculine" (instrumental) and "feminine" (expressive) elements into their personality.

If specialization along task-social lines is not a given of social interaction, then we must look elsewhere to explain the emergence of specialization in

close relationships. Current sociological theory (e.g., Biddle & Thomas, 1966; R. H. Turner, 1968, 1970) does not offer a comprehensive analysis of the origins of role specialization and provides only the most general guidelines. Theorists postulate that, when interaction is both repeated and diverse, specialized roles tend to emerge (e.g., Biddle, 1979). R. H. Turner (1979/1980) proposed that roles must be organized so that they are "functional," in the sense of organizing behavior in ways that effectively and efficiently accomplish group goals. He also asserted that roles must be "tenable"; individuals must experience roles as rewarding and supportive of their self-esteem. Research has not yet specified, however, what constitutes minimal levels of efficiency and viability; it seems likely that these assumed constraints permit wide variation in the nature and degree of role specialization.

The early suggestion by Parsons and Bales (1955) that role specialization follows universal patterns has proved much too simplistic. The origins of specialization are more complex. Specific problems of interdependence may tend to give rise to particular specialized roles, although it seems likely that any particular interdependence problem can have several alternative solutions. The pattern that develops in a relationship is significantly affected by characteristics of individual partners and the social environment.

### Power

Another relational explanation for role specialization emphasizes imbalances of power between partners. In this view, the proximal, immediate determinant of role specialization is to be found in asymmetry in the individuals' status or power. Although the chain of causality can be traced to more distal factors that establish power imbalances, the focus is on the consequences of dominance for role specialization. In a general statement of this view, J. Berger, Rosenholtz, and Zelditch (1980) argued that small groups seldom "create a social organization *de novo*, out of the interaction of their members, but instead maintain external status differences inside the group" (p. 2).

Henley's (1977) analysis of patterns of nonverbal behavior and communication illustrates a power explanation. She suggested that power equality in a relationship leads to reciprocity in behavior. Thus, in relationships among power equals, there tends to be mutual touching, reciprocal self-disclosure, equal sharing of physical space, and similarity of conversational attentiveness. In contrast, among power unequals, the more powerful person initiates more touching, receives more self-disclosure, occupies more territory, and interrupts and talks more in conversation. The patterning of interaction is structured by dominance in the relationship. Finally, and most pertinent to our discussion, Henley argued that many of the sex differences observed in heterosexual relationships are similarly caused by

men's greater power. Henley's analysis is provocative in that it offers a unified explanation for role specialization in diverse areas of interaction, but more empirical documentation of the causal contribution of power is needed.

A further question for causal analysis concerns the mechanisms through which status and power differences influence roles in relationships. One detailed explanation derives from the sociological theory of expectation states (Berger et al., 1980; Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill, 1977). According to this view, external or culturally based status characteristics, such as gender, influence interaction internal to a group through the establishment of performance expectations. High-status individuals, such as men, are expected to perform well, are given more opportunities for task performance, and receive greater approval for their behavior. In addition, Meeker and Weitzel-O'Neill argued from this theory that women are less likely than men to try to raise their own status in a social system by their performance, and that women are less likely than men to perceive competitive behavior as legitimate. A demonstration that parallel processes operate in marriage would be useful.

### Environmental Conditions

Gender-based role specialization is also influenced by the social environment. In the case of marriage, the formal forces of law and religion have long promoted specialization, emphasizing the husband's role as head of the family and the wife's role as homemaker and mother. Etiquette books and guides to married life offer detailed rules for distinguishing male and female roles (e.g., Andelin, 1963). Analyses of social factors influencing gender specialization in marriage are diverse. For example, the increasing participation of American wives in the paid labor force has been attributed both to economic necessity and to changing social attitudes about women's roles. In this section, we consider the effects of social approval and social networks.

