

## THE POWER OF MOTHERHOOD: A CONTEXTUAL EVALUATION OF FAMILY RESOURCES

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### ABSTRACT

Motherhood is considered a liability to women's socioeconomic status and marital power. However, by examining only married couples in conventional families, child care provider, gender, and low status have been confounded in previous research. Using data from a nationwide survey, we investigate couples for whom socioeconomic status and hierarchical gender relations are muted in order to separate these effects. The results show that being the primary caretaker of children can be a source of relationship power under certain conditions. These findings suggest a transformation in the meaning and value of child care with the structural and ideological advancement of women.

### INTRODUCTION

Family resource theory proposes that husbands and wives gain and lose power in their marriage depending on the resources they have available to them. The theory, as put forth by Blood and Wolfe (1960), however, has been found to be an incomplete explanation of family power (Hesse-Biber, Williamson 1984; Katz, Peres 1985; Mizan 1994; Steil, Weltman 1991; Szinovacz 1987; Warner, Lee, Lee 1986). As a consequence, resource theory has been largely cast away and at best lingers along as a residual explanatory category. We believe the theory may be useful with some serious modifications. First, the very idea of what could be a resource was so narrowly conceived and so biased in favor of traditional male resources that other resources which might give women power were not entered into the equation (Safilios-Rothschild 1976 is one notable exception). Second, the relevance of a given resource tended to be seen as stable rather than changing as society changed, varying under different situational exigencies and ideological conditions (Befu 1980; McDonald 1980; Szinovacz 1987). Thus, research has tended not to take into account the possibility that different kinds of couples, in different kinds of circumstances, might have a special hierarchy of desires and needs that give certain resources great importance. In this paper, we examine one potential resource, caring for children, and show how, under the right circumstances, being the primary caretaker of children can be a source of power for a parent. While having and caring for children are typically associated with a loss of relationship power for women, we show how understanding resources contextually creates a new view of resource theory and a different list of what resources can give power.

In recent research on power within

marriage, child care is not considered a source of power for women (Ball, Cowan, Cowan 1995; Hendrix, Pearson 1995; Vogler, Pahl 1994). Of course, we understand why child care is considered a cost rather than a benefit in a relationship. Child care is notorious for time consuming and repetitive tasks. Most of these tasks fall completely or mostly to a woman in the household and take away from the amount of discretionary time she has available, including of course, the ability to invest herself in labor force participation (Erickson, Yancy, Erickson 1979; Ross 1987; Waite, Haggstrom, Kanouse 1986). Additionally, despite the output of time, emotions and psychological expertise, few material rewards are associated with child care. Researchers have detailed the detrimental effects on the primary female parent, including a loss of relationship power and less acquisition of education, income and occupational prestige (Blood, Wolfe 1960; Centers, Raven, Rodrigues 1971; Chafetz 1988; Hewlett 1986; Michel 1967; Rindfuss, Bumpass, St. John 1980; Sweet 1982; Waite et al 1986; White, Kim 1987). As a result, in terms of resource theory, motherhood has been viewed primarily as an obstacle to socioeconomic progress and relationship power (Hesse-Biber, Williamson 1984; Scanlon 1979).

Certainly, the burdens of motherhood are real, but this picture of motherhood is incomplete. The intensity and commitment of the bond between mother and child may give psychic benefits to the mother that go beyond the pleasure of the family environment. Women may gain self esteem, confidence and interactional skills; each of which is likely to enhance work and relationships outside the home. Given the benefits of attachments and bonds associated with primary child care, it is illogical to assume that there are no conditions under

which having children and controlling child care could be a powerful personal resource. In this paper, we seek to rectify this limited vision. Why should we have assumed that these skills and ego enhancement would be encapsulated and not have any interpersonal outcomes?

One answer may lie in the fact that researchers have only considered one kind of couple, married heterosexuals, primarily in conventional families. Under these conditions, child care correlates with marital dependence. But since it is also true that being a woman correlates with dependent marital status, it becomes hard to disentangle the effects of female status and child care provider. What is really undermining the caretaker's power? Looking at it in causal terms, it is not clear if it is child care itself that results in a loss of power or the fact that the less powerful tend to be the primary caretakers of children. Caring for children may not be compensated in terms of relationship power or social recognition because of the powerlessness of those who engage in child care. Motherhood is inextricably intertwined with the structure of patriarchy in previous research.

