Sex Differences in the Use of Demand and Withdraw Behavior in Marriage: Examining the Social Structure Hypothesis

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Studies consistently show sex differences in married couples’ use of demand and withdraw behavior. The social structure hypothesis proposes that these differences are the result of power differentials between spouses. This study examined the link between 3 aspects of marital power and demanding and withdrawal behavior. Contrary to social structure predictions, results showed that wives did not possess less decision-making ability or access to resources and appeared to exhibit greater situational power (i.e., domineering and dominant behaviors) than did their husbands during problem-solving discussions. Furthermore, the spouse who exhibited the most demands also exhibited the most domineering and dominant behaviors, whereas the spouse who exhibited the most withdrawal exhibited the least domineering and dominant behaviors during problem-solving discussions.

Keywords: problem solving, demand, withdraw, marital communication, marital power

Currently, the lifetime probability of a marriage ending in divorce is about 50% (Teachman, Tedrow, & Crowder, 2000). This alarming figure has had negative effects on individuals, families, and the children of these marriages. For example, research has shown a link between divorce and the presence of physical and psychological illness, suicide, violence, depressed immune function, homicide, and disease mortality rates (Burman & Margolin, 1992). Children of divorced parents tend to experience a range of negative effects, such as poor academic performance, poor social skills, and increases in conduct disorders, health problems, depression, and social isolation (Cowan & Cowan, 1990; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Forehand, Brody, Long, Slotkin, & Fauber, 1986). Furthermore, less satisfied marriages have negative effects on family members, including higher rates of clinical depression (Beach, Fincham, & Katz, 1998). Distressed marriages are a source of stress—so much so that a person in a distressed marriage may have poorer mental health outcomes than a person who is not married but is socially isolated (Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003). Researchers theorize that it is not divorce per se that negatively affects the individual, but rather the continued marital conflict and hostility that lead to negative outcomes (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997).

Accordingly, the behaviors couples exhibit during conflict situations have been a central focus of researchers and counselors developing interventions to alleviate or prevent marital and family distress and to increase family functioning (Bradbury & Karney, 1993). Within the last 20 years, two behaviors—demand and withdraw—have become of particular interest (Christensen, 1988). Demanding occurs when one partner pursues changes in the relationship, whereas withdrawal occurs when one partner attempts to avoid discussing a problematic issue in the relationship. Demand and withdraw behaviors have been suggested to be common in intimate relationships (Gottman, 1999), even among relatively satisfied couples (Vogel & Karney, 2002; Vogel, Wester, & Heesacker, 1999). However, demand and withdraw behaviors have been of particular concern because of their (a) frequent presence in distressed couples (Christensen & Shenk, 1991), (b) link with declines in relationship satisfaction over time (Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995), and (c) link to spousal abuse (Berns, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1999). In addition, studies consistently show that women express more demands and men exhibit more withdrawal during problem-solving discussions (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Vogel & Karney, 2002). This sex difference in problem-solving behaviors spurred interest in why these differences in behavior exist. If an accurate accounting of why these differences exist could be found, interventions to assist couples in changing these behaviors could be developed.

It was initially suggested that sex differences in the use of demand and withdraw behavior reflect socialized differences in needs and desires (Christensen, 1988) or biological dispositions (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989) that women and men bring to a relationship. Recently, however, researchers have suggested that demanding and withdraw behaviors are not due to intrinsic differences in women and men but to power and resource inequalities within marriages (e.g., Kluwer, Heesink, & Van De Vliert, 2000; Sagrestano, Heavey, & Christensen, 1998). This idea has been called the social structure hypothesis, which suggests that demand and withdraw behaviors are most likely to occur in situations in which there is an imbalance in power such that one spouse “needs the other’s cooperation for resolution of the conflict [whereas] the [other] partner can achieve satisfaction without the

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This research was supported by National Institute of Mental Health Grant MH068289.

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other” (Sagrestano et al., 1998, p. 293). In these situations, the spouse who needs his or her partner’s cooperation is most likely to use demanding behaviors during the discussion to try to elicit a change in the other (i.e., equalize the power). The spouse who does not need his or her partner’s cooperation is most likely to withdraw from the discussion, to maintain the power and not make any changes. From this perspective, women are most likely to exhibit demands and their husbands are most likely to exhibit withdrawal, because sex-based inequalities in marriage (e.g., men’s control over household income, women’s responsibility for housework or child care) lead to an increased likelihood of wives being dependent on their husbands for a successful outcome of a problem-solving discussion (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey et al., 1993; Sagrestano et al., 1998).

Demand–Withdraw Studies and the Social Structure Hypothesis

Prior research examining sex differences in demand and withdraw behavior offers some support for the social structure hypothesis. For example, Christensen and colleagues (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey et al., 1993; Sagrestano, Heavey, & Christensen, 1999) asked couples to discuss two problem areas, one chosen by the husband and one chosen by the wife. They found that the sex differences in demand and withdraw behavior emerged during discussions of topics selected by wives. When couples discussed the wife’s topic, she expressed more demands and he expressed more withdrawal than when they discussed the husband’s topic. Christensen and colleagues suggested that these results are consistent with the social structure hypothesis, as the discussion of an issue in which the wife desires the most change is a context in which inequality in power is likely to be the greatest (e.g., a discussion of housework or child care issues), and as such, the wife is more likely to pressure for change, and the husband is more likely to withdraw. Also consistent with these findings, research has generally found that (a) wives desire a greater amount of change in the relationship than do their husbands and that (b) relationships in which the wife was dissatisfied with the division of labor in the relationship report the greatest degree of wife-demand/husband-withdraw behavior (Gray-Little, Baucom, & Hamby, 1996; Kluwer et al., 2000).

Inconsistencies in the Demand–Withdraw Research

Despite some evidence consistent with the social structure explanation of demand and withdraw behaviors, this literature has several limitations. First, some of the strongest evidence for the social structure hypothesis comes from studies of marital conflict in which the experimenter manipulated the problem-solving issue discussed by having the couple discuss one topic chosen by the husband and one topic chosen by the wife. The researchers then have assumed that each spouse would pick a topic for which the spouse’s cooperation is needed to resolve the conflict, and thus an imbalance in power would be present. However, this is not necessarily the case. Just because a spouse chooses a certain topic does not make it one for which there is an imbalance (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 1999). A spouse, for example, may choose topics in which she or he knows her or his partner also desires a change as a way of preempting or alleviating potential conflict (Vogel & Karney, 2002). In addition, one spouse may exert more power in a relationship, in general, or be able to exert greater influence in certain spheres in which he or she has some expertise (Tichenor, 1999), regardless of who initiated the topic discussion. A woman, for example, may hold more power in relational domains because of the perception that women are skilled in handling relationship issues (McGoldrick, Anderson, & Walsh, 1989). Consistent with this argument, some studies have reported that men often feel powerless in certain domains, such as the family (McGoldrick et al., 1989). Thus, it is only assumed that it is a power imbalance favoring the husband and not something else that leads to differences in demanding and withdraw behavior across wives’ but not husbands’ topics. To evaluate the precise effect that an imbalance in the level of power has on the nature of a marital interaction requires that each partner’s level of power in the relationship be measured, as well as her or his level of power in relation to that topic (Sagrestano et al., 1999).

