

Feeling powerful in heterosexual relationships: cultural beliefs among couples of Mexican origin

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Previous research indicates that women can have difficulty negotiating safer sex strategies with their partners because of power imbalances in sexual decision-making. Because what makes men and women feel powerful may be culturally-specific, understanding cultural beliefs regarding feelings of power could have important implications for HIV/STI prevention. The cultural beliefs of 40 couples of Mexican origin were examined in relation to what makes men and women feel more powerful in their heterosexual relationships. Participants indicated their level of agreement with 43 statements regarding what makes women and men feel more powerful in their relationship with their main partner. Data were analysed using cultural consensus modelling techniques. Analyses revealed that participants comprise a single cultural group with a set of shared beliefs about what makes men and what makes women feel more powerful in their relationships. Cultural beliefs about what makes men and women feel powerful were very similar: physical attractiveness and employment were central to both models. Participants also shared strong beliefs about the role of economic resources in men's and women's feelings of power in relationships.

Introduction

A current public health priority is strengthening women's ability to protect themselves from HIV/STIs and to negotiate safer sex behaviours with their heterosexual partners. Latino women are of particular interest for several reasons. First, in the USA they are disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS as well as other STIs. For example, the annual rate of AIDS reported in 2000 among Hispanic adult/adolescent women (13.8 per 100,000) was over six times the rate among non-Hispanic White adult/adolescent women (2.2 per 100,000) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2000). Compared to non-Hispanic White women, Hispanic women also have higher rates of chlamydia, gonorrhoea, and syphilis (Division of STD Prevention, 2000). Furthermore, HIV infection and AIDS have increased dramatically among US women over the past 10 years and, since 1994, heterosexual contact has been the largest exposure category (CDC, 1999). Among Hispanic adult/adolescent women,

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heterosexual contact was the exposure category for 47% of AIDS cases and 45% of HIV infection cases reported up to December 2000 (CDC, 2000).

Male condoms are currently the only widely accepted means for controlling the transmission of HIV and other STIs for sexually active couples. Some men may be unwilling to use condoms and, due to gender-based power imbalances, some women may be unable to negotiate use (Amaro 1995). Wingood and DiClemente (2000) define lack of 'perceived control or power to avoid unhealthy behaviours' as a behavioural risk factor that influences women's risk of HIV. Several researchers have suggested that women are likely to have difficulty in negotiating safer sex strategies with their male partners because of perceived power imbalances in sexual decision-making among men and women (e.g., Worth 1989, Fullilove *et al.* 1990, Amaro and Gornemann 1992, Amaro 1995). Previous studies indicate, however, that women's inability to negotiate condom use is one of the strongest correlates of poor condom use (Wingood and DiClemente 1998, Fullilove *et al.* 1990, Catania *et al.* 1992, Peterson *et al.* 1992). Moreover, in a recent study of predominately (89%) Latino women, sexual relationship power was positively associated with consistent condom use (Pulerwitz *et al.* 2000). Gender-based power imbalances are potentially more salient for Latino women due to the cultural values of a traditionally machista society where type and frequency of sexual behaviours are most often determined by men (Amaro 1988, Amaro and Gornemann 1992, Wood and Price 1997).

Researchers have defined and measured power in heterosexual relationships in a multitude of ways and do not agree on a definition of interpersonal power or on what makes individuals feel powerful in the context of their relationship. Perhaps the most common definition of interpersonal power among social scientists is the ability to influence another person in order to achieve desired ends (Huston 1983, Balswick and Balswick 1995). More simply, interpersonal power refers to one person's *power over* another (Yoder and Kahn 1992). In contrast to *power to*, (i.e., personal power or empowerment), interpersonal power is an individual characteristic that concerns the relationship between two people (Yoder and Kahn, 1992).

