Introduction: Power in Close Relationships

Theory and Contexts

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> "Someone once told me that the power in all relationships lies with whoever cares less, and he was right. But power isn't happiness, and I think that maybe happiness comes from caring more about people rather than less."
>
> (Conner Mead, in the film *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*, 2009)

Close relationships bring the greatest joys and pains into people's lives. The interplay between individuals' desires, hopes, and dreams is nowhere more evident than within their closest relationships. In dyadic relationships, couple members influence one another in multiple ways. Sometimes that influence is mutual and equivalent, with both members of a couple influencing each other and their outcomes to a similar extent. Sometimes that influence is neither mutual nor equivalent, with one member "calling the shots" within the relationship and the outcomes are not shared or equally distributed across partners (Agnew, 1999). In both situations, power is present within the relationship. The interpersonal dynamics of power play out in a wide variety of ways, such as in the principle of least interest (Waller & Hill, 1951), reflected in the quote above. This volume, long overdue and the first of its kind, presents a number of theoretical perspectives on power in close relationship, complemented by a consideration of the ways in which power is exerted in various interpersonal contexts.

The first part of this volume lays out theoretical approaches that can be used to explain power in relationships. Starting at what can be considered the most distal level of explanation, power in relationships is presented from an evolutionary perspective. As Zeigler-Hill and McCabe outline in Chapter 1, status is the variable of particular interest from an evolutionary approach to interpersonal power, with the human tendency to form social hierarchies having its roots in evolutionary processes. Within the evolutionary psychology literature, the term "status" tends to be used rather than "power" and the chapter considers in detail how status plays a critical role in understanding survival and reproductive success throughout human history.

Power within partnerships can also be understood by focusing on attachment-based dispositional tendencies of the partners, as originally delineated by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). As mammals, humans require care from the earliest moment of life. Caretakers can be consistently responsive, haphazardly responsive, or never truly responsive. Infants are influenced by perceived caregiving responsivity and, as an infant grows into a child and then into an adult, the mental models one forms of others' responsiveness influences how a person responds to and acts with other people. In Chapter 2, Overall and Cross consider how such attachment dynamics play out with respect to power and dependence within intimate adult relationships. They review how attachment-derived avoidant tendencies are associated with minimizing one's dependence on a partner, but also with attempts to sustain control and power in a relationship. In contrast, those individuals with attachment-based anxiety tendencies seek to maximize their dependence on a partner, with a corresponding loss of power within the relationship.

The flipside of power is dependence: the extent to which a person relies on another for the satisfaction of various desired outcome. Interdependence theory, a grand social psychological theory of interpersonal behavior, focuses on dependence in interpersonal relations. This theory has been fruitful in contributing to our understanding of how power operates within dyads for decades (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Kelley , Holmes, Kerr, Reis, Rusbult, & Van Lange, 2003; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). VanderDrift, Ioerger, and Arriaga provide an interdependence theoretic perspective on power in close relationships in Chapter 3. Interdependence theory defines power as the amount an individual is able to affect the quality of outcomes obtained by another person. Interdependence theory takes the position that relational power is best understood not with respect to broader historical contexts (such as considering evolutionary or early life influences) but by considering proximal situational circumstances. Situations can be described with reference to the amount and degree of control that one actor has over another, and the authors review various power-relevant situations found in close relationships, such as those featuring asymmetric dependence.

Power basis theory, as described in Chapter 4 by Tan, Pratto, Conroy, and Lee, combines aspects of both evolutionary and interdependence approaches by focusing on needs and their fulfillment within relationships, as well as with environmental affordances that allow for power exertion. From this approach, the authors define power as an individual's ability to meet survival needs within a given ecology. The theory and its tenets have not been previously applied to understanding power within close relationships, but its applicability to them is clear. For example, the power basis concept of power fungibility, referred to as the extent to which power in one domain (e.g., interpersonal obligation) may be exchanged for power in another (e.g., control of resources), is often seen in relationships. The implications of such exchanges are worthy of detailed consideration.

A more proximal approach to power, one that attempts to explicitly model and account for mutual influences within a couple, is the Dyadic Power-Social Influence Model (DPSIM), presented by Simpson, Farrell, and Rothman in Chapter 5. Accounting for both members of the couple within a single theoretical model is rare, although clearly necessary to capture intra-dyad dynamics. DPSIM integrates constructs and ideas from past theories into a coherent dyadic process model. The model includes a consideration of the personal characteristics of each partner, the type of power each may yield over the other, the kind of influence tactics deployed, and the outcomes experienced by each partner following an influence attempt. DPSIM offers testable hypotheses and a roadmap for future researchers interested in examining within-couple power.

Although each of the above theoretical approaches provides its own framework for understanding power in close relationships, these theories can also be used in a complementary, non-mutually exclusive manner to understand relational power dynamics. Taking such a combined perspective in Chapter 6, Harman, Stewart, Keneski, and Agnew present a model that attempts to account for multilevel sources of power influencing those involved in a close relationship. Recognizing the complex and multifaceted nature of relational power and how it operates across different social contexts, their multilevel approach incorporates macro-level factors (such as sex ratios in populations), meso-level factors (such as local matriarchies), and micro-level factors (such as the age of partners) as influencing power held and/or exerted by a partner in a relationship, with influences on each partner's relationship outcomes.

