

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Absolute power leads to absolute corruption? Impact of power on corruption depending on the concepts of power one holds

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## Abstract

Power has long been linked to the stigma of corruption. Three studies indicated that different power concepts have different implications for corruption behavior and perception. The personalized power concept relates to using power to pursue self-centered goals for one's own benefit, whereas the socialized power concept relates to using power to pursue other-focused goals for benefiting and helping others. Three studies were conducted to explore the effect of these two types of power concepts on corrupt intention or practice. The power concepts were measured in Study 1, primed through previous experience in Study 2, and utilized within a specific context in Study 3, respectively. Taken together, the three studies indicate that the personalized (vs. socialized) power concept increases (vs. decreases) self-interested behavior and tolerance towards others' (especially high-position others') corrupt practices.

*'Power is of two kinds. One is obtained by the fear of punishment and the other by acts of love. Power based on love is a thousand times more effective and permanent than the one derived from fear of punishment.'*— (Mahatma Gandhi)

Power is a fundamental aspect of everyday social life (Cartwright, 1959). "The laws of social dynamics are laws which can only be stated in terms of power" (Russell, 1938, p. 10). For ordinary people, power is something both loved and hated. People are eager to have power, but they are also afraid of power because of the countless real-world examples of corruption due to the misuse of power. However, the available empirical evidence would suggest that the connection between power and corruption might be less strong than is often assumed. The manner in which persons mentally construct their understanding of power depends on their need for and the way they use power. The availability of power does not only provide the opportunity to use power for one's own benefit but implies the opportunity to help and be responsible for others (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001; Sassenberg, Ellemers, & Scheepers,

2012; Sassenberg, Ellemers, Scheepers, & Scholl, 2014; Scheepers, Ellemers, & Sassenberg, 2013; Torelli & Shavitt, 2010; Zhong, Magee, Maddux, & Galinsky, 2006). In this study, we examined different effects of power by distinguishing between the personalized power concept (power should be used for self-centered goals) versus the socialized power concept (power should be used for other-focused goals) and tested the implications of these different power concepts in relation to the practice and perception of corruption.

## The Impact of Power on Corruption

Power is defined by Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson (2003) as "an individual's relative capacity to modify others' states by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments" (page 265). Power holders tend to be more risk seeking (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006) and to pay more attention to rewards compared with individuals low in power (Kanso, Hewstone, Hawkins, Waszczuk, & Nobre, 2014; Keltner et al., 2003). They exhibit an increased inclination for self-anchoring (Overbeck & Droutman, 2013) and experience less socially engaging emotions including guilt and

embarrassment (Magee & Smith, 2013). Furthermore, powerful individuals are more inclined to have stereotypical perceptions of those around them (Fiske, 1993, 2001; Goodwin, Gubin, Fiske, & Yzerbyt, 2000), regard others as inanimate objects (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008), display less empathy and understanding for others (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006), and exhibit cynicism towards others' generous acts (Inesi, Gruenfeld, & Galinsky, 2012). Consistent with these findings, there is a widespread belief that power corrupts and power holders act in a self-interested manner, benefiting themselves even at the expense of common good (Fiske, 1993; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Keltner et al., 2003; Kipnis, 1972, 1976).

However, there is evidence that suggests that power may produce benevolent and prosocial behavior. For example, the sense of having a high degree of power may allow individuals to individuate and understand others (Goodwin et al., 2000; Overbeck & Park, 2001; Russell & Fiske, 2010) and promote perspective taking (Hall, Coats, & LeBeau, 2005; Hall, Murphy, & Mast, 2006) and interpersonal sensitivity (Hall, Andrzejewski, & Yopchick, 2009; Schmid Mast, Jonas, & Hall, 2009). Recent research has also shown that status—a related but distinct dimension of social hierarchy—is associated with different features depending on the specific culture the individual comes from. Persons from collective cultures tend to regard individuals of high status as warm rather than competent (Torelli, Leslie, Stoner, & Puente, 2014). These findings would suggest that powerful people may also be concerned about the welfare of others.

Consequently, it seems that power is multifaceted, a flexible instrument for achieving one's unique goals or facilitating goal attainment (Kruglanski et al., 2002; Overbeck & Park, 2006). This would imply that the goals of an individual must be taken into account when considering the effect of power. Furthermore, Torelli (2006) and Torelli and Shavitt (2010) suggest that power can be understood, on the one hand, as the ability of delivering resources to control others or, on the other hand, as desire to exert a particular influence on the target of the exertion of power. Thus, there are two important elements to be considered when conceptualizing power: capacity and intention. Based on this viewpoint, we argue that the manner in which power impacts corruption might be influenced not only by the capacity of using power (power as a means) but also by the intention of power use (the goal to be achieved by power).

