What leads to Chinese women's gender role conflict?

The influence of liberal attitudes toward women's role, career aspiration and

gender stereotype perception.

Chenning Xu (2698323)

Utrecht University

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Abstract

Liberal attitudes towards women's role and career aspiration can increase women's career aspiration and gender role conflict. Gender stereotype perception can also increase gender role conflict. This study sets in the context of Chinese society, focusing on Chinese women with paid-job, between20 and 60 years old. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between liberal attitudes towards women's role, career aspiration, gender stereotype perception and gender role conflict. In total, 128 participants were included in the study. In line with the hypothesis, career aspiration partially mediated the relationship between liberal attitudes towards women's role and gender role conflict. However, no moderating effect of gender stereotype perception on the relationship between career aspiration and gender role conflict. In short, this study evidence for the role of gender role conflict in Chinese society, providing some insights that people should find a way to reduce women's gender role conflict. Future research could also continue to examine these relationships by using cultural background as a control variable in the study or use scales with original Chinese version instead of translating and rephrase English version. In addition, more factors and methods can also be considered.

Key words: liberal attitudes towards women's role, career aspiration, gender stereotype perception, gender role conflict

Introduction

More and more women have participated in the workforce after World War II challenging the traditional role of just being caregivers. In addition, women's paid employment has shifted from mainly traditional jobs to more non-traditional ones (Domenico & Jones, 2006). Traditionally, women were generally engaged in caregiving, service or handicraft work, but nowadays, not everyone agrees or want to act in line with this gender role. Women are involved in industries that were previously more male-dominated, such as engineering, medicine or IT fields. Women participate in job market actively, it can reduce gender inequality in the workplace and show that not only men can start a career, which is a sign of progress in modern society (Xu et al., 2023).

In the Chinese cultural context, especially Confucius thought, suggests that the main task of adult women is to take care of the family and be a good wife or good mother, rather than being a careerist. In modern society, the younger the women, the more they seeks freedom for personal growth and development, while older women, because of their upbringing, hold more traditional attitudes, which makes these young women more unwilling to be bound by traditional habits and leads to a conflict feeling of gender roles. Women who have a job, have the aspiration of doing something else instead of only being a wife or mother. But there are still a large number of people that think that women should not pay much attention to workplace. That is to say, the problem that traditional stereotype that "women should be the caregiver of a family" still exists (Dicke et al., 2019). This makes those ambitious women or who have motivations to make more progress in their fields feel uncomfortable, in other words, they experience role conflict.

This research will study Chinese women's gender role conflict, in particular the influence of liberal attitudes towards women's role, career aspiration and gender stereotype perception, aiming at reducing their discomfort of having a job despite the expecitations in society.

Gender role conflict

Gender role conflict happens when individuals encounter difficulties balancing personal aspirations with traditional gender roles. Gender role conflict theory (Fallon et al., 2007) suggests that role conflict occurs when a woman's expectations of her gender role differ from her actual behaviour. Gender role conflict can be defined from four perspectives: cognitive,

emotional experience, behavioural and unconscious experience (O'Neil et al., 1986). But most studies agree that, gender role conflict arises because of inconsistencies between one's own internal values and externally imposed demands. For example, traditional gender roles make women take the primary responsibility for family duties, while men are viewed as providers, contributing economically through external employment (Bullough et al., 2022). Women that have a different role or ambition, by taking part in the labour market and focusing on their career. When there is a conflict between external and internal values, individuals must either give up their original ideas and submit to the outside, or fight the outside and thus maintain their personal values (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). If people try to fulfil all the demands of multiple roles at the same time, it increases stress and role pressure (Chusmir et al., 1988). Due to the slow transformation of expectations, women are experiencing more conflict and burden of being responsible for both domestic and professional life (Zhou, 2020).

Studies showed that gender role conflict had negative correlation with involvement, and had positive relationship with absenteeism and turnover (Chusmir & Koberg, 1988). People who have gender role conflict could have less motivation or might lose out the possibility of promotion and gaining higher position in their career. Research suggests that women are more likely to experience gender role conflict, particularly ambitious women (Mahapatra, 2018; Luhaorg & Zivian, 1995). The main source of women's role conflict is they cannot handle their work and obligations expected of them, particularly when they are facing the issue of marriage and motherhood (Moore & Gobi, 1995). This also refers to women with high career aspirations are more likely to be influenced by different gender role attitudes, especially the attitudes towards women's role, which means attitudes towards women's role can be a reason for gender role conflict.

As such in this study we hypothesis that liberal attitudes towards women's role have a direct effect on gender role conflict, which can positively predict gender role conflict.

Liberal attitudes towards women's role

Attitudes toward women's role refers to attitudes toward the rights and roles of women in contemporary society (Fassinger, 1990). This can include views on many aspects, such as perceptions of women's rights, roles in society or female capabilities. Attitudes towards

women's roles are influenced by cultural, social, religious and historical factors. Positive attitudes towards women usually include respect, equality and recognition of their contribution to society, and may also encourage them to be courageous and make a difference. Negative attitudes, on the other hand, may include the idea that women should be a certain way.. In traditional attitudes, women are usually expected to act as gentle wives and mothers, to serve as support to their husbands, to take care of the family, and to take care of household chores, but are not given many expectations in terms of their careers (Fang & Walker, 2015). People with more liberal and equal attitudes tend to have greater personal aspirations, as they believe everyone can pursue their own life goals. Despite the increase in egalitarianism among men in modern society, there are still many people who hold traditional unequal gender attitudes and even discriminatory attitudes that are still a problem in many women's lives (Robinson & Schwartz, 2004), making women always have difficulties in whether they should give up their aims or endure the feeling of conflict during their work.

Whether holding traditional or liberal gender role beliefs, both employed and non-employed mothers may experience anxiety (Luhaorg & Zivian, 1995). Because of the traditional belief that women should devote more energy to their families, some women feel guilty or selfish if they prioritize their professional interests over their families, which is also a feeling of uncomfortable (Domenico & Jones, 2006). Thus, we suppose that attitudes toward women's role play a crucial role in influencing gender role conflict.

Career aspiration

Career aspirations are the extent to which a person chooses a particular career or the desire to advance and expand their career at work, or aspires to a leadership position in their career (Gray & O'Brien, 2007). Career aspirations are influenced by factors such as gender, educational attainment, social status, ethnicity, parents' occupations and educational levels, and parental expectations (Domenico & Jones, 2006).

