Gender, Culture and Power: Investigating Spousal Transgressions in India and the United States

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Research suggests an imbalance of duties exists between spouses in cultures in which hierarchical family relationships prevail (Neff, 2001; Turiel, 1998). Within these relationships, the male superiors are often seen to have more rights and the female subordinates more duties. We conducted a cross-cultural investigation within India and the United States (N=80) examining perceived transgressions between husbands and wives. We coded responses to interview questions tapping both the type of transgression mentioned and the reasons provided. More Americans than Indians reported inequality in the relationship as the basis of the transgressions, whereas more Indians than Americans reported failure to fulfill role obligations as the basis of the transgressions. Our results suggested that in India expectations and duties were not imbalanced as both husbands and wives had reciprocal role obligations.

Gender norms vary with regard to their emphasis on egalitarianism versus hierarchy. In an egalitarian gender structure, the balance of power between males and females is divided equally. On the other hand, in a hierarchy, there is a power imbalance between both genders such that one gender holds more power than the other. Ambiguity remains, however, regarding what exactly this imbalance entails in terms of the everyday experiences of those whose lives intertwine with these norms.

Social domain theorists have focused on the subversive opposition to hierarchical gender norms by those in a subordinate position. Such opposition is usually expressed by women living in patriarchal societies, who invoke moral arguments against hierarchical gender structures on the grounds that they violate such moral standards as individual rights and fairness (Turiel, 2002; Turiel, 2003; Turiel &Wainryb, 1998; Turiel & Wainryb, 2000; Turiel & Wainryb, 2003). Support for these assertions exist in both the psychological (e.g. Neff, 2001) and anthropological (Abu- Lughod, 1993) literature. From this perspective, hierarchical gender norms are seen as inherently violating principles of justice. Theorists from this perspective thus view it as appropriate to negatively evaluate these norms on moral grounds (Turiel, 2002).

Some cultural anthropologists, on the other hand, caution against hastily applying moral judgments to unfamiliar cultural practices (Shweder, 2002). It is argued that despite their apparent universality, abstract moral principles, do not necessarily manifest themselves in the same way across cultural contexts. Justice, for example, is not always synonymous with equality (Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987). Furthermore, applying liberal moral norms to perceived social problems across diverse cultural contexts may be viewed as leading to

condescending attitudes toward social groups and practices that deviate from liberal ideals (Shweder, 2002).

The existence of opposition to hierarchical gender norms clearly reflects the presence of dissatisfaction within some hierarchical social structures. However, theorists have argued that evaluative statements about hierarchical gender norms are often saturated with individualistic, ethnocentric notions of Western feminism and thus are out of touch with the lived experiences of women from different cultures that are structured by such gender norms (Menon, 2000; Menon, 2013). In this regard, Menon (2013) argues that insufficient attention is given to potentially more salient sources of dissatisfaction within such cultures, such as role-related breaches. From this viewpoint, culturally shared concerns with fulfilling valued duties can be seen as a valid concern, which should not be completely overshadowed by concerns of gender equality.

Looking at the nature of marital conflicts that occur across cultures that differ in terms of gender norms can provide a useful window into better understanding this debate through focusing on a) exactly how the power dynamic is enacted in terms of the allocation of role-related duties and entitlements and b) the way such allocations are viewed and evaluated.

In the only known study directly examining these questions in the context of a marriage, Neff (2001) analyzed responses to vignettes depicting a marital conflict among a Hindu Indian population. In response to these vignettes, participants showed a greater concern for issues of autonomy when evaluating the husbands and for interpersonal duty when evaluating the wives. These findings lend support to a viewpoint in which central to these conflicts is the lack of equality between genders, subordination of one gender over the other, and restriction of rights and freedoms (Turiel, 2002; Turiel, 2003; Turiel &Wainryb, 1998; Turiel &Wainryb, 2000; Turiel &Wainryb, 2003).

There are, however, several theoretical assumptions and methodological limitations in Neff's (2001) study that necessitate further attention to the issues of culture, autonomy, and duty within the context of a hierarchical gender structure. Theoretical assumptions include: 1) the creation of a false dichotomy between autonomy (the drive to be causal agents of one's own life) and interpersonal responsibility (the drive to abide by social expectations) and 2) a lack of attention to the reciprocal nature of role-related duties within a hierarchical social structure. Additional methodological limitations include a bias in the types of conflicts presented in the vignettes and a lack of cross-cultural comparison.

