



# Erectile dysfunction, suspicious jealousy, and the desire for power in heterosexual romantic couples

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## ABSTRACT

The present research investigated whether Erectile Dysfunction (ED) was associated with the desire for power in heterosexual romantic relationships and whether this association would be mediated by suspicious jealousy. We secured self-reports provided by men (Study 1,  $n = 117$ ), partner-reports provided by women (Study 2,  $n = 139$ ), and dyadic reports (Study 3,  $n = 113$  couples). The results of these studies provide consistent evidence that ED was associated with the desire for power in both men and women. However, the prediction that suspicious jealousy would mediate the association that ED had with the desire for power received only partial support across these studies. Specifically, men's suspicious jealousy mediated the association that ED had with men's desire for power in Study 3, but it did not mediate this association in the other studies. Discussion explores the implications of these results, including the possibility that difficulties with sexual functioning may have negative consequences for heterosexual romantic relationships.

## 1. Introduction

Healthy erectile functioning is often important for the sexual behaviors of heterosexual romantic couples. *Erectile dysfunction* (ED; NIH Consensus Development Panel on Impotence, 1993) is the aggregate term for erection problems that limit satisfying sexual interactions. Studies on ED have concentrated on its prevalence (e.g., Selvin et al., 2007), biological underpinnings (e.g., Yafi et al., 2016), and links with psychological issues such as depression (e.g., McCabe & Matic, 2008; Pakpour et al., 2016). ED also has been shown to be linked with several undesirable relationship outcomes for men and their romantic partners including a lack of sexual and emotional satisfaction with the relationship (Corona et al., 2009; Maestre-Lorén et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2003), less frequent sexual activity (McCabe & Matic, 2008), reduced levels of sexual desire, and other difficulties with sexual functioning such as reduced orgasm frequency in the female partner (e.g., Chevret et al., 2004; Fisher et al., 2005). Research also has shown ED to have negative associations with the extent to which individuals are satisfied with their relationships (Corona et al., 2009; Maestre-Lorén et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2003), and that sexual dysfunction may contribute to relationship disharmony (e.g., Brotto et al., 2016; McCabe et al., 2010).

## 2. Power

Power refers to the ability of an individual to influence the thoughts, feelings, or behaviors of another person (e.g., Simpson et al., 2015) and it plays an important role in the functioning of romantic relationships (see Agnew & Harman, 2019, for an extended discussion). The possession of power in romantic relationships is beneficial because it affords individuals more opportunities to behave in accordance with their own preferences and desires (e.g., deciding how to use shared financial resources; Galinsky et al., 2023; Keltner et al., 2003). One perspective on how power functions in romantic relationships is offered by Interdependence Theory (Blau, 1964; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Waller, 1938) which argues that the person who is more willing to terminate a relationship will tend to have more power in the relationship.

There are several distinct conceptualizations of power throughout the psychological literature, and understanding these distinctions is important for understanding the connections that power may have with romantic relationships. One important distinction in this literature differentiates social power (i.e., ability to exert control over others) from personal power (e.g., feelings of self-efficacy and agency; see Overbeck & Park, 2001 or Overbeck, 2010 for a review). Other studies investigating power in romantic relationships have further distinguished

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between experienced power (felt, subjective), positional power (held, objective), and power motive (i.e., desire to influence others; e.g., Breznsnyak & Whisman, 2004; Körner & Schütz, 2021).

Power motive may be further distinguished from the balance of power between members of a romantic couple, and from an individual's level of satisfaction with the amount of power he or she currently holds. For example, personal sense of power (felt power), and satisfaction with the amount of power held in the relationship were positively associated with overall relationship quality, and with sexual satisfaction, in particular (Körner & Schütz, 2021). In addition, women's power motive was positively associated with the male partner's sexual satisfaction. In contrast, positional or held power (access to financial resources and education level), was not associated with any aspect of relationship quality. This research partially echoes the results of previous studies showing that marital power (essentially, social power within a committed relationship) moderated the association between marital satisfaction and sexual desire (e.g., Breznsnyak & Whisman, 2004). This area of research highlights the importance of distinguishing between held and felt power, as well as different types of motivation or desire for power, especially when considering their consequences for romantic relationships.

Some research has focused on felt power and its consequences for romantic relationships. Whereas perceptions of equal power distribution in romantic couples are associated with increased relationship satisfaction (Peplau & Campbell, 1989), individuals who perceive themselves as having low power in romantic relationships tend to report lower relationship satisfaction (Perry et al., 2016). Across five studies, chronically low-power men were more likely to use or endorse the use of sexual aggression when their power was temporarily increased in an experimental setting (Williams et al., 2017). Further, individuals who perceived themselves as having lower levels of chronic power reported a greater desire for power.

