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The Role of Power in Conflict in Adult Close Relationships

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The Role of Power in Conflict in Adult Close Relationships

by

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Abstract

Past research has shown that conflict occurs regularly in close relationships and has significant implications for relationship wellbeing. The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of perceived power in conflict resolution in romantic relationships. The study examined the power, relationship satisfaction, and conflict behaviors of 37 dating couples. Participants provided ratings of power and relationship satisfaction, and then participated in a 6-minute videotaped conflict discussion, which was systematically observed and coded for both positive and negative conflict behaviors. Results indicated that individuals with high perceived power demonstrated less positive and more negative affect during conflict. Furthermore, results demonstrated that perceived power equality versus inequality is associated with a number of behavioral tendencies during conflict, and gender is a significant moderator of these associations. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

The Role of Power in Conflict in Adult Close Relationships

Relationships play a significantly role in influencing happiness and wellbeing (Ainsworth, 1985; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Despite the positive implications of close relationships for our mental health and wellbeing, conflict inevitably occurs regularly in the majority of close relationships (Brehm, Miller, Perlman & Campbell, 2002). For this reason, conflict resolution is an area of great significance in the study of close relationships. Conflict within close relationships requires close attention because the manner in which it is resolved has important implications for relationship stability and functioning as well as personal wellbeing. For example, approaching conflict effectively can lead to improved intimacy and satisfaction for the dyad (Canary & Cupach, 1988). In contrast, people in low-satisfaction relationships tend to take an ineffective approach to conflict that involves particular behaviors and cognitions that can lead to negative escalation and poor conflict resolution (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990).

What are effective and ineffective approaches to conflict? Research by Gottman and colleagues provides some answers to this question. Gottman (1998) finds that the key to successful conflict resolution is open, honest communication, in which partners do not explode with emotion or withdraw with angst. He has shown that effective conflict resolution relies on even communication, in which partners treat one another as friends who are in disagreement rather than as adversaries (Gottman, 1998). Turning our focus to harmful conflict approaches, research has shown that anger is one of the biggest detriments to effective conflict resolution, as it leads couple members to approach each other as adversaries (Gottman, 1998). Gottman defines negative emotions/actions like negative reciprocity, belligerence, contempt, and defensiveness as key contributors to the

perception of couple members as adversaries, which leads to unsuccessful conflict discussions and decreased relationship satisfaction (Gottman, 1998). Johnson et al (2005) also demonstrated that critical and hostile behaviors during problem-solving conversations increase the rate of relationship deterioration while productive, non-negative communication offsets these effects. Furthermore, contemptuous behaviors during conflict have been shown to predict marital distress two years later (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998).

Gottman has specified key behavioral predictors of relationship discord and dysfunction (and eventual dissolution) with his “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” model. This model identifies criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling as the key behaviors that predict relationship distress and dissolution. *Criticism* involves complaining about an area of disagreement as if one is suggesting that one’s partner has a defective personality. *Defensiveness* occurs when a partner wards off a perceived attack by becoming righteously indignant and meeting a complaint with a counter-complaint or by acting like an innocent victim (without taking any responsibility for one’s behavior). *Contempt* involves saying something to communicate a sense of superiority to one’s partner, such as through name-calling or a non-verbal gesture or expression of superiority or disgust. *Stonewalling* involves withdrawing from the conversation as a way to avoid conflict; icy distance, folded arms, and averted eyes are indicators of stonewalling. Stonewalling has been associated with an average heart rate above 100 BPM during conflict discussions (Gottman, 1998).

Gender and Conflict in Close Relationships

There is also a wealth of research regarding the role of gender in behavioral tendencies during conflict. For example, during conflict, women tend to take on more expressive roles, while men adopt more instrumental roles; while women are more emotionally expressive, men are more task-oriented and problem-solving in nature (Baucom, Notarius, Burnett, Haefner, 1990).

Demand/withdraw patterns have been a focus of research on gender differences during conflict. A study examining these demand/withdraw patterns systematically observed couples in problem solving interactions, and found that couple members demand at a higher level when they are discussing their own issue and withdraw at a higher level when they are discussing their partner's issue (Baucom, McFarland, Christensen, 2010). Past research has also demonstrated that women tend to demand while men tend to withdraw during conflict (Christensen & Shenk, 1991). It was suggested that women are more likely to demand because of their inherent expressiveness and affiliative nature- traits that cause women to fear rejection more than men (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). Men, on the other hand, are more likely to withdraw because of the socialized belief that men must be strong and independent- beliefs that make men more likely to fear engulfment. Although the partner who wanted something was the one who tended to demand, this research showed that women are more conflict confronting (and generating of more negative affect during conflict), whereas men are more conflict avoiding. This suggests that women are overall more demanding of change than men, while men are more likely to conservatively stick to the status quo by withdrawing.

Power in Close Relationships

Existing literature has also described the role of power in romantic relationships. However, very little research directly examines the associations between power and conflict in romantic relationships. Prior research has defined “power” in a number of ways. Often, it has been defined as the ability to influence one’s partner (Cromwell & Olson, 1975). Using this definition, some researchers have found that, in married couples, husbands tend to have more power (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Gillespie, 1971; Bernard, 1972; Scanzoni, 1982). For dating couples, some research has demonstrated a tendency of men to possess more power than women, particularly in decision-making (Peplau, 1979). However, another study found no significant differences in perceived power (Sprecher, 1985).