#### *Social attitudes*

The behavior and attitudes of married couples are influenced to some extent by social reactions to their conduct. These social reactions may in turn depend on such factors as the social class or educational level of the group, neighborhood, or community. For example, a study of working-class families by Lein (1979) found that men who deviated from traditional family roles by performing childcare and homemaking tasks were often criticized by relatives, friends, and even strangers. Men's peer groups often explicitly ridiculed them for what was perceived as effeminate or weak behavior. One husband of a working wife commented:

I know I do more than most of the guys I know as far as helping their wives. . . . We talk about it at work. We talk about it when we have a get-together with a half dozen couples, and they say, "What, are you crazy?" We get very personal, you know. The guys want to kill me. "You son of a bitch! You are getting us in trouble," and the wives say, "Does he really?" The men get really mad. (Lein, 1979, p. 9)

Thus, the attitudes of friends and family, as well as more general cultural attitudes about marital roles, may influence the degree of role specialization in a particular relationship. This influence can either increase or decrease role specialization, depending on the nature of the social attitudes.

#### *Social networks*

Early studies (e.g., Bott, 1971) suggested that marital role specialization was greater when a couple had a tightly knit network of friends, relatives, and neighbors who knew each other—rather than a more loosely knit network. It was also suggested (C. C. Harris, 1969; Wimberly, 1973) that role specialization was greater when each spouse interacted primarily with a same-sex network. More recent evidence suggests that the effects of network density and sex composition depend on the social norms of network members. Network norms can either promote traditional role specialization in marriage (as in a working-class community) or devalue such specialization (as in a feminist network). Tightly knit and same-sex networks may be more effective than loosely knit or mixed-sex networks in influencing individual behavior toward group norms.

In summary, the various explanations of gender-role specialization in marriage illustrate several more general points: First, gender-linked patterns are affected by a large number of causal conditions; our list is illustrative, not exhaustive. Biological sex differences are only one of many explanations for observed differences between the roles of men and women. Hence, to say that a particular role pattern is linked to gender provides only a first clue as to the actual causal conditions producing the pattern. Second, causation can occur on various levels simultaneously; different explanations need not be mutually exclusive. Third, one of the difficulties in assessing the relative contributions of various causal factors is that they may all operate to produce the same effect. For example, both biological and social factors may work in the direction of limiting men's participation in family work. As a result, situations in which at least one of the presumed causal conditions varies in directionality are particularly interesting. Thus, comparisons of couples in communities that encourage versus discourage gender specialization in marriage might be especially informative.

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF GENDER SPECIALIZATION

Recent changes in the American family, such as the ever-increasing proportion of employed wives, raise important questions about the implications of new patterns for individuals and their relationships. Some popular writers suggest that more egalitarian relationships will ruin our sex lives and destroy the family, but others claim that equality will improve the quality of marriage for both spouses and save the family as an institution. In this section, we consider some of the implications of gender-based role specialization in marriage for the couple, for the individual partners, and for their children. It is useful to bear in mind that marriages that have little gender specialization are not necessarily undifferentiated or unspecialized. Rather, nontraditional relationships may develop specialized roles based on such factors as skills or interests.

### Consequences for the Couple

Traditional role specialization has often been justified in terms of its assumed benefits to the marital relationship (e.g., T. Parsons & Bales, 1955). It has been argued that specialization by gender is an efficient way to run a family, that the separation of homemaking and breadwinning activities reduces potential competition and conflict between spouses, and that the mutual dependence produced by specialization increases the stability of the marital union. Empirical evidence pertinent to these hypothesized dyadic consequences is limited.

One argument, that traditional gender-role specialization is an efficient way to organize family activities, seems plausible. What is lacking, however, is evidence that gender specialization is any more (or less) efficient than a role-sharing pattern or than specialization based on factors other than gender. Researchers have neither attempted to assess systematically the degree of efficiency of family activities nor to compare traditional, modern, and egalitarian couples on this dimension. Time-budget studies (e.g., Robinson, 1977) indicate that employed wives spend about 25 fewer hours per week on housework and childcare than do full-time homemakers, suggesting that employed wives may actually be more efficient in their use of time. It is also possible that employed wives change their standards or methods of homemaking, rather than increasing their efficiency. More generally, it might be questioned whether, beyond some minimal level, efficiency is the most important criterion for evaluating family roles.

