Power is the ability to change the behavior of another member of a social system. It is a fundamental aspect of all human relationships, including family relationships. In addition to its theoretical importance, the balance of power in marriage is also an important variable for therapists and family life educators.

Theories Explaining Power Differentials

Theories and research explaining couple-to-couple and society-to-society differences in the balance of power in marriage appear to be inconsistent and contradictory. Much of the seeming contradiction stems from assuming that the various explanations are alternatives to each other. Instead, power should be viewed as having multiple determinants, and each theory identifies one or more of the many determinants. This multiple-determined theoretical perspective was formulated in a classic paper by J. R. P. French and Bertram Raven (1959) that identified six "bases" (determinants or explanations) of power: coercion, reward, legitimacy or the right to compliance, identification with the person seeking compliance, expertise or experience, and information or knowledge. Almost all subsequent research on the determinants of power can be classified under one of these six categories, although often other terminology is used. For example, much of the research on the ability of one person to provide valued rewards uses the term "resources" to refer to economic rewards, and much of the research on legitimacy uses the term "culture" or "cultural context" to refer to culturally scripted legitimacy.

Economic resources. The term "resources" was introduced by Robert Blood and Donald Wolfe (1960) for the idea that the spouse who provides the most valued resources to a marriage will have the most power. The original formulation emphasized economically important resources such as income, education, and occupational status. A sizable body of research in the ensuing two decades confirmed the findings of Blood and Wolfe's study but also demonstrated that the ability to provide economic reward by itself is not a sufficient explanation for which partner has the most power. Resource theory in the sense of an exclusive focus on economic resources became discredited. However, the fundamental tenant of the theory continues to be supported, even as new research modified it by expanding the range of determinants to include more of the six bases for power identified by French and Raven (1959). These other bases of power interact with economic resources. For example, Martin King Whyte (1990) concluded that when couples pool their income and other economic resources, the greater contribution of one partner to the pool does not influence marital power. These findings are not necessarily a refutation of the idea that economic resources influence power in marriage. Rather, they indicate specifications that must be included as part of the theory.

Interpersonal skills and relationships. Differences between couples in marital power have also been related to differences in interpersonal skills and relationships of the partners. These studies illustrate what French and Raven (1959) identify as expertise as a basis of power. Marc DeTurck and Gerald Miller (1986), for example, found that skill in communicating with a spouse affects marital power. Similarly, Jan Pahl (1983) found that money management skills influence power in decision making. What George Conklin (1979) calls the theory of primary interest and presumed competency also illustrates expertise as a basis of power.

The "primary interest" aspect of Conklin's theory is the idea that the spouse who has the most interest in a certain decision will tend to have the power to make that type of decision. This seems to contradict the principle of least interest (Waller 1951)—the idea that the spouse who is least interested in maintaining the relationship will have greater power in the marriage. This principle is illustrated by Francesca Cancian's (1987) argument that because of the "feminization of love" women need love and tenderness more than men. This makes women more emotionally dependent on marriage and, consistent with the principle of least interest, reduces their power. Both principles are correct. Some spouses can exercise power by taking the initiative, and others by the explicit or implicit coercion of threatening to leave.

Power strategies (in French and Raven's theory, power based on expertise and knowledge) can also be considered an aspect of the interpersonal skill theory of power. Strategies, in turn, can depend on circumstances. Rodney Cate, James Koval, and James Ponzetti (1984) and Christine Sexton and Daniel Perlman (1989) found that husbands and wives in dual-career couples use more and different types of strategies than single-career couples to gain power in the marriage. Ethnic culture and circumstances also
influence power strategies, as shown by Mwalimu Burgest and Mary Goosby (1985), who identified four "games of power" used in African-American families to gain or maintain the upper hand.

**Social structural theories.** In addition to expanding the scope of resources beyond those tied to economic contributions to the family, resource theory underwent another major change in response to findings from cross-cultural and cross-class research. Mirra Komarovsky (1964), for example, found that among working-class couples the husbands with the highest income and education did not have the most power. Studies in some other societies also often failed to show a strong relationship between resources and power. These cross-class and cross-cultural discrepancies led Hyman Rodman (1972) to formulate a "resources in cultural context" theory. He argued that individual resources are relatively unimportant in societies where the cultural context institutionalizes male dominance in the family. Rodman's theory seems to exemplify what French and Raven (1959) had earlier called legitimacy as a basis of power.

