

Career Orientation, Sex Role Orientation, and  
Perceived Equity as Factors Affecting Marital Power

by

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## ABSTRACT

Recently developed models of family power view power as an ability to influence others in situations of conflict of interest which is demonstrated by the process of interaction between individuals (Olson, Cromwell, & Klein, 1975; Osmond, 1978; Rollins & Bahr, 1976). Among the variables specified as influences on marital power by marital power theorists are the resources exchanged by marital partners, the perceived equity of the exchange (Osmond, 1978), and the partners' perceptions of the extent of their power in influencing spouses (Rollins & Bahr, 1976). The present study compared dual career and single career couples, in which one or both partners are involved in professional careers, on perceived marital equity, sex role orientation of spouses, and four dimensions of marital power, including influence attempts, perceived power, and two types of influence strategies.

Fifty dual career couples and fifty single career couples, selected chiefly from membership lists of professionals' organizations and matched for type of occupation and the presence or absence of children in the family, volunteered for participation. Couples completed the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974); a self-report measure of equity developed for this study; Bahr's Role Measure of Conjugal Power (Bahr, 1972); and a self-report scale of influence strategies (Davis, 1975). Couples also

resolved experimentally created conflicts from Olson and Ryder's (1970) Inventory of Marital Conflicts (IMC).

Audio recordings of couples' IMC discussions were content analysed for influence attempts of each spouse.

Tests of career orientation hypotheses indicated that dual and single career couples differed on feminine sex role orientation, with single career wives viewing themselves as more feminine than did dual career wives. Tests of gender hypotheses indicated that wives viewed their marriages as more equitable than their husbands did, with husbands rating themselves as over-benefitting and wives rating themselves as slightly under-benefitting compared to their partners. Wives tended to use control of material resources (means control) as an influence strategy more than husbands did. For dual career couples, but not single career couples, gender of spouse and masculine sex role orientation were significant predictors of marital power variables, particularly influence attempts and use of appeals to one's credibility as an influence strategy.

The direction and extent of relationships among dependent variables were found to depend on couples' career orientation and the gender of the spouse. Perceived equity was positively related to perceived marital power for husbands and for wives, to use of credibility as an influence strategy for dual career partners, and to femininity for dual career husbands. For single career partners, perceived equity was negatively related to the

use of means control. Masculine sex role orientation was positively associated with the use of credibility as an influence strategy for all subgroups, as well as with perceived power for wives. For dual career husbands, masculinity was negatively associated with the frequency of influence attempts. Additional relationships were found between some but not all marital power variables.

These results support marital power theories which assert the importance of perceived equity (Osmond, 1978) and of perceived power (Rollins & Bahr, 1976) as determinants of other power variables. These results also re-affirm the multi-dimensionality of the concept of marital power, since not all marital power variables were related to each other nor equally predicted by non-power variables (Olson, Cromwell, & Klein, 1975). Several means by which spouses' gender affects marital power and the importance of sex role orientation as a predictor of self-reported marital power are suggested by the findings.

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Marriage partners succeed in resolving countless life issues during the course of their relationship. The range of decisions they face ensures that disagreement between partners on some issues is inevitable, necessitating that one spouse's opinion prevails over the other's some of the time. The occurrence of this process raises many unanswered questions about its nature. By what means does one spouse influence his partner? Under what conditions does one spouse permit the other to dominate? What characteristics of individuals and of their relationship determine how one partner influences the other? These questions have been the concern of research on marital power and are the central questions of the present investigation.

Power is the ability to make or alter group choices, according to Turk (1975), who has identified this characteristic as common to all definitions of power. Several models have been developed recently for the analysis of the capacity to make or alter choices within a marital partnership (Olson, Cromwell, & Klein, 1975; Osmond, 1978; Rollins & Bahr, 1976). The subsequent discussion will identify each model prior to delineating the relationship between the variables of the present study as a function of these models.

