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Power, Gender, and Sexual Behavior

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Relationships among power, gender, and sexual behavior were investigated through a questionnaire completed by 191 college undergraduates. Results indicated that the relationship between power and sexual behavior depended on the type of sexual behavior and how power was measured. Power measured by dominance as a sexual motive was associated with sexual behavior across gender. Power measured by submission as a sexual motive was associated with engaging in usual sexual behavior for women and with abstaining from it for men. The power of both partners in the relationship and power as a sexual motive were associated with engaging in unusual sexual behavior for both men and women. Partners' relative power was unrelated to sexual behavior. Results point to the value of employing multiple measures of power in research on romantic relationships and sexual behavior. Findings supported, and were discussed in terms of, the matching hypothesis, equity theory, and men's (compared to women's) greater willingness to engage in sexual behavior in dating relationships.

Power has been recognized as an important variable in the study of romantic relationships since the 1950s (Waller & Hill, 1951). However, few studies have examined associations between power and sexual behavior even though many factors have been found to predict sexual behavior in young adults, including relational, social, and individual variables (see Christopher & Roosa, 1991, for a review).

Power is a potentially important predictor of sexual behavior for two reasons. First, power is considered by some theorists to be a salient variable in social relationships (e.g., French & Raven, 1959; Kemper, 1978). Because sex is an important aspect of most romantic relationships, associations between power and sexual behavior merit examination.

Second, Oliver and Hyde (1993) pointed out that neo-analytic, sociobiological, social learning, social role, and script theories all expect women to have more negative attitudes toward casual, premarital sex than do men. Indeed, their meta-analysis of gender differences in sexuality found large gender differences in both sexual permissiveness and casual intercourse. Thus, it is not surprising to find conflict in dating relationships as to when and to what extent sexual behavior occurs (Cupach & Metts, 1991; Sprecher & McKinney, 1993). Where conflict exists power may be a relevant variable.

An exception to the lack of research in this area is Blumstein and Schwartz's (1983) finding that the more powerful partner was more likely to refuse sex. Another exception is Kalof's (1995) finding that, among adolescents, social power (defined as confidence with the opposite sex, popularity, opposite sex friends, and egalitarian

gender role attitudes) was indirectly associated with less sexual behavior.

DeLamater and MacCorquodale (1979), in their research on premarital sexuality, found that sexual behavior usually developed from mutual desire and consent within an intimate relationship rather than from unilateral attempts at influence and control.

These studies suggest various relationships between power and sex. Due to this inconsistency, the paucity of research, and the potential importance of associations between power and sexual behavior, this study's purpose was to explore associations between power and sexual behavior in romantic relationships.

Definitions of Power

While power is defined in many ways, two major definitions are the ability to influence another person's attitude or behavior (Cromwell & Olson, 1975; McCormick & Jessor, 1982) and the capacity to produce intended effects (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983). Because past research has found different results for different measures of power within the same study (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1995), we took a multi-method approach. Since power has often been viewed in terms of resources (e.g., Safilios-Rothschild, 1970; Sprecher, 1985), we measured power as relationship resources. We also measured global power and power as a sexual motive.

Scope of Sexual Behavior

This study attempted to assess the whole range of heterosexual behavior, from kissing to intercourse, and a variety of unusual behaviors (e.g., anal sex, spanking, bondage, etc.). We viewed *usual sexual behaviors* as those in which most people engage and *unusual sexual behaviors* as those in which most people do not engage. We tested for gender differences in unusual sexual behavior since Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) found that men engage in unusual sexual behavior more than do women.

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We also examined relationship status and ethnicity as potential confounding factors.

Power and Sexual Behavior

In spite of evidence suggesting a negative correlation between power and sexual behavior, we predicted a positive correlation for the following reasons. First, to the extent that power means getting what you want, if most young adults want sex with someone they care for and find appealing, then, for this age group, power may be associated with engaging in sexual behavior. Second, Blumstein and Schwartz's (1983) finding of a positive correlation between power and refusing sex may indicate that a person with power controls *when* sex occurs rather than *if* it occurs. Third, Kalof's (1995) young sample and the broad social nature of her power construct could preclude a negative association between power and sex from generalizing to older subjects with whom power is measured in different ways. Finally, despite DeLamater and MacCorquodale's (1979) finding that sexual behavior was unrelated to influence tactics, some measures of power may predict sexual behavior. Therefore, we proposed Hypothesis 1: Power will be associated with engaging in sexual behavior.