This paper examines how power and parenthood operate when hierarchical gender relations, characteristic of traditional marriages, are muted. It may be that caring for children can act as a resource and thereby give power, but is a coinage that can only be utilized when one is not on the short end of a substantial, pre-existing power imbalance. Under present gender inheritances it may be that children have a peculiarly costly impact on wives because child care, gender and low status are symbolically fused. It may be that when gender-related advantages are diminished, children and child care actually give power to the primary parent since they are a "good" to the individual and the relationship, and the person who "owns" that good has a positive resource and basis of power.

For example, imagine a truly egalitarian marriage where the advantages of gender would be muted or even more dramatic, a lesbian relationship where gender privilege would be irrelevant and indeed where women's values concerning children might be more emphasized in the relationship. Under these conditions, might it not be possible that children and child rearing could enhance power? The person who is the closest to the children would accumulate "emotional capital" for herself. Moreover, by controlling the children's

relationships, she would control to a certain extent the amount of emotional capital in the relationship that is available for others. In this scenario, the caretaker's emotional dependence on her partner is lessened by virtue of the unique emotional rewards in her relations with her children. Her reduced emotional dependence, in turn, is her power resource (Emerson 1962). In our hypothesized lesbian couple, other sources of power, those associated with hierarchical gender relations and implicit in most formulations of resource theory, would be rendered inoperative by being equal. So if the caretaker is not dependent on her partner for income (could afford her present way of life on her own) then children might not be a cost. In sum, we propose that when gender and socioeconomic inequalities are removed and non-traditional values can emerge, child care may become a coveted and empowering activity.

To test this proposition, we separate financial dependence and gender related inequalities from the role of caretaker. We do this by examining lesbian couples in which gender inequalities are essentially controlled and values about children are expected to be more or less shared. In addition, for most of the couples in this sample, income and education differences between partners are minimal. For these couples, child care is separated from standard structural sources of power such as gender and socioeconomic status. Here, the effect of child care on power should be most clear.

## METHOD

The data used in this analysis are taken from a larger study of interpersonal relationships (Blumstein, Schwartz 1983). Couples were sought in extensive media campaigns in Atlanta, Dayton, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, the San Francisco Bay Area, Seattle, Washington, D.C. and Wichita, in addition to national media exposure. Although self-selected, substantial efforts were made to get as diverse a sample as possible and to avoid systematic biases. These efforts included recruiting participants from a wide variety of political, religious, social and service organizations. Nevertheless, we have a non-probability sample. We use this data because it includes couples who meet our unique criteria, and allows us to begin to investigate our proposition.

Each partner from all couples

**Table 1: Means for Division of Child Care, Resources, Dependence and Relationship Power for Mothers and Their Partners**

	Mothers (N=76)		Partners (N=76)		t-value
<b>Division of Child Care Labor</b>					
Ave. of child care tasks	6.30	(1.30)	3.81	(1.30)	11.69**
Punishes children	6.40	(1.78)	3.93	(2.08)	7.71**
Takes children to activities	6.82	(1.79)	3.56	(1.85)	10.82**
Plays with children	5.60	(1.47)	4.10	(1.60)	5.89**
<b>Resources</b>					
Education	14.80	(1.99)	14.78	(2.11)	-0.08
Income	5.99	(2.55)	6.05	(2.20)	0.17
Age	34.21	(4.68)	31.61	(6.70)	-2.78*
<b>Dependence</b>					
Commitment	4.75	(1.00)	5.11	(1.07)	-2.13*
Loneliness	6.99	(2.59)	7.64	(1.79)	-1.83
<b>Power</b>					
Global power	5.31	(1.29)	4.76	(0.96)	2.93*
Change	4.09	(1.86)	5.68	(1.60)	-5.66**
<b>Decisions</b>					
Groceries	5.62	(1.89)	4.55	(1.70)	3.76**
Decorate	5.31	(1.70)	4.66	(1.87)	2.21*
Vacation	4.94	(1.04)	5.04	(1.03)	-0.57
Eat	5.18	(1.09)	5.04	(0.99)	0.86
Move	5.03	(1.16)	4.94	(1.21)	0.45
Go out	4.97	(1.05)	4.91	(0.93)	0.41
Invite to home	5.07	(0.82)	4.78	(0.81)	2.19*
\$ on groceries	5.47	(1.81)	4.55	(1.86)	3.00*
\$ on entertainment	4.92	(1.24)	4.87	(1.24)	0.21
\$ on clothes	7.25	(2.07)	7.21	(1.94)	0.10
\$ on furniture	5.38	(1.55)	4.56	(1.59)	3.15*

