

The Balance of Power in Lesbian Relationships¹

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A questionnaire study investigated the balance of power in lesbian relationships and factors that affect it. Seventy-seven lesbian women currently in a romantic/sexual relationship participated. Although lesbians strongly endorsed an egalitarian ideal of equal power in love relationships, nearly 40% reported an unequal balance of power in their relationship. As social exchange theory predicts, the partner who was relatively less dependent on the relationship and who had greater personal resources tended to have greater power. Compared to women in equal power relationships, women in unequal power relationships reported less satisfaction and anticipated more problems in their relationships. No evidence of butch-femme role playing was found. It is suggested that the determinants of the balance of power go beyond attitudes and reflect processes of social exchange that can occur regardless of ideology or sexual orientation.

Despite the American ideal of equality, women in heterosexual relationships often have less power than their boyfriend or husband. In a study of college dating couples (Peplau, 1979), less than half the students reported that both dating partners shared equally in power, and 40% said that the boyfriend had greater power than the girlfriend. Research on married couples also indicates that male-dominant relationships are common (Bernard, 1972; Centers, Raven, & Rodrigues, 1971; Gillespie, 1971; Poloma & Garland, 1971). Explanations for the male power advantage have emphasized the impact of traditional sex-role ideology, which legitimates male superiority (Bernard, 1972; Millet, 1970), and the importance of men's greater personal resources (Gillespie, 1971; Safilios-Rothschild, 1976).

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The present study extends research on interpersonal power to lesbian romantic/sexual relationships. Although social scientists have speculated about power in lesbian couples, empirical evidence on it is lacking. Chafetz (1974) suggested that lesbians reject traditional sex roles and that "real equality between partners is easier between two females than between a male and a female or two males" (p. 189). Similarly, Kelly (1972) argued that love relationships between women are more likely to be free of factors that cause inequality. Others (Barnhart, 1975; Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978) have emphasized that lesbians strongly value equality in personal relationships. The present study investigated empirically the nature of power in lesbian relationships.

The first goal of the study was to assess both the balance of power that lesbians want and the balance of power they perceive in their current romantic/sexual relationship. Power is defined as the ability of one partner to influence the other partner's behavior (e.g., Blood & Wolfe, 1960). A relative imbalance of power is manifest when one partner has greater say about the relationship or about specific decisions made by the couple. An egalitarian balance of power is reflected in both partners' having equal say in the relationship. We predicted that lesbians would strongly support an egalitarian ideal, but we expected that a number of women would not achieve power equality in their relationship. Research suggests that endorsement of an egalitarian ideal does not ensure an egalitarian relationship. For example, Peplau (1979) found that nearly all the heterosexual dating couples in her college sample supported an egalitarian ideal for power, but less than half believed that both partners actually shared equally in power.

The second goal of our study was to investigate factors that tip the balance of power away from equality. By selecting variables derived from social exchange theory, the applicability of an exchange perspective to the unstudied population of lesbian women was tested. Social exchange theory (e.g., Blau, 1964; Rollins & Bahr, 1976; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) proposes that the balance of power in dyadic relationships is affected by the relative dependence of the two partners on the relationship and by their relative resources. Waller (1938) described the impact of dependence as the "principle of least interest." In this view, the partner who is less interested or less involved in a relationship has greater influence. Research with heterosexual dating couples indicates that imbalances of involvement are often accompanied by imbalances of power (Peplau, 1979). It was predicted that a similar pattern would be found for lesbian relationships.

The impact of relative resources has been emphasized by Blood and Wolfe (1960): "Power accrues spontaneously to the partner who has the greater resources at his [sic] disposal" (p. 13). Resources have often been assessed by measures of level of education, income or social class, but are defined more broadly as "anything that one partner may make available to the other, helping the latter satisfy his [sic] needs or attain his goals" (Blood & Wolfe, 1960, p. 12). Relative resources do appear to be a determinant of power in heterosexual married couples (e.g., Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Rollins & Bahr, 1976; Safilios-

Rothschild, 1976). We predicted that in lesbian relationships, a partner with greater educational attainment and income would have greater power.

