Earning More and Getting Less

Why Successful Wives Can't Buy Equality

Veronica Jaris Tichenor

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Chapter 2

Thinking about Gender and Power in Marriage

Thinking about power within marriage requires examining the gendered assumptions upon which marriage as an institution is built, as well as the difficulties researchers face in trying to conceptualize and measure power within marriage. In this chapter, I examine how power has been routinely conceptualized and measured within marriage, adapt these accepted measures to my work, and offer an alternative conceptualization of power that can illuminate more subtle dynamics in these marriages.

The Conventional Marital Contract

The balance of power in most marriages reflects the ideology of separate spheres in the conventional marital contract. Of course, this contract is not a written document; it consists of cultural understandings of the reciprocal rights and obligations that each spouse has within the institution of marriage. According to this unwritten contract, these rights and obligations are divided along gender lines, which construct men as breadwinners and women as mothers and homemakers. The man's main responsibilities are to provide for the family economically and to represent the family to the community or the world at large. The woman's main responsibility is to care for the home, husband, and children. If spouses hold up their end of the bargain, this exchange is considered both reasonable and fair.

While this model may seem overstated and outdated, Joan Williams (2000) argues that the basic assumptions of this contract persist. This complementary organization of market work and family life exists as a system that Williams calls "domesticity." Under this system, men are entitled and encouraged to perform as "ideal workers" in the marketplace, unencumbered by the demands of family life. Women, whether engaged

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in paid labor or not, are marginalized in the workplace by their domestic responsibilities. They continue to be seen and treated by employers as mothers or potential mothers, which limits their options and opportunities at work. That women maintain responsibility for domestic labor and child care hampers their ability to engage in paid labor as ideal workers (i.e., men). So while the assumption that women will be engaged only in domestic labor has changed in recent years, the underlying contract that delegates breadwinning responsibility to men and domestic responsibility to women remains largely unchallenged.

The conventional marital contract does not simply divide responsibilities between spouses; it also reinforces men's power within marriage. This is because the responsibilities and tasks of husbands and wives are valued differently. Within most U.S. families, the income that the husband earns is the most highly valued asset. It confers a higher status on the husband, both within and outside the relationship, and has been used to justify men's greater power in marriage, especially in terms of decision-making practices and control over the family's financial resources. Historically, men have wielded power based on their greater incomes, and wives were expected to defer to their husbands' authority. By contrast, women's caring work at home has not been accorded the same status as breadwinning. That it is unpaid work signifies its lesser value, and the ability to refuse to do such work is one of the privileges men typically enjoy in marriage (Hochschild 1989). The conventional marital contract, then, underscores the greater value of the man's contributions (income), while devaluing those of the woman (domestic services). In short, the bargain implied by the conventional marital contract is the key to continued gender inequality in marriage (Williams 2000).

Admittedly, life has changed dramatically for married couples, especially in the last several decades. This model of husband as sole breadwinner and wife as homemaker describes the reality of only 25 percent of married couples in the United States today (Raley et al. 2003). Transformations in the economy have made it impossible for all but a comparative handful of families to enjoy a moderate standard of living on only one income. This makes it tempting to think of the man-as-breadwinner/woman-as-homemaker model of married life as outdated and irrelevant.

However, marriages are still constructed against the backdrop of the conventional marital contract. Culturally, we still hold men accountable

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for breadwinning and women for mothering, regardless of whatever additional responsibilities they may take on. In most circles, men are still revered and respected based on the kind of work they perform and the standard of living their families are able to enjoy because of it. Remember that most of the men with higher-earning wives profiled in recent news articles felt like outcasts or failures for not being the major earners. Women are still expected to keep neat homes and present clean, well-adjusted, and well-mannered children to the outside world. Poorly behaved children might still be asked, "Didn't your mother teach you any better than that?"

This means that men and women get more "credit," both inside and outside the marital relationship, for engaging in activities that are consistent with conventional gender identities. While a wife's income may be important to the family, her employment lacks the social legitimacy accorded her husband's work. Women's paid work is typically seen as an option, rather than a duty. Since social convention does not obligate a woman to provide for her family, she is not protected from housework or other domestic intrusions on her breadwinning activities as a man would be. Women typically retain responsibility for the household and simply add the role of worker onto those of mother and homemaker (Hochschild 1989; Rubin 1994). Women also receive less social approval than do men for engaging in paid work and may even face condemnation for "neglecting" domestic duties (Popenoe 1989). Similarly, while men may help out with the workload at home, and in middle- to upper-middle-class circles might receive a great deal of social approval for doing so, their domestic labor is not a substitute for breadwinning; even the most involved father rarely opts out of providing altogether (Coltrane 1996; Deutsch 1999). In short, the meanings attached to paid work and domestic labor are fundamentally different for men and women, and tend to reinforce the identities of breadwinner and mother/homemaker embedded in the conventional marital contract.

