ON MOTIVATED ROLE SELECTION: GENDER BELIEFS, DISTANT GOALS, AND CAREER INTEREST

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Despite widespread changes in occupational opportunities, men and women continue to show divergent preferences for careers. This research invoked a motivational framework to explain sex-differentiated career interest. From a role congruity perspective (Diekman & Eagly, 2008), the internalization of gender roles leads people to endorse gender-stereotypic goals, which then lead to interest in occupations that afford the pursuit of those goals. Three studies provided evidence for the hypotheses. Study 1 found that male- and female-stereotypic careers were perceived to afford different goals. Studies 2 and 3 found that men and women endorsed different goals and that this gender-normative goal endorsement predicted gender-stereotypic career interest. In addition, structural equation modeling (Study 3) indicated that internalization of gender roles fully accounted for sex-differentiated goal endorsement. These findings thus extend the social role theory framework to consider processes related to self-selection into specific social roles.

Despite widespread changes in occupational opportunities for women in the paid labor force (e.g., Fullerton, 1999), men and women continue to exhibit distinct differences in the types of careers they pursue. Men constitute a majority in careers related to science, engineering, and business, whereas women constitute a majority in careers related to social service, education, and administrative support (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Various explanations for these gender imbalances have been invoked, including discrimination (e.g., Heilman, 2001; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993), the socialization of achievement-related attitudes (e.g., Eccles, 1994), gender differences in desire to work with people versus things (Lippa, 1998), and evolved sex differences in personality and cognitive abilities (Browne, 2006). In the current research, we consider the associations between goals and career interests. In this view, men and women prefer certain social roles because those roles allow the pursuit of their important long-term goals. We thus examine a role-congruity perspective on role selection: Sex differences in career interest emerge, in part, because these male- and female-dominated careers are perceived to differentially afford important goals.

Occupational Sex Segregation: Theoretical and Practical Implications

The question of why men and women tend to select different careers is one of considerable theoretical and practical importance. Although a core assumption of sociocultural theories of gender is that the surrounding context influences individual-level psychology and behavior (e.g., Deaux & LaFrance, 1998), fairly little research focuses on why and how men and women select certain contexts. To take the example of social role theory (Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000), research to date has studied extensively how the gendered division of labor leads to gender-role expectations and individual-level self-regulatory processes, which in turn produce sex differences in attitudes and behavior (see Figure 1; Eagly, Wood, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2003). An implication of social role theory, on a broad level, is that these sex differences in behavior maintain the social structure. However, little empirical work has focused on the means by which the social structure is maintained. The key goal of the current research, therefore, is to initiate a systematic analysis of how gender roles influence social role selection, as represented by the dotted arrow in Figure 1. In the current research, we examine career interests as a...
Physical specialization of the sexes
Women’s reproductive activities
Men’s greater size and strength

Division of labor and social construction of gender
(gender roles and socialization)

Individual-level processes
(social interactive, self-regulatory, hormonal)
gender belief system; distant goals

Sex-differentiated behavior and psychology
career interests


Fig. 1. General model of social role theory of sex differences and similarities.

Examination of role selection processes is of critical practical importance. Sex segregation in employment can lead to negative outcomes for both men and women: For example, women’s tendency to select out of computer-related careers may close them off from one of the fastest growing and highest paying career sectors (see Margolis & Fisher, 2003, for a review). Similarly, men’s tendency to avoid support positions, such as nursing, may put them at a disadvantage as demand for employees in these occupations increases. More idealistically, but no less importantly, avoidance of certain occupations may impede some individuals from best employing their talents, making significant contributions, or finding personal fulfillment. For both theoretical and practical reasons, then, it is imperative to understand sex-differentiated interest in careers.

A Role Congruity Perspective on Career Preference

In this research, we invoke a motivational framework to examine gender differences in career preferences. This motivational framework focuses on goal selection and pursuit from the perspective of role congruity theory (Diekman & Eagly, 2008). In this perspective, gender roles provide an opportunity structure within which men and women seek to fulfill important needs.¹

In the role congruity framework, people are motivated to align with gender roles, and gender roles function as important self-standards. Two critical hypotheses form the crux of our argument. First, we hypothesize that, corresponding to gender roles, men and women endorse relatively different distant goals—specifically, what they anticipate finding important far into the future. Second, we hypothesize that these differences in distant goal endorsement predict interest in different careers. The basic mediational model, then, is one in which gender roles predict differential distant goal endorsements, which elicit sex-differentiated career interest. Before elaborating our hypotheses, we outline the evidence supporting the idea that people are motivated to align with gender roles.

Beliefs that men are and should be agentic and that women are and should be communal are widely shared and approved (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). This strong consensus lends gender roles considerable power, with one of the most critical outcomes being that individuals adopt gender roles as standards for self-regulation. For example, research on gender differences in the self-concept suggests that gender roles can become internalized as chronic self-representations: Men tend to report higher levels of agentic characteristics, whereas women report higher levels of communal characteristics (e.g., Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001). Parallel patterns emerge when individuals are specifically asked about their life goals. In Pohlmann’s (2001) research, the majority of women (60.2%) rated communal goals (i.e., intimacy, affiliation, and altruism) as more important than agency goals (e.g., power, achievement, and seeking new experiences or excitement). In contrast, the majority of men (61.6%) rated agency goals as more important. It is critical to note, however, that communion and agency goals are generally endorsed by both men and women; the critical question is about relative emphasis on agentic or communal domains.
A consequence of integration of gender roles into the self-concept is that it is intrinsically rewarding to conform to these gender role expectations. Recent research clearly illustrates these motivational processes. For example, Wood, Christensen, Hebl, and Rothgerber (1997) found that individuals who internalized traditional gender roles were more likely to experience increases in positive affect and well-being after remembering or witnessing gender role congruent interactions. Similar patterns have been found using prospective methods: In a diary study, individuals who held gender-typed personal standards and behaved in gender congruent ways reported greater self-esteem and more positive affect (Guerrero Witt & Wood, 2007). Indeed, the motivational rewards of aligning with gender roles were illustrated even with elementary and middle school children: Feeling typical of and content with one’s gender were associated positively with well-being (Carver, Yunger, & Perry, 2003; Egan & Perry, 2001). These studies provide evidence that fit to gender roles can be rewarding for individuals, especially to the extent that those gender roles are deeply internalized. With these role congruity principles in mind, we formed two specific hypotheses regarding gender differences in career interest, as detailed below.