With regard to the first assumption of mutual exclusivity of autonomy and responsibility, we believe that this view is based on the assumption that autonomous behavior is intrinsically motivated and responsibility (social expectations) is extrinsically motivated. This assumption has been challenged by a recent empirical study by Miller, Das, & Chakrvarthy (2011) which showed that Indian participants reported the same level of satisfaction when performing a behavior that was based on personal choice as on interpersonal duty, but that Americans reported less satisfaction when performing an interpersonal duty as opposed to an act based on personal choice. Miller and her colleagues (2011) interpreted these findings as suggesting that Indians had internalized the interpersonal duties, and could perform them autonomously. In using "autonomy" and

"interpersonal responsibility" as conceptual categories meant to tap attitudes toward social behavior within an Indian population, it is important to keep these findings in mind rather than treating autonomy and duty as inherently in opposition.

Regarding the second assumption, in assuming a natural asymmetry in the rights and responsibilities allocated in a hierarchy, Neff (2001) does not adequately account for the reciprocal nature of rights and duties for both superiors and subordinates in such a structure. For example, in an educational setting, a student has lower status and less power than his or her teacher. However, this does not necessarily mean that the teacher has more rights and less responsibility. If a student has a responsibility to complete his or her work, the teacher not only has the right to expect that the student will complete the work on time but also a responsibility to provide proper guidance for the student. Additionally, the student also has the right to expect that his or her teacher will perform this expected duty.

Beyond these theoretical challenges, methodological limitations also exist in Neff's (2001) investigation. Perhaps the most significant limitation is in the selection of marital conflicts presented to the participants. In the vignettes presented by Neff (2001), conflicts between the desires of the husband and wife were comprised of duties more closely associated with female gender roles; responsibilities that are typically associated with males were absent. For example, one of the responsibilities depicted involved cooking dinner—a task typically associated with women but not men in India. A question remains as to whether the observed asymmetry in rights or duties would exist if both typically male and typically female role-related responsibilities were presented.

Furthermore, because the study was conducted using only an Indian sample, no cross-cultural differences were available to be analyzed. Conducting a cross-cultural study would allow for a greater understanding of the ways that cultural variability in attitudes toward interpersonal responsibility may influence the way individuals construe marital conflicts.

The present study speaks to some of these remaining gaps concerning the enactment of gender norms in different cultural contexts and their relation to conflict within these gender structures. We interviewed participants from two cultures often characterized as prototypical examples of collectivistic and individualistic (India and the United States, respectively) about transgressions committed by spouses (both husbands and wives) within marriages. We then coded and analyzed participants' open ended responses in terms of both the type of transgression and the justification for why it was considered to be a transgression.

Due to a greater emphasis on role-related duty in India (Miller, 2003), we expected that Indian participants would more frequently base their reasoning on violations of role-related duties than Americans. For Americans, based on the fact that gender inequality is a more salient concern in American culture, we expected more frequent mention of inequality in explaining the transgressions. We further anticipated that Indian respondents would spontaneously base their reasoning on violations of role-related duties for both wives and husbands due to the reciprocal nature of duties in a hierarchical system. This led us to predict that there would be no difference in the frequency of role-related reasoning when explaining transgressions committed by husbands versus wives in India.

METHODS

Participants:

We analyzed narratives from 40 married, middle class, middle-aged Americans, and 40 married, middle-aged Indians, recruited via flyers in New Haven, Connecticut and Mysore India (N=80, M=37.1 years, Range= 30-59). Our sample was comparable in terms of level of education, socio-economic status, and age.

Yale University research assistants interviewed American participants in English and native language speaking researchers at the University of Mysore interviewed participants in the local language of Kannada.

Procedure:

These interviews were conducted as part of a larger study in which individuals were asked about positive and negative acts committed by individuals in each family role (husband, wife, son, daughter, brother and sister). Results from the prosocial examples collected have been previously published (Miller & Bersoff, 1995). For the purposes of this paper we will focus on the previously unreported narrations collected regarding transgressions committed by husbands and wives in the US and India.