The continued distinction between mothering and breadwinning as gendered activities means that we can think of these identities as enduring "gender boundaries"—ways to mark the difference between women and men (Connell 1987; Potuchek 1997). While women may work outside the home, men still have the responsibility to provide that makes them breadwinners. Though men may help with housework or child care, it is

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still a woman's duty to provide the level of attention and care associated with mothering. The lines dividing these gendered responsibilities are still clearly drawn (Williams 2000).

If it is true that breadwinning is the central identity for men, and mothering is the central identity for women, this could be problematic for dual-earner couples. If wives are also providing an income, what distinguishes them from their husbands? In most dual-earner couples, men still outearn their wives, often by a large margin (Raley et al. 2003). Couples typically respond to this shift in behavior by thinking of husbands as the primary breadwinners, with wives as secondary earners simply "helping out" (Potuchek 1997; Willinger 1993). Similarly, couples see women's mothering and domestic responsibilities as primary, and their work commitments are often organized around the needs of the family (Hochschild 1989; Williams 2000). In this way, men can see themselves as still meeting the masculine imperative of providing for their families, and wives can see themselves as good mothers, despite being employed outside the home (Coltrane 1996).

Of course, having both spouses in the workforce could represent an opportunity to change the gendered expectations and meanings surrounding breadwinning by rejecting the idea of separate spheres embedded in the conventional marital contract. Husbands and wives could think of themselves as co-providers with a joint responsibility to meet the financial obligations of the family. They could then share the responsibilities for maintaining a clean, orderly home and raising healthy children. Sharing all family work (both paid and unpaid) more equally could break down these rigid gender boundaries.

We know that some couples have worked successfully to erode these boundaries (Coltrane 1996; Deutsch 1999; Risman and Johnson-Sumerford 1998; Schwartz 1994). These couples consciously share the work of providing and caring for a family in ways that begin to undermine the breadwinner/mother identities, as well as the power imbalance associated with them. However, even some of these partnerships contain rumblings of gender unease. For example, men and women in these relationships often collaborate to maintain some gender specialization; women want to guard part of the domestic domain as their own (Hertz 1989) or want to feel like "I'm still the mom" (Coltrane 1996; Deutsch 1999), and men still think of providing as their own responsibility

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(Wilkie 1993). Such expectations are so strong that even couples with higher-earning wives continue to cling to them (Brennan, Barnett, and Gareis 2001). These results suggest that spouses are often more comfortable with a certain level of conventional gender asymmetry in their relationships.

Williams (2000) describes this pull toward the conventional as being caught in a "gender force field." While conventional gender expectations do not determine behavior, they can exert a strong pull that can be difficult to resist and can wear people down over time. For example, after couples have their first child, the call of traditional roles and expectations can be particularly loud. With a new life depending on them, men often feel a greater need to be a good provider, and even women who had planned to continue working after their child's birth can feel unexpectedly drawn toward staying at home (Cowan and Cowan 1992; Rexroat and Shehan 1987).

In other words, even though spouses' behavior is changing, as women continue to be a strong presence in the workforce and some men become more engaged in domestic labor, it may be too threatening to give up all their conventional gender expectations—it does not feel right. This means that as men and women are engaged in similar activities, such as providing for the family, the breadwinning and mothering boundaries can take on great importance; that is, these boundaries become a crucial way for husbands and wives to create and maintain a sense of gender difference (Potuchek 1997).

So even though the conventional marital contract no longer describes the reality of most U.S. couples, by maintaining the gender boundaries of mothering and breadwinning, dual-earner couples reinforce the bargain implied by the old contract (Brennan et al. 2001; Coltrane 1996; Potuchek 1997; Wilkie 1993). This finding is significant because of the power dynamics embedded in the contract. As we have seen, the activities associated with mothering and breadwinning are differentially valued, with breadwinning generally conferring more privileges than does mothering. If employed women are not defined as breadwinners, they may lose access to these privileges. In other words, by maintaining the gender boundaries written into the conventional marital contract, spouses may undercut women's power within marriage.

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However, all of this assumes that men's power within marriage is truly rooted in their greater economic resources. While this assumption has driven much of the research on marital power, the accumulating evidence suggests that it is flawed. If money is the key to the power dynamics within marriage, we would expect the balance of power to shift as women have begun to share breadwinning with their husbands. In fact, earning an income has done little to increase women's power, which undermines the fair exchange of income earned by male breadwinners for the domestic services of their wives implied by the conventional marital contract. This means that we need to rethink the money/power link within marriage.

