Approach-Inhibition Theory of Power: A Theoretical Extension Based on Meta-Analysis

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Abstract

Power Approach-Inhibition Behavior Theory is an important theoretical framework for explaining the relationship between power and behavior; however, empirical studies applying this theory have yielded conclusions that contradict theoretical predictions. Through a meta-analytic integration of 154 studies comprising 245 empirical samples and 261 effect sizes that explored the relationship between power and approach/inhibition behaviors from 2003 to 2023, this study examines the double-edged sword mechanism and boundary conditions underlying the power-approach-inhibition behavior relationship, aiming to explain the reasons for inconsistent findings in prior research. The results demonstrate that the relationship between power and approach-inhibition behaviors exhibits a double-edged sword effect: objective power indirectly increases approach behavior and decreases inhibition behavior through subjective power, while simultaneously exerting a direct facilitating effect on inhibition behavior, with subjective power demonstrating stronger explanatory power for behavior than objective power. Moderation analyses reveal that power distance strengthens the positive influence of subjective power on approach behavior and reinforces the negative influence of subjective power on inhibition behavior. These conclusions contribute to deepening and expanding the theoretical framework of Power Approach-Inhibition Behavior Theory.

Full Text

Preamble

According to the power approach-inhibition theory of behavior, approach behaviors refer to actions that help individuals obtain goals related to rewards and opportunities, while inhibition behaviors encompass a series of actions related to punishment and threat signals, including vigilance, checking for punishment, avoidance, and inhibited responses (Cho & Keltner, 2020; Keltner et al., 2003). Whether subjective or objective, power represents greater control over resources

(Galinsky et al., 2015; Ten Brinke & Keltner, 2022). When individuals possess higher power, they find themselves in an environment rich with rewards and returns, making them more likely to leverage their superior resources for personal gain (Webster et al., 2022). Simultaneously, high power endows individuals with the ability to act without interference or restriction from others, enhancing their voice and autonomous decision-making authority (Bao et al., 2023; Cho & Keltner, 2020), which allows them more opportunities to act self-centeredly at will (Giurge et al., 2021) and to engage in behaviors that disregard rules and morality, even harming others (Kim et al., 2017). Conversely, reduced power leads to increased inhibition. Low-power individuals have fewer resources and less influence over others and events. They are also more susceptible to social threats and punishment, more aware of societal and interpersonal constraints, and more sensitive to others' evaluations and reactions (Cho & Keltner, 2020). Therefore, to protect their limited resources and avoid threats and punishment, low-power individuals often adopt inhibition behaviors such as silence, withdrawal, and compliance (Zhu & Xie, 2018; Foulk et al., 2020). Thus, the power approach-inhibition theory posits that increased power leads individuals to adopt more approach behaviors, while decreased power results in more inhibition behaviors.

Objective and subjective power (or psychological power) are typically conceptualized as two distinct types of power (Heller et al., 2023; Körner & Schütz, 2024; Smith & Galinsky, 2010). Objective power refers to an individual's actual, objective control over resources and ability to influence others, representing power that is truly and objectively possessed, measured using objective indicators (Finkelstein, 1992) or positions, such as tenure, board size (Ma et al., 2017), ownership concentration (Li, 2022), or direct inquiries about organizational hierarchy or position (Magni et al., 2022). In contrast, subjective power refers to an individual's subjective perception and experience of their ability to control resources and influence others, representing a subjective feeling and cognition (Anderson et al., 2012). Subjective power often includes a sense of power, power perception, referent power, and reward power. Objective and subjective power represent different facets of power in objective reality versus individual psychological experience, constituting two distinct conceptualizations. A comparison of the two is shown in Table 1 .

Although both objective and subjective power fall within the power domain and represent unequal control over valuable resources (Smith & Galinsky, 2010), they remain distinct conceptualizations. Given this, we argue that the magnitude of effects and influence mechanisms differ between objective/subjective power and behavior.