Other areas of research have attempted to extend the understanding of the power motive and its associations with romantic relationships. For example, the desire for power has been found to be negatively associated with relationship commitment, with this association being mediated by relationship satisfaction, investment, and perceived quality of alternative partners (Traeder & Zeigler-Hill, 2020). This pattern of results suggests that the desire for power in romantic relationships may be destabilizing for the romantic couple, which may, in turn, result in relationship disharmony.

The consequences of low power (or perceiving oneself to have little power) in romantic relationships may not be equivalent for men and women, and in fact, power deficits may be particularly harmful for women's relationship experiences. For example, relationships in which women hold less power than their male partners are associated with female-directed intimate partner violence (Filson et al., 2010; Kim & Emery, 2003), which is particularly concerning because women tend to have less power than men in heterosexual relationships (Carli, 1999; Felmlee, 1994). Thus, it may be important for research to investigate aspects of romantic relationships that might influence women's possession of power. Although the present study was primarily concerned with the potential impact of men's sexual dysfunction on their desire for power, we also were interested in whether men's experience with ED might afford the female partner an opportunity – or at least a desire – to assert more control over her romantic relationship.

### 3. Power and sexual dysfunction

To our knowledge, only a single study has explored the relationship between ED and power in romantic relationships (de Moraes Lopes et al., 2012). Specifically, a qualitative investigation on a small sample of Brazilian men who had undergone radical prostatectomy for prostate cancer and who were experiencing difficulties with incontinence and sexual functioning revealed that the difficulties experienced by these men led to feelings of decreased power and masculinity. Notably, this

study focused on men's subjective feelings of personal power, rather than positional or social power. Still, this study provides preliminary evidence that experiencing ED may undermine the extent to which men feel powerful in their current relationship. Further, Interdependence Theory (Blau, 1964; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Waller, 1938) suggests that difficulty with healthy sexual functioning may, indeed, be related to low levels of social power as well. That is, experiencing ED may undermine the extent to which men believe they would be romantically desirable to other potential partners, which, in turn, may reduce their social power in the current relationship by making them less willing to consider leaving it.

Although there is little evidence to support a direct link between ED and reduced social power, other studies of romantic relationships may provide evidence for an indirect link. ED has been shown to be associated with an array of aversive behaviors committed by men against their romantic partners including the use of sexual coercion, insults, and violence (Vance et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2023), and these behaviors are conceptually similar to what has been found for issues surrounding social power. For example, there is a growing literature showing that people who are frustrated by their lack of power in various contexts may attempt to demonstrate their power through the use of strategies such as aggression (e.g., Bugental & Lin, 2001; Fast & Chen, 2009), with this tendency being particularly strong for men who perceive themselves as lacking power in their romantic relationships with women (Overall et al., 2016).

Another reason to expect a link between ED and reduced feelings of power relates to men's self-perceived masculinity (e.g., Maliski et al., 2008). One potential explanation for the negative consequences that ED has on masculinity is that the ability to achieve and maintain an erection tends to be included – at least implicitly – in many conceptualizations of masculinity (Potts, 2000). The relationship between ED and masculinity is relevant to the consideration of power because traditional views of masculinity often involve possessing and demonstrating power (Bosson & Vandello, 2011). Thus, the results of previous studies showing that men who experience ED seem to feel that their masculinity has been threatened may align with the possibility that ED also may lead to issues surrounding power for men in their relationships.

### 4. Suspicious jealousy, and its consequences for romantic relationships

Consideration of feelings of romantic jealousy may be helpful for better understanding low felt power and its consequences for romantic relationships, and a specific focus on *suspicious jealousy* may be particularly useful. Suspicious jealousy refers to thoughts and behaviors regarding the possibility of infidelity by one's partner in the absence of irrefutable evidence (e.g., Rydell & Bringle, 2007). This particular form of jealousy tends to be linked with various problems such as feeling less secure about the relationship (Attridge, 2013; Rydell & Bringle, 2007). Although no research has examined the relationship between power and jealousy in romantic relationships, the available evidence suggests that individuals who report higher levels of suspicious jealousy may feel less able or willing to leave their current relationship and, as a result, may feel less powerful.

