FlashReport

Act with authority: Romantic desire at the nexus of power possessed and power perceived ☆

Paul W. Eastwick [a,*], Brian M. Wilkey [a], Eli J. Finkel [b], Nathaniel M. Lambert [c], Gráinne M. Fitzsimons [d], Preston C. Brown [e], Frank D. Fincham [e]

[a] Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, University of Texas at Austin, United States
[b] Department of Psychology, Northwestern University, United States
[c] Brigham Young University, School of Family Life, United States
[d] Duke Fuqua School of Business, United States
[e] Florida State University, Family Institute, United States

HIGHLIGHTS

► A synthesis of the evolutionary and social psychological literatures on power.
► These literatures posit two mechanisms by which power can inspire romantic desire.
► Both mechanisms must align for power to cause desire in live dyadic interactions.

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ABSTRACT

The social psychological literature and the evolutionary literature on power suggest different routes by which power might inspire romantic desire: the former highlights the appealing actions of the powerful, whereas the latter demonstrates that people desire powerful individuals upon learning of those individuals' powerful status. We predicted that, in an initial face-to-face interaction, both elements must align for the powerful to inspire romantic desire. In a live mixed-sex interaction, participants experienced the most romantic desire for an opposite-sex target who (a) actually possessed power and (b) was perceived by the participant to possess power. This interaction was mediated by observable behavior—the extent to which the target controlled the conversation and was given legitimacy by the group—indicating that the powerful do not behave powerfully around unaccommodating subordinates. Power manipulations implemented in only one person's mind may not approximate how power functions in real social interactions.

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Introduction

Scholars have long recognized the important role of power in human mating (Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995; Buss, 1989; Gonzaga, Keltner, & Ward, 2008; Hill, 1945; Kuntsman & Maner, 2011; Pérusse, 1993, 1994; Sadalla, Kenrick, & Vershure, 1987; Symons, 1979). Indeed, traits associated with power (e.g., ambition, independence, assertiveness) comprise an important category of people's ideal characteristics in a romantic partner (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). But how does power inspire romantic desire? Two large yet nonoverlapping literatures are relevant to this question: the social psychological literature on power (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Smith & Galinsky, 2010) and the evolutionary literature on resources and status (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Pérusse, 1993, 1994). In fact, by virtue of their divergent theoretical perspectives and empirical approaches, the two literatures suggest two very different mechanisms by which power could inspire romantic desire.

On the one hand, the emerging literature on the social consequences of power has demonstrated that experimentally assigning someone to a position of power (or priming someone with the concept of power) causes a variety of observable, approach-oriented behaviors (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). For example, power causes an increased likelihood of participating in conversations (Hall, Coats, & LeBeau, 2005; Johnson, 1994), exhibiting creativity, and expressing nonconformist opinions (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008). In principle, behaviors like these could inspire romantic desire. Thus, this literature suggests that when people experience power, they act—and these actions could appeal to members of the opposite-sex.

On the other hand, evolutionary perspectives suggest that power may be appealing in a romantic partner because it signals that an

individual possesses resources and status that could contribute to the reproductive success of offspring (Buss, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Pérusse, 1993, 1994). Therefore, an individual might not need to witness specific behaviors in order to become enamored with the powerful; merely perceiving that a target holds a position of power may be sufficient. Consistent with this rationale, experimental paradigms that manipulate the power of a target depicted in a photograph (e.g., by varying dress, income, or profession) have revealed that power inspires romantic desire, especially for women (Landolt, Lalumiere, & Quinsey, 1995; Townsend & Levy, 1990; Townsend & Wasserman, 1998).

In short, the locus of the power-attraction effect could reside in either (a) the actions of the powerful target or (b) the observer's knowledge of the target's power. To date, the social psychological and evolutionary literatures on this topic are largely independent of each other and beg for integration (e.g., Kuntsman & Maner, 2011). Indeed, it is possible that neither of these two perspectives alone is sufficient to explain naturalistic interactions. In the present case, it could be that powerful people exhibit romantically appealing qualities and behaviors only when there is a *match* between (a) the powerful mindset of a person and (b) others' accurate recognition of that person's powerful role. In other words, someone cannot successfully execute powerful and appealing behaviors unless others recognize his or her power, and people in positions of power will not be appealing unless they act with appropriate authority.

