Received: 15 February 2023 | Revised: 1 June 2023 | Accepted: 11 July 2023

DOI: 10.1111/spc3.12856

EMPIRICAL ARTICLE

WILEY

Associations between power, stress, and dominance in romantic relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic: Examining curvilinear and within-person effects

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Funding information

Mental Research Institute; Ohio University Baker Award

Abstract

Two key processes in romantic relationships—power and dominance—can contribute to relationship disruption, but the association between these variables is complex. Elucidating the association between power and dominance during the COVID-19 pandemic is particularly important given the economic, social, and health-related stressors that pose a risk to relationship health. We examined associations between power, stress, and dominance by recruiting 1813 participants to complete an initial online survey at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were contacted 10 and 22 months later to complete follow-up surveys. Results revealed two main effects: individuals who had greater relationship power and experienced more COVID-19-related stressors than other people engaged in more dominance behaviors. A significant curvilinear effect revealed that at low levels of power, power was not associated with dominance behaviors. However, once power surpassed low levels, individuals with more power engaged in more dominance behaviors. Finally, people engaged in more dominance behaviors when they experienced more

power and stress compared to their own average (i.e., within-person effects) during the pandemic. Implications for theories of power, dominance, and relationship disruption and distress are discussed.

KEYWORDS
COVID-19, curvilinear effects, dominance, intimate relationships, power, stress, within-person processes

1 | INTRODUCTION

Power and dominance are two key processes in romantic relationships that have implications for relationship health. Dominance in intimate relationships is conceptualized as deviations from egalitarianism in three ways: authority (being "in charge" in the relationship), restrictiveness (prohibiting partners' behavior), and disparagement (negative appraisals of partners' worth; Hamby, 1996). All are associated with greater distress and more negative relationship outcomes (Hamby, 1996). Relationship power—the capacity to influence one's partner while resisting their influence attempts (Simpson et al., 2015)—is also implicated in relational well-being (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983). Although power and dominance are related constructs (Blader & Chen, 2014), their association is complex.

Originally, Dyadic Power Theory (Rollins & Bahr, 1976) proposed a positive linear association between power and dominance because individuals with more power have more resources to engage in dominance behaviors. Recent empirical evidence, however, has found a curvilinear association. That is, individuals with the highest and lowest levels of power are least likely to engage in dominance behaviors (though not at equivalent levels); those high in power do not need to engage in dominance behaviors to exert influence and those low in power do not engage in dominance behaviors in order to avoid negative reactions from their partner (Dunbar & Abra, 2010, 2021; Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Dunbar et al., 2008; Dunbar & Johnson, 2015). Importantly, these tests have generally focused on dominance during specific interactions (e.g., conflict discussions); they have not examined how power is associated with broader patterns of dominance (e.g., behaviors consistent with authority, restrictiveness, and disparagement; Hamby, 1996). Research focused on behaviors closer to Hamby's conceptualization of dominance (e.g., aggression) has found both positive and negative associations between power and aggressive behavior (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1997).

Understanding the association between relationship power and dominance is particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic given the heightened risk of relationship distress during this period (Bevan et al., 2023). During the pandemic, financial anxiety, health-related concerns, and social disconnection —all key predictors of pandemic-related distress (Wu et al., 2022)—have generated a "perfect storm" of factors that could lead to increases in maladaptive relationship experiences (Gelder et al., 2020; Gresham et al., 2021; Hu & Sun, 2023; Parrott et al., 2021). Indeed, several models emphasize how stress can heighten interpersonal aggression (e.g., Allen et al., 2018; Finkel & Eckhardt, 2013). Stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, may be directly associated with greater dominance behavior. Further, various relational models describe how situational stressors, including those associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, may *interact* with person-level characteristics to influence aggressive behavior (e.g., DeWall et al., 2011; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). Therefore, the pandemic provides a unique opportunity to evaluate how these stressors moderate the connection between power and dominance.

