

Sex Differences in the Evaluation and Performance of Dominant Acts

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Bakan conceptualizes two major modes of existence: agency and communion. In the agentic (masculine) mode, the individual is concerned with self-protection, self-assertion, and self-enhancement. Communion involves concern with the larger group of which one is a part. Two studies were conducted to explore these distinctions in the domain of dominance. In the first study, subjects ($n = 57$) evaluated 100 acts, previously and independently nominated as dominant, on their social desirability. Male raters judged self-enhancing and self-asserting acts (e.g., flattering someone to get one's way) as relatively more desirable than did female raters, who judged group-oriented, communal acts (e.g., introducing a speaker at a meeting) as more desirable. The second study ($n = 83$) examined sex differences in the behaviors that express dominance. Dominant men tend to express their dominance through both communal and agentic acts, whereas dominant women tend to express dominance primarily through group-oriented actions. These results lend support to the agency/communion conceptualization and suggest sex-linked differentiation of dominant behavior.

Dominance and submission are central, probably ubiquitous facets of human interaction. Several authors (e.g., Gough, 1968; Gough, McCloskey, & Meehl, 1951; McCoby & Jacklin, 1974; Whiting & Edwards, 1973) have observed that dominance can be used either to achieve individual gains or to further group goals and aims. Furthermore, dominant acts may be performed in a domineering and coercive manner or in a polite, encouraging, and prosocial way, and attempts to dominate may be obvious to others or quite subtle, eluding immediate detection.

Several independent lines of empirical and conceptual work have linked distinctions of this kind to differences between the sexes. Whiting and Edwards (1973) differentiate *egoistic dominance* (involving attempts to control others for selfish ends) from *prosocial dominance* (controlling others by offering responsible suggestions). Between the ages of 3 and 6 years, boys engaged in significantly more egoistic dominance, whereas

girls displayed more prosocial dominance. These results were found to have cross-cultural generality, indicating that regardless of whether males and females may differ in absolute levels of dominance, they do differ in the manner of its expression.

Similar results have been found with adults. Megargee (1969) examined sex differences in the manifestation of leadership as predicted from the Dominance scale of the California Psychological Inventory (CPI; Gough, 1964). Dominance pairings involving male/female dyads were engaged in an experimental setting in which a leader had to be chosen. In all male/female pairings, males were chosen as leaders more often than females were. In the high-dominant women/low-dominant men pairings, however, Megargee discovered that the highly dominant women more often made the decision that the less dominant men would serve as leaders. In this study, dominant women displayed their leadership in a covert way, showing reluctance to assume overt leadership over the male partner. Megargee concludes that men and women manifest dominance in accordance with sex-appropriate role prescriptions.

The findings of Megargee (1969) and

I wish to thank Kenneth H. Craik, Harrison G. Gough, and Shoshana Nevo for their incisive suggestions on earlier drafts of this article.

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Whiting and Edwards (1973) appear to be subsumed by Bakan's (1966) conceptualization of sex differences. Bakan discusses two essential modes characteristic of living forms: agency and communion. In the agentic, or masculine, mode, the individual is concerned with self-protection, self-assertion, and self-expansion. Communion, the feminine mode, involves a concern with the larger group of which one is a part and an interest in maintaining harmony within that group. In an application of this conceptual framework, Carlson (1971) classified affective instances (self-reported representation of affects) as agentic, communal, or mixed. Results indicated that affective instances reported by males were significantly more agentic than were the affective instances reported by females. Carlson suggested that the agentic/communion distinction may be profitably applied to other domains as well.

The present studies examine these distinctions in the domain of dominance, a domain often presumed to be primarily male (Megargee, 1969).¹ Four related issues are addressed: (a) Do males differ from females in evaluations of the social desirability of a heterogeneous set of dominant acts? (b) Are dominant acts judged to be more socially desirable when performed by a male than by a female? (c) Do males differ from females in the frequency with which they perform dominant acts? and (d) Do males differ from females in the types of behaviors through which they express dominance?

Two broad hypotheses were pitted against each other for heuristic value. The first conceptualizes sex differences in terms of agency and communion. According to this conceptualization, the agentic mode, permeating male existence and psyche, should manifest itself in how males evaluate dominant acts and the behaviors through which they express dominance. Conversely, the communion mode should characterize these evaluations and behaviors for females.

