

# When Therapy Challenges Patriarchy: Undoing Gendered Power in Heterosexual Couple Relationships

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Transforming power imbalances is at the heart of Socio-Emotional Relationship Therapy (SERT), an approach that addresses sociocultural processes that perpetuate inequality and interfere with mutual care and support (see Knudson-Martin and Huenergardt, [“Bridging Emotion, Societal Discourse, and Couple Interaction in Clinical Practice,”](#) 2015). Working with power in couple therapy raises many challenging questions. What is power? How can we recognize it? Isn’t this a personal values issue? What if people don’t want equal power? Why would someone give up power? Addressing gendered power associated with patriarchy can be particularly challenging.

Although I have studied gendered power and practiced couple therapy for a long time, I still struggle with all these concerns and experience them daily from my vantage point as a married heterosexual woman. As part of the SERT clinical research team, I have observed countless therapy sessions, tracked and coded the clinical processes involved, explored my own personal responses, and engaged in an ongoing effort to recognize and address power disparities (see Estrella et al. [“Expanding the Lens: How SERT Therapists Develop Interventions that Address the Larger Context,”](#) 2015; Knudson-Martin et al. 2014). In this chapter, I address some of the most common questions. The case examples, which have been modified to protect confidentiality, illustrate the hidden and complex nature of gendered power.

## Why Is Power a Relationship Issue?

Because people influence each other, power is an inherent part of all relationships. Among intimate partners, power “refers to the ability of one person to influence a relationship toward his own goals, interests, and well-being” (Mahoney

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and Knudson-Martin 2009, p. 10). When power is relatively well balanced, each partner is able to engage the other around issues that are important to them and they feel equally entitled to express their ideas, needs, and feelings. Both partners notice and attend to the needs of the other and each is likely to accommodate.

When power is not equal, the more powerful partner will be less aware of the other's experience. What makes it more complicated is that people in higher power positions generally are not aware of their power; they may not even realize that others are attentive to their needs or that their interests are dominating the agenda. On the other hand, people in less powerful positions are likely to automatically take into account the desires or expectations of the more powerful. People in powerful roles (i.e., teacher, employer, physician, and husband) may take for granted that others accommodate them—or become distressed when they do not. Conflict may be reduced, but at the expense of a limited voice for the less powerful.

Contemporary intimate relationships generally presume mutuality; partners expect that the relationship will equally support each of them (Knudson-Martin 2013). Enacting the qualities that comprise the Circle of Care described in “[Bridging Emotion, Societal Discourse, and Couple Interaction in Clinical Practice](#),” (Knudson-Martin and Huenergardt, 2015) requires a relatively equal balance of power and reciprocity. Unless power imbalances are identified and transformed, other desired clinical change is likely to be difficult. Figure 1 includes a list of assessment questions developed by Mahoney and Knudson-Martin (2009, p. 11–12).

The power processes in a relationship can be surprisingly difficult to assess, especially among heterosexual partners. This is because a power hierarchy is implicit in how binary gender is socially constructed and maintained. Even in Western contexts where ideas of gender have changed considerably in recent decades, people get mixed social messages. On the one hand, both men and women increasingly seek equal relationships (Sullivan 2006); at the same time, transforming hierarchical gender patterns turns out to be much more difficult than people realize (Coontz 2005; Gerson 2010; Knudson-Martin and Mahoney 2009). People, including therapists, often believe that women and men are equal now and may not recognize how communication patterns tend to remain gendered such that men are less likely to tune into, notice, and accommodate to female partners. Or if they do, masculine gender norms tell them they have given up too much.

## Why Is Power So Difficult to Recognize?

### *Gendered Individualism*

At first, Lila (58) and Lance (61) appeared to epitomize equality. Both previously divorced with grown children, they met when each returned to graduate school. Now married for five years, this European American couple held identical jobs, strongly professed values of gender equality, and appeared to make decisions

## WHAT IS THE BALANCE OF POWER?

### RELATIVE STATUS

- Whose interests shape what happens in the family?
- To what extent do partners feel equally entitled to express and attain personal goals, needs, and wishes?
- How are low-status tasks like housework handled?