Marital Power as the Exchange of Resources

Early attempts to talk about the balance of power within marriages rested on the assumptions embedded in the conventional marital contract. This research (beginning with Blood and Wolfe 1960) was driven by resource and exchange theories that link the balance of power in marriages to the relative contributions, or resources, of spouses. Resources are anything of value, tangible or intangible, that partners bring to a relationship. They include money, occupational or social status, education, love and affection, physical attractiveness, special knowledge or expertise, services (such as performing domestic labor or giving back rubs), and so on. Under the conventional marital contract, men contribute their incomes, as well as the status attached to their occupations, in exchange for domestic labor and child-care services from their wives.

The resource/exchange model views power as the ability to prevail in a variety of household decisions, ranging from how much to spend each week on groceries to when and if the family should move. Since men and women both reported that husbands had more control over most decisions, Blood and Wolfe concluded that husbands had more power in their marriages. They also concluded that this power came, not from the influence of patriarchal ideology, but from husbands' contributing the more socially valued resources (income and status) to the marriage. Thus, resources such as income and status represent the potential for exercising power. And while both spouses have access to some resources, men have more power in marriages because they contribute the more important resources to the relationship.

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This logic is compelling and has held sway both inside and outside the academy: The more you give, the more you should receive in return. However, if this conceptualization of power within marriage were accurate, we would expect to see a shift in the balance of power between spouses over the last several decades as women have moved into the paid labor force in great numbers. According to resource and exchange theory assumptions, women who contribute economically to the relationship should be able to exercise greater control over finances and decision making, and buy a certain amount of relief from domestic labor and childrearing responsibilities. However, the marital power literature over the past few decades demonstrates that this is not happening (see, for example, Bianchi et al. 2000; Blumberg 1984; Blumstein and Schwartz 1983, 1991; Hochschild 1989; Perry-Jenkins and Folk 1994; Pleck 1985; Wright et al. 1992). Women may gain a greater measure of control over finances or household decisions, but few couples report patterns that could be characterized as egalitarian. Husbands continue to exercise greater control in financial matters and decision making.

Similarly, women's employment has done little to alter the division of domestic labor. Husbands may help a little more with household chores and child care, but much of the research argues that these changes reflect shifts in the proportion of work being done by each spouse. In other words, it looks like men are doing more because women, who are now further crunched for time, are doing less (see Chapter 3). It is clear that merely earning a wage does not significantly enhance a woman's power in most marriages.

As we have said, one reason for this continued imbalance of power may be that men typically outearn their wives, often by a large margin. This income advantage continues to lend legitimacy to the husband's authority within the marriage. He may not be earning all the money, but he is still earning most of it. This circumstance may allow spouses to continue to think of their economic assets as largely his and to justify his continued control over them. However, this is only a partial explanation for the enduring imbalance of power within marriage. If women's income buys them so little, then power is not about money—or at least, not entirely about money. Gender is also a factor.

Two examples from studies of marital power suggest that this is the case. The first example comes from Blood and Wolfe's (1960) work. One

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of their most interesting findings, given their reliance on resource and exchange theory, is that the wives in their sample who worked outside the home full time got the least amount of help with domestic labor from their husbands. It is not just that these wives could not exchange their income for more help with domestic labor from their husbands, but that they got the worst deal overall of any group of wives when they were contributing the most (in terms of paid and domestic labor) to their relationships. The second example comes from Arlie Hochschild's *The Second Shift* (1989). Hochschild reported that, while substantial sharing of domestic duties was not common in her sample of dual-earner couples, among couples where women earned more than their husbands, none of the men shared the housework and child-care duties. These results directly challenge the exchange of resources implied by the conventional marital contract, since these wives got no credit for the substantial incomes they contributed.

More recent quantitative research has produced results similar to Hochschild's and demonstrates that there is a curvilinear relationship between income contributed and the amount of housework each spouse performs (Brines 1994; Greenstein 2000; Bittman et al. 2003). Husbands who are sole (or major) breadwinners successfully trade their income for domestic labor, but wives who are the major breadwinners in their families are unable to negotiate a similar deal. That is, wives who earn all a family's income perform about the same amount of housework as wives who earn no income at all. Their husbands seem to receive domestic services, rather than to compensate for their wives' unusually high earnings by taking on more household labor. Their wives' earnings disrupt a balance of power that feels culturally right, and either these men attempt to restore that balance by asserting their right as men to their wives' domestic labor, or wives take on more household work voluntarily to avoid further assaulting their husbands' masculinity. Couples engage in "gender display" (Brines) or "deviance neutralization" (Greenstein) to restore a sense that spouses are meeting their conventional obligations. However, the exact dynamic by which gender overrides the money-equals-power equation among these couples is unclear.

