SELF-PERCEPTIONS OF COMPARATIVE POWER AND WORTH IN THREE GENERATIONAL FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT: This study focused on the extent to which self-perceptions of power and worth differed across members of three-generational families as they compared themselves with other family members. It was hypothesized that self-evaluations of worth would show more stability than self-evaluations of power in such comparisons. There was support for this hypothesis. Differences regarding self-evaluations of power according to gender and generation were also examined. The rank order, from lowest to highest, of perceived comparative power was: female adolescent grandchildren, grandmothers, mothers, male adolescent grandchildren, grandfathers, and fathers. Implications of findings for family therapists are described.

KEY WORDS: three generational families; gender; power; worth; self-perceptions.

Despite continuing interest in global measures of self-perception (Griffin, Chassin, & Young, 1981; Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1998), the predominant emphasis today is on multidimensional models that permit the investigation of variation of self-evaluation across different situational and relational contexts. An underlying assumption in this contemporary perspective is that the multiplicity of selves more accurately portrays the phenomenology of self-concept and self-evaluation (Hattie & Marsh, 1996).
Using a multidimensional model of self-perception, this paper reports the results of an exploratory study of differential self-evaluation within the social context of the multi-generational family. Specifically, the study investigates two dimensions of self-evaluation (power and worth) across different dyads or relational contexts involving adolescent grandchildren, parents, and grandparents.

SELF-PERCEPTIONS WITHIN SOCIAL CONTEXTS

There is considerable support for the notion that assessments of self are largely influenced by participation in a variety of social groups (Harter & Monsour, 1992). For example, several studies have reported that adolescents' self-descriptions vary across roles associated with different social contexts (e.g., Harter, Bresnick, Bouchey, & Whitesell, 1998).

Surprisingly, there has been comparatively little attention given to self-perceptions across different relational contexts within a particular social group. The research reported in this paper addresses this perspective in that it focuses on the extent to which two dimensions of self-evaluation (power and worth) are variable across relational contexts within the family. The family was selected as the social group for investigating intra-group differences in self-perceptions for two primary reasons. First, the family generally represents the social setting in which people report feeling most authentic and real (Thomas, Gecas, Weigert, & Rooney, 1974). Second, several scholars (e.g., Goldner, 1985; McGoldrick, Anderson, & Walsh, 1989; Rabin, 1996) have noted that the relational context of families is often characterized by differences in power and worth based on a person's gender and generational location vis-à-vis other family members. Although several studies have shown that husbands tend to have more power than wives, no known study has examined self-perceptions of power and worth among individuals in a three-generational family.

The focus on differential self-perceptions within the family is viewed as having important value for family therapists. Therapists working with multi-generational families may find it more useful to be aware of a family member's differential self-evaluations across relational contexts within the family than to know about variation in self-perceptions across social groups external to the family. This would be particularly true if intervention efforts were aimed at facilitating behavior or attitudinal change within the family. Additionally, a signifi-
cant body of research has linked power differentials within families to negative outcomes for family members and their relationships. For instance, inequity in marital relationships has been shown to have negative effects on relationship satisfaction (DeMaris & Longmore, 1996).

POWER AND WORTH AS SALIENT DIMENSIONS OF SELF-EVALUATION

Gecas (1972) identified power and worth as salient dimensions of self-evaluation (herein referred to respectively as SE Power and SE Worth). SE Power is a construct measuring a person's sense of efficacy or potency in the social environment. SE Worth is a construct connoting a sense of moral or social worth.

In the present study, the Comparative Self-Description scale (CSD) was used to measure SE Power and SE Worth. The CSD scale is a modified and adapted version of an instrument used by Thomas and associates (1974) to measure adolescent self-esteem in different cultural contexts. The CSD scale employs the semantic differential technique developed by Osgood (1964) and consists of 11 adjective pairs, each pair being set on a five-point Likert-type scale. To complete the scale, family members describe themselves on 11 adjective pairs vis-à-vis each of five other family members. Illustrated in Figure 1 is an example of the section of the grandson’s CSD scale in which he describes himself vis-à-vis his grandfather.