Only a few studies have explicitly examined the relations between marital power and demand and withdraw behaviors, and these studies have produced inconsistent findings. Sagrestano et al. (1999), for example, assessed the role of perceived marital power (measured by self-reports of the degree to which spouses felt they could influence their partner) in demand–withdraw behavior. They found that wives’ and husbands’ self-reported influence over their partner was unrelated to self-reported demand–withdraw behavior. Leonard and Senchak (1996) examined the relationship between power (measured through a questionnaire of marital problem solving) and the degree of self-reported withdrawal behavior. A positive correlation ($r = .26$) was found between withdrawal and perceived power imbalances for wives’ reports but not for husbands’ ($r = .06$; Leonard & Senchak, 1996). Finally, a study by Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, and Gottman (1993) found that power (measured by self-reports of discrepancy in decision making) was not correlated with self-reported demand–withdraw behavior.

These inconsistencies have led to some concerns about the accuracy of the social structure hypothesis. Furthermore, certain studies of marital power in distressed and violent couples have shown patterns inconsistent with high power leading to withdrawal behavior and low power leading to demanding behavior. Sprengle and Olson (1978), for example, found that wives were more dominant in clinic populations (which have also been shown to exhibit greater wife-demand/husband-withdraw behavior), as opposed to nonclinic populations (which have been shown to exhibit less wife-demand/husband-withdraw behavior). In addition, some types of partner violence (i.e., intimate terrorism) are considered to be a control tactic used by the dominant partner (see Johnson, 2005, for a discussion). However, violent couples actually have been found to exhibit more husband-demand/wife-withdraw behavior than do their nonviolent counterparts (Babcock et al., 1993; Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Stuart, 1998), who are more likely to exhibit wife-demand/husband-withdraw behavior.

Explanations for Inconsistencies in the Previous Research

One reason for the inconsistent results is that power in previous studies has only been inferred from the topic selected or assessed through self-reports of decision making or the ability to influence one’s partner. This limited measurement of power can be problematic. For example, participants may not recall past attempts to
exert power accurately, or they may respond in socially desirable ways. Wife-dominant patterns, for example, tend to counter social norms, and egalitarian relationships may be seen as more desirable; therefore, couples may be less likely to report wife-dominant behavior and more likely to report egalitarian behavior. Consistent with this, studies have found that most couples reported themselves to be in an egalitarian relationship even when they were not categorized as such by external observers (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1996). Couples may also be reluctant to discuss issues of power in their relationship (Wittman & Fitzpatrick, 1986). Thus, research on power must include both self-report and observational measures. Using a multimethod approach would strengthen the ability of researchers to detect differences and better represent the complexities of marital interactions (Gottman & Notarius, 2000).

Furthermore, most of this research has used only a single measurement of marital power (e.g., decision-making ability). However, marital power has been conceptualized as a multidimensional concept. Cromwell and Olson (1975), for example, in the introduction of their groundbreaking book Power in Families, suggested that power can be conceptualized as having three domains: (a) power bases, (b) power processes, and (c) power outcomes. Power bases consist of “the resources an individual [sic] possesses which may increase their [sic] ability to execute control in a given situation” (p. 6). Power bases traditionally have been measured in terms of access to resources (e.g., socioeconomic status [SES] differences between the spouses). The partner with greater SES is thought to wield more power. Power processes are the interactions or behaviors used to attempt to gain control over aspects of the relationship. Power processes have been measured most commonly through observing attempts to gain control (named dominance) and the success or failure of the specific attempts (named dominance; Courtright, Millar, & Rogers-Millar, 1979; Escudero, Rogers, & Gutierrez, 1997). Power outcomes refer to who ultimately gets his or her way when there is a disagreement. Power outcomes have been measured largely through self-reports of who makes decisions. The failure to measure all three of these domains in the demand–withdraw literature is an important oversight, as the role of these power domains in demand–withdraw behavior is likely complex.

It is interesting that these three domains of power are only minimally correlated, suggesting that they are tapping unique aspects of the power in a relationship (Szinovacz, 1987). Few studies have measured all three domains; however, the notion that they are measuring unique aspects of power makes sense given that power bases represent relatively stable characteristics associated with persons, whereas power processes and power outcomes represent characteristics of specific interactions that may vary widely from one situation to another (i.e., how much influence I try to wield or actually do wield will vary depending on the type of topic, my interest in the topic, etc.). Therefore, although power bases and power processes should predict power outcomes, the strength of the relationships among the three aspects of power will likely vary from situation to situation. For example, the spouse who makes the most money in a relationship may have more say in decisions about money (a high correlation between power bases and power outcomes), yet because this spouse may work a lot, he or she may have less say in decisions about child care (a low correlation between power bases and power outcomes). Thus, each of these aspects of marital power may need to be measured separately and their relationship to specific issues explored if counselors are to better understand the role of power in a relationship.

Purpose

Most researchers have found that demand and withdraw behaviors are detrimental to marital satisfaction (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & Callan, 1994); however, demand and withdraw behaviors are found in many marriages, including satisfied ones (Gottman & Krokov, 1989; Heavey et al., 1995). Possible explanations for these results point to the importance of studying marital power: More egalitarian couples may engage in some demand and withdraw behaviors but may not rigidly adhere to these behaviors, whereas less egalitarian couples may engage in more rigid or higher levels of demand and withdraw behaviors. The goal of this investigation was to fill in the gaps in the demand–withdraw literature by directly assessing the relationship among these domains of power and how the domains relate to demand and withdraw behaviors in married couples. Demand and withdraw behavior was assessed through both self-report and observational coding of problem-solving discussions. Power was measured through differences in occupational status between the spouses (power bases), observational ratings of the use of domineeringness and dominance during a problem-solving discussion (power processes), and self-report of overall level of power over decisions in the relationship (power outcomes). Examination of these three domains of power allows for a thorough analysis of the role of power in the use of demanding and withdraw behavior. This is an important step, as marital therapy programs are often based on the results of studies examining power processes and power outcomes. Moreover, demand and withdraw behaviors are frequent in many couples that counselors see. To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine marital power and demand–withdraw behavior with the use of multiple-method assessments. We had three hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Replication of Prior Research

Married couples typically exhibit sex-differentiated demand–withdraw patterns during wives’ but not husbands’ topics. Therefore, we hypothesized that these findings would be replicated in this sample of married couples across both the self-report and the observational measures.

