

Combating Structural Disempowerment in the Stride Towards Gender Equality: An Argument for Redefining the Basis of Power in Gendered Relationships

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Abstract

All advances in social equity are predicated on two important considerations: First, an internal drive emoting from those who benefit most directly from a greater stride towards equality, and second, the external forces relevant to the context in which equity is being sought. The historicopolitical phenomenon of recapturing the momentum towards achieving women's rights specifically—and gender equality more generally—is thus best understood from this dual perspective of internal and external agencies. It is argued that the only plausible solution to the quagmire of gender inequality rests not within the confines of internal agency but in the wholesale adoption of progressive societal forces on the periphery. This argument is further supported with a discussion of the paradox of structural disempowerment as a consequence of well-intended yet ill-advised social changes, such as it applies towards equality in education, employment, and sociocultural standing.

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The time has now come to reevaluate the structure of the underlying power dynamics inherent in discussions and research regarding sex and gender. One of the original arguments which helped substantiate the development of the Women's Rights Movement (Flexner, 1959) was that the conventional wisdom regarding gender and power—chiefly that men possessed much more of it than did women—did a disservice to those seeking to rebalance the distribution of power between men and women (Nicholson, 1997). The second wave of feminism (Weedon, 1999), which emanated from this movement, indicated that men had such power because men set it up that way, in education, politics, military combat, economics, and the like, and therefore it was up to women, in order to assert their equality, either to increase their own power or simply wrest it away from those who already possess it (Kahn, 1984).

But while this era of gendered social and political activism generated a growing momentum behind its efforts (e.g., Chow, 2003), including transitioning between *de jure* and *de facto* inequalities, a seemingly large disparity between its purpose and its intended consequences quietly seeped into the fold, effectively sidetracking the arduous yet necessary journey towards true gender equality. In an effort to help realign both the intention and the consequences of this important continuing movement, the following argument will be made: the only plausible solution to the quagmire of gender inequality rests not within the confines of internal agency but in the wholesale adoption of progressive societal forces on the periphery.

To help simplify the argument, reference will be made to two generic groups in this process: those with power, and those without. The form such ‘power’ takes can be of many things: financial (Colling & Dickens, 1998), career placement and advancement (Feather & Simon, 1975; Rubin, 1997), relationships (Falbo & Peplau, 1980; Reevy, 2007), education (Hensel, 1991), or politics (Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 1997). And just like politics, where there is generally one party with power and another party who seeks to obtain it, one is almost by default forced to speak about gender issues with the same relative mindset—as in describing how much money a woman makes relative to a man, or determining if there is the same percentage of female students as there are female professors in various academic departments at a university.

The reason underlying the justification of using such generic terms to discuss a powerful concept, as in categorizing groups into those with or without power (even when discussing gender dynamics), is because such general distinctions are already salient (Falk & Kenski, 2006). Almost without exception, the cause assigned to the inequitable gender distribution of power is that men, for whatever reason or however it was initially obtained, simply refused to give up what they had come to possess. Since power begets power (for anyone who possesses it—either male or female), the desire for more power continually feeds upon itself, with the result being the observations we make today, chiefly that men do seem to hold the power.

The purpose of the following discussion is thus not to identify the probable initial source of this inequitable distribution of power between men and women, but rather to redefine how such power can best be redistributed contemporarily to better serve society. Past research has indicated that men often have a greater need for power than do women (Kapur & Kaur, 2004; Person, 2005), and often express such power in mixed gender interactions (Boer & Mashamba, 2007; Dougherty, 2006; Watson & Bell, 2005), although the process of how such power is granted is relatively misunderstood. Whereas some tangible benefits can be acquired through female empowerment (e.g., Fleming, 2007; Shapiro & Leigh, 2007), true revolutionary change in terms of gendered power dynamics requires, in addition to internal agency demonstrated by those seeking more power (i.e., women), the influence of external agency (as discussed later) to ensure the success of such efforts.

From the social psychological literature, an extension of Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory would indicate that an important component of achieving success is the existence of role models to whom an individual can look up to and aspire to become (see also Festinger, 1954).

Indeed, the course of civilization has witnessed numerous examples of powerful women exerting influence in an otherwise man's world: Cleopatra, Diotima, Joan of Arc, or Elizabeth I. Whether it is saints, rulers, politicians, educators, or humanitarian activists, there have always been such female role models (and today we might include in that list Oprah Winfrey, Melinda Gates, Margaret Thatcher, or Pratibha Patil, India's first female President). Yet, despite the existence of such positive female role models, why does such hegemony of male domination persist?

Framed in the context of maintaining the status quo, various explanations could be offered. For example, there are two philosophies governing the natural state—one state psychological and the other physical—which might explain why the status quo is difficult to overcome. From the psychological literature there is the research of Melvin Lerner (1965, 1980) who describes in his “just world hypothesis” that society is the way it is essentially because that is how it should be—disadvantaged persons deserve their lot in life whereas advantaged persons merit their success and influence. According to this perspective, “people deserve what happens to them” (1965, p. 360). Likewise, theoretical astrophysicist Brandon Carter (1974) once coined the phrase “anthropic principle” to describe how the physical laws governing the universe are the proper ones, for if the universe were different, the laws would be otherwise. As later discussed by Penrose (1989), “the argument can be used to explain why the conditions happen to be just right for the existence of (intelligent) life on the earth at the present time. For if they were not just right, then we should not have found ourselves to be here now, but somewhere else, at some other appropriate time” (from Chapter 10). As applied to gender dynamics, the underlying assumption to each of these arguments is that men therefore must merit the power they possess, for if they did not, then we would not today be faced with an inequitable distribution of power between men and women.

