

## Social Power and Culture

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*Social power is a fundamental concept in social relationships. Social power is defined as a potential capacity to change other's state by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments. It exists in many kinds of everyday relationships (e.g., teacher-student and peers). Power affects not only targets but also the agents who use it. Having power or lacking power affects people's emotions, cognitions and behaviors. The Approach/Inhibition theory of power states that elevated power is associated with increased rewards and freedom and thereby activates approach-related tendencies. On the other hands, reduced power is associated with increased threat, punishment, and social constraints and thereby activates inhibition-related tendencies. In this theory, approach system links attention to rewards, positive emotions, automatic cognitions and disinhibited behaviors. Inhibition system, on the contrary, links attention to threats, negative emotions, controlled cognitions and inhibited behaviors. Another point of interest is whether or not power has the same effect across cultures. Power is originally a relational variable, and interpersonal relationships seem different across cultures (e.g., collectivism-individualism). In my opinion, cultural differences related to power have two aspects: (a) people's sensitivity to power is different across cultures, and (b) power maybe relates to a different goal in Western and Eastern cultures. Some empirical data and plans for future research in social psychology are proposed.*

Social power is an important concept in social relationships. For example, Russell (1938) states that a fundamental concept in social science is power, in the same way that energy is a fundamental concept in physics; it exists in many kinds of day-to-day relationships (e.g., boss-subordinate, teacher-student, parents-children, friends, peers).

However, it is difficult to define what 'social power' is. Many researchers have defined power from various perspectives, often conceptualizing it as social influence and control (e.g., Fiske, 1993). In recent investigations, power has been considered as the potential ability to change others' states or minds by providing rewards or punishments (Keltner, Gruenfeld & Anderson, 2003).

Social power affects not only target's states but also agents who exercise it. In an earlier work, Kipnis (1972) stated that the act of influence can change not only the behavior of persons who are the targets of influence, but also the behavior of persons doing the influencing. These changes that occur in the agents are referred to as 'the metamorphic effects of power'. Although this study focused on only negative aspects of having power, recently, more comprehensive theories on the effects of power have been proposed. They focus on how having or lacking power can influence an individual's emotions, cognitions and behaviors.

Amongst these theories, the approach/inhibition theory of power (Keltner et al., 2003) is the most central. This theory states that increased power is associated with

increased rewards and freedom and thereby activates 'approach-related' tendencies. On the other hand, reduced power is associated with increased threat, punishment, and social constraints and thereby activates 'inhibition-related' tendencies. According to this theory, the approach system links attention to rewards, positive emotions, automatic cognitions and uninhibited behaviors. The inhibition system, on the contrary, links attention to threats, negative emotions, controlled cognitions and inhibited behaviors.

A point worthy of investigation is whether the effects of power are the same across cultures. One particular perspective on cultural differences in relation to power is 'power distance' (Hofstede, 1983). Power distance refers to how much hierarchical inequality people accept and regard as legitimate according to societal norms (e.g., prestige, wealth, social status). Individuals from countries high in power distance tend to behave submissively and to be afraid in the presence of their superiors.

Collectivism and individualism are factors which also seem to relate to cultural differences of power. Since power is a social construct, the definition of power seems to be different between collectivist and individualist cultures. Markus & Kitayama (1991) proposed that one important cultural difference was the extent to which individuals construe the self as fundamentally separated from or embedded within a large social whole. Independent self-construal is typical of members of European and North American cultures. By contrast, interdependent self-construal prevails in members of Asian, Indian and Latin American cultures. In interdependent social environments, the primary imperative is to fulfill socially prescribed roles and fit into social contexts. On the other hand, in independent social worlds, the imperative is to pursue self-defined goals independently from social contexts.

Given the cultural differences as identified above, it appears that power relations in Japan do not necessarily coincide with the approach/inhibition theory in the same way as in America. Consequently, I examined this relationship between power and the approach/inhibition tendency in Japan through two studies. The first study was a questionnaire investigation study and the second study was an experimental power manipulation study, which will be discussed below.

## **STUDY 1: ASSESS RELATION BETWEEN A SUBJECTIVE SENSE OF POWER AND APPROACH/INHIBITION TENDENCY**

To verify the relationship between power and approach/inhibition in Japan, for study 1, I assessed the link between a subjective sense of power and the approach/inhibition tendencies. I measured the generalized sense of power (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006) among Japanese, which is an individuals' own sense of power across their social relationships. And I examined the relation between the generalized sense of power scale and BIS/BAS scale (Caver & White, 1994), which measures individual differences in sensitivity toward punishments and rewards. BIS which stands for Behavioral Inhibition System, has a score which represents sensitivity to punishments, whereas BAS (Behavioral Activation System) has a score which represents sensitivity to rewards. Ninety-one undergraduate students (male = 29, female = 62) answered the generalized sense of power scale and the BIS/BAS scale.