This prediction finds precedent in two related perspectives on power. The first perspective is highlighted by several recent studies suggesting that the effects of power depend on the mindset of others—namely, whether others believe that a powerful individual possesses status. Although status (i.e., the extent to which an individual is admired and regarded highly by others; Fragale, Overbeck, & Neale, 2011) is associated with power in real life, these two constructs are conceptually independent. In fact, people in power are less demeaning (Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2012), negotiate less aggressively (Blader & Chen, 2012), and are perceived more warmly (Fragale et al., 2011) to the extent that they are positively regarded by others (i.e., they have high status). Although we do not differentiate power and status in this report, we echo this literature by acknowledging that even when people have power, their behavior may also depend on others' knowledge and feelings about their power.

The second perspective is role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which proposes that people receive positive or negative evaluations depending on whether they perform behaviors that are consistent with their social roles. Role congruity theory explains negative evaluations of female leaders (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992) and modest men (Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Rudman, 2010), two cases where targets behave inconsistently with gender role prescriptions. Role congruity theory was originally developed to illuminate power-relevant topics (e.g., leadership), and most applications of the theory have examined the consequences of the mismatch between the qualities required in a leader and the qualities that are stereotypic of the female gender role (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). Yet role incongruity effects emerge above and beyond gender; for example, people are dissatisfied when interacting with members of the service industry who defy role expectations by acting rude and unaccommodating (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990). Thus, we predicted that people should positively evaluate a target exhibiting powerful behaviors only when they perceive that the target inhabits a powerful role.

To test these ideas, the present study manipulated—in a live, four-person, mixed-sex interaction—whether an opposite-sex individual had power (actual role manipulation). In addition, we took the (to our knowledge) unprecedented step of simultaneously manipulating which of the opposite-sex targets the participants *perceived* had power (perception of target's role manipulation). Drawing from role congruity theory, we predicted that the actual role manipulation and

the perception of target's role manipulation would interact to predict romantic desire. This (positive) interaction could emerge in one of two forms. One possibility is that only the opposite-sex target who was both given power and perceived to inhabit a position of power would be romantically desired (i.e., a 1 vs. 3 pattern). Alternatively, a strong form of the role congruity argument suggests that the other congruent condition (i.e., the target who was not given power and was perceived not to inhabit a position of power) would also be desired, producing a cross-over interaction. Although we predicted a positive interaction between these two manipulations, we did not advance strong predictions about the precise form of the positive interaction; all relevant contrasts are explored below. Also, given the tight linkage between the behavioral approach system and mating motives (Kuntsman & Maner, 2011), and given prior suggestive evidence that power is associated with sexual concepts but not with affiliation motives (Zurbriggen, 2000), we anticipated that our effects would be more pronounced for a measure of romantic liking rather than a measure of platonic liking for the opposite-sex individual.

Moreover, we coded videos of the interactions in order to assess two possible mediators that have been linked to power in prior research: the target's control over the conversation (Hall et al., 2005) and the perceived legitimacy of the target (Tyler, 1997). Specifically, we predicted that targets who were actually in a position of power would be more likely to control the conversation and would be treated as legitimate by their fellow group members to the extent that they were perceived to be powerful. Finally, we explored whether the power-attraction effects were stronger for women perceiving men than for men perceiving women. Although power is frequently more appealing to women than to men when participants are evaluating hypothetical targets (e.g., Townsend & Wasserman, 1998), this sex difference emerges less consistently when participants evaluate face-to-face interaction partners (Eastwick, Luchies, Finkel, & Hunt, 2012; but see Pillsworth, 2008).

Method

Participants

Participants were 198 (100 female) Florida State University students (mean age = 19.3 years, SD = 1.7 years).[1] In an online questionnaire (completed before the experiment), 8.6% of participants reported that they were African-American, 1.5% Asian-American, 59.6% Caucasian, 13.6% Hispanic/Latino, 7.1% other/multiracial, and 9.6% did not answer. Half of the participants received course credit. These students brought a same sex friend to the experiment; the friends comprised the remaining participants and were paid for their participation. The experimenter divided participants into four-person *quads* of two men and two women and never assigned both a participant and his/her friend to the same quad.

