

# THE PROBLEM OF power

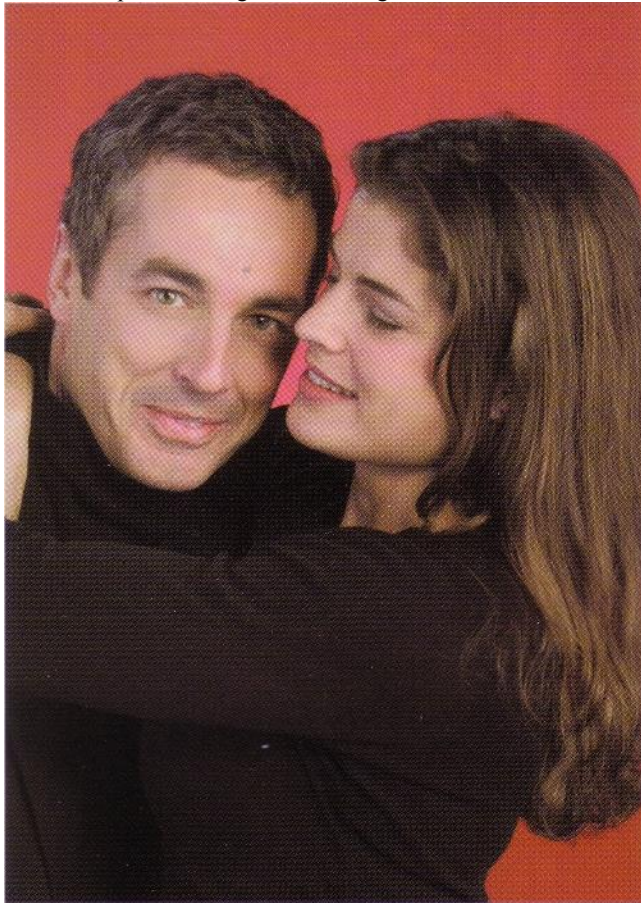
by Dolah Saleh

In an episode of the *I Love Lucy* sitcom, when she thinks she has discovered her husband's infidelity, a resigned Lucy asks her sidekick, Ethel: "Doesn't eleven years count for anything? Shouldn't I get a gold watch or something? Or at least a letter of recommendation?"

Early TV shows often depicted women somewhat controlled by the men in their lives, especially when it came to finances, decisions to work outside the home, and in raising their children. In the 1950s, it was still generally understood that the woman typically kept the home in order and took care of the basic needs of the children. A traditional male/female union meant that the man held the bulk of the power since he provided for the economic support of the family.

## The more things change, the more they stay the same

Now the lines of demarcation have been blurred, with women actively pursuing professional careers and jobs that contribute in some cases significantly to the household income. This substantial movement of women into the paid labor force represented the most important change in advancing our



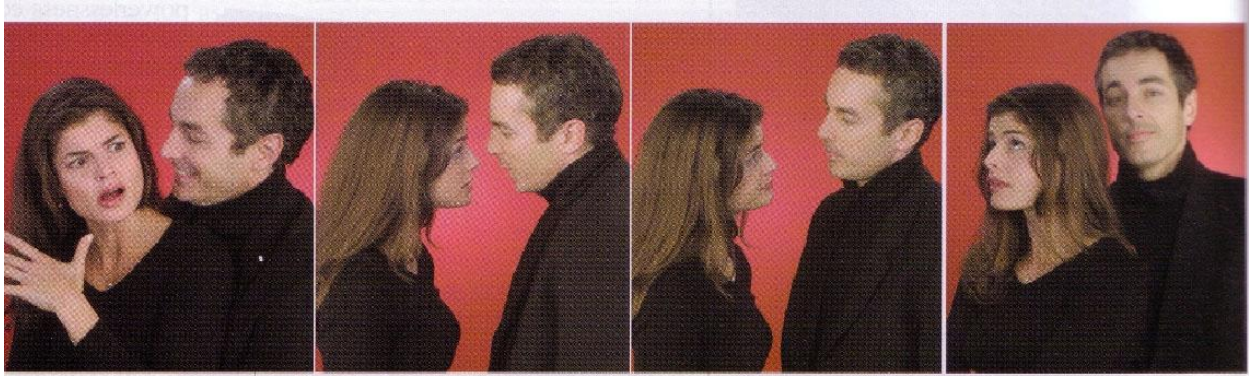
society from the traditional sex roles. But while this has obviously brought women power, it has also caused frustration, as women continue to take on and are expected to take on the majority of the responsibility for the home and any children hence the self-sabotaging "super mom" syndrome. Since husbands have not significantly increased the time they devote to domestic tasks, career advances for women have only added to the ongoing gender conflict.

