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# Coping with Powerlessness: The Relationship of Gender and Job Dependency to Empowerment-Strategy Usage

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**A critical-incident interviewing method was used to determine the strategies employed by men and women in organizational situations. Ninety-eight male and female participants provided an example of a frustrating workplace situation in which they were powerless because they were dependent on others and the action they took in response to the situation. Measures of job dependency, taken as a measure of relative power for each job, were also assessed. Chi-square, correlational, and log-linear results indicated that while men and women did not differ in the relative power of the jobs they held, women tended to use an acquiescence strategy to a greater extent than men in coping with their powerlessness. When examined, relative job dependency, however, had a greater effect than gender on the use of this strategy.\***

The belief that, in general, men hold more power in organizations than women is widely accepted. Recently, however, a debate has grown regarding the underlying conditions that explain gender differences in power. Structuralist theorists, such as Kanter (1977, 1979), maintain that the structure of the job affects one's ability to exercise power. In this view, women are hired or promoted into positions that lack power and find they have few, if any, opportunities to exercise influence. On the other hand, socialization theorists, such as Hennig and Jardim (1977), argue that women are at a disadvantage in the workplace because their learned behavioral strategies are less valued in organizational settings than are those of men.

Reconciling these perspectives may be important in understanding gender differences in the behavioral exercise of influence. The socialization perspective suggests that women and men may differ in the influence strategies they employ as a result of their learned experiences and that these differences will appear regardless of structural inequities. Advocates of the structuralist perspective maintain that the lack of information and support that accompanies low-power jobs will cause all such jobholders, regardless of gender, to behave in a powerless manner. Thus, these perspectives offer contradictory conclusions. Following the advice of Riger and Galligan (1980), Thompson (1981), and Fairhurst (1986), who have called for research and theory that promote a synthesis of structuralist and socialization approaches, I have attempted to reconcile these perspectives.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Structuralist Perspective

Proponents of the structuralist perspective argue that informal power and opportunity structures in organizations serve to exclude women. Kanter (1977) envisioned these structures as informal cycles of power and powerlessness that influence the relative availability of opportunities and resources for organizational members. Those who are part of the cycle of power are able to empower themselves through political alliances and information. Those caught in the cycle of powerlessness remain relegated to the bottom of the organization, performing menial, unimportant, and demotivating work. Being part of the power network is important, because it is often through informal alliances that one learns the ropes (Lincoln and Miller, 1979),

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builds coalitions to gain support (Thompson, 1967; Pfeffer, 1981), and gains the information necessary to move ahead (Feldman, 1981). Powerlessness, however, can lead to psychological distress (Horwitz, 1982) and breeds discontent, lost productivity, and even sabotage.

Although women have made some progress, as a group they continue to hold relatively powerless, low-status jobs that offer few opportunities to exert influence. For example, Kanter (1977) provided field evidence that shows women, relative to men, lack lines of information, support, and supply in the jobs they hold. Smith and Grenier (1982) argued that women have not been able to gain access to centralized, critical positions that allow control over resources and strategic uncertainties. Crozier (1964) dramatically showed in an earlier study that women were exclusively placed in low-status factory jobs; only men held positions of authority. Stewart and Gudykunst (1982) found that women have not acquired status and influence comparable to that of their male counterparts in organizations. Without jobs that offer opportunities to gain visibility and influence, women are unable to gain access to the sources of structural power and remain caught in the cycle of powerlessness.

Structuralist theorists suggest that not only have women had difficulty gaining access to more powerful, visible jobs, but also the way in which women have been treated in organizations intensifies and perpetuates their structural segregation (Terborg, 1977; Bartol, 1978). Acker and Van Houten (1974) determined that differential recruitment practices and sex-linked mechanisms for performance evaluation create conditions for a structural differentiation of power. A review of the research by Nieva and Gutek (1980) showed that while studies that focus on sex effects in the evaluation of past performance demonstrate few differences, a fairly consistent bias in favor of men remains in studies that emphasize selection, promotion, and the perceived causes of performance. According to the structuralists, it is often these subtle barriers that prevent women from gaining access to the determinants of structural power.

Thus, structuralist advocates suggest that women are not at fault if they lack power in the workplace; structural segregation has restricted their access to powerful positions. However, recent contradictory evidence has emerged that suggests women are beginning to overcome some of the obstacles that have limited their advancement. For example, a study by Tsui and Gutek (1984) found that women were promoted at a faster rate than men and were more satisfied with their jobs than their male counterparts. Brass (1985) found that women were as adept as men in forming networks, although they were not well integrated into the organization's dominant coalition. As women continue to make progress in overcoming these and other structural obstacles, the power differential between the sexes should begin to disappear.

However, one intriguing question remains. Despite these structural barriers, do differences exist in the way in which men and women exercise influence? In other words, do the behavioral strategies employed by men and women to gain power differ on the basis of gender alone? To answer this question, structuralists would argue that few differences, if any, would appear on the basis of gender. This is because the struc-

turalists believe that behavioral differences are considered to be a result rather than a cause of structural inequities, and gender differences, if any, would be subsumed by the structural barriers. However, proponents of the socialization perspective would take a different view. They would argue that differences in the behavioral exercise of influence would appear regardless of structural inequities, since such differences would be based upon the early learning experiences of men and women. It is important, therefore, to explore this perspective as well.

### **Socialization Perspective**

Proponents of the socialization perspective argue there are inherent differences in the ways that men and women behave in the workplace that result from early learning experiences. Henning and Jardim (1977) suggested that women may be ill-prepared, as a result of their socialization experiences, to cope with the male-dominated norms of the corporate world. For example, by not playing competitive sports as children to the same degree as men, women may not have learned the same rules of corporate gamesmanship, placing them at an immediate disadvantage.

