

# **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

Kelley et al., 1983

- 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

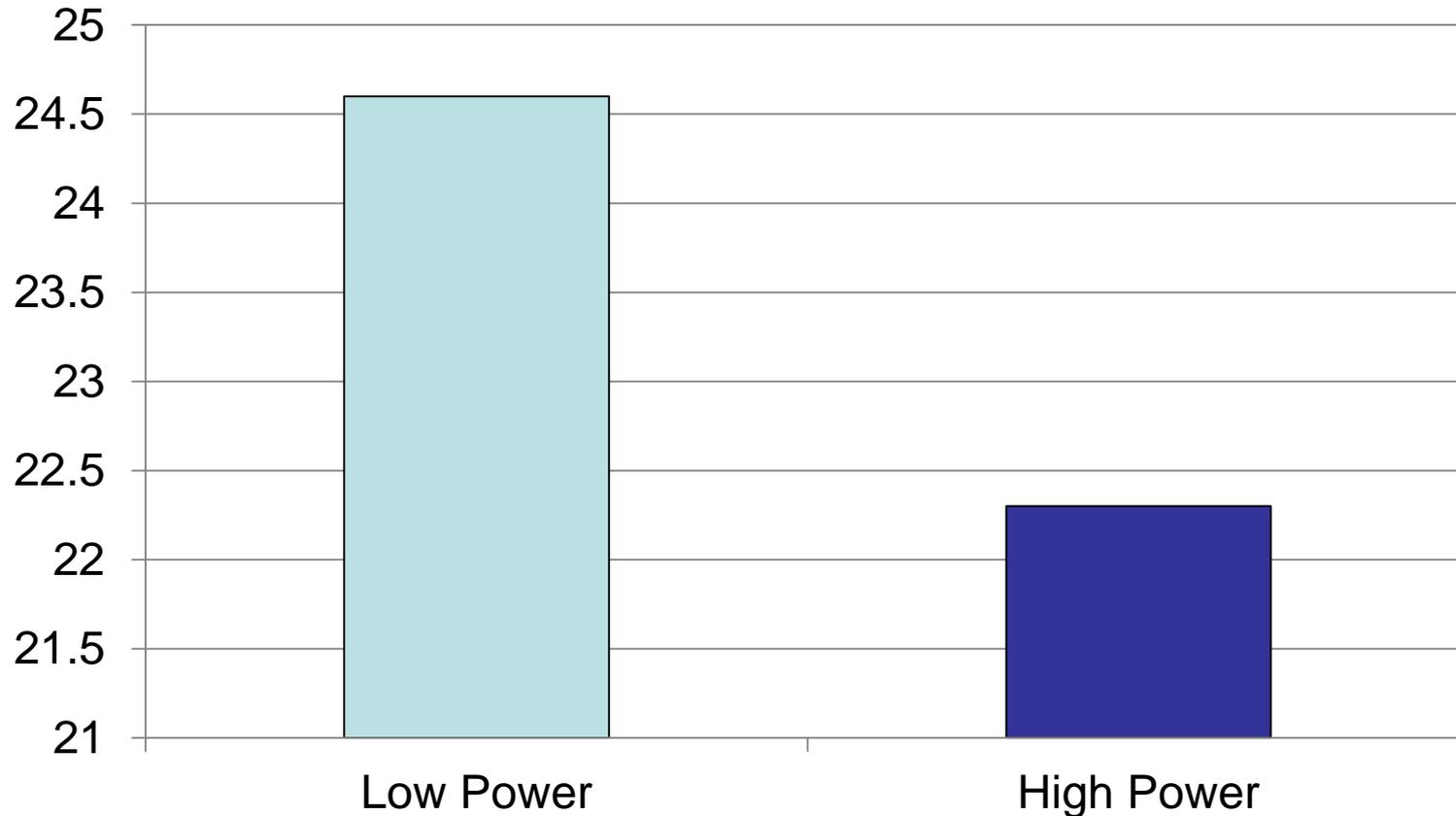
Rusbult & Buunk, 1993

