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A Review of Theoretical Approaches to Interpersonal Power

Norah E. Dunbar

Power equality or inequality is one of the most fundamental attributes of any interpersonal relationship. In this review of interpersonal approaches to power, a definition of interpersonal power is proposed and the multidimensional and complex nature of power is explored. Various theoretical models, all of which employ power as one of their key variables, are discussed, including social exchange theory, interdependence theory, normative resource theory, equity theory, dyadic power theory, necessary convergence communication theory, bilateral deterrence theory, the chilling effect, relational control approaches, and sex role theories.

Keywords: power; interpersonal communication

Power is an important part of all interpersonal interactions because it operates "under the surface," affecting the communication choices we make even if conflict is not overt.[1] Consider the case of a nurse who disagrees with a doctor about a medication that has been prescribed, a student who goes to the department chair with a complaint about a professor, and a husband who disagrees with his wife about her choice of child-rearing strategies. Power is relevant in all of these conflicts even if the nurse, the student, and the husband don't say anything at all, because power determines the topics we discuss, the opinions we share, whether we conform to the expectations of others, and the communication behaviors we choose to enact.[2] Many scholars in communication and related fields have identified power as a fundamental construct in the study of human relationships[3] and several theories have been advanced to explain the role power plays in our interpersonal interactions. However,

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few reviews of the interpersonal theories that feature power exist.[4] This article will review the various definitions of interpersonal power and discuss how power is viewed from different theoretical perspectives within interpersonal communication.

Power Defined

Over the last several decades of interaction research, many scholars have debated how to define what power is and how to distinguish it from related constructs such as status, dominance, authority, and domineeringness. These constructs have been defined in numerous, often synonymous, ways by a variety of theorists and researchers.[5] To achieve conceptual clarity and to eliminate confusion, these concepts should be differentiated from one another.

Despite the many definitions of power that exist in the interpersonal literature, scholars from diverse fields are converging on the definition of power generally as the capacity to produce intended effects, and in particular, the ability to influence the behavior of another person.[6] Since power is an ability, like other abilities, it is not always exercised, and there may be strategic reasons for withholding the exercise of power. When exercised, it is not always successful, and even when successful, its magnitude may not be fully evident unless it is pitted against a counterforce of appropriate strength.[7] This is consistent with the definitions offered by Komter, who distinguishes between manifest power, latent power, and invisible power.[8] Manifest power concerns the visible outcomes of power, such as open conflicts or particular verbal and nonverbal strategies used to achieve certain ends. Latent power is identified when the needs of the powerful person are identified or conflicts are avoided due to fear of retaliation by the powerful partner. Invisible power is the result of social or psychological mechanisms that do not necessarily surface in overt behavior or even latent grievances, but may be manifest in systematic differences between men and women due to gender norms, racial inequalities, or other culturally relevant expectancies. Often, the powerful person may not even be aware of his or her power, since power is based in the relationship between two people but is influenced by cultural norms in the society at large.[9]

An example of the gender norms that subtly influence relationships is a recent study of how cohabiting couples make decisions about relationship progression. Women in heterosexual cohabiting couples are less bound by traditional gender norms than those who do not cohabit prior to marriage. They often take a leading role in economic decisions as well as the decision to move in together, but the decision to progress to marriage still resides with the male.[10] These women often report that they are waiting for their partners to make a formal marriage proposal and use hinting to let their partners know they are ready for marriage. Even the minority of women who said they had proposed or would propose to their mates had partners who said they would laugh at or reject such a proposal, or if they accepted, felt they needed to "re-do" the proposal before it was an official engagement.[11] The fact that even amongst relatively egalitarian couples the decision to marry still resides

with the male suggests that the hidden power of men is influencing these relationships in very important ways.

