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Sex Effects or Structural Effects? An Empirical Test of Kanter's Theory of Proportions*

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Abstract

Kanter's argument that relative numbers shape perception and social interaction and that observed sex differences in groups may be attributable to the fact that women usually form a small proportion of the membership was tested empirically in relation to union workers' committees. The dynamics of boundary heightening, role entrapment and power differences were significantly more pronounced in skewed than in balanced committees, supporting Kanter's contention. Changes in group sex proportion, however, had a stronger impact on stereotypical views of women than of men. Furthermore, while structure had a moderating effect, sex was still found to have a main effect on the relationship between sex ratios and the dependent variables. The need to distinguish between numerical and institutionalized dominance is discussed.

Researchers have traditionally explained observed sex differences in attitudes and behavior within the framework of the early socialization model (Hochschild; Maccoby and Jacklin; Mednick et al.; Weitzman). According to this model, men and women undergo different socialization processes in which each sex acquires culturally specific sex-linked personality characteristics and learns sex-appropriate patterns of behavior. In addition men and women internalize differential assessments of the social worth of their respective statuses, with the attributes and achievements typically associated with men more highly valued than those typically associated with women (Bem and Bem; Deaux and Taynor; Goldberg). Differences in the adult occupational and organizational careers of men and women are then viewed as the direct and indirect outcome of differences in their early socialization.

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On the other hand, theorists stressing social structure criticize the socialization model, contending that it ignores the explanatory power of contextual-situational variables (Epstein; Katner, a.b). The structuralist critique argues for a shift in emphasis away from externally based sex-linked characteristics to structural conditions within the organization. The most prominent recent work written from this perspective is Kanter's study of men and women in a large U.S. corporation.

Kanter proposes that one of the important determinants of behavior in groups is the relative number of each sex who compose the members of the group. When the proportion of women is small they are more visible and isolated from the men who, because of their numerical dominance, determine the culture of the group (206-7). Visibility generates pressures for women to perform in accordance with sex-role expectations. Isolation results in lack of power and greater conformity with the dominant culture. These and other correlates of tokenism may be important factors in women's underachievement as indicated by a recent study that compared grades of female students in a male-dominated law school with those of female students in a law school where the percentage of women was higher (Spangler et al.).

In this study, the local union organization is used to examine some of the dynamics which, according to Kanter, are set in motion when women comprise only a small proportion of the group membership. As was sales in the corporation studied by Kanter, union leadership is dominated by men and perceived as men's work.

The Trade Union Context

We derived the data from a larger study of part-time local union officers in Israel, known as workers' committees (Izraeli and Poraz). The workers' committee in Israel is the plant level organization of the trade union department of the Histadrut (General Federation of Labor) which represents approximately 80 percent of all wage and salaried workers in Israel. We here present the context and describe the particular sample we use in a later section.

The committee is comprised of delegates elected usually every two years. In industrial firms, the interest of this paper, there are frequently separate committees for blue-collar workers and for clerical and professional workers. The members of a blue-collar workers' committee may be elected jointly by all workers with each allotted a number of ballots equal to the number of members on the committee. Or members may be elected by individual departments, or occupational groups. Once elected, the members collectively represent *all* blue-collar employees in the plant.

The workers' committee is responsible for the administration of

the collective agreement within the plant. In addition, it participates in a number of personnel functions. Members usually participate in decision-making about promotions, negotiate wage increases and fringe benefits above those determined in the industry-wide collective agreement, and intervene on matters of dismissals, transfers, and other changes of worker status or role (Kaminka). Negotiations over working conditions and other matters take place between management and the committee as a whole, although members may individually approach management with regard to particular problems of specific workers. We compared committees with relatively few women members to those with an equal proportion of men and women, to examine whether sex ratios affect perceptions and behavior bearing on performance of the union officer role.

A Typology of Groups by Sex Proportion

Kanter distinguishes four types of group composition which form a continuum of sex ratios. At one extreme are homogeneous groups—those which consist of only one significant social type. At the other extreme are balanced groups in which the proportions are approximately equal. Between the two are skewed and tilted groups. In skewed groups proportions are in the vicinity of 15:85. Kanter refers to the few members of the minority status in skewed groups as tokens because they tend to be treated as symbols, representatives of their social category, rather than as individuals (b, 208). In balanced groups structural and personal factors become more important than social type (sex). Neither sex is in a position to control the group culture. The processes activated in skewed but not in balanced groups may be related to the context of workers' committees and may be highly significant for the performance of the female members. Three of these are empirically examined in this paper: boundary heightening, role entrapment, and relative powerlessness.

