Carmen Knudson-Martin, PhD, is Professor and Director of the PhD program in Marital and Family Therapy (MFT) at Loma Linda University. She previously directed MFT master's programs at Montana State University and Valdosta State University in Georgia. Dr. Knudson-Martin publishes widely on gender and cultural issues in couples and family therapy, is an associate editor of the Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, and is on the Board of the Family Process Institute. She earned a PhD at the University of Southern California and is a licensed marital and family therapist.

Anne Rankin Mahoney, PhD, is Professor Emerita of Sociology at the University of Denver, where she also served 3 years as Director of Women's Studies. Her current areas of interest are gender, women's studies, couple relationships, and family. Dr. Mahoney has written numerous articles in these areas as well as articles and a book on juvenile justice, titled Juvenile Justice in Context. She earned her PhD in sociology from Columbia University and her MA from Northwestern University.
Couples, Gender, and Power

Creating Change in Intimate Relationships

CARMEN KNUDSON-MARTIN, PhD
ANNE RANKIN MAHONEY, PhD
Editors
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Linda Buxbaum Bass, PhD, works as a clinical supervisor and trainer with KVC Behavioral Healthcare in Kansas City, Kansas, and is adjunct faculty at Friends University in the Marriage & Family Therapy Program.

Randi S. Cowdery, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Educational Psychology at California State University, East Bay, where she teaches in the Marriage and Family Therapy program.

Douglas Huenergardt, PhD, is Director of the Doctor of Marital and Family Therapy (DMFT) program at Loma Linda University. He served as Director of the Family Institute and Director of Program Development and Evaluation at Family Service Centers in Pinellas County, Florida.

Naveen Jonathan, MS, is an adjunct professor at California State University, East Bay, and Pepperdine University, and a family therapy intern at Caritas Counseling Services of Catholic Charities in Riverside/San Bernardino County, California.

Monique E. Lewis, MS, is a PhD student in Marriage and Family Therapy at Loma Linda University.

Jose A. Maciel, MS, is a marital and family therapy intern at Caritas Counseling Services, serving the Latino population in Riverside County, California.

Dana Shawn Matta, PhD, is a licensed marriage and family therapist in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. His article on fathering, “Couple Processes in the Co-construction of Fatherhood,” received the 2007 Anselm
Strauss award for Outstanding Qualitative Family Research presented by the National Council of Family Relations.

**Seddigheh (Sandy) Moghadam, DMFT**, is a licensed marriage and family therapist specializing in couples, power, gender, and diversity issues. Dr. Moghadam is helping develop and implement a postdoctoral program in marital and family therapy for the University of Iran.

**Karen Mui-Teng Quek, PhD**, is Assistant Professor and Clinical Director of the Marriage and Family Therapy program at Seattle Pacific University.

**Rik Rusovick, MS**, is a marriage and family therapist intern working with individuals who have eating disorders and dual diagnoses at Loma Linda University’s Behavioral Medicine Center.

**Norma Scarborough, DMFT**, is Visiting Co-Coordinator of the African American Family Studies specialization in the Marriage and Family Therapy program at Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena, California.

**Gita Seshadri, MS**, is a marriage and family therapist intern at the Caritas Counseling Center Riverside/San Bernardino, California, and at the women’s program at Inland Valley Recovery Services. She teaches substance-abuse counseling at the University of La Verne.

**Rachelle Silverstein, MS**, is a licensed marriage and family therapist and a family law mediator with experience working with families in mental health and educational settings.

**Amy R. Tuttle, PhD**, is an assistant professor at Pepperdine University and a licensed marriage and family therapist. She is an AAMFT-approved supervisor and former member of the AAMFT California Division board. She co-authored *Theory-Based Treatment Planning for Marriage and Family Therapists*.

**Zanetta van Putten, MS**, is a marriage and family therapy intern who is passionate about working with underserved populations and has worked in a variety of inner-city facilities that serve this population.
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This book was motivated by the women and men who seek help for their relationships. Their quest for new options inspired our research and has been our most important teacher. Thanks especially to “June” and “Daryl,” the anonymous couple who allowed us to write in such detail about their personal experience. They are one of hundreds of couples whose experience informs our suggestions for practice.

