FEELING POWERLESS AND FINDING SUPPORT

Dynamics of Power Perceptions and Empowering Interventions in Legal Conflicts

Maria Anna Jozefa van Dijk

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FEELING POWERLESS AND FINDING SUPPORT:
dynamics of power perceptions and empowering interventions in legal conflicts

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1	Introduction	9
Chapter 2	Building Strength or Lending an Ear in Legal Conflicts: Dependence and Conflict Asymmetry as Distinct Predictors of Needs for Support	23
Chapter 3	Effects of Online Interventions and Retaliation Power on Empowerment in Consumer Conflicts	47
Chapter 4	Power Asymmetry and Early Intervention in Divorce	71
Chapter 5	Discussion	103
Addendum	References	122
	Appendix A: Supplement to chapter 3	138
	Appendix B: Supplement to chapter 4	144
	Summary	148
	Samenvatting	150
	Acknowledgements	152

Chapter 1

Introduction

Nicholas told Olivia he wants to divorce her. She is shocked by this news, angry with Nicholas, and sad about the breakdown of their relationship. She is especially worried about the impact on their two young children. Nicholas wants to move ahead with the arrangements, but Olivia did not anticipate his wish to divorce. She realizes that Nicholas has already collected information and contacted a lawyer. Olivia feels unprepared and worries that she will not be able to afford a lawyer.

Douglas ordered a new printer from a large online retailer two weeks ago but notices that the cartridges leak. He e-mailed the retailer, but the retailer replied that ink cartridges are not under warrantee. Douglas is unsure about his rights as a consumer. He wants to contact the retailer again, but doubts whether he will be able to write an effective and convincing message.

Olivia and Douglas face two very common problems. For divorce, statistics show that per year and per 1000 married people, almost 9 people get divorced in the Netherlands (CBS, 2020). Similar numbers are found in England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2022), with an even higher number of 16 people per 1000 in the US (based on married women only – Reynolds, 2020). With regard to consumer conflicts, the Dutch pathways to justice study (2019) shows that in the period 2015-2019, problems with the purchase of goods and services were the most common legal problems in the Netherlands (Ter Voert & Hoekstra, 2020). International surveys reveal a similar picture (Pleasence et al., 2013).

Although the situations of Olivia and Douglas are very different, both can be defined as conflicts. That is, both Olivia and Douglas feel ‘obstructed or irritated’ by another party and will ‘inevitably react to it in a beneficial or costly way’ (Van de Vliert, 1997, p. 4). Such reactions can range from avoidance to problem solving, and from accommodating to fighting (Van de Vliert, 1997). Depending on such responses and how the conflict further unfolds, different outcomes may arise: there could be an agreement with high benefits and low costs to both parties, or an escalated stalemate with high costs and very little benefits for either party. It is also possible that one party ‘wins’ and the other ‘loses’, or the outcome may simply be a sustained status quo with continued obstruction and irritation (Van de Vliert, 1997). Both conflicts of Olivia and Douglas can also be considered *legal* conflicts, or conflicts with legal aspects (Van de Vliert, 1996). In the case of Olivia’s divorce, she will need the legal system to finalize the divorce, but possibly also for help with negotiations in preparation of the divorce agreement. In Douglas’ consumer conflict, he could contact the other party himself. However, if he cannot reach a solution that way, legal routes are open to him. In the tradition of ‘paths to justice’, conflicts that could be handled in the legal system, even when they are not, and even when no action is taken, are considered ‘justiciable events’ or legal conflicts (Genn, 1999).

What Olivia and Douglas further have in common, is that they see the other party as more powerful than themselves. In a substantial number of legal conflicts, this is almost inevitable due to the nature of the parties. For example, a business or government organization in conflict with an individual consumer or citizen will likely already have experience with this type of conflict and they will also have more access to expert knowledge from experienced negotiators and legal experts (Galanter, 1974; Menkel-Meadow, 1999). In other conflicts, such as divorce, an imbalance of power may not be as inevitable, but can easily arise out of differences in experience and expertise, financial means buying access to experts, or individual (support) networks. An extensive body of research has shown the substantial negative consequences of facing a more powerful other in conflict and negotiation. These consequences range from lower negotiation outcomes, higher distress and more negative emotions, to higher needs for help and higher financial costs (Berdahl & Martorana, 2006; Bollen & Euwema, 2013; Coleman et al., 2012; Galinsky et al., 2017; Giebels & Janssen, 2005; Greer & Bendersky, 2013; Kim et al., 2005; Lawler & Bacharach, 1987; McCauly, 2017; Pruitt & Kim, 2004; Tesler, 1999; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Shestowsky, 2004). However, very few studies have examined how these asymmetrical conflicts play out over time and which interventions may be effective in balancing the scales. Olivia and Douglas are both at the very start of a conflict process -a process that may be short or may take a long time- and any help they receive at this stage could potentially steer the process into constructive or destructive directions, leading to advantageous or disadvantageous outcomes. In this dissertation, I will examine how power perceptions that are formed in the early stages of conflicts influence needs of the less powerful conflict party, how they affect the course of the conflict, and how they play out in terms of conflict outcomes and costs. I will also explore the potential of early interventions that are delivered online to strengthen early power perceptions of less powerful parties.

Power

Power is one of the central drivers of human interactions in general (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Bacharach & Lawler, 1981; Emerson, 1962; Galinsky et al., 2006; Hatfield & Rapson, 2012; Keltner et al., 2003; Tedeschi et al., 1973; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Van Kleef & Cheng, 2020) and conflicts in particular (Coleman et al., 2012; Greer & Bendersky, 2013; Lawler & Bacharach, 1987). I focus on the power dimension and interventions that target power during legal conflicts in this dissertation, because when the relationship between two parties develops into a conflict, the power balance between them becomes salient and apparent (Simpson et al., 2019). For researchers, defining power has been a challenge. Fiske and Berdahl (2007) summarize attempts to define power into three perspectives. The first perspective is that of researchers who have defined power as influence on other

people, focusing on the effects of power when it is enacted (e.g., Russell, 1938). The second perspective emphasizes power processes. It includes those who have defined power as potential influence, focusing on the strategies that can be used to influence others (e.g., French & Raven, 1959). Fiske and Berdahl (2007) endorse the third perspective and follow the tradition of power-dependence theory (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959; Emerson, 1962; Fiske & Depret, 1996). This perspective defines power as control over outcomes. The third definition of power has been widely adopted in conflict and negotiation studies (Coleman et al., 2012; Schaerer et al., 2020b). In this definition, person A has power over person B if they can control the physical, economic, and/or social outcomes of person B (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007). In contrast to the first two perspectives on power, it does not matter if this outcome control is actually used (e.g., as a threat) or materialized; it is the potential outcome control that parties are aware of that counts. Following most recent work, I will also adopt the definition of power as outcome control in this dissertation. Examples of power defined as such are the power Nicholas has over Olivia by his control over her access to housing after the divorce (physical), her access to financial assets (economic), and her relationship with her children (social) (see also Bollen et al., 2013). For Douglas, the retailer he is in conflict with controls whether Douglas is refunded for the printer or not (economic). Outcomes in this definition of power should be considered broadly, not only as the final outcome of a conflict or negotiation. They also include control over process related outcomes such as when a negotiation takes place, which issues are higher on the agenda, and who has access to information. These forms of process control are important as they can steer the path of conflict resolution and thus entail control over the final conflict outcomes as well.

Negative effects of a power disadvantage

An imbalance in power (i.e. power asymmetry) can lead to conflict outcomes that are both objectively and subjectively worse than in conflicts with power balance (i.e. power symmetry). The less powerful party will bear the brunt of the negative effects of asymmetry. These potential negative effects of a disadvantage in power in conflicts are well-established in the literature. Experimental studies on negotiations have shown that the powerful claim more value (De Dreu, 1995; Giebels, et al., 2000; Wiltermuth et al., 2018) and obtain better negotiation outcomes (Rubin & Brown, 1975; Schaerer et al., 2020a). Studies suggest the powerful do so by making more, more convincing, and more ambitious first offers (Galinksy et al., 2017; Gunia et al., 2013; Ma & Jaeger, 2010), by asserting more (Wiltermuth, Tiedens & Neale, 2015; Ma & Jaeger, 2010) and conceding less (Pinkley, 1995), especially when the other party displays negative emotions like anger (Overbeck et al., 2010; Van Kleef et al. 2006). Powerful parties are also less sensitive to influence tactics by the other party (Schaerer et al., 2020a), and may act more deceptively (Olekalns & Smith, 2009).

Field studies corroborate the findings from experimental studies. For example, in conflicts on the division of household tasks, the more powerful partner who wants to keep the status quo of an unequal division of tasks is more likely to win conflicts than the partner who is currently doing more and wants to change the division (Kluwer et al., 2000). In interdepartmental negotiations in manufacturing organizations, low power departments saw high power departments they negotiated with as more contending than the high-power departments saw themselves (Nauta et al., 2001). And, in mediation in hierarchical labor conflicts, low power parties expressed less satisfaction than high power parties after the mediation process, experienced more negative emotions, and were more affected by experiences of uncertainty during the mediation process (Bollen et al., 2010; Kalter et al., 2021). Negative emotions experienced by the low power party, but not by the high-power party in hierarchical labor conflicts also went unnoticed by mediators (Kalter et al., 2021).

Feeling powerless during conflicts, or with little control, is also strongly associated with negative psychological and physical outcomes (Sheldon & Gunz, 2009; Skinner, 1996). Previous research shows that individuals who experience a conflict as one where they have little control, will risk reduced daily well-being (Reis et al., 2000), high stress (Giebels & Janssen, 2005), increased negative affect (Keltner et al., 2003), and strong feelings of insecurity and anxiety about the conflict and its outcome (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003).

The costs of a disadvantage in power (in terms of negotiation outcomes and psychological effects) are important from an individual as well as a societal perspective. Conflict outcomes that are seen as suboptimal and conflict processes that people are unhappy with, can lead to new conflicts or re-litigation of old conflicts, and therefore extra costs (Kaiser et al., 2022; Tyler & Blader, 2003). In divorce conflicts, like that of Olivia, especially as she and Nicholas have children, a constructive divorce process and agreements that both parties accept will be crucial to the quality and health of the co-parenting relationship and mental health of children (Amato, 2010; Whiteside, 1998; Van Dijk et al., 2020; Visser et al., 2017). If we think of Douglas and the problem with his printer, a negative conflict outcome is unlikely to have large negative psychological or financial implications for him. However, given the sheer number of consumer conflicts, the total effect of structural power imbalances could be costly to society as a whole.

Perceptions of power

Power is a social and psychological construct and thereby by its very nature subjective (Bacharach & Lawler, 1976; Fiske & Dépret, 1996; Kim et al., 2005; Smith & Galinsky, 2010; Zartman & Rubin, 2000). In conflict and negotiation settings, there is no 'objective' tally of power sources of both parties. Many theorists acknowledge that particularly perceptions of power, rather than actual power sources, influence conflict

behavior, attitudes, and emotions (Fiske & Dépret, 1996; Kim et al., 2005; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Smith & Hofmann, 2016).

Research supports the importance of power perceptions over actual power. For example, Anderson and Berdahl (2002) found that perceived power mediated the effects of assigned power and personality dominance on emotions, expression of attitudes, and social perception in a discussion. In addition, findings from Smith and Hofmann (2016) suggest that perceptions of own power moderate the negative effects of positional power on happiness and mood. Moreover, Belkin et al. (2013) show that the perception of power can also be influenced by emotional displays. This effect of emotional displays was independent of the effect of resource power on power perceptions. These findings underline the important place of the perception of power in the explanation of conflict behavior, attitudes, and emotions.

The dynamic nature of power and importance of early power perceptions

The division of power between parties is not a static element of conflicts. Previous work has emphasized the importance of a dynamic perspective on power balance and imbalance (Coleman et al., 2012; Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). The balance of power in a conflict can change through outside circumstances (e.g. a financial setback), but individuals in conflicts will also actively attempt to improve their control over the conflict process and its outcomes (Kim et al., 2005). This can be done by creating or identifying new sources of power to obtain control over the others' outcome. For example, Douglas might introduce a new source of power by leaving a negative review on a rating website and promising to withdraw the review if the problem with the purchase is rectified, thereby gaining (some) control over the public image of the retailer. Or it can be done by reducing dependence on the other; in other words, reducing the other's power. An example would be if Olivia receives a pay rise, thereby reducing her financial dependence on Nicholas. Relationships can also be redefined through conflict, thereby changing the power balance between parties. This is most clear in the case of divorce conflicts, where the conflict itself has at its core the redefinition of the relationship. As the relationship changes from romantic partners, to co-parents, friends, or no relationship at all, dependence of the (ex-)partners on each other will change as well. Olivia and Nicholas will remain dependent on each other as co-parents, but their dependence as romantic partners will fade (Harman et al., 2019; Hatfield et al., 2008; Ogolsky et al., 2019; Simpson et al., 2019).

Despite the long-recognized importance of the dynamic nature of power, few studies on conflict and negotiation have been able to observe and examine these changing power perceptions over time (Coleman et al., 2012; Giebels et al., 2014; Van Kleef & Cheng, 2020).

While many studies have tested the relation between an imbalance in power and various negative conflict outcomes, these studies have not examined this in a dynamic context. In this dissertation, I will observe power dynamics over time, and particularly focus on the effects of early-stage power perceptions on short as well as long term consequences. I zoom in on the effect of early or initial stage power perceptions in particular, because I expect that these early-stage dynamics will carry long term (negative) effects, even when perceptions of power change over time. Why are early-stage power perceptions so important for the course and effects of the conflict? First, because based on initial perceptions of a legal conflict, individuals will decide if and how to pursue the issue. Paths to justice studies have shown that many people decide to accept the status quo or pursue their justiciable event outside of the legal system and without the involvement of (potentially costly) professional third parties (Currie, 2007; Farrow, 2014; Genn, 1999; Ter Voert & Hoekstra, 2020). In contrast, when individuals do decide to involve a third party, the choice of third party has consequences for the duration and cost of the process, and the sustainability of the outcome (Beck & Frost, 2006; Pruitt & Kim, 2004; Shestowsky, 2020). In this dissertation, I will examine what types of third-party help individuals who perceive themselves at a power disadvantage early in their conflict need and use.

Second, I expect that early power perceptions will carry long-term effects because of the importance of agenda setting (Kteily et al., 2013), opening bids (Buelens & Van Poucke, 2004; Magee et al., 2007) and first impressions (Van Kleef et al., 2006) on negotiation outcomes. Powerful parties are more likely to make assertive opening bids, thereby setting a high anchor for their own conflict outcome (Buelens & Van Poucke, 2004; Ma & Jaeger, 2010). And an assertive attitude at the start of a conflict clearly can be beneficial (Bhatia & Gunia, 2023; Ma & Jaeger, 2010; Magee et al., 2007; Van de Vliert et al., 1999).

Third, I expect that early power perceptions can carry long term effects when they result in destructive tactics and a breakdown in trust (Glasl, 1999). A disparity in power has been connected to reactions of anger (Berkowitz & Harmon-Jones, 2004), and lower reactivity to emotions and needs of the less powerful party by the more powerful party (Cho & Keltner, 2020). Negative reactions by one party often elicit negative reactions by the other (Fiske & Dépret, 1996). This means that early power disparity can quickly result in an atmosphere in which parties do not feel in control or heard by the other. Even when the balance in power is eventually restored, it can be very difficult to restore trust and positive or at least neutral interactions between parties. I expect this will ultimately result in higher emotional costs, especially for the party who perceives themselves to be at a disadvantage. Taken together, I expect that a perceived disadvantage in power will have a strong and lasting negative impact on the process and outcomes of a conflict, as well as the emotions and behavior of parties who see themselves at a disadvantage at the start of a conflict, even if the perceived asymmetry itself diminishes over time.

Early online interventions

Given the importance of the initial conflict stages, interventions that reach individuals who face legal conflicts very early in their conflicts could offer key advantages. If early power perceptions can indeed carry long-term negative effects, it is important to know if early interventions can improve these early perceptions, particularly of those who perceive themselves to be at a power disadvantage. Individuals with low power may be more likely to look for interventions to compensate for their lack of control and autonomy, and thus be motivated to pursue strategies to restore control and even the power balance (Fiske & Dépret, 1996; Kim et al., 2005; Sheldon & Gunz, 2009; SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2013). However, I note that low power is also associated with higher stress reactions. Because stress is associated with less efficient information processing (Smith et al., 2008), any potential effects of interventions for those who experience low power will likely be dependent on the accessibility of the information in clear formats and structures.

A good way to reach individuals at the very start of their conflicts is online, for example when Olivia googles 'divorce', or Douglas 'consumer rights'. The online interventions considered in this dissertation are interventions in which an individual interacts with a website through an automated chat, or by answering questions which lead them to (automatically) personalized advice through a guided pathway. These types of self-help interventions that do not involve a human third party, are relatively cheap and can be made openly accessible. Reaching individuals early on in their conflicts is much easier through online formats. It is no longer necessary to collect information flyers, go to the library, or find people in your social network who have had similar conflicts. You now simply take your phone and google what you want to know instantly. Online formats are also extremely well suited to structuring information in a helpful and accessible way (McDonald et al., 2019).

Researchers have studied how online dispute resolution such as online mediation and arbitration affect dispute handling (e.g. Bollen & Euwema, 2013). However, despite its growing importance and the wide availability of online sources, there has been little research into the effects of early-stage interventions such as online advice and information in legal conflicts (McDonald et al., 2019). McDonald et al. (2019) did find that self-help resources in general (not only online) were associated with higher outcome satisfaction for legal problems and were often used for serious legal issues. Important unanswered questions include what type of online help conflict parties need in the early stages of their conflict, what type of online intervention is most beneficial, and how online help can be adapted to individual circumstances and specific conflict types. Based on real world online interventions on the one hand, and the power literature on the other, I identify 3 potential bases of power perceptions that can be targeted in an early online intervention. These are: knowledge of the law, referrals to professional third parties, and self-efficacy.

First, if we go back to the conflicts Olivia and Douglas were facing, we have to acknowledge that (some) knowledge of the law and of the legal system will be vital in handling these legal conflicts successfully. Olivia and Douglas will need credible sources of information on rights and obligations as well as procedures. Knowledge of the law can be empowering. In the socio-legal and psychological literature, we find several ways in which it might be. Early theorists focus on the power and legitimacy that the law and legal institutions have in society, and how invoking the law could potentially transfer some of that power and legitimacy to an individual (French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1990; Raven, 2008). For example, a request for higher child support would be more powerful if it was in line with court norms for child support. Knowing that the decision of a judge later in the divorce process would likely be in line with this carries the shadow of the law (Moorhead et al., 2003). But legal norms can also bring social power to individuals by communicating the social norm that the particular law is based on (McAdams & Nadler, 2005; McAdams, 2015; Nadler, 2017). For example, mandatory parenting plans in divorce communicate the social norm that both parents should continue to play a role in children's lives after divorce.

Second, Oliva and Douglas may also need referrals to reliable professional third parties such as a lawyer, a mediator, or the court. This may be because involvement of a third party is required (as in divorce cases) or because the conflict grows too complex to handle without professional support. A third party can even the balance of power by bringing in their expertise, experience and network. This can be especially important when there is a large imbalance and a lack of trust and cooperation between parties. I note that McDonald et al. (2019) find that self-help resources that offer information about the law and legal procedures are often used in combination with advice or help from a third party.

Third, Olivia and Douglas might not only feel daunted by the legal aspects of their conflicts. They might also feel powerless in the face of the psychological turmoil caused by their conflict, feel incapable of confronting the other party, or feel intimidated by the prospect of a negotiation. Before deciding on a course of action for their conflict, Olivia and Douglas will consider how well they will be able to defend their point of view, to manage their emotions, and to react to new or complex issues that may arise. The belief in one's ability to handle situations successfully refers to Bandura's concept of self-efficacy (Bandura,1997), which has been linked to empowerment in legal conflicts (Pleasence & Balmer, 2019; Porter, 2016). Self-efficacy beliefs are rooted in experiences of being successful (or unsuccessful) in previous similar situations (Bandura, 1997), but can also be informed by seeing peers be successful in similar situation, by positive or negative verbal feedback, and by physiological experiences such as strong emotions or distress (Bandura, 1997). This opens our view to social and psychological empowering interventions, such as stories of the experiences of similar others, or emotional support to lower distress (Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2002). Beliefs about your ability to effectively deal with a particular conflict should not be equated with a sense of power or a belief in

a positive outcome (Bandura, 1997; Skinner, 1996). In a legal conflict, a party with high self-efficacy beliefs may still see themselves as relatively powerless and likely to lose. For example, someone who believes they will be able to stand up for themselves, to negotiate effectively, to manage their emotions, and to deal with new and complex issues, may still believe that the other party will have more access to critical information, or more financial means to make use of the courts and third parties. In a similar vein, parties who see that they are in a better position, for example in terms of legal rights, financial position, or social support, may still feel unable to leverage these power sources.

To summarize these three potential power sources: first, conflict parties may not be aware of limitations that the law and courts put on the power of the other party, such as in the case of guidelines for child support payments used in the Dutch courts (Kolkman et al., 2021). Second, conflict parties may not be aware of power sources they have, such as potential access to third parties with or without financial help. And third, conflict parties may not feel confident enough to leverage power sources they have in negotiation with the other; in other words, they may lack self-efficacy. While it is difficult to target power sources such as financial means or social networks through self-help resources, these three share the advantage that they can, to an extent, be offered through minimal online interventions.

Overview of studies

In this dissertation, I study how perceptions of power develop in legal conflicts, and what the effects are of a perceived disadvantage in the early stages of a conflict.[1] I first look at the effects of early power perceptions on needs for help. I then ask what type of online interventions can improve power perceptions of those who perceive themselves to be at a disadvantage. Finally, I direct my attention towards the long-term effects of early power perceptions on emotional costs, agreement assessments and third-party involvement in the specific context of divorce. (See table 1 for an overview.)

In the cross-sectional survey in the first study, reported in chapter 2, we examine how conflict perceptions, including perceived power asymmetry, affect needs for help in a broad range of legal conflicts. In this study, we compare perceived power asymmetry (an asymmetry in control over the conflict process and its outcomes) with conflict asymmetry (an asymmetry in how important a conflict is to the involved parties) (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Ufkes et al., 2012). We examine the effects of these two types of asymmetry on

1 Marian van Dijk was lead author and wrote the original draft on all chapters in this dissertation. For the empirical study in chapter 2, she also served as lead on conceptualization and data analysis. In the two empirical studies in chapters 3 and 4, she served as lead in conceptualization, study design and methodology, project management, data collection, and data analysis. Else Meedendorp-Muilerman was responsible for study design, methodology, and data collection for the study in chapter 2. Ellen Giebels and Sven Zebel provided feedback and suggestions on conceptualizations, study design and methodology, data analysis and drafts of all chapters in the dissertation.

needs for empowering support and needs for emotional support. Participants in this study are visitors of the Dutch legal aid desks (Juridisch Loket). These legal aid desks offer low threshold advice and referrals to third parties, such as a (subsidized) lawyers and mediators. With this study, our aim is to understand which types of support individuals who experience a disadvantage need and seek. As third-party involvement can change the course of conflict processes (Beck & Frost, 2006; Pruitt & Kim, 2004; Shestowsky, 2020), this is one way in which a perceived disadvantage can affect the final conflict outcome.

Study 2 reported in Chapter 3 involves an experimental study that tests the effects of retaliation power and four different types of online support on empowerment in an online consumer conflict. The online support types follow and further refine the types of support that are examined in study 1 (chapter 2). Our goal is to learn which interventions would be best suited to assist participants who feel at a small or at a large power disadvantage and if any patterns we find are consistent with the types of help people reported they wanted in study 1 (chapter 2). Empowerment in this study is conceptualized as more assertive claiming behavior, lower perceived power asymmetry and increased self-efficacy beliefs. The experiment is conducted in a simulated online marketplace, where participants are given the role of buyer, facing a seller who defaults on delivery. Participants either do or do not have the power to retaliate by leaving a negative review of the seller. The participants are then presented with one of four interventions based on real types of assistance available online.

Rechtwijzer

Rechtwijzer (signpost or roadmap to justice) was developed by the Dutch Legal Aid Council and the University of Tilburg (Raad voor Rechtsbijstand, 2019; Van der Linden et al., 2009; Van Gammeren-Zoeteweij et al., 2018; Van Veenen, 2008; Van Veenen, 2010). It is a government funded website that provides legal information to individuals before they contact a professional third party. Rechtwijzer can be classified as a legal self-help resource, meaning it is legal assistance aimed at helping people help themselves (McDonald et al., 2019). At the time of data collection, Rechtwijzer offered advice on divorce, consumer conflict, employment conflict, and conflict with governments. We evaluated the divorce element, as that was the most substantial element. Rechtwijzer still exists today and was visited more than 500 000 times in 2020 as well as in 2021 (Raad voor Rechtsbijstand, 2023). The divorce element is now supplemented by a referral to an online divorce process as well as a support module for children.

In the final study 3, presented in chapter 4, we research perceived power dynamics in ongoing divorce processes. This longitudinal study comprises both a descriptive analysis of power dynamics in divorce processes and a quasi-experimental evaluation of an online intervention called Rechtwijzer (see box above). Following up on study 1 (chapter 2), we aim to understand how early power perceptions change over time. Following up on study 2 (chapter 3), we look at what effect an early intervention could have in real-world conflicts. We chose divorce as a high-stakes conflict that typically takes several months to play out, to contrast the generally low-stakes and shorter consumer conflicts. In doing so, we are able to explore whether findings of study 2 (chapter 3) can be generalized to other contexts. We follow individuals through five months of their divorce and examine the dynamics and effects of early perceived disadvantages in power on emotional costs, process and conflict assessments, and the third-party support involved. We also explore the effect of the early online intervention Rechtwijzer on perceived power, to see whether this intervention can help to attenuate the negative impact of early perceived power asymmetry.

Table 1: Overview of studies

	Study 1/ chapter 2	Study 2/ chapter 3	Study 3/ chapter 4
Title	Building Strength or Lending an Ear in Legal Conflicts: Dependence and Conflict Asymmetry as Distinct Predictors of Needs for Support	Effects of Online Interventions and Retaliation Power on Empowerment in Consumer Conflicts	Power Asymmetry and Early Intervention in Divorce
Conflict type	Legal conflicts (no restrictions on conflict type)	Online consumer conflicts	Divorce
Research design	Cross-sectional survey	Experimental simulation	Longitudinal field survey + quasi-experiment
Participants	Visitors of the legal aid desks in the Netherlands (N = 700)	Convenience sample of students (n = 125) and general public (Dutch) (n = 50)	Individuals in or on the verge of divorce at T_1 (Dutch) (N = 312)
Independent variables	Measures: - Perceived power asymmetry - Perceived conflict asymmetry[2]	Experimental manipulations: 2 (retaliation power) * 5 (online interventions)	Measures: Perceived power asymmetry (T_1) Intervention: Use of online early intervention tool Rechtwijzer (see box) between T_1 and T_2 (intervention group: n = 260, control group n = 52)
Dependent variables	Measures: Need for empowering support Need for emotional support	Measures: Assertive claiming behavior Perceived power asymmetry Self-efficacy	Measures: Perceived power asymmetry (T_2, T_3) Emotional costs (T_2, T_3) Process and outcome assessments (T_3) Third party support (T_3)

1

2 In the conflict literature, an asymmetry in power is conceptualized as separate from an asymmetry in how important a conflict is to both parties (conflict asymmetry) (Giebels et al., 2014; Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Ufkes et al., 2012). Power asymmetry and conflict asymmetry are not necessarily independent. When the conflict is more important to you, you may feel more dependent on the other party for its resolution. However, when we imagine the consequences of these asymmetries and what type of help individuals may need, the distinction between power asymmetry and conflict asymmetry is important. Douglas for example, is facing a very powerful other (a large company), but the conflict issue itself (a faulty printer) is likely not very important to him and likely does not lead to emotional distress.

Chapter 2

Building Strength or Lending an Ear in Legal Conflicts: Dependence and Conflict Asymmetry as Distinct Predictors of Needs for Support

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Being in a legal conflict[1] can bring about a need for support (Giebels & Yang, 2009), especially if someone feels like the underdog. Such an individual faces a plethora of options to choose from to gain information and help in dealing with his or her conflict. Alternative dispute resolution, legal aid, and online legal information sources are well established and offer alternatives to the more traditional option of gaining advice from a legal professional such as a lawyer. However, with such a wide and diverse range of parties, reflecting different types of help, the question is to what extent these different types of help meet the specific needs a conflict party can have. Those needs may be particularly dependent upon the experience of asymmetry in the relationship between the conflict parties.

Cumulating evidence, primarily within work contexts, suggests that asymmetry in conflict situations may have substantial consequences, for example in terms of productivity and team functioning (Jehn, Rispens & Thatcher, 2010). Until now, research has only rarely related asymmetry to the involvement of support parties. We propose that the experience of asymmetry might not only be an important reason why conflict parties ask for help in the first place. It may also influence the specific type of help one prefers.

Despite the growing interest in conflict asymmetry in the conflict literature (e.g. De Dreu, Kluwer & Nauta, 2008; Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Ufkes, Giebels, Otten & Van der Zee, 2012), many different conceptualizations of asymmetry have been used (Giebels, Ufkes & Van Erp, 2014). For example, some studies have looked at the effects of asymmetry of roles and power between conflict parties such as the asymmetry between spouses with unequal divisions of household tasks (Kluwer, Heesink & van de Vliert, 2000). Others look into the asymmetry of conflict experiences such as the differing experience of a conflict between two neighbors where one experiences a severe conflict without the other neighbor being aware or sharing this experience (Ufkes et al., 2012). Departing from the notion that not all types of asymmetry may work out alike, we distinguish between two types of asymmetry which we consider important in relation to needs for support: dependence asymmetry and conflict asymmetry. Asymmetry of dependence refers to an imbalance in power, where one party perceives itself to be more (or less) dependent on the other side than vice versa. Conflict asymmetry reflects the extent to which a party perceives an imbalance in the amount of conflict experienced by both sides (cf. Pruitt, 1995). We predict and demonstrate that the two types of asymmetry have distinct effects on the type of support that parties involved in a legal conflict prefer. We expect that needs for help will arise out of a specific experienced relative disadvantage in asymmetrical conflicts. We also show that these distinct effects on needs for support hold across a wide range of legal conflicts. We hope this approach advances the conflict research field as it further builds upon the existing research on asymmetry in dyadic conflicts. We also hope to make a contribution to practice

1 In line with Van de Vliert (1996), we define a legal conflict as a person's experience of discord due to a socially induced subject matter involving legal aspects. Prototypical examples are divorce cases, labor conflict concerning termination of contract, conflicts with government institutions, et cetera.

by making professional support parties more sensitive to different needs and possible relevant dimensions that could help them offer more tailored advice to help seekers.

Needs for Support

Third-party intervention is generally considered to be a powerful strategy to manage conflicts and to offer resolutions for intractable disputes (Conlon & Meyer, 2004). Typically, a third party offers assistance to both parties in the process of conflict management. However, in the context of legal conflicts, a whole range of support parties are available. Professionals such as paralegals from the legal aid field, are often a first port of call in case of legal conflicts. A conflict party can ask such an outside party for advice, referrals to further help, initial practical or procedural support, or call on them as understanding listeners. The support party often meets with only one of the parties involved, has no power to decide over the case and stays on the side line, while supporting the conflict party in tackling the problem. These outside parties, or legal aid and support providers, can refer parties on to a lawyer or to third parties such as mediators when necessary.