**Men and women endorse different distant goals.** Ideas about what one will be like in the future have important implications for current-day life: As Markus and Nurius (1986) noted, these possible selves can articulate a plan for the future and provide impetus for current-day actions that will facilitate attaining desired possible selves. The internalization of gender roles into the self should influence the types of future states desired by men and women. Small but consistent sex differences in motivational strivings have been identified at both broad and specific levels of the goal hierarchy. For example, at the level of broad goals, women, more than men, tend to endorse values of benevolence and universalism, whereas men, more than women, tend to endorse values of power and achievement, self-direction, and stimulation (Schwartz & Rubel, 2005).

At the midrange in a hierarchy of motivational strivings are more specific goals that can span across many years and different contexts. Men and women report different life goals, with women, more than men, endorsing life goals related to helping others and personal growth, and men, more than women, endorsing economic goals (Roberts & Robins, 2000). As noted above, gender differences in life goals specifically related to agency and communion have also been documented (Pohlmann, 2001). Finally, at the most specific level, daily goals and action plans (e.g., going out to dinner with friends, studying for the bar exam) that serve these broader goals should also differ between men and women.

Our research focuses on distant goals, or future role-related goals (i.e., life goals); in particular, we focus on the aspects of daily life that individuals anticipate will be important to success in the future. These distant goals differ from previous constructs in that we chose to focus on what individuals believe will be important in their mid-30s. We made this choice because this point in the life span is typically when people negotiate simultaneous career and family demands. To examine our hypothesis that gender roles provide the framework for goal selection, we investigated both agentic (i.e., male-stereotypic) and communal (i.e., female-stereotypic) role-related goals. Our agentic dimension included items about the pursuit of status-related roles, and our communal dimension included items about the pursuit of caregiving-related roles. Although other types of goals may contribute to sex differences in career interest, status and caregiving represent two domains in which clear role-related differences are anticipated to emerge.

**Occupational roles afford goal pursuit.** Our second hypothesis is that career interest is predicted by endorsement of certain distant goals; to the extent that men and women endorse different distant goals, they should show interest in different careers. This prediction stems from the logic that individuals select roles to maximize positive outcomes and minimize negative outcomes. The social roles that afford the pursuit of important future goals should be preferred. This hypothesis is consistent with developmental theories of career preferences. For example, occupational theory of career development (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) posits that individuals develop career-relevant interests that reflect their sense of self-efficacy and beliefs about outcomes. These broad interests help to define the individual’s career-related goals, and these career-related goals shape choices of career-related behaviors. Because gender is highly associated with self-efficacy beliefs, as well as self-regulatory efforts to fit with gender roles (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), the social-cognitive model supports the prediction of sex differences in career interests. Likewise, Gottfredson’s (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise posits that career choices result from individuals aligning their self-concepts to consensual beliefs about occupations. Both of these theories emphasize how beliefs about the self, including those related to gender roles, intersect with the perceived social structure to influence career preferences.

In the current research, we seek to extend previous research by exploring specifically how gender differences in goal endorsement relate to career interests. Previous research supports the idea that gender differences in career-related goals exist and predict job preferences. For example, Israeli women, more than men, reported valuing job attributes related to interpersonal relationships and helping others. In contrast, Israeli men, more than women, reported valuing job attributes related to leadership, power,
and income (Gati, Osipow, & Givon, 1995). A meta-analysis of 242 samples also found sex differences in job-attribute preference consistent with traditional gender roles (Konrad, Ritchie, Lieb, & Corrigall, 2000). In addition, the endorsement of career-related goals has been shown to be related to job preference: Emphasis on career-related interpersonal goals predicted preference for education and social service careers, and emphasis on career-related status goals predicted preference for math and science careers (Morgan, Isaac, & Sansone, 2001). These findings thus provide initial evidence for the idea that career-related goals influence role selection. However, examining only career-related goals may omit important information about occupational role selection. A critical question within work–family research is how family-related responsibilities influence career decisions (e.g., Spain & Bianchi, 1996). Caregiving goals might influence career interest in two ways: Careers may either afford the fulfillment of communal goals within the workplace or they may offer enough flexibility to allow for the fulfillment of communal goals outside of the workplace. Our research thus examines distant goals that include both career and family domains so that a fuller understanding of career preferences can be achieved.

Overview of the Current Research

In three studies, we provide initial evidence for a motivational account of role selection. Study 1 provides evidence that gender-typical careers are perceived as differentially facilitating status and caregiving goals. Study 2 examines the basic prediction that gender-stereotypic differences in men’s and women’s career interest will be mediated by differential endorsement of goals. In Study 3, we replicate and extend this effect by examining the antecedents of goal endorsement in gender role beliefs. We thus propose a social-psychological model in which internalized gender roles predict distant goals, and these goals in turn predict career interest.

STUDY 1

Study 1 sought to establish that certain careers are perceived to be primarily occupied by men or women and that these gender-typical careers are perceived as differentially affording the pursuit of status and caregiving goals.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Fifty participants completed a short survey online. Participants were students in summer courses at a midwestern university. The participants included 26 men and 24 women, with a median age of 21 years (range 18–42). Of the 36 participants who reported a specific ethnicity, the majority were Caucasian (81%, n = 29). Participants completed the measures described below and provided demographic information.

Measures

Gender composition of careers. Participants rated each of 12 careers on seven-point scales assessing the extent to which the career is primarily performed by women versus primarily performed by men. These careers were chosen to be male-stereotypic (i.e., corporate lawyer, stockbroker, politician, judge, tax accountant, doctor) or female-stereotypic (i.e., nurse, social worker, kindergarten teacher, counselor, secretary, daycare worker) based on face validity and census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Both scales showed good internal consistency (male-stereotypic α = .80, female-stereotypic α = .82).

