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From grumpy to cheerful (and back): How power impacts mood in and across different contexts☆

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ABSTRACT

Although lay intuition and some academic theories suggest that power increases variability in mood, the prevailing view in the literature is that power elevates mood—a view that is not consistently borne out in empirical data. To rectify these discrepancies, we conducted five studies examining the impact of high and low power on mood in, and across, contexts of differing valence (negative vs. neutral vs. positive). Drawing on 19,710 observations from 1,042 participants, we found that high (vs. medium/control) power elevated, and low (vs. medium/control) power dampened, individuals' mood at baseline/in neutral contexts and in positive contexts. However, neither high (vs. medium/control) power nor low (vs. medium/control) power modulated individuals' mood in negative contexts. Overall, high (vs. medium/control) power tended to increase, and low (vs. medium/control) power decreased variability in mood across contexts (the former effect was marginally significant). We discuss how these findings corroborate, but also qualify, lay intuition and social psychological theories of power.

1. Introduction

In the popular TV series *Breaking Bad* viewers follow Walter White in his transformation from downtrodden high school teacher to powerful criminal linchpin. As Walter's power increases, he seemingly expresses greater happiness and exhilaration in response to positive outcomes. However, his increased happiness is accompanied by seemingly greater surges of unhappiness when circumstances take a turn for the worse. In this sense, Walter's rise to power is accompanied by an increasing variability in mood—defined here as changes in mood between pleasant and unpleasant contexts.

Although some theoretical accounts support an association between power and increased variability in mood (Guinote, 2007a), the dominant view in the literature is that high power elevates mood, and low power dampens mood (Fiske, Gilbert, & Lindzey, 2010; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). According to the latter perspective, the differential access to resources that characterises states of high and low power modulates brain systems associated with impulsivity, optimism and reward seeking (behavioural approach system), and threat, punishment, and omissions of anticipated rewards (behavioural inhibition system), respectively (Keltner et al., 2003; see also Carver & White, 1994; Gomez, Gomez, & Cooper, 2002; Gray, 1987). From this perspective, it follows that high power fosters positive mood—an affective marker of approach motivation, and low power fosters negative mood—an affective marker of behavioural inhibition (Keltner et al., 2003; but see Gray & McNaughton, 2000, for a more nuanced perspective).

Supporting this view, large scale data measuring proxies of power (e.g., social status, income, dominance) and peer-ratings of status positively predict elevated mood (Clark, 1990; Collins, 1990; Côté & Moskowitz, 2002; Hecht, Inderbitzen, & Bukowski, 1998; Kemper, 1991; Kupersmidt & Patterson, 1991; LaFreniere & Sroufe, 1985). However, research measuring and manipulating subjective feelings of power finds mixed results. For example, Smith and Hofmann (2016) tracked individuals' experiences over a three-day period finding an association between high power and elevated mood, and low power and depressed mood, in keeping with a number of previous studies (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002, Study 1; Berdahl & Martorana, 2006; Bombari, Schmid Mast, & Bachmann, 2017; Hecht & LaFrance, 1998; Langner & Keltner, 2008; Strelan, Weick, & Vasiljevic, 2014; Weick & Guinote, 2008, Study 4; Weick & Guinote, 2010, Study 4; Wojciszke & Struzynska-Kujalowicz, 2007). Importantly, an equally sizable body of research finds no association between power and mood (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002, Study 2; Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Guinote, Weick, & Cai, 2012; Rucker, Dubois, & Galinsky, 2011; Smith & Bargh, 2008; Smith & Trope,

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2006; Weick & Guinote, 2008, Studies 1a, 2 and 3; Weick & Guinote, 2010, Study 3). This could indicate that the size of the relationship between power and mood is smaller than these studies were designed to detect, or that the relationship is moderated by one or more extraneous variables.

There is reason to assume that the effects of power on mood may vary between contexts. The Situated Focus Theory (Guinote, 2007a) proposes that the psychological consequences of power can be best understood in terms of flexible adaptation to the environment, such that power attunes individuals to the present moment and promotes context-consistent thought and behaviour (Guinote, 2007a). An example of this is that high power individuals plan more context-consistent activities (e.g., social activities when visiting a friend) compared to low power individuals (Guinote, 2008; but see Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008). Similarly, at the level of visual cognition, high power individuals, relative to low power individuals, adjust their attention more flexibly to shift their focus between central and peripheral stimulus features depending on the context (Guinote, 2007a, 2007b).

It is important to pause for a moment and reflect on what "context" means. Here, we define context as a situational cue that gives rise to psychological states. Situational cues play a central role in social psychology (e.g., Lewin, 1936; Smith & Semin, 2004), and interact with person variables to impact behaviour (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Situational cues can be tangible and concrete such as an object or a person, or less tangible and more abstract such as one's work climate. In combination, situational cues form a setting (Pervin, 1987) or ecology (Brunswik, 1952). As people bring idiosyncratic characteristics such as goals, prior knowledge, or physical and mental capabilities to bear to a situation, the same cues can be construed differently by different people.