In modern societies, it has become common for women to have jobs, but the expectation that women will take care of their families still has influence on women's careers (Domenico & Jones, 2006). As women's career aspirations increase while traditional expectation persist, the feeling of gender role conflict might intensify. Researchers have also identified a correlation between egalitarian gender role beliefs and career aspirations (Nadeem & Khalid,

2018). Therefore, we could hypothesis that liberal attitudes towards women can influence women's career aspiration, and then have further effect on gender role conflict. What's wore, when women perceive gender stereotype, their promotion motivation in their career life and entrepreneurial will be affected (Hamdani et al., 2023). In other words, women's career aspirations can be influenced when they perceive gender role stereotypes from the surrounding environment.

Gender stereotype perception

Gender stereotypes are about negative perceptions of some characteristics of males and females, such as physical strength, mathematical or physical ability, sense of direction, social skills, and even driving skills. Gender bias and gender stereotypes have long existed in Chinese society (Zhao, 2020). In many people's habitual perceptions, as well as in a great number of psychological research, a typical woman is seen as considerate, gentle, kind and passive. (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993).

People of all ages may hold gender stereotypes and are aware of the bad effects of gender stereotyping (Zhao, 2020). In workplace, employers may think that women have the possibility of taking maternity leave, which may have an impact on job sustainability for the company. Even during the procedure of assessment and evaluation of recruitment, women tend to be given higher requirements than men and therefore find it difficult to get a job in many cases (Skromme Granrose, 2007). Therefore, we can assume that if women perceive gender stereotype, they will face difficulties especially in their career life and reinforce the feeling of gender role conflict led by career aspiration.

The current study

Western studies have explored women's gender role conflict, career aspirations and gender role stereotypes, while limited attention has been given to oriental contexts, particularly in Chinese society. Researchers indicates that Confucian culture had a negative influence on female career life, which is a historical social background in China (Xu et al., 2023). The traditional male-dominated society and Confucianism pose unique challenges for women in balancing career and family responsibilities, leading to role conflict. Which suggest this research is especially relevant in the Chinese context. This study aims to investigate the gender role conflict experienced by Chinese women, examining what leads to

Chinese women's role conflict and the influence of attitude toward women's roles, career aspiration and gender stereotype perception. By identifying predictors of conflict, the research seeks to propose insights reducing the feeling of gender role conflict, and harmonizing career and family life for women in China.

In sum, this study aims to answer the question that what leads to Chinese women's gender role conflict. According to the literature review, three hypothesis were proposed and Figure 1 shows the hypothesis model:

H1: Women with more liberal gender role attitudes feel more gender role conflict.

H2: The more liberal attitudes toward women's roles, the more career aspiration women have, and the more they perceive role conflict.

H3: Gender role stereotype reinforces the positive relationship of career aspiration and gender role conflict.

Figure 1

Research model visualising the proposed hypotheses
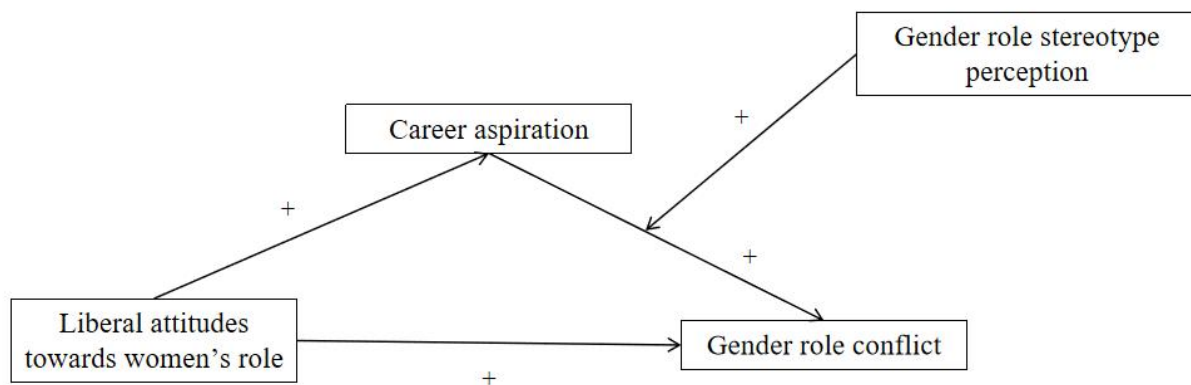
Method

This research project was registered at the Utrecht University Student Ethics Review & Registration Site (UU-SER). The research was conducted according to the rules of the ethics committee of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences and was approved by Ethical Review Board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of Utrecht University.

Participants

We aimed for 120 participants in this study. This sample size was determined by an a

priori power analysis G Power (version 3.1.9.7) with effect size f² for 0.15 (medium effect), α err prob for 0.05, power (1- β err prob) for 0.95, number of predictors for 3, resulting in a total sample size of 119 participants. In addition, we looked at previous studies with similar model (Wolfram et al., 2009). In total, 193 participants started the survey, 65 answers were deleted because they did not meet the criteria, and 128 that met the requirements were included for analysis (Table 1). The study only focused on 20 to 60 years old Chinese women with paid job, individuals that did not fit those criteria were screened out.

Table 1

Data screening and cleansing

	Did not want to participate in the study	Male	Did not have a paid-job.	Not complete the survey (until April 28th)
Number of response	4	12	13	36

As Table 2 shows, all the participants were female and on average, participants worked over 41 hours per week. The largest part (59.4%) of all participants reported a bachelor's degree as their highest level of education, after that high school or lower (27.3%) and after that master's degree (10.3%), and the smallest number of people with PhD's degree or above, at only 2.3%. The majority of the participants, 64%, had child/children, 35.9% did not. Among the 64.1% of participants with children, 41.5% had a child under 18 years old. In terms of working situation, 82% of participants work as an ordinary employee and 91.4% have only one job. Nearly 90% of participants have fixed working hours and 85.2% worked over 32 hours each week. Among all the 128 participants, 65.6% of them were from urban areas and 34.4% were from rural areas. In China, urban areas indicate the area that has higher productivity and more modern attitudes and education and living resources.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics of demographic variables

