

## **Dominance in Romantic Relationships**

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### **Abstract**

This research aimed at studying the influence of dominance in the parents' relationship and the parent-child relationship on college students' romantic relationships. Our hypothesis was that dominance in the parents' relationship and authoritarian parenting will predict dominance in college students' romantic relationships. Questionnaire data exploring this question were collected from 53 AUC students. Correlational and regression analyses were conducted and found that neither of our predictor variables; dominance in parents' relationship and authoritarian parenting predicted the outcome variable; dominance in college students' relationship. Also, no significant correlations were found between each of the predictor variables and the outcome variable. However, our two predictor variables were in fact significantly correlated. These results imply that students' dominance levels are not affected by the dominance in their parent's relationship or by their parenting styles, but that both dominance between parents and authoritarian parenting may arise out of a common factor. We suggest that this factor may be the presence of traditional patriarchal fathers.

### **Introduction**

Dominance is an essential aspect in all interpersonal relationships (Tusing & Dillard, 2000). Dunbar and Burgoon (2005) argue that both dominance and power are essential aspects of relationships, especially close and personal relationships, because individuals in relationships depend on one another to pursue and

achieve their goals. Issues arise when individuals' goals are in conflict and when power is exercised by one partner over the other pushing him/her to comply to achieve their own goals at the others expense (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005). Levels of a person's dominance are partially innate and partially learnt from interactions with others (Burgoon and Dunbar, 2000). A significant portion of one's childhood includes interaction with their parents which leads to parents affecting the child's dominance levels. This can be further explained with the attachment theory and the different attachment styles one attains in their childhood. Accordingly, adult romantic relationships are often reflection of their experiences with their parents (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). This paper aims to explore the relationships between dominance in college students' romantic relationships, dominance in their parents' romantic relationship, and dominance in the parent-student relationship. Many research papers have addressed the issue of dominance within romantic relationships and studied the influence of dominance in parent-child relationships. However, further investigation is needed to understand the influence of the interaction of the two factors on college students' romantic relationships.

'Dominance' and 'power' are both very ambiguous to a lot of people. Power is considered by many to be similar to dominance, as the term power is often used in the context of having influence or control over other people's behavior (Sadikaj, Moskowicz, and Zurof, 2016). To truly understand the concept of dominance, it must be distinguished from other interrelated terms such as "aggressiveness,

argumentativeness, assertiveness, status and power” (Burgoon; Johnson; Koch, 1998, p. 310). Aggressiveness includes an array of displays such as physical violence, verbal abuse and hostility, whereas argumentativeness and assertiveness are more related to advancing one’s own aims, for instance, refuting and defending positions and issues (Burgoon et al., 1998). Aggressiveness, argumentativeness, and assertiveness can all be classified under the category of dominance (Burgoon et al, 1998). Status, on the other hand, refers to one’s position in the social hierarchy (Ellyson & Dovidio, 1985). It is generally expected that power and dominance are understood as interchangeable terms; however, it is clarified by Burgoon and Dillman that “Power is broadly defined as the ability to exercise influence by possessing one or more power bases, dominance is but one means of many for expressing power” (1995, p. 65). A simpler understanding of these two terms would be that power refers to your ability to influence, whereas dominance would be the actual manifestation of power in behavior.

Dominance, as an act or a manifestation, doesn’t necessarily mean more power as powerful people could choose to keep their power latent; for example, when they don’t feel the need to use their power over their partners (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005). Therefore, it could only be a matter of perceived dominance. It can be perceived in two manners that complement each other: verbal and nonverbal signals.