Hypothesis 2: Sex Differences in Power Bases, Processes, and Outcomes

The social structure hypothesis asserts that there are sex differences in marital power favoring husbands. Therefore, we hypothesized that husbands would possess more power across the three measured domains of marital power (power bases, power processes, and power outcomes).

Hypothesis 3: Marital Power and Demand–Withdraw Behavior

The main tenet of the social structure hypothesis is that the less powerful partner is more likely to demand, and the more powerful
partner is more likely to withdraw. Therefore, we hypothesized that the spouse with the least power would exhibit the most demands and the spouse with the most power would exhibit the most withdrawal.

Method

Participants

Married, opposite-sex couples (N = 72) were solicited from an advertisement placed in a weekly newsletter e-mailed to staff and faculty and sent through e-mail to university students living in marriage and family housing at a major university in the Midwest. Other than asking about marital status, no exclusion criteria were used. The advertisement offered $60 to couples willing to participate in a study of marriage. On average, husbands were 33.5 (SD = 8.60) years old; 51% were students, and 3% did not report their occupation. Wives averaged 33.3 (SD = 8.84) years old; 47% of wives were employed (see footnote 1), 40% were students, and 13% were homemakers. Most participants were European American (66%) followed by Asian (22%), Hispanic (5%), African American (4%), and 3% other nationalities. The average length of the marriage was 84.4 months (SD = 85.2).

Measures

Demand and withdraw. To evaluate the extent to which couples engaged in demand and withdraw behavior during their interactions, we globally coded videotapes of the interactions with the Interaction Rating System developed by Christensen and Heavey (1990). The system consists of five dimensions used to calculate demand and withdraw behaviors (avoidance, discussion, blame, pressure for change, and withdrawal). Each scale asks the raters to place the spouse’s behavior for that dimension on a 9-point scale. As Heavey et al. (1995) suggested, a final withdraw score was computed by summing the avoidance and withdrawal dimensions and then subtracting the discussion score. In turn, a final demand score was computed by combining the blame and pressure for change dimensions. Prior research has shown that these rating dimensions correlate with self-report measures of demand and withdraw behaviors (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey et al., 1993, 1995). Additionally, Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, Bates, and Vogel (1993) found high correspondence between this coding system and other coding systems measuring demand–withdraw behaviors (e.g., Klinetob & Smith, 1996). The five dimensions that make up the demand–withdraw codes have been shown to be reliable (average r = .85) after independent raters received at least 3 weeks of training from someone knowledgeable in the use of the rating system (Heavey et al., 1993).

Before ratings of demand and withdraw behaviors were obtained, six independent raters (three male and three female undergraduate research assistants), who were blind to the research hypotheses, received approximately 70 hr of training, across 8 weeks, from authors David L. Vogel and Joann Seeman in the use of the rating system. Training consisted of viewing and rating a series of videotapes from a separate study of couples interacting. Raters were instructed to consider frequency, intensity, and duration of the participants’ verbal and nonverbal behaviors before making their ratings.

To ensure that interrater reliability remained acceptable throughout the coding process, each week we assigned two random subsets of three raters to observe 10 couples (12 couples the final week), with one set of three raters observing the husband’s discussion topic and one set of three raters observing the wife’s topic (i.e., all topics were coded by three independent raters) for a given couple. The mean of the three raters’ scores was used in the final analyses. At the end of training, the interrater reliability among the raters was .83. Each group of three raters continued to achieve acceptable interrater reliability (i.e., intraclass correlation coefficients) throughout the study, with an overall reliability of .77 (blame = .81, pressure for change = .77, withdraw = .73, avoidance = .78, discussions = .79, demand = .80, withdraw = .75).

Demand and withdraw behaviors were also measured with the Communication Patterns Questionnaire Short Form (CPQSF; Christensen, 1988). The CPQSF is designed to assess an individual’s perception of the way that discussions with his or her partner are generally conducted. The participant indicates on a 9-point scale from 1 (very unlikely) to 9 (very likely) the likelihood that the couple interacts in a specific manner (e.g., mutual negation or mutual blame) when discussing a specific issue. The current study asked participants to fill out items on the basis of their identified topic (i.e., wives filled it out regarding the topic they selected to discuss, and husbands filled it out regarding the topic they selected to discuss). All questions on the CPQSF ask about behaviors at the level of the dyad (e.g., man pressures, nags, or demands while woman withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further) rather than at the level of the individual (e.g., man pressures, nags, or demands). The measure assesses (a) the likelihood of the husband demanding while the wife withdraws and (b) the likelihood of the wife demanding while the husband withdraws, as well as (c) the total demand–withdraw communication behaviors of the couple, which is the sum of the first two subscales. Higher scores on a subscale mean that the person is reporting that the couple engages in a greater amount of those types of communication behaviors while discussing a specific issue. The validity of the scale has been demonstrated through positive correlations with positive verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors and positive correlations with negative verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors (Bodenmann et al., 1998; Christensen & Heavey, 1998). Noller and White (1990) also found that the demand–withdraw patterns, specifically the wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern, discriminated accurately between happy and unhappy couples. Further validity of the CPQSF has also been found, as the subscales correlate significantly with observational measures of demand–withdraw (Bodenmann et al., 1998; Christensen & Heavey, 1999; Hahlweg, Kaiser, Christensen, Fehm-Wolfdsdorff, & Groth, 2000; Heavey et al., 1993).

1 Husbands were employed as radiation safety technician, university staff, manager, system analyst, researcher, electrician, project programmer, professor, teacher, coach, carpenter, technician, artist, physicist, accountant, and minister and in advertising, computer support, insurance, and graphic design. Wives were employed as communications director, university staff, manager, researcher, electrician, teacher, accountant, counselor, technical writer, physicist, customer service, secretary, and receptionist.
Christensen and Heavey (1990) reported reliability of the patterns measured by CPQSF with internal consistencies for wives of .85 for wife-demand/husband-withdraw and .50 for husband-demand/wife-withdraw. For the husbands’ data, the alphas were .71 and .72, respectively. The reliabilities are similar even when the measure has been used in other countries (Bodenmann et al., 1998; Hahlweg et al., 2000). In the current sample, the Husband-Demand/Wife-Withdraw Scale had an alpha of .70 (husbands) and .60 (wives); the Wife-Demand/Husband-Withdraw Scale had an alpha of .66 (husbands) and .75 (wives).

