

The Balance of Power in Dating and Marriage

LETITIA ANNE PEPLAU AND
SUSAN MILLER CAMPBELL

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Although traditional views of romantic relationships are being challenged, proponents of the old pattern remain strong. A striking example is provided by Helen Andelin,² author of *Fascinating Womanhood* and an advocate of a benevolent form of male dominance. Andelin urges women to accept and enjoy traditional sex roles. Male leadership is a key element. According to Andelin, women should defer to men and take pleasure in being cared for. The man is "the undisputed head of the family." The woman has a "submissive role, a supporting role and sometimes an active role. . . . But, first she must accept him as her leader, support and obey him." The popularity of *Fascinating Womanhood* and similar books suggests that many women endorse this traditional view.

Young couples today are confronted with alternative models for romantic relationships. Traditional sex roles prescribe that the man should take the lead. But contemporary thinking favors a more equal balance of power. This chapter examines the balance of power in dating and marriage today. We begin by describing in depth a study of power in the dating relationships of college students. We explore attitudes about power, consider how to assess the actual balance of power in a relationship, and analyze factors that determine whether or not couples actually achieve equal power in their relationships. Later in the chapter, we broaden our focus to consider recent research on power in marriage, and examine the accuracy of popular stereotypes that black families are "matriarchies" dominated by women and that Chicano families are "patriarchies" dominated by men.

COLLEGE COUPLES IN LOVE: A STUDY OF POWER IN DATING RELATIONSHIPS

A study by Zick Rubin, Anne Peplau, and Charles Hill³ explored in detail the issue of power in dating relationships. This research, known as the Boston Couples Study, recruited 231 college-age couples from four colleges and universities located in the Boston area. These included a small private nonsectarian university, a large private nonsectarian university, a Jesuit university, and a state college enrolling commuter students. Participants were typically middle class in background, and virtually all were white. To be eligible for the study, a couple had to indicate that they were "going with" each other and that both partners were willing to participate. The typical couple had been going together for about eight months when the study began. Couples were studied intensively over a two-year period. In 1972, and again in 1973 and 1974, each partner in the couple independently completed lengthy questionnaires about their relationship. We found that the college students in our sample were strong supporters of an egalitarian balance of power. When we asked, "Who do you think should have more say about your relationship, your partner or you?" 95 percent of women and 87 percent of men indicated that dating partners should have "exactly equal say." Although male dominance may once have been the favored pattern of male-female relations, it was overwhelmingly rejected by the students in this study. It is possible that some students gave the answer they considered

socially desirable, rather than their own true opinion. In either case, however, responses indicated a striking change in the type of male–female relationship considered appropriate.

Although students advocated equality, they seldom reported having grown up in an egalitarian family. As one student explained:

When I was growing up, my father was the Supreme Court in our family. He ran the show. My relationship with Betsy is very different. We try to discuss things and reach consensus. And that's the way I think it should be.

Only 18 percent of the students reported that their parents shared equally in power. A 53 percent majority indicated that their father had more say; the remaining 29 percent reported that their mother had more say. Clearly, most college students were seeking a different type of relationship from the model set by their parents. Our next question was whether these student couples would be successful in achieving the equal-power relationship they desired.

Assessing the Balance of Power

Although the word *power* suggests a phenomenon that is obvious and easy to study, this is not the case. Power is often elusive, especially in close relationships. Consider a woman who appears to dominate her boyfriend by deciding what to do on dates, determining which friends the couple sees, and even selecting her boyfriend's new clothes. Is it reasonable to infer that she has a good deal of power in the relationship? Not necessarily. Further investigation might reveal that her boyfriend, a busy pre-med student, disdains such "trivial" matters, and cheerfully delegates decision making in these areas to his girlfriend. In addition, he may retain veto power on all decisions but rarely exercise it, because his girlfriend scrupulously caters to his preferences. In this instance, greater power may actually reside with the man, who delegates responsibility, rather than with the woman, who merely implements his preference.⁴

Power—one person's ability to influence the behavior of another to achieve personal goals—cannot be observed directly, but must be inferred from behavior.⁵ The context in which an action occurs and the intentions of the participants largely determine the meaning of the act. Especially in close personal relationships, judgments about power may be difficult to make. One reason for this is that people can exert influence in subtle and indirect ways. Indeed, traditional sex roles have dictated that men and women should use different influence tactics—he should be direct, even bold in his leadership; she should be tactful and covert. *Fascinating Womanhood* offers several suggestions about how women should give "feminine advice":

Ask leading questions: A subtle way of giving advice is to ask leading questions, such as "Have you ever thought of doing it this way?" . . . The key word is *you*. In this way you bring him into the picture so the ideas will seem like his own.