### ATTENTION TO OTHER

- To what extent do both partners notice and attend to the other's needs and emotions?
- Does attention go back and forth between partners? Does each give and receive?
- When attention is imbalanced do partners express awareness of this and the need to rebalance?

### ACCOMMODATION PATTERNS

- Is one partner more likely to organize his or her daily activities around the other?
- Does accommodation often occur automatically without anything being said?
- Do partners attempt to justify accommodations they make as being "natural" or the result of personality differences?

### WELL-BEING

- Does one partner seem to be better off psychologically, emotionally, or physically than the other?
- Does one person's sense of competence, optimism, or well-being seem to come at the expense of the other's physical or emotional health?
- Does the relationship support the economic viability of each partner?

**Fig. 1** Assessment of relationship power positions

and manage household responsibilities together. Lila spoke assertively while Lance spoke more softly. In fact, he proclaimed that he did not want to be one of those men who took over conversations. For a while, we wondered whether Lila may be in the more powerful position. But when we used the assessment guide offered in this chapter and focused on who had the ability to impact the other, it became clear that a major part of Lila's distress was that though the couple would "talk," she was unable to get him to respond to things that mattered to her. When we tracked this power dynamic in session and repeatedly observed Lance pulling away from Lila's concerns, he reported that he did not see what he could do or resisted the idea that he had any responsibility for her problems.

Though at first difficult to see, Lance and Lila demonstrated "gendered individualism" (Loscocco and Walzer 2013, p. 7), a common pattern that inadvertently perpetuates male power. We see it often in the USA. Men internalize the culture of individualism, while women are still socialized to accommodate and are held responsible for relationship maintenance. This individualistic focus discourages

men from taking relationship-directed actions. According to Loscocco and Walzer, this is one of the major reasons women are less satisfied with their marriages than men. They further argue that self-help books and other relationship experts often encourage women to be the ones to change. If we had done that, we would have encouraged Lila to take more responsibility and expected less of Lance. That would have even further perpetuated the power imbalance.

Instead, we worked first with Lance to help him become more aware of internalized messages that told him to resist relational responsibility. We also helped him get more in touch with his genuine concern and care for Lila and to express it. It was slow work and sometimes frustrating for Lila, with whom we maintained a supportive balance that validated her right to expect responsiveness from Lance while helping both partners understand the societal context of his disengagement and their shared desire to transform it. At one point, Lance actually identified that his struggle was more with the voices of other men than with her. Throughout his life, he had “failed” to live up to masculinity. Yet masculine ideals of individuality were threatening their marriage.

### ***Latent Power***

Another reason power is so hard to assess is that it is built into societal gender norms that guide how partners respond to each other. As a result, shared decisions may reflect male interests and women may unwittingly subordinate their needs. This works well to reduce conflict, but limits intimacy, mutual support, and well-being. Carole and Carl, an African American couple in their late twenties sought counseling in their first year of marriage. Both medical students, this couple generally demonstrated one of the most equal communication patterns we have seen. Each seemed attentive and responsive to the well-being of the other. Yet, Carole was in tears and Carl did not know what to do. During the process of matching for residencies, the couple had tried to list only preferences that would work for both of them. However, Carl included one choice on his list that both partners knew was not really a good option for her. It turned out that this was the only offer Carl received and Carole automatically told him it would be okay. He accepted the offer, and now the couple had to live with the unequitable decision. How did this happen? How could they move forward and prevent future inequities like this?

Carl had latent power (Komter 1989) so that shared decisions ended up favoring him. Though Carole had quietly hoped that Carl would resist taking an option that was such a poor choice for her, it seemed natural to both of them to support his career. Though they did not discuss it, they took for granted that ultimately she would likely take time away from work when they had children and therefore made an almost automatic decision that limited her career options and maximized his.