There have been six definitions of power described in the existing literature (Simpson et al., 2014). First, Social Power Theory defines power as the potential to influence others and views power as an individual quality, not as a dyadic quality (French & Raven, 1959). Second, Resource Theory defines power as the ability to change the behavior of others in a social system, considering the relative access to resources between the two partners within the dyad (Blood & Wolfe, 1960). In this context, resources are defined as anything a person provides to his/her partner to meet the partner’s needs. According to research based in Resource Theory, husbands tend to have more power than wives, particularly because of their higher average income and age (National Opinion Research Center, 1985). Third, Interdependence Theory defines power as the ability to directly influence the quality of the outcomes of another, considering relative dependence between both partners within the dyad (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Fourth, Dyadic Power Theory defines power as the ability to influence or control another person’s behavior,

considering relative control and authority between partners in the dyad (Rollins & Bahr, 1976). Fifth, the Power within Relationships Theory defines power as the ability to achieve goals by intentionally influencing the partner, considering traits, relationship norms, and environment of both partners within the dyad (Huston, 1983). Finally, the Power-Approach Theory defines power as the capacity to change others' internal states, considering relative access and desire for resources within the dyad (Keltner et al., 2003). All of these definitions have in common the assertion that power involves having some form of influence or control over another person. For the purpose of this research, I propose a model of power that synthesizes elements from those models described above: *power is the ability to influence the outcomes, behavior, and internal states of another person*. This definition does involve access and desire for resources, as is detailed in past definitions of power. In the case of our study, decision-making is a resource that is measured as a link to power.

Past research examining power as a function of gender has demonstrated differences in perceived power and power strategies between men and women (Falbo & Peplau, 1980). Falbo and Peplau found that men tend to perceive themselves as having greater power than their intimate partners, while women do not, which leads men to approach the act of influencing their partner from a perceived position of strength, while women approach the act of influencing their partner from a perceived position of weakness. The key finding here is that having a perceived sense of power, regardless of gender, leads to more dominant and stronger strategies when seeking to influence one's partner- this perceived sense of power is just more common in men.

Felmlee (1994) assessed gender differences in perceptions of power in close relationships and the impact of power imbalances on relationship stability. She sampled college students in dating relationships for her sample because of the lack of inequity in income, age, and education between the members of the dyad, controlling for the implications of Resource Theory. Felmlee assessed 4 aspects of power perceptions of each dyad member, each theoretically linked to power. These included balance of power, decision-making (which has been closely connected with the idea of power, Blood & Wolf, 1960), relative emotional involvement (which abides by the “principle of least interest” and states that the person who is less emotionally involved, or less interested in the relationship has more power in the relationship, Waller, 1937), and equity (which defines the fairness of a relationship by assessing if both partners obtain relatively equal gains from the relationship, Hatfield & Traupmann, 1981); if one partner is obtaining more benefits than the other, there is inequity in the relationship. Felmlee (1994) found that men tend to have more power within the relationship, and that relationships in which men have more power are less likely to result in dissolution.

The research on behavioral characteristics associated with different levels of power has yielded mixed, sometimes contradictory results. High power is associated with extraversion (Anderson, John, Keltner & Kring, 2000), dominance (Buss & Craik, 1981), charisma (Hogan, Raskin, Fazzini, 1990), and heightened social skills (Coats & Feldman, 1996). Despite these trends in personality and power associations, the behavioral manifestations of these personality characteristics are complicated. A study examining power as a predictor of human behavior linked high power with approach-related affect, cognition, and behavior because high power is associated with pursuing rewards, while

linking low power is linked to inhibition-related affect, cognition, and behavior because it is associated with punishment and threat (Keltner, Gruenfeld, Anderson, 2003).

Specifically, this study showed that high power is associated with positive affect, attention to rewards and to features of others satisfying personal goals, snap judgments and automatic information processing, and uninhibited social behavior, whereas low power is associated with negative affect, attention to threat and punishment as well as to other's interests and goals, deliberative reasoning and controlled information processing, and inhibited social behavior (Keltner, Gruenfeld, Anderson, 2003). However, Interdependence Theory states that in the context of romantic relationships, low power individuals tend to show extremely high levels of positive affect and affection in order to provide their high power partners with positive outcomes to prevent them from leaving the relationship for a better alternative (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Furthermore, Dyadic Power Theory (DPT; Rollins & Bahr, 1976) dictates that high power should cause people to believe they have the ability to affect or change their partner, which should lead to an increase in the number of times the high power partners attempts to change the behavior of the other by making control attempts. Consistent with this perspective, Dunbar and Bargo (2005) found that individuals' perceptions of high power were associated with more dominant behaviors during communication tasks with their partners. However, research on demand/withdraw patterns indicates that withdrawal during conflict may be associated with high power because the high power individual is more motivated to maintain the status quo within the relationship (Babcock et. al, 1993). These contradictory findings demonstrate the need for new research linking power and behavioral tendencies in interpersonal interactions.

Finally, power has been shown to have profound implications for both personal and relationship outcomes. For example, power has strong associations with psychological wellbeing (those who experienced greater power in their relationships experience greater psychological wellbeing), relationship satisfaction (equal balances of power have been associated with greater relationship satisfaction for both members of the dyad), and incidence of conflict in intimate relationships (imbalances of power have been associated with greater relationship conflict) (Horwitz, 1982; Gray-Little & Burkes, 1983; Caldwell & Peplau, 1984).