Insight: When expressing your viewpoint use words that indicate insight such as "I feel." Avoid the words "I think" or "I know."

Don't appear to know more than he does: Don't be the all-wise, all-knowing wife who has all the answers and surpasses her husband in intelligence.

Don't talk man to man: Don't "hash things over" as men do and thereby place yourself on an equal plane with him. . . . Keep him in the dominant position so that he will feel needed and adequate as the leader.⁶

Sociologists have taken note of these possible differences in male and female styles of power. In fact, Jessie Bernard suggests that in many marriages male control may be only an illusion:

From time immemorial, despite the institutional pattern conferring authority on husbands, whichever spouse had the talent for running the show did so. If the wife was the power in the marriage, she exerted her power in a way that did not show; she did not flaunt it, she was satisfied with the "power-behind-the-throne" position.⁷

For these reasons, measuring the actual balance of power in relationships can be tricky.

To assess power in our couples, we asked very general questions about the overall balance of power, as well as more specific questions about particular situations and events. For instance, we asked, "Who do you think has more of a say about what you and your partner do together—your partner or you?" Subjects responded on a five-point scale from "I have much more say" to "My partner has much more say," with "exactly equal" as the midpoint. All these measures involved self-reports; that is, we asked students to describe the balance of power in their relationship as they perceived it. Most studies of power in close relationships have also used self-reports, assuming that, in the final analysis, participants in a relationship are the best judges of their own personal experiences of power.

Our results were somewhat surprising. Despite their strong support for equality, only 49 percent of the college women and 42 percent of the men in our study reported equal power in their current dating relationship. This represents a large proportion of the students, but is much less than the 91 percent who said they favored equal power. When the relationship was unequal, it was usually the man who had more say. About 45 percent of the men and 35 percent of the women reported that the man had more say, compared to 13 percent and 17 percent, respectively, who said the woman had more say. There are two points to be made about these results. First, there was much variation in students' views of the relationships. Although many students did report power equality, other patterns were also found. Second, these results suggest that at least some students who said that they wanted equal power in their relationship were not able to achieve this goal.

Tipping the Balance of Power

Why is it that some people who want an egalitarian relationship are not successful in creating one? Research had identified three important factors that affect the balance of power in relationships: the social norms dictating

who "should" be more powerful, the psychological dependency of each partner in the couple, and the personal resources that partners bring to their relationship.⁸

Social norms. Historically, social norms or rules of conduct have specified that the man should be the "boss" in male-female relationships. If couples endorse traditional roles for their relationship—believing, for example, that the man's career should be more important than the woman's, and that the woman should look up to the man as a leader—the balance of power is likely to tip away from gender equality. Our study of dating couples included a ten-item Sex-Role Attitude Scale. Students indicated their agreement or disagreement with such statements as, "If a couple is going somewhere by car, it's better for the man to do most of the driving," and "If both husband and wife work full-time, her career should be just as important as his in determining where the family lives." Responses indicated that some students advocated strongly traditional positions, others endorsed strongly feminist positions, and many fell somewhere in between. Dating partners generally held similar attitudes; it was unusual to find an ardent feminist dating a very traditional partner.

We found that endorsement of traditional sex roles was often associated with unequal power in dating relationships. For example, 59 percent of the men who had traditional sex-role attitudes believed they had greater say than did their girlfriend, compared to only 25 percent of the men with nontraditional (profeminist) attitudes. However, exceptions to this pattern did occur. For instance, over one-third of the most traditional couples reported equal power, as Paul and Peggy illustrate. For them, power was not a prominent issue. Whereas Peggy was considered the expert on cooking and social skills, Paul made decisions about what to do on dates. They divided responsibilities in a traditional way but believed that overall they had equal power. Most often, however, sex-role attitudes did have an important impact on the balance of power. Believing that men and women can perform similar tasks, acknowledging that the woman's career is as important as the man's, and other nontraditional attitudes can foster an equal-power relationship. At the same time, it is also likely that having an egalitarian relationship encourages nontraditional sex-role attitudes. The link between attitudes and power can work both ways.

