

Reversal of Demand-Withdraw Gender Roles in University Couples

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Abstract

Consistent with the "social structure" hypothesis, demand and withdraw roles of partners in 88 heterosexual couples reversed symmetrically according to whether the problem they discussed was more salient to the woman or the man. Reversal was robust across age, marital status, and relationship duration, but appeared more pronounced in couples reporting high relationship quality.

Background

Research suggests that women are more likely to make demands and men are more likely to withdraw when couples discuss a problem in their relationship. One explanation is that men and women are simply different by virtue of either their socialization (Gilligan, 1982) or their biology (Gottman & Levenson, 1988). Alternatively, the "social structure" hypothesis suggests that women are more often in the demand role because they more often find themselves in situations where men are satisfied with the status quo while women seek to change it.

Attempts to test this hypothesis by manipulating whose issue a couple discusses (one important to the man vs. the woman) have yielded mixed results. For example, in laboratory studies employing both observational and self-report measures of the two demand-withdraw patterns, Christensen and Heavey (1990) and Heavey et al. (1993) found only partial reversal of the female-demand/male-withdraw (FD/MW) pattern, such that gender-role differences occurred when the couple discussed the woman's issue (FD/MW > MD/FW) but not the man's (MD/FW = FD/MW). Klinetob and Smith (1996), on the other hand, were able to show full reversal of the two patterns with somewhat younger couples given more freedom in selecting the topics they discussed

While most demand-withdraw gender comparisons have been observational and laboratory-based, the present study reexamined the reversal question naturalistically by having university couples recall and describe situations in which discussions focused on "his issue" and "her issue." We also sought to examine situational demand-withdraw reversal as a function of relationship commitment and duration (factors that could account for the discrepancy between the Heavey-Christensen and Klinetob-Smith results), as well as the possible moderating role of the couple's reported relationship quality.

Method

Heterosexual couples ($N=88$) recruited from upper-division university courses completed matched questionnaires after agreeing on two specific conflict situations – one more important to the man (his issue) and one to the woman (her issue). Each partner independently described the two situations qualitatively (in writing), then made quantitative ratings of how the couple interacted in each situation using demand/withdraw items from Christensen's Communication Patterns Questionnaire.

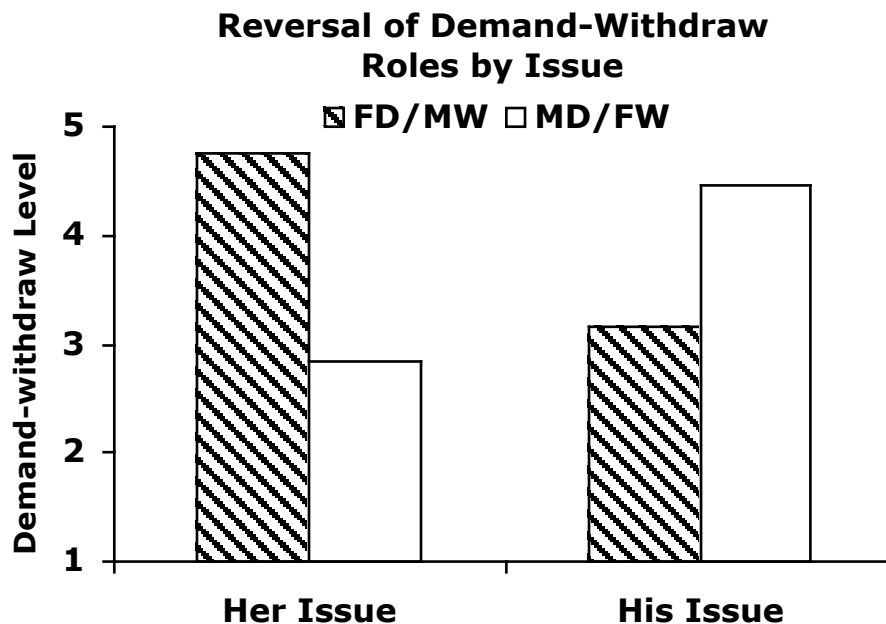
Additional ratings confirmed the differential importance of the two situations, and the partners completed a validated, 24-item Relationship Questionnaire that provided an overall measure of their relationship quality.

All couples considered themselves in a "love" relationship and 20% were married. Median relationship duration was 1.9 years ($M = 3.0$, range = .5 – 18), and median participant age was 22 years ($M = 24.8$, range = 18 – 57).