## Recent Models of Family Power

The first of three recently developed models of the nature of power is Olson, Cromwell & Klein's (1975). According to their model, power cannot be understood separately from the system in which it appears. Marital power is thus a component of the functioning of a total family, both affecting and affected by all other relationships within the family and by the family's external social context. The reciprocally or circularly causal relationship of many family life variables to marital power requires that power be identified by observing regularities in the interaction processes of marital partners, rather than solely through determination of the outcomes of interaction. In other words, the outcome of a difference of views is less salient for the understanding of marital power than is the process by which the outcome is determined. The dimensions of power include spouses' preceptions, motivations to apply power, and behaviors demonstrating power. Consequently, both objective observation and subjective self-reports of family members are required in the analysis of power relations. Family processes which may be understood by power dynamics include decision-making, problem-solving, negotiating differences, and responding to crises.

A second recently developed model of family power by Rollins & Bahr (1976) shares Olson, Cromwell and Klein's

(1975) view that power is a characteristic of social interaction, rather than a characteristic of an individual. From Rollins & Bahr's perspective, power is demonstrated only in situations where individuals have a conflict of interest, since only in these instances does potential power become an observable behavior. Each partner may have more influence than the other in specific situations. Power is therefore relative between spouses, depending on the issue and the context in which it is exerted. Power may be distinguished from attempts to influence, which may be called control attempts, and from control, which is behavior demonstrating power. The determinants of power in any situation are resources and authority. Resources are "anything that one partner may make available to the other, helping the latter satisfy his needs or attain his goals" (Rollins & Bahr, 1976, p. 621). Marital authority is a reflection of social norms determining which partner ought to have control over specific marital issues. The exercise of power, or control, is ultimately determined by the spouses' perceptions of resources and authority, with modifications resulting from counter-control attempts by the marital partner or by external others against the initiator's control attempts.

The third model of marital power, developed recently by Osmond (1978), is more explicit about the processes of marital power than either Olson, Cromwell, & Klein's (1975) model or Rollins and Bahr's (1976) model. Osmond suggests

that power relations emerge from the exchange of resources between partners occurring in the early stages of their relationship. If the worth and the rate of resources exchanged is relatively balanced, trust develops in the relationship. The partners develop expectations that the reciprocal exchange will continue. Exchanges come to be evaluated in comparison to past exchanges within the relationship and in comparison to expectations learned from observing the rewards obtained by others with similar resource exchanges in their relationships. The perceptions of the relationship partners and their comparison with standards both within and outside the relationship is termed the "referential structure" (Osmond, 1978, p. 52) of the exchange relations. When marital partners have unequal resources, attempts by one spouse to exert power result in the partner's choosing between several alternative response strategies. The partner may provide a service to the relationship in the expectation that his spouse will continue to reciprocate by providing resources in the future or the partner may provide the services in response to coercion. Failing these outcomes, the partner attempting to exert power may obtain the desired services elsewhere or may decide to do without the services. According to Osmond, a state of equitable exchange exists in a relationship if the resources contributed and the rewards obtained are proportional for each partner.

Although these three models emphasize different features

of the influence process between marital partners, they are not contradictory to one another. Taken together, they represent a conceptualization of marital power consonant with the findings of previous marital power research, which has been tested only minimally by subsequent research (Martin & Osmond, 1975; Osmond, 1978).

These recent models converge in their view of power as an ability or potential which is behaviorally demonstrated only in situations where conflict of interest occurs. A second point of convergence between these models is their assumption that power is a characteristic of a system of interaction between individuals or groups, rather than an attribute of an individual. The consequences of this view of power as a system characteristic are twofold: (a) that processes of interaction demonstrate power; and (b) that numerous characteristics of a marital relationship system affect the power relations of the partners. A third point of convergence between the models is the view the perceptions of marital partners are vital to understanding their power relations.

### The Present Research

The present research investigates aspects of marital power suggested by these recently developed theoretical models. The assumptions shared by the present research

with these models are the following: (a) that power is observable only in situations of conflict; (b) that power characterizes not an individual but a system of interaction, requiring an analysis of the interaction process; and (c) that the perceptions of participants in a power relationship are necessary for understanding power.