Imbalance of involvement. Social psychological theory suggests that power in a couple is affected by each partner's dependence on the relationship. In some relationships, both partners are equally in love, or equally disinterested. In other cases, however, the partners' degree of involvement differs. One partner may be passionately in love, while the other partner may have only a lukewarm interest in the relationship. Such imbalances of involvement are likely to affect the balance of power.⁹ Sociologist Willard Waller¹⁰ described this phenomenon as the "principle of least interest," which predicts that the person who is least involved or interested in a relationship will have greater influence. The more involved person, eager to maintain the relationship, defers to the partner's wishes. Thus, the less

interested partner is better able to set the terms of the relationship and exert control. Being deeply in love is a wonderful experience. But unless love and commitment are reciprocated, they make a person especially vulnerable to their partner's influence.

Our questionnaire contained several measures of love and involvement. One question asked straightforwardly, "Who do you think is more involved in your relationship—your partner or you?" Less than half the students reported that their relationship was equal in involvement. The principle of least interest was strongly supported by our data, as can be seen in Table 1. In couples where the man was the least involved, it was most common for the man to have more power. In contrast, when the woman was the least involved, nearly half the couples reported that the woman had greater power.

Attraction to a partner and involvement in a relationship are affected by many factors. The degree to which we find our partner desirable and rewarding is very important, as is our assessment of the possible alternative relationships available to both of us. If our present partner is more desirable than the available alternatives, our attraction should remain high. Thus, such personal resources as physical attractiveness, intelligence, a sense of humor, loyalty, prestige, or money can affect the balance of power.

Findings concerning physical attractiveness illustrate this point. Although we may like to think that inner qualities are more important than physical appearance, there is ample evidence that beauty can be a valuable resource in interpersonal relations, at least among younger adults. As part of our study, we took full-length color photos of each participant, and then had these photos rated on physical attractiveness by a panel of student judges. As predicted, if one person was judged much more attractive than her or his partner, she or he was likely to have more power in the relationship.

Another important determinant of dependency on a relationship is the likelihood that a person could find another partner if the current relationship ended. The more options a person has about alternative dating relationships, the less dependent he or she is on a single partner. We asked students whether they had either dated or had sexual intercourse with someone other than their primary partner during the past two months. We also inquired whether there was a "specific other" they could be dating at present. For

TABLE 1
Power and involvement in dating relationships

Relative power	Relative involvement		
	Women less involved (60 couples)	Equal (57 couples)	Man less involved (100 couples)
Man more say	23%	54%	70%
Equal say	28%	20%	20%
Woman more say	49%	26%	10%

both men and women, having dating alternatives was related to having greater power in the current relationship.

Our analysis suggests that a possible way to increase one's relative power in a relationship is to acquire new personal resources or greater options. This message is conveyed, in highly different forms, by both traditionalists and feminists. *Fascinating Womanhood* promises that women can have a happier marriage by learning to be more "feminine." Women are encouraged to improve their appearance, become better cooks, learn to be more sexually alluring, pay more attention to their husband, and, in general, improve their "feminine" skills. By increasing her own desirability, the woman may indirectly increase her husband's interest in their relationship. As a result, the husband may be more willing to defer to his wife's wishes and concerns. While endorsing a pattern of male leadership and control, *Fascinating Womanhood* nonetheless suggests ways for women to work within the traditional pattern to increase their personal influence and to achieve their own goals.

Contemporary feminists have rejected inequality between the sexes and have encouraged women to become less dependent on men. Women can achieve this independence by developing closer relationships with other women and by learning new skills, especially "masculine" skills such as car repair or carpentry. The greatest emphasis has been given to women's gaining financial independence through paid employment. In the next section, data from our study bearing on the impact of women's careers on power in dating relationships are presented.