Regarding effect magnitude, objective power emphasizes power conferred by organizational hierarchy or position, being relatively more objective and externalized (Heller et al., 2023), and may not necessarily be perceived by individuals to activate the behavioral approach and inhibition systems in neural mechanisms (Keltner et al., 2003). Consequently, the effect of objective power is often discounted, with weaker explanatory power for individuals' approach and inhi-

bition behaviors. In comparison, subjective power focuses more on individuals' psychological feelings (Anderson et al., 2012), primarily stemming from internal cognitive assessments of one's own power, making it relatively more subjective and internalized. Particularly within the subjective power domain exists a form of power based not on externally available resources or positions but on internal self-cognition and beliefs to influence or control others—termed internal power perception (Liang & Chang, 2016; Wagers, 2015; Wagers et al., 2021). Internal power perception means that even without objective power, individuals may still possess high subjective power, thereby more readily prompting approach behaviors and reducing inhibition. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 1a: Compared to objective power, subjective power has a stronger positive effect on approach behavior.

Hypothesis 1b: Compared to objective power, subjective power has a stronger negative effect on inhibition behavior.

Regarding influence mechanisms, objective power affects individual behavior through two pathways. The first pathway involves objective power indirectly influencing approach and inhibition behaviors through subjective power perception (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002). This logic implies that objective power is subjectively perceived by individuals as external power perception—using external resources or positions as a guarantee to influence or control others—representing activated objective power (Galinsky et al., 2003; Min & Kim, 2013; Wagers, 2015; Wagers et al., 2021). Objective power means individuals possess more resources (Heller et al., 2023), which stimulate subjective cognitions about one's ability to influence others or the environment. This subjective cognition and experience of power, in turn, promote proactive approach behaviors to pursue goals (Galinsky et al., 2015) and reduce inhibition behaviors characterized by passivity and withdrawal. Thus, higher objective power enhances individuals' sense of subjective power, leading to more approach behaviors and fewer inhibition behaviors.

The second pathway involves objective power directly influencing individual behavior. After controlling for the indirect path through subjective power, the remaining objective power becomes power not perceived by the individual—latent objective power or unactivated objective power (Galinsky et al., 2003; Min & Kim, 2013). In this case, the power holder has not yet realized they possess resources to influence or control others. Although individuals may have high objective power, they may not subjectively consider themselves high-power individuals. Since subjectively perceived power does not remain at high levels, the behavioral approach system in neural mechanisms is not activated (Galinsky et al., 2015; Keltner et al., 2003), causing such high-objective-power individuals not to exhibit more approach behaviors and fewer inhibition behaviors, and potentially even activating the behavioral inhibition system due to their "sense of powerlessness" (Anderson et al., 2012; Yu et al., 2022), thereby reducing approach behaviors and increasing inhibition behaviors. These two pathways suggest that objective power has a double-edged sword effect on approach and

inhibition behaviors: it can indirectly increase approach and decrease inhibition through subjective power perception, while also directly reducing approach and increasing inhibition. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 2a: Objective power increases approach behavior through subjective power.

Hypothesis 2b: Objective power decreases inhibition behavior through subjective power.

Hypothesis 2c: After controlling for the indirect path of objective power influencing behavior through subjective power, objective power reduces approach behavior and increases inhibition behavior.

Although the power approach-inhibition theory explains the relationship between power and behavior, some contradictory research and conclusions remain, particularly regarding the relationships between power and unethical behavior (Dubois et al., 2015), voice behavior (Duan et al., 2013; Xu et al., 2018), and prosocial behavior (Chen et al., 2022). Considering that these studies were conducted in different cultural contexts, we argue that power distance culture is an important moderating factor explaining inconsistent findings.