### Personalized Versus Socialized Power Concept

Traditionally, conceptual and operational definitions of power have predominantly focused on the control of

valued resources and outcomes (e.g., Fiske, 1993; Galinsky et al., 2003; Keltner et al., 2003). The asymmetrical ability to control others demonstrates one of the essential elements of power, that is, capacity. However, capacity is not the whole story; two persons who are equally capable to control resources will likely use the resources to achieve different goals. One person may exert power for his or her own profit, while another may use power to benefit others. For instance, some individuals desire power to reach self-centered goals, while others want power for the pursuit of prosocial goals (McClelland, 1987; Winter, 1973). The utilization of power activates different types of goals in persons with different types of social orientations. Specifically, social-responsibility goals are activated in individuals who possess a communal relationship orientation, but self-interest goals in those with an exchange-relationship orientation (Chen et al., 2001). Likewise, research concerning the attraction of power reveals that power can be construed as an opportunity to achieve one's own goal or as responsibility for one's own actions (Sassenberg et al., 2012). In addition, research that investigated the culture–power link found that power can be conceptualized around responsibility, especially in persons from East Asian cultures and individuals from horizontal collectivistic societies (Torelli & Shavitt, 2010; Zhong et al., 2006).

We suppose that these distinct findings may result from the different power concepts the respective participants held. In the present research, we define power concept as the belief about the goals one should accomplish while using one's power. A personalized power concept is associated with the belief that power should be used to strive for self-centered goals (e.g., gaining self-interests, pursuing private benefit, or satisfying one's own needs), whereas a socialized power concept implies the believe that power should be used to attain other-focused goals (e.g., benefiting others, helping others, or avoiding negative effects on others). Different power concepts shape how people think, feel, and behave. Therefore, differing acts (corrupt vs. benevolent) of power holders may be related to divergent goals held by the power holders (i.e., the different power concepts), and we expect that the two power concepts will drive the different individual attitudes and the chosen of the corresponding behavior within the context of corruption.

### Current Research

Three studies were conducted to explore whether individuals who possess a high degree of a personalized or a socialized power concept have different attitudes towards corruption and how they behave when they

are involved in a self–other interest dilemma. We predicted that the personalized power concept is linked to a more positive attitude towards corruption and a higher corruption tendency/behavior. In contrast, a socialized power concept is associated with a more negative attitude towards corruption and a lower tendency/behavior of corruption.

Furthermore, the current research focused on the power holder not only as an actor but also as an observer of others' corrupt intention and behavior. Concerning the global spread of corruption, public perception and tolerance of corruption are important factors and should be taken into consideration when fighting corruption (Manzetti & Wilson, 2007; Melgar, Rossi, & Smith, 2010). We expected that the personalized (vs. socialized) power-concept holders would show higher (vs. lower) tolerance towards others' corrupt intention and behavior. Moreover, we were interested in whether a higher or lower position of power of the corrupt actors would also influence their tolerance level when being an observer of the corrupt practice. We hypothesized that compared with a socialized power concept, the personalized power concept is associated with a higher tolerance of individuals with high position/power (rather than those with low position/power) who show corrupt practices, because this type of power concept is linked with a belief in the inequality of social groups (Torelli & Shavitt, 2010).

In addition, different power concepts can display relatively stable trait-like, measurable beliefs on the one hand (McClelland, 1987; Winter, 1973), but with a mental representation, which is likely to be activated by power-related stimuli (e.g., previous experience of exercising power to achieve some goals or salient power-related goals in current context; Torelli & Shavitt, 2010). Therefore, we conducted different operationalizations of power concepts in three studies. Study 1 utilized self-reported measures of personalized and socialized power concepts to examine the connection of power concepts and general attitude towards corrupt behavior committed by the participant or others; Study 2 primed the two power concepts using episodic recall of events associated with pursuing self-centered or other-focused goals by means of power to examine the effect of power concepts on participants' own corrupt (self-interested) intention and their attitude towards corrupt behavior of others; finally, Study 3 primed the power concepts by establishing a connection between a selfish goal or a benevolent goal and available power to investigate the effect of power concepts on real corrupt (self-interested) behavior (Study 3a) and the judgment of others in high positions who attain selfish goals at the expense of others (Study 3b).

## STUDY 1

The sample in Study 1 consisted of working adults in order that we were able to measure rather stable power concepts and their relation to the general opinion on corrupt practice. We expected that the personalized power concept would be associated with higher acceptance of corruption, whereas the socialized power concept would be associated with lower acceptance of corruption, regardless of whether one was an actor of corrupt behavior or powerful others were.

## Method

### Participants

Two hundred and sixty-three Chinese working adults (123 women; mean age =  $37.14 \pm 7.91$ ; range: 21–66 years) were recruited for participation through Wenjuan.com and received ¥10 as payment. Wenjuan.com is a Chinese on-line service function similar to Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk where individuals can solicit help with various tasks, including completing surveys, in exchange for a fee.

### Measures

**Power Concepts.** There are so far no widely accepted measures for stable power concepts. Torelli and Shavitt (2010) used the Misuse of Power scale (Lee-Chai, Chen, & Chartrand, 2001) and the Helping Power Motivation scale (Frieze & Boneva, 2001) to measure personalized and socialized power concept, respectively. According to the items, it would appear that the Misuse of Power scale measures the action that the individual who holds a personalized power concept was engaged in rather than the concept itself (e.g., "sometimes it's okay to take credit for one's staff members' ideas, because later they'll do the same thing"), and the items of the Helping Power Motivation scale are more similar to the measure of general prosocial orientation even without having power (e.g., "I feel good when I can give useful advice to someone"). In another study, the similar concepts of personalized and socialized power motive were coded and derived from the personal strivings that participants had listed (Magee & Langner, 2008). In this study, a new self-reported scale was developed to measure the two types of power concept. Based on the definition of power concepts, we developed six items to represent the personalized power concept; that is, power should be used to achieve self-centered goals and selfish gains or pleasure; another six items to represent the socialized power concept, that is, power should be used to achieve other-focused goals and benefit others (Table 1).