ED has also been shown to be associated with how men regard their romantic relationships including their feelings of jealousy toward their romantic partner and perceptions of potential infidelity by their partner (e.g., Vance et al., 2023). For example, Vance and colleagues observed that men who reported more experience with ED reported greater feelings of suspicious jealousy, which, in turn, was associated with men's use of partner-directed behaviors such as verbal and physical aggression. Men who experience ED tend to be more concerned about their ability to retain their romantic partners, which, in turn, may lead to various aversive behaviors. For example, the suspicious jealousy of men mediated the connections that ED had with their use of verbal and physical aggression directed toward their partners (Vance et al., 2023). This

suggests that men who report more severe levels of ED may be more likely than other men to use aversive strategies against their female partners in an effort to prevent them from engaging in infidelity or dissolving the relationship. This research is also consistent with the idea that men who experience greater difficulty with sexual functioning, and experience more feelings of suspicious jealousy, may resort to aversive tactics to feel more powerful in their romantic relationships (e.g., Williams et al., 2017).

## 5. Overview and hypotheses

Our goal was to investigate whether ED was associated with the extent to which men wanted more power in their heterosexual romantic relationships. Our hypothesis was that men who reported more severe ED symptoms would want additional power in their relationships. The basis for this hypothesis was that previous studies have shown that ED is linked with feelings of powerlessness in men (de Moraes Lopes et al., 2012) and that individuals who feel powerless tend to desire more power in their romantic relationships (Traeder & Zeigler-Hill, 2020). In addition, we considered whether ED would have indirect associations with the desire for power through suspicious jealousy. That is, we hypothesized that men who experienced more problems with ED would report more suspicious jealousy, which, in turn, would be associated with their desire for power. We examined the connections that ED had with the desire for power using self-reports of men (Study 1), partner-reports of women (Study 2), and dyadic reports from both men and women (Study 3). We were interested in the indirect associations that ED had with the desire for power through suspicious jealousy, so we used mediational analyses in each of the present studies.

## 6. Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to investigate whether ED had an indirect association with men's desire for power through their self-reported suspicious jealousy. Specifically, we predicted that men's self-reported experience with ED would be associated with greater feelings of suspicious jealousy, which, in turn, would be associated with their own desire for power.

### 6.1. Method

#### 6.1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 173 men who had been in heterosexual romantic relationships for at least six months and were recruited using Prolific. Participants were paid \$10.00 USD upon completion of the survey. The data reported in Studies 1–3 were collected in September 2020 as part of a larger project concerning whether ED is associated with jealousy and partner-directed behaviors (e.g., partner-directed violence). Part of that larger project has been reported elsewhere (i.e., Vance et al., 2023), but the present study is focused on the desire for power which was not included in the previous report. We excluded data for 56 participants from Study 1 due to issues such as having substantial amounts of missing data or failing attention-check items. The final sample consisted of 117 participants who had an average age of 25.66 years ( $SD = 6.50$ ;  $range = 18–65$  years) and the racial/ethnic composition of the final participants was 79.3 % White, 5.2 % Asian, 6.9 % Hispanic, 6.9 % Black, and 1.7 % multi-racial. The mean relationship length of the final participants was 3.59 years ( $SD = 4.29$ ;  $range = 6$  months–36 years;  $median = 2.71$  years).

### 6.1.2. Measures

**6.1.2.1. Erectile dysfunction.** The International Index of Erectile Function (IIEF-5; Rosen et al., 1999) was used to assess self-reported erectile functioning (5 items; e.g. “How often were you able to get an erection during sexual activity?” [ $\alpha = 0.62$ ]).<sup>1</sup> Participants responded to each question using anchors that differed across the items (e.g., 1 [*Almost never/never*] to 5 [*Almost always/always*]). We decided to reverse-score each item because we were interested in erectile dysfunction. Thus, higher scores indicated more frequent experience with ED.

**6.1.2.2. Jealousy.** We used part of the Multidimensional Jealousy Scale (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989; Rydell & Bringle, 2007) to assess suspicious jealousy (16 items; e.g., “I suspect that [my partner] is secretly seeing someone of the opposite sex” [ $\alpha = 0.88$ ]). Participants responded to each item using a 7-point scale with specific anchors that differed across the items (e.g., 1 [*never*] to 7 [*always*]).