Alternatively, a less differentiated conceptualization of sex roles views dominant behavior as primarily congruent with the male sex role and therefore acceptable and desirable in males, whereas the display of dominance of any sort is unacceptable and undesirable in females. Some evidence sup-

ports this view. Gough (1968) examined peer evaluations of males and females who scored high on the CPI Dominance scale. Dominant males were described by male peers as ambitious, dominant, forceful, optimistic, resourceful, responsible, self-confident, stable, and stern. Dominant females were described by female peers as aggressive, bossy, conceited, confident, demanding, dominant, forceful, quick, strong, and talkative. Elements of coercion, aggression, and self-promulgation seem characteristic of dominant women, whereas more favorable evaluations are given to dominant men. According to this sex role hypothesis, dominant acts should be viewed as undesirable in females; females should perform fewer dominant acts, because of this negative sanction; and the behaviors through which females express dominance should be characteristically bossy, selfish, and aggressive.

Study 1

Method

The purposes of the first study were twofold: (a) to examine sex differences in the evaluations of the social desirability of dominant acts and (b) to examine whether dominant acts, when performed by a male, would be viewed as more or less socially desirable than these same acts when performed by a female.

To sample broadly from the potential domain of dominant acts, a nomination procedure was used to generate 100 diverse acts, all considered to be manifestations of dominance. This nomination procedure is described in detail elsewhere (Buss & Craik, 1980). Examples of the acts nominated as dominant are "He demanded a backrub," "She hung up the phone on her lover," "He decided which TV program they should watch," and "She forbade someone to leave the room."

Subjects. Fifty-seven undergraduate volunteers (30 females and 27 males) participated in the first study. Each was paid a small sum of money as a token of appreciation for completing the procedures.

Judgments of social desirability. Each of the 100 nominated acts was phrased in a way suitable for performance by either sex. For example, the act "He demanded a backrub" could also be performed by a female ("She demanded a backrub"). In this way, two lists of acts were created, one consisting of 100 acts having a male actor, the other with the same acts having a female actor.

To ensure independence, each subject rated only one list of acts. Approximately half of the undergraduate

¹ This report derives from a program of research on an act-frequency conception of dispositions that is being conducted with Kenneth H. Craik (Buss & Craik, 1980).

sample rated the male-performed acts on social desirability, and the other half rated the female-performed acts. The Edwards (1957) instructional set, preceding the list of acts, was used.

Results

Design and analyses. A 2×2 factorial design was used: Male and female raters comprised the first factor and sex of actor comprised the second. The dependent variables were the social desirability ratings for the 100 acts previously nominated as dominant.

Reliability of the social desirability judgments. The alpha reliability coefficients (Cronbach, 1951) of the social desirability ratings for the male-performed acts are .97 and .96 for the male and female judges, respectively. Alpha coefficients for the female-performed acts are .90 and .96 for the male and female judges. There appears to be substantial agreement among judges about which acts are deemed desirable and undesirable.

Social desirability judgments and sex of rater. From the 100 analyses performed, 19 main effects for sex of rater proved significant beyond the .05 level. Table 1 shows examples of the dominant acts that male raters judged more socially desirable than female raters did and examples of acts that female raters judged more socially desirable than male raters did.² The dominant acts that male raters judged more socially desirable exemplify what Bakan (1966) calls *unmitigated agency*: expressions of self-assertion and self-expansion untempered by communion or concern with the larger group. The actions conveyed by these acts (blaming, flattering, withholding, complaining, managing to get one's way, walking ahead of others) all seem to connote the aggressive narcissism characteristic of unmitigated agency.

In contrast, the dominant acts that female raters judged significantly more socially desirable have a distinctly constructive, group-oriented tone. The actions described (soliciting funds for a cause, taking charge of the committee) are clearly manifestations of communion—that is, they reveal a concern with the larger group of which one is a part. It must be emphasized that the present anal-

yses focus on sex differences. Blaming, flattering, and managing to get one's way are not viewed as particularly socially desirable by either sex. Male raters, however, do not judge these acts as negatively as females do. Similarly, both sexes rate introducing a speaker at a meeting as relatively socially desirable, although females view this act as significantly more socially desirable than males do.

Social desirability judgments and sex of actor. Twenty-two significant main effects were found for sex of actor. Table 2 shows examples of acts judged to be significantly more desirable when performed by men and those that are more desirable when performed by women (see Footnote 2). These distinguishing sets of acts seem to parallel the differences found between male and female raters. Acts judged significantly more socially desirable when performed by a male convey action involving interrupting, demanding, refusing, blaming, flattering, and so on. Self-gain at the expense of concern for the larger group permeates these acts. In contrast, acts judged significantly more desirable when performed by a female centrally involve group concern (e.g., displaying courage in an emergency and taking the lead in livening up a dull party).