Two factors not related to social exchange theory — sex-role attitudes and butch-femme role playing — were also investigated for their impact on the balance of power. Among heterosexual dating couples, a significant association has been found between sex-role attitudes and the balance of power (Peplau, 1979). Men and women with pro-feminist attitudes were more likely to report that their dating relationship was egalitarian than were students with traditional sex-role attitudes. Among lesbians, a concern with equality in relationships has been linked to more general feminist beliefs (Barnhart, 1975; Peplau et al., 1978). Thus, lesbians who are active feminists may be more sensitive to power issues and perhaps also more likely to achieve equality in their personal relationships.

A common stereotype is that lesbians engage in butch-femme role playing that mimics heterosexual roles. Thus, one partner might adopt a more “masculine” and dominant role, while the other partner might play the more “feminine” and submissive role. The present study assessed the extent of role-playing patterns in the division of household activities and examined possible links between such role playing and power. Since recent evidence (reviewed in Peplau & Gordon, 1983) indicates that role-playing behavior is uncommon among contemporary lesbians, we anticipated that it would not be a significant determinant of power.

The final goal of our study was to examine links between the balance of power and satisfaction in lesbian relationships. Since lesbians lack a cultural ideology that legitimates power imbalances, they may be unhappy with non-egalitarian relationships. Thus, we predicted that lesbians would report greater satisfaction and would anticipate fewer problems if their relationship was equal, rather than unequal, in power.

The present study investigated the balance of power and factors that affect it in lesbian relationships. We should, however, note that we have borrowed heavily from research on heterosexual relationships in making predictions about the impact of relative involvement, resources, and sex-role attitudes on power. This approach sets up implicit comparisons between lesbian and heterosexual relationships. Such research may help us identify aspects of interpersonal power that operate in all close relationships and aspects that are specific to particular types of relationships.

METHOD

Recruitment

Women were recruited from the Los Angeles area for a study of “lesbian relationships” by advertisements placed in a university newspaper, a feminist

student publication, and a gay community newsletter. Leaflets were distributed at a women's center and university campus. Contacts were also made with a community feminist center, gay community services center, and a church-related lesbian rap group.

Participants spent approximately one hour filling out a detailed questionnaire. Most women completed the questionnaire in a group setting, either at the University of California, Los Angeles, or at one of five meetings scheduled at community locations in the Los Angeles area. Other participants were scheduled individually. Responses were completely anonymous. All data were collected in 1976.

The Sample

A total of 127 women participated in the study. We report data for only the 77 women who indicated that they were currently in a "romantic/sexual relationship" with a woman at the time of our testing. Of these 77 women, 44 were currently living with their romantic/sexual partner. All women were White. Ages ranged from 19 to 59, with a median age of 27. About 55% of the women worked full-time for pay, and 40% were students in college or graduate school. The majority (87%) either held a B.A. or were currently college students; the remaining 13% held a high school diploma or less.

The religious backgrounds of participants were diverse - 40% were raised as Protestants, 35% as Catholics, and 13% as Jews. Participants indicated that they were not currently very religious (mean of 3.8 on 9-point scale of religiousness). Only 19% said they attended religious services weekly, and 59% went to services less than once a year.

In general, women in the sample were fairly experienced in lesbian relationships. The women had had an average of four lesbian relationships. The length of the women's longest lesbian relationship ranged from two months to 25 years, with a median of just under 3 years. The women's age when their first lesbian relationship began ranged from 13 to 47, with a median of 20.

Many of the women in the sample had previously had romantic/sexual relationships with men. Over 95% reported having dated or gone out with a man; 84% said they had been in a romantic/sexual relationship with a man. The median number of heterosexual relationships was 3.6. Almost 80% of the women had had sexual intercourse with a man; among these women, the median number of heterosexual partners was 4.8.

Although the women in our sample were fairly diverse in religion, education, and occupation, they clearly do not include a full spectrum of lesbians (see Morin, 1977). Women in this sample were relatively young, middle-class Whites. The experiences of working-class and minority lesbians were not represented in our volunteer sample. Furthermore, our recruitment was probably

most likely to come to the attention of women involved in lesbian or feminist groups, hence, the sample may overrepresent such women. The women who volunteered for this study may well have been more interested in psychological research and more trusting of psychologists than other lesbians. Caution is obviously warranted in making generalizations from this limited sample to other segments of the lesbian population.

