For me, one of the most compelling arguments for egalitarianism is in the creation and fall passages of Genesis 1 and 3. God’s command that they, male and female alike, are to “be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. . . rule over. . . every living creature” (Gen 1:28) provides a charge for men and women alike to contribute to the continuation of family and to exert authority over God’s creation.

It isn’t until the fall that gender inequality is introduced when Eve is told “your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gen. 3:16). These words foreshadow male domination and the striving of woman to cater to the desires of man. Rather than declaring God’s intent for creation, however, this passage reflects the broken relationship we can now expect – not as God’s original intent, but as a consequence of our living in a fallen world.

As a social scientist, I am intrigued by research supporting this interpretation of Genesis 1 and 3. This article presents a social science perspective on the gender equality described in the creation account alongside the power inequality that emerges from the fall. I will then conclude with a statement of hope for the redemption of male-female relationships.

Those who study gendered behavior distinguish between behaviors that are agentic and those that are communal. Agentic behavior is goal-oriented, and encompasses qualities such as decisive problem-solving, courage, and aggressiveness. These behaviors are more often associated with the traditional male role.

In contrast, communal behavior is relationship-oriented and includes qualities such as cooperation, nurturance, and affection. As you can probably guess, these behaviors are more often associated with the traditional female role.
While behaviors from each set are valuable, when anyone exhibits one to the neglect of the other, problems arise. For instance, the person who is independent and courageous without cooperating with others or caring about their feelings is not likely to have healthy relationships. This behavioral pattern is referred to as unmitigated agency and describes an individual who focuses on himself or herself to the neglect of others. This trait is more often found in men.2

Likewise, communion can pose problems when experienced apart from a healthy amount of agency. For instance, the person who displays unmitigated communion expresses communal traits to the exclusion of agency. These individuals display communion’s cooperation and nurturance without agency’s independence or the willingness to make tough decisions. This behavioral pattern results in focusing on others to the exclusion of oneself and is more often found among women.3

The fact that unmitigated agency is more often found in men and unmitigated communion more often found in women would seem to set the stage for some serious problems. One might expect, for example, a world in which power is unequally distributed, where men expect to have the final say. One might expect for women to address their relative lack of power through pleasing those who hold the power. One might expect a home where the husband is considered the “head” while the wife takes on a more subservient role. One might expect a church to favor male leaders and to encourage its women to follow along with a cooperative spirit. One might expect exactly what we, in fact, do see in many homes and churches.

The unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion that still describe many male-female relationships today are byproducts of a fallen world, a world that needs to be redeemed.

Yet, what we see in male agency and female communion does not seem to echo God’s original design as much as God’s pronouncement to Eve that “your desire will be for your husband and he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16).

Frances Hiebert addresses the disruption of relationships which came about through the fall in stating that “man tries to be God to the woman by pre-empting the place of God in her life” . . . and . . . “the woman is willing to go through anything in order to keep the relationship.” 5

I can think of nothing more definitive of unmitigated agency than a husband trying to rule over his wife, in essence, trying to be her God. And I cannot give a better example of unmitigated communion than the wife’s desire being for her husband to the point of allowing him to be her God.

The unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion that still describe many male-female relationships today are byproducts of a fallen world, a world that needs to be redeemed.

Thankfully, the good news of Scripture is that God does not abandon us to sin but offers the hope of redemption, with the male-female relationship being no exception. We see evidence of this in the fact that many women and men, as well as churches, have moved beyond traditional gender roles.

When I see women today striving for both family and careers, I have hope that the unmitigated forms of agency and communion are not having the last word. When fathers today spend more time with their children than their dads did with them, I have hope for the next generation. When churches encourage their followers to serve based on gifts rather than gender, I have hope that traditional stereotypes are bowing to the recognition of each person’s gifts.

In short, I am hopeful that the male-female relationship is in the process of redemption. As we each develop agentic alongside communal qualities without regard for what tradition dictates, male-female relationships will become more of what God intended at creation. We, male and female, will together “rule over the earth” in right relationship with each other and with our God.


Susan Howell is professor of psychology at Campbellsville University where she teaches Gender Studies and Psychology of Religion. Her research interests center around gender and the integration of psychology and faith.