Our focus on these support parties without decision power is rooted in the growing importance of paralegals and legal aid professionals in the legal field (see e.g., Beck & Sales, 2000; Moorhead, Sherr & Paterson, 2003). Access to justice is not just access to courts, but includes access to legal aid, mediation, assistance from paralegals, and even access to legal information. As courts are generally overburdened (and budgets stretched) these types of support are becoming increasingly important. Research has pointed to the importance (in terms of numbers and effects) of these advice and support parties (Buck, Pleasence & Balmer, 2008; Pleasence, Genn, Balmer, Buck & O'Grady, 2003), but to our knowledge, research on psychological aspects of the involvement of these parties in conflicts is lacking (cf. Hillyard, 2007). In order to predict which type of intervention will be most effective for parties who experience asymmetry, insight into their specific needs for help is essential. Studies outside the legal context have shown that the involvement of parties without decision power can successfully reduce conflict stress and promote conflict resolution (Giebels & Janssen, 2005; Ting-toomey & Oetzel, 2001; Ufkes et al., 2012) . Similarly, such research has highlighted the importance of distinguishing between different types of help.

In the current study we build on coping literature (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989; Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Skinner, Edge, Altman & Sherwood, 2003), as well as on the work of Giebels and Yang (2009), who specifically focused on types of third-party help in conflicts. Recent categorizations of coping have included the coping style 'support seeking'. This coping style includes looking for support from professionals (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007; Skinner et al., 2003). These authors define two types of support: instrumental or problem-focused support and emotional or emotion-focused support seeking (Chen, Kim, Mojaverian & Morling, 2012; Connor-Smith

& Flachsbart, 2007; Skinner et al., 2003), which echoes the classic distinction between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Carver et al., 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). We first look at types of problem-focused help in the sense of being provided with practical tools, guidance, support and information to be able to handle the conflict and stand up for oneself. Secondly, we turn to emotion-focused help in the form of an opportunity to relate one’s story to an understanding listener.

Problem-focused coping and help are primarily oriented at addressing a stressor with the aim of resolving the issue satisfactorily. In their research, Giebels and Yang (2009) showed that in conflicts, such a type of help is procedural help. Procedural help focuses on structuring the process of conflict management and guiding the processing of information. This may include providing information concerning procedures to follow in conflict management and help with clearly defining conflict issues and goals (Giebels & Yang, 2009). This type of help can be provided in a mediation, where both parties are present, but it can also be provided unilaterally, by assisting one side in the conflict management process. Within the context of legal conflicts, the informational element of procedural help becomes increasingly important, as parties need knowledge of formal (legal) rules and procedures to be able to effectively deal with their conflict. Additionally, written texts are often more important in legal conflicts than in non-legal conflicts and can add to the informational load (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). Informational help includes the provision of such formal information concerning the legal context, rights and obligations and practical tools such as examples of legal letters and contracts. Additionally, and particularly in a legal context, conflict parties may have a need for support that may help them to claim their rights from the other party, stand up for themselves and defend their point of view. Such help may be used to improve one's position relative to the other side (Callan, Kay, Olson, Brar & Whitefield, 2010).

Emotion-focused coping and helping are not aimed at the stressor but address the emotions arising from the stressor (Carver et al., 1989; Chen et al., 2012). This aligns with Giebels & Yang’s (2009) concept of emotion-focused help. A support party can give emotion-focused help by showing understanding and a willingness to listen to the help seeker. Such help may be important because conflicts usually threaten conflict parties' self-image and can make them less sure or confident about themselves (Ufkes et al., 2012). Even in the mediation context, this help may be provided to each of the parties separately, in the intake phase or during caucus (Ufkes et al., 2012). Emotional support may therefore be beneficial merely because it makes parties feel understood and listened to and, as such, reduces conflict stress. Research shows that the stress inherently associated with conflict is likely to be responsible for many negative consequences of conflict in the long term, for example in terms of individual wellbeing and daily functioning (Giebels & Janssen, 2005). Furthermore, heightened levels of conflict stress make conflict parties less receptive to

more content or solution focused types of help (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Carnevale & Probst, 1998), because it impairs information processing (cf. Giebels & Janssen, 2005). Taken together, the two main categories of support (problem-focused help and emotion-focused help) may reflect different orientations toward the conflict at hand (i.e. "I want to prevail over the other side" versus "I want to be understood and listened to"). The current study explores the need for these different types of support in the context of asymmetrical conflicts.

Asymmetry in Conflicts

In previous studies, conflict asymmetry has referred to an asymmetry in the structure or division of power in conflict, but also to an asymmetry or perceived asymmetry in conflict experience (for a more extensive review see Giebels et al., 2014). We propose that although dependence (power) asymmetry and conflict (experience) asymmetry can be related, they are also conceptually distinct. While dependence asymmetry is usually the result of unequal access to valuable resources, conflict asymmetry refers to differential experiences in terms of how much the situation matters to parties. We focus on the party who is disadvantaged in terms of dependence or conflict experience. We expect this disadvantage to lead to a need for support arising out of the specific imbalance between both parties. Within the context of this study, we also expect that those who make use of legal aid, are often relatively more dependent and experience relatively more conflict, as they often face powerful others, such as governments or businesses, or an ex-spouse with a larger income.

Dependence asymmetry. Dependence asymmetry is related to power and control and a lack of resources to maintain control (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Emerson, 1962). Studies on structural asymmetries relating to role often focus on roles that are different in terms of power as well. For example, in a study on the roles of expatriates and expatriate spouses; the spouses who follow their partners are the more dependent party in the relationship, due to the contextual factors of foreign placement (Van Erp, Giebels, Van der Zee & Van Duin, 2011). Also, in their work on factors related to the willingness to reconcile of both victims and perpetrators, Shnabel and Nadler (2008) show that being a victim is associated with a threat to one's status and power. In this study we therefore use the more general concept of dependence asymmetry, with dependence referring to (the experience of) a lack of power (Emerson, 1962).

Research has shown that the experience of dependence asymmetry has a substantial impact on emotions and cognitions (e.g. a loss frame), conflict behavior, expected success, and satisfaction with mediation (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Bollen, Euwema, & Müller, 2010; De Dreu et al., 2008; Fitness, 2000; Greer & Bendersky, 2013; Jehn et al., 2010; Kluwer et al., 2000; Nauta, de Vries, & Wijngaard, 2001; Tiedens, Ellsworth & Mesquita,

2000; Van Kleef, De Dreu, Pietroni, & Manstead, 2006) . For example, Van Kleef et al. (2006) demonstrated that individuals randomly allocated to low power negotiator roles were more likely to concede after a display of emotions by their opponent, than those allocated to high power negotiator roles. Similarly, Nauta et al. (2001) show that after interdepartmental company negotiations, low power departments had more negative perceptions of the conflict behavior of the high power departments than vice versa. Additionally, Bollen et al. (2010) found that in work mediation cases, the experience of uncertainty about the mediation decreased satisfaction with the mediator for subordinates but not for supervisors. Presumably, the lack of control that subordinates experience reinforces the negative impact of uncertainty.

Conflict asymmetry. Conflict asymmetry refers to differential experiences in terms of how much the situation matters to the conflict parties. Research, primarily in work team settings, has shown that such differential experiences of the conflict at hand have a profound impact on a wide variety of work-related outcomes. Jehn and Chatman (2000) show that in work groups where members had different views of the amount of process and relationship conflict occurring in the group, work satisfaction, commitment and team performance were lower. In addition, when group members had such asymmetrical conflict perceptions, performance and creativity also decreased (Jehn et al., 2010). In another study on interpersonal conflicts at work, Jehn, Rupert and Nauta (2006) showed that perceived asymmetries predicted lower work motivation and higher absenteeism.

Often, conflict asymmetry has been studied by comparing self-reports of each of the parties or team members and by calculating the difference between the parties or the standard deviation within a team. An important question is then whether parties are aware of imbalances between them. The more a party consciously experiences an imbalance, the more it may influence individual reactions, for example, when to involve outside support parties (Meister, Jehn, Thatcher; 2014). Following Swann (1999), we expect that in such situations of asymmetry awareness, a lack of self-verification, or validation of one's understanding of own experiences, will lead to self-doubt and insecurity (Jehn & Chatman, 2000).

Taken together, although relatively little is known about how asymmetry gives rise to distinct needs for support, a number of studies have looked into the consequences of dependence asymmetry and conflict asymmetry. In line with these studies, we have argued that dependence asymmetry and conflict asymmetry are distinct experiences, and we therefore expect them to be related to distinct needs for support. These types of help may be directed at two types of insecurity: insecurity stemming from a (relative) lack of control and resources (dependence asymmetry), and insecurity about one's perception and understanding of the conflict (conflict asymmetry).

Asymmetry and Needs for Support

In conflicts where the focal party experiences a high level of dependence asymmetry, where they feel more dependent on the other party than vice versa, the imbalance is an asymmetry of power. Disadvantaged conflict parties in this situation will experience a loss of control over the situation and 'a threat to their identity as powerful social actors' (SimanTov-Nachlieli, Shnabel, & Nadler, 2013) . Control or autonomy has been identified as a basic psychological need (Staub, 1999) , which means that an experienced relative lack of control will lead to an increased motivation to restore control (Sheldon & Gunz, 2009). In conflicts specifically, we know that process control is important to conflict parties (Tyler, 1988) . Shestowsky (2004) shows that conflict parties who experience low control prefer dispute resolution procedures that grant them greater control over the conflict resolution process. In line with this, Shnabel and Nadler (2008) show that in victim perpetrator interactions, victims, as opposed to perpetrators, experience a damaged sense of power, which leads to a stronger need for power and control over the conflict situation and in the interaction with the other party.

Thus, based on previous findings we can expect that parties who experience a relative lack of control will want to restore their sense of control over the conflict situation. Such a restoring of power and control may be particularly accomplished by empowering actions of a support party. We therefore expect dependence asymmetry to be positively related to the need for problem-focused empowering types of help (procedural, informational and self-interest help); the greater their experienced disadvantage in terms of power, the stronger their need (H1).

In a situation of conflict asymmetry, where own conflict experience is perceived to be higher than that of the other side, a conflict party will likely feel distressed. That is, the other party doesn't recognize and acknowledge the urgency or intensity of the conflict to the same extent. Several authors have related this to the need to self-verify (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn et al., 2006; Ufkes et al., 2012). If conflict asymmetry indeed entails a lack of self-verification, we would expect to find a relation between conflict asymmetry and the need for emotion-focused help. This type of help corresponds closely to tactics of self-verification; specifically the tactic of creating opportunity structures of self-verification (Swann, 1983). The goal of seeking out a legal aid professional might be to find someone who will listen, and will confirm and validate one's experience of a conflict. In offering emotion-focused support, a professional support party gives a conflict party opportunity to vent their ego-focused emotions, offers to listen, and shows understanding. We know from the work of Ufkes et al. (2012) that particularly under conditions of conflict asymmetry, parties seem to benefit from emotion-focused, rather than content-oriented interventions. In a community mediation program, they showed the benefits of an initial intake without the other party present, in conflicts with asymmetrical conflict perceptions. In these intake sessions, the mediator would offer emotion-focused support, by listening

to each party separately. This finding is in line with research showing that social support may be particularly helpful to reduce conflict-associated stress (Abbey, Abramis, & Caplan, 1985; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Giebels & Janssen, 2005; Lepore, 1992) .We infer that these ex-post observed benefits will correspond to ex-ante needs and therefore expect conflict asymmetry to lead to a higher need for emotion-focused help.

However, emotion-focused support from a professional in a legal conflict is distinct from problem-focused help, in that it can be more easily provided by non-professional support parties. Whereas providing information related to court proceedings or specific rights, or help in choosing the most advantageous conflict strategy, requires specialist legal knowledge; listening to a party's story and showing understanding can also be provided by meaningful others, such as family and friends. When parties do not receive social support and understanding from their own network, they are more likely to need a professional support party to provide emotion-focused help. Therefore, we expect wider social support to moderate the relationship between conflict asymmetry and the need for emotion-focused help. Specifically, we expect the relation between own conflict experience and the need for emotion-focused help to be stronger when the other party's conflict experience is perceived to be low, but only when wider social support is relatively low instead of high (H2).

METHOD

Overview and Participants

We conducted a survey study with the help of the Dutch Legal Aid Desk: a government funded public service institution, where paralegals offer one stop legal advice to citizens in legal conflicts, ranging from divorce, termination of job contracts, to consumer conflicts and more. The Desks also refer clients to legal professionals, such as lawyers or mediators, social workers or any other professional most suited to offer help in the client's specific situation. Any inhabitant of the Netherlands can contact the Desks, free of charge, by phone, email, chat or at any of the 30 offices nationwide.

Before our main online study, we first pre-tested our survey among 99 individuals in the target population. Clients at two offices of the Dutch Legal Aid Desk were approached before they spoke to the legal aid advisors. This pilot study contributed to fine-tuning the survey questions and improving on accessible language for use of the survey as an online questionnaire. For our main study we ran an online survey during a 7 day period. Data collection was done in line with ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association.[2] The link to the survey was sent out to clients who had had contact with the Desks in the two years prior to data collection (i.e. between January 2011 and January 2009). Participants were informed that the questionnaire concerned legal aid in the Netherlands, took about 20 to 30 minutes to complete, and that their answers would be

2 A review from an ethics board was not yet available at the time of study design.

treated confidentially. The first 500 participants received a small reward (10 euro). Later, participants were informed that they could still participate but would no longer receive a reward. A total of 726 Legal Aid Desk clients participated in the study during the week it was online. We excluded respondents who indicated they only had a legal question (e.g. concerning the rules on adoption for same sex couples) and not a conflict (n= 12), who represented someone else and did not have a problem themselves (n = 4), and respondents who reported or showed serious mental health problems (n = 10). This resulted in a final sample of 700 respondents.

The average age of the respondents was 42 years (*SD* = 12.9) ranging from 19 to 79 years, and 46.1% were male. In terms of education, individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher made up 37% of the sample. Less than 2% had no or only primary education, 17.1% had completed pre-vocational secondary education, 13.7% non-vocational secondary education, and 30.4% vocational education.

A high percentage (38.3%) of respondents were involved in a labor conflict concerning termination of an employment contract, 14.9% of respondents reported a consumer conflict, 9.7% had come to the Legal Aid Desk for a divorce case, and 9.3% had a conflict with a government institution. The remaining respondents (20.7%) had other types of conflicts (e.g. conflicts between family members, neighbors or ex-partners, or conflicts with a debt collection agency or landlord). A total of 6.6% of the respondents did not report what their conflict was about. Those who had asked the Legal Aid Desk for help in more than one conflict were asked to keep their most important problem in mind.

Independent Variables: Dependence Asymmetry, Conflict Asymmetry and Social Support

Dependence asymmetry was assessed with two questions: 'To what extent were you dependent on the other party?' and 'To what extent was the other party dependent on you?' Answers were measured on 7-point scales, ranging from 0 (labeled 'not at all') to 6 ('completely'). On average, respondents felt fairly dependent on the other party (M = 4.66, SD = 1.84) and faced a less dependent other (M = 1.62, SD = 2.00). This difference was significant in a pairwise t-test, $t(700) = 27.83$, $p < .001$.

Asymmetry of conflict experience was measured with the questions: 'To what extent did you consider there was a problem?', and 'To what extent did the other party think there was a problem?'. We chose to use the word 'problem' rather than 'conflict' as the nuances of these words differ slightly in Dutch. 'Having a problem with someone' implies being in conflict with that person, whereas the word 'conflict' would suggest a highly escalated conflict. Answers were measured on a 7-point scale, where 0 reflected 'not at all' and 6 'completely'. Respondents mostly perceived a high amount of conflict (M = 5.01, SD = 1.29). On average, they also believed the conflict to be asymmetrical as they estimated the

conflict experience of the other party to be substantially lower (*M* = 2.78, *SD* = 2.30). This difference was significant in a pairwise t-test, $t(700) = 23.36$, $p < .001$.

Both types of asymmetry were measured by direct questions as we were interested in the experience of respondents. Following Jehn et al. (2006), questions related to own experience and perceived experience of the other party were asked one after the other, to ensure that respondents took into account relative differences.

As expected, most respondents experienced a disadvantage in terms of asymmetry, but there were also respondents who experienced symmetry or an advantaged position in asymmetry. A total of 21,6% (N = 151) experienced dependence symmetry and 23.3% (N = 163) experienced conflict symmetry. A total of 7% (N = 49) experienced an advantage in dependence asymmetry, and 10% (N = 70) experienced an advantage in conflict asymmetry. We chose not to exclude these respondents, but to use this opportunity to explore the advantaged side of the spectrum in terms of effects of both dependence and conflict asymmetry.

As an indication of social support, we asked respondents to indicate how many people were on their side in the conflict. On average, people reported receiving support from 7 or 8 individuals (*M* = 7.77; *SD* = 26.16); answers ranged from 0 to 500. We performed a log transformation on the skewed distribution of scores (skewness = 12.34), to prevent very high answers from having a too strong effect. The transformed scores ranged from 0 to 6.22 (*M* = 1.42 *SD* = 1.02).

Dependent Variables: Needs for Support

Respondents indicated which types of needs for support they experienced when they contacted the Legal Aid Desks for assistance. In line with Giebels and Yang (2009), emotion-focused help was measured with two items (“I wanted a sympathetic ear” and "I wanted understanding for my situation"). Similarly, the need for procedural help was measured with two items based on Giebels and Yang’s (2009) scale (e.g. “I wanted to know which steps to take to solve my problem”). Interviews with a panel of legal aid professionals confirmed the importance of adding items reflecting the informational element of procedural help in a legal context. Based on the interviews, we included 8 additional items (e.g. “I wanted to be informed about my rights and duties in my situation”). Finally, we also included two items measuring self-interest focused help (e.g. “I wanted to stand up for my own interests”). Answers ranged from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 6 (very strongly agree; see Table 1 for an overview of all items included).

A principal axis factor analysis with Oblimin rotation resulted in two factors. The first factor consisted of the three types of problem-focused help (procedural, informational and self-interest focused; see Table 1). One item related to social comparison did not load strongly on either dimension and a second item related to social comparison only loaded

weakly on problem-focused help. Because social comparison is distinct from the other types of help in that it corresponds less to the professional help the Legal Aid Desks offer, both items were excluded. The resulting 10-item factor, reflecting problem-focused help, explained 49.09% of the variance and had good internal consistency (α = .91). The second factor reflected emotion-focused help and included 2 items, which correlated highly ($r(700) = .84$, $p < .001$, Spearman-Brown Coefficient[3]: .91). This factor explained 13.13% of the variance.

Table 1 *Factor Loadings for Exploratory Factor Analysis of Needs for Support*

Need to/ for:	**M**	**SD**	**Factor** **Problem-focused help**	 **Emotion-focused help**
Know which steps to take to solve my problem	5.47	1.06	.85 **.78**	
Advice about the route to take to solve my problem	5.34	1.14	.82 **.76**	
Be informed about my rights and duties in my situation	5.46	1.08	.84 **.75**	
Know if I have the law on my side	5.29	1.23	.80 **.76**	
Someone who helps me to think of possible solutions for my problem	5.27	1.23	.76 **.78**	
Someone with concrete advice that could solve my problem	5.03	1.35	.69 **.72**	
Know if I was on the right track in solving my problem	4.88	1.4	.61 **.61**	
Know if the information that I had found myself was correct	4.93	1.39	.58 **.57**	
Stand up for my own interests	5.21	1.25	.57 **.60**	
Find the most advantageous solution for myself	5.07	1.35	.55 **.57**	
Know what the most commonly used solution to my problem is	*4.78*	*1.51*	*.52*	
Know how other people have solved a problem like mine	*4.01*	*1.79*	*.35*	
Understanding for my situation	4.00	1.73		.94 **.94**
A sympathetic ear	3.78	1.77		.83 **.90**

Note . N = 700; Values in the first row of each item correspond to the factor loadings from the exploratory factor analysis. Factor loadings below .3 were removed. Values in bold, in the second row of each item correspond to loadings of the confirmatory factor analysis. Item order corresponds to the two-item clusters that were allowed to correlate. The items in italic were removed after running the exploratory factor analysis.
Exploratory factor analysis was conducted using 'principal axis factoring' extraction with direct Oblimin rotation. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using the lavaan package in R (Rosseel, 2012). Answers ranged from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 6 (very strongly agree).

3 (Eisinga, Grotenhuis & Pelzer, 2013)

To further substantiate our proposed two-factor model, we ran confirmatory factor analyses on the remaining twelve items and compared a two-factor model with a single factor model. Confirmatory factor analyses were computed using the lavaan package in R (Rosseel, 2012). The two-factor model had better model fit indices than the one factor model (CFI= 0.84; AIC= 26497.36; RMSEA= 0.14; SRMR= 0.07 and CFI= 0.76; AIC= 27232.21; RMSEA= 0.19; SRMR= 0.10 respectively) (Schermelleh-Engel, Moosbrugger & Müller, 2003). However, modification indices suggested that the two-factor model could be improved significantly by accounting for correlation between five sets of items (see table 1). The resulting two-factor model fit the data well (CFI= 0.97; AIC= 23550.67; RMSEA= 0.07; SRMR= 0.05). Factor loadings of the final two-factor model are presented in table 1.

The need for problem-focused help was generally higher and showed less variance (M = 5.20, SD = .92) than the need for emotion-focused help (M = 3.89, SD = 1.68).

Analyses

To test our hypotheses we used hierarchical linear regression analyses with the need for either problem-focused or emotion-focused help as the dependent variable. To test the effects of asymmetry on needs for support over and beyond the effects of age, education and gender (Giebels & Yang, 2009), we added these as control variables in the first step. In the second step we added the main effects: own dependence, other's dependence, own conflict experience and other's conflict experience. In the third and final step we added the two-way interaction term of own and other's dependence and the two-way interaction term of own and other's conflict experience.

We used the interaction between own and other's dependence to test the effect of dependence asymmetry (and the interaction of own and other's conflict experience to test for the effect of conflict asymmetry). This way, we aim to address concerns associated with the use of difference scores (Johns, 1981) . For example, a difference score on dependence of 3 might mean the help seeker reported a level of own dependence of 6 and other's dependence of 3, but the values might also be 3 and 0, respectively. An interaction (moderation) analysis allows us to rule out whether such differences in absolute levels that would comprise the difference score have different effects.

We included both types of asymmetry in each analysis predicting a specific type of need, to be able to control for the other type of asymmetry and to show that the two types of asymmetry have unique and distinct effects on the two types of needs. In other words, we expected dependence asymmetry to be related to need for problem-focused support, but not, or less so, to need for emotion-focused support. Similarly, we expected conflict asymmetry to be related to need for emotion-focused support, but not, or less so, to need for problem-focused support. We used an alpha level of .05 for all statistical tests and all variables used in interactions were centered in advance.

RESULTS

Table 2 provides the means, standard deviations and correlations of the variables included in the study. It shows that own and other's dependence, and own and other's conflict experience were weakly, but significantly correlated (respectively $r(700) = .14$, $p < .001$, and $r(700) = .09$, $p = .02$). Importantly, own dependence and own conflict experience, as well as other's dependence and other's conflict experience showed no more than modest correlations, $r(700) = .26$, $p < .001$, and $r(700) = .23$, $p < .001$, indicating that these are indeed distinct constructs. Both dependence measures as well as own conflict experience were positively related to the need for problem-focused help, while the need for emotion-focused help was particularly related to own and other's conflict experience (All $r(700)$s > .08, p s <. 05). Finally, the two types of needs for support were significantly and positively related, $r(700) = .40$, $p < .001$.

Table 2 *Pearson Correlations of All Variables Included in the Study*

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Own dependence	4.66	1.84	_								
2. Other's dependence	1.62	1.99	-.14**	_							
3. Own conflict experience	5.01	1.29	.26**	-.02	_						
4. Other's conflict experience	2.78	2.30	-.10**	.23**	.09*	_					
5. Social support	1.42	1.02	.02	.10**	.03	.01	_				
6. Need for problem-focused help	5.20	0.92	.20**	-.13**	.22**	-.04	.02	_			
7. Need for emotion-focused help	3.89	1.68	.05	-.03	.08*	.08*	.03	.40**	_		
8. Gender (1 = male)	0.46	0.50	-.10**	.14**	.03	.04	.00	-.14**	-.11**	_	
9. Age	41.93	12.88	.01	-.07	.14**	.04	-.09*	.13**	.16**	.17**	_
10. Education	3.75	1.30	.02	-.04	-.01	-.04	-.04	.01	-.22**	.05	.01

Note. N=700, there were no missing values.
*p<.05, **p<.001.

Dependence Asymmetry

Following hypothesis 1, we would expect a significant interaction effect of own dependence and other's dependence on the need for problem-focused help. Table 3 shows the results of the regression analysis with need for problem-focused help as a criterion. After the final step, the model explained a significant proportion of variance in the need for problem-focused help, $R^2 = .12$, $F(9, 690) = 10.54$, $p < .001$.

Table 3 *Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting the Need for Problem-focused Help*

				95% Confidence Interval	
	Predictor	ΔR^2	*B*	**Lower Bound**	**Upper Bound**
Step 1		0.04**			
	Intercept		5.34**	5.24	5.43
	Age		0.01**	0.01	0.02
	Education		0.01	-0.04	0.06
	Gender (0 = female)		-0.30**	-0.44	-0.17
Step 2		0.07**			
	Intercept		5.32**	5.23	5.40
	Age		0.01*	0.00	0.01
	Education		0.01	-0.04	0.06
	Gender (0 = female)		-0.26**	-0.39	-0.12
	Own conflict experience		0.13**	0.08	0.18
	Other's conflict experience		-0.01	-0.04	0.02
	Own dependence		0.06*	0.02	0.10
	Other's dependence		-0.04*	-0.07	0.00
Step 3		0.01*			
	Intercept		5.30**	5.21	5.39
	Age		0.01**	0.00	0.01
	Education		0.01	-0.04	0.05
	Gender (0 = female)		-0.26**	-0.39	-0.13
	Own conflict experience		0.12**	0.07	0.18
	Other's conflict experience		-0.01	-0.04	0.02
	Own dependence		0.06**	0.03	0.10
	Other's dependence		-0.04*	-0.07	0.00
	Interaction own x other's confl. exp.		-0.00	-0.02	0.02
	Interaction own x other's dependence		-0.02*	-0.04	-0.01
Total R^2		0.12**			
N		700			

Note. There were no missing values. Table made with centered predictors.
*p<.05, **p<.001.

First, older people and women reported a higher need for problem-focused help than younger people or men, respectively: $b = .01$, $SE = .00$, $p = .001$ and $b = -.26$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$. Education had no significant influence, $b = .01$, $SE = .03$, $p = .85$. When own conflict experience was higher, so was the need for problem-focused help, $b = .12$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$. Other's conflict experience and the interaction effect of own and other's conflict experience were not significant, $b = -.01$, $SE = .02$, $p = .64$ and $b = -.00$, $SE = .01$, $p = .82$.

Both own and other's dependence significantly influenced the need for problem-focused help. The more help seekers felt dependent on the other side, the more they reported needing help, $b = .06$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, the more the help seeker felt the other party was dependent on them, the less help was needed, $b = -.04$, $SE = .02$, $p = .03$. In line with our expectations, the interaction effect between own and other's dependence proved to be significant, $b = -.02$, $SE = .01$, $p = .003$.

Consistent with hypothesis 1, and as can be seen in Figure 1, this interaction effect indicated that own dependence is a positive and significant predictor of the need for problem-focused empowerment when other's dependence is perceived to be low (0), $b = .10$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$. Please remember that when other's dependence is low, a higher level of own dependence corresponds to a higher level of asymmetry or increasing difference between the parties. In contrast, when such a disadvantage is impossible (i.e., the other's dependence is perceived to be high: 6), own dependence does not significantly predict the need for empowerment, $b = .04$, $SE = .04$, $p = .28$. Note that when other's dependence is high, asymmetry between the parties decreases as own dependence goes up. Thus, only higher levels of asymmetry, (and not higher levels of own dependence without higher asymmetry), predicted an increase in the expected need for help in preparing for conflict. We showed this interaction effect in Figure 1 using the scale values of dependence, rather than the conventional standard deviation above and below the mean, as we wanted to be able to detect asymmetry and symmetry in the graph, and standard deviations and mean scores for own and other dependence differed. Surprisingly, although the slope was not significant, the level of need for problem-focused help when other's dependence was high, seemed to be relatively high as well.

Figure 1. Dependence Asymmetry Predicting the Need for Problem-focused Help

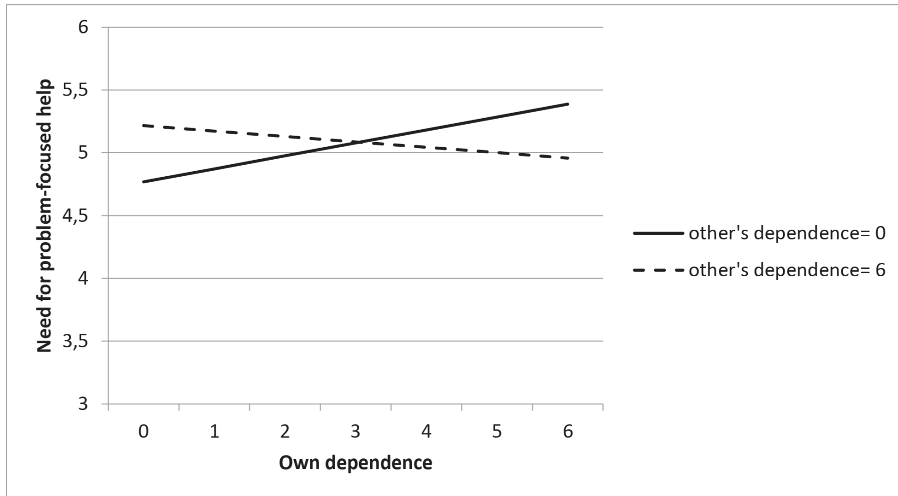

Figure 1. Interaction pattern of own and other's dependence, predicting the need for problem-focused third-party help. Based on standardized values of control variables

Conflict Asymmetry

We expected conflict asymmetry to predict the need for emotion-focused help, particularly when respondents reported low instead of high levels of social support. Therefore, a fourth step was added to the regression analysis, in which the three-way interaction of own and other's conflict experience and social support was added. The main effect of social support and underlying two-way interaction effects were added to steps two and three

Table 4 shows the results of the regression analysis with the need for emotion-focused help as criterion. After the final step, the model explained a significant proportion of variance R^2 = 12%, F(13, 686) = 7.18, p < .001. Firstly, the reported need for emotion-focused help again increased with age, b = .02, SE = .01, p < .001, but decreased with educational level, b = -.27, SE = .05, p < .001 Men were less likely to need emotion-focused help than women, b = -.42, SE = .12, p < .001. There were no main effects of own or other's dependence, b = .02, SE = .04, p = *.56* and b = - .02, SE = .03, p = .48, but the two-way interaction effect showed that asymmetry of dependence did influence the need for emotion-focused help in a way similar to its influence on the need for problem-focused help, b = - .03, SE = .02, p = .05. Thus, only increasing levels of disadvantage in dependence asymmetry, and not simply a higher own dependence, predicted an increased need for emotion-focused help.

