The Dynamic Experience of Power: Effects of Power Fluctuations and Theoretical Explanations

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Abstract

Current mainstream theories and approaches mostly conceptualize power as a binary static structure of high versus low, overlooking the variability of power states and the complex power relationships within organizations. Power fluctuation, however, provides a novel perspective for revealing the dynamic changes in power states and offers a more comprehensive reflection of power effects in organizational contexts. Although existing research has examined both positive and negative effects of power fluctuation from multiple theoretical perspectives, it remains challenging to systematically explicate the double-edged sword effect of power fluctuation and its underlying mechanisms within a unified theoretical framework. In response, this paper constructs an integrated framework for the double-edged sword effect of power fluctuation based on stress cognitive appraisal theory, aiming to further clarify the differential outcomes of power fluctuation and their boundary conditions. Future research should further elucidate the conceptualization and measurement of power fluctuation, enrich investigations into the mechanisms through which power fluctuation exerts its effects, attend to heterogeneity across different categories of power fluctuation trajectories, and integrate power fluctuation research with other domains to advance its theoretical development and practical application.

Full Text

Preamble

The Dynamic Experience of Power: Effects and Theoretical Explanations of Power Fluctuation

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Abstract: Current mainstream theories and methods predominantly conceptualize power as a binary static structure of high versus low, overlooking both the variability of power states and the complex power relationships within organizations. Power fluctuation offers a new perspective for revealing the dynamic changes in power states and provides a more comprehensive reflection of power effects in organizations. Although existing research has examined the positive and negative impacts of power fluctuation from various theoretical perspectives, it remains difficult to systematically explain the double-edged sword effect of power fluctuation and its underlying mechanisms within a unified theoretical framework. In view of this, this paper constructs an integrated framework for the double-edged sword effect of power fluctuation based on the cognitive appraisal theory of stress, aiming to further clarify the differential outcomes of power fluctuation and their boundary conditions. Future research needs to further clarify the connotation and measurement of power fluctuation, enrich the investigation of its mechanisms, attend to heterogeneity among different power fluctuation trajectory categories, and integrate power fluctuation research with other domains to advance its theoretical development and practical applications.

Keywords: sense of power, power fluctuation, intra-individual variability, cognitive appraisal theory of stress
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Power has long attracted scholarly and public attention due to its profound impact on organizations and individuals. Current mainstream theories and methods predominantly treat power as a binary static structure (Anicich, 2021; Jeong et al., 2024; Jordan et al., 2011). On the one hand, previous research has primarily focused on comparing high versus low power levels, extensively examining how power holders and powerless individuals experience the world differently through measuring or manipulating individuals' power levels (Körner et al., 2021; Septianto et al., 2020; Yan et al., 2021; Yue & Wang, 2023). However, such binary comparisons may obscure potential unique effects associated with intermediate states (Anicich, 2021). Anicich' s (2016) analysis of over 550 studies on social hierarchy variables (e.g., power) revealed that 94.6% focused on extreme states (high vs. low power), while only 5.4% addressed intermediate states. This dichotomous approach seems to imply that individuals either have power or lack it, failing to capture the complex power relationships within organizations (Anicich et al., 2021; Anicich & Hirsh, 2017). On the other hand, from the perspective of subjective perception, power can also be viewed as a malleable psychological state (Yue & Wang, 2023). However, existing research has largely adopted a static between-person perspective, implicitly assuming the presence or intensity of power while neglecting within-person variations in the sense of power. This has largely concealed its dynamic characteristics. In fact, Smith and Hofmann (2016) found that individuals' sense of power fluctuates consider-

ably, and Heller et al. (2023) reported that 82% of participants had experienced changes in their power states. Clearly, a static perspective alone cannot accurately reflect and interpret power effects in organizations, yet a dynamic power perspective remains underexplored (Foulk et al., 2018). Power fluctuation can better capture the dynamic changes in power levels over time, helping to reveal the process through which individuals perceive and experience power, thereby providing deeper insights into its impact on individual psychology and behavior.

Examining the effects of power fluctuation holds important theoretical and practical significance. First, existing research has largely focused on high versus low levels of power, offering greater reference value for organizational members who either possess or lack power. Middle managers, who serve as bridges and links between top management and frontline employees, exert important influence on organizations yet have rarely been the focus of previous power research. Given that middle managers' power interactions are more complex—they must frequently alternate between interacting with subordinates (symbolizing low power) and superiors (symbolizing high power) while attending to both strategic and operational demands (De Meyer, 2023; Falls & Allen, 2020)—the consequences of power fluctuation may be particularly relevant for them (Anicich et al., 2021; Heller et al., 2023). This can not only broaden the scope of power research but also provide new perspectives for optimizing organizational management and job design. Second, static power research helps dissect the effects of power at a particular level (e.g., the impact of low power on employee psychology and behavior), whereas power fluctuation research can explain the chain reactions triggered by the continuous activation of power states (e.g., the effects of fluctuating high and low power on employee psychology and behavior). Compared to static or constant power, employees may need to expend greater effort to adapt to fluctuating power experiences, thereby generating unique effects rarely addressed in static research. This demonstrates that the two approaches focus on different phenomena and each has its applicability across different groups and organizational contexts. Investigating the effects of power fluctuation can provide additional explanatory power beyond existing power research and contribute to a more complete and accurate knowledge system of power effects in organizations.

In summary, it is necessary to deeply explore the consequences of power fluctuation. Although scholars have called for increased research on the contingent and dynamic nature of power (Anderson & Brion, 2014; Smith & Magee, 2015), we still know little about its positive and negative impacts. This knowledge gap not only hinders effective dialogue among existing studies but also fails to provide directional guidance for future research. Therefore, this paper first reviews the conceptual development and connotation of power fluctuation, synthesizes its positive and negative effects based on relevant theoretical and empirical research, then constructs an integrated framework for the double-edged sword effect of power fluctuation based on the cognitive appraisal theory of stress, and finally proposes directions for future research. We aim to more comprehensively reveal power effects in organizations and provide insights for advancing theoretical and

practical development in the power domain.