Gender Differences in Sexual Behavior

Since the double standard has diminished for most sexual behaviors (Sprecher & Hatfield, 1996) but may still be salient for unusual ones, we proposed in Hypothesis 2 that there will be no gender difference for engaging in usual sexual behavior, and in Hypothesis 3 that men will report engaging in more unusual sexual behavior than will women.

Gender by Power Interactions

Based on gender differences in sexuality we expected that power would be associated with engaging in sexual behavior for men and with abstaining from sexual behavior for women. However, although dominance and submission intercorrelate positively (Nelson, 1978), suggesting that they both reflect a desire to engage in sexual behavior to experience power regardless of who plays which role, we also conceived of submission as the opposite of dominance, corresponding to how each is conceptualized in interpersonal theory (Carson, 1969; Leary, 1957; O'Conner & Dyce, 1997).

In this model, dominance and submission are at opposite poles of a continuum in which dominance implies having more influence and submission implies having less influence over one's partner. Thus, for men, who are often more eager than women to engage in sexual behavior (Clark & Hatfield, 1989), dominance should be associated with engaging in sexual behavior and submission associated with abstaining from sexual behavior, whereas for women, the opposite pattern should occur. Therefore, we proposed Hypothesis 4: Power will be more strongly associated with engaging in sexual behavior for men than for women except for submission, which will be more strongly associated with engaging in sexual behavior for women than for men.

METHOD

Participants

The 256 respondents were enrolled in a human sexuality class at the University of Hawaii. All students chose to participate in the study, and were given bonus points for their participation.

The various relationship categories and the percentage of participants endorsing them were as follows: not dating anyone right now (25%), casually dating someone ("we've gone out on dates a couple of times") (15%), seriously involved with someone ("we've gone out a lot or are going steady") (39%), engaged or cohabiting (14%), and married (7%). Those 65 participants who were not dating at the time were deleted from the sample, resulting in 127 women and 64 men in the final sample.

The mean age for the final sample was 23.6 years ($SD = 5.55$, range = 18 to 61). Ethnic backgrounds were African (1%), Asian (50%), European (18%), Pacific Islander (16%), and Other (14%). Ninety-six percent of respondents reported that they were in a relationship with someone of the opposite sex.

Measures

Six measures of power were employed: (a) Subject's Power (SP), (b) Partner's Power (PP), (c) Relative Resource Power (RP), (d) Relative Global Power (GP), (e) Dominance as a sexual motive (Dom), and (f) Submission as a sexual motive (Sub).

Resource power measures. Items for these measures were taken from the Traupmann-Utne-Wexler scales designed to measure equity in intimate relationships. Traupmann, Peterson, Utne, and Hatfield (1981) demonstrated Chronbach alphas of .87 to .90 and evidence of construct validity of these scales. Each respondent rated the extent to which each asset (see Appendix 1, Relationship Assets) gave her/him power and the extent to which each asset gave their partner power on a 5-point scale (0% - *No power at all*; 25% - *A little power*; 50%, 75% - *A fair amount of power*; 100% - *A great deal of power*). Chronbach's alpha was .77 for the 10 SP items and .74 for the 10 PP items.

SP was equal to the sum of the ratings of how much power each of the 10 assets gave the respondent. PP was equal to the sum of the ratings of how much power each asset gave the respondent's partner. RP was equal to SP minus PP.

Relative global power (GP). GP was measured by one item asking the participant to indicate (on an 11-point scale): "All things considered, who has more power in your relationship?" (0% = *My partner has all the power* and 100% = *I have all the power*).

Power as a sexual motive. We measured power as a sexual motive with Nelson's (1978) scales designed to measure dominance and submission as motives for engaging in sexual behavior. Nelson reported Chronbach alphas of .77 to .83 for these scales along with evidence of convergent and discriminant validity.

Nelson's dominance scale consists of four items (e.g., "Because in the act of sex more than any other time, I get the feeling I can really influence how someone feels and behaves"). His submission scale also consists of four items (e.g., "Because I enjoy the feeling of giving in to my partner"). Respondents were asked to indicate how important each reason is in their own general sexual behavior.

