

**Powerful people feel less fear of negative evaluation: the mediating role of
personal control belief**

Wei Cai

Research Centre of Brain Function and Psychological Science, Shenzhen University,
Shenzhen, China

Key Laboratory of Behavioral Science, Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of
Sciences, China

Song Wu

College of Psychology and Sociology, Shenzhen University, Shenzhen, China

To whom correspondence should be addressed, Email: weicaicc@gmail.com

Acknowledgement

This research was supported by the Humanity and Social Science Youth Foundation of Ministry of Education of China (16YJC190021), and National Social Science Foundation of China (16BSH098).

Author contributions

W.C. constructed the original concepts and draft the manuscript, W.C. and S.W. designed the study, performed research and analysed data, S.W. critically revised the paper. Both authors approved the final version of the manuscript for submission. And both researchers claim no conflicts of interests.

Word count: 3644

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Abstract: To directly examine why an individual's capacity to influence others by providing valued resources (i.e., power) could decrease the concerns about negative evaluation from others (i.e., the fear of negative evaluation, FNE) in daily life, two studies were conducted. Results found that perceived power (Study 1) was associated with lower FNE, and manipulating power levels (Study 2) caused less FNE. Furthermore, results indicate that personal control belief mediated this link. These findings provide empirical evidence of the underlying mechanism of the effect of power on reducing FNE. The current research contributes significantly because it sheds light on how power transferred from a person's "external world" to their "internal world" (i.e., personal control belief) can influence their cognition and behavior.

Keywords: power; personal control belief; fear of negative evaluation; mediator

Introduction

Imagine a scenario in which you are a professional in a specific technical field and looking for a job. A high-tech company that requires this specific technique has asked you to attend a job interview. If you know that you mastered the technique that the company lacks and desires, your worries about negative evaluations from the interviewers will be fewer. This seems to be a common situation in daily life, which raises an interesting question in our minds: why does an individual's capacity to influence others by providing valued resources (i.e., power; in this case, the specific technique) decrease the concerns about negative evaluation from others? The current study explores this issue, and proposes that personal control belief might be the mechanism underlying the relationship between power and the fear of negative evaluation (FNE).

Power is the relative capacity to influence others by providing valuable resources or punishment (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Unlike the past view that *power corrupts*, an increasing amount of research has indicated the protective function of power against threat and stress (e.g., Bombari, Schmid Mast, & Bachmann, 2016; Inesi, 2010; Kang, Galinsky, Kray, & Shirako, 2015; Scheepers, de Wit, Ellemers, & Sassenberg, 2012). Regarding social stress, on the one hand, power increases the efficiency of the heart's functioning when facing social stress (Scheepers et al., 2012), and improves an individual's performance (Kang et al., 2015) as well as their nonverbal presence (Cuddy, Wilmuth, Yap, & Carney, 2015) when under pressure, which then promote others' (including an interviewer or a bystander) evaluations of them (Lammers, Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2013). On the other hand, power not only decreases an individual's negative emotions (Bombari et al., 2016) and loss aversion (Inesi, 2010), but also increases the individual's perceived positive attitudes from others (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002). All of this evidence suggests that power can decrease individuals' concerns about how they are perceived or evaluated by others, which is an interpersonal social threat (e.g., Schmid & Schmid Mast, 2013). Yet, as described at the beginning, it is still unclear why power buffers the fear of others'

evaluations. The present study explicitly examined the influence and underlying mechanism of power on the fear of negative evaluations (FNE) by others.

The FNE is defined as “the degree to which people experience apprehension at the prospect of being evaluated negatively” (Leary, 1983). It is a key and common stress-related response in social interactions, and includes two main parts: negative emotions (i.e., fear) and potential threat (i.e., worries about making a bad impression on others). The FNE is an important psychological process that has been identified as an essential mediator in various individuals’ psychological activities in the health or work context, such as the relationship between self-esteem and social anxiety (Kocovski & Endler, 2000), and the relationship between power and performance in social evaluation situations (Schmid & Schmid Mast, 2013). However, it is still unknown why power, a social structural factor, could influence individuals’ responses in a social interaction (i.e., FNE). The current study proposed, and examined, personal control belief as the potential mediator in the relationship between power and the FNE.