Of course, in all relationships, sometimes one person has to sacrifice for the good of the other. Gender theory suggests that most often these sacrifices will

support the male partner's goals (Komter 1989; Zvonkovic et al. 1996). What was unusual was that the couple recognized the potential long-term inequity and sought help to deal with the issue. When they discussed it, they learned that Carole had approached the residency matching from a relationship-directed position that prioritized what was best for the relationship as a whole (see Silverstein et al. 2006), and Carl had automatically accepted her sacrifice as natural without noticing or attending to what she was giving up—a reflection of latent power.

### ***Invisible Power***

Overt power—such as access to resources or physical strength—is more easily recognized. But many aspects of power in a relationship are less visible. According to Komter (1989), invisible power is connected to how societal patterns affect each partner's internal sense of self, their hopes and dreams, and the skills and competencies they develop. The couple is most likely not aware of how these create power differences in what each partner feels entitled to and how much each partner acknowledges needing the other. In heterosexual relationships, these tend to be gendered. Even when the female partner makes more money or has rigid time demands from her work, other relational processes may still privilege the male partner (Tichenor 2005).

For example, women are more likely to internalize blame (Gross and Hansen 2000), putting them in a (invisible) one-down power position. When Jose and Karina, a Mexican American couple in their thirties with two young children, began therapy Karina immediately took responsibility for their relationship problems by saying that she was probably codependent. Karina was the sole breadwinner of the family and Jose was a stay-at-home dad. The couple said they made this decision for practical reasons because Karina was able to earn more money than Jose and they were able to save on childcare expenses. Both agreed he was a good father. Yet, when it came to the couple relationship, Jose seemed almost entirely self-focused. When Karina raised concerns that mattered to her, Jose consistently invalidated her perspective or took the discussion in a different direction. Even though Karina made the family income, the relationship dynamics organized around what mattered to Jose. Jose held both latent and invisible power.

### **What About Role Reversals?**

As suggested above, even when women at first appear to have the dominant voice or most income in a heterosexual relationship, the relational processes are never as simple as a role reversal. To understand each partner's experience and the power dynamics associated with it, it is necessary to expand the lens to the larger societal gender context. Everyone lives in a world in which gender still structures

economic, social, and political institutions. This larger social context shapes the meaning of behavior and influences all relationships, at least to some extent. For example, Belle, a 36-year-old African American woman married to John, a 38-year-old European American man, complained that John was not interested enough in sex. This sounds like Belle is the more sexually demanding partner and a role reversal from what couple therapists more typically see. But when the meaning of her sexual demands was explored in relation to the wider social context, it turned out that what Belle really wanted was more engagement from John, for him to show more interest in her. Since she had internalized societal gender prescriptions, she viewed sexual interest from men as the way they showed interest in women. When John did not seem to fit this expectation, she felt devalued. When the therapist helped the couple explore how they related to societal gender expectations, the nuances of their responses to each other and how these connected to power processes became clearer. Belle's plea was not really coming from a power position.

Similarly, Frank, a 42-year-old European American elementary teacher, sought therapy because he wanted more closeness with his wife, Joan, a company administrator. At first, Joan refused to attend the sessions, usually a sign of a power position. So the therapist used the Circle of Care (see Knudson-Martin and Huenergardt, "[Bridging Emotion, Societal Discourse, and Couple Interaction in Clinical Practice](#)," 2015) to help Frank assess their relationship and how he attended to and engaged his wife. Frank discovered that even though he did much of the childcare for their eight-year-old son, he really had always expected that Joan would take the relational lead. When asked about how he tuned into her or what she would find engaging, Frank was dumbfounded. He had enjoyed their relationship, which he thought had been good for most of their 20 years of marriage. It was only recently that Joan seemed to "not care" about him or not have as much time for him.

