

GENDER ROLES AND COOPERATIVE BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract

We live in a world where, without any doubt, the social, political, economical power are owned by men. Almost all the societies are more or less patriarchal and the gender roles are, generally speaking, well defined and assumed by the representatives of each gender. Also, we live in a world consisting of communities that could not exist in the absence of cooperation between individuals. However, we have to consider the fact that individuals are rational persons that choose to cooperate or not based on the gains brought by each of the possibilities.

The purpose of this paper is to show that there is a correlation between the gender roles taught by each individual in childhood according to their sex and their cooperative behaviour. The hypothesis is that gender roles and cooperative behavior are interdependent and the way men and women cooperate is determined by the gender roles taught by each person since childhood according to the sex they were born. Perhaps we all heard that women are more gentle, more peaceful and more inclined to cooperation, all this being part of "their nature", while men are stronger, more practical, more rational and more likely to compete, also according to "their nature". In this paper I will assume that all these characteristics attributed to each gender are true, but I will question the nature's responsibility in all these facts.

Keywords: Gender roles, cooperative behaviour, women's nature, teaching gender, children's cooperation

1. Introduction

The present study is part of the Political Science field. It aims to show that the way women cooperate influences the gender roles and their assumption. In other words, even if women have no inborn inclination to assume care and household roles and even if they have a choice in this regard, because they are more inclined to cooperation, they are more likely to assume household tasks, especially when they have an opposite sex partner. However, if women tend to cooperate more than men, we can assume that they are more suitable for managing resources and common property.

At this time, the literature has not reached a consensus on the general tendency of cooperation among women. Some studies show that women cooperate less in the prisoner's dilemma type of experiments. On the other hand, there are studies showing that women are more cooperative and more altruistic than men. But there is also a third category of studies which reveals the fact that the way women cooperate in this type of games depends on certain conditions of the experiments.

Further I will present a series of studies and the results of their experiments in various cooperative games, showing how and in which conditions women cooperate. I will also try to show the applicability of cooperative behavior in private life and on assuming the household tasks.

2. Context

In modern society cooperation among individuals is indispensable. From the beginning of humanity, the ability to cooperate is a criterion of natural selection. Nowadays, cooperation is also a criterion of social selection. Cooperation works based on a system of rewards and punishments. Individuals that do not cooperate with others are excluded. The individual's degree of cooperation can be measured using a wide range of tools. However, the best known and most used type of experiment is a Prisoner's Dilemma.

This world has always been run by men for men, as Mihaela Miroiu says - "often, what was considered to be generally human was a simple universalization of the masculine".² For centuries

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societies are dominated and led by men who make policy only in their favor, totally ignoring the needs of women, or treating them as inferior beings, incapable of making decisions and managing on their own, therefore needing masculine care and protection. As a result, certain rules and patterns of behavior were established as being "women specific" and other "male specific", defined in the literature as "gender roles".

3. Empirical studies

According to a research conducted by Mary Glenn Wiley, there was not observed a significant difference in behavior between men and women when they were not allowed to communicate. When verbal communication was allowed, there was no difference between men and women when they interacted in same-sex pairs. In contrast, traditional roles have occurred when communication was allowed and they interacted with the opposite sex.³ We can assume that this behavior is due to the traditional relations of the patriarchal societies in which they live, where women are educated to "listen" and to depend on men. Men are those who make the rules, they are "heads of the family".

According to Tomasello, children begin to cooperate from the age of one year old and tend to follow social norms because "this is the way it is supposed to be". More specifically, once the children see an action carried out in a certain way, afterwards someone will do the same action in another way, they will resist to the last action, arguing that "it is not the way you are supposed to do it".⁴ Assuming that there is indeed a biological inclination toward cooperation of women, girls would learn and they would conform to gender statuses since the first years of life especially because this is what they see in their family. Thus, even if women do not have a feminine nature "inborn" which makes them sensitive, obedient, gentle, ready for self sacrifice etc, given their inclination towards cooperation and compliance, they will gain, from a very early age, these attributes and will behave accordingly.