Each participant was asked to generate examples of breaches for each role (husband and wife) and the order was counterbalanced across participants. First, we prompted participants to recall an example of something a husband or wife they knew had done that they considered to be a bad thing for a husband or a wife to do. Then we asked participants to explain *why* they considered their reported example to be a bad thing to do. The specific prompts we used are as follows:

 "*Please tell me about something a husband (or wife) you know well has done to their spouse that you thought was a very bad thing for a husband (or wife) to have done.*"
 "*In your opinion, why was this example a bad thing for the husband/wife to have done?*"

Coding and reliability:

We assessed the examples participants generated for differences in themes based on culture and spousal role. We developed a coding scheme to capture major themes in the open-ended content of the type of transgression (i.e. *what* was the act) and participant's rationale (i.e. *why* these acts were bad) about these transgressions. There were four possible themes for each segment of the responses. An "Uncodable" category was used for incomplete or unclear responses or other examples that did not fit within any of the categories. Categories were not mutually exclusive – thus a narrative could be coded as belonging to more than one category. Examples from open-ended answers for the rationales are as follows:

Justice Concerns: "He had betrayed the trust she had in him."
Violation of Duties: ""Being a married man he has a responsibility of taking care of his family."
Unsupportive: ""It is wrong because he is not supportive of his wife."
Egalitarian Concerns: ""He doesn't realize that he's expecting things of her that he doesn't expect of himself."

Definitions of coding categories for the type and the rationale provided for the transgression are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Transgression Coding Categories

Type of Transgression:
Cheating/Infidelity – explicit reference to adultery/cheating/infidelity/running off/breaking marriage vows.
Harm- instances of both physical and verbal abuse, as well as undue pressure or coercion.
Financial Irresponsibility – focus on accumulating material things at the expense of the family.
Unsupportive – actively discouraging or being indifferent to spouse's goals or spouse's personal interest, passions, desires.
Uncodable. – unclear or not given.

Rationale for being a transgression:
Justice Concerns- including dishonesty (lying, lack of communication, lack of transparency, breach of trust) as well as harm (harming personal welfare of husband/wife).
Role Violations - not performing the expected duties of wife/husband, not being a "good" wife/husband, including refusal to compromise.
Thwarting Personal Goals – actively discouraging to spouse's goals or personal interest, passions, desires, beyond what is captured by role expectations or equality concerns.
Egalitarian Concerns – lack of shared power balance in the relationship, lack of equality of tasks, duties, worth, and investment.
Uncodable. – unclear or not given.

Analyses:

We assessed the reliability of the coding scheme by comparing our coding of the data to coding done by undergraduate research assistants. The unit of analysis was the theme(s) in each participant's entire response. Undergraduate students were trained in the use of the coding system and blind to the research hypotheses. Reliability was assessed on the complete sample of data and there was an 81% mean agreement between author coders and hypothesis-blind coders.

RESULTS

As all our data was qualitative we utilized non-parametric statistics (mainly, the Mann-Whitney U test) to analyze the interview responses. We found no statistically significant differences (p <.05) between male and female participants' responses in generating examples of either a *type of transgression* or providing *reasons for evaluating acts as transgressions*. For these reasons, we excluded gender from the rest of our statistical analyses.

Type of spousal transgression:

The most frequently generated type of transgression for both Indians (37.5%) and Americans (40%) was "Harm". For a detailed summary of frequencies in each category see Table 2.

Table 2. Frequencies of endorsed transgression categories related to spousal role by culture.

	US		India	
	Husband	Wife	Husband	Wife
Transgression				
Cheating/infidelity	7	14	3	6
Harm	20	11	18	12
Unsupportive	9	6	10	7
Financial Irresponsibility	3	5	9	12
Uncodable	3	6	3	7
Rationale for being a transgression				
Justice	11	14	7	9
Thwarting Personal Goals	6	6	2	3
Violation of Duties	10	13	31	23
Egalitarian	11	2	0	0
Uncodable	4	4	5	4

Our analysis yielded no statistically significant differences between Indians and Americans on the categories of "Harm" (U =2940, p >,05) and "Thwarting Personal Goals" (U =3006, p <.05). However, Americans generated more examples of "Cheating/Infidelity" than Indians (U =2542, p =.010). On other hand, Indians generated more examples of "Financial Irresponsibility" than did Americans (U =3581, p =.012). Below are examples of each of these categories:

Example of "Cheating/Infidelity":

American response to wife transgression: "I know of a case where a husband had to go out of town for his job and the wife was cheating on him-- having an affair with some man she'd met in a bar."

Example of "Financial Irresponsibility"

Indian response to wife transgression: "However good their relationship was, the wife was greedy after gold ornaments. Her husband could not afford to buy all the gold that his wife wanted. He did everything to fulfill her desires; this was the only thing that he could not achieve. She should be aware of his financial condition".

We also found significant differences among Americans when participants were generating examples of wife and husband transgressions. American participants generated more examples of "Harm" when they were discussing husbands as opposed to wives (U =535, p =.023).

