

# Perceived Power in Close Peer Relationships: Associations with Self-Esteem

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## Introduction

This presentation highlights preliminary analyses from an ongoing project comparing the quality of different types of college students' close peer relationships: same-sex (SS) friendships, other-sex (OS) friendships, and romantic relationships. One aspect of relationship quality that has not been examined much in friendships is the power dynamic. Power is defined as being able to influence your partner to go along with what you want despite initial resistance (Gallagher et al., 1999). Although college students' peer relationships are generally found to be egalitarian (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992), not all are.

In romantic relationships, having equal power or more power has been associated with satisfaction in the relationship and self-esteem (Hall & Knox, 2019). Women who felt that they had more power were more likely to have higher self-esteem, but women who felt that they had less power were more likely to have lower self-esteem (Gallagher et al., 1999). However, in same-sex friendships, people tend to be more satisfied with an equal power distribution than one with an unequal power distribution (Veniegas & Peplau, 1997).

The present study examined whether college students' close SS friendships, OS friendships, and romantic relationships were egalitarian or if one person tends to have more power. We also examined how these power dynamics are associated with relationship satisfaction and several dimensions of self-esteem.

## Participants

The participants were 94 students (79 cis females, 11 cis males, 2 trans males, 1 non-binary person, and 1 participant who did not disclose their identity) attending college at SUNY Geneseo. The students were between 18 and 25 years of age ( $M = 19.34$  years,  $SD = 1.3$  years). The majority (80.9%) of these students were White; a majority (77%) also identified as heterosexual.

Fifty-six participants reported on all three types of relationships. The final sample consisted of 45 cis females, 7 cis males, 2 trans males, 1 non-binary person, and 1 participant who did not disclose their identity, all between 18 and 24 years of age ( $M = 19.29$  years;  $SD = 0.23$  years). The majority (87.5%) of the participants identified as White (5.4% Asian; 3.6% Latinx Hispanic, or Spanish origin; 1.8% Black or African American; 1.8% as multiple identities). A majority (85.7%) also identified as heterosexual (8.9% bisexual; 1.8% questioning/unsure; 1.8% other; 1.8% preferred not to answer).

## Measures

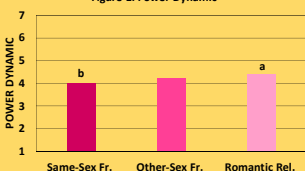
**Relationship power.** Each participant completed the 20-item Relationship Power Index (Farrell et al., 2015) for their closest SS friend, closest OS friend, and/or romantic partner. This measure evaluates the power dynamics of each of their relationships, determining whether they or their partner holds more influence over the other, or if it's an egalitarian relationship. Items were rated on a 7-point scale, with 4 indicating an equal power distribution, lower scores indicating that the other person has more power, and higher scores indicating that the participant has more power in the relationship.

**Relationship quality.** Each participant completed the 33-item Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) for their current closest SS friend, OS friend, and/or romantic partner. The measure evaluates relevant features of relationship quality for each relationship: positive features (companionship, instrumental aid, intimacy, nurturance, affection, admiration, reliable alliance, and satisfaction), and negative features (conflict and annoying behavior). The amount of positive and negative features present in each relationship were rated from 1 (little or none) to 5 (the most).

**Self-esteem.** Finally, each participant completed the 54-item Self-Perception Profile for College Students (Neeman & Harter, 1986) to measure their perceptions about themselves and their various abilities: global self-worth, creativity, intellectual ability, scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, appearance, romantic relationships, social acceptance, close friendships, parent relationships, humor, and morality. Items were rated on a 4-point scale ranging from the most negative self-concept ratings (1) to the most positive self-concept ratings (4).

## Results & Discussion

Figure 1. Power Dynamic



### Perceived Power

Overall, students reported significantly higher scores for perceived power in their romantic relationships than in their SS friendships (see Figure 1),  $F(2, 110) = 6.18, p = .003$  ( $\eta^2 = .101$ ). This indicates that participants tended to perceive themselves as having more power in their romantic relationships than in their SS friendships.

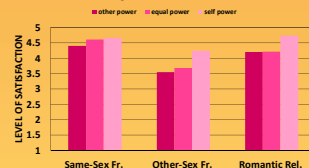
## Results & Discussion (cont.)

### Associations Between Power and Adjustment

In order to examine associations between the distribution of power with adjustment outcomes, scores for power in SS friendships were divided into three groups: other person had more power ( $n = 12$ ), equal power ( $n = 39$ ), and the participant had more power ( $n = 5$ ). This process was repeated for OS friendships ( $n = 10, 39$ , and 7, respectively), and for romantic relationships ( $n = 8, 37$ , and 11, respectively). The majority of students reported having egalitarian relationships, replicating previous research.