The aims of the current study are to (1) examine associations between relationship power, COVID-19-related stress, and patterns of dominance in romantic relationships, and (2) evaluate whether COVID-19-related stressors moderate the association between power and dominance. Because it is unclear whether fluctuations in power or

stress at the within-person level (e.g., experiencing more or less power relative to one's average level of power) are associated with varying expressions of dominance behavior, we examined these relations at both the between-person and within-person levels to untangle the complexities of these associations (e.g., Girme, 2020). Clarifying how power, stress, and dominance are related linearly and curvilinearly at both the between-person and within-person levels, and determining whether stress impacts this relation, may facilitate identifying potential interventions (e.g., stress mitigation) that could reduce relationship distress.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants and power

1813 participants recruited online from ResearchMatch who were involved in a romantic relationship for at least four months and cohabitating with their partner completed the first wave of data collection (T1; see Gresham et al., 2021 for details). All T1 participants were contacted approximately 10 and 12 months later to complete the first (T2) and second (T3) follow-up surveys. Of these initial participants, 1200 and 1142 completed the T2 and T3 follow-up surveys, respectively. A priori power analyses to determine the sample size for T1 recruitment estimated power at 1.0 for our original model (Gresham et al., 2021). After T1, we collected follow-up data from all willing participants from this pre-determined sample. Post-hoc analyses indicated that the power of the current model to detect small effect sizes is over 0.8. Participants predominately identified as White (N = 1,602, 88.4%), women (N = 1,425, 78.59%), straight (N = 1,477, 81.46%), and married (N = 1,251, 69%). On average, participants were approximately 44 years-old and had been in their current relationships for 16 years. The online supplemental material (OSM) presents full sample characteristics (Table S1) and analyses comparing those who completed all three assessments to those who did not.

2.2 | Procedure

An institutional review board approved all study procedures. Informed consent was obtained prior to completing each survey. T1 survey responses were collected in May 2020 following the initial wave of COVID-19 in the U.S. T2 survey responses were collected between February and March 2021, following the surge of U.S. cases in late 2020 and early 2021. T3 survey responses were collected between February and March 2022 following the surge of U.S. cases in late 2021 and early 2022. Participants were not paid for their participation in the T1 survey, but received $10 for their participation in each follow-up survey.

2.3 | Measures

All measures were administered at each wave (T1, T2, and T3). Unless otherwise stated, items for each scale were averaged to form composites. See the OSM for all scales.

2.3.1 | Relationship power

The 20-item Relationship Power Inventory (Farrell et al., 2015) assessed participants' perceived power relative to their romantic partner. Higher scores indicated having more power in the relationship.

2.3.2 | Dominance behaviors

A 9-item abbreviated version of the Dominance Scale (Hamby, 1996) assessed participants' use of authority, restrictiveness, and disparagement of their current partner. Principal axis factoring consistently suggested a one-factor

solution across all three time-points. Ancillary analyses in the OSM present findings when each subscale of the Dominance Scale is used. Higher scores indicated more dominance behaviors.

2.3.3 | COVID-19-related stressors

Scores from four scales assessing financial anxiety (Financial Anxiety Scale; Archuleta et al., 2013), social disconnection (Social Connectedness Scale; Lee & Robbins, 1995), health anxiety (Health Anxiety Inventory; Salkovskis et al., 2002), and COVID-19 stress and impact (Pandemic Stress Index; Harkness et al., 2020) were standardized and combined to assess COVID-19-related stressors (Wu et al., 2022). This combined measure had acceptable internal consistency (see Table S2 in the OSM) and Principal axis factoring revealed a one-factor solution.

3 | RESULTS

Tables S2 and S3 present descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations, respectively. Figures S2–S4 present scatterplots and distributions of key variables.

3.1 | Analytic plan

We conducted multilevel analyses using the MIXED procedure in SPSS (Version 28) to account for dependence in repeated assessments within individuals. We used SPSS syntax provided by Bolger and Laurenceau (2013) to model an autoregressive error structure and partition the between- and within-person associations between power and stress on dominance. This approach allowed us to simultaneously model the degree to which power and stress were associated with more dominance behaviors for participants who experienced more (vs. less) power and stress than others on average (a between-person effect) and when participants experienced more (vs. less) power and stress than their own person-specific average (a within-person effect). Participants with partially missing data were not excluded from analyses, as multilevel models enable inclusion of all data.