As Frank began to attend more to Joan and increase his responsibility for the relationship, Joan agreed to participate in couple therapy. Viewing her apparent power position in relation to the larger societal gender context and the history of their relationship, her current responses were better understood as a way to take a more equal position in the marriage. She tearfully described how when they were dating she had had sex with Frank when she really did not want to, but felt that she had no choice "if she wanted to please a man." She spoke of years of accommodating him and working hard to make the relationship flourish. She was tired and not interested in that anymore. However, as Frank began to carry more of the relationship burden, each of them expressed new life in their relationship and renewed desire for each other.

As the example of Frank and Joan suggests, by the time a couple seeks therapy, the power dynamic may have taken a turn, especially if a hurt or angry woman is no longer willing to play the role of keeping the relationship alive. She has temporarily increased her power position because she is no longer relationship oriented. This dynamic may be exacerbated when one or both partners has experienced a history of abuse (see Wells and Kuhn, "[Couple Therapy with Adult Survivors of Child Abuse: Gender, Power, and Trust](#)," 2015) or if a woman has an affair (see Williams and Kim, "[Relational Justice: Addressing Gender and Power in Clinical Practices for Infidelity](#)," 2015). However, we have found that for the relationship to resurrect, the previous underlying power

dynamic between the partners must be addressed and this usually means helping men engage from a more relationship-oriented position (see Samman and Knudson-Martin, “[Relational Engagement in Heterosexual Couple Therapy: Helping Men Move from “I” to “We”](#),” 2015).

## What if Men Don’t Feel Powerful?

When couples come to therapy, both partners may feel helpless. Sometimes heterosexual men are frustrated or puzzled because they do not understand why their partner is so distressed. Either way, men are more likely to feel incompetent than powerful (Shepard and Harway 2012). Being in a societal power position discourages men from attuning to others, but puts them at a disadvantage if they want to build relationship. Feeling incompetent is a primary hurdle because people on the top are supposed to know what they are doing. Thus, societal gender processes set couples up for failure by limiting the options for women and men. Each does better when relationships are more equal (Knudson-Martin 2013; Steil 1997). Therapy that helps each partner take a more relationally oriented position can be empowering to both (Fishbane 2011; Fishbane and Wells, “[Toward Relational Empowerment: Interpersonal Neurobiology, Couples, and the Societal Context](#),” 2015).

SERT begins by attuning to the sociocultural experience of each partner. Attention to the societal power context is an important aspect of this process. Power associated with various societal positions (i.e., age, ethnicity, social class, ability/disability, sexual orientation, religion, national origin, indigenous heritage, and other social locations) intersects with gender in many different ways and influence how intimate partners respond and react to each other. The goal is to first understand each partner’s contextual experience and then to use the position of the therapist to counteract societal power processes in ways that empower couples to create more equitable, mutually supportive relationship patterns.

In the case of Belle and John, the mixed-race couple introduced earlier, John maintained a power position that kept him disengaged from his wife and children. Yet with limited formal education and an injury that placed him on disability, he experienced himself as powerless within the family and even less powerful in the larger society. However, as a European American male, he was socialized to believe that he *should* occupy a position of respect from others. He attempted to maintain a position of personal respect by disparaging other authorities (doctors, school officials, and government policies) and, according to Belle and the children, focused mostly on his own interests at home. If he accommodated Belle’s ideas or requests, he felt diminished. He was in pain, depressed, and avoided social situations.

Belle was also in physical pain but continued her job as a teacher. Belle’s experience as an African American woman was that you had to push through whatever hardships came your way. She expected disrespect, and said she had learned not to let that hold her back from doing things she wanted to do. She was therefore impatient with John’s approach to life and vacillated between trying to



understand his situation and anger that he did not carry more of the load in the family. One of the most important challenges in the therapy was to believe that John was capable of engaging with his wife and family and empowering him to do this, while also recognizing his disempowered societal experience.