According to Hofstede's cultural model, countries differ substantially across dimensions including power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation (Hofstede, 1993, 2011). Among these, power distance, as the dimension most closely related to subjective power, substantially influences the power-behavior relationship. Power distance refers to the extent to which people accept unequal power distribution in society. Specifically, examining the relationship between subjective power and approach behavior, in high power distance societies such as China, people respect and revere power, rarely questioning or challenging authority, and often uphold traditional notions of "absolute obedience" and "clear hierarchy distinguishing superiors and subordinates" (Wang & Yu, 2022). Conversely, in low power distance societies, people strive for power equality, tend to view power critically, and encourage questioning and challenging authority (Yin et al., 2024), with power often being more transparent and supervised. Over time, compared to low power distance contexts, high power distance contexts grant individuals greater autonomous discretion through power, which may both maximize power's value and effectiveness and make power feel less constrained, causing power to expand increasingly and fostering unethical behavior. This also means the positive effect of subjective power on approach behavior is stronger in high power distance contexts.

Examining the relationship between subjective power and inhibition behavior, when power distance is high, the hierarchical order is strict, high-power individuals are expected to demonstrate power, while low-power individuals revere authority more, value others' opinions and group recognition (Hofstede, 2011), strive to avoid potential conflicts and contradictions, and tend to exhibit inhibition behaviors that avoid uncertainty and risk. At this time, low-power

individuals face higher risks when challenging authority, their resistance to self-expression increases, and they more readily exhibit inhibition behaviors such as silence and withdrawal. Conversely, when power distance is low, the overall power gap is smaller, people tend to accept equal power distribution, and are unafraid to challenge high-power individuals (Hofstede, 2011). Meanwhile, in low power distance contexts, high-power individuals typically allow different voices and viewpoints, showing greater tolerance for disagreement and debate (Wang & Yu, 2022), making channels for low-power individuals' self-expression smoother, their perceived possibility and confidence in changing the status quo greater, and thus less likely to adopt avoidance and compliance inhibition behaviors. In summary, we propose:

Hypothesis 3a: Power distance moderates the relationship between subjective power and approach behavior. When power distance is higher, the positive effect of subjective power on approach behavior is stronger.

Hypothesis 3b: Power distance moderates the relationship between subjective power and inhibition behavior. When power distance is higher, the negative effect of subjective power on inhibition behavior is stronger.

The theoretical model of this study is shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

3 Research Methods

3.1 Literature Search

Given that the power approach-inhibition theory was first proposed in 2003, the publication timeframe was limited to January 2003–December 2023. Chinese literature was primarily searched in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). To reduce publication bias, the search included CSSCI journals, master's and doctoral dissertations, and conference papers, using keywords such as power/behavior and power/approach/inhibition, yielding 4,025 initial documents (827 journal articles, 3,197 dissertations, and 1 conference paper). English literature was searched in the Web of Science Core Collection and Google Scholar using keywords power/behavior and power/approach/inhibition. Additional searches were conducted in EBSCO, Elsevier, Springer, and Wiley databases for comprehensive coverage, yielding 18,326 initial documents.

The initial search identified 22,351 Chinese and English papers. Papers were then screened according to the following criteria: (1) must be empirical research; (2) must use quantitative methods to measure main variables; (3) must involve behavioral variables; (4) must report relevant effect sizes (correlation coefficients r or convertible statistics F, t, d, M and SD); (5) duplicate samples were used only once. Literature search was conducted independently by two researchers, followed by discussion and consolidation to obtain the final sample. These five criteria yielded 154 papers (63 Chinese and 91 English), including 245 samples and 261 effect sizes. Samples were primarily from China, the United States,

the Netherlands, Australia, Israel, Belgium, Germany, the United Kingdom, Canada, Finland, Poland, India, Malaysia, Thailand, Turkey, and other countries. The specific literature search and screening process is shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper].