# **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

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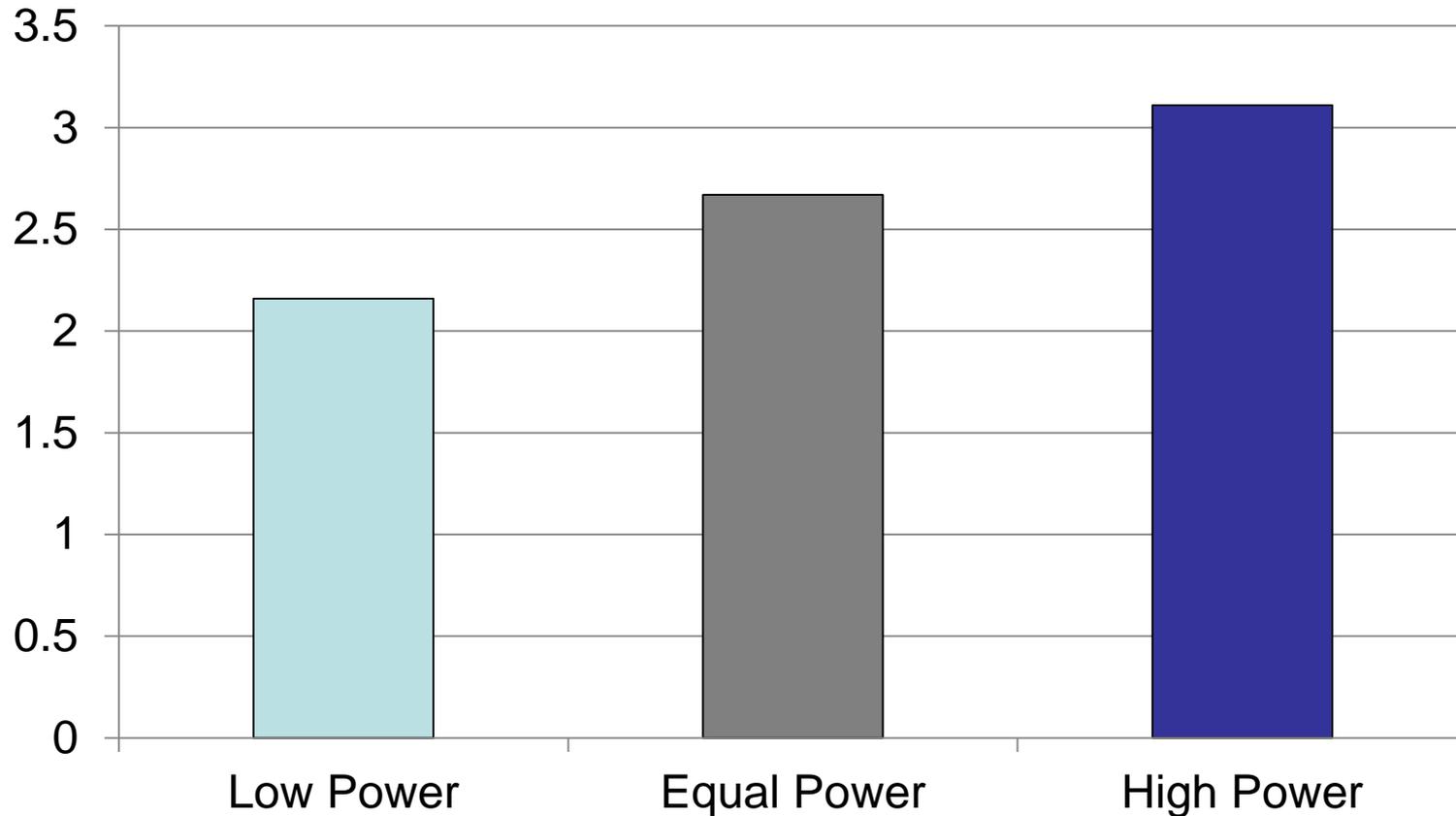
Copeland, 1994; van Kleef et al., 2008