The generalized sense of power is scored on a scale from 1 (Disagree strongly) to 7 (Agree strongly) and is composed of 8 items (e.g., 'In my relationships with others, I can get people to listen to what I say', 'My wishes do not carry much weight'). In

the BIS/BAS scale, BIS (Behavioral Inhibition System) items (e.g., 'I feel pretty worried or upset when I think or know somebody is angry at me,' 'I worry about making mistakes') measure avoidance responses in the face of perceived threat, whereas BAS (Behavioral Activation System) items (e.g., 'I go out of my way to get the things I want,' 'When I see an opportunity for something I like, I get excited right away') measure approach responses as eager goal pursuit, responsiveness to rewards, and reward or pleasure seeking.

In my study, the BIS score negatively correlated, whereas the BAS score positively correlated to the generalized sense of power score ( $r_s = -.23, .47, p < .05, p < .01, n = 91$ ). By multiple regression analysis ( $R = .53, F(2.88) = 18.5, p < .001$ ), the BIS score was a significant negative predictor of the generalized sense of power score ( $\beta = -.28, p = .002$ ) and the BAS score was a significant positive predictor of the generalized sense of power score ( $\beta = .50, p < .001$ ). The relative strength between BAS and BIS was different among the three equally divided groups of generalized sense of power (see fig.1).

The BIS score was marginally higher than the BAS score ( $F(1,88) = 10.53, p < .10$ ) only in the low generalized sense of power group. On the other hand, the BAS scores were significantly higher than the BIS score in the middle and high generalized sense of power groups ( $F_s(1,88) = 5.74, 19.41, p < .05, p < .001$ ). From my results, a subjective sense of power seemed to relate to approach/inhibition in Japan, although this didn't prove perceived power influences of the approach/inhibition tendency. I assume the link between power and approach/inhibition is to some extent universal.

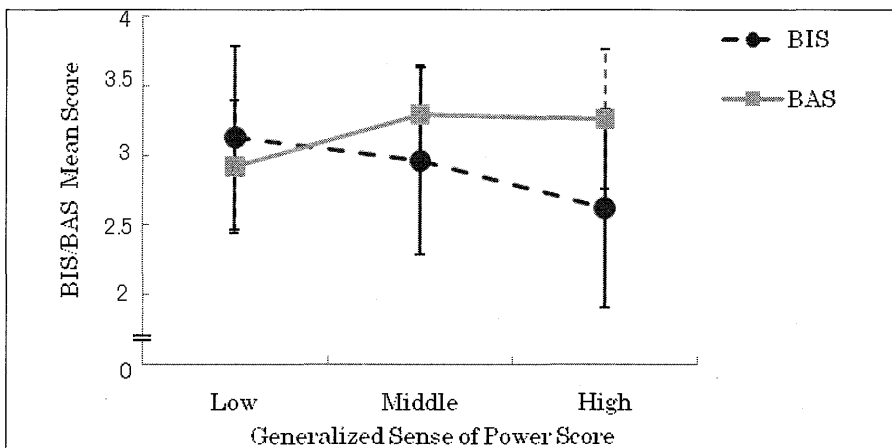


Fig 1 BIS/BAS Mean Score (*SD*) for three Generalized Sense of Power Score Group

## STUDY 2: EXAMINE THE EFFECTS OF POWER TO APPROACH/INHIBITION TENDENCY EXPERIMENTALLY

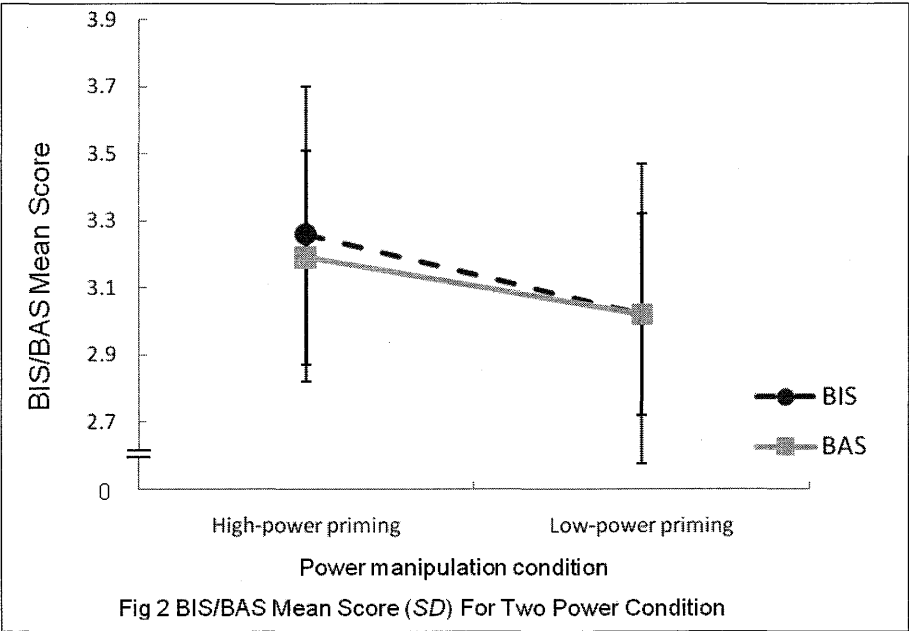
Study 2 was a replication study of Smith & Bargh (2008). In this study, participants wrote about an experience which was related to either having (high) or lacking (low) power, in order to activate a mindset of 'power'. Participants in high-power condition reported significantly higher BAS score than participants in low-power condition.

