FAMILY DECISION-MAKING

A Developmental Sex Role Model

John Scanzoni
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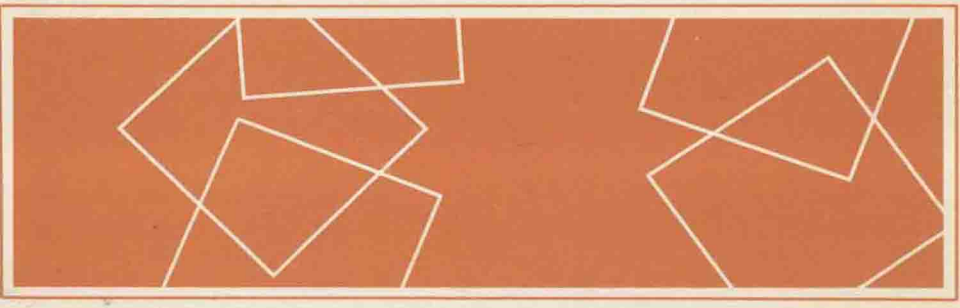

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109 Gittell **Limits to Citizen Participation**
110 Finsterbusch **Understanding Social Impacts**
111 Scanzoni/Szinovacz **Family Decision-Making**
112 Lidz/Walker **Crisis as Usual**
113 Shupe/Bromley **The New Vigilantes**

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CONTENTS

All government–indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue and every prudent act–is founded on compromise and barter.

–Edmund Burke

PREFACE

During the ten years since *Sexual Bargaining* first appeared, most of the feedback has been kind, all of it helpful. In recent years, the comments have repeatedly focused on several key questions. For instance, "What about men–why isn't more said about changes in *male* sex roles?" Or, "What about single people–never-married, divorced, widowed–why isn't more included on sex-role issues related to them?" And, "What about life-cycle differences–aren't men and women in their forties or sixties facing different kinds of sex-role issues than people in their twenties?" Then, "What about the concept of 'sex role' itself? Don't we need more detail as to what it is and what it means?"

And, "Why not expand the discussion of exchange and power and conflict 'theories'? For instance, is the idea of 'resources' limited to tangible considerations, such as land or money, or are there other kinds of resources as well?" And, "Instead of using the term 'power politics,' is there a better way to approach marital and family interaction?" Finally, "What about the larger societal context? Given tight job markets, inflation, and the energy crunch, aren't things a lot different now than they were during the late sixties and early seventies? Doesn't that mean that men's and women's sex roles are affected differently now than they were then?"

These and several additional questions have prompted us to write *Family Decision-Making.* The central theme of *Sexual Bargaining* was that "reward-seeking between males and females . . . generates . . . exchanges between them, which in turn generate conflicts and changes." The idea was that ongoing changes in patterns between the sexes were as inexorable as ongoing worldwide changes between light- and dark-skinned peoples. Nothing during the interim has altered that conclusion. In spite of difficulties encountered by ERA, as well as some other matters, those gender-related changes are continuing–sometimes imperceptibly, but continuing nonetheless.

Therefore, our purpose in this book is to cast some light on the current status of these ongoing changes. The central theme of *Family Decision-Making* is the connections between changing sex roles and changing processes of decision-making between the sexes. Scholars and students who raised the prior questions are asking for greater specificity and detail. Consequently, we intend to place the dual notions of sex roles and of decision-making under the microscope, so to speak, and scrutinize them in greater depth than has ever been done before. That is the purpose of this book.

Implied in *Sexual Bargaining,* and now explicit in *Family Decision-Making* is the proposition that the most fruitful way to understand the dynamics ("what is going on") of male-female relations (and hence of sex, marriage, family, childrearing, and so on) is through sharp focus on sex roles and decision-making. It can be argued that these two notions are the nexus or the pivotal point around which revolve all other questions concerning family relations. Once we have explored the intricacies and complexities of what sex roles are, and what "decisioning" means, we will have gone a long way toward understanding many of the other areas that are intrinsic to male-female relations, both in family and out of it.