Research examining differences in how men and women use power tends to support the sex-role socialization hypothesis. For example, in a laboratory study, Johnson (1976) studied sex differences in power bases to determine sex-linked perceptions of their use. The use of reward, coercion, legitimate power, direct information, and expert bases of power were associated with men, while the use of referent, indirect information, deceit, helplessness, nagging, and sexuality power bases were associated with women. In a related laboratory study, Falbo, Hazen, and Linimon (1982) found that male speakers who exhibited helplessness (perceived to be associated with women) and female speakers who exhibited expertise (perceived to be associated with men) were less liked and were viewed as less competent. Wiley and Eskilson (1982), who also examined perceived power bases in relation to performance in the workplace, found that men and women's adoption of similar power strategies does not necessarily ensure equivalent evaluations of their performance. Men were perceived as more powerful and received more positive evaluations of their performance when they used expert power. When women used this strategy, less positive evaluations of their performance resulted. Only reward power, or the action of providing incentives, was associated with positive evaluations of performance for women.

The compliance-gaining literature suggests a similar sex-bias theme. In a class project on securing compliance, DeTurck and Miller (1982) found men and women differed in their reported likelihood of use of compliance strategies. Women were more likely to choose appeals-based strategies, whereas men relied on promises and threats significantly more than women. Luloffs (1982) noted similar results: men relied more on threats and persuasion in seeking compliance from male friends; women were more likely to rely on self-blame and guilt-ridden strategies while interacting with both male and female friends in a hypothetical situation. Ayers-Nachamkin et al. (1982) found that men attempted to influence subordinates to a greater extent than women in a simulated managerial setting. Finally,

Falbo (1977b, 1982) found that women and feminine sex-identified individuals are more predisposed to use indirect and unilateral strategies (such as emotional manipulation, helplessness, subtlety, and tears) while men and masculine or androgynous types are more likely to report using more direct and bilateral strategies (e.g., threats and bargaining strategies) to gain compliance in intimate dating relationships.

The socialization literature, therefore, suggests a strong sex bias in the use of influence strategies; men are perceived as using more direct, aggressive strategies to gain power and influence, while women employ helpless, dependent tactics. Research on learned helplessness (see Radloff and Monroe, 1978) offers further support for this theme. This literature suggests that in many situations, women experience a loss of control, a feeling of failure, and exhibit greater symptoms of learned helplessness than do men. Baucom (1983) found that women who scored low on masculinity on a measure of sex-role traits chose not to be in control of their task situation; in other words, these women preferred their helplessness. Is it possible then, that women are more likely to remain powerless and helpless, yielding, and dependent due to the behavioral strategies they employ in organizations?

One problem with this research is that, with the exception of some of the learned-helplessness literature, the data from these studies were primarily collected in laboratory situations in which participants were asked to respond with their hypothetical reactions or perceptions. Few studies exist in which actual behavior was observed. Additionally, with the notable exception of Wiley and Eskilson (1982), most of these studies involved college students as the actors and participants rather than actual managers. Therefore, it is possible that these sex-stereotypic results are an artifact of the research design and method employed in this research.

Only limited field research has been done that examines the effect of gender on influence-strategy usage. Such research is sparse and has used gender only as an additional biographical correlate of the research. For example, both Cotton (1976) and Kipnis, Schmidt, and Wilkinson (1980) included sex as an additional correlate in their research on power tactics. Cotton (1976) focused on the power-balancing strategies employed by university personnel when dependent upon others in hypothetical situations and found no differences that were ascribed to gender. Kipnis, Schmidt, and Wilkinson (1980) also stated that there were few, if any, differences in their sample. Since this research did not directly examine gender differences, however, the results of these studies remain inconclusive.

As noted in the research on influenceability, stereotypic perceptions about social influence often affect the types of results obtained. Although experimental research has shown that behavioral sex differences in influenceability are small (Eagly, 1978; Eagly and Wood, 1982), the perception that women are more easily influenced than men, and poorer influencers themselves, remains strong. This same phenomenon may be affecting the reported research on gender differences in the behavioral use of power. The tendency for men to exercise more aggressive, threatening behaviors and for women to assume helpless, dependent postures may be a result of sex-

stereotypic perceptions rather than actual behavioral reactions in the workplace.

It remains possible, however, that actual gender differences in the use of power strategies do exist and that these differences may affect workplace behavior. Many of the studies cited suggest this. Socialization theorists argue that the behavior of men and women differs on the basis of their early learned experiences, and these differences may bear upon how men and women respond when powerless. The question is: Are such differences between men and women evident in workplace situations? If so, what implications will this have for the veracity of the structuralist versus socialization perspectives?

### **Synthesis of the Two Perspectives**

Salancik and Pfeffer (1977), Pfeffer (1981), Kanter (1977), and Kipnis (1980) have described a self-perpetuating cycle of power dynamics in the workplace. Because those in power control the resources, they can maintain their power position as the dominant coalition by reinforcing the inferiority of those who lack power. Those in power are likely to behave in ways that allow them to perpetuate their power, since they have access to the lines of information, supply, and support to enable them to do so. The reverse is true for those without power. As Kanter (1977) stated, powerlessness breeds powerlessness. Powerless individuals holding powerless jobs have no choice but to behave in ways that constrain and restrict what limited options they may have. Those who lack power act in ways that suggest territoriality, authoritarianism, and helplessness, since the jobs themselves offer few opportunities to exert influence.

Advocates of the structuralist perspective argue that differences, if any, in the exercise of power should be considered a result rather than a cause of structural inequities: if women have indeed learned to act in ways that are more submissive, indirect, and helpless, it may reflect their structural powerlessness. Advocates of the socialization perspective, however, argue that the only way in which powerless individuals can overcome structural obstacles is by acting assertively and aggressively to gain the information, resources, and support that are needed to reposition themselves in the cycle of power. No one gives away power; one has to take it or create it. If women continue to act in helpless, dependent ways, regardless of their relative structural power vis-à-vis men, they may be unwittingly contributing to the perpetuation of their own powerlessness.

One way to reconcile these two perspectives is to consider that both approaches may uniquely contribute to our understanding of this subject. It may very well be true, and in fact it is highly likely, that structural powerlessness affects behavior. Those who lack power may also lack the resources to gain influence, and this may be reflected in their behavior on the job. However, even those who lack power may be able to discover and take advantage of subtle opportunities to increase their limited power. As Mechanic (1962) noted, there are sources of power available for lower participants in organizations, such as access to persons, information and instrumentalities, attractiveness, location, expertise, irreplaceability, and carefully directed effort that can be manipulated if superiors become dependent upon them for these sources.

