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Equal Partnership Through Mutual Attunement and Mutual Decision-Making

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Equal partnership in marriage—or equal relational power—develops as each spouse improves their ability to influence each other in personal needs, interests, and goals. Power is an inescapable part of romantic relationships and the way power is distributed impacts many aspects of the marriage including marital quality, stability, and intimacy. Couples who struggle with unequal power can benefit from developing and practicing mutual attunement and mutual decision-making. Healthy levels of attunement allow spouses to become more connected as they show awareness and interest in what matters to their spouse. Seeking equal decision-making power for both partners can also lead to increased perceptions of equity and trust. This literature review will discuss how equal partnership in marriage increases as couples practice both mutual attunement and mutual decision-making.

Equal partnership marriage includes spouses sharing power and sincerely trying to hear each other's voices (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012). Many cultures are in the process of changing expectations of women and men (Knudson-Martin & Huenergardt, 2010), and many couples are beginning to more fully understand the importance of equal partnership in a marriage (Knudson-Martin & Huenergardt, 2010; LeBaron et al., 2014). Equal partnership—also called equal relational power—is demonstrated as each spouse improves their ability to influence each other in their personal needs, interests, and goals (Knudson-Martin, 2013; Leonhardt et al., 2019). Research indicates that power is an inescapable part of romantic relationships, and how both spouses perceive their marital power influences their relational well-being (LeBaron et al., 2014; Leonhardt et al., 2019). The way power is distributed in a marital relationship impacts how the marriage functions, affecting marital quality, marital stability, marital happiness, intimacy, and relationship success, as well as the spouses' physical and mental health (Knudson-Martin, 2013; LeBaron et al., 2014).

Power dynamics affect the way a couple communicates, thus affecting emotional connectivity and feelings of equality (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012; LeBaron et al., 2014). Couples who struggle with unequal power may benefit from developing mutual attunement to the feelings, needs, and cues of their spouse. Mutual attunement means that couples influence each other in thoughts, feelings, and actions—showing that each spouse is aware and interested in the other spouse (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012; Knudson, 2013). Having healthy levels of attunement allows couples to be connected and show awareness to each other, without giving up their differentiation of self—or sense of self (Dell'Isola et al., 2020; Priest, 2019). Couples who practice mutual attunement in their marriage also maintain more equal decision-making power (Leonhardt et al., 2019; Worley & Samp, 2016a; Worley & Samp, 2016b). Mutual decision-making power involves both spouses realizing a decision needs to be made, examining possible solutions for the decision, and choosing a plan of action (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2020).

Couples' efforts to understand their own marital power dynamics and how equality is portrayed in their marriage is beneficial because power differences are often overlooked, limiting equal partnership and the ability to have mutual attunement and mutual decision-making (Knudson-Martin & Huenergardt, 2010). Research shows that as couples come to understand that equality produces greater connection in their marriage, those in the higher power position are often willing to reallocate their positions of power (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012; LeBaron et al., 2014; Leonhardt et al., 2019). The desire to be more relationally connected encourages many couples to become more focused on sharing influence and decision-making (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012; Leonhardt et al., 2019). Research denotes that couples that have mutual influence in their relationship, respect both partners' opinions as valid, are both responsible for making final

decisions, followed by both partners supporting the decisions, experience greater connection and happiness in their marriage (LeBaron et al., 2014; Leonhardt et al., 2019; Jensen et al., 2013).

Although equal partnership in a marriage may require effort to create and maintain, couples who work towards a more equal balance of power have greater marital satisfaction through mutual attunement and mutual decision-making. This literature review will first discuss equal partnership as it relates to mutual attunement in a marriage and then discuss how this attunement facilitates mutual decision-making.

Equal Partnership Through Mutual Attunement

Couples who develop equal partnership practices have the most attunement in their marriages (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012; Knudson-Martin, 2013). Couples' attention to mutual attunement means that spouses are relatively equal in expressing, and achieving goals, needs, and interests; noticing and attending to their spouse's needs; seeing that one spouse does not continually organize his or her life around the other; sharing burdens; and equally supporting each spouse (Knudson-Martin, 2013; Nice et al., 2019). These relational responsibilities can bring trust in to the relationship as spouses equally respond to the other and share responsibility for maintaining the relationship, which is made possible by deliberate listening to and sharing needs (Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018; Knudson-Martin, 2013). The following sections will provide evidence on how greater mutual attunement in a marriage facilitates equal partnership between a husband and wife.