Participants were asked to rate the items on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach  $\alpha$  was .87 for personalized power concept and .83 for socialized power concept.

A principal components factor analysis was conducted for each of the power-concept items. The results of this analysis indicated that the most appropriate solution involved two factors. A varimax (orthogonal) rotation specifying a two-factor solution accounted for 58.29% of the variance. Table 1 summarizes the results from the varimax rotation for the two-factor solution. The first factor consisted of all six items of personalized power concept, while the second factor consisted of all six items of socialized power concept. By combining the Cronbach alphas and the results of the exploratory factor analysis, the new power-concepts scale has satisfactory reliability and construct validity for the follow-up tests.

**Attitude Towards Corruption.** We developed a six-item scale to measure the participants' attitude towards corruption. The items were investigated with regard to their tolerance of corrupt behavior committed by themselves (e.g., "Even if illegitimate, giving someone an additional benefit is in some cases acceptable if that can get things done quickly and easily"; "When it comes to my own interests, professional ethics can flexibly be changed"; "If someone gives me money or gifts when asking me for favors, I do not think it is an unacceptable thing") and powerful others (e.g., "Compared with low power holders, it is granted for high power holders to use power to get some benefit"; "I think that there is

nothing wrong with people with high power compared with the low power holders using their power to do something for their own benefit"; "It is more comprehensible if high-power people compared with people with low power, pursue their own interests with illegal means") on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). The  $\alpha$ s were .79 for self and .83 for powerful others.

**Costly Punishment on Corruption.** To further understand their attitude concerning corruption, participants were asked how much they were willing to pay to punish the corrupt individuals (0–100% percent of their income). The more the participant was willing to pay, the higher was his or her opposition to corruption (Henrich et al., 2006; Rockenbach & Milinski, 2006).

**Control Variables.** To determine the difference between the power concepts, especially the socialized power concept and the general prosocial motive, we adopted the Value Expressive Scale from the Volunteer Functions Inventory to assess the prosocial value motive (Carlo, Okun, Knight, & de Guzman, 2005; Clary, Snyder, & Ridge, 1992). Participants indicated how appropriate each of the five prosocial value items was (e.g., "I feel compassion toward people in need") on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Higher scores on the scale were associated with greater prosocial value motive. The Cronbach  $\alpha$  was calculated as .82.

As anticorruption is a socially highly desired concept, we adopted the 40-item Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (Paulhus, 1984) to control the

**Table 1.** Loadings from two-factor principal component analysis of power-concepts scale (Study 1)

Items	Factor loading	
	Factor 1 personalized power concept	Factor 2 socialized power concept
I would get others listen to what I say if I had power.	<b>.63</b>	.20
I would pursue everything I want if I owned power.	<b>.82</b>	.01
I could get my way if power was free for me.	<b>.87</b>	-.01
Power should benefit for oneself before for others.	<b>.74</b>	.10
If I owned power, it's of course to make my life better.	<b>.82</b>	.04
I often dream to have power to make my life easier some day.	<b>.78</b>	.12
In my opinion, I would take others' well-being into consideration at first when I owned power.	.07	<b>.70</b>
The meaning of power is to make more people's life better.	.07	<b>.62</b>
To me, owning power means taking the responsibility of the society.	.02	<b>.75</b>
I would try to make a better world when I had power.	-.04	<b>.80</b>
I want to control the resource to help others.	.19	<b>.72</b>
I often dream to have power to contribute to the society.	.14	<b>.78</b>
Eigenvalue	4.18	2.82
Percent of variance	30.97	27.32

Note: The numbers in bold represent the criteria that correspond to each factor.

response bias in follow-up analysis. Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding consists of a 20-item “Self-deception enhancement” scale (e.g., “I am a completely rational person”) and a 20-item “Impression management” scale (e.g., “I have never damaged a library book or store merchandise without reporting it”). Both the “Self-deception enhancement” ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and “Impression management” ( $\alpha = .88$ ) subscales showed good internal reliability.

**Results and Discussion**

Descriptive statistics and correlations are reported in Table 2. The correlation of personalized and socialized power concepts was negative and significant, but only moderate in size,  $r = -.34, p < .001$ . As expected, the personalized power concept was positively correlated with tolerance towards corruption committed both by oneself ( $r = .62, p < .001$ ) and by powerful others ( $r = .73, p < .001$ ) but negatively correlated with costly punishment on corruption ( $r = -.47, p < .001$ ). In contrast, the socialized power concept was negatively correlated with tolerance towards corruption committed both by powerful others ( $r = -.42, p < .001$ ) and by oneself ( $r = -.41, p < .001$ ) but positively correlated with costly punishment on corruption ( $r = .43, p < .001$ ). In addition, there was a negative association between personalized power concept and prosocial motive ( $r = -.28, p < .001$ ), while the association between the socialized power concept and the prosocial motive was positive ( $r = .50, p < .001$ ).