Personal control belief is the belief that life chances are under one’s own control, rather than under the control of fateful rules (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Possessing personal control has long been considered an adaptive and buffering factor for physical and mental health, and well-being (Rodin, 1986). It has been established that power is one of the important determinants of personal control (e.g., Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009; Guinote, Brown, & Fiske, 2006; Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Inesi, Botti, Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2011). Although both *power* and *personal control belief* are related to control, they are definitely two distinct concepts (e.g., Fast et al., 2009; Inesi et al., 2011; Scholl & Sassenberg, 2014). Power emphasizes the individual’s influence and impact on others, whereas personal control focuses on the impact on oneself. Previous research, which clearly distinguished between these two concepts, found that personal control belief is an important mediator of many classical known power effects, such as the effect of power on self-esteem (Fast et al., 2009), attitudes (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, &

Liljenquist, 2008), and self-focused counterfactual thinking after failure (Scholl & Sassenberg, 2014). Thus, it has been demonstrated that having power can increase an individual's personal control belief. Given the evidence that possessing a sense of personal control leads to successfully coping with stress (Avison & Cairney, 2003) and fewer negative emotions (Schat & Kelloway, 2000), we hypothesized that high levels of personal control belief, caused by higher levels of power, would be associated with less FNE.

Therefore, two studies were conducted in the current research, which examined whether power levels (Study 1) and manipulated power (Study 2) were negatively related to FNE via greater personal control belief. Specifically, we hypothesized that (1) power will negatively predict FNE, and (2) this link will be mediated by personal control belief.

Study 1: Power Measurement

Methods

Participants

One hundred and fifty-two students (112 female; age: $M = 23.70$ years; $SD = 3.90$) from a psychology statistics course in a Chinese university participated voluntarily in the study for extra course credit. No selection criteria were used.

Materials and procedure

The present study was conducted using a professional online questionnaire platform (Sojump, <http://www.sojump.com/>) during one week. Participants received a URL attached to an email to complete measurements of power, personal control belief, and FNE.

Power. The eight-item Sense of Power Scale (SPS) was used to measure participants' power (Anderson, John, & Keltner, 2012). The SPS consists of four directly worded items (e.g., "I can get people to listen to what I say") and four reverse-worded items (e.g., "My wishes do not carry much weight"). Participants were required to answer to what extent they agreed with each item on a 7-point scale (1 = *disagree*

strongly, 7 = *agree strongly*). The Cronbach's alpha of the SPS was 0.73 in the present study, and higher scores indicated greater power.

Personal control belief. Personal control belief was measured using a five-item scale adapted from the Pearlin Mastery questionnaire (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Participants were asked to evaluate to what extent they agreed with each item (e.g., "I have little control over the things that happen to me"; reverse-worded) on a 5-point scale (1 = *disagree strongly*, 5 = *agree strongly*). Higher scores indicated greater personal control belief. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.82 in this study.

Fear of negative evaluation. The FNE was measured using the Brief Version of the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (BFNE; Leary, 1983). The BFNE consists of 12 items, including eight directly worded items (e.g., "I am frequently afraid of other people noticing my shortcomings") and four reverse-worded items (e.g., "I rarely worry about what kind of impression I am making on someone"). Participants were asked to answer how much they agreed with each item on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*). Higher scores indicated greater FNE. The Cronbach's alpha of the BFNE was 0.91 in the present study.

Data analysis

A two-step procedure was used to analyze the mediation effect. First, we tested a measurement model to find out whether each of the latent variables was represented by their indicators. Second, a maximum likelihood model was used to test the structural model.

In order to control inflated measurement errors and to increase the communality and reliability with a limited sample size (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002), we parceled the items of the given unidimensional scales in the current study using principal component analysis and item correlation matrices. Based on our analysis, we identified three unique parcels of the SPS (parcel 1 containing four items, the rest containing two items each) and two parcels of the BFNE (parcel 1 containing eight items and parcel 2 containing four items). We did not create a parcel for the personal control belief because it only contained five items and resulted in only

one principal component in the analysis. Instead, the raw items of personal control belief were used in the model.

Results and Discussion

Common method variance

A Harman's one-factor test and a confirmatory factor analysis were used to test the common method variance. The Harman's one-factor test showed that there were three principal factors in the non-rotation situation and the first factor could only explain 35.5% of the variance. Furthermore, the results of the confirmatory factor analysis showed that the three-factor model, including *power*, *personal control belief*, and *FNE* ($\chi^2 = 42.16$, $\chi^2/df = 1.56$, $p = .03$, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .06, and CFI = .96) revealed a better fit to the data than the single-factor model ($\chi^2 = 104.37$, $\chi^2/df = 3.48$, $p < .01$, RMSEA = .13, SRMR = .09, and CFI = .82). These results indicated that the common method variance is not likely to confound the interpretation of the results.