Hypotheses

1. Kanter proposes that the presence of a token leads to "boundary heightening" by the dominants (a, 975); that is, to exaggerations of both their own commonalities and of the differences between them and the token. Feeling their commonality threatened, the dominants greatly magnify the relevance of sex differences, while tokens, having little choice, accept the definitions imposed upon them by the dominants. Following Kanter, therefore, we reasoned that the dynamics of boundary heightening would be associated with more positive attitudes towards the leadership abilities of men in general than of women in general.

Hypothesis 1: *Members of skewed groups view men as having greater role relevant skills than women compared to members of balanced groups.*

2. Stereotypical assumptions about tokens, lead to "role entrapment" whereby tokens are perceived as symbols, representatives of the total category, rather than as individuals in their own right (a, 980). Whether they wish to be or not, they are treated as status specialists and, in this capacity, are assigned to look after the special needs of their own group. Since tokens are aware that somehow they do not fully belong, they frequently justify their presence by emphasizing their representative function.

Hypothesis 2: *The proportion of members who view women as elected specifically to represent women is greater in skewed groups than in balanced groups.*

3. A characteristic feature of the token, according to Kanter, is the condition of being an outsider, of not fully belonging to the group (a, 978). Tokens face greater hardships forming coalitions and penetrating the social networks through which important information is disseminated and are often excluded from them. These conditions result in greater sex-linked power differences in skewed groups than in balanced groups. On the assumption that the social context shapes social consciousness we expected these power differences to be reflected in the way each sex perceives the amount of influence it has over others.

Hypothesis 3: *Women perceive themselves as less influential than men in skewed groups but not in balanced groups.*

Method

SAMPLE

The sampling frame was a list of firms in Israel in 1977 which met the following three criteria: they were within one of the three female labor intensive industries—food, textiles and clothing, and electronics; they had a minimum of 100 workers and at least 1 woman member on the committee. Of approximately 120 firms which met the first two criteria, only 65 had at least 1 woman member on the committee. Of the 65 eligible firms, 57 (87.7 percent) were included in the final sample: 4 refused to cooperate, 4 were excluded because of geographical distance. In each, members of the blue-collar workers' committee were interviewed personally. We obtained responses from 259 part-time local union officers (111 women, 148 men) who comprised 80 percent of the membership of these committees. The workers' committees studied ranged in size from 3 to 21 members and the number of women on each committee from 1 to 7. The mean committee size was 6.9 and the mean number of women members was 2.2.

For the purpose of this study all committees which met either of the following criteria were selected for further study:

1. Skewed groups with 20 percent or less female members. There were 18 such groups in the entire study: 23 female and 67 male members were interviewed.
2. Balanced groups with between 41–60 percent female members. There were 7 such groups in the entire study: 19 of each sex were interviewed.

The most significant difference between skewed and balanced groups was in the average proportion of women in the industrial labor force of the firms in which these committees operated (37.6 and 75.2 percent respectively, $t = 11.6, p = .000$) Thus women who were tokens on the committee were from firms in which women similarly comprised only a small portion of the work force. The firms from which skewed and balanced groups came otherwise did not differ significantly in size, age, industry, or geographical location nor in such characteristics of committee members as age, ethnic origin, or marital status. Members of skewed groups had on the average slightly more years of formal education (10.5 and 9.6 respectively, $t = 1.96, p = .05$) and more years seniority as committee members (4.3 and 2.3 years respectively, $t = 3.03, p = .003$).

From our data and observations in the field, we see no reason to expect that self-selection resulted in sexist men being unwilling to run for committees with a balanced sex membership or sexist women being more attracted to skewed groups than other women. The strong correlation between the proportion of each sex on the committee and in the firm's labor force may well have resulted in the reinforcement on the committee of processes already in operation in the larger social context.

MEASURES

Boundary Heightening

Stereotypical perceptions and specifically, attitudes towards sex differences in role competence were used as an operational measure of boundary heightening. Respondents were instructed as follows:

There are people who think that there is no difference in the behavior of men and women. There are people who think there is a difference. Indicate your opinion by replying 'men' 'women' or 'no difference' to each of the following questions: Who is generally more loyal to the workers? Who is ready to fight more for all the workers? Who is better able to stand up against pressure? Who knows better how to be persuasive? Who exerts more pressure on management?