That higher-earning wives cannot trade their income for a reduction in their domestic labor burden undermines the theoretical assumptions of the bulk of research on power in marriages. These results demonstrate that

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men's power in marriage does not come from their income or their role as (primary) breadwinner—or at least, it does not come from these resources alone. Husbands in dual-earner families retain and enjoy some rights or privileges as men. Thus, it makes sense to talk about gender as exerting an influence on marital power dynamics that is independent of income earned by spouses. We can then think of gender as a separate structure that shapes the balance of power within marriage.

Gender as Structure

Because gender so thoroughly pervades social life, it is often conceptualized as a cultural dynamic that is "woven into" other institutions, meaning that beliefs about gender and gender differences are used to maintain and justify other social practices. However, gender also exists as a separate entity (Lorber 1994). That is, while gender is indeed embedded in and shapes the practices of other social institutions, it also exerts an influence that is separable from all other institutions. In the case of marital power, men's ability to retain their control and privileges, even in the absence of the economic dominance that has legitimated this power advantage, suggests that gender exerts an influence on marital power dynamics that is distinct from men's successful enactment of breadwinner responsibilities. In short, that men retain their power advantages in these circumstances points to gender as both a separate and a stable entity.

This means that we can talk about gender as structure (Risman 1998). This structure exists and operates on multiple levels within social life: institutional, interactional, and individual. At the institutional level, gender exists as beliefs about what men and women are or should be and as organizational practices that serve to reinforce these beliefs. The typing of women and men into particular occupations, the gap in wages between men and women, and the glass ceiling in organizations are all examples of gendered organizational practices. But gender at the institutional level also exists as ideology. Beliefs that men should be stronger and rational and women weaker and emotional are part of conventional gender ideology. The conventional marital contract, with the expectation that men are breadwinners and women are mothers and homemakers, is also part of gendered ideology. These institutional-level beliefs and practices organize the behavior of men and women at the interactional and individual levels.

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At the interactional level, gender shapes face-to-face communication. That is, we interact with others as men and women, drawing on the cultural expectations for behavior that exist at the institutional level. Perhaps our best conceptualization of how the gender structure operates at the interactional level comes from West and Zimmerman (1987). They argue that men and women "do gender" as they interact with others in ordinary settings. Within a given context, individuals must clearly demonstrate to others that they are appropriately masculine or feminine. Men and women are aware of the gendered expectations for dress, speech, and behavior that exist at the institutional level, and they manage their conduct in light of the possibility that they may be held accountable to these standards by others.

For example, aside from cassocks or ceremonial kilts, men in Western societies do not wear skirts, but not because of any inherent property of the garment. Skirts are actually quite practical in terms of allowing freedom of movement and can be more comfortable than pants, particularly in warm weather when they generate their own breeze. However, since skirts have been successfully typed as women's clothing, no self-respecting (conventional) male would be caught dead in one. Those rare males who choose to adopt this style of dress risk social sanctions ranging from disapproval to ridicule to physical violence. They also risk being labeled inappropriately feminine and, therefore, not men. This example demonstrates that although conventional gender expectations may not completely determine behavior, even the smallest rules can be quite compelling. So while men and women do not always conform to the expectations for their sex categories, all know that deviations may come at a cost.

While "doing gender" encompasses a wide range of behaviors, the primary activities for men and women are the doing of dominance and submission (Berk 1985; West and Zimmerman 1987). This means that gender differences are not neutral but tied to larger power structures. At the institutional level, men enjoy greater economic and political power. At the interactional level, men assert their authority and women defer to this authority. This gender imperative is particularly salient in the context of heterosexual love relationships and marriage. Cultural notions of a man as "head of the household" or "king of his castle" continue to resonate, even if more subtly than in the past. Correspondingly, being a wife has typically entailed a certain level of service to one's husband. All spouses

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have to negotiate their relationships against the backdrop of these expectations, whether in congruence with or in opposition to them. That is, while spouses may choose to challenge conventional expectations or practices, others may still hold spouses accountable to conventional standards. These conventional assumptions regarding gender continue to shape the interactions of spouses and remain a central part of how men and women think about themselves as husbands and wives.

