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Social Roles of American Women

Enormous changes have occurred in the lives and role involvements of American women in the past century and a half. Our grandmothers led lives different from those of our mothers, who, in turn, experienced different lives from our own. How can we understand these differences and any abiding similarities?

This book examines some of the ways American women have been modifying their social roles. It is guided by the idea that the historically recent processes of modernization or social development affected men and women, urban and rural residents, upper and lower classes differently, but that in general there has been a movement toward greater societal and individual complexity and autonomy (Inkeles and Smith 1974; Inkeles 1983).¹ These processes involve three ideal-typical periods: the traditional, the transitional, and the modern. Ideal type analysis accentuates the differentiating characteristics of the phenomena (Weber 1949). The fact that we can trace these periods in the history of American women does not mean that all women currently living in this society are involved in modern

type roles. Modernization has affected women in different settings differently, as stated above. In fact, most American women are involved in transitional forms or types of family roles, and many even remain in traditional roles of, for example, wife and mother. The complexity of the society and the mobility of world populations insure the presence of all three types in even as modern a society as the American one. The vast majority of the world is still situated in traditional times, as far as women's roles are concerned.

Traditional, preindustrial society embedded women and men in an extended family system, organized usually along patrilineal lines, with patriarchal authority and patrilocal residence. Women's roles were formalized and established in this familistic intergenerational structure. According to Aries (1965), most European men and women were living in one of two worlds prior to the eighteenth century: that of the manor house or that of the village. Within each world each person was involved in a complexity of social roles. Life was public, which meant that each person had multiple obligations to many others and enjoyed multiple rights in relations with them. Mothers were assisted in child care and rearing by extended families, all the residents of households, and even communities. Children moved among adults and other youths with relative freedom but simultaneously were active in contributing to the economic maintenance of the social units. The role of wife was equally complicated by the multiplicity of people with whom she interacted precisely because she was the wife. These roles were embedded in an extended kinship network. The role of homemaker was equally complex—many women managed large households, whether in a village or in a manor. Aries (1965) found manor homes to contain as many as two hundred persons living inside or nearby who operated as a household, with many more coming and going for different reasons. The roles of neighbor and friend, of community and societal member, certainly varied by social classes and by age as well as gender, yet there appears to have been a relative similarity in the life spaces of men and women within each class. Upper-class daughters were educated by the same tutors as were their brothers, since they had to become knowledgeable about managing complex social units. However, formal public education (as in universities) excluded women until relatively recent centuries. Women ruled households and principalities in the absence of men, or in their own right. Each person operated within his or her *okolica*, as the authors of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918–

20) called the territory within which a person's reputation was contained. Among the upper classes, this could include a vast territory with the help of communication and transportation networks. Among the peasants, emergencies and daily life necessitated a tight interdependence of more localized people.

The transitional period of social development, which lasted since the middle of the eighteenth century and even up to recent years in some parts of Europe and America, started to introduce dramatic changes in women's roles (Lerner 1958). Industrialization and urbanization disorganized the ascribed, i.e. assigned, familial and community roles. Mass education and mobility diminished the power of these social units. The combination organized increasing segments of work into jobs away from the ongoing life, and specialized roles emerged in other institutions. The effects of increasing societal complexity first affected middle-class urban men, freeing them from dependence upon the male family line and the local community. The public world of economic and political life, judged to be of primary importance by the blooming American society, became dominated by men. The home lost much of its centrality, and the settings and social circles of women narrowed considerably into a "woman's sphere" (Ehrenreich and English 1979; Sicherman 1975). Although women were freed from the control of the male kin network, they were transformed into personal dependents of their fathers and husbands (Eichler 1973).

This artificial division of the world into two spheres, one much smaller than, and judged inferior to, the other, became difficult to maintain in rapidly developing, complex societies. As the transitional period moved closer to modernization in the last few decades, women started revolting over the restrictions on them and increasingly ventured into male-dominated public arenas. However, the separation of women's and men's interests and developed abilities was so embedded in American society that change was very, very difficult for these pioneers. Structural and sociopsychological barriers often made it necessary for women to focus either on the private domain, centered in the home and family, or on the public, in the form of occupations, careers, and organizational involvements.

Increasing modernization allegedly has made it necessary for all members of a society to share the complexity of its life. Mass education, the demands of democracy, and ideological reconstructions of reality by various social movements, especially that of women, are increasingly individuating people's self-concepts and patterns of

behavior. Women, and in some relations men, are creating or entering negotiated, rather than formalized, social roles.