## **Do Men Always Have Power?**

Gender is a societal process that organizes human relationships; thus latent and invisible power accompanies membership in the male social category. This is a collective process, not an individual one. However, as in the cases described above, individual women and men respond in many different ways to male power and partners frequently have more power in some aspects of their lives than in others. In healthy relationships, power is relatively equal and ideally flows back and forth reciprocally. Though few couples fully attain this ideal, many couples are making progress toward it (Knudson-Martin and Mahoney 2009).

We seldom see cases in which women dominate male partners in ways comparable to men; i.e., they do not enter the relationship with societal norms supporting latent and invisible power. But we see a lot of power struggles. In terms of undoing gender, this often is a good sign. It means there are still two active voices and one partner has not simply given up and accommodated to keep things smooth. On the other hand, power struggles can be very painful, especially when neither feels validated by the other. SERT therapists are careful to explore the socio-contextual meaning of each side of the power struggle. Power struggles and conflict may be a sign of equal power or a battle for power. It is likely to be a contest between processes undoing gendered power and those that maintain it (Deutsch 2007).

## ***Equal Power Struggle***

Yuka, a 32-year-old Christian Japanese woman who immigrated to the USA as a child, and Rahman, a 29-year-old Muslim man who emigrated from Indonesia as a teenager, were caught in a power struggle more or less as equals. Yuka was accomplished in international law, travelled and spoke frequently at conferences, and had a wide circle of friends. When she met Rahman through a friend, he was completing medical school. She took the lead in establishing their relationship. Though the couple enjoyed spirited conversations with each other, Rahman depended primarily on Yuka for his social life. Despite her clear leadership in forming the relationship, Yuka had hesitated to move in with Rahman, but did so anyway because he promised they would get married. She was also frustrated that after completing advanced fellowship training, Rahman worked in a temporary emergency room job and was not actively seeking a position more consistent with his training. The more Yuka pushed, the more Rahman seemed to resist.



Yuka had much more power in the relationship than most women do. Rahman seemed to need her more than she needed him. Still, it was Rahman who resisted deeper commitment and Yuka who ended up accommodating. Though Rahman worried often about pleasing Yuka and said he could not imagine a better partner, he feared marriage would be disappointing. Many factors were at play for this couple, including family-of-origin, cultural, and religious issues. Intersecting with all of these were the internal contradictory gender constructions with which each partner struggled. Yuka liked her independence and easily took charge, both at home and in the workplace. Yet part of her automatically accommodated her partner and also wanted him to fit masculine norms by being more proactive and assertive. Rahman valued the sense of mutuality he experienced with Yuka. It was very different from the domineering ways of his father. But internally, he also felt that that he should be “more of a man” and feared being controlled by her.

Instead of experiencing a comfortable give and take, Rahman and Yuka’s internal confusion was reflected in a power struggle that was deeply hurtful to Yuka and almost immobilizing for Rahman. An important step toward mutual support was for Rahman to become comfortable expressing his real feelings to Yuka and being able to take in her perspective without feeling controlled by her. In turn, Yuka needed to recognize how her sense of needing to keep the relationship going was a part of her identity that was not consistent with her otherwise egalitarian ideals. Though Rahman and Yuka’s situation was particularly interesting because of the many contextual factors involved, most contemporary couples struggle to some extent with contradictory internalized gender ideals because current societal discourses support equality even as old gender structures continue to organize relationships around male power (Knudson-Martin and Mahoney 2009).

### ***Battle for Power***

Power struggles also occur when women begin to resist male power. For example, Veronica, a 47-year-old European American woman, had been married for 17 years to Hal, a 55-year-old European American. The marriage began as a gender-traditional relationship with Hal earning a good income for the family and Veronica serving as a stay-at-home mother for their two sons and her daughter from an earlier marriage. Hal adhered to many stereotypical gender patterns that reinforce male dominance. He wanted to be recognized for his knowledge and was invested in “being right.” He liked Veronica’s attractive figure and monitored her appearance closely. He liked to spend time with her and expected her to be available when his schedule permitted. He felt free to criticize her values and style when they did not agree with his.

