

Female Power, Ethnicity, and Aging

Linda M. C. Abbott

The standard academic presentation on the topic of power rarely alludes to the elderly, ethnic groups, or to females of any age or race. The cultural history of humankind has been one of gross inequities in the distribution of power, and much of this distributional variance has been attributable to the categories of race, gender, and age. When these categories overlap, the impact on individual access to power has been, and continues to be, the greatest.

In order to understand the dynamics of the impact of cultural and sex-linked dimensions of power on the mid and late stages of the life cycle, the most broadly applicable bases of power must first be clearly set forth. Combining the French and Raven¹ power sources with Hilary Lips² discussion, seven categories emerge through which individuals can hold or achieve disproportionate power or authority. These categories are examined in terms of their applicability to available female life patterns across time and culture, using examples drawn from anthropological and sociological literature.

I. Coercion. In many aspects the simplest of the power bases is that which an individual holds by means of superior physical strength or skill. Historically, this base has been exclusively a male prerogative by virtue of larger size, greater muscle mass, and fewer limitations, such as those imposed by pregnancy in females. Prior to the invention and use of weapons available to either gender, coercive power rested on simple strength. When coercive power has been exercised by females, it has been viewed as unusual and has produced fear disproportionate to the actual physical threat present. Sylvia Leith-Ross quotes the reaction of a woman to a 1929 Ibo riot in protest of the imposition of British taxation:

There were plenty too much women, a very large crowd. They were coming along the road and beating their laps and lifting their heads toward the sky and waving their sticks. All had sticks, big sticks. I was afraid of them . . . they looked quite different from any other crowd of women I have ever seen . . . As they had no children with them that also made me afraid. I do not know where any of women came from. I was very much afraid of them and did not look at their faces.³

II. Authority. Formal or legitimate authority, the second universal

power base, allocates the right to control resources according to principles derived from culturally shared beliefs regarding a people's origin. Globally and historically, wide variety in the distribution of authority patterns has been evident. In examining creation stories of 112 societies for gender origin symbolism, Sanday found in fifty-six cultures that a masculine figure was the source of authority, in twenty cultures, a feminine figure was most significant, and in thirty-six societies, a couple shared the creation role. Ceremonial and political roles of men and women flow from the creation myths and become routinized as legitimate authority in the culture.

In the Seneca creation story, for example, a woman, called the ancient-bodied, is responsible for most of earthly life. The Constitution of the Five Nations (including the Seneca) which was passed on orally for generations, and written in the late 19th century, codifies the central role of women: "Women shall be considered the progenitors of the Nation. They shall own the land and the soil. Men and women shall follow the status of the mother."⁴

More commonly, male-centered creation myths transmit authority and resource control to males. Paul's concise description of the Judeo-Christian chain of command is illustrative: "But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God."⁵ This sort of male-centered understanding of derived authority has been by far the most widespread, both across time and culture, with devastating consequences for women. In a 1978 technical development conference in Canada, a delegate from Mozambique summarized the disparity in resource control between the genders:

Women constitute one-half of the world's population and one-third of the official labor force; women perform nearly two-thirds of the hours worked; women, according to UN and ILO statistics, receive only one-tenth of the world property; women make up three-fourths of the world's undernourished; women, in the developing countries, form eighty percent of the age group six to sixteen with no schooling . . . it is a fact that the hard core of the development problem is constituted by women. Women are the most unequal among unequals.⁶

III. Access to Specialized Information. The third power source has been unequally distributed as well. The sole exception to the male domination of learning opportunities has been the traditional healing arts, especially midwifery. The practice of that knowledge has been viewed with suspicion and fear and subjected to outright persecution. Formal educational institutions, both native and colonial, have more often than not been designed along parallel sex-segregated tracks. Male classes impart the knowledge base for leadership positions; females learn cooking and sewing. Higher education, in particular, long delayed the admission of women, and higher education institutions continue to

be administratively segregated. If knowledge is power, then access to learning determines the composition of the empowered class.

IV. Charisma. Personal magnetism, or charisma, the fourth power base, interacts with gender in a different manner than those previously discussed. Here, the interaction of age with gender determines access to power. Where maturity is generally a prerequisite for the exercise of coercive, legitimate, or intellectual power, maturity differentially affects the exercise of charismatic power by males and females. Youth of both genders may wield influence interpersonally by means of their attractiveness or sway millions through their “star” quality. With age, however, the male acquires an especially valued patina, whereas the female withers and is rejected as a symbol of attractiveness. As an available resource, power based on physical charm is exceptionally fleeting for the female.