The uneven rate of social development means that no matter how "modern" or developed a society is considered to be by those labeling social change, many traditional or transitional aspects of major institutions exist side by side with new technology and occupations. This means that not all women have as yet benefited from these changes (if we can call these changes "benefits")—far from it. Poverty, lack of education, discrimination, sexism, and racism keep the majority of women from exercising free choices in their role involvements and limit their rights of negotiation with circle members of many roles. In fact, most men have not benefited fully from social development. Many are stuck in the transitional stage of rigid settings, roles, and schedules. Both men and women are carrying the double burden of traditional and modern role involvements, and are feeling the strain and conflicts. We must acknowledge that even American society has not become fully "modern," if by that we mean providing equal opportunity for the development of human potential. But increasing proportions of Americans are living within, and enjoying, a complex, flexible, and negotiated social life space.

We will examine the changing roles of American women through the perspective of a symbolic interactionist form of social role theory.

Social Role as a Set of Social Relations

A *social role* is a set of patterned, mutually interdependent relations between a social person and a social circle, involving negotiated duties and personal rights (Znaniecki 1965; see also Lopata 1966, 1969b, 1971b, and 1991a).² The *social person* is that "package" of characteristics with which an individual enters a specific role. The *social circle* contains all those persons with whom the person interacts in the performance of *duties or obligations* and from whom she or he receives *personal rights*.³ These definitions and the analyses that stem from them are based on a symbolic interactionist perspective.⁴

The *social person* carries the title of the social role, although it is only in relationship with circle members that the role actually exists. A social person is that package of characteristics that an individual pulls together to enter and carry forth her or his part of the role. The total individual has many characteristics, consisting of a

constructed reality, sentiments, and emotions, as well as behavior, that are not called for or needed in each social role. Human beings live in a symbolic world whose meaning or reality they construct (Blumer 1969). The person of a student is quite different from that of a girlfriend, daughter, or waitress. Thus, a woman wishing to enter a specific social role prepares herself through anticipatory socialization—the process of learning necessary behavior and visualizing the self in the role. She becomes a candidate and, upon acceptance by the social circle, carries forth the duties, and receives the rights of that role. Or she can pull together a social circle and assign duties and rights, as in the role of homemaker.

The title of a role contains the typified, categorical identification, or the ideal image, of how a person is expected to fulfill the role's basic purpose (see Gerhardt's 1980 discussion of Simmel, Weber, and Schutz). A mother must give birth or adopt a child and take on the role in cooperation with others. If she is judged unfit, the child may be taken away from her. She must have the characteristics that will guarantee cooperation from all circle members besides the child, since she cannot take care of the child herself.⁵ The social circle can include the father, relatives on either side, pediatricians, teachers, representatives of the state, and so forth. The title of mother is carried by her into interactional situations (Simmel 1971). It serves as a label, an anticipation of behavior by potential circle members, and as a means of evaluating her as a social person. The title, however, is not the social role itself, since that requires continued relationships between the social person and the social circle.

The whole process by which an existing social circle such as an employing organization selects a social person is indicative of the qualifications deemed necessary for the role. Often latent criteria are evident only in the characteristics of the persons who are rejected. The Catholic church is convinced that women cannot be good priests. Management consulting or law firms have frequently argued (allegedly only in the past) that they would love to hire a black or a woman consultant or lawyer, but that their clients would not accept persons with those identities.

The social person must have the sort of personality that is assumed to be necessary for meeting the purposes of the relations and for interaction with circle members, and must be able to "take the role of the other," as George Herbert Mead (1934) called the process of empathetically understanding other human beings. Physical characteristics such as sight or hearing and locomotion are often

demanding of the social person, unless she or he can prove she or he has the ability to function in the negotiated manner without them.

The *social circle* of a role contains all those people toward whom the social person has duties and who have obligations toward him or her that are that social person's rights that enable him or her to carry forth the role in the agreed-upon manner. The social person's relationships with each segment of the social circle are negotiated, unless enforced by other segments or outside powers. No matter how clearly each contributor to the role has defined it prior to involvement, the actual set of relations always requires flexibility of interaction that must be negotiated. The social circle can best be literally visualized as a circle, as in figure 1. At its center is the social person, with duties and rights of self-maintenance necessary to carry forth other duties.