Thanks also to our husbands, John and Barry. You supported our every step and put up cheerfully with the many long hours we spent pounding on our computers and “thinking.” Your good humor, friendship, and love are proof positive that mutually supportive relationships are possible.

Carmen Knudson-Martin
Anne Rankin Mahoney
With a tone at once scholarly and accessible, and melding the keen eye of the qualitative researcher with a sense of deep personal connection to the couples whose stories they bring us, Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney, together with their contributors have generated a true gift to couple research, couple therapy, and couple well-being. This collection, focusing on the corrosive intersection of gender and power, and the imperative of gender equality for individual, couple, family, and community well-being, captures and extends an evolving 25-year research and practice agenda. The studies reported in this marvelously disciplined collection hold living implications for couples and their therapists. As readers, we are recipients of local knowledge and the authentic voices of research participants struggling to make sense of their lived experiences in gendered relationships. From these voices, Knudson-Martin, Mahoney, and their contributors shape a new model for the 21st century. Informed by the need for vibrant and meaningful research, they reconsider the paradigm for couple therapy practice by focusing on the effects of gender and power.

This volume leads with the refreshing transparency of Knudson-Martin and Mahoney, as they carefully articulate the research methods we will encounter, coupled with their core values regarding gendered power that inform this research. Combining a focus on their careful qualitative methods with a frank articulation of their belief in gender equality, they foreshadow chapters that provide us with well-done research, well worth doing.

The studies in this artfully threaded collection reflect a commitment to the difficult terrain of systemic research and practice. Each chapter exemplifies a willing engagement with complexity, reciprocity, and mutually influencing interactions at multiple levels of system, linking the experience of individual couples to all of the meaningful systems
in their lives: families-of-origin, parent–child, larger social systems, social and political communities, as well as ethnic and social class values and beliefs. Challenging the popular notion that a couple's dilemmas are located within the boundaries of their individual psyches and immediate relationship, we find, instead, a point of view that recognizes the effect of history and social values as these shape often invisible gendered interactions. Simultaneously, we are offered a wisely optimistic and personally responsible perspective that change happens person by person, couple by couple, as the labor for transformation made by research participants comes alive on these pages. We are provided a template for systemic research capable of taming the messiness inherent in couple relationships without forfeiting multifinality. And as we read, we experience a gigantic feedback loop, one that goes from the astute observations of seasoned practitioners to carefully crafted research studies with immediate implications for practice innovations leading to the next step of research—all in the service of real-life couples seeking to live lives informed by fairness, relational justice, emotional attunement, and genuine empathy.

The breadth of this book is sweeping as we move across the life cycle, examining newly formed couples; early marriage; childbirth and childrearing; mothering and fathering; health and illness; ethnic, racial, and national differences; and immigration and sexual identity. We learn about the intersection of gender and race, gender and health, gender and migration, and gender and the transformation of traditional societies. With no pretense at completeness, this volume serves to inspire our next steps with couples, building on the paradigm provided.

As a practicing family therapist and teacher, I most often read research with an eye to the exquisite treasures I may be able to bring to the therapy context and the classroom. As a journal editor, I read research looking for beneficial applications to the living world of couples and families. Knudson-Martin and Mahoney have given us a truly practitioner-friendly tome. Each chapter provides strong and relevant practice implications, not as an afterthought to the research but as its raison d’être. I know I will be using this book as required reading for my trainees, a must-read for my colleagues, and a well-worn reference volume for my own work with couples.