McDonald reviewed a large body of research on family power and summarized the definition of power using six issues.[12] First, power is the ability to achieve desired goals or outcomes. Even if it is used in subtle ways, people with power are more likely to get their way than people without it. Second, power is a system property rather than the personal attribute of an individual. This is reflected in the relational view of power demonstrated by Rollins and Bahr and Burgoon et al. and is demonstrated through resource dependencies and mutual influence because even powerful people depend on others to achieve their goals to some extent.[13] Third, power is dynamic, rather than static, and therefore involves reciprocal causation. Fourth, power is both a perceptual and behavioral phenomenon, which captures both of Komter's manifest and latent qualities.[14] We act on how powerful we perceive ourselves to be in most situations. Fifth, power is always asymmetrical, although the power of one individual in his or her sphere may be compensated by another individual's power in an alternate sphere, so power may be characterized as equalitarian across spheres for a relationship generally, even if power is not equal in every domain. Sixth, power is multidimensional in nature, including socio–structural, interactional, and outcome components. Clearly, power is a complex variable that cannot easily be captured in relational research, although the theoretical approaches summarized here all attempt to estimate the influence of interpersonal power on human relationships in some way.[15]

The multidimensional nature of power is reflected in the classification of power into three domains: power bases, power processes, and power outcomes.[16] "Power bases" refers to resources such as rewards or knowledge possessed by family members that form the basis for control over others. French and Raven identified five power bases that have subsequently been used extensively in the conflict literature.[17] These include reward power and coercive power, which represent, respectively, a person's right to reward and punish; legitimate power, which is power that comes from holding a high-status position that is sanctioned by society; referent power, which is the power that results when others admire and emulate a person; and expert power, which is derived from having expertise in a needed field. Other scholars have since added additional power bases, such as informational power[18] and credibility.[19] The second domain, power processes, refers to the strategies used to exert power in interactions such as decision-making, problem-solving, and conflict management. The third domain, power outcomes, refers to the actual resultant influence on others' thoughts, beliefs, and actions and includes the results of decision-making in terms of who makes the decision or who "wins."[20] One way to think about the difference between the three domains is that power bases represent potential power while power processes and outcomes represent the act of wielding that power.[21]

In contrast to power, which may be latent and hidden, interpersonal scholars tend to use the term "dominance" to refer to behaviors that are necessarily manifest.[22] It refers to context- and relationship-dependent interactional patterns in which one actor's assertion of control is met by acquiescence from another.[23] Although

dominance elsewhere may be viewed as a personality trait, in the context of communication, it is a dynamic state that reflects a combination of individual temperament and situational features that demand, release, or encourage dominant behavior.[24] Unlike domineeringness, which refers to individual attempts to control the interaction, dominance refers to the acceptance of the control attempts by the interactional partner—that is, it is defined by the sequence of "one-up" and "one-down" acts between two parties.[25] Dominance is thus both behavioral and relational. Burgoon et al. further defined interpersonal dominance dyadically and interactionally, specifically describing it as expressive, relationally based strategies and as one set of communicative acts by which power is exerted and influence achieved.[26]

While dominance is typically thought of as a purposive act, utilizing resources for the exertion of power, Huston argues that individuals with greater power may also exert power unintentionally.[27] Through a chain of causal events, the person with more power relative to the partner may influence the partner without necessarily intending to. For example, an asymmetry of power may provide one partner with more freedom of movement and require the subordinate person to anticipate the desires of the more powerful one.[28] This may be manifested nonverbally, such as through greater visual vigilance on the part of the subordinate partner, but is not likely to be intended or even noticed by the more powerful partner.[29]

Theoretical Models and Perspectives of Power

A number of social–psychological and communication theorists have attempted to explain the dynamics of power in close relationships. However, since the approaches to power have been multidisciplinary and are based on assumptions that come from very different perspectives, theories of power often bear little resemblance to one another.[30] These include but are not limited to social exchange theory, interdependence theory, dyadic power theory, normative resource theory, equity theory, necessary convergence communication theory, bilateral deterrence theory, the chilling effect, relational control approaches, and sex role theories. Each perspective makes a unique contribution to the understanding of power in close relationships, and each will be discussed in turn for the contribution it has made to the interpersonal understanding of social power.

