Who's on Top? Power in Romantic Relationships

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Power balances are investigated in a sample of 413 heterosexual dating individuals (86% white, 9.7% black, 4.3% other ethnicities). Less than half the respondents perceive their relationships to be equal in the distribution of power, and men are over twice as likely as women to be viewed as the partners having more power. Imbalances are also evident in three related measures—decision-making, emotional involvement, and equity. A higher proportion of both women and men say that the male partner, rather than the female partner, made more of the decisions, was less emotionally involved, and in general was “getting a better deal.” Finally, male dominance, but not equality of power between the genders, is associated with greater romantic relationship longevity. More specifically, the higher the relative degree of power attributed by respondents to the male, rather than the female, partner of a dyad, the lower is the subsequent rate of relationship dissolution.

An ethos of egalitarianism, whether fact or fiction, permeates the United States, a country founded on the very notion of equality for all. For many years this concept of equality was directed most commonly to men, and in particular to white men. The great social movements of the 20th century, the civil rights movement, and more recently, the feminist movement, however, appear to have made some strides in extending equal rights in the public realm to people of color and to women as well as men. Here we address the question of to what extent the ideal of equality of power between women and men has reached the private sphere of intimate relationships. We should perhaps expect such an ideal to be most evident

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among the most youthful and informed segment of the society. Previous research, for example, found that almost all respondents in a sample of college students reported support for at least the notion of equal power between the genders in romantic relationships (Peplau, 1979). Examining perceptions of the actual balance of power between the genders in the intimate relationships of such a sample will help put in perspective the extent to which this goal is realized in a highly educated segment of our contemporary population.

The balance of power in romantic dyads is of further interest because it may influence the durability of such relationships. If egalitarian ideals are expected but not met, the long-term viability of a dyad may be threatened. Very little research, nevertheless, has focused on the consequences of such power imbalances for the longevity of intimate relationships. Thus, here we will also investigate the repercussions of power (im)balances for dyadic stability in intimate relationships.

Power is certainly not the only aspect of relationships that can be used to examine the perceived degree of gender equality between members of romantic dyads, although it is the type that has received the most attention in the literature. Thus, in order to broaden the scope of this investigation, I also will examine gender balances in three other aspects of relationships that can be viewed by participants as being distributed relatively evenly or unevenly between themselves and a partner: decision making, emotional involvement, and equity. Both decision making (see Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Gray-Little & Burks, 1983) and emotional involvement (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Sprecher, 1985; Waller, 1937) have been linked theoretically and empirically to power in intimate relationships in previous studies. Equity, on the other hand, can be thought of as an overall assessment of the fairness of a romantic relationship, or as a measure of the outcome of power (im)balances in a dyad. Therefore, including these three additional measures of relationship egalitarianism allows me to assess to what extent findings with regard to the specific concept of power are unique.

This research thus investigates three questions of relevance to those interested in the interplay between gender and power: First, to what extent do individuals in heterosexual relationships perceive their dyads to be equal or unequal in terms of power? In other words, are there differences by gender in perceptions of power in intimate relationships? Second, when power imbalances occur, do they affect the outcome of a relationship? In particular, do gender differences in power influence the longevity of a romantic dyad? Third, do related dimensions of balance in relationships, such as decision making, emotional involvement, and equity, produce results similar to those obtained for power?
Balance of Power

Most research on gender differences in power has been conducted with samples of married individuals, where power often has been defined as the ability to influence one's partner (Cromwell & Olson, 1975). Findings that the husband has more power than the wife are common (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Gillespie, 1971; Bernard, 1972; Scanzoni, 1982). Additional research provides further evidence of husband dominance, but suggests trends toward more egalitarianism (McDonald, 1980; Gray-Little & Burks, 1983).