Evan Imber-Black
Director, Center for Families and Health
Ackerman Institute for the Family
Barbara,* director of a community welfare-to-work program and mother of two preschool-age children, called Carmen for an initial therapy appointment for herself. “I think I'm depressed,” she said. “I just can’t cope anymore.” Carmen asked her to invite her husband Jim to come also. Jim came and immediately expressed his concern. “I’m really worried about her,” he said. “Maybe she needs to be hospitalized.” Barbara and Jim described themselves as “best friends” and “cooperative parents.” They said their marriage was good. “So how is it,” Carmen wondered out loud, “that you are so stressed, and Jim is doing so well?” With that, Barbara’s anger erupted, “When I have a day off work I spend the time with the kids and take care of the house. When he has a day off, he plays golf!”

Like Barbara and Jim, couples today frequently use a language of equality to frame their relationships. They speak as if they are fully equal, unaware of the insidious ways gendered power affects them. They are caught in the legacy of hidden male power that continues to structure many couple interactions despite their intentions. Couples, Gender, and Power: Creating Change in Intimate Relationships documents the personal and family costs of getting stuck in these old patterns and makes a case for why it is essential for clinicians to address this issue. It draws on in-depth research of couples in different situations and cultures to identify educational and therapeutic interventions that will help couples become conscious of and move beyond gendered power in their relationships so they can expand their options and well-being.

Written for mental health professionals and others interested in contemporary couple relationships, this research-based book shows that some couples are able to get beyond the legacy of hidden male power.

*The names of all research participants are pseudonyms.
Introduction

A focus on the ability of couples to change is important. Although the main thrust of gender research over the past several years has emphasized the difficulty of change and ways in which gender processes continue to reproduce old patterns of inequality, more recent gender theorists (e.g., Sullivan, 2006) argue that change, though small, is occurring. They argue for a focus on the conditions for accomplishing change within gender interaction (Sullivan, p. 11). We place our work within this new and promising framework. In identifying differences between couples who transform gendered power in their relationships and those who do not, we make visible new ways in which women and men are organizing their relationships.

*Couples, Gender, and Power: Creating Change in Intimate Relationships* is our attempt to respond to the need for research-informed practice (Lebow, 2006; Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005). It uses research reports to illustrate clinical concerns and inform innovative interventions. Most of the studies included here are based on the Contemporary Couples Study, initiated in 2001 in the Department of Counseling and Family Sciences at Loma Linda University in Southern California. The project has yielded a large number of open-ended, directed conversations with a diverse population. With this core set of interview questions regarding how partners make decisions, handle work and family tasks, communicate, love, and support each other, the authors are able to explore the subtle ways in which gendered power is translated and transformed within couple relationships. The researchers in these studies, themselves family practitioners, combine a scholar’s interest in understanding relationship processes with an applied concern for what works for couples.

The diversity of participants described in this volume offers the opportunity to learn from many different kinds of families. A high proportion of couple studies to date have worked with predominantly White, middle-class populations. This lack of diversity is often noted as a problem by scholars, who argue that it seriously limits our knowledge about how different couples adapt to changing conditions and ideologies (Viers & Prouty, 2001). The research presented here enables us to broaden the cultural contexts through which we understand how gendered power may be transformed.

Overall, the book provides an organizing framework for studying and working with relationships that moves away from an implicit acceptance of gender hierarchy to a focus on equality. Such a shift in perspec-
tive markedly improves practitioners' ability to help couples respond to a changing society.

Part I of the book, How Gendered Power Undermines Relationships, lays out the theoretical and methodological issues of gender equality that frame the book’s research projects and practice concerns. In chapters 1 and 2, Mahoney and Knudson-Martin frame the concept of gender equality and its role in promoting mutually supportive relationships, then discuss the larger social issues involved in gendered power and its influence in the lives of couples and families. Chapter 3, “Capturing the Lived Experience of Couples” by Knudson-Martin, describes the qualitative research method and the gender lens that guided analysis.

Part II, Intimacy, Gender, and Power, examines the relational processes involved in equality between intimate partners. Chapter 4, “The Myth of Equality” by Knudson-Martin and Mahoney, is the precursor to the Contemporary Couples Study. The notion of hidden male power, that men’s needs and interests were structured within couples relationships in ways that were unintended and invisible to the couple themselves, first began to emerge in this study as we sought to explain the disconnect between the couples’ egalitarian ideals and the development of unequal relationship patterns within most of the couples.