Dunbar and Burgoon (2005) classify the nonverbal cues into vocalic, kinesic, haptic, proxemic, etc. However, the two most critical cues are kinesic and

vocalic. The kinesic code is generally viewed as the most informative code used to understand dominance (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005). It includes eye gaze, facial expression, body movements, posture and gestures (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005). More relaxed facial expressions and more direct eye contact express dominance as it increases impressions of legitimacy, expertise and credibility. The vocal cues also have an impact on people's impression of dominance. Lamb (1981) concluded that "individuals high in vocal control actually exert more control over resources and outcomes" (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005). According to Pittam (1994) there are "three parameters that are basic to physical measures of vocal cues; underlying loudness, pitch and time." (as cited in Tusing et al., 2000, p.150). Loudness is defined as how soft or loud a voice sounds while amplitude refers to how much sound is made. As amplitude increases, "the perception of loudness increases" (Tusing et al., 2000, p. 150). Pitch refers to how high or low your voice sounds. As for time, it refers to variables such as speech rate. All of these parameters play a role in how dominant you sound vocally. Those with louder voices, lower pitches, and slower speech rates are viewed as dominant. An explanation of why this came to be would be the evolutionary perspective mentioned by Tusing et al. and supported by many other scholars (2000). "The adaptive advantage of recognizing a potential threat even at a distance is readily apparent. During the course of evolutionary history, loud and low pitched sounds became associated with intimidation and hostility. [...] In complementary fashion, soft and high pitched sounds came to be identified with the absence of

aggression and the presence of submissiveness.” (Tusing et al., 2000, p. 152)

The quintessential nonverbal communicator of dominance would be vocally and kinesically dynamic (greater eye gaze, using more gestures, greater amounts of talk, and more vocal animation) while giving the impression of confidence and relaxation (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2000).

As for the verbal cues, there are various influential strategies that can be used to change the behavior or goal of a partner in a relationship. This can range from “problem-solving and compromise to unilateral accommodation and the use of insults, threats, and physical force” (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005, p. 211). There are three types of strategies as mentioned by Canary and Spitzberg “integrative strategies that are cooperative in nature, distributive tactics that are competitive and antagonistic, and avoidance strategies that seek to diffuse discussion of the conflict”.

Sadikaj, Moskowitz, and Zurof (2016) focus on the processes involving dominant behavior in romantic relationships. They researched the importance of the Interpersonal Theory which focuses on the characterization of dominant behavior and the motives behind it that link dominance to romantic relationships. This theory states that dominant behaviors are “strivings for establishing control, influence and power over the other” partner. Constant dominant behavior by a partner “may frustrate the person’s agentic motives” (Sadikaj et al., 2016, p. 1326). Agentic motives are motives for independent self-determination. Frustrating the fulfillment of these motives means denying someone the

ability to be self-determining or independent. With time, the person's interpersonal experience, portrayed by feelings of dissatisfaction in response to the partner's dominant behavior, may cause the person to feel dissatisfied with their relationship. Many studies have shown that dominance within a relationship causes displeasure. According to Sadijak (et al.) "the pattern of findings from these studies suggests that equal couples are most satisfied and wife-dominant couples are least satisfied." (Sadijak et al., 2016, p. 1326) Ehrensaft, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Heyman, O'Leary, and Lawrence (1999) explored the power of partner control Building on their work, Sadijak (et al.) concluded that "a partner's dominant behavior is related to the person's negative affect to the extent that this behavior is associated with the person's autonomous motivation, and that persons characterized by a stronger link between their negative affect and their partner's dominant behavior are also characterized by lower relationship satisfaction." (Sadijak et al., 2016, p. 1346)

Other research papers have noted that dominant people report their romantic relationship as high quality when their partner is submissive and submissive people reported high relationship quality when their partner was dominant (Markey & Markey, 2007). Markey and Markey (2007, p. 520) explained that this is understandable, as "complementarity occurs when individuals are opposite on the dominance dimension". They further noted that "a person who is somewhat dominant might enjoy continuously interacting with a submissive romantic partner because he or she allows

this person the ability to maintain his or her preferred style of behavior.” (2007, p. 530)

The quality and satisfaction in romantic relationships is related to the attachment theory. The success of the adult's romantic relationship depend on the security of the relationship which depends on the individual's' attachment styles. If tension arises from both partners having non-secure (anxious or avoidant) attachment styles then, satisfaction in the relationship will decrease and they will be more insecure in their relationship as a result of not being able to depend on each other healthily. The development of your attachment style originates from your interaction with your parents.

