

Exploring the Basis for Gender Differences in the Demand-Withdraw Pattern

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During marital conflict, wives tend to demand and husbands tend to withdraw. These behaviors were historically thought to stem from essential differences between men and women. An alternative explanation implicates one form of power differences—wives desire more change and, therefore, demand; husbands desire less change and withdraw to maintain status quo. Studying same-sex as well as cross-sex couples enables an evaluation of both explanations. We examined demand-withdraw behaviors in 63 heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples. The demand-withdraw pattern was seen regardless of type of couple. Further, for all couples, differences in the amount of change desired in partners during a conflict interaction predicted differences in demand and withdraw behaviors. These results offer further evidence that an often-observed difference in heterosexual relationships may result from social conventions that afford men greater power and women less power.

KEYWORDS *demand-withdraw, gender differences, communication, intimate relationships, interaction patterns, same-sex relationships*

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INTRODUCTION

Certain behaviors in intimate relationships have long been thought to be the province of either men or women. One specific gender-stereotyped set of behaviors has been termed the demand-withdraw pattern. This sequence is characterized by one partner, typically the wife, trying to discuss problems, criticizing or blaming their partner, and requesting or demanding change. The other partner, typically the husband, tries to avoid discussion of the problem, defends against criticism, and withdraws from the interaction (e.g. Christensen, 1988; Eldridge & Christensen, 2002; Sagrestano, Heavey, & Christensen, 1999). Terman, Bittenwieser, Ferguson, Johnson, & Wilson (1938) observed this pattern in one of the earliest studies of marriage, noting that wives often complained that their husbands were emotionally or physically withdrawn, whereas husbands complained about feeling pressured and nagged by their wives. Since those initial observations, from dating couples to married couples to couples across cultures, researchers have consistently found this pattern of gender differentiation in demand-withdraw interactions (e.g., Caughlin & Vangelisti, 1999; Christensen, 1988; Christensen, Eldridge, Catta-Preta, Lim, & Santagata, 2006; Christensen & Heavey, 1993; Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Markman, Silvern, Clements, & Kraft-Hanak, 1993; Napier, 1978; Terman et al., 1938; Vogel, Wester, & Heesacker, 1999). Thus, it is not a question of *if* there is gender differentiation in the demand-withdraw pattern in intimate relationships, but *why*?

Some researchers, as well as the popular stereotypical conceptions of Martian men and Venetian women (e.g., Gray, 1993), have historically taken an essentialist position that suggests that differences between men and women stem from innate biological or psychological attributes. The essentialist position conceptualizes gendered properties as fixed, stable, and residing within the individual. This approach to gender differences encompasses both biological perspectives (i.e., biological essentialist theories) and socialization perspectives (i.e., cultural essentialist theories; Aries, 2006; Elson, 2004; Gelman & Taylor, 2000). For example, in our own work, we (Gottman & Levenson, 1988) suggested that men are less able to tolerate sustained high levels of physiological arousal than women; thus, men withdraw from relationship conflict to avoid discomfort. With regard to socialization, it has been suggested that men and women grow up in different social worlds, which leads to profound differences in personality that are formed at an early age and are highly resistant to change (Rubin, 1983). For example, Miller (1976) suggested that women are socialized to value closeness and intimacy, whereas men are socialized to value independence and autonomy; these discrepant needs may result in women demanding and men withdrawing as they pursue their respective goals. From this viewpoint (i.e., the essentialist approach), stereotypical gender differences in demand-withdraw arise because men and women *are* different.

An alternative explanation for gender differences in demand-withdraw has focused on power differences in heterosexual marriages, stemming from the differential allocation of men and women into high-power and low-power roles, respectively (Eagly, 1987; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). Specifically, husbands generally have greater power than wives when assessed using several different power metrics: They have greater control over resources (Kenney, 2006; Scanzoni, 1979; Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2005), greater decision making influence (Beach & Tesser, 1993; Iyigun & Walsh, 2007), and derive more benefits than wives (Jacobson, 1983; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Steil, 2000). In such marriages, the status quo clearly favors men, and, thus, they may have much to lose and little to gain by engaging in discussions about issues in the relationship. Women, in contrast, may need to use confrontation to improve their position (Peplau & Gordon, 1997).