Next, a linear regression was conducted to explore the effect of power concepts on tolerance of corruption committed by oneself, by powerful others, and costly punishment on corruption, respectively. Results in Table 3 indicate that after controlling for gender, social desirability, and prosocial motive, the personalized power concept positively affected the tolerance of corruption committed by oneself ( $\beta = .55, p < .001$ ) and by powerful others ( $\beta = .73, p < .001$ ), whereas the results for the costly punishment on corruption

were negative ( $\beta = -.46, p < .001$ ). However, after controlling for gender and social desirability, the results of the socialized power concept with regard to tolerance of corruption committed by oneself ( $\beta = -.25, p < .001$ ) and by powerful others ( $\beta = -.19, p = .003$ ) were negative, whereas the findings for the costly punishment on corruption were positive ( $\beta = .45, p < .001$ ). It is also noteworthy that after adding the power concepts as predictors, the effect of the prosocial motive decreased sharply, which illustrated that the power concept was a more effective predictor than the prosocial motive.

Study 1 provided a valuable measure of power concepts. Furthermore, the results of study 1 were in line with our predictions. The stronger the personalized power concept, the greater the preparedness to engage in corrupt practice, the greater also the acceptance of powerful persons’ corrupt practice, and the less the participant is willing to punish corruption at the expense of his or her income. In contrast, the stronger the socialized power concept, the lower the tolerance towards corrupt practice—and this correlation did not depend on who the actors of corruption were, that is, the participants or powerful others—and the more the participant was willing to pay for punishment of corruption. Also, the results empirically supported that it was the power concepts rather than the prosocial motive that induced an effect on the attitude towards corruption.

In Study 1, we found different attitudes towards corruption in ordinary people who have different power concepts. In the next two studies, we focused on the effect of power concepts on corrupt attitude and behavior among those who have an equal sense of power. In other words, in Studies 2 and 3, we were interested in whether individuals with same capacity of controlling resources would differ in their attitudes and behavior towards corruption owing to their personalized or socialized power concepts. Moreover, power concepts were manipulated in the next two studies rather than

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics and correlation among the key variables in Study 1

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Gender	0.53	0.50	–					
2. Personalized power concept	4.66	1.15	-.02	–				
3. Socialized power concept	5.31	0.84	.15	-.34***	–			
4. Tolerance of corruption by oneself	4.66	1.21	-.03	.62***	-.41***	–		
5. Tolerance of corruption by powerful others	4.49	1.34	-.04	.73***	-.42***	.62***	–	
6. Costly punishment on corruption	4.11	3.57	.10	-.47***	.43***	-.31***	-.41***	–
7. Prosocial motive	5.49	0.89	.13	-.28***	.50***	-.29***	-.37***	.25***

Note: Gender was dummy-coded as 0 for female and 1 for male. The correlation represented is partial correlation controlling for the social desirability. \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 3.** Regression of power motives on tolerance of corruption by oneself versus tolerance of corruption by powerful others versus costly punishment

Factor and statistics	Tolerance of corruption by oneself		Tolerance of corruption by powerful others		Costly punishment on corruption	
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2
Gender	.00	.01	.01	.01	.07	.05
Self enhancement	.82***	.40***	.71***	.12	-.16	.12
Impression management	-.08	.07	-.03	.13*	.13	-.06
Prosocial motive	-.30***	-.04	-.42***	-.13*	.31***	-.01
Personalized power concept		.55***		.73***		-.46***
Socialized power concept		-.25***		-.19**		.45***
<i>F</i>	48.16***	76.59***	33.72***	90.40***	7.73***	20.91***
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.43	.64	.34	.68	.11	.33
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.42	.63	.33	.67	.09	.31

\*\**p* < .01;\*\*\**p* < .001.

asking for self-reports and were regarded as stable and static variables as in Study 1.

## STUDY 2

In Study 2, we primed the power concepts of two working adult groups by using a recall method in order to replicate the results found in Study 1, that is, personalized power concept (vs. socialized power concept) is a positive (vs. negative) predictor of corruption. We also gave participants a common resource task to examine their corrupt behavior. The tolerance towards powerful others' corruption was self-reported and measured the same way as in Study 1. We expected that, compared with socialized power concept-primed participants, those primed through personalized power concepts would take more money from a common pool and were more likely to accept the corruption of powerful others.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Seventy-two on-the-job graduate students (31.9% male, all Chinese) of Beijing Normal University participated in the study for course credits. Their average age was 33.72 years (*SD* = 5.88; range: 24–41 years). To ensure that participants would not suspect the purpose of the study, they were told that they would be participating in four different tasks. In the first task, participants were randomly asked to recall and write about an event in which they acted according to either the personalized power concept ("a situation in which you had power over another person or persons to get something you wanted") or the socialized power concept ("a situation in which you had the power to help others, gave

unsolicited help, assistance, advice, or support to some other person"). They were asked to write down their experience in detail (e.g., who the other person was, what happened, when it happened, and how they felt after the situation). This technique is well validated and has been shown to obtain results similar to those achieved through manipulation of actual power roles (e.g., Galinsky et al., 2003; Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008; Kifer, Heller, Perunovic, & Galinsky, 2013).

