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Power, Distress, and Compassion:
Turning a Blind Eye to the Suffering of Others

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Abstract

Responses to those who suffer are a foundation of cooperative communities. Based on the approach/inhibition theory of power (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), we hypothesized that elevated social power is associated with diminished reciprocal emotional responses to another's suffering (feeling distress at another's distress), and with diminished complementary emotion (e.g., compassion.). In face-to-face conversations, participants disclosed experiences that had caused them suffering. As predicted, participants with a higher sense of power experienced less distress, less compassion, and exhibited greater autonomic emotion regulation when confronted with another's suffering compared to those with a lower sense of power. Additional analyses revealed that these findings could not be attributed to power-related differences in baseline emotion or decoding accuracy, but were likely shaped by power-related differences in the motivation to affiliate. Implications for theorizing about power and the social functions of emotions are discussed.

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That cultures have evolved a norm of noblesse oblige – that those with power and wealth should behave generously toward low-power others – suggests that power dampens the propensity to care for others. The present investigation explores this possibility. Specifically, we examined how power influences reciprocal and complementary emotional reactions to the suffering of another (Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987; Keltner & Kring, 1998). *Emotional reciprocity* refers to the process by which one individual comes to feel the emotions of another, as when one person's distress arouses distress in another. *Emotional complementarity* occurs when one person's emotions evoke different but corresponding emotions in others, as when one person's distress arouses compassion in another. We test hypotheses concerning how power moderates these two processes so vital to interpersonal relationships.

Emotional Reciprocity and Complementarity

Humans have a well-honed capacity to respond to the emotions of others. The emotional reciprocity between parents and children helps coordinate the goal-directed behaviors of infant and parent prior to the child's acquisition of language (Campos, Campos, & Barrett, 1989; Tronick, 2003). In adults, brief exposure to another's emotions automatically triggers similar emotions in perceivers (Hess & Blairy, 2001). The emotional reactions of friends to evocative stimuli converge over time (Anderson, Keltner, & John, 2003). Such reciprocal emotional experiences benefit relationships by promoting coordinated thoughts and actions, mutual understanding, and interpersonal closeness (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Keltner & Kring, 1998).

Emotional complementarity is most evident in studies of harm, need, and suffering, which can evoke responses of compassion, pity, sadness, or even anger. In the present study we focus on empathic concern, or compassion (Buck, 1989; Clark, Ouellette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987; Clark & Taraban, 1991; Eisenberg, 2000; Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 2001). Feelings of sympathy and compassion prompt helping behavior, thus enhancing the welfare of individuals in distress (Batson, O'Quin, Fultz, Vanderplas, & Isen, 1983). Complementary emotional responses to another's suffering, therefore, benefit relationships by motivating prosocial behavior – a notion that dovetails with findings that complementarity of nonverbal behavior increases affection and comfort (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003). Reciprocal and complementary emotional responses to others' suffering tend to be correlated, yet qualitatively distinct (Batson et al., 1983, 1987).

Social Power and Emotion

Social power reflects the relative influence an individual exerts over others' outcomes, and is experienced in terms of the sense of control, agency, and freedom (Fiske, 1993). The approach/inhibition theory of power (Keltner et al., 2003) provides a basis for predictions regarding how emotional reciprocity and complementarity will vary according to the power relations of the individuals involved. According to this theorizing, high-power individuals experience fewer social constraints and more resource-rich environments. As a result, they show evidence of an activated approach system – relatively automatic information processing, behavioral disinhibition, and elevated positive emotion (e.g., Guinote, 2007). Low-power individuals, by contrast, experience greater social constraints, threats, and punishments. As a result, they show greater evidence of an activated behavioral inhibition system – more thorough information processing, behavioral inhibition, and negative emotion.

High-power individuals have been shown to experience more positive and less negative emotions than low-power people (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Langner & Keltner, in press). High-power people also express their positive emotions more (Berdahl & Martorana, 2006; Hecht & LaFrance, 1998). Furthermore, evidence suggests that high-power individuals are less accurate judges of others' emotions (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006; Gonzaga, Keltner, & Ward, in press). High-power individuals also react less to others' emotions. Anderson and colleagues (2003) found that low-power partners assimilated more to their higher-power partners in their emotional responses than vice-versa. Negotiation studies found that low-power negotiators conceded more to angry opponents than to happy ones, whereas high-power negotiators did not adjust their demands to their opponent's emotion (Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004).

