CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Gender Conflict in Marriage

Janice M. Steil
Beth Turetsky

In this chapter, we review some of the changes that have led to one of the major conflicts of the past half-century: the struggle for gender equality among heterosexual couples. We begin by considering some of the precursors to change. We then examine why, in the context of marital relationships, gender equality matters and ask why it is so difficult to achieve. Empirical findings relevant to establishing a context for constructively engaging in the conflict are highlighted, and we conclude with some implications for couple therapy.

PRECURSORS

Over the past quarter-century, women have entered the paid labor force in significant numbers; the number of single-parent families has increased, as has the number of births to unmarried mothers; the number of married couple households has declined; the racial gap in marriage rates has widened; and same-sex marriage is now legal in a growing number of states. These changing demographics have led some to argue that American society is at a unique juncture with regard to families (Vandewater and Antonucci, 1998). Others, most notably Coontz (2004), counter that many things that seem new in family life are actually quite traditional. According to Coontz (2004), two-provider families have been the norm throughout most of history. Stepfamilies were more numerous in much of history than they are today, and at various points in history, cohabitation, out-of-wedlock births, and nonmarital sex were more widespread than they are currently.

The truly radical change in Western families, according to Coontz, was fomented by the transition from a view of marriage that was primarily about property, politics, and natal family duty to one that was about love, intimacy, and satisfaction in the nuclear family. For thousands of years, marriage was a way of raising capital, constructing political alliances, and
organizing the division of labor by age and gender. “The individual needs and desires of its members (especially women and children, its subordinate members) were secondary considerations” (Coontz, 2004, p. 977). While the importance of family duty as the basis of marriage continues today in many non-Western countries and in various devout religious groups throughout the world, for the majority of those in the West, the transition to free choice in terms of whom to marry, with love as the basis, has heightened the importance of emotional life (Wilcox and Nock, 2006) and introduced the notion of personal satisfaction as an appropriate expected outcome of the marital relationship.

A second significant factor affecting family life has been the reproductive revolution. From birth control to in vitro fertilization, the reproductive revolution has transformed the traditional relationships among marriage, sex, conception, childbirth, and parenting. For the vast majority, children are no longer a financial necessity or a means of providing for the family in old age. Reproductive technology, combined with societal changes, allows those who marry the option to remain childless. Concomitantly, those who choose to have children can do so absent marriage or a partner.

For many, then, reproductive independence combined with an individualized, rather than an institutional, approach has changed the priorities of marital relationships. The shift away from societal and natal family duty to love, affection, and companionship has legitimized the importance of partner satisfaction and well-being. This lay the groundwork for one of the major family conflicts of the past half-century: the struggle for gender equality in marriage.

**WHY GENDER EQUALITY MATTERS**

To the extent that partner satisfaction and well-being are legitimate relationship expectations, gender equality matters. Beginning with the early work of Jesse Bernard (1972) and continuing to the present, a long line of studies has shown that marriage is beneficial for both women and men but especially for men. Married men have better physical and psychological health than their unmarried counterparts. Although the extent of the gap between the never married and the married may be declining (Liu and Umberson, 2008), married men continue to show lower levels of problem drinking, are less likely to be involved in crime, are less likely to be depressed or show serious symptoms of psychological distress, are less likely to have surgery, and have lower risks of dying from all sources at any point in their lives than their never-married, widowed, or divorced counterparts. Married men experience greater career success, occupy
higher-level positions, earn more money, and are more satisfied with their careers than the unmarried, even after controlling for age (Friedman and Greenhaus, 2000). Indeed, men enjoy both a marital and a parental “wage premium”—an increase in earnings relative to the unmarried and the married without children, estimated at anywhere from 4.5 to 35 percent for marriage and between 4 and 9 percent for fatherhood. The marital wage premium is greatest for married white men (relative to their unmarried peers) followed by black men and black women, respectively. Studies find no marital wage premium for white women. Similarly, the association between fatherhood and increased wages is smaller for black married men than for whites or Latinos (Glauber, 2008). By contrast, it is well established that rather than a wage premium, married mothers overall experience a per child wage penalty of approximately 5 percent (Correll, Bernard, and Paik, 2007).