2.1 Conceptual Development of Power Fluctuation

Power has long been regarded as a fundamental component of social systems and hierarchies. Traditional perspectives view power as a social structural variable grounded in objective capabilities and resources (Luo et al., 2020). However, power does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it is an inherently social construction (Anderson & Brion, 2014) involving interactions or comparisons with others (Emerson, 1962; Sabey et al., 2021). As power research has advanced, scholars have gradually recognized that individuals form psychological representations of their relative power—that is, subjective perceptions of their ability to influence others, known as the sense of power (Anderson et al., 2012). Therefore, power is not only an objective structural variable but also a psychological one. After all, organizational members operate within diverse interaction networks and frequently interact with other members at different power levels (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017), providing conditions for them to compare their own power with that of others. Given that the sense of power essentially originates from individuals' relational interactions with others (Li et al., 2024; Smith & Hofmann, 2016) and is highly sensitive to situational changes, it is not a stable attribute. As power structures within organizations and relationships among members continuously adjust, individuals' power experiences also change accordingly (Luo et al., 2020; Heller et al., 2023).

Conceptually, the formation of an individual' s sense of power depends on two key entities: "self" and "others." On the one hand, the asymmetric valuable resources controlled by oneself are in flux, causing one' s ability to influence others through these resources to fluctuate accordingly. On the other hand, "others" do not refer to a specific level or member; when interaction partners change, the effectiveness with which an individual can exert influence naturally differs (Heller et al., 2023). Moreover, the sense of power is conceptually an activatable cognition and experience (Luo et al., 2020). With the rise of dynamic research perspectives in organizational management, researchers have gradually recognized that work-related cognitions are variable. For example, Lanaj et al. (2021) found that individuals in leadership positions' identification with their leader identity fluctuates based on daily available resources, and such fluctuations in identification further shape their power expressions (Lanaj et al., 2023). Similarly, different situations and events (e.g., reporting to superiors, making hiring or firing decisions) activate different power experiences, thereby triggering fluctuations in the sense of power. Although such fluctuating power experiences may lead to unique psychological manifestations, they are difficult to explain within static power concepts, undoubtedly challenging existing notions of power (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017). In light of this, recent researchers have turned their attention to a context-specific power concept that transcends static perspectives—power fluctuation (Anicich et al., 2021; Sabey et al., 2021).

2.2 Connotation of Power Fluctuation

Sabey et al. (2021) propose that power fluctuation reflects the degree of inconsistency in individuals' power experiences during interactions, while Anicich (2021) defines power fluctuation as the extent to which individuals alternate between high-power and low-power psychological states. In other words, individuals experiencing power fluctuation may feel powerful one moment and powerless the next. Anicich and Hirsh (2017) suggest that the underlying logic of power fluctuation can be understood through vertical interaction orientation. Specifically (as shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]), high-power individuals perceive their interaction partners as generally less powerful, and their interactions are primarily directed toward low-power others, thus exhibiting a downward vertical interaction orientation in social networks—that is, the ratio of upward to downward vertical interactions approaches 0. Conversely, low-power individuals perceive their interaction partners as generally more powerful, and their interactions are typically directed toward high-power others, thus exhibiting an upward vertical interaction orientation—that is, the ratio of upward to downward vertical interactions approaches infinity. Individuals experiencing power fluctuation, however, may interact with both high-power and low-power others simultaneously, demonstrating a bidirectional vertical interaction orientation with a ratio approaching 1. Conceptualizing power as a ratio of vertical interactions highlights the dynamic nature of this concept, and the continuous activation of relative power means that individuals can experience bidirectional vertical interaction orientations from virtually any position on the continuum.

[Figure 1: see original paper]

In short, looking back at previous research, the sense of power has been treated more as a singular state that remains constant over time, whereas power fluctuation is conceptualized as a variable, inconsistent experience (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017; Smith & Hofmann, 2016). Using a 5-point Likert scale as an example: power research might focus on an individual' s state when at level 4, whereas power fluctuation research examines changes in the sense of power from 5 to 2 and back to 5. Although the average value in the fluctuating scenario is also 4, the psychological turmoil and emotional ups and downs experienced by the individual are vastly different (Sabey et al., 2021), necessitating a distinction between the two. Nevertheless, they are not mutually exclusive. Static power research reveals the impact of stable power states on individuals, while power fluctuation research captures dynamic changes in individuals' power levels over time. Combining dynamic and static perspectives contributes to a more comprehensive analysis of the multidimensional characteristics of complex power relationships in organizations.

2.3 Research Methods for Power Fluctuation

Previous organizational management research on power has predominantly employed questionnaire surveys (Cao & Yang, 2024; Liu & Zhou, 2020; Zhou & He,

2020) and experimental methods (Brockner et al., 2021; Fast et al., 2012; Tost & Johnson, 2019). Questionnaire studies typically rely on cross-sectional data, making it difficult to infer causal relationships and thus limiting research. Experimental research, primarily using recall-writing and role-playing paradigms, lacks more authentic social interactions and contexts, such as recall bias (Heller et al., 2023) and inability to demonstrate power effects in multi-person situations (Li et al., 2024). In contrast, power fluctuation research emphasizes conceptual dynamics and authentic interaction contexts. Currently, there are two main measurement approaches for power fluctuation: first, the 6-item scale developed by Anicich et al. (2021), with items such as "I often alternate between feeling powerful and powerless"; second, the experience sampling method, which involves measuring the sense of power multiple times per day over consecutive days and calculating its standard deviation to assess power fluctuation (Sabey et al., 2021). Additionally, some researchers have designed interactive experiments to examine causal relationships between power fluctuation and other variables. Anicich et al. (2021) used a behavioral simulation task to manipulate power fluctuation, requiring participants to quickly and accurately judge the performance of different targets in a series of continuous interactions, thereby simulating individuals' experiences of power fluctuation when interacting with members of different power levels in organizations. Overall, whether interactive experiments or experience sampling in natural work environments, both are more aligned with real work contexts, making the research findings more likely to provide scientifically effective guidance for practice.