Elaborating on this view, Christensen and colleagues (e.g., Eldridge & Christensen, 2002; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993) have focused on a particular element of power in relation to demand-withdraw behaviors: desire for change. They conceptualized this domain of power as a situation-specific construct defined by the degree to which one partner is dependent on the other for change on a given topic. Specifically, they proposed that the person who desires change on a given topic is in a low-power position and, therefore, must rely on the partner's compliance and engage in behaviors to elicit change (e.g., by demanding). Conversely, the other partner is in a high-power position, able to preserve the status quo unilaterally by withdrawing from discussions about that topic. Because women typically want more change in relationships than men (e.g., Gray-Little, Baucom, & Hamby, 1996; Kluwer, Heesink, & Van De Vliert, 2000; Margolin, Talovic, & Weinstein, 1983), women most often occupy the low-power (demanding) role, whereas men occupy the high-power (withdrawing) role. From this viewpoint (i.e., the power differences approach), men and women *are not* essentially different, but act differently as a result of socially constructed power imbalances.

Thus, given these contrasting viewpoints, the basic question is: Do gender differences in demand-withdraw stem more from differences between men and women or from relative power positions within a relationship? Isolating the effects of sex or gender differences versus socially constructed power differences is difficult. One approach has been to experimentally manipulate power (i.e., desire for change) by having couples discuss two different problem topics, one in which the wife wanted change and one in which the husband wanted change. Results of these studies have been mixed, with some studies supporting the power differences approach (e.g., Klinetob & Smith, 1996; Vogel & Karney, 2002), and others supporting a combination of the essentialist and power differences approaches (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey et al., 1993). Sagrestano, Christiansen,

and Heavey (1998b), however, noted a potential confound in this methodology: participants cannot be randomly assigned to be in the traditionally higher or lower power position (i.e., husband or wife). Further, as Caughlin and Vangelisti (1999) point out, just because a spouse chooses a certain topic of disagreement does not necessarily mean there is an imbalance in desire for change. Such methodological issues might account for the mixed findings of Christensen and colleagues (e.g. 1990, 1993) showing greater polarization of demand/withdraw behaviors on the wives' issues than on the husbands'.

In the present study, we adopted a different strategy for disentangling the effect of differences between men and women from differences in desire for change. First, we included both same-sex and cross-sex couples. By definition, there are no essential sex or gender differences in same-sex couples that could serve as a basis for demand-withdraw role differentiation. Observational research on same-sex communication patterns within relationships is rare. However, the existing research indicates that basic relationship processes operate similarly for heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples (e.g., Gottman, Levenson, Gross, et al., 2003; Gottman, Levenson, Swanson, et al., 2003; McFarland, Baucom, & Christensen, 2005; see summary in Kurdek, 2005), therefore, making same-sex couples an ideal comparison group for examining the basis for differences in demand-withdraw behaviors within couples. Second, unlike previous studies that relied on self-ratings of desire for change, we assessed this construct observationally. This provided an objective measure of desire for change that was not influenced by individual differences in participant ratings.

The present study examined conflict behaviors in heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples to determine whether the essentialist approach or the power differences approach better explains demand-withdraw role differentiation. If demand-withdraw differences flow from essential differences between men and women, it would follow that members of same-sex couples would act similarly to one another, and one would not expect to see the demand-withdraw role asymmetry that is seen in cross-sex couples (e.g., in female-female couples, both partners may tend to predominantly demonstrate demand behaviors and not withdraw from conflict; the opposite would be true for male-male couples). If demand-withdraw differences flow from discrepancies in desire for change, it would follow that the less powerful person (i.e., the one wanting change) would tend to demand and the more powerful person (i.e., the one invested in status quo) would tend to withdraw regardless of whether the relationship is between a man and woman, two men, or two women. Therefore, one would expect that heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples would demonstrate comparable levels of demand-withdraw behaviors, and that demand and withdraw roles would be related to who desires more change relative to his or her partner in the topic being discussed.