In a study by Fairhurst and Snaveley (1983) on tokenism, token males did not experience greater symptoms of social isolation or performance pressure than females. These findings prompted the authors to suggest that there are means for tokens (male or female) to acquire and use power even under conditions in which there is a structural imbalance. Thompson (1981) placed men and women in different simulated power dyads designed to model structural differentials in power. The study showed that power relations did not affect perceptions of negotiations, but women were more supportive than men. The question is: Will women exploit such opportunities to the same extent as men? If the answer to this question is yes, then there are likely to be few differences, if any, evidenced by men and women in their use of behavioral influence strategies, even when they are placed in a structurally powerless position. If the answer to this question is no, then the socialization hypothesis may indeed be supported. To date, only Kotter (1977, 1978) and Cotton (1976) have attempted to study power strategies in the field under conditions of dependency to learn how employees react. To determine whether or not men and women differ in the strategies they use when powerless and dependent, it is necessary to examine the behaviors of men and women in a workplace situation that forces them to be dependent and powerless.

### Power and Dependence

Emerson (1962) defined power and dependency as the inverse of one another, such that individuals hold power to the degree that others are dependent on them to achieve the goals they desire. By definition, more dependent individuals are also more powerless. In this framework, structural powerlessness may be considered to be a function of the degree of dependency inherent in a particular job. This dependency may be created by both the number of alternatives available to the participant and the degree of motivational investment, or need, to achieve the desired goals.

According to Emerson (1962), dependency may serve both as a way to define relative power and as an impetus for further action to change the situation. When individuals are dependent, they will take action to restore the power imbalance. Using Emerson's (1962) framework, empowerment strategies are defined as the actions taken by individuals to reduce their dependency on a more powerful person. The need to gain power, therefore, originates from one's initial dependency.

The present study uses this framework as the theoretical basis from which to answer the following questions: (1) Is gender associated with the reported use of different empowerment strategies under conditions of dependency and powerlessness? That is, are women more likely to adopt yielding strategies while men employ more aggressive tactics? (2) Is there an association between gender and the relative power (or powerlessness) of specific jobs? For example, do men hold more powerful jobs (defined by structural job dependency) than women? (3) Is the relative power of the job associated with the types of strategies employed? In other words, do powerful jobs dictate the use of particular strategies, while powerless jobs constrain their use? and (4) If differences in the strategies based on gender exist, to what extent are such differences the

result of structure (relative job power) or socialization (gender alone)? Is it structure or socialization that has a greater effect on the final results? To answer these questions, individuals from two companies were interviewed to determine what strategies they had used in frustrating situations at work in which they found themselves dependent on others.

## METHOD

### Sample

Interview data were collected from a total of ninety-eight participants in two companies. Data were obtained from two different companies to reduce the possibility that cultural norms in either company might have influenced strategy preferences. Sixty-nine employees from the headquarters and branch offices of a large public utility organization agreed to be interviewed. The other twenty-nine interviews were completed in two different research and development divisions of a pharmaceutical company. Both companies are mature, large-scale, bureaucratic organizations. No unusual historical or industry events affected either company prior to or during the data-collection process.

To obtain the two samples, I contacted human resource department executives in each company to request permission to conduct the research. During the weeks of data collection, I personally visited employees, described the requirements of the study, and requested their voluntary participation. Employees were selected on the basis of their availability and willingness to participate in the study; however, an effort was made to select equally proportionate numbers of men and women in both companies. Only 8 percent of those contacted refused to participate in the interview process.

It was important to determine that the two samples were sufficiently similar for the purposes of data analysis. Table 1 presents the characteristics of each sample. Kolgorov-Smirnov two-sample tests and Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon two-sample tests were performed to determine the relative similarity of the two samples; no significant differences were found for sampling by sex, age, or level of job. Therefore, the two samples were combined for the purposes of analysis.

The final sample was evenly divided between men and women, although more women than men were found to be in

Table 1

**Demographic Characteristics of the Sample by Organization and Gender (in %)**

| Characteristic | Utility (N = 69) |                | Pharmaceutical (N = 29) |                |
|----------------|------------------|----------------|-------------------------|----------------|
|                | Men (N = 35)     | Women (N = 34) | Men (N = 14)            | Women (N = 15) |
| Totals         | 51               | 49             | 48                      | 52             |
| Age 22-35      | 40               | 65             | 28                      | 53             |
| Age 36-55      | 43               | 29             | 50                      | 47             |
| Age 56-65 +    | 17               | 6              | 21                      | 0              |
| Supervisory    | 49               | 24             | 43                      | 27             |
| Nonsupervisory | 51               | 76             | 57                      | 73             |
| Staff          | 26               | 44             | 29                      | 54             |
| Line           | 74               | 56             | 71                      | 46             |

Note: Percentages may not total to 100% due to rounding error.

staff than line jobs, and more men than women served in supervisory than nonsupervisory management positions (see Table 1). These percentages were found to model the population percentages for men and women in each company.

### Interview Methodology

A critical-incident interviewing methodology, similar to that used by Schilit and Locke (1982) and Kipnis, Schmidt, and Wilkinson (1980) was used to identify dependency situations, defined here as those situations in which organizational participants find themselves dependent upon others, and the reported actions participants used to cope with their dependency on others. Dependency situations were selected, following Emerson (1962), as a means to determine how participants cope with their powerlessness when placed in a situation that requires action to effect change. The critical-incident methodology was selected because of its ability to generate rich qualitative data that could be later coded into quantifiable categories. To minimize some of the methodological problems associated with verbal reports, procedures were adopted from Ericsson and Simon (1980), Fairhurst, Green, and Snaveley (1985), and Kiesler and Sproull (1982).