Measurement model

Three latent factors and 10 observed variables were included in the measurement model. The model revealed a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 42.16$, $\chi^2/df = 1.56$, $p = .03$, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .06, and CFI = .96). The results revealed that all indicators had significant factor loadings on their latent variables ($ps < .03$), which represented good structural validity of all three measurements. Table 1 shows the means, standard deviation (*SD*), Cronbach's α , and correlations for all measures. As expected, FNE was negatively correlated with both power ($r = -.47$) and personal control belief ($r = -.45$), and the correlation between the latter two factors was positive ($r = .53$).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Structural model: the mediating role of personal control belief

As shown in Figure 1, the direct path coefficient from power to the FNE without any mediator was significant ($b = -0.46, p < .01$). To examine the mediation effect of personal control belief in the relationship between power and FNE, a partially mediated model (Model 1) was tested with a mediator (i.e., the personal control belief) and a direct path from power to FNE. The results revealed a satisfactory fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 30.31, \chi^2/df = 1.17, p = .26, RMSEA = 0.03, SRMR = 0.04, CFI = 0.99, AIC = 108.31, \text{ and } ECVI = 0.72$). The standardized coefficients of each path are shown in Figure 1. The effect of power on FNE decreased ($b = -.24, SE = .16, p = .034$), and personal control belief significantly predicted FNE ($b = -.39, SE = .14, p < .001$). A bootstrap analysis (1000 bootstrapping samples) found that the indirect effect was $-.12, SE = .07, 95\% \text{ confidence intervals} = [-0.277, -0.011], p = .026$. All of these results demonstrated that the relationship between power and FNE was partially mediated by personal control belief.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

In addition, a competing model was tested to strengthen and test our hypothesis further. Model 2 included power as a mediator and tested a direct path from personal control belief to FNE. The results revealed a satisfactory fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 30.31, \chi^2/df = 1.17, p = .26$). However, the path coefficient from personal control belief to power was not significant ($b = .31, p = .13$), which indicates that power did not mediate the relationship between personal control belief and FNE. Therefore, Model 1 was chosen as the final model, and our hypothesis regarding the mediating effect of personal control belief between power and FNE was supported.

These results support our hypothesis that power negatively predicts FNE, and personal control belief mediates this link. However, study 1 focused on measures of

perceived power already held by participants, rather than directly manipulating power. It remains to be examined whether manipulated power would produce the same effects on FNE through the same route of personal control belief. Study 2 manipulated individual's power and retested this model with a different adult sample. In this study, participants were required to recall a memory in which they had power over others (for the high power condition) or a memory in which others had power over them (for the low power condition). This manipulation pattern has been widely used in previous studies and has been proven effective for power priming. As past research has found comparable effects for manipulated and measured power (e.g., Anderson & Galinsky, 2006), we proposed that similar results would be obtained; that is, personal control belief would mediate the negative effect of power on FNE.

Study 2: Manipulated Power

Methods

Participants

One hundred and thirty-six adults (62 female; *Mean* age = 33.52 years; *SD* = 6.74) completed an online experiment via the Sample Service of Sojump (<http://www.sojump.com/>). Participants represented a wide range of household yearly incomes, with 29% reporting 100,001–150,000 RMB (1 RMB equaled 0.152 U.S. dollars during the data collection period), 24% reported 150,001–200,000 RMB, 18% reported 50,001–100,000 RMB, 15% reported 200,001–300,000 RMB, 7% reported 300,001–500,000 RMB, 5% reported under 50,000 RMB, and 2% reported over 500,000 RMB. With regard to the education level, sixty-eight percent had bachelor degrees, 17% had college degrees, 10% had graduate degrees, and 4% had high-school degrees.

Materials and procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to a high-power or low-power condition, following provision of informed consent. Participants were introduced to recall and write about an experience in which they had power over others (i.e. high-power condition) or others had power over them (i.e. low-power condition, Galinsky,

Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). To check whether the manipulation was successful, participants then rated their agreement to three statements referring the extent to which they felt “in control,” “influential” and/or “powerful” (1 = *completely disagree*, 9 = *completely agree*; Cronbach’s alpha = .97). Following this, subjects were asked to participate in an unrelated study, which included scales used in Study 1, to measure their sense of personal control belief (Cronbach’s alpha = .89) and FNE (Cronbach’s alpha = .91). Last, participants responded to some demographic questions, like age, gender, household income, and education level. Following response to all questions, participants were thanked and debriefed.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check

An independent sample T-test was used to test whether the manipulation of power was successful. Results showed that individuals in the high-power condition ($n = 70$, $M = 7.71$, $SD = 1.02$) felt more powerful than the ones in low-power condition ($n = 66$, $M = 3.0$, $SD = 1.76$), $t(134) = 19.158$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = 3.27$. After controlling age, gender, household income, and education level, the difference between conditions remained significant, $F(1, 130) = 317.3$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .71$. These results showed that the power manipulation was effective.