- 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 → Asymmetric Social Distance

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Copeland, 1994; van Kleef et al., 2008

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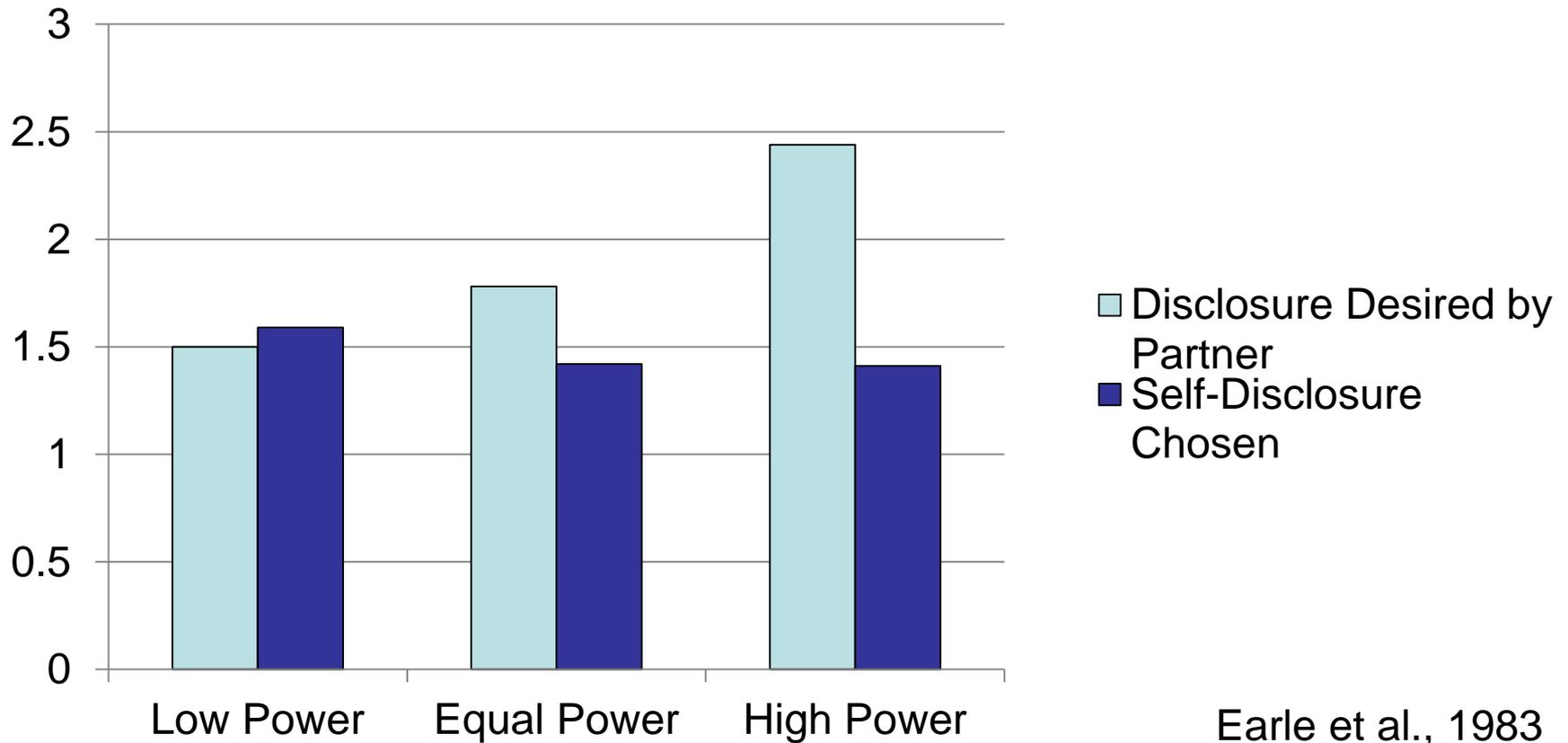
Inesi et al., 2012