Procedure

Eight to twelve participants arrived at the lab for each experimental session. Each received an identifier (men were assigned numbers between 1 and 6; women were assigned letters between A and F) and quad assignment. After checking in, participants received written instructions that contained the (randomly assigned) power manipulation (Galinsky et al., 2003). The instructions informed participants that, based on personality information assessed in the online questionnaire, one member of their quad would have power (i.e., the

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[1] In addition to the 198, the following participants were excluded from analyses: 8 participants who identified as gay or lesbian on the online questionnaire, 1 participant who failed to fill out the questionnaire properly, and 5 participants (1 whole quad and 1 additional participant) who were given incorrect power manipulations by the experimenter. Videos were available for all but two of the quads (N = 190).

"manager") over the other three (i.e., the "builders"). Specifically, the manager would decide how to structure the process for building a "Tanagram" and would evaluate the builders at the end of the session in a private questionnaire. All four quad members were instructed not to discuss these role assignments.

In half the cases ($N = 93$), the written instructions were consistent for all four members of the quad. For example, if Andrew received power, then Andrew, James, Karen, and Chelsea would be told that Andrew had received power. However, in the remaining cases ($N = 105$), the instructions were inconsistent for the men and the women in the quad such that the instructions for the sex who did not have power incorrectly described which opposite-sex partner did and did not have power. For example, if Andrew received power, Andrew and James would be told that Andrew had received power; however Karen and Chelsea would be told that James had received power.

These instructions permitted the examination of two separate experimental manipulations, which we describe from the perspective of participant Karen reporting romantic desire for opposite-sex partner Andrew. First, the instructions manipulated the opposite-sex partners' actual power (*target's actual role* manipulation): That is, the instructions indicated to Andrew whether he was the "manager" (actual leader condition) or a "builder" (actual subordinate condition). Second, the instructions also manipulated the participants' perceptions about which opposite-sex partner had power (*perception of target's role* manipulation): that is, the instructions indicated to Karen that Andrew was either a "manager" (perceived leader condition) or a "builder" (perceived subordinate condition). In other words, the target's actual role manipulation was implemented in Andrew's mind (i.e., the person about whom the dependent variable was reported) and the perception of target's role manipulation was implemented in Karen's mind (i.e., the person reporting the dependent variable). (The participant's own powerful vs. powerless role was a third manipulation generated by these instructions but is not relevant to our hypotheses; see Footnote 2.)

The experimenter placed each quad in a separate room and videotaped them having a discussion about their personal goals, telling the participants not to discuss the upcoming Tanagram task. After 5 min, the experimenter stopped the discussion, and participants completed the dependent measures. The experimenter then informed the participants that they would not have time to complete the Tanagram task. Participants completed other experimental tasks not relevant to the present study before being thanked and debriefed.

Materials

Participants completed four items about the two opposite-sex partners in their quad on a scale from 1 (*Not at All*) to 7 (*Very Much*). The four items ("This person is sexually attractive," "I would be interested in going on a date with this person," "I think this person is very much like my ideal romantic partner," and "I find this person to be very attractive") showed acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .92$) and were averaged to form the dependent variable *romantic desire*. To establish discriminant validity, participants also completed a 2-item *platonic liking* measure ("I really like this person", "I would be excited to get to know this person better") about both opposite-sex partners ($\alpha = .81$) and the same-sex partner ($\alpha = .78$) in their quad.

Four independent coders who were blind to the hypotheses and conditions of the study coded the videos of the four interacting quad members. Coders rated each participant on two *conversational control* items: "To what degree did this person direct the flow/topic of conversation" (inter-rater $r = .68$) using a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a lot*), and "How many questions did this person ask?" (inter-rater $r = .90$). In addition, coders rated each participant on two *perceived legitimacy* items: "To what degree was this person excluded from the group?" (reverse-scored; inter-rater $r = .56$) using a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a lot*), and "To what degree did the group seem interested/engaged in what this person had to say?"
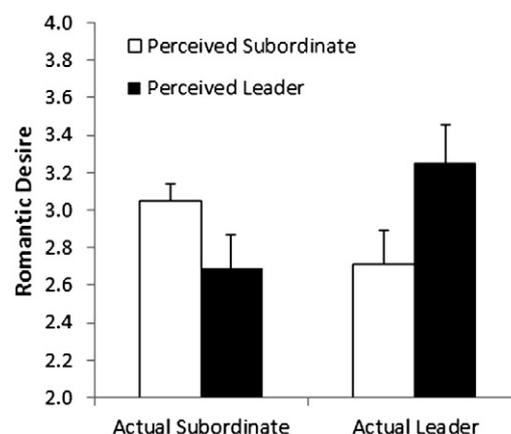

Fig. 1. Effect of Target's Actual Role and Perception of Target's Role on romantic desire.