Of the main effects and two-way interaction effects of own conflict experience, other's conflict experience and social support, only the main effect of other's conflict experience was significant in the centered model, *b* **= -** .06, *SE* = .03, *p* = .04, indicating less need for emotion-focused help when other's conflict experience increased (all other *b* 's < .07 and all other *p* 's > .15). Most importantly, the expected three-way interaction effect between own and other's conflict experience and social support exerted a significant impact, *b* = 0.05, *SE* = .02, *p* = .02. Further analyses confirmed, in line with hypothesis 2, that the simple two-way interaction effect of own and other's conflict experience was significant at low levels of social support (-1 *SD*), *b* = -.08, *SE* = .03, *p* = .01, but not when respondents indicated high levels of social support from others (+1 *SD*), *b* = .02, *SE* = .03, *p* = .50.

Table 4 *Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting the Need for Emotion-focused Help*

				95% Confidence Interval	
	Predictor	**ΔR^2**	***B***	**Lower Bound**	**Upper Bound**
Step 1		0.09**			
	Intercept		4.09**	3.93	4.26
	Age		0.02**	0.01	0.03
	Education		-0.28**	-0.37	-0.19
	Gender (0 = female)		-0.44**	-0.68	-0.20
Step 2		0.01			
	Intercept		4.09**	3.93	4.25
	Age		0.02**	0.01	0.03
	Education		-0.27**	-0.36	-0.18
	Gender (0 = female)		-0.44**	-0.68	-0.19
	Own dependence		0.02	-0.04	0.09
	Other's dependence		-0.02	-0.08	0.04
	Own conflict experience		0.05	-0.04	0.15
	Other's conflict experience		0.05	0.00	0.11
	Social support		0.06	-0.06	0.18
Step 3		0.01			
	Intercept		4.08**	3.92	4.25
	Age		0.02**	0.01	0.03
	Education		-0.27**	-0.36	-0.18
	Gender (0 = female)		-0.43**	-0.67	-0.18
	Own dependence		0.03	-0.04	0.09
	Other's dependence		-0.02	-0.09	0.04
	Own conflict experience		0.05	-0.05	0.14
	Other's conflict experience		0.06*	0.00	0.11
	Social support		0.08	-0.04	0.20
	Interaction own x other's dependence		-0.03*	-0.06	0.00
	Interaction own x other's confl. exp.		-0.03	-0.07	0.01
	Interaction own confl. exp. x social support		-0.08	-0.17	0.01
	Interaction other's confl. exp. x social support		0.01	-0.04	0.06

	Predictor	ΔR²	B	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Step 4		.01*			
	Intercept		4.08**	3.92	4.24
	Age		0.02**	0.01	0.03
	Education		-0.27**	-0.37	-0.18
	Gender (0 = female)		-0.42**	-0.67	-0.18
	Own dependence		0.02	-0.05	0.09
	Other's dependence		-0.02	-0.09	0.04
	Own conflict experience		0.07	-0.03	0.16
	Other's conflict experience		0.06*	0.00	0.11
	Social support		0.06	-0.06	0.18
	Interaction own x other's dependence		-0.03*	-0.06	0.00
	Interaction own x other's confl. exp.		-0.03	-0.07	0.01
	Interaction own confl. exp. x social support		-0.05	-0.15	0.04
	Interaction other's confl. exp. X social support		0.00	-0.05	0.05
	Three way interaction own x other's confl. exp. x social support		0.05*	0.01	0.09
Total R^2		0.12**			
N		700			

Note. There were no missing values. Table made with centered predictors.
* p< .05, **p < .001.

Examining the significant simple two-way interaction effect at low levels of social support in more detail (see Figure 2), own conflict experience was a positive and significant predictor of the need for emotion-focused help, when conflict parties perceived the other's conflict experience to be low (0), b = .33, SE = .11, p = .002 . Thus, consistent with our expectations, respondents reported a higher need for emotion-focused help with increasing levels of conflict asymmetry (i.e. experiencing more conflict than the other party). In contrast, when the other's conflict experience was perceived to be high (6), own conflict experience did not significantly predict the need for emotion-focused help, b = -.14, SE = .12, p = .24. Thus, only higher levels of asymmetry and not higher levels of own conflict experience without higher asymmetry, predicted an increase in the expected need for emotion-focused help. Again, we see that, although the slope is not significant, the level of need for emotion-focused help is remarkably high when other's conflict experience is high (at a maximum of 6). We will discuss these effects further in the discussion.

Figure 2. Conflict Asymmetry Predicting the Need for Emotion-focused Help

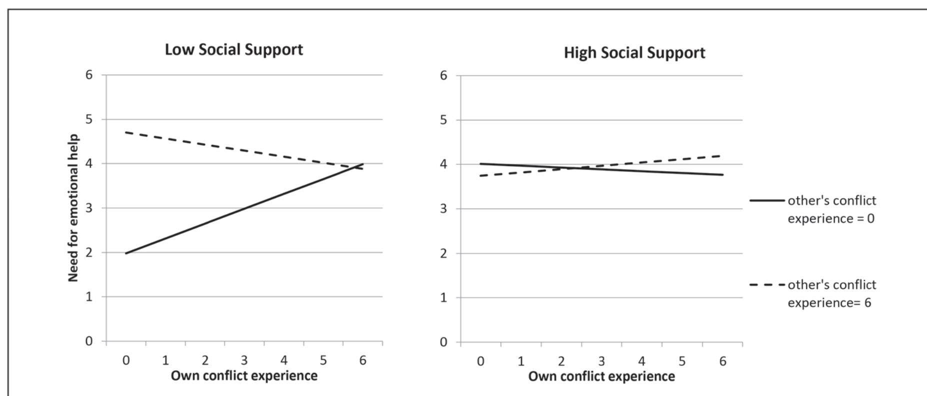

Figure 2. Interaction pattern of own and other's conflict experience, predicting the need for emotion-focused third-party help when social support is low and high. Based on standardized values of control variables.

As our sample was quite varied in terms of conflict type, we ran some additional analyses to test for the robustness of the results reported above. We tested for the effect of type of conflict and included dummy variables in the above analyses for the major conflict types (consumer conflicts, divorce, employment termination and conflicts with governmental institutions) as control variables. The aforementioned effects remained virtually identical. None of the dummies representing the different conflict types were significant predictors of the two needs for help, all *bs* < .26, *ps* > .24.

DISCUSSION

Recent research has highlighted the importance of perceptions of asymmetry in conflict-related matters (e.g. Jehn et al., 2010; Pruitt, 1995; Ufkes et al., 2012). Recent developments have also increased the importance of supporting those conflict parties who self-represent in court or solve their conflict outside of the courts in the shadow of the law (Moorhead et al., 2003). This support is often provided by professionals from the government or not-for-profit legal aid field. In this study, we strove to address the dearth of research related to these professional support parties. We have examined the relationship between asymmetry and needs for different types of support in the context of legal conflicts and legal aid. We focused on two commonly provided types of help in such settings: problem-focused help, such as information on procedures and steps to take towards a solution; and emotion-focused help, such as a support party showing understanding. We examined effects of two types of asymmetry - dependence asymmetry, a perceived asymmetry of power between two parties - and conflict asymmetry - a perceived asymmetry of conflict experience.

In line with both basic needs theory as well as previous conflict research, we found dependence asymmetry to predict a conflict party's need for problem-focused help. Specifically, help seekers who felt they were more dependent on the other side than vice versa, preferred a support party who reinforced them with practical support, information, and advice; and focused on their self-interest. Such empowering help is likely to restore the power balance and improve their position toward the other party. Although the importance of restoring power has been showed in previous conflict research (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008), we expect it to be particularly important in legal settings. Callan et al. (2010) suggest that self-interested and competitive attitudes will be stronger in legal conflicts than in conflicts that are not framed as legal. Others have shown the importance of voice and process control in legal proceedings (Houlden, LaTour, Walker & Thibaut, 1978; LaTour, Houlden, Walker & Thibaut, 1976; Tyler, Rasinki & Spodick, 1985). Our data suggest that the need for empowerment, or being armed with information and advice, with the goal of standing up for oneself, is particularly prevalent among conflict parties who perceive themselves to be more dependent on the other party than vice versa. This pattern held when we controlled for the specific type of legal conflict clients were engaged in.

Asymmetry of conflict experience proved to be a distinct predictor of the need for emotion-focused help from a professional support party. In line with our hypothesis, this relation was only found when social support was low. In other words: when people perceived their own conflict experience to be higher than that of the other party, and when they did not experience strong support from their own social network, they were particularly in need of a sympathetic ear. Previous studies have suggested that the experience of conflict asymmetry is linked to a lack of self-verification (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Ufkes et al., 2012). In this study we show that experiencing more conflict than the other party is related to a higher need for emotion-focused help. This suggests that the underlying mechanism may indeed be the need to self-verify. In other words, these conflict parties may feel a strong desire for a support party to confirm their understanding of the situation (Swann, 1983). Those who cannot find such a support party in their own personal network are more likely to turn to a legal aid professional. Again, this pattern held when controlling for the type of legal conflict parties were engaged in.

Thus, our research supports the idea that although related, dependence asymmetry and conflict (experience) asymmetry are two distinct forms of asymmetry. This is not only evident from their differential effects, but is also reflected by the weak correlations between the constructs related to asymmetry in this study. This underlines the importance for future research to clearly define what type of asymmetry is expected be important in the conflict context and for the specific outcomes of interest. We found no association between conflict asymmetry and need for problem-focused help. The expected effects of dependence asymmetry on need for problem-focused help and of conflict asymmetry on need for emotional help were strongest, but we did find a weak (but significant) association

between dependence asymmetry and the need for emotion-focused help. This association could be a result of a general need to enlist a support party as a resource, to increase a sense of control, or of a need for a specific type of emotion-focused support containing empowering messages as those in the work of Shnabel and Nadler (2008). Alternatively, it could be an effect of higher sensitivity among relatively less powerful parties, resulting in a higher need for emotion-focused help (see e.g. Van Kleef et al., 2006).We also explored the data for effects of advantages in asymmetry. A somewhat counterintuitive finding was that there were some indications for elevated needs for problem-focused empowering help when other's dependence was perceived to be relatively high. A similar pattern was observed for emotion-focused help when other's conflict experience was perceived to be high. We can think of several explanations for these unanticipated findings. First, it might be that powerful parties, those facing a dependent other, also have a particularly strong desire to maintain control (Fiske & Dépret, 1996). Second, it might be worrying to face another party with a much higher dependence and conflict experience than oneself, for example because one may fear escalation or retaliation. This may increase both the need to prepare for conflict (problem-focused help) and seek reassurance (emotion-focused help). Third, parties who experience no conflict and are confronted with another who experiences a high amount of conflict might experience an equal need to self-verify as parties in the opposite situation ("Do I have a proper understanding of this conflict? Am I missing something?"). Even more so, and following the line of Shnabel and Nadler's (2008), experiencing no conflict when the other party does, might feel like a transgression, damaging one's moral self-image. Future research might elaborate on and test such explanations. In any case, these intriguing elevated need levels among those facing a more dependent or conflictual other underline the importance of our analytical approach to test the interaction effects between own and other's dependence or conflict experience. If we had used the difference asymmetry scores as predictors, then we would not have been able to detect these elevated levels among relatively less dependent and less conflictual parties.

There are also some important limitations to note. Firstly, future studies might distinguish between dependence within and beyond the conflict context. Dependence within the conflict context might describe who controls which procedures are chosen to solve the conflict, and who has more control over the outcome. Dependence beyond the immediate conflict might, for example, be related to whether one party depends on the other for income such as alimony between divorcing partners, or welfare benefits in a conflict with government. We know that expected future dependence can impact the choices made in conflict management (Pruitt & Kim, 2004). The same may be true for expected future asymmetry of dependence. Secondly, emotion-focused help was measured with two items describing general emotion-focused support. Future studies might measure specific types of emotion-focused help such as messages of belonging (SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2013) , creating opportunities for the sharing of experiences and

venting (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 2001; Nils & Rimé, 2012), showing understanding and validation (Swann, 1983; Ufkes et al., 2012) , esteem support (Chen et al., 2012; Cobb, 1976) , or a combination of these. This might also contribute to fine tuning emotion-focused help to specific needs of low and high conflict perceivers. In addition to emotional help, social support from the help seeker's own network could then also be measured more specifically and elaborately, in a way that takes into account these dimensions. Third, due to the context of sampling and the retrospective nature of the study, the need for problem-focused empowering help could be overestimated in this study. Problem-focused help mirrors most closely what the legal aid desk provides and is expected to provide. Another limitation with regard to our sample is that it is limited to help seekers only. Future studies might include parties to legal conflicts who have not actively searched for help (yet). Such studies might also include perceptions of both parties in the same conflict to examine to what extent conflict parties' perceptions of each other's experiences correspond, and whether that impacts on needs for help as well. Finally, although this study is high in external validity because of the sample of help-seekers with real legal conflicts, it would be valuable to replicate these results in an experimental setting. This might also allow comparison between the needs of those who do and those who do not seek advice when they encounter legal conflicts (Buck et al., 2008).

In terms of its implications for practice, our study underlines the importance of understanding the conflict related perceptions of help seekers (cf: Shestowsky, 2004). For legal aid providers, it might be important to know that clients in asymmetrical conflicts are likely to have higher needs for help than clients in symmetrical conflicts. Furthermore, what type of help is needed is largely dependent on the type of asymmetry one experiences. In case of asymmetry of power, it seems more effective and useful to empower the client to face both the conflict and the other party by providing tools like information and guidance. In case of asymmetry of conflict experience, professional support parties should be aware of needs of vulnerable clients who lack a strong support network. These clients are more likely to call on their legal aid professionals for social and emotional support, replacing the support they lack elsewhere. The primary help strategy in those cases should be to take the time to listen to the client; to let them tell their story and acknowledge their experiences. In addition, for legal aid professionals who are the first port of call in legal conflicts, such as legal aid consultants of the Dutch Legal Aid Desks, it is not only important to know what help to provide, but also where to refer a client. Those experiencing dependence asymmetry might benefit most from referral to a lawyer. Those experiencing conflict asymmetry might also benefit from referral to social work.

Chapter 3

Effects of Online Interventions and Retaliation Power on Empowerment in Consumer Conflicts

The authors want to acknowledge and thank valuable contributions of Janneke Overduin, Milan van Minnen, Elze Ufkes, Caroline Lennecke, and Corry van Zeeland.
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In many legal conflicts, individuals are expected to stand up for themselves. This is particularly true for consumer conflicts. A lawyer will not accompany buyers to the store if their new laptop does not work as expected, and most consumers will have to draft their own emails when a product they have bought online is never delivered. In these legal conflicts, individuals will represent themselves, at least during the initial stages. They often face a powerful, larger, richer and repeat player (Galanter, 1974; Menkel-Meadow, 1999). In other words, the division of power in these conflicts is asymmetric, and consumers are likely to consider the seller to have the upper hand.

Increasingly, legal aid agencies and other public interest organizations offer sophisticated online support for individuals facing such justiciable conflicts[1]. In this study, we focused on self-help resources such as legal information and other types of support offered one-sidedly (McDonald et al., 2019). For example, in the Netherlands, the Dutch consumer organization offers an extensive website, which includes legal advice, standard complaint formats, and a forum where individuals can exchange experiences. Similar initiatives have been developed by consumer organizations and legal aid organizations elsewhere, such as Citizen's Advice in the UK. These online support options may contain information on rules and regulations, examples of letters, and testimonials of other people who encountered similar problems. The goal of these services typically is to empower individuals to better deal with these conflicts and stand up for themselves. To date, however, there has been very little research investigating which of such support interventions best achieve this goal and which psychological processes surround them (Labrecque et al., 2013; McDonald et al., 2019).

In the current experimental study with a simulated consumer conflict following an internet purchase, we examined the effects of online interventions that closely resemble types of support that consumers might receive in practice. We included a "classical" legal advice intervention (explaining relevant rules), and, based on psychological theories on coping (Chen et al., 2012; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982), we identified two other categories of interventions: social comparison information and emotion focused support. To map how these interventions impact the degree of empowerment, we included assessments of perceptions of power as well as actual behavior (to assertively make claims). To examine to what extent situational empowerment carries over to future consumer conflicts, we also included a self-report measure of future self-efficacy.

In addition, we considered the moderating role of an important feature of many contemporary consumer conflicts: the possibility to leave a public review of the seller online. This retaliation power to levy additional costs upon the other side if he or she fails to co-operate, is a form of power (Lawler & Bacharach, 1987). We expected to observe

1 Justiciable conflicts are conflicts that could be (but are not necessarily) handled within the justice system (Genn, 1999).

that social comparison interventions have a stronger empowering effect when individuals have this retaliation power and legal advice interventions work best when they do not have this opportunity. If so, this would speak for tailoring interventions to specific conflict situations. Finally, we examined how consumers evaluate the interventions they received, and tested whether these evaluations corresponded with the effects of the interventions on their power perceptions, claiming behavior, and self-efficacy.

Power and empowerment

An opportunity to retaliate can strengthen a conflict party's sense of power in a conflict situation and -in case one feels the other has the upper hand- thus level the playing field (Lawler & Bacharach, 1981). In online retail, the opportunity to leave a negative review of the seller or their product can provide consumers with an important piece of leverage over the seller (Labrecque et al., 2013). That is, they might retaliate by discouraging possible future customers to buy from this seller. Consumers often have retaliation power, as they can name and shame companies on social media and leave negative reviews, but this can only impact negotiations when the option is made salient. We therefore expect that consumers feel and act more empowered when they have and are made aware of an opportunity to retaliate (by leaving a negative review of the seller after the sale) (H1).

3

Empowerment includes both the perception of power as well as the ability to act on it and achieve one's goals (Bailey & McCarthy, 2009). To be self-reliant and empowered in a specific consumer conflict, consumers need to stand up to the seller, and assertively make their claim of prompt delivery of a product without faults, or, if that fails, a full restitution of money paid. Assertively making claims from the outset in a conflict or negotiation is known to strongly affect the result of negotiations even in cases of power asymmetry (Gunia et al., 2013). These initial claims are important as they can set the agenda and act as an anchor for further negotiations, both of which are strong predictors of negotiation outcomes (Magee & Galinksy, 2008; Magee et al., 2007). That is, presenting oneself as assertive and thereby powerful from the outset can result in improved negotiation outcomes for the claim maker (Galinksy et al., 2017; Gunia et al., 2013).

Following early interdependence theorists (Emerson, 1962; Kelly & Thibaut, 1978), we define power as 'relative control over another's valued outcomes' (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007). Conflict behavior and a perception of power are situational. They are the results of the distribution of sources of power of both parties in that particular situation, awareness of these power sources on both sides, and the confidence a party has that they will be able to capitalize on their relative power (Greer & Bendersky, 2013; Kim et al., 2005; Rucker et al., 2012; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Thibault & Kelly, 1959). In order to strategically make use of one's relative power position, individuals first have to be aware of the power

they hold over the other party's outcomes as well as of the power the other party holds over their outcomes (Bacharach & Lawler, 1976; Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Kim et al., 2005). We further argue that the perception of power not only comprises the awareness of (the balance or imbalance in) power sources, but also consists of an estimate of one's ability to act strategically and to effectively make use of power sources in a negotiation (Bandura, 1997; Kim et al., 2005). Consequently, and especially in situations where self-reliance is demanded, influencing an individual's perceptions of dyadic power can be considered a viable starting point for a successful intervention in consumer conflicts.

Ideally, interventions would have a long-term impact on which consumers can draw the next time they encounter a consumer conflict. If we want to test whether the interventions and possibly the experience of reacting successfully to a conflict (mastery, see Bandura, 1997) have any lasting effects that can be carried over to a potential future conflict, we need to look at an intrapersonal, rather than interpersonal conception of power. We therefore test whether the interventions as well as the experience of reacting successfully to the situation can improve self-efficacy assessments. Self-efficacy assessments have been shown to reliably predict behavior and successful coping with challenges (Bosmans et al., 2015; Jex & Bliese, 1999; Porter, 2016). As such, self-assessments of future self-efficacy are useful indicators of the medium to long-term effects of interventions on behavior.

Online conflict support

The web is filled with a wide variety of sources that offer an even wider range of different types of advice and support for consumers who experience conflicts. Legal aid and advice aim to make individuals more empowered and self-reliant in cases where legal representation is not available. However, we have to ask whether classical legal advice (explaining relevant rules) is best suited to empower individuals in such cases, or whether other interventions are more suited to assist individuals in consumer conflicts. We turn to psychological theory to differentiate between, and formulate expectations about, types of support that are available online. The literature indicates that social support can act as a buffer in stressful situations such as conflicts (Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Giebels & Janssen, 2005). Previous research shows that even minimal types of support offered by robots and virtual agents can be beneficial. For example, Brave et al. (2005) show that when computerized agents express empathy they are experienced as caring and supportive, and Chattaraman et al. (2012) show that online shoppers can experience social support from a virtual agent during their visit to a web store. Therefore, we expect consumers to feel and act more empowered when they receive any type of support, compared to when they do not receive any support (H2).

Furthermore, the classical distinction between problem-focused support and emotion-focused support differentiates between support oriented at solving the problem and support geared towards the emotions of the party in question (Chen et al., 2012; Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Skinner et al., 2003). Previous research into needs for support in legal conflicts has shown that individuals faced with a legal conflict generally report a higher need for problem-focused support, compared to emotion-focused support (Van Dijk et al., 2016). Parties in legal conflicts are more likely to take competitive attitudes than parties in non-legal conflicts and they are more likely to have a high need for process control (Callan et al., 2010; Houlden et al., 1978; LaTour et al., 1976; Tyler et al., 1985). We expect that coping with the emotional impact of the conflict will be a secondary need in such a context. Therefore, we expect the positive impact of problem-focused support on perceptions of power, assertive claiming behavior, and assessments of future self-efficacy (feeling and acting empowered) to be stronger than that of emotion-focused support (H3).

Legal advice is an archetypical example of problem-focused support. Good advice offers clear information on whether your claim is legitimate, which steps to take in stating your claim, and what goals to set for a negotiation. Informing consumers about their legal rights provides them with an opportunity to legitimate their claim with a reference to a powerful social institution (French & Raven, 1959). Consumers who are aware of their rights can invoke the legitimate power of the law and appeal to norms that are enshrined in the legal system and are likely to be shared by the seller (Raven, 1990; Raven, 2008). We therefore expect this legal support to strengthen a consumer's situational perception of power and make them more likely to assertively state their claim to the seller. Reminding parties of the legal norms that apply to their situation could make parties feel like they literally have the law on their side and can set expectations for the outcome of the conflict (McAdams & Nadler, 2005). However, the costs of bringing a case to a lawyer, a court, or to an arbitration committee, will likely be high and access relatively difficult (Zartman & Rubin, 2000). In other words, there is no clear shadow of the law[2], and providing legal support in the form of advice is perhaps the most feasible support that can be offered from a legal perspective. This means consumers often do not have an attractive and accessible alternative to negotiating by themselves with the seller.

Negotiations with sellers may be aided by the experiences of other consumers as well. Consumer interest organizations and web fora (sometimes hosted by consumer interest organizations) often share experiences, approaches and successes of those who were in a similar situation. Similar to legal advice, this may offer a legitimization for one's claim. This can thus strengthen a consumer's perception of power, which can in turn make

2 Negotiations can be said to take place in the shadow of the law, as the law and court practice dictate what outcomes might be achieved by bringing a case to court when no negotiated agreement can be reached (Mnookin & Kornhauser, 1978).

them more likely to assertively state their claim. This legitimation without reference to a powerful social institution might be weaker than legitimation gained through referencing the law. However, it can be expected that such *problem-focused support in the form of social comparison information* has additional positive effects. First, it may offer concrete directions about how to tackle the situation. Adopting behavior and learning from similar others, while knowing that these similar others have been successful, can therefore be a powerful source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). The positive effect of this mechanism is supported by the general notion that information about the actions undertaken by similar, successful peers is highly persuasive (Cialdini, 1984). Indeed, such social information can steer individual behavior in consumer conflicts (Jespersen, 2018). Next to that, the social proof of others experiencing something similar and the feeling of not being "the only one" may serve as an important source of social support (Davison et al., 2000).

The moderating role of option to review (retaliation power)

Although we may expect social comparison information to be the more effective type of problem-focused support, which type of support is most effective in specific conflicts might very well depend on situational factors. We argue that consumers with the option to review might benefit most from interventions that strengthen them in their perceived capability to use their leverage over the seller. Through social comparison information (reading about how other people solved the issue successfully), consumers can vicariously learn what they might do to solve their own conflict and feel strengthened by similar others. Those who already hold leverage over the seller in the form of a review opportunity might benefit most from this information, as well as from the reinforcement to their beliefs concerning their ability to successfully negotiate the issue.

In contrast, those without the possibility to review might benefit more from interventions that offer them an alternative, legal source of power. More specifically, legal advice might offer an important alternative source of power by referring to the legal system, providing people with information on their rights to make legal claims. This is most likely to be useful to and appreciated by those who do not have the possibility to review the seller and will therefore experience a need for power (Jin & Huang, 2019; Rucker et al., 2012).

In short, we expect an interaction effect of the option to review (retaliation power) with the type of intervention on consumer empowerment. For those with the option to review the seller, we expect social comparison information to be more effective in improving perceptions of power, assertive claiming behavior, and self-efficacy than legal information (H4a). We expect legal information to be more effective than social comparison information in improving perception of power, assertive claiming behavior, and self-efficacy for consumers without such an option (H4b).

Consumer evaluations

Finally, we look at evaluations of the interventions, to examine whether the effects we find correspond with how consumers evaluate the interventions themselves. Focus groups and user assessments are frequently used methods to assess the quality of web-based interventions. We examine whether subjective user evaluations correspond to the patterns of effects on empowerment we find in this study, and we will explore whether the pattern of evaluations is similar when consumers have some power compared to when they do not.

To summarize, in this paper we test which interventions based on classical legal aid as well as psychological mechanisms can empower consumers in conflicts with retailers, when consumers have to the option to review (and thus retaliate) and when they do not have this option. We test whether patterns of effects on three indicators of empowerment (situational power perceptions, assertive claiming behavior, and future self-efficacy assessments) correspond with subjective evaluations of the interventions by consumers.

METHOD

Design

We used a mock online marketplace in which participants experienced problems during a purchase and received support from a virtual agent before they had a chance to negotiate with the seller. A 5 (Interventions: legal advice vs. social comparison vs. esteem support vs. understanding and validation vs. control (no support))[3] x 2 (Option to review: yes vs. no) between subjects factorial design was adopted. All procedures in this study were in accordance with and approved by the ethical standards of the ethics committee of the University of Twente.[4]

Participants

Participants were students of the University of Twente, participating for course credit (*N* = 125), as well as individuals who were recruited outside of the university through messages on social media (*N* = 50). A total of 260 participants started the experiment and 175 completed the experiment.[5] Four participants did not provide all demographic information. Respondents ranged from 17 to 63 years in age (*M* = 24.73, *SD* = 9.59). More than two-thirds (69%) were female, and almost all (97%) were following or had completed higher education. The first language was Dutch for 61% of the respondents. The remaining 39% reported German as their first language, but indicated they were also fluent in Dutch.

3 Legal advice and social information constitute problem-focused forms of support; esteem support and understanding and validation are forms of emotion-focused support. See procedure for further information.
4 Document number: BCE15040; approval obtained in March 2015.
5 Dropout was especially high in the sample that did not receive course credit for participation.

Over half (52%) of the respondents had experienced a consumer conflict before. Participant numbers per cell ranged from 12 – 26 (see table 4). This variation was due to dropout. Given these low numbers, we reported appropriate effect sizes (Lakens, 2013) as well as confidence intervals.

Procedure

Simulation of a consumer conflict: online fraud. We manipulated a consumer conflict in a simulated online marketplace (see Figure 1). In order to create a realistic scenario, the web environment in which we ran this experiment was based on the designs of a well-known Dutch online retailer and an online marketplace. As a cover story, participants were told that they would be testing this online marketplace. Participants were randomly allocated to a marketplace with or without the option to review the seller. Participants were told that multiple respondents were online, and they were randomly allocated to either the role of seller or buyer. In fact, all respondents were buyers, and the sellers were simulated participants. They then read that they could win one of the products presented in the experiment if they made a successful purchase.[6] Participants were reminded several times that the seller's goal in the experiment was to make as much money as possible to suggest that the seller might be motivated to defraud the buyer participants.

At the outset of the experiment, participants received a fixed amount of a fake currency to be used in the experimental setup. They were then presented with a number of anonymous sellers who all sold vouchers of equal value to popular web stores. They could choose one of these vouchers and the corresponding seller. As soon as they confirmed their selection, the currency of the buyer transferred to the seller and a chat window opened. In the chat window, the seller sent the voucher code to the buyer in a short message.

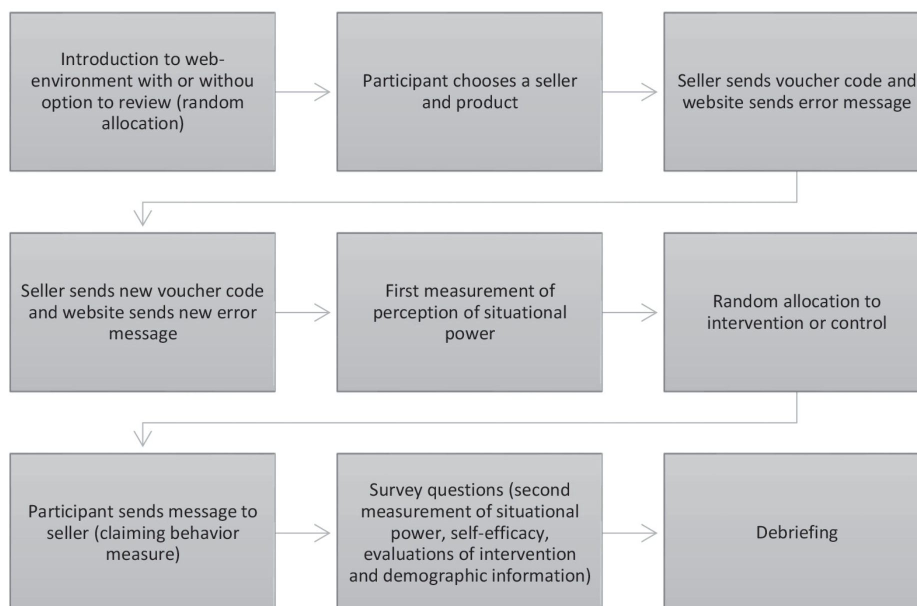
The participant (buyer) was asked to enter this code into a provided text field to complete the sale. After entering the code, they were informed that the code was incorrect, and that the seller would also be informed. The error message stated that the seller seemed to have sent them a previously used voucher code. The seller then sent a new code, which would also prove to be incorrect.

Participants were then randomly presented with one of the four support interventions or a control screen, after which they could send the seller a chat message back. The content of the chat messages sent to the seller indicated participants understood the scenario.

After completing a short survey, participants were debriefed about the real purpose of the study, given the chance to respond and thanked for their participation.

6 Two prizes in the form of vouchers for an online retailer were awarded at random after the experiment.

Figure 1 *Flowchart of Experimental Setup*



Experimental manipulations

Option to review the seller (retaliation power). To manipulate the option to review, the experiment took place in one of two different versions of the online marketplace from the outset and throughout the experiment. Half of the participants were randomly presented with an online marketplace in which they were told they could write a public review about the seller after their purchase. They were also told that future participants would be able to read those reviews. The sales environment they saw included a review box for each seller with the notification that this seller had no reviews yet. The other half of the participants did not receive this review information and option. As a manipulation check, we asked a subset[7] of participants to report how worried and scared they thought the other party was about their reputation, on a scale of 1 to 7. As expected, participants in the review condition reported that they felt the other party was more worried about their reputation (M = 4.55, SD = 1.42) than participants in the no-review condition did (M = 3.89, SD = 1.16), $t(48)$ = 1.79, p = .08, d = .84.