- Distance themselves from partner

Earle et al., 1983; Slobin et al., 1968

# Self-Disclosure

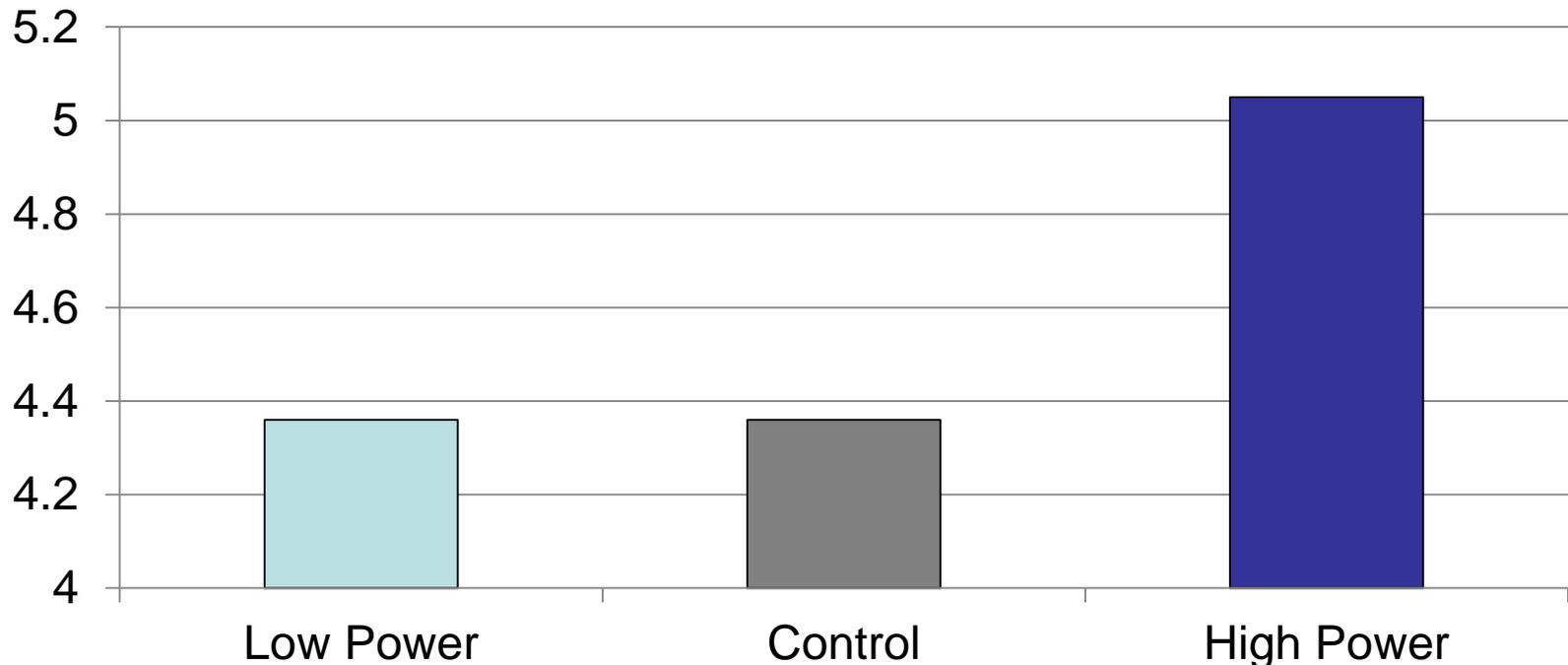
*“...informants reported most self-disclosure from fellow workers followed by subordinates and then bosses.”* Slobin et al., 1968