**6.1.2.3. Desired power.** We employed a modified version of the Desire for Power Scale (Williams et al., 2017) that was previously used by Traeder and Zeigler-Hill (2020) to assess whether individuals want more power in their relationships (4 items; e.g., “I don't have as much power in my romantic relationship as I deserve” [ $\alpha = 0.82$ ]). Participants responded to each item using a 7-point scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

## 7. Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations. It is important to note that the levels of ED were relatively low ( $M = 1.55$ ;  $SD = 0.43$ ). This suggests that our sample may not adequately represent men who experience greater difficulty with normal erectile functioning. However, low average levels of ED are not uncommon for studies using the IIEF (either the 5-item or 15-item version), or for studies investigating the psychological correlates of ED (e.g., Chevret et al., 2004; Velten et al., 2019). Thus, even in samples of older men, levels of self-reported ED may be modest or low. Still, we contend that these data are valuable insofar as they provide important information regarding the potential effects of low or moderate levels of ED on the relationships of a wide sample of men.

We had a mediational prediction, so we conducted a mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018). The results are presented in Table 2. ED was not associated with suspicious jealousy ( $\beta = 0.05$ ,  $t = 0.58$ ,  $p = .564$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-0.13, 0.24]$ ), nor was suspicious jealousy associated with the desire for power ( $\beta = 0.17$ ,  $t = 1.86$ ,  $p = .065$ ,

**Table 1**  
Study 1 (men's self-reports): intercorrelations and descriptive statistics.

	1	2	3
1. Men's Self-Reported Erectile Dysfunction	–		
2. Men's Self-Reported Suspicious Jealousy	0.05	–	
3. Men's Self-Reported Desire for Power	0.20*	0.18	–
Mean	1.55	1.91	2.86
Standard Deviation	0.43	0.74	1.22

\*  $p < .05$ .

<sup>1</sup> The alpha reliability for the IIEF in Study 1 was low ( $\alpha = 0.62$ ). Given that the alpha reliability for this measure was acceptable in Studies 2 and 3, and that the IIEF is a widely used and well-validated measure for self-reported ED, the low reliability observed in Study 1 may indicate some level of abnormality for that particular sample. Thus, the results of Study 1 should be interpreted with caution.

**Table 2**

Study 1 (Men's Self-Reports): Results of the Mediation Analysis with Suspicious Jealousy (SJ) Mediating the Association that Erectile Dysfunction (ED) had with the Desire for Power.\*\*

	$\beta$
Association with Mediator	
ED → Suspicious Jealousy	0.05
Associations with Outcome	
ED → Desire for Power (Total)	0.20*
ED → Desire for Power (Direct)	0.20*
SJ → Desire for Power	0.17
ED → SJ → Desire for Power	0.01

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

$CI_{95\%} [-0.01, 0.35]$ ). ED had a positive direct association with the desire for power ( $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $t = 2.16$ ,  $p = .033$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [0.02, 0.37]$ ), but ED did not have the expected indirect association with the desire for power through suspicious jealousy ( $\beta = 0.01$ ,  $z = 0.49$ ,  $p = .623$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-0.02, 0.05]$ ).

### 7.1. Discussion

The results of Study 1 showed mixed support for our predictions. Men's self-reported ED was positively associated with their desire for power. Conversely, suspicious jealousy was positively associated with men's desire for power in the mediation model, but the zero-order correlation was not significant. Further, we did not find support for our prediction that the association between ED and the desire for power would be mediated by suspicious jealousy. In fact, ED was not associated with suspicious jealousy in Study 1, which is not consistent with the results of recent studies reporting an association between ED and suspicious jealousy (e.g., Vance et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2023), and one case study in which ED medication relieved symptoms of morbid jealousy (Mendhekar & Srivastav, 2004).

## 8. Study 2

We attempted to replicate and extend the results of Study 1 by focusing on women's partner-reports. Specifically, we predicted that women's perceptions of their partner's ED would be associated with greater partner-reported suspicious jealousy, which, in turn, would be associated with their own desire for power.

### 8.1. Method

#### 8.1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 204 women who had been in heterosexual romantic relationships for at least six months and were recruited using Prolific. Participants were paid \$10.00 USD upon completion of the survey. We excluded data for 65 participants due to issues such as having substantial amounts of missing data or failing attention-check items. The final sample consisted of 139 participants who had an average age of 26.95 years ( $SD = 8.46$ ;  $range = 18-61$  years) and the racial/ethnic composition of the final participants was 76.1 % White, 6.5 % Asian, 2.2 % Hispanic, 10.1 % Black, 3.6 % multi-racial, and 1.4 % other. The mean relationship length of the final participants was 3.94 years ( $SD = 3.34$ ;  $range = 6$  months-16 years;  $median = 2.71$  years).