In the first years of their marriage, Veronica had also displayed many stereotypical “submissive” gender patterns. She was adept at determining what Hal and the children wanted and needed and readily responded to them. Though sometimes she found Hal’s “arrogance” irritating, she appreciated his work ethic and family

focus. Since she wanted to be a stay-at-home mother and had not been able to do that in her first marriage, she welcomed the opportunity Hal's income provided. However, his criticism of her hurt and she took to "walking on eggshells" to keep the peace.

Over time, Veronica became less and less willing to put her ideas on the back burner. As she expressed herself more, Hal became more critical and demanding. Veronica frequently did not feel valued or loved by him. When she tried to raise issues that concerned her, Hal dismissed them. Veronica's "solution" was an affair. Though the affair was over when Hal discovered it, he felt deeply rejected, hurt, and angry. He thought he had been a good husband. They report that for about six months, Veronica was very contrite and apologized often; she was paying a form of penance that put her back in a lower power position. But all the issues that concerned her before the affair were even greater now. She stopped being willing to accept a one-down role.

When the couple came to therapy, the couple was in a battle for power. Veronica went back and forth between guilt for what she had done and a sense that she was entitled to more voice in the marriage and respect from her husband. Sometimes she would get very angry and demanding. Over the course of therapy, both partners decided to recommit to their marriage and a new way of relating. Hal began to let go of the idea that he needed to always be right or that a question regarding his way of doing things was a sign of disrespect. He was increasingly able to validate Veronica as an equally competent partner. Veronica was more able to speak up in ways that positively influenced decisions and made it easier for her to look at Hal "with stars in her eyes" again. At this writing, the couple still gets caught in difficult power struggles from time to time, particularly when crises occur, but they have a vision of what a more mutual relationship looks like and are beginning to experience the positive benefits of shared power.

## **What if People Don't Want Equal Roles?**

This is an important question. The kind of power emphasized here is the power that enables one person to overlook and minimize another. It is not so much about who does the dishes or is responsible to manage the children's schedule (though these are usually also important); it is about partners having equal status and worth in the relationship. The Circle of Care provides a framework for how to relate from mutual positions that is supported by research (see Gottman 2011; Knudson-Martin 2013; Knudson-Martin et al. 2014; Williams et al. 2013).

We are not neutral about facilitating a process that promotes a more equitable flow of power in couple communication processes. We see our goal as helping couples create a relationship context that enables them to make decisions about how they divide labor or resolve conflicts in ways that support each partner. We help people bring taken-for-granted gender processes into the open and discuss them so they can decide for themselves what kind of relationship they want instead of enacting cultural norms without being aware that they are doing so.

In a recent qualitative study of how long-term couples with children made their relationship work, we found that flexibility on the part of *both* partners was directly related to stability (Nicoleau et al. 2014). These couples regularly crossed gender boundaries to “do what it takes” to support the relationship and each other. Some did this within a more stereotypic general division of labor and others described an “ungendered” approach in which responsibilities were viewed as shared and interchangeable. What stood out in the stories of these women and men was that flexibility was the result of a relational focus in which both partners described a sense that the other was tuned into their needs and invested in their well-being and that of the family. In this way, couples were undoing at least some of the constraints of gendered power. It is this kind of flexibility based on mutual support that SERT promotes.

## Clinician's Role

Gendered power is persistent and built into societal norms and institutions. It shapes the meaning and emotions that women and men experience as they attempt to live, love, and form families together. Undoing gendered power is a societal work in progress (Deutsch 2007). As therapists become aware that power disparities harm both women and men, inviting couples into a process that reconstructs historical gender processes becomes a fundamental part of our role. Without conscious action, therapists will inadvertently reinforce societal power inequities. The chapters that follow offer practical guidelines that help transform gendered power while being responsive to clients' personal and cultural contexts. Each illustrates ways to empower couples to create new, more equitable relationship possibilities.

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Socio-Emotional Relationship Therapy  
Bridging Emotion, Societal Context, and Couple  
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