

Couples' power dynamics and the gendered division of contraceptive use in Belgium

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Introduction

Previous research predominantly focused on contraceptive use as a female sphere of influence (Grady et al., 2010; Thomson, 1996). However, recent studies (Bertotti, 2013; Fennell, 2011) have indicated the importance of also taking man's characteristics into account and, more specifically, heterogamy and negotiations within couples in order to get more insight into the choice for certain contraceptive methods. As most effective reversible methods are female controlled (e.g. pills, intra-uterine device), it comes as no surprise that use of female methods exceeds use of male methods (e.g. condom). However, use of tubal ligation also exceeds use of vasectomy, even though the latter is considered the 'better' method since its overall cost – in terms of surgical risk, invasiveness, complications, etc. – is lower (Shih et al., 2011). This points towards primarily female responsibility for contraception and thus suggests that, since women generally hold lower marital power, contraceptive use is subject to couples' gendered division of power.

We aim to examine the relationship between partners' power dynamics and contraceptive use. Paralleling research on the gendered division of domestic labor (Bertotti, 2013; Fennell, 2011), we put forward two perspectives.

First, the relative resource perspective is based on the idea that most people try to bargain their way out of domestic labor as they consider it unpleasant (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). Applied to this study, this would mean that the allocation of contraceptive work can be expected to reflect the power relations within a couple. Partners' bargaining power is believed to depend on what partners have to trade and on the living standard they can obtain outside the partnership (Lundberg & Pollak, 1996), and can be expected to relate to spouses' relative earnings potential. Although the theory recognizes the differences in power between men and women, the focus on exchange relations remains gender-neutral (Coltrane, 2000).

Following this argument, we suppose that *the partner with the least relative power will take responsibility for contraceptive work (power hypothesis)*. In order to capture the complexity of power, we consider it as a multidimensional concept (Grady et al., 2010), taking both structural (i.e. educational heterogamy) and organizational (i.e. division of household labor and decision-making power) indicators into account.

Second, rather than focusing on household labor as a burden, the theory of maternal gatekeeping sees the domestic domain as a female sphere of influence in which women prefer to remain in charge and tend to limit men's involvement (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Similarly, the gender construction perspective posits that women may perform housework to reinforce and reproduce their

identity as a woman (Davis et al., 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987), especially if they have a higher status than their partner. Men, on the other hand, only share housework if their masculinity is not under threat (i.e. men with a high education, income, etc.) (Bittman et al., 2003).

Following this argument, we expect that *the partner with the most relative power will take responsibility for contraceptive work (gender hypothesis)*.

Method

Sample. The hypotheses will be examined using the Generations and Gender Programme, a European longitudinal panel survey initiated by UNECE that collects representative data in 19 countries. Our study focuses on the Belgian data (wave 1, 2008-2010). We weighted the data to correct for the representativeness. We select a subsample of 1009 co-residential heterosexual couples in which both partners had no desire for (additional) children, were aged 30 or above and the woman was younger than 50 at the time of the survey.

Analysis. We use Diagonal Reference Models (DRMs) to model the relative impact of man's and woman's education on contraceptive use, and to disentangle these effects from the additional influence of educational heterogamy while controlling for other covariates. DRMs are based on the theoretical idea that homogamous couples represent the 'core' of their group (Sobel, 1981). When cross-tabulating man's and woman's educational level, they can be considered as the diagonal referents for heterogamous, off-diagonal couples.

Since our dependent variable is measured by means of four categories, we use multinomial logistic DRMs. The model can be represented as

$$B_{ijkl} = \frac{\exp(\theta_{ijl})}{\sum \exp(\theta_{ijl})}$$

$$\theta_{ijl} = p\mu_{iil} + (1-p)\mu_{jjl} + \sum \beta_{al} h_{ija} + \sum \beta_{bl} x_{ijb}$$

where B_{ijkl} refers to the probability that respondent k uses contraceptive method l , given man's education level i and woman's education level j (Eeckhaut et al., 2013; Nieuwbeerta & Wittebrood, 1995).

Results

As shown in table 1, the probabilities for homogamous couples ($\mu_{11} - \mu_{33}$) using female controlled contraceptives show a linear pattern. Highly educated couples are most likely to use reversible female contraceptives and are least likely to rely on female sterilization. For male controlled contraceptives, there is no clear pattern.

The relative weight of man's and woman's education can be inferred based on the value of the salience parameter p . Since p theoretically ranges from 0 to 1, a score below 0.5 indicates that the relative impact of the woman's education is more important while a score above 0.5 refers to a greater weight of the man's education. Since our p -value equals 1, contraceptive use seems predominantly determined by man's education.

Looking at the covariates concerning the power relations within the couple, the results primarily confirm the power hypothesis. Couples in which the woman has more decision-making power are more likely to rely on male sterilization than on female reversible contraceptives and couples in which the man performs more housework are more likely to choose for (both reversible or permanent) male controlled contraceptives compared to female reversible methods. In addition, if the educational heterogamy is in favor of the man, couples are more likely to rely on female sterilization than female reversible methods, as compared to homogamous couples. This can be interpreted as an indication of power because permanent methods are more invasive than reversible methods and exclude the option of bearing children in a next relationship.

Discussion

By applying the prevailing theories on the division of household labor, the aim of this study was to get more insight into the association between the gendered power dynamics and a couple's choice of contraceptive method. The main findings confirmed our power hypothesis, indicating that the partner with least relative power seems to be responsible for contraceptive use. In addition, the results highlighted the importance of also taking man's characteristics into account in a "female domain" and the relevance of operationalizing relational power as a multidimensional concept.

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Appendix

Table 1. Multinomial logistic diagonal reference model with control variables, educational heterogamy, division of housework and decision-making power (N=1009)

	Reversible, male contr.	Reversible, female contr.	Permanent, male contr.	Permanent, female contr.		
Salience parameter p			1.000			
Odds for the homogamous couples with educational level i (probability between brackets)						
μ_{11}	0.149 (5.6%)	1 (37.7%)	0.874 (32.9%)	0,631 (23.8%)		
μ_{22}	0.080 (3.7%)	1 (46.2%)	0.893 (41.3%)	0,190 (8.8%)		
μ_{33}	0.119 (6.2%)	1 (52.1%)	0.709 (36.9%)	0,092 (4.8%)		
Odds for the control variables						
$b_{\text{man aged 30-39}}$	0.987	1	0.571	+	1.339	
$b_{\text{woman aged 30-39}}$	0.952	1	0.404	***	0.302	***
b_1 child	2.539	1	1.714		2.166	
b_2 children	0.342	*	0.738		0.639	
$b_{\geq 3}$ children	1.299	1	1.177		1.896	
$b_{\text{cohabiting}}$	0.723	1	0.776		0.174	
$b_{\text{heterogamy}}^{(a)}$	1.239	1	1.126		1.940	+
$b_{\text{division of housework}}^{(b)}$	1.426	+	1.400	*	1.122	
$b_{\text{decision-making power}}^{(b)}$	1.101	1	0.535	**	0.580	

Notes. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; + $p < 0.10$

(a) Educational heterogamy is measured as the signed difference between man's and woman's education (-1 = woman is higher educated; 0 = equally educated; 1 = man is higher educated).

(b) The scale for measuring division of housework and decision-making power ranges from -2 (the woman performs all housework/decides everything) to 2 (the man performs all housework/decides everything). Tasks shared/Decisions made equally are coded 0.