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses. Higher means on division of child care labor indicate greater contribution by the respondent. Higher means on the dependence and power measures indicate more dependence or more power (more change) than their partners.

independently completed a questionnaire of considerable length, concerning a wide variety of relationship issues, including measures of power and decision making within the relationship. For a couple to be included in the study, each partner had to complete and return a questionnaire, and the couple had to live together, consider themselves a couple and have been involved sexually at some point in their relationship. The study included 788 lesbian couples, of which 76 couples in which one and only one partner brought dependent children into the relationship are included in the present analysis. The presence of children is determined by individual responses to questions about whether the respondent has children, the ages of any children and the children's

present living arrangements.

The division of child care labor is measured as the difference between partners' responses to each of three nine-point items asking which partner punishes the children, plays with the children and takes the children to their appointments and activities more often (1="I do this all of the time," 9="She does this all of the time"). These items have been reverse coded so that higher values mean the respondent has done more of the activity. These three items are also averaged for an overall measure of the division of child care labor. Measures of traditional resources include each partner's annual income (1=no income, 2=less than \$2,500, 3=\$2,500 to \$4,999, 4=\$5,000 to \$7,499, 5=\$7,500 to \$9,999, 6=\$10,000 to \$12,499,

**Table 2: Regressions of Dependence and Power on Motherhood, Status and Personal Qualities for Lesbian Couples (N=76 couples)**

	Dependence		Power	
	Commitment	Loneliness	Global Power	Change
Mother or not	-.681*	-.800	.914**	-2.83**
Education	-.022	.043	-.094	-.138
Income	.096	.093	.153**	-.069
Age	-.004	-.069	.018	-.053
Aggressiveness	.029	-.459**	.070	-.060
Forcefulness	-.121	.275	.020	-.006

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ 

Note: A positive coefficient indicates that the mother is more committed, would be more lonely, has more power, or has changed more for the relationship than her partner.

7=\$12,500 to \$14,999, 8=\$15,000 to \$19,999, 9=\$20,000 to \$24,999, 10=\$25,000 to \$29,999, 11=\$30,000 to \$49,999, 12=\$50,000 or more), years of education, and age.

Relationship power is generally defined as being able to carry out one's will when confronted with resistance from the other. Such power is most often measured as influence in decision making, in particular, power is thought to belong to the partner who has the most or final say in "important" decisions. Global decision making power is computed as the difference between partners' responses to a single nine-point item which asks who has the most say in important decisions affecting the relationship (1="I much more," 9="She much more"). However, decisions are often labeled "important" in an ad-hoc, arbitrary fashion. Everyday decisions may be more vital for family functioning. Like a football game, one needs to keep an eye on the yardage gained. If a person has only rare veto power or makes only a few decisions every so often, and if those decisions are largely undisputed, that person may enjoy only symbolic power. Consequently, we also include the difference between partners' scores on eleven more specific, nine-point items asking which partner has the most influence in certain decisions that couples typically face (1="I much more," 9="She much more"). These decisions include what groceries to buy, how to decorate your home, where to go on vacation, where to go to eat, whether or not to move, where to go out, whom to invite to your home, and the amount of money spent on groceries, entertainment, clothes and furniture. These items have been reverse coded so that higher values mean the respondent has more power.

