Symposium S-A2

Power and Close Relationships: The (In)Significance and Asymmetric Influence of Others in Goal Pursuit and Emotion

Friday, February 14, 2014, 9:45 AM - 11:00 AM, Ballroom A

Chair: Joe Magee, New York University
Co-Chair: Kristin Laurin, Stanford University

New theoretical insights and empirical evidence answer questions about how social power operates in close relationships. These new developments cover topics including how social power influences self-regulation and goal pursuit in the context of close relationships, reactions to conflict situations, and social comparison and emotions in relationships.

Fighting for independence: Significant others' goals for oneself incite reactance among the powerful
Ena Inesi, Kimberly Rios
London Business School; Ohio University

We tested the prediction that power increases people's tendencies to act against the goals their close significant others have for them. Participants in Study 1 all reported in a pre-test that their mother wanted them to achieve, but that they themselves were relatively less interested in achieving. A week later, high-power (but not neutral-power) participants who were reminded of their mother were subsequently less likely to pursue an achievement goal. Study 2 replicated this pattern of results with romantic partners and showed that the effects were strongest when individuals were personally less interested in pursuing a goal they believed their significant other held for them. In Study 3, we looked at mothers and healthy eating goals, and found that the predicted pattern only emerged for close significant others. Further, feelings of reactance mediated high-power participants' tendencies to act against significant-other goals that they themselves held less strongly.

Power and goal pursuit in close relationships
Kristin Laurin, Grainne M. Fitzsimons, Eli J. Finkel
Stanford University; Duke University; Northwestern University

We examine how partners influence each other's goal pursuit as a function of each partner's power. In an initial lab study, low, but not high, power participants gravitated towards their interdependent partner's goals, cognitively activating that partner’s high-priority goals, and inhibiting that partner's low-priority goals. Two field studies examine how low power individuals pursue their own goals in existing romantic relationships. In these studies, low power predicted a willingness to sacrifice one's own goals for the partner, and the pursuit of the partner's interests at the expense of one's own. In a final study, participants led to feel low power worked more to earn money for their romantic partner's goal than for their own. These results suggest that low power individuals in particular adopt their relationship partners’ goals, and in the process abandon their own.

Power moderates the link between anger proneness and hostility during conflict interactions with romantic partners: Evidence using the principle of least interest
Angela M. Neal, Edward P. Lemay, Jr.
University of New Hampshire
According to the principle of least interest, the relatively more committed member of a romantic relationship has less social power relative to the less committed member. Using this as a framework, the current research examined whether social power would moderate effects of anger proneness on hostile behavior during conflict interactions within romantic relationships. High relationship commitment and low perceptions of the partner’s commitment eliminated the effect of anger proneness on hostile behavior. Consistent with the principle of least interest, these findings suggest that lack of social power brought about by asymmetric involvement acts as an inhibitory factor, weakening tendencies to act on dispositional anger.

The social distance theory of power: Implications for close relationships
Joe Magee, Pamela K. Smith
New York University; University of California-San Diego
We present the portion of the social distance theory of power (Magee & Smith, 2013) grounded in research on close relationships. First, we propose that asymmetric dependence between individuals (i.e., power) produces asymmetric social distance, with high-power individuals feeling more distant than low-power individuals. We contend that asymmetric distance is created because high- and low-power individuals have different levels of motivation to affiliate with each other and also divergent expectations of each other’s interest. Second, we argue that once asymmetric social distance is established, a number of factors serve to maintain it, including high-power individuals’ cynical attributions about low-power individuals’ friendly advances and interpersonal distancing signals given off by high-power individuals. Third, we articulate predictions about how power affects (a) social comparison, (b) susceptibility to influence, (c) mental state inference and responsiveness, and (d) emotions. Fourth, we review some key studies with evidence supporting these propositions and predictions.