In some marriages, unequal relational power is difficult to overcome as unequal power dynamics may be hidden (Nice et al., 2019). In unequal relationships, the spouse with more power tends to be less aware and tuned in to the needs and interests of the spouse in the lesser power position (Knudson-Martin & Huenergardt, 2010; Nice et al., 2019). Thus, the spouse in the power position may not realize they are the one with the power, as the less powerful spouse automatically accommodates the one with more power (Knudson-Martin & Huenergardt, 2010; Nice et al., 2019). When couples seek greater equality, they often return to what may be culturally supported and comfortable, even if it doesn't mutually support each partner's needs (Jensen et al., 2013; Nice et al., 2019). Mutual attunement occurs as couples are relationally present, and each spouse shows awareness to the interests and needs of the other spouse (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012; Knudson-Martin, 2013).

Couples with shared relational power recognize how to tune in to each other's emotional state, which is key to better communication, better relationship quality, and improved joint decision-making (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012). As attunement is reciprocal, both spouses are willing to accept influence and accommodate each other, allowing both to feel cared for and valued (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012; Knudson-Martin, 2013). However, many couples that desire equal partnership struggle with thwarted attunement (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012). Thwarted attunement is when couples want to have a deep connection, but due to unsolved relational problems, they are not able to tune in to and support each other (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012; Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018). Providing support for each other is beneficial for couples' well-being and positive feelings about the relationship, and a good relationship involves spouses openly talking about their problems and supporting each other through them (Biehle & Mickelson, 2012; Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018).

Equal partnership influences the ways couples communicate and feel emotionally connected; self-disclosure or the process of couples sharing personal thoughts, fears, goals, and preferences allows each spouse to give sensitive support to the other and have greater attunement in the relationship (Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018; Jensen et al., 2013; Knudson-Martin, 2013; LeBaron et al., 2014). Emotional support in marriage, both support received and support provided, are made possible as spouses participate in personal self-disclosure (Biehle & Mickelson, 2012; Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018). The practice of self-disclosure allows one spouse to see vulnerability in the other spouse, allowing each to gain a clearer understanding of what their spouse needs; understanding what a spouse needs can increase the chances that those needs are met (Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018; Jensen et al., 2013). Mutual spousal support, including self-disclosure and sensitively supporting each other, is also important for the positive feelings about the status and well-being of the relationship (Biehle & Mickelson, 2012; Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018; Jensen et al., 2013). However, there may be differences in the way many men and women self-disclose and support each other (Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018; Jensen et al., 2013).

As mutual attunement creates greater shared relational power (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012), understanding possible differences in men and women, especially how they self-disclose and support each other, is important in establishing equal power relationships (Biehle & Mickelson, 2012; Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018). Research finds that women often self-disclose more than men, and women who feel their husbands self-disclose less than them may have lower relationship satisfaction as they perceive the

relationship as unequal (Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018). Women tend to place a greater value on managing others' emotions, and wives often provide more sensitive support than their husbands (Biehle & Mickelson, 2012). While women may find it easier to provide sensitive support, research shows that when men provide more sensitive support, not only are their wives happier, but the men are also happier with their marriage as both spouses feel more equal in their shared relational responsibility (Biehle & Mickelson, 2012; Jensen et al., 2013). Spouses attain equal partnership when both regularly practice self-disclosure and sensitive support; these skills help spouses to show more conciliatory and appropriate behaviors to each other as they share both good and bad moments and openly talk about their concerns (Biehle & Mickelson, 2012; Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018; Jensen et al., 2013)

Equal Partnership Through Mutual Decision-Making

Couples who have shared relational power and who are able to mutually influence each other also demonstrate mutual decision-making practices (Leonhardt et al., 2019; Worley & Samp, 2016a; Worley & Samp, 2016b). Decision-making power is important in family life because it brings increased perceptions of equity and trust into the marriage (Osamor & Grady, 2018; Worley & Samp, 2016a). Couples who believe that power in the relationship is distributed equally and decisions are made jointly, leading to greater respect and care for each other's needs, experience higher relationship quality (Osamor & Grady, 2018; Lindová et al., 2020). The following paragraphs will provide evidence on how mutual attunement leads to mutual decision-making and increases equal partnership in a marital relationship. Spouses who can attune, sensitively share, and support each other also have the greatest success at the practice of equal decision-making (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012; Knudson-Martin, 2013). The balance of power creates greater relational influences, and in decision-making, couples are better able to attune to and understand what is important to each spouse in the relationship (Worley & Samp, 2016a; Knudson-Martin, 2013). Having mutual decision-making allows couples to more willingly voice opinions to each other and validate each other (Knudson-Martin & Huenergardt, 2010; Worley & Samp, 2016a). Couples that practice mutual decision-making are likely to obtain better outcomes to decisions as more options are explored when both partners' voices are heard and valued (Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018; Worley & Samp, 2016a). Marriages that have unequal decision-making power between spouses can move toward equality as the more powerful spouse learns to share power during the decision-making process (Knudson-Martin & Huenergardt, 2010; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2020).

