



“When uncomfortable, individuals may try to make up for it by saying something. Anything.”

Goal Auzeen Saedi, Ph.D.

Love and Power

Power infuses all relationships, but today there's a new paradigm: Only equally shared power creates happy individuals and satisfying marriages. Increasingly, it is the passport to intimacy.

By Hara Estroff Marano, published on January 01, 2014 - last reviewed on January 01, 2014

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As water is to fish, power is to people: It is the medium we swim in. And it is typically just as invisible to us.

Power is not limited to leaders or organizations; it doesn't require outright acts of domination. It's a basic force in every social interaction. Power defines the way we relate to each other. It dictates whether you get listened to. It determines whether your needs take priority or get any attention at all.

The problem for romantic partners is that power as normally exercised is a barrier to intimacy. It blunts sensitivity to a partner and precludes emotional connectivity. Yet this connection is what human beings all crave, and need. It satisfies deeply.

But there's only one path to intimacy. It runs straight through shared power in relationships. Equality is not just ideologically desirable, it has enormous practical consequences. It affects individual and relationship well-being. It fosters mutual responsiveness and attunement. It determines whether you'll be satisfied or have days (and nights) spiked with resentment and depression. "The ability of couples to withstand stress, respond to change, and enhance each other's health and well-being depends on their having a relatively equal power balance," reports Carmen Knudson-Martin of Loma Linda University. Equality, psychologists agree, is the world's best antidote to isolation. It's just not easy to attain or to sustain.

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The Ascent of Intimacy

Intimacy is nothing new. Seeking support, feeling close, forming strong emotional bonds, and expressing feelings are essential to the human experience. Both physical and psychological well-being, in fact, depend on the ability to do so.

But where we place intimacy in our lives certainly is new. The intensification of individualism and the development of the love match—ultrarecent phenomena on the human timeline—concentrate intimacy in couplehood. Until the 20th century, says social historian Stephanie Coontz of Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, intimacy was dispersed among wide family and social circles. The closeness mothers and daughters and even mothers and sons enjoyed, as well as siblings and cousins, would be considered enmeshment today. Saying "I love you" to a cousin or even a neighbor was commonplace. So was displacing a husband to spend a night in bed sharing secrets with an old friend come to town. "We have upped our expectations of intimacy but downgraded our definition of from whom it is expected and to whom it is owed," says Coontz. "We've taken all the personal feelings and expectations from other relationships and put them onto the couple relationship."

So much have social lives shrunk that men today tend to have only one confidante—their wife. That makes men especially reactive to their wives' emotions—notably their negative emotions. That's not to say that wives are not reactive to men's feelings, but having a wider social network allows women more opportunities to calibrate their emotional lives.

The place of intimacy is not all that's changing. For a long time, the prevailing definition of intimacy has revolved around the sharing of feelings and insecurities. Necessary as it is, it is no longer sufficient; confiding can be confining. It makes little allowance for individual growth, a requirement in long-term relationships. And individual growth fuels not only the expansion of love but the sexual desire and eroticism increasingly expected if relationships are to satisfy for a lifetime.

"Intimacy rests on two people who have a capacity to both listen and speak up, who have the courage to bring more and more of their full selves into the relationship," says psychologist Harriet Lerner. "Both need equal power in defining what they want and what they really think and believe. But you have to know you can leave a relationship. If you truly believe you can't survive without a relationship, you have no power to really be yourself within it."

Too often, one partner gives up too much self—core values and priorities become compromised under relationship pressures; one person does more than a fair share of giving in around decision making or gives the other's goals priority. "Historically speaking, that person has been the woman," says Lerner. "I see it more both ways now that women are more

economically independent. It takes courage to act on your own behalf.” What often happens, she says, is that people accommodate, accommodate, accommodate, grow to resent it, and then fly out of the relationship when they needed to reclaim their power much earlier. “They needed to say much earlier, ‘I don’t want you to treat me this way and I won’t be in the conversation when you talk to me this way.’ ”

Because intimacy is more important than ever, relationship equality is more necessary than ever.



Shared Power Is the Only Power

Although many people associate power with manipulation and coercion, contemporary psychologists and philosophers have forged a new power paradigm: They view power as the capacity of an individual to influence others' states, even to advance the goals of others while developing their full self. It doesn't require observable behavior, let alone force.

If a woman is as influential as her partner is, then a relationship lasts, says John Gottman. But if he's much more influential than she is, the relationship doesn't last. For the dean of relationship researchers, an “interlocking influence process” is at the heart of a balance of power. “It's really about responsiveness to your partner's emotions. If you have power in a relationship, you have an effect on your partner with your emotions. That's a good sign for the long-term stability of the relationship and the happiness of the partners. But some people have very high emotional inertia; they weigh a lot emotionally; it's hard to move them.”