3 Effects of Power Fluctuation

Although power fluctuation is prevalent in organizations (Smith & Hofmann, 2016), we currently know little about its consequences. Previous research has explored power fluctuation from different theoretical perspectives. By reviewing relevant literature, studies suggest that power fluctuation may have dual effects: it can both negatively and positively impact employees. Therefore, the following sections systematically introduce the positive and negative effects of power fluctuation and their theoretical foundations.

3.1 Negative Effects of Power Fluctuation

Power fluctuation can trigger role strain. First, role conflict emerges when the various social roles an individual plays entail incompatible behavioral norms (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017; Hirsh & Kang, 2016). To meet social expectations, individuals need to be more assertive and dominant when playing high-power roles, while showing more respect and deference in low-power roles. Therefore, Anicich et al. (2021) note that the differences between high-power and low-power states are profound and correspond to incompatible behavioral norms. Based on this, Anicich et al. (2021) examined the relationship between power fluctuation and role conflict, finding not only a significant positive correlation but also experimental evidence that merely imagining power fluctuation scenarios can in-

duce role conflict, supporting a moderate-to-strong causal association between power fluctuation and role conflict (Cohen' s d = 0.56–0.71). Second, power fluctuation may lead to role overload, which occurs when individuals perceive that available time, abilities, and other resources cannot meet the demands of their various roles (She et al., 2019). Individuals experiencing power fluctuation must transition between behavioral norms and patterns across multiple power roles, needing to satisfy more role expectations and thus facing greater responsibilities and demands. An experimental study comparing power fluctuation individuals with high-power and low-power individuals found that power fluctuation individuals experienced significantly higher role overload than low-power individuals, with the difference from high-power individuals approaching marginal significance (Anicich et al., 2021). This partially breaks the intuitive view that "low power is always bad," as the research suggests that briefly experiencing high power (i.e., power fluctuation) actually leads to stronger role strain than consistently low power.

In addition to role strain, power fluctuation increases emotional exhaustion. When individuals face power fluctuation, they must cope with the uncertainty of multiple power roles (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017), forcing them to constantly calibrate their self-positioning, predict interaction responses, and adjust behavioral strategies accordingly. This high-frequency cognitive monitoring and behavioral transformation involves conscious self-control, increasing cognitive and emotional costs while depleting resources (Baumeister et al., 1998; Inzlicht et al., 2014). Matta et al. (2017) also demonstrated that changes in work experiences can serve as potential stressors triggering employee emotional exhaustion. Therefore, stress associated with power fluctuation may lead to negative emotional experiences and continuous depletion of psychological resources. Sabey et al. (2021) investigated the relationship between power fluctuation and emotional exhaustion, finding that power fluctuation generates frustration and further manifests as emotional exhaustion—a negative state of depleted emotional resources (Maslach et al., 2001). As is well known, experiencing negative emotions (e.g., frustration) is burdensome, and the cumulative effect of emotional burdens can create negative cycles that accelerate emotional resource depletion (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2016). Consequently, compared to maintaining a constant sense of power, individuals may need to expend greater effort to adapt to fluctuating power experiences.

Furthermore, power fluctuation is associated with reduced well-being. Anicich et al. (2021) used psychological distress and physical symptoms as two indicators of well-being to examine the relationship between power fluctuation and well-being across multiple studies. On the one hand, Anicich et al. (2021) collected power fluctuation data from 233 employees while asking about physical discomfort such as headaches and eye strain, confirming a significant positive correlation between power fluctuation and these physical symptoms. However, in another experience sampling study, this relationship was not verified, indicating that the effect of power fluctuation on physical symptoms is unstable. On the other hand, psychological distress is a disturbing emotional state that indi-

viduals experience when coping with specific stressors or demands, potentially causing temporary or permanent harm (Ridner, 2004). The study assessed psychological distress using a combination of burnout, stress, and depression (Anicich et al., 2021) and found that whether power fluctuation was manipulated experimentally or measured through experience sampling, greater fluctuation was associated with more psychological distress, suggesting that experiencing fluctuating power may be aversive. Previous research has typically linked low well-being to low-power states or individuals (Kifer et al., 2013; Li, Xiang, et al., 2021), whereas the aforementioned studies indicate that fluctuating power experiences can also damage employee well-being, causing physiological stress and emotional distress.

3.2 Positive Effects of Power Fluctuation

While remaining vigilant about the negative effects of power fluctuation, we should not overlook its positive functions. Scholars have begun to examine the impact of power fluctuation on individual perspective-taking and team performance. Power fluctuation involves the continuous activation of power states (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017), prompting individuals to understand situations from different power states and strengthening their perspective-taking with interaction partners at various power levels (Parker & Axtell, 2001). After all, compared to a single power state, diverse power experiences are more likely to give individuals similar or consistent experiences with others (Sabey et al., 2021), thereby enhancing understanding of others. Sabey et al. (2021) used experience sampling to collect instantaneous power data three times daily over ten consecutive workdays to examine the relationship between power fluctuation and individual perspective-taking. Results showed that daily power fluctuation significantly positively predicted perspective-taking. Moreover, by having colleagues assess employees' contributions to team performance, the study also found that power fluctuation could increase individual contributions to team performance by enhancing perspective-taking ability, providing empirical support for the positive effects of power fluctuation.

The review of positive and negative effects of power fluctuation facilitates organizations' overall assessment of power fluctuation and provides new perspectives for subsequent management mechanisms and job design optimization. Given that the negative effects of power fluctuation cannot be underestimated, vigilance is warranted regarding this common phenomenon. If its negative effects are deemed to outweigh its positive functions, organizations might consider reducing work environments that create power fluctuation. However, if inter-team cooperation and performance enhancement are valued, organizations could appropriately create power fluctuation scenarios while also providing employees with necessary recovery opportunities to minimize attendant negative effects.

