

Perceptions of Shared Power, Gender Conformity, and Marital Quality in Same- and Different-Sex Marriages

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INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a key institutional context for the study of gender and gender inequality. One way in which gender inequality is maintained in marriage is through gender norms, which are often upheld by hegemonic masculinity—the pattern of practices that legitimize men’s dominance over women. While studies have focused on how gender conformity (i.e., women embody femininity and men embody masculinity) affects different-sex unions, they have not considered how gender conformity might shape inequalities and marital quality within same-sex unions.

Past research suggests that lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are less likely to be gender conforming than are heterosexuals. In addition, same-sex couples share the household division of labor more equally than different-sex couples. But women and men in different-sex relationships often perceive an unequal division of labor as “fair,” potentially because conforming to hegemonic gender norms requires that women do more unpaid labor at home than men. Indeed, women who believe men and women should share equal power in relationships report less relationship satisfaction than women who believe that men should hold more power in relationships.

These past studies suggest that women in different-sex marriages whose gender conformity relies on traditional beliefs about gender—such as the idea that women should do the majority of household labor—might perceive less power inequality in their relationships and report better relationship quality. In contrast, divisions of labor among same-sex couples that are unfair or unequal, particularly if these divisions are based on gender norms (i.e., breadwinners do less household labor), may result in relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution.

Because gender inequalities in relationships may be shaped by the degree to which partners conform to or reject hegemonic gender norms, it is important to examine how gender conformity influences perceptions of shared power in same- and different-sex relationships. These gender inequalities can negatively impact marital quality. This brief describes a study in which the relationship between gender conformity and perceptions of shared power—as well as associations between perceptions of shared power and marital quality—are examined in same- and different-sex marriages.

This study relied on dyadic data collected from a survey of 460 (n=920 individuals) mid-life married couples: 171 female same-sex couples, 124 male same-sex couples, and 165 different-sex couples. The analysis employed Actor-Partner Interdependence Models (APIM) in a structural equation modeling (SEM) framework.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

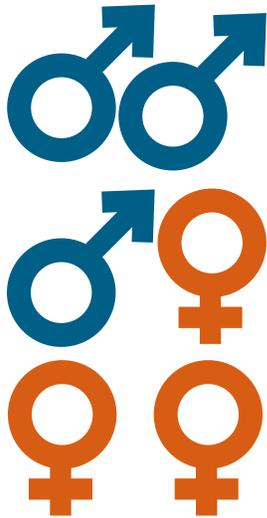
Study results point to the importance of considering not only the sex or gender identity of partners in marriages but also other aspects of gender, including gender conformity, expression, and ideology.

KEY FINDINGS

- > Women married to men, men married to women, and men married to men who were more gender conforming perceived greater shared power in their relationships.
- > Gender conformity was unrelated to perceptions of shared power among women in same-sex marriages.
- > Greater perceptions of shared power predicted better marital quality.
- > For women and men married to men, their spouses’ greater perceptions of shared power predicted their own marital quality.

(See figure)

GENDER CONFORMITY, PERCEPTIONS OF SHARED POWER, AND MARITAL QUALITY



↑ gender conformity = ↑ perceptions of shared power
 ↑ perceptions of shared power = ↑ relationship quality

↑ gender conformity = ↑ perceptions of shared power
 ↑ gender conformity = ↑ perceptions of shared power

gender conformity ≠ perceptions of shared power
 ↑ perceptions of shared power = ↑ relationship quality

This figure shows the key findings for each marital couple type: men married to men (top), men married to women and women married to men (middle), and women married to women (bottom). Blue text is associated with findings related to men and orange text is associated with findings related to women. For example, ↑ **gender conformity** = ↑ **perceptions of shared power** means that men who were more gender conforming perceived greater shared power in their relationships and ↑ **perceptions of shared power** = ↑ **relationship quality** means that women who perceived greater shared power in their relationships reported better marital quality. In addition, **gender conformity was unrelated to perceptions of shared power** for women married to women.

REFERENCE

Pollitt, A. M., Robinson, B. A., & Umberson, D. (2017). Gender conformity, perceptions of shared power, and marital quality in same- and different-sex marriages. *Gender & Society*.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Pollitt, A. M., Robinson, B. A., & Umberson, D. (2017). Perceptions of shared power, gender conformity, and marital quality in same- and different-sex marriages. *PRC Research Brief 2*(16). DOI: 10.15781/T2H41K36R.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported, in part, by Grant R21AG044585 from the National Institute on Aging (PI, Debra Umberson); Grant P2CHD042849 awarded to the Population Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD); and Grant T32 HD007081, Training Program in Population Studies, awarded to the Population Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin by NICHD.



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