Study 2

The purposes of the second study were (a) to examine whether males and females differ in consistent and meaningful ways in the extent to which they perform dominant acts and (b) to examine whether dominant men and women differ in the manner in which they express their dominance.

Method

Subjects. Eighty-three undergraduate volunteers (43 females and 40 males) participated in Study 2. None of these subjects had participated in the first study.

Materials and procedure. The second study involved two sessions separated by a 1-week interval. In the first session, subjects completed the 46-item Dominance scale of the CPI, the 20-item Dominance scale of the Personality Research Form (PRF; Jackson, 1967), and

² Only the acts showing the strongest differences are reported. The complete list may be obtained from the author.

Table 1
Social Desirability Judgments and Sex of Rater

Act	Men		Women		F
	M	SD	M	SD	
Rated more desirable by men					
She/he managed to get her (his) way.	4.70	.87	4.00	1.55	7.36**
She/he flattered her in order to get her (his) own way.	3.33	1.73	2.47	1.36	6.71*
She/he complained about having to do someone a favor.	3.26	1.43	2.40	1.43	5.90*
She/he withheld affection to get her (his) way.	2.37	1.12	1.80	1.06	5.59*
She/he blamed others when things went wrong.	2.37	1.45	1.90	1.00	4.75*
Rated more desirable by women					
She/he took charge of things at the committee meeting.	5.96	1.53	7.20	1.35	12.20**
She/he took a stand on the issue without waiting to find out what others thought.	4.63	2.45	6.33	2.32	9.09**
She/he solicited funds for a cause in which she/he was interested.	6.74	.98	7.63	1.40	7.86**
She/he confronted someone about a rumor he had spread.	5.85	1.59	6.93	1.53	7.19**
She/he is active in many community and campus activities.	6.78	1.76	7.73	1.23	7.12**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2
Social Desirability Judgments and Sex of Actor

Act	Male actor		Female actor		F
	M	SD	M	SD	
More desirable when performed by men					
She/he refused to cook or clean the house.	4.23	1.81	2.56	1.16	15.77**
She/he demanded a backrub.	4.13	1.61	2.93	1.39	10.30**
She/he refused to change her (his) mind.	4.83	1.95	3.07	1.59	10.11**
She/he blamed others when things went wrong.	2.50	1.46	1.70	0.78	9.15**
She/he was unwilling to listen to his point of view.	2.60	1.35	1.70	0.78	8.65**
More desirable when performed by women					
She/he initiated a conversation with a stranger.	6.13	1.38	6.93	1.24	7.61**
She/he displayed courage in the emergency.	8.07	1.46	8.74	0.45	6.76*
She/he took the lead in livening up a dull party.	7.10	1.54	7.74	0.98	5.09*
She/he took command of the situation after the accident.	7.13	1.76	7.74	1.10	5.02*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

other procedures included for companion studies. In the second session, a week later, subjects completed the Act Report, consisting of the 100 acts used in Study 1. For Study 2, each act on the Act Report was transformed from the third-person-singular to the first-person-singular point of view (e.g., "He demanded a backrub" became "I demanded a backrub"). Participants were asked to check "yes" or "no" according to whether they had ever performed the act. If the answer was yes, they were requested to indicate the frequency with which they performed the act on a 3-point scale ("rarely," "sometimes," or "often").

Results

Sex differences in reported performance of dominant acts. First examined were acts for which males and females differed significantly in percentage of reported performance.³ The most notable feature of these acts is that of the 24 significant differences, 22 showed males reporting a greater frequency of performance than females. On social desirability, these acts ranged from highly socially desirable ("I took command of the situation after the accident") to highly undesirable ("I said something simply to shock others"). Similarly, these acts ranged from group-oriented ("I told a long story to entertain others") to self-serving ("I used my fists in order to get my way"). Thus, males reported performing more dominant acts in the entire range. The two exceptions to this trend were the acts "I refused to have sexual relations with my partner" and "I asked several questions without waiting for answers," both of which women reported performing more than men did.