In other studies, both women and men who are married report more emotional satisfaction with their sex lives than those who are unmarried or cohabiting, but married women report significantly less satisfaction than married men do (Waite, 1995). Others have noted women’s disproportionate vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse. National surveys estimate the yearly incidence of all kinds of intimate violence at around 12 percent for the married and as high as 35 percent for cohabitating couples. Findings suggest that there is “almost perfect symmetry” in the use of violence by women and men against their partners (Johnson, 1995, p. 285), but many argue that this “symmetry” must still be viewed in a gendered context. Statistics show that one in four women, as compared to one in seven men, sustain severe physical violence by an intimate partner at some point in their lifetime. Indeed, at the extreme, 40 to 50 percent of all murders of females are committed by their intimate partners (Black et al., 2011). Such violent relationships are widely viewed as reflective of a particular kind of power struggle in which there is an escalation of hostility and no perceived exit strategy (Gottman and Notarius, 2000). From this perspective, husbands who have insufficient power and lack other means of demonstrating control and authority use violence to reaffirm their masculine identity, with devastating results (Anderson, 1997).

The extent to which, and the conditions under which, sex differences in the benefits of marriage extend across race and class are not fully known. Class, ethnicity, and race are often confounded, and many groups, including Latinos and Asians, have been less frequently studied. Yet on some dimensions, the disparity seems to be greatest among blacks. Despite pro-marriage attitudes, particularly on the part of African American women, African Americans are significantly less likely to marry, significantly more likely to divorce, and experience fewer benefits from marriage than
any other racial group (Koball, Moiduddin, Henderson, Goesling, and Besculides, 2010). More than a quarter-century ago, Carmen, Russo, and Miller (1981) constructed an index based on the proportional difference between the rates of illness among the married compared to the never married and found a 71 percent reduction in vulnerability to mental illness for minority race men who married, a 63 percent reduction for white men, but only a 28 percent reduction for white women and a mere 8 percent reduction for minority race women. Subsequent studies have also found that marriage has little if any protective effect for black women (Taylor, Henderson, and Jackson, 1991; Waldron and Jacobs, 1989) and that black women report lower levels of satisfaction with their marriages than do black men, white men, and white women (Dillaway and Broman, 2001).

Other studies show that low-quality marriages are associated with significant reductions in physical and mental well-being, such that partners suffer a twenty-five-fold increase in the risk for depressive symptomatology and a weakening of immune functioning (Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton, 2001). These studies also show that the physiological effects of marital stress are stronger and last longer in women than they do in men, suggesting that women disproportionately bear the brunt of marriage’s negative consequences (Lerner, 2002). Indeed, a meta-analysis of ninety-three studies showed a stronger association for women than for men between the stress of low-quality marriage and poorer well-being (Proulx, Helms, and Beuhler, 2007).

In sum, marriage is associated with a number of physical, psychological, emotional, and economic benefits for both women and men, though the extent of the benefits varies by both gender and ethnicity. Ross (1995), among others, suggests that these benefits probably extend to gay couples in unmarried committed romantic partnerships and unmarried heterosexual couples who have been together for years (Lerner, 2002). In contrast, other studies show that cohabitants are more similar to the unmarried than they are to the married in terms of well-being (Kim and McKenry, 2002). It is clear that the distribution of the benefits of marriage is asymmetrical. Marriage, overall, is associated with more benefits for men than for women, and unhappy marriages are associated with more costs for women than they are for men. The question, then, is why this is so.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCE OF ASYMMETRICAL BENEFITS AND COSTS

Attempts to explain the source of the gender differences in well-being have a long history. Early studies focused on three primary explanations: gender differences in help-seeking behavior, gender differences in mate selection,
and sex differences in biological vulnerability. None of these was able to fully explain the gender differences in well-being among the married. (See Steil, 1997, for a review.) By the 1980s, investigators increasingly began to examine the extent to which gender differences in the benefits of marriage might be explained, at least partially, by the inequalities of heterosexual relationships. Studies of the relationship between inequality and well-being focused primarily on the way that influence in decision making is shared, the extent to which domestic work and child care are shared, the extent to which wives’ careers are equally valued relative to their husbands’, and, more recently, the extent to which husbands participate in the emotion work of relationships. Here, we focus on two of these factors, decision-making influence and emotion work, returning to the other points of conflict at a later point.