Online conflict support. There were four intervention conditions and one control condition in which no support was offered. All interventions were preceded by a generic welcome message from a neutral virtual agent and were of equal length (90-103 words). We did not suggest any human intervention behind the computer support. In the two

7 To avoid overtaxing the respondents, we only included the manipulation check for the sample recruited outside of the university, who we expected to be more motivated as they participated without remuneration.

problem-focused interventions (legal advice and social comparison information), respondents received a suggested course of action. In the legal advice condition, respondents read: *'Based on Dutch consumer law, you will receive information on rules which apply to your problem or conflict. When a product is not delivered within the agreed deadline for delivery, you have clear rights. According to book 7, article 9:4 and article 19a of the civil code, you can declare the seller to be in breach of contract and set a new deadline for delivery. When the seller fails to deliver within this new deadline, you have the right to a full refund from the seller.'* As social comparison information respondents read the first-person account of another participant who previously had problems with this particular seller: *'You are not the only buyer who experienced problems with this seller. An example of another buyer's experience was: Buyer 26- I am not happy about my experience with this seller. I had ordered a voucher, but the seller sent me the wrong voucher code and did not solve the problem. That is why I first gave the seller a new deadline for delivery of the correct voucher code. When that did not work, I demanded my money back and in the end, I did get that.'*

We included two emotion-focused types of support (Chen et al., 2012). Both did not directly address a suggested solution but addressed the experience of the buyer. The first emotion-focused type of support was *esteem support* (Chen et al., 2012). This is similar to verbal persuasion as described by Bandura (1997), in which consumers received positive verbal encouragement or feedback on their ability to face a consumer conflict. Thus, esteem support could increase a sense of reinforcement in one's ability to assert control, which we expected to be most useful to those who held leverage over the seller. Similar to our expectation that social comparison would be most effective to consumers with the option to review (H4a), we intended to explore the pattern of reinforcing the consumer to stand up for themselves when consumers had the power to review and when they did not. In the esteem support condition, we therefore gave participants (fictional) positive feedback related to their capacity to negotiate: *'You will now receive personal information about your estimated skills in conflict resolution. We have analyzed your actions and answers on this website. From this analysis, you appear to be a strong negotiator and are likely to be highly capable of defending your position in written messages in a conflict or negotiation. You mostly reach your goals in conflicts. Based on this, we expect you to be able to handle the problem yourself. '*

The second emotion-focused type of support was emotional support in the form of *understanding and validation:* support geared towards assuaging the negative emotions connected to a stressful situation. Providing understanding and validation of feelings of stress or frustration may reduce negative affect and physiological stress (Chen et al, 2012; Giebels & Janssen, 2005), which in turn may improve self-efficacy and empowered behavior (Bandura, 1997). Understanding and validation thus only indirectly target conflict resolution. We intended to explore whether assuaging the negative, stress-related effects

of powerlessness, was most of use to those who did not hold any leverage over the seller. The virtual support agent in the *understanding and validation* condition showed understanding and gave validation for the experience of frustration of the buyer: *'You have a problem or conflict with the seller. You made an online purchase and probably expected this to go smoothly and quickly. Delayed or incorrect delivery does not correspond to your expectations. Because you can only reach the seller online, it is more difficult to solve the problem. You cannot call them or go to a store to have a face-to-face conversation with the seller. This situation can bother you and any stress or anger you experience due to this situation is understandable.'*

Dependent variables

Empowerment. We used three indicators of empowerment: assertive claiming behavior, perceptions of situational power, and assessments of future self-efficacy.

Assertive claiming behavior. Assertive claiming behavior was elicited by giving respondents a chance to send a chat message to the seller (after the interventions or control, see Figure 1). Average text length of the 175 chat messages was 32 words, ranging from 4 to 83 words. To assess assertive claiming behavior, we coded these messages on a scale of one to five to identify to what extent the participants claimed their product or money back from the seller and how assertive they were in their claim. Higher scores on the scale indicated stronger claiming behavior. See table 1 for the scale. All messages were coded blind to conditions by one Dutch and one Dutch speaking German coder. After the first set of 38 messages was coded, the coders discussed the coding procedure. Interrater reliability for the remaining 137 messages was $\kappa = .82$, $p < .001$. In case of disagreement, the first author's code was decisive.

Table 1 *Coding Scheme for Assertive Claiming Behavior*

Score	Category name	Description	Example	% of messages in category
1	Avoidance	The buyer gives up, makes no demand or explicitly states that they do not wish to continue the interaction.	I have received two incorrect codes. I give up	5.1
2	Stating the problem	The buyer raises the issue but does not demand a solution.	The voucher code does not work.	15.4
3	Nonspecific demand	The buyer demands a solution but is not specific about what kind of solution they expect from the seller.	How will you solve this issue?	10.9
4	Specific demand	The buyer specifically demands or asks for their money back or a new voucher code.	I want my money back or a voucher code that works.	50.9
5	Specific demand with deadline/ consequences	The buyer makes a demand and sets a specific deadline and/or attaches consequences in case of non-compliance.	I want to receive a correct voucher code within an hour!	17.7

Perceptions of situational power. To capture perceptions of power of both them and the other side, we asked respondents to indicate to what extent they felt like they themselves as well as the other party had control over the outcomes of the conflict (Van Dijk et al., 2016)[8]. Following Bacharach and Lawler (1976), we did not ask respondents to report the balance of power between them and the other party. Rather, we asked respondents to report how much power they felt they had, and how much power they felt the other had separately. Perception of power was measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = to a very great extent), at two times during the experiment: before as well as after the intervention was presented (see Figure 1). Before the intervention, the average own power perception was 2.72 (SD = 1.53) and other's power was 5.81 (SD = 1.20), which indeed reflects the expected negative asymmetry. After the intervention there was slightly less negative asymmetry, the average of own power was 3.19 (SD = 1.48) and 5.58 (SD = 1.21) for other's power.

Assessment of future self-efficacy. As self-efficacy is known to be domain specific (Bandura, 1997; 2006), we adapted an existing scale to measure self-efficacy in future consumer conflicts. To effectively deal with a conflict, individual conflict parties have to be confident in their abilities to look for solutions, possibly even integrative solutions. They have to trust their ability to negotiate with the other party, argue their case and protect

8 In addition, we included scales asking participants to indicate how dependent they felt on the other party and how dependent they felt the other party would be on them (Bacharach & Lawler, 1976). We expected these items to show very strong correlations with the items that measured control over the outcome but found only weak and moderate correlations (between -.04 and .43). This is consistent with another study that looked into experience of individuals in legal conflicts in the Netherlands (Van Dijk et al, 2023). We speculate that in the Dutch anti-hierarchical and individualist culture (Hofstede, 2001), dependence is seen as particularly negative and possibly even insulting (reflecting weakness of character) and thus is expected to lead to biased power measures. Therefore, we decided not to include these scales in further analyses.

their interests in the negotiation. These qualities are similar to those in problem solving self-efficacy as defined by Heppner and Petersen (1982). We therefore adapted the five strongest loading items from their problem-solving inventory (Heppner & Petersen, 1982) to the situation of a consumer conflict, for example: 'I am confident in my ability to communicate and come to an agreement with the seller.' A scree test showed one clear factor which explained 63% of variance (Cronbach's alpha = .85). All factor loadings were above .60 (Stevens, 2002). Average self-efficacy in future consumer conflicts, measured after the experiment, and on a scale of 1 (low self-efficacy) to 6 (high self-efficacy) was 4.37 (*SD* = .91).

Evaluations of interventions. Respondents evaluated the support they received on 5 items on a scale of 1 to 7 (e.g.: 'The information in the help screen was relevant to me.' and 'I felt supported by the help.') , where 1 represented a very negative evaluation and 7 a very positive. They could also indicate that they did not know or had no opinion on the intervention, in which case their answer on that item was excluded. As the control group did not answer these questions, 129 participants evaluated the interventions. A scree test revealed one clear factor, which explained 80% of the variance. All factor loadings were above .82. The final construct showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .94). The average of evaluations of the interventions was 3.53 (*SD* = 1.61).

RESULTS

We first examined the associations between the main dependent variables and the (demographic) covariates as shown in tables 2 and 3. A significant and positive correlation between assertive claiming behavior and future self-efficacy assessments emerged, $r(175) = .20$, $p = .008$. In addition, younger participants showed more assertive claiming behavior, $r(172) = -.26$, $p < .001$. Perceptions of own power before and after the interventions correlated positively, $r(175) = .49$, $p = < .001$, as did perceptions of other's power $r(175) = .48$, $p = < .001$. Own and other's power did not correlate (before or after the interventions), $r(175) = -.10$, $p = .20$, and $r(175) = -.17$, $p = .02$. Participants with Dutch as first language reported less own power, $t(169) = 2.97$, $p = .003$, and more other's power, $t(169) = -3.33$, $p = .001$, after the interventions than participants with German as first language, see also table 3. Furthermore, assertive claiming behavior was weakly positively associated with the perception of other's power before the intervention but not with perception of other's power after the intervention. In addition, we noted that self-efficacy seemed to be slightly positively associated with other's power before, but not after the intervention. Men and younger people reported higher assessments of future self-efficacy, respectively, $t(170) = 3.05$, $p = .003$ and $r(172) = -.16$, $p = .04$. In line with the findings for self-efficacy, those who had already experienced a consumer conflict experienced more own power both before, $t(170) = -2.03$, $p = .04$, and after the intervention, $t(170) = -2.93$, $p = .004$, than those who had not experienced a consumer conflict before. They also rated other's power lower

after the intervention than those who had not already experienced a consumer conflict, $t(170) = 2.37$, $p = .02$.

Table 2 *Summary of Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations on Dependent and Demographic Variables*

	N	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Assertive claiming behavior	175	3.61	1.10	_						
2. Own power (before intervention)	175	2.72	1.53	.00	_					
3. Other's power (before intervention)	175	5.81	1.20	.18*	-.10	_				
4. Own power (after intervention)	175	3.19	1.48	.08	.49**	-.05	_			
5. Other's power (after intervention)	175	5.58	1.21	.02	-.10	.48**	-.17*	_		
6. Assessment of future self-efficacy	175	4.37	0.91	.20**	.15	.12	.15*	.05	_	
7. Intervention evaluations	136	3.53	1.61	.12	.04	.04	.13	.04	.16	_
8. Age	172	24.73	9.59	-.26**	-.05	-.08	-.07	.04	-.16*	-.14

* p < .05, ** p < .01

Table 3 *Means and Standard Deviations of Dependent and Demographic Variables Across Groups*

	Gender			First language			Experienced consumer conflict		
	Male (0)	Female (1)	*p*	German (0)	Dutch (1)	*p*	No (0)	Yes (1)	*p*
1. Assertive claiming behavior	3.80 (1.03)	3.50 (1.13)	.103	3.58 (1.12)	3.60 (1.11)	.936	3.52 (1.13)	3.66 (1.09)	.393
2. Own power (before intervention)	2.61 (1.53)	2.78 (1.55)	.507	2.91 (1.54)	2.63 (1.53)	.238	2.48 (1.50)	2.96 (1.55)	.044
3. Other's power (before intervention)	5.57 (1.31)	5.91 (1.14)	.092	5.63 (1.19)	5.92 (1.20)	.117	5.81 (1.26)	5.80 (1.15)	.959
4. Own power (after intervention)	3.15 (1.61)	3.21 (1.43)	.795	3.61 (1.50)	2.93 (1.42)	.003	2.86 (1.41)	3.51 (1.49)	.004
5. Other's power (after intervention)	5.50 (1.26)	5.62 (1.21)	.556	5.22 (1.32)	5.84 (1.07)	.001	5.81 (1.01)	5.37 (1.37)	.018 [a]
6. Assessment of future self-efficacy	4.68 (0.93)	4.23 (0.88)	.003	4.29 (0.81)	4.42 (0.98)	.380	4.33 (0.84)	4.40 (0.98)	.608
7. Intervention evaluations	3.35 (1.62)	3.63 (1.60)	.348	3.57 (1.58)	3.50 (1.61)	.810	3.80 (1.64)	3.31 (1.61)	.079
8. Age	23.70 (6.51)	25.19 (10.70)	.262 [a]	21.67 (2.84)	26.74 (11.71)	< .001 [a]	23.41 (9.04)	25.96 (9.96)	.082

Note : $n_{male} = 54$, $n_{female} = 118$, $n_{German} = 67$, $n_{Dutch} = 104$, $n_{No} = 83$, $n_{Yes} = 89$ for variables assertive claiming behavior through self-efficacy plus age and $n_{male} = 43$, $n_{female} = 90$, $n_{German} = 61$, $n_{Dutch} = 71$, $n_{No} = 62$, $n_{Yes} = 71$ for intervention evaluations. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

[a] Equal variances not assumed for significant Levene's tests.

Perceptions of power before interventions

We first tested for the effect of the option to retaliate on initial situational power perceptions (before the interventions, see figure 1). Participants who were on a website where the option to review the seller was available, reported marginally significantly higher perceived own power before the interventions (N = 85, M = 2.94, SD = 1.65) than those without the option to review (N = 90, M = 2.51, SD = 1.39), $t(165)$ = 1.86, p = .06, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.89], Hedges' g_s = 0.28[9]. This finding lent support for our expectation that retaliation power would improve perceptions of power (H1). As expected, the pattern was reversed for perceptions of other's power. Participants perceived the other to have lower power when they had the option to review (M = 5.68, SD = 1.27), compared to when they did not (M = 5.93, SD = 1.11), but this difference was not significant, $t(173)$ = -1.39, p = .17, 95% CI [-0.61, 0.11], Hedges' g_s = 0.21.

Effects of interventions, moderated by option to review

We then tested for the effects of our manipulations (option to review x interventions) on feeling and acting empowered (assertive claiming behavior, situational perceptions of own and other's power, and future self-efficacy assessment after the experiment).

The ANOVA model predicting assertive claiming behavior was not significant $F(9,165)$ = 0.27, MSE = 1.27, p = .98; we found no significant main or interaction effects of the interventions or the option to review, all F's < 0.37, all p's > .83, all η^2_p's < .01.

For situational power perceptions, we expected improved perceptions of power for those who received some type of support (H2). We expected stronger improvements of perceptions of situational power for consumers who received problem-focused than emotion-focused support (H3). We expected that consumers who had the option to review would benefit most from social comparison information and that those without the option to review would benefit most from legal advice (H4a & H4b). We tested this in two (one for own and one for other's power) repeated measures ANOVAs with measurement of power (before and after the interventions) as within subjects factor and option to review and interventions as between subjects factors. We expected an interaction effect of measurement and intervention (H2 & H3) and a three-way interaction effect of measurement, intervention and power to review (H4a & H4b).

We first examined the repeated measures ANOVA model with situational perceptions of own power as dependent variable. A significant effect of the within subjects factor indicated that own power increased significantly between the first and second measurement, $F(1, 165)$ = 16.57, p < .001, partial η^2 = 0.09 (see Table 4). Consistent with our analysis above and our first hypothesis, we found a marginally significant main effect of

9 Levene's test indicated unequal variances between these two groups (F = 4.05, p = .05), so degrees of freedom were adjusted from 173 to 165.

option to review, $F(1, 165) = 3.04$, $p = 0.08$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$. The main effect of interventions was not significant, $F(4, 165) = 0.36$, $p = .84$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$, nor was the interaction of the two between subjects factors, $F(4, 165) = 0.26$, $p = 0.91$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$. Contrary to our second and third hypothesis, there were no two-way interactions of measurement with the interventions, $F(4, 165) = 1.78$, $p = .14$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.04$, or option to review, $F(1, 165) = 1.44$, $p = .23$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$. However, consistent with our expectations, the increase in own power was qualified by a significant three way interaction of the two manipulations with measurement, $F(4, 165) = 3.05$, $p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.07$.

Planned comparisons revealed that when participants did have the option to review, as expected, they reported a significant increase in perception of own situational power when they received support in the form of social comparison information, with an average increase of 1.29, $p < .001$ 95% CI [0.65, 1.92] in own power perceptions (see Table 4 and Figure 2). In line with our expectations (H4a), the change in own power perceptions was negative, much smaller (*M* difference = -0.53) and not significant for those with the option to review who received legal advice, $p = 0.12$, 95% CI [-1.12, 0.14]. In the control condition there was no difference in perceptions of own power before and after the interventions, *M* difference = 0.00, $p = 1.00$, 95% CI [-0.84, 0.84]. We explored what happened when participants received emotion-focused support and found only marginally significant changes for understanding and validation, $M = 0.58$, $p = 0.09$, 95% CI [-0.08, 1.24], and no changes for esteem support, $M = 0.29$, $p = 0.47$, 95% CI [-0.49, 1.06].

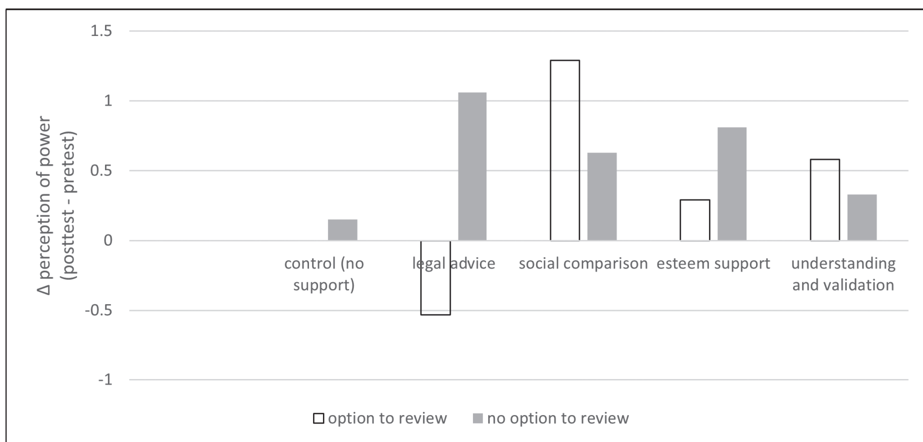
When participants **did not** have the option to review, legal advice led to a significant increase in perception of own situational power of 1.06, $p = .003$, 95% CI [0.36, 1.76]. This difference was much smaller, $M = 0.63$, and only marginally significant for those who received social comparison information, $p = 0.09$, 95% CI [-0.10, 1.35], corroborating hypothesis 4b. There was no significant change in perception of power for those in the control condition, $M = 0.15$, $p = .59$, 95% CI [-0.41, 0.72], or those who received understanding and validation, $M = 0.33$, $p = 0.38$, 95% CI [-0.41, 1.08]. Interestingly, participants without the option to review who received esteem support, reported an average increase in own power of 0.81, $p = .03$, 95% CI [0.09, 1.54].

Table 4 *ANOVA Results for Situational Perceptions of Own Power*

			Perception of own power			95% CI for difference score	
Option to review	**Intervention**	**N**	**Before intervention**	**After intervention**	**Δ (after intervention - before intervention)**	**Lower bound**	**Upper bound**
Yes	control (no support)	12	3.00	3.00	0.00	-0.84	0.84
	legal advice	19	3.47	2.95	-0.53	-1.19	0.14
	social comparison	21	2.57	3.86	1.29***	0.65	1.92
	esteem support	14	3.21	3.50	0.29	-0.49	1.06
	understanding and validation	19	2.58	3.16	0.58	-0.08	1.24
No	control (no support)	26	2.81	2.96	0.15	-0.41	0.72
	legal advice	17	2.12	3.18	1.06**	0.36	1.76
	social comparison	16	2.69	3.31	0.63	-0.10	1.35
	esteem support	16	2.31	3.13	0.81*	0.09	1.54
	understanding and validation	15	2.47	2.80	0.33	-0.41	1.08

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Figure 2 *Changes in Perception of Own Power After Interventions*



As shown in Figure 2, there were two conditions in which perceived own power improved by more than 1 point (on the 7-point scale). This happened when consumers did not have the option to review and received legal advice, and when consumers did have the option to review and received social comparison information. The effect that was most clear is that of social comparison given to participants with the option to review. We note that table 4 shows there were some differences in own power before the interventions so we cannot exclude regression to the mean effects.

We repeated the analysis above for situational perceptions of other's power. In the second analysis, other's power decreased significantly between the first and second measurement, $F(1, 165) = 6.35$, $p = .01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.04$. We found a significant main effect of option to review on average perceived other's power $F(1, 165) = 4.78$, $p = .03$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.03$, further confirming hypothesis 1; that retaliation power would improve perceptions of power. We found no significant main effect of the interventions $F(4, 165) = 0.71$, $p = 0.58$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$, but there was a significant interaction between these two between subjects factors, $F(4, 165) = 4.38$, $p = .002$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.10$, suggesting a regression to the mean effect. We found no significant two (H2 & H3) or three way (H4a & H4b) interaction effects that might indicate significant changes over time caused by our manipulations on other's power (all p's > .34, all partial $\eta^2 \le 0.01$).

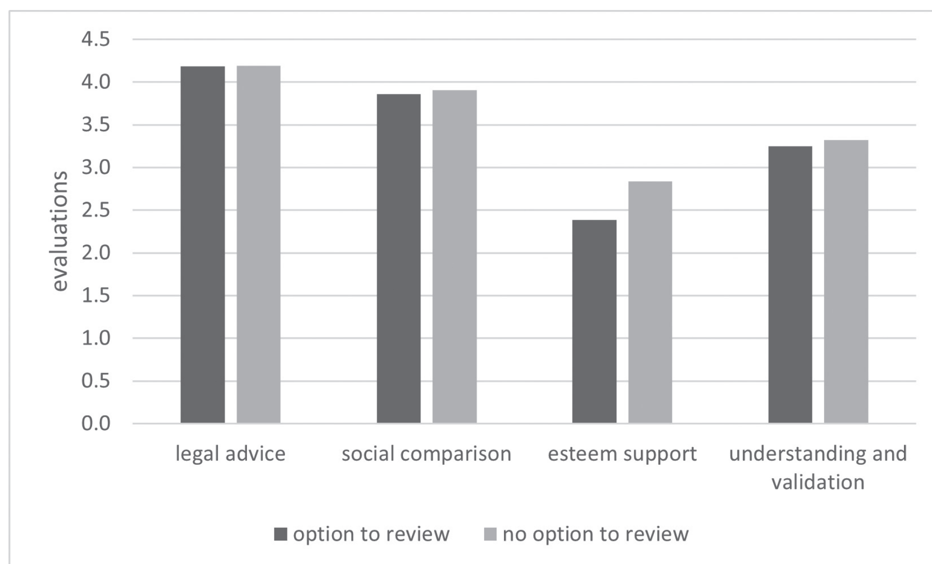
Finally, the ANOVA model predicting assessment of future self-efficacy with interventions and options to review as factors was not significant, $F(9,165) = 0.51$, $MSE = 0.85$, $p = .87$. We unexpectedly found no enduring effects of the manipulations on self-efficacy, nor did we find significant main or interaction effects, all F's < 0.82, all p's > .52, all partial η^2's < .02.

Evaluations of interventions

Finally, we explored the effects of the manipulations on patterns of participant evaluations and examined whether these correspond to patterns of effects. In a two way ANOVA with type of intervention and option to review as between subject factors, we found a significant main effect of type of intervention on evaluations, $F(3, 128) = 6.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.14$, and no significant main effect of option to review $F(1,128) = 0.30$, $p = .59$, $\eta^2 = 0.002$, or interaction effect $F(3, 128) = 0.14$, $p = .94$, $\eta^2 = 0.003$. Post-hoc tests with Bonferroni corrections showed that, congruent with hypothesis 3, the problem-focused interventions received more positive evaluations than the emotion-focused interventions (see also Figure 3). Legal advice was evaluated more positively than esteem support, $M = 1.58$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.58, 2.59], and marginally more positively than understanding and validation, $M = 0.90$, $p = 0.09$, 95% CI [-.09, 1.89]. Social comparison information was also evaluated more positively compared to esteem support, $M = 1.27$, $p = .007$, 95% CI [0.25, 2.30], but not significantly more than understanding and validation, $M = 0.60$, $p =$

.66, 95% CI [-0.40, 1.59]. There were no significant differences between evaluations of social comparison information and legal advice, *M* = -0.30, *p* = 1.00, 95% CI [-1.28, 0.67].

Figure 3 *Mean Participant Evaluations of Interventions*



3

In comparing the effects of type of intervention and option to review on perception of power to the evaluations of the different types of interventions, we thus found an important discrepancy. Participants did not evaluate the interventions differently depending on whether they held retaliation power (had an option to review) over the other party or not, whereas we did find expected differences in effectiveness of the interventions on perceived power under these two conditions.

DISCUSSION

The current research examined different types of online interventions and their effects on empowerment in a realistic online consumer conflict, taking into account the retaliation power that consumers can hold over sellers when they have the option of leaving a public review. Interventions were selected based on psychological theory on problem- and emotion-focused support and self-efficacy sources (Bandura, 1982; Chen et al., 2012; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). To increase the ecological validity of our findings, we included interventions based on what consumers in conflicts actually encounter online. Participants received the interventions in the context of a simulated conflict in which they interacted with the seller through chat messages. We expected to find that the effect of

intervention would depend on the relative power the consumer experienced vis-a-vis the seller. We anticipated consumers to feel and act more empowered when they had the opportunity to retaliate by leaving a public review of the seller, especially when they had received an intervention that reinforced their confidence in their ability to successfully handle the conflict. In addition, we expected legal advice, which may be used to invoke the legitimate power of the legal system, to be more beneficial when consumers did not have the option to leave a public review and thus could not retaliate.

Underscoring the importance of making consumers aware of the possible leverage they hold (Labrecque et al., 2013; Lawler & Bacharach, 1987; Rucker et al., 2012), we first observed that having the option to leave a negative review of the seller improved situational perceptions of power of consumers. Consistent with our expectations, we found that social comparison information was most effective at increasing perceptions of own power when participants held retaliation power over the other party, in the form of an opportunity to leave a negative review. Again as expected, legal advice was most effective at raising perceptions of power for participants who had no retaliation power over the seller. There was a smaller effect of esteem support on perception of own power for those without the option to review, but not for those who could review the seller in the conflict. In contrast to our expectations, we did not observe that these effects on perceived power translated and motivated participants to make more assertive claims, nor did it affect their assessments of self-efficacy in future consumer conflicts.

While we see effects of self-efficacy based support in the form of social comparison information on perceptions of own power when participants have retaliation power, crucially, classical legal advice was the most powerful intervention for those consumers who were powerless. Consumer cases are rarely brought to court because of high transaction costs in terms of money as well as time in preparing the case. Legal advice from a computer is quite different from face-to-face support from a legal advisor such as a lawyer. In this experiment, there was clearly no option of recourse to the law, and there was no suggestion of repercussions for the seller by the website administrators either (Katsh et al., 1999; Mnookin & Kornhauser, 1978). Nonetheless, in the absence of support by a third party or the alternative of adjudication in case of a failed negotiation, we still observed an effect of legal advice. It might be that, by being reminded of the legal norms that are relevant to a certain conflict, consumers feel they can invoke this legitimate power of the law (Raven, 2008). As the legal system is highly legitimate, consumers may trust that these norms will also move the seller, as the seller will want to act in accordance with norms they subscribe to. We found this to be true, especially, for those who were quite powerless to begin with.

In this experiment, the seller had already received payment and had not delivered a product, making the buyer fully dependent on the seller. However, when consumers held retaliation power, the seller could not walk away from the negotiation without

consequence (Lawler & Bacharach, 1987). We expected that esteem support would strengthen consumers' confidence to use this punitive form of power, but instead found only an effect of esteem support for those without power. Reinforcing self-esteem might partly fulfill a need for power of consumers without retaliation power (Rucker et al., 2012). It warrants further investigation whether esteem support could indeed be powerful enough to strengthen perceptions of power in the absence of real power, for example by strengthening consumers' confidence in their ability to appear dominant in a negotiation (Wiltermuth et al., 2018).

Assertive claiming behavior seems to have been more strongly related to enduring factors, as evident in the associations of assertive claiming behavior with age, assessments of self-efficacy in future consumer conflicts, and experience with consumer conflicts. The self-efficacy items were phrased to relate to the specific consumer conflict participants were dealing with, but the skills that they referred to were general skills, such as the ability to negotiate, problem solve, look for information, and stand up for oneself. We did not test the directionality of the correlation between self-efficacy assessments and assertive claiming behavior. It may be that those with higher future self-efficacy assessments were more assertive, or it may be that those who were successful in composing an assertive message reported higher self-efficacy as a result of this successful experience. The correlation does reinforce that self-efficacy, along with situational factors, is a useful indicator of self-reliance in legal conflicts, especially when observing behavior is not feasible (Pleasence & Balmer, 2019; Porter, 2016).

A clear limitation of this study was that due to high dropout rates, the final number of participants per cell was not high, and the pattern of effects found here requires replication. Furthermore, we found no correlation between situational perceptions of power and assertive claiming behavior suggesting that our manipulations of perceptions of power were not strong enough to carry through and change behavior. We can think of three reasons why perceived power was unrelated to the actual claims participants made. First, as we based these interventions on quite minimal interventions consumer can find online; it might be that these interventions are simply not strong enough to change behavior. Tailoring their content even more closely to individual circumstances such as perceived power differences and making more use of interactive technology may strengthen their effects on empowerment. Future studies should incorporate those innovative interventions that are available as well as explore new opportunities. Second, interventions in this simulated conflict were offered by an anonymous virtual agent. This may limit their effects as social support from a person (or more human like avatar) would likely have stronger effects on behavior (Ströfer et al., 2016). Future studies should explore this possibility, as it will also have consequences for the way online interventions to consumers are offered. Third, this study delivers a proof of concept of intervention testing in realistic environments in which power (and other factors) can be manipulated.

However, despite the fact that we simulated a realistic online consumer conflict, the stakes may not have been high enough to engender changes in behavior. Participants did not invest any of their own money, and the effect of loss aversion of virtual monopoly money in the game may not have been strong enough.

Future studies can explore other scenarios, such as those where not only distributional, but also procedural and interactional justice issues arise between buyer and seller (Bechwati & Morrin, 2003). It would be interesting to explore whether allowing individuals to practice and gain an experience of enacted mastery (Bandura, 1997), or successful negotiation of a conflict, within the game-like context of a simulated conflict as we used in this study, could successfully improve self-efficacy assessments in future negotiations and conflicts. Realistic simulations similar to gaming offer promising ways of testing online behavior and online interventions, but might also be used as interventions themselves. This would be valuable for the next generation of online interventions, especially for those legal conflicts in which no legal representation is available and self-reliance is key. These interventions might also be relevant to platform services such as e-bay, where conflict resolution can be integrated in the platform itself (Katsh et al., 1999).

We tested whether evaluations of interventions corresponded to the effects we found. Legal advice was most positively evaluated by participants, along with social comparison information. Esteem support received the most negative evaluations, showing a contrasting pattern with effects of the interventions on perceptions of own power. Although the effects of interventions differed between those who did and did not have an option to review the seller, there was no difference in evaluations of the interventions between these two groups. This suggests that user evaluations, although presumably vital in predicting rate of use of interventions, should be used cautiously as an indicator of quality in terms of effects (Hyman et al., 2022).