The major consequences of these assumptions for the present study are seen in the research design and in the choice of dependent variables. The consequence for the research design is the concept of using the marital dyad rather than each partner as the basic unit of analysis, since marital power is a characteristic of the relationship system rather than of either the husband or wife. The dependent variables of power in this investigation include attempts to influence the marital partner, the strategies partners identify in their attempts to influence and partners' perceptions of their relative power in decisions affecting the relationship. The present research thus provides an opportunity to observe both the interaction process and the participants' perceptions of power, as well as the effects of process and perception on each other.

The purpose of the present research is to investigate marital power by comparing the process of influence during conflict interactions of two types of marital dyads, dual career and single career professional couples. Dual career couples, in which both partners pursue careers while maintaining a family life together, differ from single

career couples, in which one member of the couple pursues a career, in the kinds of rewards and costs contributed to the marriage by each partner. These couples therefore provide a means of investigating the effects of equity, or equality in the reward-cost balance of the marriage partners, on marital power. If the single career couples are the type in which the husband is the breadwinner, these couples also differ in the extent to which husband and wife share or do not share the family provider and family homemaker roles traditionally ascribed to husbands and wives, respectively. Thus, dual and single career couples also provide a means for investigating the effects of sex role orientation or androgyny on marital power.

In summary, the present investigation proposes to study: (a) the effects of couples' career orientation and gender of spouse on dimensions of marital power suggested by recently developed models of family power; (b) the effects of couples' career orientation and gender of spouse on perceived equity of the relationship and on sex role orientation of the partners; (c) the effects of perceived equity and sex role orientation on marital power. The independent variables of the present investigation are couples' career orientation and gender of spouse, while the dependent variables are perceived equity, sex role orientation, attempts to influence, influence strategies and perceived power. Perceived equity and sex role orientation are considered mediating variables for the

effects of career orientation and gender of spouse on power variables.

The discussion to follow illustrates the hypothesized differences between couples of differing career orientation and between husbands and wives on marital power, on the perceived equity of the relationship, and on the sex role orientation of the marital partners.

#### Resources as Determinants of Marital Power

Rollins and Bahr (1976) and Osmond (1978) share with older, classical theories of family power their identification of both resources and authority as significant determinants of marital power. The possession of valued resources increases the ability of a marital partner to influence his or her spouse. Authority, or the role-based ascription of decision-making power to a spouse determined by social values, may be considered a resource since possession of authority augments its holder's power. Neither Bahr and Rollins nor Osmond specify what attributes constitute the resource base of family power. However, several older theories of marital power have specified the resources base of marital power in ways that suggest differences between the dual and single career professional couples which are the focus of the present investigation (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Heer, 1963a, 1963b; Wolfe, 1959).

If, as assumed by Wolfe (1959), marital power must be based on possession of resources needed by one's spouse, then the distribution of marital power between dual career and single career families is necessarily different. Resources contributed by the husbands in both instances include the provision of financial support for the family, social status resulting from occupational participation, and the contribution of skills that are a by-product of occupational participation.<sup>1</sup> The resources contributed by wives in dual and single career families differ markedly, however. The single career wife contributes to the accomplishment of household and child-rearing tasks as her major occupation while the dual career wife contributes the resources resulting from her occupational activity. Since the kinds of resources exchanged in the two types of relationships differ so markedly, the power relations must differ in the two types of relationships, according to Wolfe.

Family power is affected specifically by resources

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<sup>1</sup>Resources, in Wolfe's sense, may refer to all possible kinds of contributions, from the universal level (resources which may be contributed by anyone possessing them) to the particularistic or highly personal level (resources or contributions which are considered as such by the recipient only because of the identity of the person contributing them.) Both these kinds of resources are exchanged in marriage relationships. The most obvious differences between dual and single career marital dyads are those of the universal type. These types of resources are the major ones referred to in the discussion of the resource-base of marital power, although not in subsequent discussion of other possible differences between the two types of couples.