Variables	Options	Frequency	Percentage
	20-25	28	21.9
	26-30	16	12.5
	31-35	12	9.4
	36-40	13	10.2
Age	41-45	13	10.2
	46-50	23	18.0
	51-55	19	14.8
	56-60	4	3.1
Living area	Urban	84	65.6
	Rural	44	34.4
Have child (children) or not	Yes	82	64.1
	No	46	35.9
Have child (children) under 18 years old	Yes	34	26.6
	No	94	73.4
	High school or lower	35	27.3
Education level	Bachelor	76	59.4
	Master	14	10.9
	PhD or higher	3	2.3
Have fixed working hours or not	Yes	115	89.8
	No	13	10.2
Self-employed (entrepreneurial) or not	Yes	23	18.0
	No	105	82.0
Have one job or more than one jobs	Only one	117	91.4
	More than one	11	8.6
	More than 41h	60	46.9
	33-40h	49	38.3
Total working hours each week	24-32h	11	8.6
	Less than 24h	8	6.3

Design and procedure

The survey were designed in Qualtrics and distributed using an anonymous link or QR code. Participants were recruited through the researchers' own social media platform WeChat in China in April of 2024. Additionally, friends, family and acquaintances were approached by the researcher by phone. Participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire completely and carefully. As the participants of the research were Chinese women of 20 to 60 years old with paid job, participants were asked about their gender (options male and female), age, and have a paid job or not. The brief description of the aim of the study as well as a declaration were clearly stated in the information letter and consent form at the beginning of the questionnaire. All participants had to accept these information if they want to start the survey. If participants did not wish to participate, they could withdraw at any time without reasons and without any negative impact on them.

Measures

Four variables were measured using items from four different existing scales that are further explained below. All items and instructions were originally in English and translated to Chinese by the researchers and checked by a Chinese friend with a major in English. The informed consent and complete questionnaire can be found in Appendix A and B.

Gender role conflict

Gender role conflict is defined as "the degree of conflict between an individual's treatment based on gender versus that person's desired treatment as an individual" (Chusmir & Koberg, 1986, p. 398). To measure gender role conflict, the Sex Role Conflict Scale was used (Chusmir & Koberg, 1986). The scale is a 17-item Likert-type scale to measure how much people perceive gender role conflict. In this study, 9 items were used that made sense in the social and culture context of China (Cronbach's α= .90)[1]. Participants were asked how much discomfort, disagreement or difficulty they as a woman would feel in situations, such as "You are disliked by the group because your level of competence is considered disproportionate to your gender." "You are given tasks that are too simple or boring because

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[1] The other 8 items did not adapt in the cultural context of China and difficult to translate to make participants easily understand, for example:" When you are viewed as a 'token' woman (man) at work."

of your gender."

Participants indicated how uncomfortable they felt on a scale ranging from not *make me feel uncomfortable at all* (1) to *make me feel very uncomfortabl*e (5). The higher the score, the greater the gender role conflict (Chusmir & Koberg, 1986).

Liberal attitudes towards women's roles

Attitudes toward women's role refers to attitudes toward the rights and roles of women in contemporary society (Fassinger, 1990). To measure liberal attitudes towards women's roles, a short version of the Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS) was used (Spence et al., 1973). The scale has 25 items investigating attitudes about romantic relationships, family responsibilities, independence, and women's vocational, intellectual, and educational roles in society. In this study, 11 items were used (Cronbach's α= .73). For example, "Women should take increasing responsibility for leadership in solving the intellectual and social problems of the day." "Under modern economic conditions with women being active outside the home. Men should share in household tasks such as washing dishes and doing the laundry."

Participants respond to each statement on a scale from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (3). The total score was calculated by adding the scores on all of the items, with the range from 0 to 33. Six items were reverse scored. High scores indicated liberal attitudes toward women's roles.

Career aspiration

Career aspiration refers to women's self-reported desire for promotion or leadership positions (Gray & O'Brien, 2007). To measure career aspiration, the Career Aspiration Scale (CAS) was used. The CAS is comprised of 10 items on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Since the objectives of this study were working women, the context of the questions in the questionnaire is also the work environment. In this study, 5 items were used (Cronbach's α= .68). For example, "I hope to become a leader in my career field." "I do not plan on devoting energy to getting promoted in the organization or business I am working in."

Participants indicated how true each statement was for them on a scale ranging from n*ot at all true of me* (0) to *very true of me* (4). One item was reverse scored, with a higher score indicating greater aspiration.

Gender role stereotype perception

To measure gender stereotype perception, the Gender Stereotypical Roles Scale (GSR) was used, which was a 4-item measure that assesses young people's perceptions about gender norms regarding traditional stereotypical roles (Moreau et al., 2021) on a 5-point Likert-type scale (Cronbach's α= .88). The items were about people in China think about women or men. Participants were asked to indicate to what extent they perceive the descriptions in their daily life. For example, "Most people in Chinese society think a woman's role is taking care of her home and family." "Most people in Chinese society think a man should have the final word about decisions in the home."

Participants responses from not at all (1) to always (5). Answers are combined to provide a mean score, with higher scores signaling perceptions of more gender stereotypes.

Demographics

At the end of the survey, there were several demographic questions about participants' living area, education level, have a child or not, number of jobs, self-employed or not, working hours per week, and occupation type.

Statistical analysis

The statistical analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics v25. F test and T test were conducted to see if the dependent variable differ in terms of demographic variables. Besides, model 4 and 14 was used in the PROCESS macro v3.4.1 in the SPSS for testing mediating effects and moderated mediating effects in the model. Analysis plan for each hypothesis is as followed.

H1: Multiple linear regression to test the relation between liberal attitudes toward women's roles and gender role conflict.

H2: Multiple linear regression and PROCESS model 4 to test the mediation effect of career aspiration on the relation between liberal attitudes toward women's roles and gender role conflict.

H3: Multiple linear regression and PROCESS model 14 to test the moderation effect of gender role stereotype on the relation between career aspiration and gender role conflict.

Other detailed results are shown in the result part below.

Results

Gender Role Conflict

To test if gender role conflict differ in terms of demographic variables, ANOVA was conducted with gender role conflict as a dependent variable and age as an independent variable, showing that there was a significant difference in gender conflict, depending on the age, $F(7, 120) = 2.42$, $p = .02$, indicating that, younger participants especially those aged 20 to 25 years old ($M = 32.68$, $SD = 6.32$) experience more gender conflict. Similarly, ANOVA (F test) with gender role conflict as a dependent variable and education level as an independent variable, suggest a significant difference in gender role conflict depending on the education level, $F(3, 124) = 11.74$, $p < .001$, indicating that participants with master ($M = 3.86$, $SD = .47$) and bachelor's level ($M = 3.30$, $SD = .42$) have more gender conflict and participants with high school or lower education level ($M = 2.73$, $SD = .90$) have less gender conflict. However, interestingly, participants with a PhD's degree ($M = 1.78$, $SD = 1.35$) have the lowest score on our gender role conflict scale. For the difference of gender role conflict on working situations, there was a significant difference in working hours of each week, $F(3, 124) = 3.39$, $p = .02$. Furthermore, according to ANOVA (T test), participants who don't have child/children ($M = 3.56$, $SD = .79$) felt more gender role conflict than those who have child/children ($M = 2.95$, $SD = .82$), and the difference was significant, $t(126) = -4.09$, $p < .001$. Finally, among these who have child/children, participants who don't have child/children under 18 ($M = 3.27$, $SD = .84$) felt more gender role conflict than those who have child/children ($M = 2.90$, $SD = .84$), and the difference was significant, $t(126) = -2.16$, $p = .03$. There were no significant differences in having fixed working hours, the number of jobs or self-employed or not.