To state that these philosophies maintain the status quo is not so much to imply that such perspectives are condoned, but more so that they are observable across a wide swath of situations. What makes each of these perspectives difficult to take seriously, of course, is the impossibility of progress. It is disingenuous to imply that, if individuals were not meant to be disadvantaged or discriminated against, then the world would already be structured otherwise. Or, perhaps more specifically, that if the sexes were meant to be equal, they would already be equal.

Obviously, such a tautological explanation (read trivial) appears non-sensical: if things were different, they would be different. This type of circular reasoning justifies the structure of the system merely by describing the result of the system. Of course, neither perspective was intended to be interpreted in light of gender dynamics, but doing so offers us a glimpse into the same misguided thought processes which continue to plague our current understanding of male and female equality.

Although many others could be offered, just two examples will help illustrate this point. First is the Doctrine of Two Spheres (e.g., Brannon, 2007), which states that men and women are different because their interests are different. If they had the same interests, they wouldn't be different—but they do, so they are. Second is gender schema theory (Bem, 1981), which states that children learn from an early age what is appropriate for their particular gender. If what were appropriate were different, they would learn that—but it isn't, so they don't. These are of course simplifications of these two gender terms, but to some extent the same circular logic applies. Why do we recognize the folly of the former examples, but not these latter?

Perhaps one reason why these flawed perspectives persist lies in the source of their power. Specifically, by internalizing the flawed rationale that the result of the system justifies the system itself. If true change cannot come from within the system itself, then, why continue to work from within the system?

The concept of true change having to come from outside the system in need of change, i.e., from the periphery, is not new. This is perhaps experienced most adroitly in representative democracies. As discussed by Aequitus, “what lends political legitimacy to democracies is the fact that they are societies not governed by an elite minority which imposes its will onto the whole, but by the people themselves.” Of course, the legitimacy of such governance becomes compromised when the “legislature’s composition begins to differ overtly from the will of the electorate.” From this example, one can immediately recognize the paradox of having to work within such a system to effect change. To regain the momentum of gender equality, therefore, one has to question the legitimacy of the gender status quo—that men chiefly have all the power.

The Greek playwright Aristophanes wrote a fanciful tale of just such an occurrence in his play *Lysistrata*, in which Lysistrata, a female, successfully campaigns to have the men end the fighting taking place in the Peloponnesian War. To secure the peace, she did not seek to obtain power via internal agencies, such as by enlisting in the army to influence combat strategy, or by

attacking directly the moral imperative of the war. Instead, progress was only realized by instituting external influence on those supposedly in power—the men fighting the war. Of particular note in the play is the expediency by which external agency, in this case the actions of the story's female characters in terms of withholding sex, fostered equality of power. Relying solely on internal agency, as in attempting to end the war by joining the fight, would have been a flawed strategy which would have disempowered the possibility of progress.

Past research has well documented how the structure of the system determines the use of power (Emerson, 1972a, 1972b). In such cases, solely relying on the structure of the prevailing system results in the inability to effect meaningful change to that system, a process which can be loosely referred to as structural disempowerment. So how can this principle of combating structural disempowerment be applied to foster gender equality in the present? For our purposes, there will always be of concern the extent to which under-represented, or in some cases non-represented, individuals are assured access to the same privileges and opportunities enjoyed by those who are at less of a disadvantage. This applies to many classes of individuals. Although “widescale civil disobedience would historically seem to be the most optimal means of rectifying structural inequalities” (Aequitus), there lacks within gender dynamics the same sense of structure to be rectified.

Ideally, conscientious societies will put into place safeguards to prevent corruption of the equitable distribution of resources. In politics, for example, this upholds the virtues of majority rule with minority rights (e.g., Catt, 1999). Historically, however, it has often been the case that such safeguards are only begrudgingly adopted, and then even questionably enforced, by those in power. Lacking motivation to themselves relinquish control over the power they possess, those who are most advantaged (which, as previously discussed, constitute a minority themselves, albeit an elite minority) must have such power wrested from them via external agency.

On a psychological level, what this presupposes is that those entities with power put forth more effort into securing their power than those entities without power put forth effort to obtain it for themselves. In such cases, the question then becomes not who has the most power, but instead who has the most power to lose which forms the basis of motivation (Molm, 1997). Whether we are motivated by the possibility of gain or loss is an important distinction to make, for it helps us understand the true structure of the gender dynamics power hierarchy. Regardless

of how such power was granted, what prevents such power from being redistributed? Do those with power hang on to it, or do those without power fail to take it back?

Consistent with the current argument in favor of redefining the structure of power dynamics, it can be argued that one is more motivated by the fear of loss than by the possibility of gain (e.g., Fodorova, 2004; Murray, 1999). Whether one stands to lose a lot or a little, the concreteness of an actual deficit pangs more sharply than the uncertainty of an abstract gain, again whether a lot or a little (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Ironically, then, those with the most to lose, i.e., those already with the power, are the least motivated to maintain the power. Therefore, the reason why such inequitable power allocations remain is not because those in power act to maintain it, but because those with the least amount of power lack the motivation to put themselves in a position where they would have more to lose (for an example of how this applies to salary negotiations, see Babcock, 2007).

This argument thus offers an alternative explanation of the true nature of gendered power allocations. It calls into question whether the term ‘power’ itself is accurately applied in those situations where one individual wields influence over another, and reinforces the notion that the reallocation of power requires external rather than internal agency. Looking forward, the concept of power must be reevaluated within this context as it applies to all forms of social, political, economic, and similar interactions if true power equality as a function of gender is to be realized.

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