V. Spiritual Power. Age impacts upon spiritual power in nearly the opposite way. In many religions, closeness to God is attained through the patient practice of spiritual discipline over many years. Where gender is concerned, however, spiritual power as a resource is more available to men than to women, as has been the case with the other bases of power examined. Although a few remarkable women have founded and advanced religions, in the majority of religions women are excluded from the powerful intermediary role of priest, rabbi, mullah or shaman. People who are thought to have special closeness or access to God are usually men, a circumstance related to the male image of God in Christian, Jewish, and Moslem cultures, among many others. Where women do appear to hold some supernatural power, it is likely to be attributed to a link with the devil, not with God. The connection between women’s possession of special knowledge and the accusation of witchcraft is well-documented elsewhere.⁷ In the 13th-17th century witchcraft craze, some eighty-five percent of those put to death for witchcraft were women.⁸ The three categories of crimes for which this punishment was deemed appropriate included sexual expression, being organized into groups, and rendering medical assistance through traditional healing practices. Men, by virtue of their physical similarity to Christ, were thought to be immune from these temptations and women—thought to be fickle, lustful, and weak-minded creatures—were especially vulnerable. While this explanation of women’s assertive behavior may have inspired fear and awe as well as persecution, it generally did not place them in the position of respect accorded spiritual leadership.

VI. Reward Power. The sixth source of power, the ability to reward, is a derivative of the preceding five, and extends their impact. For example an individual who controls resources, or has special access to

God, or who has superior knowledge, is in a position to share these attributes and their reflected glory with faithful friends and followers. Conversely, such an individual is empowered to withhold such favors for cause, spite, or displeasure. As a derivative, this power base follows the male-dominant pattern of each of the others, multiplying their effect and lengthening the term of their dominion.

VII. Referent Power. The final source, referent power, is based on an individual's attraction to another person or group, and may also be derivative. For instance, a person who wanted to be a doctor might adopt mannerisms, vocabulary, social style, and other behaviors observed to be typical of doctors. The strength of the identification may be explained by the informational or legitimate sources of power actually enjoyed by physicians, or the attachment may be idiosyncratic, operating independently of any reasonable explanation. Referent power, when a derivative source, is distributed differentially by gender, race, and age, following the pattern established by the primary bases of power. In general, the pattern is male dominant, but there is an important exception. Nearly all individuals admire, want to be like, and attribute power to their primary care-giver in infancy and childhood. Since this is most often the female parent, a widespread belief in the power of mother exists among children, based in large part upon her capacity to reward, which in turn stems from what appears to the child to be her control of resources. In actuality, her discretion in the distribution of resources may be extremely limited, a circumstance which becomes apparent to children later in life.

These seven power sources describe the base of disproportionate levels of influence enjoyed by individuals. Power relationships are dynamic rather than static, however, and fluctuate as cultures respond to natural disaster, war, invasion, growth or decline, disease, or technological innovation. While it is beyond the scope of this review to chart these changes, some generalizations can be outlined. Sanday's wide-ranging survey found that in those cultures with an inner, or earth-centered orientation, females were likely to have equal or higher status than males.⁹ In those cultures with an outer, animal, or sky-centered orientation, males generally enjoyed dominant status. These relationships tend to be stable until war or disaster introduce new circumstances which lead to new mythology legitimating altered power relationships. One typical pattern is that found in response to Western Colonialism. European influence universally resulted in the erosion of female status. When paired with migration which disrupted agriculture, it profoundly and permanently depressed the position of women relative to what it had been.

Several African societies, in which agriculture was women's work and the source of women's disposable income, experienced a similar disruptive impact of European agricultural technology. Instruction in using equipment was given exclusively to men as well, displacing the prior order and depressing the status of women by removing their access to a livelihood.

Another illustration can be drawn from Haudenosaunee (Six Nations) history in the United States. According to one interpretation, Quaker ideology espousing the importance of the nuclear family was adopted to provide legitimate status to males who had been deprived of their traditional life on the trail. However, the salvation of the Haudenosaunee male was achieved at the expense of the traditional matrifocal system, and several defiant old women were actually executed when they attempted to defend their prerogatives.

The crisis of culture called modernization has had adverse effects on many Third World peoples, but this impact has been most devastating for women through the removal of their traditional bases of power. In the economic, sociopolitical, educational, and spiritual spheres, colonial exploitation created new dependencies for women.¹⁰

The impact of modernization and technological innovation on women in general has been to remove that portion of their power which rested on a magico-cultural or religious base and to depress that portion of their power which rested on cultivation, consumption, and marketing of traditional crops. This experience is similar across racial groups, intensifying rather than changing in nature for women of color.