Results

The two demand-withdraw patterns were examined in a repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA), with Role (FD/MW v. MD/FW), Issue (his v. hers), and Reporter Sex (male v. female) as within-couple sources of variance. A strong Role x Issue interaction ($F [1, 84] = 68.53, p < .001$) confirmed the presence of reversed demand-withdraw gender roles, as shown in Figure 1. The only other notable effect was a marginally significant Role x Sex interaction ($p = .051$), indicating that men were somewhat more likely to differentiate demand-withdraw gender roles than women.

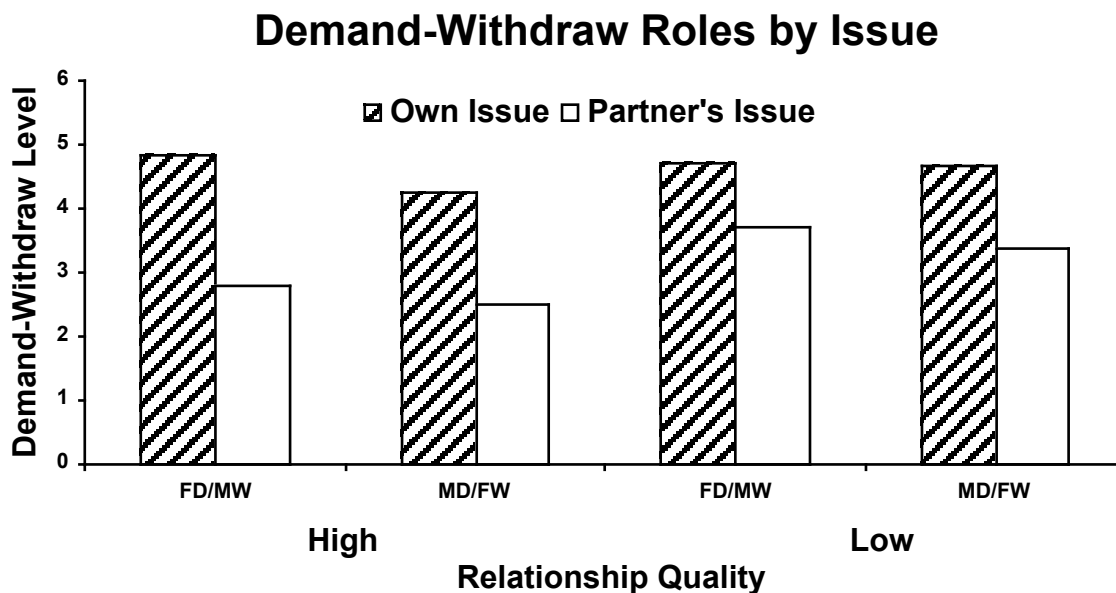
Figure 1



To examine relationship duration, marital status, and relationship quality as possible between-case moderators of the reversal effect, we added various splits on these variables in mixed-model ANOVA designs and found no hints of 3-way interactions that could link role reversal to marital status or relationship duration.

Relationship quality, on the other hand, did interact with Role and Issue ($F [1, 82] = 4.94, p = .029$), as shown in Figure 2, where the demand-withdraw role reversal appears more pronounced for high- compared to lower-quality relationships. Post-hoc comparisons indicate partners in high-quality relationships reported less demand-withdraw than those in low-quality relationships, but only when discussing their partner's issue and not their own.

Figure 2



Conclusions

Consistent with the social-structure hypothesis, the results replicate those of Klinetob and Smith (1996) in showing a symmetrical pattern of demand-withdraw role reversal according to whose issue the couple discussed, the man's or the woman's. This reversal occurred regardless of whether the reporter was male or female, though men overall were somewhat more likely than women to differentiate demand-withdraw roles by gender.

We found no evidence that role reversal is attenuated by relationship duration or commitment (marriage), though the relatively restricted range of these variables in our university sample could be a factor in these null findings.

Although role reversal also occurred across different levels of relationship quality, couples with lower quality reported more demand-withdraw when discussing their

partner's issue compared to those with high quality. Thus, even when an issue was unimportant to them, low-quality couples still demanded and withdrew more than the happier couples, which could reflect relative rigidity of communication patterns (Klinetob & Smith, 1996).

In sum, the results support the social structure hypothesis by highlighting the malleability of demand-withdraw gender roles among university students who recall (rather than enact) situations of differential but balanced importance to the two partners. Whether older, more established, or more traditional couples would respond similarly is not clear.

References

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