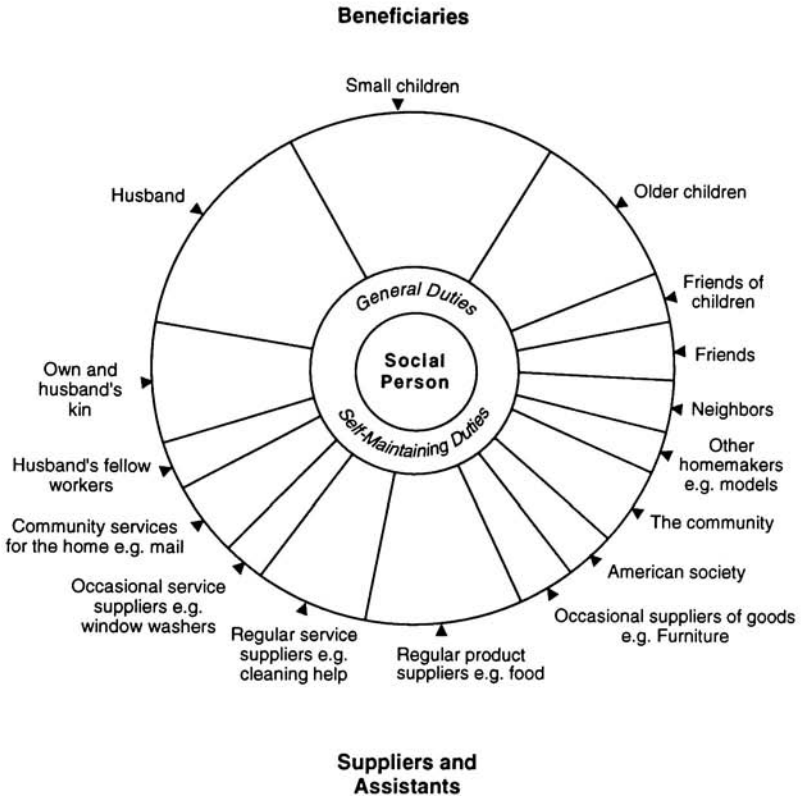
All social circles contain "clients" or beneficiaries, who in turn have duties toward the social person that are part of her or his rights. These rights may simply be the permission to the social person to perform her or his duties. The title of a role often contains a presupposition as to the beneficiary. University professors profess to students, judges judge defendants, architects design buildings for clients. Social roles tend to contain assisting segments of the social circle, which vary enormously in the amount of work they contribute and the duties that must be directed toward them. Each member of the assisting segments must be related to the beneficiary, with duties and rights connected to what they do for him or her. In fact, the beneficiaries do not necessarily receive the greatest amount of direct attention by the social person, as in the case of patients of physicians who have a large staff of receptionists, nurses, laboratory technicians, medical specialists, and hospital personnel who serve as intermediaries. In modern times the doctor often spends more time with these circle members than with the patient for whom all the activity is carried forth.

Many roles contain a "colleague" segment—people carrying forth the same role in the same organization—with whom cooperation is often necessary and without whom there would be no role for the social person. A saleswoman needs others selling goods in a large store. The segment containing suppliers includes anyone whose objects or services make possible the person's performance of her duties.

A social person may have rights to include or exclude members of a preexisting social circle. If she creates her own circle, she will

Fig.1.

THE SOCIAL ROLE OF HOMEMAKER*



* The size of the area represents its relative significance to the role, performed at a complex level. Modified from Helena Znaniecka Lopata, *Occupation: Housewife*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 138.

include those she thinks necessary for the carrying forth of her duties, or those whom she may not be able to avoid. A wife may have to relate with the in-laws who come into her circle with the husband. The social circles of different persons in the same type of role can vary considerably due to the influences of size, setting, the number and social class of beneficiaries. Hillary Clinton, as the manager of the household of the president of the United States, has a different social circle than she had when she lived a more private life.

The *duties* of a social role's central person are of two major sorts: those deemed necessary by all involved to meet the role's purpose, and the relational duties that make the whole process possible. These duties are not necessarily determined by what we would consider logical methods, since they tend to be lodged in history and beliefs about life held by the participants. Certainly, some duties are made inevitable by the nature of the role's purposes. As far as social science has discovered, a social mother is universally supposed to care for the physical welfare of her child, directly or through the cooperation of others. Her duties become even more complex in societies that do not believe that children are born with an already formed personality (Ehrenreich and English 1979). The relatively new theory of the developmental needs of human potential places a heavy burden on the main socializer. The more people that are involved in each child's social circles, the more people with whom the mother must interact to meet the role's purposes. Cultures and even subcultures differ in what is defined as proper care of children and the means used to achieve it. The mother must also recognize and relate to all the circle members, accepting their duties as her rights and giving them the resources they need to help her.

The *personal rights* of a social role include all those resources that must be supplied to the social person so that she can perform her duties as negotiated with circle members. Her rights also include circle members' obligations toward her. The personal rights of a social role must contain the permission to carry forth the duties. As Hughes (1971) and other sociologists of work point out, many roles cannot be carried out without the person's learning "guilty knowledge" about circle members. Priests, psychiatrists, physicians, and newspaper reporters claim and usually receive the right to gain, and not to divulge, confidential knowledge about people with whom they work, no matter how important that information is to others. The right to safety, unless waived by the social person—as in the

case of military personnel in time of war—is an important right, as is the right to be recognized and to have one's performance of one's duties acknowledged. Rights in roles with similar functions vary by societal norms regarding what is necessary to the person.