METHOD

Participants

GAY AND LESBIAN SAMPLE

The gay and lesbian couples were recruited as part of a project conducted in 1990–1991 (see Gottman, Levenson, Gross, et al., 2003, for a detailed description of recruitment procedures and screening criteria). Couples were recruited by placing advertisements in the classified sections of Berkeley and San Francisco gay newspapers, posting flyers, contacting various gay and lesbian groups, and making public service announcements on Bay Area radio stations. Respondents completed a general information form and a modified version of a standard relationship satisfaction inventory (Locke & Wallace, 1959). Selection criteria were designed to make the sample comparable to other gay and lesbian samples from research involving the correlates of relationship satisfaction. Specifically, partners had to be between the ages of 21 to 40 and living together in a committed relationship for at least two years. Other inclusion criteria were: a) no more than a 10-year difference in ages between partners, b) childless, c) no previous committed (i.e., living together) heterosexual relationships, d) discrepancy of no more than 25 points in the modified Locke-Wallace relationship satisfaction scores, and e) couple speaks English to one another at home. The sample included couples with a wide range of relationship satisfaction levels. A total of 42 couples (21 gay and 21 lesbian) participated in the study.

HETEROSEXUAL SAMPLE

The comparison sample of heterosexual couples was selected from a larger study conducted in 2004–2005 that recruited couples from the Bay Area for a study of marriage and emotion (see Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993, for more information about the study). Couples were recruited by posting flyers, advertisements placed on a popular website (www.craigslist.org), and by a recruitment firm. Respondents completed a general information form and the Locke-Wallace inventory online. Selection criteria were designed to make the sample mirror those couples in the larger study of marriage and emotion on every variable except age and marital duration. Specifically, partners had to be between the ages of 25 to 40 years and married for at least three years. Other inclusion criteria were: a) no more than a 5-year difference in ages between partners, b) discrepancy of no more than 25 points in the modified Locke-Wallace relationship satisfaction scores, and c) couple speaks English to one another at home. While the criteria regarding age difference between partners was different from that of the same-sex sample criteria, a one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) analysis showed that there were no differences between the two samples on partner age difference. The sample included couples with a wide range of relationship

satisfaction levels. So that all couple groups were the same size, 21 couples from the 28 couples in this sample were randomly selected for inclusion in the present study.

DEMOGRAPHICS

With all samples pooled, the majority of the subjects were Caucasian (78.1%), followed by Latino (5.6%), Asian (4.8%), African American (4.8%), and other (5.6%). A chi-square analysis showed no differences in the ethnic composition of the couples for gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples, $\chi^2(8, N = 63) = 9.3$, n.s. A series of one-way ANOVAs was conducted to determine the equivalence of the three couple groups on: age, length of relationship (years married for heterosexual couples; years living together for gay and lesbian couples), and relationship satisfaction (assessed by averaging scores from the Locke-Wallace [Locke & Wallace, 1959] and Locke-Williamson [Burgess, Locke, & Thomes, 1971] inventories). Results of the analyses revealed no differences in any of these variables (Table 1).

Procedure

Procedures were modeled on those developed by Levenson and Gottman (1983) and used in many other studies over the years including in studies of same-sex couples (e.g. Gottman, Levenson, Gross, et al., 2003). Partners individually completed questionnaires that were sent to the home. They came to the Berkeley Psychophysiology Laboratory and had recording devices attached for obtaining physiological measures (not part of the present study). Couples then engaged in three conversations: a) events of the day—a general discussion of what had happened in the past day; b) conflict—a mutually selected area of continuing disagreement in their relationship; and c) positive—a mutually selected pleasant topic. Each conversation lasted 15 minutes and was preceded by a 5-minute silent period. During the silent periods and conversations, a video recording was made of the interactions using partially hidden cameras. Because demand-withdraw behaviors are most commonly manifest during times of conflict, we only utilized data from conflict conversation.

TABLE 1 Demographic Information

	Heterosexual mean (<i>SD</i>)	Gay mean (<i>SD</i>)	Lesbian mean (<i>SD</i>)
Age (years)	31.8 (4.0)	32.5 (5.2)	29.3 (4.2)
Length of marriage/cohabitation (years)	6.9 (2.8)	7.6 (4.9)	6.1 (4.2)
Relationship satisfaction	107.6 (16.4)	104.9 (14.3)	108.7 (11.3)

Measures

OBSERVER MEASURE OF DEMAND-WITHDRAW

An abbreviated version of the Couples Interaction Rating System (CIRS; Heavey, Gill, & Christensen, 1996) was used to code demand and withdraw behaviors. Coders watched the entire videotaped interaction and rated the demand and withdraw behaviors using a 9-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *a lot*). Demand behaviors consisted of the following: blame (blames, accuses, or criticizes the partner and uses critical sarcasm or character assassinations) and pressure for change (requests, demands, nags, or otherwise pressures for change in the partner). Withdraw scores consisted of the following: withdrawal (withdraws, becomes silent, refuses to discuss topic, or disengages from discussion), avoidance (avoids discussing the problem by hesitating, changing topics, diverting attention or delaying the discussion), and the reverse score of discussion (the extent to which the person is engaged in the discussion; the reverse score therefore indicated the extent to which they were disengaged). Coders were instructed to consider both the relative intensity and frequency of each behavior when generating ratings.