Eckel conducted an experiment - called "the dictator experiment" – in which a group of women and a group of men received \$ 10, which they had to share with an anonymous partner, as they wanted to, as compensation for the fact that the anonymous partner came to the experiment and was not distributed to the "dictators" group, that had full control over resources. The result shows that women were twice more generous than men. The average amount donated by them to an anonymous partner, was \$ 1.60 while the average amount donated by men was \$ 0.82. Among women, only 1.47% have donated nothing, compared to 60% of men. Also, 30% of them have donated at least \$ 3, compared with only 10% of men.⁵ I shall, therefore, question how can women expect men to make policy especially for women, while 60% of them are not willing to share resources with someone else? This is also a good argument in favor of imposing gender quotas in Parliament, assuming that men wouldn't be willing to voluntarily give up power.

A series of three experiments conducted by Van Vugt, De Cramer and P. Janssen had shown that men cooperate more within the group if the group is in competition with another group than in the situation where the group they belong to is not a competition. Cooperation of women has not changed significantly in the case of competition between groups. However, within the group, when there is no competition, women cooperate more than men. Though, when there is competition

² Mihaela Miroiu, *Drumul către autonomie. Teorii politice feministe*. (Iasi: Polirom, 2004), 16

³ Mary Glenn Wiley, "Sex Roles in Games", *Sociometry* 36 (1973): 526, . Accessed January 28, 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2786248>

⁴ Michael Tomasello, *Why we cooperate*. (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009), 49

⁵ Catherine Eckel, and . Philip J. Grossman, *Men, Women and Risk Aversion: Experimental Evidence*. In C.R. Plott and V.L. Smith, *Handbook of Experimental Economics Results*. (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 2008), 730

between groups, women cooperated approximately to the same extent as they did when there was no competition, while men cooperated almost twice more.⁶ This is a very interesting fact, if we consider the possible competition between women and men, for example, in sharing resources and common property.

As we know, for women in Romania, there was never the "right moment" to enjoy rights and direct access to resources.⁷ So I could say that this study strengthens the hypothesis that Romanian men behaved as being in a competition between groups trying, to remove half of the competitors.⁸

4. Application in private life

I consider that the results of these researches are relevant to study the behavior of individuals in private life. There are many situations even in family life that can be explained through prisoner's dilemma type of games. From the division of roles in the household, the education of children up to the decision to divorce, family life can be translated by a long series of prisoner's dilemma type of situations.

To illustrate such a possible situation, I will take as an example a married couple that has a child and whose dilemma is who to deal with its care. I will assume that each of the actors is rational and tends to maximize its own welfare. I will not take into account the feelings, principles or other emotional factors. I will show the situation from three points of view, of each rational actor involved - the mother's point of view, then the father's and then of the group's:

From the perspective of the mother (Table 1)

- If both cooperate, each of them will lose a moderate amount of time and energy, including the mother;
- If mother cooperates and father does not cooperate, the mother will lose maximum amount of time and energy;
- If the mother does not cooperate but the father does, she wouldn't lose anything, but she will even be able to use her time and energy doing enjoyable activities for herself;
- If none of them will cooperate, no one will lose time and energy but the child will be untidy and the task will not be completed.

| Mother's perspective | Mother cooperates | Mother does not cooperate |
|----------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| Father cooperates | 4 | 5 |

⁶ Van Vugt, M., De Cramer, D. si Janssen, P, "Gender Differences in Cooperation and Competition. The Male-Warrior Hypothesis." *Psychological Science* 18 (2007): 19-23, Accessed January 30, 2012. <http://www.fed.cuhk.edu.hk/~lchang/material/Evolutionary/cooperation%20and%20competition.pdf>

⁷ Mihaela Miroiu, *Drumul catre autonomie. Teorii politice feministe*. (Iasi: Polirom, 2004), 110

⁸ Mihaela Miroiu, *Drumul catre autonomie. Teorii politice feministe*. (Iasi: Polirom, 2004), 95

| | | |
|---------------------------|---|----|
| Father does not cooperate | 0 | -1 |
|---------------------------|---|----|

Table 1

From the perspective of the father (Table 2)

- If both cooperate, each of them will lose a moderate amount of time and energy, including the father;
- If father cooperates and mother does not cooperate, the father will lose maximum amount of time and energy;
- If the father does not cooperate but the mother does, he wouldn't lose anything, but he will even be able to use his time and energy doing enjoyable activities for himself;
- If none of them will cooperate, no one will lose time and energy but the child will be untidy and the task will not be completed.

| | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| Father's perspective | Father cooperates | Father does not cooperate |
| Mother cooperates | 4 | 5 |
| Mother does not cooperate | 0 | -1 |

Table 2

Group perspective (Table 3)

- Best situation for the group is when both partners cooperate
- The middle situation is when only one partner cooperates and the other defects
- The worst situation is when none of them cooperates

| | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| Group perspective | Mother cooperates | Mother does not cooperate |
| Father cooperates | 5 | 2 |
| Father does not cooperate | 2 | -1 |

Table 3

We see, therefore, that each of them, individually speaking, has more to gain if he/she defects and the other cooperates. However, there is a chance that, if both defect, the task is not accomplished, that would be the worst possible outcome. However, considering the results of the previously mentioned studies, which concluded that women are more cooperative than men, especially when communication is allowed between partners, the probability that the mother will be the one who cooperates is higher. If she cooperates, it would result either the middle individual situation (see Table 1), but the best for the group, in which both partners cooperate (see Table 3), or the weakest individual situation, but the middle for the group, where only she cooperates and the partner defects. Based on these facts, many men choose to defect, so they get the best individual situation. These are the most common family types, according to studies, in Romania: those in which the care of the children is in the mother's charge. The smaller percentage of men who choose to cooperate leads to the existence of partnership-based families, in which both partners share the tasks equally. This game model can be applied in many situations of private life concerning common property or collective action.

Previous studies, based on cooperative games, have shown that women are more oriented towards community and society and men are more oriented to individual. Paradoxically, however, in the real world, women are responsible for the individual space, for the private life and the men for the society. As we saw in the example above, I believe this also happens because of women's inclination towards cooperation in private life.

This behavior of women is and was useful to them as many times as they were given the opportunity to manifest in public space, especially during the battle to win their political and social rights. Let's think, for example, that the suffragettes would have been less cooperative within the group. Would women had obtained the right to vote if each of them would have chosen to defect and let someone else deal with this situation? I think I can infer from these studies that there is a greater possibility that in cooperation games, "the free rider" to be men than women. In this case, I can not help wondering, rhetorically - of course, why public goods are not managed by women, considering the fact that they are more cooperative and therefore it can be assumed that they would have the ability to manage them more efficiently than men do.

"The tragedy of common goods" is often described using prisoner's dilemma type of games. In general, the "tragedy" comes from the fact that each individual tends not to cooperate with others in order to achieve a common goal, but to defect in order to maximize their personal profit. Most studies say, however, that women are more cooperative and more altruistic than men. This means that in cases where players are women, the "tragedy" is less likely to happen.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the fact that women are the ones that usually take care of the house and family, may depend, in the cases when they are given the choice, of their inclination towards cooperation and altruism. But often, the choice they make is not only because of their inclination to cooperate, but also due to their partner's inclination to defect.

However, the increased tendency to cooperation makes women be more valuable for the group and therefore, when choosing it, for society or community. If women are more oriented towards the society, being more willing to cooperate and men are more oriented towards the individual, being more selfish, perhaps a reversal of roles between women and men would be needed for a better functioning of the society. Just that, given the inclination of women to cooperate, I have reasons to believe that a reversal of roles wouldn't necessarily lead also to a reversal of gender

statuses. Being more cooperative would not, automatically, make women to be directed exclusively to public life and to "defect" in private life, as at this time it does not make them focus only on private life. These choices are made, or should be made, depending on personal preferences.

I think that in the future this issue needs to be the subject of more experiments that take into account the conditions in which women are more likely to cooperate, to see if, indeed, gender roles and cooperative behavior are interdependent.

If gender roles and cooperative behavior are interdependent, women may be caught in a vicious circle: they cooperate because of gender roles and gender roles tend to preserve because they cooperate. If men are also caught in the same vicious circle, it means the only possible option is to maintain the status quo. Due to the fact that this is not desirable, I believe that the only way out is through policies to facilitate the removal of traditional gender roles, both for women and men. If the two variables are indeed interdependent, this will lead to the modification of the cooperative behavior so that there wouldn't be a "female specific" and a "male specific" anymore, but individuals will be free to cooperate or not, depending on each individual situation. Of course, we can hope for a world where most people, and not most women will choose to cooperate for mutual benefit.

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