WOMEN AND POWER:

Psychology's Search for New Directions

by Hilary M. Lips

Power is a word that echoes with images. A dictator screams orders at trembling subordinates. An executive topples financial empires with a single phone call. Significantly, outside of the fantasy world of witches and sirens most of the images are masculine.

Feminist psychologists now attempting to discern the existing and potential relationships between women and power find themselves hindered by the very masculinity of such images. Do we see power as masculine simply because men generally have more power than (and power over) women in this society? Or

is it also the case that in our masculine-dominant society we have learned to view only certain kinds of behaviour as powerful and are therefore insensitive to power that is centered in women (or in other "powerless" groups)? Can women increase their power? The answers to these questions are surrounded by a host of scientific, personal and political implications. What has psychology to offer in sorting out the issues?

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Power in Social Psychology

Power is most commonly defined in social psychology as the capacity to control or influence another's behaviour. Thibault and Kelley (1959) suggest that the amount of power held by an individual is indicated by the range of behavioural outcomes through which s/he can move another person.

As simple as the definition appears, psychologists have been quick to acknowledge that power is not a simple concept. French and Raven (1959) and Raven (1965) delineated six different kinds of power: six different methods of exerting control or influence over other people. In this typology, reward power involves getting one's way by offering a reward for compliance; coercion means controlling people through the use of threats; referent power involves influencing people by getting them to identify with oneself; legitimate power is exercised when a person makes a demand that s/he has a "right" to make by virtue of a certain role or position; expert power is used when someone uses his/her status as an expert to enforce demands; and informational power involves using the possession of information that others do not have to influence or control them.

Feminist researchers have recently begun to shed some light on the way societal sex roles interact with the type of power used by women and men.

Anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo has pointed out, for example, that women in various cultures shared a common lack, not of all kinds of power, but specifically of that type of legitimate power known as authority (Rosaldo, 1974). She claims that the open exercise of power by women has been seen in virtually all cultures as disruptive and illegitimate. Therefore, although women have exercised plenty of "behind the scenes" power in most cultures, it has usually been both covert and unacknowledged. Jessie Bernard (1972) has made a similar point when writing about marriage in North America. She suggests that women do not necessarily have less power than men in the marriage relationship. Rather, she argues, the wife and husband usually conspire to hide the wife's power. Again, cultural requirements have dictated that the woman's use of power be covert.

Psychologist Paula Johnson has recently theorized that the sex roles allotted to women and men differ in their preferred power styles along three dimensions: directness-indirectness, concreteness-personalness, and competence-helplessness (Johnson, 1976). The female role dictates that women use power in an indirect "undercover" way (often called manipulation) while men are permitted more openness and directness in their influence attempts. Thus, for example, while a woman may use French and Raven's reward or coercion power techniques, she must be very subtle in order to avoid breaking out

of her role and being cast as a "bitch" or "castrating female." On Johnson's second dimension, men are seen as more likely to wield power based on concrete resources such as money, knowledge, position and physical strength, while women's power is expected to derive most often from personal resources, such as affection and sexuality, which are specific to particular relationships. Men, then, having greater access to concrete resources, are expected to rely more heavily than women on expert and informational power and on direct reward and coercion. Women, on the other hand, may use their personal resources to wield strong referent power or may bargain or threaten with their love or sexuality, as long as this process is not too obvious and direct. Finally, on the third continuum, men are expected to wield power by being competent (expert and informational power), while women wield it by being helpless and dependent. Interestingly, the use of helplessness by women is classed by Johnson as a kind of "legitimate" power. In our society, women have a right to be helpless, and therefore to be helped, in a large number of situations.

Johnson's analysis, which has received some support from her own research (Johnson, 1976; Johnson & Goodchilde, 1976), begins to show how current sex roles, while not totally denying power to women, prevent them from growing in strength and power. She notes that a user of indirect, covert power may find it difficult to develop a self-image as a powerful person, and that

reliance on personal or helpless modes of influence renders a person dependent on certain relationships. In Johnson's scheme, then, the kinds of power that women are most likely to use, while effective in the short run, may reinforce women's dependence on men in the long run.