Participants in low power-condition showed higher BIS score than participants in high-power condition, although this effect was statistically non-significant. This means that activating a mindset of power implicitly increases the approach tendency.

I conducted a replication of this study in Japan. Forty undergraduate students participated in either the high-power condition (20) or low-power condition (20) in my study. A writing task for power manipulation and the same BIS/BAS scale as study 1 were used.

In the high-power condition, the power manipulation writing task was ‘writing about a particular time or incident when you had influence over another individual or individuals. Here power means you have control over what other people want or avoid’. In the low-power condition, the writing task was ‘writing about a particular time or incident in which someone else had influence over you’. This power manipulation task is considered to activate power related mindsets.

Fig. 2 (below) shows the results of study 2. In my study, participants in the high-power condition seemed to report a higher BAS score than participants in the low-power condition, but the BIS score was also higher in the high-power condition than the low-power condition. This is different from the results of Smith & Bargh (2008). In my study, recalling a high-power experience did not simply increase BAS, but increased total activation of BIS/BAS ( $F(1,38) = 4.76, p < .05$ ).



I could not find the same results as the previous study. One possible reason for the dissimilarity could be a fault in the study method or procedure. Experiments using priming (activation of concept or mindset) procedures are sometimes difficult to replicate. Another possible reason is cultural difference, although, I don't think power is unrelated to approach and inhibition in Japan as indicated by study 1. If this dissimilarity demonstrated in study 2 resulted from cultural difference, what are important points to consider (in relation to cultural differences and power) in future research? This will be discussed below.

## WHERE DO CULTURAL DIFFERENCES OF POWER EXIST?

In my opinion, cultural differences related to power have two aspects: (a) people's sensitivity to power is different across cultures, and (b) power relates to a different goal in Western and Eastern cultures. These will be explored below.

People's sensitivity to power is critical from the viewpoint of experimental power manipulations. If participants do not perceive their power consciously or unconsciously through experimental power manipulation, power will not affect any dependent variables. I assumed that Americans are more sensitive to their own power over others than Japanese. Indeed, American people can influence targets including others more than Japanese (Morling, Kitayama & Miyamoto, 2002). I compared the Japanese Generalized sense of power score with the American score (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006), and found that it was significantly lower: ( $Mean = 4.43$  ( $SD = 0.72$ ) vs  $Mean = 5.16$  ( $SD = 0.91$ ),  $t(86) = 4.13$ ,  $p < .01$ : same ratio of male to female and about similar age group). From this data, Americans generally "agreed a little" that they have power over others. On the other hand, most Japanese people scored in between 'neither agreed nor disagreed' and 'agreed a little' that they have power over others. This result suggests that Americans feel more power over others in general when compared to the Japanese. If the failure of study 1 resulted from cultural difference, I think this sensitivity to power may be a problematic factor.

Another point related to cultural difference of power is difference of power related goals between Western and Eastern cultures. In many studies, participants were asked to write about an event in which they exert power (influence) over others as an experimental manipulation of power. But, the word 'power' may be defined differently across countries and consequently elicit different images. Mondillon, Niedenthal, Brauner, Rohmann, Dalle and Uchida (2005) state that a comparison of French, German, American and Japanese, reveal that Germans appear to believe that powerful people can violate social norms without sanction and disagree with the idea that powerful people are obligated to uphold social norms. In Germany, Japan and particularly in the United States, power was associated with control over the self. Power was associated with free expression of emotion in the United States. In Germany, and to some degree in the United States, power was also associated with control over others. In all four countries, the belief that power is associated with an influence over other people's emotions was found. These results suggest that the word 'power' has different meanings across cultures.

If perceived power is related to different goals or beliefs across cultures, having or lacking power will lead to different effects across cultures. Chen, Lee-chai, and Bargh (2001) revealed that the concept of power is mentally associated with different goals for individuals with a communal or exchange relationship orientation. It suggested that communal individuals associate power with social-responsibility goals, whereas exchange individuals link power with self-interest goals. If 'Westerners' and 'Easterners' have different power related goals, the consequence of power should be different as well (e.g., Miyamoto & Wilken, in press).

I think it is important to assess the relationship among power related situations, personal sensitivity to power and personal goals (self or group interest), in order to understand how power affects emotions, cognitions and behaviors comprehensively across cultures. In addition, to manipulate power effectively in an experimental condition, I also want to assess how and when people feel that they have social power across cultures. My future research will focus on these themes mentioned above.

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