Current Research

It is clear that the topic of conflict in close relationships is an area already rich with data. However, there is a major gap in the literature regarding the intersection of power and conflict that the current research aims to fill. Past research has not considered how the balance of power in an intimate relationship impacts observed behavioral tendencies during conflict.

We had three goals in this research. The first was to examine the association between perceived power and, more specifically, perceived power equality and behaviors during conflict. We predicted that individuals with high power would display more negative affect and hostility as a result of their position of dominance within the relationship. We also predicted that couple members who perceived their power within the relationship as equal to their partner (neither higher nor lower) would demonstrate more positive conflict behaviors (positive affect, affection, emotional support, self-disclosure, positive problem solving, accepting responsibility), and less negative conflict behaviors (denial, negative affect/hostility, dysphoric affect, demand, withdrawal,

criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling) overall during the interaction, and the opposite would be true for those who perceived their power as unequal to their partner.

The second goal was to examine the role of gender in predicting how perceived power and perceived power equality are associated with behavioral tendencies during conflict. When examining perceived power as a continuous variable, we predicted that men, overall, would exhibit more positive conflict behaviors when they perceived themselves as having more power and more negative conflict behaviors when they perceived themselves as having less power than their partner. In contrast, operating under the assumption that women in positions of perceived low power produce compensatory positive behaviors in order to provide their partner with positive outcomes, we predicted that women would exhibit more positive conflict behaviors when they perceived themselves as having less or equal power or when their partners perceived themselves as having more power. When examining perceived equality of power, we hypothesized that both men and women, overall, would exhibit more positive conflict behaviors when they perceived themselves as having power equal to that of their partner.

Finally, we examined the association between perceived power and power equality and relationship satisfaction. We hypothesized that participants who perceived power equality within their relationship would report greater relationship satisfaction than participants whose relationships had a power imbalance.

Method

Participants

Participants were 37 heterosexual dating couples (74 couple members) recruited from the local Pittsburgh area using flyers and online marketplaces, and from the Carnegie Mellon University psychology department participant pool. Couple members either received monetary compensation or course credit for their participation. All participants were over the age of 18, had been dating for at least six months, and spoke and wrote in English fluently. The average age of participants was 21.92, and their average relationship length was 27.4 months. The average education level was an associate's or bachelor's degree, and the mean earned annual income was between \$60,000 and \$80,000. Demographics for this sample were as follows: 1.2% were American Indian, 17.4% were Asian, 4.7% were African American, 5.8% were Latino/Latina, 59.3% were Caucasian, 2.3% reported "Other". None of the couples were married or had children, 30% were currently living together, and all couples reported being monogamous.

Procedure

This research project was an observational investigation that employed elements of self-report in order to examine associations between power, conflict behaviors, and relationship satisfaction. Couples participated in the study one couple at a time for a 2-hour session. Upon arrival to the lab, couple members completed background questionnaires, which assessed various personal and relationship characteristics, as well as areas of disagreement in their relationship. Of interest in the current investigation were assessments of power and relationship satisfaction. (Described below).

After completing the background questionnaire, couple members were asked to participate in several activities as part of a larger investigation on romantic relationships.

For the conflict discussion, the experimenter instructed couple members to discuss their greatest area of disagreement and asked that they try to resolve the disagreement. Then, couple members engaged in a six-minute conflict interaction, which was the focus of this investigation. Couples were unobtrusively observed and recorded. Later, independent raters coded each couple member for specific behaviors enacted during the discussion, such as demand, withdraw, criticism, and negative affect/hostility (described in detail below).

Following the conflict interaction, couples discussed the first time they met in order to assuage any tension or negative affect that had resulted from the conflict interaction. Couples were then debriefed and compensated for their participation.

Measures

Couple members completed self-report measures of power, relationship satisfaction, and areas of disagreement in the relationship.

Power. *Power* was measured with two items to assess balance of power and decision-making power (Felmlee, 1994). To measure balance of power, couple members were independently asked: “In your relationship, who has more power?” Couple members were asked to rate the item on a 7-point Likert scale, with one labeled “I have much more power than my partner,” four labeled “we both have equal power,” and seven labeled “My partner has much more power than I do.” To measure decision-making power, couple members were asked “In your relationship, who makes more of the decisions about what the two of you do together?” On a 7-point response scale, one was labeled “I make most of the decisions,” four was labeled “we both do equally,” and seven was labeled “my partner makes most of the decisions.” A composite representing the

individual's level of perceived power within the relationship was computed by averaging the two power items. Cronbach's α for this composite was .80.

We first used this composite, continuous assessment of power to examine the extent to which perceived power predicts behavioral tendencies during conflict. Then, in order to examine differences in conflict behaviors for perceived power equality versus inequality, we created two levels of a categorical power variable: *Equal Power* and *Unequal Power*. The first group, *Equal Power*, included individuals who reported having equal power in their relationship (an average score of 4 on the power composite). The second group, *Unequal Power*, included individuals who reported having more or less power in the relationship (an average score of less than or greater than 4 on the power composite). Thus, each individual couple member was classified into either an equal power or high power group depending on their own perceptions of equality of power in the relationship; equality of power is an individual-level rather than a couple-level variable. Table 1 presents the distribution of participants into the two power balance groups.