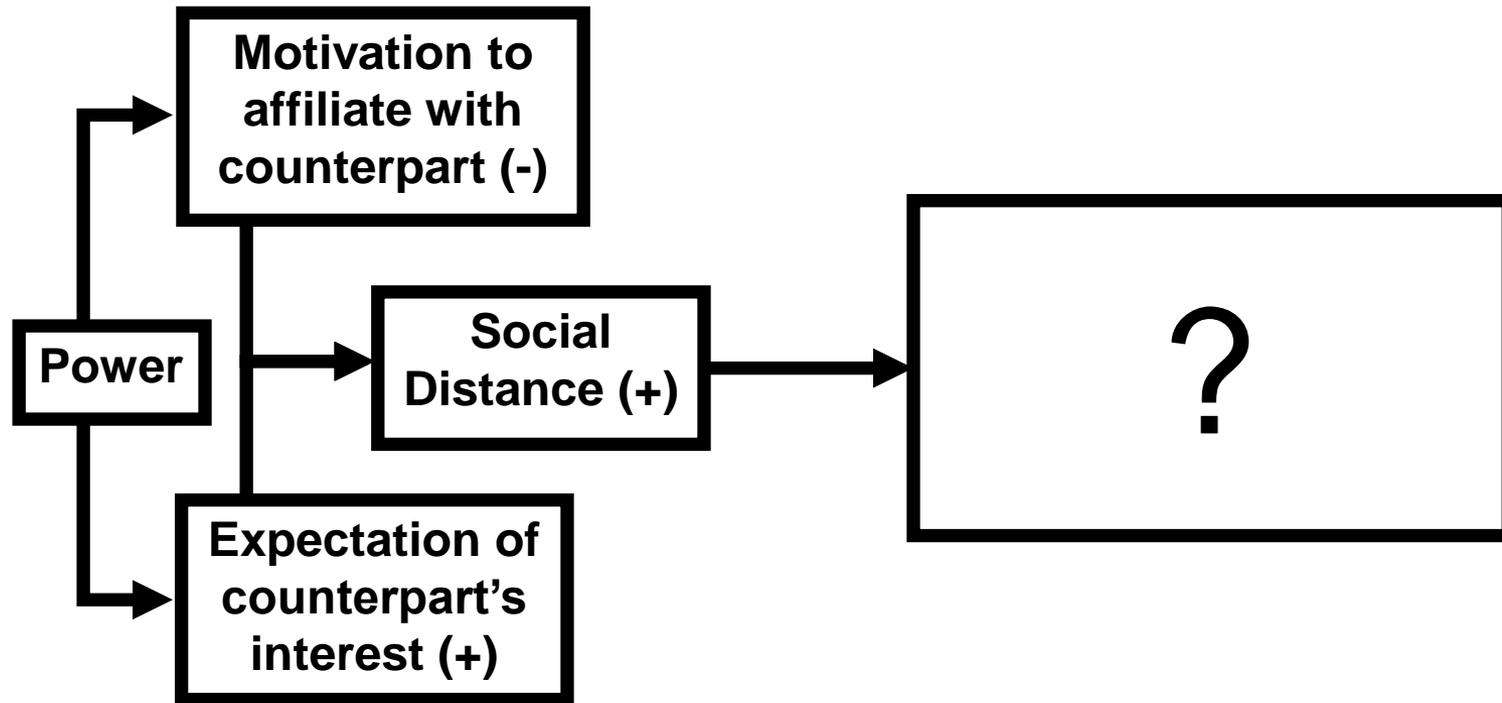
# Higher Power Increases Social Distance