Adult romantic relationships are reflections of their experiences with their parents (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). The attachment theory confirms that the set of expectations and beliefs that the child experiences through infancy tend to persist through life which is why the attachment style that is developed through infancy will continue to have effect on one's adult romantic relationship (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). Furthermore, it was argued that once a child has set expectations and beliefs about relationships, he/she will seek out relationships that are consistent with those beliefs (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). This process promotes the continuity in attachment patterns over life course which means that children who are raised in a certain pattern will be influenced by this pattern of beliefs and behavior over their lifespans (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). Therefore, we should be able to observe significant

effects of both parent-child and parent-parent relationships on college students' romantic relationships.

According to Wilson and Barrett (1987), "a significant relationship was found between the reported degree of dominance for the significant other and the reported degree of dominance for the opposite-sex parent." Deducing from that, a role model, their opposite sex parent, was essential in order for a person to choose a romantic partner. That romantic partner is most likely to have dominance levels matching the persons opposite sex parent. This shows how a person sets their beliefs of relationships according to their parents' relationship and mirrors that in their own relationship.

Moreover, parents affect future romantic relationships of their children through their parenting. Hazan and Shaver (1987) argue that "the affectional bonds in adult romantic relationships are translations of infant-caregiver relationship in infancy" (p. 511). This translation focused on three attachment styles; avoidant, secure and anxious (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). These styles continue through one's life based on his/her "mental models of self and social life" (Hazan and Shaver, 1987, p. 511). These mental models are in part determined according to the relationship between the parent and the child and relationship experiences with parents (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). Therefore, based on your experience of responsiveness and accessibility with your parents, you start to develop your attachment style which you will continue exhibiting in your own adult romantic relationship (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). Moreover, if one infant's mother is not responsive enough, then the child will develop an anxious or



avoidant attachment style instead of a secure attachment style (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). Shi argues that “individuals with an anxious attachment style, on the other hand, may use dominance as an attempt to ensure their partners’ availability” (Shi, 2003, p. 153).

Parenting styles differ from one household to another and that is natural as every parent does what he thinks is best for his children. However, researchers classify parenting styles, according to the amount of dominance practiced on the child, in three categories: permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative (Baumrind, 1966). Baumrind (1966) says that each parenting style affects children differently. First, the permissive parenting style is “a non-punitive, acceptant, and affirmative manner toward the child’s impulses, desires, and actions” (p. 889). The parent does not impose any rules or regulations on the child, on the contrary, the parent has to reason with the child and convince him with what he thinks is right (Baumrind, 1966). The child then is free to decide everything on his own (Baumrind, 1966). This parenting style depends on self-regulation (Baumrind, 1966). Its advantage is that it frees the child from the restraints of his parents’ expectations and the frustrations that come with these restraints. It doesn’t allow the parents to shape the child however they want. Second, the authoritarian parenting style is when the parent attempts to shape the child according to certain values that come from higher authority (Baumrind, 1966). Baumrind (1966) explains that this parent values obedience and will be punitive, if house rules weren’t implemented. No verbal discussions occur between the parent and the child as the parent expects the kids to take

their word for it and nothing else (Baumrind, 1966). This style depends on inhibiting self-will as it is “the root of all sin and misery” (Baumrind, 1966, p. 890). The parent is stern and bans autonomy because he cares. Baumrind (1966) adds that the child who depends on his parents’ wisdom to make decisions is not likely to take initiative and be independent. He/she is also more likely to be successful and intelligent but not creative (Baumrind, 1966). Third, the authoritative parenting style describes the parent who guides the child with reason (Baumrind, 1966). The parent shares the reasons behind house policies and encourages verbal discussions with child (Baumrind, 1966). This style depends on both autonomy and conformity as he enforces his perspective as an adult however he also respects the child’s individuality (Baumrind, 1966). The child will take responsibility of his actions which is different from the permissive parenting style, where there is no familiarity with organization or consequences, and different from the high restrictiveness present in the authoritarian parenting style.