Relationship Satisfaction. A composite of six items from Collins and Read's (1990) measures was used to assess relationship satisfaction. This measure included questions, such as, "How satisfied do you feel in your relationship?" which were reported on an 8-point scale (8 being the highest satisfaction). Cronbach's α for *relationship satisfaction* was .89.

Areas of Disagreement. Each couple member completed the *Couple's Problem Inventory* (Knox, 1971), rating the severity and duration of 15 common areas of disagreement in close relationships (e.g. finances, amount of time spent together, division

of housework). The area of disagreement receiving the highest average severity rating was selected for the disagreement discussion.

Observational Measures of Conflict Interaction. Independent raters, blind to the study hypotheses and trained to reliability, observed recordings of the six-minute conflict discussions and rated the quality and frequency of behaviors exhibited by each partner on a 5-point scale, with 1 = “Not at all” and 5 = “Consistent or highest quality”.

At least two coders rated each of the following behaviors (ratings were averaged across coders and ICCs are reported for each behavior):

Affective Behaviors. *Positive affect toward partner* (expression of positive affect specifically toward the partner such as laughing with a partner, smiling at him/her, or an enthusiastic voice tone directed toward the partner, ICC = .79), *negative affect/hostility* (expressions of anger or hostility expressed specifically toward the partner such as negative voice tone, verbal and nonverbal responses that communicate hostility, displeasure, or disapproval, ICC = .78), and *dysphoric affect* (sad or depressed expressed emotional states, ICC = .77),

Positive Behaviors. *Affection toward the partner* (physical and verbal displays of affection such as hugging, kissing, long romantic looks, and statements like “I love you”, ICC = .73), *emotional support/validation* (positive listening and speaking skills that demonstrate support and understanding to the partner, ICC = .71), *positive problem-solving* (describing/defining the problem positively or neutrally without resorting to blaming the partner, expressing wishes for a desired outcome to be reached, contributing to the discussion effectively, ICC = .87), *accepting responsibility* (explicitly accepting responsibility for a past or present problem that has been previously defined within the

negotiation, ICC= .85), and *self-disclosure* (statements about feelings, wishes or beliefs that are more than minimal personal significance, statements that reveal something about the person's feelings about the conflict, ICC = .80).

Demand/Withdrawal. *Demand* (raising or pursuing topics of unhappiness and conflict, ICC= .80), and *withdrawal* (avoidance of interaction or of problem's existence, ICC= .87).

Negative Behavior. Negative behaviors coded included denial and the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. *Denial* (active rejection of a problem's existence or of personal responsibility for the problem being discussed, ICC= .85), Four horsemen: *Criticism* (attacking partner's personality or character, usually with the intent of making someone right and someone wrong, ICC= .75), *defensiveness* (warding off a perceived attack by one's partner and portraying one's self as an innocent victim, ICC= .88), *contempt* (attacking partner's sense of self with the intention to insult or psychologically abuse the partner, ICC= .92), and *stonewalling* (severely withdrawing from interaction to avoid conflict, ICC= .87).

Results

Descriptives

Means and standard deviations for all study variables, power and outcomes (conflict behaviors and relationship satisfaction), are displayed in Table 2. The power of dating partners was significantly negatively correlated ($r = -.61, p < .0005$), indicating that as one couple member's reported power is high the other's is low.

Data Analytic Strategy

In order to test the impact of both couple-members' perceived power on behavioral outcomes during the conflict interaction, we used the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 1999; Kenny, Kashy & Cook, 2006), a dyadic data analytic technique, using the mixed model procedure in SPSS. The APIM conceptualizes dyadic relationships as inherently interdependent, and applies the appropriate statistical methods to control for the interdependence in dyad-members' responses. This technique tests for the independent variables' effects on individuals' outcomes, but each individual is nested within a dyad, controlling for the non-independence of responses among relationship-partners. This allows researchers to estimate the effect of both couple-members' behavior on outcomes by isolating "actor" and "partner" effects (see Kenny & Cook, 2006 for a detailed description of APIM analyses). For this study, an "actor effect" refers to the influence of an individual's own power on their own outcomes (e.g., the effect of the boyfriend's perceived power on his own positive affect during the conflict discussion). A "partner effect" signifies the impact of the individual's intimate partner's power on the individual's outcome (e.g., the effect of the girlfriend's perceived power on the boyfriend's positive affect). To test whether the effect of perceived power was specific to boyfriends or girlfriends, we tested for interactions of power and gender, where girlfriends were coded as 0 and boyfriends were coded as 1. This allowed us to test whether outcomes were only (or more strongly) related to boyfriends' or girlfriends' power. Analyses were conducted using the Mixed Models procedure in SPSS.

Power and Conflict Behaviors

This first set of analyses tests power as a continuous variable (the power composite) as a predictor of conflict behaviors and relationship satisfaction.

Affective Behaviors. Results revealed a significant actor effect for positive affect: the actor's higher perceived power was associated with his/her own less positive affect, $F(1, 35.3) = 8.3$, estimate = $-.36$, $p = .006$. There was also a non-significant trend for negative affect, $F(1, 35.6) = 1.7$, estimate = $.19$, $p = .19$, in which the actor's higher perceived power corresponded with the actor's increased negative affect. Thus, it appears that high power was associated with less positive affect and more negative affect/hostility during the conflict discussion.