Cooperation from circle members must be built into personal rights, because duties cannot be carried forth otherwise. The rights and duties of a role are often paired. The duty to exert authority must be accompanied by the right to obedience. If initiating behavior is not required, then someone else must direct the person. All roles are located in one or more social settings, such as houses, factories, or streets, with specific rights and duties of access and management of the space and objects.

Role Strain

The fact that social circles can be large and complicated may result in a great deal of role strain. One of the sources of strain is *role overload*, which occurs when there is too much to do in general, or when too many circle members make too many demands, each considering his or hers as most important (Goode 1960). The social person may be deeply committed to her role and frustrated by obstacles or barriers to adequate performance, such as the lack of cooperation from others. Role strain also arises when members of the social circle make conflicting or inconsistent demands. Fathers and children sometimes demand contradictory behavior from the mother. Strain also occurs when a circle member makes conflicting demands, creating a double-bind situation. Problems can also arise when the role demands behavior that the person considers to be objectionable or incompatible with her or his abilities and desires (Turner 1978 and 1981).

The social person can handle role strain in several ways, such as compartmentalization (dealing with each demand separately), delegation of duties, or negotiation. She or he can ignore a troublesome member of the circle. And, if things are too bad and there are alternatives, she or he can leave the role or that role relationship. Divorce is an established way out of a marriage, and jobs may be quit. All kinds of culturally approved explanations are available to people who fail to meet some role expectations, while barriers against intrusion can prevent circle members from claiming rights (Becker 1951; Scott and Lyman 1968). Some people, of course,

thrive in roles that require constant negotiation and flexibility, preferring these to roles in which all relational problems are allegedly minimized.

Social circles, especially organized groups, can be aware of problems built into their roles and may introduce strain-reducing mechanisms (Goode 1960). Roles can be shifted in the structure; third parties (such as therapists) may be brought in to mediate conflict; norms of adequacy of role performance can be redefined; and people of "the right persuasion" or the "right" color or other characteristics can be hired to produce greater trust among circle members. Kanter (1977) found corporation men unwilling to admit women to their circle because they did not trust them.

The Role Cluster and Social Life Space

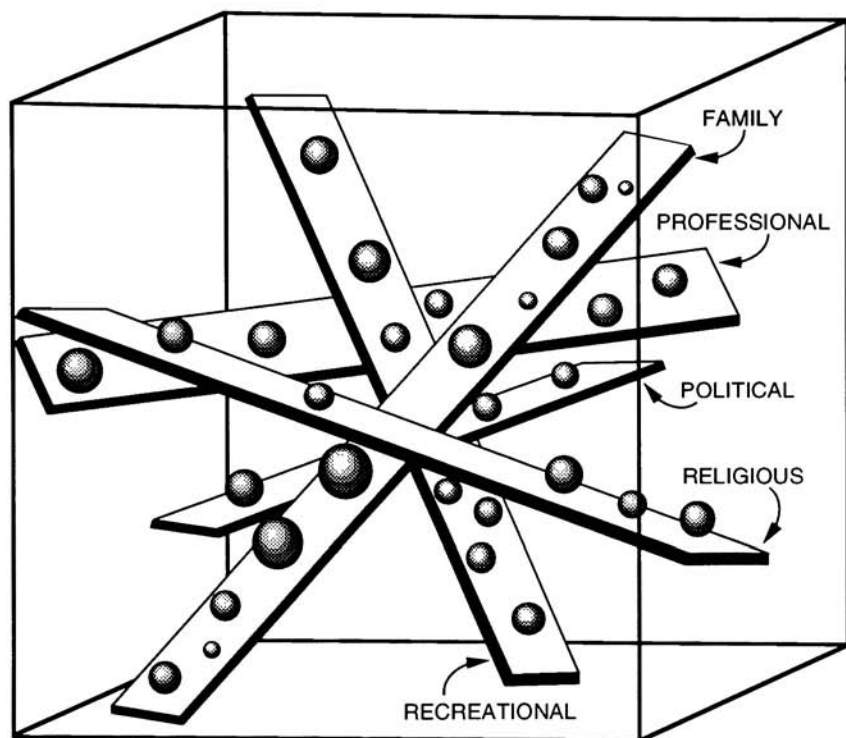
Each human being is involved in numerous social roles, at any time and throughout the life course. The *role cluster* changes over time, as some roles are exited, new ones are added, modifications are introduced to current ones, and hierarchies are adjusted. In order to explore the connections among roles in an individual's cluster, I have developed the concept of "social life space" (Lopata 1969b and 1987e), adapted from the work of Kurt Lewin (see Deutsch 1954), who used the term *life space* to refer to a field or total situation of action containing the actor.⁶ My housewife interviews (Lopata 1971b and 1987e) indicated a very logical way of organizing the social life space: We can look at roles within the same institutional dimension as sharing a similar cultural base and so as enabling more effective negotiation than do roles in different institutions.