**Influence in Decision Making**

Studies of the outcomes associated with differential decision making influence are extensive. Across a variety of decision-making domains and a number of measures, the findings are consistent. Wife dominance is reported least often and is associated with the lowest levels of relationship satisfaction for men and women alike. Some studies found that husbands are equally satisfied either when they have greater influence or when decision-making influence is equal. Most studies, however, show that husbands and, particularly, wives are most satisfied when decision-making influence is equal. Compared to relationships in which one partner is dominant, those in which decision making is described as equal are characterized by more mutually supportive communication, less manipulative forms of influence, more affirmation and affection, more constructive interaction and intimacy, greater sexual and marital satisfaction, greater marital happiness, less divorce proneness for both partners, and less dysphoria for wives (Amato, Johnson, Booth, and Rogers, 2003; also see Steil, 2001, for a review). Clearly the way in which influence in decision making is shared matters in terms of the well-being of husbands, wives, and relationships.

**Emotion Work**

The research on husband participation in emotion work is less extensive and has a shorter history than research on decision making. Emotion work has been defined both as the efforts partners make to understand each other and to empathize with the other’s situations and feelings (England and Farkas, 1986) and as emotional support aimed at the enhancement of the other’s emotional well-being (Erickson, 1993). Historically, emotion work was viewed as a natural outcome of marital intimacy and as
something that women were naturally good at. Such constructions masked the fact that successful interaction does not just happen but depends on the work of the participants and that intimacy is the outcome of this emotion work. Indeed, recent studies using both observational and self-report measures suggest that emotion skills sustain intimacy, which in turn mediates marital health (Mirgain and Cordova, 2007).

Wives, it seems, do vastly more of the emotion and interaction work that relationships require than do husbands. Fishman (1983), in a detailed analysis of the conversations of white, professional couples at home, effectively illustrated the gender differences in the work of relationships. An analysis of fifty-two hours of taped conversations concluded that wives were three times more likely than husbands to ask questions as a means of initiating and maintaining interaction. Wives tried more often to initiate conversation, but they were less successful due to husbands’ failure to respond. Husbands tried less often but seldom failed because wives were generally more attentive and responsive to their husbands’ efforts to establish a conversation topic (Fishman, 1983).

Others have found that women are more emotionally skillful than men are (Mirgain and Cordova, 2007) and that gender differences in emotion work result in wives’ providing better emotional support for husbands than husbands provide for wives. More men than women say they receive affirmation and support from their spouse (VanFossen, 1981). Moreover, when asked to focus on the person closest to them (excluding parents and siblings), wives were twice as likely as husbands (22 percent versus 12 percent) to describe a relationship with a same-sex best friend rather than their husband (Fischer and Narus, 1981). Indeed, 64 percent of a sample of married heterosexual women reported being more emotionally intimate with other women, compared to 11 percent who said they were more emotionally intimate with men (Rosenbluth, 1997). The gender difference in nurturance holds true for blacks as well as whites. Among married black women, 43 percent named a family member (exclusive of spouse) as the person “to whom they felt closest,” 33 percent named a family friend, and only 19.6 percent named their spouse (Brown and Gary, 1985).

