



Not so lonely at the top: The relationship between power and loneliness



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ABSTRACT

Eight studies found a robust negative relationship between the experience of power and the experience of loneliness. Dispositional power and loneliness were negatively correlated (Study 1). Experimental inductions established causality: we manipulated high versus low power through autobiographical essays, assignment to positions, or control over resources, and found that each manipulation showed that high versus low power decreased loneliness (Studies 2a–2c). We also demonstrated both that low power can increase loneliness and that high power can decrease loneliness by comparing these conditions to a baseline condition (Studies 3–4, 6). Furthermore, we establish a key mechanism that explains this effect, demonstrating that the need to belong mediates the effect of power on loneliness (Studies 5–6). These findings help explain some effects of power on social cognition, offer insights into organizational well-being and motivation, and speak to the fundamental question of whether it is “lonely at the top” or lonelier at the bottom.

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What can solitude have to do with leadership? Solitude means being alone, and leadership necessitates the presence of others—the people you’re leading. When we think about leadership in American history we are likely to think of Washington, at the head of an army, or Lincoln, at the head of a nation, or [Martin Luther] King, at the head of a movement—people with multitudes behind them, looking to them for direction. And when we think of solitude, we are apt to think of Thoreau, a man alone in the woods, keeping a journal and communing with nature in silence.

[William Deresiewicz (October 2009) in a lecture to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point]

1. Introduction

Deresiewicz poses a question about the relationship between loneliness and power, a relationship that prior research has broached, but never directly addressed empirically. In a chapter that asks explicitly, “Is it lonely at the top?” Lee and Tiedens (2001) reviewed extensive research suggesting that power creates social distance (i.e., independence). Likewise, Magee and Smith (2013) articulated the social forces that can increase

power-holders’ sense of distance from others: among other distancing effects, power increases feelings of self-sufficiency while decreasing willingness to help others (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2012) and reduces desire for contact with subordinates (Kipnis, 1972).

To the extent that social distance and subjective isolation are similar, this previous research suggests that high-power people would experience greater loneliness than low-power people. However, we argue that the social distance experienced by power-holders differs from subjective isolation in two important respects. First, the social distance experienced by power-holders refers specifically to the people over whom they have power (Magee & Smith, 2013). In the current research, we are additionally interested in whether simply having or lacking power affects the psychological experience of loneliness more generally, outside their power-related relationships.

Second, a sense of social distance is not inherently negative or positive, so it need not translate into an undesirable state of loneliness. An important component of our theorizing is that loneliness and social distance are orthogonal constructs. We propose that high power reduces loneliness by reducing the motivation to connect socially with others, whereas low power increases loneliness by increasing this motivation. That is, having power decreases the need to belong compared to low power, which increases this need. Contrary to the received wisdom that it is lonely at the top,

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we propose instead that lacking power leads to more loneliness than having power. In the current research, we will show that the need to belong is an important driver of the relationship between power and loneliness.

1.1. Power as a potential driver of loneliness

Before turning to evidence for why lacking versus having power might affect the psychological experience of loneliness, we want to acknowledge that power can contribute to loneliness in a number of ways. For example, as noted above, power increases independence (House, 1988; Kipnis, 1972; Lee & Tiedens, 2001) and personal control (Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009), both of which represent a cluster of characteristics that emphasizes personal agency. Such self-focused characteristics also emerge in how power influences relational dynamics. In social interactions, high-power individuals pay less attention to, and listen less to, others than do low-power individuals (Ellyson, Dovidio, Corson, & Vinicur, 1980; Tost, Gino, & Larrick, 2013).

This diminished attention toward others can result in a lack of concern for others' feelings and opinions. Power decreases people's consideration of others' perspectives (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006) and their compassion for others' suffering (Van Kleef et al., 2008). In addition, power increases dehumanization (Lammers & Stapel, 2011) and heightens objectification of others, whereby people treat others as a means to their own goals (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008). These behaviors do not represent the actions of a socially engaged individual.

Power may also facilitate loneliness by changing the perceptions of one's social relationships. One set of studies demonstrates that power can decrease trust and increase cynical attributions for others' generosity (Inesi, Gruenfeld, & Galinsky, 2012). This pattern of results emerges because people in power question whether subordinates' kind behavior is genuine or simply instrumental. These findings suggest that power may increase loneliness by increasing social distance from, and decreasing social engagement with, others.

