**The Repercussions of Power Balances in Intimate Partner Conflict**

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PSYC 3730H: Research Proposal

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Power is an attractive and desirable attribute in many domains of life. Individuals strive to gain power and subsequently exercise it, to obtain personal goals and objectives. Power can be defined as the ability to produce the intended effects, specifically to influence the behaviour of another individual (Dunbar & Albra, 2021). In the context of conflict, power has many layers and can often have pervasive impacts within the scope of intimate partnerships. Conflict can be understood as any serious disagreement between individuals and as such, is unavoidable in our social relationships. Unsurprisingly this area of study has broad practical implications and holds individual importance for how partners navigate conflict. A consideration of how the balance of power relates to the strategies an individual uses within romantic partnership conflict has obvious and immediate repercussions for relationships in every day, real-world situations. The objective of this study is to consider the relationships between power, influence strategies, and successful conflict resolution in intimate couples.

Previous literature has continually demonstrated the importance of power in relationships. Bay-Cheng et al. (2018) argued that relational stability is heavily mediated by the power one holds over another in a relationship. Their study looked to increase the understanding of the interaction between power and gender on relationship quality, specifically assessed in the domains of stability, intimacy, and pleasure. To do this, researchers performed a mixed methods study utilizing a digital life sex history calendar (a self-administered, web-based instrument) alongside a survey. The results demonstrated that balanced relationships – ones in which power is equally distributed, were deemed to have higher qualitative rates of inter-partnership intimacy and stability than unbalanced relationships. Importantly, this study also considered gender as a moderator variable for the interaction between power and relationship outcomes. A key finding supporting this claim highlighted that power imbalances are more problematic for women than men, in which women rated their relations as less intimate and stable when they perceived themselves as the individual with lower power (Bey-Chang et al., 2018). The results of this study contribute to the compelling evidence that power has a direct correlation on relationship quality.

It is difficult to unravel the exact implications gender has on power imbalances in relationships, especially due to the recent increases seen in women’s rights, and subsequently power, over the last century. Schwarzwald et al. (2013) delved into this topic by conducting two studies: one on manager-subordinate relations and one on husband-wife relations. In both studies participants estimated the frequency of power strategy usage (harsh/intermediate/soft) by men and women in three different time periods: past, present, and future. Their goal with this study was to investigate the power tactics used by either gender, and how these tactics have changed over time in the workplace and at home. It was found that males more frequently used harsh power tactics such as threats or exercising authority. In contrast, females were found to use soft tactics such as negotiation and adherence to rationality more often. Having said this, these differences in power usage strategies stratified by gender were perceived to be decreasing over time. Specifically relating to the tactics used at home, researchers found that male usage of harsh power tactics was perceived to decline over time, while females use of soft tactics was perceived to increase. The importance of this study is shown through the comparison of gendered power tactics across different social and contextual relationships, and furthermore, corroborates past research that there are often power discrepancies between genders in heterosexual relationships (Carli, 1999).

Additionally, it has been found that specific types of power are related to relationship satisfaction. Koerner & Schuetz (2021) found that couples felt relatively balanced in terms of personal power (i.e., one’s own perception of their capability to influence another) but imbalanced in positional power (power defined by the capacity to influence another based on socioeconomic resources). Overall, the researchers concluded that men were not only perceived to have more positional power, but also pursued more power (Koerner & Schuetz, 2021). It was also shown that participants who felt they held more power had more positive evaluations of their relationships, further corroborating previous power research (Körner et al., 2019). Koerner and colleagues critically highlighted the importance that subjective power had a substantial impact and relevance to the quality of relationships, more so than objective power. The relevance of such, targeted towards the current research is that perceptions of a couple’s power should be measured subjectively by them, rather than objectively. Consequently, this study will utilize self-report measures embedded within the questionnaire in place of other objectively based methodologies.

Power theories such as the dyadic power theory (DPT; Dunbar, 2004) have been employed to explain conflict interaction patterns in romantic relationships and will be used to solidify the link between power and conflict. Dunbar & Abra (2021) conducted one such study, in which their objective was to determine if DPT could provide an explanation for demand and withdrawal patterns, and furthermore investigate interpersonal power in a wider range of personal contexts. They utilized an online survey to collect data on university students. Participants were randomly assigned into a high-power, equal-power, or low-power condition. In each condition participants were primed with a paragraph encouraging them to consider a relationship in which they were in situations of high, equal, or low power while answering the questionnaire. The results indicated that ‘equal-power partners’ generally adapted a more positive style during conflict, and that these partnerships experienced higher rates of relationship satisfaction when compared to higher- or lower-partner power dynamics (Dunbar & Aba, 2021). These findings demonstrate the influence power has on communication and satisfaction – both of which are crucial components for the maintenance of relationships. It also presents a clear link between power and conflict negotiation, however, fails to specify the tactics employed within unequal- or equal-partnerships relations during conflict.

