

When “mom’s the boss”: Control over domestic decision making reduces women’s interest in workplace power

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Abstract

Although men are typically considered to have more power than women, women are more likely than men to be primary decision makers in the household domain. We argue that the portrayal of women’s traditional role as representing a form of power, albeit limited in scope, is widespread in popular culture, and that this power is perceived as desirable and providing a subjective sense of control (Study 1). Yet power over household decision making may also function to reduce women’s objections to a status quo in which they have less power overall, outside their traditional role. Two experiments (Studies 2 and 3) showed that power over household decisions (but not mere domestic tasks) reduced women’s interest in achieving power in the workplace. Men’s interest in workplace power, on the other hand, was unaffected by the degree to which they wielded power at home.

Keywords

gender, power, status, system justification

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This paper explores power across two key life domains—the workplace and the home. Historically, men have wielded more power than women in workplace settings, but women, at least those in Western cultures, are more likely to wield control in the household domain (e.g., Silverstein, Sayre, & Butman, 2009). We suggest that people may view these two forms of power as providing “balance” across gender groups, with both men and women occupying a role of power and authority (albeit in separate domains)—rather than as inequality in the distribution of power. For women, conceiving of their traditional role as

providing access to power may reduce their desire to increase their status outside the home. Specifically, we hypothesized that granting women power over domestic decisions would reduce their interest in seeking power in the workplace.

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Justification of Gender Inequality

Compared to men, women as a whole fare more poorly on many life outcomes. Women earn less money, are less likely to be literate and educated, are underrepresented in political institutions, and have fewer legal rights than men in much of the world. Indeed, no country has yet achieved full gender equality (United Nations, 1997, 2000). Despite this, women are not necessarily unhappy with their lot in life. In fact, most studies find women's life satisfaction to be comparable to men's, across cultures and class distinctions (Haring, Stock, & Okun, 1984; Myers & Diener, 1995). Moreover, women in Western cultures are just as satisfied as men with their (lower) salaries (Crosby, 1982; Graham & Welbourn, 1999; Jackson, 1989; Jackson, Gardner, & Sullivan, 1992) and tend to find their (larger) share of household labor to be fair (Blair & Johnson, 1992; Sanchez, 1994; Thompson, 1991).

One answer to this seeming paradox might be provided by system justification theory, which holds that people's motivation to maintain the status quo may outweigh their desire for equality, which would require social change (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & van der Toorn, 2012; Kay, Gaucher, et al., 2009). As a result, existing inequalities between groups are perceived as fair and appropriate, even by members of lower-status groups (Ashburn-Nardo & Johnson, 2008; Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002; Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003; Rudman, Feinberg, & Fairchild, 2002). Such perceptions are exacerbated when people perceive inequalities as entrenched and unlikely to change (Kay & Friesen, 2011; Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012; Laurin, Shepherd, & Kay, 2010).

Consistent with this, women (and men) appear motivated to perceive current differences between men's and women's roles and outcomes as fair and inevitable. For instance, some women endorse maternalistic attitudes toward men, suggesting that women's traditional role as men's caregivers is appropriate because men would "fall

apart" without women to care for them (Glick & Fiske, 1999a). Importantly, women's endorsement of such beliefs (known as benevolent sexism) is stronger in countries where gender inequality is greater (Glick et al., 2004), in keeping with the idea that lower-status group members will be especially likely to justify existing inequalities when those inequalities are more intractable. Additional research demonstrates that experimentally activating the motive to uphold the status quo, such as by describing threats to governmental or economic stability, increases tolerance of gender-based inequalities among women as well as men. These inequalities have included women's underrepresentation in politics and business (Kay, Gaucher, et al., 2009), dislike of agentic women (Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012), rape-victim blame (Stahl, Eek, & Kazemi, 2010), greater pay entitlement among men (O'Brien, Major, & Gilbert, 2012), and men's preference for women who embody traditional gender roles (Lau, Kay, & Spencer, 2008). In the reverse direction, women reminded of a past experience of sexual objectification were more accepting of the gender status quo, and in turn less motivated to pursue collective action (Calogero, 2013). In other words, women may be at least partially accepting of gender inequalities because such acceptance satisfies epistemic desires to view the current system as just and fair, as do system justification processes more generally (Jost & van der Toorn, 2012).