Yet data from a number of studies confirm the importance of emotional support to partner well-being. Both men and women in relationships rated high in intimacy were less likely to report symptoms of depression and anxiety than those in relationships rated low in intimacy. By contrast, people who lack intimate relationships experience more stress-related symptoms, are more likely to develop illnesses, and have slower recoveries as well as a higher probability of relapse (Hook, Gerstein, Detterich, and Gridley, 2003; Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton, 2001; Prager, 1995).
In one of the few explicit studies of emotion work, Erickson (1993) assessed wives’ perceptions of the frequency with which their husbands engaged in fifteen behaviors, including confiding innermost thoughts and feelings, initiating talking things over, offering encouragement, expressing concern for well-being, and respecting their points of view. Higher wives’ ratings of their husbands’ involvement in emotion work were associated with higher ratings of the quality of their marriage and lower ratings of marital burnout. Furthermore, although husbands’ higher levels of involvement in child care and housework were associated with higher marital quality and lower marital burnout, husbands’ involvement in emotion work was a better predictor of marital well-being than either of the other two (Erickson, 1993). Building on Erickson’s work, Wilcox and Nock (2006) found that perceptions of fairness in the division of household labor played a key role in influencing wives’ reports of happiness with their marriage; indeed, there was some evidence that fairness perceptions may mediate wives’ satisfaction with husbands’ emotion work. Yet, overall, men’s emotion work was the most crucial determinant of women’s marital quality.

In sum, a growing body of research suggests that the inequality of heterosexual relationships is a factor in partner well-being. This helps to explain why marriage is more beneficial for men than it is for women. We chose two areas on which to report in that regard: decision making, one of the most investigated relationship domains and one in which couples have made the greatest gains toward equality, and emotion work, one of the least investigated domains but one of singular import to individual and relational well-being. Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, when empirical interest in relationships emerged, there has been significant change. Women have increased their influence in decision making; men have increased their participation in family work, if not emotion work; and women’s careers are more valued. Yet despite the change, relationships remain asymmetrical. Women still maintain a disproportionate responsibility for managing the work-family balance and for the emotional life of family and relationships. Why?

IMPLICATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE CONFLICT

Forty years ago, approximately 40 percent of married women with husbands present were employed, with white women less likely to be employed than black women. By 2010, approximately 61 percent of all married women, including 70.1 percent of married mothers—77.1 percent of black, 69.8 percent of white, 65.5 percent of Asian, and 57.6 percent of Hispanic married mothers—were in the labor force (U.S. Census Bureau,
Children today in two-parent families are almost twice as likely to have an employed as compared to a full-time homemaker mother. As well, these dual-earner families have the highest median incomes of all other family types, and this is increasingly due to the economic contributions of employed wives. This increased labor force participation of married women led to expectations for many women of greater relationship equality. Yet such expectations have proved difficult to achieve. To understand why, we must look at the struggle as one that takes place both within and between individuals, in relationships, and within a complex tangle of deeply embedded family and societal beliefs and institutional practices.

**The Social Context**

Many of the beliefs about gender, work, and families, including theories that have guided scholarly research, work policies, and clinical practice, had their roots in the 1950s—a time of “remarkable sex segregation, gender asymmetry and stability in work and family patterns” (Barnett and Hyde, 2001, p. 781). The prevalent doctrine was one of separate spheres, which argued that “family functioning is optimized when the husband specializes in market work and the wife in domestic work” (Barnett and Hyde, 2001, p. 782). This view of family life was widely internalized such that a generation later, half of all women and 48 percent of all men continued to say that the most satisfying lifestyle was a marriage where the husband worked and the wife stayed home and took care of the house and children, and more than 70 percent of women said that it was more important for a wife to help her husband’s career than to have a career herself (Mason, Czajka, and Arber, 1976; Roper Organization, 1980). Similar attitudes continued into the 1980s, but by 1996, the proportion of survey respondents agreeing that “it is better for everyone if men are the achievers and women take care of the home” and that “it is more important for a wife to help her husband’s career than to have one of her own” decreased to a significant minority (30 percent and 20 percent, respectively; Brewster and Padavic, 2000). Support for working women reached new highs in 2010 when 75 percent of Americans agreed that “a working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work,” and 65 percent said that preschool children were not likely to suffer if their mother worked outside the home. Over a third of Americans, however (35 percent and 36 percent, respectively), continued to agree that preschool children are likely to suffer if their mother works outside the home and that “it is much better for everyone involved if the man earns the money and the woman takes care of the home and children” (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman, 2012).
Throughout this period, women consistently reported more egalitarian attitudes than men, and women with at least some college education who were employed full time were the most egalitarian of all (Mason et al., 1976). Among men, older, less educated, and married men, especially those with full-time homemaker wives, were less egalitarian in their views than younger, unmarried, and highly educated men, especially those who were of a high status with wives who were employed full time (Wilkie, 1993). There are differences by race and ethnicity as well. Hispanic women are less likely to be employed and less likely to endorse egalitarian beliefs than white or black women. Little is known of Asians, who are underrepresented in these studies. The findings with regard to men are mixed. Hispanic men seem least likely to endorse egalitarian attitudes. Some studies find black men endorsing more egalitarian attitudes than white men, while others find the reverse (Ransford and Miller, 1983; Wilkie, 1993). Ethnic attitudinal patterns often parallel the demographics. In Wilkie’s study, for example, black men, compared to other groups, tended to be younger, and a higher proportion were unmarried. Of those who were married, more had wives who were employed full time.