Interpersonal power in heterosexual relationships can originate from many sources. Most work in this area has focused on marital power. Balswick and Balswick (1995) describe four models of marital power. In the traditional patriarchal model, marital power is ascribed to the husband because of his position in the marriage and family. This model fits within the normative perspective of marital power, which suggests that marital power originates in cultural beliefs about authority (Huston 1983). The resource theory of marital power posits that marital power is determined by spousal resources. Resources are broadly defined to include money, employment, skills, status, knowledge, affection and nurturance, and physical attractiveness (Huston 1983, Balswick and Balswick 1995). Resources also play a role in the democratic exchange model, but in this model spouses can use resources to bargain and negotiate with each other for power. Finally, Balswick and Balswick (1995) propose an empowerment model of marital power where husbands and wives can use personal resources to develop and affirm power in each other. All four models of

marital power can, to some extent, apply to non-marital heterosexual relationships as well. The first three models focus on interpersonal power.

Interpersonal power in heterosexual relationships may also depend on relative interest in the relationship. The 'principle of least interest' posits that the partner with the least interest in the relationship has more power and, conversely, the partner with the most interest has less power (Huston 1983, Agnew 1999). In their study of the balance of power in romantic heterosexual relationships, Sprecher and Felmlee (1997) found that less emotional involvement was associated with greater power. Least interest could be defined in ways other than emotional attachment. For example, in his study of power over condom use, Agnew (1999) measured relative interest in the relationship in terms of the desirability of perceived alternatives to the current relationship. Interest in the relationship could also reflect economic dependence. The 'principle of least interest' is linked to resources in that a partner who has resources such as physical attractiveness or money, or the ability or opportunity to obtain resources from others, may have less interest in (i.e., more alternatives to, less dependence on) the current relationship.

Feelings of power may also be based on authority, resources, or relative interest in the relationship. An individual's feelings of power may incorporate beliefs about his or her actual power, but feeling powerful and having or exerting power are not the same (Lips 1991). Both men and women have the potential to feel powerful in their heterosexual relationships. What makes men and women feel powerful may reflect social norms about gender roles. Culturally shared beliefs about interpersonal power in heterosexual relationships may influence personal feelings of power and gender-specific behaviour in these relationships. Given that interpersonal power is considered to have such an important role in HIV/STI prevention, and that what makes men and women feel powerful may be culturally-specific, understanding cultural beliefs regarding feelings of power may have important implications for the development of interventions to prevent HIV/STIs. For example, if women in a specific cultural group believe that certain resources make women feel powerful in their relationships with men, an intervention that improves access to or develops those resources may enhance women's feelings of power and, in turn, support HIV/STI prevention behaviours.

In this paper, we examine whether women of Mexican origin and their heterosexual partners have consistent shared belief systems regarding (1) what makes a woman feel more powerful in her relationship with her spouse or main partner; and (2) what makes a man feel more powerful in his relationship with his spouse or main partner. When a single set of beliefs is shared by participants, we identify the content of the shared cultural beliefs and, in addition, explore gender and other demographic differences in the endorsement of these cultural beliefs. It is important to emphasize that our objective was to improve understanding of *cultural beliefs* about men's and women's feelings of power. We did not examine individuals' or couples' beliefs about or expressions of power in their own relationships. The present study was part of a larger study that examined couple dynamics in sexual and reproductive decision-making among

couples of Mexican origin (Harvey *et al.* 1997). The data were collected to inform the design of an intervention to assist women in negotiating condom use with their partners.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 40 sexually active heterosexual couples of Mexican origin. All couples lived in a primarily Mexican community in Los Angeles, California, USA. To be eligible for study inclusion, women had to be of Mexican origin, 18–34 years of age, and sexually active. Heterosexual partners were defined as a couple if they self-identified as such. Marital status and cohabitation were not used as inclusion-exclusion criteria. Definitions of 'being married' in the Mexican community frequently do not coincide with those of non-Hispanic whites; partners are often considered to be husband and wife (*esposo* and *esposa*) even though they are not legally married and/or married in the church (Harvey *et al.* 1997). In addition, migration patterns are such that some individuals, usually the men, may travel frequently between their homes in Mexico and the United States and, therefore, a couple may not live together continuously.

The demographic and background characteristics of the sample are presented in table 1. As shown, participants' mean age was 27.6. The majority were born in Mexico, had resided in the USA for more than 5 years, and were predominately Spanish-speaking. Most men were working full-time, whereas most women were not working. The majority of participants had less than 12 years of education. Over half of the participants reported that they had been in the relationship for at least 5 years and most considered their relationships to be stable. Approximately 90% of the couples had biological children within their current relationship and just over half of the participants reported wanting another child with their partner (data not shown in table).