The Questionnaire

Participants completed a 23-page questionnaire. Development of the questionnaire was based on extensive two-hour interviews with 12 lesbians about their relationships, and on group discussions held with lesbian students. The questionnaire benefited from previous research with heterosexual dating couples (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976; Peplau, 1979; Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1976), and a number of questions were adapted for the present questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire concerned the participant's background, attitudes, and characteristics. The second part of the questionnaire focused on a specific "romantic/sexual relationship," and included questions about power, love and commitment, sexual behavior, satisfaction, problems in the relationship, and characteristics of the partner.

The assessment of power in close relationships is a complex matter (see discussions by Cromwell & Olson, 1975; Olson & Rabunsky, 1972; Safiliros-Rothschild, 1970). The present study followed Blood and Wolfe (1960) and Rollins and Bahr (1976), who have focused on individuals' perceptions of power in their relationships. The specific power questions used in the present study had proved to be reliable and useful measures in an earlier study of power in heterosexual dating couples (Peplau, 1979; Peplau et al., 1976). Beliefs about the ideal balance of power were measured by the question "Who do you think should have more say in your relationship – your partner or you?" Perceptions of the overall balance of power in the relationship were assessed by "Who do you think has more of a say about what you and your partner do together – your partner or you?" Other questions concerned perceptions of power in deciding how much time the partners spent with each other and how much time the couple spent with other people. Responses to all power questions were made on 5-point scales. For example, in responding to the question of who actually has more say, participants checked one of five responses: "My partner has much more say," "My partner has somewhat more say," "We both have exactly the same amount of say," "I have somewhat more say," "I have much more say."

Relative dependence on the relationship was assessed by two items: "Who do you think is more involved in your relationship – your partner or you?" and "Who do you think is more committed to the relationship – your partner or you?" As for the power questions, 5-point response scales were provided for

each question. To examine the effects of relative resources, questions were included about two personal resources – level of education and monthly income. Participants indicated their own and their partner's level of education. Education was considered equal when both partners had attained the same level of schooling (e.g., both had master's degrees, or both had finished junior college). One partner was considered to have greater relative education if she had more schooling than the other (e.g., one had a master's degree and the other had a bachelor's degree). Relative income was determined by the differences between a participant's report of her own monthly income and of her partner's monthly income.

Sex-role attitudes were measured by a 10-item Sex-Role Traditionalism scale (Peplau, 1973) assessing general attitudes about proper roles for men and women. Also included was an 8-item index of involvement in feminist activities (see detailed description in Peplau et al., 1978), which inquired about participation in feminist groups, attendance at feminist social and political events, and self-ratings of involvement in feminist activities.

For the 44 women in the sample who were currently living with their partner, additional questions explored possible butch-femme role playing in the division of household tasks. Questions asked which partner more often performed each of five traditionally "feminine" tasks (i.e., cooking, decorating, cleaning, laundry, and food shopping) and three traditionally "masculine" tasks (i.e., household repairs, household accounting, and driving). Scores for the five feminine tasks and for the three masculine tasks were totaled separately.

Other closed-ended questions asked about closeness and satisfaction in the relationship. Also included were Rubin's (1973) 9-item "Love Scale" and "Liking Scale." The Love Scale assesses feelings of attachment, intimacy, and caring for the partner; the Liking Scale measures attitudes of respect and affection toward the partner. Finally, participants were presented with a list of 17 "factors that may cause difficulties in close relationships" (adapted from Hill et al., 1976). These included such possible problems as jealousy, differences in attitudes and background, and the desire for greater independence. Respondents indicated on a 3-point scale how likely it was that each factor might create problems in their own relationship during the coming year.

RESULTS

Balance of Power

The lesbians in this sample were virtually unanimous in their support for the ideal of equal power. Ninety-seven percent thought that both partners should have "exactly equal" say in their relationship. Not all women believed that their current relationship achieved this ideal, however. Although a majority of women

(61%) indicated that both partners had "exactly equal" say in their relationship, a sizable minority (39%) said that one partner had greater influence than the other.