Authoritarian parenting has a significant effect on children’s emotional and behavioral problems which may result in different levels of dominance. Emotional and behavioral functioning of children have been found to be closely related to parenting styles (Rizvi and Najam, 2015). It was also found that authoritative parenting is the optimal parenting style, while permissive and authoritarian parenting are significantly associated with emotional and behavioral problems (Rizvi and Najam, 2015). These emotional and behavior problems are categorized in two groups; externalizing and

internalizing problems (Rizvi and Najam, 2015). Externalizing problems are problems manifested in the child's external behavior such as aggressive and disruptive behavior (Rizvi and Najam, 2015). Internalizing problems are problems that affect the child's internal psychological environment such as social withdrawal, anxiety and depression (Rizvi and Najam, 2015). Authoritarian parenting results in children with emotional and behavioral problems (Sartaj and Aslam, 2010). "Children of such parents either tend to withdraw into themselves (internalizing) or become aggressive (externalizing) towards others" (Sartaj and Aslam, 2010, p. 49). Therefore, authoritarian parenting styles potentially affect dominance levels as a child with aggressive and disruptive behavior is more likely to exhibit dominance towards his/ her future partner more than a healthy functioning person who experienced authoritative parenting. On the other hand a child who expresses social withdrawal and anxiety is more likely to exhibit submissive behavior towards future romantic partner.

Regarding gender, Furman, Simon, Shaffer & Bouchey (2002) have concluded that women react differently to violence than men. Women tend to internalize the blame and associate the violence received from the mother with the violence received from their partner (Furman et al., 2002). On the other hand, men tend to externalize the blame and they exercise this violence on their partners, therefore they associate violence received from the mother with receiving and inflicting violence on their partners (Furman et al., 2002). In other words, it can be said that women are

more likely to become submissive as a result of experiencing a dominant parent-child relationship, while, men can be dominant as a result of experiencing dominance in their parent-child relationship.

In conclusion, past research has generally defined dominance, how it is perceived, and its effect on romantic relationships and parent-child relationships. However, throughout the research on this topic, the interrelation between the parent-parent relationship and the parent-child relationship with the child's later romantic relationships is lacking. This research paper will attempt to fill this gap in our knowledge, by studying the influence of dominance in the parents' relationship and the parent-child relationship on college students' romantic relationships.

Because prior research has shown that dominance between parents and authoritarian parenting may influence dominance in a child's future interpersonal relationships (Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Wilson and Barret, 1987; Shi 2003; Rizvi and Najam, 2015; Sartaj and Aslam, 2010), we hypothesize that:

Dominance between parents and authoritarian parenting style will both predict dominance in college students' romantic relationships.

## **Methods**

This study aimed to examine how the dominance present in parents' romantic relationship and the type of parenting style the parents use affect college students' dominance in present romantic relationships. We conducted a survey to examine these relationships.

### *Participants*

We attempted to collect 60 participants of equal number of 30 females, and 30 males. However, our sample was 53 AUC students in romantic relationships. They consisted of 30 females, 19 males, and 4 unknowns. Purposive sampling was used to recruit the required amount of participants. The criteria were that they had to be currently studying in the AUC and currently in romantic relationships.

### *Measures*

Our questionnaire included three measures: two versions of the 'Dominance in Relationships' scale, one for the students' relationships, and another for the parents' relationship, and the 'Parenting Styles' scale. The 'Dominance in Relationship' measure is a scale of 20 items that indicates the extent of dominance an individual exercises on his/ her partner in a romantic relationship (Hamby, 1996). This measure is a self-report measurement scale. The response scale is a four-point interval scale where participants select whether they strongly agree (1), agree, disagree, or strongly disagree (4).

To measure the dominance in parents' romantic relationships the same scale of 'Dominance in Relationships' was used. However, the items were adapted to fit with the college students' observation of their parents' romantic relationship.

The parenting style measure is a 32-item scale that determines the type of parenting the students' parents use. The measure of this survey is a 6 points interval scale in which participants select options from never (1) to always (6). The types of parenting measured in this scale are permissive, authoritarian and authoritative. The measure is split into these three types with 13 questions each for authoritative and authoritarian types, while 4 questions measure the permissive type. The type of parenting is determined according to the highest score obtained in the three subtests (Robinson; Mandeleco; Olsen & Hart, 1995). Since we are interested in the effect of authoritarian parenting specifically as a proxy for dominance in the relationships between parent and child, we only used the 13 items specified to measure the authoritarian parenting style in our questionnaire.