It is believed that all conflict revolves around a struggle for power and it would seem that the "stronger man" wins. Is there a difference, however, between an overt rule by intimidation and threat, and a covert dominance through manipulation and passive aggressive behavior? And is the difference gender related?

Let's face it, when it comes to conflicts between man and woman, whether in personal or professional relationships, it is still very much a man's world. As authors Anne Moir & David Jessel write in their controversial best seller, *Brain Sex* (1991), "The biggest behavioral (sic) difference between men and women is the natural, innate aggression of men, which explains to a large degree their historical dominance of the species." The authors go on to assure their readers that this is not so much a learned trait, contrary to some prevailing and persistent sociological arguments, but a "male feature," a biological imperative.

Scientific evidence that affirms how the brain of man and woman differ suggests that there will never be an equality of the sexes. Not acknowledging this difference makes us intolerant to and in near perpetual conflict with

one another and the idea of power struggles an inevitable and irresolvable misfortune. This not only perpetuates disharmony between man and woman but also ultimately compromises peace among humans.



From a pure female perspective, power plays would be antithetical to their natural instincts. If they had their druthers, I am reasonably certain that women would be happier if they did not need to be concerned with power struggles with men, with other women, or even with any system. Women just seem to be better at social diplomacy. (Moir & Jessel)

Of course, the 'battle of the sexes' is centuries old. Shakespeare's work, which reflected standard gender images in society as far back as the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, was replete with commentaries on male and female power or control and lack thereof. For example, in *Hamlet*, when Laertes genuinely weeps over the death of his sister, he says, "the woman will be out," to claim that the feminine part of him is having a hard time containing itself. And when Lady Macbeth decides to get actively involved in her husband's fatal deed, she implores, "Come, you spirits ...unsex me here, And fill me ...of direst cruelty," meaning that cruelty is more a manly rather than naturally womanly characteristic.

It may be that as individuals we are apportioned power in accordance with social standards and biases and that we enter into couple relationships with that given set of power attributes. Points might be "assigned" for things like position or social status, money, celebrity, and good looks. But while couple relationships probably start out on equal footing, power becomes unevenly distributed as children enter the picture and the family becomes dependent upon the greater wage earner of the family. This evolution, while not inevitable; might occur because someone feels they are not getting their needs met, senses a powerlessness, and for that reason gives in to a need to control the situation.

The problem is that on the other side of someone's need to control is an individual being controlled. It is a win/lose mentality where one is victor and

the other victim. According to Claude Steiner, author of an old book I was required to read in graduate school, *Scripts People Live (1982)*, power plays are techniques employed to get a person to do something they do not want to do. He said that winning through power is security gained by way of control over the situation. But control and power are not satisfying; satisfaction is about getting enough of what we need. And this is not achieved through a power play but rather through cooperation.

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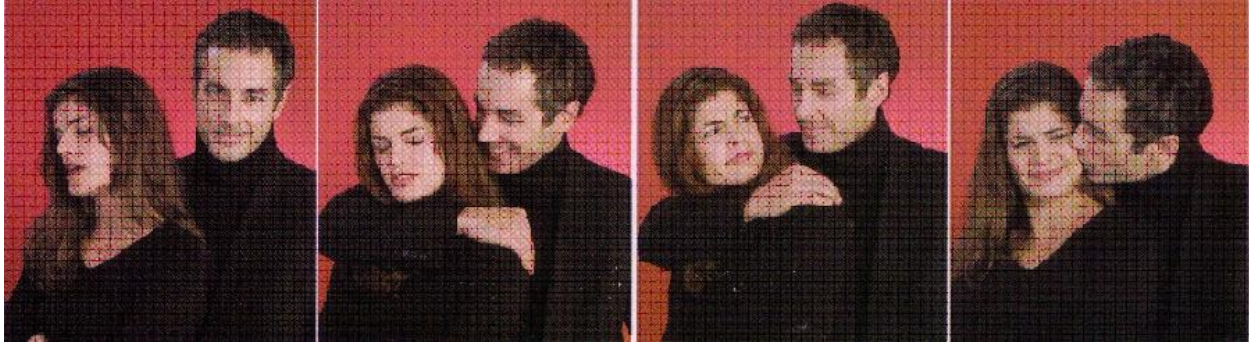
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Couple #1

