

# The Sexual Balance of POWER

WOMEN'S PUSH FOR EQUALITY with men extends to all areas. The traditional patterns of male dominance in marriage and close relationships are being re-examined. One young man described this shift toward egalitarian relationships: "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, very egalitarian. We try to discuss things until we reach a consensus. And that's the way I think it should be."

We wondered how these changing attitudes have affected young couples. As part of a two-year study of dating relationships, we examined the balance of power among 231 dating couples (see box).

These young people overwhelmingly favored equality. Ninety-five percent of the women and 87 percent of the men said boyfriends and girlfriends should have "exactly equal say" about their relationship.

The reality, they admitted, was different. When we asked, "Who do you think has more say about what you and your partner do together?" only 49 percent of the women and 42 percent of the men felt both were equal. Among the rest, two thirds of the women and three quarters of the men thought the man had more of a say.

We wondered if this general pattern held in all areas of the couples' relationships. To find out, we asked who had more say in five important areas: recreation, conversation, sexual activity, amount of time spent together, and activities with other people.

Here again, in each area fewer than half the students reported equal power. Equality was greatest in the area of conversation: "what you talk about and don't talk about when you are together." Men were most likely to control the area of recreation: "how you

spend your free time together, where you go and what you do together." None of the five areas was seen as a domain for female power by a majority of students.

When we compared answers about these five areas with answers to our first question—who usually has more say—they were closely related. The more powerful person tended to have more say in each of the five areas.

Further probing showed that the balance of power is often complex. For example, fewer than half the students reported equal power in the area of sex. When decisionmaking wasn't mutual, students reported two to one that the man had more say about the type and frequency of sexual activity. Yet when it came to contraception, the woman usually had more say than the man.

**Lysistrata strikes again.** Couples considered many specific issues such as these in judging the overall balance of power. Making decisions about contraception was not related to the general balance of power, probably because most students see it as a legitimate area for female control. Decisions about intercourse, however, were more important. In response to our general-power question—who usually has more say—women refraining from intercourse were twice as likely as other women to report having more say than their boyfriends.

Approaching power from another standpoint, we asked the couples to imagine themselves in several hypothetical situations that called for a choice. For instance, both want to go to a movie, but disagree about which picture. Or, the couple has a serious argument. Who is the first to make up?

Many students told us that the alternatives offered were too simple to

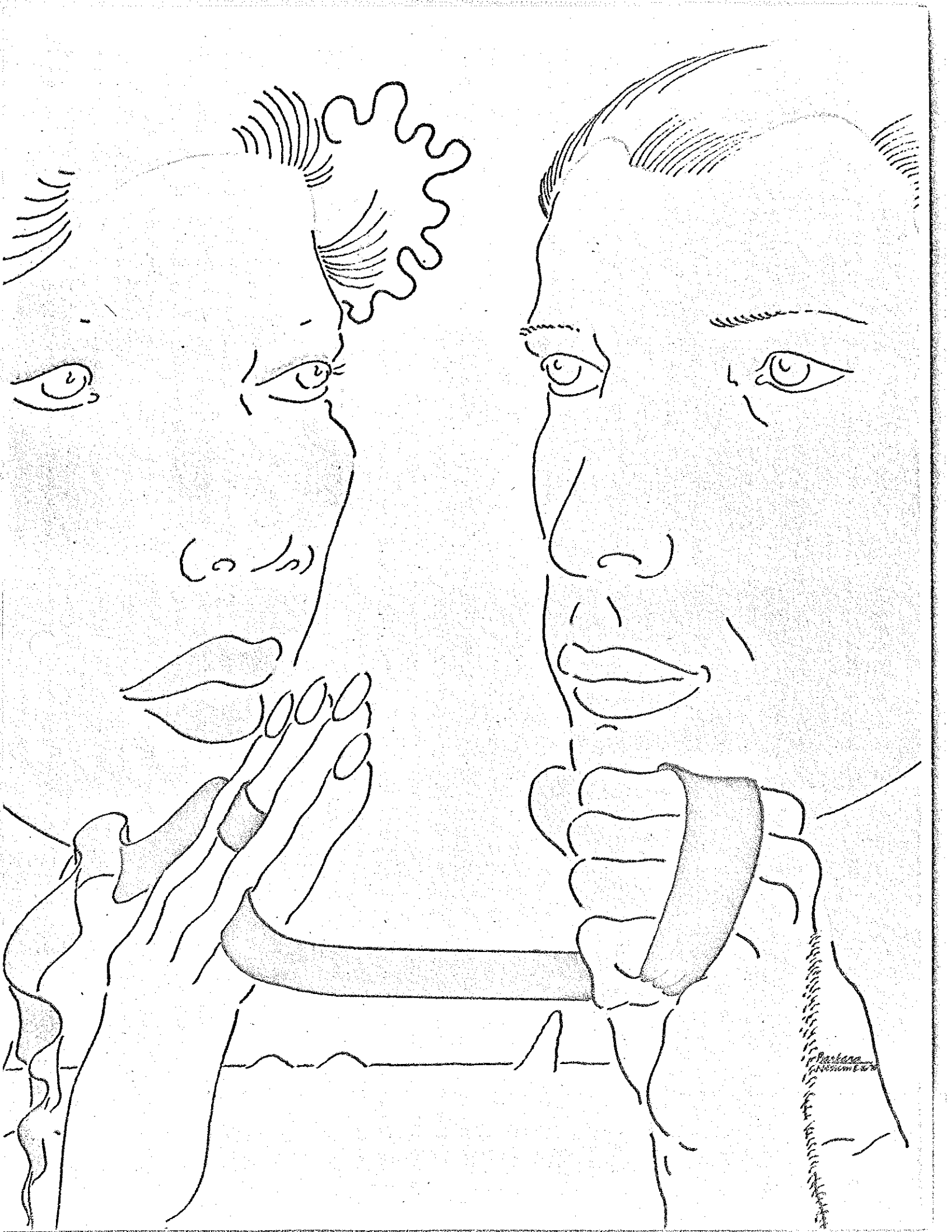
capture what actually happened. In real life, they said, they would often compromise, going to one partner's movie one week, the other's the next week. Their decisionmaking extended over a period of weeks and months, no one decision told the whole story.