Social Exchange Theories

Perhaps most prominent in the theoretical perspectives that delineate power as a key construct are *social exchange theories*, which are reflected by the early writings of Emerson, Blau, and others[31] and later by researchers like Molm and Sprecher.[32] In general, social exchange theorists assume that individuals will act to maximize their interpersonal rewards and minimize their interpersonal costs.[33] A pivotal concept of this theory is dependence—the extent to which one's outcomes is contingent on exchange with another. When we consider that much of what we want and need in life can only be obtained from others, it is difficult to consider a relationship in which

dependence does not play a part.[34] Dependence is a function of both value and alternatives, inasmuch as people are more dependent on those whose exchange relationships they value highly, especially when alternatives are few.[35] Power, then, is achieved dyadically when a person is valued as an exchange partner and there are few alternatives.[36] This may be especially true if the partner has desired resources or is considered a high-status actor.[37]

Several researchers have examined the applications of social exchange theory to the management of interpersonal conflict and the longevity of interpersonal relationships.[38] When deciding whether to divorce, for example, individuals weigh the rewards of the marriage such as companionship, affection, and cooperation in the running of a household with the costs of marriage such as dissatisfaction, conflict, and sacrificing relational alternatives. They evaluate their alternatives in the context of their present relationship and the costs associated with extricating themselves from the marriage. The rewards must outweigh the costs for the relationship to continue. When people receive few rewards from the relationship, face few barriers to ending the relationship, and perceive good alternatives to the relationship, the likelihood of marital dissolution is increased.[39] This is not to say that social exchange theories are restricted to selfish acts or hedonistic desires: "The theory makes no assumptions about *what* actors value; rather, it assumes that *if* actor A values y then A will choose behaviors that produce more rather than less of y."[40] Thus, social exchange theory predicts that if individuals value their partner's happiness in a marriage, they will act in a way to maximize their partner's happiness, even at their own expense.

In addition, social exchange theorists argue that reciprocal dependence may be indirect, as in "generalized exchange," where benefits given by one partner to another are not reciprocated immediately but are expected in the future from the social network or group. "In larger systems of generalized exchange, the reciprocal dependency becomes increasingly indirect and in many cases quite diffuse, as examples of giving wedding gifts and reviewing journal manuscripts illustrate."[41] Thus, the social exchange perspective, assumes that power is embedded in a relationship, not only between two dyadic partners but also within the general society in which the dyad operates.

Social exchange principles can be seen operating in what Waller called "the principle of least interest."[42] He observed that both parties in a dating relationship are not equally interested in continuing the relationship. Since both parties are not equally emotionally involved, if the dating were terminated, it would be more traumatic for one than for the other and so the least interested party is in a position to dominate or even exploit the other.[43] Since Waller's time, the principle has largely been supported and has been linked to marital satisfaction and stability as well as the amount of emotional distress experienced after a break-up.[44] Dependence plays a key role in understanding these findings because once a person is less dependent on their partner than vice versa, they have more available alternatives and do not value that partner as an exchange partner. This creates a power imbalance between the two partners, which is generally seen as undesirable.

Additional Theories Related to Social Exchange

One offspring of Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) version of social exchange theory is Rusbult's *interdependence theory*.[45] Interpersonal interdependence is defined as "the process by which interacting persons influence one another's experiences—the effects individuals exert on other persons' motives, preferences, behavior, and outcomes."[46] While Rusbult and Van Lange argue that it is a misnomer to call interdependence theory a social exchange theory, it shares many of the assumptions of social exchange, including that individuals seek to maximize outcomes and that they use comparisons to their alternatives to make decisions.

