

Feeling Heard in Romantic Relationships

The role of feeling heard in the relationship between power and relationship satisfaction

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate whether people felt less satisfied with their relationship when they experienced an unequal distribution of power with their partner in everyday conversations about household labor, and if the relationship between these two variables was affected by the extent to which people felt heard in these conversations. The study also took an explorative look at dominant communication behavior between romantic partners and its consequences on feeling heard and relationship satisfaction. Based on literature about power, dominance, relationship satisfaction, and feeling heard, it was expected that when people experienced an unequal distribution of power with their romantic partner in everyday conversations about household labor, they would be less satisfied with their relationship after a conversation about this topic. Furthermore, it was expected that this effect would be mediated by the extent to which people felt heard by their partner in that conversation. To test this, a survey was performed ($N = 90$). The results showed no relation between how people experienced the power distribution in their relationship in everyday conversations about household labor and relationship satisfaction after a conversation about this topic. Also, no mediating effect of feeling heard on the relationship between these variables was found. The study did show that dominance was negatively and significantly related to relationship satisfaction. This relation was mediated by feeling heard: if someone felt their partner was dominant in a conversation about household labor, this caused them to feel less heard in that conversation, which resulted in less relationship satisfaction after that conversation. Although the results of this study were different than expected and differ in some respects from previous research, they also bring new theoretical and practical insights when it comes to everyday conversations between partners and the research area concerning power dynamics, dominance, feeling heard, and relationship satisfaction.

Keywords: dominance, feeling heard, power, relationship satisfaction

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Feeling Heard in Romantic Relationships

Maintaining a romantic relationship is something most people will be confronted with at some point in their life. The level to which a relationship is experienced as successful is determined by relationship satisfaction: the extent to which a person is happy and pleased with their relationship (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2016; Ogolsky et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, many people experience dissatisfaction within their romantic relationships, and, as a result, not all romantic relationships have a happy ending (Felmlee, 1994). In fact, relationship dissatisfaction seems to be increasing. Compared to roughly 45 years ago, divorce rates have increased over the years, from 6.2 out of a thousand marriages in 1976 to 7.8 out of a thousand marriages in 2021 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, n.d.). Moreover, research shows that couples between the age of 24 and 30 who live together nowadays split up more often than their peers fifteen years ago; after 7 years of living together, 27 percent of the 24-year old's have split up compared to 22 percent fifteen years ago (Kooiman et al., 2021).

Besides relationships coming to an end, being dissatisfied with your romantic relationship can also have other consequences. While smooth-running romantic relationships can have a positive effect on personal health, well-being, and connections with other people outside the relationship (Fincham & Beach, 2010), dysfunctional romantic relationships can have a negative influence on an individual's health and well-being, and can, for example, cause depression (Bradbury & Lavner, 2012; Kansky, 2018; van Eldik et al., 2020). Since almost everyone deals with romantic relationships, it is important to determine what makes people less satisfied with these relationships, so the mentioned negative influences on personal (mental) health can be prevented and the chances of success of romantic relationships can be increased.

One thing that has a negative effect on relationship satisfaction is an unequal distribution of power between the people in that relationship (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983; Lindová et al., 2020). Power can be defined as the capability of someone to influence the actions, thoughts, and emotions of someone else and to resist the attempts of that person to influence them in return (Galinsky et al., 2008; Simpson et al., 2015). Many studies have looked at the overarching effects of power distribution in romantic relationships and its effect on relationship satisfaction (e.g. Bradbury & Lavner, 2012; Kansky, 2018; Lindová et al., 2020; van Eldik et al., 2020). Yet, not much is known about the way power affects everyday conversations between romantic partners, while the way power works in these conversations could explain why an unequal distribution of power leads to lower relationship satisfaction (Lindová et al., 2020).

A possible way through which power in these everyday conversations may influence relationship satisfaction is by affecting the extent to which people feel heard in these conversations. Feeling heard is an important component of intimate relationships and plays a role in everyday conversations within those relationships (Roos et al., 2021). In their study, Roos et al. (2021) found that in conversations where there was a difference in status between the conversation partners, both partners felt less heard than in a conversation where people felt equal to their conversation partner. This could be because the conversation partner with a higher level of power dominates the conversation, leaving less space for the non-dominant partner to participate. Because of that, the non-dominant partner will hardly respond, which eventually leads to both partners feeling less heard since the dominant partner gets no reaction and the non-dominant partner cannot react (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Roos et al., 2021). What this shows is that through an unequal power distribution, conversation partners may feel less heard. Feeling heard has been shown to have positive effects on relationship satisfaction (Collins, 2022; Kuhn et al., 2018), suggesting that when someone does not feel heard,

resulting from an unequal distribution of power with their partner, it can lead to lower levels of relationship satisfaction and harm the relationship.

Although the connection between feeling heard and unequal power distribution has been researched by Roos et al. (2021), this has not been specifically researched for romantic relationships as the study by Roos et al. (2021) researched all types of relationships, including friends and colleagues. This study will try to fill these gaps and explore the role of feeling heard in everyday conversations between romantic partners and its effect on the relationship between power and relationship satisfaction. The specific context that will be looked at for these conversations is household labor since this is one of the most common topics couples talk and discuss about (Betcher & Macauley, 1990), resulting in the following research question:

***RQ:** To what extent do people feel satisfied with their relationship when they experience an unequal distribution of power with their partner in everyday conversations about household labor and is this relationship affected by the extent to which they feel heard in these conversations?*

Answering this research question is also interesting for practice because by understanding how an unequal power distribution may lead to less satisfaction within romantic relationships, it will be possible to understand how this can be best dealt with. As a result, relationships can be more successful, relationship satisfaction can be increased, and the associated negative effects on personal (mental) health can be prevented.

Theoretical Framework

Power in Romantic Relationships and the Effect on Relationship Satisfaction

Power dynamics in romantic relationships have been the subject of research for many years and can be considered a core aspect of relationships. Power dynamics can define how romantic relationships work and the extent to which they succeed (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Galliher et al., 1999; Gordon & Chen, 2013). Some studies have found that most romantic partners experience an equal distribution of power within their relationship (e.g. Körner & Schütz, 2021; Neff & Suizzo, 2006). However, the majority of research has found that more than half of the people involved in romantic relationships experience an unequal distribution of power with their partner to some extent, meaning that one partner can influence the actions, thoughts, and emotions of their partner without their partner influencing them to the same degree in return (Galinsky et al., 2008; Simpson et al., 2015). A series of studies by Peplau (1979; 1984) and Peplau & Campbell (1989) asked people whether they or their partner had a greater say in deciding which activities they did together. These studies showed that 51 percent of male participants and 58 percent of female participants stated that there was an unequal distribution of power within their relationship. When an unequal distribution was present, most of the participants perceived that the man had a greater say than the woman. The same results were found by Felmlee (1994): 54 percent of the participants in this research reported an unequal distribution of power in their relationship with the man most likely to be the dominant partner. These findings are also supported by a more recent study by Bruhin (2003) in which 59 percent of female interviewees and 68 percent of male interviewees declared an unequal distribution of power.