These societal beliefs support structural barriers that impede the achievement of gender equality within the family. A study of highly educated professionals in forty-eight countries, grouped in four categories, identified as the United States, the affluent West, the developing West, and collective (as compared to individualistic) cultures, found that across all cultures, women continue to experience more conflict between family and work than men, and conflict is a more salient feature of their work lives than it is for men (Hill, Yang, Hawkins, and Ferris, 2004). As well, studies of eight industrialized countries in Europe and Asia showed that gendered beliefs were primary factors in determining career opportunities for women and role sharing among couples. Defining masculinity in terms of the provider role, believing that children require full-time maternal care, and alleging that mothers work by choice creates an atmosphere where there is little societal or partner support for women in the paid labor force. Societies that endorsed these beliefs provided little public child care, freed husbands from domestic responsibilities, and left employed mothers to work out their own support systems (Lewis, Izraeli, and Hootsmans, 1992). It is noteworthy, then, that compared to countries at similar levels of economic and political development, the United States comes out dead last in work-family policies (Coontz, 2013). Out of nearly 200 countries in a study by Jody Heymann (2013), 180 now offer guaranteed paid leave to new mothers and 81 offered paid leave to fathers. The United States offers neither.

Religious institutions also play an important role in the way in which couples, particularly those who are members of ultrareligious groups,
negotiate society’s struggle for greater gender equality. Evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, ultraorthodox Jews, and devout Muslims subscribe to a hierarchical view of marriage that allocates greater power to men and a submissive role to women. These groups endorse complementary, or “equal but different,” roles for husbands and wives, based on naturalistic notions of men’s and women’s strengths (Levitt and Ware, 2006). Yet even these highly religious subgroups are grappling with challenges to gendered roles within marriage. While some religious women reconcile their marginalized marital influence with the benefits of stability and security, a small but vocal percentage have emerged as strong proponents of greater equality, fueling a gender equality debate in current religious thinking.

And What of the Couples Themselves?

**Attitudinal Factors.** Comparing data from two national surveys conducted in 1980 and 2000 respectively, investigators found that nontraditional attitudes toward gender were associated with greater marital happiness and higher levels of interaction for both husbands and wives (Amato et al., 2003). Overall, those with similar belief systems and, particularly, those in egalitarian relationships fare best. When belief systems are discordant, however, adopting less traditional gender attitudes is associated with lower marital quality among wives but higher marital quality among husbands (Amato et al., 2003). Wives who adopt less traditional views often encounter resistance from husbands, whereas husbands who adopt less traditional views more often receive support from their wives.