3.3.1 Boundary Theory

The static concept of power has limited the applicability of boundary theory, which reflects dynamic role transitions, in the power domain. Power fluctuation, however, involves transitions between high-power and low-power roles and can be considered a process of micro role transition (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017; Sabey et al., 2021), making the introduction of boundary theory particularly appropriate. Each role identity has its unique behavioral norms and standards (Kam & D' Arcy, 2023). To effectively manage multiple roles, individuals establish and maintain boundaries between roles to simplify and order their environment (Xie et al., 2022; Ashforth et al., 2000). Therefore, as micro role transitions between high and low power occur, individuals must cross role boundaries (Feery & Conway, 2023; Kam & D' Arcy, 2023), reposition themselves according to the different tasks, characteristics, demands, and norms of new roles, and follow new behavioral norms (Sabey et al., 2021). Ashforth et al. (2000) noted that individuals find it difficult to psychologically detach completely from one role and switch to another. Although different role norms may appear clear and easy to adopt when considered independently, transitions from high-power to low-power roles (or vice versa) may be difficult to execute (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017; Conroy et al., 2023). When multiple roles emerge simultaneously and individuals cannot adequately handle the associated demands and responsibilities, role strain arises (Goode, 1960). In summary, power fluctuation triggers individuals' strain responses due to the transition across multiple power roles.

3.3.2 Approach-Inhibition-Avoidance Theory

Keltner et al.' s (2003) approach-inhibition theory is one of the most widely applied theories in the power domain. This theory posits that high and low power activate the behavioral approach system and behavioral inhibition system, respectively, thereby differentially affecting individuals' cognition, emotion, and behavioral tendencies. To break the theoretical limitations of the binary static view of power, Anicich and Hirsh (2017) further proposed the approach-inhibition-avoidance theory based on this framework, introducing the fight-freezing-flight system. Specifically, high power activates the behavioral approach system, leading individuals to focus on reward cues and exhibit positive emotions and approach motivation. Low power is associated with activation of the fight-freezing-flight system, making individuals sensitive to concrete and immediate threat cues and generating fear emotions and avoidance motivation. Power fluctuation, however, is associated with competing response options from high power (approach motivation) and low power (avoidance motivation), leading to increased behavioral inhibition system activity, allocating attention to broad and uncertain threat cues, and inducing anxiety emotions and inhibitory motivation. This makes power fluctuation individuals more likely to have a broad risk-averse mindset, constantly monitoring and scanning for potential threats in various situations, thereby becoming more anxious (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017) and more likely to experience negative outcomes such as psychological

distress.

3.3.3 Social Distance Theory

According to the social distance theory of power (Magee & Smith, 2013), high-power individuals perceive greater social distance and thus tend to adopt higher-level construal, representing things more abstractly to capture their core features, whereas low-power individuals are more likely to use lower-level construal, employing concrete mental representations to extract event details (Ni & Cheng, 2022; Trope & Liberman, 2010). However, traditional social distance theory of power can only explain binary high-power and low-power effects, lacking comprehensive consideration of both states. To address this, Sabey et al. (2021) expanded the theory, proposing that when power fluctuation individuals transition between high and low power states, they also swing between high and low construal levels, switching between abstract and concrete mental representations. This dynamic switching creates unique opportunities for individuals to experience the cognitive effects of different power states, allowing power fluctuation individuals to simultaneously grasp both the core features and specific details of matters (Sabey et al., 2021). According to Trope and Liberman (2010), this enables people to transcend immediate limitations and comprehensively consider the past, future, others' perspectives, and unlikely possibilities. Therefore, power fluctuation can broaden individuals'thinking horizons, making them more likely to understand others and the world from multiple dimensions, thereby promoting synergistic effects in organizations and generating positive outcomes.

4 Theoretical Integration of the Double-Edged Sword Effect of Power Fluctuation

The above review reveals that multiple theoretical perspectives exist to explain the positive and negative effects of power fluctuation. Boundary theory focuses on crossing role boundaries, explaining strain responses associated with power role transitions. Approach-inhibition-avoidance theory emphasizes that power fluctuation individuals are sensitive to broad and uncertain cues, providing a basis for the negative emotions triggered by power fluctuation. These two theories explain the negative effects of power fluctuation, implicitly assuming individuals' poor adaptation to power fluctuation—that is, assuming individuals lack sufficient potential or resources to cope with power fluctuation. However, in practice, different individuals may adopt different coping strategies (Jiang & Wang, 2022), suggesting that these theories overlook the possibility of individuals coping well with power fluctuation. Social distance theory of power focuses on representational modes in different power states, revealing the multiple perspectives individuals gain during power fluctuation and providing theoretical support for positive effects. However, this theory assumes by default that individuals possess the resources and capabilities to flexibly switch representational modes, similarly failing to address individual differences in responses. Overall, these theories offer useful insights for understanding the unilateral positive or

negative impacts of power fluctuation but fail to dialectically explain its double-edged sword effect. Moreover, since previous research has not considered individuals' diverse coping processes for power fluctuation nor deeply explored what factors influence its effects, it remains unable to explain why and how power fluctuation produces differential outcomes.

This not only hinders systematic explanation of the double-edged sword effect and its mechanisms but also impedes further research. Lazarus and Folkman' s (1984) cognitive appraisal theory of stress describes the process through which individuals cognitively appraise stressors, cope with them, and produce outcomes, revealing individuals' diverse reactions to the same stressor (Jiang & Wang, 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). If individuals believe the external environment may harm their well-being and they cannot effectively cope, negative reactions are triggered; conversely, if they believe they can overcome the stressor, positive reactions emerge (Jiang & Wang, 2022). Based on this, we argue that the cognitive appraisal theory of stress can provide a powerful explanation for the above questions. However, the theory covers a broad range of stressors, and to provide more targeted information for power fluctuation effects, it needs to be combined with the characteristics of power fluctuation as a stressor. On this basis, whether it is the approach-inhibition-avoidance theory specific to power expression, the social distance theory of power, or boundary theory reflecting dynamic power role transitions, all can provide further supplementation. Therefore, this study builds an integrated framework for the double-edged sword effect of power fluctuation (as shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]) based on the cognitive appraisal theory of stress, integrating the above theoretical perspectives. We aim to address the limitation of previous research in directly answering why power fluctuation has a double-edged sword effect and to further clarify the differential outcomes of power fluctuation and their boundary conditions.

