

## THEORY DEVELOPMENT, NOMINAL CATEGORIES, AND SEX ROLES

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A new specialty, the sociology of sex roles, is marked by conceptual confusion and lack of theoretical development. It has served as a spur for an outpouring of descriptive research, and for critiques of biases in "standard" sociological interpretations (Acker 1973; Daniels 1975; Millman & Kanter 1975; Oakley 1974). Now, we will suggest strategies which may facilitate progress beyond the descriptive level, to enhance understanding of social phenomena from a sex role perspective.

Work in the sociology of sex roles deals with two sets of variables, both at the nominal level of measurement. Males and females constitute a biological variable called sex, typically treated as a dichotomy. Although there is a continuum of differences, even at the biological level, maleness and femaleness are universally treated as a dichotomous nominal variable (Kessley & McKenna 1978; Money & Ehrhardt 1972). We speak of gender roles in terms of masculinity and femininity, or the masculine and feminine roles. But we generally recognize degrees of masculinity and femininity, and a mixed type called androgyny, or "male-female". But this recognition applies to individuals. At the social level we continue to speak in terms of two distinct role constellations, by sex, and they are complex, nominal categories.

Theories in any science purport to be general explanations of general phenomena. As such, they apply a quantitative logic. They consist of propositions concerning relations between variable phenomena which are stated typically in terms such as: "As x increases, y increases." It is difficult to develop general theoretical propositions using nominal variables precisely, because their use precludes a

quantitative logic (Hage 1972). When the primary variables are maleness and femaleness, or the corresponding roles, general theory becomes considerably more difficult. However, important descriptive data often results from the use of nominal categories. Such data are important for practical purposes in the development and implementation of public policy oriented toward enhancing equality of opportunity.

## MACRO-THEORY AND SEX ROLES

The sociology of sex roles is a very loose rubric covering a wide variety of interests. Most work in sex roles could also appropriately be classed in such diverse areas as stratification, work and occupations, social movements, political sociology, sociology of law, social psychology, minorities, medical sociology, life cycle, social change, social control, crime and deviance, marriage and family, demography, or sociology of education. One could conclude that the sociology of sex roles is only a general perspective, rather than a substantive area.

Much of the work divides into macro-level and micro-level approaches. At the macro-level, women are typically viewed in terms of a minority or subordinate group, which is discriminated against, and which suffers from low status and limited opportunities. The statuses, roles, and opportunities available to males are taken as the norm against which women are compared. Descriptive work concerns the current picture, changes over time, and cross-cultural comparisons. Recently, an increasing amount of interesting theoretical work has related such social-structural variables as economic development, technological change, national political ideology, and kinship systems to the degree of inequality suffered by women relative to men (Blumberg 1978; Nielsen 1978; Martin & Voorhies 1975; Kandiyoti 1977; Clignet 1977; Arizpe 1977). Usually,

revised versions of existing macro-level theories in the areas of stratification, political sociology, and majority-minority relations are employed in such works. Blumberg and Nielsen elaborate on Lenski's (1966) theory of class stratification. They stress technology and economic surplus as crucial independent variables. Others call upon a Marxist tradition (Chinchilla 1977; Saffioti 1977; Miranda 1977).

. Such works constitute attempts to develop general theory. They use a quantitative logic. While the theories pertain to a comparison between two nominal categories, the dependent variable is not the nominal category per se, but the degree of inequality between them. Beyond this, there is another level of macro-theory which should develop, to integrate the sociology of sex roles with general sociology. Women comprise only one of several subordinate or minority groups in many societies, including the United States. They differ in degree of powerlessness, discrimination received, and blocked opportunities. Particularly important are theories which attempt to explain not merely why one such group becomes and remains subordinate to the majority, but also the extent of subordination relative to the majority group. Such theory would be at the most general, and most widely applicable level. Such an approach assumes that the experiences of various minority groups are not idiosyncratic; that at a sufficiently high level of abstraction the same set of variables affect the differential fortunes of all groups. Such work on minority relations has already begun (Bonacich 1972; Turner & Singleton 1978).

#### MICRO-THEORY AND SEX ROLES

. Most work specializing on sex roles is at the micro-level, and mainly on the descriptive level. Very little is of a general theoretical nature. It tends to focus

on the social role constellations called "masculinity" or "femininity". These roles are examined in terms of the process by which they are taught and learned, and in terms of their ramifications for the behavior and attitudes of men and women. Clearly, role analysis is relevant to understanding the relative status of women. However, logically the two types of approaches are not the same, and until our theoretical understanding in the area of role analysis is clarified, we will not be able to integrate the two in anything more than a speculative, ad hoc manner.

. In the more mature specialty of minority-majority relations, there are today no counterpart concepts to the two gender roles. Thus, we do not speak of a black role and a white role in terms of race. It is likely that in the case of racial and ethnic minorities, discrimination has been so blatant that micro-applications are played down. While discrimination is apparent, females do indeed choose careers, including the "career" of full-time home-maker, which are distinct from those of males. Where racial and ethnic minorities have often attended segregated schools, where they received an education inferior to that of the majority group, the longer tradition of coeducational schools has exposed females to essentially the same educational opportunities as their male counterparts. Because of these differences, considerable attention has been devoted to analysis of the processes which lead females to choose as they do. Our macro-concerns stem from our need to understand inequality that is clearly the result of forces which include and over-reach educational and occupational discrimination. "Masculinity" and "femininity" are complex nominal terms which cover a variety of personality traits, like aggressiveness and passivity, and technical skills like cooking and car repair, intellectual interests like mathematics

and language, sets of norms and values, like instrumental and expressive values, and clusters of specific social roles, like husband-father, and wife-mother. All of these presumably co-vary with biological sex. Moreover, these two clusters of attributes are time and space specific, regarding content. Everywhere, there tend to be two such clusters, and they tend to be differently evaluated and ranked. They represent ideal-typical constructs which rarely fit actual people.