Procedure

Women were recruited at a primary health care clinic that offers outpatient services to lower income residents of East Los Angeles. Eligible women were asked to discuss the study with their partner and determine whether he was willing to participate. If both partners were willing to participate, interviews were scheduled.

Individual structured interviews were conducted with each member of the couple. Although the interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish, the majority were administered in Spanish. The same instrument was used for both men and women. All female participants were interviewed by a female bilingual interviewer; male participants were interviewed by either a male or female bilingual interviewer. Each person was interviewed in private without the partner present. The structured

Table 1. Selected demographic and background variables for respondents*.

	Men (n = 40)	Women (n = 40)	Total (n = 80)
Place of birth			
Mexico	85.0	95.0	90.0
United States	10.0	2.5	6.3
Other	5.0	2.5	3.8
Age (years, mean)	29.3	25.9	27.6
Years residing in US			
5 years or less	12.8	35.0	24.1
> 5 years to 10 years	38.5	40.0	39.2
> 10 years to 15 years	23.1	7.5	15.2
More than 15 years	25.6	17.5	21.5
Language generally used for reading and speaking			
Spanish only	12.5	45.0	28.8
Spanish more than English	42.5	27.5	35.0
Spanish and English equally	32.5	22.5	27.5
English more than Spanish	12.5	5.0	8.8
Work status			
Working	90.0	20.0	55.0
Not working	10.0	80.0	45.0
Years of education completed			
6 years or less	22.5	25.0	23.8
7 to 11 years	37.5	52.5	45.0
12 or more years	40.0	22.5	31.3
Religious affiliation			
Catholic	80.0	82.5	81.3
Other	20.0	17.5	18.8
Importance of religion			
Not important at all	2.5	2.5	2.5
Somewhat important	17.5	7.5	12.5
Important	32.5	35.0	33.8
Very important	20.0	50.0	35.0
Extremely important	27.5	5.0	16.3
Years in relationship (mean)	5.4	5.7	5.5
Years in relationship			
Less than 5 years	45.0	45.0	45.0
35 and less than 10 years	42.5	40.0	41.3
10 or more years	12.5	15.0	13.8
Stability of relationship			
Very unstable	2.5	5.0	3.8
Somewhat unstable	5.0	2.5	3.8
Somewhat stable	20.0	22.5	21.3
Very stable	72.5	70.0	71.3
Number of children			
None	5.0	2.5	3.8
One	25.0	25.0	25.0
Two	37.5	35.0	36.3
Three or more	32.5	37.5	35.0

* Except where indicated otherwise, data presented are percentages.

interviews were either conducted at the health care clinic or at the participant's home and were, approximately, 30 minutes in length. Each participant was paid \$20.

Measures

A structured instrument was developed that measured several domains including what makes men and women feel more powerful in their relationships with their spouses or main partners. Instrument development was informed by the findings of an earlier in-depth qualitative study of 39 Mexican immigrant couples who were similar to the sample in the present study (i.e., in terms of age, length of time in US, primary language spoken, education level, and number of children) (Harvey *et al.* 1997).

In the earlier study, semi-structured interviews were conducted separately with each partner in a couple and covered various topics, including relationship characteristics, gender roles, and power in the dyad. Content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. Of relevance to this study, participants in the qualitative study were asked 'What things do you think make a woman feel more powerful in a relationship?' and 'What things do you think make a man feel more powerful in a relationship?' The researchers extracted verbatim text from the transcripts of both men and women on specific topics, identified themes, and developed statements that expressed those themes. For example, a theme in respondents' descriptions of what makes a woman feel more powerful was the impact of working outside the home and earning money. One man explained:

When a woman works, the money makes her climb. To say, 'I am bringing home my check and I make more than you,' makes them go higher [feel more powerful] ... Here work makes them *subir* [go up] and have more power over men.

We developed several structured items to express the sentiment of statements like this. We also developed an equal number of statements to express the opposite view in order to control for response bias.