Discordant belief systems have a number of other costs as well. Studies show that full-time employment is generally associated with positive outcomes for women. Yet the quality of a woman’s work life is linked to both the characteristics of her work environment and the quality of her parental and marital relationships. Women whose husbands supported their employment both behaviorally, by sharing the responsibilities of the home and children, and attitudinally, by respecting the importance of their wives’ work, were less depressed than women who had unsupportive husbands (Amaro, Russo, and Johnson, 1987; Elman and Gilbert, 1984; Hughes and Galinsky, 1994; Kessler and McRae, 1982; Krause and Markides, 1985; Ross, Mirowsky, and Huber, 1983; Ulbrich, 1988). There is a parallel effect for husbands. Wives’ employment is negatively associated with husbands’ well-being infrequently, but when it is, it occurs only when husbands believe their wives should be home full time. The source of the distress seems to lie in a husband’s belief that his wife’s employment is inconsistent with what “should be.”
Societal Beliefs Give Meanings to Behavior. Gendered beliefs can give
different meanings to the same behaviors when they are performed by
wives as compared to husbands or vice versa. It has been shown, for exam-
ple, that the more husbands earn relative to their partners, the lower their
involvement in domestic work is and the better they feel about themselves
as spouses. Yet this is not the case for women. Wives who earn more than
their husbands do not feel better about themselves as spouses. As wives’
earnings increase relative to their husband’s earnings, the proportion of
housework they perform declines until it reaches its minimum at the point
where their earnings are approximately equal. Once women’s earnings
surpass those of their husbands, however, the pattern is reversed and the
proportion of housework she performs again increases while that of her
husband decreases (Brines, 1994; Greenstein, 2000). In a similar vein, the
asymmetries of domestic work take on different meanings in the context
of opposing belief systems. Women who endorse more traditional values
often view housework as an expression of love and a way of caring for oth-
ers. Indeed, studies have shown that feeling appreciated by their husbands
for the domestic work they do is one of the best predictors of wives’ percep-
tions of marital fairness (Hawkins, Marshall, and Meiners, 1995). From this
perspective, a context of support and appreciation changes the meaning of
domestic tasks, and women perceive their relationships as fair not on the
basis of how tasks are shared but when they receive the interpersonal out-
comes they value.

Yet even in couples where both endorse egalitarian views, partners
can struggle with their own deeply entrenched gendered expectations. An
interview study with white, professional, dual-career couples found that
almost all men and women felt it would be easier for wives’ careers to be
less successful than their husbands’ careers than for the reverse. Among
the reasons wives gave for this disparity were that his work has more
importance to his sense of self, she needed her husband to be success-
ful, and she feared that people would say his lack of success was her fault
for making him help at home (Silberstein, 1992). In a subsequent study,
Rosenbluth, Steil, and Whitcomb (1998) found that when women and men
assessed the importance of their own careers, both rated their careers as
“highly important,” with no differences by sex. When these same men and
women were asked to respond on behalf of their spouses, however, men
perceived their wives’ careers as only “moderately important” to them,
whereas women perceived their husbands’ careers as being “extremely
important” to them. In a study of fifty couples, Cowdery and Knudson-
Martin (2005) found that parents with young children wanted fathers to be
involved in child-rearing tasks, but many were unable to relinquish gen-
dered ideas of women as more naturally suited to mothering. Yet when
fathers did participate in child care collaboratively and more equally, they
developed stronger emotional connections with their children and, as
other studies have shown, as a result of learning how to care for their chil-
dren, they also paid more attention to emotional cues from their wives and
engaged in more reciprocal communication (Coltrane, 1996).

According to Coontz (2013), 65 percent of fathers interviewed in a
recent study believed that mothers and fathers should provide equal
amounts of caregiving for their children. Yet only 30 percent of the fathers
who wanted to, did so. Similarly, in-depth interviews of women who opted
out of successful careers to become stay-at-home moms showed that, con-
trary to media accounts reporting a growing tendency for professional
women to abandon rewarding jobs and career aspirations, these women
were better described as “shut out” rather than “opting out.” A major
factor in the change of lifestyle was the inflexibility with regard to work
hours and family demands of both their own and their spouse's
workplaces (Stone, 2007).