Response options for each item were on a 4-point scale of *very important*, *pretty important*, *not too important*, and *not important at all*. The one, two, or three items with the highest factor loadings were also selected from Nelson's (1978) pleasure, love, conformity, and recognition motive scales. These items were interspersed among the Dominance and Submission items to give their presentation greater face validity and to see how Nelson's other sexual motives correlated with our dependent variables (see Browning, Hatfield, Kessler, & Levine, 2000).

Dependent variables. The list of sexual behaviors included 25 activities (see Appendix 2, Sexual Behaviors). Respondents were asked to "indicate whether you have participated in the following sexual activities during the last month with your current sexual partner, and, if so, who generally initiates them. Please answer honestly. Your answers will be kept strictly confidential". Response options for each item were *Yes* and *No*.

Procedure

Respondents were administered the questionnaire in groups of four, with each person seated in one corner of a room. Before beginning, an attempt was made to ensure confidentiality by asking each respondent to put the completed questionnaire in a manila envelop and to place it randomly in the pile of questionnaires in a reception box. They were also informed that they were not required to participate and could withdraw at any time.

RESULTS

Power Measures

Table 1 shows correlations among the six power measures. As shown in Table 1, Subject's Power and Partner's Power were highly correlated ($r = +.70$).

Subject's Power also correlated positively with Relative Resource Power, Relative Global Power, Dominance, and Submission. Partner's Power correlated negatively with

Table 1. Correlations Among Power Measures

	SP	PP	RP	GP	Dom	Sub
SP		.70**	.46**	.30**	.39**	.35**
PP			-.31**	.03	.34*	.34**
RP				.37**	.09	.04
GP					.13	.04
Dom						.55**

Note. N varied from 179 to 188 due to missing data. SP = Subject's Power; PP = Partner's Power; RP = Relative Resource Power; GP = Global Power; Dom = Dominance; Sub = Submission.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2. Correlations Between Sexual Behavior and Gender, Relationship Status, Ethnicity, and Power Measures

Variable	Usual SB		Unusual SB	
	Simple	Partial	Simple	Partial
Gender	.02	.00	.08	.07
Relationship status	.19**		.09	
Ethnicity	.09		.05	
Subject's power	.09	.10	.19**	.19**
Partner's power	.07	.06	.15*	.14
Relative power	.03	.05	.07	.08
Global power	-.01	.00	.02	.01
Dominance	.10	.15*	.23**	.24**
Submission	.05	.05	.24**	.21**

Note. SB = sexual behavior. Partial correlations partialled out relationship status and ethnicity. N was 177 for partial correlations and ranged from 182 to 188 for simple correlations as a function of missing data. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Relative Resource Power and positively with Dominance and Submission. The two measures of relative power intercorrelated .37, and Dominance and Submission intercorrelated .55.

Overview

The 25 sexual behaviors (SB's) were condensed into two composite variables: Usual—the number of usual SB's the respondent reported engaging in during the previous month, and Unusual—the corresponding sum for unusual SB's. As expected, a majority of respondents reported engaging in each Usual SB, and less than 25% reported engaging in each Unusual SB. This provided an empirical basis for categorizing SB's as usual and unusual. To test for ethnicity effects, Pacific Islanders were included in the Asian-American group, which was compared with Euro-Americans.

Power and Sexual Behavior

Table 2 shows correlations among the two composite dependent variables and gender, relationship status, ethnicity, and the six power measures. Partial correlations controlled for relationship status and ethnicity. Among the power measures, only Dominance with relationship status and ethnicity partialled out was associated with Usual SB. However, four power measures (SP, PP, Dom, and Sub) were associated with Unusual SB. Notably, neither form of relative power (RP and GP) was associated with Usual or Unusual SB. Thus, Hypothesis 1, which predicted that power would be associated with SB, found singular support for Usual SB and multiple support for Unusual SB.

Gender and Ethnicity Differences in Sexual Behavior

As shown in Table 2, gender was not associated with Usual SB, indicating that men and women did not differ in the number of Usual SB's in which they reportedly engaged, thus confirming Hypothesis 2. However, men and women also did not differ in the number of Unusual SB's in which they reportedly engaged, thus failing to support Hypothesis

3, which predicted that men would report engaging in more Unusual SB's than would women. Ethnicity was not associated with Usual or Unusual SB.