### **A typical stand-off**

Lisa and Mike got married while still in college. Because Lisa became pregnant, the decision was made for her to temporarily suspend plans to complete her education to stay home and care for the children while Mike aggressively pursued his entrepreneurial spot in the world of business. But soon, Lisa became disillusioned with her life as she felt more and more "controlled" from budget limitations to physical attractiveness expectations. "There was no struggle, he was clearly the one in power," said Lisa. In exchange for Mike's support of the family, Lisa

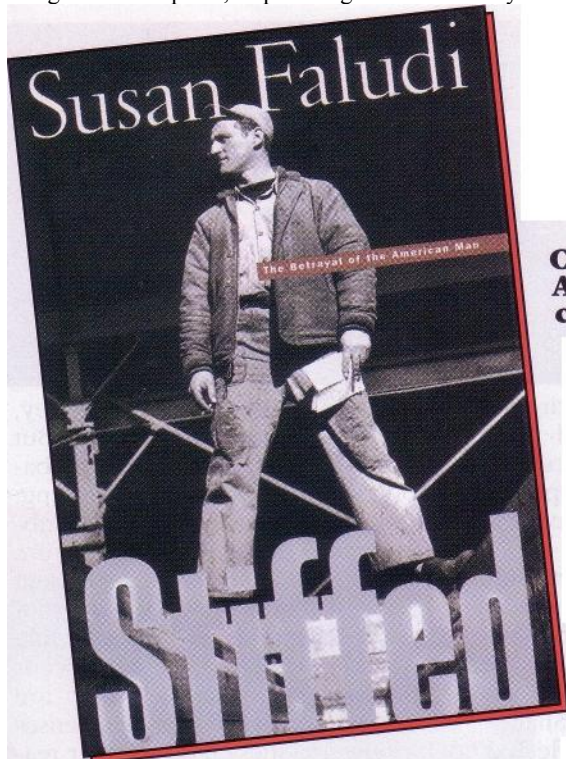
was expected to care for the children, maintain a clean and orderly home, be beautiful and sexy, ready with a home-made meal upon greeting him on the nights he was



in town, all within a particular and predetermined budget. This left Lisa feeling used and under appreciated. Eventually, she found a way to complete her education, received a Masters in Fine Arts, and became the artist she had originally set out to become before having two children. Seventeen years into the marriage-and after several attempts at counseling-Lisa gave up and asked Mike for a divorce.

Lisa later said that her expectations were minimal. She only wanted to be appreciated. She had done what was expected of her and longed for acknowledgment of a job well done. Her anger led to a borderline desire for revenge, not easily comforted by her most reliable resource, her faith. In a recent book written by Harold Kushner, *Living a Life That Matters* (2001), he explains that our feelings of victimization arise from a sense of powerlessness over what has happened to us. And often, what we seek is merely an acknowledgment that removes those feelings of powerlessness and restores our ability to tolerate or accept, mitigating or eliminating any demands for vengeance.

Also, exerting power and control over another is an oppressive act, never to gain a positive outcome. Perhaps Mike and Lisa's marriage could not be saved, but Lisa's need for validation and appreciation and her concern for her own sense of powerlessness could have been addressed. As Kushner explains, being heard and taken seriously cures the sense of helplessness that being a victim imposes, empowering us to reclaim any loss of dignity that may have occurred in the process.



**Couple #2:  
A contemporary  
compromise**

Dr. Michael Lenta, a very successful surgeon, married Linda Talman, an attorney. Although they now have three children and a wonderful life, Linda has retained her maiden name and always continued to work as a company attorney. Many people, including her husband, says Linda, can't understand why she doesn't put her career on hold for a brief time while her children are still very young, making comment such as "It isn't like you need the money," or, "You'll regret your choice not to spend more time with the children while you still can." Linda is satisfied with her choice, but there exists "moderate tension" with her husband, who dislikes the frequency with which the children need to be in the care of nannies and non-family persons.

One might suggest that Linda fears losing her power position with her husband if she chooses not to work outside the home. Many professional women, especially those who work only part time at their careers, tell me that in terms of financial benefit, often it is not the most cost effective choice but they do it anyway, to "keep (their) foot in the door," or even to preserve contact with the adult world. They feel that this makes them more interesting partners and less frustrated mothers, even as it may add to moderate feelings of guilt. Perhaps it allows these women to feel more in control over their lives, less dominated by and dependent on a man.