Complementary Rather Than Unequal Outcomes

As suggested by these diverse examples, inequalities between groups can be rationalized or justified in numerous ways. One form of rationalization reported in recent research is the motivation to perceive people as enjoying "balanced" or complementary outcomes (rather than simply unequal outcomes). For example, Gaucher, Haferkamp, Kay, and Davidenko (2010) reported that people may justify experiences of undeserved good luck by assuming that compensatory bad

luck will inevitably follow. In the domain of group stereotypes, people appear motivated to apply complementary (positive as well as negative) stereotypes in order to maintain the view that a group's lower social standing is balanced by positive characteristics. For instance, activating system justification motives increased individuals' endorsement of stereotypes of lower-status ethnic groups (e.g., southern Italians) as warm (albeit also less agentic; Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermandi, & Mosso, 2005), or of overweight people as sociable (albeit also lazy; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005). In the reverse direction, exposure to complementary stereotypes such as the idea that poor people are happier than the rich increases support for the status quo (Kay & Jost, 2003), especially among the political left (Kay, Czaplinski, & Jost, 2009).

The effects of complementary stereotyping are particularly pronounced in the case of gender, where it is argued that ambivalently valenced views of women as having positive qualities (e.g., warmth and moral purity) as well as negative ones (e.g., incompetence and sexual manipulateness) serve to justify traditional gender roles in which women hold a subordinate status (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Worldwide, women are more likely to endorse beliefs about women's positive, but role-traditional qualities (known as benevolent sexism) the more that men in their country endorse beliefs about women's negative qualities (hostile sexism; Glick et al., 2000). It is hypothesized that by emphasizing the positive characteristics associated with a traditional role, such benevolently sexist beliefs allow women to make peace with their subordinate status and perceive gender relations overall as fair.

Experimental studies have borne out this theorizing. For example, activating system justification motives increases endorsement of complementary gender self-stereotypes (women believing that they are communal but not agentic, and men the opposite) and, in reverse, activating self-views consistent with these stereotypes increases support for the system (Laurin, Kay, & Shepherd, 2011). Similarly, exposure to either benevolent or complementary (benevolent +

hostile) beliefs about women increases women's support for the status quo (Jost & Kay, 2005) and decreases their interest in collective action (Becker & Wright, 2011). Finally, endorsement of benevolent beliefs about women is associated with greater life satisfaction in more egalitarian nations (Napier, Thorisdottir, & Jost, 2010), reinforcing the idea that "balanced" views of women and men are linked to a sense of a just and fair system in countries that ostensibly value equality. In summary, beliefs and stereotypes about women having positive (but stereotypical) qualities serve to increase people's tolerance and acceptance of a system in which women overall have access to fewer resources than men (Kay et al., 2007).

Power in the Household Sphere

One such unequally distributed resource is power. In keeping with their overall higher status, men around the world are more likely to hold positions of political power, to lead social and religious institutions, and to hold high-level corporate positions (Catalyst, 2008; United Nations, 2000). Combined with their greater likelihood of owning property and having a high income, these differences mean that men, compared to women, are more likely to wield influence and to control valued outcomes of others (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007).

Yet women, even within their traditional role, are not utterly powerless. Indeed, Glick and Fiske (1996, 1997, 1999b) have argued that the social groups of men and women are unique (compared to other groups that differ in status, such as ethnic or religious groups) as a result of their necessary mutual dependence. Traditionally, not only do women depend on men for financial support and protection, but men also depend on women as wives, mothers, and romantic partners. This dependence is argued to give women a form of power (termed dyadic power). Specifically, women can control men's outcomes in the domain of dyadic heterosexual relationships, as when a woman decides whether to accept a man's marriage proposal, bear his child, or grant him

access to sex (Goodwin & Fiske, 2001; Guttentag & Secord, 1983).

Women also act as decision makers in domestic arenas beyond heterosexual relationships. In contrast to the image of men as “heads of household,” women (at least in Western, relatively egalitarian cultures) in fact make the majority of decisions within families about health care, new cars, food, and day-to-day purchases (Catalyst, 2012; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003; Silverstein, et al., 2009). In a poll of married Americans, 43% reported that the woman makes more decisions at home (26% say the man makes more decisions, and 31% say decisions are made equally; Pew Research Center, 2008). Moreover, research on family dynamics has found that not only do women make the majority of child-care decisions within heterosexual couples, they are often reluctant to give up this role of authority and power in the home to allow fathers to play a greater role in caretaking (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Cannon, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Sokolowski, 2008; Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Gaunt, 2008; McBride et al., 2005; Rasmussen, Hawkins, & Schwab, 1996; Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf, & Sokolowski, 2008). In this way, women’s role as “maternal gatekeepers,” while providing women with a subjective sense of power and status, also serves to limit paternal involvement and therefore reinforce gender inequalities in caregiving.

The concept of women as powerful within the household sphere is reflected in popular culture as well. In modern English-language discourse, evidence of women’s household power can be seen in a coffee mug that proclaims that “Mom’s the boss,” a woman’s résumé that accounts for a period away from the workforce as a time when she was “CEO of my family,” or comedian Bill Cosby’s admonition to his fellow men of a “fundamental truth about marriage ... the wife is in charge” (Cosby, 1989, p. 134). These cultural references are intended as flattering reminders of women’s traditional authority and standing in the household domain—but in fact they may serve to limit women’s influence in other domains.