A feminist version of marital power based on legitimacy derived from cultural norms was put forth by Dair Gillespie (1971). She theorized that marital power can best be described as a caste/class system because husbands as a class have power in marriage as a result of discrimination against women in society, not because of the specific resources they contribute to the marriage. The feminist perspective overlaps with conflict theory as applied to the study of marital power by Randall Collins (1971) and Pauline Boss and her colleagues (1993). This approach holds that power differentials within families are a result of sex stratification in the larger society and that family members with the most power in the larger society are more able than others to advance their interests within the family.

Research by Rosemary Cooney and her colleagues (1982) on Puerto Rican families tested the theory that normative ascription of power overrides resource contribution. They found that the decision-making power associated with the contribution of resources changed as predicted between generations, depending on the level of assimilation and acceptance of modern values.

Rebecca Warner, Gary Lee, and Janet Lee (1986) found that women had more power in societies characterized by cultures that specify matrilocality residence, nuclear rather than extended families, and matrilineal descent. These aspects of social organization affect marital power regardless of whether or not they are normative. The influence of nonnormative social organization was illustrated by a study of families in Bombay, India, which found that despite strong norms specifying male dominance, wives in nuclear households had more power than wives in extended households (Straus 1975). A comparative study of couples in Bombay and Minneapolis also found that economic and interpersonal skill resources and the resource of kin support influenced marital power in both cities (Straus 1988). Similarly, a study of 122 societies did not find support for the overriding importance of normative ascription of power (Lee and Peterson 1983). It was found that even in strongly patriarchal societies, wives' resources increased the likelihood that they would have marital power.

Other social organization variables that have been shown to influence the balance of power in marriage include whether the couple is married or cohabiting, whether it is a second marriage, whether there are minor children, and the age of the partners.

**Multidetermined theories.** Rather than thinking of individual resource theories and social structural theories as competing, it is more fruitful to think of them as parts of a multidetermined system. For example, Komarovsky's (1964) theory encompassed both types of determinants, including systems of mate selection, willingness to take advantage of a spouse's vulnerabilities, manipulative skills, social rank in the community, lower emotional involvement, and cultural norms vesting power in men. Komarovsky was also one of the first to point out that violence is a noneconomic resource through which men gain power in marriage. Rae Lesser Blumberg and Marion Tolbert Coleman (1989) also developed a multidetermined model to explain marital power.

**Trends in Marital Power**

Research on trends in marital power since the early 1980s has mostly been under the influence of feminist scholarship in the form of studies of the changing roles of women. These studies have found a trend toward more egalitarian marriages. Explanations of the trend seem to fall under the same headings as in studies of marital power done in the 1960s and 1970s.

Some authors, such as Phyllis Moen (1992), note the economic resources women acquired with the increase in the percentage of women in paid employment. For example, the percentage of women with paid jobs and with children under six years of age increased from 13 percent in 1950 to 52 percent in 1987.

Other authors have emphasized the normative shift brought about by the feminist movement, which campaigned for equality between men and women as a societal goal. Despite these gains, traditional roles and power imbalances remain (Moen 1992). The review by Paula England and Diane Swoboda (1988) concluded that although women are taking on more traditional male roles (e.g., careers, sports, and criminal activities), husbands are not taking on traditional female roles (e.g., housework and child care), and this preserves inequality in marital power.
Consequences of Power Distribution

Much of the research since 1980 has focused on the consequences of the unequal distribution of marital power. These studies uncovered a wide array of consequences. Empirical research has generally confirmed Jessie Bernard's (1972) idea that, as a result of greater power, husbands are more satisfied with their marriage than are wives (Aida and Falbo 1991; Fowers 1991). Mark Whisman and Neil Jacobson (1990) found that marital satisfaction is greatest for the spouse with the greatest power. However, Bernadette Gray-Little (1982) found that marital satisfaction is greater in traditional marriages.

The mental health of spouses is also linked to power. Wives who have greater power report higher levels of self-esteem (DeTurck and Miller 1986) and lower rates of depression (Mirowsky 1985). Gladis Kaufman (1988) found that egalitarian marriages result in the least stress for wives and that both egalitarian and husband-dominated (as opposed to wife-dominated) relationships result in the least stress for husbands.

The distribution of power in marriage is related to the division of household labor. Gienna Spitz (1988) argued that the spouse with the most power and resources used his or her power to pass the household work on to the other spouse. Arlie Hochschild (1989) confirmed this hypothesis for men but not for women. Women continued to do the majority of the housework regardless of their economic contribution. Beth Anne Shelton (1990) found that although women with paid employment do less housework, their husbands did little more than husbands of women without paid jobs.

Physical violence is more likely to occur in marriages where the power is unequally distributed (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz 1980). One explanation is what Craig Allen and Murray Straus (1984) call the "ultimate resource theory." When husbands lack economic or interpersonal skill resources to maintain a dominant position in the marriage, they tend to fall back on a resource that, on average, husbands have more than wives: physical size and strength.