Only a few studies, however, have examined gender differences in power among dating couples. Findings here are somewhat mixed. Peplau (1979), for example, found that male dating partners had more power than female dating partners in a study of the 231 couples from the Boston Dating Couples study. In particular, she found that less than one half of the subjects reported that the partners shared equally in power, and when the balance of power was unequal, the man usually had more say. Grauerholz (1985) also reports that men were seen as having more decision-making power than women in several matters having to do with paying for date activities in a study of 328 unmarried individuals. Decisions in the expressive domain, such as how much to talk about relationship problems, were viewed as more equally shared. On the other hand, Sprecher (1985) found no significant gender differences on an index of perceived power in her sample of 50 couples.

Resource theory, a variant of social exchange theory, has been most frequently used to explain the balance of power in relationships. Resource theory maintains that a person's power is a function of the number of resources she or he possesses (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Blau, 1964). Resources here refer to anything that one partner makes available to meet the other's needs. Theoretically, then, either partner can be more powerful, depending on the relative distribution of valued resources.

Given the tenets of resource theory, it is not surprising that research generally finds evidence that husbands have more power than wives. In most U.S. marriages, the husband earns substantially more income and tends to be older than his wife (National Opinion Research Center, 1985). Income and age are personal resources that are associated empirically with social power (Blood & Wolfe, 1960).

College dating relationships, on the other hand, offer a unique opportunity in which to examine gender differences in power. On average, men and women in college dating pairs are likely to be more similar in terms of the basic resources of income, age, and education than those in marriages. Second, since college students represent a highly educated and
youthful segment of our society, they are likely to hold relatively liberal attitudes toward relations between males and females as compared to the average married couple. Third, dating relationships in college seldom involve children, whose presence may influence the marital power distribution (Safilios-Rothschild, 1970). For these reasons we would expect romantic relationships for this group to be relatively egalitarian. In other words, a college population offers an opportunity for an approximation of a “natural experiment” in which many of the variables that are likely to tilt the balance of power in marriages are held somewhat constant. Nevertheless, since men have more power in general in this society (Lipman-Blumen, 1984; Lips, 1991), it is probably naive to expect a college population to be unaffected by this fact, and thus asymmetries of power may still predominate in this group.

**Decision Making**

The second relationship measure that is used here is decision making. Decision making has been closely connected to the notion of power in a relationship, and many investigators use decision making specifically as a measure of power (e.g., Blood & Wolfe, 1960). Nevertheless, although the two concepts are related, they are not synonymous. In fact, there are problems with the use of decision making as a measure of power, such as the fact that one person may make more of the decisions because the other has chosen to delegate those decisions (Safilios-Rothschild, 1970). Thus, here I use separate measures of power and decision making.

**Relative Involvement**

Emotional involvement is the third measure that I use, and this measure is included because it is often linked theoretically to power. According to the “principle of least interest” (Waller, 1937), the person who is less interested or less involved in an interpersonal relationship can exercise more power. Peplau (1979) finds support for this hypothesis in that relative involvement was associated with power for both males and females. Caldwell and Peplau (1984) subsequently found additional support for the principle of least interest in a sample of lesbian women. Sprecher (1985), however, found that relative involvement was associated with perceived power only for the women in her sample of couples.
Equity

Equity is the fourth and final relationship measure used here, and it is included in order to examine the relative "fairness" of a relationship. Equity is achieved when both partners obtain equal relative gains from the relationship (Hatfield & Traupmann, 1981). Inequity, on the other hand, occurs when one partner benefits more from the relationship than the other. Due to the egalitarian norms that are generally prevalent on college campuses, relationships in which there are imbalances in power are likely to be viewed as inequitable.

Relationship Outcome

A review of the literature suggests that the balance of power can have consequences for individuals in romantic relationships. First, general psychological well-being is associated with power. Horwitz (1982) reports that men and women who occupied more powerful roles experienced lower levels of psychological distress than those with less power. Second, a number of related studies indicate that an equal balance of power is associated with relationship satisfaction. Research on married couples finds the highest levels of satisfaction are reported by egalitarian couples and the lowest satisfaction levels reported by those in which the wife has more power (for a review, see Gray-Little & Burks, 1983). Furthermore, additional research suggests that imbalances in power are linked to increases in conflict. For example, Caldwell and Peplau (1984) found that lesbians who perceived unequal power anticipated a greater number of problems or difficulties in their relationship over the next year than did those who perceived equal power.