Power as a multidimensional concept

The social-psychological approach discussed above is obviously limited in that it applies most readily to interpersonal power and less clearly to power in the political and economic arenas. Yet even in the interpersonal sphere, an argument can be made for a broader definition of power.

The inadequacy of the definition to popular social understandings about interpersonal power is revealed by asking people, in an open-ended way, how they would go about influencing another person. Informal discussion of this issue with my own students suggests that, while many people give answers that can be readily characterized in terms of French and Raven's and/or Johnson's scheme, a substantial minority of others do not. As the hypothetical influence situation moves closer to home, the percentage of "unclassifiable" responses seems to mount. There are those among both my male and female students who feel uncomfortable with the idea of exerting power over someone else, particularly as that someone is pictured as a friend, family member or spouse rather than an anonymous stranger. These students, when asked, for example,

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how they would go about influencing a reluctant spouse to take a joint vacation in a specific place, either tend to refuse to see the issue in power terms (for example, "I just wouldn't. I'd go where I wanted and he could go where he wanted") or else to fantasize a situation where neither person really loses to the other (for example, "We would work it out so that we took turns choosing where to go on vacation"). The students who respond in this way seem not to be speaking out of a position of weakness or powerlessness but from both a sense of their own personal power and strength and a co-operative orientation which is neglected in our current thinking on power.

In her recent book on the psychology of women, Jean Baker Miller (1977) notes that the concept of power has traditionally implied a winner-loser situation. Viewed within this framework, the power of another person is always seen as dangerous. Thus, within a two-party framework, any increase in power for one of the parties automatically leads to a decrease in power for the other. The quest for power, in this scheme, is always a competition.

It is becoming apparent, however, that the definition of power need not (and perhaps can not) be restricted to the ability to influence or control another. This insight emerges in the writings of various thinkers, as well as from an examination of some social-

psychological research completed during the past twenty-five years. From the writers comes the assertion that power can be for oneself without implying control over others. From the research comes the notion that power can exist and be used in a co-operative framework as well as a competitive one., i.e., that it can be for oneself and for others at the same time.

Miller (1977) suggests that the power which women really need is that which can be defined as the "capacity to implement" (p. 116). Women, she argues, must be free to implement their abilities. This kind of power seems to imply a lack of constraint by and dependence on others, but not domination of them. It involves a refusal to be controlled rather than a necessary exertion of control over other people. In a similar vein, Rich (1976) writes of a concept of "powerfulness" which implies the ability and freedom to direct one's expressive energy outward in some creative effort rather than being forced to suppress it. This powerfulness stems from the development of the self rather than from the domination of others. Finally, both Daly (1973) and Tillich (1954) write about a "power of being" which involves a radical recognition, enhancement and development of the self and which, to be authentic, cannot be separated from the forces of love and justice.

There is ample precedent, then, for a notion of power which is chiefly for

the self and which only secondarily or not at all implies control over others. Perhaps this might be termed personal (as opposed to interpersonal) power. Miller (1977) makes a strong argument that an increase in this type of power for someone is ultimately beneficial rather than detrimental to others. For the greater an individual's development, she believes, the greater is her effectiveness and the less her need to restrict or limit others.

Research in social psychology has tended to suggest that, at least in the lab, women are less comfortable than are men in exerting power over others. Women tend, when possible, to use power in a co-operative rather than exploitative way. For example, in studies of coalition formation in three-person games (Vinacke, 1959; Bond and Vinacke, 1961) it has been found that men tend to form coalitions (alliances) with other players only when this will help to win the game and to maximize their own gains. Women, on the other hand, form alliances to achieve the best outcome for all players, so that each player will have a fair share of the final prize. These differences seem to hold for both single-sex and mixed-sex groups. Worthy of note is the fact that women do as well or better than men in terms of total points earned, despite the fact that their strategy is not an exploitative one.