Gender is also a fundamental component of identity construction; it is impossible to think of ourselves separately from our identity as a man or woman. At the individual level, the gender structure constrains men and women as they attempt to construct meaningful identities. That is, doing gender is an internal process as well (Acker 1992). Individuals often hold themselves accountable to conventional conceptions of gender-appropriate behavior, regardless of the standards imposed by those around them. That is, it is important to feel that one is behaving in a way consistent with one's identity as a man or woman.

The research reviewed thus far suggests that, within marriage, the gendered identities of breadwinner and mother may still resonate for spouses and represent an important touchstone for constructing individual identities. Still, for husbands and wives, this identity construction occurs in the context of the couple; doing gender is a team performance. One spouse's failure to engage his or her part appropriately may reflect negatively on the partner. For example, having a wife who makes substantially more money may represent a significant threat to a man's gender identity, given that breadwinning is such a fundamental component of masculinity in U.S. culture, and the couple must find a way to manage this tension. Spouses must construct gender identities in tandem to find a balance that feels right to them, both as a couple and as individuals.

Although we can conceptualize these three levels of the gender structure as distinct from one another, they operate simultaneously and reinforce each other. While institutional practices and ideologies shape microlevel behavior, behavior on the interactional and individual levels has an impact on gender at the institutional level, for it is through microlevel dynamics that the larger gender structure is either challenged or reproduced. For example, at the microlevel, couples with higher-earning wives could represent a potential site of gender change. They could challenge the conventional link between breadwinning and power

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by sharing domestic labor, decision-making power, and the responsibility to provide equally. They could rewrite the gender scripts of the conventional marital contract and expand the possibilities for both men and women in marriage.

In spite of this opportunity, it seems that women's incomes have bought them little in their marriages because the gender structure assures men certain privileges within the marital relationship. As we have seen, the gender structure seems to have accommodated women's paid labor by constructing men as primary breadwinners, and therefore still due the privileges attached to this activity. However, couples with higher-earning wives present a more serious challenge to the gender structure. These couples disrupt the cultural link between gender, money, and power more profoundly and create new tensions for spouses to manage. These couples' efforts to preserve men's authority and interpersonal dominance despite women's economic advantage highlight the difficulty of rewriting conventional gender scripts and demonstrate the resilience of the gender structure in the face of potential challenges to it.

Conceptual Issues in Analyzing Power

Love: What's Power Got to Do with It?

Conducting research on marital power raises some sticky questions, because we are not used to thinking that power operates in our most intimate relationships. In U.S. culture, marriage is supposed to be based on romantic love. This notion requires that our relationships be ruled by our hearts and emotions, as in "I'm so crazy about her" or "He just swept me off my feet." This overpowering emotion often puts us beyond the reach of reason. We do not rationally calculate whether we should be in love with someone; we act largely on the basis of feelings. In fact, thinking rationally about a relationship, or weighing its pros and cons, opens us up to the charge that we are not really in love.

Being involved in a romantic relationship also means being focused on the other. That is, loves requires a certain degree of altruism. One's personal desires cannot always be primary. Romantic love often requires putting the needs of one's partner first to make her or him happy or even to preserve the relationship. This selfless giving is often the standard used to assess the nature of our feelings. Only when we can place the interests of the other before our own is our caring and commitment seen as genuine.

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This emphasis on affection and altruism leaves little room for power considerations in a love relationship. In fact, Western culture sets up love and power as opposites. If love means a denial of self for the sake of the other, power implies a calculation of one's rational self-interest above the interests of the other. Power means forcing another to do something she or he would prefer not to do, or even taking advantage of another for personal gain. Power considerations, then, seem anathema to the kind of blissful relationship idealized by our cultural emphasis on romantic love.

It is the equation of power with this kind of domination that makes us reluctant to admit that power plays a role in our love relationships. Few people want to think of having power over (or being subordinate to) their beloved. However, power is not simply domination; power also refers to autonomy—the ability to act according to one's wishes and desires. Using this conceptualization of power, the need for love and the need for power are no longer mutually exclusive dynamics in a love relationship but are intimately connected. Great acts of love depend on a free and autonomous self capable of both feeling and action. In this way, love and power are both fundamental dynamics in any healthy relationship (Nyberg 1981).

Even if we think of power as autonomy rather than domination, we can see how power and love exist in tension with one another in any relationship. Fulfilling one's own desires can sometimes mean thwarting those of one's partner, raising important questions, such as, How much should I give up to make my partner happy? and What do I have a right to expect from my partner in return? Conflicting desires or needs between spouses mean that at some point one person's autonomy will be sacrificed to meet the desires of the other. Often these issues exist on an unconscious level and surface in a relationship only in the context of "fairness," as in, Why do *I* have to do all the cleaning? or Why do you always get your way? Despite the clear power implications of these issues, they are rarely framed as evidence of differential power between spouses.