Mediation model

We first examined whether power decreased FNE. An independent sample T-test yielded a significant difference between conditions, $t(134) = -3.43$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = -0.59$. Powerful individuals ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.74$) felt significantly less FNE than powerless individuals ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.70$). We then examined if power increased personal control belief. As expected, an independent sample T-test showed a significant difference between conditions, $t(134) = 5.89$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = 1.01$. Powerful individuals ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.80$) perceived greater personal control belief than powerless individuals ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.82$). Moreover, as shown in Table 1, personal control belief was negatively associate with FNE, $r = -.46$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = -1.03$.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Next, a mediation analysis was performed to test whether power decreased FNE, via increased personal control belief. Orthogonal contrast was used to code high power as 1 and low power as -1. An SPSS macro developed by Preacher and Hayes (2008) was used. Ninety-five percent bias corrected bootstrap confidence intervals for total and specific indirect effects were used, based on 1000 bootstrap samples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Figure 2 represents the mediation model and provides path coefficients. As shown, the negative association between powerful (in contrast to powerless) and FNE turned nonsignificant when feelings of personal control belief were included in the model. Results showed that a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval of the indirect effect of power on FNE did not include zero (-.311 to -.092). This indirect effect remained statistically significant (95% CI: [-.217, -.068]) when controlling the following variables: age ($b = -.02, p = .08$), gender (coded as male = 1, female = -1, $b = .08, p = .50$), household income ($b = -.01, p = .85$), and education level ($b = -.07, p = .43$). The coefficient of the effect of power on FNE was $-.16, p = .01$, and then changed to $-.05, p = .46$, after including personal control belief in the model. These results suggest that greater personal control belief mediated the effect of power on FNE.

By manipulating power, the results of Study 2 supported the hypothesis that personal control belief is the mechanism underlying the relationship of power and FNE. These findings not only replicate previous results, but also extend them, from measured generalized power, to manipulated situational power, in a different sample.

Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to explicitly test the underlying mechanism of the effects of power and FNE. The present studies supported our hypotheses that FNE was negatively predicted by power, and that

this relationship was mediated by personal control belief. These results support and extend previous theories and findings.

These findings provide substantial evidence to support the approach-inhibition theory of power (Keltner et al., 2003). According to this theory, in order to achieve goals, individuals with elevated power may be more likely to perceive rewards and less likely to perceive threats than individuals with reduced power. Therefore, it is possible that powerful individuals would inhibit negative emotions, and hence, display less FNE. In fact, the results of the present two studies are consistent with the approach-inhibition theory of power, as well as the findings of previous research (Schmid & Schmid Mast, 2013). In order to gain others' acceptance, individuals with high FNE are more likely to be influenced by other people or situational factors (Leary, 1983). Therefore, it is likely that individuals who have less FNE will be more successful at concentrating on, and then achieving their personal goals in social interactions. Thus, the FNE may be the key underlying mechanism of previous findings that people with greater power are more likely to focus on, and realize their goals.

In addition, it was found in the present research that the relationship between power and FNE was mediated by personal control belief. Power emphasizes the ability to influence others, through controlling valued resources, while personal control emphasizes controlling the individual's own life and being free from others. The present results suggested that an individual's ability to influence others and the "external world" (i.e., power) may increase their abilities and sense of control in their "internal world" and being free from others (i.e., personal control belief), which, in turn, helps the individual to inhibit negative emotion or cognition. These findings shed

light on how power transferred from the “external” to “internal” can influence an individual’s cognition and behavior, which enriches and extends current theories of power. One recent study, which demonstrated that people increase their desire for power when they lack control over their own fate, is in line with our results (Lammers, Stoker, Rink, & Galinsky, 2016). Future research needs to further study the relationship between power and personal control belief.

Yet, aside from the theoretical contributions of the current research, there are some limitations. Specifically, the current research used only self-report measurement of FNE. Although it is the most common method for studying FNE, future studies need to use some objective methods to represent the FNE, such as psychophysiological indexes, and further test the mediating role of personal control belief in the relationship between power and FNE. Furthermore, these studies tested only individuals’ responses to one type of threat (i.e., social threat); thus, it is still unclear whether other kinds of threat (such as existential threat, physical threat, etc.) could be influenced by power through the personal control belief path.

Despite these limitations, the present findings provide empirical evidence regarding the effect of power on reducing FNE, and the mediating role of personal control belief in this link. These results not only significantly contribute to the power literature, by directly exploring and determining how and why power influences social concerns about being evaluated, but also extend the mediating role of personal control belief into a social evaluation situation. This suggests how control over others (i.e., power) transfers into control over one’s own fate (i.e. personal control belief), and, consequently, influences individuals’ cognition.