Goal affordances. Participants rated the extent to which each of the 12 careers would help them to achieve status or caregiving goals. Participants rated how much each career would help them “achieve high status (having a great deal of power or influence, running a company or organization).” Next, participants rated how much each career would help them “take care of others (helping with cooking or laundry, arranging playdates for your children).” Ratings were made on seven-point Likert scales, ranging from does not help me at all to helps me very much. Internal consistency for each scale was good (male-stereotypic α = .86, female-stereotypic α = .72).

Results

Gender Composition of Careers

The ratings of gender composition were analyzed in a 2 (career type: female-stereotypic or male-stereotypic) × 2 (participant sex) mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA), with career type as a within-subjects factor. This analysis revealed a main effect of career type, F(1, 48) = 277.29, p < .001, η² = .852, with female-stereotypic careers rated more likely than male-stereotypic careers to be performed by women (M = 3.97, SD = 0.80) compared to men (M = 3.30, SD = 0.35) to rate careers as being performed by men. No interaction was detected.

Goal Affordances

The critical hypothesis was that male-stereotypic careers would be perceived as helping people to attain status goals, whereas female-stereotypic careers would be perceived as helping people to attain caregiving goals. Goal affordance ratings were analyzed in a 2 (career type) × 2 (participant sex) × 2 (goal: status or caregiving) mixed ANOVA, with career type and goal as within-subjects factors.
The predicted Career Type × Goal interaction emerged, \( F(1, 48) = 272.01, p < .001, \eta^2 = .781 \). As shown in Table 1, male-stereotypic careers were perceived as facilitating status goals more than caregiving goals, \( F(1, 48) = 81.59, p < .001, \eta^2 = .630 \), and female-stereotypic careers were perceived as facilitating caregiving goals more than status goals, \( F(1, 48) = 225.75, p < .001, \eta^2 = .813 \). In addition, male-stereotypic careers, relative to female-stereotypic careers, were perceived as facilitating status goals, \( F(1, 48) = 322.75, p < .001, \eta^2 = .871 \), and female-stereotypic careers, relative to male-stereotypic careers, were perceived as facilitating caregiving goals, \( F(1, 48) = 80.49, p < .001, \eta^2 = .610 \). In addition, overall goal affordance was perceived to be higher for male-stereotypic careers (\( M = 4.74, SD = 1.62 \)) than female-stereotypic careers (\( M = 4.05, SD = 1.64 \)), \( F(1, 48) = 37.88, p < .001, \eta^2 = .655 \).

Discussion

Study 1 provided initial evidence that individuals perceive careers as differentially occupied by men or women and that they perceive male- and female-stereotypic careers as facilitating the attainment of different types of goals. Specifically, careers that are identified with men are perceived as facilitating the achievement of status goals, and careers that are identified with women are perceived as facilitating caregiving goals. Moreover, male and female respondents similarly perceived goal facilitation to vary across types of careers, suggesting that these perceptions are consensual among men and women. Although Study 1 provides clear support for the idea that gender-typical occupations are perceived as differentially affording status or caregiving goals, these data do not examine whether men and women differ in these goals or whether goal endorsement predicts individuals’ own career interest. To this end, we conducted Study 2.

STUDY 2

The purpose of Study 2 was to establish a gender difference in distant goals and to examine whether this difference underlies gender differences in career interest. Specifically, we hypothesized that (a) men and women will differ in the content of distant goals and (b) this difference in goal preference will predict gender-differentiated career interest.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants included 65 individuals (43% male, 91% Caucasian, ages 18–22 years old, median age = 19) at a midwestern university who received partial course credit for taking part in the study. Participants completed the measures described below and provided demographic information.

Measures

Participants first completed the measure of distant goals, and then they reported their interest in 14 different careers. Items for the goal and career measures were presented in random order within each measure.

Goals. Participants were asked to consider what they wanted their life to be like at age 35, and they then rated the importance of elements of future success on seven-point Likert scales ranging from not important at all to very important. Specifically, participants responded to the stem "at age 35, how important will be . . . ," followed by several potential goals. Embedded among several other items (not central to this study) were the critical items related to status and caregiving goals. Status items were: running a company or organization, having a great deal of power or influence, being the person in charge, and being the head of your department or division (\( \alpha = .82 \)). Caregiving items were: attending field trips, arranging playdates for your children, packing school lunches, and helping with cooking or laundry (\( \alpha = .82 \)).

Career interest. Participants rated their interest in six male-stereotypic careers (i.e., corporate lawyer, finance, public defender, politician, government negotiator, and tax accountant) and eight female-stereotypic careers (i.e., nurse, social worker, teacher, kindergarten teacher, career counselor, secretary, daycare worker, and crisis counselor). These career choices were based on the items from Study 1, with a few changes to improve the measure (e.g., greater specification of career, such as separating “counselor” into “career counselor” and “crisis counselor”). Ratings were made on seven-point Likert scales, ranging from not at all interested to very interested. Items showed good reliability and were averaged to form indices of male-stereotypic career interest (\( \alpha = .81 \)) and female-stereotypic career interest (\( \alpha = .80 \)).

Results

The role-congruency model posits that gender differences in career interest stem from differences in distant goal
endorsement. To provide support for this model, we first must demonstrate (a) gender differences in goal endorsement and (b) gender differences in career interest. Finally, we must demonstrate that the relationship between sex and career interest is mediated by endorsement of gender-stereotypic goals.

Goals

To examine our hypothesis that each sex would favor gender-stereotypic goals, we analyzed the distant goals measures in a $2 \times 2$ (participant sex) mixed ANOVA, with goal as a within-subjects factor. A significant effect of goal, $F(1, 63) = 4.97, p = .03, \eta^2 = .052$, reflected that caregiving goals ($M = 5.20, SD = 1.27$) received greater endorsement overall than status goals ($M = 4.65, SD = 1.19$). However, as predicted, this effect was moderated by sex, as reflected in the significant Sex $\times$ Goal interaction, $F(1, 63) = 27.65, p < .001, \eta^2 = .289$. Men rated status goals more highly than did women, $F(1, 63) = 5.37, p = .02, \eta^2 = .079$, and women rated caregiving goals more highly than did men, $F(1, 63) = 23.09, p < .001, \eta^2 = .268$ (see Table 2).