Conceptualizing and Measuring Power within Marriage

The widespread cultural denial of the presence of power in love relationships makes it difficult to conceptualize and measure power within marriage. Most obviously, one spouse's exerting his or her will over the other (overt power) gives us a concrete way to examine the balance of

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power in a relationship, and much of the work on marital power has taken this factor as its starting point. Spouses have been asked to report on how much "say" each spouse has in a wide range of decisions commonly made by married couples. One's ability to influence or control decision making is a fundamental indicator of one's power within the relationship.

However, power dynamics, particularly within marriage, can be much more nuanced and subtle, and decision-making outcomes tell only part of the story. The process of making decisions, including the various ways in which partners can influence negotiations, also reveals much about who exerts more control within the relationship. For example, while one spouse may be making what appear to be important decisions, it is possible that these are merely tasks delegated by the other partner. Paying the bills could put one spouse in a position of power by allowing her or him to closely monitor the family's finances and make at least some monetary decisions unilaterally. However, in other circumstances, paying the bills may be a task dumped on a spouse by a partner who considers this job menial and stressful. Therefore, knowing how couples come to decisions can be a more important indicator of the balance of power between spouses than the actual outcome of the decision-making process.

The ability to suppress issues, or "non–decision making," is also an important indicator of power. This kind of power would show up in the successful resolution of conflict or resistance in the past in ways that keep similar conflicts from reemerging (latent power). In this case, the partner who "lost" the first round on a particular issue might fear open confrontation if she or he attempts to renegotiate the outcome, and therefore lives with the past decision rather than actively pursuing her or his desires. Power then lies with the partner who is able to avoid discussion or conflict over an issue once it has been settled to her or his satisfaction.

Considering overt and latent power, as well as power processes, gives us a number of ways to assess the balance of power in a relationship. But even these approaches do not examine all the possible avenues for exercising power. Steven Lukes (1974, 1986) has conceptualized power in a way that allows us to explore power dynamics that are embedded in larger cultural assumptions or ideologies. He advocates what he calls a three-dimensional view of power, which examines overt and latent power but also attempts

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to uncover power that is "hidden." Lukes argues that the ability to keep particular issues from entering the arena of conflict is a more thoroughgoing exercise of power than any overt struggle for dominance. The most effective exercise of power draws on prevailing ideological constructions, so that an individual's or group's domination seems beneficial, reasonable, or natural. In this way, the most adept uses of power are largely hidden.

Hidden power can be exercised in a variety of ways: through individual decisions, institutional procedures, or by dominant values that shape interaction (e.g., conventional gender expectations). Consensus may seem to exist, as ideology masks the contradictions in lived experience; but uncovering these contradictions reveals the exercise of power. We can easily see the distinction between the various conceptualizations of power by looking at the issue of domestic labor. If a husband and wife struggle over domestic labor, and the husband successfully resists his wife's request for him to do more around the house, he has exercised overt power. If his wife then accepts the situation and avoids raising the issue again out of fear of renewed conflict, he has exercised latent power. But even if this issue is never raised between the two spouses because the wife accepts it as her duty to bear the domestic labor burden—even when she is employed outside the home—her husband has benefited from the hidden power in prevailing gendered practices and ideology.

Aafke Komter (1989) adapted Lukes's framework to her examination of the hidden power in Dutch marriages. She found that husbands benefit from the implicit hierarchy of cultural worth that values men over women, and that couples rely on conventional gender expectations to explain inequities in their relationships. For example, men explained that their wives perform more housework because they were "better at it" or "enjoyed it more." These explanations reinforce conventional gender expectations and obscure men's power advantage in these relationships.

This conceptualization of hidden power is particularly useful given our emphasis on analyzing the effects of gender on multiple levels in the marital relationship. It allows us to assess how cultural expectations regarding gender at the institutional level affect both the interactions between spouses and their attempts to construct meaningful identities. Attention to hidden power can sensitize us to the subtle ways in which gender expectations shape the power dynamics within marriage.

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While this conceptualization of power moves us forward theoretically, it represents only half the battle. Measuring power can be equally challenging because power cannot generally be measured in any direct way. Rather, theoretically driven indications of power are measured. Within the context of a marriage, the ability to prevail in the face of conflict is an obvious reflection of one's power. The relative level of control spouses exercise over financial and other family decisions has also been seen as indicative of the relative power of each spouse. More recently, especially as women have moved into the workforce, the division of domestic labor has been used to reflect the balance of power between spouses. The assumption here is that performing such labor is onerous and undesirable, and that a spouse will avoid this labor if she or he has the power to do so. And men's strong resistance to performing household chores, despite women's labor-force participation (as well as their continued efforts to get men to help), has been viewed as a successful expression of men's power or privilege (Hochschild 1989).