In conclusion, this study highlights that minimal interventions might not be strong enough to have a meaningful impact on behavior. Noting that the interventions used in our experiment were based on interventions that consumers can actually find online, we should be wary of assuming that legal advice, assistance and representation could be replaced by minimal interventions supporting self-reliant individuals. These initial findings and questions require further explorations. One avenue for follow-up might be to develop stronger interventions in more immersive gaming type situations, possibly even using the game as intervention. That said, this study simultaneously shows the promise of online interventions based on psychological knowledge of self-efficacy and effective support in legal conflicts, especially if interventions are suited to the power dynamics and power position of users of these interventions. All internet users have the option of leaving a public review of a seller on a public platform or social media website. Our results highlight the importance of making consumers aware of the retaliation power and leverage this option provides them. The current study highlights that offering self-efficacy support in

the form of social comparison information is likely to be most useful for consumers, or individuals facing other legal conflicts, who hold some sort of leverage over the other party. In contrast, if individuals are relatively powerless, offering and reminding them of sources of power, such as the legitimate power of the legal system, or the option of leaving a review, can empower those who feel most vulnerable.

Chapter 4

Power Asymmetry and Early Intervention in Divorce

Anonymized data relevant to this publication is available on OSF: osf.io/5gzqh.
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Power dynamics drive psychological as well as economic outcomes of conflict negotiations (Bacharach & Lawler, 1981). They have been a central point of focus of conflict research since the 1950's (Emerson, 1962; Tedeschi et al., 1973; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Increasingly, asymmetric distributions of power have received scholarly attention in this field of research (e.g., Giebels et al., 1998; McAlister et al., 1986; Olekalns, 1991). One reason for this is that power asymmetry often evokes power struggles (Zartman & Rubin, 2000; Giebels et al., 1998) which is likely to result in conflict escalation and, ultimately, intractable conflict. How power and power perceptions change over time has long been acknowledged as important (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), yet few studies have investigated the longitudinal dynamic nature of perceived power asymmetry in conflicts and negotiations (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Coleman et al., 2012). This is unfortunate, as many and particularly the most severe conflicts develop gradually, over multiple interactions, and over longer periods of time (Giebels et al., 2014). As such, understanding the development of power dynamics in (severe) conflicts over time can offer important insights for intervention and help to prevent further conflict escalation.

In the current research, we explore the effects of perceived power asymmetry over time, in a conflict context that involves one of the most impactful human life events: divorce (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Given its associated emotional and financial costs, it is remarkable that there is a relative lack of research into the (power) dynamics of divorce conflicts. Most studies on divorce focus on divorce interventions (e.g. mediation, counseling; Sbarra et al., 2012; Shaw, 2010; Strouse & Roerhle, 2011) or look at what happens after the divorce has been finalized by examining adaptation processes (Hetherington, 2003; Lucas, 2005), co-parental relationships (Baum, 2003; Emery & Dillon, 1994, Harman et al., 2021), and effects on children (Amato, 2001; Nielsen, 2014; Visser et al., 2017). As far as we know, no studies so far have followed individuals through their divorce process to examine the power dynamics over time.

In this paper, we will focus on a longitudinal dataset we collected with individuals in the Netherlands going through divorce. We argue that and test whether perceptions of initial power asymmetry will have a profound influence on subsequent stages of the divorce process and affect emotional as well as economic divorce outcomes, even if, as we expect, the asymmetry itself is reduced over time. We postulate that particularly the initial experience of a power disadvantage (as opposed to a power advantage) will have a detrimental effect on subsequent emotions and appraisals of divorce agreements and their sustainability and will be associated with seeking more third-party involvement in the divorce process.

Assuming that the experience of a power disadvantage is an important precursor for later detrimental outcomes, interventions aimed at countering (the effects of) power asymmetry and its consequences should ideally reach people at the very start of a divorce process, even before they contact legal, social, or psychological professionals. Web-based

interventions, which reach people at the point where they start googling ‘what to do in a divorce’ are in a good position to offer such early intervention. We therefore also explore the effects of a prototypical web-based intervention that was developed in the Netherlands[1], which targets people at the early stages of divorce.

Perceptions of Power Asymmetry in Divorce

To date, research has provided insights into power dynamics in related fields, such as during various phases of romantic relationships (Harman et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2019; Simpson et al., 2019), including relationship decline (Hatfield et al., 2008), as well as in post-divorce families (Harman et al., 2021, Ogolsky et al., 2019). However, to our knowledge, no studies have yet looked at the changing power dynamics during the (legal) dissolution of marriages or at the effects of these power dynamics on the divorce process and resulting agreement.

One of the most encompassing ways to conceptualize power dynamics in relationships is through Interdependence Theory (Kelly & Thibaut, 1978; Kelly et al., 2003; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Van Lange & Balliet, 2015). As the inverse of dependence, power refers to the ways in which people can affect one another’s outcomes during the course of their interaction. In a divorce process, partners can affect the other’s outcomes by controlling the divorce process and its resulting divorce agreement (Farrell et al., 2015; Galliher et al., 1999; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). For example, process control in the form of agenda setting and involving third parties may affect negotiation outcomes (Magee et al., 2007; Magee & Galinsky, 2008).

Importantly, the literature indicates that it is the subjective experience of power-dependence that is particularly influential in affecting behavior, cognition, and emotions (Bacharach & Lawler, 1976; Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Fiske & Depret, 1996; Greer & Bendersky, 2013; Kim et al., 2005). From the perspective of an individual in a divorce process, the division of power in their divorce may either be perceived as symmetrical (an individual perceives both parties to hold either high or low levels of control) or asymmetrical. In the latter case, individuals can see themselves at a power disadvantage or power advantage. Generally, a power disadvantage harms fulfillment of a fundamental need for agency and autonomy, and thus motivates parties with a power disadvantage to pursue strategies to restore control and even the power balance (Fiske & Dépret, 1996; Kim et al., 2005; Sheldon & Gunz, 2009; SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2013). That is, parties can actively try to change the balance of power by acquiring and/or withholding information, or by recruiting support (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Kim et al., 2005; Zartman & Rubin, 2000). This need is arguably driven by the powerless party’s feelings of insecurity and anxiety over the outcomes of the conflict (Rusbult & van Lange, 2003). We argue and expect that perceived advantages or disadvantages in power are likely to decrease during the divorce process (**H1**).

1 See for the latest version: https://www.Rechtwijzer.nl.

Effects of Power Asymmetry

The negative effects of power asymmetry are well established in the conflict literature (Coleman et al., 2012; Greer & Bendersky, 2013; Lawler & Bacharach, 1987) and beyond (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Galinsky et al., 2006; Keltner et al., 2003). However, research has yet to determine whether and to what extent these negative effects of perceived power asymmetry occur in divorce conflicts. In the current study, we identify and examine three domains in which we particularly expect perceptions of disadvantages to have negative effects on the divorce process in terms of emotional costs (e.g., anger, anxiety, and stress), agreement appraisals, and third-party involvement.

Emotional Costs . Divorce can be associated with negative affect such as anger, rejection or humiliation, anxiety about the future, and stress related to conflict interactions. We know that a lack of power, control and autonomy is associated with a variety of negative effects (Sheldon & Gunz, 2009; Skinner, 1996) including reduced daily well-being (Reis et al., 2000) and increased negative affect (Keltner et al., 2003). In conflicts specifically, experiencing a power disadvantage is associated with heightened levels of stress (Giebels & Janssen, 2005). These effects of perceived power disadvantages are likely to be especially pronounced in a high stakes conflict (Giebels et al., 2014) with a high degree of interdependence between the parties (Coleman et al., 2012; Rusbult & van Lange, 2003) such as divorce. However, there is nothing inevitable or necessary about the association between intense negative affect and the divorce process. Most people adapt well to divorce and come to high quality divorce agreements, where other divorce processes escalate into high conflict divorce and problematic co-parenting relationships (Amato, 2010; Whiteside, 1998; Visser et al., 2017). We hypothesize that a perceived disadvantage in power could be a determining factor in this process, increasing the extent to which individuals experience intense negative emotions. A power disadvantage has also been associated with anger (Berdahl & Martorana, 2006) and humiliation (McCauly, 2017). In a divorce, such reactions of anger and humiliation may be especially pronounced in case of a one-sided decision to initiate divorce (an asymmetry in control over the preservation of the relationship) (Sprecher et al., 1998), or when one parent is able to withhold contact with children (Harman et al., 2021).

Agreement Appraisals. We also examine how those who perceive a power disadvantage evaluate the (provisional) outcomes of their divorce. We consider appraisals of the agreement itself and its perceived future sustainability, as well as the process leading up to the agreement. Generally, those in a low power position are likely to be less assertive in negotiations: they make fewer first offers, are less ambitious in their offers, and present offers in a less convincing way (Galinsky et al., 2017). They are also more likely to experience uncertainty (Bollen et al., 2010). This is likely to result in unfavorable outcomes and – reinforced by an experienced lack of control over the process– negative

feelings about the obtained outcomes (Bollen & Euwema, 2013; Galinsky et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2005; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

Third-Party Involvement. Previous research suggests that in legal conflicts, the need for third-party help is higher for individuals who perceive a power disadvantage (Van Dijk et al., 2016). If a third party is a good fit, help can be beneficial, especially to low power holders (Bryan, 1999; Shestowsky, 2020; Ting Toomey et al., 2000). However, third-party involvement has important disadvantages. Specifically, it can contribute to less sustainable outcomes, high financial costs, longer procedures, and more destructive conflict (Pruitt & Kim, 2004; Tesler, 1999). Mediation can often contribute to a more positive conflict process but may not be a good fit when the power differences between parties are large (Beck & Frost, 2006; Beck & Sales, 2000).

Enduring Effects of Early Asymmetry. We expect that over time, perceived (dis) advantages in power will decrease. At the same time, we expect that perceptions of a power disadvantage early on in the divorce process will set the tone and process of a divorce resulting in enduring negative effects for those with a power disadvantage (Kelley & Thibault, 1978). These enduring effects of early power perceptions could be explained by well-researched conflict dynamics. Potential explanations include early negotiation tactics, conflict escalation spirals, and third-party dynamics. Research shows that early negotiation tactics such as agenda setting and first offer making by the high-power party at the outset of the conflict can result in substantial benefits in terms of negotiation outcomes (Gunia et al., 2013; Ma & Jaeger, 2010; Magee et al., 2007; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Early escalating behaviors can have a further profound effect on the conflict and its outcomes. Once parties start exhibiting negative conflict behaviors, it is difficult to stop or even reverse a spiral of conflict escalation (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). High-power parties who are insensitive to concerns of low-power parties and the resulting anger and humiliation of low-power parties could act as a catalyst for further negative conflict behaviors (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Galinsky et al., 2006; Keltner et al., 2003). In legal proceedings such as divorce, an early choice for a third party with an adversarial style can cement these negative patterns (Beck & Sales, 2000; Shaw, 2010; Tesler, 1999). This also implies that negative patterns will be difficult to reverse, even if the underlying power imbalance is remedied. Perceived early asymmetry can thus set in motion behaviors and choices that can have an enduring negative impact. We therefore expect that people who perceive a power disadvantage at the start of the process, compared to a power advantage or power symmetry, will report higher emotional costs (increased anger, humiliation, anxiety, and stress) throughout the divorce process **(H2)** , and more negative agreement appraisals **(H3).** We also expect them to have recruited more third-party involvement in the medium to long term, both in negotiations **(H4a)** and in bringing the divorce to court **(H4b)** .

Power Asymmetry and Early Intervention

Given the importance of the early conflict stages, early web-based interventions might be ideally placed to alter early perceptions of power and mitigate the lasting effects of an experienced power disadvantage in the early stages of a divorce process. With digital media, sophisticated interventions can reach individuals long before professional third parties see them. Web-based interventions in legal processes are quickly becoming an important part of the legal aid landscape in many countries (Smith, 2019), and their importance is arguably even larger since the start of the covid-19 pandemic.

One such intervention is the Dutch 'Rechtwijzer' (RW), which is translated as a signpost or roadmap to justice. It is a government funded web-based advice and support website that was originally developed by the Dutch Legal Aid Council and the University of Tilburg (Raad voor Rechtsbijstand, 2019; Van der Linden et al., 2009; Van Gammeren-Zoeteweij et al., 2018; Van Veenen, 2008; Van Veenen, 2010). The Dutch initiative was unique at the time and received quite some (inter)national attention. Subsequently, similar initiatives have emerged in e.g. Canada, Australia, and the UK (Smith, 2019); and there is some overlap with divorce education programs in the US (Cronin et al., 2017). The RW intervention was built around 3 goals: (1) to support self-reliance/ empower individuals; (2) to direct parties to appropriate help early in the process when self-reliance was not feasible; and (3) to encourage constructive conflict resolution and avoid a lengthy court process (Van der Linden et al., 2009; Van Veenen, 2008). The website could be easily found through search engines or through links from associated (government) services. Visitors to the website were first prompted to reflect on their divorce process in a short series of questions and were then presented with a custom (only showing information that is relevant to the user) and clearly structured step by step plan for their divorce (Van Veenen, 2008). The intervention used a clear design to structure the complex divorce process. RW offered tools for self-help such as a guide to discussions between divorcing partners, but also highlighted access to (subsidized) third-party support (Sandefur, 2015; Shestowsky, 2017) when this was not feasible. Throughout, users were prompted to reflect on the interests of children (if relevant), of both parties, and negative conflict behaviors and emotions.

It is an important empirical question whether such an intervention is widely applicable or whether it is particularly beneficial to specific user groups.[2] If an intervention were able to improve perceptions of one's power position, we would expect this to have lasting effects on the divorce process and result in a more equal divorce agreement. Previous work has shown that feeling powerful results in acting like one has power (Galinsky et

2 From a previous study, which analyzed user behavior on the website (clicks and time between clicks) in the same user group as this study's sample, we know that the way RW users used the website followed expectations and intentions of the designers (Hessels, 2015). Evaluations of the website by this same group were moderately positive (Bickel et al., 2015). Users who reported repeat visits to the website, were moderately positive about the intervention, and would recommend it to others.

al., 2003; Galinksy et al., 2017). Hong and Van der Wijst (2013) found that priming with power reduced the power imbalance in negotiation outcomes, suggesting that altering perceptions of power of less powerful parties can increase their negotiation outcomes. Generally, legal aid practice has warned that those in a more vulnerable position are less likely to benefit from online assistance (Smith & Paterson, 2014; Smith, 2015). However, there are several reasons to expect an intervention such as RW to be especially beneficial to those who experience a power disadvantage. First, effectively structuring information -as RW does - might be especially helpful to those who perceive a power disadvantage, as their higher levels of stress might make ordering complex information more challenging to them (Giebels & Janssen, 2005; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003).[3] Second, psychological research tells us that those without power are likely to be motivated to regain control (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2013), will pay more attention to information related to their divorce (Fiske & Depret, 1996; Rusbult & van Lange, 2003), and can benefit from reducing uncertainty at the outset of a conflict (Bollen & Euwema, 2013). Third, individuals may perceive themselves at a power disadvantage because they may not be aware of potential power bases such as subsidized legal aid or may not know how to capitalize on available power bases if they lack knowledge of the legal framework of a divorce (Fiske & Depret, 1996; Greer & Bendersky, 2013; Kim et al., 2005). We therefore expected individuals who experience a disadvantage in power to benefit most from this web-based intervention, in terms of improved perceived own power (H5).

To summarize, in this paper we argue that a perceived disadvantage in power early in the divorce has a profound impact on the further course and outcomes of a divorce process (H2 – H4), even if the perceived imbalance decreases over time (H1). We also examine whether an early web-based intervention during a divorce process can counter this perceived disadvantage in power (H5).

METHOD

We included longitudinal data from one sample of individuals (N_{T1} = 312) in the Netherlands who were going through divorce. Participants were users of a web-based intervention (RW) offered by the Dutch Council for Legal Aid and a control group. We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, and all measures in the study. Before data collection, approval for this study was obtained from the ethics committee of the University of Twente.[4]

3 Anecdotal evidence from focus groups held during the development of RW suggest that the structured overview of information is the most appreciated feature of the website. See internal documents of the Dutch Legal Aid Board.

4 Approval obtained in June 2013.

Sampling Procedure

Participants filled out three questionnaires over the course of their divorce process. Visitors to the web-based intervention were prompted with a request for participation in our study at the start of their visit to the 'divorce' section of the website. Respondents were not made aware at this point of the goal of exploring the effects of the use of the intervention. We communicated to them only the goal of understanding the process of divorce as it develops over time. Those who agreed to participate were immediately redirected and filled out the first survey, before continuing their visit to the website (intervention). We recruited participants for the control group (i.e., individuals going through divorce without using the intervention) through messages on diverse national and regional radio, both commercial and public, in national and regional newspapers, and on social media with the same introduction to the research. Data was collected between July 2013 and June 2015. Participants received a 10-euro gift card after participation.

The second survey was emailed to respondents one week after the first survey. Those respondents who did not (yet) fill out the second survey were reminded up to 4 times, after every 5-7 days. The third survey was sent 5 months after the second. Surveys were closed to responses two weeks after the last reminders. We did not do any analyses before closing the surveys.

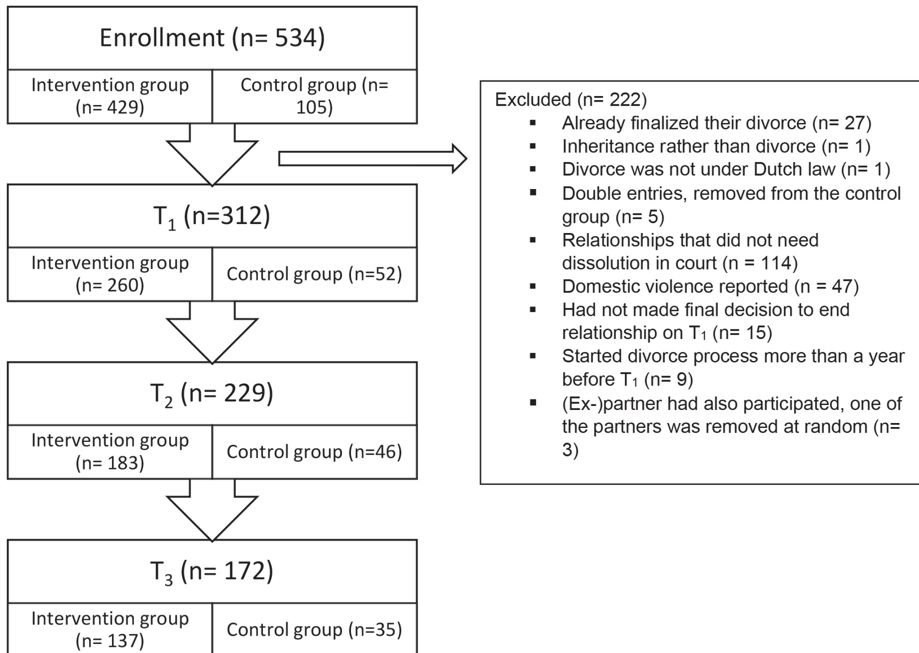
Sample Selection

There were 534 entries on the pre-test, 429 in the test group and 105 in the control group. We removed data from 34 respondents who did not meet the criteria. For details, see figure 1. In addition, we only included relationships that had to be dissolved in court. In the Netherlands, this means legal marriage and registered partnerships when the partners have children under the age of 18.[5] We removed those with other relationship forms (including cohabitation) (n = 114).[6]

5 For registered partnerships when the partners have children under the age of 18, a co-parenting agreement has to be presented to the court for approval.

6 A total of 16% of the intervention group had a cohabitation agreement and 9% cohabitated without a formal agreement. This shows the intervention does reach these groups to a certain degree and a separate exploration for the effect of the website for this group is needed. In this study, as our control group consisted only of people who were legally married or in a registered partnership, we did not examine the cohabitation group further.

Figure 1 *Sample Selection and Attrition*



To ensure that vulnerable individuals received appropriate help, the RW intervention included a question that asked if there was or had been violence in the relationship. If this was the case, the website immediately redirected these users to a page with direct links to access in person help. As these individuals no longer received the RW intervention, they no longer qualified for the RW intervention group of this study. We copied the question on violence from the intervention for the control group questionnaire to ensure selection was done on identical criteria. In total, 47 participants were removed based on this criterion.

At T_2, respondents reported timelines of their divorce processes. We removed individuals who had not made the final decision to end their relationship at the time of the first survey (n = 15)[7]. We also removed those who had started their divorce process (arrangements or negotiations) more than a year before the first survey (n = 9) to avoid overrepresentation of people with complex and escalated divorce processes in our sample.

Finally, we could check whether both partners in a couple had participated in our study as we asked participants to create an anonymous code (Kearney et al., 1984) based on their and their partner's birthday and the first letters of their names. We found three

7 Twelve of these people were from the intervention group, which suggests that people (also) use the intervention to look for information on the possible consequences of a final decision to end the relationship. We included a question on the T_2 survey to check whether individuals were indeed in a divorce process at that time.

couples and randomly removed one person from each couple to prevent interdependence in the dataset.

The resulting dataset included 312 individuals, of which 260 in the test group and 52 in the control group on the first measurement (T_1), 183 and 46 on the second measurement (T_2), and 137 and 35 on the last measurement (T_3) respectively[8] (Van Dijk et al., 2022).

Sample Description

As sampling methods differed, we analyzed differences between the intervention and control groups. All descriptive statistics and comparisons can be found in tables 1 and 2. There were no statistically significant differences between the intervention and control groups on age, gender, being employed or not, partner's education, income categories, owning a business, being married versus in a registered partnership, or having children under the age of 21. There was a statistically significant difference in education of the respondent, $\chi^2(3) = 7.91$, $p = .048$, $V = .16$, see also table 1. For each respondent who reported their divorce timeline on T_2 (n = 210), we calculated the number of weeks between starting divorce arrangements or negotiations and the first survey on T_1 (see table 2).[9] In the intervention group, average time elapsed between starting divorce arrangements or negotiations and T_1 was shorter than in the control group, $t(208) = 2.80$, $p = .006$, $d = .48$, We therefore also controlled for time elapsed in our analysis of the effect of RW.

8 These numbers correspond to respondents starting each survey. A few respondents drop out during each survey. We will report *n* 's for each variable.

9 In the Netherlands, 90% of the divorce cases in court last between 6 weeks and a year (Rechtspraak service-centrum, 2017). However, successful or unsuccessful negotiations will almost always have taken place before a divorce is taken to court. In the Netherlands, divorce agreements have to be ratified by a judge, but the majority of these cases are dealt with relatively quickly. This is because often, a prepared agreement proposal is submitted for ratification only. The full divorce process, starting from the (hard to pinpoint) decision to divorce can thus last much longer (Amato, 2010; Emery & Dillon, 1994; Symoens et al., 2013).

Table 1 *Categorical Variables and Comparisons Between Intervention and Control Groups*

Variable	Intervention		Control		X^2	*p*	*Cramer's V*
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*			
Sex respondents					.15	.70	.02
Female	179	69	34	65			
Male	79	30	17	33			
Decline to answer	2	1	1	2			
Sex (ex-)partners[a]					.30	.59	.03
Female	81	31	18	35			
Male	177	68	33	63			
Decline to answer	2	1	1	2			
Education respondents					7.91	.05*	.16
Primary or secondary education	31	12	7	13			
Vocational degree	96	37	15	29			
Professional bachelor's degree	101	39	16	31			
Academic bachelor's degree or higher	32	12	14	27			
Education (ex-)partners					2.05	.56	.08
Primary or secondary education	57	22	10	19			
Vocational degree	92	36	17	33			
Professional bachelor's degree	83	32	16	31			
Academic bachelor's degree or higher	27	10	9	17			
Employed							
Respondents	173	67	38	73	.85	.36	.05
(Ex-)partners	205	79	42	81	.10	.76	.02
Business owner (respondent, partner or both)	66	25	17	33	1.19	.28	.06
Gross yearly income respondents[b]					6.39	.38	.18
Emergency income respondents[b]					.14	.71	.03
< 20,000, no emergency income	39	28	13	35			
< 20,000, with emergency income	16	12	2	5			
> 20,000 < 50,000, no emergency income	54	39	10	27			
> 20,000 < 50,000, with emergency income	17	12	4	11			
> 50,000	12	9	8	22			
Marital status					.02	.90	.01
Married	249	96	50	96			
Registered partnership	11	4	2	4			
Children under the age of 21	204	78	37	71	1.32	.25	.07

Note. N = 312 (n intervention group = 260, n control group = 52).
$* p < .05$
[a] There were nine same sex couples in the sample. [b] Income questions were answered by 175 respondents. Income was measured with two questions. Respondents reported what their gross yearly income was (no income, below 10,000, 10,000 - 20,000, 20,000 - 30,000, 30,000 - 40,000, 40,000 - 50,000, above 50,000). Respondents also reported whether they had income to fall back on in emergency, for example from a parent, partner, or relative. Chi-squared tests were done with the original variables. Information on the categories was condensed for the table. For comparison: in 2015, minimum wage in the Netherlands for an adult was 1501.80 euros per month (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2014) and the modal income was 35,500 euro per year (Centraal Planbureau, 2017).

Table 2 *Numeric Variables and Comparisons Between Intervention and Intervention and Control Groups*

Variable	Intervention			Control			*t*	*p*	*Cohen's d*
	M	*SD*	Range	*M*	*SD*	Range			
Age in years respondents									
Women	41.97	8.27	23 - 67	41.18	9.04	25 - 68	-.51	.61	-.09
Men	46.19	9.50	30 - 80	46.76	7.40	35 - 62	.23	.82	.06
Age in years (ex-)partners									
Women	43.21	9.56	25 - 81	44.50	7.63	29 - 60	.54	.59	.14
Men	44.31	8.24	26 - 66	43.61	8.22	30 - 68	-.45	.66	-.08
Time elapsed[a]	6.71	10.37	-4 - 48	11.98	12.86	-4 - 50	2.80	.01**	.48

Note. For age, *N* = 312 *(n* intervention group = 260, *n* control group = 52). For time elapsed, *N* = 210 *(n* intervention group = 168, *n* control group = 42).
*** p < .01*
[a] Time elapsed between starting divorce arrangements or negotiations and T_1 in weeks.

Power Asymmetry

We measured perceived power by asking to what extent respondents felt they and their (ex-)partner controlled the process and outcomes of the divorce (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Van Dijk et al., 2016). All four items were measured on a seven-point scale where 1 represented low control and 7 represented high control. Respondents indicated to what extent (1: *not at all*, 7: *to a very large extent*) they agreed with statements about their own and other's perceived control over the outcome as well as over the process of the divorce. Table 3 shows the items, item means, standard deviations, and correlations for these perceived power measures on T_1, T_2 and T_3.

Based on the high correlations, we combined control over process with control over outcome into perceived power measures for the respondent and the partner. There were statistically significant differences between the control and intervention groups in perceptions of power on T_1 . Those in the intervention group reported higher own power ($M_{\text{intervention group}}$ = 4.28, *SD* = 1.53, versus $M_{\text{control group}}$ = 3.74, *SD* = 1.40), *t*(310) = 2.34, *p* = .02, *d* = .36, as well as higher, although not significantly so, power of their partners (*M* = 4.63, *SD* = 1.41 versus *M* = 4.28, *SD* = 1.50), *t*(310) = 1.63, *p* = .10, *d* = .29. On T_2 , there were no statistically significant differences in perceptions of own power between both groups ($M_{\text{intervention group}}$ = 4.14, *SD* = 1.48 versus $M_{\text{control group}}$ = 3.93, *SD* = 1.45), *t*(207) = 0.85, *p* = .40, *d* = .15, or in perceptions of other's power ($M_{\text{intervention group}}$ = 4.49, *SD* = 1.37 versus $M_{\text{control group}}$ = 4.49, *SD* = 1.40), *t*(207) = 0.01, *p* = .99, *d* = .002. Again, on T_3, perceptions of own power between both groups ($M_{\text{intervention group}}$ = 4.37, *SD* = 1.59 versus $M_{\text{control group}}$ = 4.23, *SD* = 1.40), *t*(149) = 0.44, *p* = .66, *d* = .09, or in perceptions of other's power ($M_{\text{intervention group}}$ = 4.11, *SD* = 1.56 versus $M_{\text{control group}}$ = 4.47, *SD* = 1.40), *t*(149) = 1.18, *p* = .24, *d* = .24, did not show statistically significant differences.

Table 3 *Item Statistics and Correlations for Power Measures*

Measurement	To what extent do you feel that:	*n*	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3
T_1	1. you control the outcome of the divorce?	312	4.03	1.66	_		
	2. your (ex-) partner controls the outcome of the divorce?		4.47	1.61	.03	_	
	3. you control the way the divorce is dealt with?		4.34	1.66	.68**	-.00	_
	4. your (ex-) partner controls the way the divorce is dealt with?		4.68	1.54	-.05	.65**	.07
T_2	1. you control the outcome of the divorce?	207	3.98	1.58	_		
	2. your (ex-) partner controls the outcome of the divorce?		4.47	1.47	0.11	_	
	3. you control the way the divorce is dealt with?		4.22	1.59	.75**	0.03	_
	4. your (ex-) partner controls the way the divorce is dealt with?		4.51	1.49	0.12	.74**	0.10
T_3	1. you control the outcome of the divorce?	86	4.09	1.66	_		
	2. your (ex-) partner controls the outcome of the divorce?		4.20	1.59	.32**	_	
	3. you control the way the divorce is dealt with?		4.05	1.76	.78**	.22*	_
	4. your (ex-) partner controls the way the divorce is dealt with?		4.15	1.61	.32**	.78**	.27*

** p < .01, * p < .05

As we set out in the introduction, parties going through divorce can experience high or low power and can perceive the other party to hold high or low power. This means that next to a distinction between symmetry and asymmetry, we can include both high and low power symmetry (Giebels, De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 2000; Rubin & Brown, 1975; Schaerer et al., 2020b; Zartman & Rubin, 2000). To identify how these patterns of the perceived balance or imbalance in power between (ex-) partners (high-high, high-low, low-low, low-high) are distributed in the current sample, we conducted SPSS two-step cluster analysis based on Log-likelihood distances (Bacher et al., 2004; Clatworthy et al., 2005; Henry et al., 2005, Marquand et al., 2016). We only used variables from T_1 in the cluster analysis, as we were interested in effects of initial asymmetry. We set the number of clusters to four. Resulting clusters were perceptions of positive asymmetry (a power advantage, *n* = 41), perceptions of symmetry at low to middle levels of power (*n* = 126), perceptions of symmetry at high levels of power (*n* = 98), and perceptions of negative asymmetry (a power disadvantage, *n* = 47). We validated this cluster solution by running two ANOVA analyses to test whether the clusters predicted different values of perceptions of the

respondent's own power and perceptions of the respondent's partner's power. Differences between clusters were statistically significant for own power, $F(3, 308) = 245.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .71$, as well as for other's power, $F(3, 308) = 217.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .68$. For means and standard deviations per cluster, see table B1 supplementary materials (appendix B). There were no associations between the four clusters and the demographic variables, age, sex, having children, and owning a company, all Pearson $\chi^2 < 4.72$, all *p's* > .19. There was an association between the clusters and educational level, with more people with relatively lower educational levels experiencing asymmetry (both negative and positive) and more people with relatively higher educational levels experiencing high power symmetry, $\chi^2 = 17.84$, $p = .04$, $V = .14$. More people whose partner had relatively lower educational levels experienced positive asymmetry, and more people whose partner had relatively higher educational levels experienced high power symmetry, $\chi^2 = 21.89$, $p = .01$, $V = .15$.

Outcome Variables

Emotional Costs. We measured four main constructs of divorce related negative affect, two representing stress and anxiety and two representing negative emotions towards the partner. All four constructs were measured on a seven-point scale were 1 represented low negative affect and 7 represented high negative affect. We conducted scale analyses for each measurement.