In our pilot study we found that workers ranked the above five leadership skills as highly important for effective performance of the union officer role.

To test whether the stereotypes were more favorable to men than to women, responses were coded: women = -1, no difference = 0, men = +1; and a sex-stereotype scale with a range from -1 to +1 was constructed from the combined average score on the five questions. The reliability of the index was tested using Cronbach's coefficient alpha for internal consistency reliability (Hays). The reliability coefficient of the sex-stereotype scale: $\alpha = .78$.

Role Entrapment

Two separate questions measured perception of group members as symbolic representatives of their status category. We asked respondents first whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "A female committee member is elected to look after the women workers." (In the larger study each respondent was asked a parallel question about men.) Second, we asked the following open-ended question: "Why is a woman needed on the committee?" Three independent judges classified responses which were collapsed into two main categories:

1. Women are needed to represent or look after workers of their own sex.
2. Other response (including "there is no special need for women").

Influence

Respondents were asked to rate the amount of influence they have on members of the workers' committee and on fellow workers respectively, using a scale from 1-5. An index of influence was constructed from the combined average score on the two questions. The reliability coefficient of the influence index: $\alpha = .74$.

Results

We hypothesized that members of skewed groups compared to those of balanced groups view males as more endowed with relevant leadership skills than females. The mean score on the sex-stereotype scale is significantly higher for skewed than for balanced groups (Table 1). The findings support Hypothesis 1. A breakdown by sex of respondents reveals that the difference is significant for female but not for male respondents. A larger proportion of women on balanced groups view women as more skilled than men compared to women on skewed groups. It appears that the sex proportion of the group has a stronger effect on women's judgments than on men's. T-tests comparing the differences between sexes within each group type revealed that these are significant for both skewed and balanced groups (Table 1). Regardless of group type, men are more strongly promale than women. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) produced a nonsignificant main group effect, a significant main sex effect ($F = 22.21, p = .001$) and a

Table 1. MEAN SCORES ON SEX-STEREOTYPE SCALE* BY GROUP SEX RATIO AND SEX

Respondents	Skewed Groups			Balanced Groups			t
	\bar{x}	SD	n	\bar{x}	SD	n	
Total	0.414	.38	84	0.188	.49	33	2.38*
Women	0.232	.38	19	-0.089	.44	18	2.37*
Men	0.468	.36	65	0.520	.33	15	NS
	t = 2.38**			t = 4.58***			

*range = -1 to +1.

** $\alpha < .05$.

*** $\alpha < .01$.

two-way interaction effect between sex and group type ($F = 5.20, p = .02$). Sex explains 19.4 percent and group type 5.8 percent of the variance in the sex-stereotype scale.

The proportion who agree that women are elected to represent women is not significantly higher in skewed than in balanced groups. But the difference *is* significant for female (Kendall's Tau $p = .01$) but not for male respondents (Table 2a). An additional finding is that regardless of group sex ratio, a significantly higher proportion of respondents agree that women are elected to look after women (over 50 percent) than agree that men are elected to look after men (less than 20 percent).

A significantly higher proportion of members of skewed groups than of balanced groups believe that women are needed on workers' committees in order to look after the special problems of women—primarily problems related to sanitation, bus schedules, day care centers, and summer camp child allowance, rather than closing the sex gap in pay or opportunities for training or promotion. (Table 2b). The difference is significant among male respondents and approaching significance among female respondents where the small sample size is probably the reason for the lack of statistical significance. The findings only partially support Hypothesis 2.

In skewed groups, women experience themselves as less influential than men (Table 3). The difference between the sexes in balanced groups, however, is not significant. The findings support Hypothesis 3. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) produced a nonsignificant main group effect, a significant main sex effect ($F = 12.94, p = .001$), and an interaction effect that was significant at the .07 level. Sex explains 12 percent and group type 3 percent of the variance in perceived influence.