[Figure 2: see original paper]

4.1 Power Fluctuation as a Stressor Based on Cognitive Appraisal Theory

Stressors refer to demands from the external environment on individuals (Jiang & Wang, 2022). As previously mentioned, power fluctuation involves transitions in representational modes, crossing role boundaries, and vigilance toward uncertain cues, requiring individuals to adapt their cognition and behavior to a greater extent (Brown et al., 2020). This demands additional effort to cope, leading scholars to conceptualize power fluctuation as a workplace stressor (Anicich et al., 2021; Sabey et al., 2021). According to cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), whether power fluctuation as a stressor produces positive or negative effects may depend on individuals' cognitive appraisal and coping processes. Specifically, when individuals experience power fluctuation, they initiate an appraisal process, making comprehensive judgments about this stressor and their ability to cope with it. If individuals perceive power fluc-

tuation as harmful to their well-being and beyond their capacity to change or resolve, they may appraise it as threatening and prefer negative coping; however, if they view it as a challenge promoting personal growth and believe they can overcome it, they may appraise it as challenging and 倾向于积极应对. Furthermore, individual differences in appraisal and coping of power fluctuation lead to different reactions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), such as stress symptoms like anxiety and reduced well-being (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017; Anicich et al., 2021) or positive outcomes like high team performance (Sabey et al., 2021). Thus, individuals' appraisal and coping of power fluctuation may be the crucial psychological processes linking power fluctuation to its double-edged sword effects.

4.2 Cognitive Appraisal, Coping, and Outcomes of Power Fluctuation

Cognitive appraisal theory posits that individuals' cognitive appraisal of stressors plays a key role in the stress process (Wang et al., 2021; Webster et al., 2011). Cognitive appraisal refers to individuals' comprehensive judgments about stressors themselves and their ability to cope with them (Zhang et al., 2023), and appraisal outcomes determine what coping strategies individuals will adopt (Jiang & Wang, 2022; Ahmad et al., 2022). According to the classic framework of cognitive appraisal theory, coping strategies can be divided into two types: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. The former focuses on eliminating or changing the stressor, while the latter aims to alleviate or manage the emotional stress caused by the stressor (Zhang et al., 2023; Aguiar Fernández et al., 2023; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This study proposes that power fluctuation as a stressor also triggers individuals' cognitive appraisal and coping processes. Specifically, although emotion-focused coping involves individuals' regulation of their own emotions (Jiang & Wang, 2022), why and how these emotions arise has not been elaborated in detail, while approach-inhibition-avoidance theory can provide explanations for the negative emotions triggered by power fluctuation. According to this theory, power fluctuation individuals are sensitive to broad and uncertain threat cues, causing them to monitor and scan for potential risks in the environment (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017). If individuals focus more on the harm brought by power fluctuation (e.g., needing to remain constantly vigilant) and judge that their coping potential and external available resources cannot help them change or resolve it, they will experience negative emotions such as anxiety and frustration (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017; Sabey et al., 2021) and make a threatening appraisal. In this case, individuals may prefer emotion-focused coping (Jiang & Wang, 2022; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) to manage the negative emotions brought by power fluctuation. However, if individuals focus more on the potential opportunities brought by power fluctuation (e.g., timely detection and avoidance of risks, exercising adaptability) and their potential and available resources are sufficient to support good coping, they may appraise power fluctuation as a challenging stressor. In this case, individuals are more likely to adopt problem-focused coping strategies (Jiang & Wang, 2022; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) to obtain potential growth opportunities. Therefore,

the relevant content of approach-inhibition-avoidance theory can be used as a supplement to individuals' cognitive appraisal process of power fluctuation and further influence subsequent coping strategies.

Furthermore, different coping strategies lead to differential stress responses (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). How can we capture what these stress responses specifically refer to? This requires analyzing the coping process and outcomes in combination with the characteristics of power fluctuation and other theories. Specifically, previous research has found that boundary theory provides an important perspective for negative stress responses to power fluctuation. Given that emotion-focused coping leads individuals to instinctively engage in self-protection, it typically hinders problem resolution (Zhang et al., 2023), such as 倾向于采取回避、退缩和疏远等应对策略 (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to boundary theory (Xie et al., 2022; Ashforth et al., 2000), power fluctuation can be viewed as a process of micro role transition. Therefore, emotion-focused coping may cause individuals to avoid or distance themselves from work situations involving power role transitions, such as temporarily escaping by reducing or avoiding unnecessary social interactions with leaders, but this may also cause individuals to miss opportunities for further social exchange or developing high-quality relationships with leaders (Venkataramani et al., 2013). Meanwhile, since problems essentially related to power fluctuation are not well resolved (Zhang et al., 2023), once they cannot be avoided or recur repeatedly, individuals must face the demands and responsibilities associated with multiple power roles. However, individuals' potential and available resources cannot provide effective support for this, which may trigger related strain responses (Anicich et al., 2021; Goode, 1960) and negative effects such as increased job burnout (Aguiar Fernández et al., 2023) and reduced well-being (Parker et al., 2012). Additionally, research has shown that social distance theory can explain the positive effects of power fluctuation. According to this theory, power fluctuation is accompanied by switching between construal levels and representational modes, and using different construal levels to mentally represent the environment can help individuals gain multiple perspectives to better understand others and the world (Sabey et al., 2021; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Given that problem-focused coping can stimulate individuals' proactivity and guide them to overcome stress and solve problems (Zhang et al., 2023), individuals may utilize sufficient internal and external resources to achieve flexible switching of representational modes, thereby deeply understanding situations and interaction partners in different power states to adapt to constantly changing social activity boundaries. In this process, a series of positive effects emerge. Considering inconsistent situations from multiple perspectives can not only broaden attention span and enhance flexible adaptability (Rothman et al., 2017; Huang et al., 2022) but also facilitate synergistic effects among team members and promote cooperative behavior (Parker & Axtell, 2001) and team performance improvement (Sabey et al., 2021) by adopting and integrating information from team members' perspectives. In summary, this study proposes that individuals' differential coping with power fluctuation triggers the double-edged sword

effect, and boundary theory and social distance theory can provide powerful supplements for the coping and outcomes of power fluctuation.