Stress Surrounding Interaction with Partner. We assessed conflict related stress using four items of the questionnaire developed by Giebels and Janssen (2005). Questions were designed to test stress associated with interactions with the other party. As not everyone had spoken to their (ex-) partner about the divorce at the time of the pre-test, only 256 respondents (82% of total sample) answered this question. Scree plots for each measurement showed one clear factor, which explained 75% of variance on the T_1, and 81% on T_2 and T_3. All factor loadings were above .75 and Cronbach's alpha was .89 on T_1, and .92 on both T_2 and T_3.

Three emotional cost constructs were measured by presenting emotion words to respondents and asking them to what extent they experienced these emotions in relation to their divorce (Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Fitness, 2000; Frijda et al., 1989; Lazarus, 1991; Weiner, 1985; Wetzer et al., 2007).

Divorce Related Anxiety. Anxiety was measured using two items. Respondents reported to what extent they felt anxious and worried about the divorce process and about the time after the divorce, $r(310) = .74$, $p < .001$, $r(205) = .84$, $p < .001$, and $r(156) =.72$, $p < .001$ on T_1, T_2 and T_3 respectively.

Anger Towards Partner. Anger towards the partner was measured with three items. Respondents indicated to what extent they felt anger, indignation, and rage towards their (ex-) partner. A scree test showed one clear factor, which explained 72%, 78% and 76% of

variance for T_1, T_2 and T_3 respectively. All factor loadings were above .66 and Cronbach's alphas were .88, .86, and .84.

Humiliation by Partner. Using three items, respondents indicated to what extent they felt insulted, humiliated, and belittled by their (ex-) partner. Scree tests for all three measurements showed one clear factor, which explained 71%, 83%, and 81% of variance on T_1, T_2 and T_3 respectively. All factor loadings were above .78 and Cronbach's alpha were .88, .89, and .88.

Emotional Costs Summarized. Table 4 shows means, standard deviations and correlations between these four emotional costs constructs for T_1, T_2 and T_3. For each time of measurement, the four variables were moderately to strongly correlated. Therefore, to condense the data and reduce the number of analyses, we averaged these variables to construct emotional costs measures for T_1-T_3 each. Exploratory factor analyses using principal axis factoring using the four affect variables supported the validity of a general emotional cost factor, which explained 62%, 63% and 63% of variance on T_1, T_2 and T_3 respectively. All factor scores were above .50. Alphas for the emotional costs scale on T_1, T_2 and T_3 were all .79.

Table 4 *Item Statistics and Correlations for Emotion Measures*

Measurement	Variable	*n*	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3
T_1	1. Stress surrounding interaction with partner	256	4.60	1.58	–		
	2. Divorce related anxiety	312	4.21	1.90	.47**	_	
	3. Anger towards partner	312	3.92	1.84	.51**	.39**	_
	4. Humiliation by the partner	312	3.75	1.97	.46**	.38**	.76**
T_2	1. Stress surrounding interaction with partner	210	4.08	1.60	–		
	2. Divorce related anxiety	207	3.94	1.90	.53**	_	
	3. Anger towards partner	207	3.71	1.75	.56**	.36**	_
	4. Humiliation by the partner	207	3.51	1.93	.49**	.29**	.76**
T_3	1. Stress surrounding interaction with partner	151	3.95	1.60	_		
	2. Divorce related anxiety	158	3.15	1.73	.51**	_	
	3. Anger towards partner	158	3.48	1.62	.56**	.37**	_
	4. Humiliation by the partner	158	3.24	1.82	.52**	.30**	.73**

** $p < .01$

Agreement Appraisals. On T_3, respondents evaluated the process as well as the outcomes of their divorce. Final agreements had been reached in the divorce procedures of 65 (44%) respondents, and 84 (56%) respondents answered questions about provisional or temporary agreements as they stood at T_3. On a scale from 1 to 7, respondents reported

to what extent they were content with the process of their divorce, felt the (provisional) divorce agreements were sufficient and sufficiently detailed, to what extent they felt the (provisional) divorce agreements were to their advantage and to their ex-partner's advantage, to what extent they felt that they and their ex-partner were content with the (provisional) divorce agreement, and, finally, to what extent they expected the agreements to be sustainable in the future. We used the individual items in our analyses, as we were interested in comparing effects on the different aspects of the agreements by respondents. Means, standard deviations and correlations can be found in table 5.

Table 5 *Item Statistics and Correlations for Agreement Appraisals*

To what extent did you feel:	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. content with the way arranging your divorce has proceeded?	4.39	1.85	_					
2. that the divorce agreements were sufficient and sufficiently detailed?	4.56	1.77	.65**	_				
3. that the divorce agreements were to your advantage?	3.68	1.41	.54**	.53**	_			
4. that the divorce agreements were to your ex-partner's advantage?	3.94	1.39	.02	0.13	-.08	_		
5. content with the divorce agreement?	4.51	1.63	.69**	.77**	.56**	-.01	_	
6. that your ex-partner was content with the divorce agreement?	4.44	1.68	.50**	.47**	.07	.31**	.43**	_
7. that the agreements will be sustainable in the future?	4.36	1.92	.50**	.58**	.20*	.14	.54**	.56**

Note . N = 149, with 65 final agreements and 84 provisional/ temporary agreements.
** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Third-Party Involvement. We asked respondents about third-party involvement in the preparation of the agreement as well as in court.

Third-Party Involvement in Preparation of Agreement. Respondents first reported whether they had drawn up their divorce agreement and negotiated mostly (1) with their ex-partner without the help of a professional, (2) with the help of a mediator, or (3) whether they had left most of the negotiations to their lawyers. At T_3, 30% of respondents had negotiated mostly with their ex-partner without the help of a professional, 48% used a mediator, and 22% had left most of the negotiations to their lawyers.

Third-Party Involvement in Bringing Divorce to Court. To finalize a divorce in the Netherlands, a lawyer has to present the case to court for approval. We therefore asked respondents whether they, together with their partner, hired one lawyer who presented their settlement to court for approval only, or whether they were not able to come to a

common agreement and both hired their own lawyer[10]. The majority (70%) had contracted one lawyer together with their (ex-) partner and 21% had each had their own lawyer.

Dropout

Of the total sample of 312 respondents, 164 persons completed all three surveys. Dropout was lower in the control group where 65% of respondents completed all three surveys versus 50% in the intervention group, $\chi^2(1, N = 312) = 4.11$, $p = .04$, $V = .11$. Respondents from couples where at least one partner owned a company were more likely to drop out of the study than those who did not own a company, $\chi^2(1, N = 312) = 6.10$, $p = .01$, $V = .14$. There were no other statistically significant differences between respondents who did and did not drop out of the study in terms of background characteristics. Additionally, dropout was comparable across the four power perception clusters, $\chi^2(1, N = 312) = 0.59$, $p = .90$, $V = .04$. Thus, aside from company ownership and group membership (intervention vs. control group), there were few differences between participants who did or not complete the three surveys, suggesting that dropout was largely random.[11]

RESULTS

We first tested our hypothesis on the development of power perceptions over time. We ran a mixed effects ANOVA to test our expectation that a perceived disadvantage or advantage in power would decrease over time (H1). The dependent variable in this analysis was power perceptions and we included two fixed within subject effects: time with T_1, T_2 and T_3, and partner with perception of self and perception of other (a large negative difference between perception of self and perception of other equaled a perceived disadvantage in power).

We examined whether changes in power perceptions were driven by the use of the intervention (H5). Our expectation was that for individuals who perceived a disadvantage in power, the effect of using RW (compared to not using RW) on perceived own power at T_2 would be positive. We tested this expectation using a three-way interaction effect [between perceived own power, perceived other's power, and using RW] in a regression

10 Divorce cases where both parties hire a lawyer can take longer and can escalate further (Ter Voert, 2009), as the case is discussed in the oppositional setting of a courtroom. In some couples, one partner had contracted a lawyer and the other had not. As self-representation is not possible in divorce cases, this could mean that partner 1 did not oppose partner 2. However, it is equally possible that partner 1 was eligible for legal aid subsidies and partner 2 or the partners combined were not. In these cases, a seemingly one-sided divorce request is in reality a divorce by mutual consent and agreement. We excluded this group when we analyzed results related to this variable. After exclusion, *N* was 135, with 104 respondents reporting one lawyer and 31 respondents reporting two lawyers in opposition.

11 Anonymized data relevant to this publication is available from https://osf.io/5gzqh/?view_only=5db8ad-01cf2f4fdfa76085894e27e8f4. Correlation between the main study numeric variables can be found in table B3 in the supplementary materials to this article (Appendix B).

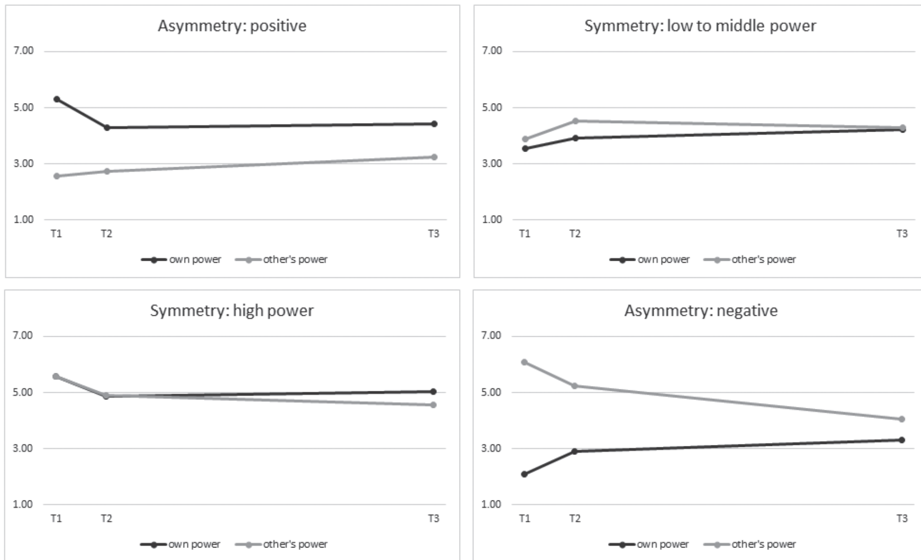
analysis with power on T_2 as dependent variable. In light of the quasi-experimental nature of this study, we controlled for the number of weeks since starting divorce arrangements, age, sex, education, partner's education, employment status, partner's employment status, having children, and owning a business.

We then tested our hypotheses on the effects of perceptions of negative asymmetry. For these analyses, we used the 4 power perception clusters to facilitate interpretation (positive asymmetry, low-middle power symmetry, high power symmetry, negative asymmetry). We hypothesized that individuals who saw themselves at a power disadvantage at the outset of the process, would be more likely to report higher emotional costs (H2), lower evaluations of process and outcome (agreements) (H3), and more third-party involvement (H4) later in their divorce. We used a mixed effects ANOVA to examine emotional costs over time (within subjects: T_1, T_2 and T_3) and per cluster (between subjects). We tested our hypotheses on the effect of perceived power (represented by the four clusters) on agreement appraisals on T_3 and third-party involvement on T_3, using ANOVA and chi-square analyses.

Power Asymmetry Over Time

We ran a repeated measures analysis of variance with time (T_1, T_2 and T_3) and partner (perception of self, perception of other) as within-subjects factors. We tested our expectation that the perceived difference in power (the effect of partner) would decrease over time. There were no main effects for time $F(1.92, 266.71) = 1.00$, $p = .37$, $\eta^2 = .01$, or for partner $F(1, 139) = 2.16$, $p = .14$, $\eta^2 = .02$, but the expected interaction effect of time and partner was statistically significant, $F(1.79, 249.04) = 7.87$, $p < .001$ $\eta^2 = .05$, confirming that respondents perceived a decline in power disparity over time. To illustrate the decline in asymmetry in more detail, we can inspect the power perceptions pattern graphically and per cluster (see figure 2). We see that when respondents felt that power positions were asymmetrical at the start of their divorce process, they were likely to report a decrease in power differences over time. Whereas respondents who reported symmetry at the start of their divorce process, continued to report symmetry.

Figure 2 *Own and Other's Power Over Time per Cluster*



Note . Participant numbers on T_1, T_2, T_3 respectively: Positive asymmetry: n = 41, 29, 21, Low-middle power symmetry: n = 126, 85, 63, High power symmetry: n = 98, 64, 44, Negative asymmetry: n = 47, 31, 23. Means and standard deviations can be found in table B1 in the supplementary materials (Appendix B).

Effect of RW on Perception of Own Power

To test hypothesis 5, that people who perceive the other party as powerful, but do not feel powerful themselves, will benefit most from the intervention, we used multiple linear regression analysis. Our dependent variable was perceived own power at T_2, one to four weeks after the use of Rechtwijzer (RW). We controlled for time elapsed since starting arrangements, the socio-demographic and divorce related variables as well as perceived own and perceived other's power on T_1. In addition, we included the interaction of the pre-test power measures (own x other power) to test for effects of early asymmetry[12]. To test our hypothesis, we added RW use and the interactions between the use of RW and the perceived power variables as well as the three-way interaction term between both perceived power measures and RW use. We predicted that the use of RW would have the strongest empowering effect to those who felt relatively powerless. In other words, we expected that when perceived own power was low and perceived other's power was high (a perceived power disadvantage), the effect of RW would be strongest. (H5).

12 Using both original measures as well as the interaction term is preferable to using the difference score as it allows us to examine the effect of asymmetry, without losing information on total perceived power in the dyad (Johns, 1981; Van Dijk et al., 2016).

The model (see table 6) explained 43% of variance on perceived own power on T_2, $F(20, 185) = 7.01$, $p < .001$[13]. The three-way interaction was not statistically significant, $b = -0.19$, $SE = 0.28$, $t(185) = -0.69$, $p = .49$, but we did observe a marginally significant interaction effect of perceived other's power and RW on perceived own power, $b = 0.43$, $SE = 0.23$, $t(185) = 1.89$, $p = .060$. However, we note that participant numbers in the control group on T_2 were low (n = 46) and VIF and tolerance scores for the interaction terms were high, which makes it difficult to pinpoint where in the interplay of these variables the interaction effect is located.

Table 6 *Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis on Own Power (T_2)*

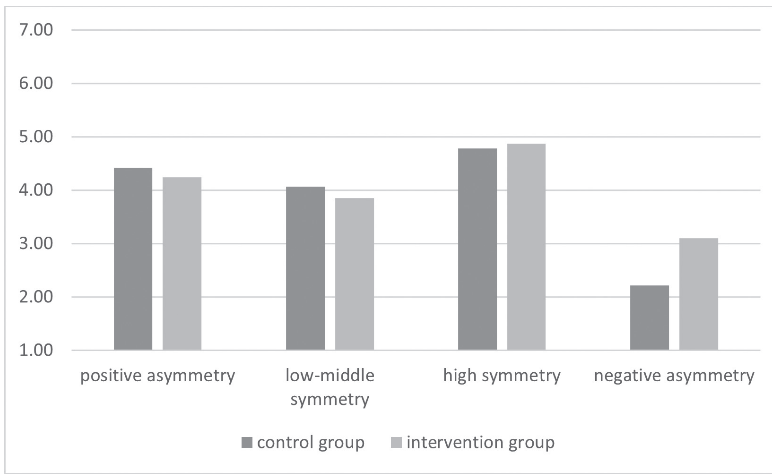
Variable			95% Confidence Interval			
	B	SE	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	VIF	Tolerance
Intercept	3.57	0.42	2.74	4.40		
Weeks from start arrangements to T_1	0.02	0.09	-0.16	0.20	0.85	1.18
Age	0.16	0.10	-0.04	0.35	0.74	1.36
Sex (female = 1)	0.22	0.19	-0.15	0.59	0.87	1.15
Own education dummy 1 and 2	-0.37	0.37	-1.11	0.37	0.41	2.44
Own education dummy 3	-0.28	0.29	-0.85	0.29	0.35	2.89
Own education dummy 4	-0.04	0.28	-0.59	0.50	0.37	2.70
Partner's education dummy 1 and 2	0.17	0.35	-0.52	0.87	0.32	3.12
Partner's education dummy 3	0.62**	0.30	0.02	1.21	0.31	3.21
Partner's education dummy 4	0.01	0.30	-0.57	0.60	0.35	2.85
Own employment status	0.05	0.19	-0.32	0.43	0.87	1.15
Partner's employment status	0.29	0.23	-0.16	0.74	0.81	1.24
Children	-0.21	0.21	-0.63	0.21	0.82	1.22
Business owner	-0.14	0.20	-0.53	0.26	0.90	1.11
Own power (T_1)	1.07***	0.22	0.64	1.51	0.15	6.49
Other's power (T_1)	-0.31	0.20	-0.71	0.09	0.17	5.82
Interaction own * other's power	0.33	0.27	-0.21	0.86	0.07	13.84
RW (0 = control)	0.00	0.22	-0.44	0.44	0.83	1.21
Own power * RW	-0.25	0.24	-0.73	0.23	0.15	6.57
Other's power * RW	0.43*	0.23	-0.02	0.87	0.18	5.60
Own * other's power * RW	-0.19	0.28	-0.75	0.36	0.07	13.67

Note. N = 207, regression with standardized and binary predictors.
* p < .1, ** p < .05, *** p < .001.

13 In a regression analysis which did not include the effect of RW, explained variance was 41%, $F(16,189) = 8.34$, $p < .001$.

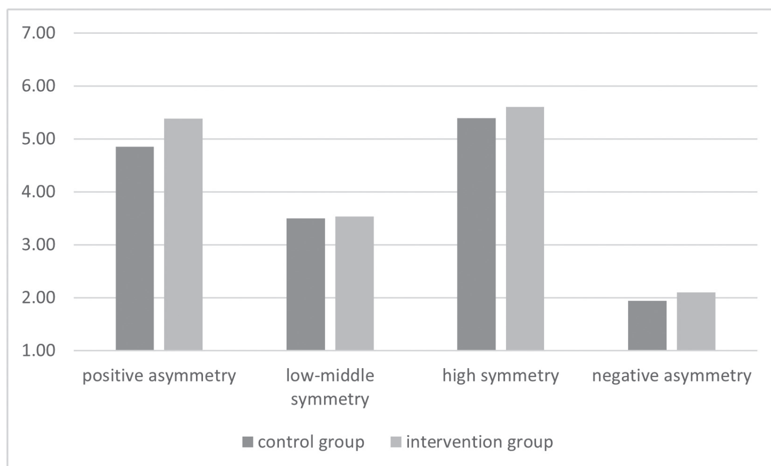
We can illustrate our findings with figure 3, in which we show mean perceptions of perceived own power in the intervention and control groups on T_2 across the four clusters. We see that the intervention group in the negative asymmetry cluster reports feeling more powerful than the control group. This difference does not appear on T_1 (see figure 4).

Figure 3 *Perceptions of Own Power on T_2*



Note . Participant numbers in control group: n = 6, 22, 7, and 7 respectively; in intervention group: n= 23, 63, 57, and 24 respectively

Figure 4 *Perceptions of Own Power on T_1*



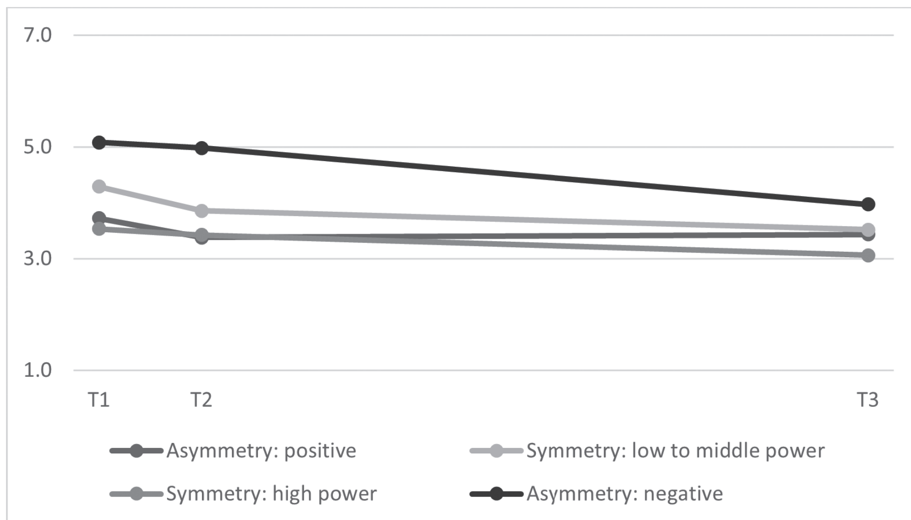
Note . Participant numbers in control group: n = 7, 27, 9, and 9 respectively; in intervention group: n = 43, 99, 89, and 38 respectively.

4

Enduring Effects of Early Asymmetry

Emotional Costs. Consistent with H2, and throughout the process, those who perceived negative asymmetry on $T_{1,}$ reported statistically significantly higher emotional costs than respondents in the other three clusters did (see figure 5, and table B2 of the supplementary materials, appendix B). A mixed design ANOVA showed that the expected between subjects effect of cluster on emotional costs was statistically significant, $F(3, 142) = 5.34$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .10$. In addition, these analyses indicated a statistically significant effect of time, indicating that emotional costs decreased, $F(1.91, 270.83) = 17.72$, $p < .001$[14], $\eta^2 = .11$. Finally, there was no interaction effect between time and the power perception clusters, $F(5.72, 270.83) = 1.27$, $p = .27$, $\eta^2 = .03$, indicating that early effects of asymmetry persisted. We explored these statistically significant main effects in pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni corrections. Emotional costs in the negative asymmetry cluster were higher than in the positive asymmetry cluster, $M_{dif} = 1.04$, $SD = .36$, $p = .028$, and the high-power symmetry cluster, $M_{dif} = 1.20$, $SD = .31$, $p = .001$. Comparisons also showed that the reduction of emotional costs in the short term (T_1 to T_2) was marginally significant, $M_{T1\text{-}T2} = 0.20$, $SD = .09$, $p = .07$, and that the effect was stronger in the long term (T_2 to T_3), $M_{T2\text{-}T3} = 0.40$, $SD = .11$, $p = .001$

Figure 5 *Emotional Costs per Cluster Over Time*



Note . Participant numbers on T_1 , T_2, T_3 respectively: Positive asymmetry: n = 41, 30, 21, Low-middle power symmetry: n = 126, 85, 66, High power symmetry: n = 98, 64, 48, Negative asymmetry: n = 47, 31, 23. Means and standard deviations can be found in table B2 in the supplementary materials (Appendix B).

14 Following Mauchly's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(2) = .92$, $p = .002$, we use the Huynh-Feldt corrected degrees of freedom.

Agreement Appraisals. In accordance with H3, in a repeated measures ANOVA, the asymmetry clusters significantly predicted all divorce process and outcome (agreement) evaluations by respondents on T_3 (all *F*'s (3, 145) ≥ 3.36, all *p*'s ≤ .02, all, $\eta^2 > .07$, with the exception of the perceived (ex-)partner's contentment with the outcome of divorce, *F*(3, 145) = 1.82, *p* = .15, $\eta^2 = .04$. A first inspection shows that the most positive appraisals are given in the high-power symmetry cluster, and the most negative appraisals are given in the negative asymmetry cluster (see table 7). Pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni corrections showed that those who perceived a power disadvantage on T_1 were less content with the process (*p* = .016, *p* = .010, and *p* < .001 for comparisons with the positive asymmetry, low-middle power symmetry, and high-power symmetry clusters respectively), and with the (preliminary) agreements of their divorce (*p* = .031, *p* = .061, and *p* < .001 for comparisons with the positive asymmetry, low-middle power symmetry, and high power symmetry clusters respectively). They also scored lower than those in the high-power symmetry cluster scored on feeling that the agreements were sufficient and sufficiently detailed, *p* = .008, and would be sustainable in future, *p* = .051[15]. In addition, individuals in the negative asymmetry cluster were more likely than those in the positive asymmetry cluster, to feel that agreements were to the advantage of their ex-partner, *p* = .020, and less likely to feel that they were to their own advantage (*p* = .071, and *p* = .055, for comparisons with the positive asymmetry, and high-power symmetry clusters respectively). All other comparisons between the four clusters were not statistically significant, all *p's* > .178.

To test for perceived asymmetry in the agreement appraisals, we compared evaluations of own content with estimated content of the partner and evaluations of own advantage with estimated advantage of the partner. We found that individuals in the positive asymmetry cluster felt more content than they estimated their partners would feel, *t*(20) = 2.27, *p* = .034, *d* = .50. We found that those in the negative asymmetry cluster reported a disadvantage in the agreements compared to their partner, *t*(22) = -3.09, *p* = .005, *d* = -.64. There were no further statistically significant differences (all *p*'s > .125).

15 There were marginal differences between those in the high-power symmetry cluster and the remaining two clusters on estimated sustainability as well, *p* = .098, *p* = .076, for comparisons with the positive asymmetry, and low-middle power symmetry clusters respectively.

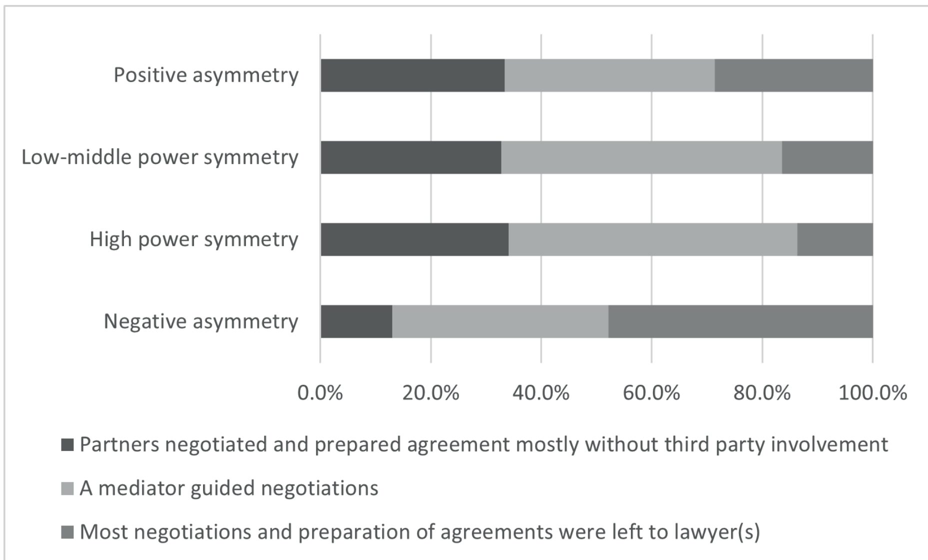
Table 7 *Agreement Appraisals Across Clusters*

	Positive asymmetry		Low-middle power symmetry		High power symmetry		Negative asymmetry	
To what extent did you feel:	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**
content with the way arranging your divorce has proceeded?	4.62	1.86	4.37	1.79	5.02	1.68	3.00	1.68
that the divorce agreements were sufficient and sufficiently detailed?	4.67	1.68	4.53	1.83	5.07	1.49	3.61	1.88
that the divorce agreements were to your advantage?	4.14	1.62	3.50	1.39	4.02	1.22	3.09	1.35
that the divorce agreements were to your ex-partner's advantage?	3.48	1.03	3.82	1.48	3.93	1.26	4.70	1.43
content with the divorce agreement?	4.76	1.64	4.42	1.69	5.09	1.31	3.43	1.47
that your ex-partner was content with the divorce agreement?	3.95	1.66	4.40	1.84	4.88	1.31	4.17	1.77
that the agreements will be sustainable in the future?	3.90	2.07	4.18	1.94	5.12	1.62	3.83	1.95

Note . N = 149, Positive asymmetry: n = 21, Low-middle power symmetry: n= 62, High power symmetry: n = 43, Negative asymmetry: n = 23.

Third-Party Involvement in Preparation of Agreement. Consistent with H4a, when respondents perceived a power disadvantage early in the divorce process, there was more involvement of lawyers in preparing the divorce agreement (47.8%), than among respondents in the other three clusters (13 – 29%) and much less negotiating without third parties (13%) than in the other three clusters (32 -34%), $\chi^2(6, N = 149) = 13.33$, $p = .04$, $V = .21$, see also figure 6. Mediator guided negotiations were more popular in the symmetry clusters (51% for low-middle power and 52% for high power) than in the asymmetry clusters (38% and 39% for positive and negative asymmetry respectively).

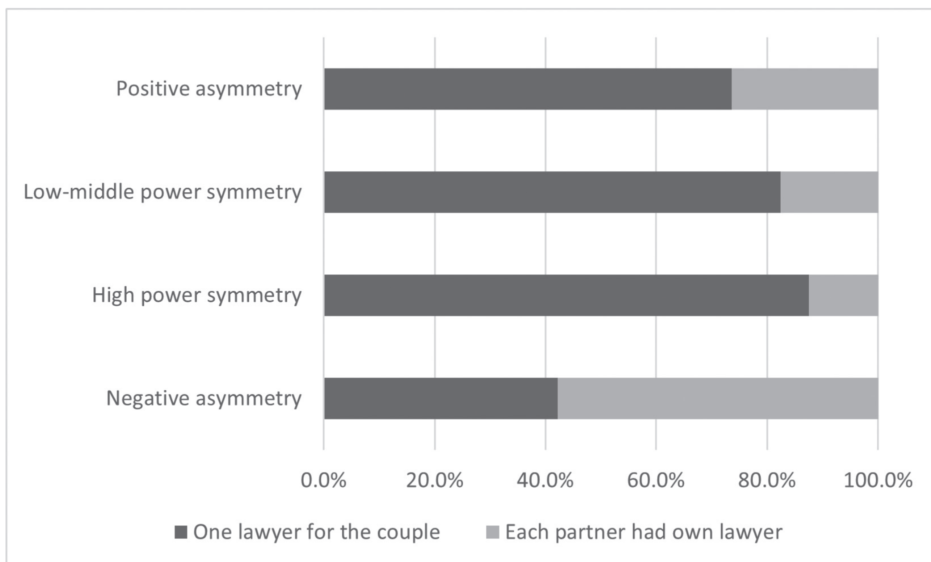
Figure 6 *Third-Party Involvement in Preparation of Divorce Agreement per Cluster*



Note : Positive asymmetry: n = 21, Low-middle power symmetry: n = 61, High power symmetry: n = 44, Negative asymmetry: n = 23.

Third-Party Involvement in Bringing Divorce to Court. As expected under H4b, for respondents who perceived a power disadvantage, an adversarial procedure with two lawyers was much more likely (57.9%) than in the other three clusters (12 – 27%), $\chi^2(3, N = 135) = 16.65$, $p < .001$, $V = .35$, see also figure 7.

Figure 7 *Third-Party Involvement in Bringing Divorce to Court per Cluster*



Note : Positive asymmetry: n = 19, Low-middle power symmetry: n = 57, High power symmetry: n = 40, Negative asymmetry: n = 19

DISCUSSION

Divorce is a major life event (Sbarra et al, 2012; Mancini et al., 2011), yet we know little about how the process of a divorce unfolds. This is especially true for the initial stages, which take place beyond the sight of courts, lawyers, and mediators. In this study, we examined the initial perceived power balance of divorcing parties and its development over time, as well as enduring effects of early perceptions of power disadvantages on emotional and financial costs. We also explored whether a web-based intervention (RW) that can reach people very early on in their divorce process, can affect the initial perceptions of (own) power. In line with our expectation, and regardless of whether it concerned an initial advantage or disadvantage, perceived asymmetry decreased over time. However, and also in line with expectations, we observed prolonged detrimental effects of early perceptions of power disadvantages in the medium and long term. In light of the decrease in perceived asymmetry, the pattern of negative effects was remarkably persistent. First, individuals who reported a power disadvantage early on in their divorce reported higher levels of negative emotions including stress, anxiety, anger, and humiliation. We note the parallel with equity theory which tells us that an experienced lack of equity (balance in the ratio of contributions and benefits of each party) in a romantic relationship is associated with distress such as anger, sadness, and resentment towards the partner (Hatfield et.al., 2008).