When someone experiences an equal distribution of power between themselves and their partner, they experience higher levels of safety, joy, trustworthiness, and dedication toward the relationship and are more likely to open up to their partner than someone who experiences an unequal distribution of power (Grauerholz, 1987; Guerrero et al., 2013; Walster et al., 1978). Equal power distribution is also positively related to building an

intimate relationship, greater relationship success, better emotional health, and higher relationship satisfaction (Aida & Falbo, 1991; Drigotas et al., 1999; Kim et al., 2019).

In contrast to an equal distribution of power being positively related to relationship satisfaction, an unequal distribution is negatively related to relationship satisfaction (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983; Lindová et al., 2020). Given that romantic relationships are an important part of everyday life for most people, it becomes crucial to identify factors that contribute to decreased satisfaction in these relationships. This knowledge enables us to proactively increase greater success in romantic relationships, and therefore prevent the negative impact on personal (mental) health mentioned before.

A possible explanation for this lower level of relationship satisfaction could be the higher occurrence of unfavorable communications and behaviors between romantic partners where there is an unequal distribution of power between them (Lindová et al., 2020). In fact, power distribution in a relationship plays a significant role in communication between romantic partners and in making decisions within the relationship (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Farrell et al., 2015). Dunbar & Burgoon (2005) showed that individuals experiencing a higher level of power than their romantic partners tend to show dominant behavior in conversations. Dominant conversation partners tend to be the person who determines the subject(s) and direction of the conversation (Linell et al., 1988), have a greater say than their partner when significant decisions are made (Farrell et al., 2015), and tend to not take into account their partner's demands and desires (Parker, 2009). These dominating tendencies could be difficult for the partner experiencing less power since they have a higher tendency to constrain their behavior and struggle with expressing their thoughts and addressing their partner's unpleasant behavior (Keltner et al., 2003; Rusbult et al., 1991). The dominant behavior could also leave less to no room for the other person to participate in the conversation, possibly causing them

to feel less heard because they do not feel they can, and have the opportunity to, take part in the dialogue (Roos et al., 2021).

As mentioned earlier, the sense of feeling heard is an important factor when it comes to communication in intimate relationships and plays a significant role in everyday conversations within those relationships (Roos et al., 2021). It could explain how and why the dominant behaviors caused by an unequal power distribution may be negatively influencing relationship satisfaction through those everyday conversations. Before moving on to the effects of feeling heard, it is first important to define the concept.

Feeling Heard

According to Roos et al. (2021), feeling heard can be defined as “the feeling that one’s communication is received with attention, empathy, respect, and in a spirit of mutual understanding” (p. 10). The construct of feeling heard includes three units (me, you, and we) and five elements. These five elements are (1) voice (an individual needs to be and feel capable to send a communicative message to feel heard), (2) attention (the receiver of the message has to pay attention to that message to make the sender feel heard), (3) empathy (by paying attention, the receiver has to make the sender feel that they understand where the sender is coming from and what the sender wants to achieve), (4) respect (the receiver has to give the sender the feeling that they are okay the way they are), and (5) common ground (the sender and receiver have to experience some level of mutual information and convictions to be able to communicate successfully) (Clark, 1996; Clark & Schaefer, 1989; Roos et al., 2021).

While the extent to which someone feels heard relies on the (interpretation of the) actions of the receiver, it also influences the subsequent behavior of the sender towards the receiver and vice versa. If a person feels heard in a conversation, it might be easier for them to return attentive behavior and also make the other person feel heard, while if a person does not

feel heard, this might be difficult. A study by Roos et al. (2021) showed that in interactions with someone of equal status, people tend to feel more heard compared to interactions with someone of lower or higher status. The researchers suggest that a possible reason for this lack of feeling heard could be the dominance of the person higher in status since they tend to do most of the talking. The person lower in status will have less space to participate in the interaction, causing them to experience lower levels of voice, attention, and respect. As a result, they feel less heard (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Roos et al., 2001). Additionally, the reason for the person higher in status not feeling heard, as suggested by the researchers, could be the lack of reacting of the person lower in status, caused by their feeling of not being heard (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Roos et al., 2021). However, it must be mentioned that this is mere speculation since the study did not investigate why people higher in status did not feel heard. In sum, these findings suggest that experiencing an unequal distribution of power with one's interaction partner could lead to both parties feeling less heard.

Although feeling heard plays an important role in intimate relationships, the concept has not yet been thoroughly studied when it comes to romantic relationships (Roos et al., 2021). A related concept that, on the other hand, has been extensively researched in the context of romantic couples is perceived responsiveness (e.g. Adair et al., 2018; Itzchakov et al., 2022). This is the conviction that your romantic partner will pay attention to your well-being by understanding, supporting, and having compassion for you (Reis & Clark, 2013; Reis et al., 2004). Perceived responsiveness has been shown to have enhancing and reinforcing effects on relationships, for example by boosting relationship satisfaction (Gable & Reis, 2010). However, the concepts differ from each other in the sense that feeling heard is more specific than perceived responsiveness as it focuses on a particular communication event instead of a generic understanding of an individual's demands, desires, and ambitions (Roos et al., 2021). Researching feeling heard is thus useful because its focus on particular

communication events, such as everyday conversations, possibly offers a new explanation for the effects of an unequal distribution of power on relationship satisfaction.