The effect of aging on the power sources available to women in cultures of varying stages of modernization is not as simple or clear. Although physical strength as a source of coercive power clearly declines with age, both expert and referent power may actually increase. An accumulating body of research supports the notion that many intellectual capacities continue to expand well into the eighties among persons who have not suffered damage from diseases which affect the brain. Referent power, which is based on liking and respect, also may increase with age simply because the majority of the elderly are women, and research has shown that women have more favorable attitudes toward women than men do. Legitimate authority and resource control diverge with age, with authority potentially remaining stable or even increasing, depending on the cultural value of age. Economic power, however, declines precipitously except for a fortunate few.

In the United States, most older women subsist on low, fixed social security incomes based on their husband's earnings. In many rural families, the men were not covered by social security, so their widows

have no income whatsoever, except for handouts from their children or part-time earnings from babysitting or jobs as waitresses or laundry workers where their health permits such employment. Seventy-nine percent of unmarried women over sixty-five years of age fall well below the poverty level, with fifty percent of that group comprised of widows.¹¹ In 1980, the average social security benefit for all women was \$230 a month, far below the level required for the exercise of economic power.¹²

The likelihood of victimization compounds the effect of poverty, particularly for women of color. Black women, at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale, are "eighteen times more likely to be victims of rape than white women," and "more affluent blacks are a great deal more likely to be victimized (burglarized) than are more affluent whites."¹³

Functioning additively, such victimization, the loss of economic power, and the negative cultural view of aging as it impacts the personal attractiveness of women, together with loss of such sources of self-esteem as the wife and mother roles, might lead to a prediction of widespread depression or mental status deterioration for women as they age. However, such negative results of the aging process are far from universal, even within any single ethnic group, and vary widely among such groups. Part of the reason for this variance, of course, is because "members of different ethnic groups have varying expectations of the aged. This probably [even] differs by generation and class within given ethnic groups."¹⁴

A sampling of research findings may shed some light on this diversity. Corrine Azen Krause, in a 1979 study, found a surprising level of mental health among the elderly Slavic women in her sample.¹⁵ She attributes this positive outlook to the combined impact of several features of Slavic culture, particularly deep religiosity and a continuing participation in home and community affairs. The Slavic woman continues to play a significant role in the extended family, fostered by proximity, and provides dedicated service to her church as long as physically able. She is protected by the maintenance of these power bases from the loss of meaningful roles so often associated with aging.

In research involving different ethnic groups, Cohler and Lieberman found nearly the opposite results from prolonged immersion in the ethnic culture.¹⁶ The Italian and Polish respondents reported a certain amount of stress associated with the continuing demands on their energies resulting from family and community embeddedness. Their socialization into dependent and caring roles had not permitted them as rapid a disengagement as their personal circumstances might have required.

When broader generalizations are sought regarding the impact of aging on women's power and mental health, a few suggestive findings

from research emerge. An Israeli cross-cultural study of female attitudes toward menopause explored attitudes toward femininity, psychosexual histories, menopause experiences, and family and social problems associated with age.¹⁷ While most findings were negative, the mixed results suggested that the subject of adjustment to aging is more complex than previously thought. For at least the Oriental-Arab subjects in this sample, a positive response to menopause was associated with the desire to have no more children.

Because of the complexity of women's responses to aging, and due to the variability both within and among ethnic groups, the most utilitarian of the research reports appear to be those that suggest strategies useful in facilitating adjustment to later life, and strategies explicitly designed to maintain several of the power bases available to women at earlier stages of the life cycle.

In a mid eastern study of over 200 married women between the ages of forty-six and sixty-one who were college graduates, Black and Hill found that no single specific life event was associated with adjustment or lack thereof.¹⁸ Rather, their findings indicate the most important single factor in women's mental health was their ability to cope creatively with situations as they arise. Those who had demonstrated to their own satisfaction the ability to adapt to new situations were the most satisfied and well-adjusted. They also indicated the positive value of the women's freedom to explore new alternatives in their careers and life-styles after many of their family responsibilities had been discharged.

One strategy frequently employed among women involves tapping others in similar situations for experiential wisdom. These networks, common in most cultures, share resources and information through formal or informal mechanisms. This active involvement in networks not only is a strategy for retaining some forms of power but also serves to initiate the members to a variety of coping strategies which may be applicable to their situation. Common bonds may be formed by profession, residence area, age, or by the triple jeopardy of race, sex, and class. As a mechanism typical of females, network strategies may help forge a response to the hierarchical pattern of authority that have excluded many women from the paths to power. By opening these networks to people of both genders, an important step will be taken to break status barriers in favor of new, more permeable situation-based alliances. Such a strategy has proven its worth in the management field; perhaps it is worth attempting in applied human relations.

In summary, a review of the seven bases of power indicates that women consistently experience and exercise less power than men. Further, modernization and technological innovation have served to

depress the status of women in those limited realms where some degree of authority had been accorded by the traditional culture. In American culture, where personal worth is often equated with economic power, the condition of women as compared to men is depressed and stable, if not deteriorating.