Second, early perceptions of power disadvantages predicted lower assessments of quality and sustainability of the agreements and perceived disadvantages in the agreement. This is noteworthy, not only because it may predict further litigation (Koel et al., 1994), but also because we know that negative divorce experiences can translate into negative co-parenting relationships (Visser et al., 2017). Remarkably, the group who saw themselves at a disadvantage in power early in the divorce as well as at a disadvantage in the agreements later in the divorce, reported no difference in contentment about the agreement between them and their (ex-)partner. This was mirrored by individuals who saw themselves at a power advantage early on. They reported that they were more content about the divorce agreement than their (ex-)partner was, but saw no difference in advantages in the divorce agreement. These findings suggest that divorcing partners anchor their assessment of what a good outcome would be on what they can expect to gain or lose (Welsh, 2004). Effect sizes of the decline in asymmetry over time as well as the enduring effects of asymmetry on emotions and evaluations of the agreement ranged from medium to large effects. Finally, perceived power disadvantages early in the divorce process predicted more involvement of lawyers, less direct negotiations with the other party, and more adversarial procedures in court, all of which are associated with higher financial costs during the divorce and a higher potential for further litigation in post-divorce families (Quek Anderson et al., 2022). Effect sizes for third party involvement were small to medium. With respect to the RW intervention, effect sizes were less clear due to a lack of power and multicollinearity. Our sample results suggest that only individuals who experience a power disadvantage and who use the RW intervention, are empowered (report higher perceived power) during the early weeks of their divorce. In other words, those who face a power disadvantage might be most susceptible to an early web-based intervention like RW (Rusbult & Lange, 2003; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008).

Limitations

This study has some notable limitations. First, the analysis of the effect of the intervention is based on a quasi-experimental pre-post design, as it was impossible to select participants randomly or to assign participants randomly to the intervention and control group. Although we included covariates to account for differences in demographic and divorce related variables as well as perceptions of power on the first measurement, considering our study design and the differences in attrition rates between the intervention and control groups, we cannot exclude selection effects.

Secondly, our analyses of the development of perceptions of power balance over time and correlations to negative emotions, agreement appraisals, and third-party involvement are of a descriptive kind. Whether there is a causal link between these factors will have to be examined in future research. We note that gender (Kaufman & Pulerwitz, 2019; Raley

& Sweeney, 2020), children (Ogolski et al., 2019), and different types of power sources (Pratto et al., 2011) are likely important factors in these processes.

Third, we used clusters based on perceived balance or imbalance of power to draw a broad picture, while avoiding the pitfalls of using difference scores (Johns, 1981). Cluster analysis lends itself to creating clarity and is specifically suited to this study, as the correlations between the clusters and the negative effects are relatively large and clear and are easily made visible using the clusters. At the same time, we do not suggest that people who go through divorce can be divided into these four clear-cut categories (Marquand et al., 2016). Future studies should aim for higher participant numbers, allowing for analyses that are more sophisticated.

Fourth, the population of this study was limited to divorcing partners who did not report violence in the relationship. Yet, a distinction between structural and incidental violence, or in intensity of violence, mutuality of violence, and whether children were victimized or not, was not made but could be potentially relevant to more precisely determine if, and to which population the current results can be generalized (Davidson & Beck, 2017; Watson & Ancis, 2013). A study that would include individuals who experience partner violence would require a study design with access to dedicated help.

Fifth, the measures we used in this study were taken from various fields of psychology as well as from practice and were mostly short to avoid overburdening respondents who were going through divorce. In future studies, a more fine-grained analysis, particularly of the emotions during the divorce process would be valuable to better understand the type and extent of emotional costs of an early perception of power disadvantage. Finally, and in relation to the measurement of perceived power, these measurements were limited to the divorce process and viewed from the perspective of one of the divorcees. Future research should strive to create a more complete picture by recruiting couples rather than individuals, and include other methods next to self-report questionnaires, for example measuring actual power bases as observed by independent observers (Tan et al., 2019). Research could also look more closely into the temporal context of power dynamics in the divorce process. Note that we did not expect nor observe a decline in absolute power-dependence. An important reason for this is that our research endeavors focus exclusively on the divorce process itself. During this process, feelings of dependence are inherently present, as the parties continuously need each other to attain their goals and ultimately reach an agreement. Of course, when a relationship ends, there is a process of detachment, which in most cases would reduce mutual dependence. However, research has shown that shifts in power divisions are likely to start earlier, when relationship quality declines (Fine & Sacher, 1998; Hatfield et al., 2008; Rusbult et al., 2012; Sprecher et al., 1998). In addition, the literature on post-divorce families shows that in most families, there is a level of enduring dependence on the other parent and power dynamics between co-parents continue to evolve (Harman et al., 2021, Ogolsky et al., 2019). It is likely that the decrease

in mutual dependency between separating romantic partners could best be observed when we take into account both the final stages of a relationship and the post-divorce dynamic when the power division crystallizes into a more long-term state of weaker dependence.

Implications for Policy

This study included a first exploration of the impact of the Rechtwijzer (RW) intervention with a focus on asymmetry of power and empowerment. This framework offers a template for how to think about effects of these programs for different groups, with a focus on potentially vulnerable groups. With the launch of the RW website, there were concerns of the legal aid field that those with a power disadvantage would not benefit from online assistance (Smith, 2015). These concerns are only scarcely reflected in our research findings. Although individuals who used the RW intervention perceived a slightly higher level of own power than those in the control group, those who experienced a power disadvantage seem to benefit most from using the intervention. This exploration of the effect of RW suggests that web-based interventions that reach individuals early on, could potentially offer a form of empowering help that is beneficial particularly to vulnerable/disadvantaged parties (Van Dijk et al., 2016).

In terms of implications for the field of divorce support (legal as well as social/psychological), this study shows the importance of early process perceptions and interventions. We would like to highlight two elements. First, our findings show that perceptions of power, which can be easily measured by way of self-report, are a promising and strong early indicator for a costly divorce process, which could be very useful to professional third parties. The perception of a power disadvantage early in the process increases the risk of emotional and economic costs, which warrants alertness to these perceptions by third parties.

Second, this study dealt with early process dynamics. The RW intervention mostly targets the early stage in a divorce process where individuals orient themselves towards the complex procedure. Importantly, RW was able to reach individuals in the early stages of their divorce, long before they had received any guidance from professional support parties such as lawyers or mediators. Policy makers can make use of these relatively minimal early interventions that can be made available online to help individuals start out on a constructive conflict path. This does not mean that these types of interventions will make third-party support obsolete for all their users, although it might do for some. Rather, these interventions offer an opportunity to provide help before third parties come into the process.

A final observation with respect to field implications, was that across groups, participants in our study indicated that filling out the questionnaire helped them to see their divorce process more clearly. This unanticipated effect of our study suggests that

doing research can function as an intervention in itself. In particular, sufficient reflection on the psychological aspects of the divorce process could offer important benefits for the parties involved (Larson & Sbarra, 2015).

Conclusion

This study is unique in that it focused on power perceptions during the divorce process rather than during relationship decline or in post-divorce families. It empirically demonstrated the dynamic nature of the divorce process, the important role and consequences of early power perceptions, and the potential of web-based interventions that target individuals in the very first stages of a divorce process to empower those who are most vulnerable.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Access to justice is the ability of individuals to obtain a just solution to a legal problem or conflict (OECD, 2021). It is supported by a range of legal services, including legal information, alternative dispute resolution, legal representation, and the court system. Without access to justice, citizens may not be able to obtain a reasonable settlement after divorce or hold a company to live up to a guarantee after an expensive product has failed (Buck et al., 2008). The research in this dissertation speaks to the psychological experiences that may limit access to justice of individuals in legal conflicts.[1] Specifically, I highlighted the importance of the psychological experience of power. I took a dynamic perspective on power in legal conflicts and particularly focused on individuals who see themselves at a power disadvantage vis-à-vis the other side. I examined what needs those individuals have, and what the consequences of a perceived power disadvantage early on in a conflict are in terms of conflict processes and outcomes. These consequences include psychological experiences such as distress and negative emotions.

To provide access to justice, we should not only aim to open the same door to just solutions for all citizens, but we should also ensure that all citizens have the knowledge, support, and confidence to go through that door (Buck et. al., 2008). In other words, interventions that offer knowledge, support, and confidence could potentially empower. In this dissertation, my co-authors and I examined several online interventions and their potential to attenuate an experienced power disadvantage. We were especially interested in self-help resources that are available online and can be accessed early on in conflicts. We looked at three potential sources of empowerment that could be provided by these resources: information about the law (knowledge), information about and referral to third parties (support), and self-efficacy support (confidence).

My co-authors and I conducted three empirical studies. In the first cross-sectional survey study with 700 individuals who had recently faced a legal conflict, presented in Chapter 2, we tested which psychological needs for help were expressed among people who experienced power asymmetry (a disadvantage in power). We tested whether these needs could be distinguished empirically from needs for help of people who experienced conflict asymmetry (a disadvantage in how much the conflict mattered to them and the other party). To this end, we examined the relationship of both types of asymmetry with the need for two different types of third-party help. First, we looked at needs for empowering help: help aimed at strengthening the position of the disadvantaged party using information about rights and duties, steps to take, and suggestions for possible solutions. Second, we looked at needs for emotional help, which was defined as understanding and acknowledgement by offering a sympathetic ear.

1 Conflicts are legal, or justiciable, when they have legal elements and are, or could potentially be, handled within the legal system (Genn, 1999; Van de Vliert, 1996). See also chapter 1.

In study 2 (chapter 3), we ran an experiment with 175 participants in a simulated online marketplace to examine what types of early online help would be most empowering for individuals who experienced a disadvantage in power. We used empowering and emotional help again but made a further differentiation between two types of empowering and two types of emotional help. All four types of help were offered in a chat window by a neutral bot-like agent. The first type of empowering help was legal information, comparable to that found on legal information websites available in many countries. The second type was support in the form of social comparison information, which was based on the stories consumers share on social media and through consumer rights organizations. Emotional help was divided in understanding on the one hand and esteem support on the other; the latter was defined as verbal confirmation of a party's ability to solve the conflict.

Finally, in study 3 (chapter 4), we followed 312 individuals from the early stages of their divorce processes and throughout a period of approximately six months thereafter. This allowed us to learn how their power perceptions developed over time and to test our expectation that the perception of a power disadvantage in the early stages of a divorce could entail negative consequences in the long run. In addition, part of the 312 participants made use of an online intervention (Rechtwijzer) in the early stage of their conflict. This intervention offered information about the procedures and rights in divorce (knowledge), referrals to third parties (support), and support in self-help (confidence). Using a quasi-experimental design, we explored the effects of this intervention on perceptions of power.

In this final chapter, I will first summarize findings and theoretical contributions of the three studies in this dissertation, with a particular emphasis on the two main themes: power and interventions. Next, I will discuss limitations and future directions and will then zoom in on methodological considerations around the measurement of power. Finally, I will discuss the practical implications of my research.

Main findings and theoretical contributions

Study 1

In study 1 (chapter 2), 700 individuals who had recently contacted the Dutch Legal Aid Desks were surveyed on their legal conflicts. The Legal Aid Desk is a low threshold, free of charge public institution that can be contacted online, by phone, or at physical offices. It offers legal advice and tools such as examples of letters, and referral to other third parties, such as lawyers, mediators, or arbitrators. The sample included people with all types of legal conflicts, ranging from divorce to neighbor disputes to consumer conflicts. We found that most visitors of the Legal Aid Desks felt less powerful than the other party they faced in their conflict. In other words, they reported that the other party had more control over the conflict process and outcomes than they had. Such a perceived disadvantage in power was much more common than a disadvantage in terms of how much the conflict

mattered to each party (i.e. asymmetry in conflict experience). We found that a perception of power asymmetry, more specifically, a perceived disadvantage in power, predicted stronger needs for empowering help. The need for emotional help was predicted positively by both the perception of a disadvantage in power and the perception of a disadvantage in how much the conflict matters to you (asymmetry of conflict experience). The latter is in line with Ufkes et al. (2012) who found that individuals who experienced negative conflict asymmetry benefited from an individual meeting with a mediator to whom they could voice their concerns and who provided a listening ear.

In each case, it was the perceived asymmetry that predicted the need for help, and not the mere perception of one's own (low) power or -alternatively- high conflict experience. In other words, individuals with legal conflicts have a higher need for help when they experience (power and/or conflict) asymmetry, than when both they and the other party have little power or when the conflict is very important to both them and the other party. This confirms the importance of distinguishing between relative and absolute levels of power (Bacharach & Lawler, 1976; Emerson, 1962; Johns, 1981; Rubin & Brown, 1975).

As this first field study was retrospective and cross-sectional, we cannot exclude the possibility that conflict trajectories, including the third parties involved, colored our participants' memories of their experiences of asymmetry and needs early in their conflicts. This led to the next study, in which we developed a conflict simulation in which we manipulated power, and randomly allocated different types of interventions. This experimental setup allowed us to test the interaction between power and empowering and emotional help.

Study 2

In the experiment in study 2 (chapter 3), we set up a simulated conflict in an online consumer marketplace in which we manipulated the power disadvantage that participants had vis-à-vis the seller. We varied the size of the power disadvantage by removing the option to review the seller for half of the participants and examined the effect of both levels of power disadvantage on conflict perceptions and behavior. As intended, we found that participants with the ability to review the seller had higher perceptions of power than those who did not. We also examined the effect of different types of interventions, modelled after classic legal interventions, psychological interventions, or both.

We found that for the participants who had the largest power disadvantage, legal information on the rights and duties of the buyer and seller had the strongest positive effect on power perceptions. This is in line with previous work which has shown that invoking legal norms can increase power of negotiation and conflict parties (French & Raven, 1959; McAdams & Nadler, 2005; Moorhead et al., 2003). For those who had the power to review, social comparison information was the most helpful intervention. It seemed that they benefited most from an example of a peer on how to leverage the power

they already had. Indeed, seeing the successful experience of a peer has been identified as a source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). A higher sense of self-efficacy could in turn increase the perception of own power vis-à-vis the other by creating a stronger sense of being able to make use of existing power sources in negotiations (Kim et al., 2005; Rucker et al., 2012). In addition to this, this peer example may also convey a social norm, although the social comparison information did not state that this norm was legally binding as did the legal information intervention.

Interestingly, participants' self-reported preference for the interventions were independent of whether they held the power to review. In both conditions they gave the most positive evaluations of legal information, closely followed by information about how conflicts were successfully resolved by similar others. This is in line with the results from study 1 (chapter 2), where the needs for help which offered potential practical solutions and information about rights (problem-focused help) were reported more strongly overall than needs for emotion-focused help, such as receiving acknowledgment and understanding from others. The difference between the measured effects and the reported evaluations underlines the importance of effect assessments of interventions, as opposed to relying on evaluations by users only.

The experimental setup of this study allowed us to examine which elements of interventions might be most helpful to individuals in legal conflicts. However, the low stakes nature of the consumer conflict limits the generalizability of our findings. The effects of online interventions may play out differently in high stakes conflicts. The experimental nature of this study also raises the question to what extent this effect can be replicated outside of the simulated environment. In study 3 we followed individuals in the field, as they went through divorce. This allowed us to examine the development of early power perceptions over a longer period of time and in a high stakes conflict. We also explored the effect of a freely available intervention for individuals in divorce, to test if it could indeed, as in study 2, improve power perceptions.

Study 3A – Longitudinal Measurement of Power Perceptions and Their Effects in Divorce

In our third study (chapter 4), we took a dynamic perspective on power in divorce conflicts and examined how experiences of individuals in divorce developed from the decision to separate to (preliminary) agreements. Most participants (n = 260) were contacted through a government-funded advice website (Rechtwijzer) which targeted individuals as they were orienting themselves on the divorce process. Additional participants (n = 52) were found through various media. Participants filled out online questionnaires at three moments in time, the first early in their divorce, the second to ascertain short term changes after a week, and the third after 5 to 6 months. We showed that in the early stages of divorce, some individuals perceived a symmetrical division of power and some an asymmetrical division,

and that generally, perceived asymmetries of power shrank over time. Thus, compared to the start of their divorce, individuals who initially perceived a power disadvantage reported more equality five to six months later. However, despite the fact that the perceived asymmetries became smaller, negative effects associated with early perceptions of a power disadvantage persisted over time. That is, those who reported a power disadvantage early in their divorce also reported higher negative emotions throughout their divorce, as well as more negative appraisals of the divorce agreements and more, potentially costly, third-party involvement. This is in line with the findings from study 1, as particularly the experienced disadvantage in power in comparison to the other party, rather than a low perception of own power in itself, predicted these negative long-term effects. These empirical findings also point at the importance of taking a dynamic perspective on power in the course of conflicts (Coleman et al., 2012; Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Without this, for example, negative outcomes found at the end of a divorce could go unexplained, as perceived disadvantages in power tend to fade away.

Study 3B – Effects of the Rechtwijzer Intervention on Power Perceptions in Divorce

Additionally, study 3 (chapter 4) explored the effect of an online intervention that had the goal of orienting and supporting individuals from the early phases of their divorce: Rechtwijzer. Rechtwijzer presented individuals in the early stages of divorce with a step-by-step plan to tackle their divorce process with their partner, with guidelines on where to start, instructions for negotiations, and referrals to third parties with indications of when this would be recommended and required. Users went through a question tree which prompted them to reflect on their divorce, wellbeing of children, and their own goals and alternatives to a negotiated agreement, as well as those of the other party. This practical guidance on how to handle their divorce as well as the questions that prompted reflection were designed to improve self-reliance (Van Veenen, 2008). The structured format of Rechtwijzer was designed to be accessible to those who experienced high levels of stress (Van Veenen, 2008), which can impair information processing (Smith et al., 2008). In line with study 2 (chapter 3), we tested the short-term effect of this intervention on perceptions of own power. We compared measures of own power before using Rechtwijzer to measurements of own power one week after using the intervention. We included a control group who were also in a divorce process but did not make use of Rechtwijzer. We found that between the pre- and post-measurements, the average perception of own power had increased for Rechtwijzer users who reported a disadvantage in power; this did not occur in the control group. Although we were not able to show a strong link between the use of Rechtwijzer and this effect, it was intriguing that individuals who initially reported such a negative view showed an improvement after this short amount of time.

To summarize, study 1 (chapter 2) confirmed the importance of power perceptions in legal conflicts and showed that perceptions of power asymmetry, and not one-sided power,

predicted needs for help. In study 2 (chapter 3) we found that asymmetry affects what type of help is more empowering in an experimental design, and study 3 (chapter 4) confirmed the importance of early power asymmetry and showed its negative effects in a longitudinal field study. This last study is especially valuable because data on experiences of people as they go through divorce is rare. Our findings suggest the potential for psychological interventions, as well as the importance of clear and accessible legal information and referrals to third parties. However, many questions remain. One avenue for future research would be to further test the potential of early online interventions, particularly with regards to its potential to counteract long term consequences of perceived disadvantages.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

I will discuss limitations and open questions related to choice of outcome measures, external validity, and internal validity of the three studies. I will then discuss limitations and potential avenues for future research based on two notable findings from study 3 (chapter 4). First, I will develop potential further explorations of our finding that third party support in divorce was different for individuals who reported a power disadvantage early in the process. Then, I will discuss potential generalization of our finding that early negative perceptions of power in divorce predicted persistent negative effects, even when the initial perceived power disadvantage disappeared.

Choice of outcome measures

An important limitation in all three studies, is that we mostly chose self-report measures reported by one party to the conflict as outcome measures. In study 1, we did not compare our findings to help that the participants had actually received. In study 2, the negotiation as well as the other party were simulated. This meant we could not test if assertive claiming behavior of participants had the intended effects on the other party. And in study 3, we did not compare reports of our participants to reports by their (ex-)partners, nor did we collect data from third parties on the help they provided or their assessment of the conflict outcome. Including these perspectives on legal conflicts in future studies would enrich our understanding of the role of power perceptions. In a later section, I will elaborate further on the strengths and weaknesses of our methodological choices in the measurement of power perceptions specifically.

In this light, it is important to also stress that a rich analysis of a conflict cannot focus on power aspects only. Other important aspects are, among others, the conflict orientations and values of parties, the institutional process available to parties, and interactions with third parties (Coleman et al., 2012; Pruitt & Kim, 2004; Shestowsky, 2020). It would also be reductive to view elements that are correlated with power in the light of that correlation only. For example, strong negative emotions at the start of

a conflict may be associated with perceived disadvantages in power, but even without a perceived power disadvantage, negative emotions merit attention (both by relevant third parties and researchers).

External validity

Data for all three of these studies were collected in the Netherlands with mostly Dutch respondents. I note that this may have consequences for the generalizability of the findings, not only with respect to the cultural context, but also with respect to the law and legal aid landscape. Dutch culture is individualistic (Hofstede, 2001; Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018), which has been connected to more social support seeking (Kim et al., 2006), and a less cooperative negotiation style (Caputo et al., 2019). Follow-up studies should replicate the work here with a focus on power dynamics and effect sizes in different countries. With respect to the institutional context, the Netherlands has a legal aid landscape in which legal advice is available through legal expenses insurance, labor unions, consumer organizations, and through subsidized legal aid for low-income groups. This accessibility of affordable legal advice may mean that online provision of advice is rated as less important. This raises the question what the effect of a similar online intervention would be in countries where legal advice is less widely available.

Furthermore, those who had been in higher education were slightly overrepresented in our samples of studies 2 and 3 (chapters 3 and 4). The bias to participants with higher educational levels may further limit generalization of our findings. This is important as education can be a source of power in conflicts, and power differences can be exacerbated when the more educated also obtain more help. Previous studies indicate that those with higher education are more likely to obtain advice from a third party and tend to obtain better outcomes in legal conflicts (Buck et al., 2008). We can speculate that those with higher educational levels are also more likely to find and make use of online help, because educational level significantly predicts digital skills (Van Laar et al., 2020). In addition, McDonald et al. (2019) found that individuals who used self-help resources were also more likely to seek out other types of help. This could mean that these resources mostly reached individuals who already knew their way around the legal landscape. Future studies into power perceptions should include alternative sampling methods and data collection methods that rely less on surveys to avoid this bias. For example, face to face interviews rather than online surveys would prevent exclusion with those with lower literacy skills (e.g. the PULS project: Balmer et al., 2023). I note that the results of study 1 (chapter 2) support the importance of power perceptions in a sample that did not show a bias towards those with higher educational levels.

Internal validity

Third, future research should ask further questions on the causal nature of relationships studied here. Studies 1 and 3 were cross-sectional and quasi-experimental field studies respectively, and we did not manipulate power nor randomly assign to the intervention or control conditions. This means we cannot rule out that the association between low power perceptions on the one hand and higher needs for help, more negative emotions, more third-party involvement and more negative outcome assessments on the other hand can be explained by other factors, nor that it may be reversed. For example, we found that early in the divorce, a perceived disadvantage was associated with higher negative emotions. Causality in this association could go both ways and is most likely bidirectional. That is, a perceived disadvantage in power is likely to increase negative emotions, and higher negative emotions are likely to lower perceived own power thus increasing a perceived disadvantage. This could be especially true for stress and anxiety, as these can result in a lower feeling of control (Kim et al., 2005; Bandura, 1997). I note that this does not explain why the perceptions of power disadvantages do dissipate and negative emotions do not. Stable psychological traits such as self-efficacy may also play a role in explaining the associations. For example, in study 2 (chapter 3) we found that that individuals who reported higher self-efficacy made stronger claims to the seller they were in conflict with. Self-efficacy in turn, and as expected, was correlated with having experience with consumer conflicts. In other words, those with more personal experience in consumer conflicts, rated their own ability to handle the conflict higher than those without experience. Accordingly, individuals who had these higher beliefs in their own ability to handle the conflict did indeed show more powerful claiming behavior. This is in line with researchers who take into account self-efficacy in work on access to justice and legal empowerment (McDonald et al., 2019; Pleasence & Balmer, 2019; Porter, 2016). I note that even if low power perceptions early in a conflict are not a cause but rather an indicator of higher needs and more negative outcomes, this does not discount their potential practical importance.

As for the interventions, our findings require follow up studies. In study 2 (chapter 3), the impact of power perceptions in the course of simulated consumer conflicts was less important than expected. Surprisingly, correlations between perceived power and self-efficacy (the perceived ability to handle the conflict), or between perceived power and the subsequent claiming behavior in the conflict (the strength of claims made from the seller in default) were very weak. It is possible that participants in the simulated conflict did not experience enough control within the experimental setting for the manipulations to have an impact on their behavior or self-efficacy assessments.

The exploration of the effect of Rechtwijzer also had important limitations. This study was done in the field, by contacting users of the intervention that was freely available at that time. As a result, individuals were not randomly assigned to conditions. In addition, the

number of participants in the control group was low. Nevertheless, we did see an intriguing increase in power perceptions after using the intervention in individuals who experienced a disadvantage in power when they compared themselves to the other party. It may be that this group became more aware of potential third parties they could involve, or -for example- of their legal rights, because Rechtwijzer offers this information in an accessible format. It could also be that their feeling of self-efficacy increased during this period, potentially because of the information offered on Rechtwijzer, and that this resulted in an increase in perceived own power. Future studies could explore the experiences of intervention users in more detail to understand which elements or combination of elements were most effective. I note that the goals of Rechtwijzer included the promotion of constructive conflict resolution in addition to empowering information (Van der Linden et al., 2009; Van Veenen, 2008), specifically by encouraging users to take the perspective of their (ex-)partners. We did not explicitly test this first goal in the presented study.

Third parties in divorce

With regards to the third parties that were used by individuals in divorce, we found that individuals who perceived themselves to be at a disadvantage at the start of the divorce were more likely to negotiate through lawyers and less likely to directly negotiate with the other party. This was in line with the higher needs for empowering help that were reported by those who experienced a disadvantage in power in study 1 (chapter 2). We also saw more use of mediators by individuals who reported power asymmetry than by individuals who reported power symmetry. What we do not know is whether the type of third-party help that was involved contributed to or attenuated the negative appraisals and emotions that those who experienced a disadvantage in power also reported. Our data in this study was not sufficiently rich to explore these questions but they are clearly important if we want to understand how best to assist individuals in asymmetrical conflicts in which they are at a disadvantage. Although more third-party involvement could be costly, the potential benefits of engaging a third party early on may outweigh the financial costs in the long run (Lawrence et al., 2007; Shaw, 2010). Because of their disadvantage in negotiations, this will be especially true for parties who experience strong negative asymmetry.

Third parties can help to counteract the effects of holding a low power position on negotiation behavior and they can prevent imbalanced and negative outcomes for the low power party in a number of ways. Third parties bring knowledge, tactics, status, and easier access to institutions, which can all be asserted to change the power balance between the two divorcing parties (Galinsky et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2005; Mnookin & Kornhauser, 1978; Zartman & Rubin, 2000). Thus, the importance of being able to engage a non-neutral third party such as a lawyer, possibly with the help of public legal aid provisions, as a way of employing outside power to counter power imbalances in the conflict, cannot be underestimated. Third parties can also counter the negative effects of low self-efficacy and

high stress by taking over conflict management, thus reducing negative affect (Giebels & Janssen, 2005). Finally, procedure oriented neutral third parties, such as mediators, can level the field by giving parties equal opportunity to speak, and counter negative conflict escalation spirals that may arise from negative asymmetry (Baitar et al., 2012; Bollen & Euwema, 2013; Shaw, 2010; Shestowsky, 2004).

Persistent negative effect of early perceptions of power asymmetry

The decrease in perceptions of asymmetry with negative effects that persisted over time was a robust pattern in study 3 (chapter 4). An important open question is whether this pattern is specific to divorce conflicts or if can we generalize these findings to other types of (legal) conflicts. Study 1 (chapter 2) did confirm the importance of power perceptions and perceived disadvantages of power across all types of legal conflicts encountered by individuals, but this study did not offer insight into how power perceptions developed over time. Three aspects of divorce conflicts may offer insight into how the longitudinal patterns we found in study 3 (chapter 4) potentially translate to other conflicts. First, in divorce, the conflict itself revolves around a growing independence of partners from each other. This may translate to non-romantic partners, such as business partners who dissolve their joint venture. Second, the sources on which (ex-)partners in divorce base their power perceptions are likely to be wide ranging and complex. They likely include economic and informational power sources as well as social/ psychological ones. An example of a psychological power source is guilt about breaking up the relationship that is leveraged in the negotiation by the (ex-)partner who was left. And because of the inherent changes to the (ex-)partners lives during divorce, these varied power sources are likely to be unstable. This may translate to other conflicts in which power divisions are complex and potentially unstable, such as inheritance disputes among siblings. Third, if the perceptions of large disadvantages in power early in divorce are related to the strong emotions and high salience of a conflict when it starts, the pattern of shrinking perceived disadvantages over time may translate to other conflicts that are very emotional and highly salient to individuals' lives, such as employment conflicts following lay-offs.

I note here that as discussed in chapter 4; the most problematic divorce processes were likely underrepresented in our sample. Divorcing partners who reported that there was some form of violence in the relationship were not included in the study. This could mean that the pattern of diminishing perceptions of asymmetry with persistent negative effects does not translate as well to the 10% to 20% of divorce conflicts that develop into complex divorce with lasting conflict (Anderson et al., 2011; Koppejan-Luitze et al., 2021; Smyth & Moloney, 2017).

Measuring power

In all three studies in this dissertation, we chose to measure the perception of power with one or two questions on the dependence or control held by each conflict party. This way of measuring a direct attitude of individuals offers the advantage of being efficient for use in practice as well as research (Kim et al., 2005). It also offers the advantage of translating across different types of conflicts and between both straightforward and complex situations. For an insightful measure of perceptions of power, we wanted to know whether power between conflict parties was perceived to be asymmetrically or symmetrically distributed, but also if the overall level was high or low (Bacharach & Lawler, 1976; Emerson, 1962; Johns, 1981; Rubin & Brown, 1975). To obtain this information, we asked participants to report their perceptions of their own power and the other party's power separately. We saw that this was important in study 1 (chapter 2) where it was higher levels of asymmetry between the two power measures that predicted higher needs, and not lower own power in itself. This pattern was confirmed in study 3 (chapter 4) where a perceived disadvantage (low own power with high power of the other party) was associated with persistent negative effects, where low power symmetry (the perception of low own power combined with low power of the other party) was not. In addition, results from study 1 (chapter 2) supported construct validity of our measure of power as we showed that our measure of perceived power asymmetry was clearly distinguished from conflict asymmetry by respondents, as correlations between these two measures were low. Research has shown that self-reports of power are reliably connected to actual power positions (Smith & Hofmann, 2016). However, our choice of measure also comes with its own limitations.

First, when we measure power perceptions with one or two questions, how these questions are formulated is important. In study 1 (chapter 2), power was measured by asking respondents to what extent they were dependent on the other party. A disadvantage here is that we cannot separate power in the context of the conflict from power in general in the relationship between the parties. Because the first study among visitors of the Legal Aid Desks (chapter 2) was retrospective, the difference between perceived control at a particular time within the conflict may be difficult to distinguish from a general perception of dependence between the two parties. However, I believe that this difference was more important in studies 2 and 3 (chapters 3 and 4) in which we were interested in power after interventions. We therefore formulated our questions to more clearly tap into the perception of power within the conflict at that time. In addition to questions on dependence, we also asked respondents to what extent they and the other party controlled the outcome of the conflict. For divorce conflicts (study 3), that usually last longer and are more complex than consumer conflicts (study 2) we also asked about control over the process. Correlations between the two control measures in divorce conflicts (control over the outcome and control over the process) were moderate to high.