This was undoubtedly true. Yet when we compared the answers about these hypothetical conflicts with answers to our first question—who usually has more say—they tended to go together. The more powerful person was likely to win in most cases.

The next question we asked was whether boyfriends and girlfriends agreed who held the balance of power. We found that half the couples agreed perfectly. Only two percent disagreed completely about who had more power, with one saying it was the man and the other the woman. Among the rest of the couples, one partner reported equal power, the other said one of them had more say.

When couples disagreed about power, the difference was often a matter of what decisions each felt were important. Tom and Sandy, a couple who got married during our study, illustrate this point. Sandy felt she had more say because she selected their apartment, decided how it would be decorated, and generally determined the couple's lifestyle. To Tom, these were minor decisions he gladly turned over to his wife. The decisions he considered important, such as not having children and selecting a new car, were shared. As far as Tom was concerned, he and Sandy had equal power.

Disagreements about power also reflected different styles of influence. Traditionally, women use subtle ways to get what they want, while men are more direct and assertive. An article by Paula Johnson and Jacqueline Goodchilds in last month's PT ["How Women Get



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Their Way"] discussed this idea, and concluded that the stereotype still holds in many cases. A person unaware of subtle influence tactics may tend to overestimate his or her own power and disagree with the partner's assessment of the situation.

In addition, dating partners may have different definitions of what "having a say" really means. Imagine for instance, a man saying to his girlfriend, "Let's go to a movie. You decide which one." She picks an old Bogart film and they start off. Who exercised more power—the woman, who made the final decision, or the man, who delegated decision-making to her? The tricky task of defining power can perplex couples as well as researchers. Men and women often perceive events in a relationship differently. Although they know each other well and love each other deeply, the reality they experience may be quite different.

**Tipping the balance.** Even though our couples staunchly supported equality, fewer than half felt they achieved it. We explored three factors that work against achieving equal power. One was the couples' beliefs about how men and women should act. We had them answer a sex-role attitude questionnaire, which asked them to agree or disagree with 10 statements, such as: "It's just as appropriate for a woman to open a door for a man as vice versa" and "When a couple is going somewhere by car, it's better for the man to do the driving."

Dating partners tended to give similar answers. Sex-role traditionalists were likely to date other traditionalists; liberals dated liberals. We averaged the partners' scores to create a joint traditionalism score for each couple, and then used the scores to divide couples into traditional, moderate, and liberal groups.

As you might expect, men were more powerful among traditional couples. Forty-three percent of the men and 59 percent of the women said he had more power. Among liberal couples, only about 25 percent of both sexes believed the man had more say.

Yet there were important exceptions to this rule. Ten percent of traditionalists said the woman had more power, and nearly 40 percent reported equal power. Paul and Peggy are a good example. Peggy was the expert on cooking and social etiquette; Paul decided which restaurant they'd go to and what they'd do on a date. They divided responsibility in a traditional way, but they

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believed each had equal power overall.