Univariate ANOVAs were conducted to determine whether students with these power distributions differed in their adjustment outcomes. Post hoc Tukey comparisons followed statistically significant main effects. Means with different letters differ significantly at  $p < .05$  in Tukey comparisons.

Figure 2. Satisfaction



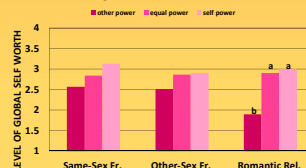
### Relationship Satisfaction

Contrary to previous findings, there was not a significant relationship between satisfaction in SS friendships with the amount of perceived power the participant held in said relationships, nor was there an association with the other types of relationships ( $ps > .135$ ; see Figure 2).

### Global Self-Worth

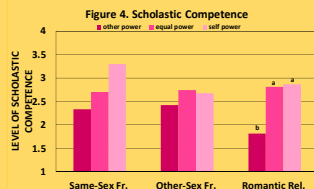
There was a significant relationship between power in romantic partnerships and self-perceptions of global self-worth (see Figure 3),  $F(2, 53) = 7.90, p = .001$  ( $\eta^2 = .230$ ). Those who perceived they held equal or more power in their romantic partnerships had higher global self-worth than those who perceived they had less power in their romantic partnerships. Associations between global self-worth and power in both SS and OS friendships were not significant ( $ps > .369$ ).

Figure 3. Global Self-Worth



### Scholastic Competence

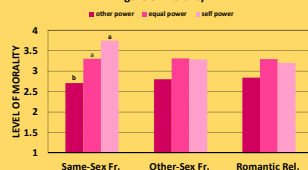
There was a significant relationship between power in romantic partnerships and self-perceptions of scholastic competence (see Figure 4),  $F(2, 53) = 6.60, p = .003$  ( $\eta^2 = .199$ ). Those who perceived they held equal or more power in their romantic partnerships also perceived themselves to have higher scholastic competence than those who perceived they had less power in their romantic partnerships. Though not significant, the relationship between power in SS friendships and self-perceptions of scholastic competence trended towards significance,  $F(2, 53) = 2.82, p = .068$  ( $\eta^2 = .096$ ). The relationship between scholastic competence and power in OS friendships was not significant ( $p = .541$ ).



### Morality

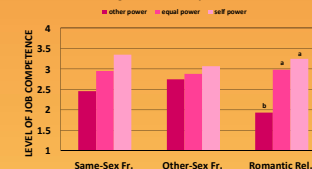
There was a significant relationship between power in SS friendships and self-perceptions of morality (see Figure 5),  $F(2, 53) = 5.44, p = .007$  ( $\eta^2 = .170$ ). Those who perceived they held equal or more power in their SS friendships also perceived themselves to be more morally correct than those who perceived they had less power in their SS friendships. Relationships between morality and power in both OS friendships and romantic partnerships were not significant ( $ps > .129$ ).

Figure 5. Morality



## Results & Discussion (cont.)

Figure 6. Job Competence



### Job Competence

There was a significant relationship between power in romantic partnerships and self-perceptions of job competence (see Figure 6),  $F(2, 53) = 8.32, p = .001$  ( $\eta^2 = .240$ ). Those who perceived themselves to hold equal or more power in their romantic partnerships also perceived themselves to have higher job competence than those who perceived they had less power in their romantic partnerships. Though not significant, the relationship between power in SS friendships and self-perceptions of job competence trended towards significance,  $F(2, 53) = 2.70, p = .076$  ( $\eta^2 = .093$ ). The relationship between job competence and power in OS friendships was not significant ( $p = .738$ ).

## Conclusions/Next Steps

- Similar to the findings of both Hall and Knox (2019) and Galliher et al. (1999), those who perceived that they had more power than their romantic partner felt better about themselves in some areas of self-esteem than those who thought they had less power than their partner.
- Comparable to Hall and Knox's findings, those who perceived that had they equal power with their romantic partner felt better about themselves in some areas of self-esteem than those who thought they had less power than their partner.
- However, we were not able to replicate Hall and Knox's finding that having equal power or more power with a romantic partner was associated with higher satisfaction with the relationship, or Veniegas and Peplau's (1997) finding that egalitarian SS friendships were associated with the highest self-esteem.
- We plan to collect data for approximately 200 additional participants.
- Re-conducting these analyses with a larger more representative sample will allow us to better clarify how these three types of close peer relationships are similar or different in respect to power and how power is associated with relationship satisfaction and self-esteem, as well as whether the findings vary based on gender and sexual orientation.
- We also plan to use person-oriented analyses to distinguish patterns of power across these relationships and determine how these patterns are associated with self-esteem.

## References

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