In total, 21 items about what makes a woman feel more powerful in her relationship and 21 items about what makes a man feel more powerful were incorporated into the structured instrument used in the current study. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each of the statements on a 4-point Likert scale. Participants were told: 'We are interested in knowing what makes a woman feel more powerful in her relationship with her spouse or main partner. I'm going to read you some sentences and you can tell me how much you agree or disagree with these. We would like you to make a choice from the following possibilities'. At this point the four response options (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = somewhat agree, 4 = strongly agree) were read and participants were given a card describing the options. They were then asked: 'How much do you agree that...'. A second set of identical statements elicited participants' perceptions of what makes a man feel more powerful in his relationship with his spouse or main partner. In addition, we included the statement, 'When there is true love between a couple, there are no issues regarding power' with the statements regarding what makes a woman feel more powerful. Because this item was not gender-specific, it was included only once. A Spanish version of the final instrument was prepared by translating the English version to Spanish, and then translating it back to

English for comparison; each translation was performed by different translators.

Analysis

Participants' agreement with each of the 43 statements was analysed using cultural consensus modelling. Cultural consensus modelling is a method for evaluating whether a group shares a single set of beliefs concerning a specific domain. It is similar to a factor analysis in which cases rather than variables are clustered. More specifically, consensus analysis provides a measure of whether or not a single set of beliefs and values ('cultural knowledge') is held by a group or subgroup, identifies these beliefs and values, provides an estimate of the cultural 'competence' of each individual (i.e., the extent to which the individual agrees with the culturally shared knowledge), and estimates the strength of these beliefs in the group (Romney *et al.* 1986). Cultural consensus modelling is unique in that it does not depend upon knowledge of the answers *a priori*, but rather estimates the 'correct' answers (that is, the beliefs and values shared by the sample) based on patterns of agreement among respondents (Romney *et al.* 1987). The answers are thus culturally defined.

The method has been used to study environmental values (Kempton *et al.* 1995), concepts of disease and illness (Weller 1984), Latino beliefs about diabetes (Weller *et al.* 1999) and Latino beliefs about AIDS (Trotter *et al.* 1999). In other analyses, the first two authors used cultural consensus analysis to examine cultural beliefs of couples of Mexican origin regarding the use of influencing strategies (Beckman *et al.* 1999) and contraceptive and condom use behaviour (Harvey *et al.* 1999).

Because the model operates on data with low variance, small samples usually are sufficient (see Romney *et al.* 1986). A sample size of 40 per group was selected to have sufficient cases to evaluate whether a single set of beliefs existed and examine the association of competency scores with demographic variables.

Cultural consensus analysis consists of several steps. The first step is to use goodness of fit criteria to determine whether the data fit the model of a single set of shared beliefs across all respondents. Goodness of fit criteria requires strong evidence of a single factor solution, usually demonstrated by a ratio greater than 3:1 between the first and second eigenvalues (Romney *et al.* 1986). The higher the ratio, the greater the likelihood that only one factor exists (Borgatti 1996).

The next step is to calculate individual competency scores. Competency scores are 'extracted from a matrix of interrespondent similarity coefficients similar to a factor analysis of people' (Weller *et al.* 1999). Competency is the extent to which an individual agrees with the aggregated responses of the group. The greater an individual's competency score (ranging from 0 to 1), the more culturally knowledgeable or competent the person is believed to be (Romney *et al.* 1986). A mean competency score among all respondents, equivalent to the per cent of answers 'known', on average, by respondents, also is calculated (Romney *et al.* 1987). For instance, a mean

competency score of 0.60 can be interpreted as 60% of beliefs being shared in a sample.

Finally, the beliefs and values shared by the community, i.e., the 'correct answers' to the items, are estimated. These 'correct answers' are obtained by weighting responses of individuals by their individual competency scores and then pooling the responses across individuals. In this procedure, the responses of those who agree more often with the aggregated group are weighted more heavily (Romney *et al.* 1986).

For this analysis the INTERVAL procedure of the software package ANTHROPAC (Borgatti 1996) was applied. The estimated answers calculated by the procedure were collapsed from the interval key as follows: strongly disagree = 1.00 to 1.50; disagree = 1.51 to 2.50; agree = 2.51 to 3.50; strongly agree = 3.51 to 4.00. In analyses of what makes a woman feel more powerful, one case (a female) was excluded because it was identified as an extreme outlier in a respondent by respondent matrix. In analyses of what makes a man feel more powerful, three cases were omitted: one case (female) was excluded because it was identified as an extreme outlier; another (female) was dropped because data were missing for more than one variable comprising the domain; and one additional case (male) had to be removed in order to meet the conditions for adequate fit.