Further evidence strengthening the link between conflict interactions and power must be reviewed to solidify the connection between these two factors. For example, it has been shown that power can influence partners’ perceptions of tone and voice; particularly, high-power individuals are less accurate in emotional prosody than low-power individuals (Uskul, 2016). A connection can be drawn between the ability of a partner to accurately decode the tone and intent of their intimate partner’s voice, and a higher rate of successfully resolved conflicts. Relating to this, the way we infer traits of individuals is also mediated by our perceptions of their power level. A ‘benevolence’ bias (Orghian et al., 2018) is apparent in which we perceive powerful people to have more positive traits as opposed to negative ones (Orghian et al., 2018). This holds consequences for couples in conflict because powerful individuals may dominate these arguments. Not only is this not helpful to relationship dynamics, but the presence of such actions may be overlooked entirely by the individual with less power. Finally, power has been shown to be related to extreme conflict, specifically intimate partner violence (IPV) (Munro-Kramer et al., 2021). In college students, individuals committing IPV often also engaged in very direct influence tactics such as academic and technology-based abuse, hinting at a correlation between these two variables. The aforementioned collection of studies further helps to demonstrate the clear link between power and conflict, in that power can influence how; (1) we perceive conversation, (2) perceive our partner, and (3) direct influence strategies can be escalated to physical harm.

Current literature in this area lacks an examination of the connection between perceptions of power in relationships and subsequent tactics employed by those individuals within conflict situations. As previously stated, Bey-Cheng and colleagues (2018) highlighted the importance of power and how it can impact the stability and quality of relationships. Having said this, it would be irresponsible to ignore the practical implications of research into this topic. The objective of this study is to investigate the influence strategies used by individuals during conflict, and to identify whether perceived power impacts these strategies. Furthermore, a second objective of this study is to consider the relationships between power balances in couples and successful conflict resolution. The first proposed hypothesis is that individuals who perceive themselves as higher in power will utilize more direct strategies, such as coercion and physicality. Individuals low in power are predicted to report to use of more indirect strategies in conflict, for example gossiping or garnering social support against the opposing individual. The rationale behind this hypothesis is multifaceted; not only is there a distinct inequity in power perceptions of males compared to females (Carli, 1999), but previous evidence shows the gendered use of direct/indirect influence strategies (Schwarzwald et al., 2013). The second hypothesis of this study is that couples in which partners feel an imbalance of power are more likely to report unsuccessful resolutions of conflict, captured by escalation of conflict, lack of progress on issues, and negative affect towards their partner. The second hypothesis becomes rationalized when considering the known impacts of balances in power on accuracy in emotional prosody (Uskul, 2015), relationship satisfaction (Koerner & Schuetz, 2021), and relationship stability (Sprecher, 1997). These objectives are inestimable when considering the implications they have on everyday relationships, both professional and interpersonal. The knowledge of power balances and their effects on couples may go on to facilitate equity in relationships and contribute to better relationship health and functioning.

**Methods**

**Participants**

A total of 100 romantic couples were recruited from Trent University to partake in this study (*N =* 200). Of the 100 couples, 60 were heterosexual (60%), 20 were lesbian couples (20%) and 20 were gay male couples (20%). There was an even split with 100 male and 100 female participants, with ages ranging from 17 to 27 (*M* = 21.33, *SD =* 2.44). All participants that completed the survey entirely were included within the study.

**Materials**

***Perceived Power in Relationships***

A simple three-item Likert scale was developed by researchers of this study to measure the perceptions of power balance in intimate partnerships (see appendix). Participants read a series of statements and were asked to indicate how much they agreed with a particular statement on a scale of 0-10, with zero being they do not agree at all and 10 being they agree totally. Items on the scale were developed from Dunbar’s research (2008).