. The common sense notion of the sexes is that they are "opposite" one another. Many, if not most of the components for the two ideal types also convey this idea. Males are said to be dominant, females submissive; males are active, females passive; males rational, females intuitive; males stoical, females emotionally expressive (Chafetz 1978 Ch 2). In fact, we have two polar ideal types.

. Ideal types are heuristic methodological devices, not designed to describe real cases. One could look at flesh and blood people and ask how near or far they are from each polar type. To what extent is each person "feminine" or "masculine", given the current content of those types? So what? One could ask about factors which control the individual's approach to the "sex-appropriate" ideal types, such as family related variables, media consumption, class and ethnicity factors, and modeling phenomena. Outcome variables are also associated with the degree to which one approaches the "appropriate" ideal type, such as degrees of educational and occupational attainment, political involvement, marital happiness, and socio-political attitudes. One could also examine the ways in which the content of the ideal types change in time and space, and seek to trace the manifest and latent social consequences of the two types. All of these constitute efforts in general theory building, and go beyond the bare

descriptive level. They involve a quantitative logic. This constitutes a crude, imprecise, and cumbersome approach to developing theories which are less generalizable than they should be.

. It is safe to assume that the two ideal types of femininity and masculinity are also commonly held social stereotypes which exert pressure on most people to conform more or less fully with the "sex-appropriate" content in a given social situation. Masculinity and femininity as stereotypes, are "social facts" in Durkheim's sense, and affect each person's evaluations of self and others, and their definitions of social situations, in the sense of W.I. Thomas. Thus, they have ramifications for almost every aspect of the ways in which males and females live out their lives, individually, and collectively. The polar ideal types are useful to sociologists precisely because they mirror the social stereotypes which impact the sociologists' objects of study.

. But the ideal types and social stereotypes, like all nominal categories, are composites of a series of inherently quantitative variables. By placing these variables together under types, both the quantitative dimension and multidimensionality are lost. The type labels for masculine and feminine roles become shorthand notations used to represent the variables we really have in mind, such as degree of assertiveness, emotional expressiveness, and nurturance. To employ a mental shorthand tends to reify the ideal types and social stereotypes by assuming that the underlying quantitative variables are highly correlated, and that people who conform to typical expectations on one dimension, necessarily conform to the more general stereotypes of masculinity or femininity.

. The types and stereotypes provide a catalogue of variables which we expect will tend statistically to take different values

for females, compared to males. In a random sample of our own population, we expect males to be more physically aggressive than females, that females should be more expressive of tender emotions than males. The social polar types often express this in absolutes: Males are aggressive. Females are emotionally expressive.

Clearly, they are not absolutes. Instead, they have parameters of frequency and degree. Theoretical statements require the use of these traits as variables. The ideal types and social stereotypes, while not directly useful in stating theory, help to understand why variables found to be associated with sex are so associated. For instance, suppose that the dependent variable "attitudes toward capital punishment" is found to be positively associated with a general personality trait, "degree of aggressiveness". Our ideal types help us to understand why support for capital punishment is more common among men than among women, since they list aggressiveness as a component of masculinity, and deny it to femininity. The types help us to predict the distribution of a phenomenon; they are not themselves the explanation of that phenomenon. Presumably, aggressive women would have the same probability of supporting capital punishment as their male counterparts. There should just be fewer of them.

. There are examples of this basic type of theoretical development. Rosabeth Kanter (1976) attempted to explain why men frequently perform better than women in administrative roles. She delineates a series of general variables which impact the dependent variable, administrative performance, which affect women more negatively than men. The logic of her argument also predicts that members of any social minority will tend to be less effective administrators than majority group members. She thus presents a highly generalizable theory. She

offers three propositions: 1) The higher the status of the person in the world external to the organization, the more likely subordinates will inhibit their aggression and negativity. 2) The more likely that a superior will be more upwardly mobile, the more loyal will be her/his subordinates, who hope to rise with their superior. 3) The more the superior experiences vulnerability and insecurity arising from lowly status and blocked mobility, the more likely that person is to be authoritarian and restrictive toward subordinates.

. In these propositions, the independent and dependent variables are not sex-linked, but the probabilities associated with the independent variables are sex-linked, and the dependent variable tends to be associated with sex.

#### CONCLUSION

. Sex and gender roles are complex nominal variables which make their use in theory development problematic. It is really not sex or gender roles that we mean when using these labels in theories, propositions, or hypotheses. We mean, rather, that certain variables of a ranked type, which are presumed to co-vary with these roles, are associated with the phenomenon in question. The use of sex or gender roles is thus a shorthand notation used to represent the variables we really have in mind. The polar types give us checklists of what those ranked variables are, and suggest that they are differently distributed by sex. Our theories ought to use the variables themselves, not the short-cut designation of sex or gender roles. The short-cut method reifies the types by assuming that real men and women actually do conform to our notions of masculinity and femininity. They also make our theories irrelevant to other kinds of population differences, such as racial or class differences, and unnecessarily limit the generality of our

understanding.

. Those interested in gender roles should use available data, and our relatively new perspectives on a variety of social phenomena to reformulate, broaden, strengthen, and create new middle-range theories in substantive areas of sociology. Such theories concern social structures and social psychological processes. It is impossible to develop a theory of gender roles unless we aim at a theory which explains why we have social stereotypes of masculinity and femininity and why these types have a given content in a particular social context. These macro-issues are probably best approached by using revised and expanded versions of existing macro-theories. It is also important to develop general middle-range theories about human behavior, using ideal typical gender roles to identify differential rates of such behaviors. Eventually, the two approaches should be integrated.

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