It seems “our political and economic institutions lag behind our per-
sonal ideals” (Coontz, 2013, p. SR1), leaving couples to struggle with
making things work. A recent interview study of 120 men and women
between the ages of eighteen and thirty-two found that the majority of
respondents hoped for enduring, egalitarian relationships in which part-
ners share equally in financial and family responsibilities. Most had
doubts of fulfilling these goals due to inflexible work hours and a lack
of suitable child care options. If unable to achieve egalitarian relation-
ships, most had fallback plans, but these plans were incompatible. Men
expected to fall back on traditional gender roles, with their partners
assuming responsibility for parenting, allowing them to avoid career set-
backs. In contrast, most of the women expected to maintain their auton-
omy and self-reliance by continuing to work (Gerson, 2010).

Dual-career couples, it seems, “build life structures with one foot in the
past, mimicking traditional marriages of their parents’ generation, and one
foot in the feminist influenced present” (Silberstein, 1992, p. 174). They
hold not only “consciously altered expectations (about gender roles, work,
family, and marriage) but also deeply socialized, internalized and probably
change resistant experiences, emotional needs, and entrenched patterns
of behavior” (p. 13). These entrenched beliefs often emerge after children
arrive, when couples encounter the inflexibility of the workplace in try-
ing to cope with family needs. Clearly their respective beliefs need to be
fully examined if couples are going to move forward. To do so, however,
requires faith in their partner's willingness to listen and change, as well
as the courage to bring the conflict forward. The kinds of strategies used,
the way the conflicts are defined, and the context in which differences are discussed determine the kinds of outcomes that can be achieved (Bradbury and Karney, 2004).

**IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERVENTION**

Conflict can have many positive functions. It prevents stagnation. It stimulates interest and curiosity. It is the medium through which problems can be aired and solutions arrived at. It is the root of personal and social change (Deutsch, 1973). Thus, it is not the presence of conflict in relationships but rather the conflict processes couples use that matters.

One of the most widely documented dysfunctional processes is the demand-and-withdraw pattern of marital conflict. In this pattern, the demander, more often the partner who wants some kind of change, pressures the other through the use of emotional requests, criticism, and complaints. In contrast, the withdrawer, often the person who does not want change, retreats through defensiveness and passive inaction (Christensen and Heavey, 1990). Particularly in conflicts of gender equality, the partner who wants change is more likely to be the wife. Even in a sample of dual-career respondents who indicated no differences in terms of the importance they placed on equality in their own relationships, 90 percent of wives and 55 percent of husbands reported that the wives were more likely to raise the issue of equality in their relationships (Rosenbluth et al., 1998). Both the demand and the withdraw strategies are generally viewed as weak and ineffectual. In fact, implementation of these strategies is associated with one of the strongest predictors of divorce: a pattern of husband defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling and the thought that it is better to work out problems alone (Gottman, 1993).

Developing the capacity to engage in constructive conflict is a skill. When husbands resist wives’ attempts at change, wives often defer. With this, wives pay a heavy price, including a devaluation of themselves. “Keeping quiet to keep the peace” promotes resentment, undermines intimacy, compromises affection (Deutsch, 1999), and leads to a deterioration in the level of relationship satisfaction over time (Gottman and Krokoff, 1989). Conversely, when wives do not comply, husbands often withdraw and turn away. Yet research consistently shows that conflict avoidance, whether through compliance or withdrawal, is equally dysfunctional. Indeed, Gottman (1998) has identified withdrawal, also called stonewalling and disengagement, along with criticism, defensiveness, and contempt as the four horsemen of the apocalypse in dysfunctional relationships.
RESOLVING GENDER-BASED CONFLICTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THERAPY

The Issues at Hand

Although the impact of gender conflicts on mental health and marital relationships has been reported extensively, couple therapists often fail to adequately attend to these issues in the clinical setting (Macfarlane and Knudson-Martin 2003). Those who do sometimes inadvertently support unequal power by encouraging accommodation rather than raising the option of change. Gender is socially constructed and is best conceptualized as a process that can be altered (Risman and Johnson-Sumerford, 1998).