Moreover, power as ability or potential cannot be measured directly, and methodological

studies indicate that a variety of distinct measures capture unique dimensions of the distribution of power in a relationship (See McDonald 1980 for a review of these studies). Thus, multidimensional indicators of this ability are desirable (Blumberg, Coleman 1989). Therefore, we also include a measure of change for the relationship, and we measure dependence on the relationship. Change is measured as the difference between partner's scores on a nine-point item asking who has changed more for the relationship (1="I much more," 9="She much more"). Dependence on the relationship is assessed as differences in partners' scores on two nine-point items asking who is more committed to the relationship and who would be more likely to be lonely if the relationship should end (1="I much more," 9="She much more"). Personal qualities of aggressiveness and forcefulness, other potentially confounding variables, are measured as self report ratings on nine-point scales (1="extremely," 9="not at all").

## RESULTS

This lesbian sample is uniquely suited to this task because, besides controlling for gender, the partner who brings children into the relationship (referred to here as "biological mother" to differentiate her from her partner) is also overwhelmingly the primary caretaker of the children (Table 1). Four couples for whom this was not true were excluded from the analyses. Moreover, these biological mothers do not differ significantly from their partners in terms of income or education, two traditional resources (Table 1). For 45 percent of these couples, partners report the same or just one year difference in number of years of education, and 87 percent of these couples report that they differ by three years or less in years

of education. Likewise, 59 percent of these couples are in the same or an adjacent income category, and there is no difference in income means between biological mothers and their partners (Table 1). Partners differ significantly only in age, with biological mothers being on average slightly older than their partners (Table 1).

Thus, except for age, we have a naturally occurring situation in which the distinguishing feature between partners is that one partner brought children into the relationship and is the primary caretaker of them. For these couples, the biological mother is consistently the more powerful partner (Table 1). These couples tend to be egalitarian on many measures with means from both partners falling in the middle of the scales. However, there are several significant differences in power and in all cases, biological mothers have the advantage. The overall means for the biological mothers suggest that they tend to feel that they have more decision making power than their partners and that they have changed less for the relationship than their partners have (larger means indicate more power for or change by the respondent). Their partners confirm this picture as the overall means for this group indicate that they tend to feel that they have less decision making power and have changed more for the relationship than the biological mothers have. In addition, the means for both groups indicate that biological mothers tend to be less committed to the relationship. Finally, of the eleven variables measuring the influence each partner has in making specific decisions, five are significantly different between groups, and each indicate more influence by the biological mother.

Partner differences in power and dependence on the relationship are regressed on partner differences in standard structural resources and being the biological mother or not in Table 2. When controlling for partner differences in the traditional status based resources of education and income, along with age and self ratings of aggressiveness and forcefulness, all significant effects suggest that being the biological mother means having more power and less dependence on the relationship (Table 2). Being the biological mother is predictive of more influence in important decisions (global power) and relatively less commitment to and change for the relationship. An alternative explanation for the effect of children and child care on power for lesbian couples is

that the partner with children brought some personal, power related quality into the relationship, which, for example, enabled her to establish a committed relationship even though children are a potential disadvantage in attracting a partner. To test this, partner differences in aggressiveness and forcefulness were included in the regression analyses. These variables do not preclude the significant effects of having and caring for children on power and dependence (Table 2). All of these analyses suggest that the biological mother, the partner who has and cares for children in these lesbian couples, is more powerful and less dependent on the relationship than her partner.

## DISCUSSION

These data indicate that where structural sources of power are not operating, caring for children may enhance one's relative power. Indeed, these lesbian couples, though comparable in socioeconomic status, face a markedly inequitable arrangement. The biological mother has several primary relationships, with her partner and her children, while her partner has just one. Of course, either partner may have other significant relationships in their lives, but the biological mother has an immediate and permanent emotional, psychological, and practical commitment to her children. Consequently, the childless partner is more dependent on their relationship because the biological mother has alternative options in her children for significant interpersonal relationships. In addition, in the event that the couple's relationship dissolves, the partner's relationship with the children is likely to be severed or at the discretion of the biological mother. The partner in these couples has limited legal recourse in terms of custody or even visitation of her partner's children. The childless partner's greater dependence on the relationship then is reflected in the power disadvantage. She has to change more for the relationship, and she is more committed to it. If the couple separates, the biological mother still has her children, but her partner is alone. For these couples, having and caring for children means power. This is not purely a least interest interpretation. It is not just that one has additional significant relationships; it is the nature and extent of those relationships. A special bond is created between primary caretaker and children.