Women's career goals. Traditionally, men divide their interest and energy between personal relationships and paid work. For women, in contrast, a family and a career have often been viewed as incompatible goals. Typically, women have given far higher priority to personal and family relationships than to paid employment. Many of the college students in our study rejected the idea that the woman's place is in the home; both men and women tended to support careers for women. What impact does this have on power in male-female relationships?

Full-time paid employment makes women more similar to men in several ways. Work provides women with additional skills and expertise, with important interests outside the relationship, and with additional resources such as income or prestige. For all these reasons, it seems likely that a woman's employment might affect power in a dating relationship.

Leonard and Felicia, two participants in our study, illustrate this effect. They met and were married in college, where both majored in music. The couple agreed that while Felicia is a competent musician, Leonard is a musical genius on his way to becoming a famous composer. After college, Felicia took a job as a music teacher to put her husband through graduate school. She acknowledged his superior ability and was willing to support his career by working. But she viewed her job strictly as a necessity. Her primary involvement was in her marriage. Leonard's job attitude was completely different. Felicia said bluntly: "For him, music comes first and I'm second. If he had to move to New York to be famous and I wouldn't go, he'd leave me." In part because of this imbalance of involvement, Leonard had greater power

in their relationship. He determined where they lived, for instance, and required Felicia to tolerate his sexual infidelities.

When we reinterviewed Leonard and Felicia a year later, we learned that there had been a great deal of strain in their relationship. Partly because of this tension, Felicia took a summer-school course in a new method of teaching music. She found the course exciting, and during the summer she gained greater confidence in her abilities as a music teacher. She became seriously interested in teaching as a career. With the support of other women in the class, Felicia decided to apply for admission to a graduate program in the new instructional method. In long talks with other women, she reexamined her ideas about marriage, sex roles, and her career. She realized that "the fantasy of having a man fulfill a woman is a dangerous myth. You have to fulfill yourself." Despite some objections from Leonard, Felicia intended to start graduate school the next year. She felt that these changes had already helped her marriage and changed the balance of power. "If I'd gone on working this year to support him, as Len wanted me to, he'd be the more dominant. . . . If I hadn't decided to go to school, he'd be taking the money and running the show." Having made her decision, Felicia felt less dominated and exploited by her husband. She hoped that, as she gained more respect for her own abilities, Len would gain respect for her, too.

This is only one example. We asked all the couples about their educational and career plans. Nearly 70 percent of both men and women said they planned to go to graduate school. Among those seeking advanced degrees, women were more likely than men to desire only a master's degree (50 percent of women versus 32 percent of men). Men were more likely than women to aspire to a doctorate or the equivalent (38 percent of men versus 19 percent of women). Additional questions probed students' attitudes about full-time employment for women and their personal interest in having a dual-career marriage in which both spouses have full-time careers.

As expected, the women's educational and career plans were significantly related to the balance of power in the current relationship. For instance, in one analysis we examined the relationship between the highest degree the woman aspired to and the balance of power. The results were striking. When the woman aspired to less than a bachelor's degree, 87 percent of students reported that the man had more power in their relationship. When the woman planned to complete her bachelor's degree, about half (45 percent) reported that the man had more power. And, when the woman planned on an advanced degree, only about 30 percent reported that the man had more say. As the woman's educational aspirations increased, the likelihood of a male-dominant relationship decreased sharply. In contrast, no association was found between the man's educational aspirations or career plans and power.

In summary, we have found that power in a dating relationship is related to sex-role attitudes, to the balance of involvement, and to personal resources such as the woman's career plans. For college women in our sample, these three factors were interrelated. Women who planned on graduate school reported relatively less involvement in their current relationship, had more liberal sex-role attitudes (and tended to date men who were also more

liberal), and often planned to make a major commitment to a full-time career, as well as to marriage.

For college men in our sample, educational plans, sex-role attitudes, and relative involvement were *not* interrelated. Liberal and traditional men did not differ in their educational goals or in their relative involvement in the current relationship. In American society, all men are expected to have jobs. This is as true for men who reject traditional roles as for men who support them. Although the man's educational plans did not affect the balance of power, his own sex-role attitudes and his relative involvement in the relationship were important determinants of power.