When women were asked more specific questions about power in particular areas, a comparable pattern was found. About two-thirds of women (66% in both cases) reported that they and their partners contributed equally to "deciding how much time the two of you spend together" and "deciding how much time you two will spend with other people." As expected, reports of the overall balance of power were significantly correlated with reports of who decided about time together, $r(73) = .22, p < .05$, and who decided about time with others, $r(74) = .33, p < .05$. These correlations are modest but reasonable, given the complex relationship between decisions in any particular area and the overall balance of power in a relationship (see Safilios-Rothschild, 1970). In later sections, results are presented based on the more general measure of overall balance of power.

Factors Influencing the Balance of Power

Relative Dependence. As predicted, imbalances in relative involvement were linked to imbalances in power. The partner who was relatively less involved in the relationship was perceived as having greater power in the relationship, $r(74) = -.36, p < .001$. Most women (62%) reported that they and their partner were equally involved in their relationship. Among these equally involved women, 72% also reported equal power. In contrast, among the 38% of women who reported unequal involvement, 82% perceived the less involved partner as having relatively greater power.

A similar pattern of findings emerged from analyses of commitment. As might be expected, women's reports of relative involvement and relative commitment were significantly correlated, $r(75) = .48, p < .01$. As with relative involvement, a majority (61%) of women described both partners as equally committed to the current relationship. When unequal commitment occurred, the partner who was less committed tended to have greater power in the relationship, $r(74) = -.30, p < .01$. Thus results provide clear support for the effect of the "principle of least interest" on power in lesbian relationships.

Relative Resources. Inequality in personal resources was also related to power in lesbian relationships. As predicted, women with relatively less education than their partner had less power, $r(71) = .37, p < .001$. Similarly, women with a lower monthly income also tended to have less power in the relationship, $r(44) = .28, p < .05$.

Sex-Role Attitudes and Butch-Femme Role Playing. It was predicted that adherence to traditional sex-role patterns would affect the balance of power in lesbian relationships. It should be noted at the outset that women in this sample held fairly nontraditional views about sex roles. Most women scored

in a feminist direction on the 10-item Sex-Role Traditionalism scale, and over half of the women belonged to a feminist group or organization. Contrary to popular stereotypes, no evidence was found that women in the sample engaged in butch-femme role playing. If role playing occurs, there should be a negative correlation between the performance of traditionally masculine and feminine tasks. Results, however, showed no significant relationship between performing male and female activities, $r(42) = .14, p = .18$.

Analyses examining the links between sex roles and the perceived balance of power yielded mixed results. Women in equal power relationships were more feminist in their responses to the Sex-Role Traditionalism scale than women in unequal power relationships, $t(75) = 1.05, p < .05$, one-tailed test. But no association was found between the balance of power and women's recent participation in feminist groups or activities. Nor, as might be suggested by sex-typed role playing, was there any relationship between how often a partner performed traditionally masculine tasks or traditionally feminine tasks and how much power she had, $r(42) = -.06, ns$, and $r(42) = -.13, ns$, respectively. It appears that the absence of butch-femme role playing and the general feminist orientation of the majority of women in this sample limited the impact of sex-role attitudes on the balance of power.

Predicting Power. Previous bivariate analyses examined how various individual factors affected the balance of power. Statistically significant associations were found between relative power and the following variables: relative involvement, relative commitment, relative education, relative income, and sex-role attitudes. A multiple regression analysis with pairwise deletion showed that these five variables accounted for 31% of the variance, $R = .55, F(5, 38) = 3.35$. Part correlations indicated that relative education, $r = .25$, made the largest contribution to predicting power after the four other variables were taken into account. The contributions of relative involvement, $r = .21$, and relative income, $r = .20$, were somewhat less. Relative commitment, $r = .10$, contributed least, probably because of its substantial correlation with relative involvement. Sex-role attitudes, $r = .12$, added little and accounted for only 1.5% of the variance in power.