Research Questions

Three questions guided this exploratory study:

1. Of the two dimension of self-evaluations that constitute the focus of the study (SE Power and SE worth), which is the most stable (least variable) when comparisons are made across five different relational contexts within the three generational family?
2. Are there generational differences in stability in the dimensions of self-evaluation?
3. Are there generation and/or gender differences in self-evaluation regarding comparative assessments of power?
FIGURE 1
Adolescent Grandson’s Comparative Self-Evaluation Vis-à-Vis His Grandfather

For each item listed, circle the number that describes yourself compared to your grandfather.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Less Powerful</strong></td>
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<td>More Powerful</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Less Wise</strong></td>
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<td>More Wise</td>
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<td><strong>Less Attractive</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Less Confident</strong></td>
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<td>More Intelligent</td>
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<td><strong>Less Independent</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Weaker</strong></td>
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<td>Stronger</td>
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<td><strong>Less Helpful</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Less Honest</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Less Dependable</strong></td>
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<td>More Dependable</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Worse</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Better</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Literature Review and Statement of Hypotheses

Stability of self-perceptions of comparative power and worth. Gecas (1972) reported SE Power to be a less stable dimension of self-evaluation across social groups than SE Worth. He posited that SE Power implies interactions with others; SE Worth does not. Gecas (1972) did not discuss the SE Worth dimension as extensively as he did SE Power, but implied that feelings of moral or social worth are not as contextually sensitive as comparisons centered on power, dependency, potency, or efficacy. One implication is that SE Worth is more stable across social groups and settings than is SE Power. Hence, the following hypothesis was made.

Hypothesis 1: SE Power would be more variable across relational others than would be SE Worth.

Generational differences. This study included three generations within families: adolescent grandchildren, their parents, and one set of grandparents. It was anticipated that there would be generational differences in self-perceptions as grandchildren, parents and grandpar-
ents compared themselves to each other, but there were few theoretical or empirical clues to indicate specifically how generational membership might influence an individual's comparative self-evaluations.

Fortunately, the literature is not devoid of orienting ideas. For example, given that Erikson (1963) claimed adolescent family members are at a critical developmental stage in identity formation, one could hypothesize they would demonstrate less stability in measures of self-worth than would their parents or grandparents. From this line of reasoning, it could be assumed that periods of identity formation are characterized by fluid definitions of self, and as such are more apt to vary as adolescents compare themselves with different significant others in the family.

Another possibility enters on the assumption that adolescent identity crises are the product of an anticipated need to enter and to establish positions in a recognized and pre-existing adult social structure (e.g., becoming heads of household, entering the workforce). It could be argued that the more solidly anchored people are in adult social structures, the more they will demonstrate stability in their self-evaluations, or at least they will show greater stability in such evaluations than will persons who are less sure of their foothold in the adult world. If one assumes members of the parent generation are relatively more secure or solidly anchored in the social fabric and structure of adult life than their adolescent offspring, it can be hypothesized that parents' self-evaluation measures will be more stable than those of their adolescent children.

But what about the relative position of the parent and grandparent generations with regard to self-evaluation measures? Kalish (1969) argued that members of the grandparent generation may find that their position in the social structure resembles their grandchildren more than it does their adult children (the parent generation). Many older adults face the difficult task of re-defining their self-identity as they anticipate or experience forced or voluntary separation from important arenas of activity, such as parenthood and work. Declines in health and financial resources may place the older generation in roles increasingly characterized by dependency. All such adjustments, while they may not be as dramatic or as intense as during adolescence, may have the potential to require a marked redefinition of self (Rosow, 1974).

The foregoing ideas provided the basis for the following hypothesis with regard to generational differences in the stability of self-evaluation dimensions:
Hypothesis 2: The parent generation will demonstrate the most stability in self-evaluation, followed by the grandparent generation. The youngest (adolescent) generation will demonstrate the least stability in measures of self-evaluation.