Combining Power, Relationship Satisfaction, and Feeling Heard

One possible consequence of not feeling heard turned out to be that someone would feel less satisfied with their relationship (Collins, 2022; Kuhn et al., 2018), suggesting that not feeling heard as a consequence of experiencing an unequal distribution of power with one's partner can harm the relationship and increase the chance of a possible break-up (Felmlee, 1994). However, not much is known about how, in everyday conversations between romantic partners, power works and to what extent people feel heard in these conversations. To explore this further, this research will focus on the variables power, feeling heard, and relationship satisfaction in everyday conversations about household labor between romantic partners, leading to the formulation of the following hypotheses:

***H1:** When people experience an unequal distribution of power between themselves and their romantic partner in everyday conversations about household labor, that will cause them to be less satisfied with their relationship after a conversation about this topic.*

***H2:** The extent to which people feel heard by their partner in everyday conversations about household labor mediates the effect that an experienced unequal distribution of power with one's romantic partner leads to lower relationship satisfaction.*

In addition to testing the above-mentioned hypotheses, this research will also take an explorative look at dominant communication behavior between romantic partners and its consequences on feeling heard and relationship satisfaction. This will be done because the

above-described literature showed close positive relations between an unequal power distribution between partners and the presence of dominant behavior in conversations between them (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Farrell et al., 2015; Lindová et al., 2020), and also a possible connection between dominance and feeling heard (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Roos et al., 2021). Therefore, including dominance could be helpful and insightful when interpreting the results and provide a better understanding of the effects of an (un)equal distribution of power on relationship satisfaction.

Method

Participants

To answer the research question and test the hypotheses, an observational survey study was performed. The participants recruited for the study had to be at least 18 years old, native Dutch, and involved in a romantic relationship in which they lived together with their partner because couples who live together are more likely to have conversations about household labor than couples who do not live together. The participants were recruited via social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn), the personal (work) network of the researchers, and the network of friends/family of the researchers.

In total, 101 participants fully completed the survey. Of these participants, 3 participants were excluded because they did not give a valid description of a past conversation (e.g. used random characters). Another 8 participants said that their described conversation was not (fully) representative of other conversations they had about household labor with their partner. To make sure the results were about a wider range of conversations and not so much about single conversations, these participants were all excluded from the data, resulting in a total of 90 participants. Of the remaining participants, 80 percent were women ($N = 78$) and 20 percent were male ($N = 12$). The average age of the participants was 34.71 ($SD = 11.98$) years old.

Procedure and Measures

The survey was executed through Qualtrics. The survey was performed in Dutch and can be found in the Appendix. Before filling in the survey, the participants read the study information about their rights as a participant and gave their informed consent.

At the beginning of the survey, the participants were asked about their age and gender. This section also included a control question that checked if the participants indeed lived together with their partner. After filling out their personal details, the participants were asked if they could think of a past conversation with their partner in which they had to make a decision concerning household labor. If they could not remember such a conversation, the survey stopped automatically. If they could remember it, they were asked to describe the conversation with at least 100 characters. This was done to evoke a clear picture of the conversation in the mind of the participants, which was needed for them to answer the upcoming questions. These questions can be divided into two categories: questions related to the described conversation and questions related to conversations about household labor in general.

Measures Related to the Described Conversation

Feeling Heard. To measure the extent to which participants felt heard in the conversation they described, the Feeling Heard Scale (Roos et al., 2021) was used. This scale consisted of 8 items, such as “In this conversation, I felt heard by the other person” and “In this conversation, the other person was more concerned with him/herself than with what I said (R)”, which were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The reliability of the scale was good ($\alpha = .90$).

Dominance. The degree of dominance in the described conversation was measured via 9 items (Burgoon & Hale, 1987), for example, “In this conversation, my partner tried to keep the control” and “In this conversation, my partner tried not to influence me”. The items

were measured on a seven-point Likert-type scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The scale had questionable reliability ($\alpha = .68$), but when item 3 was left out, the reliability was acceptable ($\alpha = .75$). This section also included a standalone question unrelated to the scale asking the participants who took the lead in the conversation, to get an even more complete understanding of who was dominant in the described conversation.

Relationship Satisfaction. To measure the extent to which the participants were satisfied with their relationship after their described conversation, 10 adapted statements from the Relationship Satisfaction scale (Røysamb et al., 2014) were included, for example: “After this conversation, I felt that I was very happy with our relationship” and “After this conversation, I felt that I want to put effort into our relationship”. To bring the scale more in line with the rest of the survey, it was measured on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* instead of a six-point Likert-type scale used in the paper of Røysamb et al. (2014). The reliability of the scale was good ($\alpha = .83$).

Measures Related to General Conversations about Household Labor

Power. The extent to which participants experienced an (un)equal distribution of power between themselves and their partner when it came to conversations about household labor in general was measured using the Relationship Power Inventory (Farrell et al., 2015). This scale is specially created for romantic couples and includes items such as “I have more say than my partner does when we make decisions in our relationship” and “When we make decisions in our relationship, my partner has the final say (R)”. The formulation of these items was specified towards household labor, for example: “I have more say than my partner does when we make decisions about household labor”. The original scale consisted of 20 items. For this study, 10 items were selected to ensure that the questionnaire did not become too long. The items were originally measured on a seven-point Likert-type scale from *never* to *always*, but when translating the scale into Dutch, two points turned out to be very similar

(*occasionally* and *sometimes*), which could be confusing for the participants. To resolve this, a six-point Likert-type scale from *never* to *always* was used (*never – seldom – sometimes – regularly – often – always*). The reliability of the scale was good ($\alpha = .89$).

The survey included more measurements than those reported above, but these turned out to be irrelevant for this particular study, so they were excluded from the method section. After the survey, the goal of the study was briefly explained and the participants were thanked for their participation and given the opportunity to contact the researchers in case they had any questions or wanted more information about the study.

Analysis

After collecting the needed data, the results were analyzed using SPSS. First, the descriptive statistics and correlations were analyzed and described. Next, a linear regression analysis was performed to test hypothesis 1. After that, a mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro with relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable, power as the independent variable, and feeling heard as the mediator was performed to test hypothesis 2. Last, another explorative mediation analysis with dominance instead of power as the independent variable was performed to see if dominance caused an effect on relationship satisfaction through feeling heard.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

All means, standard deviations, and correlations can be found in Table 1. On average, participants felt heard in the conversation they described ($M = 3.89, SD = .72$), felt like their partner was not dominant in that conversation ($M = 2.93, SD = .93$), were very satisfied with their relationship after that conversation ($M = 4.20, SD = .58$), and regularly experienced more power than their partner in conversations about household labor ($M = 4.01, SD = .74$). The answers to the general question asking who took the lead in the conversation showed that

12,4 percent of the participants said their partner took the lead in the conversation they described, 38,2 percent said they took the lead, and 49,4 percent said they and their partner equally took the lead in the conversation.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between the Different Variables (N = 90)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Feeling heard</i>	<i>Dominance</i>	<i>Power</i>
Feeling heard	3.89	.72	-		
Dominance	2.93	.93	-.68**	-	
Power	4.01	.74	-.10	-.05	-
Relationship satisfaction	4.20	.58	.55**	-.43**	-.15

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A Spearman's correlation test was performed to see how the variables were correlated. The test showed that if people experienced their partner as more dominant in the conversation they described, they felt less heard in that conversation ($r_s = -.68, p < .001$), and were less satisfied with their relationship after that conversation ($r_s = -.43, p < .001$). When participants felt more heard in the described conversation, they also were more satisfied with their relationship after that conversation ($r_s = .55, p < .001$). No significant relationships were found between power and the variables dominance, feeling heard, and relationship satisfaction, indicating that if someone experienced a more unequal distribution of power in conversations about household labor, it was not reflected in the extent to which they felt heard in their described conversation, perceived their partner as dominant in that conversation, or the extent to which they were satisfied with their relationship after that conversation.