Marital power. Following Cromwell and Olson’s (1975) theory, we assessed three domains of marital power (power bases, processes, and outcomes). Power bases were classified on the basis of spouses’ current occupation. Two psychology professors were given the seven rank-ordered occupation categories from Hollingshead’s Two-Factor Index of Social Position and asked to categorize each couple as (a) being equal in terms of occupation status, (b) favoring the wife, or (c) favoring the husband on the basis of their relative ranking of their occupations. For example, if the husband’s job was in sales and the wife’s job was a manager, the couple would be categorized as having an SES favoring the wife. The two professors agreed on all but three cases (two cases were not classified because 1 partner did not report an occupation), for 96% agreement ($\kappa = .93, p < .001$). In these three cases, a final code was selected by consensus.

Power processes were assessed with two aspects (domineeringness and dominance) of partners’ power during the problem-solving discussions. Domineeringness, an individual measure of power, is defined as the number of control attempts exhibited during the conversations. Dominance, a relational measure of power, is defined as the number of control attempts by a person followed by the partner’s submissive and/or accepting moves. Domineeringness and dominance were assessed with the Family Relational Communication Control Coding System (FRCCCS; Heatherington & Friedlander, 1987). To determine whether a statement was a control attempt, we took into account both the structure and grammar of the statement and the pragmatic function of the statement. For example, a statement coded as an assertion (structure) and an order (pragmatic function) was determined to be a domineering behavior, according to a system of rules developed by the coding system’s authors. The FRCCCS has reported inter-rater reliability (kappa ranging from .75 to .95; Heatherington & Friedlander, 1987) and is moderately related to other relational control schemes (Tracey & Ray, 1984). Criterion validity of the FRCCCS has been established in that family therapists who were not trained on this coding system were able to match the FRCCCS codes ($z$ test of Cohen’s $\kappa = .56, p < .001$; Gaul, Simon, Friedlander, Culter, & Heatherington, 1991). Independent raters (six female research assistants), who were blind to the research hypotheses, received approximately 150 hr of training across 15 weeks from author Megan J. Murphy in the use of the coding system. Training consisted of coding transcripts of couples’ videotapes from an unrelated study. Fifty percent of the couples’ tapes were coded by two raters to ensure that interrater reliability remained acceptable throughout the coding process. Disagreements were resolved by the training team leader. At the end of training, the interrater reliability between the raters was .84 ($\kappa$ range = .74–.94). The raters continued to achieve acceptable reliability throughout the study, with an overall kappa of .80 (range = .68–.92).

Finally, power outcomes were assessed with the Perceived Marital Power Scale (Sagrestano et al., 1999). The Perceived Marital Power Scale was chosen on the basis of its use in other studies examining marital power and the use of demand and withdraw behavior (Sagrestano et al., 1999). The Perceived Marital Power Scale asks participants to respond to four items regarding (a) potential ability to influence one’s partner, (b) confidence in influencing one’s partner, (c) likelihood of influencing one’s partner, and (d) overall rating of whether one can influence the partner. The items are scored on a 7-point scale, with higher scores representing more perceived power. Validity of the scale was demonstrated by its correlation with husbands’ ($r = .31–.36$) and wives’ ($r = .31–.32$) use of physical violence in the relationship. The internal reliability of the scale has been reported previously ($\alpha = .60–.67$). For the current study, Item 3, “I am likely to do what my partner wants,” was dropped because this increased the reliability of the measure (from .59 to .72 for men and from .61 to .64 for women). Dropping this item did not change any of the subsequent results.

Marital satisfaction. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale–7 (DAS–7; Hunsley, Best, Lefebvre, & Vito, 2001; Hunsley, Pinsent, Lefebvre, James-Tanner, & Vito, 1995) was used to measure each couple’s level of marital adjustment. The DAS–7 is a seven-item instrument developed from the original DAS (Spanier, 1976) and was designed to assess the quality of the relationship as perceived by married or cohabitating couples. The DAS–7 has six items rated on a 6-point scale and one item rated on a 7-point scale, with higher scores reflecting greater satisfaction. The DAS–7 has evidence of validity, correlating with the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale ($r = .67–.73$) and the Emotional Self-Disclosure Scale ($r = .41–.50$; Hunsley et al., 2001). The DAS–7 has shown validity by discriminating between community and clinic samples (Hunsley et al., 2001). The DAS–7 also has an internal consistency of .75 to .82 (Hunsley et al., 2001, 1995). For the current study, the internal consistency was .80 for wives and .68 for husbands.

Procedures

Upon arriving for the initial visit, each spouse was escorted to a separate room, where informed consent was obtained. While separated, each participant was asked independently to complete a survey containing the questionnaires used in the study (e.g., relationship satisfaction, assessment of overall decision-making ability in the relationship) and to identify a problem area in the relationship. The problem was identified by asking each spouse to select an issue in the relationship in which he or she desires the most change and that cannot be resolved without the spouse’s cooperation. The issues selected by husbands and wives are found in Table 1. Spouses were then asked to answer some questions about this topic, including the type of problem-solving behaviors that generally occur when this topic arises and the importance of the topic. Subsequently, the spouses were brought together and asked to discuss each of the problem topics for 10 min. Whose problem they were asked to discuss first was randomized through a coin flip. If both spouses chose the same topic, the spouse who lost the coin flip was asked to choose a second topic. After 10 min, the experimenter knocked on the door, and the couple was asked to discuss the second topic (i.e., the other spouse’s topic) for 10 min.
Each discussion was videotaped. At the end of the discussions, couples were separated again. While separated, each spouse was debriefed, and her or his feelings and reactions to the study were discussed. Referrals to local mental health and family therapy clinics were given to all participants.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations for all variables examined in the analyses. As the means in Table 2 reveal, the married couples in this sample were slightly dissatisfied (husband: $M = 25.44$, $SD = 3.99$; wife: $M = 25.93$, $SD = 5.20$ [scale range = 7–43]) and similar to other community samples (husband: $M = 25.30$, $SD = 4.70$; wife: $M = 26.40$, $SD = 4.70$; Hunsley et al., 2001). Couples in the current sample viewed their selected issues as moderately important ($M = 6$ on a 9-point scale) and were generally rated as engaging in low to moderate levels of demand and withdraw behavior. Their demand and withdraw behaviors were very similar in level to other studies that have measured husbands' and wives' demand and withdraw in the same manner (see mean and standard deviation results from Heavey et al., 1995, in the parentheses in Table 2). The table also reveals substantial variability on all of these variables, justifying further analyses.