And responsiveness to a partner is what makes a relationship feel fair, says Gottman, professor emeritus in psychology at the University of Washington and head of Seattle's Relationship Research Institute. Housework and childcare chores don't even have to be divided 50/50 to establish equality in a relationship. “A relationship has to feel fair. And that requires flexibility and responsiveness to emotions. People try to get their partner's attention or interest, or open a conversation or share humor or affection. We look at what proportion of the time a partner turns toward such a bid or a need. The turning towards needs to be at a very high level.”

Fairness has one critical element, says University of Washington sociologist Pepper Schwartz—respect. In interviewing thousands of couples around the world she found that the American definition of a good relationship is “best friend.” (Europeans prefer “passionate lover.”) Best friends are egalitarian, and what most characterizes good friendship is respect—equal dignity.

In marriage, Schwartz says, it applies to division of labor, joint decision making, and especially license to speak up. “Respect means that someone takes my humanity into consideration and sees me as worthy in my own right of a positive and collaborative relationship. I’m understood as a human being worthy of occupying the same kind of space in the world as you. Why is cleaning toilets good only for me but not for you? OK, I’ll clean the toilets and you’ll throw out the dog poop; then we both know we have dirty jobs we do for the collective well-being of the relationship.”

There’s no single objective measure of fairness. People can accept unequal division of labor—as long as they have influence and are appreciated and not demeaned. “Unfairness does not always equal unhappiness,” she says.

By contrast, power differences afflict almost all distressed heterosexual couples, and most occur along gender lines, at least in the United States, reports Knudson-Martin. It’s not that it results from outright acts of domination. In the press of daily life, couples slip into society-based patterns that favor men’s needs and desires in ways that seem unquestionable. “Distressed relationships tend to be organized around the interests of the more powerful, often without conscious intention,” Knudson-Martin reports in *Family Process*. Or partners are caught in a power struggle in which one tries in vain to influence the other, and so they are locked in argument, often about one issue over and over again—a positive sign, some experts believe, that a partner hasn’t completely sacrificed identity.

For Knudson-Martin, the mutuality of influence that is so central to equality hinges on reciprocal engagement. In her studies of the process, she has found that each partner, by being aware of and interested in the needs of the other, allows the other to feel not only important but supported in the relationship.

With identity and worth affirmed, partners then can open themselves to being changed by the other, to accept influence. They also feel safe enough to reveal their innermost thoughts, express concerns, even admit weakness, uncertainty, or mistakes in a partner’s presence. Mutual vulnerability becomes a high-water mark of bringing one’s whole self into a relationship.

Knudson-Martin finds that when power is equal, partners also engage in direct communication strategies. They can ask straightforwardly for what they want. They don’t use the children as their mouthpieces. They don’t devote hours to dopping out the mood of their partner before broaching a topic.



Beyond Manipulation

Straight talk is essential to shared power, insists relational therapist Terry Real, who is based in Boston. But for some females, that can be dicey at first—it requires giving up the only form of power they have long been confined to practice. “The indirect exertion of power through manipulation is part of the traditional female role,” says Real. “Men don’t like being manipulated, and it’s one of the few legitimate reasons they don’t trust women. That women exert indirect power because direct power has historically been blocked doesn’t make it any less ugly.” There’s a significant reward for direct communication, Knudson-Martin finds—the intensification of intimacy, leading to increased relationship satisfaction.

Equal partnership has another critical feature—shared responsibilities for the relationship itself. The more equal the relationship, the more responsibility both partners feel to make it work or get it on track if it is off. Most commonly, Knudson-Martin says, distressed heterosexual couples walk through her door and only one partner—guess which one—is making the effort to understand what is going on. “The men say they want the relationship to work, but they haven’t internalized the idea that part of their job is to figure out how to preserve it.”

To create a truly shared relationship, Stephanie Coontz notes, women have to loosen their hold on a cherished psychological tradition—emotional sharing. A demand for the constant confiding of feelings as the mark of closeness, she contends, is a strictly female view of intimacy.

Centering intimate relations around the sharing of feelings is a legacy from the gendered division of labor that prevailed in the 19th century, when men ventured into the new, impersonal world of commerce and women stayed home, says Coontz. “We don’t recognize how much of the exploration of feelings arose from female powerlessness. As women, we became skilled in reading the emotions of others in our lives as a way to anticipate them or move them in other directions. And now we demand that kind of intimacy of men without realizing that we took up such emotional specialization precisely because we didn’t have any power to just say, ‘Hey, this is what I’d like to do.’”

Not only can the demand for too much understanding overburden couple relationships, but every little problem does *not* need to be talked out right now, Coontz adds. “We have underestimated the intimacy of unspoken, practical acts,” more the male approach to love.

