The Social Distance Theory of Power

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Theoretical Issues

• Most evidence on the psychological effects of power over the past decade attributed to Approach/Inhibition Theory.

• How compelling is the evidence? Consistent with vs. Supportive of
  – “As If” Theory: Patterns of data look as if the theory were true.

• Some evidence simply can’t be accounted for by existing theory.
Theoretical Foundation
“Power as Control” Model (Fiske, 1993)

• Power motivates different concerns for high- and low-power parties.
  - High Power: What do I want, and how do I get it?
  - Low Power: What does he/she want, and how does that affect me?

• Sometimes this is all the theoretical logic you need.
Social Distance Theory of Power

Key Principles

• Principle #1: Asymmetric dependence (i.e., power) produces asymmetric social distance
  – Social distance = the opposite of feeling close to another person (Aron et al., 1992)

• Principle #2: Power heightens construal level (via social distance)

  Magee & Smith, 2013, *PSPR*
Dependence and Social Distance

- Closeness in relationships is achieved through repeated interactions of symmetrically dependent individuals
  - Symmetrically dependent partners want to minimize distance and thus need each other’s affiliation (*motivation*)
  - They expect the same of each other (*expectations*)

- Asymmetric dependence (i.e., power) can emerge for at least two reasons:
  - Differential investment
  - Relative attractiveness of each partner’s alternatives

Kelley et al., 1983
Rusbult & Buunk, 1993
Asymmetric Dependence →
Asymmetric Social Distance

• High-power individual has lower need to affiliate with partner

Copeland, 1994; van Kleef et al., 2008
Affiliative Motivation (Concern with Getting Along)

Copeland, 1994
Asymmetric Dependence →
Asymmetric Social Distance

• High-power individual has lower need to affiliate with partner
  Copeland, 1994; van Kleef et al., 2008

• High-power individual has higher expectations that partner will try to affiliate; however…
  – Makes cynical attributions about low-power affiliation attempts
    Inesi et al., 2012
Cynical Attributions
(Attributions that Your Spouse is Behaving Instrumentally in Doing You a Favor)

Inesi et al., 2012
Asymmetric Dependence $\rightarrow$ Asymmetric Social Distance

- High-power individual has lower need to affiliate with partner
  Copeland, 1994; van Kleef et al., 2008

- High-power individual has higher expectations that partner will try to affiliate; however…
  - Makes cynical attributions about low-power affiliation attempts
    Inesi et al., 2012
  - Distance themselves from partner
    Earle et al., 1983; Slobin et al., 1968
Self-Disclosure

“…informants reported most self-disclosure from fellow workers followed by subordinates and then bosses.”

Slobin et al., 1968

Earle et al., 1983
Higher Power Increases Social Distance

- High-power individual experiences more social distance than partner
  - Feels more distant and behaves more distant

Desire to Work Alone

Lammers et al., 2012
Model Summary

- Power
- Motivation to affiliate with counterpart (-)
- Social Distance (+)
- Expectation of counterpart’s interest (+)

?
Predictions from Social Distance

• Social Comparison
  – High-power more likely to discount social comparison information from partner
    Johnson & Lammers, 2012
  – High-power more likely to contrast away from partner in comparison processes
    see Mussweiler, 2003

• Social Influence
  – High-power more impervious to partner’s social influence attempts
    • Less need to resolve self-other discrepancies (e.g., attitudes)
    • Less motivation to even pay attention to partner’s thoughts and feelings
    Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Galinsky et al., 2008
Predictions from Social Distance

• Interest in Partner’s Thoughts and Feelings
  – High-power less likely to take partner’s perspective and feel empathic concern
    Galinsky et al., 2006; Woltin et al., 2011
  – High-power less responsive to partner’s mental states
    (less reciprocation and less complementarity)
    Anderson et al., 2003; Van Kleef et al., 2008

• Empathic Accuracy
  – High-power less accurate at inferring/judging/decoding thoughts and feelings of partner
    Galinsky et al., 2006; Shirako et al., 2012
Predictions from Social Distance