Hypothesis 1: Direct effect of liberal attitudes towards women's role on gender role conflict

Table 3 shows the correlations between the four variables in the research model of this study. All four variables showed a significant positive correlation between each of them.

Table 3

M, SD and correlations between each variables (N = 128)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4
Liberal attitudes towards women's role	28.17	4.16	-			
Career aspiration	1.98	.69	.37***	-		
Gender stereotype perception	3.10	.97	.25**	.26**	-	
Gender role conflict	3.17	.86	.51***	.44***	.43***	-

M. mean. *SD.* standard deviation

*. Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

***. Correlation is significant at the .001 level (2-tailed).

To test hypothesis 1 "direct effect of liberal attitudes towards women's role on gender role conflict", linear regression analysis was carried out. The assumption of normality and linearity was also met, as a normal distribution of the scores was visible (see Appendix C). In addition, VIF indicates that there is no serious problem of multicollinearity between the independent variables (less than 10) and Durbin-Watson value is 1.92, which was approximately equal to 2, indicating that the autocorrelation between the variables is not serious.

Table 4

Linear regression with liberal attitudes as independent variable and gender role conflict as dependent variable

	Adjusted R²	F (1, 126)	Unstandardised		Standardised	t	VIF
			B	SE	Beta		
Liberal attitudes towards women's role	.251	43.65***	.10	.02	.51	6.61***	1.00

***. Significant at the .001 level (2-tailed).

As shown in Table 4, the dependent variable of the regression model is gender role conflict, which is indicated by the adjusted R² = .251, meaning that the three variables

explain 25.1% of the variance in gender role conflict, and the model is significant, F (1, 126) = 43.65, $p < .001$, indicating that hypothesis 1 was supported.

Table 5

Multiple linear regression (MLR) of all the three variables predicting gender role attitudes

	Adjusted R²	F (3, 124)	Unstandardised		Standardised	t	VIF
			B	SE	Beta		
Liberal attitudes towards women's role			.07	.02	.35	4.60***	1.20
Career aspiration	.389	27.94***	.29	.09	.23	3.07**	1.21
Gender stereotype perception			.25	.06	.29	3.91***	1.11

*. Significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

**. Significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

***. Significant at the .001 level (2-tailed).

According to multiple linear regression (MLR) in Table 5, the dependent variable of the regression model is gender role conflict, which is indicated by the adjusted $R^2 = .389$, meaning that the three variables explain 38.9% of the variance in gender role conflict, and the model is significant, F (3, 124) = 27.94, $p < .001$

Hypothesis 2: Career aspiration is a mediator of liberal attitudes toward women's roles and gender role conflict

To hypothesis 2, the mediating role of career aspiration between liberal attitude towards women's role and gender role conflict, Hayes' (2017) model 4 was run. A summary of the path coefficients and the indirect effect can be found in Table 6.

First, the direct paths in the model were tested. Liberal attitudes towards women's role had a significant positive effect on gender role conflict, $B = .08$, $t = 5.05$, $p < .001$. Liberal attitudes towards women's role had a significant positive effect on career aspiration, $B = .06$, $t = 4.52$, $p < .001$. Career aspiration had a significant positive effect on gender role conflict, $B = .36$, $t = 3.68$, $p < .001$ (see figure 2).

Table 6

Path coefficients and significance levels

Path	B	SE	t	Bootstrap 95% CI
Liberal attitudes towards women's role → Career aspiration (a)	.06	.01	4.52***	.04, .09
Career aspiration → Gender role conflict (b)	.36	.10	3.68***	.17, .56
Liberal attitudes towards women's role → Gender role conflict (c')	.08	.02	5.05***	.05, .11

B = beta. SE = standard error.

*. Significant at the .05 level.

**. Significant at the .01 level.

***. Significant at the .001 level.

Importantly, as Table 7 shows, the total effect (B = .07, SE = .02, 95% CI [.07, .14]), direct effect (B = .08, SE = .02, 95% CI [.05, .11]) and indirect effect (B = .02, SE = .01, 95% CI [.01, .05]) were all significant, meaning career aspirations partially mediated attitudes towards women's role and gender role conflict, with a 20% proportion of mediation effect. Hypothesis 2 was also supported.

Table 7

Total effect, direct effect, indirect effect and Bootstrap confidence intervals

	Effect	SE	Bootstrap 95% CI		Proportion
			Lower border	Upper border	
The whole mediation model	.10	.02	.07	.14	
Liberal attitudes towards women's role → Gender role conflict	.08	.02	.05	.11	80.00%
Career aspiration as a mediator for liberal attitudes towards women's role and gender role conflict	.02	.01	.01	.05	20.00%

SE = standard error.

Hypothesis 3: Gender role stereotype perception is a moderator of career aspiration and gender role conflict, which reinforce the positive relationship of career aspiration and gender role conflict

To test hypothesis 3 "gender role stereotype perception is a moderator of career aspiration and gender role conflict", Hayes' (2017) model 14 was run. The moderating effects of gender stereotype perception (hypothesis 3) was tested and it was not supported. A summary of the path coefficients and the interact effect can be found in table 8, showing that the path coefficients and their significance levels from the independent variable liberal attitudes towards women's role to the mediating variable career aspiration, from career aspiration to the dependent variable gender role conflict, from liberal attitudes towards women's role to gender role conflict, and from the interaction of the moderator variable gender stereotype perception and the mediator variable career aspiration to gender role conflict.