Positive Behaviors: With regard to positive behaviors during the conflict discussion, results revealed a marginally significant partner effect for affection: actors whose partners had higher perceived power exhibited less affection during the conflict interaction, $F(1, 35.7) = 3.7$, $p = .06$, estimate = $-.37$. There were no other significant actor or partner effects for any of the other positive behaviors assessed.

Demand/Withdrawal: No significant results were found.

Negative Behaviors: No significant results were found.

Relationship Satisfaction: No significant results were found.

Power Equality Versus Inequality and Conflict Behaviors

The next set of analyses tested hypotheses using the categorical variable representing power equality versus inequality as a predictor of conflict behaviors and relationship satisfaction.

Affective Behaviors. Results are shown in Table 3. There were no significant effects of perceived power equality or inequality for *positive affect*. There was a

significant interaction between gender and partner power equality predicting for *negative affect/hostility*, in which men whose girlfriends perceived power equality showed more negative affect and hostility. There was a marginal trend for partners' perceived power equality predicting actors' *dysphoric affect*. When partners perceived power equality in the relationship, actors demonstrated more dysphoric affect. This effect was marginally stronger for men than for women. In other words, when men's girlfriends perceived power equality, men displayed more dysphoric affect.

Positive Behaviors. As shown in Table 4, there was a marginally significant actor effect for *affection*. Individuals who perceived themselves as having unequal power compared to their partner showed more affection during the conflict interaction. There was a marginal actor effect for *emotional support*: Actors who perceived themselves as having unequal power showed more emotional support. A significant gender by power equality interaction indicated that this effect was stronger for women than for men. In other words, women who perceived a power inequality with their partner were more emotionally supportive during the conflict interaction than men who perceived a power inequality.

In addition, there was a marginal actor effect for *positive problem solving*. Actors who perceived an equality of power in their relationship exhibited more positive problem solving during the conflict interaction. There was also a significant partner effect for positive problem solving: When the partner perceived a power inequality, the actor displayed more positive problem solving. A significant gender x partner power equality interaction indicated that this partner effect was stronger for women than for men. That is, women whose boyfriends perceived power inequality exhibited more positive problem

solving during conflict. There was a significant gender x partner power equality interaction for *accepting responsibility*, in which partner's perceived power inequality predicted one's own tendency to accept responsibility. This effect was stronger for women, indicating that women whose boyfriends perceived power inequality accepted responsibility more during the conflict interaction. Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 4.

Demand/Withdrawal. As shown in Table 6, there was a significant partner effect predicting withdrawal, indicating that when partners perceived more power equality, actors showed more *withdrawal* during the conflict interaction. A significant partner power equality x gender interaction indicated that this partner effect was stronger for men than for women. Specifically, men whose girlfriends perceived power equality within the relationship displayed more withdrawal during the conflict interaction. No significant actor, partner, or gender effects were found for demand. Means, standard deviations, and significance tests are shown in Table 5.

Negative Behavior. As shown in Table 6, a significant effect emerged for denial during the conflict interaction. Specifically, there was a significant gender effect for *denial*, indicating that women showed more denial during the conflict interaction than men. Means, standard deviations, and significance tests for all variables are shown in Table 6. *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse:* As shown in Table 7, there was a marginally significant gender x partner power equality interaction for *criticism*, indicating that the effect of partner perceived power equality on criticism is stronger for men than for women. More specifically, men whose girlfriends perceived power equality criticized more during conflict than women whose boyfriends perceived power equality. No

significant effects were found for *defensiveness*, *stonewalling*, or *contempt*. Means, standard deviations, and results of significance tests are shown in Table 7.

Relationship Satisfaction. No significant effects were found for relationship satisfaction. Means, standard deviations, and results of significance tests are shown in Table 8.

Discussion

This is the first work to investigate how the perceived power of couple members impacts behavioral tendencies during conflict. This study provides an important contribution to the body of literature on conflict in close relationships by indicating that relationship power is a significant determinant of behavior during conflict.

We had three goals in this research. The first was to examine the association between perceived power/power equality and behaviors during conflict. The second was to examine the role of gender in predicting how perceived power and perceived power equality are associated with behavioral tendencies during conflict. Finally, we aimed to examine the association between perceived power and power equality and relationship satisfaction.

Power as a Continuous Variable

In order to examine power on a continuum from low to high, we first assessed power as a continuous variable. Consistent with our predictions, partners who had relatively higher perceived power exhibited strong negative affect during the conflict interaction. Individuals with high power displayed less positive affect and more negative affect/hostility. These results may be explained by Interdependence Theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Interdependence theory states that individuals who are more dependent on their partners, and therefore have less power, tend to be more

accepting of unequal exchanges in their relationships. Furthermore, in these power imbalanced relationships, individuals with high power may have better alternatives, making them more likely to leave their relationships unless their partners provide them with special outcomes, like great amounts of love and affection. Although our results did not demonstrate a significant difference in positive affect and affection for those with low power, the significantly lower levels of displayed positive affect for those with high power are consistent with interdependence theory. These high power individuals may be independent from their partners and have appealing alternatives, leading them to not need to express positive affect and affection the way partners with low perceived power do. These results fit nicely with an established theory, and expand on this theory by offering evidence for behavior on the part of high power individuals that complements the existing findings concerning the behavior of low power individuals.