Dominance scales and the Act Report. The CPI and PRF dominance scales were then correlated with reported performance of each act for the sexes separately. Table 3 presents those acts that correlated significantly with dominance for both sexes. Table 4 presents the acts that correlated significantly with dominance for men but not women and those acts that significantly correlated with dominance for women but not men.⁴

The acts shown in Table 3, correlating significantly in both sexes with at least one of the dominance scales, exemplify what Gough (1968) calls the "constructive dominant [who] appeals to socially valid and worthwhile goals [and whose dominance] is

not an end in itself but a means by which one's group can be influenced toward more rational and more moral actions" (p. 59). Taking the lead, addressing groups, telling a long story, and generally talking a great deal, are all actions that appear to covary with assessed dominance in men and women.

The top half of Table 4 shows the acts that correlated significantly with at least one dominance scale for men but did not significantly correlate with either dominance scale for women. A considerably different picture of the dominant male emerges from these correlates. In addition to the group-oriented themes found in both sexes, a fair amount of narcissism, manipulateness, and self-enhancement appears to characterize dominant men. Men scoring higher on dominance more often reported persuading others to do their menial tasks, managing to get their own way, refusing to compromise, demanding that others run errands for them, and managing to control the outcomes of meetings surreptitiously.

The bottom half of Table 4 shows the acts that significantly correlate with dominance (at least one of the two scales) in women but not in men. A somewhat different picture of the dominant woman emerges from this pattern of correlations. Dominant women reported settling disputes among others, actively engaging in community and campus activities, and introducing speakers at meetings. In addition, the only three acts in the Act Report concerning sexual behavior all emerged as correlates of dominance in women. The dominant women reported initiating sexual activity, but they also more frequently reported refusing to have sexual relations with their partners. It appears that dominant women take a more active role in the sexual sphere, regardless of whether the initiative involves approach or avoidance.

Discussion

To summarize these results, Study 1 found that men and women differed considerably

³ A complete list of these analyses may be obtained from the author.

⁴ To conserve space, only the strongest correlations are presented. The complete list may be obtained from the author.

Table 3
Acts Significantly Correlated With Dominance for Both Sexes

Act	Men		Women	
	PRF	CPI	PRF	CPI
I was highly involved in a political campaign.	51**	54**	36*	30*
I took the lead in livening up a dull party.	47**	40*	50**	32*
I took charge of things at the committee meeting.	49**	57**	57**	50**
I persuaded others to accept my opinion on the issue.	51**	40**	37*	33*
I issued orders that got the group organized.	60**	34*	43**	36*
I talked a great deal at the meeting.	50**	48**	67**	53**
I addressed a public gathering.	33*	19	33*	37*
I told a long story to entertain others.	55**	39*	36*	26
I took command of the situation after the accident.	42**	33*	35*	19

Note. PRF = Personality Research Form; CPI = California Psychological Inventory.

* $p < .05$, two-tailed. ** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

in the social desirability attributed to dominant acts. In general, male raters viewed self-centered, self-enhancing, and manipulative acts as relatively more socially desirable than did women raters. In contrast, women rated group-oriented, socially constructive acts as relatively more socially desirable. A similar pattern of results was obtained by examining differences in social desirability when males or females performed the act. Acts involving interrupting, blaming, refusing, demanding, and flattering, although not seen as particularly desirable in general, were seen as more desirable when performed by a male than by a female. Conversely, actions directed toward bettering the group (e.g., livening up a dull party) were seen as more desirable when performed by women than by men.

Study 2 examined sex differences in the acts through which dominant men and women express their dominance. Men expressed their dominance in the entire range of dominant acts. They reported more often taking the lead in groups, initiating group activities, and talking considerably in public. In addition, however, dominant men also more frequently reported performing a large number of narcissistic, self-serving acts.

They managed to persuade others to perform their menial tasks, boasted about their accomplishments, surreptitiously controlled meeting outcomes, and sometimes used their fists to get their way. Dominant women reported expressing their dominance primarily in group-oriented actions: settling disputes among group members, introducing people, involvement with community activities, and organizing projects. Interestingly, this active orientation extended to the sexual sphere: Dominant women reported taking the initiative in sexual encounters as well as refusing to have sexual relations with their partners. Dominant women clearly do not express dominance in the narcissistically manipulative way that dominant men sometimes do.