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

## Desire to Work Alone



# Model Summary



# 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

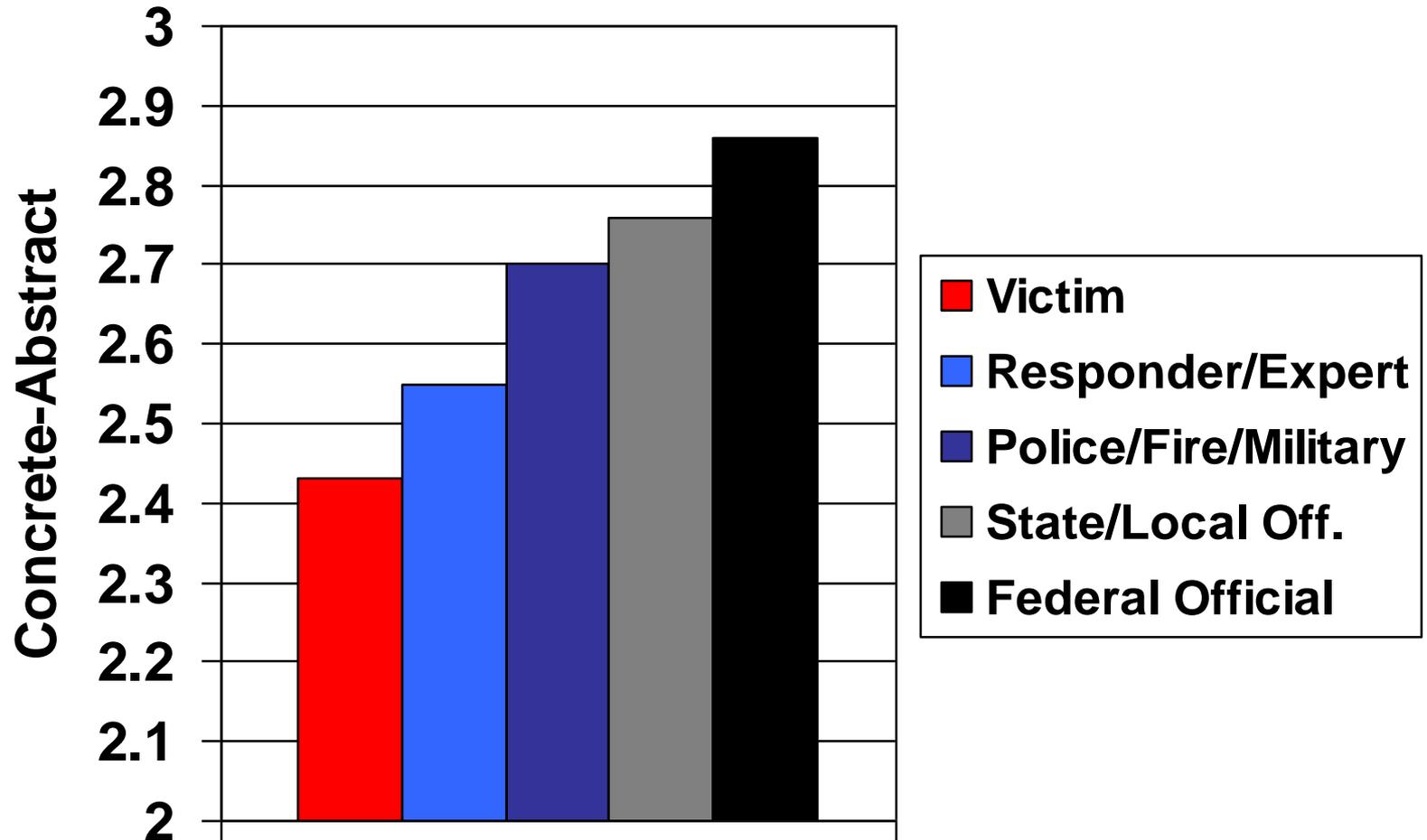
# Power Increases Abstraction

- Social Distance → 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)
- Power increases social distance, and social distance heightens construal level.

Trope & Liberman, 2010

# Power Increases Abstraction

## Responses to Hurricane Katrina



# 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

Guinote, 2007, 2008

- 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