Hypothesis 1: Replication of Prior Research

Previous research (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey et al., 1993) has shown that married couples typically exhibit sex-differentiated demand–withdraw patterns during wives’ but not husbands’ topics. Therefore, we tested whether this pattern of results was replicated among this sample of married couples. These analyses were conducted on both the self-report and the observational data.

Self-report. Using the CPQSF, participants reported the degree to which wives demand while husbands withdraw and the degree to which husbands demand while wives withdraw when discussing a topic of importance to them. To account for the dependency among the paired husband–wife scores, we conducted repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVAs) in which topic (wives’ report of her topic and husbands’ report of his topic) and demand–withdraw role (wife-demand/husband-withdraw and husband-demand/wife-withdraw) were factors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Husband M</th>
<th>Husband SD</th>
<th>Wife M</th>
<th>Wife SD</th>
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<tr>
<td>Marital satisfaction (DAS-7)</td>
<td>25.44 (25.30)</td>
<td>3.99 (4.70)</td>
<td>25.93 (26.40)</td>
<td>5.20 (4.70)</td>
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<td>HDWW (CPQSF)</td>
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<td>5.34</td>
<td>10.24</td>
<td>5.26</td>
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<td>WDHW (CPQSF)</td>
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<td>5.35</td>
<td>13.38</td>
<td>6.44</td>
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<td>Decision making (PMP)</td>
<td>14.32</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>13.68</td>
<td>3.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Importance of issue</td>
<td>6.33</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>6.82</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demand</td>
<td>3.21 (3.59)</td>
<td>1.28 (1.13)</td>
<td>3.19 (3.22)</td>
<td>1.39 (1.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdraw</td>
<td>-0.68 (-1.55)</td>
<td>3.31 (2.42)</td>
<td>-0.49 (-1.15)</td>
<td>3.57 (2.98)</td>
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<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dominance</td>
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<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demand</td>
<td>2.84 (2.68)</td>
<td>1.02 (1.03)</td>
<td>3.93 (4.29)</td>
<td>1.92 (1.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdraw</td>
<td>-0.50 (-0.03)</td>
<td>3.24 (2.42)</td>
<td>-1.14 (-1.98)</td>
<td>3.34 (2.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domineeringness</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominance</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. DAS-7 = Dyadic Adjustment Scale–7; HDWW = Husband demand/Wife withdraw; CPQSF = Communication Patterns Questionnaire Short Form; WDHW = Wife demand/Husband withdraw; PMP = Perceived Marital Power scale.

a For comparative purposes, the means and standard deviation results from Hunsley et al. (2001) are presented in the parentheses.

b For comparative purposes, the means and standard deviation results from Heavey et al. (1995) are presented in the parentheses.
husband-demand/wife-withdraw) served as within-subject factors. The results replicate previous findings, as there was no significant main effect for topic, $F(1, 71) = 2.12, p = .15$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$, but a significant main effect for demand–withdraw role, $F(1, 71) = 4.44, p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .12$, qualified by a significant Topic $\times$ Role interaction, $F(1, 71) = 9.68, p = .003$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$. To determine the nature of the interaction, we performed two planned comparisons. The first examined the mean differences between the wife-demand/husband-withdraw and husband-demand/wife-withdraw patterns during her topic, and the second examined the same differences during his topic. The mean difference between the wife-demand/husband-withdraw ($M = 13.38, SD = 6.44$) and husband-demand/wife-withdraw ($M = 10.24, SD = 5.26$) patterns was significant for wives’ reports about their topic, $t(71) = 3.92, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .18$, but not for the husband-demand/husband-withdraw ($M = 12.68, SD = 5.35$) and husband-demand/wife-withdraw ($M = 12.88, SD = 5.34$) patterns reported by husbands about their topic, $t(71) = -0.20, p = .84$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$. Wives reported more wife-demand/husband-withdraw than husband-demand/wife-withdraw during their topic, which was consistent with previous research. By contrast, husbands reported no differences in wife-demand/husband-withdraw or husband-demand/wife-withdraw during their topic.

Observed demand and withdraw behavior. To match the self-report data, we first examined the observational data by following Heavey et al.’s (1993) precedent of generating a score indicating the degree of wife-demand/husband-withdraw behavior by summing the behavioral ratings of wife’s demanding behavior and husband’s withdrawal behavior in each problem-solving interaction. Similarly, we generated a score indicating the degree of husband-demand/wife-withdraw behavior during the problem-solving discussions of husbands’ topics. Thus far, our results replicate prior studies and support the social structure hypothesis. We next examined whether there would be the expected sex differences in marital power (i.e., that husbands would possess more power). To examine this, we first examined the chi-square difference in wives’ and husbands’ SES (power bases). We then conducted repeated measures ANOVAs comparing wives’ and husbands’ self-reported ability to make decisions in the relationship (power outcomes) and observed domineeringness and dominance behavior during the problem-solving discussions (power processes). We accounted for the dependency among the paired husband–wife scores by using spouse sex (husband and wife) serve as a within-subject factor in the ANOVA analyses. For the observation data (dominance and domineeringness), we also controlled for whose identified problem was discussed first (hers first vs. his first) by having topic order serve as a between-subjects blocking factor. The largest group of couples in this sample was classified as having equal status occupations (43%), followed by couples with status favoring the husband (32%) and then wives (22%). However, these differences were not significant, $\chi^2(2, 67) = 3.74, p = .15$. Furthermore, wives and husbands reported having equal levels of decision-making ability, $F(1, 71) = 1.32, p = .26$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. Of interest, though, is that when examining the observed domineering and dominance data, we found that wives, during discussions of either husbands’ topics, $F(1, 70) = 7.68, p = .007$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$, or wives’ topics, $F(1, 70) = 6.38, p = .014$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$, behaviorally exhibited more domineering attempts than husbands and were more likely to be dominant (i.e., have their partner give in) than were husbands during either husbands’ topics, $F(1, 70) = 6.68, p = .012$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$, or wives’ topics, $F(1, 70) = 5.80, p = .019$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$, topics (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). These results did

Next, to clarify whether the above sex differences in the way husbands and wives engage in the demand–withdraw pattern were a result of differences in demanding, differences in withdrawal, or both, we conducted paired sample $t$ tests comparing wives and husbands in their tendency to engage in demand and withdraw behavior, separately, during each interaction. These analyses revealed that, during discussions of wives’ topics, wives ($M = 3.93, SD = 1.92$) were significantly more demanding than husbands ($M = 2.84, SD = 1.02$), $t(71) = 4.47, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .22$, and husbands ($M = -0.50, SD = 3.24$) were significantly more withdrawing than wives ($M = -1.14, SD = 3.34$), $t(71) = 2.42, p < .29$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$. During discussions of husbands’ topics, wives ($M = 3.19, SD = 1.39$) were not significantly more demanding than husbands ($M = 3.21, SD = 1.28$), $t(71) = 0.13, p = .90$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$, and husbands ($M = .068, SD = 3.31$) were not significantly more withdrawing than wives ($M = -0.49, SD = 3.57$), $t(71) = -.93, p = .35$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Thus, the elevated levels of the wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern, identified above, appear to reflect both a high level of wives’ use of demanding behaviors and husbands’ use of withdrawing behavior during discussions of wives’ issues.

