

# The Balance of Power in Interracial Couples

*Manan Khattar*

How power, or a sense of dominance in a relationship, was distributed amongst couples and varied with factors like race, wealth, cultural background, parental upbringing and future plans was one of the most stimulating aspects of my research. In my first transcript, Wayel, an Arab/white man, had a predominantly unsaid but nevertheless quite apparent sense of superiority over his Chinese wife, Vivian. Not to say that he did not love her, but he seemed to subconsciously assume that his word, his will, and his decisions were more important to the success of the family than hers. One example appears in the following quote, in which he describes his disagreement with her views on independence:

The fact that she would say, early on, oh my view is my husband needs to take care of the finances, that's not an egalitarian viewpoint. She, she used to say, oh, I'm very independent, you know, I'm living in Berkeley by myself, without a car, paying my own bills... that doesn't make you independent.

Here, Wayel has his perspective on how proper distribution of work and chores in a relationship, and in describing Vivian's perspective he is almost dismissive in his tone. One possible reason for this power dynamic in their relationship is Wayel's personality itself: he is confident and aware of his technical and social abilities, but this confidence often overflows into arrogance and self-centrism. When describing how he and Vivian did not immediately start dating despite having sex, he mentions how both of them were dating other partners and he has a very distinct "philosophy" when it comes to dating. He describes how wants to make sure "the other girl understands it," and wants to "give her time so she doesn't think that [he is] moving on very quickly." Immediately I got a sense of him thinking of himself as someone who is successful enough with dating that he needs to institute rules so that his exes can get over him, giving me the perception that he is quiet but over-confident. He goes on to talk about Vivian's ex in the following manner:

R: And she was very admirable, but the poor guy, was just, umm [...] it was very hard for him to propose to her, very hard—both of us [inaudible] [0:10:19.7]. Uhh, just I mean, I don't think there was anything wrong with him as a person, just—[10:25:00]

His casual dismissal of Vivian's ex's will and determination further highlights his own self-assuredness. Part of his self-confidence stems from the fact that he is hungry for control in his life, and he receives it the majority of the time. This leads into another factor that could cause this imbalanced power dynamic—his occupation and wealth. He describes himself as having roughly "four times" the wealth of Vivian, and the significant disparity in the work they do—Wayel is a mathematician currently working at Google, while in describing Vivian's schedule he says "You know, Vivian watches TV, you know, Vivian sleeps for eight hours a night, and watches TV, and that already is, more I feel, that takes up..." He seems to think the fact that disparity in the number of hours the two work for the family and the income they make gives him the

authority to be the primary decision-maker for the family. This is why he is annoyed at Vivian's parents' assumption that Wayel and Vivian will take care of them financially; in fact, this almost makes him want to split with Vivian, as he describes: "I was like, fine, you buy them a house, fantastic, bear in mind, we're breaking up." While he later uses reason and logic to understand Vivian's parents' reasoning, as is his wont, his instinctive dismay with Vivian's part of the family assuming some control of things highlights his natural inclination towards power.

Money is as good a point as any to start comparing the respondent in my other transcript, Shreyas, with Wayel. Shreyas is an Indian man with a white wife, Elizabeth, and interestingly enough the distribution of power in Shreyas' relationship is markedly different. In particular, in relation to money, while Wayel repeatedly talks about the financial steps he has taken to stabilize the family, including creating a joint trust, a separate trust for his parents, changing his financial adviser, etc., while Shreyas simply mentions that he and Elizabeth jointly decided to create a pooled account and didn't think too much of it afterwards:

R: Well we started out we didn't have—I think that was one of the things we did—I think we did that right after we got married, I'm not—sounds about right, I'm not 100% sure but I think, when we got married, we're like ok, you know, might as well, pool our resources, so I think that was kind of the [trails off].

Shreyas doesn't seem to hold money in as large an importance as Wayel, and thus money doesn't become something that he has to exert sole control over; rather, it becomes something that he can collaboratively figure out with his wife. Shreyas is also much more willing to admit when he his wife has done something better than him—for example, both Wayel and Shreyas claim to cook somewhat more fancier meals than their wives, but while Wayel takes great pains to explain that how much more technically intricate his meals are than his wife's in almost all scenarios, Shreyas freely admits that "Elizabeth makes better Indian food" than he does. This willingness to not be right all the time is much more prevalent in Shreyas's character.