Nor were all the liberal couples egalitarian, as Jim and Judy illustrate. From the beginning of their relationship, he set out to change her. Jim felt he was a Pygmalion, the skilled teacher of a naive but promising student. He encouraged Judy to join a women's consciousness-raising group and pressured her to be less feminine in traditional ways.

For her part, Judy largely accepted Jim's influence. She wanted to change and looked up to him as an intellectual leader. Yet she sometimes resented his domination and detected hints of chauvinism. For instance, he chided her for not doing more of the driving, but then criticized her performance when she got behind the wheel. Jim dominated Judy in order to liberate her, and Judy's eagerness to become liberated led her to accept his domination.

A second factor that worked against equal power was the relative involvement or dependency of the boyfriend and girlfriend. When we asked, "Who do you think is more involved in your relationship, your partner or you?" only

half the couples reported equal involvement. Jill, for example, told us that "Warren would do anything I want ... I come first, he's a distant second as far as he's concerned." She was less strongly attracted to him.

Some 40 years ago, sociologist Willard Waller predicted that an imbalance of involvement would lead to an imbalance of power. "That person is best able to dictate the condition of an association," he wrote, "whose interest in the continuation of the affair is least." Our data provide strong support for this "principle of least interest." The less-involved partner has greater say than the partner who is more involved, presumably because the person who cares more defers to the wishes of the other.

Unequal involvement is costly for both partners, however. The less-involved partner may become bored or feel like an exploiter. The more-involved person may get frustrated or feel used. Not surprisingly, 54 percent of couples with unequal involvement broke up during our study, compared to only 23 percent of couples with equal involvement.

A woman's educational and career goals were a third major factor in the balance of power. Higher education and work make women more equal to men by providing special skills and expertise, additional resources such as income or prestige, and sources of satisfaction outside a relationship. Our data indicate clearly that as a woman's educational plans increased, male power decreased (see table). No such relationship was found between the man's

#### How the Couples Were Recruited

In the spring of 1972 we wrote to a random sample of 5,000 sophomores and juniors, 2,500 men and 2,500 women, at four colleges in the Boston area. We asked if they would be interested in participating in a study of "college students and their opposite-sex relationships." We invited those who said they were going with someone to attend a questionnaire session with their boyfriend or girlfriend. The 202 couples who showed up, plus 29 others recruited by advertising at one of the four schools, made up our sample.

Ninety-five percent of the men and women were or had been college students, typically a sophomore woman dating a junior man. Nearly all were white; 44 percent were Catholic, 26 per-

cent were Protestant, and 25 percent were Jewish. At the beginning of the study, a third of the couples had been going together for less than five months; a third, for from five to 10 months; and a third, for longer. The median period was eight months. Four fifths of the couples had had sexual intercourse and one fifth lived together all or most of the time.

In addition to an initial 40-page questionnaire, the couples answered follow-up questionnaires six months, one year, and two years later. We didn't lose many people along the way; 80 percent or more of the original group answered every questionnaire. To get the personal details and feelings missing from questionnaires, we also interviewed a number of couples several times during the two years.

educational aspirations and power in the relationship.

**My husband, the genius.** Leonard and Karen are an example, extreme in some ways, of how education can affect power. After college, Karen took a job as a high school art teacher to put her husband, whom both considered an artistic genius, through graduate school. She saw her job as a necessity, not a source of enjoyment or the start of a career. Karen's primary involvement was in her marriage.

Leonard's attitude was completely different. "For him," Karen admitted, "painting and sculpture come 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." His lesser involvement in the marriage gave Leonard the upper hand. He determined where they lived and Karen felt she had to tolerate his infidelities.

Partly because of their strained relationship, Karen took a summer-school course in a new method of teaching art. She found it exciting, became seriously interested in teaching as a career, and decided to apply to graduate school. In long talks with other women, she reexamined her ideas about marriage, sex roles, and her career.

Karen feels these changes helped her marriage and altered the balance of power. "If I'd gone on working to support him," she told us, "he'd be the more dominant. If I hadn't decided to go to school, he'd still be taking the money and running the show." She hopes that as she gains more respect for her abilities, Leonard will, too.

As we've seen, power among these couples was influenced by three factors: attitudes toward appropriate sex roles, the balance of involvement in the relationship, and the woman's educational plans. For women, these three factors were closely related and cumulative in effect. Women who planned on graduate school had more liberal sex-role attitudes and usually dated men who were more liberal. They often planned on a full-time career as well as marriage. This made them less dependent on men

in general and decreased their relative involvement in dating relationships. For men, these factors were not inter-related.