***Strategies in Conflict***

The Richardson Conflict Response Questionnaire (RRQ, 2003) was utilized to broadly assess the strategies employed by an individual within conflict situations. This questionnaire contains 28 items, 10 of which are meant to measure direct strategies, and 10 meant to measure indirect strategies as well as eight filler items (see appendix). Respondents indicated the frequency of which they engage in such strategies on a 1-5 scale (1 meaning a participant had never engaged in those strategies and 5 meaning they used those strategies frequently). Direct and indirect items can be summed and averaged to give a representation of the use of direct and indirect strategies by an individual.

***Conflict Outcomes***

A questionnaire from Bippus (2003) was adapted to fit the goals of this study. Four of the original eight measures used by Bippus (2003) were included in this study with the intent of capturing the aftermath of conflict specifically pertaining to the emotional state of the participant and progression on the conflict issue (see appendix). Participants were instructed to think about their last conflictual interaction with the romantic partners and indicate how much they agreed with the subsequent statements; attitudes towards the conflict issue, resolution of conflict, escalation of conflict, and attitudes towards partners were each measured by five items on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 indicating they don’t agree at all with the statement and 5 indicating they agree wholly). Scores were totalled to be representative of the outcomes and emotional repercussions of their last conflict.

**Procedure**

Questionnaires were distributed to participants online via Qualtrics survey technology. An introductory paragraph included assurances of confidentiality and instructions for participants specifying they consider their current romantic partnership when responding. In addition, many power and conflict questionnaires can be tainted by a self-serving bias (Malone & Richardson, 2005). In an effort to reduce such bias, the introduction highlighted there were no wrong answers and encouraged honesty in responses. A short demographic questionnaire was embedded within the larger questionnaire to determine age, gender, ethnicity, and length of relationship. Then the three-item power questionnaire was completed, followed by the RRQ (2003), culminating with Bippus (2003) conflict outcome questionnaire. All questionnaires were contained within one larger Qualtrics survey.

The end of the survey included a debrief with the purpose of the study, the supervising faculty and contact information should they wish to reach out and learn more about the results of the study. Correlational analysis was run on the results to determine relationships between the various factors. Chi-square tests were also used to determine the relationships between the equal and unequal power categories in the dimensions of argument outcomes and use of direct versus indirect strategies.

**Discussion**

The first hypothesis will be supported by the present study. These findings will be consistent with previous literature that has shown that high power individuals are more likely to exhibit dominance in conflict situations (Dunbar & Young, 2008). However, there is a possibility that this relationship would be found to be non-significant, as we are seeing recent shifts in gender-power disparities towards equal-balance power partnerships (Schwarzwald et al., 2013). The second hypothesis will be supported. This is backed up in literature by the several studies that have demonstrated equal-power relations increases relational satisfaction (Koerner, & Schuetz, 2021), positive interaction (Dunbar & Albra, 2021), and longevity (Bay-Cheng et al., 2018).

Shortcomings to this study include the use of a correlational design. No causal explanations can be drawn from this work, we can only support the relationships that are observed. Furthermore, our power measure was designed by the researchers based off measures used in Dunbar’s research (2008). As such, the validity of the perceived power measure is low, and the convergent validity should be confirmed in subsequent research. As a final consideration, this study did not consider gender as a moderator or confounding variable. Literature has shown gender to be an important factor in the division of power (Schwarzwald et al., 2013), however considering gender differences was not a key objective of this study, and therefore analysis of gender was not included or considered.

This study contributes to the literature regarding power and conflict-interactions by considering their implications on conflict strategies employed and the subsequent outcomes of conflict. This is important because power imbalances and use of direct influence strategies have been shown to be related to detrimental conflict approaches such as violence (Skidmore et al., 2021). This study can help to demonstrate the stepwise progression of power imbalances – in which these may start with direct tactics for influence in conflict but eventually progress to more extreme strategies. Furthermore, this study also supported previous literature that power balance influences relational satisfaction, but specifically in the context of conflict outcomes. Overall, this study contributes to the literature by extending the previously known benefits of power balance to the context of conflict. The real-world implications of such pertain to the need to promote a balanced relationship, contrary to historical gender stereotypes. Future research should seek to use experimental manipulation to create causal links between conflict strategies and power balances.

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**Appendices**

Introduction and Consent

Please read the following paragraph and indicate your understanding and consent by clicking the checkmark below.