• Affective Experience
  – Low-power experience more socially engaging emotions than partner
    • Compassion: responding to partner’s needs
    • Gratitude: helps maintain commitment to partner
    • Guilt and Embarrassment: for relationship repair
  – High-power experience more socially disengaging emotions than partner
    • Pride: produces a sense of difference from partner
    • Anger: associated with reduced closeness (in short-term)
    • Contempt: associated with desire to avoid social contact
    • Disgust: reserved for individuals with whom one feels little human connection
Power Increases Abstraction

- Social Distance $\rightarrow$ Heightened Construal Level
  - High-level construal
    - Schematic, emphasizes central and superordinate features
    - Invariant across situations
    - Why (over how)
    - Desirability (over feasibility)
  - Low-level construal
    - Unstructured, emphasizes peripheral and subordinate features
    - Variant across situations
    - How (over why)
    - Feasibility (over desirability)

Trope & Liberman, 2010

- Power increases social distance, and social distance heightens construal level.
Power Increases Abstraction
Responses to Hurricane Katrina

Concrete-Abstract
Victim
Responder/Expert
Police/Fire/Military
State/Local Off.
Federal Official
Consequences of High-Level Construal

• Subjective Certainty
  - Information incongruent with expectations or disconfirming of hypotheses is *peripheral*
    
    Darley & Fazio, 1980; Nickerson, 1998
  - Power increases subjective certainty
    
    Briñol et al., 2007; Fast et al., 2012; See et al., 2011; Tost et al., 2012

• Value-Behavior Correspondence
  - Values provide a compass for action when focused on why you might do something (vs. how you might do it)
    
    Torelli & Kaikati, 2009
  - Power leads to intentions and behavior that are more reflective of values
    
    Bargh et al., 1995; Chen et al., 2001; Galinsky et al., 2008
Consequences of High-Level Construal

• Goal selection
  – Abstract thinking helps detect central goals afforded by situations
  – Focus on desirability without much concern for feasibility
  – Power increases efficiency of goal selection

• Goal pursuit
  – Once a goal is selected, abstract thinking helps prioritize central over peripheral activities in a situation
  – A greater range of means can be recruited to pursue a goal represented at a higher level
  – Power facilitates goal pursuit
    Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Karremans & Smith, 2010; Slabu & Guinote, 2010
Consequences of High-Level Construal

• Person Perception
  – Stereotypes are high-level representations of people
    *Maas et al., 1989; McCrea et al., 2012; Semin & Fiedler, 1991*
      ➢ If goal-relevant stereotype is available and applicable, power increases stereotyping
        *Chen et al., 2004*
  – Traits are high-level representations of behaviors, and trait inference is a key component of individuation
    ➢ Absent an applicable stereotype, power increases individuation
      *Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Overbeck & Park, 2001*
  – Abstract representation of goals facilitates the perception of how others fit with one’s goals
    ➢ Power increases instrumental person perception
      *Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Kunstman & Maner, 2011; Overbeck & Park, 2006*
Social Distance Theory of Power

- Dissimilarity, contrast in social comparison (+)
- Imperviousness to social influence (+)
- Interest in others’ mental states (-)
- Responsiveness to others’ needs (-)
- Accuracy in mental state inference (-)
- Emotions
  - Socially engaging (e.g., guilt, gratitude) (-)
  - Socially disengaging (e.g., pride, contempt) (+)

- Desirability concerns (+), Feasibility concerns (-)
- Subjective certainty (+)
- Value-behavior correspondence (+)
- Goal pursuit (+)
- Individuation (+), if goal-relevant stereotype not available
- Stereotyping (+), if goal-relevant stereotype available
- Instrumental person perception (+)

Motivation to affiliate with counterpart (-)

Expectation of counterpart’s interest (+)

Social Distance (+)

Goal Selection (+)

Active Goal

Construal Level (+)

Power

Magee & Smith, 2013