Notably, because stressors themselves have multiple dimensions and facets, cognitive appraisal theory suggests that multiple appraisals may occur for the same stressor (Zhou et al., 2023; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Li et al., 2022). For example, when individuals believe that power fluctuation can both cause harm and promote growth, they may simultaneously make both threatening and challenging appraisals. Moreover, individuals' appraisal and coping of stressors are continuously changing dynamic processes (Zheng et al., 2023; Jiang & Wang, 2022; Cheng et al., 2021). First, based on changes in stressors, individuals' appraisals of stressors will adjust accordingly (Jamieson et al., 2022). As interaction partners and task characteristics change, the direction and degree of power fluctuation may shift, affecting individuals' appraisals. When power changes from low to high, individuals may make challenging appraisals; when power changes from high to low, they may shift to threatening appraisals. Second, when a stressor first appears, individuals may attempt to resolve it and 倾向于采取聚焦问题的应对方式, but if the same stressor occurs frequently in a short period, individuals may shift to emotion-focused coping due to exhaustion and aversion (Jiang & Wang, 2022). Based on the above analysis, challenging and threatening appraisals of power fluctuation, as well as problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, may both coexist and transform into each other.

4.3 Moderating Factors in Cognitive Appraisal and Coping of Power Fluctuation

The ultimate goal of power fluctuation research is to promote the healthy flourishing and sustainable development of individuals and organizations. Since the positive and negative effects of power fluctuation coexist, how to maximize its benefits while minimizing its drawbacks has become an urgent issue. Unfortunately, existing research cannot provide systematic answers. Therefore, this study incorporates possible boundary conditions for the double-edged sword effect of power fluctuation into the framework. Cognitive appraisal theory emphasizes the interactive relationship between environment and individual, proposing that individual factors and situational factors jointly influence stressor appraisal and coping (Jiang & Wang, 2022; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Specifically, individual factors emphasize what individuals can do regarding stressors themselves (Jia et al., 2022), with the key being recognition of one' s own coping potential. Individuals who perceive higher coping potential tend to have more positive appraisals and reactions to stressors (Jiang & Wang, 2022). Situational factors emphasize what individuals can do with external help regarding stressors, relating to resources available from the outside (Jiang & Wang, 2022). Individuals with abundant resources have less threat perception and fewer negative reactions to stressors (Wang et al., 2024; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Therefore, based on cognitive appraisal theory, the following sections propose moderating factors for cognitive appraisal and coping of power fluctuation from two aspects:

individual coping potential and external available resources.

4.3.1 Individual Coping Potential

First, positive self-evaluation helps individuals believe they possess high coping potential and thus cope more effectively with stressors. Research has shown that individuals with high self-efficacy are confident in their development and more likely to view stressors as challenges (Li et al., 2018). Role breadth self-efficacy, an extension and development of self-efficacy, refers to employees' perceived capability to perform a broad range of role tasks beyond organizational prescriptions (Parker, 1998; Wang & Xie, 2023). Given that power fluctuation involves multiple power roles (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017; Sabey et al., 2021), role breadth self-efficacy may enhance individuals' assessment of their coping potential for power fluctuation. As a positive self-perception, individuals with high role breadth self-efficacy tend to have greater confidence and motivation to play diverse roles (Parker, 1998; Ren et al., 2023). This positive psychological 暗示 strengthens individuals' positive appraisal of stressors and prompts them to actively cope with changes and problems (Cai et al., 2023), such as breaking established role constraints to perform integrative tasks (Wang & Xie, 2023). Conversely, individuals with low role breadth self-efficacy lack confidence in undertaking broad role tasks, worrying about the need to complete more and more complex role tasks, thus 倾向于做出威胁性评价并采取规避策略 (Shi et al., 2024). This demonstrates that role breadth self-efficacy may play an important role in helping individuals cope with power fluctuation, not only enhancing their confidence in managing multiple power roles but also making them more likely to adopt proactive coping and correspondingly reduce negative coping strategies.

Second, because power fluctuation involves transitions between inconsistent states, individuals with the ability to cope with contradictions or flexibly switch may be better at handling experiences related to power fluctuation (Anicich, 2021). Individual ambidexterity refers to the ability to switch between different thinking and action modes in contradictory activities (Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2021), and individuals high in ambidexterity can easily handle contradictions and undertake multiple roles or tasks (Papachroni & Heracleous, 2020; Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2021). Additionally, Miron-Spektor et al. (2018) argue that the impact of resource scarcity and experiencing contradictions on work outcomes depends on individuals' paradoxical thinking levels, as paradoxical mindsets shape how people understand contradictory conflicts. Research has found that inducing paradoxical thinking can enhance individuals' ability to solve competitive tasks (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011). Therefore, compared to individuals low in paradoxical thinking or ambidexterity, those high in paradoxical thinking or ambidexterity may be less likely to make threatening appraisals of power fluctuation and less likely to subsequently engage in emotion-focused coping; simultaneously, they may be more likely to view power fluctuation as a challenge that can be overcome through effort and thus more inclined to adopt problem-focused coping.