### Relevance To Resource Theory

In a society where sources of power are uncritically seen as the only resources available, the value of relating to and taking care of children has been under analyzed and not fully comprehended. It is as if child care could only be a burden imposed on those of lesser status. But, far from being unwillingly saddled with child care, many mothers seek parenthood. They generally find it empowering personally, and intuitively, they know they corner the market on a valuable resource. We add that child care provides a source of relationship power which can be activated under certain conditions.

Research on family power has been inadequate because these permutations of power have been ignored, thus leaving our knowledge of power under conceptualized. Under-standing power is complicated. Power belongs to the person who can carry out her or his will, but the full range and value of wills have not been explored. In addition, the value of resources depends not only on the power of the holder of those resources, but also on the values of those judging the resource. In fact, Kranichfeld (1987) argues that women are much more powerful in the family than men because of their roles as nurturers and kin keepers and their entrenchment in an extensive and supportive intergenerational network, whereas men tend to have weak cross-generational ties. England and Farkas (1986) though add that women's sources of power, emotional and instrumental investments in the relationship, are not transferable to future relationships. Men, on the other hand, who cultivate earning power, can transport this resource to another relationship. This dynamic may not operate for lesbian couples. Without more complete knowledge about what men and women value, when goods become resources, and what allows this transition to take place, we cannot fully understand power in a relationship.

We are not suggesting that men do not continue to be generally more powerful than women as power is traditionally measured or that there are no structural constraints that are maintained in most marriages; we are proposing however, that relationships change, that power can fluctuate and that women can hold specific kinds of power that have not been well tapped by standard power measures. Certainly, as exchange principles proffer, all resources are not equally valued, and one's

dependence on specific resources varies with the availability of alternative means for acquiring those resources and one's need (Blau 1964; Emerson 1962). In this case, without independent socioeconomic means and supportive ideology, the impact of any resource women control is likely to be limited at least in terms of relationship power. Conversely, with such means and ideology, resources controlled by women may be sufficient to instigate a new power structure. This research shows that one source of women's power, once economic security is established and hierarchical gender relations are removed, may be the continuing companionship that children provide. We propose that it is not that women's attachment to child care is inherent and inevitable, rather, child care is attractive work, which yields an array of valuable benefits, that are just beginning to be appreciated with women's greater status. That, as women come into power, child care gains social respect and translates into even more power for women, is no small matter.

### Prospects For Future Research

These data were not collected to examine the division of child care labor or to test our specific hypothesis. As a consequence, these results are exploratory and presented with the expectation that they will generate future research. While the findings for these couples are clear, qualitative work is needed to flush out the dynamics of this effect. Moreover, we have examined only lesbian couples in a unique set of social circumstances; that is, where one and only one partner brings children into the relationship and is the primary caretaker of them. While this allows us to isolate the consequences of having and caring for children, other lesbian couples share caretaking to a greater extent, both partners bring children into the relationship, or children are acquired during the course of the relationship (Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, Joseph 1995; Patterson 1995). Examining gay men in circumstances similar to this sample would also be valuable, especially in ascertaining gender related effects. Of course, it may not be necessary to create a gender undifferentiated world, or a world where children are more likely to be equally treasured by both partners, for caretaking to enhance power in the relationship. Women in heterosexual relationships may reap power benefits from primary child care when other structural resources, such as

socioeconomic independence, are secured. Finally, men in heterosexual relationships who are primary caretakers of children may reap gains in relationship power as a result of their caretaking activities. It has already been demonstrated that men who "mother" acquire skills and pleasures from the activities associated with child care similar to those reported by female caretakers (Risman 1987). An examination of these structural arrangements, not possible with this dataset, would contribute to our understanding of the role of children and child care in evolving relationships.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Philip Blumstein died after this research project was started.

# Land of Darkness

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