

# The Agentic-Communal Model of Power: implications for consumer behavior

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This paper presents an Agentic-Communal Model of Power as a means to understand how power shapes and guides consumer behavior. We present theoretical arguments and review empirical data that reveal how the possession of power can produce a more agentic orientation within consumers, whereas the lack of power can produce a more communal orientation within consumers. As a consequence of either an increased agentic or communal orientation, psychological states of power and powerlessness affect a wide variety of consumer behaviors ranging from gift giving to persuasion to consumer misconduct. The Agentic-Communal Model of Power brings clarity to the full range of consumer behavior affected by power.

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Power is a cornerstone of the social sciences. Although studied extensively for over half a century, the last decade has born witness to several major shifts in power-related research. One area where research has been particularly fruitful in expanding our understanding of power is the domain of consumer behavior. It has led to a new model of power — the Agentic-Communal Model of Power — that can explain a wide-range of effects of power, both within and outside of the consumer domain.

As defined by Magee and Galinsky [1] power reflects ‘asymmetric control over valued resources in a social relationship,’ (see also [2]). Power relationships can be understood as structural in nature; that is, those with power have more of some valued resource compared to those without power. Indeed, power is often manipulated

by giving individuals differential access to resources and/or differential control over tasks and people [3–5].

Contemporary research has established that the effects of power are not limited to its structural forms. A critical advance in power theorizing, as well as methodology, is the recognition that power is a psychological state or mindset that can be activated in the absence of structural differences in power [4,6]. For instance, individuals’ sense of power can be subjectively activated by having them recall past episodes of possessing power [4,7] or physically activated by the postures people assume [8,9]. Structural differences can even be represented via imagining one’s future hierarchical role such as envisioning oneself as a manager or employee in a future job [10].

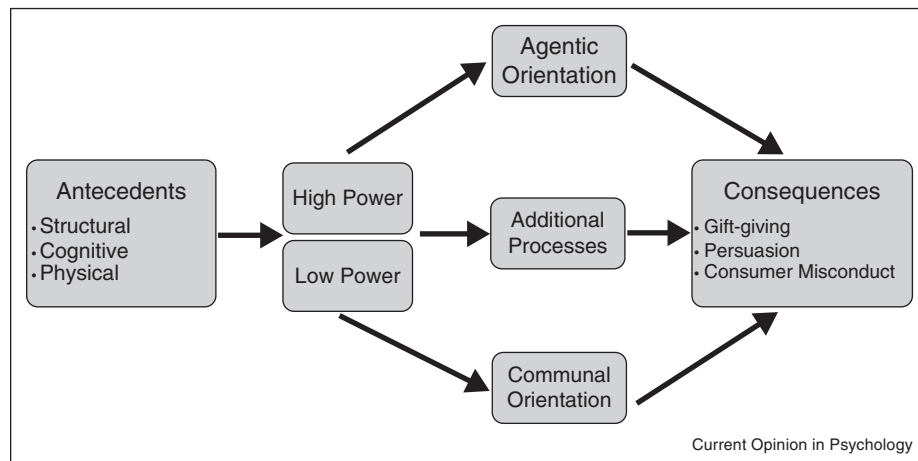
Researchers have also opened up the black box of power to understand the psychological forces that drive the effects of power on thought and behavior. As the conceptual richness of the power construct has increased and the documented consequences of power have exploded, we have a richer understanding of how power matters for social behavior (for a review see [11]). Two theoretical models have postulated that power affects behavior by altering the relative neurological activation of the behavioral approach and inhibition systems [12] and by producing a sense of psychological distance [13]. In the current review, we offer a third model to explain the effects of power on consumer behavior and more broadly on social behavior: the Agentic-Communal Model of Power.

## The Agentic-Communal Model of Power

Rucker, Galinsky and Dubois [14] presented the idea that the effects of power on behavior could be partially understood through the lens of two psychological forces: agency and communion. Introduced by Bakan ([15, see also 16,17]), agency reflects striving to get ahead, a focus on competence and achievement, and a desire for independence and separation from others. Agency makes the value of the individual self as an agent paramount. In contrast, communion reflects a desire to get along, a focus on warmth and relations with others, and a desire to connect and bond with others. Communion makes others crucial to the individual. Agency and communion can be understood as two independent orienting forces used by the same individual in different degrees in different situations.

Rucker and colleagues [14] argue that the possession of power, either structurally or subjectively, activates a

Figure 1



An Agentic-Communal Model of Power. High-power and low-power states, regardless of how induced, can affect consumer behavior through agentic and communal orientations, respectively. High and low power states may also affect consumer behavior through additional processes beyond agentic and communal orientation (see [35]).

psychological orientation toward agency. By definition, power increases one's independence from others and thus allows people to focus on their own needs; power holders possess the ability to act as an individual agent within their environment and to satisfy their own goals and objectives. In contrast, a lack of power increases one's dependence on, and tethers one to, others; one's fate is more tightly bound to others and cooperation with others is often required to satisfy one's own goals. As a consequence, a lack of power can affect behavior through these two orientations (see Figure 1).

As evidence of a relationship between power and an agentic orientation, people in high-power states view the self as more important than those in low-power states or baseline conditions [18<sup>\*</sup>]. In contrast, people in low-power states view themselves as more dependent on others than those in high-power states or baseline conditions (see Figure 2). More recently, high-power states have been found to lead to a greater endorsement of agentic goals (e.g., achievement, self-promotion, focus on the self) whereas low-power states produce a greater endorsement of communal goals (e.g., helping others, caring for others, serving the community; [19]). Consistent with these data, a meta-analysis of over twenty experiments finds that as individuals' power increases, so do individuals' tendency to view the self favorably and others less favorably [20].

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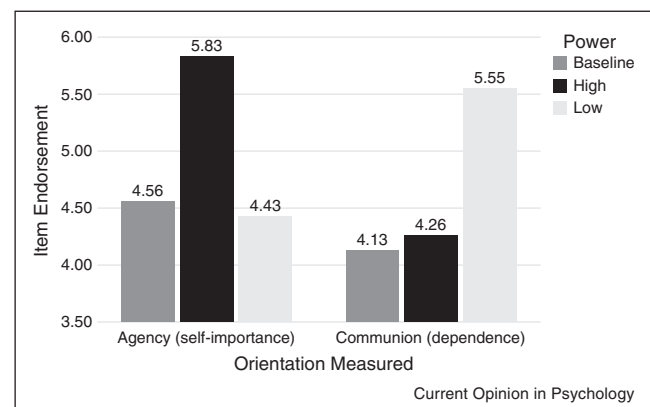
We examine implications of the Agentic-Communal Model of Power across three distinct domains of consumer behavior: gift-giving, persuasion, and consumer misconduct. In doing so, we consolidate the empirical

evidence for this new model and demonstrate how it allows scholars to move beyond main effect predictions of power to interaction predictions.

### Gift giving

Although gift giving might often be thought of in the context of others, consumers also engage in a variety of gift giving rituals and behaviors for the self. Two specific predictions can be derived from the Agentic-Communal Model of Power for how power shapes consumers' purchases for the self versus others. First, the link between

Figure 2



Evidence of an Agentic-Communal Model of Power. Results from Rucker, Dubois, and Galinsky [18<sup>\*</sup>]. Consistent with greater agency, participants in the high-power condition viewed the self as more important than those in low-power or baseline condition. Consistent with greater communion, participants in the low-power condition viewed themselves as more dependent on others than those in the high-power or baseline condition.

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