The following survey is designed to acquire knowledge about your perceived power in an intimate relationship, the strategies you engage in during conflict with your partner, and the outcomes of conflict that you experience. There are no incorrect responses, and we encourage you to responds as honestly as possible. Please think of the romantic partnership that you are currently a part of when answering the following questions. Some stress and anxiety may be felt as we will be asking questions relating to personal and potentially emotionally painful events. You have the right to stop and withdrawal from participation at any point in time. Your responses will be completely confidential and anonymous.

* I understand and agree to participate in the following survey

Demographics

What gender do you identify as?

* Female
* Male
* Other

What is your age?

Text Response: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

What ethnicity best describes you?

* White/Caucasian
* Hispanic/Latino
* Black/African American
* Native American/Indigenous
* Asian/Pacific Islander
* Other

What is your current relationship status?

* Single
* Dating
* Cohabitating (living together but not married)
* Married

What best describes your current relationship?

* Heterosexual relationship
* Homosexual relationship (male partners)
* Lesbian relationship (female partners)
* Other

How long have you been in your current relationship?

* Less than 6 months
* 6 – 12 months
* 12 – 18 months
* 18 – 24 months
* Over 2 years

Section One: Please indicate below the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Do not agree at all |  |  |  | Somewhat agree |  |  |  |  | Completely agree |

In my relationship, my partner and I have equal power and influence over each other.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Do not agree at all |  |  |  | Somewhat agree |  |  |  |  | Completely agree |

In my relationship, I have more power and influence than my partner does.

In my relationship, my partner has more power and influence than I do.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Do not agree at all |  |  |  | Somewhat agree |  |  |  |  | Completely agree |

Section Two: When answering the following questions, think about you and your partner’s last argument/conflict. Rate the frequency with which you yourself engaged in the following behaviors, 1 meaning you have never engaged in that behaviors during conflict and 5 meaning that you engage in those behaviors frequently.

1. Yelled or screamed at them.



2. Did things to irritate them.



3. Threatened to hit or throw something at them.



4. Made up stories to get them into trouble.



5. Did not show that I was angry.



6. Cursed at them.



7. Threw something at them.



8. Tried to make them look stupid.



9. Stomped out of the room.



10. Made negative comments about their appearance to someone else.



11. Hit (or tried to hit) them with something hard.



12. Insulted them or called them names to their face.



13. Talked the matter over.



14. Spread rumours about them.



15. Sulked and refused to talk about it.



16. Kicked (or tried to kick) the other person but not with anything.



17. Dropped the matter entirely.



18. Took something that belonged to them.



19. Hit (or tried to hit) the other person but not with anything.



20. Gossiped about them behind their back.



21. Pushed, grabbed, or shoved them.



22. Told others to not associate with them.



24. Waited until I calmed down and them discussed the problem.



25. Told others about the matter.



26. Threw something (but not at my partner) or smashed something.



27. Destroyed or damaged something that belonged to them.

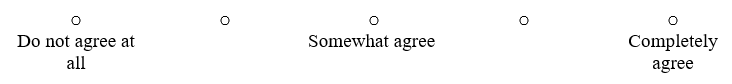


28. Gathered other friends to my side.

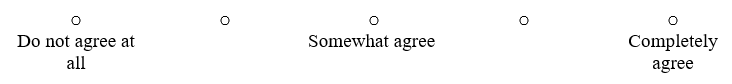


Section Three: Please read the following statements and indicate the extent to which you agree with the following when thinking about your relationships; 1 meaning you do not agree at all and 5 being that you completely agree. Think of your most recent conflict with you partner when answering these questions.

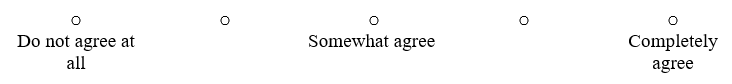
1. I felt positively toward my partner.



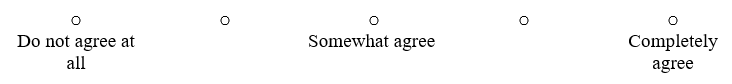
2. After my partner and I disengaged, I felt good about what we had discussed.



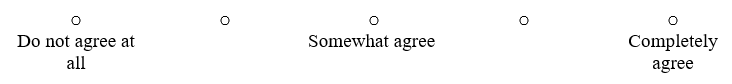
3. After my partner and I disengaged, I felt better about the topic of conversation than I had before.