*Gender × Generational Differences in SE Power*

From assessments of self-perceptions across familial significant others, particularly with regard to the dimension of SE Power, gender and generational membership may be postulated as determinants. Although shifts are occurring with regard to the role and status of women in society and the family, females are still frequently cast in subordinate power positions vis-à-vis their male counterparts. If this gender difference in relative power is considered in combination with the notion that parents are generally more powerful than their children, and that a role reversal in terms of power and dependency often occurs between aging parents and their adult children, it is possible to pose a third hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: The lowest level of SE Power will be demonstrated by the female adolescent, followed by her grandmother, her mother, the male adolescent, and the grandfather. The father was hypothesized to possess the highest SE Power.

**METHODODOLOGY**

*Sample*

A purposive sample of 3,000 students was drawn representing the undergraduate student body population of a university located in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. A short “postcard” questionnaire was mailed to these students in order to determine those who were members of three-generational families. Approximately 1,200 students returned the questionnaire. The results indicated 160 students were members of families in which there were at least six persons representing three generations: the university student, a younger adolescent sibling, the student’s parents, and at
least one set of grandparents. From this list of eligible families, a sample of 65 was randomly drawn for the present study.

Data Collection

A self-administered questionnaire was mailed to six members of each of the 65 families. A packet containing one questionnaire was mailed to the student, another packet containing three questionnaires was mailed to his or her parents and a younger sibling, and a third packet containing two questionnaires was mailed to his or her maternal or paternal grandparents. Each packet included questionnaires, an instruction sheet, and a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and offering assistance if needed. Instructions requested family members to complete their respective questionnaires privately and not to discuss them with other family members until all questionnaires had been completed and returned.

Respondent Characteristics

The final sample consisted of 47 three-generational families in which all six members completed and returned questionnaires. The average age for the younger generation (university student and younger, adolescent sibling) was 17.8; the average age of the parent generation was 45.4 and for the grandparent generation was 70.2. Among the family members of the oldest generation who completed the questionnaire were 30 maternal grandparents and 17 paternal grandparents.

FINDINGS

Validating the Multidimensionality of Self-Evaluation

In order to confirm that the Comparative Self-Description scale measured two factors, SE Power and SE Worth, as relatively distinct dimensions of self-evaluation (Gecas, 1972), principal components analysis was performed. The 11 items were analyzed using varimax factor rotation; Table 1 displays the two-factor solution for this analysis. Varimax rotation simplifies factors by maximizing the variance of the loadings within factors, thereby making interpretation easier (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989). Five items comprised SE Power (less powerful-
TABLE 1
Factor Analysis of Comparative Self-Description Scale Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Factor I-Power</th>
<th>Factor II-Worth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less Powerful-More Powerful</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaker-Stronger</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Confident-More Confident</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Independent-More Independent</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Intelligent-More Intelligent</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Dependable-More Dependable</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Helpful-More Helpful</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Honest-More Honest</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worse-Better</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Attractive-More Attractive</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Wise-More Wise</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 1, most factor loadings were in excess of .63, which is considered very good (Comrey, 1973). One of the CSD scale items (less attractive-more attractive) did not have high factor loadings on either SE Power or SE Worth. Another item (less wise-more wise) did not have factor loadings that were distinctly SE Power or SE Power. Both of these items were excluded from measures of SE Power and SE Worth.

Prior to investigating cohort and gender differences in measures of self-evaluation, one prerequisite was to establish the fact that different family members (i.e., different generations and males versus females) were evaluating themselves along the same dimensions. Meaningful comparisons would be impossible to make if this were not the case. In fact, failure to establish factorial invariance may indicate an age-sensitive or sex-biased instrument (Baltes & Nesselroade, 1973; Holter, 1983). The Comparative Self-Description scale was factor analyzed across cohorts and for both sexes. The factor loading structure and two-factor solution was similar in all cases.
Comparative Stability of SE Power and SE Worth

As family members made comparative self-evaluations across familial significant others, it was hypothesized that the dimension of SE Worth would show more stability than SE Power; that feelings of worth would not be as contextually specific or sensitive as those of power or potency.