Results

What makes a woman feel more powerful

The cultural consensus analysis suggests that the participants comprise a single cultural group with a set of shared beliefs regarding what makes a woman feel more powerful in her relationship with her spouse or main partner. As shown in table 2, data for the total sample, the men only and the women only samples all adequately fit the model. Eigenvalue ratios were above 3:1. Competency scores ranged from a low of 0.08 to a high of 0.87, with a mean of 0.62 (SD = 0.18) for the total sample. When data were analysed separately for men and women, women demonstrated higher average competence in this domain than men (0.67 compared to 0.58,

Table 2. Results of cultural consensus modelling: what makes a woman and what makes a man feel more powerful.

	What makes a woman feel more powerful			What makes a man feel more powerful		
	Men (<i>n</i> = 40)	Women (<i>n</i> = 39)	Total (<i>n</i> = 79)	Men (<i>n</i> = 40)	Women (<i>n</i> = 38)	Total (<i>n</i> = 77)
Ratio, goodness of fit	3.596	5.284	4.332	5.396	10.914	7.421
Competency score (M)*	0.576	0.668**	0.619	0.587	0.743***	0.666
Competency score (SD)	0.206	0.151	0.182	0.271	0.205	0.245

*Higher competency scores indicate greater agreement with the common cultural model;

** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

$t[77]=2.24, p<0.05$, see table 2). Using analysis of variance and parametric and non-parametric correlation, we also examined the association between competency scores and demographic variables including age, years in the USA, primary language spoken, years of education, employment status, total income, years in the relationship, religious affiliation and number of children. No significant relationships were found between competency scores and demographic variables.

As shown in table 3, the item with the strongest agreement in the model was 'When there is true love between a couple, there are no issues regarding power'. Participants also shared the belief that women feel they are more powerful when they are physically attractive. Not surprisingly, participants rejected the idea that women feel more powerful when they are not desired by other men.

Participants also believed that working outside the home, bringing home more money than their partner, and earning money make women feel more powerful. Although men agreed with the statement that women 'feel they are more powerful when their husbands do not work', women disagreed with the statement. Neither male or female participants believed that women feel they are more powerful when they are not able to support their families, when they do not work, when they are economically dependent on men, or when they stay at home and take care of children.

Participants agreed that women feel they are more powerful when they can act independently. They also accepted the statement that women 'feel they have more power when their partner asks them for help'. Women are also believed to feel more powerful when men accept whatever they want to do in bed. Participants strongly disagreed with the statement indicating that women feel more powerful when they are unable to sexually satisfy their partners.

Women are believed to feel more powerful when they have children by their partners. In addition, participants accepted the idea that women feel more powerful when they are not emotionally dependent on men. They disagreed with statements indicating that women feel they have more power 'when men do not express their love for them' and 'when there are problems in the relationship'. They also did not believe that women feel more powerful when they let their husbands leave the house, when they hit or beat their partner, or when they give orders to their partner.

As shown in table 3, men's and women's views of what makes a woman feel more powerful were very similar. Compared to the men, however, female participants more strongly rejected several items.

What makes a man feel more powerful

Data from the combined sample and the separate male and female samples all provided an adequate fit for the model of what makes a man feel more powerful in his relationship with his spouse or main partner (see table 2). The ratio of first to second eigenvalues was particularly strong in the analysis of women's responses.

The model suggests that participants share beliefs with regards to

Table 3. Shared cultural beliefs on what makes a woman and what makes a man feel more powerful, among men, among women, and among total sample.