A second hypothesis is that gender-based role specialization is beneficial because it reduces competition and conflict in a relationship. If this hypothesis is true, we might expect greater competition among dual-worker couples than among traditional couples. Available evidence generally contradicts this

position, however. For example, Holmstrom (1972) found little competition among the dual-career couples she studied. Oppenheimer (1977) has argued that a wife's employment can actually benefit families by enhancing their status in the larger community. Although wives typically earn less than their husbands, the wife's income can "provide a functional substitute for upward occupational mobility on the husband's part, or [compensate] for a husband's relatively low earnings compared to other men in his occupational group" (Oppenheimer, 1977, p. 404). Oppenheimer also argued that there are many alternatives to role specialization as ways of preventing competition and conflict between spouses. For example, spouses may work in different occupations or in different work settings.

A final hypothesis is that traditional role specialization increases marital stability. As a general principle (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), partners are more likely to stay in a relationship if they depend on each other for important rewards and have no alternative sources of these rewards. Gender specialization, in which the wife depends on the husband for financial support and the husband depends on the wife for homemaking services, is one possible basis for marital interdependence. But other bases of dependence also exist, such as strong feelings of love and attraction or the sharing of pleasurable joint activities. There is evidence (reviewed in J. Scanzoni, 1979b) that traditional role specialization, particularly women's economic dependence, does contribute to marital stability. Wives who are financially dependent are less likely to seek a divorce than are employed wives who are financially independent (e.g., Hannan, Tuma, & Groeneveld, 1977). If one values the permanence of marriage at all costs, traditional role specialization may therefore appear beneficial. However, an alternative interpretation (J. Scanzoni, 1979b) is that the asymmetry of economic dependence in traditional marriage puts wives at a power disadvantage that can force them to stay in an unsatisfying relationship. Increased economic independence could permit women to bargain more effectively to improve the quality of their marriage, and so avoid divorce, or enable women to escape from a hopelessly unrewarding relationship. For many Americans today, marital satisfaction is a more important goal than merely staying together.

### Consequences for Partner Satisfaction

Gender specialization can influence individuals in many ways, affecting, for example, their self-concept, personality, or economic resources. Our discussion focuses on marital satisfaction—partners' evaluations of their happiness with the marriage. The literature on this topic is large and often inconsistent (see reviews in Aldous, Osmond, & Hicks, 1979; Laws, 1971; R. A. Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Peplau & Gordon, in press). In general, most husbands and wives report that their marriage is satisfying, and spouses'

happiness ratings are positively correlated. Differences between the sexes, when they do emerge, are small.

There is little evidence that traditional sex-role specialization enhances marital satisfaction. In a study of British couples, Bott (1971) found no association between marital satisfaction and the degree of role segregation. Similar results were obtained in a study of middle-class American families (Rainwater, 1965). Some evidence has linked role-sharing in marriage to greater enjoyment of couple activities (Rapoport, Rapoport, & Thiessen, 1974) and to reporting fewer serious problems in marriage (Rainwater, 1965). One reason for these mixed findings may be that people's global assessments of marital satisfaction are based not only on their actual experiences but also on their aspirations (Komarovsky, 1967). Couples with clear-cut specialization of husband-wife roles may expect little interaction or sharing between spouses and judge their marriage on that basis. More generally, traditional and nontraditional couples may use different yardsticks in assessing marital success.

Most satisfaction research (see reviews cited earlier) has examined specific aspects of marital roles, rather than global measures of degree of role specialization. Many studies have found that the greater the husband's occupational success and income, the greater the marital satisfaction of both spouses (R. A. Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Recently, Aldous et al. (1979) suggested that this relationship may actually be curvilinear, with extremely low and high occupational success by the husband detracting from the enjoyment of marriage. The impact of the wife's employment is more controversial. Overall marital satisfaction is probably highest when both partners are satisfied with the wife's employment status (Lewis & Spanier, 1979).

Satisfaction in heterosexual relationships is significantly associated with the balance of power or decision making. Studies of married couples (e.g., Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Centers, Raven, & Rodrigues, 1971; Rainwater, 1965) have generally found higher levels of satisfaction among both male-dominant and egalitarian marriages, and lower satisfaction among female-dominant marriages.

