INTRODUCTION

Parallel to, and an integral aspect of, the Women's Movement in the United States, is a large increase in the number of studies of how gender and social behavior, especially social power, are related. With rare exception,¹ these studies conclude that women are subordinate to men, universally, but that the degree of women's subordination varies from one society to another society. This universality yet variability is concisely stated by Ortner (1974: 70): "The secondary status of women in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact. Yet within this universal fact, the specific cultural conceptions and symbolizations of women are extraordinarily diverse and mutually contradictory ... Both of these points—the universal fact and the cultural variation—constitute problems to be explained."

Various complex and sometimes interrelated factors are said to cause women's subordination: the meanings which societies traditionally attach to the concepts of female and male, or woman and man; the difference in prestige which societies assign to the 'domestic domain' and the 'public domain', and the unequal affiliation of women and men with each of these domains; the kinds of norms governing inheritance, property, and productivity; forms of kinship and marriage; and how mothers differently socialize their daughters and sons. This socialization thesis, as originally formulated by Chodorow (1974), suggests that the sense of subordination felt by mothers is much more
likely to be inculcated in their daughters than in their sons because mothers, having themselves been girls and being of the same gender as their daughters, define their infant daughters, as compared with their infant sons, as less different from themselves. The popularity of this thesis is shown by its repetition by several sociologists nearly a decade after its first appearance (Lorber et al. 1981: 492, 500, 508).

Other studies depict the consequences of this presumably, universal subordination of women to men and give attention to such matters as: general personality development; the ‘feminine psyche’; character structure; thought and emotion; forms of social behavior such as affiliation, nurturance, and aspirations for social mobility; and self-esteem.

Our Objectives and Sources of Data

Research on gender differences is still in its infancy; there remain many unexplored subjects. For example, Lois Paul (1974: 281) observes:

The fact of a standard status gap between the sexes leaves unanswered a number of questions. How do women construe their position vis-à-vis men? Do they see themselves as more subordinate to men in one sphere and less in another? What are women’s sources of satisfaction and self-esteem? Their fears and defenses? What are their ideas of the body and its boundaries? What, in short, are their self-concepts?

Self-concepts, as Goffman, among others, has shown, are developed and enacted in a social matrix and reflect cultural definitions of social roles and situations.

More recently, like Paul, Safa-Isfahani (1980: 33) has stated the need to study women’s self-concepts.

Our study of gender and self-concepts may serve to complement the studies of Paul and other researchers. It describes and analyses how women, and men, express conceptions of the Self when asked to respond to a highly unstructured instrument known as the Twenty Statement Test (TST). Unlike other studies, the test compares women and men in a comprehensive fashion rather than only in terms of specific traits such as power and subordination, body-concept, or sexuality. While our study does not explicitly talk about the ‘causes’ of gender differences, it should be noted that implicit in the use of the TST is a theory of the Self’s origin (Driver 1969: 342-343).

Our guess, or hypothesis, about the universality of gender differences is based on our beliefs concerning the degrees and kinds of cultural variability which occur from one society to the next. It is our belief that such variability is indeed great, and, that, as a consequence, men and women in a given society turn out to be more similar to one another than to cohorts of their respective gender in other societies. As a rough way of proving or disproving this hypothesis, we shall observe the frequency with which the self-conceptions of women, or of men, in each society differ more from the self-conceptions of the opposite gender in their own society than they differ from persons of their own gender in other societies.