### **Couple #3:**

#### **Happy with tradition**

When Larry, a surgeon with a successful practice, met Michelle, she was a divorced

mother of two with a great job as a RN. Once they married, Michelle quickly resigned her position and proceeded to have two more children with Larry. She readily admits that she neither misses her work nor has any desire to resume her career. It is possible that Michelle feels perfectly satisfied in the traditional role, adequately appreciated for her contributions, and content with her dependence upon her husband. Our individual perceptions on the matter regardless, Michelle may feel neither controlled nor dominated by Larry and therefore not powerless in the relationship.

#### **Couple #4: Happy with concessions**

As soon as children came along, Diane and Tom jockeyed for position as two attorneys with active social schedules and a busy practice. Diane felt that Tom gave up nothing, particularly as he continued to maintain his active golf schedule while she was left during those hours to be at home with the children. While there were problems at first, Diane has decided to "pick (her) battles" and resigned herself to pay for help at home and to accept Tom's desire to be on the golf course every weekend. They have compromised, she said, with time schedules and child care allowances and attention to the relationship. "It works," Tom said, "we're both satisfied."

At least one psychotherapist that I had read about during this investigation believes that control and power are a natural phase in a love relationship and that when handled in an emotionally healthy manner can evolve into true love. Does that mean that couples who fail like Lisa and Mike, never loved each other quite enough? And that Diane and Tom always did have the "right stuff"? Or did Diane simply manage it better than did Lisa in her situation? It is possible, too, that time and patience are the most important elements in resolving most power struggles.

#### **When genders are the same**

Contrast these cases with same sex partnerships and one may be led to believe in the inevitability of gender conflicts. Suzanne and Sherry are a gay couple who have both been married and have had families. "It's so different in this relationship," said Suzanne. "When Sherry works, I make dinner, when she is home, she makes it. And we both dean up after-not as a 'favor,' but just in a spirit of cooperation." There is no delineation in which is "woman's" work and which is a "man's job" in their relationship, they explained. Both take out the garbage, keep the property maintained, and wash clothes.

Still, with biological imperatives predisposing us to differences in priorities, ambitions, and behavior notwithstanding, and power distributed according to social biases, not all men dominate their women partners. The cooperative arrangements expressed by gay couples are echoed in professional couples without children. Again, one might infer the balance of power in these cases is dependent on an acceptable level of financial independence-contributing to a desired joint lifestyle. And, having listened to a number of people comment on their capable mothers who "allowed [a father] to *think* he was in charge," I was reminded of the power of covert or passive aggressive behavior in managing couple relationships. I heard this kind of sentiment expressed more than once and it reminded me how it may indeed be just a matter of time in learning how to manage-as long as the love is there.

#### **The new male angst**

And there is something else that has happened to men in recent history that may not be so readily acknowledged, but has the power to unite men and women and neutralize any need, real or imagined, for dominance. Not because of the feminist movement or affirmative action, but because men have been "Stiffed," says Susan Faludi in her analytical and revolutionary diagnosis of the male dilemma, written about extensively in her book of the same name (1999). She says that men have not fared so well, contrary to what we might think in terms of their biological "advantage" over women. Instead, beginning with the baby boomer age, they have experienced a social tragedy, having had little or no real definition or direction in what it means to be a man.

Faludi "breaks down the familiar lines of (the) gender battle" as her investigations take her from the steel industry to the porn industry, from male dominated institutions to the marital relationship. She discusses a

constraining cultural force which tells of men feeling ornamental, that rather than resolving what it means to be masculine, "their masculinity lies in figuring out how to be human," how to be useful to society and lead meaningful lives.

In the end, Faludi's examinations uncover a parallel between men and women, a point with which to unite rather than fight. She writes of men having "a historic opportunity" and suggests an impending rebellion "commensurate with women's and, in the course of it, to create a new paradigm for human progress that will open doors for both sexes."

We have a social responsibility to create the peace and harmony from which we all obviously will benefit-a situation where the urge to control will be replaced by understanding and acceptance of our differences.

*With over fifteen years of experience in counseling, Dolah Saleh is also the author of Dating and the Pursuit of Happiness (available at [www. amazon. com](http://www.amazon.com)).*