



When, why, and how do powerholders “feel the power”? Examining the links between structural and psychological power and reviving the connection between power and responsibility



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ABSTRACT

Recent research in social psychology has examined how psychological power affects organizational behaviors. Given that power in organizations is generally viewed as a structural construct, I examine the links between structural and psychological power and explore how their interrelationships affect organizational behavior. I argue that psychological power takes two forms: the (nonconscious) cognitive network for power and the conscious sense of power. Based on this view, I identify two causal pathways that link psychological power and structural power in predicting organizational behavior. First, the sense of power is likely to induce a sense of responsibility among (but not exclusively among) structural powerholders, which in turn leads structural powerholders to be more responsive to the views and needs of others. Second, the sense of power, when brought into conscious awareness, activates a non-conscious association between power and agentic behaviors, which in turn leads structural powerholders to enact agentic behaviors. I discuss the ways in which these predictions diverge from previous theorizing, and I address methodological challenges in examining the relationship between structural and psychological power. In doing so, I suggest that certain features of the predominant methodological approaches to studying psychological power may have induced a bias in the empirical findings that obscures the crucial link between power and responsibility.

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Will the CEO's strategy be implemented? Or will she be over-ruled by the board of directors? Will a manager succeed in placing a new initiative on the agenda for an upcoming meeting, or will his supervisor reject its consideration? Will an entrepreneur acquire needed venture capital? To whom will a team leader assign an onerous and unrewarding task? Which defense contractor

will acquire the next Pentagon contract? None of these questions can be fully addressed without appeal to the concept of power.

Power motivates people (Russell, 1938), shapes social interaction (Weber, 1947), and drives valued outcomes. Power is such a fundamental component of social structure that Clegg, Courpasson, and Phillips, 2006 (p3) argued that “power is to the organization as oxygen is to breathing.” Indeed, a vast range of empirical evidence demonstrates the importance of power in shaping organizational outcomes. Power shapes strategic choice among decision

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makers (Allison, 1971; Child, 1972; Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988; Finkelstein, 1992; Hinings, Hickson, Pennings, & Schneck, 1974; Pettigrew, 1973) and drives organizational and strategic change (Miles & Cameron, 1982), and power disparities in teams play a significant role in enhancing or diminishing team performance (see Anderson & Brown, 2010 for a review). Moreover, the effects of power extend beyond practical concerns about organizational direction and performance: power has important implications for the moral dimensions of organizational life. Power enables the subjugation, domination, and manipulation of some just as it liberates, inspires, and energizes others (Cote et al., 2011; Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008; Fleming & Spicer, 2014).

It is therefore unsurprising that power has garnered scholarly attention at multiple levels of analysis. Power has been conceived of as an organizing force at the societal level (Marx, 1867/1972), the industry level (Borenstein, 1989), the organizational level (Courpasson, 2000; Friedman, 1993; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Weber, 1947), the intergroup level (Nadler, 2002; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001), the team-level (Anderson & Brown, 2010), the dyadic level (Molm, 1990; Molm, Quist, & Wisely, 1994), and the individual level (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). As such, power is a nexus for multiple theoretical perspectives on social dynamics, a reality that has both advanced and hindered the illumination of its nature. The relevance of power as a construct across multiple levels of analysis has advanced our understanding of power because a broad range of perspectives have reminded theorists that power has many manifestations, roles, dimensions, and effects. But like the proverbial blind men who fail to discover the full nature of the elephant, differing definitions, theoretical foundations, methodological approaches, and target audiences have hampered the integration of these views on power.

As a case in point, the *Academy of Management Annals*, the Academy of Management's journal dedicated to reviewing and synthesizing management research, has published two articles on power—a primarily psychologically-oriented article in 2008 (Magee & Galinsky, 2008) and a more sociologically-oriented article six years later (Fleming & Spicer, 2014). The authors of both, who are all remarkably productive and influential scholars on the topic of power in organizations, were not cited at all in one another's reviews. This lack of integration is understandable given the vastness of the power literature, and neither paper specified cross-level or cross-subfield integration as a goal. But the lack of integration is also unfortunate, because such integration is necessary for the advancement of social scientific research on power (Sturm & Antonakis, 2015). One reason that this divide may be so entrenched is the lack of clarity regarding how differing views of the construct of power map onto one another.

To understand why this is so, some definitions may be helpful. Power refers to asymmetric control over valued resources, which in turn affords an individual the ability to control others' outcomes, experiences, or behaviors (Depret & Fiske, 1993; Emerson, 1962; Fiske, 2010; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Keltner et al., 2003; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The primary approach to the study of power in

social psychology in recent years involves a focus on power as a psychological state. In particular, the focus has been on the sense of power. The term *sense of power* has, as I will explain, been used in multiple ways, but it refers generally to an individual's internal mental representations of their power in relation to others in their social environments (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Anderson, John, & Keltner, 2012). A person with a high sense of power in a particular situation construes the social relationships in question in a way that characterizes him or her as having a relatively high ability to control the outcomes, experiences, or behaviors of others.

Psychological manifestations of power have been demonstrated to affect an almost astonishing list of constructs that are relevant to the study of organizations. For example, psychological power affects numerous variables related to strategic decision making, including optimism (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006), overconfidence (Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2012a), risk-taking (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006), temporal discounting (Joshi & Fast, 2014), loss aversion (Inesi, 2010), advice taking (See, Morrison, Rothman, & Soll, 2011; Tost, Gino, & Larrick, 2012), and advice giving (Schaerer et al., 2015). Psychological manifestations of power also impact a range of variables related to other aspects of organizational behavior, such as goal pursuit (e.g., Guinote, 2008; Slabu & Guinote, 2010), action-orientation (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003), verbal communication (Tost, Gino, & Larrick, 2013), emotional expression (Van Kleef, De Dreu, Pietroni, & Manstead, 2006), social evaluations (Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Kipnis, 1972), performance evaluations (Georgeson & Harris, 1998, 2000), perspective taking (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006), fairness (Blader & Chen, 2012), prosocial behavior (Cote et al., 2011), and ethical decision making (DeCelles, DeRue, Margolis, & Ceranic, 2012), among others (for reviews, see Anderson & Brion, 2014; Magee & Galinsky, 2008).

It is an impressive list, but how are we to understand how these effects map onto the ways power is conceived in organizational research? In organizational studies, researchers have traditionally thought of power as a structural variable driven by the objectively demonstrable control of valued resources (e.g., Fligstein, 1987; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) and intimately tied to organizational politics, which involves the mobilization of power to realize desired goals and interests (Fleming & Spicer, 2014). Do these psychological forms of power map directly onto the more structural view? That is, is the sense of power reliably and accurately evoked when someone holds a position that affords structural power?

There are substantial reasons to doubt an affirmative answer to this question. From a conceptual standpoint, the sense of power has been viewed and studied as both a psychological state and as an individual trait, with evidence suggesting that people high on this trait are predisposed to feel an enhanced sense of power quite apart from their structural position (Anderson et al., 2012). Empirical evidence has also produced multiple findings in which structural power and the sense of power diverge (e.g., Bugental & Lewis, 1999; Tost & Johnson, 2015). For example, Bugental and Lewis (1999) review research

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