The methodology was developed in a pilot study (described below), and the resulting interview format had three parts: (1) a general introduction and request for the example of the dependency situation, (2) the participant's description of the situation and actions taken, and (3) specific interview questions designed to probe particular elements of each situation and the strategies employed. Participants were requested to consider a recent frustrating situation (within the past year), in which they were dependent on someone in the organization for task or career reasons, and to describe their actions in response to the situation. The purpose of the study was not revealed; participants were simply asked to describe a recent frustrating situation. Each interview was tape-recorded to ensure that all relevant information would be retained on file. To ensure consistency throughout the data-collection process, I served as the only interviewer.

### Verbal Reports As Data

The following example will help the reader understand the complexities of the data that were uncovered in the critical-incident interviews. In this situation, a male foreman was dependent on his workers to complete a difficult outside installation in the rain and snow. Through the process of the interview, the situation and his actions were described as follows:

They told me they needed [a job done at] this Holiday Inn by Monday . . . and if it was done, I knew I could get some extra points with my boss. So on my way into work, I went by and checked the work location. It was raining and snowing, but I figured by having two police officers there it would be a safe situation. . . . When the guys came in, I told them we had an important job to do. One of them told me he wouldn't do it. I said, "You have to do this job. It's company policy." They can do it under protest, which means the union officer has to come in and check the job [for safety] but they still have to keep working until that happens. I told them I had checked the job myself and it was safe.

So probably an hour and a half went by — I hadn't heard, so I figured they were working. All of a sudden one of the union stewards came

into the office. He introduced himself and said he had a grievance on this work location, and he wanted me to take him and show it to him. . . . We got into my vehicle and went down there and lo and behold, there's nobody working there. So I showed them the location and I said, "Those men are supposed to go from the garage to the work location. Now there's nobody here, which means they're off the job. Now if I wanted to, I could put these guys in trouble." He said, "You're absolutely right, but give them the benefit of the doubt. Maybe the police haven't shown up and they've gone to the station." Well, just as we're driving down the road, there's a McDonalds and I saw the company truck in the parking lot.

We went in and found them, but my boss had gotten involved once the union had come to fight. . . . We knew he would be coming, and sure enough, after talking a while about the situation, we saw a company car approach, with him and the other union guy in it. . . . I told the guys I wouldn't get them into trouble if they would just start working. They appreciated that, cause I could have gotten them into a whole lot of trouble, with the union steward and all. . . . So I told my boss that we were all on a break and that everybody was going back to work, no need for him to be there, and all. . . . But later I did tell the men I thought they owed me for that because there could have been some action taken against them. I'm sure if my boss had gone down there and they weren't working, I'm sure he wouldn't have done what I had done. I figure, one hand can wash the other.

**Pilot study.** The example above suggests some of the ambiguity and complexities of coding the data that resulted from the critical-incident methodology used in the study. To ensure that the verbal reports in the study could be treated as reliable sources of data, I completed a pilot study with twenty-two participants, all employees of a local telecommunications company, who agreed on a voluntary basis to be interviewed. After a personal introduction by a human resource department manager, employees were selected to participate on the basis of their availability during a two-day, on-site, data-collection period.

The purpose of the pilot study was to become more familiar with the types of dependency situations that might arise during the interviews. This helped me to determine that dependency situations tended to fall into two categories: job-task related and career-support related, which helped me to rephrase my opening request for information at the start of each interview. I also discovered through the pilot study that few people knew what I meant by dependency situations; they were better able to respond to my request if I asked about "typically frustrating" situations in which they were dependent.

The pilot study also helped me to phrase specific probing questions during the actual interviews. One benefit of the critical-incident method is that it allows the use of probes to jog the memory of interviewees. For example, rather than asking, "What else happened in the situation?" I learned to ask, "Were there any other people involved in the situation other than the individual you described?" Specific questions were used in the actual interviews to ascertain the exact sequence of events, the precise actions taken, outcomes of the situation, and the dominant strategy employed. A sample of actual interview questions are included in Appendix A.

To ensure valid data, I used an approach advocated by Ericsson and Simon (1980) and Fairhurst, Green, and Snavelly (1985) of subdividing the types of questions and probes used to encour-

age memory recall in the actual interview. For example, the questions and probes used in the first part of the interview concerned only facts and details; later questions involved the participants' subjective interpretation. Breakpoints were used (Kiesler and Sproull, 1982) to help participants break their recounting of the situation into smaller clusters by asking them to rephrase and clarify their actions at different points in time in the situation being described. To close the interview, I offered a summary of my interpretation of how the situation evolved and how the interviewee reacted. This was done to provide the participant with an opportunity to clarify any discrepancies or to correct, add, or change pieces of information.

Thus, although there may have been some initial problems using this method, great care was taken during the interviews to ensure the veracity of the verbal reports obtained from interviewees. Case statistics from the interviews showed that a mean of seven interview probes, in addition to the standard questions, were used per interview. All of the cases concerned a situation in which the focal individual found him- or herself dependent on another employee for a particular reason and took action to restore the power imbalance. About 41 percent of the cases concerned a task or informational problem (e.g., needing information, expertise, resources to get the job done), while 59 percent of the cases concerned career issues (e.g., needing support for a promotion, transfer, highly visible project). Approximately 48 percent of the cases concerned a focal dependency relationship in which a superior was the target, 24 percent had a peer as the target, and 28 percent concerned subordinates. In addition, 51 percent of the participants reported that as a result of their actions, their dependency on the focal target was reduced at the end of the critical event, while 49 percent reported that they felt their dependency had increased.

### Variable Coding

Three categories of variables were measured for the purposes of the study: (1) gender, measured by biographical data, (2) empowerment strategies used in the dependency situation, and (3) job dependency, taken as a measure of relative power.

*Empowerment strategy measures.* Reviews of the literature on influence tactics and compliance-gaining strategies show that a multitude of power strategies have been identified by a variety of authors (e.g., Strauss, 1962; Marwell and Schmitt, 1967; Cotton, 1976; Falbo, 1977a; Kotter, 1977, 1978; Kipnis, Schmidt, and Wilkinson, 1980; Schilit and Locke, 1982; Fairholm, 1985). These strategies include ingratiation, coalition formation, assertion, manipulation, expertise, evasion, threats, rules, persuasion, compromising, helplessness, neutralizing, and others. However, it was unclear which, if any, of the strategies previously identified would arise under conditions of powerlessness. The pilot study helped answer these questions.