Chapter 5, “Beyond Gender: The Processes of Relationship Equality” by Knudson-Martin and Mahoney, uses data from two time periods, the 1980s and 2001, to identify characteristics of couples who are moving toward equality in their relationships. In chapter 6, “Carrying Equal Weight,” Jonathan studies same-sex couples to explore what happens when gender does not organize relationships. His analysis identifies important emotional processes involved in relationship equality. Chapter 7, “An Unequal Burden: Gendered Power in Diabetes Care” by Knudson-Martin, shows how differently men and women are supported as they attempt to manage their disease. This chapter lays bare the hidden nature of gendered power and how it affects health.

Part IV, Transforming Power in Cultural Contexts, shows both similarities and cultural variation in power issues in different cultural settings. In chapter 11, “We-Consciousness: Creating Equality in Collectivist Culture,” Quek provides a view into how issues of equality are being handled by young couples in Singapore. Her research raises interesting questions about gender not only in emerging nations but also in our own culture. Chapter 12, “Pulling Together: How African American Couples Manage Social Inequalities” by Cowdery and colleagues, considers how racial experience increases the complexities of gender and power in couple life. Chapter 13, “Pushing the Gender Line: How Immigrant Couples Reconstruct Power” by Maciel and van Putten, analyzes the pragmatic, trial-and-error processes through which immigrant couples negotiate between what works and cultural expectations. In chapter 14, “Keeping the Peace: Couple Relationships in Iran,” Moghadam and Knudson-Martin discover considerable diversity in how couples work within a male-dominant legal and social structure that also includes a long cultural tradition of respect for and equality of women. Chapter 15 by Rusovick and Knudson-Martin provides a glimpse into the future by examining “Gender Discourse in Relationship Stories of Young American Couples.”

Part V, The Practice of Transcending Gendered Power, draws on the previous chapters to offer a guide for mental health professionals. Chapter 16, “Relational Orientations” by Silverstein and colleagues, provides a framework for assessment and practice that explicitly identifies the relational issues underlying power and gender. In chapter 17, “Addressing Gendered Power,” Knudson-Martin details how to put the key ideas in this book into practice. Chapter 18, “Gender and Power as a Fulcrum for Clinical Change” by Huenergardt and Knudson-Martin, concludes with an in-depth case illustration that shows how transforming gendered power is pivotal to the emotional bonds that underlie mutually supportive relationships.

In each of these chapters readers will find rich examples that bring to life how gendered power subtly structures couple relationships and how it may be transformed. Specific implications for practice are offered throughout, with suggestions for how to sensitively work with women and men across varying cultures and social contexts.

Carmen Knudson-Martin
Anne Rankin Mahoney
REFERENCES


How Gendered Power Undermines Relationships
Becky and Tom sat huddled together on Carmen’s green couch. They had been married just over a year and had an infant son. At considerable sacrifice to them both, Becky had dropped out of school to care for the baby while Tom worked full time and went to school. As they held hands, the tears streamed from Becky’s eyes: “I don’t think you love me anymore; you never listen to me.” Carmen turned to Tom: “Becky says you don’t listen to her.” “I do,” he says; “when I think it’s important.”

In Singapore a wife says that cooking dinner is her responsibility, then later backs off, explaining that if there is a rush job at work she has to stay to finish it. “I can’t leave work early just to come home and cook,” she argues. A male physician from Cuba takes a less powerful family role when he and his family seek refuge in the United States. An Anglo father in the United States says that he wants to be more involved in caring for his children, but describes a work schedule that makes it “impossible.” A Black couple in the United States shares most household tasks, but the wife wakes her husband to fill the car with gas, because that is “a man’s job.”