Our results indicated significant differences between cultures in the nature of the examples generated for wife transgressions. More American participants generated examples of "Cheating/Infidelity" than Indian participants (U =617, p =.034). See Figure 1.
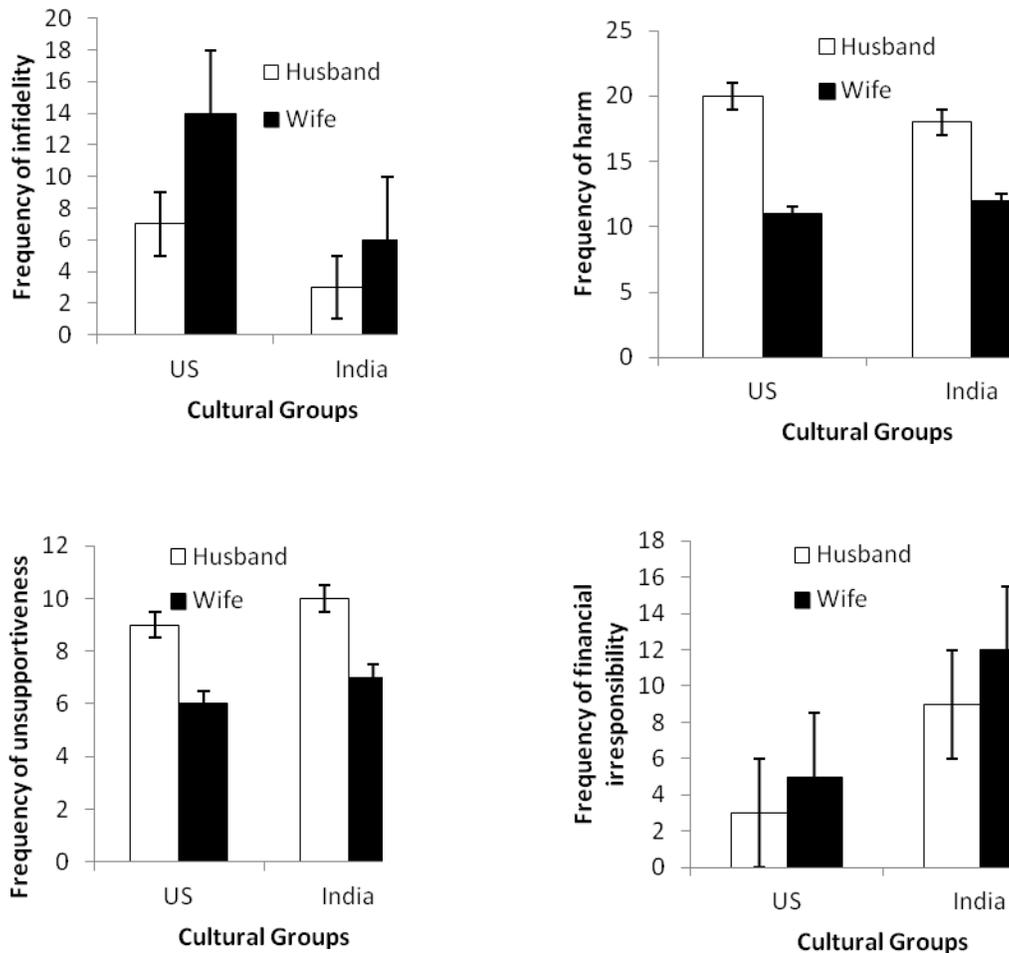

Figure 1. Frequencies of generated transgressions by culture and spousal role.

Why participants considered generated examples as transgressions:

The top concerns expressed by Americans when providing reasons for considering acts as transgressions was "Justice" (32.9%) whereas for Indians it was "Violation of Duties" (67.5%). For a detailed summary of frequencies in each category see Table 2.

Our analysis yielded no statistically significant differences between Indians and Americans on the categories of "Justice" (U=2648, p >.05), and "Thwarting Personal Goals"" (U=2750, p >.05). As expected we found that Americans expressed "Egalitarian Concerns" more frequently than Indians (U =2520, p <.001) when providing reasons for why they considered the act to be a transgression. On other hand, Indians expressed concern with "Violation of duties" more frequently than Americans (U =4172, p <.001) when providing reasons for why they considered the act to be a transgression. Below are examples of each of these categories:

Example of "Egalitarian Concerns":

American response to husband transgression: "Because he is stopping her from fulfilling herself as an individual, above and beyond her role as a wife and partner."

