The Effects of Sex-Role Attitudes and Group Composition on Men and Women in Groups

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The dual impact of group gender composition and sex-role attitudes on self-perceptions and social behavior was explored. Androgynous and stereotyped men and women were placed in groups of skewed sex composition. Subjects' self-descriptions of masculine attributes shifted significantly in the group environment. In some instances, sex role-stereotyped subjects responded most stereotypically when their gender was in the minority in the group. Differences between men and women and between androgynous and stereotyped subjects in sex role-related preferences for group roles and discussion topics were also found.

In the past decade or so, researchers frequently have examined the development and functioning of sex-role stereotypes and the manner in which these stereotypes affect individuals' social behavior (Bem, 1974, 1975; Spence & Helmreich, 1978; Spence et al., 1974). In addition, there is a small but growing body of experimental work concerning the ways in which our awareness of gender is enhanced by situational features of social life. For example, in a number of studies, researchers have established that consciousness of gender will be heightened in instances in which one's own gender is in the minority in a group. McGuire and Padawer-Singer (1976) proposed that people concentrate on the distinctive aspects of the relation-

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ship between the self and the social context. In support of this proposition, they found that sixth graders who were asked to tell about themselves were more likely to mention their gender spontaneously when their gender was in the minority rather than the majority in their classrooms. Observers of group interaction also attend differentially to individuals who are in the minority as opposed to the majority in a group. For instance, Taylor et al. (1978) varied the sex composition of groups and found that observers were more likely to remember those of the minority gender and to perceive them as playing a sex-stereotyped role in the group. Similarly, Kanter (1977a, b) documented the high visibility of token individuals in business settings and the concomitant stereotypic distortions and misperceptions of these individuals' characteristics. Furthermore, in an experimental study, Heilman (1980) varied the sex composition of an applicant pool. He found that women applicants were perceived more stereotypically and evaluated less favorably by MBA students for a managerial job when women constituted only a small proportion of the applicant pool.

One important question about the sex composition of groups that has not been explored in any depth is how the heightened salience of gender will affect the behavior (especially the sex role-related behavior) of an individual who finds himself or herself in the minority in a group. One possible outcome, derived from conformity theory and research (Asch, 1956), is that those who are in the minority gender will simply conform to those in the majority gender in their sex role-related behavior. A second possibility is that shifts in sex-role behavior will be asymmetrical. Greater value is often placed on male characteristics and male preferences (Andersen, 1983), and women sometimes exhibit greater conformity than men in group settings (Eagly, 1978). As a result, when men are in the majority, women in the minority may conform, but when the situation is reversed, men in the minority gender may not conform. A third hypothesis is suggested by the research on objective self-awareness that shows that individuals in a heightened state of awareness alter their behavior in the direction of their "ideal" selves. It follows that when consciousness of gender is heightened by being in the minority gender in a group, people should alter their sex role-related behavior in a direction consistent with their sex-role attitudes. Thus, men and women with traditional sex-role attitudes should be especially likely to behave stereotypically when they find themselves in the minority gender in a group. In contrast, men and women who characterize themselves as androgynous would not be expected to show the same pattern. No unequivocal prediction for androgynous people can be derived directly from objective self-awareness theory. However, compared to stereotyped individuals, androgynous people in the minority should be better able to respond to situational demands and thus might be likelier to exhibit the behaviors and preferences of the majority.