As mentioned in the introduction, one confounding variable—gender—will be taken into consideration through the data collection process as it has been shown to alter the way that individuals get influenced by their parent-child relationship. Therefore, an additional item to obtain self-reported gender was added to the survey.

### *Procedures*

This study took place over two to four weeks. Personal and confidential information was not collected, and all data was anonymous. The participants were approached in public areas in the university such as the university Plaza and the Library etc. Participants were given the

survey to fill out privately. In addition, advertisements were posted on closed AUC community groups on social media. Participants contacted us to enroll in the study and receive the questionnaire. The questionnaire was given out in the form of handouts.

The data was analyzed using multiple regression to examine whether our predictor variables successfully predict dominance in students' romantic relationships. If both the parents' romantic relationship observed by the college student and the parenting style used on the college student during their youth predicted a significant effect on the dominance levels in college students' current romantic relationship, we should find significant positive regression slopes in our analysis.

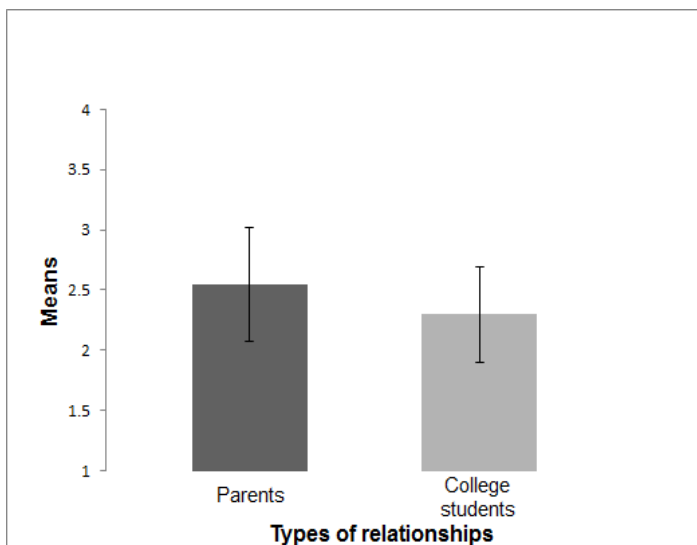
## **Results**

Our sample was composed of 53 AUC students currently in romantic relationships, including 19 males, 30 females and 4 participants of unknown gender.

Reliability statistics for our three scales all showed good reliability. The first measure focused on the dominance in college students' relationships. It consisted of 20 items with an inter-item correlation of 0.820 which shows a strong reliability between the items of the scale. The second measure assessed parenting style. It consisted of 13 items with an inter-item correlation of 0.891, which shows a very strong reliability between the items of the scale. The third part of the survey's scale focused on the students' observed dominance in their parents' relationships. It consisted of 20 items with in an inter-item correlation of 0.804,

which shows strong reliability between the items of the scale.

The mean of dominance in the college student relationship was 2.30 with standard deviation of 0.4 showing a slight amount of dominance on average in their relationship. The mean of observed dominance in parents' relationship was very similar to that of the students in their romantic relationships ( $M=2.54$ ,  $SD=0.47$ ), indicating slight dominance in these relationships on average as well. Parenting style was moderately authoritarian on average ( $M=3.30$ ,  $SD=1.12$ ). (see figure 1)



**Figure 1:** Means of dominance in parents' relationship and college students' romantic relationships. Error bars represent standard errors.



All bivariate correlations were non-reliable ( $p > .05$ ), with the exception of the correlation between parenting style and observed dominance between the parents ( $r = 0.42$ ,  $p = .002$ ), showing a moderately positive association between these variables.

We conducted a regression analysis to test our hypothesis. Our predictor variables were observed dominance in the parents' relationship and degree of authoritarian parenting style. Our outcome variable was dominance in college students' relationship. Two potential confounding variables were controlled for; gender and relationship status. Regarding gender, we controlled for it by inserting gender in the regression equation. As for relationship status, it was controlled for by ensuring that all sampled participants were in a romantic relationship. Neither of our predictors nor gender reliably predicted the outcome variable dominance in students' romantic relationships.

## **Discussion**

In this research we aimed to study how the dominance present in the parents' romantic relationship and authoritarian parenting style affect the college students' dominance in present romantic relationships. However, our findings did not support our hypothesis that "dominance between parents and authoritarian parenting style will both predict dominance in college students' romantic relationships".