One focus of interdependence theory is on the outcomes of interpersonal interdependence. Thibaut and Kelley argue that a comparison level (CL) is the quality of outcomes an individual has come to expect, whereas a comparison level for alternatives (CL-alt) is the lowest level of outcomes an individual finds acceptable in light of outcomes available elsewhere.[47] CL influences feelings of satisfaction, whereas CL-alt affects dependence on the partner for important needs.[48] Mutuality of dependence refers to the degree to which partners are mutually rather than unilaterally dependent on one another for attaining positive outcomes. When partners are mutually dependent, they possess equal levels of power and are motivated to maintain the relationship. This leads to enhanced stability and reduces the potential for exploitation by either partner.[49] On the other hand, non-mutual dependence is associated with greater suspicion, insecurity, abuse of power, and avoidance of interaction.[50]

A recent investigation of 120 dating couples tested the relationship between power and commitment using the factors established by interdependence theory as mediators: satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investment.[51] The results suggest that having greater power does improve the quality of alternatives available and reduce commitment, as the principle of least interest would suggest, but also decreases satisfaction with the relationship.[52] Previous studies have found that equitable relationships are the most desirable[53] which is why Dunbar and Burgoon[54] speculated that the majority of their sample of married and cohabiting couples preferred characterizing their relationship as equal rather than unequal in power despite the differences in dominance behavior exhibited. Generally, the investment model has proved to be a useful tool for examining power relationships as they affect the stability and commitment of close relationships.

Another theory that has roots in the social exchange perspective is *normative resource theory*, which has focused on marital power. This theory, first posited by Blood and Wolfe, holds that power in marriage is manifested in the ability to make decisions regarding the life of the family.[55] This ability is dictated by two main factors: the societal and cultural norms that influence the relationship (especially patriarchal norms), and the comparative resources possessed by each partner in the marriage.[56] Blood and Wolfe argue that economic resources give husbands greater decision-making power, but recent research has identified many other resources available to both husbands and wives, such as health and energy, social support,

social skills, emotional strength, age, or the presence of children from prior marriages.[57] Kulik found that "non-instrumental resources are considered especially important and contribute substantially toward explaining marital power relations."[58] Crosbie-Burnett and Giles-Sims studied remarried couples with stepchildren and identified several factors that should be incorporated into theories of marital power above the income earned by each, particularly when they are applied to remarried couples.[59] These are (a) prior ownership of the family home, (b) levels of satisfaction with the alternative of being single even if it means being a single parent, (c) relative ages of the spouses, (d) financial support of children by the stepparent, and (e) similarity to normative family structure.

It cannot be assumed, however, that employment will increase the power of wives in all marriages. First of all, simply examining who is contributing to the household income overlooks how the finances are handled within the home.[60] Second, while it was once assumed that employment would provide wives with the power to get their husbands to share more of the household chores, it has been found that husbands' contribution to domestic duties increase only slightly when their wives work.[61] A study of Chinese couples found that patriarchal norms guided marital decision-making more than income because wives failed to use their relative income to bargain for more power.[62] Pyke examined the effects of the wife's employment according to "the economy of gratitude."[63] For example, a woman whose husband views her employment as a threat will derive less power from her employment. This is supported by research that has demonstrated that women with jobs that were higher in status than their husbands' jobs were more likely to suffer life-threatening violence from their mates than were wives who were occupationally similar to their husbands, suggesting husbands may react negatively when they view their wives' employment as a burden rather than a gift.[64] In short, the resources a woman gains by employment are not necessarily dictated by the amount of money she earns but by how much her partner values her labor.

Equity theory, which is another theoretical perspective on power related to social exchange theories, holds that people strive to maintain a balance in what they and their partners put in to and take from their relationships.[65] Equity theory predicts that people will be happiest or most satisfied with their relationships when such an equitable balance of investments and rewards is maintained. Both "over-benefited" partners (who receive more rewards relative to inputs compared to their partners) and "under-benefited" partners (who receive fewer rewards relative to inputs compared to their partners) will be less satisfied than those who perceive receiving rewards that match their expectations.[66] Thus, this theory goes beyond the typical cost-benefit analysis of the social exchange-based theories and posits additional relationships between power equity and satisfaction.