Understanding in and of itself is important. Understanding (theoretical explanation) is intrinsically satisfying and meaningful. But in reality, understanding cannot be separated from application. As we close out the twentieth century, many voices in and out of government are asking, "What can we do to make family life better? Can anything be done to improve the ways we raise our children?" These and several related questions are matters of public policy. What steps, if any, should governments, schools, civic and community organizations, and churches take to enhance the quality of relations between the sexes, between the generations? As citizens, we need answers–we need practical suggestions. Ideally, these policy matters should be informed by clear understanding. The better, or more valid, the explanation of what's going on, the more successful will be the policy, or "answers" we eventually propose to enhance relations between the sexes. Therefore, as we explore the broad question of changes in sex roles and in decision-making, we want both to understand and to apply that understanding.

Plan of the Book

In Part I, we describe a general model of sex roles and family decision-making. Throughout all of the social sciences, there is increasing discomfort with the fact that we have ignored dynamics–processes–in favor of more easily understood notions of structure. Nowhere is this assessment

more true than in the study of family. Yet the very term–decision-*making*–suggests some sorts of shifts or movements. Therefore, Chapters One through Five analyze in great detail the numerous facets of those dynamics. We try to show how and why long-standing, or *traditional,* sex roles tend to minimize the likelihood of decisioning dynamics. Next, given gradual ongoing changes in sex roles, we show how and why decision-making dynamics emerge, what they are like, and how they proceed. Questions of power, conflict, negotiation, and change, as well as discussion and consensus, are systematically built into our decision-making model.

In addition to having ignored processes, social scientists have also ignored the reality of *group* phenomena in favor of more easily studied *individual* data. To contribute toward remedying that situation, this book treats the couple (or the parent-child dyad) as the main focus (or unit) of analysis. Family decision-making is not a solo exercise. It requires two or more persons to do it; and we make this reality an explicit part of our model.

An additional feature of our model is its applicability to macro, or societal concerns, as well as to micro, or family, concerns. While our attention is concentrated on the latter, we suggest how the model can be used to analyze decision-making among large-scale groups concerned with national family policies.

Part II takes the general ideas of the Part I model and applies them in very concrete fashion to marriages and families (and family-like groups) *at various stages throughout the life cycle.* Generous use is made of case studies to analyze the particular issues that require decisioning at each life stage. No single case study is exhaustive of all aspects of the Part I model, but taken together they illustrate important facets of the model that apply to persons in those particular life-cycle situations. And while we assume that persons in the several categories are living during the present, each chapter makes brief allusion to a couple actually traced throughout their life-span from the late 1950s to the 1980s.

Besides applying the model to premarital dating, young marrieds, parents and children, parents and adolescents, and to mid-life and senior couples, we also apply it to decision-making among adult singles, divorced persons, cohabitors, and committed gay relationships. A brief discussion of social policy implications closes out the book.

Because both of us have critiqued each other's work throughout the writing of these chapters, the book is genuinely a joint effort. Nevertheless, prime responsibility for Chapters 6, 8, 10, and 11 fell to M.S.; J.S. drafted the remaining chapters. We both owe a great debt to colleagues who stimulated our thinking both before and during the writing of the manuscript, especially those who commented on selected chapters.

The Audience

The book is designed to appeal to several audiences. Students will find that the ideas are presented simply and plainly enough to be readily understood. Numerous examples are given to illuminate concepts and ideas, and thus the book is appropriate for classroom instruction. We also hope that professionals (teachers, researchers, counsellors, program-planners) will find the ideas sufficiently fresh and stimulating to incorporate them into their own thinking, and their own work.