Interestingly, in studies 2 and 3 (chapters 3 and 4) we found that control and dependence were correlated only weakly to moderately. Lower average reports of dependence than control in both of these contexts suggested that the words 'dependence' and 'control' were interpreted differently by our Dutch speaking respondents. In the Dutch anti-hierarchical and individualist context (Hofstede, 2001), 'dependence' might be seen as particularly negative. Although we found strong results for our control measures in divorce conflicts, future studies should keep in mind that cultural interpretations of power, dependence, and control could play a role in measuring power perceptions.

Second, we did not collect dyadic data in these studies. It would be valuable if future research assesses perspectives of both parties to verify if perceptions of the other party correspond with perceptions that this other party has of themselves. Additionally, a professional third party could provide an outsider's perspective and assess relevant power sources of both parties as well as the control both parties are seen to have over negotiations. This would allow a comparison to the perceptions of parties. For example, in divorce, (ex-)partners who negotiate with the help of a mediator could be asked to assess their perceptions of power (at different stages). These perceptions could be compared with assessments the mediator makes of the parties, the process, and the outcome of negotiations. This would enrich our understanding of what power perceptions are based on. Power resources are particular to individuals and conflicts and can be widely varied. They can range from financial power to engage strong third-party support, to access to platforms for naming and shaming, to the ability to control the relationships of a coparent with children. Understanding which power sources are leveraged in a conflict could create a richer picture of power dynamics and would create opportunities for help that is further tailored to individual needs.

Research that collects data on perceptions of both parties as well as those of a professional third party could also enrich our understanding of the formation of perceptions. For example, in study 3 (chapter 4) we saw that the experiences of those who reported a power disadvantage only partly mirror the experiences of those who reported a power advantage. That is, with respect to perceived gains and losses in, and satisfaction with the divorce agreement of both parties, the evaluations of those who report a power disadvantage mostly mirror those of people who report a power advantage. However, we see that individuals who feel at a power disadvantage give more extreme evaluations of the final divorce agreement. On average, and when we compare with the perceptions reported by those who see themselves at an advantage, they see higher perceived gains for the more powerful party and lower perceived gains for themselves. In addition, in terms of involvement of third parties we saw that those who reported a power advantage and those who reported power symmetry were equally likely to have negotiated directly with their (ex-)partner without the help of a third party and to have used one lawyer for the couple for the finalization. This was much less likely for those who reported a power

disadvantage. They were more likely to have negotiated through lawyers, and to have used one lawyer for each partner to finalize the divorce. This is notable because if power assessments of these individuals are correct, those who say they are more powerful would have been negotiating with someone who was at a power disadvantage and vice versa. This raises the question if those who report a disadvantage (or half of those who report symmetry) underestimate their power or if those who report an advantage (or half of those who report symmetry) overestimate theirs. One question to explore in this light would be to what extent the perception of a disadvantage arises out of low self-efficacy in relation to the divorce process. For example, to what extent do individuals who feel very unprepared for their divorce in general, translate this feeling into a negative perception of power.

Implications for practice and ambitions for the future

Our findings offer practical insights for professional third parties as well as developers of online interventions. Professional third parties, especially those who help people early on in their legal conflicts, can use the accessible self-report measures of power used in the studies presented here to quickly identify individuals who feel powerless. These measures can easily be used in face to face as well as remote forms of help. Experiences of power disadvantages come with higher needs for help (study 1, chapter 2), and we know that a perceived power disadvantage has negative consequences on emotions and evaluations of conflict outcome (study 3, chapter 4). This is especially important early on in the process, when power disadvantages can be consolidated in negotiations through agenda setting, power signaling and opening bids (Buelens & Van Poucke, 2004; Kteily et al., 2013; Magee et al., 2007; Van Kleef et al., 2006; Van de Vliert et al., 1999). For mediators especially, who guide negotiations, it is important to ask parties what their perceptions of power are. Research suggests that it may be more difficult for mediators to perceive the experiences of low power parties (Kalter et al., 2021), further supporting the potential importance of measures as used in the studies presented here. Studies 2 and 3 suggest that those who experience a power disadvantage can particularly benefit from legal information and third parties could use this to even the balance during preparatory stages. Finally, study 3 suggests that third parties should be aware that those who experience a power disadvantage do not always contact the same type of help as those who experience symmetry. It is important that third parties help assess conflict parties in whether the path they go down will be helpful or harmful (Beck & Frost, 2006; Pruitt & Kim, 2004; Shestowsky, 2020).

For the future development of online self-help resources, we examined needs for and effects of interventions, with a focus on interventions that offer information about the law, information about and referral to third parties, and self-efficacy support. All three studies support the importance of classic legal information as help early on in conflicts.

We found high needs for legal information in study 1, an effect as well as appreciation of a classic legal information intervention in study 2, and higher perceptions of own power in the sample that used Rechtwijzer, which includes legal information, in study 3. This is in line with other work that has shown that legal information is both useful and valued by its users (Bickel et al., 2015; McDonald et al., 2019). Needs reported in study 1 also point to the importance of fitting referrals to third parties, and again the Rechtwijzer intervention in study 3 included referrals. Finally, findings in studies 2 and 3 suggest there is potential in self-efficacy support. The Rechtwijzer intervention in study 3 included a focus on self-help, and in study 2 the experience of a peer who was successful in a similar situation improved power perceptions. I do note that the effects seen in studies 2 and 3 (chapters 3 and 4) are modest and will need to be replicated. Limited forms of help such as online information provision logically only have limited effects and will often need to be part of a trajectory in which professional third parties are involved as well (McDonald et al., 2019).

Minimal online interventions are relatively low cost and can be made widely available. However, when online self-help interventions are used to increase access to justice, e.g. in the form of legal advice or information, we should be aware that online interventions can lower the barrier to justice for some but may raise it for others. Young people who are reluctant to make phone calls or step into a legal advice office will benefit from online help. On the other side of the digital divide, those with limited (digital) literacy skills will lose out, if online help replaces in person or telephone advice. Using interactive formats and personalizing information can increase reach, but I note that individuals can never benefit from the most innovative online help, if they lack the means to find and access it (McDonald et al., 2019; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2019).

What the three studies in this dissertation add to the field, is an understanding that in addition to classic legal advice, self-efficacy support and emotional help also deserve a place in the legal aid landscape. The Rechtwijzer intervention already takes a few steps in this direction, encouraging its users to reflect on interests and conflict attitudes of both parties (Van der Linden et al., 2009; Van Veenen, 2008). Anecdotal evidence from comments on the questionnaires we used in study 3 further suggest that a moment of reflection on emotions of both parties was seen as beneficial. The work in this dissertation suggests further opportunities for psychological interventions. For example: individuals at a disadvantage may benefit from learning about power perceptions, and how they can project a powerful image, especially in the early phases of a negotiation (Carney, 2020; Ma & Jaeger, 2010; Magee et al., 2007). An individual can be made to feel (temporarily, slightly) more powerful when they are primed with power cues, e.g., when they are asked to think about a time during which they felt powerful (Galinksy et al., 2003). If these nonconscious cues are fleeting, they will not have a lasting effect on power perceptions. However, when present at crucial early moments in the conflict (e.g., agenda setting, choosing to engage or withdraw), they may have a lasting impact on the conflict process

and its outcomes. Future interventions could also build on the experiences of study 2, in which participants went through a simulated conflict and thus gained experience in negotiating with an uncooperative other. We saw in study 2 that previous experience with conflicts led to higher beliefs in own capabilities to deal with future conflicts. Games may play a role in helping people gain such experience. A realistic (AI powered) negotiation game may be the next addition to classic legal information.

In conclusion

In the introduction, we met Olivia who was facing divorce from Nicholas, and Douglas who had a conflict with a company about a printer he purchased. Both Olivia and Douglas felt at a power disadvantage vis-à-vis the other party in their legal conflicts. If we were to revisit Olivia and Douglas at the end of their conflicts, what would we expect them to have experienced? Based on our overall findings, we expect that both Olivia and Douglas would have had a high need for empowering help, particularly at the start of their conflicts. That is, they would value help that would inform them about which solutions are possible, which steps to take to achieve those solutions, and their rights and duties from a legal perspective. The studies presented here suggest that if Olivia and Douglas would have encountered this type of information online early on in their conflicts, they would likely have experienced smaller power disadvantages as a result. What we do not yet know, is if this type of help would have lasting effects. For Olivia in her divorce, we could make some further predictions. We expect that given her perceived disadvantage at the start of her divorce, she would experience a high degree of negative emotions throughout her divorce process, even if she has been able to improve her perceived power position in the course of the divorce process. Because of her experienced power disadvantage, Olivia is more likely than average to have engaged a lawyer to represent her in the divorce and to have negotiated with Nicholas through lawyers. We also expect that she is not very happy with the final agreement she made with Nicholas and that she expects to renegotiate their agreement in the future.

To conclude, my work clearly shows that those who experience a power disadvantage, like Olivia and Douglas, face more barriers and need more help to solve their conflicts in a way they can be happy with. To provide access to justice, we should not only aim to open the same door to all citizens, but we should also ensure that all citizens have the knowledge, support, and confidence to go through that door (Buck et. al., 2008). Early online interventions have the potential to contribute to opening that door to justice for those who need that empowerment most.

Addendum

References
Appendix A: Supplement to chapter 3
Appendix B: Supplement to chapter 4
Summary
Samenvatting
Acknowledgements

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APPENDIX A: SUPPLEMENT TO CHAPTER 3

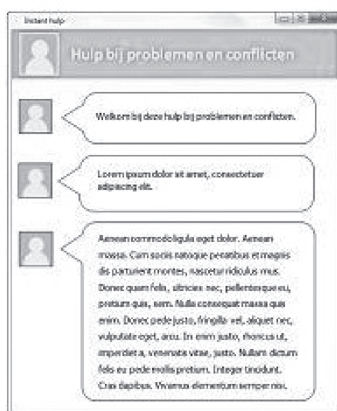
In this supplement we provide illustrations of the stimulus material from the online marketplace paradigm we used. We also include original versions and translations of all questions used in the research, and steps we took in cleaning the data. Finally, we provide tables of cell means and standard deviations for ANOVA's that were not included in the body of the manuscript.

Stimulus Materials

Below are two screenshots of the simulated web-environment in which the experiment was conducted.

Figure A1 *Illustration of the Simulated Web-Environment With Reviewing Option*

Figure A2 *Window With Virtual Agent in Which Interventions Were Presented*



Original Versions and Translations of all Questions

This research was conducted in the Netherlands and in Dutch. Below we provide the original questions with translations. When questions were based on existing scales published in English, we consulted English native speakers who were proficient in Dutch. Some scales included additional items for a bachelor thesis research. These items were not used in the analyses for the current manuscript.

Perceptions of Situational Power

Onderstaande vragen gaan over u en de verkoper. Soms moet u zich inleven in de verkoper. – The following questions are about you and the seller. Sometimes you will have to imagine the situation of the seller.

Scale from 1 (helemaal niet – not at all) to 7 (in zeer grote mate – to a very large extent)

- In hoeverre heeft u controle over de uitkomst van deze situatie? – To what extent do you have control over the outcome of this situation?
- In hoeverre heeft de verkoper controle over de uitkomst van deze situatie? – To what extent does the seller have control over the outcome of this situation?

Assessment of Future Self-Efficacy

Als u denkt aan uw conflict met de verkoper, welk antwoord past dan het beste bij u? – If you think about your conflict with the seller, which answer fits you best?

Scale from 1 (helemaal niet – not at all) to 6 (zeker wel – extremely so)

- Ik kan voor mijn standpunten opkomen tegenover de verkoper - I can stand up for my point of view when facing the seller.

- Ik heb vertrouwen in mijn vermogen om met de verkoper te overleggen en afspraken te maken. – I trust my ability to talk to/ debate the seller and to reach a fair agreement.
- Ik kan op een goede manier omgaan met emoties die spelen in de kwestie. – I can deal with the emotions that arise in this issue in a good way.
- Ik heb vertrouwen in mijn mogelijkheden om nieuwe en ingewikkelde problemen die zich voordoen in de kwestie op te lossen. – I trust my abilities to solve new and complicated problems that arise in the issue.
- Ik ben goed in staat om uit te zoeken wat er precies moet gebeuren om de kwestie te regelen. – I am capable of finding out exactly what has to be done to arrange the issue.

Evaluations of Interventions

Als u denkt aan de hulp die u heeft gehad. In hoeverre bent u het dan eens met de volgende stellingen? – If you think about the intervention you received, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?
Scale from 1 (helemaal niet – not at all) to 7 (in zeer grote mate – to a very large extent) + weet ik niet/ geen mening – I don’t know/ have no opinion on this.

- Ik voelde me gesteund door de hulp – I felt supported by the intervention.
- Ik voelde me beter over het conflict na het lezen van de hulp. – I felt better about the conflict after reading the intervention.
- Ik had minder stress na het lezen van de hulp. – I felt less stressed after reading the intervention.
- Ik voelde me geholpen na het lezen van de hulp. – I felt I was helped after reading the intervention.
- De informatie in de hulp was relevant voor me. – The information in the intervention was relevant to me.

Age, Gender, First Language, Experienced Consumer Conflict

- Heeft u ooit een consumentenconflict gehad? – Have you ever had a consumer conflict?
  - Ja, Nee, Weet ik niet zeker – Yes, No, I am not certain
- Wat is uw geslacht? What is your sex?
  - Mannelijk, Vrouwelijk, Anders/ Zeg ik liever niet – Male, Female, Different/ Would rather not say
- Wat is uw leeftijd? – What is your age?
- Welke taal spreekt u het beste? – Which language are you most proficient in?
  - Nederlands, Anders, namelijk: - Dutch, Different, namely:

Data cleaning steps

We included only participants who seriously participated in the online study. In step 1, we removed participants who did not send a message to the seller. This removed 5 participants. We then removed participants who dropped out before answering the questions on dependent variables. This removed a further 11 participants. Table 1 shows the distribution of data across conditions and for both steps of data cleaning.

Table A1 *Distribution of Data Across Conditions for Each Step of Data Cleaning.*

	Before data cleaning			**Data cleaning step 1**			**Data cleaning step 2**		
	Option to review			**Option to review**			**Option to review**		
Intervention	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
Control (no support)	13	27	40	13	26	39	12	26	38
Legal advice	20	20	40	20	18	38	19	17	36
Social comparison	22	16	38	22	16	38	21	16	37
Esteem support	15	18	33	14	17	31	14	16	30
Understanding and validation	23	17	40	23	17	40	19	15	34
Total	93	98	191	92	94	186	85	90	175

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Cell means and standard deviations

Tables 2 to 6 provide cell means, standard deviations and cell sizes for all ANOVA and repeated measures ANOVA analyses in the manuscript.

Table A2 *Cell Means, Standard Deviations, and Cell Sizes for Assertive Claiming Behavior*

Option to review	**Intervention**	**N**	**M**	**SD**
Yes	control (no support)	12	3.67	1.07
	legal advice	19	3.53	1.35
	social comparison	21	3.76	0.89
	esteem support	14	3.43	1.22
	understanding and validation	12	3.67	1.07
No	control (no support)	26	3.50	1.10
	legal advice	17	3.82	1.01
	social comparison	16	3.69	1.14
	esteem support	16	3.56	1.15
	understanding and validation	15	3.40	1.35

Table A3 *Cell Means, Standard Deviations, and Cell Sizes for Own Power*

			Before intervention		After intervention	
Option to review	**Intervention**	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**
Yes	control (no support)	12	3.00	1.95	3.00	1.60
	legal advice	19	3.47	1.68	2.95	1.13
	social comparison	21	2.57	1.86	3.86	1.88
	esteem support	14	3.21	1.67	3.50	1.34
	understanding and validation	19	2.58	1.02	3.16	1.46
No	control (no support)	26	2.81	1.36	2.96	1.43
	legal advice	17	2.12	0.99	3.18	1.51
	social comparison	16	2.69	1.40	3.31	1.30
	esteem support	16	2.31	1.49	3.13	1.63
	understanding and validation	15	2.47	1.73	2.80	1.37

Table A4 *Cell Means, Standard Deviations, and Cell Sizes for Other's Power*

			Before intervention		After intervention	
Option to review	**Intervention**	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**
Yes	control (no support)	12	6.00	0.85	5.58	1.31
	legal advice	19	5.53	1.39	5.11	1.37
	social comparison	21	5.43	1.47	5.29	1.52
	esteem support	14	5.29	1.64	5.00	1.30
	understanding and validation	19	6.21	0.54	5.79	1.23
No	control (no support)	26	5.88	0.91	5.92	0.93
	legal advice	17	5.88	1.11	5.53	1.07
	social comparison	16	6.38	0.62	6.19	0.83
	esteem support	16	6.25	1.00	6.06	0.85
	understanding and validation	15	5.27	1.62	5.20	1.21

Table A5 *Cell Means, Standard Deviations, and Cell Sizes for Self-Efficacy*

Option to review	**Intervention**	**N**	**M**	**SD**
Yes	control (no support)	12	4.57	0.76
	legal advice	19	4.47	0.87
	social comparison	21	4.18	1.14
	esteem support	14	4.46	0.58
	understanding and validation	19	4.24	0.74
No	control (no support)	26	4.27	0.91
	legal advice	17	4.42	0.95
	social comparison	16	4.65	0.71
	esteem support	16	4.40	1.35
	understanding and validation	15	4.19	0.85

Table A6 *Cell Means, Standard Deviations, and Cell Sizes for Evaluations of Interventions*

Option to review	Intervention	N	M	SD
Yes	legal advice	19	4.18	1.56
	social comparison	21	3.86	1.49
	esteem support	14	2.39	1.30
	understanding and validation	19	3.25	1.57
No	legal advice	17	4.19	1.92
	social comparison	15	3.91	1.72
	esteem support	16	2.83	1.46
	understanding and validation	15	3.32	1.03

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APPENDIX B: SUPPLEMENT TO CHAPTER 4

In this supplement, we provide tables for data that was represented in graphs in the main article as well as a full correlation table.

Table B1 *Own and Other's Power per Cluster Over Time*

Power	Cluster	T1			T2			T3		
		N	*M*	*SD*	N	*M*	*SD*	N	*M*	*SD*
Own power	1. Asymmetry : positive	41	5.3	0.7	29	4.3	1.4	21	4.4	1.3
	2. Symmetry: low-middle power	126	3.5	0.9	85	3.9	1.4	63	4.2	1.6
	3. Symmetry: high power	98	5.6	0.8	64	4.9	1.2	44	5.0	1.2
	4. Asymmetry: negative	47	2.1	0.6	31	2.9	1.3	23	3.3	1.6
Other's power	1. Asymmetry : positive	41	2.5	0.8	29	2.7	1.1	21	3.2	1.6
	2. Symmetry: low-middle power	126	3.9	0.8	85	4.5	1.2	63	4.3	1.5
	3. Symmetry: high power	98	5.6	0.8	64	4.9	1.0	44	4.5	1.4
	4. Asymmetry: negative	47	6.1	0.7	31	5.2	1.3	23	4.1	1.6

Note. This table shows cell means and standard deviations accompanying figure 1 in the main article.

Table B2 *Emotional Costs per Cluster Over Time*

Cluster	T1			T2			T3		
	N	*M*	*SD*	N	*M*	*SD*	N	*M*	*SD*
1. Asymmetry : positive	41	3.72	1.37	30	3.38	1.05	21	3.44	1.24
2. Symmetry: low-middle power	126	4.29	1.42	85	3.86	1.41	66	3.52	1.40
3. Symmetry: high power	98	3.53	1.29	64	3.42	1.28	48	3.06	1.21
4. Asymmetry: negative	47	5.08	1.33	31	4.98	1.34	23	3.97	1.39

Note. This table shows cell means and standard deviations accompanying figure 4 in the main article.

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Table B3 *Correlations for Study Variables*

Variable	N	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1) own power T1	312	_																
2) own power T2	209	.57**	_															
3) own power T3	151	.48**	.62**	_														
4) other's power T1	312	0.01	0.02	0.02	_													
5) other's power T2	209	-.15*	0.10	0.02	.59**	_												
6) other's power T3	151	0.04	0.14	.26**	.34**	.48**	_											
7) emotional costs T1	312	-.42**	-.37**	-.42**	0.02	0.01	-0.12	_										
8) emotional costs T2	210	-.43**	-.41**	-.46**	0.10	0.12	-.19*	.77**	_									
9) emotional costs T3	158	-.25**	-.36**	-.50**	-0.07	-0.02	-.28**	.63**	.62**	_								
10) content with process	150	.45**	.47**	.63**	-0.03	0.05	.21*	-.31**	-.39**	-.43**	_							
11) sufficient agreements	149	.27**	.40**	.46**	-0.02	0.07	.18*	-.21*	-.29**	-.33**	.65**	_						
12) own advantage	149	.31**	.34**	.42**	-0.07	-0.12	-0.01	0.04	-0.06	-0.08	.54**	.53**	_					
13) other's advantage	149	-.21*	-.20*	-0.05	.21*	.19*	.17*	0.03	0.02	-0.03	0.02	0.13	-0.08	_				
14) own contentment	149	.40**	.49**	.56**	-0.04	0.08	.22**	-.33**	-.42**	-.48**	.69**	.77**	.56**	-0.01	_			
15) other's contentment	149	.18*	.22**	.29**	.18*	.19*	.28**	-.26**	-.28**	-.40**	.50**	.47**	0.07	.31**	.43**	_		
16) sustainable, * agreements	149	.24**	.21*	.29**	.19*	.19*	.31**	-.38**	-.42**	-.50**	.50**	.58**	.20*	0.14	.54**	.56**	_	
weeks from start to T1	210	-0.13	-0.05	0.01	-0.05	0.05	0.07	0.02	0.00	0.00	-0.13	0.02	-0.10	0.15	-0.02	-0.06	-0.08	_
RW (1 = intervention, 0 = control)	312	.13*	0.06	0.04	0.09	0.00	-0.10	-.12*	-0.12	-0.02	-0.01	0.11	-0.02	-0.07	0.10	0.15	0.11	-.19**

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

SUMMARY

Conflicts about consumer purchases, divorce, employment contracts, and government benefits are not only legal issues, but psychological (life) events. In this dissertation, I examine the perception of power of individuals in legal conflicts; specifically the perception of facing a more powerful other in conflict. In a cross-sectional study among visitors of the Dutch Legal Aid Desks (N = 700, study 1, chapter 2), a simulated consumer conflict in an experimental study (N = 175, study 2, chapter 3), and a longitudinal field study following individuals through divorce (N = 312, study 3, chapter 4), my co-authors and I looked at the development and consequences of perceptions of power and powerlessness, and the potential of interventions to remedy those.

In study 1 (chapter 2), we hypothesized that *power* asymmetry (being more dependent on the other party than vice-versa) would predict a need for problem-focused help. We distinguish *power* asymmetry from *conflict* asymmetry (experiencing more conflict than the other side), which we expected to increase the need for emotion-focused help. Results among clients of the Dutch legal aid desks who had experienced one or more legal conflicts, showed that power asymmetry was indeed a strong and positive predictor of problem-focused empowerment needs, whereas both power asymmetry and conflict asymmetry positively and significantly predicted the need for emotion-focused help, particularly in the absence of wider social support.

In the experiment in study 2 (chapter 3), we tested the impact of different online interventions on consumer empowerment in a realistic online conflict. Consumer power was manipulated by offering or withholding the opportunity to leave a review of the seller, and consumers were randomly assigned to one of four interventions based on either legal or psychological help. We hypothesized that consumers would be more empowered when they had the opportunity to leave a review, especially when they had received an intervention that reinforced their confidence. We expected legal advice, invoking the power of the legal system, to be more beneficial when consumers did not have the option to leave a review. We developed an online mock market-place paradigm in which participants experienced problems during a purchase. We tested for effects on three indicators of empowerment: assertive claiming behavior, the perceived power division, and self-efficacy assessments. We found effects in line with expectations on power perceptions, but found no effects on claiming behavior and self-efficacy. It may be that the stakes were not high enough or the interventions not strong enough. The latter would be important, because we closely mirrored the interventions as consumers may receive them in practice.

In study 3 (chapter 4), we examined the relationship between perceived differences in power in individuals going through divorce and their subsequently reported emotions, appraisals of agreements, and third-party involvement in divorce settlement. Our main expectation was that an initially perceived disadvantage in power would influence subsequent stages of the divorce process, even when the perceived disadvantage

reduces over time. Furthermore, we expected an empowering effect of an educational web-based intervention that can reach people early in the divorce process. Employing a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design, the sample included Dutch adults who visited (n = 260) or did not visit (n = 52) a web-based intervention and were assessed at 3 points in time. As expected, and despite a decrease in perceptions of power asymmetry over time, we observed enduring detrimental effects of an early power disadvantage in terms of higher emotional costs, more dissatisfaction with the process and content of the agreements, and more third-party involvement. Interestingly, those who reported power asymmetry (both as disadvantage ánd advantage) also reported more lawyer and less mediator involvement. Also as expected, in this sample, those who reported a power disadvantage and used the web-based intervention, reported higher power at a later stage than those who did not use the web intervention.

The three studies in this dissertation show the importance of early identification of negative power perceptions, especially in high stakes conflicts such as divorce, where we saw that negative outcomes linked to initial negative power perceptions persisted, even when the initial perceived powerlessness was resolved. These studies also show the importance of tailoring interventions to diverging needs of those who perceive themselves as powerless or powerful. Finally, we saw that minimal online interventions can reach individuals very early in their conflicts, before they have started negotiations with the other party or have contacted third parties. The studies in this dissertation showed the limitations as well as the potential of such interventions to empower those who need it most.

SAMENVATTING

Conflicten over consumentenaankopen, echtscheiding, arbeidscontracten en overheidsuitkeringen zijn niet alleen juridische kwesties, maar ook psychologische (levens) gebeurtenissen. In dit proefschrift onderzoek ik de perceptie van macht van individuen in juridische conflicten; specifiek de perceptie van het geconfronteerd worden met een machtigere ander in een conflict. In een cross-sectionele studie onder bezoekers van de Nederlandse Juridische Loketten (N = 700, studie 1, hoofdstuk 2), een gesimuleerd consumentenconflict in een experimentele studie (N = 175, studie 2, hoofdstuk 3), en een longitudinale veldstudie die individuen volgt tijdens echtscheiding (N = 312, studie 3, hoofdstuk 4), hebben mijn coauteurs en ik gekeken naar de ontwikkeling en gevolgen van percepties van macht en onmacht, en de mogelijkheden van interventies om deze te verhelpen.

In studie 1 (hoofdstuk 2) stelden we de hypothese dat machtsasymmetrie (meer afhankelijk zijn van de andere partij dan andersom) een behoefte aan probleemgerichte hulp zou voorspellen. We onderscheidden machtsasymmetrie van conflictasymmetrie (meer conflict ervaren dan de andere partij), waarvan we verwachtten dat het de behoefte aan emotiegerichte hulp zou vergroten. Resultaten onder cliënten van de Nederlandse Juridische Loketten die een of meer juridische conflicten hadden meegemaakt, toonden aan dat machtsasymmetrie inderdaad een sterke en positieve voorspeller was van probleemgerichte empowermentbehoeften, terwijl zowel machtsasymmetrie als conflictasymmetrie de behoefte aan emotiegerichte hulp positief en significant voorspelden, met name bij afwezigheid van bredere sociale steun.

In het experiment in studie 2 (hoofdstuk 3) testten we het effect van verschillende online interventies op de macht van consumenten in een realistisch online conflict. De macht van consumenten werd gemanipuleerd door het aanbieden of onthouden van de mogelijkheid om een beoordeling over de verkoper achter te laten. Consumenten werden willekeurig toegewezen aan een van de vier interventies op basis van juridische of psychologische hulp. De hypothese was dat consumenten zich meer empowered zouden voelen als ze de mogelijkheid hadden om een beoordeling achter te laten, vooral als ze een interventie hadden ontvangen die hun vertrouwen versterkte. We verwachtten dat juridisch advies, dat een beroep doet op de macht van het rechtssysteem, meer effect zou hebben wanneer consumenten niet de mogelijkheid hadden om een beoordeling achter te laten. We ontwikkelden een paradigma waarin deelnemers problemen ondervonden tijdens een aankoop in een gesimuleerde online marktplaats. We testten effecten op drie indicatoren van empowerment: assertief claimgedrag, de waargenomen machtsverdeling en self-efficacy. We vonden effecten in lijn met de verwachtingen op machtspercepties, maar vonden geen effecten op claimgedrag en self-efficacy. Het kan zijn dat de inzet niet hoog genoeg was of de interventies niet sterk genoeg. Dat laatste zou belangrijk zijn,

omdat we de interventies in deze studie baseerden op interventies die consumenten in de praktijk zouden kunnen tegenkomen.

In studie 3 (hoofdstuk 4) onderzochten we de relatie tussen waargenomen verschillen in macht bij individuen die door een echtscheiding gingen en hun later gerapporteerde emoties, beoordelingen van overeenkomsten, en betrokkenheid van derden bij de echtscheiding. Onze belangrijkste verwachting was dat een aanvankelijk ervaren machtsnadeel de volgende fasen van het scheidingsproces zou beïnvloeden, zelfs als het ervaren machtsnadeel na verloop van tijd afneemt. Bovendien verwachtten we een empowerment-effect van een educatieve online interventie die mensen vroeg in het scheidingsproces kan bereiken. We maakten gebruik van een quasi-experimenteel pretest-posttest design. Deelnemers bestonden uit Nederlandse volwassenen die een online interventie bezochten (n = 260) of niet bezochten (n = 52). Zij beantwoordden vragen op 3 tijdstippen. Zoals verwacht, en ondanks een afname in percepties van machtsasymmetrie na verloop van tijd, zagen we blijvende nadelige effecten van een vroeg machtsnadeel in termen van hogere emotionele kosten, meer ontevredenheid over het proces en de inhoud van de afspraken, en meer betrokkenheid van derde partijen. Een onverwachte bevinding was dat degenen die machtsasymmetrie rapporteerden (zowel als nadeel én als voordeel), ook meer betrokkenheid van advocaten en minder van mediators rapporteerden. Zoals verwacht zagen we in deze groep deelnemers dat degenen die een machtsnadeel ervoeren en de online interventie gebruikten, in een later stadium meer macht rapporteerden dan deelnemers die ook een machtsnadeel ervoeren maar de interventie niet gebruikten.

De drie studies in dit proefschrift laten het belang zien van vroegtijdige identificatie van negatieve machtspercepties, vooral in conflicten waarin veel op het spel staat, zoals echtscheidingen, waarin we zagen dat negatieve uitkomsten gekoppeld aan aanvankelijke negatieve machtspercepties bleven bestaan, zelfs toen de aanvankelijk ervaren machteloosheid was opgelost. Deze studies laten ook zien hoe belangrijk het is om interventies af te stemmen op de behoeften van mensen die zichzelf als machteloos of machtig ervaren. Tot slot zagen we dat minimale online interventies individuen al heel vroeg in hun conflicten kunnen bereiken, voordat ze in onderhandeling zijn gegaan met de andere partij of contact hebben opgenomen met derden. De studies in dit proefschrift toonden zowel de beperkingen als het potentieel van deze interventies om diegenen te helpen die dat het meest nodig hebben.

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