Table 2A. MEASURES OF ROLE ENTRAPMENT BY SEX AND GROUP TYPE

Women Are Elected to Represent Women	Total		Women		Men	
	Skewed	Balanced	Skewed	Balanced	Skewed	Balanced
Yes	53.5 (46)	41.7 (15)	65.0 (13)	31.6 (6)	50 (33)	50.9 (9)
No	46.5 (40)	58.3 (21)	35.0 (7)	68.4 (13)	50 (33)	47.1 (8)
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Kendall's Tau	NS		p = .02		NS	

Table 2B. MEASURES OF ROLE ENTRAPMENT BY SEX AND GROUP TYPE

Why Women Are Needed On Committee	Total		Women		Men	
	Skewed	Balanced	Skewed	Balanced	Skewed	Balanced
To represent women	67.7 (58)	47.2 (17)	75 (15)	52.6 (10)	64.2 (43)	41.2 (7)
Other	33.3 (29)	52.8 (19)	25 (5)	47.4 (9)	35.8 (24)	58.8 (10)
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Kendall's Tau	p = .02		p = .07		p = .04	

Discussion and Conclusions

We found considerable support for Kanter's general argument that the sex ratio of a group's membership affects its culture. Attitudes reflecting boundary heightening, role entrapment and asymmetrical power relationships are more apparent in skewed than in balanced committees. These empirical findings are particularly relevant because of the important differences in the social situation of the groups in the two studies: that is between union committees in small- and medium-sized Israeli factories, and an industrial sales force in a large U.S. corporation.

In the industrial corporation described by Kanter, female tokenism was most prominent where women were just beginning to penetrate a field of activity monopolized by men, as in the case of sales. A woman in sales had a double hurdle to overcome which made her position highly precarious, that of belonging to a social category perceived as somewhat out of place in the role and that of being personally a stranger to the

Table 3. MEAN SCORES ON ESTIMATED INFLUENCE BY GROUP SEX RATIO AND SEX

	Skewed Groups			Balanced Groups		
	\bar{x}	SD	n	\bar{x}	SD	n
Women	3.43	.69	20	3.63	1.12	19
Men	4.19	.58	65	3.82	.92	17
t	4.45**			NS		

** α = .001.

members of the group. Stereotypes are more prevalent when there is insufficient information on which to judge the individual in question. The tokens, new to the sales department and it seems to the salesmen, were treated as typical members of a category. Neither condition existed among the factory workers' committees in our sample where female membership was not a novelty. In all but one factory there had been at least 1 woman member on the previously elected committee. Furthermore, workers tend to run for office only after having been in the firm for an average of 3-4 years so that the members of the committee were very likely already acquainted with one another. Nearly half of our larger sample (49 percent of the men and 46 percent of the women) had been first line supervisors in the factory prior to election, which increases the likelihood of interaction prior to election. In addition, the average seniority of both sexes on the committee was greater in skewed than in balanced groups, a fact which should have reduced the likelihood of stereotyping in the former.

Despite the salient differences in the social context of the two studies, tokenism resulted in similar dynamics. The visibility of women in skewed groups increased the probability of their encapsulation in the role of status specialist. Being viewed as elected primarily to look after the special needs of women may well have contributed to the women's feeling that they are relatively uninfluential. Our larger study showed, furthermore, that male members of skewed groups rated women as having even less influence over committee members than women rated themselves (Israeli and Poraz). The power difference between the sexes in skewed groups has important ramifications, since as Kanter argues, the ability to negotiate with peers over the definition of the group culture is a major determinant of one's condition in the group.

An unexpected finding is that group sex ratio had a stronger effect on women's attitudes toward both the relative abilities of the sexes and women's role on the committee than it had on men. While women held

more promale attitudes on the sex-stereotype scale and a greater proportion viewed women as elected to represent women in skewed than in balanced groups, group ratio had no such effect on men. The initial expectation that men would display more promale stereotypical attitudes in skewed groups was based on Kanter's argument that the entry of a token threatens the communality of those enjoying dominant status. They react by exaggerating the differences between themselves and the token. In the context of the workers' committee, it may be suggested that rather than threaten male communality, the presence of token women in fact buttresses it. Aware of their visibility, the token women in this study seem to have adapted by calling on traditional feminine scripts to put themselves and their partners at ease. As Miller notes, "since women have had to live by trying to please men, they have been conditioned to prevent men from feeling even uncomfortable" (57).

Evidence of this pattern is reflected in the fact that the proportion of women in skewed groups who viewed women as needed to look after women and as elected to represent them (Tables 2a and 2b) is even greater than the proportion of men who believed this to be the case. The tendency for women willingly to play limited roles that fit stereotypical assumptions about their category may explain why men in skewed groups did not hold more promale (or antifemale) attitudes than men in balanced groups, as well as why the former rated themselves as more influential than the latter ($t = 1.56$), a difference, however, that was not significant. It may be suggested that this mode of adaptation is dysfunctional for women's integration within the union structure in that it perpetuates the popular view that women are incapable of representing the worker community as a whole.