Relationship vignettes like the ones just described are common. People are often hurt and frustrated by their partners, but don’t know
why. The research presented here suggests that part of the problem is that partners think they are equal, yet old gender disparities continue to structure their interactions, creating barriers to equality despite the couple’s best intentions. How can clinicians and educators help clients with these conflicts and work with couples to create the kinds of relationships they want? In this chapter we describe the current trends toward greater gender equality in couple relationships, what keeps old patterns of gendered power alive, and why equality is so important for successful relationships. We end with the presentation of our model of relationship equality, which underlies the studies included in this collection.

**TRENDS TOWARD GENDER EQUALITY**

The trend toward egalitarian ideals is evident everywhere in the industrialized world (Sullivan, 2006). In the Western world and even in cultures built around extended families, the individual couple increasingly stands at the core of family life; partners are expected to engage in emotional communication and intimacy. This is new. Marriage has rarely been based on intimacy in the past (Giddens, 1999). Intimacy, as we use it here, involves sustained mutual psychological openness and vulnerability—states difficult to maintain unless partners hold equal status (Horst & Doherty, 1995). Equality is becoming a prerequisite for successful contemporary relationships.

Although the movement toward gender equality in relationships is not as rapid as early advocates originally hoped, recent research suggests that change, at least in the sharing of family work, has been continuous and significant, not just in young couples who entered their relationships with more flexible ideas about gender, but also among older couples in which the wives have been in the workforce for some time (Sullivan, 2006). There appears to be a growing convergence in the hours that men and women in the United States spend in the broad categories of paid work, family work, and leisure (Fisher, Egerton, Gershuny, & Robinson, 2006; Lang & Risman, 2006). Data from 20 industrialized countries from 1965 to 2003 show an overall cross-country increase in men’s proportional contribution to family work from less than one fifth to more than a third (Hook, 2006).
Chapter 1  Gender Equality in Intimate Relationships

The convergence between what men and women do and want is a force for equality. Coontz (2005) notes, “Over the past century, marriage has steadily become more fair, more fulfilling, and more effective in fostering the well-being of both adults and children” (p. 301). Paradoxically, this convergence brings its own set of concerns. Couple relationships are now more personal and more fragile. Individuals pick and choose the kind of relationships they want. Most women are no longer willing to stay in unequal relationships and most men no longer want a weaker, subservient partner (Coontz). Couples set their standards for marital success high and then have trouble living up to their own ideals. Their potential for failure is also aggravated by social contextual pressures over which they have little control.

OLD CULTURAL PATTERNS KEEP INEQUALITY ALIVE

Sharing family and outside work more equitably is only part of the gender-equality story. Today, most couples must forge their relationships in an environment of competing values and practical considerations in which there is little agreement about what constitutes appropriate behavior for men and women. Individuals are reshaping their family lives to take into account new opportunities and circumstances. Some couples are resisting the processes that keep gender inequalities in place and are discarding and transforming old gender legacies (e.g., Deutsch, 1999; Dienhart, 1998; Rabin, 1996; Risman, 1998). Others are getting stuck. Couples who hang on (either consciously or unconsciously) to old gendered patterns that were originally developed to meet different social and economic conditions find themselves struggling to cope with the demands of the 21st century.

Relationship models based on traditional gender roles implicitly organize around gender categories and male power. If heterosexual couples are to move toward the equality they say they want, they must become aware of and transform the power patterns in their relationships. However, discussion of power can be confusing and complex. People who assume they should be equal are often uncomfortable examining power in their relationships. Besides, gendered power differentials are often hard to see because they are embedded in taken-for-granted differences. Couples, and the professionals who work with them, frequently do not notice them. By default, behavior that fits within these traditional
expectations is often either not noticed or viewed as normal. Both couples and professionals forge ahead as though partners are equal without examining the intricacies of the power processes beneath the surface.