A number of studies have also shown that when asked to allocate rewards to themselves and partner(s) as payment for task performance, women and men behave differently. Men generally follow an equity rule, allocating rewards on the basis of perceived inputs. Women tend to favour a more equal distribution of rewards, regardless of input. However, when they themselves have relatively low inputs, women may penalize themselves more than they would someone else. (See Sampson, 1975 and Deaux, 1976 for reviews of this literature) These results have been interpreted to mean that women are often more concerned with the interpersonal aspects of a situation than with the material rewards. Thus, they choose to safeguard relationships by de-emphasizing status differences and, in some instances, accepting smaller rewards. If this interpretation is correct (and I believe it may represent at least part of the truth) then women are operating in a value system which may be very positive in its human-centeredness. On the other hand, some additional factors must be considered in the explanation of these results. Perhaps, as women are simply not accustomed to having the power to dominate others, they do not use it effectively. Or perhaps, to return to Johnson's (1976) analysis, the directness and overtness of the power use required in the experimental situation is too uncomfortable for women who have been trained to use a manipulative mode of influence and to maintain an image of unselfishness. Perhaps, also, women

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tend to undervalue their own contributions in these situations, as they do in so many others (Frieze, 1975). Further research may sort out these explanations. In the meantime, however, we are left with the suggestion that women feel more comfortable when co-operating with other adults than when using power to control them, at least in an experimental situation. Whether this holds true in less overt and structured situations, and whether women's power relationships with children fall into the same pattern are questions that require some empirical work. Perhaps the most important aspect of the results to date, however, is the demonstration that people can and do choose to use power co-operatively, with effective results. Even in the research lab, power need not always involve a win-loss situation.

Some may argue that for the sake of clarity the term power should be reserved for the traditional definition used by social psychologists. However, expanding rather than limiting our definition of power seems important because the traditional definition, representing a somewhat distorted view of what is popularly understood as power, constrains us to label as powerless the person who cooperates with others or who concentrates on the strong effective expression of her self and her abilities rather than on the manipulation of others.

If power has been defined too narrowly by psychology in the past, how can our approach be broadened? The important point is that power should not be considered as a single dimension. One dimension of power is that traditionally called power by social psychologists: the capacity to influence the behaviour of others. However, there are other dimensions that require exploration, particularly personal power (power for the self, the capacity to implement one's abilities) and the kind of collective or cooperative power demonstrated by women in the research or reward allocation. There is reason to believe that these dimensions are independent of one another to some extent. For example, a person who is very good at manipulating others (and therefore high in interpersonal power) may actually have little sense of personal power.

Significant work on the dimension of personal power is underway in psychology in two general areas: the exploration of feelings of power and powerlessness and the communication of power.

Feeling Powerful

Surely the first step in the rearrangement of power relationships between women and men is the deepening of women's recognition of themselves as potentially and/or actually powerful. The issue of this recognition is being tackled by psychologists and others on at least three fronts:

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images, attributions and the re-con-
ceptualization of certain "feminine
weaknesses."

At the recent conference of the Asso-
ciation for Women in Psychology, a
highlight of a workshop on women and
power was one participant's discussion
of her attempt to maintain an image of
herself as strong and powerful just
after the birth of her child. Rather
than succumb to the patriarchal vision
of the "little mother," she had de-
vised for herself an image with which
she could identify that was both
powerful and appropriate: that of a
lioness.

This anecdote brings into sharp relief
both the importance of images in an
individual's life and the shortage of
powerful female images with which women
can identify. It has long been recog-
nized in social psychology that fe-
males, lacking readily available
achieving and powerful women as
models, are at a disadvantage in the
social learning of certain achievement
orientations. Yet, the problem is now
recognized as being more serious: the
accepted imagery of power and the
accepted imagery of femininity in this
society are totally incompatible and
mutually exclusive. "Proper" feminine
images are filled with powerlessness
and weakness, and those feminine
images which do incorporate power are
portrayed as evil and frightening (the
witch, the wicked stepmother, etc.).