Six research assistants (three male, three female, consisting of a combination of undergraduate students and recently graduated assistants) were trained in the use of these CIRS measures over a four-week period. Training consisted of viewing and rating a series of videotaped interactions from a separate study of couples engaging in similar conflict discussions, along with weekly meetings to discuss the video ratings. By the end of training, reliability was over .80 for each of the demand and withdraw behavior codes.

During the course of the study, coders viewed six videotapes per week and met weekly to discuss their ratings. For each videotaped interaction, three coders were randomly assigned to rate one partner while the other three rated the other partner. Coders demonstrated high reliability, with an average interobserver alpha of .90 for blame, .92 for pressure for change, .80 for withdrawal, .83 for avoidance, and .82 for discussion.

To compute demand-withdraw variables, same-sex partners were randomly assigned as partner A or partner B. The same was done for the cross-sex couples, with the one constraint that half of the couples ($n = 11$) had the female as partner A and the male as partner B, and the other half ($n = 10$) had the female as partner B and the male as partner A. Using the CIRS ratings, we derived the following scores for each couple based primarily on methods used by Christensen and colleagues (Eldridge, Sevier, Jones, Atkins, & Christensen, 2007; Walczynski, 1998): a) *demand*—partner A's demand score plus partner B's demand score; b) *withdraw*—partner A's withdraw score plus partner B's withdraw score; c) *total demand-withdraw*—the sum of the total demand and total withdraw scores; and d) *demand-withdraw polarization*—the sum of partner A's demand score and partner B's withdraw score minus the sum of partner B's demand score

and partner A's withdraw score. This latter score indicates the extent to which one partner is in the demanding role and the other partner is in the withdrawing role.

SELF-REPORT MEASURE OF DEMAND-WITHDRAW

The Communications Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984) is a 35-item self-report inventory assessing dyadic communication about relationship problems. Six items on the CPQ assess the demand-withdraw interaction pattern. Three of these items measure the extent to which the self is the demander and the partner is the withdrawer (i.e., self-demand/partner-withdraw), and the other three items assess the reverse (i.e., partner-demand/self-withdraw). For example, the self-demand/partner-withdraw items are "I try to start a discussion while my partner tries to avoid a discussion," "I nag and demand while my partner withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further," and "I criticize while my partner defends him/herself." Reliability for the two subscales used to construct these scores was comparable to that found in other studies using the CPQ (see review in Eldridge & Christensen, 2002), with an alpha of .69 for the self-demand/partner-withdraw subscale and an alpha of .67 for the partner-demand/self-withdraw subscale.

Due to missing responses or to failure by some participants to return questionnaire packets, we did not have complete CPQ data for the entire sample (complete CPQ data from both partners were available for 13 of 21 gay couples, 13 of 21 lesbian couples, and 20 of 21 heterosexual couples). Analyses of demographic data (age, length of relationship, relationship satisfaction) revealed that couples with complete data did not differ from couples with incomplete data. These similarities and the desirability of having both self-report and observational measures of the demand-withdraw pattern argued for inclusion of the CPQ data. Based on the methods of Christensen and colleagues, (e.g. Christensen & Heavey, 1993; Eldridge et al., 2007; McFarland et al., 2005; Walczynski, 1998), we derived scores paralleling two of the behavioral scores described above: a) *total demand-withdraw* and b) *demand-withdraw polarization*.