Elevated power may reduce the propensity to respond emotionally to others' suffering via three potential mechanisms. First, powerful people generally experience and express more positive than negative emotions (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Berdahl & Martorana, 2006; Hecht & LaFrance, 1998). Disposed to experience less negatively valenced emotion, one would therefore expect high-power individuals to respond with less distress and compassion to the suffering of others (a *baseline* account). Second, powerful people appear to attend less to their less powerful counterparts than vice versa (Fiske, 1993). As a result, they may perceive others' emotions less accurately (Galinsky et al., 2006), and therefore fail to respond to others' suffering with distress and compassion for the simple reason that they do not perceive their distress (a *decoding* account). Third, high-power individuals may respond less emotionally to others' suffering because they are less dependent on others, and therefore less invested in interactions

with others (De Dreu & Van Kleef, 2004). Lacking this motivation, they should be less responsive to the suffering of others (a *motivational* account).

Based on these considerations, we predicted that high-power individuals would be less emotionally responsive to an interaction partner's distress than low-power individuals. We tested this prediction in the context of face-to-face dyadic interactions during which participants disclosed experiences of suffering. Concerning reciprocal emotional responses, we hypothesized that high-power individuals would experience less reciprocal distress than low-power individuals when confronted with their partner's distress (*Hypothesis 1*). Regarding emotional complementarity, we hypothesized that high-power individuals would feel less compassion in response to their partner's distress (*Hypothesis 2*). In addition, we explored whether power affects autonomic emotion regulation as reflected in respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA) reactivity, an index of the neural regulation of the heart rate via the vagus nerve (Porges, Doussard-Roosevelt, & Maiti, 1994). Parasympathetic down-regulation of emotions in response to psychological stressors is marked by increased RSA, which facilitates relatively lower heart rate and a more relaxed state. For example, relative to a comparison group, women who were instructed to regulate their emotions during a conversation about a negative film showed increased RSA during the conversation (Butler, Wilhelm, & Gross, 2006). More generally, self-regulatory efforts, such as denying oneself a cookie or persisting at a tedious mental task, are accompanied by increased vagal control of the heart (Segerstrom & Solberg Nes, 2007). We expected high-power individuals (but not low-power individuals) to respond to increasing levels of distress from their partners with increased autonomic emotion regulation (*Hypothesis 3*), thus tempering their emotional responses to the other's suffering. We also explored whether the hypothesized power-related differences in emotional reciprocity and complementarity might be

explained by power-related differences in baseline emotion, decoding accuracy, or motivation to affiliate.

Method

Participants

Participants were 118 undergraduates (70 females, 48 males; $M = 20.90$ years of age, $SD = 4.99$; 49.3% Asian-American, 29.6% Caucasian, 4.2% Hispanic, 3.5% African-American, 13.4% other) from a large Western university who participated in return for $15 or credit toward a psychology class requirement.

Procedure

Previously unacquainted partners were randomly paired into same-sex dyads, seated approximately two feet apart in comfortable chairs facing one another, and connected to physiological monitoring equipment while they received instructions. The experimenter then left the room for the remaining duration of the experiment and communicated with the dyad via intercom. Two video cameras recorded each participant individually. Before interacting with their partner, participants completed measures of social power and baseline emotions.

Participants were then asked to think about an event during the past five years that had caused them a great deal of emotional suffering and pain. For three minutes, both participants wrote a summary of this event in their questionnaire packet. Participants then took turns discussing their event (as "talker") with the other participant ("listener") for about five minutes each, with emotion ratings obtained after each turn. The order of the roles was randomly determined by means of a coin flip. As talker, participants were instructed to convey the feelings evoked by the event and its impact on their life (see Table 1 for descriptive information). As

listener, participants were instructed to attempt to gain an understanding of the other's experience, and they were allowed to ask questions to that end.

Baseline emotional experience. Prior to the conversations, participants indicated on 7-point scales to what extent they felt a variety of emotions (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very strongly*). Positive emotions were assessed by three items: "Right now, I am feeling… [happy, optimistic, hopeful]," which were combined (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$). We also measured baseline distress ("Right now, I am feeling… [disturbed, distressed, troubled]"; $\alpha = .80$) and compassion ("Right now, I am feeling… [touched, compassion, sympathy]; $\alpha = .80$).

Assessment of power. Participants' sense of power was assessed using the capacity for power scale (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006), which taps into individuals' general sense of power. The measure is based on the idea that individuals form internal representations of their power relative to others across contexts and relationships. Thus, the sense of power as measured by this scale is anchored in relational experiences. The scale consists of a stem ("In my relationships with others...") and eight items: "I can get people to listen to what I say"; "My wishes do not carry much weight," reverse scored; "I can get others to do what I want"; "Even if I voice them, my views have little sway," reverse scored; "I think I have a great deal of power"; "My ideas and opinions are often ignored," reverse scored; "Even when I try, I am not able to get my way," reverse scored; and "If I want to, I get to make the decisions" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Scores on this scale are correlated with people's actual standing in power hierarchies and predict the same behaviors as structural manipulations of power and manipulations based on semantic priming and autobiographic recall (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). The scale's reliability in the present sample was $\alpha = .89$.