We also found that individuals whose partners reported high power exhibited less affection during the conflict interaction. This partner effect for affection is contradictory to interdependence theory detailed above. Because there were no significant actor effects, it is possible that these individuals whose partners reported high power all displayed less affection, regardless of their own perceived power, but with different motivations. One possible explanation for this finding is that individuals whose partners have a sense of high power take on the role of the low-power individual, and thus experience the inhibition-related affect, cognition, and behavior that can be associated with low power (Keltner, Gruenfeld, Anderson, 2003). On the other hand, it is also possible that the partner's high rating of power is not indicative of the actor's low power. In this case, individuals whose partners have high perceived power may be showing less affection

because they do not perceive themselves as having low power and are dissatisfied with their partner's misguided sense of power over them.

We did not find significant associations between power and demand, withdrawal, criticism, or defensiveness. It is possible that power is not a key predictor of these behaviors. We posit that high and low power people might engage in these behaviors equally, despite differences in motivations. For example, some people who perceive high power may demand in order to assert their dominance in the relationship, while others who perceive high power may withdraw in order to avoid change and maintain the status quo. Similarly, some individuals who perceive themselves as having high power may criticize because their position of power allows them to take acute notice of their partner's flaws and to feel comfortable expressing these criticisms, others perceiving high power may not feel the need to criticize their partner because of their satisfying position of power. Thus, we did not see significant differences in overall effect for high versus low power.

Power Equality as a Categorical Variable

Consistent with our predictions that power equality would be associated with more positive conflict behaviors, results revealed that perceived power equality was associated with more positive problem solving. However, because positive problem-solving is a multi-faceted behavior and cannot be identified solely as a dichotomous, positive or negative behavioral variable, this finding warrants a more thorough examination. Some past research has indicated that relationships in which there is an equality, or near-equality, of power are associated with more attempts at gaining control by couple members than relationships in which there is an extreme power imbalance.

Individuals within these couples will make more of an effort to gain control and achieve their desired outcome via communication like positive problem-solving when negotiating with their partner in response to their perception that their partner is questioning their decisions (McDonald, 1980). Despite its positive nature, positive problem solving has been identified by past research (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987) as an integrative, cooperative, influence strategy. It is possible that partners perceiving power equality use positive problem solving as an influence strategy to get what they want because the lack of power discrepancy makes it a closer match in terms of which partner will achieve their desired outcome.

Contrary to our predictions, we found that couple members who perceived their power within the relationship as equal to their partner did not always display more positive conflict behaviors. In fact, perceived power equality often led to more negative behaviors, and perceived power inequality often led to more positive behaviors. We found that individuals who perceived themselves as having unequal power compared to their partner showed more affection during the conflict interaction. It is possible that this association is the result of compensatory behavior. For example, individuals who perceive power inequality may be compensating for the inequality (particularly if they are in a position of low power) by displaying increased affection toward the partner in order to prevent the partner from leaving for a better alternative (consistent with Interdependence Theory). Alternatively, if these individuals have greater power in the relationship, they may be acting from their position of high power in a positive, extraverted way (as is characteristic of individuals who are high in power (Keltner, Gruenfeld, Anderson, 2003)).

Along with this unexpected association between power inequality and more positive behaviors, another significant trend that emerged was that men whose girlfriends perceived power equality tended to display more negative behaviors. Men whose girlfriends perceived power equality within the relationship displayed more negative affect, dysphoric affect, criticism, and withdrawal during the conflict interaction. It is possible that this trend reflects men acting out as a result of their frustration with their girlfriends' perception of power equality. Past research has found assorted results regarding the association between gender and power; while it has been suggested that men tend to have more power (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Gillespie, 1971; Bernard, 1972; Scanzoni, 1982) and demonstrate more decision-making (Peplau, 1979), other research has found no significant differences in perceived power (Sprecher, 1985). Our findings may be influenced by the traditional male role stereotype indicating that men must be dominant, powerful, and in control. To the extent that men endorse this stereotype, they may react especially negatively to being with a woman who perceives power equality, which may result in exhibiting more negative behaviors, whether it is in a conflict-confronting or conflict-avoiding manner.

We also found that women whose boyfriends perceived power inequality displayed more positive behaviors during conflict; these women employed more positive problem solving and accepted responsibility. It is possible that these women engage in positive, productive behaviors as a way of promoting relationship health and alleviating their boyfriends' frustration with his perception of the power inequality within the relationship. Similarly, we also found that women who perceived power inequality were more emotionally supportive. It is possible that all of these relationship-promoting

behaviors in the face of perceived power inequality are compensatory in nature. In order to preserve the relationship, women make a noticeable effort to engage in positive behaviors.

Despite our prediction that relationship satisfaction would be associated with equal power, results revealed no significant links between power and relationship satisfaction. The non-significant results for power predicting relationship satisfaction contradicts past research indicating that relationship satisfaction is positively associated with equally balanced power (Horwitz, 1982; Gray-Little & Burkes, 1983; Caldwell and Peplau, 1984).

