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Women's Prosocial Dominant Acts

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Synonyms

Female strategies; Prosociality; Social hierarchy;
Social status

Definition

Females display a sex-specific pattern of expressions of dominance, which is a universal feature of human psychology.

Introduction

Dominance is a common strategy for achieving social influence across social species, including among humans. Dominance can be defined as the use of aggression, threats, fear, and intimidation to attain and maintain disproportionate levels of influence within a social group (Barkow 1989), and evidence suggests there are important sex differences in the expression of dominance (Buss 1981). Among sexually dimorphic species, females are often at a disadvantage concerning dominance-based strategies for achieving social

influence (Archer 1988). This disadvantage can be compounded by sociocultural factors limiting female political participation (Rosaldo 1974). However, a close review of experimental literature and social systems in small-scale society reveals that women do utilize dominance-based strategies for achieving positions of social influence in ways distinct from males incorporating a dimension of prosociality (Buss 1981), oftentimes with an ontogenic component.

Women's Prosocial Dominance in Childhood

Traditional perspectives in developmental psychology have portrayed young girls as lacking expressions of dominance and overt aggression. Buss (1981) revealed the shortsightedness of these long-standing gender stereotypes demonstrating, among a sample of Western undergraduates, women tend to express social dominance in the context of group-focused behaviors, such as conflict resolution, social networking, and organization in collective action. Women are more likely to achieve positions of social influence through prosocial behavior than men, and less likely to use overt, direct aggression to subordinate followers. However, when aggression is operationalized more broadly, incorporating indirect aggression and gossip, the female dimension of social competition expands (Hess et al. 2010). In studies of Western preschoolers, Hawley has found that

children most effective at controlling group resources often employ strategies of both dominance and prosociality. When the opportunity for both dominance-based and more prosocial tactics are available, there is less gender bias in social control, and group members rate boys and girls as equally as effective and desirable leaders (Hawley et al. 2008). Women use dominance-based strategies for achieving social influence in ways distinct from men, linked to their sex-specific life history parameters.

Theoretical Perspectives on Women's Expressions of Dominance

Across much of human history, and in contemporary natural fertility populations, the lives of women heavily revolved around reproduction and childcare. This has led a number of scholars to overlook and discount female-specific expressions of dominance and status competition. Several biological and psychological theories have been suggested to universally account for gender differences in the relative levels of ascribed and achieved statuses and expressions of dominance (Rosaldo 1974). The physical dominance of males over females, and the biological constraints and parental obligations related to motherhood, are frequently cited explanations for the limited political and broader social influence of females in traditional societies. Furthermore, gender differences in socialization have been used in an attempt to explain women's confinement to the domestic sphere and disinterest in dominance-based social strategies (Rosaldo 1974).

Previous attempts to predict female's social status relative to males based on variation in societal level economics or subsistence strategies have neglected to holistically examine female-specific expressions of dominance and there are few existing theories on the subject. Some researchers assert that women are often primarily limited to domestic participation because of their maternal roles, and that extra-domestic participation by women is largely constrained because of the responsibilities related to childcare and socialization (Rosaldo 1974). This perspective suggests

that because women are absorbed in household activities and direct their attention and energy toward their children, the avenues available for women to pursue dominance-based social positions and gain prestige will be shaped by their involvement in the domestic domain (Rosaldo 1974).

Heavy restriction within the domestic domain however does not exclude women from competition and expressions of dominance. Within local communities, competition between females is likely to be indirect and focused on the acquisition of valuable resources rather than political status attainment (Campbell 1999). Through indirect aggression and prosocial investments, women are able to compete socially and politically without experiencing significant risks of bodily harm (Campbell 1999). Women's high parental and reproductive investments prioritize bodily integrity and resource acquisition, over physical competition and injury (Campbell 1999). Many female psychological processes revolve around reproductive success and maternal demands. The loss of a mother can be life-threatening for young children, and natural selection has driven women to avoid physical harm in status competition in favor of a more maternal focus on current and future offspring (Campbell 1999).

In addition to an inherent aversion to physical harm, Brown (1970) suggests that the division of labor and the local political structure in traditional societies is similarly shaped by maternal demands. The subsistence activities of women are more likely to be those that are more compatible with childcare (Brown 1970). Such qualities include tasks that are located within close proximity to home, not especially cognitively demanding, and are relatively safe. Additionally, women's work will more likely be compatible with frequent interruptions from needy children (Brown 1970). While these activities prioritize successful parenting, they also serve to restrict women's ability to play a larger and more active role in local politics, at least while women are in their childrearing years.

Prosocial Expressions Through Cooperative Breeding

Other theoretical perspectives suggest that female status striving and intrasexual expressions of dominance revolve around various activities directly related to motherhood (Barkow 1989). Barkow (1989) suggests that, because in small-scale societies opportunities for expressions of dominance are often limited and infant and child mortality are typically high, a female's primary social identity may be frequently associated with her reproductive capacity and childrearing abilities. Hewlett (1991) provides comparative data from 57 traditional societies illustrating that among preindustrial populations, active hunter-gatherers suffer the greatest infant and child mortality rates with means of 23.1 and 45.5%, respectively. The combined mean data on infant and child mortality from horticulturalists and pastoralists is 21 and 38.1%, respectively (Hewlett 1991). Demographic factors, ecological pressures, and limited health care all impact female reproductive health and group-wide mortality rates. In this context, motherhood becomes a severely critical role. Women that compete for status through motherhood build reputations and gain esteem and in spheres that are valued by women and not through the activities that are necessarily valued by men. As cooperative breeders, women in traditional societies are able to enhance their reputation and social position through their personal skills as mothers and the degree to which they participate in prosocial communal childrearing.

Post-Reproductive Prosocial Dominance Expressions

Another distinct aspect of female status striving that has been described by researchers is related to postmenopausal changes and the increased availability of status opportunities, prosocial investments, and wider political roles. Brown (1985) outlines three reasons for women's middle age status mobility. First, the end of their reproductive careers provides women in many traditional societies increased freedom from culturally specific

restrictions (e.g., menstrual customs) and the constraints of childcare, giving them the opportunity to maximize their social influence and enjoy greater mobility (Brown 1985). Next, middle age grants a woman administrative authority over her juniors; she has the right to delegate tasks and organize the labor of her younger family members and also exercise great influence in important matters concerning youths' eligibility for initiation and marriage. Lastly, Brown (1985) concludes that middle age provides women with avenues for extra-domestic recognition, through the pursuit of special status positions such as curer, midwife, or ceremonial leader. Status competition and prosocial expressions of dominance in cooperative breeding yield dividends later in life when high-status women emerge as major political agents in many small-scale societies.

Conclusion

Across the life span, women are adjusting their individual strategies for pursuing positions of social influence. Women tend to use prosocial investments and communally focused behavior to increase their social rank and attain positions of influence within the group. A female-specific approach to understanding expressions of dominance must take into account sexual selection, life history parameters, and the physiological demands of motherhood and childcare, all of which have influenced the evolved psychology of women and the cultural systems in which they operate. A broader conception of women's expressions of dominance is realized when these sex-specific features are not viewed as limitations but rather the context in which female specific social strategies have evolved.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Dominant Acts Expressed](#)
- ▶ [Men's Egoist Dominant Acts](#)

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