

Reply to A. Randrup & G. Sorenson

Social hierarchies seem to vary enormously in how pleasant it is to live at the bottom. Some subordinates are treated well, others are literally pecked to death. In human hierarchies, the important thing seems to be the nature of the person who ranks above you. If he is kind and competent, you are all right. If he is kind, he does not keep putting you down with words or blows; he may even praise you and make you feel valued. If he is competent, you can respect him and work for him happily, even love him; and he does not give you ideas of usurping his place, ideas which makes you insubordinate, which makes him put you down with words or blows.

In your own work with bank voles (1), you found that an enriched environment greatly reduced the "putting down" of subordinates by high ranking voles; but even in the enriched environment there was one tyrant who persecuted the subordinate for no apparent reason, and in the pernicious environment some hierarchies were peaceful. In many species the unprovoked bullying of subordinates is enough to induce a state of learned helplessness - no electrified grid is necessary in these species. In some species there are physiological effects in subordinates which seem an important part of their adaptation; inhibition of sex change in certain fish, adoption of juvenile colouring in lizards, inhibition of ovulation in mice and some New World monkeys; we do not know the mechanisms of these changes, nor whether they are related to the central nervous mechanisms responsible for psychogenic death. Nor do we know whether hypertension and other causes of psychogenic death are entirely mediated by the increased secretion of corticosteroids which is a recognised accompaniment of subordinate status. Research on subordination has a long way to go; at present it seems to be mainly financed by cardiologists, gastroenterologists, nephrologists and more recently immunologists; only in Denmark is it realised that psychological problems may intervene between aversive experiences and physical damage.

Regarding the book Depression, Your Name Is Woman, I would not see depression as an extension of the female role, even of its submissive component. Some of the most submissive people are blissfully happy. To the extent that female depression is the result of domination by men, I think it is an extension of the unacceptable aspect of their subordinate role, leading to involuntary or depressive yielding. A man can make a woman depressed if he is more powerful and if there is a mismatch in their role expectations. Either the man can be too tyrannical, or the woman can be too rebellious - as the husband of one of my patients put it, "she doesn't take correction, doctor", and his solution was to apply increasing amounts of correction. The same, of course, can apply to a subordinate husband; see for instance the depression suffered by Bishop Proudie in Trollope's The Last Chronicles of Barset. Depression can thus be seen as an extension of the coerced subordinate role of any underprivileged individual or group.

But I think it would be wrong to blame male domination alone for the increased female liability to depression. Women are also dominated by their children, and even those who are not dominated are in receipt of frequent aversive (catathetic) signals from them. The normal 2-4 year old mounts as many verbal or physical attacks on its mother as the 9 year old referred for the treatment of aggressive behaviour, and the normal baby spends 8% of its waking life crying (2). Women are also dominated by other women, and there is reason to think that in Western society the female hierarchy may be more depressogenic than the male hierarchy. For instance, formal ranks do not protect women from social competition in the way they do men; and women, being the expressive rather than the instrumental sex (Talcott Parsons), are more skilled than men at subtle methods of putting each other down.

In summary, I would agree with R & S that subordination is not pathogenic (depressing) in itself: only in certain circumstances. These circumstances would seem to be:

1. If the environment is unfavourable so that agonistic interactions are increased.
2. If the higher ranking individual is a bully or lacks the social skill to accept submission.
3. If the individual lacks the social skill to submit adequately (or does not wish to submit) or lacks other coping skills such as R & S's stereotypes.

It might clarify things if we reserved the term submission for voluntary acceptance of subordination, in contrast to its involuntary depressive counterpart, which could be called depressive yielding. The title of my essay was confusing, suggesting that depression masquerading as physical illness was a metaphor of submission, whereas, being totally involuntary, it should not have come into the category of submission at all. If you submit voluntarily, you do not need to undergo depressive yielding.

induced in bank voles (*Clethrionomys glareolus*) by a restricted cage milieu. Progress in Neuro-psychopharmacology and Biological Psychiatry, 11, 9-21.

2. Patterson, G.R. (1982) Coercive Family Process. Eugene, Oregon: Castalia Publishing Co.