There are notable limitations to the study reported here. First, the sample consisted of mostly Caucasian, middle or upper socioeconomic status, heterosexual couples. Findings may not generalize to other populations. Second, findings do not take into account the nature of couples' disagreements, including conflict topic, severity, and which partner rated the topic more highly. It is possible that these nuances of the disagreement topic used for the conflict interaction could play a significant role in conflict approaches. In addition, we provided couple members with one conflict topic for the discussion, the one that they identified as the biggest area of disagreement in the relationship (based on the ratings of both couple members). If this topic was less severe than anticipated or already resolved, then the conflict interactions may not have been representative of their typical interactions surrounding a contentious topic. Third, behavioral interactions in the laboratory may not be representative of how the couple engages in conflict outside of the laboratory. Finally, this study only examined perceived power based on self-report. We do not know if these perceptions of power and power

equality reflect reality. It is possible that women who report a perception of equal power in their relationship actually have more power in the relationship, but report equality because they are aware that men value dominance (and don't want to report their male partner as being weak). Therefore, it could be that these men are reacting negatively to female partners who actually have the control in the relationship. We can only speculate about these findings given how we measured power.

Despite these limitations, this study offers a wealth of new information with regard to advancing knowledge of conflict processes in close relationships by demonstrating that perceived power in the relationship shapes the course of conflict discussions. This study provided evidence in support of the postulate that perceived power predicts behavioral approaches during conflict, while simultaneously indicating that gender can have significant moderating effects on conflict approaches.

Future research should control for the nature of the conflict topic (e.g. conflict topic and rated severity discrepancy between partners) in order to tease out further the effects of relationship power on conflict approaches. Future work would also benefit from outside observers' assessments of who has the most power in the relationship – or from more indirect assessments that might be less influenced by social desirability. Power is a complex term that can be defined in many different ways. Because of the multifaceted nature of power as a trait, future research should investigate the different types of power and the implications of these different subsets for conflict approaches. For example, power can be determined by considering emotional involvement in the relationship, where the partner who is more emotionally involved has less power (Waller,

1937). This type of power is different than the decision-making power tested in this study, and may have different implications for conflict approaches.

The study of power, particularly as it relates to relationship processes such as conflict in adult close relationships, has not received much research attention in recent decades. In the current study, we investigated the effects of power on behavioral tendencies during conflict and relationship satisfaction, while also examining the moderating effects of gender. Findings suggest that the association between power and conflict behaviors is quite complicated, and equal balance of power within a relationship does not always lead to more positive conflict approaches, and can in fact lead to more negative conflict approaches depending on who perceives the power equality. We hope that this work will spur researchers to consider power in a relationship (perceived or actual) as an important predictor of a variety of important relationship processes.

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Table 1. *Power Balance and Group Sizes*

<u>Power</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
Equal Power	24	32.4
Unequal Power	50	67.6

Note. $N = 74$.

Table 2. *Means and Standard Deviations for Study Variables*

<u>Variable</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Power	3.83	1.27
Relationship Satisfaction	6.85	.97
Positive Affect	2.97	.79
Affection	2.57	.99
Emotional Support	2.70	.84
Positive Problem Solving	2.76	.96
Accept Responsibility	1.67	.90
Self-Disclosure	2.93	.93
Denial	1.62	.84
Negative Affect/Hostility	1.67	.94
Dysphoric Affect	1.90	.81
Demand	2.41	.82
Withdrawal	1.67	.93
Criticism	1.64	.74
Defensiveness	1.65	.81
Contempt	1.35	.72
Stonewalling	1.07	.31

Table 3. SPSS mixed models testing the actor-partner interdependence effects of power equality/inequality predicting affective behavior outcomes.

	Estimate	<u>Positive Affect</u>		
		SE	df	t
Intercept	2.59***	.30	38.57	8.67
Gender	.54**	.24	34.58	2.22
Actor Power	.35	.29	34.84	1.19
Partner Power	.17	.33	41.99	.52
Actor x Gender	-.41	.46	51.60	-.89
Partner x Gender	-.27	.13	52.52	-.61
	Estimate	<u>Negative Affect/Hostility</u>		
		SE	df	t
Intercept	1.81***	.34	37.64	5.29
Gender	-.61**	.30	34.49	-2.04
Actor Power	.21	.33	34.70	.62
Partner Power	-.31	.38	40.27	-.80
Actor x Gender	-.12	.53	51.40	-.23
Partner x Gender	1.03*	.52	52.13	1.97
	Estimate	<u>Dysphoric Affect</u>		
		SE	df	t
Intercept	2.21***	.30	38.57	8.67
Gender	-.29	.24	34.58	2.22
Actor Power	.08	.29	34.84	1.19
Partner Power	-.47†	.33	41.99	.52
Actor x Gender	-.26	.46	51.60	-.89
Partner x Gender	.73†	.44	52.05	1.64

Note. $N = 74$.† $p \leq .10$ * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

Table 4. SPSS mixed models testing the actor-partner interdependence effects of power equality/inequality predicting positive behavior outcomes.