The balance of power may further influence the actual stability of a relationship, although this has been much less often studied than other outcomes. The previous findings that imbalances in power are related to dissatisfaction, psychological distress, and conflict imply that power inequalities will increase the likelihood that a relationship would end. Peplau (1979), however, found no differences between equal-power and male dominant college couples in breakups. Nevertheless, the balance of power could influence relationship stability in ways that have not been examined previously, because inequality in power might increase the speed at which a relationship dissolves over time. In order to examine this possibility, I will investigate the effect of power imbalances on the hazard rate of relationship dissolution.
METHODS

Data

The initial sample consisted of 598 students (185 men and 413 women) from several lower and upper level undergraduate sociology classes at two large midwestern universities. During class time at the beginning of the semester, students completed a voluntary questionnaire about their romantic relationships. The participants were asked to respond to the questionnaire in reference to their current relationship or most recent relationship if not currently involved. At the end of the semester, 447 (75%) of the original participants completed a shorter follow-up questionnaire. Eighty-six percent of the sample was white, 9.7% was black, and the remaining 4.3% represented other ethnicities. The average length of relationship (prior to the initial survey) was 1.78 years, and the average age of respondent was 21 years.

The sample used here is restricted to respondents from the original sample who were involved in a dating relationship at the initial survey period and to heterosexuals [there were too few homosexuals (n = 13) to analyze separately]. Our final sample size, after omitting cases with missing data on the relevant variables, was 413. For a more complete description of the data, see Felmlee, Sprecher, and Bassin, 1990.

The data set consists of individuals in relationships, rather than couples. Although there are certain advantages to sample of couples, there are also potential biases I wished to avoid. Male and female responses when based on couples are not independent. The most critical issue, however, is that subjects who define themselves as couples, and who agree to volunteer for research as couples, may also be more egalitarian than average.

Measures

Empirical research has attempted to measure power in relationships in several different ways, such as by observing couples' interactions (e.g. Gray-Little, 1982), or most commonly, by examining self-reports concerning the control of relationship decision making (e.g., Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Gray-Little, 1982). The difficulties in measuring power have been discussed previously at some length (Safilios-Rothschild, 1970; Cromwell & Olsen, 1975; McDonald, 1980). Here, similar to related research on power in premarital relationships (Peplau, 1979; Sprecher, 1985), respondents are asked directly about their own perceptions of the balance of power in their re-
relationships in a global self-report measure. The other relationship dimensions (decision making, emotional involvement, and equity) are treated as distinct from that of power, and each of these concepts is measured in separate global items.

The use of such a global measure for power asks respondents, in effect, to assess the extent to which one partner has more or less power than the other (or has equal power) in the relationship as a whole.\(^2\) One disadvantage of this procedure is that self-assessed power balances, like other self-report measures, may reflect merely perceptions of power balances, rather than "real" power balances. On the other hand, such perceptions in and of themselves are of interest, since at the very least they reflect individuals' notions of how power should be, or often is, distributed in an intimate relationship. Furthermore, this procedure has the advantage that individuals are allowed to define power, and assess the balance of power in their relationships, in their own terms.

1. **Power:** A question was asked directly about power: "In your relationships, who has more power?" The possible responses ranged on a Likert scale from 1 to 7, where 1 is *I have much more power than my partner* and 7 is *My partner has much more power than I do.*

2. **Decision Making:** The question about decision making was, "In your relationship, who makes more of the decisions about what the two of you do together?" (1: *I make most of the decisions;* 7: *My partner makes most of the decisions.*)

3. **Emotional Involvement:** Subjects were asked, "Who would you say is more emotionally involved in the relationship?" (1: *I am much more emotionally involved;* 7: *My partner is much more emotionally involved.*)

4. **Equity:** The Hatfield global measure of equity was used (Hatfield & Traupmann, 1981). The measure is, "Considering what you put into your relationship, compared to what you get out of it...and what your partner puts in compared to what he or she gets out of it, how does your relationship "stack up"?" The possible responses range on a Likert scale from 1 to 7, where 1 is *I am getting a much better deal than my partner, 4 is We are both getting an equally good...or bad...deal* and 7 is *My partner is getting a much better deal than I.*