Satisfaction and Anticipated Problems

A final set of analyses examined links between the perceived balance of power and measures of satisfaction and problems in the relationship.

Satisfaction. Since most women endorsed an ideal of equal power for their relationship, it was predicted that women in unequal relationships would be less satisfied than women in equal relationships. Comparisons of equal power and unequal power relationships provided clear support for this prediction. As shown in Table I, women in equal power relationships reported greater satisfac-

Table I. Mean Scores for Lesbians in Equal Power and Unequal Power Relationships^a

	Equal power	Unequal power	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Satisfaction measures				
Overall satisfaction in relationship (maximum score = 9)	7.85	6.00	4.14 ^e	75
Sexual satisfaction with partner (maximum = 9)	6.29	5.27	3.16 ^d	73
Closeness to partner (maximum = 9)	8.17	6.97	3.03 ^d	74
Love Scale (maximum = 9)	7.00	6.91	.26	74
Liking Scale (maximum = 9)	7.30	6.52	2.54 ^c	74
Likelihood relationship will exist in one year (maximum = 7)	5.75	4.92	1.88 ^b	68
Anticipated problems (scale of 0 to 2)				
My desire to be independent	.54	1.00	2.69 ^d	73
Partner's desire to be independent	.43	.93	2.93 ^d	73
My dependence on partner	.36	.62	1.96 ^b	72
Partner's dependence on me	.41	.66	1.50 ^f	73
Conflicts about exclusivity	.38	.72	2.24 ^c	74
Differences in background	.21	.45	1.97 ^b	74
Differences in intelligence	.15	.31	1.38 ^f	74
Differences in interests	.49	.76	1.61 ^f	74
Total of 17 problems (maximum = 34)	6.44	9.21	2.31 ^c	71

^a Degrees of freedom (*df*) vary slightly due to missing data. Significance tests are one-tailed.

^b $p < .05$.

^c $p < .025$.

^d $p < .01$.

^e $p < .001$.

^f $p < .10$.

tion with the overall relationship and with the sexual aspect of their relationship. They also rated their relationships as significantly closer. These differences occurred even though women in the sample generally felt quite satisfied and close to their partner. The mean level of overall satisfaction with the relationship fell midway between "moderately satisfied" and "extremely satisfied" (mean of 7.14 on a 9-point scale). Similar results were obtained for satisfaction with sex (mean of 5.88 on a 7-point scale) and for closeness (mean of 7.68 on a 9-point scale).

Additional analyses examined the association of perceived power and scores on Rubin's (1973) Love and Liking scales. Consistent with the findings for satisfaction, women in equal power relationships reported greater liking for their partners than did women in unequal power relationships (see Table I). Strong feelings of respect and affection were concomitants of power equality among the lesbians in this sample. In contrast, no association was found be-

tween power and scores on Rubin's Love Scale, a measure of feelings of attachment, caring, and intimacy.

No differences were found in the duration of equal and unequal power relationships. Women in equal power relationships were, however, more likely to predict that their relationship would continue for the next year. This may reflect the greater satisfaction of women in egalitarian relationships and their anticipation of fewer problems in their relationship.

Anticipated Problems. It was expected that women in equal power relationships would anticipate fewer problems in their relationship. Women indicated how likely each of 17 factors was to lead to difficulties in their relationship in the next year. Included were such potential problems as desire to be independent, differences in interests, pressure from parents, and jealousy. In general, lesbians anticipated few problems in their relationships. Most women reported that the potential problems listed were unlikely to lead to difficulties or would be only minor problems. Nonetheless, as shown in Table I, women in unequal power relationships anticipated a greater number of problems than women in egalitarian relationships.

An examination of specific problems that were of greater concern to women in unequal power versus equal power relationships highlighted the importance of issues of dependence and independence. Women in unequal power relationships were significantly more worried about possible problems caused by "my partner's desire to be independent," "my desire to be independent," "my dependence on my partner," and "conflicting attitudes about exclusivity in our relationship." Only one related item, "my partner's dependence on me," fell short of statistical significance. These results, as a whole, are consistent with earlier data directly linking imbalances of involvement with imbalances of power.

