Sex Roles and Chivalry: Some Conditions of Gratitude to Altruism

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In a quasi-field experiment 479 subjects (beneficiaries) were observed as experimenters (benefactors) performed an altruistic act for them. Their responses were classified mainly into shows of gratitude, such as saying "Thank you." Such amenities are expected in a traditional model of courtly chivalry, i.e., the door-opening ceremony. Experimenters were randomly assigned in a three-factor design, setting x sex of experimenter x sex of subject, with approximately 60 subjects per cell. The town-gown setting (university vs. community library) unexpectedly produced no difference. Traditional pairs (i.e., male benefactors and female beneficiaries) elicited most thanks. Estimated physical attractiveness of subject interacted strikingly with sex in affecting level of thanks shown. Most thankful were plain female beneficiaries for whom male benefactors held doors open. Overall, the data conformed best with a traditional model but also hinted at anomie (tradition in transition).

Is chivalry dead? This study examines the effect of sex role on gratitude in response to a chivalrous act. Chivalry is often thought of as a benefit conferred by a man to please a woman. Yet the temper of the times, particularly women's liberation, raises such questions as, Does a chivalrous act elicit thankful or resentful responses? And is a woman free to open a door for a man, or one man for another? Such freedom might indicate that common courtesy has displaced courtly chivalry.

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Chivalry may be understood as a kind of altruism, a helping act rendered to a stranger with no thought of immediate or direct compensation (Bar-Tal, 1976). Previous research examined the proactions of benefactors, while the present research examines the reactions of beneficiaries. The presence of a grateful reaction can maintain altruism over time, and the absence of gratitude can extinguish it. Prior research has attended to antecedents; this research looks at consequents in the "giving interaction" (Bar-Tal, 1976) between donor (benefactor) and recipient (beneficiary). A truly social psychology takes account of dyads, not just monads (Ventimiglia, 1978).

Walum (1974), like Durkheim and Goffman before, has written of chivalrous interaction as the stuff of which social solidarity is spun and the cement that holds society together. A classic example is the "door-opening ceremony," where traditional norms have prescribed that men act as benefactors and hold doors open for women acting as beneficiaries. This tradition is embedded in habits and assumptions about sex roles. As Walum (1974) writes:

To be masculine means to be active; to be feminine means to be passive. This distinction pervades the entire ceremony. The male is the active party in the encounter, the female waits passively for the door to open and for the door to close. The passivity is closely linked to another prescribed feminine trait, namely, dependence. By waiting for the service to be performed, the woman communicates that she needs someone to help her through her daily round of activities. The male, in turn, communicates his independence by actively meeting the challenge of the door and overcoming it.

Such a sexual script starts to sputter in a time of social change heralded by the new feminism. As the tradition deteriorates, anomie (normlessness) sets in and responses vary. Walum (p. 509) has noted a variety of other responses arising from this situation. They included simple confusion, a testing of the waters, humanitarian concern, an indignant defensiveness, and rebellion. These are presumably transitional responses as society finds its way to a new equilibrium in which anyone opens a door for anyone else, or no one opens doors for anyone else.

Eclectic Theoretical Perspective

Table I summarizes the eclectic theoretical perspective that informs this study. From (a) the degree of institutionalization (ritualistic vs. spontaneous) underlying the door opening and (b) the motive (positive, negative, or neutral) attributed to the door opener, Table I generates six models of door opening from the subject's (beneficiary's) point of view. The perspective combines such structural-functionalist concepts as anomie and traditional norms, such attribution/symbolic interactionist concepts as motives and situational definitions, and such behavioral exchange concepts as gifts and ingratiation.