#### 8.1.2. Measures

**8.1.2.1. Erectile dysfunction.** We modified the IIEF-5 to assess women's perceptions of their male partner's ED (5 items; "How often was your partner able to get an erection during sexual activity?" [ $\alpha = 0.82$ ]). Again, we reverse-scored each item such that higher scores indicated more frequent ED in women's partners.

**8.1.2.2. Jealousy.** We modified part of the Multidimensional Jealousy Scale to assess women's perceptions of the male partner's suspicious jealousy (16 items; e.g., "[My partner] is worried that some member of the opposite sex may be chasing after me" [ $\alpha = 0.84$ ]).

**8.1.2.3. Desired power.** We used the Desire for Power Scale from Study 1 to assess whether individuals want more power in their relationships ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ). Whereas the previous two measures assessed women's perceptions of their male partners, this measure assessed women's own desire for power in their relationships.

## 8.2. Results

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations. The results of the mediation analysis are presented in Table 4. Women's perception of their male partner's ED was not associated with their perception of their male partner's suspicious jealousy ( $\beta = 0.08$ ,  $t = 0.97$ ,  $p = .332$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-0.09, 0.25]$ ), but women's perception of their male partner's suspicious jealousy had a positive association with women's self-reported desire for power ( $\beta = 0.32$ ,  $t = 4.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [0.17, 0.48]$ ). Women's perception of their male partner's ED had a positive direct association with women's desire for power ( $\beta = 0.24$ ,  $t = 3.12$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [0.09, 0.40]$ ), but it did not have the expected indirect association with women's self-reported desire for power through women's perceptions of their male partner's suspicious jealousy ( $\beta = 0.03$ ,  $z = 0.92$ ,  $p = .358$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-0.03, 0.08]$ ).

### 8.3. Discussion

The results of Study 2 were similar in many ways to those of Study 1. As expected, women's perceptions of men's ED and suspicious jealousy were both positively associated with their own desire for power. However, there was no support for the association between women's perception of men's ED and their own desire for power being mediated by their perception of men's suspicious jealousy. As in Study 1, ED was not associated with suspicious jealousy, which does not align with the results of recent studies showing a link between ED and suspicious jealousy (e.g., Vance et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2023).

## 9. Study 3

We attempted to replicate and extend the results of the previous studies by examining both members of heterosexual romantic couples. This represents a significant extension of Studies 1 and 2 which relied on reports from men and women who were independent from each other. Although suspicious jealousy did not mediate the association between ED and the desire for power in the previous studies, we were still interested in investigating whether this pattern would emerge in a dyadic sample of romantic couples. Thus, we predicted that experience with ED would have an indirect association with desire for power through suspicious jealousy.

**Table 3**

Study 2 (Women's Partner-Reports): Intercorrelations and Descriptive Statistics.\*\*\*

	1	2	3
1. Women's Perceptions of Men's Erectile Dysfunction	–		
2. Women's Perceptions of Men's Suspicious Jealousy	0.08	–	
3. Women's Self-Reported Desire for Power	0.27***	0.34***	–
Mean	1.31	1.62	2.49
Standard Deviation	0.44	0.53	1.28

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 4**  
Study 2 (Women's Partner-Reports): Results of the Mediation Analysis with Perceptions of Suspicious Jealousy (SJ) Mediating the Association that Perceptions of Erectile Dysfunction (ED) had with Self-Reported Desire for Power.\*

	$\beta$
Association with Mediator	
ED → Suspicious Jealousy	0.08
Associations with Outcome	
ED → Desire for Power (Total)	0.27**
ED → Desire for Power (Direct)	0.24**
SJ → Desire for Power	0.32***
ED → SJ → Desire for Power	0.03

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

9.1. Method

9.1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 280 community members (i.e., 140 romantic couples) who had been in heterosexual romantic relationships for at least six months. As in Studies 1 and 2, participants were recruited via Prolific; however, this only allowed us to contact one member of each couple. At the beginning of the survey, Prolific participants were informed that their romantic partner would receive a \$10.00 Amazon gift card if they also participated in the study. At the end of the survey, Prolific participants were presented with a web link to the survey, and a random 5-digit code to give to their partner so their responses could be linked. Prolific participants received \$10.00 USD for participating, and their partners received a \$10.00 Amazon gift card if they also participated. We excluded data for 27 couples due to issues such as at least one member of the couple having substantial amounts of missing data or failing attention-check items. The mean relationship length of the final 113 couples was 4.05 years ( $SD = 3.60$ ;  $range = 6$  months-19 years;  $median = 3.08$  years). For men, the mean age was 27.34 years ( $SD = 7.84$ ;  $range = 18-60$  years) and their racial/ethnic composition was 83 % White, 5 % Asian, 4 % Hispanic, 2 % Black, and 6 % other. For women, the mean age was 26.23 years ( $SD = 7.38$ ;  $range = 18-58$  years) and their racial/ethnic composition was 79 % White, 7 % Asian, 8 % Hispanic, 2 % Black, and 4 % other.