Old cultural norms shape the nature of relationships in spite of a couple’s intention and desire. Even the way couples define equality is informed by old cultural stories and patterns of expected behavior expressed through personal orientations, which Hochschild (1989) calls gender ideologies, that is, norms about what has been expected, normal, and fair among marital partners. Because some couples and partners have been more influenced by these older gender ideologies than others, the term “fair” may refer to a wide range of couple and partner behavior. “Fair” does not necessarily refer to equal relationship conditions or fully take into account the needs of both partners (Hawkins, Marshall, & Meiners, 1995; Sanchez & Kane, 1996; Thompson, 1991).

Gender ideologies are replicated in the way men and women communicate with each other and influence the kind of emotional and relational symptoms men and women present in therapy. Power differences often go unrecognized by couples until a therapist asks a key question that elicits an answer like Tom’s, quoted at the beginning of this chapter: “I listen when I think it’s important.” How couples deal with these gender and power issues is integral to both individual well-being (Steil, 1997) and relationship success (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Johnson, 2003).

The impact of gender and gendered power on heterosexual couples is made more visible when we observe the lack of these kinds of power relationships in same-sex couples. There is considerable research that shows that committed gay and lesbian relationships tend to be more egalitarian than those of heterosexual couples (Connolly, 2005; Green, Bettinger & Zacks, 1996; Jonathan, 2009, this volume; Kurdek, 1995). Although same-sex couples, like all couples, do have to work through power issues, they do not have a ready-made framework of complementary gendered power expectations to structure their relationships. Without them they seem more able to create equitable relationships.

Heterosexual relationships, on the other hand, have tended to benefit men more than women. This discrepancy was first articulated through the research of sociologist J. Bernard in 1973. She made a strong case that, contrary to general belief, men were much more likely to prosper in marriage than women, especially with regard to mental and physical
health. More recent research finds that, although a good relationship is related to better health status for both women and men (Sternberg, 2001), men still gain more benefits than women. Husbands, more often than wives, report being understood and affirmed by their spouses (Lynch, 1998). The lack of such support, as well as the stress of providing it for their spouses, is associated with depression in women (e.g., Bird, 1999; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; McGrath, Keita, Strickland, & Russo, 1990).

Stereotypic gender patterns and power differences between partners work against the shared worlds and egalitarian ideals that women and men increasingly seek. They limit options for both. The exercise of power of one partner over the other (dominance) is a prime deterrent to relationship success (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). Consequently, gender and power are at the core of the struggles that contemporary couples face as they form families, engage in the workplace, and love each other.

Practitioners are not immune to these deeply embedded models of expected behavior. Like couples, clinicians hold equitable ideals but often fail to recognize underlying social patterns that work against them (Haddock, MacPhee, & Zimmerman, 2001). They can only make visible to clients what they themselves see. In the studies described in this book, researchers interviewed couples who were at different points on the change continuum. They looked for differences between couples who seemed to be moving toward more equal relationships and those who were having trouble. Then they identified strategies that professionals can use to help their clients transform their relationships from gender-based to equality-based.

**EQUALITY PROMOTES RELATIONSHIP SUCCESS**

Feminists advocate for gender equality. Family practitioners work for the well-being and stability of contemporary families. The goals of these two groups have often seemed at odds. Yet we are now learning that equality and relationship success are closely connected. There is a growing body of research in family and clinical studies that shows that partner inequality undermines relationship success and that equality promotes it (Cooke, 2006; Frisco & Williams, 2003).
Gottman’s findings from his long-term research on marriage are similar (Gottman & Silver, 1999). He found that husbands frequently *stonewall* (i.e., remove themselves mentally and emotionally from the conversation) when their wives raise relationship or other issues. Stonewalling behavior makes it difficult for wives to influence husbands or even have a sense that their unease is being heard. Wives, on the other hand, tend to engage in their husbands’ concerns. The effect of this gendered disparity in willingness to be influenced is dramatic. In Gottman’s studies, men who were unwilling to be influenced by their wives had an 81% risk of divorce (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). Contemporary women’s lack of interest in this kind of unbalanced relationship may account for recent findings that most divorces are now instigated by women (Coontz, 2005).