The source of this decline in relative economic power is potentially a source of strength. Demographic changes, particularly increasing longevity, have produced a rapid rise in sheer numbers of older women. Media attention to community organizing efforts involving older women provide role models and inspiration for many. On a more superficial level, the media can be seen as an ally to older women. Several of the actresses most in demand are well over forty, an unusual and promising circumstance. Capitalizing on the novelty of legitimization for at least the charismatic form of power for the "older" woman, leaders may seek legitimization for other power bases as well.

More solid, long-range gains in equity may be derived from encouragement of women pursuing technologically-based careers in science and health fields. As the number of women approach significance in these fields, acknowledged intellectual power will be one by-product. Similarly, access for women to seminary training offers promise for increasing standing in terms of spiritual power.

The awakening of older women to their power in numbers and the training of younger women in career paths that constitute legitimate access to power are two significant strategies challenging inequity at the present time. For the vast numbers of women fitting neither category, forms of assistance must be developed and delivered which speak to their circumstance as well. Here, feminist organizations, women's studies classes, and informal discussion groups can render important services by teaching a range of coping skills and strategies. This method of empowerment, although labor-intensive, has the distinct advantage of producing immediate and significant increases in personal power for women in a variety of age, cultural, and ethnic categories, as well as in many life circumstances. Such coping skill training offers promise in addressing the pervasive and continuing inequities facing women.

Notes

¹J. R. P. French, Jr. and B. Raven. "The Bases of Social Power." *Studies in Social Power*. I. D. Cartwright, ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1959).

²H. M. Lips. *Women, Men, and the Psychology of Power*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981).

³S. Leith-Ross. *African Women*. (New York: Praeger, 1965) 31-32.

⁴A. C. Parker. *The Constitution of the Five Nations*. Bulletin, No. 184. Albany: New York State Museum. (1916) 42.

⁵*Bible*. I Corinthians 11:3.

⁶M. R. Leet. *The Roles of Women in Science and Technology Development*. (Toronto: 20th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, 1979) 15.

⁷A. Rich. *Of Women Born*. (New York: Norton, 1976).

⁸Lips, 17.

⁹P. R. Sanday. *Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origins of Sexual Inequality*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹⁰For a fuller discussion see: *Comparative Perspective of Third World Women: The Impact of Race, Sex and Class*. B. Lindsay, ed. (New York: Praeger, 1980).

¹¹U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *Money Income and Poverty of Families and Persons in the United States: 1981*. Series P-60, No. 134, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981).

¹²*Ibid*.

¹³Anonymous. "Intelligence Grows Across the Life Course." *Aging International*. Vol. II, No. 2 (Summer, 1984) 7.

¹⁴D. E. Gelfand and A. J. Kutzik, eds. *Ethnicity and Aging*. (New York: Springer, 1979) 359.

¹⁵C. A. Krause. "Ethnic Culture, Religion, and the Mental Health of Slavic-American Women." *Journal of Religion and Health*. Vol. 14, No. 4 (Winter, 1979) 298-307.

¹⁶B. J. Cohler and M. A. Lieberman. "Social Relations and Mental Health." *Research on Aging*. Vol. 2, No. 4 (December, 1980) 445-469.

¹⁷B. Maoz, N. Dowty, A. Antonovsky, and H. Wijssenbeek. "Female Attitudes to Menopause." *Social Psychology*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring, 1970) 35-40.

¹⁸S. M. Black and C. E. Hill. "The Psychological Well-being of Women in their Middle Years." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. Vol. 8, No. 3 (Spring, 1984) 282-292.

Critique

"Female Power, Ethnicity, and Aging" will surely be of interest to readers of this journal. Scholars in ethnic and women's studies have, no doubt, considered at one time or another the impact of ethnicity and age on the power of women in our culture and have a sense of the negative influence of these factors on women who as a group have marginal status in our power structures. So it is that we are anxious to have our sense of these relationships documented in some way or to have the philosophical implications of the intersections of these factors explored and defined. This is a big order and not one that is very satisfyingly filled by Abbott's presentation.

The typology which she uses for the discussion of sources of power seems to be derived from standard sociological description, but it is eye-opening nonetheless. Her categories will remind the reader of the varieties of power sources functioning in any culture and they will also suggest for the American reader, at least, the ways in which these power sources reinforce one another and tend to concentrate power in small groups (minorities, if you will) of people with conservative values and extensive economic resources. These people are clearly not women and they are not ethnic minorities. An examination of the power sources, such as the one provided here, is useful in pointing to the avenues by which a powerless group seeking power can endeavor to obtain it. So far, so good.

The method favored by academic sociologists for the analysis of such a multifaceted issue as the one considered here is the collection of data, usually through the use of a statistically reliable survey, and the