Beyond a consideration of theoretical underpinnings, power plays itself out within quite varied interpersonal contexts. Part II of this volume considers in detail how power operates in different environments and via different modalities. To begin, in Chapter 7, Ogolsky, Whittaker, and Monk describe power dynamics operating within families. Family form, structure, and function have changed markedly in recent decades, with corresponding changes in power dynamics. The authors consider family systems theory, family hierarchies, parental styles, and sibling relationships, among other topics with power dimensions. They also examine power-relevant issues with respect to single-parent families, stepfamilies, and same-sex couple families. Finally, they describe intimate partner violence within families, including a discussion of clinical interventions designed to reduce some of the negative consequences associated with power exertion.

Within sexual involvements, gender roles are highly influential in determining who possesses power and in how it is exerted. As Kaufman and Pulerwitz detail in Chapter 8, sex is associated with a number of positive outcomes, although sex can also be used in a relationship as a negative expression of power. For example, power dynamics can lead one partner to insist that a condom not be used in sexual relations or can lead to unwanted sexual activity.

The authors consider the association between power and gender, as well as the actions that might be taken to balance gendered sexual power to optimize the well-being of sexual partners. They also describe current measurement approaches to assessing power within sexual contexts.

Intimate relationships are the forum in which power often figures prominently. In Chapter 9, Kim, Visserman, and Impett describe power within the context of close, intimate relationships. They review past theoretical work on power, isolating some key commonalities across approaches. They also describe how power operates in the context of initial romantic attraction, the role of gender and gender norms in power dynamics, and they review key individual differences that shape how power is expressed in intimate relationships. They also review implications for possessing versus not possessing power in a relationship and how imbalances in power within a relationship are associated with a number of personal and relational outcomes. Power is also discussed with respect to engaging (or not engaging) in pro-relationship behaviors, that is, behaviors known to underpin relationship stability (Agnew & VanderDrift, 2015).

Power can beget violence. One partner may use violence, psychological and/or physical, to exert their will on the other. Interpersonal violence is the focus of Chapter 10, written by Leone and Conroy. They review a useful distinction between two types of intimate partner violence, based on empirical work that examined forms of power and coercive control: Intimate terrorism and situational couple violence (cf. Johnson, 1995). The former type, with power at its core, has been linked to more severe violence compared to the latter and is the focus of the chapter. Intimate terrorism is characterized by the exertion of coercive control over a partner. Men are more likely to be intimate terrorists than are women, and this reality is based on both macro- and micro-level factors that have placed men in greater positions of power within society for centuries. The authors describe the significant barriers that women face in attempting to leave violent relationships and discuss the prevalence of sexual violence within these relationships. They also review interpersonal violence in non-intimate contexts, between youths and their peers.

The communication of power within relationships is the focus of Solomon and Roloff's chapter (Chapter 11). Relationship partners communicate in a variety of ways, to each other and to others, and these communications often provide evidence of the power dynamics operating in a given relationship. The authors emphasize how the characteristics of the individuals in a given relationship affect the interpersonal communication of power. They also provide illustrations of communication behaviors in which power is manifest within relationships. Power is also communicated in nonverbal ways, as highlighted in Chapter 12 by Dunbar and Bernhold. Power can be indicated via a wide variety of nonverbal cues, including gestures, facial expressions, and even clothing. Research has examined kinesic cues (e.g., gestures, eye gaze, posture) and how they are related to conveying the sense of greater authority. Physical and haptic cues have also been linked to power communication. For example,

the use of physical space and touch to convey power has been examined, and it is clear from the accumulated data that such cues can be potent in their influence.

This volume, which bring together major theoretical perspectives and highlights relational power within meaningful contexts, should prove useful to scholars studying power in close relationships, including those wishing to extend what is currently known. One current socially relevant area ripe for inquiry involves the commonalities and differences between power dynamics as played out within close relationships versus such dynamics played out among those not particularly close or even among mere acquaintances. For example, power dynamics between coworkers in the workplace, and between employees and their supervisors, share some commonalities with those operating within close relationships, but also often some important differences (e.g., set differences in relative status, direct control over material outcomes, etc.). Recent public revelations regarding sexual assault and harassment that have given rise to the worldwide "#MeToo" and Time's Up movements speak volumes regarding the more nefarious aspects of interpersonal power dynamics in the context of non-close relationships. Situations featuring unequal power can lead to significant abuses by the powerful to the powerless. Future research might harness what is known about close relationship power dynamics to further our understanding of how people with less power in a given situation can best navigate their plights.

Collectively, the work presented in this volume makes it abundantly clear that power dynamics within close relationships are an undeniable part of the human experience. The need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) is a fundamental motivation for relationship formation and maintenance, and creates situations in which there is inherent dependence on others to meet our needs (e.g., survival, reproductive, psychosocial). The challenges of group living, whether in dyads, families, or larger social systems (e.g., clans) have resulted in the development of specific strategies to manage dependencies, and in how we cooperate or compete with others within our relationships. Power strategies that are used within and across multiple relationships (e.g., friends, extended family) and social levels (e.g., family court, police) are better understood when interpreted with the frameworks presented here. The diverse theories and frameworks detailed in this volume serve to elucidate numerous ways that power has been conceptualized in the relationships that are closest to us and provide a springboard for future research.

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