Career Interest

To examine our hypothesis that each sex would show greater interest in gender-stereotypic careers, we analyzed the career interest measures in a $2 \times 2$ (participant sex) mixed ANOVA, with career interest as a within-subjects factor. The only significant effect emerging from this analysis was the predicted Sex $\times$ Career interaction, $F(1, 63) = 16.26, p < .001, \eta^2 = .194$. Men expressed more interest in male-stereotypic careers than did women, $F(1, 63) = 11.56, p = .001, \eta^2 = .158$, and women tended to express more interest in female-stereotypic careers than did men, $F(1, 63) = 3.91, p = .052, \eta^2 = .058$ (see Table 2).

Mediation of Sex and Career Interest by Distant Goals

We used path analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986) to examine whether distant goals mediated the relationship between participant sex and career interest. As shown in Figure 2, multiple regression analyses indicated that women were more likely than men to endorse caregiving goals, and this endorsement in turn predicted interest in female-stereotypic careers. Endorsement of caregiving goals fully mediated the relationship between sex and female-stereotypic career interest (Sobel Goodman $z = -2.20, p = .03$). In parallel, men were more likely than women to endorse status goals, and such endorsement in turn predicted interest in male-stereotypic careers. Endorsement of status goals partially mediated the relationship of sex and male-stereotypic career interest (Sobel Goodman $z = 1.96, p = .05$).

In addition, we examined whether these motivational processes work primarily through facilitatory means, in

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**Table 2**

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*Note.* Means with different subscripts by column and row within study differ significantly, $p < .05$.

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**Fig. 2.** Goals mediate the effect of sex on gender-stereotypic career interest.
which endorsement of certain goals is related to an increase in congruent career interest, or inhibitory means, in which endorsement of certain goals is related to a decrease in incongruent career interest. Specifically, our path analyses provide support for the hypothesis that endorsement of status goals facilitates interest in male-stereotypic careers, but it is also possible that endorsement of status goals inhibits interest in female-stereotypic careers. To examine these goal-inhibitory processes, we performed path analyses in which we examined the prediction of male-stereotypic careers from caregiving goals and female-stereotypic careers from status goals. These path analyses demonstrated that these alternative models were not as successful: Caregiving goals did not predict male-stereotypical career interest, $p = .22$, and status goals did not significantly predict female-stereotypical career interest, $p = .06$. As a consequence, both models failed to meet the necessary conditions for mediation. Within the current data, the supported finding is that goals do not act primarily to proscribe certain career paths, but to make congruent career paths more desirable.

Our theoretical framework places goals prior to career interest in the causal sequence. However, also plausible is the reverse path, in which career preference predicts the endorsement of congruent goals. We thus examined mediational models in which sex predicted career interest, which in turn predicted goals. These analyses yielded mixed results: The path model for female-stereotypical career interest leading to caregiving goals failed to reach significance, Sobel Goodman $z = -1.62$, $p = .11$, but the model for male-stereotypical career interest leading to status goals was supported, Sobel Goodman $z = 2.44$, $p = .01$. Because measures were collected simultaneously, these data cannot definitively support a particular causal direction, and most likely reciprocal causation plays out over time. However, consistent with our motivational perspective, we assume that the endorsement of a goal state precedes the selection of goal pursuit methods, and the stronger set of models supports mediation of the sex–career interest relationship by distant goals.

Discussion

The findings of Study 2 provide support for a motivational explanation for gender differences in career interest. First, gender differences in the content of distant goals emerged: When projecting success in their mid-30s, men, more than women, anticipated status goals to be important, and women, more than men, anticipated caregiving goals to be important. Second, this gender difference in distant goals accounted for the gender difference in career interest. The gender difference in male-stereotypic career interest was mediated by differential endorsement of status goals, and the gender difference in female-stereotypical career interest was mediated by differential endorsement of caregiving goals. These findings demonstrate that gender differences in career interest are due at least in part to the content of distant goals.

Importantly, these findings also demonstrate that endorsement of distant goals does not have a prescriptive effect on career interest: Endorsement of status goals did not predict avoidant tendencies toward female-stereotypic careers, and endorsement of caregiving goals did not predict avoidant tendencies toward male-stereotypic careers. These mediational analyses, thus, delineate some of the processes by which distant goals affect career interest. Additionally, the set of models positing reverse causation performed less well than the set of models positing our hypothesized path that goals lead to career preferences. However, given the plausibility of these models, we investigate the possibility of reverse causation in more detail in Study 3.

STUDY 3

The logic of the role congruity framework suggests the endorsement of gender-normative distant goals should depend on the extent to which individuals endorse these gender roles as self-standards. This internalization of gender roles is a critical mechanism by which the broader social structure is maintained (e.g., Figure 1): The gendered division of labor leads to the elaboration of ideas about the behaviors that are appropriate for men and women, which are reflected in gender role attitudes. These individual differences in endorsement of traditional gender roles (e.g., high levels of ambivalent sexism) have consequences for a range of role selection processes, such as mate preference (Johannesen-Schmidt & Eagly, 2002). The incorporation of ideas about the self into these gender role beliefs begins early in childhood (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), and these gender differences in self-related beliefs are critical in understanding the interpretation of social information as well as behavioral choices (e.g., Gabriel & Gardner, 1999).