At level-2, we included the following predictors: the linear effect of between-person power, the linear effect of between-person stress, and the interaction between the two. We also modeled a curvilinear between-person effect of power and examined the interaction with the between-person, linear effect of stress. At level-1, we modeled the linear effect of within-person power and stress, their interaction, and the interaction between the curvilinear effect of within-person power and the linear effect of within-person stress. We also included two dummy codes to represent potential changes in dominance behavior over time, with our first assessment (T1) as the reference group. The intercept and within-person, linear effects of power and stress were modeled as random effects. Table 1 presents the results.

3.2 | Aim 1: Associations between power, COVID-19-related stress, and dominance

The between-person analysis revealed that participants who reported more power and stress relative to others engaged in more dominance behaviors. Additionally, a significant curvilinear effect of power on dominance indicated that at below-average levels of power and above (inflection point = 1.51 SD below the mean; absolute score = 3.14), participants who had more power relative to others engaged in more dominance behaviors (see Figure 1). At the within-person level, at times when participants experienced more power and stress relative to their own preson-specific average, they engaged in more dominance behaviors.

TABLE 1 Effects of relationship power and COVID-related stressors on dominance behaviors.

Predictor variables	*B*	SE	*t*	*p*	*r*
Between-person effects					
Relationship power	0.11	0.01	9.77	<0.001	0.23
Relationship power^2	0.05	0.01	5.83	<0.001	0.14
COVID-related stressors	0.19	0.01	13.79	<0.001	0.31
Relationship power × COVID-related stressors	−0.02	0.02	−1.31	0.191	0.03
Relationship power^2 × COVID-related stressors	−0.02	0.01	−2.44	0.015	0.06
Within-person effects					
Relationship power	0.04	0.01	3.29	0.001	0.15
Relationship power^2	0.03	0.02	1.06	0.287	0.03
COVID-related stressors	0.07	0.01	4.77	<0.001	0.19
Relationship power × COVID-related stressors	0.03	0.05	0.52	0.603	0.01
Relationship power^2 × COVID-related stressors	0.01	0.05	0.02	0.984	0.00
Time 1 versus Time 2	−0.04	0.01	−5.15	<0.001	0.12
Time 1 versus Time 3	−0.04	0.01	−4.96	<0.001	0.14

Note: The variables marked with ^{2} are curvilinear variables. Effect size *r* was estimated using Rosenthal and Rosnow's (2007) formula: $r = \sqrt{(t^2/[t^2 + df])}$.

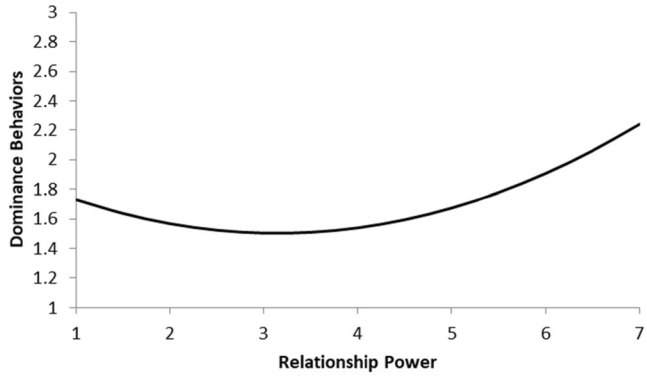

FIGURE 1 The curvilinear association between relationship power and dominance behavior.

3.3 | Aim 2: Moderation of the association between power and dominance by COVID-19-related stressors

The interaction for the between-person, curvilinear effect of power and stress was significant. However, the estimated effect size was small ($r = 0.06$), and this effect did not always remain significant in ancillary analyses, reducing our confidence in the finding. See the OSM for a full description of this effect. No within-person interaction effects were significant.

4 | DISCUSSION

We examined associations between relationship power, COVID-19-related stressors, and dominance behavior across three assessments during the COVID-19 pandemic. We found a complex association between power and dominance.