4.3.2 External Available Resources

The same individual may appraise and react differently across different stressful situations, indicating that context is an important factor influencing cognitive appraisal and stress coping (Jiang & Wang, 2022). Contextual factors primarily focus on resources individuals can obtain externally, and organizational resources, as important channels for accumulating individual resources, can supplement individual resources (Zheng et al., 2023). Research has found that organizational culture and climate affect organizational members' coping with and reactions to stressors. For example, organizational support and psychosocial safety climate can effectively weaken employees' negative cognitive appraisals and stress reactions to stressors, thus playing a moderating role in the relationship between stress and work outcomes (Dollard et al., 2012; Neves et al., 2018). Additionally, Khan et al. (2024) found that psychosocial safety climate can alleviate discomfort caused by change and help employees prepare for adaptation. Therefore, positive organizational culture and climate may serve as important external resources, providing support for members to adapt to constantly changing social activity boundaries. Even when the demands of power fluctuation exceed individual capabilities, members can still rely on organizational strength to reduce negative effects caused by power fluctuation.

Beyond organizational-level resources, leaders, as direct guides and managers of employees' daily work, are also important sources of resources for employees (Jiang & Wang, 2022; Zheng et al., 2023; Hackney et al., 2018). If employees believe leaders can provide support to help them cope with power fluctuation, they are more likely to believe they can overcome its negative effects and respond more proactively. Positive leadership styles (e.g., humble leadership) demonstrate leaders' respect, support, and encouragement for employees (Chandler et al., 2023; Guo et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2022), not only helping alleviate employees' emotional distress during power fluctuation and reducing their emotion-focused coping strategies but also giving them greater confidence and motivation to choose problem-focused coping to meet challenges. Conversely, negative leadership styles such as authoritarian leadership involve destructive behaviors like power abuse and subordinate denigration (Huang et al., 2023; Li, Chen, et al., 2021), not only failing to provide employees with needed support for coping with power fluctuation but also depleting limited coping resources while undermining their confidence and initiative (Siddique et al., 2020). This hinders employees from adopting proactive coping strategies (Zhang et al., 2022) while intensifying their threatening appraisals of power fluctuation and withdrawal coping strategies, thus more likely leading to further negative stress responses.

5 Summary and Outlook

The rise of power fluctuation research aligns with the increasing dynamic research perspectives and methods in organizational management. This study focuses on the effects of power fluctuation on employees and organizations and their theoretical explanations. Based on cognitive appraisal theory, this paper

argues that power fluctuation as a stressor can trigger differential cognitive appraisals and coping processes, thereby producing a double-edged sword effect, and that these processes are constrained by individuals' coping potential and available resources. However, as an emerging research direction, power fluctuation still has many areas to explore: conceptually, the definition of power fluctuation contains inconsistencies that need clarification, and its measurement indicators need to be specified; theoretically, the mechanisms of power fluctuation effects need testing; content-wise, previous research has mainly focused on the magnitude or degree of fluctuation while neglecting the specific processes and trajectories of fluctuation; and question-wise, power fluctuation research is still in its infancy, with many worthwhile potential issues yet to be addressed. In view of this, we propose the following directions for future exploration and advancement.

5.1 Clarifying the Connotation and Measurement of Power Fluctuation

First, it is necessary to clarify the connotation and extension of power fluctuation. According to Anicich et al.' s (2021) definition, fluctuation refers to alternating between high and low levels. However, Sabey et al. (2021) argue that power fluctuation primarily reflects the degree of inconsistency in power experiences—that is, any deviation from previous states can be considered fluctuation (Rosen et al., 2020). This shows that current definitions of power fluctuation still contain discrepancies, but the consensus is that both emphasize the dynamic changes in the sense of power. Therefore, future research can draw on experiences from other fields to appropriately narrow the conceptual connotation while expanding its extension (Xu et al., 2022; Krizan & Herlache, 2018) to encompass and explore more complete dynamic change processes. Specifically, narrowing the connotation of power fluctuation to inconsistent experiences of power sense would allow its extension to accommodate gradually rising, declining, and fluctuating patterns. Using experience sampling as an example, when the sense of power is measured multiple times and its standard deviation is used to reflect power fluctuation, it is also difficult to distinguish data that fluctuates up and down from data that gradually climbs or declines, making this approach seem feasible. Simultaneously, future research needs to expand the extension of power fluctuation. Sabey et al. (2021) proposed two forms of power fluctuation: daily power fluctuation and general power fluctuation. The former refers to individuals experiencing greater or lesser power fluctuation on a given day than on other days, representing periodic or short-term temporary fluctuation; the latter refers to some individuals generally experiencing greater or lesser power fluctuation than others, representing long-term or persistent fluctuation. Sabey et al. (2021) argue that the impact of daily power fluctuation should be more pronounced, as persistent fluctuation may lead to habituated adaptation, whereas occasional fluctuation is more easily captured by individuals and triggers discrete emotions (Beal, 2015). Additionally, compared to occasional fluctuation, persistent power fluctuation may lead individuals to more actively

cope with or overcome its negative effects, because if these negative effects are not addressed, individuals would need to expend continuous effort to cope over the long term. In summary, different forms of fluctuation may produce different effects, representing a direction for future research.

Second, future research also needs to specify measurement indicators for power fluctuation. Anicich et al. (2021) developed the Power Fluctuation Scale (PFS) and used scale scores to measure the strength or magnitude of power fluctuation, with higher scores representing greater power fluctuation. However, given that fluctuation reflects variability over time, existing research has mostly used dispersion to represent fluctuation (Anicich et al., 2021; Matta et al., 2017; Sabey et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2012), such as using the standard deviation of the sense of power as an indicator of power fluctuation in experience sampling studies. Are the contents reflected by these two measurement approaches consistent? The former is employees' self-reports and subjective evaluations of fluctuation, while the latter is an indirect calculation of fluctuation through statistical indicators. Will the results obtained from these two methods differ? Future research can further explore these questions to clarify the validity and applicability of different measurement approaches.