In Study 3, we expanded our investigation to include possible antecedents to distant goals, with the hypothesis that these goals stem from the internalization of gender roles. To assess this internalization, we examined three different aspects of the individual’s gender belief system (e.g., Deaux & Lafrance, 1998; Deaux & Major, 1987): gendered self-concept, endorsement of gender norms (i.e., ideals for a same-sex target), and sexism. Increasingly gender-typical self-concept, greater endorsement of gender norms, and more sexist beliefs were expected to predict more gender-typical goals, which in turn were expected to predict gender-typical career preference. We chose ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001) as the sexism construct of interest because it captures two distinct dimensions that have been shown to be uniquely related to gendered decisions in previous research (e.g., Johannesen-Schmidt & Eagly, 2002). Benevolent sexism reflects an endorsement of traditional gender roles based on protectiveness toward women, and hostile sexism reflects an endorsement of traditional gender roles based on derogation of women. Although these constructs are all conceptualized to be part of a broad gender belief system, it is also possible that...
sexism will diverge in its effects from gendered self-concept and gender norms. Both gendered self-concept and gender norms as conceptualized here focus on agency and communion, whereas sexism more broadly captures attitudes toward women’s traditional and nontraditional roles. This study thus offers the potential to examine complexity within the gender belief system.

To explore the interrelationships among variables, we employed structural equation modeling (SEM). This technique allowed us to replicate the basic mediational model supported in Study 2 but also to expand the model to look at the multiple factors underlying the gender beliefs construct. In this model, traditional gender beliefs were hypothesized to predict both gender-typical goals and career interest, and gender-typical goals to predict career interest (see Figure 3). An important feature of Study 3 is the ability to examine whether sex itself—that is, categorization as male or female—contributes to goal endorsement and career interest beyond endorsement of gender beliefs. As such, this study provides a strong test of the posited internalization processes integral to social role theory.

**Method**

**Participants**

Three hundred forty-eight undergraduates (30% male, 95% Caucasian, ages 17–31 years old, median age = 19) at a midwestern university participated in exchange for partial class credit. An additional 48-year-old participant was removed from analyses because her age rendered the critical task of projecting success at age 35 uninterpretable. The sample size allowed sufficient statistical power to detect all hypothesized effects (all values of $1 - \beta > .99$).

**Procedure and Measures**

Participants were told that they would take part in three separate studies (to reduce the possibility of contamination of responses from one set of measures to another), and participants were presented with three questionnaire packets. To reinforce the cover story, each packet was printed using different typefaces and paper colors. Participants first completed the gender belief system measures, with order of presentation for self-concept, gender norms, and sexism counterbalanced. They then completed measures of distant goals. Finally, participants completed the career interest measure and reported demographic information.

**Gender-typical self-concept.** Participants rated themselves on eight stereotypically agentic and communal traits (Diekman & Eagly, 2000). Specifically, participants responded to the prompt “please indicate to what extent you possess the following characteristics” and rated each characteristic on a seven-point scale ranging from not at all to extremely. Four items measured agentic self-concept (competitive, adventurous, daring, aggressive; $\alpha = .67$), and four items measured communal self-concept (affectionate, sensitive, sympathetic, gentle; $\alpha = .80$). A measure of gender-typical self-concept was constructed by subtracting the counterstereotypic from the stereotypic dimension (e.g., for men, subtracting communion from agency). Positive scores represented a more gender-typical self-concept, and negative scores represented a more gender-atypical self-concept. In each instance where dependent measures were calculated as difference scores, use of discrete dependent measures yielded similar results.

**Gender norms.** Gender norms were assessed through participants’ ratings of agency and communion of ideal same-sex targets. For example, male participants responded to the prompt “please indicate to what extent the ideal man would possess the following characteristics.” Participants then rated the ideal same-sex target on the four agency items and four communal items included in the self-concept measure. Ratings were made on seven-point scales ranging from not at all to extremely. Averaging across these

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**Fig. 3.** Hypothesized model: Goals mediate the effect of gender beliefs on career interest.
items produced scales of acceptable reliability (for men, agency \( \alpha = .70 \), communion \( \alpha = .85 \); for women, agency \( \alpha = .76 \), communion \( \alpha = .81 \)). A measure of gender norms was constructed by subtracting the counterstereotypic from the stereotypic dimension (e.g., for women, subtracting ideal agency from ideal communion). Positive scores represented a more gender-typical ideal for one’s own sex, and negative scores represented a more gender-atypical ideal.

Ambivalent sexism. Participants completed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996). This inventory includes 11 items assessing hostile sexism (e.g., “women seek to gain power by getting control over men”; \( \alpha = .84 \)) and 11 items assessing benevolent sexism (e.g., “women should be cherished and protected by men”; \( \alpha = .76 \)). Ratings were made on six-point Likert scales, ranging from disagree strongly to agree strongly.

Goals. Participants completed the four-item status goals scale (\( \alpha = .88 \)) and the four-item caregiving goals scale (\( \alpha = .82 \)) used in Study 2, embedded among several other items. A measure of gender-typical goal emphasis was constructed by subtracting the counterstereotypic from the stereotypic dimension (e.g., for women, subtracting status goals from caregiving). Positive scores represented more gender-typical goals, and negative scores represented more gender-atypical goals.

Career interest. Participants completed the male-stereotypic (\( \alpha = .76 \)) and female-stereotypic (\( \alpha = .82 \)) career interest scales from Study 2. A measure of gender-stereotypic career interest was constructed by subtracting the counterstereotypic from the stereotypic dimension (e.g., for women, subtracting male-stereotypic career interest from female-stereotypic career interest). Positive scores represented more gender-typical career interest, and negative scores represented more gender-atypical career interest.

Results

We first present replications of the critical analyses from Study 2 to confirm the hypothesized relationships among participant sex, goals, and career interest. Next, we present analyses examining differences between men and women among components of the gender belief system. Finally, we used SEM to test a series of structural models investigating the relationships among gender beliefs, goals, and career interest.