3.2 Variable Coding

This study collected effect sizes for the relationship between power and individual behavior (variable definitions and coding are shown in Table 2). Power included objective and subjective power. Objective power refers to power that individuals truly and objectively possess. When literature described position power, organizational hierarchy, executive power, or CEO power, it was coded as objective power. Subjective power refers to the psychological perception of one's ability to influence others (Anderson et al., 2012). When literature described personal sense of power, power state, power perception, reward power, referent power, coercive power, expert power, or relative power, or when power was measured or manipulated using Anderson et al.'s (2012) General Sense of Power Scale, recall priming methods (Galinsky et al., 2003; Wiltermuth & Flynn, 2013), word search tasks (Chen, 2021; Smith & Trope, 2006), Schaerer et al.'s (2015) Power Scale, Yukl and Falbe's (1991) Position Power Scale, Yu et al.'s (2019) Perceived Power Scale, or role-playing methods (Chen, 2021; Galinsky et al., 2003), it was coded as subjective power.

Individual behavior involves numerous variables. Therefore, based on Keltner et al.'s (2003) power approach-inhibition theory, all behaviors were categorized into two broad types: approach and inhibition behaviors. Approach behaviors include both positive and negative forms (Nikitin & Freund, 2010; Puleo, 2020). Positive approach behaviors primarily include voice, innovation, knowledge sharing, and proactive behavior, while negative approach behaviors include competition, dishonesty, aggression, and self-serving behavior. Inhibition behaviors also have positive and negative categories (Nikitin & Freund, 2010; Puleo, 2020). Positive inhibition behaviors include humanistic orientation, altruism, helping, and prosocial behavior, while negative inhibition behaviors include social loafing, silence, withdrawal, and compliance. Four psychology researchers were invited to categorize individual behaviors, showing high inter-rater reliability (Fleiss' Kappa = 0.851, $p < 0.001$). The final analysis included 61 behavioral variables, with 41 approach behaviors and 20 inhibition behaviors.

The moderator variable was power distance, measured using Hofstede's Power Distance Index (PDI). The PDI values for the 18 countries involved were: Malaysia (104), China (80), Sri Lanka (80), India (77), Singapore (74), Poland (68), Turkey (66), Belgium (65), Thailand (64), Pakistan (55), United States (40), Canada (39), Netherlands (38), Australia (36), United Kingdom (35), Germany (35), Finland (33), and Israel (13).

Variable coding was conducted independently by two researchers, with an initial coding consistency rate of 85.7%. Discrepancies were discussed and corrected.

AI tools (Wenxin Yiyan and ChatGPT-4o mini) were also used to assist coding, yielding final consistent results. When multiple measures of the same variable appeared in one study sample, effect sizes were integrated to reduce bias from artificially inflating sample size (Wei et al., 2018; Joshi & Roh, 2009). Reliability coefficients for subjectively measured variables were collected for subsequent measurement error correction in meta-analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis

This study used Smart Meta-analysis (SMA) 1.0 (Wei, 2024) and Mplus 8.3 for data analysis. Publication bias was assessed using funnel plots and fail-safe N statistics. Results showed that effect sizes were generally symmetrically distributed around the mean, and most significant effect sizes met the 5k+10 criterion (see Table 3 and Table 4), indicating minimal publication bias. For effect sizes not meeting the 5k+10 standard, the trim-and-fill method was applied for correction. Regarding the relative contribution of objective and subjective power to behavior, relative weight analysis was used to examine their differential effects. For mediation analysis, this study first coded effect sizes reported in all focal literature (i.e., power-behavior studies), including both focal relationships (objective/subjective power with approach/inhibition behaviors) and non-focal relationships (objective power with subjective power, approach behavior with inhibition behavior), to form an initial correlation matrix (Bai et al., 2024; Podsakoff et al., 2007). Second, following previous scholars' practices (Chung et al., 2022), this study also searched previous meta-analyses for non-focal relationships (i.e., approach-inhibition behavior, subjective-objective power) as supplementary data for the correlation matrix. Subsequently, Mplus 8.3 was used for meta-analytic structural equation modeling (MASEM) to analyze the influence of objective power on approach and inhibition behaviors through subjective power.