What makes a woman feel more powerful	Men (n = 40)	Women (n = 39)	Total (n = 79)	What makes a man feel more powerful	Men (n = 40)	Women (n = 38)	Total (n = 77)
When there is true love between a couple, there are no issues regarding power.	SA	SA	SA	Being physically attractive	A	SA	SA
Being physically attractive	A	SA	SA	Making money	A	SA	SA
Leaving the home to work	A	A	A	Leaving the home to work	A	A	A
Bringing home more money than their partner	A	A	A	Bringing home more money than their partner	A	SA	A
Making money	A	A	A	Women accepting whatever they want to do in bed	A	SA	A
Being able to do whatever they want without consulting their husbands	A	A	A	Their partner asking them for help	A	SA	A
Their partner asking them for help	A	A	A	Being able to do whatever they want without consulting their wives	A	SA	A
Men accepting whatever they want to do in bed	A	A	A	Having children by their partners	A	SA	A
Having children by their partners	A	A	A	Their wives not working	A	A	A
Not being emotionally dependent on men	A	A	A	Giving orders to their partner	A	A	A
Giving orders to their partner	D	D	D	Not being emotionally dependent on women	D	A	A
Their husbands not working	A	D	D	Hitting or beating their partner	D	A	A

Table 3. (Continued).

What makes a woman feel more powerful	Men (n = 40)	Women (n = 39)	Total (n = 79)	What makes a man feel more powerful	Men (n = 40)	Women (n = 38)	Total (n = 77)
Staying at home and taking care of children	D	D	D	Staying at home and taking care of children	D	SD	D
Hitting or beating their partner	D	D	D	Letting their wives leave their house	D	D	D
Being economically dependent on men	D	SD	D	Women not expressing their love for them	D	SD	SD
Not being desired by other men	D	SD	D	Problems in the relationship	SD	SD	SD
Not working	D	SD	D	Not being desired by other women	D	SD	SD
Problems in the relationship	D	SD	SD	Not being able to sexually satisfy their partners	SD	SD	SD
Men not expressing their love for them	D	SD	SD	Being economically dependent on women	SD	SD	SD
Letting their husbands leave their house	D	SD	SD	Not working	SD	SD	SD
Not being able to sexually satisfy their partners	SD	SD	SD	Not being able to support their families	SD	SD	SD
Not being able to support their families	SD	SD	SD				

Note: Estimated answers were collapsed from interval key as follows: Strongly Disagree (SD) 1.0 to 1.50, Disagree (D) 1.51 to 2.50, Agree (A) 2.51 to 3.50, Strongly Agree (SA) 3.51 to 4.0. Statements are ordered by strength of agreement for model of what makes a woman feel more powerful and model for what makes a man feel more powerful.

factors influencing men's feelings of power within their relationships. Competency scores ranged widely from 0.00 to 0.97 for an overall mean of 0.67 (SD=0.25). Women demonstrated a higher level of competence than men (0.74 compared to 0.59, $t[69.9]=2.80$, $p<0.01$). The standard deviations of competency scores suggest moderately high levels of variability in individuals' cultural competence, with men showing greater variability than women (Levine's test for equality of variance, $F=7.01$, $p=0.010$). Similar to the analyses measuring cultural consensus on women's feelings of power, competency scores did not differ across demographic categories.

Like the model of what makes a woman feel more powerful, physical attractiveness was a central belief about what makes a man feel more powerful (see table 3). Conversely, participants rejected the statement that men feel they are more powerful when they are not desired by other women.

The sample also believed that men feel more powerful when they make money, when they work outside the home, when they bring home more money than their partner and, to a lesser extent, when their wives do not work. Participants strongly disagreed with statements indicating that men feel they are more powerful when they are not able to support their families, when they do not work, and when they are economically dependent on women. They also rejected the idea that men are more powerful when they stay at home and take care of children.

Participants agreed that men feel they are more powerful when women accept whatever they want to do in bed and rejected the item indicating that men feel more powerful when they are unable to sexually satisfy their partners. Men are believed to feel more powerful when their partner asks them for help and when they can do whatever they want without consulting their wives. Participants also believed that men 'feel they have more power when they give orders to their partner'. Whereas female participants accepted the statement that men 'feel they have more power when they hit or beat their partner,' men disagreed with this statement.

Participants agreed that men feel they are more powerful when they have children by their partners. Whereas female participants believed that men feel they have more power when they are not emotionally dependent on women, male participants did not. Participants rejected statements indicating that men feel they have more power when there are problems in the relationship, when women do not express their love for them, and when they let their wives leave their house.

As shown, male and female participants held similar beliefs about what makes men feel more powerful in their relationships. Compared to the men, however, female participants more strongly accepted many of the items and more strongly rejected others.