Two raters with no advance knowledge of the hypotheses of the study reviewed the transcripts of the initial pilot interviews to determine the types of strategies employed in the dependency situations. A qualitative method of data analysis was used to cluster the actions taken in each situation and code them into strategies. The process of data analysis, originated

by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later modified by Sieber (1973) and McClintock, Brannon, and Maynard-Moody (1979), involved searching the data for initial categories that seemed to reflect similarities in action. Preliminary hypotheses about strategy categories were generated, and those strategies that fit the categorization schema were grouped together.

The actual interview data were analyzed in three separate coding iterations. First, an initial "brush" with the data generated a categorization schema similar to Emerson's (1962) four general categories of balancing operations designed to restore the power imbalance (withdrawal-helplessness, extend the network, coalition formation, and status emergence-ingratiation). A second evaluation by both raters disclosed three other strategies (problem enhancement, coercion, method alteration). The third and final iteration involved the rejection of certain strategies that did not seem to stand alone or could be combined for the purposes of analysis. Strategies were rejected or combined (1) if the strategies in question could not be conceptually differentiated from other strategies, or (2) if the intercorrelations among the strategies showed a significant relationship, indicating they were conceptually similar.

For example, initially two separate categories for persuasion were formed: problem enhancement and coercion. Further analyses of these categories suggested they were conceptually similar. Strategies initially coded as problem enhancement involved persuading the target to perform some activity and sometimes used extreme measures, such as implicit threats. Strategies coded as coercion tended to exercise extreme persuasion, including implicit or (occasionally) direct threats or punishment. The correlation between these two strategies was moderately high ( $r = .42$ ), indicating similarity across the data. Therefore, these two categories were combined into a single category, entitled "persuasion," for the purposes of analysis.

This iterative process of data analysis resulted in five final strategies. Phi correlations among the five final strategies were minimal, ranging from .02 to .18, indicating independence. Median off-diagonal correlations also showed minimal relationships, further supporting the uniqueness of the strategies. The five final strategies were defined and coded as follows: (1) *ingratiation*: the low-power individual offers concessions or performs favors to create a sense of obligation with the target; (2) *alternatives*: the low-power individual finds another method to obtain or an individual who can provide what is needed; (3) *coalition formation*: the low-power individual joins with at least one other individual to put pressure on the target for what is needed; (4) *persuasion*: the low-power individual discusses the situation persistently (even to the point of threats) with the target to obtain what is needed; and (5) *acquiescence*: the low-power individual accepts the power imbalance and decides that nothing else can be done in the situation, acting in a helpless, dependent manner.

Based on the definitions they had developed, the raters coded the strategies into these categories as the iterative process of data analysis evolved. For example, the dependency-situation example offered above involved a description of particular actions designed to create obligations and do a favor for the group

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of subordinates in question. In this situation, the focal individual was dependent on his subordinates for task reasons to get the job done on time. By exercising an opportunity to avoid difficulties, he was able to offer them a concession, create a future obligation, and, in so doing, restore the power imbalance that had temporarily slipped away from him in this situation. This was therefore coded in the third iteration as an ingratiation strategy.

In the case of multiple strategies, the dominant strategy was coded. The dominant strategy was defined as the strategy used either repeatedly or last in the situation. Subjects were asked whether or not the strategy was indeed dominant in the situation, as a check on the process. Cohen's weighted kappa (Cohen, 1968) for nominal scales was computed to assess measures of interrater reliabilities for the coded strategies, with the following results: ingratiation,  $r = .72$ ; persuasion,  $r = .70$ ; coalition formation,  $r = .74$ ; alternatives,  $r = .66$ ; acquiescence,  $r = .69$ . Coded examples of each strategy are provided in Appendix B.

*Job-dependency level.* Job dependency was used as a measure of the relative power among the jobs sampled. Job dependency was defined using Emerson's (1962) model in which power and dependency share an inverse relation, such that individuals who are in a position to have others dependent on them are considered powerful, while those who are dependent are considered relatively powerless. By using this definition to define relative job power, the jobs that forced participants to be continually dependent on others for resources or information were considered to be jobs that were relatively powerless, while the jobs that allowed participants to be minimally dependent on others for resources or information were considered to be more powerful.

Emerson (1962) noted that dependency is a function of two attributes: motivational investment in the goal and availability of alternative sources of gratification. Jacobs (1974) suggested that a ranking of job dependencies be defined in this manner, examining the essentiality of the sources of information associated with the job and the substitutability of other sources to obtain what is needed. Following Jacobs (1974), the level of job dependency was assessed by coding the data in two ways: (1) the number of job dependency relationships typically encountered by each participant (i.e., the number of sources of information needed to perform critical job-related tasks) and (2) the magnitude of those dependencies (i.e., extremely dependent or minimally dependent) on the targets described. The first category was assessed by asking participants to identify the number of sources they were dependent on to perform typical job activities. Magnitude was determined by asking whether or not alternate sources of information were available. Each index was coded on a 1 to 5 scale, and both indices were multiplied to determine a global measure per job. A midpoint cutoff was used to differentiate between high and low job dependency categories for the purposes of data analysis.

Thirty jobs were rated in the sample. Since more than one person frequently held the same job, multiple rankings were made for groups of jobs to enhance the validity of the coding procedure. Means and standard deviations for each job cluster are

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presented in Table 2. As a psychometric test of validity, the jobs were nonhierarchically clustered to determine if similar jobs could be identified on the basis of the subscale rankings. A nonhierarchical clustering method advocated by Punj and Stewart (1983) was chosen to split the clusters so that all case information could be used.

Clusters were identified on the basis of the number and magnitude rankings, which were then compared to actual job titles. The clustering procedure validated the two subscales used to determine the relative power of different jobs in the sample: similar jobs clustered together; dissimilar jobs did not. Twelve job clusters were identified, each containing two to three similar job categories.