People vary in the *dimensional richness* of their social roles, that is, in the number of roles in which they are involved within a single institution and also in the relative importance assigned each role. Sociologists refer to an institution as a set of patterned procedures by which a major area of societal life is carried forth. We can thus compare different women within the same society, or cross-culturally, or women to men, in terms of the richness of their involvement in any of the major institutions, such as educational, family, political, economic, religious, and recreational institutions. People also vary in the complexity or multidimensionality of their social life spaces, in that they undertake roles in different institutions (see figure 2).

This perspective is central to my analysis of the changing roles

Fig. 2.

A MULTIDIMENSIONAL LIFE SPACE WITH VARIED
"RICHNESS" OF INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSIONS



Modified from Helena Znaniecka Lopata, "Women's Family Roles in Life Course Perspective." Pp. 381-407 in *Analyzing Gender: A Handbook of Social Science Research*, edited by Beth B. Hess and Myra Marx Ferree (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1987), p. 384.

of American women. The process of modernization appears to proceed first from the destruction of a full life space within a traditional community, flattening women's life spaces into the domestic/family sphere, and men's into the public sphere, during the transitional period. Only gradually does modern society provide opportunities for socialization and education to expand people's life spaces again to new multidimensionality, this time within a greater scale of complexity. Modern life requires the presence of many multidimen-

sional people, able to manage roles in most institutions and even roles bridging two or more institutions. However, not all members of even modern societies have such complexity of self. Most people still exist in relatively "flat" social life spaces, focusing on one institution.

The presence of multiple roles can create *role conflict*, similar in sources to role strain. One of the ways people try to diminish role conflict is by organizing their role clusters into a hierarchical system, either temporarily, as roles surface in importance due to events, or in more or less rigid structures (Lopata 1969b and 1987e; Lopata and Barnewolt 1984; Stryker 1980). Social groups also try to decrease role conflict among their members. The Catholic church decided long ago that the role of priest conflicts with the roles of husband and father, and it continues to forbid marriage in spite of much pressure for change from the clergy in recent years.

The Location of Social Roles in Social Systems

Social roles can be placed in different types of social systems, one of which I have labeled "chart positions," modifying Davis's (1966, 68) concept of "office," which "would designate a position in a deliberately created organization, governed by specific and limited rules in a limited group, more generally achieved than ascribed." The concept of "chart position" is broader and may be used in describing roles in a family, a kinship network, a neighborhood, or a formal association. The chart shows each member the lines of communication and authority, and the province of activity within which the role is connected to other social roles.

Another system within which social roles can be positioned is that of prestige, often accompanied by power or its legitimated version of authority. In American society, men are located at a higher-status position in the gender stratification system than are women. Such a location has very important consequences for the status of other roles available to men and permeates the availability of choices of many objects, such as kitchens or airplanes, within the culture.

People entering social roles as social persons or members of social circles usually have a fairly good idea of what to expect, because models of roles are contained in cultures. Most roles have a historical base and are performed by more than one person at any

given time. The models are more or less visible parts of the culture, learned at home and in other primary and secondary groups such as neighborhoods and schools. Established roles vary by specialized function, alternative ways of meeting purposes, and relationships of members. Thus, there are two ways in which social roles influence societies and their members: as actual sets of relations (e.g., waitresses at a Four Seasons restaurant) and as cultural models of relations (e.g., our image of waitresses in general).

The Life Course of Role Involvements of American Women

The presence of cultural models of roles does not guarantee the match between social persons and the social circles that makes the life of the society possible. In order for the whole thing to work, new societal members must be socialized into "humanness" and the necessary knowledge, identities, and motivations to become involved in all kinds of interactions and social roles. Social groups develop whole socialization and educational systems to guarantee that enough people want to, and are able to, carry forth needed roles.

One important form of socialization is into pervasive identities that are deemed appropriate to different roles, and one of these identities is gender. Every society identifies each newborn as male or female on the basis of its visible genitals. The implications of such classification, however, vary considerably the world over, because it contains assumptions as to personality and potentials for action throughout childhood and adulthood. Socialization insures that each individual develops the appropriate *gender personal identity*, which is carried everywhere and is more or less intrusive in all social roles.