To test this hypothesis, stability scores for SE Power and SE Worth were computed for each family member. Using the example of an adolescent grandson’s comparative ratings on SE Worth (see Figure 2), a stability score was derived in the following manner. Computed first was the mean rating for each of five dyadic comparisons across the four SE Worth items. In the example of a grandson comparing himself to his grandmother, the mean rating across the four SE Worth items was 3.0. Second, an overall mean was derived by averaging the five mean comparison ratings. In the example portrayed in Figure 2, the

![FIGURE 2](attachment:image.png)

*Example of Deriving an SE Worth Stability Score for an Adolescent Grandson*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worth Item</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Grandmother</th>
<th>Grandfather</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Older Sibling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less dependable-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More dependable</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less helpful-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More helpful</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less honest-</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>More honest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worse-Better</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean for dyadic comparison rating</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall mean = 2.64

Deviation from overall mean:

| Deviation squares | .36 | -.84 | .16 | -.64 | .96 |

Deviation squares:

| Deviation squares | .13 | .71 | .03 | .41 | .92 |

Sum of squares of deviations = 2.19 (SE Worth stability score)
overall mean for this grandson respondent was 2.64 (i.e. the average of 3.0, 1.8, 2.8, 2.0 and 3.6). Third, for each dyadic comparison, the deviation from the overall mean was computed. In the example presented in Figure 2, the deviation for the grandson-grandmother dyad was 0.36 (3.0−2.64). The deviations were then squared (to remove negative values) and summed. The sum of the squares of the deviations is the SE Worth stability score. In this example, the sum of the squares of deviations was 2.19. The higher this value, the less the stability in self-evaluation comparisons across five other family members. The same procedure was used for computing a stability score for SE Power. The only difference was that ratings were summed across five items rather than four.

The mean stability scores for SE Power and SE Worth for the entire sample are presented in Table 2. Mean stability scores by generation and gender are also given. For the entire sample, the mean stability score for SE Power was 9.8 and the mean stability score for SE Worth was 2.7. Since a high score is indicative of high variability (low stability), it was concluded that SE Power, as hypothesized, was less stable than SE Worth when measured across different relational contexts within the family. This also appeared to be the case within generation and gender categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>Mean Stability Scores for the Dimensions of SE Power and SE Worth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Groups</td>
<td>Mean Stability Scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entire sample</td>
<td>SE Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandchild generation</td>
<td>11.282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male sibling</td>
<td>12.270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female sibling</td>
<td>10.483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent generation</td>
<td>7.645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>6.259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>9.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent generation</td>
<td>10.380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandfather</td>
<td>9.535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td>11.224</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cohort Differences in Stability of Self-Evaluation

Another question addressed in the study was whether or not there were generational differences in stability measures of self-evaluation. It was hypothesized the parent generation would show the highest stability in self-evaluation measures across significant others in the family, followed by the grandparent generation. It was assumed the lowest stability would be manifested by members of the youngest (adolescent grandchild) generation.

Stability in self-evaluation was measured in the same manner described above for computing stability scores for SE Power and SE Worth. The only difference was that scale items measuring SE Power and SE Worth were combined in computing the sum of the dyadic comparison scores.

Since a high score in stability is indicative of low stability (high variability), the relative order of the mean stability scores followed the hypothesized pattern. The parent generation had the lowest mean stability score (11.519), which was indicative of low variance and high stability. The grandparent generation had the next lowest mean stability score (16.986). The highest mean score (indicating high variance and low stability in self-evaluation assessed across familial significant others) was demonstrated by the adolescent grandchild generation (18.065).

Gender and Generational Differences in SE Power

The final question addressed in the study centered on generational and gender differences in SE Power. Because of societal perceptions that females are comparatively less powerful than males, parents are generally more powerful than their children, and that a role reversal in terms of dependency may occur between aging parents and adult children, it was hypothesized the lowest SE Power scores would characterize female members of the youngest generation (female adolescents), followed by female members of the oldest generation (grandmothers), female members of the middle generation (mothers), male members of the youngest generation (male adolescents), and male members of the oldest generation (grandfathers). The male members of the middle generation (fathers) were expected to have the highest SE Power scores.