Discussion

Cultural consensus analyses revealed that participants shared beliefs about what makes men and women feel more powerful in their relationships with their spouses or main partners. In general, cultural beliefs about what

makes *men* and what makes *women* feel more powerful in their relationships were very similar among this sample of couples. Participants believed that men and women feel more powerful in their relationships with their spouse or main partner when they are physically attractive, employed, and making money. These findings suggest that within this particular culture resources are believed to play an integral role in men's and women's feelings of power in heterosexual relationships. Independence (e.g., being able to do whatever they want without consulting their spouse) and their partner's dependence (i.e., their partner asking for help) were also thought to be associated with both men's and women's feelings of power. These findings are consistent with the literature on resource theory which posits that marital power is determined by spousal resources (defined to include money, employment, skills, status, knowledge, affection and nurturance, and physical attractiveness) (Huston 1983, Balswick and Balswick 1995).

Our results shed light on the possible influence of cultural beliefs about feelings of power on gendered behaviour in couples of Mexican origin. The similar belief systems regarding men's and women's feelings of power suggest that cultural beliefs about feeling powerful in heterosexual relationships are not gender-based. Contrary to popular stereotypes, our findings indicate that among this sample of Mexican immigrant couples' beliefs about feelings of power generally do not support traditional gender roles or patriarchal ideology such as *machismo*. Recent studies rejecting the notion that Mexican women lack power in heterosexual relationships may reflect changing cultural beliefs about gender roles within sexual relationships (Oropesa 1997) and/or changes in cultural beliefs that occur with immigration to the United States (Viadro, 1996, Harvey *et al.* 1997, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 1997). Another possible explanation is that cultural beliefs do not incorporate gender differences in feelings of power when intimate relationships of Mexican couples are evaluated. Cultural beliefs involving gender roles and gendered behaviour may, however, have greater influence in more public arenas such as the workplace.

To a large extent men and women shared a single set of beliefs about what makes men and women feel powerful in their relationships. Even so, female participants had significantly higher mean competency scores, indicating that they had a higher level of shared beliefs. The responses of female participants concerning what makes a man feel powerful were also less varied than the male participants. Women may share more beliefs and their responses may be more homogenous because they have thought about and talked about these issues more than men. A possible explanation for why the women had stronger beliefs than men is that women may more often be negatively impacted upon by power issues and, consequently, have stronger feelings about these topics.

Gender was the only demographic and background characteristic associated with cultural competency. Contrary to what was expected, years residing in the USA and language generally used for reading and talking were not related to cultural beliefs about feelings of power. Although these measures are sometimes used as proxies for acculturation, future research on this topic should include more valid measures of acculturation.

Although the statement 'When there is true love between a couple, there are no issues regarding power' does not describe what makes men or women feel powerful in their relationships, we included it in the interview instrument because it reflects a major theme from an earlier study (Harvey *et al.* 1997). As shown in table 3, both women and men strongly agreed with this statement, yet they also agreed that certain resources could make men and women feel more powerful in their relationships. A possible explanation for these potentially contradictory findings is that participants believe that power is not an issue in a loving relationship because both members of a couple can feel powerful in their relationship. This interpretation is in accord with the democratic exchange model of marital power (Balswick and Balswick 1995).

Study participants were 40 couples of Mexican origin recruited from a primary health care clinic in East Los Angeles and, therefore, our findings have limited generalizability. Cultural beliefs among participants may be different from those of other Mexican populations in the USA. Participants were predominately immigrants, and most had lived in the USA for more than 5 years. Compared to our sample, more recent immigrants (e.g., those residing in the USA for less than a year) may have more traditional gender role norms, and their beliefs about what makes a woman feel more powerful may reflect those norms. Viadro (1996) found that Latino immigrant men and women responded similarly to what gender roles are in a marriage (e.g., men are the providers, women's duties focus on domestic tasks), but his findings indicated that these roles often change as a result of the female partner working in the USA. Similarly, in the earlier qualitative study of Mexican immigrant couples (Harvey *et al.* 1997), the majority of participants believed that women have more influence in heterosexual relationships after moving to the USA.