(inter-rater $r = .38$) using a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). For both constructs, the two items were standardized and then averaged ($\alpha = .81$ and $\alpha = .52$, respectively).

Results

We examined the target's actual role manipulation (actual leader = .5, actual subordinate = −.5) and perceptions of target's role manipulation (perceived leader = .5, perceived subordinate = −.5) on romantic desire. Betas below indicate standardized effect sizes, whereas gammas (which correspond to the figures) indicate unstandardized effects. Men reported significantly more romantic desire than women, $M_{Men} = 3.27$, $M_{Women} = 2.70$, $t(197) = −3.60$, $p < .001$, but participant sex did not interact with either manipulation or their interaction, $ps > .418$. We collapsed across sex for all subsequent analyses.

We used multilevel modeling (SAS PROC Mixed) to account for nesting of opposite-sex partners within participant and the nesting of participant within quad; we permitted the intercept to vary randomly across participant and quad (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Romantic desire was regressed on the manipulations of target's actual role, perceptions of target's role, and their interaction. The main effect of the target's actual role was not significant, $\beta = .03$, $\gamma = .11$, $t(195) = 0.85$, $p = .399$, and the main effect of the perceptions of target's role was not significant, $\beta = .03$, $\gamma = .09$, $t(195) = 0.70$, $p = .487$. However, as predicted, their interaction was significant, $\beta = .13$, $\gamma = .90$, $t(195) = 2.33$, $p = .021$; that is, romantic desire for the opposite-sex actual leader (vs. the actual subordinate) depended on whether participants perceived the opposite-sex partner to have power or not (see Fig. 1)[2] When participants reported on an opposite-sex partner who was actually a leader, they desired that partner more when they perceived the partner to be a leader than when they perceived the partner to be a subordinate, $\gamma = .54$, $t(195) = 2.13$, $p = .034$. Furthermore, when participants reported on an opposite-sex partner whom they believed to be a leader, they reported more romantic desire when that partner was actually a leader than when the partner was actually a subordinate, $\gamma = .56$, $t(195) = 2.21$, $p = .029$. Also, the contrast comparing the actual leader/perceived leader cell with the other three cells was significant, $\gamma = .65$, $t(195) = 2.17$, $p = .032$. All significant simple effects are presented in Table 1.

The Actual Role × Perception of Target's Role interaction did not significantly predict platonic liking ratings for the opposite-sex partner, $\beta = .04$, $\gamma = .21$, $t(195) = 0.78$, $p = .438$. Furthermore, in an analysis

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[2] This interaction remained significant in subsidiary analyses that (a) controlled for a dummy variable indicating whether or not the participant actually had power, $t(195) = 2.31$, $p = .022$, and (b) eliminated the 98 participants who rated two partners in the perceived subordinate/actual subordinate condition because they were in a quad where either they themselves or their same sex partner was given power, $t(100) = 2.16$, $p = .033$.

Table 1
Simple effect tests.

Dependent variable	Actual subordinate		Actual leader	
	Perceived subordinate	Perceived leader	Perceived subordinate	Perceived leader
Romantic desire	3.05$_{a,b}$	2.69$_a$	2.71$_a$	3.25$_b$
Conversational control	−.04$_a$	−.20$_a$	.03$_a$	.40$_b$
Perceived legitimacy	−.03$_a$	−.26$_a$	.01$_a$	.42$_b$

Note: means that share subscripts do not significantly differ from each other ($p<.05$) within a row.

that accounted for liking type (coded romantic $=-1$, platonic $=1$) as an additional layer of nesting, the Actual Role × Perception of Target's Role × Liking Type three-way interaction was marginal, $\beta=-.04$, $\gamma=-.26$, $t(393)=-1.77$, $p=.078$. In other words, the romantic desire two-way interaction was marginally stronger than the nonsignificant platonic liking two-way interaction, suggesting that the effects documented in Fig. 1 appear to be specific to romantic evaluations. Also, the Actual Role × Perception of Target's Role interaction was nonsignificant predicting the platonic liking report provided by the same-sex partner, $\beta=.03$, $\gamma=.12$, $t(143)=0.39$, $p=.699$.