Contemporary couples value gender-equal relationships. Yet gender inequalities frequently underlie their emotional and organizational functioning. Contributing to relationship tasks more equally may be a significant therapeutic outcome for some couples, but the more important goal is raising awareness and curiosity about the underlying imbalance of power so that partners can achieve equal influence over decisions relating to their lives together. When the goals and needs of one partner are treated as more important than those of the other partner, relational power is unequal. This kind of power differential is thought to be a primary underlying source of marital distress (Atwood and Scholtz, 2005); therefore, if gendered behaviors are addressed, but the power differential between partners is ignored, gains may be temporary rather than long-lived (Faulkner, Davey, and Davey, 2005).

Because power is often invisible, as when one member of a couple submits to a subordinate position to facilitate more harmonious functioning, couple therapists may miss the inequalities. Here, power appears to be equal because both members of the couple express a desire for the same thing, but the needs and goals of one member of the couple take priority over the needs and goals of the other. Power, then, can be latent, characterized by inequality based on tacitly accepted gendered ways of thinking that prevent other options from being considered (Knudson-Martin and Mahoney, 2005).

Gender conflict does not only emanate from within couples. Even when partners’ beliefs and goals are consistent with one another, work-related, religious, and cultural institutions exert influence and may create marital stress that is not always visible to couples. Uncovering, exploring, and negotiating the demands and inflexibilities of these institutions in a way that is acceptable to both partners can be an important task of therapy.

From Ideas to Practice

For couple therapy to be successful, therapists must first identify their own blind spots with regard to recognizing gendered power issues. This
requires thoughtful consideration of how gender and power have influenced them in their own lives. Both the therapist and the couple must examine current modes of functioning with the goal of creating a relational context in which changes in gendered power differentials can occur. Relationship characteristics that set the stage for developing gender and power equality include (1) a commitment to active negotiation about family life, that is, a willingness to deal with conflict head-on; (2) freedom in the relationship to challenge gendered behaviors and expectations; (3) a willingness for partners to develop new competencies rather than hide behind beliefs that their partner is more naturally suited for certain behaviors; and (4) mutual attention to the relationship and its tasks, including being empathic, supportive, and attentive to each other’s needs, goals, and well-being (Knudson-Martin and Mahoney, 2005).

After analyzing transcripts of fifty male-dominant couple therapy sessions, Ward and Knudson-Martin (2012) identified a number of therapist actions that facilitate couples moving toward a greater balance of power in their relationships. When therapists consistently intervened to adjust the power dynamics in the session by elevating, creating space for, and valuing the competence of the less powerful partner, change was facilitated. Identifying the operating power structure for couples was also important, as was the therapist’s consistently encouraging and helping the men to engage in more of the emotion work of the relationship. Suggesting and exploring new options to replace gendered ideas and behaviors also served to alter the power dynamic.

Although gender and power conflicts are not the only salient issues in couple treatment, they play a significant role in relationship satisfaction and partner well-being. As therapists become more attentive to these imbalances and increasingly help couples to recognize the institutional contributions to their marital distress, couples will move toward greater relationship equality and enjoy more positive therapy outcomes.

In sum, couples who are struggling to achieve more equal relationships are often doing so in the face of little institutional and cultural support. Yet relational conflict is interpersonal. Therefore, for the outcome to be positive, the conflict must be defined as a mutual problem that requires constructive engagement, and it must be defined as a situation in which there are no individual winners and losers, only mutual gains for women, men, families, and relationships. Studies show that couples can overcome limited relationship skills, although not without struggle (Bradbury and Karney, 2004), and couples who are open to change can move significantly toward relationship equality. The difficulties should not be minimized, but neither should the rewards. Returning to the precursors with which we started, the findings are strong and consistent: resolving gender and power conflicts
in favor of equal relationships is associated with that which couples most desire—greater intimacy, greater respect, greater satisfaction, and greater well-being for both partners.

References


Koball, H. L., Moiduddin, E., Henderson, J., Goesling, B., and Besculides, M. “What Do We Know about the Link between Marriage and Health?” *Journal of Family Issues*, 2010, 31(8), 1019–1040.