Example of "Violation of Duties":

Indian response to husband transgression: "Being a family man he should have certain responsibilities towards his family. His family was running a pathetic life; he should have helped them to better their situation".

We found significant differences among Americans in the extent to which "Egalitarian Concerns" were expressed for husband transgressions as opposed to wife transgressions. Americans more frequently expressed "Egalitarian Concerns" when discussing husband transgressions than wife transgressions (U=544, p =.005).

Our results indicated significant differences between cultures when participants provided reasons for why they considered acts transgressions. More American expressed "Egalitarian Concerns" when evaluating husband transgressions (U=520, p <.001) than did Indians. On the other hand, more Indians expressed concern with "Violation of Duties" when discussing husband transgressions (U=1113.5, p <.001) than did Americans. See Figure 2.
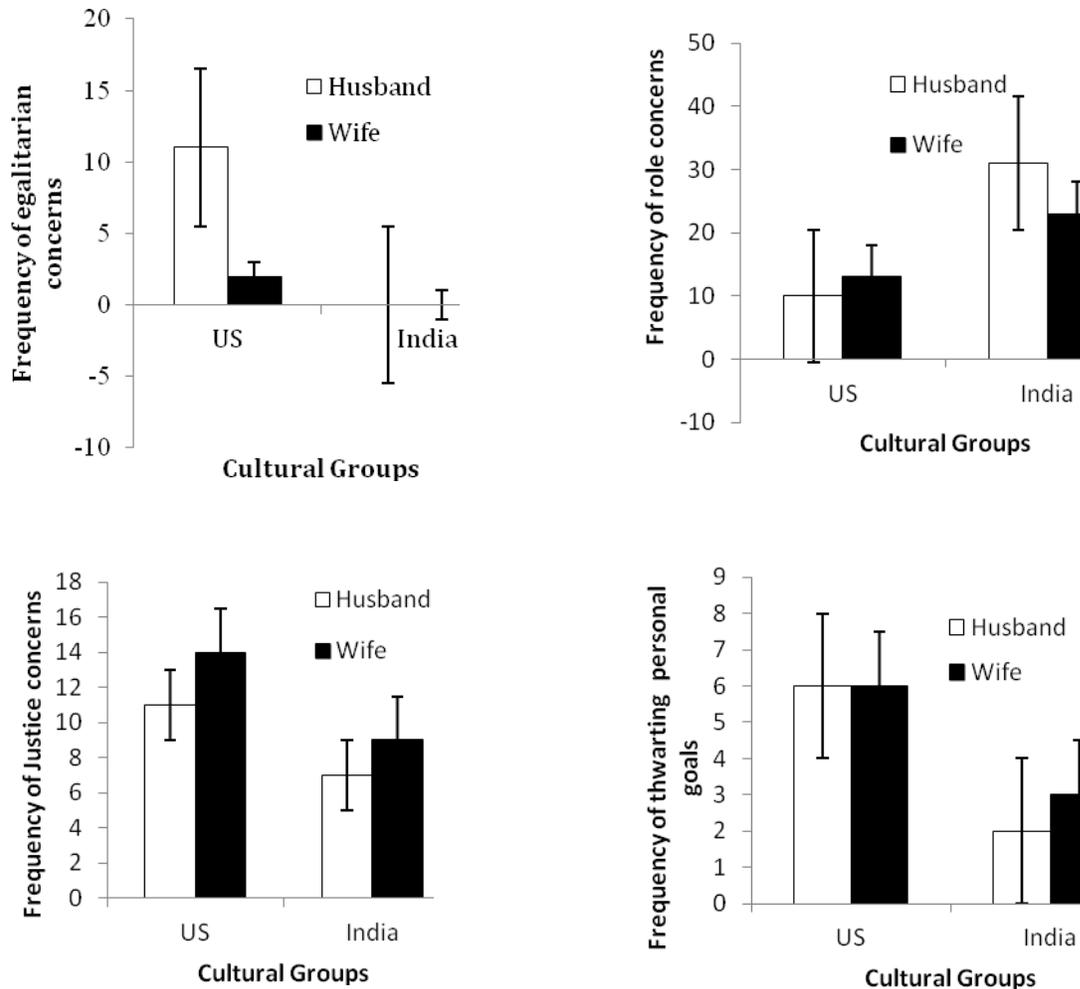
Figure 2. Frequencies of why participants considered generated examples as transgressions by culture and spousal role.