Dyadic power theory is another theory that draws from a social exchange perspective. Dunbar predicts that pre-existing cultural, relational, and social factors and the resources that one has access to determine the perceptions of one's own power that influences their behavioral tactics within social interactions.[67] The theory suggests that partners in relationships with a power inequality will engage in less

overt dominance than those in relationships that are power balanced. This is consistent with work by Keltner and colleagues, who argue that partners with greater relative power approach situations with the confidence that comes from having high status.[68] Indeed, several recent studies have examined the differences between power-equal and power-unequal dyads and have found their dominance tactics differ according to their perceptions of their dependence on their partners.[69]

Recent work on dyadic power theory has begun to incorporate the idea that power is not only relevant when comparing power across dyads in terms of power equality or inequality but can also be traced to certain domains of power within a relationship as well.[70] A relational domain refers to any sphere of activity over which partners may negotiate. For example, a general power imbalance may have the effect of stifling conflict because one partner is afraid of the consequences of conflict (in accordance with the chilling effect discussed below) and the other prefers the status quo and thus neither raises the issue. However, there are still periodic conflicts, and DPT would predict these are most likely when the partners believe they are generally power balanced on that issue, even if there is a general power imbalance overall in their relationship. DPT builds on the social exchange, interdependence, and normative resource traditions described earlier, and also assumes that the communication that results because of power perceptions within a relationship is of central importance to understanding the effects of power on interpersonal relationships.

A recent theory of interpersonal power is Miller-Day's *necessary convergence communication* (NCC) theory. The theory posits that low-power partners in a relationship engage in "convergence communication" which is a pattern of uncritical acceptance of or conformity to the more powerful partner's point of view.[71] The submissive partner appropriates the social meanings of the powerful partner for relational maintenance purposes.[72] She argues that those who perpetually converge with another, particularly in enmeshed relationships, are wracked by depression, learned helplessness, eating disorders, and other mental health problems.[73] Convergence is exemplified in the example of a mother–daughter interaction in which an adult daughter is wearing a unique clip in her hair and when speaking alone with the interviewer, says that she likes it. Later, her mother expresses disapproval and the daughter removes it saying to the interviewer "I didn't really like it that way anyway... I guess. Besides, I didn't want to have to put up with her annoying gazes."[74] Dunbar and Mejia, and Dunbar and Johnson found other examples of convergence in their studies of couples in conflict and found that it was characteristic of unequal power dyads.[75]

Convergence communication has been characterized by NCC as a construct with three dimensions: disequilibrium, interpersonal deference, and motivation.[76] Disequilibrium refers to the inequality of an individual's participation in and contribution to meaning in the interaction. Since the higher-power partner has a greater ability to social meanings, the lower-power partner submits to his or her construction and an inequality or disequilibrium in their conversation is evident. Interpersonal deference occurs when the low-power partner submits to the high-power partner. He or she might repeat what the powerful partner says, and might

even embrace it, and make it his or her own. Motivation refers to the relational reason low-power individuals give for their interpersonal deference. For example, avoiding punishment or attaining greater resources from one's partner are often a sufficient motivation to submit.

A final theoretical approach to the study of power is Lawler's *bilateral deterrence theory.* Lawler distinguishes between dependence power, the control that is achieved by being less dependent on the other, and punitive power, the influence gained by a person perceived as likely to inflict harm.[77] The cornerstone of Lawler's theory is that power is not zero-sum. He argues that the total or absolute amount of power in a relationship is not fixed but variable in that total power is the sum of each party's absolute power and relative power—the power difference of each party's absolute power.[78] As many social exchange theorists have noticed, power is rarely in the hands of one person, but is shared as people become dependent upon one another. The nonzero-sum conception of power distinguishes between tactics that use an existing power capability (power-use tactics) and those that can change the power in an ongoing struggle (power-change tactics). Bilateral deterrence theory argues that if the power capability of both parties increases such that they can hurt each other, they will use that power less often because of the costs associated with power use. In other words, as the power capacity of both parties' increases, each develops a higher fear of retaliation and a lower expectation of attack that reduces the use of hostile tactics. However, if the power is unequal, then the higher-power party uses power more because of a lower fear of retaliation, whereas the lower-power party uses power more because of higher expectations of attack.[79] Although Lawler's theory was not specifically designed to explain power differences in interpersonal relationships, his argument that the power of each individual influences the choice of tactics is relevant to the explanation for power use that come out of the social exchange tradition.