Although many women in our sample wanted to pursue a career, they did not see this as a substitute for marriage. About 96 percent of women and 95 percent of men said they expected to marry eventually, although not necessarily this partner. Further, 90 percent of women and 93 percent of men said they wanted to have one or more children. What distinguished traditional and liberal women was not their intention to marry but rather their orientation toward employment.

Finally, we should note that couples can achieve equal power in different ways. Some, perhaps most often nontraditional couples, attempt to share all decision making completely. Ross and Betsy told us that they always make joint decisions—they shop together, discuss entertainment and vacation plans together, and reach mutual solutions to conflicts. Other couples, perhaps most often traditionalists, adopt a pattern in which each partner has specific areas of responsibility. Diane told us that she and Alan have equal power, but explained that “in almost every situation, one of us is more influential. There are very few decisions that are fifty–fifty.” For instance, Diane picked their new apartment, but Alan decided about moving the furniture. Diane said, “I make the aesthetic decisions and Alan makes the practical ones.” Dividing areas of responsibility, sharing decision making totally, or some mixture of the two are all possible avenues to equal power in relationships.

Power and Satisfaction in Dating Relationships

Fascinating Womanhood proposed that the acceptance of traditional sex roles and male leadership is essential to a happy male–female relationship. Feminists argue that traditional sex roles oppress women and make honest male–female relationships difficult. What impact do sex-role attitudes and the balance of power have on the success of a dating relationship? Our surprising answer is that they seem to have little impact on the happiness or survival of dating relationships.

We found no association between sex-role attitudes and satisfaction with the current relationship. Liberal and traditional couples rated themselves equally satisfied with their relationships and indicated that they felt equally close to their partners. Liberal and traditional couples did not differ in reports of the likelihood of eventually marrying the current partner, of love for their partner, or of the number of problems they anticipated in the relationship. Data from our two-year followup indicated that liberal and traditional couples were equally likely to break up.

To understand these findings, we must remember that dating partners usually had similar sex-role beliefs. Sharing attitudes and values may be much more crucial to the success of a relationship than is the content of the attitudes. Mismatching on sex-role attitudes can create problems for couples, and such differences may be most important when a couple first begins to date. Since all the students in our study were already "going with" their partner, we do not have information about the impact of sex roles on first meetings or casual dating. Couples in our study had all survived the beginning of a relationship, perhaps partly because they agreed about sex roles or had managed to reconcile their differences.

Since students were nearly unanimous in their endorsement of an egalitarian ideal of power, we might expect the balance of power to affect couple satisfaction or survival. In fact, equal-power and male-dominant couples did not differ in their reports of satisfaction and closeness, or in the likelihood of breaking up by the time of our two-year followup. In contrast, however, both men and women reported *less* satisfaction in relationships where the woman had more say. It is apparently easier to follow a traditional pattern or to adhere to the new pattern of equality than to experience a female-dominant relationship.

Currently, there is much controversy over proper behavior for men and women. Whether to adopt traditional standards, to attempt to modify them, or to reject old patterns outright are decisions we all must face. The results of this study suggest that traditional and egalitarian patterns are equally likely to lead to a satisfactory dating relationship or to a miserable one. Consensus between a woman and a man may be more important for couple happiness than is the particular pattern a couple follows. Feminists, however, might raise a further question. Even if individuals are able to find personal happiness in unequal relationships, is it good for society to perpetuate male dominance in marriage?

POWER IN MARRIAGE: MYTHS AND REALITIES

How many American marriages today are equal in power? Current research cannot yet answer this question. It is clear that there is much variation among marriages, from couples in which one spouse (usually the husband) makes virtually all decisions, to relationships in which spouses share fully in power and decision making. Many contemporary American couples describe their marriages as relatively equal in power.

For instance, in a recent large-scale survey, Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz¹¹ recruited a sample of over 3,500 married couples. These couples learned about the research from announcements on television, on the radio, or in newspapers, and then volunteered to participate. They were virtually all white, and many were college graduates. The median age was 36 for husbands and 34 for wives. A 64 percent majority said that the balance of power in their marriage was equal. When power was not equal, 27 percent of husbands and 28 percent of wives said that the husband was more powerful. Only 9 percent of husbands and 8 percent of wives described the wife as more dominant. As in our study of dating couples, the balance of

power in these relationships was affected by norms and personal resources. Male dominance was most common in marriages where partners endorsed the belief that the husband should be the provider in the family, and where the husband's income was substantially larger than the wife's. We should note, however, that although this sample was unusually large, those who volunteered tended to be relatively young, urban, well educated, and white. Their experiences are not representative of those of all married Americans.

