# Low power individuals in social power research: A quantitative review, theoretical framework, and empirical test

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A B S T R A C T

We examine the role of low-power individuals in social power research. A multi-method literature review reveals that low-power individuals may be insufficiently understood because many studies lack necessary control conditions that allow drawing inferences about low power, effects are predominantly attributed to high power, and qualitative reviews primarily focus on how high-power individuals feel, think, and behave. Challenging the assumption that low power tends to produce opposite consequences of high power, we highlight several similarities between the two states. Based on social exchange theories, we propose that unequal-power (vs. equal-power) relationships make instrumental goals, competitive attitudes, and exchange rules salient, which can cause both high- and low-power individuals to behave similarly. Two experiments suggest that although low-power individuals sometimes behave in opposite ways to high-power individuals (i.e., they take less action), at other times they behave similarly (i.e., they objectify others to the same extent). We discuss the systematic study of low-power individuals and highlight methodological implications.

## 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, a considerable interest in understanding the consequences of social power has developed. This research provides us with a multitude of insights into how the powerful think, feel, and behave. For example, studies report that, compared to having little power, being powerful leads individuals to form superficial social perceptions (Dépret & Fiske, 1993; Fiske, 1993), engage in approach-related behavior (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002), objectify themselves and others (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008; Inesi, Lee, & Rios, 2014), overestimate their own height and underestimate others' height (Duguid & Goncalo, 2012; Yap, Mason, & Ames, 2013), reap more benefits at the bargaining table (Galinsky, Schaerer, & Magee, 2017), and report greater well-being (Kifer, Heller, Perunovic, & Galinsky, 2013).

Power can be defined as individuals' asymmetric control over valuable resources (Emerson, 1962; Fiske, 2010; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Magee & Smith, 2013). Thus, being high in power implies having control over relatively more resources, while being low in power implies having relatively less control over valued resources. A review of the published literature relying on this conceptualization suggests that past theories and studies have mainly focused on explaining the consequences of having control over *a lot* of resources, i.e.,

the behavior of the *powerful* (for recent reviews, see Galinsky, Rucker, & Magee, 2015; Schaerer, Lee, Galinsky, & Thau, 2018; Sturm & Antonakis, 2015). The present research investigates whether this focus on high power may have led to an insufficient understanding of the consequences of *low* power. Specifically, prior research appears to assume that powerfulness is the driving causal force behind the effects of power and that inferences for low power *linearly* follow from high power. Such assumptions, in turn, may have influenced the ways in which theories of social power have been formulated, studies have been designed, and inferences have been drawn from data. To more systematically evaluate whether there is merit to these claims, we conduct a quantitative review of past social power research published in management, psychology, and marketing journals. Using frequency and content analyses, we assess how extant research has theorized about power, what study designs have been used to test these theories, and how power effects have been attributed in the published literature. Our analyses suggest that the literature's focus on powerfulness has indeed led to one-sided theory development, study designs limiting our ability to draw theoretical inferences for low-power individuals, and potential inconsistencies in the literature.

Based on these inductively derived insights, we develop a theoretical model of low power by conceptually separating it from high power. Specifically, we propose that although high- and low-power

individuals are *different* in many respects, including the amount of agency they enjoy and the influence they have over others, they also share certain *similarities*. Both high- and low-power individuals are part of asymmetric, unequal-power relationships. The common experience of such a relationship is proposed to elicit (in domains we specify) similar psychological experiences, judgments, and behaviors, compared to individuals who are in symmetric, equal-power relationships. Building on social exchange theories (Blau, 1964; Coleman, 1994; Cook & Yamagishi, 1992; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1961; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), we propose that unequal-power relationships (versus equal-power relationships) are purposive and individuals primarily enter and maintain these relationships for self-interested reasons. We thus argue that unequal-power relationships increase the salience of instrumental goals, promote competitive attitudes, and lead to the emergence of exchange rules (relative to equal-power relationships). Based on this distinction between unequal- and equal-power relationships, we then derive predictions for when being high in power and low in power lead to similar (rather than opposite) judgments and behaviors. Finally, we conduct two high-powered experiments (one of which being a pre-registered replication using a different subject pool) to provide an initial test of this framework. In these experiments, we examine two consequences of power – action orientation and objectification – for which it remains unclear whether low power linearly follows from high power, because prior experiments testing these consequences used study designs that did not include low power.

