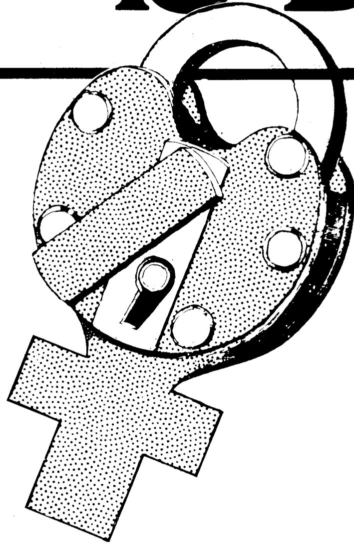
SEXISM IS DEPRESSING



Women are more depressed than men. The cause may be sexism, and psychologists are exploring methods of preventing sexual stereotyping.

BY ROBERT J. TROTTER

She works at a garment factory to supplement her husband's income. She takes care of a home and three children. She has almost enough money to keep chasing the American Dream. Her marriage needs help occasionally, and her children are less than perfect. All in all, at age 28, she is very nearly the typical modern woman. Statistically, she is a prime candidate for suicide. At the very least, she is in danger of suffering a serious depressive disorder. She feels trapped, powerless and helpless. She is, according to Marcia Guttentag of Harvard University, a victim of sexism.

In most age groups, female admissions to mental hospitals exceed those of males. At community mental health centers, private mental hospitals and general hospitals, depressive disorders are the leading diagnosis for women. Figures from a National Institute of Mental Health survey show that twice as many women as men are diagnosed as suffereing from depression. The highest rates of depression occur among women between the ages of 21 and 44.

Depression can lead to suicide, and throughout the developed world suicide attempters are overwhelmingly young females between the ages of 20 and 30. Reviewing data on depression and suicide, Guttentag concludes that "it is the young, married, working blue-collar mother who is most likely to be depressed." And the risk of depression for these women has increased dramatically during the past two decades.

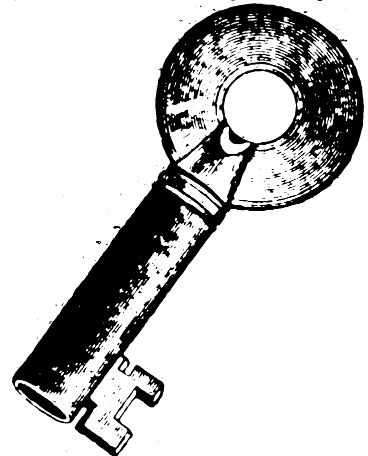
Women's entry into the labor market has also increased markedly during the past 20 years, and that may be part of the problem. Sexist attitudes have long kept women from achieving educational and occupational equality. When they do work, women are often placed in underpaid, unsatisfying positions while still being expected to fulfill the traditional sexist family roles. As a result, a women might easily begin to feel trapped, powerless, stressed and depressed.

"If these mental health findings are viewed in relation to sex-role stereotypes," says Guttentag, "the conclusion is inescapable that it is sex-stereotyped familial and socio-emotional roles which, in addition to the occupational burdens that women now carry, are causing the greatly intensified stresses they experience."

For many years now, feminists have argued that sexual stereotyping is psychologically damaging. Guttentag has attempted to prove this point with mounds of mental health data. But even if the point is proved, can anything be done to change the situation? Laws and regulations, such as the still unratified Equal Rights Amendment, have helped to curb overt institutional discrimination, but sexism continues to exist as an informal part of cultural and family practices. Guttentag contends this type of sexism has to be prevented if mental health damage is to be averted.

Even young adolescents, both boys and girls, show the damaging effects sex stereotypes can have on their self concepts and on the life possibilities that they believe are open to them. It thus seems that prevention of sexism should begin at an early age, and one logical place to start would be in the schools.

If schools do provide the best setting for the prevention of sexism, how can they best be used in such prevention? Does the age of the child make a difference? Who should be the targets of preventive efforts—should they be equally directed toward boys and girls? Guttentag and her colleagues have designed and implemented an experimental program that answers these questions. Results of the study will be published in a forthcoming book. Highlights of the findings were presented



at the recent conference on the prevention of psychopathology (SN: 8/9/75, p. 90).

Three school systems in the Boston area were selected for the six-week study. They represented different social and ethnic backgrounds. Three age groups were selected: 5-, 9- and 14-year-olds (kindergarten, fifth and ninth grades). They represented different stages of cognitive development. The aim of the study was to see whether it was possible, through the use of curricula, teachers and peer groups, to modify children's sex role stereotypes in three areas: occupational, familial and socio-emotional.