9.1.2. Measures

9.1.2.1. *Erectile dysfunction.* We used the IIEF-5 from the previous studies to assess male self-reported ED ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ) and the perceptions that women had of their male partner's ED ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ).

9.1.2.2. *Jealousy.* We used part of the Multidimensional Jealousy Scale from the previous studies to assess male self-reported suspicious jealousy ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ) as well as the perceptions that women had of their male partner's suspicious jealousy ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ).

9.1.2.3. *Desired power.* We employed the modified version of the Desire for Power Scale from the previous studies to assess the extent to which men ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ) and women ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ) want additional power in their romantic relationships.

9.1.3. Data analysis

We examined the associations that ED had with desire for power through suspicious jealousy with an Actor-Partner Interdependence Mediation Model (APIMeM; Ledermann et al., 2011) using the MEDYAD macro (Coutts et al., 2019). The APIMeM is capable of examining indirect associations in dyadic data structures and it accounts for the fact that individuals in a romantic relationship influence each other such that the outcomes experienced by one person are influenced by factors

concerning both the individual (an actor effect) and their partner (a partner effect). For example, a man's self-reported ED may be associated with his own desire for power (actor effect) and the desire for power reported by his romantic partner (partner effect).

9.2. Results

Table 5 presents descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations. The results of the APIMeM analysis are presented in Table 6.

9.2.1. Actor effects for men

Consistent with our predictions, men's self-reported ED had a positive association with men's self-reported suspicious jealousy ( $\beta = 0.34$ ,  $t = 3.09$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [0.12, 0.55]$ ). Tests of mediation revealed that men's self-reported ED had the expected positive indirect association with their own desire for power through self-reported suspicious jealousy ( $\beta = 0.11$ ,  $z = 2.15$ ,  $p = .032$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [0.02, 0.24]$ ).

9.2.2. Actor effects for women

Women's perceptions of their male partner's ED were not associated with their perceptions of their male partner's suspicious jealousy ( $\beta = 0.18$ ,  $t = 1.65$ ,  $p = .102$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-0.04, 0.40]$ ). Tests of mediation revealed that women's perceptions of their male partner's ED did not have an indirect association with their own desire for power through perceptions of their male partner's suspicious jealousy ( $\beta = 0.00$ ,  $z = -0.22$ ,  $p = .826$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-0.06, 0.05]$ ).

9.2.3. Partner effects for men

Men's self-reported ED did not have an indirect association with his female partner's desire for power through men's own self-reported suspicious jealousy ( $\beta = 0.05$ ,  $z = 1.06$ ,  $p = .289$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-0.03, 0.13]$ ).

9.2.4. Partner effects for women

Women's perceptions of their male partner's ED did not have an indirect association with their male partner's self-reported desire for power through their perceptions of their male partner's suspicious jealousy ( $\beta = -0.01$ ,  $z = -0.49$ ,  $p = .624$ ,  $CI_{95\%} [-0.06, 0.05]$ ).

**Table 5**  
Study 3 (Dyadic): Intercorrelations and Descriptive Statistics.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>Men's Reports</i>						
1. Self-Reported Erectile Dysfunction	–					
2. Self-Reported Suspicious Jealousy	0.27**	–				
3. Self-Reported Desire for Power	0.41***	0.30***	–			
<i>Women's Reports</i>						
4. Perceived Erectile Dysfunction	0.58***	0.04	0.37***	–		
5. Perceived Suspicious Jealousy	0.34***	0.47***	0.20*	0.44***	–	
6. Self-Reported Desire for Power	0.28**	0.11	0.39***	0.37***	0.28**	–
Mean	1.41	1.71	2.46	1.38	1.64	2.50
Standard Deviation	0.45	0.65	1.24	0.54	0.64	1.16

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

**Table 6**

Study 3 (Dyadic): Results of the APIMeM Analysis with Suspicious Jealousy (SJ) Mediating the Association that Erectile Dysfunction (ED) had with the Desire for Power.