In the second task, participants completed an unrelated questionnaire including two manipulation check items. The purpose of the first 7-point item ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) of "If I have power, I will use it to get whatever I want" was to measure the personalized power-concept, and the second item of "If I have power, I will use it to benefit others" was used to measure the socialized power concept.

In the third task, participants were told that they shared a pool of 500 credits with other people and they would have to decide how many credits (between 0 and 10) they would take for themselves or leave for others. All participants learned that the total of the number of credits taken out determined how many lottery credits they received, and one participant would receive a 100 gift certificate from a lottery drawing, depending on the number of credits each participant possessed. Participants were instructed to be careful not to take too much, because if there were no more credits in the common pool at the end of the game, no one would receive the reward. Participants were then asked how many credits they wished to take (between 0 and 10) from the common pool (Brewer & Kramer, 1986; DeCelles, DeRue, Margolis, & Ceranic, 2012). Obviously, the more credits the participants intended to take, the higher was their tendency of self-interest.

Finally, participants completed three items that investigated their tolerance towards corrupt behavior committed by powerful others (see Study 1; the  $\alpha$  was .83 in Study 2). The participants then answered demographic questions, were debriefed, and were dismissed.

## Results and Discussion

First, to ensure that the two types of power concepts are measured rather than that the participants' differing sense of power resulted in a different impact on corruption, two independent judges blind to the condition and hypotheses of this study coded the essays participants wrote describing their power perceptions (9-point scale: 1 = *low*, 9 = *high*;  $r = .84$ ). As expected, the sense of power did not differ between the personalized power-concept group ( $M = 6.36$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ) and the socialized power-concept group ( $M = 6.03$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ;  $t(70) = 1.02$ ,  $p = .31$ ). A manipulation check showed a significantly higher score in the personalized power-concept item for the personalized power-concept group ( $M = 5.31$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ) rather than for the socialized power-concept group ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ;  $t(70) = 13.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, there was a significantly higher score in the socialized item for the socialized power-concept group ( $M = 5.19$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) than for the personalized power-concept group ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ;  $t(70) = -9.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results indicated that the two conditions were equal in the sense of power; thus, any difference that subsequently emerged within the dependent variables was due to the manipulation of the two power concepts.

Descriptive statistics and correlations are reported in Table 4. Based on the number of credits each of the participants removed as the dependent variable, the results of the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) demonstrated that the main effect of power concepts was significant ( $F(1, 70) = 20.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.226$ ). The number of credits taken by the individuals in the personalized power concept-primed group ( $M = 4.86$ ,

$SD = 1.25$ ) was higher than that in the socialized power concept-primed group ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ).

Likewise, utilizing the tolerance of powerful others' corruption as a dependent variable, the results of ANOVA showed that individuals recalling an experience related to the personalized power concept were more tolerant towards powerful others' corrupt behavior ( $M = 6.44$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ) than those who recalled an experience related to the socialized power concept ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ;  $F(1, 70) = 44.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.389$ ).

In Study 2, a previous experience related to using power for self-serving goals primed the personalized power concept, whereas cues related to having power to help people in need primed the socialized power concept. As hypothesized, Study 2 showed again, compared with the socialized power concept, that the personalized power concept was associated with a higher level of self-interested behavior at the expense of others and higher tolerance towards powerful others' corrupt behavior.

Study 2 verified the hypothesis again; however, there are some limitations. First, there was a lack of a control group, so the relative degree of effect of power concepts compared with the baseline was unknown. Second, manipulation check items were answered before measuring the dependent variables; therefore, it is reasonable to assume that it was the manipulation check items that made the power concepts salient. Finally, the tolerance towards powerful others' corruption was still measured by a questionnaire that measured an attitude rather than a behavior. Study 3 tried to deal with these weaknesses.

## STUDY 3

Two experiments with an added control group were conducted to examine the effect of the two power concepts on one's own self-interested behavior (Study 3a) and the tolerance of powerful others' self-interested behavior (Study 3b), respectively. Study 3 differed from Study 2 in that it primed the two power concepts in

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics and correlation among the key variables in Study 2

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Gender	0.32	0.47	–			
2. Power concept (manipulated)	0.50	0.50	–.15	–		
3. Self-interested commons dilemma behavior	4.86	1.25	.03	–.48***	–	
4. Tolerance of corruption by powerful others	3.56	1.21	.08	–.62***	.38***	–

Note: Gender was dummy-coded as 0 for *female* and 1 for *male*. Power-concept manipulation was also dummy-coded as 0 for *personalized group* and 1 for *socialized group*.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

contexts that made the corresponding power-goals connection more evident.

### Study 3a

#### Method

**Participants.** Ninety-four Chinese students (59 women, aged  $20.29 \pm 1.60$  years; range: 17–24 years) from Beijing Normal University were recruited through the campus BBS website for 10 and randomly assigned to personalized power group ( $n=32$ ), socialized power group ( $n=30$ ), and control group ( $n=32$ ).