Although the incongruity of social
notions of femininity and of power has
been noted for many years by feminist
writers (see, for example, de Beauvoir,
1952), it is perhaps the feminist
theologians (e.g., Daly, 1973; Fioren-
za, 1976) who have been forced to con-
front it in its deepest sense. God,
the ultimate image of power, is in-
escapably male--not just male, but also
a father. The strength of the hold
that this image has on our western
consciousness can perhaps be gauged
by the violence of people's reactions
to the idea of women as priests, rabbis
and ministers. Many people recoil from
this notion as blasphemous, and some
feminists have had to struggle with
the "rightness" of this image as they
have with no other.

Can our culture develop images of
power for women? Some important steps
are being taken in this direction.
Pressure is being exerted on the media
to portray women more often as strong,
competent and powerful. While the
response to such pressure is agonizing-
ly slow, powerful women as role models
are somewhat more obvious now than they
were in the past. Perhaps more ex-
citing, because it seems to be happen-
ing more quickly, is the growth of a
new awareness that women have the
ability and the right to develop their
bodies so that they are physically
strong and competent. Female athletes
are becoming more visible and an in-
creasing number of women are developing
a sense of pleasure in their own

strength. Research is beginning to indicate that these changes can have a significant impact on women's self-perceptions (see for example, Rohrbaugh, 1979, and Duquin, Note 1).

In the area of psychotherapy, interesting work is being done in helping women to come to terms with their images of themselves as powerless. Britain (Note 2), for example, reports on the use of dreams to help women realize the extent to which they have connected femininity with powerlessness. One theme which emerges here is that of women being hampered, restricted, tripped or vulnerably exposed by the "feminine" clothing they find themselves wearing in their dreams. These images occur even for successful professional women. Clearly the notion of feminine weakness is a difficult one to dislodge.

Why is the equation of femaleness with weakness sometimes so difficult to dispel, even when it runs counter to one's intelligence and experience? The answer to this question may be at least partially found in the way people explain their experience and their behavior. The process of attributing causes for behaviour has enjoyed considerable attention in social psychology in recent years. Research suggests that it is intimately tied in with sex roles and with feelings of effectiveness and power.

According to Weiner, Frieze, Kukla,

Reed, Rest and Rosenbaum (1971), four frequent explanations for a person's success or failure are ability, effort, luck and level of task difficulty. Ability and effort are considered internal factors, originating within the individual. Luck and task difficulty, on the other hand, are environmental factors, external to the individual. Furthermore, ability and task ease are thought of as relatively stable and unchanging, while both effort and luck are unstable factors capable of large fluctuations.

Frieze (1975) points out some logical implications of various possible patterns of causal attributions. She explains, for example, that a person feels maximum pride and security in her success when she sees it as due to the internal stable factor of ability, while success attributed to external factors brings less pride. Frieze points out also that if basic lack of ability is seen as the cause of a failure, there is little tendency to "try again," because the person has little reason to believe that failure can be changed to success.

Frieze argues that high self-esteem is theoretically associated with internal, stable attributions for success and external or unstable attributions for failure. The sexes, she points out, appear to differ somewhat in their preferred attributional patterns. Women more often than men show patterns which are the result of and/or con-

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tribute to low self-esteem. She cites a number of studies that show women making more external attributions than men for both their successes and failures, and notes that men rely more heavily on ability and women on luck to explain their successes. More recent research (Bar-Tal & Frieze, 1977) shows a sex difference in attribution patterns even among highly achievement-motivated women and men, with the women using effort and luck to explain both their successes and failures, and the men relying heavily on ability to explain success and on external factors to explain their own failures.

The above perspective suggests that men and women, even under conditions of equal success, often do not experience success in the same way. Men have learned to expect success and to regard it as a source of pride. Women, on the other hand, seem to view their successes as less susceptible to their own control, and therefore as less reliable and less worthy of praise. It is not surprising, then, that women may maintain a self-image of weakness and powerlessness even when their behaviour seems to others to be a demonstration of power and strength.

Frieze suggests that, to enhance their self-image, women need not just an extra "dose" of success, but also re-education in ways of interpreting their successes so that they result in increased self-esteem and continued striving. Such a re-education process,

in terms of both general socialization and therapy, seems to be the next obvious problem for psychologists to tackle in this area. Women must learn to take credit where credit is due if they are to develop a sense of their own powerfulness.