	Actor Effects		Partner Effects	
	$\beta_{Men}$	$\beta_{Women}$	$\beta_{Men}$	$\beta_{Women}$
<i>Association with Mediator</i>				
ED → Suspicious Jealousy	0.34**	0.18	0.16	-0.06
<i>Associations with Outcome</i>				
ED → Desire for Power (Total)	0.24*	0.20	0.15	0.23*
ED → Desire for Power (Direct)	0.14	0.21	0.11	0.26*
SJ → Desire for Power	0.34**	-0.03	0.14	-0.06
ED → SJ → Desire for Power	0.11*	0.00	0.05	-0.01

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

### 9.3. Discussion

The outcomes of Study 3 supported our predictions. Men's self-reported ED and suspicious jealousy were positively associated with their own desire for power, as we expected. Additionally, we found evidence to support our prediction that the connection between ED and men's desire for power would be mediated by men's self-reported suspicious jealousy. These findings are in line with the idea that men with higher levels of ED might also have higher levels of suspicious jealousy, which might then encourage a stronger desire for power. Similar to Study 2, women's perceptions of men's ED were positively associated with their own desire for power. However, the jealousy of men did not mediate the association between women's perceptions of men's ED and their own desire for power.

## 10. General discussion

The goal of these studies was to investigate whether ED was associated with the desire for power reported by both men and women as well as whether the suspicious jealousy of men mediated these associations. The results of three studies provided mixed support for ED being positively associated with the desire for power for both men (Studies 1 and 3) and women (Studies 2 and 3). These results suggest that men who experience more difficulty with ED desire more power in their romantic relationships. This pattern of results aligns with previous studies showing that ED was associated with feelings of powerlessness in men (e.g., de Moraes Lopes et al., 2012), and more broadly, suggests that men may derive some sense of power in their relationships from their ability to perform sexually.

Results also showed mixed support for the mediating effect of men's suspicious jealousy. Specifically, men's suspicious jealousy mediated the association that ED had with men's desire for power in Study 3, but it did not mediate this association in Study 1. Further, women's perceptions of men's suspicious jealousy did not mediate the association that ED had with women's desire for power in Studies 2 or 3. Although previous research has shown ED to be positively associated with men's feelings of suspicious jealousy (Vance et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2023), this association did not emerge consistently across the present studies. It is unclear why the expected pattern would emerge only for men in Study 3. One possibility is that the men in Study 3 – or their romantic relationships – differed from the men in Study 1. The participants in Study 1 were composed of individuals who were unable or unwilling to recruit their romantic partner for participation, which may be especially relevant for social power, or the ability to exert one's influence over others. Although we can only speculate why the romantic partners of participants did not take part in this research, it is possible that Study 1 consisted of individuals who had less power in their relationships which resulted in them being less successful in convincing their partners to participate. It is possible that a difference of this kind between the participants in these studies could have been at least partially responsible for the inconsistent

results across these studies.

Somewhat more puzzling, however, is why women's perceptions of their partner's ED would be associated with their own desire for power in the relationship. One possibility is that the onset or worsening of ED symptoms may disrupt the power dynamics in heterosexual romantic couples by increasing the likelihood that men feel relatively powerless. This disruption of the pre-existing power dynamic may suggest the possibility of a renegotiation of power within the relationship, which may be particularly attractive to some women – especially if they have experienced undesirable relationship outcomes as a result of their lack of power. This possibility aligns to some extent with previous results showing that events such as women earning more money than their male partners often lead to a renegotiation of power within heterosexual romantic relationships (Tichenor, 2005). An alternate possibility is that, when men experience symptoms of ED, they are more likely to use aversive partner-directed behaviors, and the female partners experience increased desire for power as a result of these behaviors, rather than as a direct result of their partner's ED. Indeed, previous research has provided evidence for the association between men's ED and their use of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse (Vance et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2023), as well as the association between abusive behaviors and women's feelings of powerlessness (e.g., Filson et al., 2010; Kim & Emery, 2003).

Much of the existing literature exploring the connections between ED and suspicious jealousy has been informed by an evolutionary perspective (Vance et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2023). Specifically, this area of research has explored the possibility that ED serves as a cue to sperm competition risk, such that men who have difficulty with normal sexual functioning are at a disadvantage in their ability to engage in copulatory sperm competition behaviors (e.g., deeper and more vigorous copulatory thrusting to displace the semen of rival males). As a result, men experiencing ED may resort to alternate strategies, such as mate retention behaviors, partner-directed violence, and sexual coercion to mitigate their risk of experiencing sperm competition (Vance et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2023). Issues related to social power within romantic relationships have also been associated with men's use of aversive partner-directed behaviors (e.g., Bugental & Lin, 2001; Fast & Chen, 2009). Thus, feelings of powerlessness, and the desire for more power in romantic relationships resulting from experience with sexual dysfunction may also have important connections with the perceived risk of sperm competition, and the pattern of results observed in the present study may benefit from further investigation adopting an evolutionary theoretical perspective, and sperm competition theory, in particular.