Hypothesis 2: Sex Differences in Power Bases, Processes, and Outcomes

Thus far, our results replicate prior studies and support the social structure hypothesis. We next examined whether there would be the expected sex differences in marital power (i.e., that husbands would possess more power). To examine this, we first examined the chi-square difference in wives’ and husbands’ SES (power bases). We then conducted repeated measures ANOVAs comparing wives’ and husbands’ self-reported ability to make decisions in the relationship (power outcomes) and observed domineeringness and dominance behavior during the problem-solving discussions (power processes). We accounted for the dependency among the paired husband–wife scores by using spouse sex (husband and wife) serve as a within-subject factor in the ANOVA analyses. For the observation data (dominance and domineeringness), we also controlled for whose identified problem was discussed first (hers first vs. his first) by having topic order serve as a between-subjects blocking factor.
not support the social structure hypothesis,\(^2\) as the expected sex differences in power, favoring men, were not found.\(^3\)

**Hypothesis 3: Marital Power and Demand and Withdraw Behavior**

Although the expected sex differences in marital power, favoring men, were not found, we still wanted to directly examine the main tenet of the social structure hypothesis that the less powerful partner is more likely to use demands and the more powerful partner is more likely to withdraw. One way this concept has been examined in previous research (see Vogel & Karney, 2002) has been to look at the importance of the issue selected. Imbalances in the relationship could lead to one partner having more need for his or her topics to be raised. The social structure explanation of demand and withdraw behavior then suggests spouses ought to make more demands when discussing topics of greater importance to them and to withdraw more when discussing topics of less importance to them. Therefore, we examined the associations between spouses’ ratings of the importance of their topic and their spouses’ demand and withdraw behavior during discussions of that topic. Table 3 presents the zero-order partial correlations between each spouse’s ratings of his or her issue importance and spouses’ demanding and withdraw behavior controlling for spouses’ rating of their issue importance. As the table reveals, and inconsistent with the social structure predictions, our results showed that during discussions of husbands’ or wives’ topics, the importance of the topic to the husband or wife was not related to demand behavior for either spouse \((rs = -.08 to .09).\) Similarly, during discussions of husbands’ or wives’ topics, ratings of topic importance were related \((rs = -.16 to .36)\) to each spouse withdrawing less, not more (although only statistically significant in one case for wives). Furthermore, paired sample \(t\) tests revealed that husbands and wives did not rate their partner’s topic as less important than their own \((ps > .4;\) see Table 2 for means).

Although topic importance is one way to test the social structure hypothesis, another way is to examine the relations among the three domains of marital power (power bases, processes, and outcomes) and who does the most demanding (difference between husband and wife demands) and withdrawing (difference between husband and wife withdrawal) in the relationship. The social structure hypothesis proposes that the person with least power should exhibit the most demands and the person with the most power should exhibit the most withdrawal. To test this hypothesis in relation to power bases, we conducted separate ANOVAs with SES classification \((1 = \text{husband}, 0 = \text{equal}, -1 = \text{wife})\) as the independent variable and who did the most demanding and who did the most withdrawal during each problem-solving discussion as the dependent variables. To test the hypothesis in relation to power processes, we examined the correlations between who exhibited the most demanding during each discussion (difference between husband and wife domineeringness) and who exhibited the most dominance during each discussion (difference between husband and wife dominance) and who exhibited the most demanding and the most withdrawal. Similarly, to examine the hypothesis in relation to power outcomes, we examined the correlations between who reported the most self-reported decision-making ability (difference between husband and wife self-reported decision-making ability) and who exhibited the most demanding and withdraw behavior. The results of all of these analyses were inconsistent with social structure hypothesis. Differences in SES between wives and husbands did not differentiate who performed the most demanding or withdrawal. In addition, as seen in Table 4, during either the husbands’ or wives’ topic, the spouse who exhibited the most domineering behavior and most dominance expressed the most demands \((rs = .32 to .45).\) Similarly, the spouse who exhibited the least domineering behavior during the wives’ topic expressed greater withdrawal behavior \((r = -.29).\) Furthermore, who withdrew the most was not related to domineering behavior during the husbands’ topic \((r = .00)\) or dominance during either topic (and the direction of the correlations, \(r = -.17\) and \(-.21,\) is consistent with other findings). There was also no relationship between who performed the most demands or the most withdrawal and who reported the most self-reported decision-making ability \((ps > .07).\)

**Discussion**

The results of this study across both the self-report and observational data replicate previous research demonstrating a sex discrepancy in the use of demand and withdraw behaviors during discussions of issues selected by wives but not during discussions.

\(^2\) One reason these findings regarding power may be opposite of what is predicted by the social structure hypothesis is that in relatively satisfied couples, power differences between spouses are less severe than, or even reversed, in distressed couples. In dissatisfied couples, wives may have less influence. To address this possibility, we conducted the same repeated measures ANOVAs but included the couples’ marital satisfaction score as a factor. If the social structure hypothesis is correct just for distressed couples, then we should find an interaction between satisfaction and spouses’ sex (i.e., moderation effect) such that the most distressed couples would exhibit the most sex discrepancies in marital power in favor of the husband. However, marital satisfaction did not significantly moderate the effect of sex on marital power \((ps > .13).\)

\(^3\) As our sample was more diverse than many studies on marital couples (i.e., 34% non-Caucasian), we decided to examine the potential effect of couples’ race/ethnicity on the results. Specifically, we re-examined the results by including the racial/ethnic groups with sufficient numbers (i.e., Caucasian and Asian) in the analyses (all other groups, \(n < 3).\) Therefore, we conducted the same analyses as before, but this time including race/ethnicity \((\text{Caucasian} = 1, \text{Asian} = 2)\) as a between-subjects factor. However, race/ethnicity did not have a significant effect on the self-report or observed degree of power discrepancies between wives and husbands \((ps > .12).\)
of issues selected by husbands (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey et al., 1993). Although these initial results support the social structure hypothesis, the other findings of the study do not. The subsequent analyses revealed that husbands and wives had equal SES, picked topics of equal importance to them, and self-reported having equal ability to make decisions in the relationship. Moreover, wives behaviorally exhibited more domineering attempts and were more dominant (i.e., more likely to have their partner give in) than husbands during discussions of either spouse’s topic. Thus, the expected sex differences in marital power, favoring husbands, were not found. Furthermore, spouses who expressed the most demands during either husbands’ or wives’ topics did not appear to exhibit less situational power during the discussion (power process), as would be hypothesized by the social structure hypothesis, but in fact exhibited the most domineering behavior and were most likely to be dominant during the discussions. Similarly, exhibiting greater withdrawal was not related to domineering behavior during the husbands’ topic or dominance during either topic and actually related to less use of domineering behavior during the wives’ topic. We also found no statistically significant relationship between differences in SES status between spouses (power bases) or who self-reported the most ability to make decisions in the relationship (power outcomes) and who demanded or withdrew the most. In all, these results suggest that spouses may exert certain types of marital power and may exert more or less power across areas of their relationship. Thus, the relationship between marital power and demand and withdraw behaviors is more complex than simply who is able to exert more control in the relationship.

