Sex-Role Behavior and Obedience to Authority: A Field Study

Robert Geffner
University of Texas at Tyler

Madeleine M. Gross
San Jose State University

Obedience by male and female subjects to male and female experimenters was investigated under various conditions of "perceived legitimacy." The procedure involved an experimenter stopping a subject who was about to cross a street at a particular crosswalk, the subject was then instructed to cross at another designated location. The dependent variable was the level of obedience to these instructions. The four main factorial independent variables were the sex of the experimenter, the sex of the subject, and two conditions of "perceived legitimacy" (presence or absence of a "uniform," presence or absence of an "explanation"). Significant results were obtained for the uniform and sex of subject main effects (more obedience with a uniform, more disobedience by females). Additional analyses indicated that "older" subjects disobeyed more often than "younger" ones, that "formally" dressed subjects disobeyed more often than "informally" dressed ones, and that ethnic minority group experimenters were disobeyed significantly more often than Caucasian experimenters. Significant interactions were also obtained, mainly due to the behavior of the younger men and the older women. Male and female experimenters were obeyed equally, in general. The results are discussed in relation to sex-role prejudice and discriminatory behavior.

In the last 10 years, there has been a substantial increase in the number of studies investigating sex-role prejudice. Most of these studies have either examined the sex-role stereotypes held by college students (Best et al., 1980; Brover-
man et al., 1972; Ruble et al., 1975), or have investigated the evaluations given for men and women’s supposed performance and accomplishments (Cline et al., 1977; Gross & Geffner, 1980; Levenson et al., 1975; Peck, 1978; Piacente et al., 1974). The results of these questionnaire and evaluative ratings research seem to indicate that negative stereotypes of women and prejudice toward women may be declining, or at least becoming less overt. There have, however, been very few experiments investigating discriminatory behavior in actual interactions between men and women. What, if any, is the connection between the pattern of data obtained from questionnaires and ratings and sex-role behavior in the “real world”?

Statistical information suggests that there is discrimination in the occupational world. For example, Bem and Bem (Note 1) reported that women in 1970 made up approximately one-third of the work force in the United States, but that their jobs were concentrated in just a few fields, e.g., nurse, secretary, clerk, etc. In addition, only 1% of the female workers were in “truly professional jobs,” and only 4% in some type of managerial position. Similar statistics have been reported more recently by several researchers (Bernard, 1975; Blau, 1975; Dixon, 1976). Thus, women as a group have generally occupied the lower status, lower paying jobs. Other research has shown that male management personnel in general have negative stereotypic attitudes toward women in occupational roles (O’Leary, 1974; Schein, 1973). However, with the changing laws and the Women’s Liberation Movement, women are beginning to occupy more positions of authority in the work world. What will be the effects in these relatively new circumstances when men and women attempt to influence each other in situations as equals as well as in situations where the women are in the superior position? In other words, how will power be used and what will be the consequences? How will people act when “given orders” by women: with obedience, resentment, or rebellion?

Many of the studies concerning obedience seem to deal with sex-role effects more as an afterthought than as a major emphasis of the research. However, the manner in which sex roles determine or influence how one uses power and how one complies to it is important in its own right. Johnson (Note 2) has hypothesized that it is likely that those women occupying roles normally associated with power have not even been granted the legitimacy of their position; if this is true, these women might encounter resistance when attempting to exercise their presumed power. In a series of experiments, Johnson (1976; Note 2) found that more direct forms of power were expected to be used by males while more indirect forms of power were expected to be used by females. Johnson did not find differences in the subjects’ perceived level of compliance to the various types of power, but her paradigm was not specifically designed to test for these effects. Very few studies have investigated sex-role effects of authority figures, and those that did obtained different results. For example, Milgram (1974) re-