Feminist researchers have emphasized the importance of expanding the scope of research to include women and men from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In research on marital power, several studies have investigated the experiences of black and Chicano couples. The results may surprise you.

Black Matriarchy: The Myth of Female Domination in Marriage

Black families in the United States have often been described as "matriarchal," or female dominated. The term *matriarchy* can refer to two different situations. Some have used *matriarchy* to refer to the greater frequency of female-headed households among black Americans as compared to other ethnic groups. Thus, a family is described as matriarchal because the mother is raising children without a husband present. A second meaning of the term *matriarchy*, and the one of relevance to our discussion of husband-wife power, is the suggestion that in black marriages, the wife is typically the dominant spouse.¹² For many years, the stereotype of black matriarchy went untested and was used as an explanation for the problems faced by black families in America. In a controversial report published in 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan¹³ contended that the black "matriarchal structure . . . is so out of line with the rest of American society [that it] seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole."

Controversial statements such as this spurred researchers to study the actual balance of power in black marriages. A substantial body of research refutes the matriarchy stereotype.¹⁴ For example, in one large-scale study, Dietrich¹⁵ studied lower-class black families from urban and rural areas. She classified 62 percent of the relationships as egalitarian, 24 percent as wife dominant, and 14 percent as husband dominant. In another study of both middle- and lower-class blacks from Los Angeles, DeJarnett and Raven¹⁶ found a similar pattern. Based on questionnaire responses, they rated 68 percent of couples as egalitarian, 25 percent as husband dominant, and 8 percent as wife dominant. Socioeconomic class was unrelated to the balance of power in this study. This finding is important because it shows that perceptions of equal power in marriage are not limited to middle-class couples, but are also true of lower-income couples.

In a comparative study, Dolores Mack¹⁷ recruited 80 married couples, evenly divided among black working class, black middle class, white working class, and white middle class. Mack examined not only what couples *said* about power in their relationship, but also how couples behaved in power-relevant situations. In one phase of the study, each spouse individually filled out a questionnaire about their relationship. Results showed that the four groups did *not* differ significantly in their perceptions of marital power. Next,

couples went over the questionnaire together, and if they disagreed about their answers, they had to discuss and resolve them for the joint questionnaire. Mack assessed the number of disagreements resolved in favor of the husband versus the wife as another indication of power. In all groups, the wives and husbands were equal or nearly equal on this measure of power, and no racial differences were found. On this measure, working-class husbands (both black and white) were slightly more powerful than were middle-class husbands.

As a second task, couples were asked to discuss two topics—politics (a traditionally masculine topic) and childrearing (traditionally feminine). Mack was not interested in the content of these discussions, but rather in the amount of time each person spent talking. She found that there were no significant gender, racial, or class differences; husbands and wives held the floor for the same amount of time, whether they were black, white, working class, or middle class.

For the last part of the study, Mack devised a clever method of measuring power differences in a bargaining situation. The husband and wife were asked to play the roles of a salesperson and a customer in an African boutique. The salesperson (played by the husband) was given four African items to sell (a ring, a dress, a wood carving, and a gourd) and was told that the four items had cost him a total of \$73. The higher the price he could get for the items, the higher his profit. The customer (played by the wife) was told that she had \$150 to spend on the four items. The lower the price paid by the wife, the more money she would get to keep. The couple was then allowed to bargain over the items. Power was measured as the total price that the customer paid for the four items. The less money she spent, the more powerful the wife was. Again, Mack found no racial differences, but she did find class differences. Middle-class wives spent more on the items (an average of \$102) than did working-class wives (an average of \$91). While this result might indicate that the middle-class husbands are more powerful, it might also indicate that the middle class are more comfortable spending a larger amount of money.