Goals, Career Interest, and Mediation Analyses

A 2 (goal: status, caregiving) \( \times \) 2 (participant sex) mixed ANOVA with goal as the within-subjects factor yielded an effect of goal type, \( F \) (1,346) = 5.92, \( p = .015 \), \( \eta^2 = .015 \), in which caregiving goals were endorsed more strongly than status goals, that was subsumed by the predicted significant Sex \( \times \) Goal interaction, \( F \) (1,346) = 30.01, \( p < .001 \), \( \eta^2 = .077 \). Men endorsed distant status goals more strongly than women, \( F \) (1,346) = 6.70, \( p = .01 \), \( \eta^2 = .019 \), and women endorsed distant caregiving goals more strongly than did men, \( F \) (1,346) = 34.01, \( p < .001 \), \( \eta^2 = .089 \) (see Table 2). A similar pattern emerged for career interest; \( \alpha \) (career: male-stereotypic, female-stereotypic) \( \times \) 2 (participant sex) mixed ANOVA with career as the within-subjects factor resulted in a significant Sex \( \times \) Career interaction only, \( F \) (1,345) = 120.69, \( p < .001 \), \( \eta^2 = .259 \). Men expressed more interest in male-stereotypic careers than did women, \( F \) (1,345) = 53.89, \( p < .001 \), \( \eta^2 = .135 \), and women expressed more interest in female-stereotypic careers than did men, \( F \) (1,345) = 72.55, \( p < .001 \), \( \eta^2 = .174 \) (see Table 2).

To establish that men and women differed as predicted in their self-concepts, we analyzed the self-concept ratings in a 2 (trait: agentic, communal) \( \times \) 2 (participant sex) mixed ANOVA, with trait as the within-subjects factor. Overall, sex differences in career interest (see Figure 2). Being male predicted endorsement of status goals, and status goals predicted interest in male-stereotypic careers. Status goals significantly mediated the relationship between sex and male-stereotypic career interest (Sobel Goodman \( z = 2.36 \), \( p = .02 \)). Being female predicted endorsement of caregiving goals, and caregiving goals predicted interest in female-stereotypic careers. Caregiving goals significantly mediated the relationship between sex and female-stereotypic career interest (Sobel Goodman \( z = 3.80 \), \( p < .001 \)).

Sex Differences in Gender Beliefs

To establish that men and women differed as predicted in their self-concepts, we analyzed the self-concept ratings in a 2 (trait: agentic, communal) \( \times \) 2 (participant sex) mixed ANOVA, with trait as the within-subjects factor. Overall, self-ratings of communion were higher than agency, \( F \) (1,342) = 56.52, \( p < .001 \), \( \eta^2 = .126 \), but this tendency was moderated by sex, as reflected in the significant Sex \( \times \) Trait interaction, \( F \) (1,342) = 47.05, \( p < .001 \), \( \eta^2 = .105 \). This interaction was decomposed by examining effects of participant sex within trait: Men reported more agentic self-concepts than women, \( F \) (1,342) = 38.95, \( p < .001 \), \( \eta^2 = .102 \), and women reported more communal self-concepts than men, \( F \) (1,342) = 16.67, \( p < .001 \), \( \eta^2 = .046 \) (see Table 3).

To establish the presence of traditional gender norms, we analyzed ratings of same-sex ideals in a 2 (normative ideal: agentic, communal) \( \times \) 2 (participant sex) mixed ANOVA, with ideals as the within-subjects factor. Overall, same-sex ideals for communion were higher than agency, \( F \) (1,343) = 24.95, \( p < .001 \), \( \eta^2 = .042 \), but this tendency was moderated by sex, as reflected in the significant Sex \( \times \) Ideal interaction, \( F \) (1,343) = 203.83, \( p < .001 \), \( \eta^2 = .345 \). When we decomposed this interaction by examining participant sex within gender ideal, simple effects showed that men’s same-sex ideals included more agency than did women’s, \( F \) (1,343) = 159.62, \( p < .001 \), \( \eta^2 = .318 \), and
women’s same-sex ideals included more communion than did men’s, $F(1, 343) = 46.01, p < .001, \eta^2 = .118$ (see Table 3).

Ambivalent sexism was analyzed in a 2 (sexism: hostile, benevolent) × 2 (participant sex) mixed ANOVA, with sexism entered as the within-subjects factor. A significant main effect of sex emerged, $F(1, 246) = 34.08, p < .001, \eta^2 = .117$; men expressed more sexism ($M = 3.93, SD = 0.44$) than women ($M = 3.47, SD = 0.66$). A significant main effect of type of sexism also emerged, $F(1, 246) = 18.50, p < .001, \eta^2 = .056$; men and women both expressed more benevolent sexism ($M = 3.77, SD = 0.73$) than hostile sexism ($M = 3.49, SD = 0.80$).

### Structural Relations: Gender Beliefs, Goals, and Career Interest

All SEM analyses used LISREL 8.80 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2006). Covariance matrices served as input, using maximum-likelihood estimation. Scaling metrics for the latent variables were fixed by setting factor variances to 1.0. Goodness of fit was evaluated using the comparative fit index (CFI), nonnormed fit index (NNFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Initial models were tested using the measures of career interest and goal emphasis as indicators of their respective constructs, and measures of gendered self-concept, gender norms, and ambivalent sexism as indicators of the gender beliefs construct (see Figure 3 for hypothesized model). Correlations between measures were modest, ranging from $r = -.29$ (female-stereotypic career interest with status goals) to $r = .50$ (agentic ideal with agentic self-concept). This correlation between agentic ideal and agentic self-concept ($r = .50$), as well as the corresponding correlation between communal ideal and communal self-concept ($r = .48$), were the only correlations to exceed $r = .35$ in magnitude. The magnitude of these correlations suggests that the measures represent distinct constructs, although related, as would be expected.

#### Model 1: Mediation of gender beliefs and career interest by goals

The initial model (Model 1) in which all three aspects of gender beliefs predicted career interest, with goals as a mediator, yielded a poor fit, $CFI = .76, NNFI = .56, RMSEA = .16$. Removal of hostile and benevolent sexism (Model 1r) significantly improved the fit of the model, $CFI > .99, NNFI > .99, RMSEA < .001, \chi^2$ difference $p = .01$. These analyses suggest that gender beliefs focused on agency and communion are central to explaining sex-differentiated goals; we thus omitted ambivalent sexism from subsequent analyses.

In the improved model (Model 1r; see Figure 4), gender-typical self-concept and gender norms predicted gender-typical goals, which in turn predicted gender-typical career interest. The path from gender beliefs to career interest failed to reach significance, indicating that goals fully mediated the relationship between gender beliefs and career interest.