Regarding model selection, fixed-effect models assume identical true effects across studies, with differences resulting only from random error; random-effects models assume true effects may vary across studies due not only to random error but also to different samples or measurement methods (Borenstein et al., 2021; Schmidt et al., 2009). In empirical studies of power and behavior, different sample and measurement tool selections affect results, thus warranting random-effects models. Additionally, from a statistical perspective, if heterogeneity among effect sizes is high—indicated by significant Q statistics or high I^2 values—random-effects models are appropriate. Results showed that all Q values reached significance, with I^2 values exceeding 60% (Higgins & Thompson, 2002), indicating high heterogeneity (see Tables 3 and 4), thus supporting the use of random-effects models. For reporting results, this study presents both uncorrected correlation coefficients r and measurement error-corrected true correlation coefficients r with 95% confidence intervals.

4 Results Analysis

4.1 Main Effects

Table 3 shows the relationships between power and approach/inhibition behaviors. Power had significant positive effects on positive approach ($r = 0.213$, $p < 0.001$), negative approach ($r = 0.192$, $p < 0.001$), and overall approach behavior ($r = 0.204$, $p < 0.001$). Power had marginally significant negative effects on positive inhibition ($r = -0.074$, $p = 0.063$) and significant negative effects on negative inhibition ($r = -0.237$, $p < 0.001$) and overall inhibition behavior ($r = -0.141$, $p < 0.001$). These findings align with power approach-inhibition theory predictions.

Relative weight analysis (Tonidandel & LeBreton, 2015) examined differences in the magnitude of objective and subjective power effects. Table 5 results show that subjective power accounted for greater explained variance in both approach and inhibition behaviors. Specifically, for approach behavior, subjective and objective power explained 89.43% and 10.57% of variance respectively, supporting Hypothesis 1a. For inhibition behavior, subjective and objective power explained 66.17% and 33.83% of variance respectively, supporting Hypothesis 1b.

Given that Hofstede's PDI index was developed earlier and may have diminished timeliness, this study conducted robustness checks using Taras et al.'s (2012) updated PDI index. Table 9 meta-regression results show that higher power distance strengthened the positive relationship between power and approach behavior ($b = 0.083$, $p < 0.05$) and the negative relationship between power and inhibition behavior ($b = -0.003$, $p < 0.05$), confirming the robustness of Hypotheses 3a and 3b.

5 Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

First, this study validates and extends propositions of the power approach-inhibition theory. Although numerous empirical studies have tested this theory (Wei & Zhang, 2023; Luo et al., 2023), contradictory findings remain. Through meta-analysis integrating previous empirical results, this study confirms that power increases approach behavior and decreases inhibition behavior. Furthermore, by distinguishing differential effects of objective and subjective power on approach and inhibition behaviors, this study clarifies differences in explanatory power, demonstrating that subjective power explains behavior more strongly than objective power for both approach and inhibition behaviors, thereby expanding understanding of the true relationship between different power types and behavior.

Second, this study explores differential mechanisms through which objective and subjective power influence behavior (see Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper]), partially explaining inconsistent previous findings and deepening the power

approach-inhibition theory. When proposing the theory, Keltner et al. (2003) defined power broadly, discussing both objective and subjective power in a manner suggesting both apply equally to the theory, reducing its explanatory power. Addressing this limitation, this study introduces the objective-subjective power distinction into the theoretical framework to examine their respective fit and differences. Results show that objective and subjective power indeed exhibit different patterns and effects when activating power approach-inhibition mechanisms. Specifically, objective power indirectly increases approach and decreases inhibition through subjective power, revealing subjective power's bridging role between objective power and behavior.