\(^2\)Such a global measure cannot ascertain the extent to which each partner is perceived as having more power than the other in different domains of the relationship. A global measure asks respondents instead to assess the balance of power, overall, in the relationship.
5. **Relationship Longevity:** At the first questionnaire period, respondents were asked when their relationships first began (month/day/year). If respondents indicated that a relationship had broken up at the time of the second questionnaire, they were asked to indicate when the relationship ended (month/day/year). The length of the relationship was equal to the number of days it survived.

In order to compare easily the responses to items by gender, all four items were also recoded from the original seven response categories to the following three categories for the initial set of analyses: (1) the female in the dyad has/gets/is more (responses 1–3 for female subjects and responses 5–7 for male subjects); (2) there is an equal/equitable balance (response 4); and (3) the male in the dyad has/gets/is more (responses 1–3 for male subjects and responses 5–7 for female subjects).

**Event History Analysis**

To examine the effects of imbalances in power and other hierarchical measures on relationship dissolution rates, I use event history analysis, or hazard analysis (Tuma, Hannan, & Groeneveld, 1979). This procedure is used instead of a static analysis procedure such as probit regression because the relationships reported on here break up at differing times over the course of the survey period. Event history analysis allows me to investigate the degree to which imbalances in power influence, not only whether or not a relationship ends, but how quickly it ends (or does not end).³

The dependent variable that is estimated in the analysis is the hazard rate \( h(t) \), and it is defined as follows:

\[
  h(t) = \lim_{\Delta t \to 0} \frac{P_{jk}(t, t + \Delta t)}{\Delta t}, \ j \neq k
\]

(1)

were \( P(t, t + \Delta t) \) is the probability that an event will occur in the interval between time \( t \) and \( t + \Delta t \). The hazard is the unobserved rate at which events occur. In this situation, we will be examining the rate at which relationships terminate over the survey period. Respondents whose relationships are ongoing at the time of the second survey are treated as "censored" cases, i.e., cases that survived until the second survey period.

³For applications of the use of event history analysis to the study of relationship dissolution, see Felmlee et al. (1990) and Teachman (1982). For a general, basic discussion of event history analysis and its comparison to regression analysis, see Allison (1984).
The multivariate model that will be estimated is as follows:

\[ h(t) = \exp[a_0 + a_1X_1 + a_2d(t)] \]  \hspace{1cm} (2)

where \( h(t) \) is the hazard rate of breakup at relationship duration \( t \), \( X \) is a vector of covariates, \( d(t) \) is duration in the relationship since the first questionnaire period, and the \( a_i \)'s are coefficients. The measure of duration in the relationship \( d(t) \) is included to control for the possible tendency of dissolution rates to vary exponentially over the survey period. In order to control for effects of prior history on relationship dissolution, I also include a measure of relationship duration prior to the first survey as a covariate.

The exponential form of the model was chosen, rather than, say, a linear form, because it has the advantage of constraining the hazard rate to be positive. This log-linear relationship also usually fits data better than does a linear relationship.

Maximum likelihood estimation is used to estimate the coefficients in the model [eq. (2)]. Maximum likelihood estimation has been shown to have relatively good large sample properties (Tuma et al., 1979). This estimation procedure also has the advantage that information from censored events, cases that have been interrupted before a change in state has occurred, can be included in the analysis. For example, attrited cases (as well as cases in which relationships survived the survey period) did not need to be eliminated from the present analysis. Respondents who completed the first, but not the second, questionnaire were treated as censored cases, i.e., cases that survived to the data of the first questionnaire period. Relationship duration for these cases was calculated as the number of days from the beginning of the relationship to the day of the first survey.