Affairs: A Cost of Inequality

He who wields excess power in a relationship wins the battle—but loses the war, says Terry Real, who aims to nudge the world into thinking about relationships ecologically. “You’re not above the system. You’re in it. If you throw out pollution over there, it winds up in your lungs over here. Relationally, if one partner wins and the other loses, both lose—because the loser always makes the winner pay.”

Bullying doesn’t engender love, observes Real. It engenders resentment and hatred, which tend to show up in passive-aggressive behavior—withdrawal of generosity, of sexuality, of passion, and, ultimately, of love itself. “People don’t like being controlled,” Real explains. “The exercise of power is really an illusion, but it’s an enormously destructive illusion.”

Unless a partner is willing to risk the relationship, power imbalances can lead directly to affairs or the kind of exits that leave a powerful partner in head-scratching surprise. Real calls it “the paradox of intimacy. In order to sustain healthy intimacy you have to be willing to risk the relationship. The powerless person needs to acquire enough self-esteem to stand up to the bully: ‘I don’t want to make love to you while you’re treating me this way.’ Or ‘I don’t want to perform services for you while you’re treating me this

way. Pick up your own dry cleaning.' It's necessary to be congruent with one's own displeasure, which predictably gets the other person's attention."

Much as power feeds grandiosity, the state of emotional disconnection that the powerful inhabit is awfully lonely. And therein lies trouble. Sometimes the powerful person will say, "This marriage has been dead for years," Real reports. And they're right. "They themselves have built up such a bill of resentment the partner has withdrawn to the point where there is no juice in the relationship. What they don't get is their own culpability."

More often, the powerful slip into outside relationships—and feel fully justified in doing so. The lonelier they feel, says Real, the more they blame their partner. That enables them to feel entitled to find someone else, either by leaving the relationship for a different a partner or by having affairs.

Subordinate partners are no strangers to loneliness, but the cascade of events may be slightly different, less an entitlement than a quest for attention. There's a turning away from the relationship to get one's needs met, says Gottman, because often the partner, usually the woman, doesn't want the relationship to end. She begins a search elsewhere for friends, intellectual stimulation, and fun. But such substitution doesn't work well; loneliness seeks a responsive human being. Boundaries get crossed.

However, even if women are having affairs from a one-down position, after vainly trying to get a partner's attention, the affair gives them some power in the relationship. Their partners may suddenly launch into hot pursuit to get them back into the marriage.

Power Changes Everything

Denying the dignity of one partner has consequences not only for relationship stability and happiness, but for health.

Power, says Berkeley psychologist Dacher Keltner, has distinct biological correlates. The "new science of power" emerging from his decades-long research shows that "people with power tend to behave like patients with damage to the brain's frontal lobes, a condition that can cause overly impulsive and insensitive behavior."

The possession of power changes powerholders—usually in ways invisible to them—by triggering activation of the behavioral approach system, based in the left frontal cortex and fueled by the neurotransmitter dopamine. It's automatic. Nevertheless, it makes powerful people quick to act on appetites, to detect opportunities for material and social rewards such as food, money, attention, sex, and approval. They think about sex more and flirt more flagrantly. Poorly attuned to others, they pay little attention to others' feelings and assess their attitudes, interests, and needs inaccurately. Politeness be damned, they act rudely, indulging their own whims. "Having power," Keltner reports, "makes people more likely to act as sociopaths."

The biological obverse marks the powerless. Their lack of power activates the brain's inhibitory system, centered in the right frontal cortex, which directs attention to threat and punishment and sets in motion avoidant behavior. It also ushers in negative feelings, notably anxiety and depression, virtually hallmark emotions of those denied power. If the thwarting of identity isn't distressing enough, add in the lack of partner responsiveness.

"Whenever someone gives up her voice," says Harriet Lerner, author of the now-classic *The Dance of Anger* and most recently of *Marriage Rules*, "whenever one person in the relationship sacrifices too much of the self, that partner experiences the greatest loss of power and is most apt to become symptomatic—to develop depression or anxiety or headaches." It isn't always the woman. "It could be the CEO of a company, if he gets

home and doesn't speak up, if he tells himself it's not worth the fight. People lose power in different ways and at different times in the relationship."

One of the consequences of powerlessness, says Keltner, is that the reigning fear narrows focus onto threats and makes the powerless keen observers of those who have power over them. They know them better than the powerful know themselves. It's a natural channel for self-preservation.



When Pressure Sparks Power Strife

Young couples today enter marriage expecting equality. Both partners assume they are going to be working, Schwartz reports. Men feel much more permission to be involved in the everyday lives of their children than their fathers did. Beginning during courting, they are likely to be sharing expenses.

But ideology crashes into reality when children arrive. Then the necessity of allocating childcare responsibilities gives rise to power inequalities that surreptitiously erode a sense of self and decision-making power. "The woman usually becomes the only parent who is changing her life for the children," Schwartz points out. "She loses outside influence and an internal as well as external sense of who she is. As she loses power as an individual, her partner may exercise veto power in decision making or become cavalier about when to be home for dinner."