In terms of re-education, a slightly different approach is taken by Miller (1977). She suggests that, in the process of recognizing their own powerfulness, women must re-conceptualize some of their "weaknesses" as potential strengths. She points out, for example, that in our society, men have been taught to deny and women have been taught to cultivate the feelings of vulnerability and weakness that are an inevitable part of our experience. She argues that, while this state of affairs results in women's being considered the weaker sex, women's tolerance of their feelings of vulnerability is actually a strength. Psychological growth, she suggests, involves repeated feelings of vulnerability throughout life. If an individual flees from or denies such feelings, possibilities for growth are lost. Women, then, can learn to look upon their very openness to and understanding of weakness as a strength, as long as they work productively with those feelings rather than remaining trapped in them.

All of the above approaches toward feeling powerful have in common a focus on women's difficulty with

acknowledging their own powerfulness. In this sense, they provide an echo as well as an expansion of Johnson's (1976) notion that women are unlikely to use direct, overt modes of power. This does not, of course, imply that women are to blame for their own powerlessness. There are strong social, physical and economic constraints against the open use of power by women, whether it be power over someone else or a demonstration of power to be, become, or implement abilities. Perhaps, because of these constraints, women have a reluctance to admit their powerfulness even to themselves. It appears unlikely, however, that women will grow in power until they learn to accept, develop, build on and revel in their own strengths.

Communicating Power

Johnson's (1976) analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of different power modes seems to argue for the notion that feeling powerful is inextricably related to the communication of power. She argues, it will be remembered, that the user of indirect power does not receive credit for the influence s/he exerts because it is hidden. Thus, the individual continues to be treated as powerless and perhaps does not experience the gain in self-esteem that would occur if her/his effectiveness were recognized by others. It seems likely that this analysis applies to power in its broader sense and not just in its "power-over" sense. It may be diffi-

cult to continue feeling powerful if one's power must continually be hidden.

The question of how power is communicated is being pursued on at least two related fronts in psychology: nonverbal communication and assertiveness training. Work in both areas has assumed tremendous importance for women.

Nancy Henley (1977) has contributed a ground-breaking analysis of how power differences between the sexes are maintained nonverbally. She notes that women tend to be more constrained, controlled and non-intrusive in their posture, smile more, stare less, and are less often the initiators and more often the objects of touch, than are men. All of these behaviours are also characteristic of subordinates in dominant-subordinate relationships. Moreover, she suggests that the actions of a woman who breaks these rules by staring at or touching men are interpreted as sexual invitations rather than as power gestures, which are both unexpected and unacceptable in women. Such an interpretation is often punishing to the woman, as it leads to unwelcome kinds of attention and embarrassment. If her gesture is interpreted correctly as a power signal, it is also likely to be met with punishment--in the form of a nonverbal threat or strong re-establishment of dominance by the man.

Henley's analysis is particularly interesting in view of the notion that women rely heavily on indirect forms of

power. Since the content of non-verbal communication is usually unacknowledged in our culture, such communication should be a prime vehicle for the exertion of indirect power. Indeed it is, but only, it seems if women stay within the rules. Weakness and helplessness, communicated nonverbally, can be strong sources of power. Impatience, irritation, tears, coldness--all signals of trouble to be negotiated in a relationship--are more than adequately communicated by nonverbal means and can be used by women seeking power through appeals to personal resources. If, as Henley suggests messages communicated nonverbally fall into the two general categories of power and intimacy, women seem, paradoxically, to wield most of their power by using the intimacy category! Henley's research and analysis suggest that in many situations the assertion of power either in terms of dominance or of simple self-confidence may require more directness, even when done nonverbally, than many women (or others in a subordinate position) find comfortable. The discomfort associated with power messages, stemming from years of social control, may lead women to fall back on the messages that communicate degree of liking, loving and intimacy as a less direct way of wielding power. A greater awareness of the work of Henley and others in this area may lead to some shifts in interaction patterns that result in women's being able to express power more directly.