OBSERVER MEASURE OF DESIRE FOR CHANGE

The amount of change each partner desired from the other partner in the conflict discussion topic was scored by a second, independent team of four coders. Prior to each conflict discussion, couples worked with a facilitator to select their conversation topic. The facilitator asked each partner to describe his or her position on the specific topics that couple had rated as having the highest level of disagreement. Coders viewed these facilitation discussions

and were instructed to write down each partner's position on the conflict topic. Based on these observed positions, coders assigned each partner a score using a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *does not want any change* to 9 = *wants a lot of change*. For example, a set of summary statements for a discussion about housework might read "Partner A wants partner B to clean up around the house more. Partner B feels that he contributes enough to the household labor." In this example, partner A would receive a high score and partner B would receive a low score. Because coders rated desire for change based on the description of the problem to the facilitator, this approach separated impressions of desire for change from the frequencies or intensities of specific demanding or withdrawing behaviors manifest during the actual conflict conversation.

Four research assistants (one male, three female, consisting of a combination of undergraduate students and recently graduated assistants) were trained to code this variable over a two-week period, also by viewing and rating a series of videotaped interactions from a separate study of couples engaging in similar conflict discussions. During the course of the study, coders viewed eight videotapes per week and met weekly to discuss their ratings. For each videotaped interaction, two coders were randomly assigned to rate one partner while the other two rated the other partner. Coders demonstrated high reliability, with an average interobserver alpha of .82. For each partner, the two coder's scores were averaged to create that individual's desire for change score. A final score, *relative desire for change*, was calculated (partner A's score minus partner B's score). This score indicates the extent to which one partner desires change in the conflict discussion topic relative to the other partner.

RESULTS

Evaluating the Essentialist Approach

The essentialist approach predicts that the demand-withdraw pattern will differ as a function of couple type. Specifically, if differences in the manifestation of demand and withdraw behaviors stem from differences between men and women, only heterosexual couples would demonstrate stereotypical gender differentiation in demand and withdraw roles within the couple. Further, it might be expected that lesbian couples would show higher overall levels of demand behaviors and that gay couples would show higher overall levels of withdraw behaviors. These predictions were evaluated using ANOVA with couple type (heterosexual, gay, and lesbian) as a between-subjects factor. First, analyses showed that there were no differences between couple types in either observer ratings of total demand-withdraw, $F(2,60) = .21$, $p = .81$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$., or in self-reports of total demand-withdraw, $F(2,43) = .12$, $p = .89$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$.

Similarly, no differences were found between couple types in demand and withdraw behaviors considered separately (this could only be determined for observer ratings; comparable self-reports were not obtained): demand behavior, $F(2,60) = .56$, $p = .58$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$; withdraw behavior, $F(2,60) = .04$, $p = .96$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$.

We then tested the essentialist approach prediction that only heterosexual couples would demonstrate differentiation between demand-withdraw roles by comparing absolute values of the demand-withdraw polarization scores. These values represent the degree to which partners in each couple occupied differentiated demand or withdraw roles; higher scores indicated greater polarization in demand-withdraw roles. ANOVA analyses revealed no differences between couple types in observational data, $F(2,60) = 1.08$, $p = .35$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, or in self-report, $F(2,43) = .38$, $p = .68$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Thus, using three different measures of the demand-withdraw pattern (two of which were computed using both self-report and behavioral data), no support was found for predictions derived from the essentialist approach. Means, standard deviations, and effect sizes for each of these comparisons are presented in Table 2.

Although this set of findings essentially constitutes support for a null hypothesis (i.e., no differences between heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples), it is important to note that the effect sizes of the nonsignificant group differences were very small (average $\eta_p^2 = .02$) with our sample size of 63 couples. Following the logic presented by Rosnow and Rosenthal (1989), we calculated the sample size we would have needed for these differences

TABLE 2 Means, Standard Deviations, and Comparisons of Couple's Demand-Withdraw Scores

	Heterosexual mean (SD)	Gay mean (SD)	Lesbian mean (SD)	<i>F</i>	Effect size (η_p^2)
Observer ratings ($N = 63$)					
Total demand-withdraw	28.9 (6.8)	29.9 (4.9)	30.0 (5.7)	0.21 (<i>n.s.</i>)	0.01
Demand	13.1 (4.8)	14.4 (4.1)	14.4 (5.0)	0.56 (<i>n.s.</i>)	0.02
Withdraw	15.8 (5.5)	15.5 (3.1)	15.6 (3.7)	0.04 (<i>n.s.</i>)	0.00
Demand-withdraw polarization (absolute values)	6.8 (4.3)	5.0 (3.7)	6.3 (4.2)	1.08 (<i>n.s.</i>)	0.04
Self-report ($N = 46$)					
Total demand-withdraw	22.0 (7.1)	22.5 (8.0)	23.3 (7.2)	0.12 (<i>n.s.</i>)	0.01
Demand-withdraw polarization (absolute values)	4.9 (2.8)	5.1 (3.8)	3.4 (3.2)	1.12 (<i>n.s.</i>)	0.04