The Relation between Power and Relationship Satisfaction

A linear regression model with power as the independent variable and relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable was built to see that if participants experienced an

unequal distribution of power between themselves and their partner in conversations about household labor, this would cause them to feel less satisfied with their relationship after a conversation about this topic (hypothesis 1). Before testing the model, the assumptions of the data were checked.

Cook's distance was used to see if the data contained any outliers. The calculated Cook's distance was 0.30, which did not exceed the threshold of 1, so no outliers were found. The assumption of collinearity showed that multicollinearity was not a problem (Power, Tolerance = 1.00, VIF = 1.00), the assumption of independent errors was met (Durbin-Watson = 1.28), and the scatterplot of standardized residuals illustrated that the assumptions of homogeneity of variance and linearity were also met. Last, a Shapiro-Wilk test was used to check if the data was normally distributed. The test showed normal distribution for power ($W = 0.976, p = .10$), but not for relationship satisfaction ($W = 0.910, p < .001$). Therefore, the data was bootstrapped.

The regression model was not significant ($R^2 = .02, F(1, 88) = 1.88, p = .17$). Power did not significantly predict relationship satisfaction ($b = -.11, \beta = -.15, t(88) = -1.37, p = .17, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.29, .05]$), indicating that if someone experienced a more unequal distribution of power between themselves and their partner in conversations about household labor, this did not cause them to be less satisfied with their relationship after the conversation they had described. Therefore, hypothesis 1 cannot be supported.

Feeling Heard as a Mediator

The Relation between Power and Relationship Satisfaction

Hypothesis 2 predicted a mediating effect of feeling heard on the relation between power and relationship satisfaction. Prior to looking further into this effect, the dataset was checked for violating any assumptions.

Assumptions. The data contained no outliers since Cook's distance was 0.33, which did not exceed the threshold of 1. The data also met the assumption of independent errors (Durbin-Watson value = 1.73). The assumption of collinearity showed that multicollinearity was not a problem (Power, Tolerance = 1.00, VIF = 1.00; Feeling Heard, Tolerance = 1.00, VIF = 1.00). The scatterplot of standardized residuals illustrated that the data met the assumptions of homogeneity of variance and linearity. Last, a Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted to see whether feeling heard was normally distributed since power and relationship satisfaction were already tested before performing the previous regression analysis. The test showed feeling heard was not normally distributed ($W = 0.964, p = .01$). Therefore, the data was bootstrapped.

Mediation Analysis. After checking the assumptions, a mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro with relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable, power as the independent variable, and feeling heard as the mediator was performed. A summary of the mediation analysis can be found in Figure 1. First, the direct effect of power on relationship satisfaction was analyzed (*path c*). Power did not have a significant direct effect on relationship satisfaction ($b = -.09; p = .19, SE = .07, 95\% CI [-.22, .05]$), meaning that the extent to which someone experienced an (un)equal distribution of power with their partner in conversations about household labor did not directly affect how satisfied they were with their relationship after their described conversation.

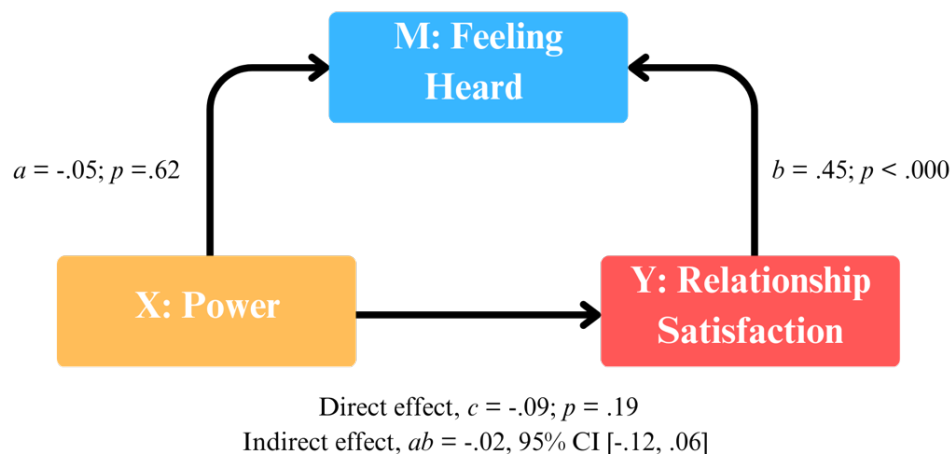
Next, the effect of power on feeling heard was analyzed (*path a*). This showed no significant relationship between the two variables ($b = -.05; p = .62, SE = .10, 95\% CI [-.26, .15]$), meaning that the extent to which someone experienced an (un)equal distribution of power with their partner in conversations about household labor did also not affect the extent to which they felt heard in their described conversation.

Third, the effect of feeling heard on relationship satisfaction was examined (path b). Feeling heard was positive and significantly related to relationship satisfaction ($b = .45; p < .000, SE=.07, 95\% CI [.31, .59]$), showing that when people felt more heard in their described conversation, this caused them to be more satisfied with their relationship after that conversation.

Finally, the mediation itself was examined (path c'). The indirect effect of power on relationship satisfaction via feeling heard was not significant ($b = -.02; SE=.05, 95\% CI [-.12, .06]$). Based on these findings, hypothesis 2 suggesting that the extent to which people feel heard in everyday conversations about household labor mediates the effect that an experienced unequal distribution of power with one's romantic partner regarding this topic leads to lower relationship satisfaction, cannot be supported.

Figure 1

Mediation Analysis Summary of the Effect of Feeling Heard on the Relation Between Power and Relationship Satisfaction (N = 90)



The Relation between Dominance and Relationship Satisfaction

Since the literature showed close positive relations between power and dominance and a possible connection between dominance and feeling heard, it was decided to perform an exploratory mediation analysis with dominance as the independent variable instead of power, to see if dominant behaviors in the described conversation did affect how satisfied people

were with their relationship after that conversation through the extent to which they felt heard in that conversation. First, the assumptions were checked once again.