One of the problems with discussions of gender identity has been the recent introduction into the social sciences of the theoretically and actually inappropriate concept of "sex roles." There are, simply, no sex roles in America any more than there are race or class roles (Lopata and Thorne 1978; see also Thorne 1982). There is no set of relationships of social persons with social circles whose main function is gender identity (Lopata, Miller, and Barnewolt 1984).

There are only gender or racial identities—and probably class identities at the self-conscious extremes of the class structure.

In order that sexual identification of people by others and socialization into gender identity be possible, the culture must contain images of “typical” girls (and boys), and young, middle-aged, and old women (and men). In order for the self and the others to include gender in their consideration of selection and interaction in roles, they must have indicators of such identity. Girls and boys have traditionally worn divergent hair and clothes styles, enabling easy identification. Visitors entering a home usually receive multiple clues as to the gender of a child, and adult roles often utilize uniforms as aids to classification. Changes in visual cues that occurred when the Catholic church allowed nuns to remove their identifying and isolating clothing made it easier for nuns to leave their orders. One of the major functions of the habit is to camouflage those aspects of gender identity that were traditionally associated with the roles of wife and mother, roles considered more normal for women in American society.

Language also contains clues as to gender identity. Girls must learn to talk like girls, and women allegedly share a universe of discourse apart from that of males.⁷ In fact, Jessie Bernard (1981) developed a complex analysis of this in *The Female World*. Dale Spender (1980) devotes a whole volume to the analysis of “man-made language,” pointing out, for example, that *master* and *mistress* have different meanings. M. Johnson (1988, 5) noted the same variation in the phrases *mothering a child* and *fathering a child* (see also Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley 1983). The world of discourse of different areas of life can keep unwanted people out of a role or group. There is much documentation of the difficulties faced by women trying to function in male-dominated occupations (Lopata, Miller, and Barnewolt 1986; Walshok 1981). Even the idea of high levels of achievement in competitive fields assumed to be masculine can lead young women into “fear of success,” according to Matina Horner (1972). The initial popularity of that concept indicates that it must have some relevance even in modern America.

Children gradually develop their self-concepts, going through the stages G. H. Mead so carefully analyzed: awareness of the physical self, *playing at a role*, and *game playing* leading to the incorporation of a *generalized other* (Mead 1934). As a girl grows, she becomes increasingly conscious of how she looks in the eyes of

others, not just physically, but as an actor in social roles. She learns to apply to herself the standards others seem to be applying to her, and to feel certain sentiments, such as pride or mortification, in response (Cooley [1902] 1922). She can try to change these responses, if she wishes. Unfortunately, life is not that simple. She learns that she frequently cannot fully control her environment, especially others within it.

It is obvious that people do not remain in the same social roles all their lives, and that involvement in any one social role changes over time (C. A. Miller, 1981). In order for a woman to enter a social role she must be aware of its existence and must take the necessary steps to enter its social circle—unless she pulls together a new one. For example, let us say that a woman wants to take on her first full-time job. First, she must choose one or more occupations, out of the welter available to women nowadays, that she thinks she might like and for which she feels probably qualified. There are special agencies that can help her at this stage, including career counselors at schools and employment agencies. She will probably place some other limitations on her search—territorial, geographical, or social (e.g., she may be unwilling to move out of state or to venture into a very large corporation). Next, she must learn from newspaper advertisements, or other search agents about the various organizations that can provide the circle within which her role can be carried forth. She must learn the potential employer's hiring criteria and eliminate those potential employers that she knows will never accept her, or take the time to better prepare herself to meet their standards. She then selects the one (or ones, in case she does not get her first choice) she prefers and goes through a process of application. After testing, which usually includes personal interviews by people trained to fit workers into slots, she may get the job. She must follow the same procedures, with more or less complexity, any time she enters a new social role in an established organization. Of course, not every woman goes through such calculated procedures to find a new job. Some simply hear of one through a friend or go to a place that is likely to hire persons of their capabilities.

That is not, however, the end of the entrance stage of involvement in a social role. Regardless of prior formal preparation, the person must learn the rules of the game in that particular circle. Anticipatory socialization is a process by which she learns by anticipating what she might need to know. Some schools or job training programs may provide opportunities to role-play the future occupa-

tion, with other trainees enacting the duties and rights of circle members. Reading about the job, even in fiction, may enable the applicant to go through dress rehearsals for her own performance. Talking to others in the same or a similar role can also provide clues, as does the simple process of asking people about their jobs.