to reach statistical significance (power = .80, α = .05). This ranged from 270 couples for the finding of no differences in demand-withdraw polarization to 9,630 couples for the finding of no differences in observed withdraw behavior (across all reported findings of no group differences, the average number of couples needed would be 2,266). Taken together, it appears that the overall finding of no significant differences between heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples in the demand-withdraw pattern reflects an actual lack of differences between the groups rather than simply a lack of statistical power.

Evaluating the Power Differences Approach

The power differences approach predicts that regardless of the sex composition of the couple, the partner wanting more change will demand and the partner wanting less change (i.e., the one invested in status quo) will withdraw. We used multiple regression analyses to determine whether differences between partners in their desire for change in the conflict topic predicted role differentiation in the demand-withdraw pattern. The dependent variable was observed demand-withdraw polarization. This variable captures the degree *and* direction of demand-withdraw role differentiation: a positive score indicates that A more often demands while B more often withdraws, whereas a negative score indicates that B more often demands while A more often withdraws. The greater the number, either positive or negative, the greater the demand-withdraw role polarization between partners. Scores for the primary independent variable, relative desire for change, similarly indicate the degree and direction of differences in desire for change.

In step 1 of the analysis, relative desire for change was entered and was found to predict demand-withdraw polarization, $R^2 = 0.41$, $F(1, 61) = 41.67$, $p < .01$. Next, in Steps 2 and 3, sexuality group (cross-sex vs. same-sex) and the interaction between sexuality group and relative desire for change were entered. These did not contribute significantly to the model, R^2 Change = .004, $F(1, 60) = 0.45$, $p = .50$, and R^2 Change = .002, $F(1, 59) = 0.23$, $p = .63$, respectively. Therefore, the results indicate that the more change an individual desires relative to his or her partner, the more likely that person is to demand while the partner withdraws, regardless of the sex of the partners (Figure 1).

To ensure that pooling gay and lesbian couples did not account for the null finding for sexuality group, we separated the gay and lesbian couples and conducted a series of follow-up multiple regression analyses comparing pairs of groups (heterosexual vs. gay, heterosexual vs. lesbian, gay vs. lesbian). Sexuality group and the interaction between sexuality group and relative power were not significant predictors in any of these analyses.