5.2 Enriching Mechanism Research on Power Fluctuation Effects

Based on cognitive appraisal theory, this paper proposes that power fluctuation influences individuals' problem-focused or emotion-focused coping through challenging or threatening appraisals, thereby producing positive or negative effects. This provides a feasible approach for future research on the double-edged sword effect and mechanisms of power fluctuation, but direct empirical support is still lacking. Meanwhile, Jiang and Wang' s (2022) review of cognitive appraisal theory research found that the relationship between cognitive appraisal and coping strategies has not reached consistent conclusions. Stressors can directly affect outcomes through cognitive appraisal (Kronenwett & Rigotti, 2020; Rice & Busby, 2023) or indirectly affect outcomes by influencing coping strategies (Liu et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2023). Therefore, future research can simultaneously test both pathways to provide richer evidence for the mechanisms of power fluctuation effects. Additionally, given that cognitive appraisal of stressors is a continuously changing dynamic process (Jiang & Wang, 2022; Zheng et al., 2023), coping strategies and outcomes may in turn affect stressor appraisal. For example, when individuals adopt proactive strategies to cope with power fluctuation and achieve positive outcomes, this may strengthen their positive appraisal of power fluctuation, creating positive feedback. Therefore, the feedback path from coping and outcomes of power fluctuation to cognitive appraisal awaits exploration.

5.3 Focusing on Specific Processes of Power Fluctuation

Existing research has primarily explored general patterns of power fluctuation based on whether fluctuation occurs or its degree, without deeply considering the specific processes of fluctuation—that is, initial levels, rising or declining trajectories, etc. In view of this, future research can expand existing studies from the following two aspects. On the one hand, dispersion reflects the degree of data scatter and should theoretically be independent of the mean level, but since the two are not completely independent statistically (Cole et al., 2011), previous research has only controlled for mean levels when analyzing dynamic changes and rarely involved the interactive effects of mean levels and dynamic changes (Dong et al., 2021). Obviously, when the sense of power fluctuates between 5 and 2 versus between 1 and 4, individuals' initial and average sense of power differ. Therefore, future research can further examine the interactive effects of individuals' initial or average sense of power and power fluctuation. For example, Matta et al. (2020) studied interpersonal justice level and justice fluctuation, finding that the two not only functioned independently but also showed interactive effects. Testing for interactions helps more deeply reveal the dynamic changes in the sense of power and their impacts and provides explanations for whether power fluctuation produces differential effects on individuals with different initial or average power levels.

On the other hand, Latent Class Growth Model (LCGM) can depict variables' initial states and trajectories over time through intercepts and slopes while analyzing potential different change categories (Liu et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2014). Muhlenmeier et al. (2022) used latent class growth models to investigate the effects of different categories of time pressure trajectories on employee well-being. Similarly, future research can use latent class growth models to deeply explore the initial level of the sense of power and its fluctuation trajectories and further analyze heterogeneity issues among different trajectory categories such as rising and declining fluctuation. Additionally, latent class growth model analysis may simultaneously reveal fluctuating and stable trajectories, providing opportunities for comparing static and dynamic power effects. Therefore, future research can also consider integrating static and dynamic senses of power. Beyond using latent class growth models to present different trajectories of the sense of power, researchers can also draw on Anicich et al.' s (2021) method of experimentally manipulating individuals' high, low, and fluctuating power senses. This helps answer how fluctuating high and low power differs in its impact on individuals compared to static high or low power, with conclusions being more explanatory and applicable than isolated examinations of single power states or fluctuation degrees.

5.4 Extending Power Fluctuation Research to Decision-Making

Currently, power fluctuation research is still in its infancy, and future research can integrate it with broader topics. Particularly, applying power fluctuation research to the decision-making domain may become a valuable topic, not only providing new ideas for improving organizational decision quality but also being important for curbing irrational decisions and improving organizational risk governance mechanisms. Especially for middle managers who may frequently experience power fluctuation (Anicich et al., 2021; Heller et al., 2023), their decisions directly affect organizational strategic direction and team operational management, making them crucial for both employees and organizations. Numerous studies have found that individual decision-making is closely related to their sense of power (Dissanayake & Jayawardana, 2023; Sekscinska et al., 2024; Tan et al., 2024; Yue & Wang, 2023). Does fluctuating power also affect decision-making? Among decision-making topics, risk decision-making is a typical theme, referring to individuals' decisions in uncertain situations, with preferences typically involving risk-seeking and risk-aversion (Lu et al., 2025; Purcell et al., 2022). Although approach-inhibition-avoidance theory suggests that power fluctuation individuals are sensitive to uncertain threat cues and frequently monitor and scan for potential risks (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017), the relationship between power fluctuation and risk decision-making remains unclear. Therefore, future research can explore the risk preferences of power fluctuation individuals, such as whether middle managers experiencing power fluctuation become more risk-taking or more conservative in decision-making. Additionally, choice deferral, as a universal yet special decision avoidance behavior, has also attracted scholars' attention (Costa-Gomes et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2023; Yazdanabad, 2024). On the one hand, power fluctuation triggers individuals' negative emotions (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017; Sabey et al., 2021), and decision-makers in negative emotional states (e.g., anxiety) tend to prefer systematic, in-depth information processing, take longer to decide, and be more indecisive (Easey et al., 2018; Polat et al., 2019). This state increases decision difficulty, making individuals more inclined toward choice deferral (de Vries et al., 2008). On the other hand, decision-making is not only interfered with by irrelevant information but may also be distracted by competing thinking activities, requiring filtering of irrelevant stimuli to maintain attention on the current decision task (van Knippenberg et al., 2015). However, power fluctuation individuals are sensitive to broad rather than specific threat cues (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017) and may be unable to focus on current decisions. Whether power fluctuation increases the likelihood of choice deferral through these dual cognitive and emotional mechanisms still requires future research verification.

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