Our research makes several contributions to the social power literature. First, it quantitatively evaluates extant theories, study designs, and the attribution of results in social power research, highlighting a focus on high-power individuals and an insufficient understanding of low-power individuals. Second, we revisit and build on micro-sociological conceptualizations of power (e.g., Coleman, 1994; Cook & Yamagishi, 1992) to develop a theoretical model, which proposes that high- and low-power states emerge within the context of unequal-power relationships and that such relationships come with shared psychological experiences and behavioral schemata that categorically differ from equal-power relationships. The majority of recent power research tends to refer to micro-sociological perspectives on power only in passing and we believe that integrating recent empirical evidence with these foundational perspectives provides new insights into the psychology of being in unequal-power relationships and, in turn, helps illuminate the psychological consequences of being low in power. Based on the distinction between unequal- and equal-power relationships, we then derive several propositions for the effects of low power that open new lines of inquiry for future research. Third, our theoretical framework serves as a heuristic guide for researchers to more systematically delineate when high and low power likely lead to *opposite* effects and when they may lead to *similar* effects. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and methodological implications for future power research. We suggest ways in which the psychology of low power can be systematically incorporated into future theories of social power. We also discuss relevant methodological considerations, such as the use of more nuanced study designs and the selection of appropriate control conditions.

## 2. Preoccupied with the powerful?

People with power hold prominent positions in society. We read about them in the news, learn from them in the classroom, are affected by their decisions, and often strive to emulate them. Because the actions and decisions of the powerful tend to be more consequential compared to individuals with less power (Schwartz, Tesser, & Powell, 1982; Spiegel & Machotka, 1974; Van Vugt, 2006), the powerful capture our imagination and attention (Dépret & Fiske, 1999; Fiske & Dépret, 1996; Hall, Carter, & Horgan, 2001). People in positions of high power also tend to be perceptually more salient than people low in power. For example, the offices of powerful CEOs are often situated on higher floors and a judge's seat in the courtroom is elevated to differentiate them from others (Fiske, 2004; Schwartz, 1981). Experimental evidence also suggests that the powerful, relative to those with less power, are more likely to stand out in social settings (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008; Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007). And because perceptual salience attracts causal attributions (Pryor & Kriss, 1977; Taylor & Fiske, 1975, 1978), past research may have been inclined to explain the world through the eyes of the powerful, giving rise to a trend in research to explain the consequences of high power while leaving the distinct consequences of low power unexplored.

### 2.1. Does the literature focus more on high than low power? A quantitative review of the social power literature

If past research has indeed placed more emphasis on studying high- relative to low-power individuals, then this tendency is likely reflected in how theories of social power have been constructed, studies have been designed, and inferences have been drawn from data. We conducted a quantitative review of past social power research to gauge the degree to which high power, relative to low power, has been at the center of research attention.

#### 2.1.1. Focus of past review articles

First, we systematically examined the extent to which theoretical review articles on social power have focused on high power relative to low power. Since reviews reflect the central themes and debates in the literature (Webster & Watson, 2002), they should give insight into the extent to which the field of social power has focused on the two opposing sides of the power spectrum. Specifically, we calculated the relative frequency of words related to high power (i.e., "high power," "powerful," "powerfulness," "have power," "more power") relative to low power-related words (i.e., "low power," "powerless," "powerlessness," "lack power," "less power") in ten major reviews of social power.[1] We found that high-power-related words were used more frequently (63.6%) than low-power-related words (36.4%).

Although this analysis provides a preliminary indication that past research may have put more emphasis on studying powerfulness, we also conducted more systematic analyses. One way to gauge a field's focus is to quantitatively review (a) which conditions (i.e., high power, low power, control) have been included in experimental designs and (b) to which experimental condition effects have been attributed to. Both experimental designs and effect attributions are directly guided by the literature's assumptions and expectations about the effects of power. If high power and low power are of equal interest, then we would expect to find an approximately equal number of study designs that contrast both high- and low-power conditions to a control condition. However, if the literature focuses primarily on high power, then we would expect to find more study designs that compare high power to either low power or a control condition. Similarly, if there is an equal interest in high and low power, then we would also expect an approximately balanced discussion of study results in terms of whether each state is responsible for an effect.

#### 2.1.2. Frequency of study designs used

To examine whether past studies were primarily designed to assess the effects of high or low power, we conducted an extensive literature search to retrieve relevant published studies in which social power served as the independent variable. First, we searched major academic databases (e.g., PsycINFO, Google Scholar) for articles published in a pre-determined list of 19 journals in organizational behavior (e.g.,

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[1] The following reviews were included: Anderson and Brion (2014); Bunderson and Reagans (2011); Fiske (2010); Galinsky, Chou, Halevy, and Van Kleef (2012); Galinsky et al. (2015); Hirsh, Galinsky, and Zhong (2011); Keltner et al. (2003); Magee and Smith (2013); Magee and Galinsky (2008); Sturm and Antonakis (2015).