PART I

EXPLORING A MODEL OF FAMILY DECISION-MAKING

Part I has two main objectives: one, to describe *why* changes in sex roles continue to alter the character of family decision-making; and two, to analyze the nature of the decision-making that confronts families as they close out the twentieth century and enter the twenty-first. In recent years, family investigators have drawn on ideas from *symbolic interaction, social exchange,* and *social conflict* theories to try to understand relationships between family dynamics and the rapidly changing larger society. Part I attempts to synthesize these three approaches under what has come to be known as a "subjective utility" approach (Blalock and Wilken, 1979). The underlying idea is basically a simple one–family members have items (tangible and intangible) they wish to give to and also receive from each other. Simultaneously, family members want to give and receive (exchange) items with parts of the larger society. The capability of engaging in one of those kinds of exchanges usually depends on the capability of doing the other as well. Organizing those exchanges in an orderly and satisfactory fashion is what decision-making is all about–and Part I tries to show how we can understand what decision-making is.

Chapter One

SEX ROLES AND DECISIONS

According to Spiegel, traditional sex roles result in an "economy of effort, and relieve us from the burden of decision-making: The person is spared the necessity of coming to decisions about most of the acts he performs, because he knows his parts so well. . . . He tends not to be aware of them. He enacts them automatically, and all goes well" (1960: 364). In Spiegel's time, as a man and a woman approached a door, they and everyone watching knew who would pause while one opened the door and allowed the other to enter. In that situation shared knowledge of sex roles made decision-making, or what we'll call "decisioning," superfluous. Each knew automatically what he/she and the other should and would do. Today, approaching a door in mixed company is comparable to driving up to a four-way stop sign. At the door people look at each other quizzically. Who's closest to the handle? Will she/he "mind" if I hold the door for him/her? But they usually smile, make a joke or two, and proceed to "decide" who will hold the door, who will go through first, and so on. And if there's a second door 50 feet away, the "decisions" may have to be repeated all over again unless the one who was ushered through the first door says: "You held it before, so now allow me." That too, of course, is a "decision" made on the rebound from the earlier one.

Definitions

Identifying the connections between sex roles and decision-making requires some definitions. The broad notion of sex role (sometimes called gender role) has been examined in at least three specific senses. The first of these occurs at the macro level and is described by Nielsen (1978: 10) as "sex stratification" or what others call "gender differentiation" (Holter, 1970; Collins, 1975; Jaggar and Struhl, 1978). This construct taps the idea that men and women are systematically funneled into social positions that provide greater amounts of valued rewards (tangible and intangible) to men than to women. The result are strata which, according to Engels (1884), existed at the dawn of recorded history: "the first class oppression [is] that of the female by the male sex." Men represented a dominant group in society; women, a subordinate group. This layering effect continues today although recent census data reveal that increasing numbers of women are managing to permeate positions throughout government, business, and the professions once reserved exclusively for males (Reubens and Reubens, 1979).

And that leads us to the definition of a second construct–the division of labor by sex. As implied by the preceding discussion, it is the attachment of gender to particular social positions that gives rise to the layering effect that exists in virtually all known societies. Nielsen (1978: 8) points out that men become attached to positions that exist in the public sphere; women's positions are found in the private sphere–most importantly, of course, family. Likewise, she argues (p. 9) that the positions or roles men perform consist of "exchange-value work." Men do their work in the *public* sphere and in exchange for it gain rewards and status in that sphere. Those resources give men power to maintain the gender stratification system that currently exists.

In contrast, the roles women perform generally consist of what Nielsen calls "use-value work"–their goods and services are produced "for immediate consumption by the family or clan." Consequently, those women have nothing left by which to obtain status in the public sphere–the sphere that controls their destiny. Thus, they have no power to change the existing stratification, even if they wanted to–which many women (and men) do not.

The issue of volition leads us to the definition of a third construct–what Nielsen calls sex-role norms. Holter (1970: 54) also calls them gender norms. In contrast to the care with which Nielsen and Holter label subjective sex-role orientations, other researchers have failed to grasp the significance of conceptualizing these orientations in a meaningful way. Terms such as sex-role ideologies and attitudes have no theoretical under-