	<u>Affection</u>			
	Estimate	SE	df	t
Intercept	1.97***	.37	38.24	5.34
Gender	.79**	.30	34.60	2.59
Actor Power	.69†	.36	34.85	1.92
Partner Power	.32	.41	41.31	.77
Actor x Gender	-.81	.56	51.35	-1.44
Partner x Gender	-.52	.55	52.30	-.95
	<u>Emotional Support</u>			
	Estimate	SE	df	t
Intercept	2.55***	.34	34.89	7.54
Gender	.46	.36	34.90	1.27
Actor Power	.54†	.32	34.20	1.66
Partner Power	-.13	.39	35.46	-.33
Actor x Gender	-.89†	.48	54.26	-1.86
Partner x Gender	.01	.48	52.12	.01
	<u>Positive Problem Solving</u>			
	Estimate	SE	df	t
Intercept	2.29***	.36	38.34	6.28
Gender	.71	.44	35.14	1.60
Actor Power	-.58†	.34	34.06	-1.67
Partner Power	.90*	.42	34.57	2.14
Actor x Gender	.40	.53	56.82	.75
Partner x Gender	-.94†	.53	55.62	-1.78
	<u>Accepting Responsibility</u>			
	Estimate	SE	df	t
Intercept	1.97***	.30	34.02	4.74
Gender	.49	.49	35.89	.98
Actor Power	.12	.29	34.00	-.43
Partner Power	.37	.35	34.03	1.06
Actor x Gender	.14	.50	58.33	.29
Partner x Gender	-.95*	.48	65.49	-1.98
	<u>Self-Disclosure</u>			
	Estimate	SE	df	t
Intercept	2.61***	.34	34.09	7.67
Gender	.23	.53	36.29	.44
Actor Power	.49	.32	34.01	1.53
Partner Power	-.03	.39	34.16	-.09
Actor x Gender	-.48	.51	62.61	-.95
Partner x Gender	.33	.49	64.55	.66

Note. N = 74.

† $p \leq .10$ * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

Table 5. SPSS mixed models testing the actor-partner interdependence effects of power equality/inequality predicting demand/withdrawal behavior

	<u>Demand</u>				
	Estimate	SE	df	t	
Intercept	2.35***	.33	34.02	7.03	
Gender	-.22	.46	36.07	-.49	
Actor Power	.08	.31	34.00	.27	
Partner Power	-.04	.38	34.04	-.12	
Actor x Gender	.10	.45	64.52	.24	
Partner x Gender	.36	.46	58.09	.80	
	<u>Withdrawal</u>				
	Estimate	SE	df	t	
Intercept	2.51***	.32	34.00	7.70	
Gender	-1.32**	.48	35.71	-2.72	
Actor Power	-.07	.31	34.00	-.23	
Partner Power	-.93**	.37	34.00	-2.49	
Actor x Gender	.54	.50	60.46	1.08	
Partner x Gender	.99*	.48	62.80	2.04	

Note. $N = 74$.† $p \leq .10$ * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

Table 6. SPSS mixed models testing the actor-partner interdependence effects of power equality/inequality predicting a negative behavior outcome.

	Estimate	SE	<u>Denial</u> df	t
Intercept	2.16***	.31	34.00	6.80
Gender	-.86*	.44	35.76	-1.94
Actor Power	-.14	.30	34.00	-.46
Partner Power	-.52	.36	34.00	-1.42
Actor x Gender	.51	.46	61.48	1.11
Partner x Gender	.48	.45	60.39	1.06

Note. $N = 74$.

† $p \leq .10$

* $p \leq .05$

** $p \leq .01$

*** $p \leq .001$

Table 7. SPSS mixed models testing the actor-partner interdependence effects of power equality/inequality predicting “four horsemen of the apocalypse” behavior outcomes.

	<u>Criticism</u>			
	Estimate	SE	df	t
Intercept	1.48***	.22	35.02	6.52
Gender	-.04	.30	34.62	-.15
Actor Power	.33	.21	34.22	1.55
Partner Power	-.24	.25	35.68	-.93
Actor x Gender	-.20	.42	50.58	-.47
Partner x Gender	-.73†	.39	55.20	1.88
	<u>Defensiveness</u>			
	Estimate	SE	df	t
Intercept	1.26***	.30	34.22	4.16
Gender	.17	.38	35.31	.44
Actor Power	.45	.28	34.05	1.56
Partner Power	.09	.34	35.36	.28
Actor x Gender	-.39	.45	57.67	-.87
Partner x Gender	.37	.44	57.21	.83
	<u>Contempt</u>			
	Estimate	SE	df	t
Intercept	1.44***	.27	36.12	5.22
Gender	-.37	.26	34.69	-1.39
Actor Power	-.18	.26	34.46	.71
Partner Power	-.23	.31	37.55	-.74
Actor x Gender	-.11	.41	51.95	-.28
Partner x Gender	.62	.41	52.22	1.52
	<u>Stonewalling</u>			
	Estimate	SE	df	t
Intercept	1.11***	.09	34.01	11.22
Gender	-.15	.17	35.84	-.86
Actor Power	.03	.09	34.00	.40
Partner Power	-.08	.11	34.03	-.76
Actor x Gender	.01	.18	53.46	.09
Partner x Gender	.22	.16	65.43	1.35

Note. $N = 74$.

† $p \leq .10$

* $p \leq .05$

** $p \leq .01$

*** $p \leq .001$

Table 8. SPSS mixed models testing the actor-partner interdependence effects of power equality/inequality predicting relationship satisfaction.

	Estimate	<u>Relationship Satisfaction</u>		t
		SE	df	
Intercept	7.01***	.37	38.38	18.57
Gender	-.00	.45	35.12	-.00
Actor Power	-.37	.36	34.08	-1.03
Partner Power	.23	.43	34.62	.54
Actor x Gender	.13	.55	56.70	.23
Partner x Gender	-.46	.54	55.43	-.85

Note. $N = 74$.

† $p \leq .10$

* $p \leq .05$

** $p \leq .01$

*** $p \leq .001$