The lack of the clear confirmation of the social structure hypothesis, although somewhat unexpected, is in fact largely consistent with the extant studies. The self-report studies that have looked specifically at marital power and problem-solving behavior have shown that husbands’ and wives’ self-reported ability to make decisions in the relationship was unrelated to self-reported demand–withdraw behavior (Babcock et al., 1993; Sagrestano et al., 1999), that wives are more dominant in relational domains (Sprenkle & Olson, 1978), and that couples exhibiting violent behaviors are most likely to use male demand–female withdraw behavior rather than the reverse (Babcock et al., 1993; Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1998). The strongest evidence for the social structure hypothesis came from studies of marital conflict in which the experimenter manipulated the problem-solving issue discussed. In this study, when we manipulated the topic discussed in the same manner, we found the same demand–withdraw difference that other studies have found. However, when we went further and—instead of assuming an imbalance in power was present—assessed marital power from three different domains and used both self-report and observational data, we found results inconsistent with the notion that during problem-solving discussions, women have less marital power and therefore demand more and that men have greater marital power and thus withdraw more.

One reason for the current findings is that choosing a specific topic does not necessarily make it one for which there is a true imbalance in marital power. Many forms of power may extend themselves across domains. Women may have to address a topic several times to exert enough influence for their partners to accede to their wishes, whereas men may only have to address a topic once to influence wives to change in response to their topic. In other words, the topic of discussion in itself may not provide researchers with an “even playing field” to examine power differences. Some researchers have also noted that many relationship topics do not neatly fall into “his” and “her” issues and that couples may often choose to discuss issues for which both desire an equal amount of change (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 1999). In fact, one study by Caughlin and Vangelisti (2000) found no sex differences in who desires the most change in their partner. Furthermore, many of the issues discussed by the couples could be considered in the relational domain, which women may feel more responsible for managing, possibly because of the perception that women are more skilled than men in handling relationship issues (McGoldrick et al., 1989). This assertion is strengthened when one looks to the differential findings regarding the observed and self-reported marital power data. The self-report data asked participants to respond to questions about their overall ability to make decisions in the relationship (i.e., was not domain specific), and this may have led these couples to be more likely to report equal power. However, power processes (i.e., domineeringness and dominance) were observationally coded from the problem-solving discussions. These discussions were focused on “changing or improving the relationship” and thus may have been an area in which women are able to assert more marital power.

Our inconsistent findings with the social structure hypothesis lend support to recent alternative hypotheses (e.g., personality factors; Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000) as well as the notion that demand and withdraw behaviors may simply be learned (reinforced) patterns over time. However, this does not mean the social structure hypothesis may not be partially accurate. For example, it is possible that although the social structure hypothesis does not apply to nondistressed couples, it does apply to more distressed couples. In nonclinically distressed couples, power may be equal, and women may be able to assert their needs (domineeringness) and have those needs responded to (dominance). Gottman (1999), for example, noted that marriages in which men accept women’s influence tend to be more satisfied. In clinically dissatisfied couples, however, women may have less power and/or may not have their power attempts responded to. Although our findings did not show that the couples’ marital satisfaction level was related to marital power differences between the spouses, previous research has found that unhappy spouses are less likely to have negotiated mutually respected roles (Gray-Little et al., 1996). Thus, our sample, although similar to most community research samples and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Husband topic</th>
<th>Wife topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Most domineering</td>
<td>Most dominant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most demanding</td>
<td>.40***</td>
<td>.33**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most withdrawing</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
slightly distressed, may not have had serious enough problems to
elicit the power imbalances and the demand–withdraw patterns
described by the social structure hypothesis. Therefore, future
researchers may want to replicate the current study with a more
distressed or specifically clinical sample.

Another possible reason that we did not find the expected
support for the social structure hypothesis is how we assessed
marital power. We went further than previous studies in including
an assessment of three domains of marital power; however, marital
power can be measured in a number of ways. In particular, power
bases have been suggested to contain a number of important
elements that could be assessed. Although we measured power
bases in the most traditional way, as personal assets or resources
(i.e., occupational status), power bases could also be assessed
through gendered role expectations and norms, societal sanctions,
personal attributes such as attractiveness, communication skills
and expertise, the desire to be in the relationship, as well as the
perceived number of attractive alternative options (Babcock et al.,
1993). Each of these different aspects may play a role in the overall
amount of power spouses have in their marriage and may need to
be measured separately to understand the relationship of marital
power and the use of demand and withdraw behavior. For example,
it may be particularly important to assess gender role norms
and expectations. The wife earning more or having a higher status
job does not necessarily translate into a relationship in which the
woman has more marital power, possibly owing to different con-
tributions being weighted differentially, depending on whether the
contribution fits gender role expectations (Tichenor, 1999). Thus,
a woman’s earnings may be weighted to have less impact, and a
man’s earnings weighted more, to fit societal notions and make the
discrepancies acceptable (Komter, 1989). Therefore, true power
discrepancies, from this perspective, may be based less on overt
differences between spouses but more on the expectations (explicit
or unstated) that give one partner greater ability to exert power in
a given situation (Rollins & Bahr, 1976).

This leads us to believe that counselors and researchers may
want to assess for not just a problem area or overt differences in
reported ability to exert power but instead how satisfied the
spouses are with their relative contributions (i.e., income, educa-
tion, commitment, skills, etc.) to the marriage and how the couple
arrives at decisions. It is likely that the demand and withdraw
behaviors arise in couples who are either dissatisfied with their
relative contributions or dissatisfied with how much power each spouse
has in how discrepancies are resolved. Researchers, for
example, have suggested that husbands are satisfied with their
contributions to the marriage because they underestimate their
wives’ contributions to household tasks, responsibilities, and child
care and overestimate their own contributions (Komter, 1989). As
a result, future studies examining spouses’ satisfaction with their
relative inputs to the marriage, and the potential gender role
weightings, may help verify the accuracy of the social structure
hypothesis.

