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Two mediators of power on subjective well-being in China [☆]

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ABSTRACT

Power may enhance well-being via authenticity, but it can also lead to misery, which arises as a consequence of assertiveness. To address inconsistencies in the results of previous studies, we took the literature regarding well-being and personality of agency into account. Consequently, we formed a hypothesis in which the complex effects of power on subjective well-being could be explained via agency and unmitigated agency. Because power increases agency, which contributes to subjective well-being, it could enhance subjective well-being by encouraging people to become more agentic. However, when agency is not mitigated by communion that is referred to as unmitigated agency, it reduces subjective well-being due to dissatisfaction with relationships. Therefore, we hypothesized that power would enhance subjective well-being via greater agency and reduced unmitigated agency. Three surveys completed by 202 Chinese participants showed consistent evidence that power, both dispositional and role-specific, was positively related to subjective well-being and role satisfaction via agency and unmitigated agency. Both agency and unmitigated agency mediated the effects of power on subjective well-being. These results elucidate the complex psychological mechanisms underlying the influence of power on subjective well-being from the perspective of personality and provide a basis for future research.

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'The mutual impact of power and personality is a topic of enduring human interest (p. 7).'

[[Lasswell, 2009]]

How power affects well-being has recently moved to the forefront of many researchers' attention (Anderson, John, & Keltner, 2012; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Evidence from a number of studies shows that possessing power can allow individuals to experience higher self-esteem and well-being (Adler, Epel, Casterlazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Wojciszke & Struzynska-Kujalowicz, 2007). However, increased power may give rise to emotions and behaviours, such as anger and aggression, which are harmful to others (Fast & Chen, 2009; Tiedens, 2001) and may reduce well-being via low relationship satisfaction (Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997).

Drawing on theory and research linking power, agency, and well-being, we proposed that the seemingly contradictory effects of power on subjective well-being (SWB) could be explained via

positive and negative sides of agency. The research reported here sought to determine whether power is linked to SWB, which is the affective and cognitive evaluation of one's own life, both generally and in specific roles (Diener, 2000), through greater agency and reduced unmitigated agency.

1. Agency as mediator between power and SWB

Power, a fundamental aspect of daily social life, is typically defined as an individual's relative capacity to modify others' states by providing or withholding resources or administering punishment (Keltner et al., 2003). Evidence from a number of studies shows that possessing power can lead to more positive affect and higher self-esteem (Duguid & Goncalo, 2012; Wojciszke & Struzynska-Kujalowicz, 2007). Meanwhile, power results in more consistent behaviour with respect to internal traits and desires (Keltner et al., 2003) and allows people to express their true attitudes (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008). Results from previous studies suggest that power contributes to agency, which involves self-affirmation and individualization (Bakan, 1966; Goldman & Kernis, 2002). Considering that agency has a pervasive and positive influence on well-being (Helgeson, 1994; Saragovi, Koestern, & Aube, 1997), we hypothesized that power would predict SWB by motivating people to become more agentic.

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2. Unmitigated agency as mediator between power and SWB

On the positive side, agency contributes to power and is beneficial to well-being. On the negative side, when agency is not mitigated by communion, it is referred to as unmitigated agency, which can adversely affect well-being. Unmitigated agency is an extreme focus on the self and precludes the possibility of being oriented toward others (Helgeson, 1994); this could lead to arrogant and egoistic behaviour (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001), including exerting control over others through physical abuse (Mason & Blankenship, 1987), in the power holder. Considering that communion is related to relationship satisfaction (Helgeson, 1994), unmitigated agency could reduce people's well-being through relationship dissatisfaction (Kumashiro, Rusbult, & Finkel, 2008; Kwan et al., 1997). For this reason, the power holder will only achieve high SWB if unmitigated agency (negative effect) is reduced and agency (positive effect) is increased.