From our sample of 53 college students, an intermediate level of dominance was found in their romantic relationships. The mean of scores of the

authoritarian parenting style scales was moderate which shows that there was a moderate level of perceived parental authoritarianism among the students. Furthermore, high average levels of perceived dominance in the parents' romantic relationship were not found either; a moderate level of dominance was observed among students' perceptions of these relationships as well.

We found that the level of authoritarian parenting and perceived dominance in the parents' romantic relationship were related. It was a positive medium correlation which means that when high dominance levels are present in the parent's relationship then it is most likely that a more authoritarian parenting style was present. We speculate that this association may be due to a single (most likely male) parent who is dominant with their partner will most likely be authoritarian with their child as well. It is possible this association is overestimated - the college student observing their parents may relate the dominance observed in their parents' relationship with dominance observed in their own relationships with their parents.

Contrary to our hypothesis, the levels of dominance between the college students' relationships were not associated with the dominance they experienced with their parents or the dominance they observed between their parents.

One could speculate that the absence of association between our outcome and parenting style may be because they were not affected by their parenting styles specifically in the context of romantic relationships. Instead, the mirroring might happen when

they start having their own children and developing their own parenting styles. Also, according to the different gender effect pointed out regarding authoritarian parenting, women tend to internalize their emotions which may lead them being less dominant, while men tend to externalize their emotions which may lead them to being more dominant (Furman, 2000; Sartaj and Aslam, 2010). Therefore, the fact that the number of females was greater than the number of males may have shifted the means of dominance in the students' relationship to portraying less dominance than there actually was. Perhaps, if we obtained equal numbers of males and females the mean dominance level would be higher.

As for the lack of association between the dominance in parents' relationship and the dominance in college students' romantic relationship, it may be because the students were more exposed to other, more impactful exemplars of romantic relationships, and no longer mirror their parents' relationship as they see many other alternatives. The attachment theory was not applicable to our study. This could be because our sample included several participants that had parents that were divorced, remarried, or deceased. They did not have set expectations based on their parents' relationship. Instead, they question their surroundings and start to formulate their own attitudes towards romantic relationships. Furthermore, this difference in the effect of the attachment theory could be due to the change in cultural context. As Egypt is a collectivist culture there are social norms concerning dominance that are different from Western countries. Non-western

countries perceive some dominant behavior (especially from a man towards a woman) as more acceptable and standardized. This could play a role in how the student perceived dominance in relationships.

#### Limitations

The limitations of this study included several confounding variables. We did not account for parents' marital status, as it was observed that some of the participants had a deceased parent, or had a step father or a step mother, or were divorced. Another confounding variable that was not controlled was that we were observing the college students' perception of the dominance in their parents' relationship, which could have been biased, and may not portray the reality of the dominance in their parents' relationship. In addition, the duration of the couples' relationship could affect their perception of each other and their dominance. Dominance may differ in the beginning of a relationship than couples who have been together longer. We did not assess relationship duration. Also, as we had a relatively small sample that was obtained through purposive sampling, it was not representative of the Egyptian population neither the AUC population. Finally, relationship satisfaction could have an effect on how our respondents perceive their relationships, and this needs to be measured and controlled for. The same applies the other way as dominance can affect the satisfaction of the relationship.

Based on the previously mentioned limitations we would recommend the following adjustments for future research. First, measure and control the aforementioned confounding variables by adding items

concerning the parents' marital status and the students' relationship duration. Second, provide a copy of the survey to the parents in order to obtain the actual dominance in their relationship rather than the perceived dominance observed by the student. Third, use random sampling as well as obtain a larger number of participants for a more diverse sample. Finally, ask the student about their satisfaction levels in their current relationship and ask them to state the factors that could affect these levels in order to see if dominance was one of them.

In conclusion, at least for our sample, students do not adopt dominant behavior in their own relationship based on the parenting style they experienced, or due to modeling their relationships on that of their parents. We did find that parents are more likely to be perceived as authoritarian in their parenting style when they are perceived as dominant in their own romantic relationships.

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