To test this hypothesis, an SE Power score was computed for each respondent using the following procedure. First, a dyadic comparison score was computed for each of the five instances wherein a family
member evaluated himself or herself vis-à-vis another. Importantly, the dyadic comparison score was derived by summing the values across five items in the Comparative Self-Description scale (less powerful-more powerful, weaker-stronger, less confident-more confident, less dependent-more dependent, and less intelligent-more intelligent). Since a five-point scale was used for each item, the range of dyadic comparison scores for each respondent vis-à-vis another family member was 1–5.

Second, a mean SE Power score was computed for individual respondents by summing their five dyadic comparison scores for SE Power and dividing by five. The range of values for each respondent was 5–25, with higher scores indicative of higher perceived power vis-à-vis other family members. The ranking of mean SE Power scores resembled the hypothesized pattern. The ranking of mean SE Power scores were as follows: female adolescents—16.50; grandmothers, 18.02; mothers—18.31; male adolescents—19.00; grandfathers, 20.76; and fathers—20.85.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the extent to which self-perceptions of power and worth differed across members of multi-generational families as they compared themselves with other family members. The results indicate that, across generation and gender, feelings of worth are less contextually sensitive than those of power. In other words, a family member's feelings of worth remain relatively stable when they compare themselves with various family members, whereas a person's feelings of power change in response to which family member they are comparing themselves. This study also revealed that the stability of comparative self-evaluations are most stable among the parent generation, followed by the grandparent generation, and then the adolescent generation. Finally, perceived power was highest for fathers, followed by grandfathers, adolescent males, mothers, grandmothers, and adolescent females.

Goldner (1989) argued that age and gender are the two fundamental organizing principles of family life. The data in this study provide empirical evidence supporting Goldner's assertion, showing that rather definite patterns exist in families based on gender and generation. In most societies, gender and generation are considered reasonable and legitimate bases for the distribution of rights, resources, power, privi-
lege, and responsibilities (Baber & Allen, 1992; Feree, 1996; Risman, 1998). This distribution within families is largely informed by real or perceived access to valued resources. As such, one can deduce that the middle family unit within a three-generational system emerges as the center of power or most influential unit because it is this unit that holds or controls many of the resources or is the unit on which the other two generations depend. This access to resources also may explain why the parent generation possessed more stable evaluations of worth and power than the older and younger generations.

The data for this study indicate that gender is more predictive of one's power than is generation. Husbands possessed more power than wives, which is consistent with a large body of literature that shows that this power differential persists in contemporary marriages (Rosenbluth, Steil, & Whitcomb, 1998; Steil, 1997). Indeed, not only did husbands possess more power than their similarly aged wives, but even the youngest males possessed more power than all other female family members regardless of age, including their mother, grandmother, and sister.

Several scholars have attempted to determine the consequences of power differentials for relationship quality. Inequity in marital or intimate partnerships has been shown to have negative effects on relationship satisfaction (DeMaris & Longmore, 1996; Feeney, Peterson, & Noller, 1994). Beavers (1986) found that the greater the power differential between partners, the more dysfunctional and unsatisfying the marriage. Gottman's longitudinal research on married couples found that "when a man is not willing to share power with his partner, there is an 81 percent chance that his marriage will self-destruct" (Gottman & Silver, 1999, p. 100). Rabin (1996), Schwartz (1994), and Steil (1997) contend that deep friendship and sustained intimacy are unattainable in a relationship based on power differentials.

It also is important to consider the implications of gender-based power differentials in parent-child relationships. Given that male adolescents possessed more perceived power than their mothers and grandmothers, one may easily deduce that this power differential limits mothers' and grandmothers' abilities to influence, mentor, and supervise male children. This may be particularly problematic given that mothers are typically more involved in parenting than are fathers. The data for this study also revealed that the greatest difference in perceived power exists between fathers and adolescent daughters. It seems likely that this power differential would easily contribute to a loss of relational intimacy between fathers and daughters.
This study also found that grandfathers and grandmothers possess less power vis-à-vis their adult children. This power differential between the younger and older generation of adults may result from several factors. As mentioned, the older generation may be less actively engaged with societal institutions, such as the workplace, that grant members a degree of status. Second, societal norms wherein older individuals are devalued may contribute to this intergenerational dynamic.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY THERAPISTS