First, the direct paths in the model were tested. The results in Table 8 shows that liberal attitudes towards women's role had a significant positive effect on gender role conflict, B = .08, t = 4.86, p < .001. Liberal attitudes towards women's role had a significant positive effect on career aspiration, B = .06, t =4.52, p < .001. Career aspiration had a significant positive effect on gender role conflict, B = .32, t = 3.35, p = .001. The interaction of career aspiration and gender stereotype perception did not have a significant effect on gender role conflict, B = .13, t = 1.67, p = .10, 95% CI [-.02, .27]. Hence, gender stereotype perception did not moderate the direct effect of career aspiration on gender role conflict.

Table 8

Path coefficients and significance levels

Path	B	SE	t	Bootstrap 95% CI
Liberal attitudes towards women's role → Career aspiration (a)	.06	.01	4.52***	.04, .09
Career aspiration → Gender role conflict (b)	.32	.10	3.35**	.13, .51
Liberal attitudes towards women's role → Gender role conflict (c')	.08	.02	4.86***	.05, .12
Career aspiration×Gender stereotype perception → Gender role conflict (moderation)	.13	.08	1.67	-.02, .27

B = beta. *SE* = standard error.

*. Significant at the .05 level.

**. Significant at the .01 level.

***. Significant at the .001 level.

The moderating effect of career aspiration on gender role conflict was tested for three levels of gender role stereotype perception. As Table 9 shows, the moderating effect was only positive and significant for a mean and higher level of gender role stereotype perception and not for a lower level of gender role stereotype perception. In sum, there was no evidence for the moderating effect of gender role stereotype perception. When looking at the total moderating effect, zero was included in the confidence interval and the interaction effect was not significant, 95% CI [-.004, .019], indicating that the moderation was not tenable. Thus, hypothesis 3 was not supported. For a graphic representation of the whole research model, see Figure 2.

Table 9

Total effect, direct effect and conditional indirect effects of liberal attitudes towards women's role on gender role conflict at different values of the moderator (gender role stereotype perception)

	Effect	*SE*	Bootstrap 95% CI	
			Lower border	Upper border
Total effect	.008	.006	-.004	.019
Liberal attitudes towards women's role → gender role conflict	.077	.016	.045	.108
Gender stereotype perception - 1SD	.012	.01	-.005	.035
Mean Gender stereotype perception	.020	.009	.005	.040
Gender stereotype perception + 1SD	.027	.011	.007	.052

SE = standard error.

Figure 2

Research model including the results of the analyses (H stands for hypothesis)
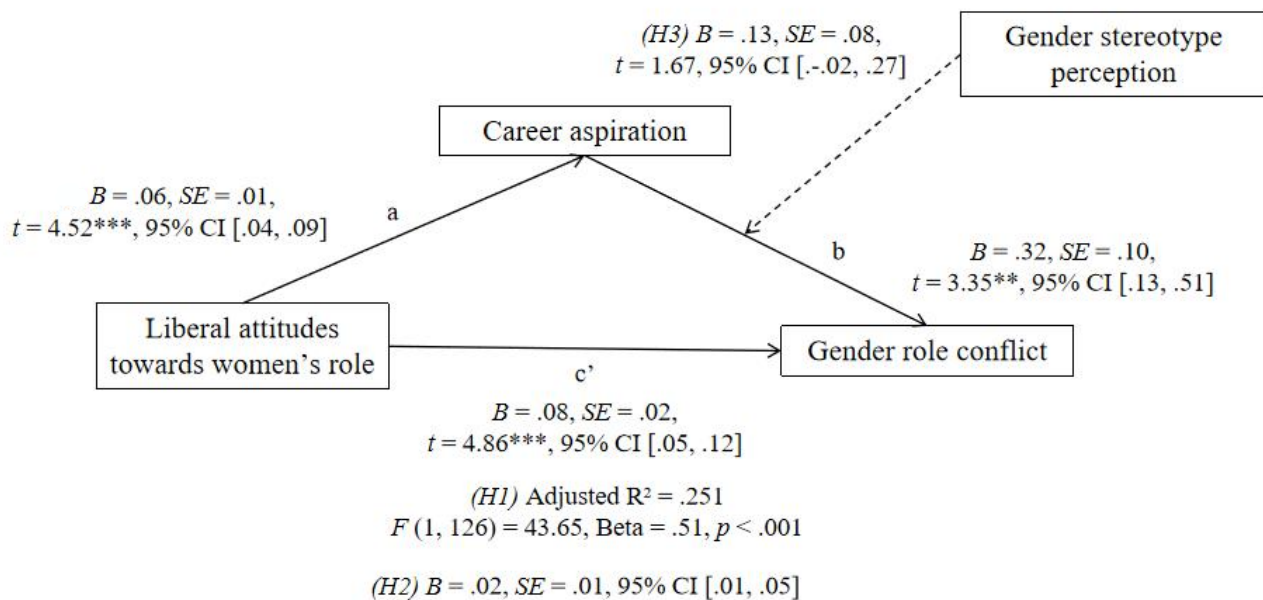
H1: the direct effect.

H2: the mediation effect.

H3: the moderation effect.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the relationships between liberal attitudes towards women' s roles, career aspiration, gender stereotype perception, and gender role conflict. The results provide several important insights into these dynamics.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the level of development of Chinese women has risen considerably, but there is still a long way to go in terms of gender equality in the field of employment in China (Lun & Chen, 2024). The traditional thoughts of Confucianism has a long history that it has influenced Chinese people for generations, leading to the women are still facing the difficulties of having their own career. In this study we focus on the experience of gender role conflict in particular. The purpose of this study was to have a better understanding of what leads to Chinese women's feeling of gender role conflict and provide a guidance to reduce such conflict according to reasons of liberal attitudes towards women's role, career aspiration and gender stereotype perception.

Liberal attitudes towards women's role and gender role conflict

This research found that liberal attitudes towards women's roles could positively predict gender role conflict. Indicating that if women were more "career focused", they felt more gender role conflict. This findings aligns with some previous studies. For example, Betz and Fitzgerald (1987) found that higher career aspirations often lead to increased awareness of gender role conflicts. O' Neil and colleagues (1986) also found that when men held more liberal gender role attitudes, they could experience greater gender role conflict when they had non-traditional roles in their social lives, such as working in the service industry or placing extra emphasis on his family. And in the same case of women, it can be surmised that women with liberal attitudes are also more likely to feel gender role conflict when they work in challenging occupations like being a leader or at least, did not devote their whole live to care.