Kanter's thesis challenges the widely accepted idea that differences observed in the attitudes and behavior of men and women are best explained in terms of sex-linked characteristics. Emphasizing the relevance of contextual factors, she contends that relative numbers shape both the social perception of the group members and their interaction. Since women are usually the small minority in skewed groups, the influence of proportions is mistakenly attributed to sex effects. This paper attempted an examination of the empirical validity of Kanter's argument. In general the data support the contention that structural conditions have a significant impact on attitudes and perceptions and contribute to the explanation of apparent sex differences. Sex differences in influence found in skewed groups were not found in balanced groups. Members of skewed groups had stronger promale attitudes than those in balanced groups and a significantly larger proportion of the former than of the latter viewed women as status specialists.

Both Kanter and Spangler et al. would suggest that sex stereotyping and role entrapment diminish overall because they diminish among both men and women in balanced groups. Women become less visible as a cate-

gory and consequently men are less provoked to emphasize the boundary that separates them from the outsider (Kanter, b). Women in balanced groups are better able to defeat attempts at generalization which emphasize the contrast between themselves and the men in the group. And in balanced groups, both sexes find it harder to confine women to the "women's slot." The findings of this study, however, indicate that change related to boundary heightening and role entrapment occurred more frequently in women than in men, and that women were more responsive to changes in sex ratio than were men. In other words, the diminution in sex stereotyping appears to be less global than the previous work has indicated.

The underlying assumption of the structural mode of analysis is that women and men are essentially similar in relevant characteristics and that observed differences are the outcome of contextual arrangements. Given, in this case, an approximately equal proportion of both sexes in a group then we would expect that boundary heightening, role entrapment, and power differences generated by tokenism would disappear. While influence scores in fact converged in balanced groups, men held stronger pro-male stereotypical attitudes than women regardless of the sex proportion of the group. Similarly, regardless of group sex ratio a significantly higher proportion of the total sample viewed women as elected to look after women than viewed men as elected to look after men. These findings suggest that while the immediate structure had a moderating effect on the relationship between sex characteristics and the dependent variables, it neither created nor fully eliminated the observed differences between the sexes.

Kanter ignores the distinction between numerical domination which is situational and domination which is institutionalized. The former is a matter partly of chance as when a team of doctors comprises four women and a man. The latter is stable, as when one status group is closely identified with a specific field whether its members happen to be in the majority on any specific occasion or not. Women are dominant in the field of child care and if a mother strolling her infant in the park is joined on the bench by five fathers engaged in similar activity, situationally she may be a token but culturally she may likely be dominant in any discussion about matters of infant care. Proportions have their most significant effect in shaping institutionalized cultural patterns. Those who dominate a field of action *over time* come to determine the rules of interaction for strangers who chance to penetrate the boundaries. Neither their culture nor their power is neutralized by numerical reshuffling.

Among the nurses in Segal's study cited by Kanter, male nurses felt excluded not only because they were few in number, but also because nursing is culturally defined as women's work. A male doctor in the group would have felt differently. People who choose the wrong occupation for their sex, such as the female mechanic or the male kindergarten teacher,

often pay the price of being made to feel that they are deviant or in some important way not in place. They face the double problem of proving that despite their occupational choice their femininity or masculinity is not open to question and that despite their sexual identity their occupational skill is not diminished. Similarly with sales at Indsco. As long as sales is regarded as a male specialty, even the numerical dominance of women will not lead men to feel they are under pressure to prove themselves, as are token women. This was the case on the union committees, a male domain. The numerical equality of females on a committee did not alter the fact that men more than women were perceived categorically as representing all workers in the firm, and as more endowed with leadership skills.

More research is needed to investigate the conditions under which proportions in a specific context shape social interaction and those under which external status, such as sex, a stratifying principle in the broader social context, is imported into the situation to become a dominant organizing principle of social interaction.

There is also a need to move away from the view of socialization theory and the structural approach as alternative modes of analysis. We need greater integration of the two perspectives. A step in that direction is to view socialization throughout the life cycle as the process by which social norms and values are internalized and transmitted and to view structural arrangements as generating the dynamics which shape the contents of what is transmitted.

The fact that the hypotheses were tested on real groups in the field rather than on artificially created groups in the laboratory lends additional credence to the findings. The small *N*s, however, make these findings tentative until further research will support, modify, or reject them.

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