Toward Understanding Sex Differences in Pay Allocation: Agency, Communion, and Reward Distribution Behavior

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This research examined the extent to which the personality characteristics of agency and communion are sex linked, and the extent to which differences in these orientations can account for sex differences in reward distribution behavior. In two studies, the agency and communion level of large samples of male and female undergraduates were assessed. As expected, males were more agentic and females were more communal. Moreover, when subjects who scored high or low on agency and high or low on communion were asked to allocate rewards between themselves and a co-worker, these personality differences were related to their allocation decisions. These results were used as the basis for discussing the role that sex-linked personality differences might play in distributive justice judgments.

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Public consciousness of the issue of economic parity for females in our society has accelerated in recent years. For instance, there has been an increase in the introduction (and sometimes passage) of legislation aimed at establishing equal pay and equal credit opportunities for women. This increased concern about economic justice no doubt is a consequence of a growing realization that forces in our economic and governmental institutions have traditionally operated to severely restrict the economic freedom of females (cf. Chesler & Goodman, 1976). However, there is also reason to believe that this sexual inequality is rooted in psychological factors as well as in economics and politics.

For example, beginning with the work of Leventhal and Lane (1970), research has shown consistently that males and females tend to behave differently when confronted with a decision about how to allocate rewards between themselves and a coworker (e.g., Carles & Carver, 1979; Kahn, 1972; Lane & Messé, 1971; Mikula, 1974; Reis & Jackson, 1981). In general, results of these studies have demonstrated that compared to their male counterparts, females tend to underreward themselves and act more generously toward their co-worker.

Several explanations have been advanced to account for sex differences in reward allocation behavior (Kahn, O'Leary, Krulewitz, & Lamm, 1980; Mednick & Tangri, 1972; Sampson, 1975; Leventhal, Note 1). For example, Kahn et al. (1980) and Sampson (1975) speculate that the personality characteristics of agency and communion are sex-linked and that differences in the relative strength of these orientations could very well account for differences in the manner in which females and males distribute rewards.

Bakan (1966) introduced the concepts of agency and communion to denote the primary psychological orientations of human beings, which are reflected in persons' thoughts and actions. In Bakan's model, agency summarizes concerns with achievement, prominence, success, and so forth; communion represents concerns with interpersonal relationships, intimacy, attachments, etc. Findings of past research, in fact, have suggested that females are most communal and males more agentic in their orientations (Bakan, 1966; Carlson, 1971, 1972).

The idea that agency and communion are sex-linked personality characteristics has interesting implications for understanding sex differences in reward allocation. For example, Deutsch (1975) has hypothesized that the norm of equity is most compatible with concerns about individual achievement, while the norm of equality is more congruent with interpersonal concerns. If these speculations are valid, it would follow that males would be more likely than females to allocate a greater share of the reward to themselves when their work inputs are superior to those of their