These findings may guide future research, and help us to understand further the nature of power. Future studies should continue to examine and investigate the relationship between power and the response to threat.

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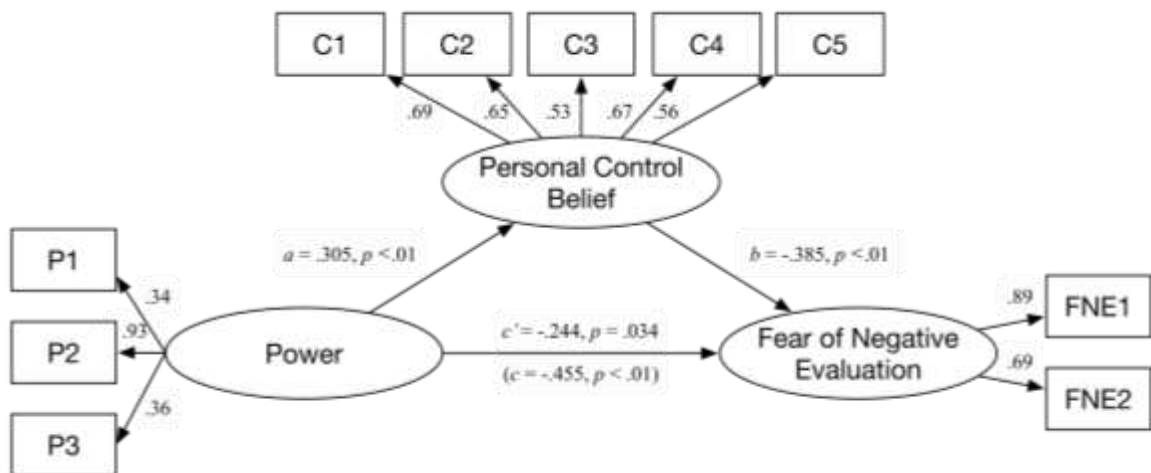


Figure 1. The structural model of the mediating effect of personal control belief in the relationship between power and fear of negative evaluation (Study 1, $N = 152$).

Note. Factor loadings are standardized. P1–P3 = three parcels of power, C1–C5 = five items of personal control belief, and FNE1–FNE2 = two parcels of fear of negative evaluation. The coefficient in parentheses is the direct effect of sense of power on fear of negative evaluation.

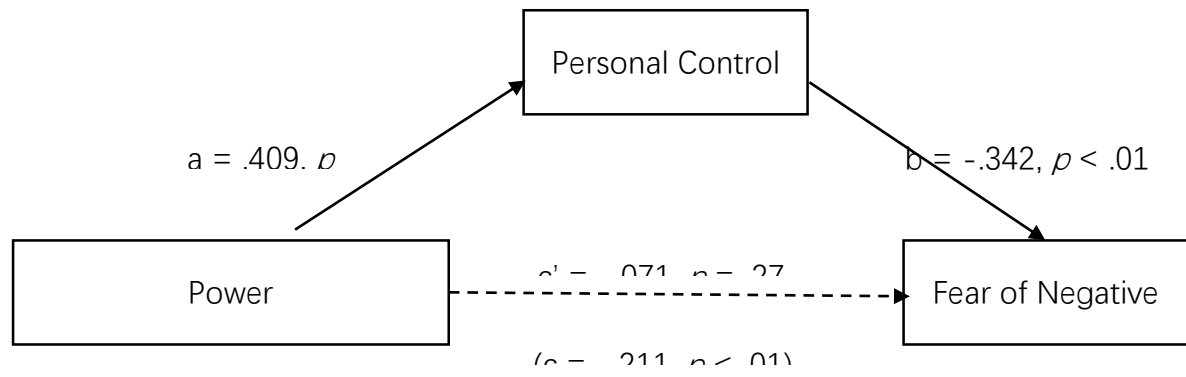


Figure 2. The mediation model of Study 2 (N = 136).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations for all measures.

Variables	<i>M (SD)</i>	Cronbach's α	1	2
Study 1 (n = 152)				
1. Power	4.46 (0.82)	.73	---	
2. Personal control belief	3.36 (0.77)	.82	.53*	---
3. Fear of negative evaluation	3.37 (0.76)	.91	-.47***	-.45**
Study 2 (n = 136)				
2. Personal control belief	3.41 (0.90)	.89	---	---
3. Fear of negative evaluation	3.00 (0.75)	.91	---	-.46***

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.