We next calculated the effect of the Actual Role × Perception of Target's Role interaction on the potential mediators conversational control and perceived legitimacy. In both cases, the main effect of the target's actual role was significant; conversational control $\beta=.16$, $\gamma=.33$, $t(187)=2.93$, $p=.004$; perceived legitimacy, $\beta=.19$, $\gamma=.36$, $t(187)=3.76$, $p<.001$; but the main effect of the perceptions of target's role was not; conversational control $\beta=.05$, $\gamma=.11$, $t(187)=0.95$, $p=.343$; perceived legitimacy, $\beta=.05$, $\gamma=.09$, $t(187)=0.94$, $p=.350$. Importantly, their interaction was significant in both cases; conversational control $\beta=.11$, $\gamma=.53$, $t(187)=2.21$, $p=.029$; perceived legitimacy, $\beta=.15$, $\gamma=.64$, $t(187)=2.95$, $p=.004$ (see Figs. 2A and B). The patterns were largely similar to the dependent variable romantic desire: again, the contrast comparing the actual leader/perceived leader cell with the other three cells was significant, conversational control $\gamma=.71$, $t(187)=3.11$, $p=.002$; perceived legitimacy $\gamma=.77$, $t(187)=3.84$, $p<.001$. All simple effects are presented in Table 1.

To test whether the conversational control and perceived legitimacy variables mediated the effect of the Target's Actual Role × Perception of Target's Role interaction on romantic desire, we used the online spreadsheet (www.quantpsy.org) provided by Bauer, Preacher, and Gil (2006) to calculate the indirect effects and 95% confidence intervals from the SAS PROC Mixed output. In two separate mediational analyses, these two variables mediated the interaction of target's actual role and perception of target's role on romantic desire (i.e., mediated moderation); standardized pathways and 95% confidence intervals for both models are presented in Table 2. In short, the direct effect of the interaction on romantic desire was significantly reduced by including conversational control and perceived legitimacy in the model.[3]

Discussion

Participants reported the greatest romantic desire when the opposite-sex target was both (a) actually given power and (b) perceived to be in a

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[3] The coders also rated the extent to which each target was liked by the same-sex member of the quad ("S/he really liked this interaction partner") and the extent to which each target was sexually desired by each of the opposite-sex members of the quad ("S/he is sexually attracted to this interaction partner"). The Actual Role × Perception of Target's Role interaction did not significantly predict the same-sex liking ratings, $t(130)=-0.33$, $p=.739$, but it did predict the opposite-sex sexual attraction ratings, $t(179)=2.81$, $p=.006$. Furthermore, these opposite-sex sexual attraction coder ratings mediated the Actual Role × Perception of Target's Role interaction on romantic desire, 95% CI [.013, .062]. These findings suggest that the two manipulations primarily affected the observable behavior of the opposite-sex, not the same-sex, individuals in the quad.
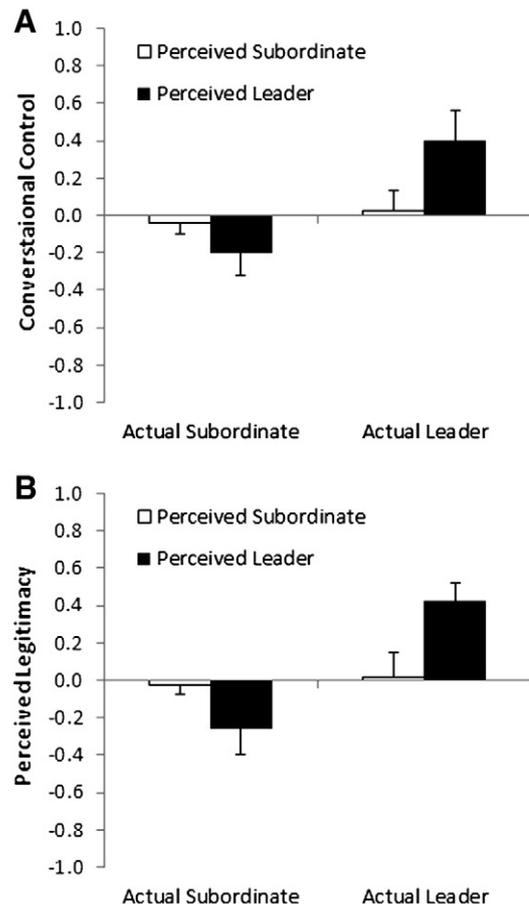
Fig. 2. Effect of Target's Actual Role and Perception of Target's Role on conversational control (A) and perceived legitimacy (B).