Mack measured power in three quite different ways, and found no racial differences in any of the three. Black wives were no more powerful than their white counterparts in any of the three situations. Small social-class differences were found in two of the three situations. The results of the study do *not* support the notion of a black matriarchy.

In summary, many studies have found that equal power is the most common pattern among black couples. Studies that have directly compared power patterns in black and white couples have found strong similarities.¹⁸ Dietrich appears to be correct in concluding that "the black matriarchy has been exposed as a myth."¹⁹

Machismo: The Myth of Male Dominance in Chicano Marriages

Popular stereotypes depict the Chicano or Mexican-American family as patriarchal; that is, as dominated by the husband. Skolnick summarized ethnic stereotypes about marital power this way: "While the black family was seen

as pathological because of its presumed female dominance, the Mexican-American family was viewed as unhealthy because of its patriarchy. In contrast, the ideal middle-class Anglo family was seen as egalitarian and democratic."²⁰

According to this image of Chicanos, the husband "is seen as the absolute head of the family with full authority over the wife and children. All major decisions are his responsibility, with part of the wife's role involving seeing that the father's decisions are carried out. Power and prestige are the absolute prerogatives of the male head."²¹ This alleged Chicano male dominance is part of a broader pattern of *machismo*, a Spanish word meaning "strong or assertive masculinity, characterized by virility, courage, or aggressiveness."²²

Hawkes and Taylor²³ studied Mexican and Mexican-American farm-laborer families to test the "macho" stereotype. They interviewed seventy-six women whose families lived in one of twelve migrant-worker family camps in California. The interviewers were women who themselves lived in the camps and had been trained by the researchers to do the interviewing. Power was measured by responses to two different kinds of questions: questions about decision making and questions about action taking. That is, the researchers were interested not only in who made decisions, but also in who then acted on the decisions. Decision-making questions assessed who decided how to spend the money, how many children the family should have, how to raise the children, and so on. Action-taking questions asked who paid the bills, who took steps to control the number of children the family had, who handled the children, and so on. The questions could be answered in three ways: the husband usually decides or acts, the wife usually decides or acts, or they both decide or act together. Based on the answers to these questions, couples were classified according to their family power pattern.

The families fell into six pattern types, which are summarized in Table 2. Families classified as *husband dominant* were characterized by the husband deciding and acting on the decisions. *Husband semidominant* referred to fami-

TABLE 2
Marital power in Mexican and Mexican-American families

Family power type	Definition	Percent of total (76 couples)
Husband dominant	He decides and he acts	7
Husband semidominant	He decides and both act, or Both decide and he acts	9
Husband decides — wife acts	He decides and she acts	3
Egalitarian	Both decide and both act	62
Wife semidominant	She decides and both act, or Both decide and she acts	17
Wife dominant	She decides and she acts	3

SOURCE: Based on research by Hawkes and Taylor that interviewed 76 wives living in farm labor camps in California.

lies where the husband decides and both act, or both decide and the husband acts. *Husband decides—wife acts* was the third category. (No couples showed the reverse pattern, in which the wife decides and the husband acts.) When the husband and wife both decide and act, the family was considered *egalitarian*. *Wife semidominant* referred to families where the wife decides and both act, or both decide and the wife acts. The last category, *wife dominant*, consisted of families in which the wife both decides and acts. The results were quite clear. Most couples (62 percent) were classified as egalitarian. Only 7 percent were classified as husband dominant, and 3 percent as wife dominant. There is thus no evidence for the stereotype that most Chicano husbands have complete power at home.

Many other studies²⁴ have replicated Hawkes and Taylor's findings that Chicano husbands and wives report relatively equal power. In a review of this research, Staples and Mirande²⁵ conclude that "virtually every systematic study of conjugal roles in the Chicano family has found egalitarianism to be the predominant pattern across socioeconomic groups, educational levels, urban-rural residence, and region of the country." The popular myth that Chicano marriages are typically dominated by a dictatorial, "macho" husband is clearly false.