The most interesting factor both linking and separating the two men is their connection with their cultural background, and how it has affected their current self and how they want to pass it on to the next generation. Wayel is extremely proud of his Arab background; in fact, when asked if he considers himself White, he responds in the negative and says he is an Arab first and foremost. This almost devotional attachment to his roots explains much of his subsequent behavior: much of the conflicts he has with Vivian and her family stem to the fact that he cannot relate or fully understand the Chinese culture that Vivian has taken for granted all her life. Arab culture is very patriarchal and proud, even inflexible at times; Wayel describes how his grandfather did not even accept his father's offer for a toilet seat, even though the toilet seat in his house was broken. Wayel reflects that attitude, almost to a T, in his male-centric attitude, his pride, and his unwillingness to change. When it comes to his future children, he combines his love for control with his love for his culture and almost completely plans out his plan for their cultural education, even if he dies. Once again, Vivian plays a minimal role in this decision, and instead of talking to her about his plans, Wayel worries if she will be able to culturally educate his children to his specifications in the case of him passing away.

Shreyas has a superficially similar, yet truly distinct approach to his Indian culture and background. Although both came over from their respective countries to the United States for college, and have lived roughly half of their lives in each cultural world, Shreyas seems to have let culture affect his personality and decisions much less than Wayel. Shreyas is well-aware of the pitfalls and downsides of Indian culture; as one

example, when describing the Indian tendency to be late to everything, he says:

R: So I mean one good example would be like when their, their sense of like lateness and time is one thing, um, things are just much more kind of, being late is just not that big of a deal in India, and much more of a given, and, you know, some, it drives Elizabeth off the rock sometimes because my family will sort just decide their own time for something, and there's like no adherence to any kind of schedule whatsoever...

In addition, Shreyas does not want to go back to India, as compared to Wayel who visits the Middle East multiple times a year. He considers himself a transnationalist, lacking a firm sense of national identity, while Wayel seems to be secure in his ethnicity and nationality. Part of the reason for this could be the color of Wayel's skin, which allows him to pass as a white male and thus a part of the dominant sociological class in America. Shreyas, on the other hand, is repeatedly reminded of his immigrant status by both members of Elizabeth's extended family as well as American society in general, especially when it comes to doubting that he is the father of his daughter.

Shreyas' general lack of faith in his culture is reflected in his attitude towards passing on this culture to his children. While Wayel is adamant that he and Vivian must leave no stone unturned in efforts to give their children the most complete cultural education, alluding that their lives as his children would be incomplete otherwise, Shreyas is much more lax in this attitude toward his daughter Satya. He believes that he should do his best to ensure that Satya experiences the culture she comes from and realizes that "[these are real things that exist in the world,]" but ultimately the decision of what she wants to do with this information is up to her:

R: I think what'll happen is that at some point, she will, she'll probably, rebel against um, whatever it is we're trying to impart to her, and so, I'm sure it'll change from that perspective. I'd be surprised if it changed dramatically in terms of how [inaudible] [1:16:15.4] the-the-the things that we're trying to expose her to, I'd say we'd probably continue to do the same. In particular the thing that's most important to me is that she gets to go to India every few years and continue that connection, everything else will fall into place outside of that.

As he lacks this feeling of security and superiority in his own culture, Shreyas does not impose his will on his family when it comes to differences in cultural issues. Both Wayel and Shreyas experience culture shock in some way when it comes to interacting with their wife's family; Shreyas is dumbfounded when he sees a gun on Elizabeth's mother's wall, while Wayel cannot understand the Chinese tradition of supporting one's parents well into their retirement. But while Shreyas takes these differences into his stride, saying that he rarely ever sees his in-laws and that it is not worth the time/effort to engage them about some of the unreasonable things they talk about, Wayel cannot seem to put his ego aside and accept that the Chinese perspective is a perfectly acceptable world view:

I wavered at the time. I was like, I don't like this. And [inaudible] [1:20:08.6], I'm like ok, maybe what they're expecting, uh, is, within like, within traditional Chinese culture, but I don't know Vivian, you have to understand this is very weird for me, I can't—it's very hard.

For all the seeming slight I have given to Wayel in this memo, he seems to be a commendable person. He is a hard worker, deeply attracted to Vivian, faithful and committed to his relationship, and wants to do

everything he can to make sure his children and his family, even his in-laws, have an excellent future. In his devotion to his culture, however, he tends to assume that most things associated with his culture and by extension himself are “correct” or “proper,” and therefore assumes power in his relationship over Vivian because he subconsciously believes that the decisions he would make would more beneficial ones than Vivian could. On the other hand, Shreyas is much less sure of his identity and what he wants to make from himself in terms of his legacy, perhaps as a result of his race, perhaps a result of his insecurities about trying to fit in in college, perhaps as a result of other factors. But as a result, he is more willing to divide up power between himself and his wife, less eager to immediately assume control of everything in their family life, and more willing to let things take their natural course. Thus, what I’ve learned from studying these two respondents is that cultural background and the extent to which it is incorporated in one’s life seems to play a very significant role in the distribution of power between spouses.