position of power. Thus, for power to have aphrodisiacal effects in live interactions, it appears as though people have to both see themselves as and be seen as a leader. This pattern did not emerge for a measure of platonic liking, which is consistent with prior work suggesting that people commonly associate power with sex (Kuntsman & Maner, 2011) but that power and affiliative motives tend not to be positively associated (Zurbriggen, 2000).

The pattern for romantic desire is consistent with the role congruity theory postulate that people receive negative evaluations when they engage in behaviors that are inconsistent with their roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Intriguingly, the pattern of data for romantic desire (but not conversational control or perceived legitimacy) hinted at the strong form of the role congruity prediction: descriptively speaking, the other "congruent" condition (the actual subordinate who was perceived to be a subordinate) was desired more than the two "incongruent" conditions. One possibility is that participants expected these powerless targets not to take control of the conversation, and because these targets confirmed participants' expectations by remaining deferential, the targets were well liked. Overall, this

Table 2
Mediational pathways.

Mediator	IV→ mediator	Mediator→ DV	IV→DV (direct)	IV→DV (full model)	95% CI
Conversational control	.11 (.05)	.08 (.04)	.12 (.06)	.11 (.06)	[.000, .024]
Perceived legitimacy	.15 (.05)	.13 (.04)	.12 (.06)	.10 (.06)	[.004, .040]

Note: IV = Actual Role × Perception of Target's Role interaction; DV = romantic desire. All variables were standardized; numbers in parentheses indicate standard errors.

study offers a unique demonstration of role congruity theory in which both the target's role and the perceiver's expectations of the target's role were manipulated.

This study did not document sex differences in the effects of power. Several of the studies reviewed above found that power tended to affect women's evaluations more than men's (e.g., Townsend & Wasserman, 1998), and given that power is generally more consistent with the male than female role, role congruity theory might also predict that the pattern of effects would have been stronger for women's desire ratings. Nevertheless, the power manipulation in this study was very explicit, and for most participants in this relatively egalitarian setting, gender roles might not have had sufficient time to become accessible as would be typical in the workplace (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Furthermore, although some aspects of power and agency inspire romantic desire in live interactions more strongly for women (e.g., "provider" traits; Pillsworth, 2008), others do not (e.g., earning prospects/ambition; Eastwick et al., 2012), so it is not without precedent that we detected no sex differences in the effects of power on romantic desire. Nevertheless, it remains plausible that visible markers of power (e.g., clothing worn for a high or low status job; Townsend & Levy, 1990) could be more appealing to women than to men in live interactions, and future studies might make use of such manipulations.

Finally, we documented evidence that the coded variables conversional control and perceived legitimacy mediated the interaction of the two experimental conditions on romantic desire. Prior research has documented that people in power are more likely to dominate conversations (Hall et al., 2005) and that subordinates confer legitimacy onto the powerful (Tyler, 1997). We found both of these main effects of actual power in the current study, but these main effects were qualified by the Target's Actual Role × Perception of Target's Role interactions. That is, targets controlled the conversations and were treated as legitimate only when they both had power and were perceived to be in a position of power. In everyday situations, power may not have the typical approach-oriented effects if there is ambiguity about who inhabits the powerful role, as people attempting to behave powerfully may be obstructed by those who do not see them as possessing the requisite authority (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008). If the powerful are to inspire romantic desire, it may help to be enabled by their subordinates.

Conclusion

In dyadic interactions, people defer to dominant individuals and exert authority over subordinate ones, and they like interaction partners more when the partner complements their own dominant or submissive role (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003). These automatic reactions perhaps reflect the comforting appeal of interacting within a stable hierarchy. The current study extends this logic to group interactions: above and beyond one's own role assignment, it may be distressing for people to witness what they believe to be an unaccommodating subordinate trying to coordinate with an ineffectual leader. Such an awkward melee seems less conducive to romance than a group discussion in the firm control of a mutually recognized leader.

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