DISCUSSION

Our review of research on power in male-female relationships leads to several general conclusions. First, there is much diversity among contemporary American couples. Many couples—the majority in most of the studies we examined—describe their relationship as egalitarian. But other couples report male dominance or, less frequently, female dominance. All three patterns coexist in contemporary society. Partners who report an equal balance of power do not necessarily share all decision making or divide responsibilities in a nontraditional way. Equal power can be based either on sharing, or on "separate but equal" areas of influence. Many couples have different spheres of influence within a relationship, and these are often linked to traditional sex roles. For example, a couple may perceive their relationship as egalitarian because the husband makes financial decisions, the wife makes decisions about household matters, they share decisions about leisure activities, and they believe that overall their power balances out evenly. In other words, couples often describe relationships that combine power equality with traditional sex roles.

Second, among the many factors that can determine the balance of power in dating and marriage, existing research has emphasized three. Research suggests that relationships are most likely to be equal in power when the partners endorse egalitarian norms for male-female relations, have roughly equal personal resources, and are equally dependent on the relationship. No single factor alone is sufficient to guarantee an equal-power relationship. Thus, for example, some couples who value equality are unable to achieve it in their relationship; other couples who endorse traditional values nonetheless perceive their actual relationship as equal in power.

Third, empirical research has refuted the myth that black marriages are matriarchal and that Chicano marriages are patriarchal. In general, the

balance of power in marriage has not been shown to differ among whites, blacks, and Chicanos. These findings should encourage us to question other ethnic stereotypes about male–female relations as well.

Finally, it is worth considering a question that skeptics might raise about these research findings; namely, whether the majority of American marriages are *really* equal in power. Dair Gillespie,²⁶ for example, has argued that truly egalitarian marriage is a “myth.”

Some criticisms of current research findings are methodological. Since most studies are based on self-reports of power, it is possible that research participants have deliberately exaggerated the degree of equality in their relationships, perhaps in an effort to present themselves positively to the researchers. This seems unlikely in most cases, however, because of the consistency of findings across many independent studies and also because participants often revealed themselves to be traditional in other aspects of their relationships. Another methodological concern is that studies of marital power have not included a representative sample of American marriages; those who volunteer for research may come from the more liberal segments of society. In particular, there is reason to believe that men with traditional sex-role attitudes may be reluctant to volunteer for studies about personal relationships.²⁷ As a result, existing power research may paint an overly egalitarian portrait of American marriages.

Another important issue is that “insiders” often have a perspective on their own relationship that is different from that of an “outsider.” Power is difficult to evaluate in intimate relationships, so it is reasonable that partners might view their relationship in a way different from the way outside observers would. For instance, as outsiders we might judge a relationship as male-dominant because the husband’s professional career determines where the family lives, sets the family’s lifestyle, and makes many demands on the wife’s time. But both the husband and wife might ignore the influence of his work decisions on the marriage, and focus instead on their equal sharing of decisions about the children and leisure activities. They might view the relationship as equal in power.

In close relationships, partners’ judgments of the balance of power are not strictly rational assessments based on objectively counting specific decisions or influence attempts. Although these “facts” are important in assessments of power, other factors also come into play. People are probably more likely to see their relationship as equal in power if the relationship generally seems “fair,” if they do not feel “exploited,” if they are able to do the things that they personally want to do, and, more broadly, if they feel they can trust their partner and believe they have a good relationship. In a recent study, Elizabeth Grauerholz²⁸ provided evidence that dating couples were more likely to report equal decision making if they trusted their partner and were strongly committed to the relationship. In the psychological algebra that lovers use to evaluate equality, factors such as trust and commitment may counteract or reduce power imbalances.

Some outside observers, however, might interpret these patterns differently. Critics might suggest that, in many close relationships, love and intimacy serve to disguise the reality of male dominance. A couple’s perception that their relationship is equal in power might be viewed as a conve-

nient illusion. Indeed, Gillespie goes so far as to suggest that true equality in marriage cannot be achieved until women as a social group have equal status in society. As long as social institutions provide men with greater opportunities to develop their competence and personal resources, women will be at a power disadvantage in male-female relations. For those interested in understanding power in dating and marriage, it is important to consider both insiders' and outsiders' perspectives.

NOTES

We are grateful for the help of Monique Watson and Eileen Davis in preparing this manuscript. We received valuable bibliographic suggestions from Steven Gordon, Vickie Mays, Hector Myers, Amado Padilla, and Belinda Tucker.

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