Gender by Power Interactions

Gender by power interactions were tested by first conducting a regression analysis with power, gender, relationship status, ethnicity, and ethnicity by gender terms and then with a power by gender term added, and testing for significance of the change in R². Table 3 shows the results of this procedure for Submission, which was the only power variable to interact with gender for Usual SB. The Submission by Gender term added .045 R² to the model.

Correlational analysis revealed that, as predicted, high Submission scores were associated with abstaining from Usual SB for men (r = -.28, n = 61, p <.05) and with engaging in Usual SB for women (r = .15, n = 124, p <.09). Thus, although none of the other power measures interacted significantly with gender, Hypothesis 4 was supported for power measured by submission as a sexual motive. None of the power measures interacted with gender for Unusual SB.

Multiple Regression Analyses

To compare the relative value of predictor variables, multiple regression analyses were conducted for Usual and Unusual SB. Gender, ethnicity, RP, and GP, each of which displayed low, nonsignificant correlations with SB, and PP, which correlated highly with SP but yielded lower correlations with sexual behavior than did SP, were deleted from these analyses to increase the ratio of respondents to predictor variables. In each case a stepwise regression was performed with relationship status, SP, Dom, Sub, and the interaction between gender and ethnicity and between gender and each of the six power measures as predictor variables (11 altogether). Table 4 shows the regression results for Usual Sexual Behavior and for Unusual Sexual Behavior.

As shown in Table 4, Relationship Status added .08 and Dominance added .06 unique R² for Usual SB. For Unusual SB, Relationship Status added .07 and Dominance added .04 R². Subject's Power added .02 R² with p = .07. Thus, although Subject's Power, Partner's

Table 3. Results of Hierarchical Regression on Usual Sexual Behavior

Variable	Beta	R ² +	F change
Step 1			
Submission	.15		
Gender	-.43		
Relationship status	.22**		
Ethnicity	.04		
Ethnicity by gender	-.37	.09	F(5,148)=3.10**
Step 2			
Submission by gender	-.72**	.05	F(1,147)=7.69**
Total regression		.14	F(6,147)=3.98**

Note. R² + = R² change.
*p < .05. ** p < .01.

Table 4. Summary of Multiple Regressions on Sexual Behavior

Predictor	Statistic		
	Beta	R ² +	F change
Usual Sexual Behavior			
Relationship status	.30	.08	F(1,153)=14.04**
Dominance	.27	.06	F(1,153)=11.16**
Model		.11	F(2,152)= 9.62**
Unusual Sexual Behavior			
Relationship status	.27	.07	F(1,147)=11.15**
Subject's power	.16	.02	F(1,147)= 3.53 [†]
Dominance	.22	.04	F(1,147)= 6.15*
Model		.13	F(3,145)= 7.12**

Note. Only predictor variables significant beyond the .10 level are listed. R² + = R² increase.

[†]p <.07. *p <.05. **p <.01.

Power, Dominance, and Submission each were associated with Unusual SB, of these only Dominance accounted for significant, unique variance.

DISCUSSION

Power Measures and the Matching Hypothesis

The high correlation between Subject's Power and Partner's Power (+.70) suggests that they were measuring power of the relationship itself more than power of the separate partners and that dyadic power may represent a third basic type of power, and supports the matching hypothesis in attraction and equity theory (Hatfield, Walster & Berscheid, 1978). Couples do tend to match in physical attractiveness (Hatfield, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978) and in intelligence (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). Our results suggest that couples also match on many other relationship assets.

Power and Usual Sexual Behavior

Consistent with our prediction that power would be associated with sexual behavior, Dominance as a sexual motive accounted for usual sexual behavior across gender. Also as predicted, Submission was associated with engaging in usual sexual behavior for women, and with abstinence for men. With submission implying deference to the other's desires, this finding is consistent with the evidence that men push for sex while women set limits (La Plante, McCormick, & Brannigan, 1988).

Power and Unusual Sexual Behavior

Both Subject's Power and Partner's Power were associated with Unusual Sexual Behavior. This, in combination with the absence of significant effects for relative power, suggests that dyadic rather than relative power is associated with engaging in unusual sexual behavior.