Assumptions. Cook's distance was 0.27, which did not exceed the threshold of 1, so the data contained no outliers. The assumption of independent errors was met (Durbin-Watson value = 1.71) and the assumption of collinearity showed that multicollinearity was not a problem (Dominance, Tolerance = .50, VIF = 1.99; Feeling Heard, Tolerance = .50, VIF = 1.99). The scatterplot of standardized residuals illustrated that the data met the assumptions of homogeneity of variance and linearity. Last, a Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted to see whether dominance was normally distributed since feeling heard and relationship satisfaction were already tested in the previous assumption checks. The test showed dominance was not normally distributed ($W = 0.968, p = .03$). Therefore, the data was again bootstrapped.

Mediation Analysis. A summary of the mediation analysis can be found in Figure 2. First, the direct effect of dominance on relationship satisfaction was analyzed (*path c*). Dominance did not have a significant direct effect on relationship satisfaction ($b = .03; p = .70, SE = .08, 95\% CI [-.12, .18]$), meaning that the extent to which someone experienced their partner as dominant in their described conversation did not directly influence how satisfied they were with their relationship after that conversation.

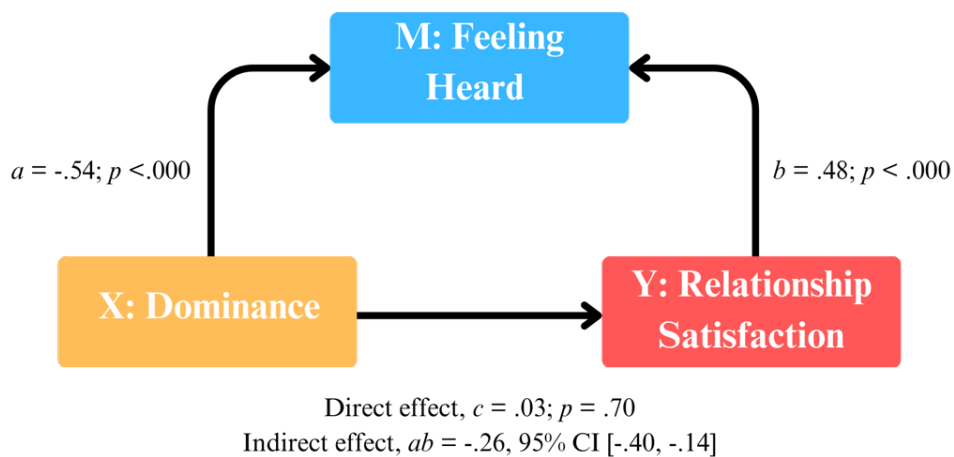
Second, the effect of dominance on feeling heard was analyzed (*path a*). This showed a significant negative relationship between the two variables ($b = -.54; p < .000, SE = .06, 95\% CI [-.66, -.43]$), meaning that when a participant experienced their partner as more dominant in their described conversation, this caused them to feel less heard in that conversation.

Following, the effect of feeling heard on relationship satisfaction was examined (*path b*). This relation was again positive and significant ($b = .48; p < .000, SE = .10, 95\% CI [.28, .67]$), showing that when people felt more heard in their described conversation, this caused them to be more satisfied with their relationship after that conversation.

Lastly, the mediation itself was analyzed (path c'). The indirect effect of dominance on relationship satisfaction via feeling heard was significant ($b = -.26$; $SE=.07$, 95% CI [-.40, -.14]), indicating that feeling heard is a mediator for the relation between dominance and relationship satisfaction. This means that if someone felt their partner was dominant in the conversation they described, this caused them to feel less heard in that conversation, which resulted in less relationship satisfaction after the conversation. The findings also suggest the presence of a suppression effect: while the direct effect between dominance and relationship satisfaction was not significant, adding feeling heard as a mediator made the relationship stronger and significant. Therefore, feeling heard is an important variable that explains the relationship between dominance and relationship satisfaction in this mediation.

Figure 2

Mediation Analysis Summary of the Effect of Feeling Heard on the Relation Between Dominance and Relationship Satisfaction (N = 90)



Conclusion and Discussion

This study aimed to investigate whether people felt less satisfied with their relationship when they experienced an unequal distribution of power with their partner in everyday conversations about household labor, and if the relationship between these two variables was affected by the extent to which they felt heard in these conversations. As described in the literature, an unequal power distribution in which one partner can influence

the actions, thoughts, and emotions of their partner without their partner influencing them to the same degree in return, may be harmful to satisfaction in romantic relationships (Galinsky et al., 2008; Gray-Little & Burks, 1983; Lindová et al., 2020; Simpson et al., 2015). It was speculated that this might be partly due to couples' experiences of everyday conversations (Lindová et al., 2020), in which an unequal power distribution might lead to them feeling less heard (Roos et al., 2021), causing these lower levels of relationship satisfaction (Collins, 2022; Kuhn et al., 2018). It was also speculated that the presence of an unequal power distribution would lead to the partner higher in power behaving more dominant in these everyday conversations (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Farrell et al., 2015; Lindová et al., 2020), possibly also affecting feeling heard and relationship satisfaction (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Roos et al., 2021). To look deeper into the relations between these variables, a survey ($N = 90$) was conducted which looked at everyday conversations between partners on the topic of household labor.

The Relations between Power, Dominance, Feeling Heard, and Relationship Satisfaction

The first hypothesis predicted that when people experienced an unequal distribution of power between themselves and their partner in everyday conversations about household labor, this would cause them to be less satisfied with their relationship. No evidence has been found for this hypothesis: the extent to which people experienced an unequal distribution of power in conversations about household labor did not affect the extent to which they were satisfied with their relationship after a specific conversation about this topic.

The results showed that the majority of participants indeed experienced an unequal distribution of power with their partner, which is in line with what was expected based on previous research (Bruhin, 2003; Felmlee 1994; Peplau, 1979; 1984; Peplau & Campbell, 1989). However, the literature also suggested that an unequal distribution of power would

cause a lower level of relationship satisfaction (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983; Lindová et al., 2020). This was not reflected in the data of this study.

A first possible explanation for this difference could be the new angle of this study which specifically focused on power distribution in everyday conversations between couples, while the previous studies focused on power distribution in the general relationship. Focusing on the topic of household labor has exposed that although people do experience an unequal power distribution with their partner given the topic of household labor, this does not necessarily have to lead to less satisfaction with their relationship after a conversation about this topic. An unequal power distribution concerning a small area in the relationship may have too little effect on relationship satisfaction because although the measure for relationship satisfaction measured how satisfied the participants felt with their relationship after the conversation they described, the participants could still have included other factors in their assessment, therefore still leading to higher scores on this measure. To conclude, it seems that an unequal power distribution only leads to negative consequences for relationship satisfaction when it is present in the general relationship rather than in a specific area.