To ensure comparability with previous work on power in marriage, I examined these standard indicators: the division of domestic labor and child care, patterns of financial management, decision-making practices, and conflict-resolution strategies. Therefore, I was concerned with such issues as who performed which household or child-care tasks and with what frequency, who managed the money, and who prevailed in both day-to-day conflicts and major decisions. These kinds of outcomes are the most basic indicators of each spouse's relative power within the relationship.

To move beyond these measures of overt power, I looked for subtle expressions of power or privilege. I explored such issues as whether one partner's work defined the family (set the daily schedule, received preference in consideration for family moves, and so on), or whether one job was considered more important than the other, for whatever reason. I wanted to know whether decisions about work were made according to each spouse's occupational potential (assuming in these families that the wife's exceeds her husband's), or whether men received automatic first consideration in job-related decisions. I asked spouses about changes they would like to make—in their jobs, in the division of domestic labor, in their relationships—to see if their lives seemed organized around their preferences or their partners'. I asked whether they felt they could pursue

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these changes and, if not, why. This gave me a sense of how empowered spouses felt individually, and the extent to which they felt constrained by their partners. And finally, I asked if there had been any disappointments in their relationships and whether they had ever considered leaving. These questions tap into potentially serious frustrations with the relationship. People who consider leaving their spouses are on the verge of deciding that the marriage is not worth it anymore—they are not getting enough of what they want or need, so it is time to move on. All these questions allow me to expand previous ideas and evidence of power within marriages, and to offer a more complete picture of their overt and hidden power dynamics.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The Sample

The sample consists of thirty married couples. I recruited twenty-two couples in which wives' income, occupational status, or both are substantially higher than their husbands'. Deciding what constitutes a substantial disparity in these variables is a rather arbitrary decision. Previous work assessing marital power in couples where wives earn more than their husbands has used income differences as small as a few thousand dollars per year (McRae 1986). To put the maximum stress on the gender structure, I examined larger income and status differences that would be more difficult for couples to ignore. Wives had to earn at least 50 percent more per year than their husbands earned (for example, a woman making $45,000 per year, married to a man making $30,000). Status differences were defined by a combination of factors: established occupational rankings, such as Duncan's Socioeconomic Index; education required for the job; and position within the bureaucratic hierarchy. In practice, I relied largely on the last two factors. For example, I judged a wife who was a midlevel bank manager higher in status than her husband who worked as a car salesperson.

In fifteen of these twenty-two couples, wives surpassed their husbands on both income and occupational status. In four couples, wives earned 50 percent more, but there was no clear status difference between them (for example, an attorney married to a physician). In three couples, wives made $4,000 to $7,000 more per year than their husbands

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did (which did not meet the 50 percent standard) but held jobs with substantially higher status (for example, a research project manager married to a telephone repairer). I included these couples to get a sense of whether income or occupational status seemed more important in driving the power dynamics of the marriages. However, in the final analysis I collapsed these categories into one because the power dynamics among these three types of couples proved substantially similar; that is, the results demonstrate that surpassing one's husband on either income or occupational status affects the power dynamics in similar ways to surpassing him on both.

I also recruited eight comparison couples (for a total of thirty couples) in which husbands' income and occupational status are higher than their wives', or in which spouses are relatively equal on both variables. The comparison couples provide an important contrast to separate out the effects of wives' employment from the effects of their earning substantially more than their husbands. This contrast can tell us whether the dynamics among couples with higher-earning wives are similar to, or differ substantially from, the dynamics of more conventional two-income couples.

Characteristics of the Couples

In general, the two types of couples are similar on key demographic variables. On average, husbands are only slightly older than their wives (thirty-seven years vs. thirty-six years for couples with higher-earning wives, thirty-five vs. thirty-four years for comparison couples). Couples with higher-earning wives had been married for about eight years, with an average of 1.8 children; comparison couples, for ten years, with 2.0 children. There are also no large discrepancies between the two groups in terms of class background, ethnicity, or religiosity of spouses. All couples in both groups are two-income couples with at least one child at home, and all wives are employed full-time. However, five husbands with higher-earning wives spend most of their time in the home (earning, at most, $3,000 per year) and are classified by their part-time occupations. Note that, although the sample includes men whose primary job is that of stay-at-home father, there are no stay-at-home mothers in the comparison group. I was most interested in contrasting the effects of wives'

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employment alone with the effects of wives having a higher income and occupational status. Contrasting the experiences of these two groups of women provides a way to separate out the relative effects of gender and income on the balance of marital power.