1.2. Power as an alleviator of loneliness

Although power can increase factors associated with loneliness, other research suggests a negative relationship between power and loneliness. Research has found that power can provide social opportunities that may enhance feelings of social connection. For instance, people with power tend to have more network ties (Blackburn, 1981; Ibarra, 1995) and therefore can connect otherwise disconnected individuals (Burt, 1992). Research also indicates that powerful people overestimate the extent to which people they know are "in their corner" (Brion & Anderson, 2013). Although this overestimation may impair future social connection and the ability to maintain alliances with others (Brion & Anderson, 2013), in the short term people might benefit psychologically from perceiving strong social connections with others.

Not only can power enhance perceived access to social ties but also it can bolster specific social skills. For example, trait measures of power are correlated with the ability to decode others' nonverbal emotional cues (Hall, Halberstadt, & O'Brien, 1997). Experimentally increasing perceivers' sense of power can also increase their ability to infer others' thoughts and feelings, particularly when perceivers are dispositionally prosocial or have an empathic leadership style (Côté et al., 2011; Schmid, Jonas, & Hall, 2009). These enhanced social skills conferred through experiencing power might also increase the subjective sense of being able to connect with others and thus reduce loneliness.

Another way that power may reduce loneliness is through buffering against social stressors. Physiological research on

primates and humans has shown that power is related to increased testosterone, a hormone that buffers threat (Carney, Cuddy, & Yap, 2010; Sapolsky, 2005) and lower levels of cortisol, a hormone that is released in response to stress (Abbott et al., 2003; Carney et al., 2010; Coe, Mendoza, & Levine, 1979; Sapolsky, 1982; Sapolsky, Alberts, & Altmann, 1997; Sherman et al., 2012). Multiple studies have found that the powerful experience less distress, cortisol reactivity, and physiological arousal in the face of socially stressful situations (Carney et al., 2015; Kuehn, Chen, & Gordon, 2015; Schmid & Schmid Mast, 2013). Having power also makes people more socially resilient, increasing the likelihood of finding new connections after experiencing social exclusion (Narayanan, Tai, & Kinias, 2013). These findings suggest that even when power presents demands that threaten social relationships, the stress-buffering effects of power might reduce loneliness.

Finally, studies have shown that low power (versus high power) increases attention to social context and increases the desire for interpersonal harmony (e.g., Adler, 1983; Copeland, 1994; Jones & Pittman, 1982; see Lee & Tiedens, 2001). These findings suggest that individuals low in power are lacking and wanting of social connection.

Taken together, these findings suggest that it is lonelier at the bottom of social hierarchy. Because power enhances social opportunities, specific social skills, and buffers the effects of social stressors, and because lacking power appears to increase loneliness and the desire for social opportunities, we suggest that high power will diminish the subjective experience of loneliness relative to low power. In other words, we propose that the experience of power will psychologically be associated with reduced loneliness. Conversely, we propose that lacking power will be associated with increased loneliness.

1.3. Social distance versus loneliness

The research we have summarized suggests that power has different relationships with two different forms of social disconnection, social distance and loneliness. Here, we distinguish between these two constructs to demonstrate why we predict a negative association between power and loneliness despite the existence of a positive association between power and social distance.

To properly conceptualize loneliness we draw on the important distinction between *objective* and *subjective* social isolation, the latter of which characterizes loneliness (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009a; Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). Objective social isolation reflects the quantity of one's social interactions and includes one's relationship status, how often one interacts with others, and one's living arrangements with others. On the other hand, subjective social isolation—captured by the construct of loneliness—concerns the quality of those interactions and reflects dissatisfaction with one's social relationships. The relationship between subjective and objective isolation is surprisingly modest (Hughes, Waite, Hawkley, & Cacioppo, 2004), with evidence indicating objective isolation may or may not contribute to the subjective emotional state (Cole et al., 2007; Wheeler, Reis, & Nezlek, 1983). Loneliness, as a subjective assessment of one's relationship to others is also a necessarily negative state, described by Weiss (1973) as a "gnawing, chronic disease without redeeming features" (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012, p. 446). Unlike loneliness, social distance is not necessarily undesirable. Social distance is a "subjective perception or experience of distance from another person or other persons" (Magee & Smith, 2013, p. 159) and would only translate into loneliness if the powerful expected to be close to the people from whom they actually feel distant. Although a wealth of data supports the positive relationship between power and various forms of social distance (Magee & Smith, 2013), the present research suggests that power is negatively associated with a

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