The Present Research

In the present work, we explored the hypothesis that power over domestic decision making may hold a dark side. We theorize that granting women power in the household domain may signal that although men may hold more power than women in the workplace and community, women have their sphere of influence and authority as well. Just as complementary stereotypes imply that positive qualities are balanced across groups (e.g., the rich have more money but the poor enjoy greater happiness; Kay et al., 2007), power may be seen as balanced across gender groups (with women wielding power at home and men at work; Fiske, Xu, & Cuddy, 1999). As a result, women may feel less motivated to seek change and to pursue workplace power for themselves, compared to if they were not conceiving of their role at home as one involving power. This may be particularly true given that workplace power is not easy to achieve, and may be even more elusive for women than for men—especially for women who are mothers (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007; Crosby, Williams, & Biernat, 2004; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004). That is, both men and women may feel uncertainty about their ability to realize the desirable goal of workplace power, but women may be even less willing to take on this challenge if an alternative role (in this case, their traditional role in the domestic sphere) is made to sound more appealing and less low-status.

Alternatively, perhaps women are simply less interested in power than are men, and therefore their power needs are more easily satisfied by the chance to wield control over household decisions. Extensive past research suggests, however, that men and women do not differ in their overall levels of power motivation (Hofer et al., 2010; Pang & Schultheiss, 2005; Winter, 1988; Winter & Barenbaum, 1985). Thus, we suggest that it is not that women’s household power fully satisfies their power needs, but rather that such power adds to the appeal of women’s traditional role, and decreases the appeal of a nontraditional one.

We tested two specific hypotheses regarding women’s power over household decisions. First,

we predicted that this form of power will be perceived as desirable—that is, not merely as the burden or chore of household labor—and as subjectively powerful—that is, as providing a subjective sense of power and control. In this way, we hypothesized, the opportunity to wield power in the household makes women's traditional gender role more attractive. For the present studies, we operationalized household power as control over domestic decisions that affect others. Because power always, by definition, involves other people whose outcomes are controlled, power-holding targets in each of the present studies were married and were parents (i.e., their decisions affected the outcomes of their spouse and children).

Second, we predicted that wielding power over household decisions will lessen women's objections to their lack of power in other domains of life. Here, we operationalized this in the form of interest in achieving workplace power, specifically hypothesizing that when women wield household power, they will be less interested in workplace power, compared to when household decision making is shared. For men, on the other hand, household power is not part of their traditional gender role, which instead places them in leadership positions in the public sphere. That is, workplace power is consistent with men's role and with the status quo, rather than being (as for women) role-inconsistent and in opposition to the existing system. Likewise, household power is inconsistent with men's role and therefore does not serve to justify that role, as it was hypothesized to do for women. We therefore did not expect that men's interest in workplace power would be influenced by the degree to which they wielded power in the home setting. These hypotheses were tested across three studies.

Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to test our first hypothesis, that power over household decisions will be perceived as both desirable and subjectively powerful, and as different than general domestic activities. We predicted that both women and

men would perceive the exercise of household power as subjectively positive and powerful, and as more positive and powerful than carrying out domestic tasks that did not involve power.

Method

Participants. Participants were 136 Stanford University students. They had volunteered to complete a mass survey, in which the present survey was embedded, in exchange for \$20.00. They completed the survey via computer while seated in individual cubicles in a laboratory room. The sample was 65% female with an average age of 20 years (range 18–30). About 36% of participants identified as Asian American, 30% as White, 10% as Latino, and 7% as Black; the remaining 14% were of mixed or other ethnic backgrounds.

Materials and procedure. Participants were told to “imagine a person who is married and has two children, and is employed.” The target's gender was not specified. Participants were given as much time as they needed to imagine the scenario.

In randomized order, participants were then asked to rate two items regarding power over household decision making, four power-irrelevant domestic items, and two nondomestic filler items. Each was rated on four dimensions: how positively the person would feel, how negatively the person would feel, how much control over other people's outcomes the person would feel he or she had, and how powerful the person would feel about being the person who carried out the behavior described. Responses were made on the following scale: “*not at all*” (1), “*a little*” (2), “*some*” (3), “*quite*” (4), or “*very*” (5).

The two items representing power over household decisions were: “Decides what is served for a family dinner” and “Determines what living-room furniture is purchased for the house.” Both items involve female-stereotypic tasks (food and furniture selection), as well as a power component, in that one person is exercising his or her own opinion over issues that will affect the outcomes of other household members (what they eat and what they sit on).

Table 1. Mean ratings, Study 1.