Although many women were interested in a career, they didn't see it as a substitute for marriage. Nearly all the men and women (96 percent) expected to marry, although not necessarily each other, and more than 90 percent said they wanted one or more children. What distinguished the liberal women from the traditionalists wasn't marriage, but their plans for a career.

We don't know, of course, whether the women will follow through on their plans for advanced education and full-time careers. Our results suggest, however, that their decisions will strongly affect how much power they have in personal relationships with men.

Men and women have traditionally exercised power in different ways. Men are expected to be direct, even bold in their leadership; women, to be subtle, even sneaky. These different styles often mask where the real power lies, as sociologist Jessie Bernard explained in her book *The Future of Marriage*: "...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...."

Psychologist Susan Kaplan asked 59 of our couples to participate in a study of how men and women make decisions. In one part of her study, couples read case histories of hypothetical couples who had a disagreement. To stimulate discussion, the man and woman read slightly different versions of the case history, one more favorable to the man's position; the other, to the woman's. They were asked to discuss the case and reach a joint decision about who was right.

**Pretty please.** The couples' discussions were tape-recorded and analyzed for 12 different power strategies people use to win arguments. Some are traditionally

feminine, such as making an emotional appeal or asking for information. Others, such as taking charge of the discussion or voicing a strong opinion, are stereotypically masculine. When Kaplan analyzed the tapes to see which strategies were used most by men and by women, she found no sex differences in 10 of the 12 strategies. Men were as likely as women to use emotional appeals, for example, or ask questions.

Sex differences appeared in two of the strategies. Men gave information much more often than women did. And women were more likely to disagree with an idea or contradict information given by their boyfriends.

Because we contacted couples several times over a two-year period, we had an opportunity to see whether power shifted as relationships developed. We found no link between the balance of power and how long couples had been going together. We might expect male power to be strongest when a couple first starts to go out, and to diminish over time. This didn't happen. New couples were no more likely to be male-dominated, or egalitarian, than couples who had been going together for several months or years.

Given our students' strong preference for equality, you might think that couples with liberal sex-role attitudes and an egalitarian relationship would stay together longer and be happier. This was not the case among the 103 couples who broke up and the 128 who remained together during the two-year study. There was no relationship between who held the power and whether a couple split or stayed together. Sex-role liberals and traditionalists were also equally likely to stay together.

Further, both liberal and traditional couples rated themselves as equally satisfied and felt equally close. They didn't differ in their estimates of the likelihood of eventually marrying their partner, love for the partner, or the number of problems in their relationship. **Shared happiness.** It's important to remember that our couples had already survived the early stages of a relationship, perhaps because they had similar attitudes—on sex roles and other issues—or had managed to reconcile their differences. The fact that a couple shares values and beliefs may be more significant to happiness than what the beliefs are.

Although female-dominated, male-dominated, and egalitarian relation-  
(Continued on page 151.)

If the Woman Planned to Get:	The Woman Reported That			The Man Reported That		
	Man Had More Power	Equal Power	Woman Had More Power	Man Had More Power	Equal Power	Woman Had More Power
Less Than B.A. Degree	87%	13%	0%	87%	13%	0%
College Degree	38%	45%	17%	47%	45%	8%
Graduate Degree	21%	60%	19%	39%	42%	18%

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## Sexual Balance (Continued from page 147.)

ships sailed along or sank in equal numbers, there was a difference in satisfaction. Both men and women were significantly less satisfied when the woman held the upper hand than when they were equal or the man was in charge. It is apparently easier for couples to follow the traditional male-dominant pattern or the currently accepted egalitarian pattern than to violate convention by female domination.

We hear a lot of talk about how men and women should act, whether it's best to adopt traditional attitudes, modify them, or reject them outright. Our data indicate that egalitarian and male-dominated couples have an equal chance for happiness. No particular pattern of power can assure a couple of a long-lasting relationship. We found a wide gap between the egalitarian ideal endorsed by the large majority of couples and the actual balance of power that couples achieved. Equality is obviously a difficult and elusive goal.



Letitia Anne Peplau received her Ph.D. in social psychology from Harvard in 1973, and is now an assistant professor of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her interest in the development of close love relationships is currently focused on lesbian couples. Zick Rubin taught at Harvard for seven years before assuming his present position as professor of social psychology at Brandeis University. Next year he will be a visiting fellow at the Institute of Human Development at the University of California, Berkeley, to study children's social development. He received the 1969 Socio-Psychological Prize of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Charles T. Hill, an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Washington, received his Ph.D. in social psychology from Harvard in 1975. His research interests include how interpersonal relationships develop, how individuals perceive themselves and others, and how they interact with and try to influence one another.

For more information, read:  
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