While the two groups are similar on many key demographic variables, as expected they vary more widely on income. Higher-earning wives made an average of $47,000 to their husbands' $22,000 in the year that preceded the interviews. Comparison wives made an average of $33,000 to their husbands' $45,000. (The five husbands who were primarily at home bring this average down considerably. Without them, the average salary for husbands with higher-earning wives is $30,000, making the income discrepancies between spouses in both groups comparable.) The range in family incomes is also slightly greater for couples with higher-earning wives. Total family income ranged from $27,000 to $175,000, with most couples (sixteen of twenty-two) falling in the $50,000–$80,000 range. The corresponding range of total family income for comparison couples is $35,000 to $150,000. Here the distribution is more bimodal, with half the families below $50,000, and the other half above $70,000. This means that, while most families in both groups would be considered middle to upper-middle class, both groups also included families that would be considered solid working class.

There is also some variation between the groups on educational attainment. Over one-third of higher-earning wives have more education than their husbands have. This gap generally reflects a wife with a master's degree and a husband with a bachelor's degree. Among the comparison couples, the husband's education is equal to or exceeds his wife's in all but one case. In short, couples with higher-earning wives are very similar to comparison couples, with the exception that higher-earning wives are more likely to possess more-advanced degrees than do their husbands, and to outearn them by a considerable margin.

This sample is limited in two ways. First, there is little racial diversity among these couples. The sample includes only two Asian Americans, two African Americans, one Latino, and one émigré from the Middle East; all remaining respondents are European American. Second, the sample is highly educated. Over two-thirds of spouses have bachelor's degrees, and most have at least some graduate training. Therefore, while the sample

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contains some variation by social class, most spouses in both groups are highly educated and white.

Recruiting Couples and Gathering Data

All couples were living in a major metropolitan area in the eastern United States. Couples were recruited primarily through ads placed in a local newspaper that was delivered free to all households in the surrounding communities once a week. The ad asked for volunteers for a study on work, marriage, and family life, and stated that "especially needed are couples in which the wife's income and/or occupational status is higher than the husband's." I also received several referrals through acquaintances. Recruitment efforts ceased after thirty couples had completed the entire data-collection process.

Potential participants were screened during the initial phone contact to determine their eligibility. Of the couples who agreed to participate, spouses were first mailed separate but identical questionnaires. The questionnaires included fixed-choice items about household decision making and the division of domestic labor and child care. These items were taken directly from Blood and Wolfe's (1960) research. (See Appendix A for a copy of the questionnaire.) The questionnaire also asked for information about the respondent's income, education, occupation, current marriage, and family background. The small size and nonrandom nature of the sample meant that I could not analyze these data using standard statistical techniques. However, the questionnaires did yield background information on the respondents and illuminated areas of disagreement between spouses. This information was helpful in the subsequent interviews.

Once the questionnaires were returned, I contacted respondents to schedule face-to-face interviews. I interviewed spouses individually in their homes, usually consecutively, with interviews lasting from one to four hours. The interviews were structured around an interview guide, but questions were designed to be open-ended to allow respondents to explore issues I had not anticipated. (See Appendix B for a copy of the Interview Guide.) The interview topics included personal background (including information about family of origin), current work and work history, the history of the couple's relationship, the division of household chores and child care, financial organization and practices, decision-making practices, and conflict-resolution strategies. Near the end of the interviews,

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I also asked spouses direct questions about the balance of power in their relationships to see who they thought exerted more control and under what circumstances. In short, the interview questions were designed to encourage spouses to reflect on multiple dimensions of their lives and relationships, and to assess how satisfied they are with the amount of control they exercise in each of these areas.

This research design allows us to answer important questions about the complex relationship between money, gender, and power. While I build on previous conceptualizations of power, the emphasis on hidden power dynamics opens a window on the subtle ways in which the link between money and power within these marriages is undermined for women while men's dominance is maintained. This conceptualization of power is especially useful because it gives us a way to assess the impact of the gender structure on the balance of power in these marriages—particularly how the expectations embedded in the marital contract and the conventional gender identities of breadwinner and mother/homemaker continue to shape marital power relations.

The in-depth interview data presented here provide a crucial counterpoint to what little we know about couples with higher-earning wives. As we listen to how spouses feel about themselves and their partners, and how they describe their relationships, we can see how they struggle with and manage the tensions associated with having or being a wife who earns more. These results highlight the stability of the gender structure and demonstrate how men's dominance is reproduced at the interactional and individual levels as spouses work together to construct appropriate gender identities and maintain viable marriages.

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