	Household-power items			Power-irrelevant domestic items
	Male participants	Female participants	All participants	All participants
Positivity	3.75** (0.56)	4.03 (0.49)	3.94*** (0.53)	3.78** (0.52)
Power	3.11 (0.75)	3.19 (0.74)	3.17*** (0.77)	2.59*** (0.84)
Control	3.36 (0.86)	3.32 (0.79)	3.32*** (0.81)	2.33*** (0.88)

Note. SDs are in parentheses. Significance levels associated with household-power items (all participants) indicate mean values that are greater than 2, or “a little.” Significance levels associated with power-irrelevant domestic items indicate mean values that are smaller than those for the household-power items. Finally, the significance level associated with household-power items (male participants) indicates a value that differs from that for female participants.

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .005$.

The four items representing power-irrelevant domestic activities were as follows: “Schedules a dentist appointment for himself/herself,” “Decides when his or her symptoms merit a doctor’s visit,” “Prepares a healthy breakfast for himself/herself,” and “Reads a magazine article about disciplining children.” These items reflected domestic tasks that were intended to be comparable to the household power activities in terms of their domestic nature and their overall desirability, but they differed from the power items in terms of their focus on acting for the self rather than exercising power over other household members.

Results and Discussion

Household power as desirable. The first goal of Study 1 was to test whether household power is viewed positively. First, negativity ratings were reverse scored and averaged with the positivity ratings to create a single index representing how positively the target was predicted to feel about wielding household power. Ratings of the two household-power items (average $\alpha = .67$) were then averaged. If participants view household power as desirable, they should rate it higher than 2, representing “a little,” on the positivity index. Consistent with this, a one-sample t test revealed that mean positivity ratings for the household-power items were significantly greater than 2, $t(135) = 42.10, p < .005$ (see Table 1 for all means.) Participants’ perception of the positivity of household

power fell closest to a response choice of “quite” positive (4).

Next, the household-power items were compared to the power-irrelevant domestic items (average $\alpha = .77$) in terms of expected positivity. Ratings were analyzed with a mixed-model ANOVA, with item type (household power vs. power-irrelevant domestic) as the within-subjects factor and participant gender as the between-subjects factor. Results revealed that wielding household power was predicted to feel more positive than performing power-irrelevant domestic activities, $F(1, 129) = 9.70, p < .01$. There also was a main effect of participant gender, with women perceiving both item types more positively than men, $F(1, 129) = 12.72, p < .01$, but no interaction, $F < 1$. Thus, participants expected that wielding household power would be more desirable than performing similar domestic tasks that did not involve power, and this was equally true for men and women.

Household power as subjectively powerful. The second goal of Study 1 was to test whether household power is viewed as providing a subjective sense of power and control. One-sample t tests comparing participants’ ratings of the household-power items on the dimensions of power and control against the value of 2 (“a little”) revealed that mean ratings of power were significantly greater than 2, $t(135) = 17.71$, as were mean ratings of control, $t(135) = 18.98$ (p s $< .005$; see

Table 1.) Thus, on average, participants' predictions of how powerful and in control a household powerholder would feel fell between "some" (3) and "quite" (4).

Next, the household-power items were compared to the power-irrelevant domestic items in terms of subjective power and control. Ratings were analyzed with a mixed-model ANOVA, with item type (household power vs. power-irrelevant domestic) as the within-subjects factor and participant gender as the between-subjects factor, and power ratings as the dependent variable. This analysis yielded a main effect of item type, such that participants expected a target to feel more powerful when wielding household power than when performing power-irrelevant domestic tasks, $F(1, 135) = 57.21, p < .005$. Neither the main effect of participant gender ($F < 1$) nor the interaction ($F = 1.34$) was significant. The analysis with control ratings as the dependent variable similarly revealed that participants expected a target to feel more control over others' outcomes when wielding household power than when performing power-irrelevant domestic tasks, $F(1, 135) = 115.77, p < .005$. Again, neither the main effect of participant gender nor the interaction was significant (both F s < 1). Thus, participants expected that wielding household power would make one feel more powerful and in control, compared to similar domestic tasks that did not involve controlling the outcomes of others, and this was equally true for men and women.

Finally, we explored the relationships among the positivity, power, and control ratings of household power. Positivity was moderately related to power ($r = .24, p = .004$) and to control ($r = .34, p < .005$). These relationships were comparably sized among male ($r_{\text{power}} = .20, r_{\text{control}} = .41$) and female ($r_{\text{power}} = .25, r_{\text{control}} = .35$) participants.

In sum, consistent with predictions, both women and men perceived household power as positive and as providing a sense of power. Based on these ratings, one can infer that the participants in this study would rather have household power than not, and would rather wield power

over household decisions than simply carry out domestic tasks that do not involve power. However, the apparent desirability of household power may make it all the more insidious (especially for women). In Studies 2 and 3, we explored whether household power, despite its positive veneer, might have negative consequences for women in terms of their interest in workplace power.