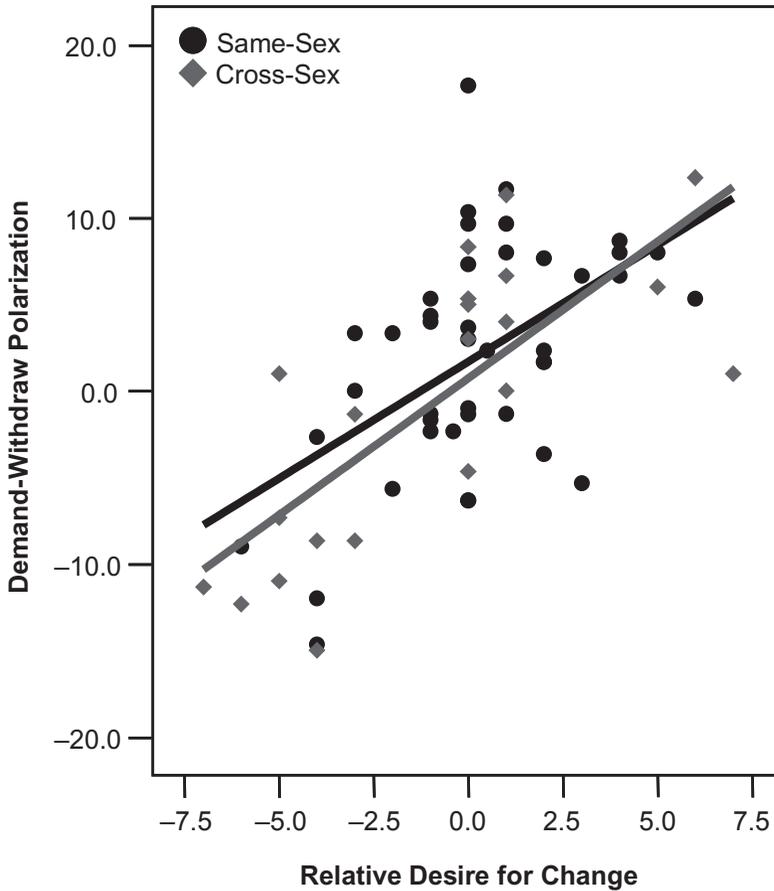


FIGURE 1 Relationship between demand-withdraw roles and desire for change. Scatterplot and regression lines of relationship between partner differences in observer measures of demand-withdraw behavior and desire for change. Relative desire for change predicted polarization in demand-withdraw roles; this was true to the same extent for both cross-sex and same-sex couples.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to determine if differences between men and women (the essentialist approach) or differences in desire for change (the power differences approach) better accounted for role differentiation in the demand-withdraw pattern, a common and destructive pattern of communication wherein stereotypically women demand and men withdraw. The study used observational data and self-report data to compare the demand-withdraw pattern in cross-sex and same-sex couples. This design allowed us to test the alternative models by observing whether or not the demand-withdraw pattern was the same in male-female couples and in couples with no essential sex or gender differences to account for role differentiation.

We found no support for the essentialist approach. There were no differences between heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples in total demand-withdraw behaviors, demand and withdraw behaviors considered separately, or in the level of asymmetry of demand-withdraw behaviors as rated by trained coders. Where self-report data were available, these also failed to reveal differences among couple types.

In contrast, we did find support for the power differences approach. Results indicated that the more change a person desires relative to his or her partner, the more that person will demand and the more the partner will withdraw. Moreover, there were no differences in the strength of this association for heterosexual, gay, or lesbian couples.

These results suggest that men and women are not inherently different in their tendencies to demand and withdraw, but rather that often-observed differences in demand-withdraw behaviors may result from strategic responses to unequal power. Why, then, do such strong stereotypes of demanding women and withdrawing men exist? One reason may derive from a tendency for differences between men and women to be overestimated by both scholarly and popular literature. For example, while reports of gender differences that meet criteria for statistical significance are common, these findings might not represent sizable or meaningful differences (Aries, 2006; Tannen & Aries, 1997). Contributing to this issue, many studies fail to report effect sizes of found differences, which are often of a small magnitude. The result is that men and women are portrayed as two separate, homogeneous, and polarized categories (Wood & Dindia, 1998). In stark contrast to this picture of dichotomy, an extensive meta analysis of research on gender differences showed that men and women are more alike on most psychological variables than not (Hyde, 2005). Further, studies in which no gender differences were found may be deemed unworthy of publication (Aries, 1998) and, thus, not find their way into the scientific literature. This point underscores a critical challenge for research to include findings demonstrating similarities between men and women that might otherwise end up hidden in researcher's proverbial "file drawers" (e.g. Shadish, Doherty, & Montgomery, 1989).

A second factor in the persistence of demand-withdraw gender stereotypes may stem from the fact that, as Aires (1998) notes, "The gender differences we observe are produced in a context in which men hold positions over power over women" (p. 73). Specifically, when looking only at heterosexual couples, as the majority of research and clinical literature does, demand-withdraw gender stereotypes are confirmed. Such observations of heterosexual couples only, however, may mask the ways in which power differences contribute to behavioral differences. As noted above, women typically have less power in marriage (e.g. Beach & Tesser, 1993; Scanzoni, 1979) and seek more change in their spouses (e.g., Kluwer et al., 2000; Margolin et al., 1983). Therefore, it follows that women would

demonstrate behaviors associated with the low-power role. Nagging and pressuring behaviors on the part of wives come to be seen as the behavior of women. Similarly, avoidant and withdrawing behaviors on the part of husbands come to be seen as the behavior of men. Lost in this conclusion is the alternative possibility that these putatively female and male behaviors are those of individuals in low- and high-power roles, respectively (e.g. Eagly et al., 2000; Sagrestano, Christensen, & Heavey, 1998a; Wood & Dindia, 1998). In this way, what are in essence power-defined roles come to be seen as gender-defined roles, thereby perpetuating popular ideas about the differences between men and women.