The specific pattern of interaction that a couple adopts may be less important to satisfaction than whether the partners agree about the pattern. Several studies (reviewed in Hicks & Platt, 1970; Lewis & Spanier, 1979) document the importance of role consensus or agreement between the marital expectations and behavior of spouses. It seems obvious that an ardent feminist who desires shared roles in marriage will be happier with a partner who supports these views than with a staunch traditionalist. Disagreement between spouses about marital roles is a major source of potential conflict and dissatisfaction.

Several older studies (reviewed in Hicks & Platt, 1970; Laws, 1971) found that marital satisfaction was significantly linked to the wife's ability to perceive her husband as he perceives himself and to conform to his expectations—but not vice versa. Laws (1971) referred to this phenomenon as the norm of wife-accommodation and explained that "an accommodative (or empathic, or considerate) spouse contributes to *anyone's* marital satisfaction, . . . and the social norms decree that it shall be the wife's role" (p. 501).

### Consequences for Children

Is it "good" for children if parents interact in distinctive, sex-typed ways? Ultimately, an answer to this question rests on assumptions about the processes of personality development and the desired outcomes of childhood socialization. Pleck (1981b) has offered a detailed and provocative analysis of social science models of sex-typing and personality development. He contrasts the "role identity" paradigm that has dominated both lay and scientific thinking with a newly emerging "sex-role strain" paradigm.

The role identity paradigm, found in the work of T. Parsons and Bales (1955) and others, rests on two basic ideas: First, to be psychologically mature as males or females, individuals must develop a secure sense of sex-role identity, manifested by having the psychological characteristics culturally defined as appropriate for their sex. It is not sufficient for individuals to know their biological sex; rather they must psychologically "validate" or "affirm" their sex-role identity through exhibiting sex-typed traits, interests, and behaviors. Second, the development of sex-role identity is often a risky, failure-prone process, especially for boys. Because sex-role identity is a learned outcome, it is susceptible to faulty socialization. Parental role specialization is seen as essential to the development of adequate sex-role identity in children. If parents deviate from traditional roles, the paradigm holds, their children will not develop properly and will suffer from an array of "problems," including aggressiveness, learning difficulties, homosexuality, and delinquency. Pleck (1981b) examined the theoretical and empirical support for this paradigm and found it largely inadequate. Data suggest, for example, that individuals who are highly sex typed may actually function less effectively than those who are less rigidly sex typed.

Pleck believes that traditional sex roles can create problems for individuals, but he interprets such difficulties from an alternative, sex-role strain paradigm. In this view, sex-role development involves conformity to culturally defined sex roles. Individuals sometimes experience difficulties because cultural role definitions are internally inconsistent or are incompatible with the person's own temperament and interests. Traditional sex roles can be





unnecessarily confining, and overconformity to traditional roles can be dysfunctional, as when male assertiveness is expressed as physical violence.

The work of Pleck and others challenges traditional wisdom about goals of sex-role development and the importance of parental sex-role specialization. Whereas the establishment of a secure, sex-typed identity was once considered the ideal goal, today some social scientists propose that the ability to transcend sex roles and to behave more flexibly is preferable to the extent to which personal identity must and should be linked to gender identity under debate. This reassessment of goals also calls into question how parents influence children. Although much more will undoubtedly be written on this matter, there is no clear evidence that highly specialized parental roles contribute to the psychological well-being of children.

Our discussion of roles has examined relatively broad and comprehensive patterns in close relationships. Although the concept of role has been important in the social sciences, the term has been used in diverse and contradictory ways. Our conceptual framework has helped to clarify different usages of the term and has provided the basis for our own analysis of role. We have found it useful to employ the role concept descriptively to recognize consistent patterns of individual activity in a relationship. We distinguish the role concept, which describes observable regularities in relationships, from various causal conditions that create, maintain, and produce change in role patterns.

This chapter has also considered the more specific topic of gender-linked roles in contemporary American dating and marriage. Gender specialization is a prominent feature of many close relationships. Thus, a careful description and causal analysis of gender-linked roles not only illustrates the application of more general notions about roles but also addresses central aspects of heterosexual relationships.