The distribution of power appears to have important consequences for romantic relationships (e.g., Peplau & Campbell, 1989; Traeder & Zeigler-Hill, 2020), and the results of the present studies suggest that men's sexual dysfunction may have consequences for their desire for power in their relationships. Difficulties with normal erectile function may threaten men's self-perceived masculinity, and may lead to feelings of powerlessness. Along these lines, some recent work has shown that men who identify as feminist are more likely to report using ED medication (Silva & Fetner, 2022), whereas men who believe manhood is precarious (i.e., hard to attain and easy to lose) were more likely to report experience with ED (Walther et al., 2023). Thus, the results of the present studies may highlight, at least implicitly, the importance of men's ability to navigate changing social dynamics, and to reconcile their feelings of masculinity—not only for the sake of their own sexual health, but also for the maintenance of their romantic relationships.

It is also worth considering the possibility that the conceptualization of power used in the present research somewhat limited our explanatory power. Specifically, the present study focused exclusively on the desire for power. However, it is possible that experience with healthy sexual functioning and feelings of suspicious jealousy may, instead, be more closely related to feelings of personal power (e.g., de Moraes Lopes et al., 2012). A similar issue relates to the pathways by which individuals achieve status and power in their romantic relationships. For example, some areas of research have distinguished between dominance and

prestige as two distinct pathways by which individuals can achieve status and ascend social hierarchies (e.g., [Henrich & Gil-White, 2001](#); [Maner, 2017](#)). Individuals who experience difficulties with healthy sexual functioning may, consequently, experience a loss of social status, even if this reduction is restricted to their romantic relationship. However, it is unclear whether individuals who experience a loss of social status in such contexts are more likely to use dominance or prestige to mitigate their loss of status. And indeed, previous research has documented individual level variation in the methods used to increase social status. Prestige-based strategies for attaining status often include instilling feelings of admiration and respect in members of the social group, whereas dominance-based strategies involve coercion and intimidation. Thus, similar to the issues associated with feelings of masculinity described above, men who typically use dominance-based strategies to achieve status may experience more complications to their relationship as a result of ED than men who use prestige-based strategies. Thus, future research in this area may benefit from assessing dominance-based and prestige-based strategies for seeking status.

### 10.1. Limitations and future directions

These studies contained several limitations. One limitation is that we relied on modestly sized convenience samples recruited through Prolific. Additionally, the relatively small sizes of our samples would have limited our ability to detect small effects (e.g., [Du & Wang, 2016](#); [Lakens, 2022](#)), and future studies should attempt to secure data from larger samples to increase confidence in these findings.

Another limitation is that there were low levels of ED across all three samples. Thus, our results may not represent men who typically experience ED. The relatively low levels of ED in our studies were most likely due to the relatively young mean age of our participants, whereas previous research has identified increased risk of ED in older individuals ([Selvin et al., 2007](#)).

A third limitation is that our samples may differ from the general population in a number of ways. For example, inclusion in Study 3 required at least some level of cooperation between both members of the romantic couple. Thus, our sample in Study 3 may not be representative of couples with severe relationship problems. As discussed above, participants in Study 3 may have differed from the participants in Studies 1 and 2, given that inclusion in Study 3 required at least some cooperation between both members of the romantic couple. Despite these limitations, we believe the results of the present studies provide important information about the connections that ED has with the desire for power in heterosexual romantic relationships.

### 10.2. Conclusion

We examined the connection that ED has with the extent to which people want power in heterosexual romantic relationships. Our results showed that the male partner's experience with ED is associated with a greater desire for power in both men and women. However, our prediction that men's suspicious jealousy would mediate the association that ED had with the desire for power received inconsistent support across the present studies. Taken together, our results are consistent with the idea that ED is associated with an increased desire for power by both men and women who are involved in heterosexual romantic relationships.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Gavin Vance:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Virgil Zeigler-Hill:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Madeleine K. Meehan:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. **Gracynn Young:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. **Todd K. Shackelford:**

Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

### Declaration of competing interest

None.

### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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