A second possible explanation for these deviating results could be the topic regarding everyday conversations chosen, namely household labor. When it comes to this topic, it might be the case that people do not regard unequal power distribution as a problem since it might be an area in life for which they are used to it being unevenly distributed in society in general. Prior studies showed that the division of household labor can still be quite traditional when looking at gender, with women doing more tasks compared to men (Breen & Cooke, 2005; Dilli et al., 2019; Presser, 1994). That could be because the division of household labor is a context that plays an important metaphoric role in illustrating gender (Brines, 1994), in which people can strengthen and embody their sense of being a woman or man (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In other words, these two findings could indicate that certain traditional

unequal patterns concerning the division of household labor could arise in a relationship based on the fact that people act like what has been expected from their gender in the past. The division of household labor may have led to a certain distribution of power that aligns with this division. So, this might point out that the reason why an experienced unequal power distribution concerning household labor does not have to hinder relationship satisfaction is because people assume an unequal power distribution is normal and got used to it over time.

The second hypothesis predicted that the extent to which people felt heard by their partner in everyday conversations about household labor would mediate the effect that an experienced unequal distribution of power with one's partner leads to lower relationship satisfaction. Although no relationship was found between power and satisfaction, it was nevertheless decided to look at this mediation effect to possibly gain more understanding of the results. No support was found for this second hypothesis: the results of the mediation analysis showed no significant mediation effect of feeling heard on the relationship between power and relationship satisfaction. Experiencing an unequal power distribution with one's partner in conversations about household labor did not result in feeling less heard in the described conversation, which did not lead to less relationship satisfaction after that conversation. Yet, the results did show a positive significant relation between feeling heard and relationship satisfaction, meaning that when people felt more heard in the conversation they described, this caused them to be more satisfied with their relationship after that conversation. This found connection is in line with previous research and indeed shows the expected positive relationship between feeling heard and relationship satisfaction (Collins, 2022; Kuhn et al., 2018).

This study also took an explorative look at dominant communication behavior in everyday conversation between romantic partners and its consequences on feeling heard and relationship satisfaction, since the literature showed close positive relations between power

and dominance (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Farrell et al., 2015; Lindová et al., 2020) and a possible connection between dominance and feeling heard (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Roos et al., 2021). However, the results showed no correlation between power and dominance, meaning that when people experienced an unequal distribution of power with their partner in everyday conversations about household labor, this did not show in the amount of dominance that was present in the described conversation.

A possible explanation for this could be the measurements of the scales. The scale for power indicated that the higher the participant scored, the greater power they experienced in their relationship in comparison to their partner. The scale for dominance measured if someone experienced their partner as dominant, not if they were dominant themselves. That being the case, it may have resulted in a mismatch between the two variables, since power related to the participant and dominance only to their partner, losing some of the potentially at-play relations between power and dominance. For example, the answers to the general question asking who took the lead in the conversation showed that 38,2 percent of the participants said they took the lead, suggesting that over one-third of the participants did experience some form of dominance which was not included in the measurement of the scale. Since the literature suggested that when there is an unequal power distribution between partners, the partner with more power is likely to be dominant (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005), it could have been the case that when the scale for dominance had focused on the dominant behavior of the participant instead of the behavior of their partner, that a correlation would have been found. Also, since the survey was not performed in dyads, there is no data available from both sides of the relationship, resulting in an unclear picture of the relative power distribution and dominant behaviors between a couple.

Nevertheless, the results showed that dominance did have a significant negative relation with relationship satisfaction: if people experienced their partner as being dominant in

their described conversation, they were less satisfied with the relationship after that conversation. This is in line with previous research since it was suggested that dominant communication behaviors would lead to a lower level of relationship satisfaction (Cundiff et al., 2015; Lindová et al., 2020). The second performed mediation analysis looked deeper into this effect. It showed the presence of a suppression effect: the direct effect between dominance and relationship satisfaction was not significant, but when feeling heard was added as a mediator, the relationship did become significant and stronger. Thus, if someone felt their partner was dominant in the conversation they described, this caused them to feel less heard in that conversation, which resulted in less relationship satisfaction afterward.

These findings show that feeling heard is an important factor in the relationship between dominance and relationship satisfaction and are again in line with previous research: it was expected that when dominant communication behaviors were present in the conversation, someone would feel less heard (Roos et al., 2021), which could lead to lower levels of relationship satisfaction (Collins, 2022; Kuhn et al., 2018). By strengthening these results, this study contributes to previous research because of its main focus on everyday conversations between romantic partners, whereas previous research mainly focused on other interpersonal relationships and the overall sense of perceived responsiveness between romantic partners (Adair et al., 2018; Gable & Reis, 2010; Itzchakov et al., 2022; Roos et al., 2021). Focusing on particular communication events in the form of everyday conversations, therefore, offers new insights into the effects of dominant communication behaviors on feeling heard and relationship satisfaction.

Combining all the variables and the above-mentioned results, it can be concluded that an unequal distribution of power in everyday conversation between couples about a specific topic might not have to cause lower levels of satisfaction and feeling heard, as long as people do not experience an unequal distribution of power in their overall relationship. It does

however have negative effects on relationship satisfaction via feeling heard when inequality is present in the form of dominant behavior in these everyday conversations. Feeling heard is thus a key factor that establishes the relationship between dominance and relationship satisfaction: a higher level of perceived dominance of the partner caused lower levels of feeling heard, resulting in less relationship satisfaction.

Limitations and Future Directions

Sample

The sample of this study consisted mostly of women (80 percent) and the average age was relatively low ($M = 34.71$, $SD = 11.98$), meaning that the results have limited generalizability because men and people of older age are not well-represented in the data. As mentioned before, prior studies showed that when an unequal power distribution was present, the man was most likely to be the dominant partner (Felmlee, 1994; Peplau & Campbell, 1989; Peplau, 1979; 1984). This could be because power can trigger certain characteristics of an individual related to the concept, including dominance. These characteristics are related more to masculinity than femininity (Hong & van der Wijst, 2013). Hence, the potential consequences of an unequal power distribution between men and women on the topic of this study can only really be explained when you speak to an equal number of men and women. Based on these findings, having an equal amount of men and women in the sample might have had an interesting effect on the scores for power and dominance: if more men were included in the data, they might have scored higher on perceived power and lower on dominance, which could have influenced the results.