In addition, correlations among the variables were used to assess the independence of the job-dependency variable. Only minimal correlations between supervisory level ( $r = .08$ ) and a self-report measure of autonomy ( $r = -.03$ ) were found. Cronbach's alphas were also computed for both raters and were found to be satisfactory (for high job dependency,  $r = .76$ ; for low job dependency,  $r = .73$ ). Coded quotations describing high and low classified jobs are presented in Appendix C.

Table 2

**Means and Standard Deviations for Representative Jobs Clustered by Number and Magnitude of Job Dependency ( $N = 98$ )**

| Organization         | Total <i>N</i><br>per job | Number of<br>dependencies |      | Magnitude of<br>dependencies |      |
|----------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|------|------------------------------|------|
|                      |                           | Mean                      | S.D. | Mean                         | S.D. |
| Public utility       |                           |                           |      |                              |      |
| Staff trainers       | 10                        | 3.8                       | .42  | 4.7                          | .48  |
| Account executives   | 9                         | 4.7                       | .50  | 4.8                          | .67  |
| Engineers            | 6                         | 2.2                       | .41  | 2.3                          | .52  |
| Instructors          | 6                         | 2.1                       | .75  | 3.0                          | 1.50 |
| Line supervisors     | 8                         | 3.8                       | .46  | 4.8                          | .71  |
| Office supervisors   | 6                         | 2.8                       | 1.16 | 2.6                          | 1.31 |
| Programmers          | 5                         | 1.6                       | .89  | 2.4                          | 1.52 |
| Staff assistants     | 7                         | 2.0                       | .82  | 2.6                          | .98  |
| Unclassified         | 12                        | 2.3                       | 1.26 | 3.0                          | 1.15 |
| Pharmaceutical       |                           |                           |      |                              |      |
| Scientists           | 8                         | 3.8                       | .46  | 4.4                          | .52  |
| Group leaders        | 3                         | 3.3                       | 1.00 | 4.3                          | 1.15 |
| Systems analysts     | 3                         | 2.3                       | 1.33 | 3.0                          | 1.00 |
| Support supervisors  | 4                         | 3.5                       | 1.00 | 3.8                          | 1.50 |
| Personnel assistants | 3                         | 4.0                       | 1.00 | 4.0                          | 1.00 |
| Engineers            | 4                         | 2.0                       | .50  | 2.8                          | .50  |
| Unclassified         | 4                         | 3.5                       | 1.00 | 4.2                          | .96  |

## RESULTS

**Gender and empowerment-strategy variables.** Three types of analyses were used to test the relationship between gender and the use of empowerment strategies: percentage tabulations, correlations, and chi-square tests. Percentage tabulations of the data show that a much higher percentage of women reported using the acquiescence strategy than did men (48 percent women, 26 percent men), and a higher percentage of men reported using the persuasion strategy than did women (20 percent men, 8 percent women). These results are re-

ported in Table 3. Correlational analyses also produced significant results between gender and acquiescence ( $r = .24, p < .02$ ), as well as gender and persuasion ( $r = -.18, p < .07$ ). Chi-square tests were also used to determine the relative independence of the gender and strategy variables. Significant results were found for gender and acquiescence (chi square = 5.25,  $df = 1, p < .02$ ), indicating a relationship. Only marginally significant results were obtained between gender and persuasion (chi square = 3.98,  $df = 1, p < .07$ ). Therefore, although the results for persuasion are somewhat inconclusive, significantly more women than men reported using acquiescence when confronted with an organizational situation that left them dependent and powerless.

Table 3

**Percentages, Correlations, and Chi-Square Results of Reported Strategy Usage by Gender and Job Dependency**

|                     | Percentages  |                | Phi correlation coefficients (with gender) | Chi-square statistic (df = 1) |
|---------------------|--------------|----------------|--|-------------------------------|
|                     | Men (N = 49) | Women (N = 49) |  |                               |
| Strategy usage      |              |                |  |                               |
| Ingratiation        | 16           | 9              | -.12                                       | 1.52, n.s.                    |
| Alternatives        | 21           | 19             | -.02                                       | .07, n.s.                     |
| Coalition formation | 16           | 15             | -.03                                       | .09, n.s.                     |
| Persuasion          | 20           | 8              | -.18*                                      | 3.98*                         |
| Acquiescence        | 26           | 48             | .24**                                      | 5.25**                        |
| Job dependency      |              |                | .08  | .65, n.s.                     |
| High                | 57           | 49             |  |                               |
| Low                 | 43           | 51             |  |                               |

\* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ , two-tailed tests.

Note: Percentages are intended to be totaled down each column and may not reach 100% due to rounding error.

**Gender and job dependency.** As shown in Table 3, percentage tabulations indicate that similar proportions of men and women in the sample were rated as having high- and low-dependency jobs. No significant associations were found between gender and job dependency (chi square = .656,  $df = 1$ , n.s.). Correlations showed that gender and job dependency were unrelated ( $r = .08$ , n.s.), as were job dependency and management level ( $r = .09$ , n.s.). However, correlations between gender and management level showed a moderate relationship ( $r = -.22, p < .05$ ), reflecting the greater proportions of men who held supervisory jobs in the sample. Therefore, it was not true for this sample that men and women differed in the relative power of the jobs they held. Men and women were equally associated with powerful (and powerless) jobs, defined by job dependency.

**Job dependency and empowerment-strategy usage.** Chi-square analyses were used to test for independence between job dependency and strategy usage. Significant results between the alternatives strategy and low job dependency (chi square = 9.7,  $df = 1, p < .05$ ) and for acquiescence and high job dependency (chi square = 18.78,  $df = 1, p < .005$ ) were obtained. However, the relationships between job dependency and persuasion, ingratiation, and coalition formation were not found to be significant. These results suggest that individuals in high-power jobs are more likely to search for alternatives than

individuals in high-dependency or low-power jobs. In addition, individuals in high-dependency jobs are more likely to acquiesce than individuals in low-dependency jobs.