Compounding the problem is income disparity. It tends to give men more decision-making power. "But it's more money-specific than gender-specific," says Schwartz.

Either way, the idea and reality of best friendship are corroded. Enter resentment and anger. "It can undermine the generosity and goodwill—what each person will do for the other—that make a relationship work," says Schwartz. Often, sex becomes an instrument for withholding or rewarding. But most of all, the once-equal partner now has a diminished sense of self—unless she brings an unusual array of personal resources into the relationship. Here's where charm, beauty, social skills, and fitness count, undemocratic as their distribution might be. They confer power precisely because they imply a person can function outside the relationship.

Jettisoning Gender Roles

In 200 years, says Gottman, “heterosexual relationships will be where gay and lesbian relationships are today.” That’s a long time to wait for change, but it reflects his findings that couple interactions are far more direct and kind among same-sex partners than the power struggles that arise among heterosexual ones.

Rather than rely on cultural assignment of gender roles, gay men and women must come up with their own ways to divide labor and share decisions. Having to actively decide who does what pulls for greater consciousness of fairness and equality, even after children arrive. Lesbian parents—family responsibilities among gay men are too new to have undergone similar study—are “dramatically more equal in sharing of child-care tasks and decision making than heterosexual parents,” researchers report.

Conflict discussions are most telling. Both gay men and lesbians are far more egalitarian than heterosexuals in resolving differences. They bring up a problem less harshly; they don’t come out of the starting gate with an accrual of resentment and attack their partner—a crucial distinction because conflicts tend to end up the way they start out. Same-sex partners are less accusatory and deploy more humor in their disagreements. There’s less belligerence, less domineering, less fear, less whining, Gottman reports in the *Journal of Homosexuality*. Same-sex couples show more affection, listen better, and take more turns talking. Their ability to influence each other keeps discussions positive. Conflict resolution among same-sex partners gets off to a good start also because “there is nothing to decode,” observes Mark McKee, a gay male in a long-term relationship. “No one has to devote mental energy to figuring out what the other partner is really thinking. Each understands exactly what the other means.” The sad irony is that same-sex partnerships are not as durable as heterosexual ones, likely because they have not had the same kind of social support to promote their staying together—until now.

Nevertheless, Gottman concludes, heterosexual couples may have a great deal to learn from homosexual relationships. Equity is a greater concern in homosexual relationships—and partners behave in accordance with their concerns. And all relationships could benefit from recognizing that power and love, long cast as emotional matter and antimatter, are in fact convergent forces. “There’s a widely held belief that to be loved you have to abandon power, and vice versa,” says Adam Kahane, author of *Power and Love*. “Then you choose a partner who provides the missing function.”

In fact, when expressed separately, love and power degenerate, he argues. Lack of love turns power into unconstrained self-interest; lack of power makes love sentimental and romantic, demanding fusion and loss of selfhood. A healthy relationship is both two and one at the same time—love enables individual partners to become their full selves. And such growth provides them with the strength to maintain their oneness. Power, he explains, isn’t dominion over others but the drive of every living thing to realize itself. “Nothing in the world would happen without power; it’s the life force. Love enables power.”

The Elements of Equality

- **Attention.** Both partners are emotionally attuned to and supportive of each other. They listen to each other. And both feel invested in the relationship, responsible for attending to and maintaining the relationship itself.
- **Influence.** Partners are responsive to each other’s needs and each other’s bids for attention, conversation, and connection. Each has the ability to engage and emotionally affect the other.
- **Accommodation.** Although life may present short periods when one partner’s needs take precedence, it occurs by mutual agreement; over the long haul, both partners influence the relationship and make decisions jointly.

- **Respect.** Each partner has positive regard for the humanity of the other and sees the other as admirable, worthy of kindness in a considerate and collaborative relationship.
- **Selfhood.** Each partner retains a viable self, capable of functioning without the relationship if necessary, able to be his or her own person with inviolable boundaries that reflect core values.
- **Status.** Both partners enjoy the same freedom to directly define and assert what is important and to put forth what is the agenda of the relationship. Both feel entitled to have and express their needs and goals and bring their full self into the relationship.
- **Vulnerability.** Each partner is willing to admit weakness, uncertainty, and mistakes.
- **Fairness.** In perception—determined by flexibility and responsiveness—and behavior, both partners feel that chores and responsibilities are divided in ways that support individual and collective well-being.
- **Repair.** Conflicts may occur and negativity may escalate quickly, but partners make deliberate efforts to de-escalate such discussions and calm each other down by taking time-outs and apologizing for harshness. They follow up by replacing defensiveness with listening to the other's position.
- **Well-being.** Both partners foster the well-being of the other physically, emotionally, and financially.

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