Sense of Power and Markers of Challenge and Threat during Extra-Dyadic Problem Discussions between Romantic Partners

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Abstract

The current study examined how one’s sense of power is related to self-reported and physiological indicators of psychological challenge and threat during discussions of extra-dyadic problems (i.e., problems occurring outside of the relationship) between romantic partners. We recruited 145 romantic couples to attend a laboratory session in which one dyad member (the discloser) disclosed their most stressful extra-dyadic problem to their partner (the responder). Cardiovascular measures recorded at baseline and during the conversation were used to examine pre-ejection period, cardiac output, and total peripheral resistance reactivity. Using a series of Actor-Partner Interdependence Models, we found that, although greater actor power was associated with self-reports consistent with greater challenge and less threat, for disclosers with high-power partners, greater actor power was associated with physiological responses consistent with more threat and less challenge. This research highlights the importance of situational attributes that may undermine one’s sense of power during self-disclosure with a high-power partner.
References


INTRODUCTION
Power, the capacity to influence others and resist influence attempts directed at the self [1] has been linked to greater approach motivation [2].

Using the Biopsychosocial Model of Challenge and Threat framework, we examined how power is related to self-reported and physiological responses indicative of psychological challenge (i.e., approach) and threat (i.e., avoidance) during extra-dyadic problem discussions between romantic partners.

METHOD
139 couples (N = 278) completed a 2-hour laboratory session during which one dyad member (the discloser) revealed and discussed a problem they were currently experiencing to their romantic partner (the responder).

RESULTS
For both anticipatory and recovery ratings, there was a main effect of actor power such that those with higher levels of power reported greater resources relative to demands (i.e., greater challenge; anticipatory: $B = 0.43$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.70], $t = 3.14$, $p = .002$, $r = .20$; recovery: $B = 0.49$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.80], $t = 3.09$, $p = .002$, $r = .20$).

There was a significant interaction between actor power, partner power, and role, $B = 0.47$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.86], $t = 2.38$, $p = .019$, $r = .22$. Among disclosers with high power partners, higher actor power was associated with more threat, $B = 0.713$, 95% CI [0.082, 1.344], $t = 2.24$, $p = .027$, $r = .21$.

DISCUSSION
Our research demonstrates that, although a greater sense of power is associated with self-reports consistent with greater challenge and less threat, for partners disclosing their problem with high-power partners, a greater sense of power was associated with physiological responses consistent with more threat and less challenge.

By using a dimensional, dyadic approach and assessing power in pre-existing relationships, we highlight the importance of co-examining self-report and physiological markers of stress.