**Gender, job dependency, and empowerment-strategy usage.** Since the chi-square results showed significant relationships between gender, job dependency, and acquiescence (chi square = 30.26,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .005$ ), log-linear analyses were performed to determine the best model to describe the relationships among the variables. When all possible combinations of variables were analyzed, the best fitted model (Feinberg, 1977) was found to be a combination of job dependency with gender on acquiescence (chi square = 4.11, likelihood ratio = 3.63,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ). These findings were supported by further hierarchical analyses on the selected model to determine the relative strength of the separate variables in the model. While the effect of gender was significant (coefficient = .3745, S.E. = .131,  $Z$  value = 2.85), the effect for job dependency was stronger (coefficient =  $-.5965$ , S.E. = .139,  $Z$  value =  $-4.28$ ). Partialled chi-square results also suggested the same pattern: for gender and acquiescence (chi square = 9.12,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .003$ ); for job dependency and acquiescence (chi square = 23.64,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). Therefore, individuals in low-power or high-dependency jobs had a greater tendency to use acquiescence than individuals in powerful jobs. Because women in the sample were also associated with the use of this strategy, women in particular may acquiesce when holding low-power positions.

The qualitative data also supported this relationship between gender, job dependency, and the use of acquiescence. In those cases in which the participant was rated as holding a high-dependency job, acquiescence was reported as the primary response *at least two thirds* of the time. The following quotation is presented from a case in which the acquiescence strategy was used in a dependency situation by a (female) staff trainer:

I don't believe I'm describing anything unique to me; it's just a part of the "Staff Trainer's Curse." As I say, it's through no fault of the [other] department either. . . . They're working with their system. Priorities are different. They're certainly not going to work in advance for us on a project that's not ready to be filed when they have eight other projects sitting on their desks. . . . But we're totally dependent on them, and when we don't get the information we need when we need it, it makes us look real bad, puts our jobs in jeopardy, everything. . . . We all know this situation exists and it can't be eliminated because there are no ways you can go around it. . . . I guess you just have to accept it, to fill in the holes if you can. . . . But every time one of these situations comes up, you're stuck. We're totally dependent. So the only thing we can do is accept it and walk around with mud on our faces all of the time.

This example aptly illustrates a key characteristic of many of the high job-dependency cases in the sample. Individuals in high-dependency jobs felt their jobs were structured in such a constraining manner that they had no alternative but to respond with acquiescence. In short, their actions were proscribed by their own powerlessness.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that *both* the structuralist and socialization hypotheses can contribute to our understand-

ing of gender differences in empowerment-strategy usage. Acquiescence was found to be associated with both the degree of job dependency (the structuralist hypothesis) and the gender of the dependent worker (the socialization hypothesis). However, job dependency was found to have a slightly greater effect on the results. The final conclusion suggested by the log-linear modeling is this: Individuals in highly dependent or powerless jobs are more likely to give up and acquiesce than individuals in powerful jobs. Women in highly dependent, powerless jobs, however, are more likely to acquiesce than men.

It is somewhat disturbing that women were found to have a greater tendency to acquiesce than men. Of all the strategies studied, acquiescence suggests an acceptance of the power imbalance as well as a sense of the individual being vanquished by the high-power target. Taken at face value, this finding suggests that women may indeed be contributing to their own powerlessness by the disproportionate use of this strategy, confirming the socialization hypothesis. However, an intriguing relationship between low-dependency jobs and the alternatives strategy was also found. This suggests that individuals in relatively powerful jobs may be better equipped to discover alternate sources of information to empower themselves when dependent. Fortunately, this was a strategy that men and women used equally. One implication, therefore, may be that as women move into more powerful jobs and become better adapted to the increased resources available, they may minimize their use of acquiescence.

One interesting aspect of this study is that structural powerlessness (measured here by job dependency) may indeed generate an acquiescence response, but the use of this strategy may create even further job-related dependency and powerlessness. Kanter's (1977) notion of the spiraling effect of the cycles of power and powerlessness accurately describes this phenomenon. Caught in job situations in which there are few opportunities for change, individuals in powerless jobs may acquiesce because they simply do not know what else to do. One of the consequences of the use of acquiescence in dependency situations is that the response may lead to behavior that reinforces acquiescence in the future. This suggests that for individuals in powerless jobs who continually acquiesce, a state of "learned powerlessness" (similar to that of learned helplessness) may prevail, leading individuals to respond only with increased acquiescence rather than, for example, the alternatives strategy. Although the present study can only suggest this possibility, this could be a fruitful area for further research.

Interpretations of these results may be limited for several reasons. First, the limited sample size could have influenced the findings. Only 98 individuals were interviewed; a much larger data base will be needed to generalize these findings. Second, although the combined sample showed few differences on biographical indices (and therefore were merged for analytic purposes), there may have been an unknown bias in the sample, in that similar cultural norms in the two organizations could have influenced strategy preferences similarly in both organizations. For example, employees in highly bureaucratic organizations may have a greater tendency to use coalition formation, due to the prevalence of rules and regulations in such organizations.

On the other hand, employees in companies characterized by organic cultures may exhibit greater preference for the alternatives strategy. The two organizations sampled were similarly bureaucratic, and it is not known whether or not bureaucratic, reactive cultures may tend to foster an acquiescence response. Because cultural analyses were not performed on the data, it is impossible to know whether or not this was a source of bias that could have influenced the results. Further research is needed to determine the effects of culture on the strategy preferences of employees in different organizations.

The use of verbal reports as data in this study is another limitation that must be considered in any interpretation of these results. Although great care was taken in using the critical-incident method to increase the veracity of the data, retrospective accounts are problematic at best. Respondents were only able to outline what they *think* they did, rather than what they actually did. Additionally, bias may have been introduced in the coding of the often ambiguous and complex recounting of the dependency situations selected for analysis. Although multiple coders were used, and the results were rechecked several times, it is not known at what point an interpretation of one strategy as the dominant one in the case may have influenced the final coding decisions.

Another limitation is that measuring job dependency is only one way to characterize relative power. Other measures of structurally defined job power, such as job autonomy, effectiveness, and visibility, were not used in the study. In addition, no assessment was made of the effect of the political network of each organization on each job, nor was any index of departmental power taken. Perhaps it is not only job dependency but also departmental power or network variables that relate to job dependency that may have influenced these findings. Further research that takes into consideration these variables as they may affect job dependency as a measure of relative power is needed to fully interpret these initial findings.