DISCUSSION

As predicted, we found that more Americans than Indians viewed the basis of transgressions as a lack of equality. We also found that concern for equality was endorsed more when Americans evaluated husband-transgressions as opposed to wife transgressions. We believe that the high frequency of equality concerns endorsed by Americans (and not Indians) reflects the greater emphasis placed on egalitarian concerns as a source of conflict in marital relationships in the U.S. Moreover, the higher frequency of equality in husband evaluations as opposed to wife evaluations speaks to the dissatisfaction of traditional marital roles in the US. Also in line with our predictions, more Indians than Americans viewed the basis of transgressions as lack of fulfillment of role related duties. Importantly, this emphasis on role violations as a source of transgression did not differ significantly between spouses. These findings reflect a greater emphasis placed in India on shared understanding of duties associated with marital roles. Though

husband and wives may have different duties, we observed that neglecting a role related duty was a salient transgression for both husbands and wives.

These results challenge claims made by Neff (2001), and other domain theorists that inherent in gender hierarchies is an asymmetrical allocation of rights and responsibilities, with subordinates charged with more responsibilities and superiors more rights (Turiel, 2002; Turiel, 2003; Turiel &Wainryb, 1998; Turiel & Wainryb, 2000; Turiel & Wainryb, 2003). These results also demonstrate the existence of shared understanding of reciprocal duties between husbands and wives in a hierarchical family setting. Rather than attempting to subversively overthrow gender norms, a concern with ensuring that each party pulls his or her weight emerged as a more dominant theme in the Indian respondents' narratives. These results provide empirical support for the concerns voiced by Menon (2013) and others with regard to the lack of consideration of local cultural ideals (i.e. role-related duties) when attempting to apply Western feminist principles to non-Western cultural contexts.

Unexpectedly, we found that more Americans generated "Infidelity/Cheating" transgressions than did Indians, whereas Indians generated "Financial Irresponsibility" more frequently as a transgression than did Americans. We believe that these results also lend support to a greater emphasis placed on issues of justice and harm in the US within social relationships as opposed to role related responsibilities in India.

We also found some interesting within culture differences that were not part of our hypotheses. American participants generated more examples of "Harm" when discussing husband than wife transgressions. We believe that "Harm," which included issues of dishonesty, pressure and also emotional harm, possibly speaks to women's concerns with equality within social relationships.

We also observed significant within culture and between culture differences in "Infidelity/Lying". US wife transgressions were evaluated more frequently on "infidelity/lying than both US husband transgressions and Indian wife transgressions. The within culture differences perhaps reflect a "double standard" that exists when it comes to evaluating the sexual behavior of females versus males (for recent meta-analysis see Crawford & Popp, 2003). Promiscuity and infidelity tend to be judged more harshly when evaluating females as opposed to males (Crawford & Popp, 2003). The low incidence of infidelity related transgressions in India could be due to a reluctance to discuss deviant sexual behavior (Lambert & Wood, 2005).Overall, our results suggested that Indians and Americans generated similar transgressions but differed significantly on why the acts were considered transgressions. Whereas Americans and Indians both display concerns with "supportiveness", "pressure" and "criticism," in the case of both wife and husband transgressions the reasons for why these acts were considered transgressions significantly differed for Indians and Americans. Whereas Indians displayed concern for "violation of duties," Americans were more likely to endorse "egalitarian concerns."

Although this study is a rich source of open ended data that explores firsthand the perceptions of married individuals in both India and the United States, there are several limitations to be taken into account before making cultural generalizations. First, our study

explored hierarchical versus egalitarian concerns within a spousal relationship; therefore it does not speak to the balance of rights and responsibilities within other domains of life, such as employment, social welfare and civil rights. Perhaps the power in gender hierarchies within spousal relationships is not defined in terms of the distribution of rights and responsibilities but in the accountability experienced by males and females within this gender structure. Second, our study consisted of middle aged participants and therefore may not generalize to younger populations with more progressive perceptions of gender hierarchies within spousal or romantic relationships. Thirdly, we observed a high frequency of "uncodable" data for the types of transgressions that participants generated. Although problematic, we believe this reflects the wide range of themes that did not neatly fit into other categories as the participants were asked to generate real life examples without forced choice prompts or multiple choice options.

Since our results suggest that the asymmetry of rights and responsibilities is not an inevitable consequence of gender hierarchies future research may consider investigating other aspects of power dynamics associated with hierarchies. For example, empirically testing discrepancies in accountability for violating spousal duties for men and women could provide further insight into understanding power dynamics within hierarchical structures.

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