RESULTS

Power and Hierarchy

In the first part of the analysis I examine perceptions of balance in four hierarchical relationship dimensions—power, decision making, emotional involvement, and equity. The findings for power suggest that less than half of the respondents are engaged in egalitarian relationships. Approximately 46.1% of the sample views the power distribution as equal. When the relationship is viewed as unequal in power, a greater proportion (over twice as many) say that it is the male who has more power (36.5%) than the female (17.3%). In addition, the findings for the power measure differ by gender (see Fig. 1). The modal category of response for females
Table I. Cross-Tabulations for Hierarchical Measures (in Three Categories) by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>6.84</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making</td>
<td>17.15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.0002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional involvement</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. Cross-tabulation by gender of perceptions of the balance of power, decision making, emotional involvement, and equity in relationship. Responses to the following questions: “In your relationship who... (1) “has more power?” (2) “makes more of the decisions?” (3) “is more emotionally involved?” (4) “is getting a better deal?”

is the category “equal,” i.e., 48% of the females perceive their dating relationships to have an equal balance of power between the two partners. The modal response for male respondents (45.6%), on the other hand, is the response that they, the males, have more power in their relationships. The least likely response, for either sex, is that the female has more power. The response patterns of males and females are significantly different, ac-
cording to a chi-square test (see Table I). In analyses not shown here, t-tests, using the original 7-point response scale for the power measure, reveal that men are significantly more likely than women to reply that the male partner has more power \( p < .01 \).

The findings for the second measure, decision making, are not unlike those for the power measure (Fig. 1). Less than half the respondents (40.1%) perceive decision making to be equally shared. On the other hand, about 38% report that the man makes more of the decisions, whereas females are seen as making more of the decision in only 21.9% of the cases. Furthermore, the statistically significant chi-square value suggests that the response pattern is again not independent of gender (Table I). The t-tests reveal that males are significantly more likely than females to perceive the man to be making more of the decisions (in analyses not shown here, using the original scaling, \( p < .01 \)). The majority of males, 52.8%, perceive themselves as being responsible for more of the decision making in their relationships, whereas the modal response for females (43.2%) is that the responsibility for decision making is shared equally. The least likely response is that the female makes more of the decisions (14.4% of males; 25% of females).

The responses for the third hierarchical measure, emotional involvement, are such that once again much less than half of the sample (only 39.7%) view their partner and themselves as equal on this dimension. The remaining findings nonetheless diverge from those for the previous measures in that the one usually seen as more emotionally involved is the female partner (39.4%) rather than the male (20.9%). Findings by gender, as depicted in Fig. 1, indicate that men (45.6%) are most likely to view their partners as being more emotionally involved in the relationship. In contrast, women (43.6%) are again most likely to view their relationships as equal, e.g., both partners as equally emotionally involved. Both females (19.6%) and males (24%) are least likely to respond that the man in the relationship is more emotionally involved. The differences between the responses of males and females are statistically significant according to a chi-square test (Table I). The t-tests for differences by gender, however, are not statistically significant (analyses not shown here, \( p < .72 \)).

The final measure observed in the these analyses is equity. As can be seen in Fig. 1, the majority of respondents (53.6% of both males and females) report that they thought their relationships “stacked up” fairly. That is, respondents see both partners as “getting an equally good (or bad) deal” in the relationship. Furthermore, both males and females tend to respond similarly to this question; thus neither the chi-square testing for independence of gender and response, nor t-tests for gender differences, are statistically significant. For those participants who thought their rela-
tionships were not equitable, however, a much greater number report that the males in the relationship got "a better deal" than did the females, and these differences are statistically significant. For example, only 16% of the males perceive their partners as getting a better deal in the relationship, whereas almost twice as many of the men (30.4%) report that they are getting a better deal than their female partners.

In order to examine the relationships between power and the four other hierarchical concepts, I next analyze their intercorrelations (table not depicted here). Power and decision making are positively and significantly correlated (.31, \( p < .01 \)), which is not surprising since decision making is often used as a measure of power. As predicted by the "principle of least interest," the correlation between power and emotional involvement is negative and significant (−.49, \( p < .01 \)). In other words, perceptions of powerlessness increase with feelings of emotional involvement. In addition, there is also a statistically significant positive correlation between power and equity (.26, \( p < .01 \)), which means that perceptions of getting a better deal than one's partner increase with feelings of greater relative power. Finally, similar patterns of correlations are obtained when the analyses are performed separately by gender.