Further, our sample was comprised of women aged 18–34 and their partners. Young adults may have different beliefs about interpersonal power than older adults. In addition, the couples who agreed to participate in this study may differ from other couples of Mexican origin in important ways. Because the women in our sample had to be willing to ask their partners to participate in the study and their partners had to agree, they may have more interpersonal power than other women. The couples in this study may also have more egalitarian beliefs about relationships than do other couples. Also, participants' relationships were stable and relatively long-term. Women and men involved in more 'casual' relationships may have different beliefs about power.

The relatively small sample size also may limit our findings. The increased statistical power associated with a larger sample size might have resulted in the identification of differences in competency scores for sociodemographic variables other than gender. Finally, because we asked only closed-ended questions, participants could not report on additional beliefs that they may have regarding what makes men and women feel powerful in their relationships.

Our findings, coupled with research that indicates a positive association between relationship power and condom use among Latinas (Pulerwitz *et al.* 2000), have important implications for HIV/STI prevention. Cultural

beliefs about feelings of power in relationships could be addressed in the design of interventions, programmes and policies intended to reduce HIV/STI transmission among young women of Mexican origin. For example, if women believe that employment and access to financial resources are important resources for feeling powerful, then providing or improving access to employment and educational opportunities, job and skills training, and child care and transportation may enhance women's feelings of power and, in turn, support HIV/STI prevention behaviours. Thus, our findings suggest that, in addition to interventions targeted at individual behaviour change, programmes and policies that address larger social and economic factors are likely to have an important role in the prevention of HIV/STIs among women.

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Résumé

Des recherches antérieures indiquent que les femmes peuvent avoir des difficultés à négocier des stratégies de sexe à moindre risque avec leurs partenaires, en raison des déséquilibres dans les pouvoirs en matière de

sexualité. Dans la mesure où ce qui fait que les hommes et les femmes se perçoivent comme plus ou moins puissants pourrait être d'ordre culturel, la compréhension des croyances culturelles sur les sentiments de pouvoir pourrait avoir d'importantes implications en matière de prévention du VIH et des MST. Les croyances culturelles de 40 couples d'origine mexicaine ont été examinées dans le but de comprendre ce qui fait que les hommes et les femmes se perçoivent comme plus puissants dans leurs relations hétérosexuelles. Les participants ont indiqué leur niveau d'adhésion à 43 affirmations différentes sur le sentiment de pouvoir chez les femmes et les hommes dans leur relation avec leur partenaire principal(e). Les données ont été analysées grâce à des techniques de modélisation de consensus culturels. Les analyses révèlent que les participants constituent un groupe culturel singulier avec un ensemble de croyances partagées sur ce qui fait que les hommes et les femmes se sentent plus forts dans leurs relations. Ces croyances sont très similaires : l'attrait physique et l'emploi occupent une place centrale aussi bien pour les femmes que pour les hommes. Les participants ont également en commun des croyances très prononcées sur le rôle joué par les ressources économiques.

Resumen

Estudios previos señalan que para las mujeres puede ser difícil negociar relaciones sexuales seguras con sus parejas, debido a las desigualdades de poder en la toma de decisiones sexuales. Puesto que aquello que hace que hombres y mujeres se sientan poderosos puede tener una especificidad cultural, entender las creencias culturales que afectan a los sentimientos de poder podría tener implicaciones importantes en la prevención del VIH y otras enfermedades de transmisión sexual. Para conocer los motivos por los que los hombres y mujeres se sientan poderosos en sus relaciones heterosexuales, se estudiaron las creencias culturales de 40 parejas de origen mexicano. Los participantes indicaron en que medida estaban de acuerdo con cada una de las 43 afirmaciones relacionadas con los aspectos que permiten que mujeres y hombres se sientan más poderosos en su relación con sus parejas principales. Se analizaron los datos obtenidos, usando técnicas de modelización del consenso cultural. Los resultados mostraron que los participantes forman parte de un grupo cultural único, que comparte ciertas creencias en cuanto por qué hombres y mujeres se sienten poderosos en sus relaciones. Las creencias culturales que permiten que hombres y mujeres se sientan poderosos son muy similares: atracción física y empleo fueron los dos aspectos más importantes en ambos modelos. Los participantes también compartían creencias arraigadas sobre la importancia de los recursos económicos en los sentimientos de poder en las relaciones de hombres y mujeres.