A number of other consequences of marital power have been studied. For example, spouses in egalitarian relationships tend to evaluate each other more highly and perceive that the spouse evaluates them more highly than in husband-dominant relationships (Lundgren, Jergens, and Gibson 1982). Regardless of sex, traditionally male characteristics were attributed to the partner perceived as the leader, and traditionally female characteristics tended to be attributed to the partner with less power (Gerber 1988). Success in losing weight by wives is related to their having an income and control of the checkbook (Hamilton and Zimmerman 1985).

The studies cited indicate that inequality in marriage has serious negative effects. However, some studies suggest that when the inequality is in the form of female dominance, the negative effects are less severe. Both male dominance and female dominance are associated with a higher risk of violence than in egalitarian marriages, but the risk is greatest in male-dominant marriages (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz 1980). Some studies have found no harmful consequences of female dominance (Gray 1984; Henggeler et al. 1988).

As a result of these studies, it is known that unequal power in marriage is not merely contrary to democratic and humanistic values; it also has a variety of harmful effects, including lowered marital satisfaction and an increased probability of conflict, stress, depression, and violence.

Measuring Power

Although there is agreement on the importance of understanding and measuring marital power, how to measure it is a subject of controversy. This can be illustrated by the controversy over Blood and Wolfe's (1960) Decision Power Index. This index measures power by asking who had the final say in respect to a series of decisions, such as what house or apartment to take, or how much money to spend per week on food. It stimulated a great deal of research because it is brief and can be included in survey research. Ironically, the Decision Power Index is probably also the most frequently criticized aspect of the research it stimulated. These criticisms do not necessarily mean that other measures are better. In fact, the criticisms apply to at least an equal or greater extent to other measures. In addition, much of the criticism of this instrument is based on plausible assumptions rather than empirical research that compared the Decision Power Index with some other measure and found the other measure to be better. An example is the assumption that, since the Decision Power Index was developed for use in the United States, it is not valid to use it for other societies. Despite the plausibility of this assumption, when it has been used in cultures as diverse as those of Japan and India, the findings tend to parallel those obtained for American couples or to differ in ways that reflect the unique features of that culture and, therefore, show the ability of the Decision Power Index to provide culturally meaningful findings (Allen 1984; Allen and Straus 1984).

Large discrepancies have been found between data provided by a wife and data provided by her husband (Monroe et al. 1985). It has been assumed that this will also result in findings that are different when the analysis uses data from interviewing husbands as compared to findings when the analysis uses data provided by wives. Janet Bokemeier and Pamela Monroe (1983), for example, deplore the fact that most of the
eighty studies they reviewed used a single family member as the informant, but they do not discuss any studies that compare the results of testing the same hypothesis using data provided by wives with data provided by husbands. In fact, the few studies that have actually investigated this issue found that the results tend to be parallel (Allen 1984; Allen and Straus 1984; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz 1980). The empirical data on reliability do show the Decision Power Index to be low relative to tests with fifty or a hundred items, ignoring the fact that it is not lower than the reliability of other instruments with only eight items (Allen 1984; Allen and Straus 1984). There does not seem to have been research that compares the reliability of the Decision Power Index to other measures of marital power.

The problems of “final say” measures of marital power are serious, and research to develop better measures is needed. However, the available empirical evidence does not show any alternatives that are more valid or more reliable. Different measures do yield different findings, but probably more because they measure different aspects of marital power, not because one is valid and the other is not.

Conclusions

Research from a feminist perspective reinvigorated research on marital power by focusing on gender-based differences in power. This should not obscure the fact that in addition to normative ascription of superior power to husbands and gender bias in economic opportunities, many other characteristics of the partners and the marriage affect the balance of power. Despite considerable progress in understanding the determinants of power in marriage, there is much still to be learned. For this reason, the balance of power in marriage will continue to be an important issue to study. Power will also continue to be an important quality-of-life issue, because research shows that inequality has many harmful effects and because, despite progress toward equality, inequality remains predominant. Thus, it is important that steps to achieve greater equality in marriage be a focus of family life education and family therapy. However, important as these efforts are, it is equally important to keep in mind the research that shows that much of the inequality in marriage has its roots in the inequality between men and women in the larger society. Consequently, an essential part of national family policy is to reduce the inequality between men and women, which is at the heart of much of the imbalance in power between husbands and wives.

(See also: Conflict; Dual-Earner Families; Equity and Close Relationships; Family Gender Roles; Family Life Education; Family Policy; Family Therapy; Family Violence; Gender; Marital Quality; Measures of Family Characteristics; Resource Management)

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