#### Model 2: Inclusion of participant sex

To examine whether participant sex provided predictive power beyond the gender beliefs construct, we examined Model 2, in which participant sex served as an additional predictor of goals and career interest. This model yielded a significantly poorer fit than Model 1r, $CFI = .98, NNFI = .88, RMSEA = .10, \chi^2$ difference $p = .01$. Including participant sex as an indicator of the gender beliefs construct also yielded poorer fit than Model 1r, $CFI = .97, NNFI = .92, RMSEA = .08, \chi^2$ difference $p = .01$. Participant sex, thus, does not appear to contribute to mediation beyond gender beliefs; indeed, inclusion of participant sex provides a worse fit to the data.

#### Model 3: Reverse causal mediation

To test the reverse- causation model in which career interest leads to goal endorsement, we examined a model that reversed the causal path between goals and careers. Although Model 3 yielded good fit, $CFI > .99, NNFI > .99, RMSEA < .001$ (see Figure 5), the direct path from gender beliefs to goals remained significant even when career interest served as a mediator. These findings suggest that although role-related goals and career interest are closely intertwined, role-related goals more strongly mediate the relationship between gender beliefs and career interest than the reverse.

### Discussion

Consistent with the social role framework, internalized gender beliefs—particularly self-concept and injunctive gender norms—predict the endorsement of gendered distant
goals, and these goals predict gender-stereotypic career interest. This study expanded upon Study 2 in two critical ways. First, Study 3 established that gender differences in goals and career interest can be fully accounted for by differences in gender beliefs. In these analyses, participant sex did not predict goals when entered into the model along with gender beliefs; indeed, overall model fit worsened significantly. In essence, the previous findings of a relationship between sex and goals can be explained by examining traditional gender beliefs. Findings of gender differences in men’s and women’s role-related goals thus rest on their different internalization of gender roles.

Second, the findings of Study 3 provide additional support for the hypothesis that distant goals lead to differential interest in male- and female-stereotypic careers, rather than the reverse. In these data, goals fully mediated the

Fig. 4. Structural model: Mediation of gender beliefs and career interest by goals.

Fig. 5. Structural model: Mediation of gender beliefs and goals by career interest.
relationship between gender beliefs and career interest, whereas full mediation was not achieved in the reverse model. However, a clear aim for future research is to disentangle the relationship between goals and career interest, as we explore in the General Discussion below.

Another interesting finding from Study 3 is that ambivalent sexism did not contribute to explaining gender differences in role-related goals or career interest. Overall model fit improved significantly with the omission of ambivalent sexism from the gender beliefs construct. Gender beliefs tied closely to agency and communion appear to be especially influential in predicting sex-differentiated goal endorsement. It is possible that sexism instead predicts other outcomes, such as self-efficacy or projected success in careers, rather than interest in careers. In other research (e.g., Johannesen-Schmidt & Eagly, 2002), ambivalent sexism clearly has emerged as an indicator of the internalization of gender roles and a predictor of sex-differentiated outcomes. The finding from the current data, however, is that gendered self-concept and gender norms, but not sexism, help to explain gender differences in distant goals, and in turn career interest. The divergence in the predictive capacity of components of the gender belief system highlights the importance of examining the complexity of gender beliefs in greater detail. The findings of Study 3 suggest that beliefs about gender roles influence the content of distant goals, which in turn influences interest in certain careers. In effect, goals serve as a critical mechanism through which beliefs about gender roles may contribute to self-selection into specific social roles.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The three studies presented here provide converging evidence that it is important to consider how distant role-related goals are associated with gendered career preferences. Through this motivational framework, the projected desire for high status or caregiving opportunities in one’s mid-30s relates to career interest several years in advance. These studies help to fill an important gap within the literature on social role theory by examining how internalized beliefs about gender roles contribute to the maintenance of a gendered division of labor. In Study 1, male- and female-typical careers were perceived as differentially related to status and caregiving goals. In Studies 2 and 3, gender differences in distant goals and career interest were documented. Most importantly, the relationship between sex and career preference was mediated by differential endorsement of distant goals. Overall, these studies provide support for the role congruity framework (Diekman & Eagly, 2005), in which gender roles provide an opportunity structure through which men and women identify important goals and the means by which to pursue them.

An important finding in the current research is that internalized gender roles (i.e., gender-typical self-concept and traditional same-sex ideals) fully accounted for gender-stereotyped goals and career interest. Put simply, once internalized gender roles are taken into account, being male or female does not appear to matter in terms of goal endorsement or career interest. Certainly, these findings do not rule out more biologically based theories of sex differences in career or family goals (Browne, 2006). However, these data do suggest that at the least these gender differences are mediated through social cognitive means—that is, through beliefs about how one does and should align with traditional gender roles.

These findings also cohere with other examinations of how broad goals and ideologies relate to career preference. In particular, social dominance orientation has been shown to relate to career preference, with individuals high in social dominance selecting into hierarchy-enhancing roles and individuals low in social dominance selecting into hierarchy-attenuating roles (Sidanius, van Laar, Levin, & Sinclair, 2003). Likewise, a wide range of research within the framework of the Eccles’s (1994) achievement model has shown that gender roles, the self-concept, and long- and short-term goals influence achievement-related behaviors. To our knowledge, however, these findings are among the first to demonstrate both that gender differences in distant goals account for career interest and that these differences between men and women may be fully accounted for by gender-role traditionalism.

**Theoretical and Practical Importance of Considering Motivated Role Selection**

As noted at the beginning of this article, the systematic study of gender differences in occupational role selection can provide both theoretical and practical benefits. Our studies are among the first to explore directly whether gender differences in internalized distant goals are associated with differences in career interest for men and women. To understand fully the impact of the gendered division of labor, which has been a critical element of social role theory, we also need to understand how individuals create and maintain this division of labor. A comprehensive theory of gender thus includes both causes and consequences of the differential positioning of men and women in social roles. Such consideration has been given to the historical origins of the division of labor through the biosocial model (Wood & Eagly, 2002); the current research contributes to understanding the causes of the division of labor by examining the proximal forces that can influence self-selection into gendered social roles.