Also, the correlational measures used in the study are suspect, due to the well known chicken-and-egg problem of statistical inference. Although the direction and strength of the correlational and chi-square results were further verified by the log-linear analyses, it is not known what other extraneous variables may have influenced these results. Ideally, a time-series design and analytic method are needed to specify and determine accurately strategy usage over time in future applications of this research.

Alternative interpretations for these findings may result from a further analysis of the variables affecting the situations themselves. One such variable is the outcome of the situation. The expected outcome of the situation, or the perceived probability of success, may affect the type of strategy employed. Perhaps men are more confident in their expected outcomes, increasing their use of the persuasion strategy, while women are less confident, suggesting the acquiescence response. Considered this way, it may be that the expectation of a particular outcome, rather than gender, influenced these results.

The target of the influence attempt may also have affected these findings. Kipnis, Schmidt, and Wilkinson (1980) demonstrated that the target and the reason for the influence attempt

can affect the types of strategies employed. If superior targets prompt the use of acquiescence, and women continually chose situations that involved a superior target, this linkage may explain why women were associated with this strategy to a greater extent than men. It is not known whether these or other hidden linkages may have influenced the findings of the study; the fact that such associations may exist suggests alternative interpretations.

Finally, certain strategies may have been used less often than others, since some strategies may simply not have been appropriate to the particular situation. For example, coalition formation may be considered a drastic response in those situations in which the focal individual holds a low-power job. In other situations, the only "alternatives" strategy may be quitting one's job. The appropriateness of the strategies in particular situations may be influenced by the social and cultural norms of the companies in question, as well as the situation itself. This is a source of error that may also lead to alternative interpretations of these results.

The conclusions derived from the present study, although tentative, provide support for Kanter's (1977) hypothesis that powerless jobs may cause individuals to behave in powerless ways. Although both the structuralist and socialization hypotheses were found to contribute to an understanding of gender differences in empowerment-strategy usage, the structuralist hypothesis had a greater effect. No differences, however, were found for men and women on the relative power of the jobs they held (as defined by job dependency). Further research is needed to document the complex relationship between job dependency, strategy usage, and gender, taking into consideration the target, domain, and outcome of dependency situations. What is clear from this study is that poorly designed jobs that force individuals to be excessively dependent on others create frustration, panic, and a sense of helplessness, even powerlessness for the jobholders — an entirely demotivating situation. The more that we learn about dependency situations and the pattern of dependency relationships among jobs, the more we will understand how individuals can cope with their own powerlessness.

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## APPENDIX A: A Sample of Typical Interview Questions

### Basic Introduction:

"What I'm interested in learning about are some typically frustrating situations you may have encountered in which you found yourself dependent at work. These dependencies may involve task or career factors and usually involve being dependent upon a superior, subordinate, or peer. What I am interested in hearing about is how you handled the situation."

### Strategy Questions:

"Exactly what actions did you take in this situation once you found yourself confronted with the problem?"

"In describing this situation, what would you describe as the dominant action that you took to deal with the problem?"

"What other options existed in this situation? What reasons did you have for not pursuing these other options?"

### Job-Dependency Questions

"Tell me about your job. What are some of the typical activities you are responsible for on a daily basis?"

"Name the primary people/departments that you interact with to get your work accomplished on a daily/weekly basis."

"What kinds of information or resources do you obtain from your interaction with these people/departments?"

"How important is it that you obtain the information or resources you just described from these people/departments?"

"How dependent are you on their help to complete the work required of you in your job?"

"Are there alternative sources of information/resources other than these people/departments?"

## APPENDIX B: Examples of Strategy Coding

### Strategy Description

*Ingratiation*: offering concessions to the high-power target to gain favor.

### Example

"I did one thing I wasn't supposed to do. . . . I lent her money for lunch. I said, 'You don't owe me anything.' I was trying to get on her good side, to let her open up a little. I said, 'Look, I'll buy today and next payday you can get lunch.'"

*Alternatives:* finding another person or method that can provide what is needed.

"Many times if I'm looking for information from our staff people, who are supposedly our knowledge people, what I will do is if I don't get any response from them, what I will do is go to another department who has the expertise and I will tell [them] directly about my problem. And if I don't get any satisfaction from them, I will continue until I do, calling other engineers, other offices, etc."

*Coalition formation:* joining with at least one other individual to put pressure on the target.

"The method I used was that I went to my boss and asked him to go to his boss with me to get some of the questions answered."

*Persuasion:* discussing the situation persistently (even to the point of threats) with the target to overcome the dependency.

"What I had to do to resolve the situation was that I [had] to arrange a meeting to make them aware of how serious a problem it was and how many other things it affected within my realm. . . . Once I sat down and explained to them how they were affecting me . . . then it was like night and day."

*Acquiescence:* accepting the power imbalance by shifting one's values or priorities regarding the goal and acting in a helpless, dependent manner.

"I have resolved myself to the point that this problem cannot be resolved. . . . I can accept that there are some situations you have no control over and can't do anything about. This was one of those."

## **APPENDIX C: Sample Coding of Job-Dependency Descriptions**

### **High Job Dependency**

#### *Account-executive job:*

"It's kind of a double-edged sword. My job is to go out, deal with a customer, analyze his business problems, make a proposal for a system, get a signed contract, take it over to my support team, and say, 'You people take care of this.' What happens is if it's not done, the only one in the company the customer knows is me. So now I have to go back and chase things I shouldn't be doing. . . . To do my job completely, I'm probably very dependent [on the support people]. . . . I have to chase things around, wait for them 'cause they're really the main source, it's all hurry up and wait, all the time."

### **Low Job Dependency**

#### *Power-engineer job:*

"Well, I guess I'm lucky . . . in this job I can pretty much do my own thing. You know, well it's true that there are times when I have to rely on others, to go to others for information and all, but usually that information is available from other sources. I'm really not very dependent, as you say, on others in this job for much of what I do. Sometimes, yeah, but usually not really at all."

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