Entering a social role requires forming relationships with all circle members, which is a gradual process, since the person usually does not come into contact with all at the same time. Involvement in a social role important to the woman requires, in greater or lesser degree, "becoming" the title bearer (a mother) (a wife) (see Becker 1953; Lopata 1971b). This is a process of placing oneself within the role, seeing oneself as a "natural" center of the circle and the role as part of one's role cluster and self-concept. Gradually, the person quits being a novice and enters the regular performer stage. Relationships are established and modified only by events in the lives of partners, or by the exits and entrances of circle members. Role strain has been decreased by negotiations, or the person has learned to live with it. Duties become standardized, sometimes to the level of boredom. Several paths can lead from this stage. The person can be fired for losing enthusiasm and the ability to innovate; she can be retained in a dead-end position until the phase-out stage (Kanter 1977); or she can start to again socialize herself anticipatorily into another role—one of higher status in the hierarchy or in another organization, or of a completely different type. Effective preparation can lead to promotion, until the person is no longer willing or able to socialize herself to the new role. The process of phasing oneself out of one role is influenced by one's stages of involvement in other roles.

The concept of *life course involvements* can be applied not only to roles but also to the individual's total life. A life course is usually defined in terms of stages; transitions are bounded by cultural norms of timing and the consequences of being "off time" or not at the typical time of life. Some social roles cannot be entered until certain age-related criteria are met. The biological system refuses to allow a woman to become impregnated and carry a child to birth until a certain stage of development. Most societies have motherhood norms related to schooling, official adulthood, or marriage age. At the other end of the life course, some roles must be left. Women cannot bear children after a certain age; retirement policies force or encourage the dropping of major occupational roles. Some circles put definite age parameters on candidates because of assumptions about age-

related abilities. In traditional societies, it was impossible to be an "expert" in most social roles until at least adult age. One of the problems of modern society, based as it is upon traditional but rapidly changing culture, is that young people are learning the new technology required in many roles faster, earlier, and more exclusively than are their elders, which often lands them in positions of authority over their seniors.

Social Psychological Aspects of Role Involvement

A person's involvement in a particular social role can be conceptualized as including nine sociopsychological aspects. The first set consists of the *hierarchical importance of the roles* in the role cluster, the *richness of each institutional dimension* in which the roles are located, and the *multidimensionality of the social life space* (Lopata 1969b).

As mentioned above, women tend to diminish role conflict by developing, more or less consciously, a hierarchy within the cluster of roles they are performing at any one time. The role order changes with the introduction of important new roles to the cluster. For the most part, occupationally committed American women do not face competition from the two roles considered most important to their gender—wife and mother (Lopata and Barnewolt 1984). Once these roles are added, the whole cluster changes. The role of mother was generally considered most important for women with young children, even more so than the role of wife, if both are active in the role cluster (Barnewolt 1986). More-educated husbands in higher status jobs often rank higher for these women than their children do, but then the duties of these wives are often more complex than those of wives of men in less "greedy" jobs (L. Coser 1974; Lopata 1971b; see also the discussion in chapter 2 on the role of wife). Some women see life-course changes in their role hierarchies, explaining that they now have to focus on being mothers, because of the needs of small children, but that they will return to a focus on wifeness in the future (Lopata and Barnewolt 1984).

We can assume that involvement in a social role is also influenced by the richness of the dimension in which it is located. On the one hand we can predict that a woman with multiple roles in one institution will receive much support in each role from circle members in other roles in that institution. A mother can count on support

with minimum conflict from her other roles in the family institution. On the other hand, members of the circles of her roles of wife, daughter, granddaughter, sibling, aunt and cousin may compete for her attention and complicate her life. Having to be a daughter-in-law may make life miserable for her in her role of mother.

The complexity or multidimensionality of the social life space is also important. Social roles in other dimensions can compete severely with roles in the family dimension, and vice versa. Although a mother may understand the priority her daughter gives to her children, the daughter's boss may not.

The next three aspects of role involvement deal with the role itself. People vary in their *assignment of importance to the different segments of the social circle*, in the extent to which they are *task-versus relations-oriented*, and in whether they see the duties as a set of *unrelated actions or processes* or in terms of *product* (Lopata 1969b, 290–92). Mothers may be more concerned with how their in-laws view their child rearing than with how the child is affected. Women differ in their perceptions of the duties of any role, seeing them variously as a series of disjointed incidents or events, as a set of processes, or in terms of product alone (Lopata 1969b, 291). Many homemakers are so overwhelmed by daily existence that they move from one task to another without seeing patterns or end results. Others plan the sequence of processes, with a rhythm of start, work, and finish, moving from one sequence to the next. Finally, there are many women who, for example, do not concentrate on what they do, but concentrate only on maintaining or restoring things to their proper state. Their work is done when the house is clean or the laundry finished.