Other Models of Interpersonal Power

One program of research that has investigated conflict in a comprehensive manner examines the decisions people make to avoid interpersonal conflict in terms of a *chilling effect.* It predicts that individuals who feel powerless or who fear aggression from their partners will avoid conflict.[80] The chilling effect perspective of power in interpersonal relationships asserts that a partner's power has the tendency to quell the expression of interpersonal complaints. That is, lower power persons will withhold grievances and avoid conflict because they fear the response of their relational partner (worrying that the partner will leave or de-escalate the relationship or use physical or symbolic aggression). It is the perceptions individuals have of their partner's' potential actions that creates the chilling effect, rather than partner's' actual behaviors.[81] Thus, people suffering power deficits will be more likely to accommodate a partner's irritating behaviors for fear that confrontation would prompt these partners to withdraw their resources or respond aggressively.[82]

Additionally, the concept of *relational control* emphasizes who offers and who accepts control in a relationship.[83] The interaction between two people in a

relationship is characterized by the complementarity and symmetry of the interaction. In complementary relationships or exchanges, one person's controlling maneuvers are matched by the other's submissive maneuvers. In symmetrical exchanges, their interaction is a maneuvering of both people to either dominance or submission. In referring to control in interpersonal relationships, Millar and Rogers (1976) say: "The control dimension is concerned with who has the right to direct, delimit, and define, the action of the interpersonal system in the presently experienced spatial-temporal situation."[84] Rogers-Millar and Millar relate their concept of relational control to interpersonal power in two ways. First, they argue that of the three power domains (bases, processes, or outcomes) relational control is part of the power process rather than power bases or outcomes. As opposed to power bases which people "have," relational control is a process which people "do" in order to establish and maintain power. Second, though they view power as a static variable, relational control can be seen as "meta-power," or the dynamic set of behaviors that define and characterize the rule structure in an interaction.[85] Thus, while relational control should not be seen as synonymous with power, it is one method of achieving power or exerting influence in a given interaction. This is akin to the definition of dominance proposed earlier because it is a manifestation of the perceived power one has.

Several different coding schemes of relational control have been developed,[86] the most prominent of which was developed by Rogers and colleagues.[87] They differentiated between "one-up" attempts to be domineering, "one-down" submissive behaviors, and "one across" moves that are attempts to establish equality through neutralizing behaviors and identification with the other. Their dyadic approach to dominance results in three different types of patterns: symmetrical patterns in which partners use similar behaviors, complementary patterns in which partners use opposite behaviors, and transitory patterns which combine one-up or one-down behaviors with one-across acts. Zietlow and VanLear (1991) argue that both escalating symmetry and rigid complementarity are "schismogenetic" which means they are dysfunctional and progressive patterns of mutual influence that may lead to the eventual destruction of the relationship.[88] However, in their study of married couples at different relational stages, they found that established relationships used more competitive and complementary patterns than newly formed relationships, perhaps because the investment that has already been made by both partners and the trust that has been established allows them to withstand competitive attempts at control. Relational control coding schemes are a useful way to understand the dominance dynamics within an interaction although they have been critiqued for failing to take the larger context and the relational history into account.[89]

Finally, it is impossible to discuss power without acknowledging the plethora of research that has been conducted highlighting gender and sex differences in the ability to control and use power bases. *Sex roles* are the learned behaviors differentially displayed by the sexes that are shaped by common social assumptions and expectations.[90] It is difficult to trace the history of sex role research—sociologists trace its origins to the work of Mead and Parsons[91] while psychologists trace the

study of sex roles to Freud.[92] Bem's gender schema perspective draws from social learning as well as cognitive-developmental approaches and proposes that children learn sex-related associations that guide and organize their perception into an evolving gender schema.[93] Current iterations of sex role theories assume that there are socially normative roles for men and women that are rooted in socialization and internalized by individuals.[94] Men are expected to be more self-assertive and motivated while women are believed to be more selfless and concerned with others. While these norms are slowly changing, research has found that sex role congruent behavior is evaluated more favorably than sex role incongruent behavior and that sex role incongruent behavior may even be met with penalties such as social rejection, reduced prestige, and negative evaluations from others.[95]