There was also a tendency for women in unequal power relationships to anticipate greater problems due to differences in background, intelligence, and interests. But only differences in background reached statistical significance. Other problems not linked to power were differences in political views, pressure from parents, feelings about being a lesbian, societal attitudes toward lesbian relationships, conflicting attitudes about sex, jealousy and living too far apart.

To reiterate, women in egalitarian and unequal power relationships did not differ in their love for their partner or in the duration of their current relationship. An imbalance of power in lesbian relationships was not the result of lack of love for the partner, nor a "phase" in relationship development. Results clearly indicated that women in unequal power relationships were less satisfied with the relationship, felt less closeness, scored lower on a measure of liking for their partner, anticipated more problems in the relationship, and were less confident that the relationship would continue. These findings seem to suggest that for lesbians, egalitarian relationships may function better than unequal power relationships. Imbalances in dependency and resources may produce strains in relationships, leading to lower satisfaction and greater problems.

DISCUSSION

Although the lesbian women in our sample were strong supporters of the egalitarian ideal of shared power in love relationships, nearly 40% of the women perceived the balance of power in their current relationship as unequal. Social exchange theory proved a useful framework for understanding power imbalances in lesbian relationships. Women were likely to be at a power disadvantage if they were more involved in the relationship than their partner and if they had relatively less education or less income than their partner. Four variables measuring relative dependence and resources (i.e., involvement, commitment, education, and income) accounted for over a quarter of the variance in power.

This study examined a rather limited set of personal resources. Safilios-Rothschild (1976) has suggested that other important resources in interpersonal relationships may include prestige, affection, understanding, intellectual companionship, and housekeeping services. Future research might profitably examine a wider range of resources. It may be that women in lesbian and heterosexual relationships differ in the availability and the importance of particular resources. For example, in contemporary society, men have greater access to socioeconomic resources than do women; thus, women are likely to enter heterosexual relationships with a power disadvantage (Bernard, 1972) that is not present in lesbian relationships. Lesbians and heterosexuals may also differ in the value or importance they place on particular resources. One stereotype suggests that a woman's physical beauty is a greater asset in a heterosexual relationship than in a lesbian relationship. A detailed account of the personal resources that are central in lesbian relationships is currently lacking.

Links between feminism and power in lesbian relationships were ambiguous, perhaps because a majority of the women in our sample had pro-feminist beliefs. The balance of power was significantly related to a measure of sex-role attitudes, but was not related to personal involvement in feminist activities. The impact of feminist beliefs on power may be complex. For example, while feminism may increase a woman's desire for an egalitarian relationship, it may also provide her with more exacting standards of what constitutes equality. It appears that egalitarian attitudes alone can not always compensate for major imbalances in dependency or resources. Contrary to cultural myth, no evidence was found that lesbians engaged in a sex-typed division of household activities. Butch-femme role playing did not occur and was not a determinant of the balance of power in the relationships we studied.

Among the lesbians in this study, there was a clear association between power equality and satisfaction with a relationship. Women in equal power relationships reported greater personal satisfaction and closeness, and anticipated fewer problems in their relationships than did women in unequal power relationships. This contrasts with findings using similar power measures in a sample of heterosexual dating couples (Peplau, 1979). Among that college sample, men

and women were equally satisfied in egalitarian and male-dominant relationships, but were dissatisfied in female-dominant relationships. Lacking a cultural ideology that endorses the superiority of one partner as boss and decision maker, lesbians may be less comfortable than heterosexuals with unequal power relationships.

Our study provides a first attempt to describe and analyze the balance of power in lesbian relationships. Research on this topic with women from other segments of the lesbian population (e.g., women who are older or from working-class backgrounds) would be valuable. Nonetheless, the present study does suggest that being in a lesbian relationship is no sure guarantee of avoiding power imbalances. Even among lesbian feminists who have been sensitized to power issues in personal relationships, the balance of power can be tipped away from equality if the two partners are not equally involved and do not possess equal resources. The determinants of the balance of power go beyond attitudes and reflect processes of social exchange that can occur regardless of ideology or affectional preference.

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