3. Overview of current study

The current study tested whether power (both dispositional and role-specific) was positively related to SWB and role satisfaction via agency and unmitigated agency. We measured dispositional sense of power, traits of agency and unmitigated agency, and SWB, as well as role-specific power and satisfaction with work and romantic relationships. We tested our hypothesis that dispositional power is a positive predictor of SWB, and this link is mediated by agency and unmitigated agency. Furthermore, we investigated whether the hypothesis holds true in markedly different social roles. Although work and romance roles are characterized by varying levels of satisfaction (Kifer, Heller, Perunovic, & Galinsky, 2013) and differences in power levels (Anderson et al., 2012), given our theoretical rationale regarding a fundamental link between power, agency, unmitigated agency, and SWB, we hypothesized that the direct effects of power on SWB would be mediated by agency and unmitigated agency, both generally and within the specific roles.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

The participants were 202 Chinese adults (123 women; mean age = 29.75 years, $SD = 5.83$, age range: 19–54; married = 162) recruited from a professional website offering paid online tasks (<http://www.sojump.com/>). Participants varied considerably in profession (e.g., 4% college students, 16.8% technical personnel, and 23% managerial personnel, and so on), socioeconomic status (monthly income from 2 thousand to 50 thousand RMB), and education (from high school degree to master degree). Prior to completing the questionnaire, each individual was informed of the broad nature of the research. To minimize the impact of social desirability, we instructed participants to answer every question as honestly as possible to ensure they would receive accurate feedback of psychological tests and reward for participating. Having read the study information, participants then indicated their agreement with the study protocol and procedure by signifying their consent online.

4.2. Procedure and measures

To control for order effects, we randomized the order of the questionnaires within each survey. All ratings were recorded using 5-point scales rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The English scales were translated into Chinese, according to the standard guidelines, by a native Chinese speaker with English as a second language (Beaton, Bombardier, Guillemin, & Ferraz, 2000).

4.2.1. Power

Dispositional and role-specific power was assessed via the Sense of Power Scale (Anderson et al., 2012). This eight-item scale is used to record respondents' reported beliefs regarding their power; the scale includes items such as 'I think I have a great deal of power'. To measure role power, we adjusted the instructions to fit each role. Cronbach's α s for general, work, and romance power were .88, .91, and .83, respectively.

4.2.2. Subjective well-being (SWB)

Life satisfaction was assessed the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985); the scale includes 5 items such as 'In most ways, my life is close to my ideal'. Cronbach's α for the SWB survey was .89. Positive affect (PA) and negative affect (NA) were measured using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule ((Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The PA scale includes 10 items, such as 'interested', and the NA scale includes 10 items, such as 'upset'. Participants were instructed to estimate the extent to which they generally experienced these emotions. Cronbach's α s for PA and NA were .91 and .86, respectively. As in previous studies, we computed SWB by summing the standardized life satisfaction and PA scores and subtracting the standardized NA score (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999).

4.2.3. Role satisfaction

Participants were instructed to respond to each item based on their general satisfaction in specific roles. Work satisfaction was measured using five-item measure ($\alpha = .82$), which includes items such as 'I feel fairly satisfied with my present job' (Brayfield & Rothe, 1951). Romantic role satisfaction was measured using six-item romance satisfaction measure ($\alpha = .86$), which includes items such as 'My relationship with my partner makes me happy' (Norton, 1983).

4.2.4. Personality traits of agency and unmitigated agency

Participants' agency and unmitigated agency were measured using the agency and unmitigated agency subscales of the Extended Version of the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence, Helmreich, & Holahan, 1979). Each subscale consists of eight items. Agency items, such as 'independent', reflect a positive orientation toward the self. Unmitigated agency items, such as 'arrogant', reflect an orientation toward the self to the exclusion of others. In the current study, Cronbach's α s for the agency and unmitigated agency subscales were .88 and .81, respectively.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive statistics and relationships between variables

The descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for all variables are presented in Tables 1 and 2. As expected, power, whether dispositional or contextual, was positively uncorrelated with agency and SWB (or role satisfaction). However, unmitigated agency was negatively correlated with all other variables.

To further assess how power, agency, and unmitigated agency would contribute to SWB or role satisfaction, we employed a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses. The results were consistent with our predictions that power emerged as a significant positive predictor of SWB after controlling for age and gender. Analysing the two role surveys confirmed our predictions that the positive effect of power could be generalized to a specific context (Table 3).

We also found that dispositional power positively predicted agency ($\beta = .66$, $SE = .05$, $p < .0001$) and negatively predicted unmitigated agency ($\beta = -.23$, $SE = .07$, $p = .001$) after controlling for

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