**Relationship Stability**

In the second part of my analysis I examine the relationship between balance of power and stability of relationships. In particular, I look at the effect of power imbalances on the hazard rate at which couples break up.

I begin by examining the hypothesis that the more equal the power balance, the lower is the rate of relationship dissolution. In order to examine this hypothesis, the original response to the power variable is recoded so that the lowest value indicates that the respondent views her or his relationship as having the greatest amount of imbalance in either direction, and the highest value indicates equality. For example, a response to the power question of either a 1 (*I have much more power than my partner*) or a 7 (*My partner has much more power than I*) is recoded a 1; a response category of either a 2 (*I have somewhat more power than my partner*) or a 6 (*My partner has somewhat more power than I*) is recoded a 2; etc. I assess the effect of this measure of power on the hazard rate of relationship breakup by including this power measure as a covariate in eq. (2).

The results, as shown in the first row of Table II, are somewhat surprising. Although the effect of the equal power measure is in the expected negative direction (the greater the equality, the lower the rate of breakup), it is not statistically significant. In other words, relationship termination
Table II: Estimates of the Effects of Three Measures of Balance of Power on the Rate of Relationship Breakup, Controlling for Prior Relationship Length (N = 413)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Power measure</th>
<th>Coefficient (standard error)</th>
<th>Parameter F ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equitable power</td>
<td>-.095 (.160)</td>
<td>.350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-power</td>
<td>-.008 (.126)</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male power</td>
<td>-.311 (.124)</td>
<td>6.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of breakups</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily breakup rate</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

rates are not predicted significantly by degree of power equality here. This finding is true even though the model includes the controls of relationship duration prior to the survey (its effect is negative and highly significant in this and the following hazard analyses) and relationship duration over the survey period (its effect is nonsignificant in this and the following hazard analyses). It is possible that relationship stability could be influenced by other types of power imbalances, however. For example, perhaps it is not perceptions of unequal power balances that influence relationship dissolution, but instead perceptions of having power over a partner. Relationships that survive may be those in which the involved individuals feel especially powerful. (Note that it is theoretically possible for both members of a dyad to simultaneously feel more powerful than the other.) Long-lived relationships, then, could be those in which both partners convince themselves that they are relatively powerful. In order to investigate this hypothesis, a measure of “Self-Power,” reflecting the degree to which individuals themselves felt powerful, was constructed. The original responses to the measure of power were coded so that high values indicated that an individual perceives her- or himself as having relatively high levels of power, and with low values

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4The coefficient for the control variable, prior length of relationship, is negative and statistically significant (p < .05) in each of the three hazard analyses. In other words, the longer the relationship prior to the initial survey period, the lower is the rate of breakup. The coefficient for duration dependence, however, does not reach statistical significance. This means that the rate of breakup does not decline (or increase) significantly over the survey period. Finally, the likelihood ratio chi-square for the models is highly significant (p < .001), suggesting that the models represent a significant improvement over a model in which the hazard rate is constrained to be constant.
representing relatively low levels of power compared to her or his partner. The hazard analysis indicates, nevertheless, that this measure of power imbalance does not have a significant impact on dissolution rates (see Table II).

Finally, it is possible that imbalances in power on the basis of gender affect the survival time of a romantic relationship. That is, it may be that having one gender "on top" stabilizes romantic relationships. In order to investigate this hypothesis, a measure of "Male Power" was created. Responses to the original power measure were recoded so that low values for this variable indicate that the respondent (male or female) perceived that the woman (either the man's partner or the respondent herself) had more power than did the man. High values indicate here that the respondent viewed the male as having more power. The coefficient for this power variable is negative and statistically significant in the hazard analysis (Table II). This finding indicates that the higher the perceived power of the male partner (relative to that of the female) at the beginning of the survey period, the lower is the subsequent relationship breakup rate. Furthermore, the magnitude of the effect is quite substantial. The size of the effect is such that a one unit increase in the degree of relative power assigned to the male partner (on the 7-point scale measuring power) decreases the rate of relationship dissolution by slightly more than one fourth.\(^5\)