Researchers have developed various approaches to examine how people classify real (Magnusson, 1971; Pervin, 1976) and hypothetical contexts (Forgas & Van Heck, 1992; Vansteelandt & Van Mechelen, 1998), using lists of dictionary-derived terms (Edwards & Templeton, 2005; Van Heck, 1984), experimenter-generated terms (Endler, Hunt, & Rosenstein, 1962), and data-driven Q-sort procedures (Rauthmann et al., 2014; Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2010; Wagerman & Funder, 2009). This work has uncovered a significant degree of variation in the emergent psychological dimensions that underpin contexts (for a review see Wagerman & Funder, 2009), with data often producing idiosyncratic dimensions, such as 'joint working' (Van Heck, 1984) or 'ease of negotiation' (Edwards & Templeton, 2005). However, valence—that is, positivity and negativity—emerges more consistently and appears to be a fundamental dimension that characterises situational cues (Edwards & Templeton, 2005; Forgas, 1976; Magnusson, 1971; Rauthmann et al., 2014; Sherman et al., 2010). Importantly for the present discussion, people draw on affective experiences to construe the valence of situational cues; positive cues are experienced as pleasant and elicit positive mood, whilst negative cues are experienced as unpleasant and elicit negative mood (Russell & Pratt, 1980).

Returning to the predictions for how power may impact mood in different contexts, it stands to reason that if power-holders are more focused and attuned to the context (Guinote, 2008), high power may elevate mood in situations that are conducive to positive mood, but also depress mood in situations that are conducive to negative mood. In contrast, low power people are cognitively busy and inclined to dwell on multiple pieces of information, some of which may not be relevant for the task at hand (Schmid, Schmid Mast, & Mast, 2015; Smith, Jostmann, Galinsky, & Van Dijk, 2008). As such, low power may elevate mood less in positive contexts, but also depress mood less in negative contexts. In other words, high power may foster greater variability, and low power less variability, in mood across contexts of differing valence.

To our knowledge, only one study has investigated the relationship between power, mood, and context, finding that participants assigned to a high power role varied more in their mood when planning summer versus winter activities, compared to participants assigned to a low power role (Guinote, 2008). These results are intriguing but derive from a single small sample ($n = 44$), and may be explained by objective differences in the activities participants brought to mind. Moreover, it is difficult to disentangle the effects of high and low power without comparisons with medium/control levels of power (Moskowitz, 2004). This is particularly important because there is some indication that differences in high and low power individuals' mood may derive entirely from the mood-dampening effect of low power (e.g., Hecht & LaFrance, 1998).

1.1. The present research

The aim of the present research was to examine different perspectives on the link between power and mood. As indicated earlier, the dominant view in the literature is that low power dampens, and high power elevates mood, with little regard for how these associations may vary between contexts (Fiske et al., 2010; Keltner et al., 2003). Other perspectives suggest that the mood-bolstering effects of power only emerge in pleasant contexts, but not in unpleasant contexts, thereby producing greater variability in mood between contexts (Guinote, 2007a). To investigate these theoretical predictions, we conducted five studies in which we examined participants' mood repeatedly in contexts of differing valence (negative vs. baseline/neutral vs. positive). Within and across studies, we sampled a wide range of contexts (see Table 1), thereby not only creating optimal conditions to investigate variability in mood, but also ensuring our findings have broad applicability. Similarly, to ensure that findings emerging from the present studies are generalizable and not restricted to a particular way of operationalising power (cf. Tost, 2015), we draw on relevant individual differences, episodic priming techniques, and structural power manipulations to examine the association between both high and low power and mood.

Below, we report two initial studies (Studies 1a and 1b) looking at the relationship between chronic feelings of power and mood in different imagined contexts. In a third study (Study 2), we employ experience sampling to examine the association between chronic feelings of power and mood in everyday life situations. In a final set of studies (Studies 3 and 4), we manipulate power and examine mood in response to different music and images, respectively. In all our studies, we sought to isolate the effects of both high and low power through comparisons

Table 1
Overview of the operationalisations of context, number of sampled stimuli and example stimuli for each stimulus category (Studies 1–4). Tables S1-S6 in Supplementary Materials provide full lists of stimuli and further details on pre-tests.

			Example stimuli		
Sample	Operationalisation	# sampled stimuli	Negative	Baseline/neutral	Positive
Study 1a	Imagined Context	3	Exam day	*How do you generally feel?*	Summer day
Study 1b	Imagined Context	17	*You have been sued for negligence*	*How do you generally feel?*	*You have been promoted*
Study 2	Circadian rhythm	21	Non-preferred times of the day	Times of the day for which participants are indifferent	Preferred times of the day
Study 3	Music	25	*Street Killer - Terry Devine-King*	*Losing Your Winter Fur - Sue Verran*	*Heroes Return - Luke Richards*
Study 4	Images	48	Pollution	Towel	Erotic Couple