**Procedure.** Participants were made to believe that they were in a team with other two students for the purpose of an experiment to explore how team members working individually would affect team performance. In the beginning, participants imagined they were part of a team in a management consulting company, with a top-down team hierarchy with one leader and two executive officers. Each participant's role was determined by a lottery. In fact, the participants were always assigned the role of a leader; in other words, they were always at the top of the hierarchy. This setting assured that each participant had equal capacity to use power and excluded the effect of their socio-structural position. Then they would ask the team to complete a task of location selection. Each participant would, as team leader, assign tasks to two subordinates, evaluate their reports, and make the final decision. The manipulation of power concepts depended on the instructions read by each participant. Participants in the personalized power-concept group were instructed to select a location for a restaurant with the priority being to achieve as high a level of their own personal profit as possible. Participants in the socialized power-concept group were instructed to select a location for a nursing home with the priority of convenience for and benefit of those in need of care guiding their decisions. Participants in the control group were instructed to select a new office for a company with no additional information.

After they had finished decision making, all participants were asked to complete an irrelevant filler questionnaire. They were told the experimenter would evaluate the team performance during that time.

Finally, the participants received 90 tokens as a team reward based on team performance, and they were told that according to the evaluation, the contributions of the three team members were equally good. Next, in their function as a leader, they were allowed to distribute tokens to each team member. If the participants distributed more than 30 tokens to themselves, this was

regarded as a corrupt practice. The more tokens above 30 the participant kept, the higher the degree of corrupt practice. To exclude an effect created by the presence of the experimenters, we told participants that neither the experimenters nor the subordinates knew the distribution results. The only thing they had to do was to bring their tokens to another room to exchange them for money, and the two other members would share the rest of the tokens. Last, the participants were asked to answer two manipulation check items (see Study 2), debriefed, and dismissed.

**Results.** The manipulation check showed that the score of the personalized power-concept item in the personalized power-concept group ( $M=5.22$ ,  $SD=0.71$ ) was significantly higher than that of both in the socialized power-concept group ( $M=3.97$ ,  $SD=0.85$ ;  $t(60)=6.32$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and in the control group ( $M=4.38$ ,  $SD=0.87$ ;  $t(62)=4.26$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Similarly, the score of the socialized power-concept item in the socialized power-concept group ( $M=5.77$ ,  $SD=0.82$ ) was significantly higher than that in the personalized power-concept group ( $M=4.16$ ,  $SD=1.02$ ;  $t(60)=6.83$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and in the control group ( $M=4.56$ ,  $SD=0.80$ ;  $t(60)=5.86$ ,  $p<.001$ ). We noticed that there was marginal difference both between the socialized power-concept group and the control group in the score of the personalized power-concept item ( $t(60)=1.87$ ,  $p=.067$ ) and also between the personalized power-concept group and the control group in the score of the socialized power-concept item ( $t(62)=1.77$ ,  $p=.081$ ). It appears that the priming of personalized power concept to some extent inhibited the socialized power concept in this study, and vice versa.

Next, we explored how the three groups differed with regard to taking away more than 30 tokens. The number of participants who took for themselves more than 30 tokens in the personalized power-concept group ( $n=21$ , 65.63%) was significantly higher than in the socialized power-concept group ( $n=6$ , 20%;  $\chi^2=13.11$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and that of the control group ( $n=13$ , 40.63%;  $\chi^2=4.02$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Besides, there were fewer participants of the socialized power-concept group than of the control group who took more than 30 tokens away ( $\chi^2=3.10$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

Furthermore, taking the number of tokens kept for oneself as the dependent variable, the results of ANOVA demonstrated that the effect of power concepts was significant ( $F(2, 91)=11.89$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.207$ ). Participants in the personalized power-concept group ( $M=40.78$ ,  $SD=12.05$ ) took more tokens away than those in the socialized power-concept group ( $M=30.67$ ,  $SD=5.98$ ;  $t(60)=4.14$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and the control group ( $M=33.91$ ,  $SD=5.20$ ;  $t(60)=2.92$ ,

$p = .004$ ). In addition, participants in the socialized power-concept group took less tokens away than those in the control group ( $t(60) = 2.28, p = .026$ ).

### Study 3b

The procedure was identical to that of Study 3a, except that in this experiment, the dependent variable was changed from self-interested behavior committed by the participants themselves to tolerance of self-interested behavior committed by others. In this study, we also considered whether the corrupt actors' position (high or low) influenced the tolerance of corrupt practice.