Findings for the observed effects of the three balance of power measures on dissolution rates, while controlling for prior length of relationship using Eq. (2), are displayed graphically in Fig. 2. Here we see the dramatic differences in the effects of the three different measures of power on relationship breakup. Neither the degree of equality of power between the genders, nor the amount of power attributed to the respondent him- or herself, is associated with changes in the hazard rate of relationship breakup (that is, associated with the likelihood at any point in time over the survey period that a breakup occurs). On the other hand, the rate of relationship dissolution decreases substantially, and exponentially, with increases in the relative power of the male partner.

Finally, comparable analyses of the effects of imbalances in decision making, emotional investment, and equity on relationship dissolution are undertaken. All three types of measures for these variables are also employed. None of these measures (regardless of how they were recoded),

\(^5\)The antilog of the coefficient for the measure of male power is .733. This means that a one unit increase in male power multiplies the hazard rate by .733, i.e., decreases it by .267, while holding relationship duration constant.
has effects on breakup rates that reach conventional levels of statistical significance (findings not shown here). 6

DISCUSSION

Let us return to the original question posed in this paper: "Who's On Top?" The answer is men—or that men are more likely to be perceived as such than are women. In part, the answer also depends on who you ask. The modal response for women in our sample was that power was equally shared. Men's modal answer was that they had more power than did their female partner. When inequalities were admitted, however, women as well as men were more likely to say the man in the relationship had more power, made more of the decisions, was less emotionally involved, and in general

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6 In addition to the Hatfield equity measure, the Sprecher (1986) measure of equity was used in the analysis of Eq. (2). The Sprecher item asks which partner, if any, “contributes” more to the relationship. The effect of this measure of equity (and its recodings) also failed to reach statistical significance.
all four measures was "equal." Men, on the other hand, were significantly more likely to respond that they, the male partner, had more power and made more of the decisions than their female counterparts. Nevertheless, over half of the respondents of either gender thought their relationships were fair, as discussed earlier. One interpretation of these findings is, thus, that men tend to have different notions than women as to what constitutes an equitable relationship.

Could the discrepancies in the female and male responses to the hierarchical measures observed here be due to the fact that the sample does not consist of couples? Probably not. Research on married couples often reveals inconsistencies in the responses of wives and husbands to questions regarding decision making power (Safilios-Rothschild, 1970; McDonald, 1980). Furthermore, even if the responses of male and female partners were identical, we would still be left with questions as to why there were significantly more relationships in which males (rather than females) had more power, and why most respondents viewed their relationships as fair, regardless of the balance of power.

Recall that one reason that men are more likely than women to be seen as dominant may be the result of differential resources. Although college-age females and males are probably closer in personal resources than are their married counterparts, males attending college may have more actual resources available to them than their female partners. Males may also use financial resources to pay for more date activities than do females. Whereas resource differences are not likely to be as large as those for married couples, they may still be sizable enough to tilt the balance of power in favor of the male partner. On the other hand, research on college populations has not found relative resources to be related significantly to relative power between the two sexes (Sprecher, 1985; Grauerholz, 1987). In part, this may be because differences in resources in real terms are minimal among college populations.

A second plausible explanation for the finding that males are often perceived as the more powerful partner is that in this society, males have more power than women in general (Lipman-Blumen, 1984; Lips, 1991). On average, men hold more powerful occupational positions than do women, earn more income, and are less likely to be in poverty (U.S. Department of Labor, 1990). Moreover, women face structural blocks to power that are reflected in several societal arenas, including the legal marital contract, the educational system, suburbanization, and physical coercion (Gillespie, 1971). Thus, discrepancies in power between dating males and females are likely to widen after the college years. Expectations of future structural differences may influence current gender power balances in college, consciously or not, via a process of anticipatory socialization.
Furthermore, not only do men usually have more power than women, but men are expected to have more power. In this society, being dominant remains one element of the masculine, but not the feminine, stereotype (Williams & Bennett, 1975; Ruble, 1983). Such differences in gender stereotypes are related to the roles that men and women are expected to occupy in an intimate relationship, with men expected to be the leaders and women the followers (Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Gerber, 1988). These stereotypical messages are broadly portrayed in the general mass media and literature and are deeply rooted in U.S. cultural institutions. The dating relationships of young adults operate in this cultural atmosphere, and this fact is likely to have a major impact on interactions with the opposite sex. In sum, gender differences in the balance of power documented here probably reflect cultural expectations associated with gender stereotypes in this society as well as actual discrepancies in resources.