On the other hand, egalitarian family organization appears to enhance couple stability, as seen in Coltrane’s 1996 study of men. Coltrane argues that in itself, the act of caring for children changes men; it stimulates development of greater sensitivity and nurturing behavior. A study of couples who considered themselves to be successfully managing the work–family balance also showed that equality and partnership were central to success (Haddock, Zimmerman, Ziemba, & Current, 2001). Analysis of a national probability sample not only identified equal decision making as a critical factor in explaining relationship quality and stability, it also showed that the contribution of equality to relationship success has increased over the last 20 years (Amato, Johnson, Booth, & Rogers, 2003).

Why the connection between equality and relationship success? When power in the relationship is unequal, argues Beavers (1985), both partners are motivated to hide thoughts and emotions. The “top dog” cannot afford to be vulnerable; fear of showing weakness limits open communication and the capacity for intimacy. The “underdog,” afraid of upsetting the balance in the relationship or losing the relationship itself, holds back thoughts, feelings, and needs. Without open communication of emotions, vulnerabilities, and needs, intimacy is difficult. Steil’s 1997 study of the links among gender equality, personal well-being, and relationship satisfaction suggested that when partners perceive that they can influence each other (as in a more equal relationship), they are more likely to use direct-influence strategies. This openness in communication, in turn, is associated with reports of greater intimacy and relationship satisfaction for both women and men.
Attuned responsiveness and validation from others are vital to well-being and involve accommodating, adjusting the self in order to promote the relationship (Greenberg & Golden, 2008; Siegel, 2007). Dominance and controlling behavior do the opposite, leaving submissive partners unrecognized and minimizing their worth. Greenberg and Golden argue that this power dimension of intimate bonding is distinct from the affiliation dimension and must be addressed. Gendered power is an important piece of this relationship dynamic and restricts a couple’s capacity for mutual attending and nurturance (Dolan-Del Vecchio, 2008). Intimacy requires a model of a relationship based on equality, one that promotes the equal status and well-being of each partner and encourages both of them to attend to and accommodate the other.

MOVING TOWARD A MODEL OF RELATIONSHIP EQUALITY

Our conceptualization of relationship equality grew out of several years of in-depth reading, observing, and writing that was motivated by our dual concern for the equality of women and the strength and stability of marriages. Over time we have developed a framework in which to talk about gender equality in relationship. We see a couple’s movement toward equality as a process, a conscious transformation from a relationship that is structured by male power to one in which partners attempt to equally share responsibilities and benefits. Equality is not a status that is achieved, once and for all, but a dynamic ideal that partners work toward. It is commitment to a process that takes into account the needs and goals of both partners as these change in a shifting environment and over the life cycle.

Different Views on the Nature of Relationship Equality

Almost all couples say they want an “equal relationship” (Keith & Schafer, 1991; Walsh, 1989), but what they mean by this is often vague. How do couples know equality when they experience it? How do therapists recognize an equal relationship when they see one, or recognize that a couple’s definition of themselves as equal leaves out some essential dimensions?
Part I  How Gendered Power Undermines Relationships

The literature on gender equality in marriage is large and varied. To date there is little consensus on what equality is. Studies have been done, for example, from the perspectives of equality as fair exchange, balance of power, sharing household labor and child care, status equality, and shared decision making (Deutsch, 1999; Dienhart, 1998; Risman, 1998; Schwartz, 1994). As the field evolves, additional facets of family life, such as emotional and organizational labor, are being considered as well (Zimmerman, Haddock, Ziemba, & Rust, 2001).

In an extensive review of quantitative and qualitative studies on marital equality, Harris (2006) finds little agreement about how it should be defined and operationalized. He discovered in his own qualitative study of partners who defined themselves as “equal” that individuals had widely differing ideas about what being equal meant. Harris takes this as support for his phenomenological position that meaning always emerges from individual, situated experience and, as a consequence, it is not useful to establish guidelines for equality in marriage.