The mediating effect of career aspiration

According to the results, liberal attitudes towards women's role could positively predict career aspiration and career aspiration also had a positive effect on gender role conflict. The more career aspiration women have, the more gender role conflict they will feel. The results also supported the hypothesis that career aspiration mediates the relationship between liberal attitudes towards women' s roles and gender role conflict. This is in line with several previous

research, such as Bona and colleagues' (2010) and Holahan & Gilbert's (1979) research, women's career aspiration was influenced by gender role attitudes (Bona et al., 2010). Eagly and Wood's (2012) research also suggests that the more liberal society's attitudes towards women's gender, the higher women's career aspirations. Some research also showed that if women have high career aspiration, they will have more gender role conflict (Holahan & Gilbert, 1979). Women who have more liberal attitudes towards gender role are more likely to have higher career aspiration, and then they will experience more gender role conflict.

In this study, the mediation effect found in this study was partly mediation, meaning that career aspiration was appropriate as a mediating variable, but perhaps because the sample size is not large enough or there are more accurate factors that would be better suited as mediating variables than career aspiration.

The moderating effect of gender stereotype perception

Contrary to hypothesis 3, the study found no evidence for the idea that gender stereotype perception can reinforce the impact of career aspiration on gender role conflict. We would note, there was also a direct relation with gender stereotype perception, career aspiration and gender role conflict. There were previous findings that gender stereotype perception could have such influence. For example, Eagly and Karau's (2002) found that individuals with higher perceptions of gender stereotype could feel more uncomfortable when their career aspirations do not align with traditional gender roles. Additionally, BarNir (2021) found that gender stereotypes are not only negatively associated with women's aspirations, but also interfere with self-efficacy, making them feel less confident and fearful of being discriminated against at work.

The moderating effect of perceived gender stereotype was not confirmed, suggesting that other more appropriate factors than stereotype, such as organisational culture or social support systems, may play a more critical role in moderating the impact of career aspirations on gender role conflict, and could be used as a source of improvement. Another explanation for the lack of a moderating effect may be due to the fact that women have exposed to a gender-stereotyped social environments and this has habituated them, making them less responsive to it.

Gender role conflict and demographic variables

Interestingly, our data showed a significant difference in gender role conflict depending on different age group. Younger participants reported higher level of gender role conflict compared to older participants. This finding is consistent with the traditional customary thoughts, in China, old people tend to have some customary thoughts about the main tasks of each gender at different ages because of traditional culture. In Chinese labour market, women have long been in a disadvantaged position, and the imbalance between the dual roles of women in society and in the family is the 'main culprit' of women's employment disadvantage (Wang, 2014). For example, in recruitment, it is sometimes the case that it is considered 'natural' for particular jobs, tasks and skills to belong to only one particular gender (Tang, 2006). While young women tend to do what they like, rather than what they should, so when they are told to obey such traditional thoughts, they will have more reaction to have more conflict.

In addition, the analysis also found that education level significantly impacts gender role conflict. Participants with higher education level (bachelor's and master's degrees) reported more gender role conflict while those with a high school education or lower reported less. In China, a great number of people think that high education level is useful for finding job, so people always try their best to study for a higher degree, in order to have a better job with good salaries. In turn, when people have a high education level, they often think they deserve higher rank in the company or better treatment. But interestingly, women with PhD's and above have the least amount of gender role conflict. Commonly, a PhD's degree is regarded as a professional standard of higher level for scholars. Factors limiting the careers of female academics include 'fears and tensions' about balancing academic life and family responsibilities. The traditional perception of being the primary caregiver, and the significant time and cognitive costs of a family's perception that a career will delay marriage and childbearing, make them more likely to experience internal conflict (Dai et al., 2021). This might suggest that, for female PhDs, those women who dared to choose to pursue or even succeed in obtaining a doctoral degree have more inner strength and are more aware of their own pursuits, and are less likely to feel a strong sense of conflict due to their status as women.

Participants without children felt significantly more gender role conflict than those with

children. Additionally, among participants with children, those without children under 18 had higher gender role conflict than those with younger children. A potential explanation for this findings lays in the literature on…There was a study suggesting that attitudes towards gender roles become more traditional for both parents when they have children, and change more for women than for men (Katz-Wise et al., 2010). Meaning that children especially babies or adolescents are not yet capable of taking care of themselves, they are more likely to prioritise putting a lot of energy into caring for them, which is driven by motherhood, and therefore more likely not to feel that caring for children conflicts with their own development. People without children may have more time and energy to pay attention to their personal development, but society expects them to fulfil traditional female roles, which creates a conflict with the desire for personal development (Hewlett, 2002).

Strengths, limitations and further research

As mentioned, one of the strengths of this study is that it measures attitudes towards women's role and career aspiration among Chinese women, which gives important insights in how liberal attitudes towards women's role influence women's career aspiration. If women hold more liberal attitudes towards women's role, they will have more career aspiration, and then they will feel more gender role conflict.Most previous relevant studies have been conducted in Europe and the United States. Conducting research in the context of Chinese society adds cultural nuance and broadens the generalisability of the findings.

Previous research were mostly conducted within European or the United State's context, and were more about men's gender role conflict, instead of women. So this study focus on women's gender role conflict in Chinese context, which is a strength. Future research could still continue to examine these relationships by using cultural background as a control variable in the study.

On the other hand, this study has limitations that should be discussed. The questionnaire was not using all the items of the original version because the original scales was too long, which may make participants feel boring or tired to complete. Although the validity all met the requirement of statistical analysis, it is still possible that the questionnaire can not describe the society situation comprehensively, but only some aspects. The original version were not designed by Chinese scholars. So there may be small differences in meaning from

the original, which may causing some errors. Further studies can try to find a scale designed by Chinese scholars, making the items more relevant to Chinese society will ensure that Chinese participants can more accurately understand.

In addition, this study is a cross-sectional study comparing the differences in gender role conflict among Chinese women of different ages, and future research could also be conducted in a longitudinal manner, perhaps to see how gender role conflict arises and develops when the same individual is of different ages, and possibly to further identify other influencing factors. One possible direction can be that investigating the impact of parenting styles on gender role conflict perception at different ages.

Practical implications

Throughout history, talented women have always been praised, and competence has never been the privilege of a certain gender (Zeng, 2020). Men can be competent, and so can women. The findings of these studies have several practical implications. The results highlight the factors that contribute to gender role conflict. In the unique cultural and developing social context of Chinese society, there is a greater need to deal with women's gender role conflict by reducing traditional attitudes towards women and increasing encouragement of women in the workplace. At the same time, people also should appropriately reducing the tasks and pressures on women as caregivers. When considering the sense of conflict at work, it is also important to consider the pressure on women to remain as carers, and the sense of conflict and ambivalence that both bring to women at the same time.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are consistent with other studies on women and work. Chinese culture has strong Confucian thoughts and traditional ideas about women's roles in a long history, making modern younger people have more gender role conflict.

