

Study finds wives have greater power in marriage problem-solving behavior

July 3 2007

Men may still have more power in the workplace, but apparently women really are "the boss" at home. That's according to a new study by a team of Iowa State University researchers.

The study of 72 married couples from Iowa found that wives, on average, exhibit greater situational power -- in the form of domineering and dominant behaviors -- than their husbands during problem-solving discussions, regardless of who raised the topic. All of the couples in the sample were relatively happy in their marriages, with none in counseling at the time of the study.

Associate Professor of Psychology David Vogel and Assistant Professor of Human Development and Family Studies Megan Murphy led the research. The ISU research team also included Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Studies Ronald Werner-Wilson, Professor of Psychology Carolyn Cutrona -- who is director of the Institute for Social and Behavioral Research at Iowa State -- and Joann Seeman, a graduate student in psychology. They authored a paper titled "Sex Differences in the Use of Demand and Withdraw Behavior in Marriage: Examining the Social Structure Hypothesis," which appeared in last month's issue of the Journal of Counseling Psychology -- a professional journal published by the American Psychological Association.

Wives have the marriage power

"The study at least suggests that the marriage is a place where women can exert some power," said Vogel. "Whether or not it's because of changing societal roles, we don't know. But they are, at least, taking responsibility and power in these relationships. So at least for relatively satisfied couples, women are able to take some responsibility and are able to exert some power -- but it's hard for us to say why that's so."

"Women are responsible for overseeing the relationship -- making sure the relationship runs, that everything gets done, and that everybody's happy," said Murphy, "And so, maybe some of that came out in our findings in terms of women domineering and dominating -- that they were taking more responsibility for the relationship, regardless of whose topic was being discussed."

The researchers solicited participation from married couples in and around the Iowa State campus. On average, spouses were around 33 years of age and had been married for seven years. Most participants were European Americans (66%), followed by Asian (22%), Hispanic (5%), and African-American (4%) -- with the final three percent representing other nationalities.

Each spouse was asked to independently complete a questionnaire on relationship satisfaction and an assessment of overall decision-making ability in the relationship. Each spouse also was asked to identify a problem in their relationship -- an issue in which he or she desired the most change and which could not be resolved without the spouse's cooperation. Spouses were then asked to answer some questions about their chosen topics, including the type of problem-solving behaviors that generally take place when this topic arises, and the importance of the topic. Couples were then brought together and asked to discuss each of the problem topics for 10 minutes apiece -- discussions that were videotaped. The researchers did not participate in the discussion.

"We actually just asked them to start talking about the issue, and then we left the room," said Vogel. "And so they were all by themselves in the room talking. We were as non-obtrusive as possible. We just came back at the end of the period of time, and asked them to talk about the other topic."

At the end of the discussions, couples were separated again. Each spouse was then debriefed and discussed his or her feelings and reactions to the study.

The researchers reviewed and coded the videotapes of couples' interactions using a widely-accepted interaction rating system. The system consists of five dimensions to calculate demand and withdraw behaviors -- avoidance, discussion, blame, pressure for change, and withdraws.

Not all talk and no action

The researchers concluded in their paper that wives behaviorally exhibited more domineering attempts and were more dominant -- i.e., more likely to have their partner give in -- than husbands during discussions of either spouse's topic. That refuted their initial premise that sex differences in marital power would favor husbands.

Vogel said that wives weren't simply talking more than their husbands in discussions, but actually were drawing favorable responses from their husbands to what they said.

"That's what I think was particularly interesting," he said. "It wasn't just that the women were bringing up issues that weren't being responded to, but that the men were actually going along with what they said. They (women) were communicating more powerful messages and men were responding to those messages by agreeing or giving in."

"There's been research that suggests that's a marker of a healthy marriage -- that men accept influence from their wives," said Murphy.

The study was funded, in part, by the National Institute of Mental Health, along with ISU. Vogel and Murphy hope to expand upon this research through a future study.

Source: Iowa State University

Citation: Study finds wives have greater power in marriage problem-solving behavior (2007, July 3) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2007-07-wives-greater-power-marriage-problem-solving.html>

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