Importantly, while this study offers evidence in support of a power differences model of demand-withdraw role differentiation, it by no means provides a definitive explanation of why partners demand versus withdraw. For example, another potential explanation for differences in demand-withdraw behaviors includes gender role identities. Bem and Lenney (1976) suggest that the more strongly one identifies as masculine or as feminine, the more tightly constrained the individual will be to gender stereotypical behaviors. Markman et al. (1993) have noted that stereotypic femininity entails an orientation toward communal or expressive functioning, whereas stereotypic masculinity entails an orientation toward instrumental functioning (and away from interpersonal processes). In the face of conflict, people may be increasingly inclined to fall back on these stereotypical gender roles. Moreover, this study focused on one specific aspect of power: desire for change. But it has been suggested that power in intimate relationships exists on many other levels, including perceptions of potential influence (Sagrestano et al., 1999) or control over resources (Scanzoni, 1979; Solomon et al., 2005). It will be important to understand how these power constructs may be interacting with situational measures of desire for change in influencing demanding or withdrawing behaviors.

Although there clearly is difficult work ahead to fully understand the basis of stereotypical gender differences in demand-withdraw behaviors, this in no way diminishes the importance of findings that clearly run counter to the view that these differences are based on fundamental differences between the men and women. Human characteristics that are thought to be linked to intrinsic qualities are often thought to be “unchangeable” and “inevitable.” Social and political structures that are built on these assumed differences often cast people in roles that severely limit their options and possibilities (Hyde, 2005). Although we certainly would not argue against the important role that biological sex plays in many areas of human life, we believe that the present findings provide strong evidence against the view that factors inherently linked to being a man or a woman in and of themselves determine whether a person will demand or withdraw when faced with issues that are critical for the health of an extremely important, intimate relationship.

This study had several strengths and limitations. Strengths included the assessment of demand-withdraw communication based on both behavioral observation and self-report, the use of an established methodology for studying couples interactions, and the utilization of same-sex as well as cross-sex couples. Limitations included the aforementioned inferential problems inherent in supporting a null hypothesis, sample generalizability, and differences between the samples of same-sex and cross-sex couples. With regard to generalizability, the subjects in this study consisted primarily of younger, monogamous, cohabitating Caucasian couples. Although the relatively homogeneous sample enhanced the internal validity of these results, generalizations to other populations should be made with caution. Future research would benefit from expanding these questions to populations varying in age, ethnicity, relationship status, living arrangements, and relationship duration.

With regard to sample differences, there were certain variations in the recruitment criteria between the cross-sex couples and the same-sex couples (e.g., age difference between partners, presence of children). These variations were present because each of the two samples was originally recruited to match criteria used in other research studies, not because of any preconceived notions about differences between same-sex versus cross-sex relationships. There is no published indication that these particular factors directly influence demand-withdraw behavior; nonetheless, it would be important to replicate this study with samples matched on all recruitment variables. Finally, the gay and lesbian couples in this study were recruited in the early 1990s, whereas the cross-sex couples were recruited more recently (2004–2005). Since the time of the first study recruitment, attitudes toward gay and lesbian relationships have changed significantly in this country. Replicating these findings with new samples of couples collected at the same time would eliminate any possible cohort differences resulting from data collection at different time points, as well as make the findings more applicable to contemporary gay and lesbian couples. Despite these differences, heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples were well matched on key variables known to relate to relationship functioning (e.g., age, relationship satisfaction). Moreover, identical laboratory methodologies were used for data collection with all couples. Thus, we felt justified in using the data from these samples of couples to address questions regarding the basis for stereotypical gender differences in demand-withdraw behavior.

Conclusion

Using a sample of same-sex and cross-sex couples, we found strong support that a variable indicative of power differences, rather than essential differences between the men and women, better accounts for differences in

demand-withdraw behavior. Thus, a commonly observed gender difference in heterosexual relationship behaviors that has often attributed to factors that reside within the individual appears instead to be a reflection of external factors. Future research utilizing same-sex couples as well as cross-sex couples holds promise for isolating the effects of such factors from those tied inherently to one's status as a man or woman. More broadly, these findings point to the need to question commonly held notions about "innate" differences between men and women that are found in both folk theories and empirical research.

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