Problems in marriages are perceived as less severe when couples have equal decision-making power (Worley & Samp, 2016a; Worley & Samp, 2016b). Equal decision-making couples consider problems as less severe because they understand that their voices will be heard, making it more comfortable to voice relational concerns and making it easier for each spouse to support the other when these concerns are known (Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018; Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012; Worley & Samp, 2016a). Research shows that women are more likely to bring up relational problems, and when men sensitively respond to these concerns, joint decisions can increase marital satisfaction for both partners (Jensen et al., 2013; Worley & Samp, 2016b). In essence, relationships are most satisfying when decision-making power is perceived as equal and partners feel a sense of fairness (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2020; Worley & Samp, 2016b).

Mutual decision-making is also important to relationships because couples who share more with each other perceive stronger intimacy and support (Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018; Worley & Samp, 2016a). Previous work shows that while joint decision-making has a positive effect on marital quality for both men and women, the effect may be larger for women (Worley & Samp, 2016b). This finding could be attributed to women tending to bring relational problems up (Worley & Samp, 2016b), and especially for women, romantic love may be linked to the power they have to make decisions (Lindová et al., 2020). The supportive behavior of mutual decision-making facilitates intimate communication and allows spouses to respond in positive and understanding ways as they emphasize mutual concern for the goals of each partner (Rauer & Volling, 2013; Worley & Samp, 2016a). Because of this, couples with equal decision-making power expect positive outcomes when concerns are expressed or decisions need to be made (Worley & Samp, 2016a; Worley & Samp, 2016b). Daily marital decisions regarding housework and finances are more successful as the couple practices equal decision-making (LeBaron et al., 2019; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2020). Couples who are egalitarian are more likely to have an equal division of labor, creating more satisfaction in the marriage (LeBaron et al., 2014), yet couples who discuss household chores may find greater satisfaction even if the division of labor is more traditional (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2020). Similarly, couples who jointly manage finances have lower conflict and more stability in their marriage (LeBaron et al., 2019). Couples who have issues with the division of labor regarding housework can improve their relationship as they both contribute to decisions about the division of labor (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2020). The ability to mutually influence each other in regard to housework and finances is positively associated with how powerful a spouse feels in the relationship (LeBaron et al., 2019; Taniguchi &

Kaufman, 2020). Couples who talk about family matters, mutually make decisions, and support each other report higher quality marriages (Rauer & Volling, 2013; Worley & Samp, 2016b).

Conclusion

Mutual attunement, or the ability for couples to communicate with both self-disclosure and sensitive listening, is significant to the development of equal partnership. (Jensen et al., 2013; Knudson-Martin, 2013; Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018). Also important to equal partnership, and facilitated by mutual attunement, is mutual decision-making, as couples who make decisions together know their voices will be equally heard (Worley & Samp, 2016a; Worley & Samp, 2016b). Research shows that both mutual attunement and mutual decision-making produce marriages that have greater relational power with increased perceptions of trust in the marriage (LeBaron et al., 2014;

Leonhardt et al., 2019; Lindová et al., 2020; Worley & Samp, 2016a). Trust comes about as couples both take responsibility for maintaining the relationship by equal participation in good communication practices (Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018; Knudson-Martin, 2013). This literature review has implications for therapists, as therapists may help couples recognize any unequal power patterns and respond appropriately to interrupt the usual flow of power (Knudson-Martin & Huenergardt, 2010; LeBaron et al., 2019). To aid couples who have an imbalance of power, therapists can focus on these four conditions that foster relational power: shared relationship responsibility, mutual vulnerability, mutual attunement, and mutual influence (Knudson-Martin, 2013; Knudson-Martin & Huenergardt, 2010). Helping couples notice how power works in their marriage may bring about significant marital benefits as equal partnership increases (Knudson-Martin, 2013; LeBaron et al., 2014).

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