As family scholars and practitioners have begun to realize the powerful influence of power differentials on family relationships, family therapists have grown increasingly attentive to addressing power in their work with families. Clients often fail to recognize power as central to their presenting problems, as it often acts as an “invisible” barrier to intimacy and emotional connection. Yet therapists have a responsibility to highlight and respectfully question how power differentials may be contributing to individual and relationship difficulties, including relationship dissatisfaction, depression, substance abuse, and delinquent behavior. Foundational to the success of any therapy is respect for clients’ values and beliefs (e.g., religion, culture), which may influence their therapeutic goals related to gender and equality (Lyness, Haddock, & Zimmerman, in press). Therefore, while it is incumbent on therapists to introduce the topic of power, when relevant, it is important that therapists encourage flexibility and choice for each family member in developing relationships in accord with their personal and family values. Rather than imposing particular ideas about how power should be managed within families, therapists can exhibit respectful curiosity, asking clients questions about their values, how these values were formed, and which values they want to reinforce and which they want to change. Similarly, therapists will address power differentials in a variety of ways, based on their own experiences, theoretical orientation, gender, age, and culture. With an understanding that diversity among clients and therapists obviously shape the therapeutic process, some ideas for assessment and intervention are offered below.

Therapists can assist clients in recognizing the ways in which power differentials manifest in family relationships. For instance, in marital relationships, power differentials can manifest in both partners prioritizing the man’s career and personal interests; expecting less responsibility from him in household chores, and parenting; granting
him greater influence in important family decisions; prioritizing his leisure time and allowing him more discretionary spending; and expecting from him less emotional investment in family relationships (McGoldrick et al., 1989; Rabin, 1996). In sibling relationships, power differentials may be revealed by differences in the amount or desirability of possessions, in the amount of responsibility for household chores, and in the degree of freedom granted each child.

Therapists can guide clients in assessing the way in which power is manifested in their particular family relationships. In fact, the instrument used in this study could be used as a diagnostic tool when administered to individual families. The results could help therapists identify order of self-evaluation as perceived by the group members. The Power Equity Guide is another tool that can be used for similar evaluative purposes (Haddock & Zimmerman, 2001); it assists clients in examining how power is shared in specific areas of family, including housework, decision making, finances, and sexuality. These assessments could lead to discussion about if their self evaluations are consistent with their values about how power should be managed in families.

Therapists can assist clients in evaluating the costs and benefits of power differentials in family relationships. The therapist can share relevant research findings (e.g., Gottman, 1999; Schwartz, 1994; Rabin, 1996; Risman, 1998; Steil, 1997) that illustrate the way in which power differentials typically influence relationships and the personal development of family members. Clients may be assigned readings on this topic, such as Gottman and Silver (1999) and Schwartz (1994).

Because relationships based on power differentials are the norm in U.S. society, clients may need assistance in imaging alternative ways of relating. Therapists can guide clients in finding alternative images of such relationships in the media, and among close friends or acquaintances. Clients can also engage in conversation about what sharing power with a spouse "looks like," and about how power should be managed between parents and children of different ages. For instance, reducing power differentials between parents and adolescent children may not mean less parental supervision, but may include increased involvement by children in family decision making. With adult children and parents, a more flattened hierarchy may mean that adult children consult their parents more often for advice in recognition of their parents’ wisdom and the value of their lived experiences.

Therapists can recommend strategies for families designed to flatten hierarchies. For instance, an adolescent male may be coached to consult his grandmother about a problem. A father may be coached to
discuss gender-based power differentials with his son and daughter, or to make changes to his daily routines that reflect managed power. Couples may be coached to devise ways to more equitably share household tasks and childcare. Additionally, therapists can be attentive to pointing out behaviors in the therapy room indicative of power differentials. For instance, if male clients have a pattern of interrupting female family members, the therapist can gently call attention to this pattern. If female clients tend to defer decisions to male family members, therapists can similarly address this pattern. Many resources exist for therapists that offer suggestions for addressing power differentials in family therapy (e.g., Haddock, Zimmerman & MacPhee, 2000; Lyness et al., in press; McGoldrick et al., 1989; Rabin, 1996; Walters, Carter, Papp, & Silverstein, 1988).

REFERENCES