Results further show that after controlling for the indirect path through subjective power, objective power's direct effect on approach behavior is non-significant, while it positively promotes inhibition behavior. This appears inconsistent with the theory's predictions but actually refines and extends the theory from another perspective. That is, when objective power is subjectively perceived (external power perception or activated objective power), individuals' resources activate subjective cognitions about influencing others or the environment, thereby increasing approach and decreasing inhibition. When objective power goes unperceived (latent objective power or unactivated objective power), even high objective power may coincide with low subjective power, and individuals may not identify as high-power actors, thus not necessarily exhibiting approach behaviors or reduced inhibition. This explains why some individuals with seemingly high objective power still exhibit other-oriented inhibition behaviors (Chen & Lu, 2019; Baruch et al., 2004). Additionally, when individuals have low objective power but high subjective power (internal power perception), they influence or control others based on internal self-cognition and beliefs, largely unaffected by external power, and consider themselves high-power actors, thus still showing high approach and low inhibition. This explains why some individuals in lower positions exhibit high approach and low inhibition (van Dijke et al., 2018). These findings not only confirm differences in how objective and subjective power apply to the theory but also highlight the necessity and importance of distinguishing these power types within the theoretical framework.

Finally, this study found that power distance moderates the relationship between subjective power and approach/inhibition behaviors, extending the theory's boundary conditions. Keltner et al. (2003) suggested that power distance might moderate the power-behavior relationship. However, due to geographical or resource constraints, previous empirical studies often focused on one or a few countries, limiting systematic examination of how different power distance cultures affect the theory across large samples. Through meta-analysis, this study demonstrates that power distance indeed moderates these relationships: higher power distance strengthens both the positive effect of subjective power on approach behavior and the negative effect on inhibition behavior, indicating significant cross-cultural differences.

5.2 Practical Implications

First, organizational managers should recognize differential impacts of objective and subjective power. Results show that objective power increases approach and decreases inhibition through subjective power. This indicates that only when individuals' subjective power is high will they behave as predicted by the theory. If objective power is increased without activating subjective power, individuals may not feel powerful, and power may not produce expected effects. Therefore, organizations and managers must recognize that objective power does not equal subjective power and appreciate subjective power's importance in linking objective power to behavior, thereby maximizing power's effectiveness by enhancing subjective power.

Second, organizational managers should consider cultural factors like power distance in power-behavior relationships. Results show that high power distance strengthens both the positive effect of subjective power on approach behavior and the negative effect on inhibition behavior. This indicates that in high power distance contexts, high-power actors are less constrained, more confident and bold, while low-power actors are more silent and passive. Therefore, in high power distance settings, power supervisors should be more vigilant, implementing reasonable and effective regulatory mechanisms to assess and regulate power, reduce unconstrained power expansion, and improve power-responsibility transparency. Additionally, organizations should facilitate upward communication channels, moderately adjust rigid hierarchical systems, reduce employees' reverence for authority, and encourage them to speak up and challenge authority.

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

First, meta-analysis relies on extensive literature. Although this study made comprehensive efforts to locate eligible studies, some literature and data may have been missed due to language and tool limitations, potentially affecting results. Future research should expand sample sizes and include studies in more languages and from diverse sources.

Second, this study examined and validated only behavioral propositions of the power approach-inhibition theory. However, the theory also includes propositions regarding emotion and cognition, which are closely related to behavior. Future research should examine whether positive/negative emotions relate to the positive/negative approach and inhibition behaviors proposed here, and how power affects emotional experience and expression (Van Kleef & Lange, 2020). Future studies could test other theory propositions or systematically examine all propositions to provide stronger evidence.

Third, in testing the relationship where objective power influences inhibition behavior through subjective power, only five papers examined objective power-inhibition relationships, potentially affecting result robustness. Future research should continue exploring these hypotheses to enhance accuracy and validity.

Finally, this study only examined power distance as a moderator, while many other potential moderators exist. For example, scholars could explore legitimacy of power as a boundary condition. Research shows that status (Gu et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2021), competence, or capability are important legitimacy prerequisites determining power's influence mechanisms (Amedu & Dulewicz, 2018). Future research could examine whether status or competence moderate power-behavior relationships, further extending the theory.

Note: Asterisks indicate studies included in the meta-analysis. A complete list of meta-analyzed literature is available in the appendix.

Appendix: List of Meta-Analyzed Literature (Sorted by First Author's Surname, Chinese First, Then English)

[The appendix lists authors and years as provided in the original text, which should be preserved exactly as shown in the input.]

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.