The final set of aspects of role involvement are those of “style” or of being the self in the role. People can vary along the continuum of *passive-reactive-initiating approaches*, the type of *sentiments* experienced as a result of being in that role, and the *judgments of the self* in it (Lopata 1969b, 292–96). Both the passive and the reactive person in a role are noninitiating, but the first responds only to outside pressure without thinking about it or preparing herself for the onslaught of demands. The reactive person knows that she must respond and is prepared to do so, seeing that as the function of the role rather than as a natural response on her part. People can carry forth all three stances, usually in separate roles but often in relation to different segments of the same role. A mother can wait passively for the children to come home from school and make demands on

her, she can prepare hygienic lunches for them because she knows what the school demands, and she can arrange a birthday party, inviting grandparents. The historical past of many societies demanded either passive or reactive stances toward the public sphere by the vast majority of their members. This is not desired, or possible, in a democratic society. The changes accompanying modernization and the feminist movement in America, at all stages, have pushed toward the self- and other-definition of women as initiators in their role selection and behavior. Education and the ability to see the wider scene within which one's role is located enable people to make such decisions and know where to push for rights. Conflict occurs when circle members do not respond to a person's changes of approach. Families may object to a wife/mother's refusal to be passive or reactive to their demands.

People differ in the sentiments they feel about various aspects of their roles. Women may hate the role of homemaker in which they feel they must be involved; they may dislike certain duties, or feel antagonistic to some segments of the circle that benefit from their work (such as in-laws). The same task may be greeted neutrally, or even with pleasure, by others. The concept of sentiments, merged by symbolic interactionists with that of emotion, is very important for the understanding of role relations.

Finally, women can vary in how they see themselves in each role or parts of it. They judge how well they are doing, aware that others are also judging them, and they feel certain ways in response to these judgments. "I am very good with the children, I read and play with them, but I can't follow a tight schedule. They get to bed when I get them to bed—this irritates their father," a woman once stated in an interview.

Thus, there are many ways in which people differ in their involvement in any role. This is not surprising, since each individual gradually builds her own social self or adjusts to the characteristics needed to enter social roles. She learns from the past, practices anticipatory socialization, interacts with circle members, and experiences the various aspects of involvement discussed here.

Commitment

The end result of the social psychological aspects of role involvement is role commitment (Lopata 1992d). People differ in which role

they are most committed to, the degree of commitment they have to any role, and the kinds of "side bets" they have placed in order to insure continued participation and success (Becker 1960). Side bets include investment in education and job training, the search for and performance in an appropriate role, and the selection and arrangement of other roles so that they do not conflict or interfere with the commitment role.

The shift in women's ideology from total commitment to family roles to involvement in broader life choices accompanying modernization has moved women toward direct involvement in the public sphere. Simultaneously, it has reaffirmed the commitment of some women to motherhood and wifeness (Lopata, 1987). Some of these women have little choice, and their commitment is quite defensive; but many of them are relatively young, highly educated mothers who experienced success in occupations and then decided to stay home. They, however, unlike women in traditional or transitional times, consider such commitment to be temporary, to be followed by a return to commitment to an outside career (see also Lopata, Barnewolt, and Miller 1985).

Summary

We have now examined the basic theoretical framework guiding our analysis of the changes in social roles and life spaces of American women and some of the basic concepts to be used throughout this book.⁸ The framework applies social development or modernization theory to such women. The conceptual model hinges upon the definition of social role as a set of patterned, mutually interdependent social relations between a social person and a social circle, involving task and relational duties and personal rights.

Social roles are located in the role clusters and social life spaces of individual members of the society, either within a single institutional dimension or multidimensionally in several separate institutions. Involvement in social roles influences not only the life spaces but also the identities of human beings. The models for such sets of relations are contained in a society's cultural base, while actual, situated roles are located in several social systems, organizational charts, or status structures.

Socialization into feminine gender identity and appropriate behavior begins as soon as the baby is identified as female. Girls are

assigned relevant roles, or they are so heavily encouraged to anticipatorily socialize themselves in those directions that purposeful deviation is hard to accomplish. This female identity is carried throughout life, entering more or less intrusively into all other social roles. The social structure of a society constantly reminds people of their pervasive identities, which can block or open opportunities for role involvements.

Social roles have their own life courses, and each individual fits them into her total life course. Social psychological aspects of involvement in any particular role include the role's rank order of importance and the individual's stances vis-à-vis its various components. The complexity of the social life space influences not only the breadth of perspective with which life is constructed, but also the manner in which role conflict is resolved.

We now turn to the examination of the social roles of American women in their traditional, transitional, and modern variations.