#### Method

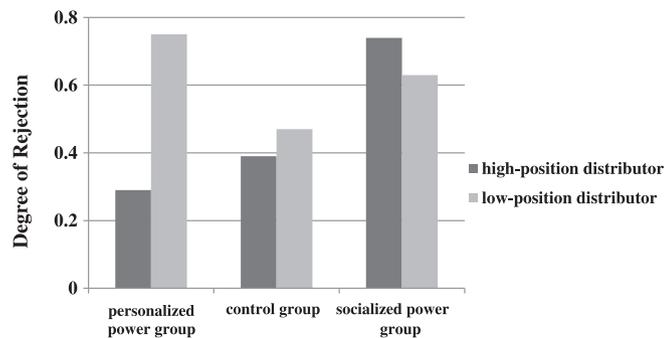
**Participants.** One hundred and ninety-nine Beijing Normal University students (125 women; aged  $19.90 \pm 1.73$  years; range: 16–26 years) participated in the experiment and received 10 as payment. We randomly assigned 63 of the participants to the personalized power-concept group, 69 to the socialized power-concept group, and 67 to the control group. Each group was further divided into two subgroups differing by the position of the corrupt actor (high versus low). Thus, Study 3b was a  $3 \times 2$  between-subject design, and there were 31–35 participants per condition.

**Procedure.** The tasks of Study 3b were almost the same as in Study 3a; however, the dependent variable and manner of measurement differed. After they had finished decision making, participants were told that two members of the other group would distribute the payment, and one of them had the authority to distribute, but the other one had no information concerning the distribution. In order to prevent unfair behavior (because their contributions were equal), the participants had the right to make a decision as to a third party. The corresponding distribution plan was that the decision maker have 60 tokens and the other one have the remaining 30 tokens. Participants also knew that the decision maker's position was that of a leader (of high-position subgroups) or a subordinate (of a low-position subgroup), while the position of the third group member was unknown. If the participants accepted the plan, the distribution results would remain unchanged; if they rejected the plan, two individuals would obtain 45 tokens each. Participants were asked to write down their decision (acceptance or rejection, we coded 0 for acceptance and 1 for rejection) and were informed that their own payment would not be linked to their

decision. Finally, they completed the manipulation check items, were debriefed, and were dismissed.

**Results.** The manipulation check showed that the score of the personalized power-concept item in the personalized power-concept group ( $M = 5.10, SD = 0.93$ ) was significantly higher than that of both in the socialized power-concept group ( $M = 3.57, SD = 1.22; t(130) = 8.06, p < .001$ ) and in the control group ( $M = 3.60, SD = 1.24; t(128) = 7.76, p < .001$ ). There was no difference in the last two groups ( $t(134) = 0.17, p = .87$ ). Similarly, the score of the socialized power-concept item in the socialized power-concept group ( $M = 5.51, SD = 0.93$ ) was significantly higher than that of the personalized concept power group ( $M = 3.89, SD = 1.03; t(130) = 9.45, p < .001$ ) and of the control group ( $M = 3.69, SD = 1.44; t(134) = 8.79, p < .001$ ). There were no differences among the two latter groups ( $t(128) = 0.92, p = .36$ ). The manipulation of power concepts was successful.

Analysis by a  $3$  (power concepts)  $\times 2$  (distributor/corruption actor's position) ANOVA (Figure 1) showed that only the two-way interaction effect was significant ( $F(2, 193) = 6.04, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = 0.059$ ), and the simple effect test showed that participants in the personalized power-concept group were less likely to reject the unfair distribution plan proposed by those who were in a higher position ( $M = 0.29, SD = 0.46$ ) versus in a lower position ( $M = 0.75, SD = 0.44; t(61) = 4.05, p < .001$ ), but this result did not occur in the other two groups (socialized group:  $t(67) = 0.94, p = .349$ ; control group:  $t(65) = 0.63, p = .534$ ). Furthermore, the degree of rejection of higher position distributors in the socialized power-concept group ( $M = 0.74, SD = 0.45$ ) was higher than that in the personalized power-concept group ( $M = 0.29, SD = 0.46; t(63) = 3.94, p < .001$ ) and that in the control group ( $M = 0.39, SD = 0.50; t(65) = 2.96, p = .004$ ). There was no difference between the two latter groups ( $t(62) = 0.86, p = .391$ ). Finally, when the distributor was in a lower position, participants in the personalized concept group ( $M = 0.75, SD = 0.44$ ) made more rejection decisions than those in the control group ( $M = 0.47, SD = 0.51; t(64) = 2.39, p = .020$ ), but there was no difference between the two power-concept primed groups ( $M = 0.63, SD = 0.49; t(65) = 1.02, p = .292$ ) and between the socialized concept group and the control group ( $t(67) = 1.32, p = .193$ ). It is also worth noting that although the higher and lower position distributors were not treated differently within the socialized power-concept group and the control group, the average degree of rejection to unequal distribution in socialized power-concept group ( $M = 0.68, SD = 0.47$ ) was



**Fig. 1:** Degree of rejection as a function of power prime and high (or low)-position distributor in Study 3b

significantly higher than that in the control group ( $M = 0.43$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ;  $t(134) = 2.99$ ,  $p = .003$ ).