The second question posed here concerned the ability of power imbalances to predict the longevity of a dating relationship. Here little support was found for the argument that an equal balance of power lowers the likelihood that a couple will end their relationship. Instead, I found that perceptions of the man having more power than the woman appeared to lend a "stabilizing influence" to the romantic relationship. In other words, dyads in which the male was perceived as having more power had lower breakup rates over the survey period than did those in which the female was perceived as the greater power holder. Neither imbalances in decision making, emotional investment, nor equity, however, had significant predictive effects on termination rates. Previous research also failed to find a significant relationship between equity and breakups (Lujansky & Mikula, 1983; Cate, Lloyd, & Henton, 1986).

An initial point one may draw from these findings is that the concept of power per se (rather than the related concepts of decision making, emotional investment, and equity) apparently plays a critical role in relationships. Although responses to the power variable are correlated with those for some of these other measures, only the power measure had a significant effect on relationship dissolution rates. Such a finding is congruent with the actual definition of power—the ability to influence relationship outcomes. Therefore it is perhaps no surprise that this measure has a significant impact on the actual behavioral result.

Prior research on the determinants of relationship termination has investigated the role of numerous social psychological factors in disengagement, including social exchange measures. Such studies, however, have not included the variable of "power" (see review by Cate & Lloyd, 1992). Although the findings obtained here are limited in that only a single measure of self-reported power is used, that this measure has significant effects in
these analyses suggests that the concept of power deserves attention in subsequent research on breakups. Note, however, that gender inequalities in power were the only type of power imbalance that was predictive of relationship instability here. Thus, not only the distribution of power, but the interplay between power and gender, needs to be considered in future research.

The question remains, however, as to why perceptions of the male having more power than the female were associated with relationship stability. Several possible explanations suggest themselves. First, female-dominant dyads are not simply breaking stereotypes by engaging in egalitarian relationships, but they are running counter to stereotypes. Such relationships may be especially vulnerable to social pressure that encourages their early demise. Perceptions of approval from family and friends for any particular couple have a powerful influence on the likelihood that they will stay together (Felmlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). Second, because relationships in which females have more power receive less social acceptance, they may also be less satisfying to individuals. For example, research indicates that wife-dominant marriages tend to be associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction than do those that are egalitarian or husband dominant (McDonald, 1980). Similarly, Peplau (1979) reports that women and men were least satisfied in dating relationships in which the women had more power. Third, research documents further that women are more likely than males to be the ones initiating the ending of a relationship (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976). Thus, romantic dyads where women are dominant may be those in which the woman decides to use that power to terminate the relationship.

These findings have important implications for research in the area of the social psychology of gender differences. A recent trend among researchers is to de-emphasize gender differences and to argue that dissimilarities between women and men have been exaggerated. For example, scholars argue that males and females are more alike than different when it comes to cognitive abilities, personality, capacity to love, and behavior (e.g., Cancian, 1987; Hyde, 1990). Although many such psychological and social differences between males and females have been overstated, given my findings I would argue that this is not necessarily true of differences concerning social power.

These results also further buttress arguments that power relationships between men and women are a function of the broader social structure and culture in which such relationships are embedded (e.g., Gillespie, 1971; Rodman, 1972). That is, our society is still one in which males have more power than do females, and in spite of egalitarian ideals, this fact filters down to influence even the most intimate relationships in individuals' lives.
REFERENCES


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