Study 2

The goal of Study 2 was to test the hypothesis that household power reduces women's interest in seeking power in the workplace. For this study, we recruited a sample of young (30 and under) women, who are themselves likely to be on the cusp of making decisions about education, career, and family. They were asked to imagine either having household power (being the one in their household who makes most of the domestic decisions) or sharing decision making equally, and to indicate their interest in workplace power.

Method

Participants. Participants ($N = 166$) were women aged 18–30 who had signed up for a list of people interested in research studies, maintained by Stanford University. They completed the study online in exchange for a small gift certificate to an online retailer. The sample was 61% White, 17% Asian American, 6% African American, and 3% Latina; 13% were of mixed ethnic background. About half (53%) had a bachelor's degree or higher. Forty percent were employed; the remainder were students (28%), stay-at-home mothers (20%), or neither (12%). Two participants' study completion times were suggestive of inattention (< 4 minutes); their data were not analyzed.

Materials and procedure. Participants were told that they would be given a scenario of a "fantasy life," one that may be similar to, or different from, the life they actually lead, and that they were to imagine what such a life would be like. Participants then read the following scenario:

Table 2. Mean interest in workplace power, studies 2 and 3.

	Study 2	Study 3	
	Women	Women	Men
Household power	2.47 (0.89)	2.48 (1.01)	3.32 (1.03)
Equal power	2.77 (0.92)	2.88 (1.08)	3.27 (0.99)
Household tasks without power mention	—	2.72 (1.18)	3.08 (1.04)

Note. SDs are in parentheses.

You are a 27-year-old woman. You have a college degree, but are not settled on a career path. You enjoy reading and swimming. You are married, and your husband works in the business development field. You and your husband have a 3-year-old daughter. You live near the area where you grew up. At home, *you tend to be the one to make many of the decisions* (you and your husband make a number of decisions together), such as what your family will eat for dinner each night, and what furniture should be chosen for the home.

Key components of the scenario included that the participant imagined herself married with a child (thereby providing two people over which she could potentially wield power) and that her career plans were as yet undetermined. Participants in the household-power condition (text in italics) imagined themselves exercising control over domestic decisions, whereas participants in the equal power condition (text within parentheses) imagined sharing decision making equally with a spouse. All participants were asked to spend time vividly imagining such a life, including thoughts, feelings, and goals. Participants were required to spend at least 60 seconds imagining this life.

Next, participants were given a series of life goals and asked to indicate the importance of each. Our primary interest was in two goals relevant to workplace power: “Be an important person at work” and “Earn a high salary.” Seven additional goals unrelated to workplace power (“Be a good parent,” “Travel widely”) were included as fillers. Participants rated the importance of these goals using a 1 (*not important at all*) to 5 (*very important*) scale. Finally, participants

provided demographic information and were debriefed.

Results and Discussion

Ratings of the two workplace power goals were highly correlated ($r = .54$) and thus were combined into a single index representing interest in workplace power. This index was analyzed as a function of the power manipulation. Results showed that female participants in the household-power condition, who imagined exercising control over domestic decisions, were less interested in workplace power compared to female participants in the equal power condition, who imagined sharing decisions equally with a spouse, $F(1, 163) = 4.36, p = .04, \eta^2 = .03$ (see Table 2 for means).

Ratings of the filler goals unrelated to workplace power also were combined ($\alpha = .38$). The low reliability is not surprising given that the filler goals were not chosen to represent any particular domain other than to not be relevant to workplace power. Regardless, the power manipulation had no effect on participants’ interest in the filler goals, neither when combined, $F(1, 163) < 1$, nor as single items (F s = 0.07–1.37, all *ns*).

These results provide support for the hypothesis that being granted power over domestic decision making, which feels desirable and provides a sense of control (Study 1), also has the effect of reducing women’s interest in seeking other forms of power, such as workplace power, that are less traditional for women. Although these young women imagined wielding power hypothetically for the present study, these situations are likely to parallel those currently faced

by many in the sample, as they establish new households with a partner and work out household roles.

Study 3

We had three aims in Study 3. First, we sought to replicate Study 2 by again showing that wielding household power at home reduces women's interest in power outside the home.

Second, we sought to establish that it is the *power* aspect of household power—not merely exposure to the female-stereotypic domain of the home—that dampens women's interest in other forms of power. Study 2 participants who wielded household power may have inferred that they were not employed (perhaps because their husband worked full time and/or earned sufficient income), whereas participants who shared household power may have inferred that they were employed and shared breadwinning responsibilities (perhaps because their husband worked part time and/or earned insufficient income). Alternatively, participants may have expected that wielding household power would take more time than would sharing decision making equally, and that it was an expectation of less available time that reduced their interest in workplace power.