**Discussion.** Study 3 again confirmed our hypothesis that personalized power concept primed individuals exercise power in a self-interested manner, whereas socialized power concept-primed individuals exercise power in a socially responsible manner. Specifically, when the socialized power concept was activated, fewer individuals chose to take more (compared with the personalized power-concept group and the control group) for themselves at the expense of others, even in an anonymous condition, and the amount of money they took was the lowest among the three groups. Furthermore, when observing others' self-interest practices, socialized power-concept holders showed a similar level of low tolerance, regardless of whether the other team member was in high or low position. For personalized power-concept holders, however, the degree of tolerance towards others' corrupt behavior depended upon the position of the corrupt actor; if a person in a high position made an unjust and self-interested decision, they showed a much higher level of tolerance. This finding indicated that compared with socialized power-concept holders, personalized power-concept holders are more likely to believe in the inequality of social groups and in the appropriateness of maintaining one's own interest by exploiting others.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Power is an eternal and important topic in psychology, in part because it has long been linked with the stigma of corruption, people frequently associate power holders with actions aimed at self-centered goals (Kipnis, 1976), and misuse of power is viewed as a widespread phenomenon. The present studies were committed to the challenge of addressing this stigma and suggested that the association between power and corruption depends upon the intention of individuals

to use power for gain, or the achievement of their goals. Specifically, a personalized power concept, a belief in using power to achieve self-centered goals (e.g., self-interest and private gains), promotes the corrupt practice and the tolerance towards corruption. In contrast, socialized power concept, the belief in using power to achieve other-focused goals (e.g., benefiting others and helping others), decreases the corrupt practice and the tolerance towards corruption.

These effects were shown by using different power-concept measures and were captured by a variety of dependent variables. Specifically, we examined how personalized and socialized power concepts with trait-like properties (Study 1), primed through previous experience (Study 2) and utilized within a specific context (Study 3), are likely to influence one's attitude towards one's own corrupt practice (Study 1) and that of powerful others (Studies 1, 2, and 3b), one's intention towards corruption (Study 2), and corrupt behavior (Study 3a). Converging evidence demonstrated that the personalized power concept (vs. socialized power concept) increased (vs. decreased) the tolerance of corruption (either by oneself or others, especially higher position others), and the tendency towards corrupt practice.

## Implications

Our findings may extend previous understanding of the power concept and the impact of power on corruption. First, the findings could potentially contribute to a better understanding of previously mixed findings of power by enhancing the understanding of self- versus other-interested actions. Although the definition of power in the literature widely varies, in most studies, power was conceptualized and centered on the power holder's capacity of controlling resources and punishments (Keltner et al., 2003). However, two persons with an equal capacity to control resources do not necessarily achieve the same goals through power. For instance, as the current research has shown, one may see power

as a way to achieve more profit for oneself, while another may intend to use power to do good for others. It is a reminder to scholars that not only capacity or means but also intention and goals should be considered when exploring the effects of power. Thus, it is noteworthy that power is multifaceted (Guinote, 2007a, 2007b; Guinote & Vescio, 2010; Lammers & Stapel, 2009; Van Dijke & Poppe, 2006).

Second, the present research also contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the “benevolent” side of power (e.g., Chen et al., 2001; Howard, Gardner, & Thompson, 2007; Torelli & Shavitt, 2010). For a long time, power was often stigmatized by assuming the power holder would misuse power to attain selfish goals at the expense of others. “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” This truism gained popular support. However, our findings indicated that there is no absolute connection between power and corrupt practice. Whether power is used to do evil or good depends on the concepts of the power holders. Corrupt actions are more likely to occur when power is associated with selfish goals rather than with prosocial goals of being responsible for others.

Third, different power concepts lead to distinct thinking and behavior not only when power holders are actors but also when they are observers. A personalized power concept (rather than a socialized power concept) makes individuals more self-interested on the one hand and enhances the tolerance of others’ corrupt practice on the other hand. Furthermore, this effect might be magnified, especially when personalized power-concept holders perceive a corrupt actor as having a high status. This may explain the phenomenon of “bureaucrats shielding one another” to some extent. In addition, in the action against corruption, it is important to select and appoint officials who hold a socialized power concept rather than a personalized power concept. Moreover, emphasizing the socialized power concept by means of education, propaganda, and policy would contribute to the fight against corruption.

### Limitations and Future Directions

As suggested by our research, different power concepts differ in the corrupt practice. However, on the one hand, as the present research is interested in what the boundary condition is when people have power and which factor can block the negative effect of power, we did not compare the effects of the two types of power concept with a low-power condition. The effect of priming the low sense of power and the power concepts at the same time could be explored in the further research. On the other hand, our work is silent regarding the issue

of the underlying mechanism regulating how power concepts may affect the power holders’ actions and thoughts. How does a personalized power concept (rather than a socialized power concept) facilitate the corrupt practice? Is it possible that a power holder who has a high capacity of control combined with a self-centered intention would experience a higher psychological entitlement (a stable and pervasive sense that he or she deserves more and is entitled to more than others; Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004) and then activate an unrestricted misuse of power? Possible mediators like psychological entitlement could be explored in future studies. Besides, past studies have focused on the cultural antecedents of power concepts (e.g., Torelli & Shavitt, 2010, 2011). We have shown that different power concepts may also be activated through particular social cues under equal cultural circumstances (i.e., Mainland China). Are there any other antecedents that might nurture the two power concepts in addition to culture? For example, a recent study suggested that higher residential mobility was associated with higher bribe giving (Chen, Liu, Lan, & Hong, in press). Would a higher mobility cause a greater focus on the instrumental benefit that enhances the selfish concern when holding power? These possibilities will be subject to further exploration.

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