In conclusion, this study highlights the relationships between liberal attitudes towards gender roles, career aspiration and gender stereotype perception in predicting gender role conflict. The results of the study show that liberal attitudes towards women's role have a positive direct influence on gender role conflict, which is partly mediated by career aspiration. Although gender stereotype perception's moderating effect on career aspiration and gender

role conflict was not statistically significant, gender stereotype perception still had a positive correlation with gender role conflict. Meaning that the more gender stereotype women perceive, the more gender role conflict they will have.

In contemporary Chinese society, having career aspiration could give pressure on women, and this pressure can make them feel uncomfortable and conflicted while doing their jobs, which can hinder their career development. Therefore, there is a need to address this pressure that women face in order to reduce women's experience of conflict and improve their position in the labour market. By addressing these issues, it is also more conducive to creating a more inclusive and equitable workplace and social environment.

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Appendix A

Informed consent

Welcome to this research study!

Dear participant,

You are invited to participate in this survey. The purpose of this research is to have a better understanding of how much gender role conflict does Chinese women feel in current society. Thank you for your cooperation.

The study is conducted according to the rules of the ethics committee of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of Utrecht University. The results will be used for scholarly purposes only. The procedure involves filling in this online survey that will take approximately 10 minutes. This survey collect the data on an anonymous basis, and no IP addresses are collected. Furthermore, no directly identifying information is requested in the questionnaire.

Your participation is voluntary, and complete confidentiality is guaranteed. First, you will be asked several general demographic questions. Subsequently, you will answer a series of questions on various topics. It is important that you answer the questions truthfully. There is no right or wrong answer. Your initial instinct for the answers is the most applicable. You can stop the survey at any time if you do not want to continue, without giving a reason and without any negative consequences for you.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me via the following email address:
c.xu1@students.uu.nl

Declaration

If you decide to participate after reading this information below, you agree by checking the "Yes" box.You will then automatically be redirected to the online questionnaire.

1.You have read the information given above.

2.Your participation in this study is voluntary.

3.You are at least 20 years old.

Do you want to participate in this study?

- Yes

- No

Appendix B

Scales

Part 1

In this part, you will answer several questions about yourself, there is no private information collection and will be kept confidential, please choose your answer honestly.

1. What's your gender?

- Male

- Female

2. What's your age?

- 19 or younger

- 20~25

- 26~30

- 31~35

- 36~40

- 41~45

- 46~50

- 51~55

- 56~60

3. Are you working for a paid-job?

- Yes

- No

Part 2

The statements listed below describe attitudes toward the rights and roles of women in contemporary society.

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements. There is no right or wrong answer. You just need to choose the one that best suits you.

0=Agree strongly, 1=Agree mildly, 2=Disagree mildly, 3=Disagree strongly

1. Women should take increasing responsibility for leadership in solving the intellectual and social problems of the day.

2. Under modern economic conditions with women being active outside the home. Men should share in household tasks such as washing dishes and doing the laundry.

3. There should be a strict merit system in job appointment and promotion without regard to sex.

4. Women should worry less about their rights and more about becoming good wives and mothers.

5. Women earning as much as their dates should bear equally the expense when they go out together.

6. Women should assume their rightful place in business and all the professions along with men.

7. Women should be concerned with their duties of childbearing and house tending, rather than with desires for professional and business careers.

8. The intellectual leadership of a community should be largely in the hands of men.

9. On the average, women should be regarded as less capable of contributing to economic production than are men.

10. There are many jobs in which men should be given preference over women in being hired or promoted.

11. Women should be given equal opportunity with men for apprenticeship in the various trades.

Part 3

In this part, you will be asked several questions about if you have the motivation to promotion or leadership position in your career life. Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements.

0=Not at all true of me, 1=Not very much true of me, 2=A little true of me, 3=A lot of true of me, 4=Very true of me

1. I hope to become a leader in my career field.

2. When I am established in my career, I would like to manage other employees.

3. I do not plan on devoting energy to getting promoted in the organization or business I am working in.

4. When I am established in my career, I would like to train others.

5. I hope to move up through any organization or business I work in.

Part 4

In this part, there are some descriptions about people in Chinese society think about women or men, please indicate to what extent you perceive the following statements in your daily life.

1=Not at all, 2=Not very much, 3=Medium, 4=Quiet a lot, 5=Always

1. Most people in Chinese society think a woman's role is taking care of her home and family.

2. Most people in Chinese society think a man should have the final word about decisions in the home.

3. Most people in Chinese society think a woman should obey her husband in all matters.

4. Most people in Chinese society think men should be the ones who bring money home for the family, not women.

Part 5

In this part, please assume you are in the following scenarios. Indicate how much discomfort, disagreement or difficulty you as a woman would feel in the following situations:

1=Not make me feel uncomfortable at all, 2=Not make me feel uncomfortable very much, 3=Makes me feel a bit uncomfortable, 4=Makes me feel uncomfortable quite a lot, 5=Make me feel very uncomfortable

1. You are disliked by the group because your level of competence is considered disproportionate to your gender.

2. You are given tasks that are too simple or boring because of your gender.

3. Men in the company don't like working with you because of your gender.

4. Because you are a woman, you often have to do unnecessary work.

5. Your attempts to exercise leadership and influence are not accepted by the opposite sex.

6. The way people say women are happier if they stay at home and take on family responsibilities.

7. You work with policies and guidelines that are inconsistent with your beliefs as a woman.

8. You have to do things at work that you think you should do differently as a woman.

9. You have to do work that is not consistent with your values as a woman.

Part 6

The last part, you will answer several questions about yourself, there is no private information collection and will be kept confidential, please choose your answer honestly.