Also, previous research illustrated that the way household labor is divided can change over the course of a relationship; over the years women start to do fewer household duties (Artis & Pavalko, 2003; Lam et al., 2012). This changing division might result in a more equal distribution of household labor and power among older couples compared to younger

couples, which can reduce the occurrence of dominant behavior and change its effects on feeling heard and relationship satisfaction. Future research could look further into these differences concerning gender and age and their possible effects on the results by using a minimum quota for gender and deliberately targeting different age groups.

Topic

This research only looked at one specific topic concerning everyday conversations, namely household labor. Since there has been a limited amount of research into the working of power dynamics and its consequences in everyday conversations, and the results for power are different when specifically looking at household labor compared to power in the general relationship (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983; Lindová et al., 2020), the found results can possibly also be linked to this specific domain. To overcome this possible limitation and get a more general understanding of the way power, dominance, feeling heard, and relationship satisfaction work in these everyday conversations between partners, future research might look at other topics regarding everyday conversations couples discuss, such as finances, raising children (Betcher & Macauley, 1990), or leisure (Rauer et al., 2020).

The Measure for Dominance

As previously explained, the scale for dominance focused on whether the participant experienced their partner as dominant, not if they were dominant themselves. To get a better understanding of the specific ways dominance works in everyday conversations, future research could focus the measurements both on the dominance of the partner and the perceived dominance of the participant to see if this causes different effects for the extent to which they feel heard in these conversations and are satisfied with their relationship after these conversations. The measuring could be done in dyads, so it can also be seen whether partners within a relationship have the same experiences and perceptions regarding dominant behavior.

Recall Bias

Important to mention is the possible occurrence of a recall bias when the participants were asked to describe a past conversation between them and their partner. A recall bias refers to remembering an event more or less intensely based on how long ago it happened (Colombo et al., 2020); the more time has passed since it happened, the more or less intensely it will be described. Hence, this bias possibly caused the participant to describe their conversation differently than it truly happened, increasing the chance that the results that were found can be explained by a flaw in the method instead of the theory discussed (Patten, 2003). Still, the recall bias does not have to be a shortcoming since people often base their judgments on their interpretation and experience of a particular conversation and not on the way it factually happened. So, thinking back to a conversation and describing it could be a good base for answering statements about how an individual experiences their relationship and the conversations about household labor that happen in that relationship. Nonetheless, to still reduce the chance of a recall bias in future research, the time elapsed could be minimized, for example by explicitly directing participants to write down the last conversation they had with their partner in which they had to make a decision. Another possibility would be to let couples decide on a topic in a lab, record and analyze the conversation, and question both partners individually on the different variables afterward.

Practical Implications

The results offer some implications that can be considered for practice to increase relationship satisfaction, enhance relationship success, and prevent possible negative effects on personal health mentioned at the beginning of this study (Bradbury & Lavner, 2012; Kansky, 2018; van Eldik et al., 2020). First, since power was not significantly related to any of the other variables, it can be assumed that experiencing an unequal distribution of power with one's partner in everyday conversations about household labor does not necessarily have

to have negative effects on relationship satisfaction, as long as the unequal distribution does not lead to dominant behavior of the partner in a conversation about the topic. The occurrence of dominant behavior does however have negative consequences for relationship satisfaction and feeling heard within these conversations. To reduce the occurrence of dominant behavior, couples could focus on the way they discuss a topic such as household labor together. By becoming more aware of how to communicate with each other in a respectful, effective, and attentive way, these discussions might become less unevenly divided when it comes to dominance. In this way, couples can have more balanced conversations and therefore experience more relationship satisfaction.

Second, as dominance had a significant negative relation to feeling heard, it is important to realize that when someone is showing dominant behavior, it can result in other people not feeling heard in a conversation. When someone does not feel heard, they will be less satisfied with the relationship, which can result in a possible break-up (Felmlee, 1994). Therefore, it is important to make sure that someone feels heard, which might once again be done by trying to prevent dominant behavior from happening. This could also be done by paying attention to one's own behavior in a conversation with one's partner. As explained earlier, dominant conversation partners tend to have a greater say than their partner when making a significant decision (Farrell et al., 2015), determine the subject(s) and direction of the conversation (Linell et al., 1988), and tend to not take into account their partners demands and desires (Parker, 2009). By being conscious of these behaviors and paying attention to them, someone can try to prevent those behaviors from happening in a conversation and in that way make their partner feel more heard. The results of this study could also be included as a topic during couples' therapy, so couples become more aware of the effects of dominance and feeling heard on their relationship.

Conclusion

To give a concluding answer to the research question, it can be said that experienced power distribution between romantic partners in everyday conversations about household labor is not connected with relationship satisfaction. The relationship between these variables is also not affected by the extent to which someone feels heard in conversations about the topic. Dominance did however have a negative relation with relationship satisfaction: if someone experienced their partner as more dominant in a conversation about household labor, they were less satisfied with their relationship after that conversation. Also, feeling heard showed to be a mediator in this relationship: if someone felt their partner was dominant in a conversation about household labor, this caused them to feel less heard in that conversation, which resulted in less relationship satisfaction after that conversation.

Although the results of this study were different than expected and also differ in some respects from previous research, it also brings new theoretical and practical insights to the research area concerning power dynamics, dominance, feeling heard, and relationship satisfaction. So, to conclude, it is not the general distribution of power with regard to household labor that matters, but the occurrence of dominant behavior as a form of inequality in everyday conversations on the topic.

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Appendix

The Performed Survey in Dutch

Welkomsttekst & toestemming

Welkom!

Fijn dat je wilt deelnemen aan dit onderzoek van Tilburg University. Lees voordat je aan het onderzoek begint onderstaande informatie zorgvuldig door.

Met deze vragenlijst onderzoeken wij de impact van gesprekken over het huishouden onder mensen die samenwonen met hun partner. Deelname brengt geen risico's met zich mee en jouw antwoorden zijn anoniem en vertrouwelijk. Deelname is volledig vrijwillig en je kunt op elk moment stoppen met het onderzoek. Mocht je hier nog andere vragen over hebben, of over het verdere verloop van dit onderzoek, neem dan contact op met Elisanne van As via c.e.vanas@tilburguniversity.edu.

De enquête zal maximaal 10 minuten duren. Alvast bedankt voor het invullen!