Sex role identity translates into structural power differences between men and women in society. While certainly not all relationships conform to societal norms, interactions between husbands and wives do not occur in a vacuum, but are influenced by the norms of the culture in which they live.[96] This creates a gendered hierarchy in cross-sex relationships that is difficult to change because it is learned through socialization and embedded in the continued interactions of the couple. Felmlee found that even in a sample of college students who appear to be relatively equal in their economic resources and status, less than half of the respondents were in equalitarian relationships.[97] When the relationship is unequal in power, a greater proportion (36.5%) say it is the male who has more power than the female (17.3%). Being dominant is more consistent with the masculine than the feminine sex role. So powerful is this societal stereotype, that female-dominant dyads often face added difficulties in dealing with power issues and resolving conflicts. This has been shown to be especially true for non-Western couples who face more strict patriarchal norms than U.S. couples,[98] although norms are slowly changing in other places as well.[99]

Sex roles have been linked to power in interpersonal decision-making in many different studies. Ball, Cowan, and Cowan reported that wives expressed frustration and powerlessness at their subordinate position in their marriages due to "wives' tenacity in pressing for mutual engagement about and finding solutions to the problem; and husbands' reluctance to engage in problem talk, resistance to their wives' proposed solutions, and avoidance of implementing solutions."[100] This is supported by the finding that husbands in troubled relationships often do not accept influence from their wives.[101] Earning more income or attaining greater education has been demonstrated to empower women to leave violent marriages, but as discussed earlier, women are often reluctant to use their resources as tools to influence the decisions in their relationships.[102] The cultural (and often patriarchal) norms in which relationships are embedded are important factors in the study of interpersonal power.

Conclusions

Based on this review, what can we conclude about power in interpersonal relationships? Various theoretical perspectives have been promulgated that use

power differences to explain why some relationships survive and others do not; why power diffuses some conflicts and exacerbates others, or why having power affects the behavior of some people more than others. Although many of the perspectives described here have their roots in the social exchange phenomenon, they emphasize different aspects of power including dependence, power use, freedom to choose alternatives, commitment to partners, fear of retaliation, and communication tactics.

Although differentiating power from dominance and other related concepts may seem like a purely semantic exercise, it is important because power has become associated with corruption, abuse, stereotyping, and prejudice. These notions flow from the confounding of power with the dominance/submission relationship implicit in dependence and the pejorative emotions associated with dominance that suggest it is inherently related to subjugation.[103] Turner suggests that power is neither inherently oppressive nor maladaptive—nor is it detrimental to social cohesion, because the coordination and centralization of group action through legitimate authority empowers group members to achieve their goals and establish a coordinated identity. A few of the theoretical models here do assume a pejorative view of power and some have been critiqued for their neutral stance on the subjugation of powerless groups, such as women.

However, understanding how equality and inequality in our close relationships affects how we communicate within them is one of the most fundamental puzzles of interpersonal communication, and knowing how theories can help answer those questions is important. Interpersonal power affects our satisfaction with our relationships, the methods of communication we choose, the topics we discuss or avoid, our own emotional and physical well-being, and a host of other outcomes. Changes in the balance of power in a relationship could also be studied as an outcome if we examine how our communication patterns affect our perceptions of interpersonal power and how conflict, argument, and debate can change the emotional and cognitive responses of participants. Although a great deal of research on the interpersonal approach to power has already been conducted, this review reveals that there is still much to learn.

Notes

[1]   R. Janss, S. Rispens, M. Segers, and K. A. Jehn, "What is Happening under the Surface? Power, Conflict and the Performance of Medical Teams," *Medical Education* 46, no. 9 (2012): 838–49.

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