One force within psychology which focuses on helping individuals to increase their effectiveness by being more direct in their communication in the assertiveness training movement. Much assertiveness training has been developed specifically for women, under the assumption that they are less assertive than men (see, for example, Phelps & Austin, 1975). The training encourages the individual to recognize clearly her own thoughts and feelings and to express them directly and honestly. It may thus help women to allow their powerfulness more open expression as well as to be more direct in their influence attempts. Perhaps there are problems with this approach. Henley (1977) notes that women's non-assertive behaviour does not occur in a vacuum but in interaction with men. Focussing on the behaviour of one party, particularly the subordinate party, in the interaction, may therefore not be as effective as one would wish. Furthermore, she points out, the emphasis on the woman's behaviour seems to represent a "blaming the victim" approach to the problem of woman's subordinate status. Her comments lead to the suggestion that assertiveness trainers should direct more of their attention toward training men to be less aggressive (also a component of assertiveness training). They ignore, however, the observations of many assertiveness trainers and trainees that women are often unassertive with other women as well as men.

A final comment made by Henley underlines the need for sweeping changes in political and economic power hierarchies as well as in the interpersonal ones. Many women, she says, are in positions where it is simply too dangerous for them to be assertive. "Uppity" women risk losing their jobs. For examples it is instructive to read the accounts of women who have refused to suffer in silence the sexual harassment inflicted on them at their jobs. Many, upon registering a complaint, have been fired. See Lindsey (1977). Similarly, assertiveness training does not protect a woman from the threat of physical violence. Indeed, some might argue that a woman is increasing her chances of being beaten by an enraged and violence-prone husband if she tries to be assertive with him.

Despite all the problems and limitations, however, one can argue that assertiveness training presents valuable possibilities in terms of power for individual women and for women as a group. It may help individual women to achieve and communicate a sense of their own powerfulness in certain situations. It may, through its stress on honesty of expression help women to be more direct with one another and thus strengthen the bonds among them. Even in situations where assertive behaviour is ineffective, it has the saving grace of making the conflict very clear. No longer need women belittle themselves for not having the courage to make certain demands. Instead, they can channel their emotional energy into anger when the demands they make are ignored! It should be clear that neither assertiveness training nor any other method of helping women to recognize and communicate their own powerfulness can be regarded as a solution to the problem of male dominance. These methods may be an important beginning, however, in helping women to develop the self-confidence, collective strength and courage to create the conditions where both women and men can be powerful in the broadest sense.

Conclusion

Power is a crucial issue for women. If psychology is to continue to contribute in a meaningful way to the understanding of power, it is essential that it not be trapped in a definition that includes only dominance and control. It is easier to measure the extent to which one person can influence another than to ascertain the extent to which any individual is implementing her abilities or expressing his creative energy. Yet the latter problem must be tackled.

A number of possibilities for research emerge from the present discussion. In terms of traditional definitions of power, how do women use power with children? How might alterations of the social context change the effectiveness of certain kinds of power or affect sex differences in power use

and expression? To what degree and in what ways are changes in expressed powerfulness in an individual (or group) met with changes in those with whom s/he interacts? How does an awareness of the power being communicated nonverbally in an interaction affect the behaviour of the participants? What is the relationship between the experience of powerfulness and behaviour which expresses that power?

Insights into the relationship between women and power have come from several areas of psychology. Perhaps not surprisingly, psychology has more to say about personal and interpersonal power in the lives of individual women than it does about social, economic and political power structures and how these can be changed. It is the contention here that this personal and interpersonal approach is not trivial or diversionary, but that it represents a necessary and important beginning in the creation of a culture wherein individuals are not constrained by role expectations enforced through economic and emotional dependence.

NOTES

1. M. Duquin, "Androgyny, attributions and athletics: Reviewing the role of sport in female passages." Paper presented at the Fifth National Conference on Feminist Psychology, Pittsburgh, March 1978.

2. S.D. Britain, "Contribution to S. Britain and J. Douglas," Beyond depression to power. Panel presented at the Fifth National Conference on Feminist Psychology, Pittsburgh, March 1978.

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