- *Ik geef hierbij toestemming voor mijn deelname aan dit onderzoek*
- *Ik geef hierbij GEEN toestemming voor mijn deelname aan dit onderzoek en wil stoppen*

Demografische gegevens

1. Wat is je leeftijd?
2. Met welke geslacht identificeer jij je? *Man – Vrouw – Wil ik liever niet zeggen – Anders, namelijk:*
3. Woon je samen met je partner? *Ja – Nee – Anders, namelijk:*
 - Als iemand 'nee' antwoordt, eindigt het onderzoek.

Instructie

Denk terug aan een typerend gesprek dat je in het echt hebt gehad met je partner, waarin jullie een beslissing moesten nemen met betrekking tot het huishouden. Dit kan bijvoorbeeld gaan over de verdeling van huishoudelijke taken, zoals eten koken, boodschappen doen, afval wegbrengen, schoonmaken, etc.

Kan je zo'n gesprek herinneren? *Ja – Nee*

- Als iemand 'nee' antwoordt, eindigt het onderzoek.

Geef hieronder een korte omschrijving van dit gesprek (minimaal 100 tekens).

- Minimale lengte 100 tekens, maximale lengte 1.000 tekens.

Controlevraag

1. Was dit gesprek representatief voor andere gesprekken over het huishouden die je hebt met je partner? *Ja – Nee – Anders, namelijk:*

Vragen over ‘feeling heard’ (5-puntsschaal: helemaal oneens – helemaal eens)

De volgende uitspraken gaan over hoe jij het gesprek dat je zojuist hebt omschreven hebt ervaren. Geef aan in hoeverre je het eens bent met elk van deze uitspraken.

1. In dit gesprek voelde ik mij gehoord
2. In dit gesprek heb ik kunnen zeggen wat ik graag wilde zeggen
3. In dit gesprek was de ander meer met zichzelf bezig dan met wat ik zei
4. In dit gesprek luisterde de ander naar wat ik zei
5. In dit gesprek probeerde de ander zich in mij te verplaatsen
6. In dit gesprek was de ander ongevoelig voor mijn gedachten en gevoelens
7. In dit gesprek behandelde de ander mij met respect
8. In dit gesprek begrepen we elkaar

Vraag met betrekking tot dominantie in het gesprek

1. Wie had de leiding/was dominant in het gesprek? *Ikzelf – Mijn partner – We waren gelijk – Anders, namelijk:*

De volgende uitspraken gaan over hoe jij het gesprek dat je zojuist hebt omschreven hebt ervaren. Geef aan in hoeverre je het eens bent met elk van deze uitspraken.

(7-puntsschaal: helemaal oneens – helemaal eens)

1. In dit gesprek probeerde mijn partner mij te overtuigen
2. In dit gesprek probeerde mijn partner de controle te houden
3. In dit gesprek probeerde mijn partner niet mijn gunst te winnen
4. In dit gesprek probeerde mijn partner mijn goedkeuring te krijgen
5. In dit gesprek probeerde mijn partner mij niet te beïnvloeden
6. In dit gesprek had mijn partner de overhand
7. In dit gesprek beschouwde mijn partner ons als gelijk
8. In dit gesprek wilde mijn partner met mij samenwerken
9. In dit gesprek behandelde mijn partner mij niet gelijk

Vragen over ‘relationship satisfaction’

De volgende uitspraken gaan over jouw relatie met je partner. Houd bij het beantwoorden het gesprek dat je eerder hebt omschreven in gedachten en geef aan in hoeverre je het eens bent met elk van de volgende uitspraken.

(5-puntsschaal: helemaal oneens – helemaal eens)

1. Na dit gesprek, voelde ik dat ik een hechte relatie heb met mijn partner.
2. Na dit gesprek, voelde ik dat mijn partner en ik problemen hebben in onze relatie.
3. Na dit gesprek, voelde ik dat ik erg blij ben met onze relatie.
4. Na dit gesprek, voelde ik dat mijn partner over het algemeen begripvol is.
5. Na dit gesprek, voelde ik dat ik vaak overweeg om onze relatie te beëindigen.
6. Na dit gesprek, voelde ik dat ik tevreden ben met de relatie met mijn partner.
7. Na dit gesprek, voelde ik dat we het vaak oneens zijn over belangrijke beslissingen.

8. Na dit gesprek, voelde ik dat ik geluk heb gehad met mijn partnerkeuze.
9. Na dit gesprek, voelde ik dat we het eens zijn over hoe we onze kinderen willen opvoeden.
10. Na dit gesprek, voelde ik dat ik denk dat mijn partner tevreden is met onze relatie.

Vragen over machtservaringen (6-puntsschaal: nooit – altijd)

De volgende uitspraken gaan over jouw machtservaringen op het gebied van het huishouden in de relatie met je partner. Ze refereren niet naar het specifieke gesprek dat je eerder hebt omschreven, maar gaan over het onderwerp in het algemeen. Geef aan in hoeverre je het eens bent met elk van deze uitspraken.

1. Ik heb meer te zeggen dan mijn partner wanneer we beslissingen maken over het huishouden.
2. Ik heb meer controle over het maken van beslissingen over het huishouden dan mijn partner.
3. Wanneer we beslissingen maken over het huishouden, heb ik het laatste woord.
4. Mijn partner heeft meer te zeggen dan ik wanneer we beslissingen maken over het huishouden.
5. Mijn partner heeft meer controle over de besluitvorming dan ik op het gebied van het huishouden.
6. Wanneer we beslissingen maken over het huishouden, heeft mijn partner het laatste woord.
7. Wanneer mijn partner en ik beslissingen maken over het huishouden, heb ik de neiging om de discussie te structureren en leiden.
8. Ik heb de neiging om problemen op het gebied van het huishouden vaker ter sprake te brengen dan mijn partner.
9. Wanneer mijn partner en ik beslissingen nemen over het huishouden, heeft mijn partner de neiging om de discussie te structureren en te leiden.
10. Mijn partner heeft de neiging om vaker dan ik problemen ter sprake te brengen bij beslissingen op het gebied van het huishouden.

Eindvraag

1. Hoe voel je je op dit moment over jouw relatie met je partner? *Geef een cijfer van 0-10.*

Eindtekst

Bedankt voor het invullen van deze vragenlijst. Met dit onderzoek willen we kijken of wanneer mensen een machtsverschil ervaren tussen zichzelf en hun partner tijdens een alledaags gesprek (over het huishouden), dit invloed kan hebben op de mate waarin zij zich gehoord voelen in dit gesprek en hoe tevreden ze aan de hand daarvan zijn over hun relatie. Mocht je na het invullen nog vragen hebben over het onderzoek, neem dan contact op via c.e.vanas@tilburguniversity.edu.