The children's sexual stereotypes were measured in a number of ways. Protective questions were used, such as: "Tell me about a typical day when you are 30 years old." "Describe a day in the life of a typical woman; a typical man." The answers were used to determine the children's understanding of adult roles and the extent to which they felt they would conform to such roles. The children were asked to tell about the jobs they thought

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men and women could have and to describe what men and women like personally (socio-emotional qualities). They were asked to tell stories using the characterictics of the opposite sex and to tell researchers what they thought real girls and boys were like, what ideal girls and boys were like and what they themselves were like. Children in experimental and control groups were questioned before and after the intervention program.

The intervention consisted of specially devised curricula that were integrated into regular English and social studies work and into the entire day of the kindergarteners. Books, plays, records and special projects were included. Teachers received training in how to work with children in nonsexist patterns, such as maintaining a high rate of interaction with both girls and boys. Observers recorded teacher-pupil interactions before, during and after the intervention. Teachers were also rated on their enthusiasm and use of curriculum material.

The social class and ethnic backgrounds of the children made no difference in their initial sex-role stereotypes. Having a working mother, even a high-status working mother, made no difference. Even the kindergarten children, regardless of their backgrounds, had highly stereotyped views. This, says Guttentag, suggests that even at young ages children have learned cultural stereotypes, probably through television and their peers, and that these are more powerful than the influence of the family.

The intervention effort worked differently on the three groups. Initially, the kindergarteners were quite stereotyped about occupational roles. They emphasized that men and women had different jobs and spent their time doing different things. A woman could not be a mother and an aviator. Fathers always went to work, except on weekends when they played with the children. Following the intervention, the kindergarteners had increased significantly in their ability to understand that the same job could be held by either a man or a woman. The girls, especially, were more likely to place men in interpersonal jobs such as social worker, teacher or sales clerk. The children did not, however, change their attitudes toward the family and emotional roles that men and women play.

Fifth graders were the least stereotyped of the three groups. They believed that women could have jobs, but that they might not succeed at them. They nearly always put men and women into sex stereotyped private routines and hobbies. Boys and men were ascribed particularly restrictive socio-emotional roles. They never admitted to having any problems and saw themselves as active in sports and economically successful. Girls readily accepted an emotional emphasis as an important part of their role. They also showed a slight tendency toward negative self esteem—they felt they were not as beautiful as they should be.

In the fifth grade, the intervention was most effective with girls. Their belief that women could have varied and successful careers was strengthened. There were also changes in their attitudes towards men's roles. The boys, however, were very little changed.

Ninth graders were the most stereotyped of all. They believed that interpersonal and emotional qualities were essential for women. Although the girls supported women in occupations, the boys were suspicious of employed women. Girls more often presented the women in a dual marriage and career situation. Ninth graders tended to react negatively to the intervention. Most boys' views became more stereotyped after the intervention. And peer-group support for the boys was particularly strong in upholding the sexist attitudes. From these results, says Guttentag, it appears that a little intervention of a nonsexist type may be worse than none at all for ninth grade boys.

Perhaps the most meaningful and relevant finding of the study, says Guttentag, came from examination of changes in individual classrooms. The amount of attitude change was closely correlated to the individual teacher's effectiveness in implementing the curriculum. In other words, the teacher who cared about the issue of sexism in roles and society and who used the curriculum regularly and creatively, was able to change the attitudes of students even in a brief six-week intervention period.

Although the girls at all ages were the most responsive to the program, it was the boys' sex-role stereotypes that were most in need of change. But as is the case in most types of intervention, those who need it most were the least likely to change. Even so, in classrooms where there were active and committed teachers, there were changes in all children, even the boys, and change occurred even at the most resistant age. "It is clear," concludes Guttentag, "that the schools can be used in a primary preventive role. Even a brief nonsexist intervention, implemented schoolwide, can have marked effects on sexist stereotypes of children and adolescents."

"It looks," says Guttentag, "very much as though for the young, married, working mother, we are confronted with a time-lag problem. The occupational roles of women have changed more quickly than have their family-role definitions. This is particularly true for blue-collar women. Given the rapidly changing labor market participation rates for women, less sexist definitions of male and female family and socio-emotional roles could have an ameliorative effect on the stresses which many women now experience. . . . The schools are one socializing instrument which can immediately serve in the primary prevention of sexism." □