In general, these differences seem to be succinctly captured by Bakan's (1966) conceptualization of the agentic and communal modes. Self-assertion, self-enhancement, and manipulativenness, the defining features of the agentic mode, seem to characterize the desirability with which males view dominant acts and acts through which they express dominance. This self-serving dimension of dominance is not seen in women, who tend to view group-oriented and group-facilitating acts as relatively more socially desirable

Table 4
Differential Correlates of Acts With Dominance According to Sex

Act	PRF	CPI
Correlated for men only		
I told others to perform menial tasks, instead of doing them myself.	48**	34*
I managed to get my own way.	36*	36*
I argued vigorously on behalf of my personal beliefs.	36*	36*
I solicited funds for a cause in which I was interested.	34*	31*
I refused to compromise despite considerable group pressure.	50**	40*
I assigned roles and got the game going.	56**	42**
I voiced my opinions in a large class.	31*	43**
I spoke with a loud firm voice.	39*	35*
I made a final decision.	36*	36*
I was able to get the other person to do what I wished.	36*	36*
I set goals for the group.	44**	21
I readily used the authority of my position.	40**	26
I told him which of two jobs he should take.	37*	31
I managed to control the outcome of the meeting without the others being aware of it.	36*	27
I demanded that he run an errand.	36*	29
Correlated for women only		
I settled a dispute among the members of the group.	39**	35*
I took the lead in organizing a project.	43**	43**
I challenged someone to discuss her position.	30*	42**
I took the initiative in a sexual encounter.	30*	34*
I introduced the speaker at the meeting.	32*	42**
I made a bold sexual advance.	30	32*
I chose to sit at the head of the table.	35*	21
I refused to have sexual relations with my partner.	39*	24
I initiated a conversation with a stranger.	34*	26

Note. PRF = Personality Research Form; CPI = California Psychological Inventory.

* $p < .05$, two-tailed. ** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

and express their dominance through more selfless behaviors. These are the hallmarks of communion: a concern with the larger group of which one is a part and an interest in maintaining harmony within that group.

These findings corroborate and extend results found by other researchers. In a cross-cultural study of children, Whiting and Edwards (1973) found that boys tended to engage in more egoistic dominance, whereas girls displayed more prosocial dominance. Similarly, Megargee (1969) found that relatively more dominant women tended to express their dominance by appointing the less dominant male as leader rather than by assuming overt leadership themselves. The present results extend this network by find-

ing similar sex differences both in attitudes toward a heterogeneous group of dominant acts and in the acts through which dominance is expressed by men and women.

The present findings also demonstrate the usefulness of examining in detail the behaviors subsumed by dispositional constructs (Buss & Craik, 1980). However, a major limitation of Study 2 is that recorded performance of the dominant acts was obtained through self-report. Future research could fruitfully turn to observational studies by employing the 100 acts as a checklist to be used by friends, family, or trained observers for gauging a person's dominant behavior. Such studies could powerfully corroborate the implicative sex differences found in the

present studies and yield more subtle exemplars of these differences.

Future research could also link the present findings with research on androgyny (e.g., Bem, 1974; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). For example, expressions of dominance in the service of the group may reflect a fusion of masculine and feminine orientations (androgyny), whereas expressions of dominance for self-gain may be related to a traditional masculine sex-typed orientation. A related issue concerns the lack of performance of dominant acts. Does a failure to express dominance of any sort indicate a feminine orientation or an undifferentiated sex role orientation? These issues await future empirical work.

Another issue raised but not answered by the present research concerns the origins of sex differences in the evaluation and performance of dominant acts. One explanation may lie in the differential socialization of males and females; perhaps the sexes are differentially reinforced for behaving in agentic and communal ways. An alternative explanation would invoke the biologically adaptive role of the sexes in an evolutionary context (Freedman, 1971). The present findings may be related to the greater affiliative behavior shown by females (e.g., Freedman, 1971; Garai & Scheinfeld, 1968; Lewis, Kagan, & Kalafat, 1966) and the greater preoccupation of males with attaining a position in the dominance hierarchy (Freedman, 1971). The greater affiliativeness of females may dispose them to express dominance through communal, group-enhancing behaviors; the greater concern of males with hierarchies may dispose them to express dominance through self-enhancing actions.

In sum, the present results indicate that dominant behavior should be viewed in a relatively differentiated way. Dominance may be used to further individual gains at the expense of others or may be used to further group goals and enhance communal functioning; it may be overt or subtle, eluding detection. Dominant behaviors may be performed with coercion and arrogance or with politeness and benignity. In light of the

implicative sex differences associated with these distinctions, future research could fruitfully explore their origins.

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Received January 31, 1980 ■