Simple and partial correlations between Dominance and Unusual Sexual Behavior and between Submission and Unusual Sexual Behavior were significant for both women and men, suggesting that, in contrast to Usual Sexual

Behavior, Unusual Sexual Behavior was, to some extent, predictable from a sexual motive to experience power, regardless of who plays which role.

Conceptualizations of Dominance and Submission

The above results suggest the value of conceptualizing Dominance and Submission as sexual motives in two ways: (a) as having in common a desire to experience power when engaging in sexual behavior regardless of who plays which role; and (b) as polar opposites in which Dominance entails influencing and Submission entails being influenced by one's partner, as in interpersonal theory (Carson, 1969; Leary, 1957; O'Conner & Dyce, 1997).

Gender Differences in Sexual Behavior

Our finding of no gender difference in Unusual Sexual Behavior contrasts with Laumann et al.'s (1994) national survey in which male respondents reported engaging in unusual sexual behavior more than did female respondents. Two questions for future research are whether the gender difference in reports of unusual sexual behavior in the general population is absent for college undergraduates and, if so, why?

Comparison with Kaloff (1995).

Our finding that Dominance was associated with sexual behavior across gender and that Submission interacted with gender in association with Usual Sexual Behavior contrasts with Kaloff's (1995) indirect, negative association between power and sexual behavior for both genders. We suspect that this discrepancy is due to differences in sample ages and how power is measured. With a norm of limited sexual activity for adolescents, variables such as confidence and popularity may be expected to correlate with less sexual behavior. In contrast, for young adults, power, measured as dominance as a sexual motive, correlates with sexual behavior across gender, and submission as a sexual motive interacts with gender, as discussed above.

Limitations

We attempted to minimize, but cannot rule out, the pitfalls of self-report methods by (a) ensuring complete confidentiality of responses and (b) asking participants to recall their sexual behavior only during the previous month in order to reduce forgetting and selective memory. Also, our data were based on human sexuality students, and future research is needed to determine if our results generalize to other subsets of the U.S. population and to other cultures. Finally, our results were based on correlational data only and hence no conclusions regarding causality can be drawn.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that the power of a dyadic relationship itself, and power as a sexual motive, may be important predictors of sexual behavior, but that relative

power between partners does not predict sexual behavior. The results also point to the value of distinguishing between usual and unusual sexual behavior, since submission interacted with gender in predicting usual sexual behavior, but was positively associated with unusual sexual behavior for both genders. Results were consistent with equity theory, the matching hypothesis, and with men's (compared to women's) greater willingness to engage in sexual behavior in dating relationships.

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Appendix 1

Relationship Assets

1. Physical Attractiveness (Being good-looking and well-groomed)
2. Intelligence (Being smart, well-educated and informed)
3. Sex (Being a good sexual partner)
4. Physical Affection (Enjoying kissing, hugging, hand-holding)
5. Intimacy (Being understanding, accepting, supporting)
6. Money (Having comfortable finances)
7. Responsibility (Doing a fair share of making and carrying out decisions or duties)
8. Social Status (Being popular, friendly)
9. Services (Doing favors, e.g., fixing the car, helping with school)
10. Security (Being committed and faithful)

Appendix 2

Sexual Behaviors

Oral and manual stimulation

1. “Dry” kissing, on the mouth
2. French-kissing (open mouth/tongue)
3. Kissing of neck and ears, hickeys
4. Stimulation of breasts with hands
5. Oral stimulation of breasts
6. Stimulation of male genitals with hand
7. Stimulation of female genitals with hand
8. Fellatio (oral stimulation of male genitals)
9. Cunnilingus (oral stimulation of female genitals)

Sexual intercourse

10. Partner on top
11. You on top
12. Rear vaginal entry (“dog style”)
13. Anal sex

Masturbation

14. Masturbated yourself for your partner
15. Had your partner masturbate him/herself for you

Erotic media

16. Read erotic literature with your partner
17. Watched pornographic films with your partner

Dominance/Submission

18. Tied your partner up
19. Been tied up by your partner
20. Spanked your partner
21. Been spanked by your partner

Cross-dressing

22. I dressed as the opposite sex
23. My partner dressed as the opposite sex

Other

24. Participated in a threesome, group sex or swapped partners
25. Used sexual aids (e.g., vibrator)