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Fighting for independence: Significant others' goals for oneself incite reactance among the powerful

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HIGHLIGHTS

- High-power participants contrast against their significant others' goals for them.
- This effect is strongest for goals participants are not interested in pursuing.
- This effect is most pronounced for close significant others.
- This effect is mediated by feelings of reactance.

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ABSTRACT

We tested the prediction that power increases people's tendencies to act against the goals their close significant others have for them. Participants in Study 1 all reported in a pre-test that their mother wanted them to achieve, but that they themselves were relatively less interested in achieving. A week later, high-power (but not neutral-power) participants who were reminded of their mother were subsequently less likely to pursue an achievement goal. Study 2 replicated this pattern of results with romantic partners and showed that the effects were strongest when individuals were personally less interested in pursuing a goal they believed their significant other held for them. In Study 3, we looked at mothers and healthy eating goals, and found that the predicted pattern only emerged for close significant others. Further, feelings of reactance mediated high-power participants' tendencies to act against significant-other goals that they themselves did not hold.

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Introduction

Eating healthy foods, achieving, exercising regularly, and developing one's creativity are all examples of goals our loved ones might like us to pursue. Pursuing such interpersonal goals, even if they are not important to us personally, can be a functional way to foster and maintain close relationships. Fortunately, there is evidence that we are automatically more likely to pursue (i.e., assimilate to) interpersonal goals when reminded of our loved ones, even when we are not aware of it (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Shah, 2003a,b).

At the same time, recent research has highlighted one group that may be particularly unresponsive to close others' goals for them: individuals with power. In the current research, we investigate whether the experience of power affects the pursuit of interpersonal goals, even those linked to relationships not characterized by power differences. Power-holders' responsiveness to interpersonal goals in close relationships is a particularly interesting area of inquiry because it suggests competing hypotheses. On one hand, power may simply

blunt responsiveness to interpersonal goals because it reduces interpersonal sensitivity more generally (e.g., Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006; Van Kleef, Oveis, Van der Löwe, LuoKogan, Goetz, Keltner, 2008). On the other hand, the sacrifice implied by pursuing a goal for the sake of someone else may be discordant for people in power, who, by virtue of their position, are able to set the terms of their relationships with others (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997; Lee & Tiedens, 2001). According to this logic, instead of simply diminishing responsiveness to close others' needs, power might under some circumstances actually trigger reactance, meaning that power-holders actively avoid pursuing interpersonal goals when reminded of a significant other. We test these competing hypotheses across three experiments that include different significant other relationships (romantic partners and mothers) and different interpersonal goals (achievement and healthy eating).

Close relationships and interpersonal goal pursuit

The goals and expectations that people have for their significant others (i.e., important people in their lives) are a central component of interpersonal relationships (Shah, 2003b). For example, parents may want their children to succeed in school and roommates may

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want each other to keep their living space tidy. Over time, people develop an understanding of what their close significant others expect from them, and they internalize these interpersonal goals as part of the mental representation of their relationship (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Baldwin, 1992). Such mental representations are less likely to form for non-close others because the goals and expectations non-close others may harbor for the self are less clear (Shah, 2003a). Importantly, significant other representations may include interpersonal goals that are consistent or inconsistent with the self. For example, children whose mothers want them to eat healthy foods will likely develop a “mother” representation that contains the interpersonal goal to eat healthily, regardless of whether these children personally have a strong desire to eat healthily.

When individuals are reminded of a particular significant other, the significant other representation becomes active and they typically pursue the related interpersonal goals, even in the absence of conscious awareness. For example, participants primed with their parents perform better on a subsequent achievement task than do participants not primed with their parents, presumably because most parents want their children to achieve (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Shah, 2003b). Assimilation to significant other primes is functional because it serves to maintain important relationships – for example, by cultivating harmony between individuals and their significant others (Chartrand, Maddux, & Lakin, 2004; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004).

This assimilation tendency has important moderators, however. People who do not personally hold the goal that their significant other has for them (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Morrison, Wheeler, & Smeesters, 2007) are less likely to assimilate to the interpersonal goal when reminded of the relationship. Also, people are less likely to assimilate to interpersonal goals when they are not close to their significant other, presumably because, as mentioned previously, the mental representation of their relationship with that person is less well-developed (Leander, Shah, & Chartrand, 2009; Shah, 2003a). Finally, the significant other must hold the goal for the person in the first place; otherwise, the goal is not part of the person's representation of his/her significant other and reminders of the significant other will not affect pursuit of that goal (Shah, 2003b).