1. Do you have child (or children)?

- Yes

- No

2. Are you from urban or rural area?

- Urban area

- Rural area

3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- High school or lower

- Bachelor's degree

- Master's degree

- PhD or higher

4. Do you have fixed working hours?

- Yes

- No

5. Are you self-employed (entrepreneurial)?

- Yes

- No

6. Do you have one job or more than one jobs?

- One

- More than one

7. Your working hours each week is about?

- 41 hours or more

- 33~40 hours

- 24~32 hours

- Less than 24 hours

8. What is your occupation type? (Based on the Dictionary of Occupational Classification of the People's Republic of China (2022 Edition))

- Heads of state organs, party and group organisations, enterprises and institutions

- Professionals and technicians

- Clerks and related personnel

- Social production and life service workers

- Agricultural, forestry, animal husbandry and fishery production and auxiliary personnel

- Operators of production and transport equipment and related personnel

- Military personnel

- Other workers for whom it is not convenient to classify

Thank you for your time to take this survey. Your response has been recorded. If you have any questions about the research or the results, please contact me via email:
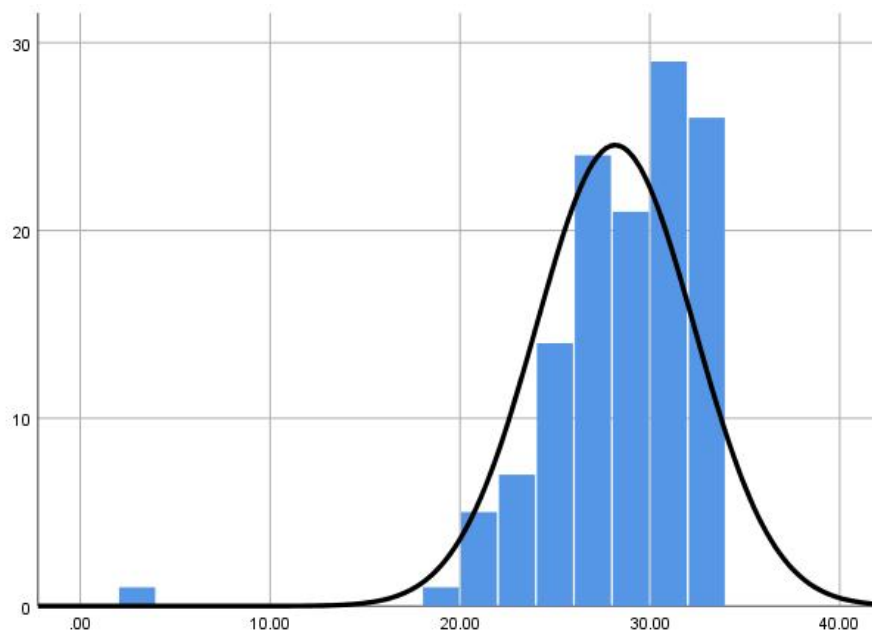
c.xu1@students.uu.nl

Appendix C

Normality tests for the four variables in this study

Figure 3

Normality test for liberal attitudes towards women's role (X)

N = 128, *M* = 28.17, *SD* = 4.16

Figure 4

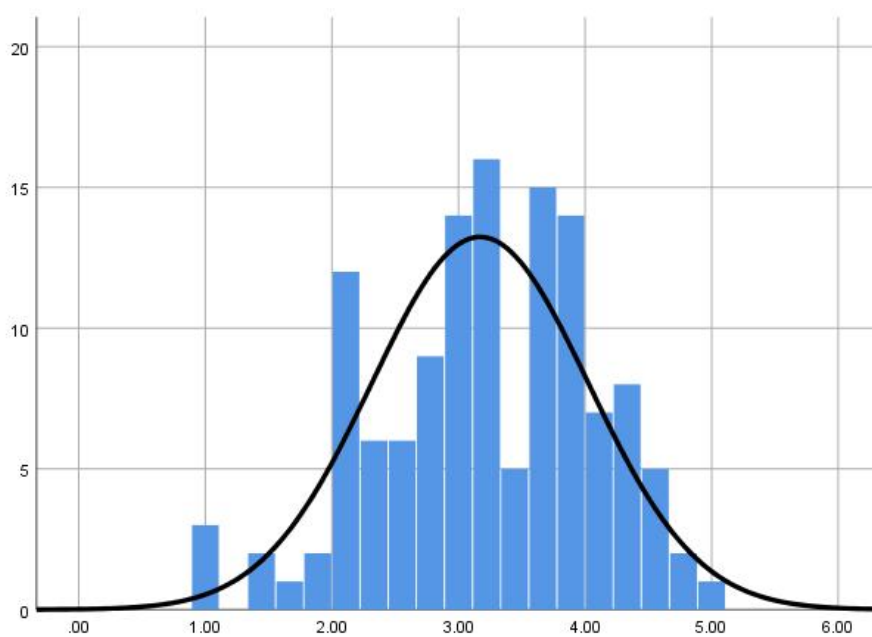*Normality test for gender role conflict (Y)*
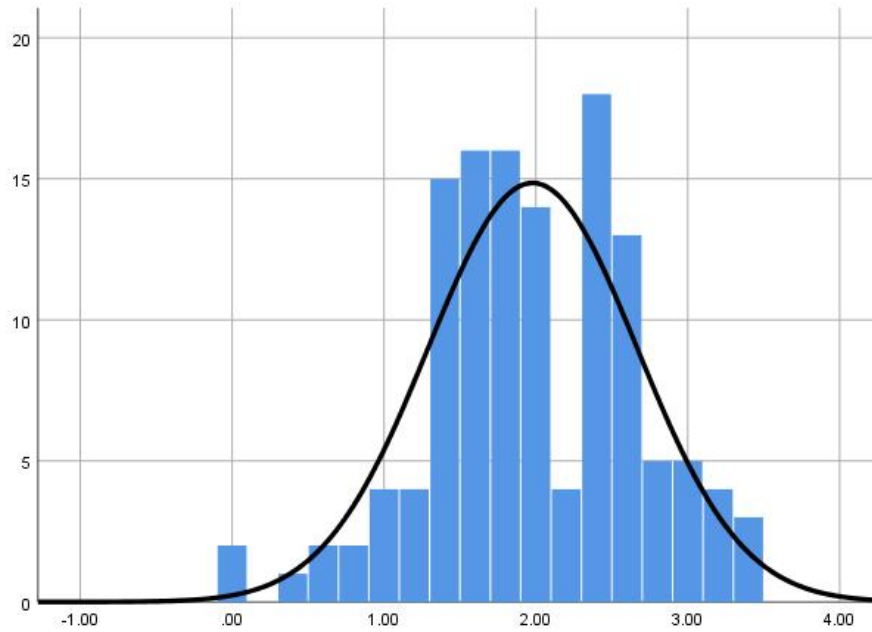
N = 128, *M* = 3.17, *SD* = .86

Figure 5

Normality test for career aspiration (Me)

N = 128, *M* = 1.98, *SD* = .69

Figure 6

Normality test for gender stereotype perception (Mo)

N = 128, *M* = 3.10, *SD* = .97