To address these possible alternative explanations, a third condition was added in which participants imagined themselves carrying out household tasks without mention of wielding power. We hypothesized that only the household-power condition, and not the household-tasks condition, would reduce women's interest in workplace power relative to the condition in which power is shared equally. That is, we suggest that the positive valence that power language brings to the carrying out of everyday household chores makes a domestic role seem more appealing than it otherwise would. If so, this would reduce support for the alternative explanations involving participants' inferences about spousal employment and time commitment, because carrying out household tasks presumably conveys comparable implications about

spousal employment, and requires comparable amounts of time, as does wielding household power.

Third, we sought to demonstrate that the negative effect of household power on interest in workplace power is limited to women. Thus, men as well as women were included in Study 3. We theorize that household power disarms by adding a positive veneer to women's traditional subordinate role. For women who are uncertain about taking on the challenges required to achieve power in a nontraditional domain such as the workplace, household power provides a way to continue to wield influence and control, albeit within a limited setting. Men's traditional role, on the other hand, is in the workplace. Whether men also wield power at home (vs. share it) was not expected to be relevant to their interest in workplace power.

Thus, the study used a 2 (gender) \times 3 (household power vs. equal power vs. household tasks without power mention) experimental design. We hypothesized that, for women but not men, having household power (but not merely carrying out household tasks) would reduce their interest in workplace power relative to when household power is shared equally.

Method

Participants. Participants ($N = 644$, 59% male) were adults aged 18–30 who were recruited by a market research firm and who expressed interest in completing surveys. They completed the study online in exchange for \$1.00. The sample was 65% White, 12% Asian American, 8% African American, and 6% Latino; 9% were of mixed ethnic background. About one third (38%) had a bachelor's degree or higher. Most (61%) were employed; the remainder were students (20%), stay-at-home parents (8%), or neither (11%). In terms of sexual orientation, 91% described themselves as heterosexual, 5% as bisexual, and 4% as homosexual.

Materials and procedure. The materials and procedure followed that of Study 2, with the following

exceptions. First, a male condition was added that referred to “a 27-year-old man” (vs. woman) and “your wife” (vs. husband). Participants indicated their gender at the beginning of the study, and were shown a gender-matching version of the life scenario. Thus, although the “fantasy life” they were reading about was described as fictional, the expectation was that participants (who shared the same gender and approximate age as the target described) would be able to identify with this life scenario and see it as at least somewhat plausible for themselves.

Second, a third level of the power manipulation variable was added in which the target was described as carrying out household tasks without mention of any decision-making authority. Specifically, the end of the scenario in the no-power household-tasks condition read: “At home, you tend to be the one who ends up doing most of the household chores. For example, today you cooked dinner and looked for some new furniture.”

Third, the dependent variables measuring goal interests were modified slightly. A third power goal, “Be famous for my accomplishments,” was added to increase the reliability of the interest in power index and to more broadly reflect the idea of power and status in the public sphere. Also, the number of filler goals was reduced to four.

Results and Discussion

Ratings of the three workplace power goals were highly correlated ($\alpha = .82$) and thus were combined into a single index representing interest in workplace power. This index was then analyzed as a function of both gender and power condition. Means and standard deviations can be found in Table 2. Results showed a main effect of gender, such that men were more interested in workplace power goals than women, $F(1, 643) = 39.79, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$, but no main effect of power manipulation condition, $F(2, 643) = 1.89, p = .15$. The gender main effect was qualified, however, by the predicted gender \times power manipulation interaction, $F(2, 643) = 3.41, p < .03, \eta^2 = .01$.

Follow-up analyses revealed that the effect of the power manipulation on interest in workplace power was significant for women, $F(2, 321) = 3.44, p = .03, \eta^2 = .02$. Consistent with hypotheses, women were less interested in workplace power when they imagined themselves wielding household power versus sharing power equally, $F(1, 200) = 7.45, p = .007, \eta^2 = .04$, replicating Study 2. Merely performing household tasks without mention of power, however, did not reduce women’s interest in workplace power relative to the equal-power condition, $F(1, 217) = 1.05, p = .31$. The difference between the household-power and the household-tasks conditions was marginally significant, $F(1, 222) = 2.69, p = .10, \eta^2 = .01$, providing some support for the idea that it is wielding power at home (rather than simply carrying out tasks at home) that undermines women’s workplace power motivation. Men’s interest in workplace power was not affected by the power manipulation, $F(2, 322) = 1.62, p = .20$, as expected.

