Sex Differences in Dominance Behavior

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The effect of the status characteristic of sex on dominance behavior was investigated as a function of a challenger's sex and in relation to one's sex-role orientation. Dyads composed of a student and a confederate recorded individual preferences, then joint decisions, for the more attractive picture of 20 pairs of pictures. The number of challenges a student sustained each time a disagreement occurred regarding the more attractive picture of a pair was recorded. Males withstood significantly more challenges against their preferences than females did (p < .006). However, no differences were found as a function of the sex of one's partner; nor did the Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS) prove to be a good predictor of dominance. Results were discussed in terms of predictions made by the theory of status characteristics.

The theory of status characteristics (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972) predicts that in newly established task-oriented groups, previously existing indicators of status will determine behavior in independence of a particular task. With reference to sex, one highly visible status characteristic, males are generally accorded the higher status by both sexes and are expected to manifest more power and prestige than females in group interaction. Although many terms – ascendance, assertiveness, dominance, leadership, prominence – have been used to describe the person with a tendency to emphasize self rather than deference to others in a group, dominance will be used in the present study.

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Both empirical investigations and sex-role stereotype literature suggest that a sex difference exists in dominance behavior. Studies have shown females to be more conforming than males (Larsen, 1974; Nord, 1969), less competitive against males than against females in a prisoner's dilemma game (Bedell & Sistrunk, 1973; Carment, 1974; Skotko, Langmeyer, & Lungren, 1974), and less likely than males to interact in a mixed-sex discussion group (Aries, 1974). Even women, who by measures of self-report are rated as high in dominance, will not manifest this characteristic during initial encounters with men who rate themselves low in dominance (Megargee, 1969).

Males are stereotyped as dominant, competitive, and aggressive (Bem, 1974; Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman, & Broverman, 1968; Williams & Bennett, 1975). In contrast, one of the core elements in the stereotypic female role is said to be a "ban on the expression of direct assertion, aggression, and power strivings except in areas clearly marked woman's domain" (Franks & Burtle, 1974, p. 418). However, in light of recent changes expanding old sex roles, one cannot generalize a well-defined set of behaviors to all women or all men. Two investigations have demonstrated that one's attitude toward woman's role is related to conformity and competitive behavior (Johnson & MacDonnell, 1974; Peplau, cited in Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Individual differences in these attitudes may influence expectation states and thus aid in explaining within-sex variation in dominance.

A paradigm for a behavioral measure of dominance was reported by Knott and Drost (1969), who defined dominance in terms of the number of contributions an individual in a dyad made to a joint decision. This behavior is very similar to the measures Berger et al. (1972) cite as constituting the "observable power and prestige order" of a group. Knott and Drost studied adolescent males, who were ranked in a "pecking order" by adults familiar with them. High and low dominant boys were randomly paired and instructed to record individual preferences for 20 pairs of photographs of girls. The photographs had previously been paired so that neither girl was preferred more than 55% of the time by a comparable group of adolescent males. The subjects then went through the photographs a second time, coming to a joint decision as to the more attractive girl. One "dominant" point was given each time the dyad choice equaled an individual's choice. Results showed that the boys ranked high in dominance received significantly more points than the boys ranked low in dominance.

The present study was designed to investigate sex differences in dominance as a function of a challenger's sex. It was predicted that (a) in newly formed task-oriented dyads, men would play a dominant role, while women would play a more compliant one; (b) in dyadic interaction, females would be more sensitive to the sex of their partner and would play a more compliant role with men than with women partners; (c) men would manifest a more stable amount of dominance behavior regardless of their challenger's sex; and, finally, (d) one's sex-role