The finding that gender differences in goals predict gender differences in career interest has important practical implications for the direction of efforts to reduce occupational sex segregation. For example, a common strategy in reducing occupational sex segregation is to focus on hostile work environments that block women’s entry into certain occupations. Although efforts to ameliorate the hostile workplaces that result from overt sex discrimination are
important and necessary (Button, 2001), these efforts may be efficacious only for certain occupations or certain individuals. In many cases, the obstacle may not be solely external but also internal; that is, women may select out of occupations even when external barriers do not exist. The obstacle may instead be that the occupation is not perceived as congruent with important goals. The current findings are especially deserving of attention because career interest here was associated with college students’ goals for the distant future, years before these students can actually know the constraints and opportunities of their own family and career lives.

Although the current data illustrate the importance of understanding internalized motivations for career selection, these findings should not be interpreted as providing evidence for a simplistic model in which the occupational outcomes for men and women are solely the result of their own choices. Even though goals differ between men and women, the extent to which they differed was predicted by traditional gender beliefs. Thus, external forces in society, such as gender norms and socialization, become internalized into an individual’s chosen goals. Similar internalization processes have been elaborated in Eccles’s (1994) model of achievement-related choices. The line between external and internal forces on gendered life decisions is, therefore, not easily drawn, and certainly deserves greater consideration.

Future Directions

A clear prediction from our role congruity model is that careers perceived as affording role-related goals will be preferred. For example, portraying male-stereotypical careers as compatible with caregiving goals should increase interest among women, and portraying female-stereotypic careers as compatible with status goals should increase interest among men. Evidence for this type of matching hypothesis as applied to perceptions of others has been demonstrated in employment research (e.g., hiring masculine individuals for male-typical occupations, Glick, 1991; Judd & Oswald, 1997; hiring younger individuals for quickly changing occupations, Diekmann & Hirnisey, 2007). Highlighting aspects of occupational roles that are consistent with goals should also affect self-selection into these roles. Research pertaining to this hypothesis could inform interventions that seek to increase gender equality in occupations.

An important question arising from our current model is the nature of the relationship between distant goals and career interest. Although our data support the motivational hypothesis that goals lead to career interest, the concurrent measurement of these constructs in the current research prohibits definitive evidence against the reverse path (that career interest leads to goal endorsement). To fully examine these causal sequences, both longitudinal designs and experimental manipulations of goals and career interest are necessary. Moreover, reciprocal relationships between goals and career choices are most likely at play over the lifespan, with certain goals leading to career selection, and then career choices and socialization strengthening some goals and weakening others (e.g., Jenkins, 1987).

Although the current treatment of status and caregiving goals examines these goals as separable constructs, many careers might simultaneously afford opportunities for both status and caregiving. In fact, to the extent that people endorse both goals, then careers that fulfill both goals should be preferred to careers that fulfill a single goal only. This prediction is consistent with the goal systems theory principle of multifinality (Kruglanski et al., 2002; Shah, Kruglanski, & Friedman, 2003). Examining the interplay between goals and the resulting effect on career interest is thus a promising avenue for future research.

Another fruitful direction for future research is the more detailed exploration of the gender belief system. In the current research, the complexity of the gender belief system was illustrated by the fact that goals and career interest were predicted by gendered self-concept and same-sex ideals but not by ambivalent sexism. Theories of gender would benefit from greater exploration of the relationships between components of the gender belief system and important outcomes, as well as the relationships between goal endorsement and other components of the gender belief system. In addition, other features likely interact with the gender belief system to moderate its effects. For example, Deaux and Major’s (1987) social interaction model identified situational context, self-presentation concerns, and certainty, among other factors, as part of the gender belief system. Broadening the existing model to include these other contributing factors could offer further insight into how these predictors interact with role-related goals.

Finally, several additional factors that were not studied in the current research provide important avenues for understanding how goals influence career preferences. First, prior research on achievement-related choice has demonstrated many additional influences that might intersect with goals to predict career interest, including values, efficacy beliefs, and perceived cost (Eccles, 1994). Second, additional constraints likely affect the relationship between goals and career preferences. The current data were collected primarily from middle- to upper-class college students, who may perceive a wider range of career opportunities than individuals lower in socioeconomic status. The perceived opportunity structure undoubtedly will vary depending on characteristics of social groupings and individual life circumstances. Nonetheless, the current research suggests that individuals’ distant goals are an important facet to consider as they navigate such opportunity structures.

Conclusions

These findings can provide insight into both change and stability in gender roles and the division of labor. Until
the nature of gender roles changes, certain career domains likely will remain segregated by sex. Correspondingly, the current data show that the division of labor rests in part upon self-selection into occupational roles that are congruous with one’s gender belief system. However, the division of labor is malleable, both in reality (Fullerton, 1999) and in perception (Diekman & Eagly, 2000). At times, this malleability may be imposed by economic demands (e.g., the “Rosie the Riveters” of World War II). At other times, this malleability may be created on an individual basis, as particular individuals reject gender roles as standards for their own lives. In examining the critical link between internalization of gender roles and one’s own fit to the social structure, our research provides an important illumination of forces that contribute to both change and stability in social roles.

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NOTES

1. Certainly, other opportunity structures based on social categorization (i.e., race) or on individual life circumstances exist; moreover, the gendered opportunity structure may not be relevant to all human needs. However, the gendered opportunity structure is critical to examine because it has the potential to apply widely. The trait dimensions central to gender roles—agency and communion—have been posited as basic human needs (Bakan, 1966). It is thus important to consider how men and women navigate the constraints and opportunities of gender roles to achieve agency- and communion-related goals.

2. We chose to omit physically demanding careers (e.g., fashion model, construction worker) from this research because they are less relevant to our college population and because beliefs about efficacy in these careers likely relate to male- and female-stereotypic physical features rather than to social or motivational constructs.

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Gender Beliefs, Goals, and Career Interest


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