Last, ratings of the filler goals unrelated to workplace power were combined into a single index ($\alpha = .54$). Neither gender, power manipulation, nor their interaction affected the combined filler goals index, $F_s = 0.16$ to 1.21 , all *ns*. Considering the items individually, female participants endorsed three of the nonwork goals (“Be a good parent,” “Become an excellent cook,” and “Become very skilled at a craft or hobby”) more than did male participants ($F_s = 6.82$ – $13.72, p_s < .01$); the power manipulation also significantly affected the goal to become an excellent cook, with ratings highest in the household-tasks condition ($F = 3.94, p = .020$), and marginally affected the filler goal to become a homeowner ($F = 2.97, p = .052$), with ratings highest in the equal-power condition. Most important, however, the power manipulation did not affect any of the four filler goals in interaction with gender ($F_s = 0.33$ – 1.71 , all *ns*).

In sum, these results show that, for women, imagining a life in which they wield power in the private sphere reduces their interest in pursuing power in the public sphere, replicating Study 2. Moreover, merely carrying out household tasks

that did not involve exercising influence over others did not have this effect for women. This suggests that it is the power aspect of household power that undermines women's interest in workplace power rather than alternative possibilities such as exposure to a female-stereotypic domain, inferences about spousal employment, or expectations of the time required to manage household decision making. In both the household-power condition and the household-tasks condition, domestic chores must be completed, but the language of power suggests a more positive experience compared to the language of tasks, as supported by the results of Study 1. This more positive framing of similar responsibilities appears to reduce women's motivation to seek power in domains outside the home.

Finally, neither condition affected workplace power interest for men. This supports our theorizing that household power increases the apparent desirability of a role that is traditional for women (but not men).

General Discussion

These studies explored decision-making power in the household sphere, traditionally the domain of women. We found that both women and men view this kind of power as desirable and as giving a person a sense of power and control (Study 1). Yet despite its positive image, household power had negative effects on women's career motivation, but not men's. In Studies 2 and 3, women who imagined wielding decision-making power at home were less interested in pursuing workplace power, relative to women who imagined sharing decision making equally with a spouse. This effect did not occur, however, when mere household tasks (without mention of power) were described (Study 3), suggesting that it is the *power* aspect of household power that drives the effects on women's motivation.

The fact that men and women responded differently to household power, such that women's interest in workplace power was reduced whereas men's was not (Study 3), reinforces our theorizing that these effects are not simply due to role-neutral

processes whereby individuals who are powerful in one area of life may be sated to the point of choosing not to seek power in another. Instead, these results suggest that household power carries a different meaning for women than it does for men. Exercising power over household decisions may bring a semblance of status and control to women's traditional role, to the point where they may have less desire to push against the obstacles to achieving additional power outside the home. For men, wielding household power may feel similarly positive (Study 1) without affecting their interest in pursuing the form of power that represents their traditional role (i.e., workplace power).

These results are consistent with system justification theory, particularly recent research demonstrating that complementary stereotyping helps satisfy people's need to legitimize the status quo (Kay et al., 2007). We propose that individuals may view power as a resource that can be "balanced" between otherwise unequal groups, in the same way that positive stereotypic characteristics can be viewed as evenly and fairly distributed across groups. Just as thinking of themselves as communal (if not agentic) increases women's support for the status quo (Laurin et al., 2011), in the present studies, thinking of themselves as powerful at home appeared to increase women's acceptance of their relative lack of power at work, as suggested by their reduced interest in acquiring more of it. The present findings also are consistent with those of Becker and Wright (2011), who found that women exposed to positive, but traditional, beliefs about women (benevolent sexism) were less motivated to act against gender inequality. In general, lower-status group members may not seek to increase their status to the extent that their current role is presented in a positive light.

Implications for Gender Inequality

These results have important implications for efforts to realize gender equality. Having power feels good (Kifer, Heller, Perunovic, & Galinsky, 2013), as does being complimented for one's skill or being asked to give advice because of one's

expertise. In the case of power over household decisions, however, such positive feelings may come at a cost for women. In recent history, women's roles have changed more than men's, such that women have taken on workplace roles once reserved for men more quickly than men have taken on caretaking and domestic duties that were women's traditional domain (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Diekmann, Goodfriend, & Goodwin, 2004; Hochschild, 1989; Twenge, 1997). One reason for this asymmetry may be women's reluctance to part with their role of power and authority in the household domain. For example, when women wield the authority over child-care decisions that accompanies their maternal role, they are likely to get less of the involvement from the child's father that they seek (Allen & Hawkins, 1999).

These results also suggest that we should be cautious about using language that invokes power and status when describing women's activities at home. When well-intentioned male partners defer to their wives' clothing choices, or let the kids know that "mom's the boss" of the household, these seemingly flattering interactions may carry the implication that the woman in question is *not* the boss outside the home, or lacks expertise in areas other than fashion. It is socially normative to say nice things, rather than disparaging things, about low-status groups (Jeffries, Hornsey, Sutton, Douglas, & Bain, 2012). By extension, describing a group only in positive terms—such as with "complimentary" references to women's domestic power and expertise—may reinforce the perception that members of that group are low in status.