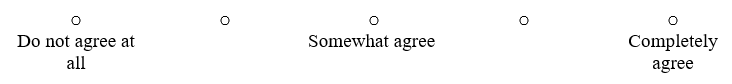
4. I felt satisfied with my partner.



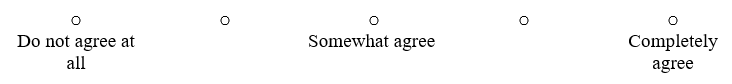
5. I felt fewer negative emotions after I talked with my partner than I did before.



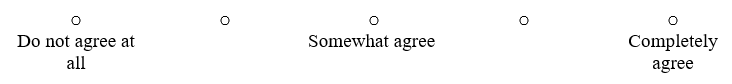
6. I felt the issue was worse than before we had talked.



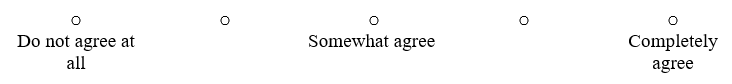
7. The conflict had definitely escalated from the beginning of the conversation to the end.



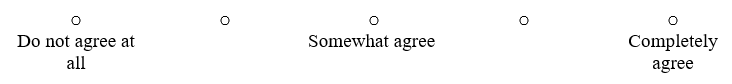
8. The conflict between us was worse.



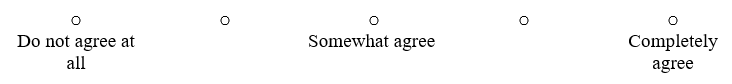
9. I felt negatively toward my partner.



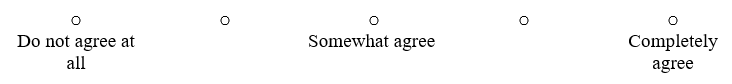
10. I did not feel comfortable talking with my partner.



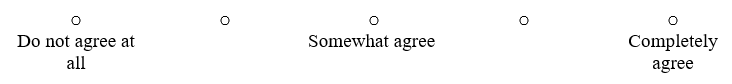
11. I felt we had resolved the conflict.



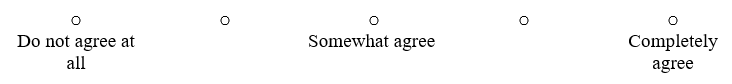
12. I felt we had made good progress in resolving the conflict.



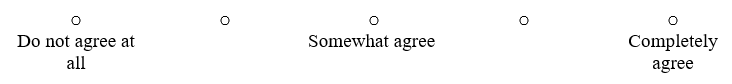
13. I felt we had solved our problem.

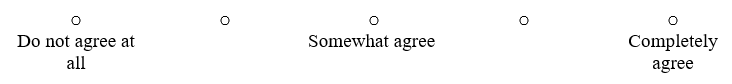


14. I felt a sense of accomplishment about the conflict.

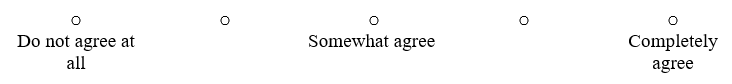


15. I had a more productive attitude about the issue we were arguing about.

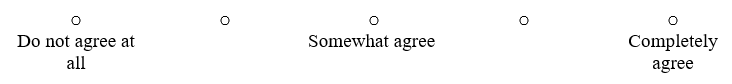
16. I felt that it was easy to talk to my partner about something we disagreed on.



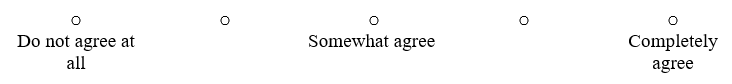
17. I felt that my partner listened to what I had to say in our discussion.



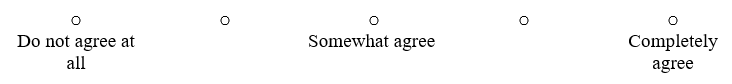
18. I felt like I could say what I wanted, even if I knew my partner wouldn’t like it.



19. I felt like our conversation stayed on the topic we wanted to discuss.



20. I felt like we both listened to what the other had to say.



Thank you for participating in this study. If you are interested in the results of the study, you can contact the study supervisor by email ([jmalcolm@trentu.ca](mailto:jmalcolm@trentu.ca)). Results of this survey will be used to examine the relationships between perceived power balances, conflict resolution and influence strategies within conflict. We thank you for you participation.

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