Implications

One of the main implications of this study for counselors is that
marital power may not rest entirely with one spouse or the other.
Spouses may exert more or less marital power in certain areas or
during certain topics, or they may be able to exert different types
of marital power. For counselors and researchers, this means that
it is important to access spouses’ level of power from multiple
domains and across multiple areas of the relationship. When work-
ing with a couple, it is important for counselors to specifically
assess how power bases (SES, education, and perceptions of
gender role), power processes (how the couple discusses the issue
and uses tactics such as domineeringness or dominance), and
outcomes (who ultimately makes the decision) affect the couple’s
decision making and satisfaction across all problematic aspects of
the relationship. Although it seems logical that counselors already
attend to power dynamics in couples relationships, there is some
evidence that counselors are not adept at detecting clear power
abuses such as domestic violence (Avis, 1992), let alone power
imbalances or power dynamics associated with less severe behav-
iors. Our sample of couples from the community, for example,
suggests that domineeringness and dominance behavior are present
in many couples’ relationships. As such, directly attending to these
process issues may be important. Researchers can assist in this
process by focusing on developing tools to better assess these
domains of marital power and start to examine their separate
contributions to marital communication and marital satisfaction.

A second important implication of this study is that it sheds
some new light into how counselors can intervene to reduce the
negative connection between demanding and withdrawal behav-
iors and negative outcomes such as reduced marital satisfaction.
The common notion is that demand and withdraw behaviors are
detrimental to marital satisfaction (Christensen & Heavey, 1990;
Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; Noller et al., 1994); however, in some
cases they are not (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey et al.,
1995). One reason for this difference in the relationship between
demand and withdraw behaviors and marital satisfaction may be
the degree to which the spouses share power. Couples who have
nongealitarian relationships may engage in more rigid demand and
withdraw behaviors and not be able to alter their positions,
whereas egalitarian couples may engage in demand and withdraw
behaviors, but the behaviors may be more flexible or complemen-
tary (e.g., the spouses engage in similar levels of each behavior)
because the couple is more accepting of each others’ position, in
general. Therefore, one of the reasons that couples in this study
may not have exhibited more pronounced demand–withdraw pat-
terns is that wifes were able to assert their immediate needs, and
these assertions were responded to. When both spouses are able to
express their needs, problematic communication patterns may be
decreased. Thus, severing the link between demand and withdraw
behavior and negative outcomes may require interventions that not
only address the presence of demand and withdraw behaviors in
couples’ relationships directly but also attend to spouses’ ability to
exert certain types of marital power (i.e., power processes). For
example, one way to address power, in session, is to work with
couples’ moment-to-moment displays or exhibitions of marital
power (power processes) in an effort to make positive changes for
the couple, such as improved marital satisfaction. Trying to negate
demand and withdraw behaviors without also negotiating issues of
power may lead to disappointing results.

A third and related implication is that the current findings
support previous research demonstrating that demand and with-
draw behaviors are present even among relatively satisfied couples
(Noller et al., 1994; Vogel & Karney, 2002; Vogel et al., 1999).
Demand and withdraw behaviors are common to some degree in
nearly all relationships (Gottman, 1999), and thus, studying non-clinical samples can inform what behaviors may be problematic for more distressed couples. In our nonclinical community sample, demand and withdraw behaviors were common at low to moderate levels, and in the case of demand during wives’ topics, wife and husband differences were present with moderate effects. Thus, it could be that even in relationships that are relatively egalitarian (i.e., in our study no difference in SES was found), some types of power differences may exist. For example, women may feel responsible for managing the relationship and resolving interpersonal conflicts and therefore demand more. If counselors want to intervene to help couples reduce the presence of demand and withdraw behaviors, they may need to assess the other aspects of the relationship (e.g., each spouse’s level of responsibility for the topic) that could play a role in the presence of demand and withdraw behavior.

Strengths and Limitations

Researchers in the field have called for studies of marital power that include both self-report and external reports of power (Eldrige & Christensen, 2002; Gottman & Notarius, 2000). Therefore, one of the strengths of this study is that it is the first that we are aware of to include self-report and observed assessments of marital power and demand and withdraw behaviors in marital interactions. However, despite this strength, the conclusions that can be drawn from these results may be limited in several ways. First, given that this was the first study to examine behavioral links between demanding and withdrawal behaviors and marital power, generalizations to other populations should be made with caution until future research replicates these findings with different measurements of power. Furthermore, although the sample was somewhat distressed, these findings may not apply to all dissatisfied marriages. There is the possibility that the relationship of various aspects of marital power and demand and withdraw behaviors may differ in couples who vary in ethnicity or SES. Furthermore, although there was some diversity in the sample with regard to age, relationship length, employment status, and race/ethnicity compared with many studies of married couples, future cross-cultural research could shed further light on claims about the role of social structure in marital relationships, especially if sex differences were found to vary across cultures that differ in levels of gender equality.

The low reliability of some of the self-report assessments also limits the understanding of the findings, as low reliability limits the ability to detect relationships among the variables. When we started the study, we recognized that some of the self-report measures had limitations in terms of the reliabilities reported in previous research. However, we chose to use them to be consistent with the previous research on demand and withdraw behavior and because there were few self-report measures of the behaviors of interest (i.e., demand–withdraw behaviors). We also believed that having both self-report and observational data would add more to than hinder the interpretation of the findings. The consistent findings with the use of the self-report and observation data support this belief, but future studies should attempt to measure power outcomes with reliable self-report assessments.

It should also be noted that the recorded conversations took place in a laboratory. Although this is the most common setting for research examining marital communication, the dynamics that occur in this type of situation may be different from discussions that take place at home. Furthermore, given the cross-sectional nature of these data, any causal statements must be made with caution. In particular, any strong statements about the way marital power may influence demand and withdraw behaviors over time must wait longitudinal tests of the patterns that appear to emerge early in marriage. It has been suggested that the balance of power in a relationship may change (Blumberg & Coleman, 1989), particularly during times when the relationship is undergoing change (i.e., birth, job change; Ferree, 1990; Gerson & Peiss, 1985). An examination of these processes over time may increase understanding of this issue. Thus, there is a need to see how marital power and demand and withdraw behaviors change over the course of a relationship. Finally, whereas the size of the current sample compares favorably to other samples used to examine these issues, it is possible that a larger sample would have had more statistical power to detect sex differences in the use of marital power. In all, these findings highlight the need for more research to further the field’s understanding of complex power dynamics as they play out in marital relationships.

References


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