Specifically, linear and curvilinear effects of power on dominance emerged at the between-person level. The linear effect indicated that individuals with greater power in their current relationship relative to other people engaged in more dominance behaviors. The curvilinear effect revealed that once power surpassed low levels, higher power was associated with greater engagement in dominance behaviors.

Power was also positively and linearly associated with dominance at the within-person level: when individuals experienced more power than their average, they engaged in greater dominance. This highlights the dynamic association between power and dominance. It is not just individuals who have higher power relative to others who engage in more dominance behaviors; increases in power relative to one's *own* average are also associated with increases in dominance behaviors. Although Dyadic Power Theory posits that dominance behavior occurs because of an individual's level of power (e.g., Dunbar et al., 2008), current models of social hierarchy acknowledge dominance as both an antecedent and consequence of power (Blader & Chen, 2014). Thus, it is unclear whether higher power promoted dominance behavior or whether engagement in dominance behaviors led individuals to feel more powerful. This may explain the lack of association between power and dominance at low levels. Although this study did not experimentally manipulate power, there was no within-person curvilinear effect showing that when individuals experience less power than their average they compensated with more dominance behaviors.

Though tests of Dyadic Power Theory have found curvilinear relations between power and dominance in more discrete interactions (e.g., Dunbar & Abra, 2010, 2021; Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Dunbar et al., 2008; Dunbar & Johnson, 2015), our results indicate that when examining the association of power and broader patterns of dominance behavior, both effects are present depending on the level of analysis. Further, the curvilinear effect we observed is different than those found in previous tests. Instead of finding that people at the highest and lowest levels of power engaged in less dominance behavior, we found that dominance behaviors were greatest among those at the highest levels of power. This finding highlights differences in conceptualizations of dominance and/or how general patterns of dominance behavior may differ from dominance behaviors enacted during specific dyadic interactions in laboratory settings. Individuals high in power, for instance, may be less likely to engage in overt dominance behaviors if they are being observed.

We also found that stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic were positively associated with dominance at both the between-person and within-person levels, such that individuals reported engaging in more dominance when they experienced more stress relative to others and when they experienced more than their own average level of stress. This is consistent with research indicating that COVID-19-related stressors during the pandemic may have increased the risk for aggression in relationships (e.g., Gelder et al., 2020; Gresham et al., 2021; Parrott et al., 2021). Although we might expect individuals experiencing the greatest COVID-19-related stressors to display the most dominance, even those who experience relatively lower levels of stress may still enact dominance behaviors when they experience greater stress than they normally do (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). The COVID-19 pandemic offered a unique context during which to study these associations but given the existing research that highlights stress as a risk factor for relationship dysfunction, findings most likely apply when individuals experience other stressful life events. Thus, intervention efforts may employ strategies that target both populations at higher risk of COVID-19-related stress and those who have recently experienced stressful life events.

Strengths of this work include repeated assessments of power, stress, and dominance during peak periods of COVID-19 and a large sample of participants in established relationships. However, there are some limitations. Because one of the primary aims was to assess intimate partner violence during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gresham et al., 2021), we did not enroll both romantic partners in the study due to security concerns. Future work should examine power, stress, and dominance dyadically across time (e.g., Simpson et al., 2019). The demographic composition of our sample, generally low levels of dominance behavior, and the use of only three timepoints to assess within-person effects are additional limitations.

By assessing both linear and curvilinear relations between relationship power, stress, and dominance at the between- and within-person levels during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research underscores the importance of modelling nuanced, complex effects (Girme, 2020). These analytic approaches can help to identify novel associations between power, stress, and dominance. Our findings highlight that associations are not necessarily linear, and they

may change depending on whether one examines differences relative to other people versus relative to the self over time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported financially by the Mental Research Institute and the Ohio University Baker Award.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The study was not preregistered. Data are available upon request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All study procedures were approved by an institutional review board.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Gresham, A. M., Peters, B. J., Karantzas, G. C., Cameron, L. D., Simpson, J. A., & DiGiovanni, A. M. (2023). Associations between power, stress, and dominance in romantic relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic: Examining curvilinear and within-person effects. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, e12856. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12856