More relevant to the current research, certain conditions may even elicit behavior that directly *contradicts* what the significant other wants the individual to do. In other words, individuals may sometimes be *less likely* to pursue an interpersonal goal when reminded of a significant other, exhibiting a contrast effect. In the only set of studies to date that has examined such conditions, participants who were reminded of their significant other acted in opposition to this person's desires if he/she was perceived to be controlling, or when the participant was chronically reactant (Chartrand, Dalton, & Fitzsimons, 2007). These results are consistent with reactance theory, which postulates that people will act in ways to preserve or regain their freedom from others when this freedom is threatened or eliminated (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Further, people may go so far as to act against their own preferences in order to regain this sense of freedom (Brehm, 1966; Clee & Wicklund, 1980; Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004).

Though these findings are informative, they leave open the question of what particular situations might lead people to either reduce assimilation to interpersonal goals, or even react against these goals. Here, we propose that the state of power may play such a role.

Power and independence: reduced assimilation vs. reactance

Defined as relative control over valued resources (Emerson, 1962; Magee & Galinsky, 2008), power has been shown to activate responses that negatively affect social relationships, including stereotyping, objectification, reduced empathy, reduced conformity, and reduced affiliation motives (Fiske, 1993; Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008; Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Van Kleef et al., 2008). This interpersonal insensitivity is not only directed at power-holders'

subordinates, but also extends to individuals over whom they do not objectively have power (Inesi, Gruenfeld, & Galinsky, 2012; Van Kleef et al., 2008). This means that an individual who feels powerful can carry damaging interpersonal behaviors into relationships not characterized by power differences.

The predominant rationale for why power-holders behave in ways that hamper social relations is that they are focused on their personal goals. Power has been hypothesized to activate the Behavioral Approach System (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), which triggers processes that facilitate the achievement of rewards (see also De Wall, Baumeister, Mead, & Vohs, 2011; Guinote, 2007 for related arguments). At the same time, power may dampen the Behavioral Inhibition System, which manages responses to threats (Hirsh, Galinsky, & Zhong, 2011; Inesi, 2010), and may buffer the individual from stress responses (Carney et al., 2012). Power-holders are thus more engaged in pursuing their personal goals and less affected by the associated negative interpersonal ramifications. According to this logic, the pattern of assimilation (i.e., increased interpersonal goal pursuit) that typically occurs when an individual is reminded of their significant other would be weaker, or even nonexistent, for people in power. We call this the *reduced assimilation hypothesis*.

A more interesting and novel hypothesis emerges from the possibility that power-holders may see others' goals for the self as a threat to their independence, triggering reactance. Thus, when reminded of a significant other, rather than exhibiting reduced assimilation, power-holders would exhibit a contrast effect. Core to our theorizing is the notion that power is characterized by increased interpersonal independence (Emerson, 1962; Keltner et al., 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008), defined as “freedom from subjection, or from the influence of others” (Simpson & Weiner, 1989, p. 847). Power-holders' greater access to resources means that they are less dependent on others to get what they want and therefore less beholden to act in ways that please others (Emerson, 1962; Molm, 1990). Thus, the independence associated with power is not so much a state of social isolation as it is an ability to dictate the terms of social interactions (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997; Lee & Tiedens, 2001).

Reactance occurs when people feel they have lost a freedom they possessed (Baumeister et al., 2002; Hong & Faedda, 1996). Because social power implies the freedom to dictate the terms of social interactions, power-holders should be more likely to react against any perceived threats to this freedom (see Liu, Smeesters, & Vohs, 2012 for a related logic). Interpersonal goals constrain behavior in a direction prescribed by one's significant other, suggesting that power-holders may experience these goals as a threat to their independence, triggering reactance. As a result, interpersonal goal pursuit will actually *drop* when powerful individuals are reminded of their significant other, indicating contrast². We call this the *reactance hypothesis*.

From this perspective, power does not make people insensitive to others' desires for the self, as the reduced assimilation hypothesis would suggest. Rather, we propose that power-holders will be particularly *sensitive* to, and will react against, people and situations that threaten the freedom associated with their power

Interpersonal goal match

Our theorizing thus far has focused on the ways in which power might affect individuals' tendencies to automatically pursue interpersonal goals. The existence of an interpersonal goal implies that the significant other has a strong desire for the individual to pursue a given goal, as weak significant-other goals would not be associated with the mental representation of the significant other (see Shah, 2003b). However, the individual's own desires to pursue the same

² Throughout the paper, we define *contrast effect* as the pattern of results in which an individual is less likely to pursue a goal when reminded of a significant other. *Reactance* refers to the psychological process underlying the contrast effect.

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