Finally, references to a woman's household power may affect her own self-views and motivation, probably outside of conscious awareness. In the present studies, we speculate that our female participants were likely unaware that they were experiencing power as a tradeoff—such that in exchange for power in the household domain they chose not to seek power in the workplace. In this way, women arguably become unknowingly complicit in perpetuating gender inequality.

Alternative Perspectives

One alternative view of the present results is that perhaps women are simply less interested than men in workplace power, despite previous findings that women and men have comparable levels of overall power motivation (e.g., Winter, 1988). Indeed, in Study 3, mean interest in workplace power was higher among men than women. However, it does not follow that women's interest in workplace power, but not men's, would necessarily operate in a hydraulic fashion as seen here, where more power in one domain (the household) leads to less interest in another (the workplace). That is, even if women desire workplace power less than men, or (orthogonally) find more satisfaction in the domestic domain than men, this would not mandate that these levels of interest must correlate. In keeping with modern women's ongoing self-doubts about whether they can truly "have it all" (Pearson, 2002; Slaughter, 2012), women, to a greater degree than men, appear to view the workplace and familial spheres of life as inherently in conflict with each other and as requiring tradeoffs.

One might also consider the role of socioeconomic status (SES) and employment in the present results. As mentioned earlier, women who envision themselves wielding household power may infer that they have a high-earning spouse and are not themselves employed. Yet the results of Study 3 indicate, importantly, that this does not occur for men. That is, given that men's interest in workplace power was not affected by their household power, household power does not appear to lead men to infer a high-earning wife who has no need for their financial contributions. Thus, it may be that part of the lay stereotype of a household powerholder is a woman who is not in the paid workforce. This is an interesting aspect of the phenomenon to be considered in future research. Moreover, it may be worth considering whether the negative consequences of household power might be particularly strong for women with more education or more money. For higher-SES women, because of their stronger economic circumstances, personal choice may be assumed to play a greater role in their decisions to

eschew the paid workforce than it does for low-SES women. That is, high-SES women who wield household power may be assumed by outside perceivers to be “voluntarily” stepping back from the pursuit of workplace power. Past research suggests that interpreting women’s roles in this way, through a lens of personal choice, can further reinforce the gender status quo by reducing individuals’ recognition of gender discrimination in the workforce (Stephens & Levine, 2011; Stone, 2008).

Limitations and Future Research

The present studies are limited by their use of self-ratings to measure interest in workplace power, rather than actual pursuit of such power. It would be interesting to test whether women’s power over household decision making affects their behavior when faced with a direct opportunity related to a high-status occupation. Moreover, these studies also relied on scenarios rather than actual life choices. What happens when young men and women actually form relationships, set up households, and establish a division of labor and decision making? In particular, are young women who find themselves as the primary decision makers in their household less likely to subsequently pursue high-status careers? We see these as fascinating questions for future research.

It is also worth remembering that this research was conducted in a Western, relatively egalitarian cultural context, with a relatively educated populace. The effects of household-power framing may be weaker in cultural contexts with more traditional gender roles. In such contexts, there may be minimal effort to “spin” women’s traditional role to make it appear more appealing than it might otherwise be (Napier et al., 2010), given that there is no expectation of gender egalitarianism. Indeed, some evidence suggests that certain system-justification tendencies such as complementary stereotyping may be stronger among those with more egalitarian values (Jeffries et al., 2012; Kay, Czaplinski, et al., 2009), who may be

more motivated to account for disparate group outcomes. In other words, it may be those women who are most open to the possibility of changing gender roles who are most vulnerable to the effects of household-power framing on their motivation for change. Alternatively, women who possess certainty about their ability to achieve workplace power would presumably be less vulnerable to the effects of household-power framing because their workplace power is more likely to seem assured, and therefore orthogonal to any role they might play at home.

Finally, an additional area of interest would be the operation of this phenomenon in the other direction—that is, the effect of workplace power on interest in power holding at home. Based on the present theorizing, we would not expect that workplace power would reduce motivation for household power, for either men or women. Unlike the domestic sphere, the workplace is not a low-status domain that is made more appealing by framing it as a source of power; instead, the workplace is widely recognized as a means of acquiring power and status. We suggest that framing household responsibilities as power undermines women’s desire to challenge the status quo (via the acquisition of workplace power), and that this occurs because the household domain is (a) relatively low in status, compared to the workplace domain, and (b) consistent with women’s stereotypical arena of expertise.

Concluding Thoughts

We propose that power over domestic decision making, in which women are given the ultimate say in household choices that affect others’ daily lives, serves to create an illusion of equality in the domain of power. Women’s power in the household may appear to compensate for a lack of power in the workplace or public sphere. Ultimately, however, women must at least partially abdicate their role as household decision makers—and men must agree to share such authority—in order to realize true gender equality in both the public and private spheres.

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