Although we appreciate and understand Harris’s position, we argue that it is possible to think about general dimensions or guidelines for an equal relationship. We argue that Harris’s emphasis on individual self-definitions of relationship equality does not take into consideration gendered power and the institutionalized processes that keep this power in place, often below the awareness of both partners. Contrary to Harris, we believe that some general guidelines for relationship equality are possible. These guidelines underlie our clinical work and the research analysis in this book.

The concept of relationship equality rests on the ideology of equality articulated in philosophical, legal, psychological, and social standards present today in American and world cultures. It rests on a notion of personal power. Personal power, as it is used in our model of marital equality, refers to the ability of one person to influence a relationship toward his or her own goals, interests, and well-being. It is related to the ability to set the agenda for discussion and negotiation (Wilkie, Ferree, & Ratcliff, 1998). The goal is for each partner to have his or her needs and concerns heard and considered equally with those of the other partner. This is a different kind of power than always being able to get your own way. Decisions are made in ways that maximize, as much as possible, the well-being of both partners in the short and long term. Power used in this way is also a form of empowerment. Each partner enables the other person to expand his or her range of choices.
and personal freedom. Personal gain is negotiated within the framework of the collective good of the relationship (Fishbane, 2001).

Personal power within a framework of the collective good is probably what most couples seek today. In individualistic cultures such as the United States, each partner wants to feel equally entitled to pursue his or her own personal goals. Many couples in traditional cultures also seek more egalitarianism than their parents had. This expanding desire for fairness is supported by a growing ideology of equality in many parts of the world and formal statements like The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), often called the Women's Bill of Rights, adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly (United Nations, 1979).

Model of Relationship Equality

After looking at the many ways in which relationship equality has been defined, and as a result of our own clinical practice, research, and writing, we articulated a model of equality based on four relationship dimensions. These underlie both our clinical work and our current research. We have found these four dimensions useful in getting a sense of a client's power issues and in helping clients recognize ways in which their relationship might be out of balance. They also guide analysis of our research interviews, the process for which is outlined in detail in chapter 3. The four dimensions of the model are: relative status, attention to the other, accommodation patterns, and well-being.

Relative Status

The focus of this dimension is on who defines what is important; who has the right to have, express, and achieve goals, needs, and interests. It asks whether both partners have the ability to use the relationship to support their interests. It has to do with both partners' power to define the agenda of the relationship. Traditional gender socialization encourages feelings of entitlement in men and an expectation that women will put family needs before their own. To the extent that men and women absorb this set of expectations, even if unconsciously, they set themselves up for unequal status. We explore relative status through questions such as:
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 the Other

Part of the egalitarian model for relationships is an expectation that partners are emotionally present for and supportive of each other. They are attuned to each other’s needs and responsive to their emotions and stresses. We explore attention to the other through questions such as:

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

Accommodation to one another is a necessary part of couple life. If partners equally influence the relationship, then accommodations tend to be reasonably balanced over time. When accommodations are not equal, one partner appears to organize more of his or her life around the other. Accommodation by the lower status spouse may feel natural or expected to both partners and may happen automatically. We explore accommodation through questions such as:

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

In equal relationships burdens are shared and the well-being of each partner is supported equally, both in the short term and over the long
haul. Even though equal well-being may not be possible all the time, both partners recognize a disparity when it occurs, acknowledge it, and work together to equalize it. We explore well-being through questions such as:

- 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?

The preceding standards for relationship equality emphasize joint concern for mutual well-being and benefit in a relationship. For most couples, development of an egalitarian relationship is likely to be an ongoing process as they move toward a more expanded view of personal power and work toward greater mutuality in their relationships. The dynamics of traditional gendered power makes this difficult. Men have been discouraged from sharing power and empathically listening and responding to the needs of others, whereas women have been discouraged from speaking up and asking for what they need.

Thus we cannot talk about gender without talking about power. Chapter 2 describes the social context of gendered power and the ways in which social structures and institutions intermesh to keep it in place, even though it may work against couples’ desires to develop the kind of relationship they want and need to adapt well to a rapidly changing world.

REFERENCES