Emotional experience during conversations. After each conversation, talker's distress and listener's distress were measured on 7-point (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very strongly*) scales with three items: "During the last conversation, I felt… [disturbed, distressed, troubled]" (α = .83 and .87, respectively). Listener's compassion was also assessed with a 3-item scale: "During the last conversation, I felt… [touched, compassion, sympathy]" (α = .85).

Decoding of partner's distress. After each conversation, the listener also rated the talker's distress on a three-item scale: "During the last conversation, I think the other participant felt… [disturbed, distressed, troubled]" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very strongly*; α = .89).

Respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA) reactivity. Electrocardiogram (ECG) recordings, sampled at 1,000 Hz, were obtained from leads placed on the torso in a Lead II configuration using an ambulatory monitoring system (Free University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands). All data were filtered for artifacts. RSA was calculated in the .12Hz - .40Hz band of the R-R interbeat interval series using CMET cardiac metric software (available from http://apsychoserver.psych.arizona.edu). Baseline RSA was calculated from two minutes of ECG data acquired 15 minutes after the start of the experiment, during the time when participants were quietly filling in questionnaires. Listeners' RSA reactivity was calculated by subtracting baseline RSA from RSA for the first two minutes of each interaction.[1]

After the conversations, participants reported their feelings about their partner. Five items assessed participants' motivation to affiliate with their partner: "I would like to get to know the other participant better"; "I feel like the other participant and I are friends"; "I feel close to the other participant"; "I would like to befriend the other participant"; and "I would like to spend more time with the other participant." These items were combined in an index of affiliation motivation (α = .86). Finally, three items measured participants' trust and connection with their

partner: "I feel the other participant trusts me"; "I feel I can trust the other participant"; and "I feel connected to the other participant" (α = .85).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

We tested our hypotheses using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992) to account for possible non-independence of the data (i.e., talkers and listeners were part of the same dyad).[2] Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of the focal variables.

Before testing our hypotheses, it was important to establish that high-power listeners were not hearing less intense stories from their counterparts, as this could provide an alternative explanation for our findings. Two coders blind to all hypotheses and participant characteristics rated video recordings of each story of suffering for its emotional intensity on 1 (*not at all emotionally intense*) to 7 (*very emotionally intense*) scales (α = .71). HLM revealed that talkers told more intense stories to high- rather than low-power listeners, β = .23, $t(114) = 2.43$, $p < .05$, rendering our hypotheses tests below more conservative, in that powerful listeners were actually responding to more emotionally evocative stories. We included story intensity as a control variable to account for its possible impact (analyses without this control yielded similar results).

Power Moderates Listener's Emotional Responses to Talker's Suffering

Listener's distress. Hypothesis 1 held that high-power individuals would respond with less distress to their partner's distress than would low-power individuals. Consistent with this prediction, HLM revealed a significant interaction between talker's distress and listener's power on listener's distress, β = -.20, $t(114) = -2.02$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 1). Simple slope analysis revealed that an increase in talker's distress was associated with increased distress on the part of low-power listeners (β = .36, $p < .01$), but not high-power listeners (β = -.02, $p = .87$).

Listener's compassion. Hypothesis 2 held that high-power individuals would respond with less compassion to their interaction partner's distress compared to low-power individuals. A significant interaction between talker's distress and listener's power on listener's compassion, β = -.25, $t(114) = -2.61$, $p < .01$, indeed revealed that an increase in talker's distress was accompanied by increased levels of compassion on the part of low-power listeners (β = .31, $p < .01$), but not high-power listeners (β = -.19, $p = .20$; see Figure 2).

Listener's RSA reactivity. In line with Hypothesis 3, HLM yielded an interaction between talker's distress and listener's power on listener's RSA reactivity, β = .23, $t(114) = 2.37$, $p < .05$. As can be seen in Figure 3, high-power listeners' RSA reactivity was a positive function of talker's level of distress – as talker's distress went up, listener's RSA reactivity increased (β = .37, $p < .05$). By contrast, low-power listeners' RSA reactivity was not significantly associated with talker's level of distress (β = -.22, $p = .16$). There was no significant main effect of power on RSA reactivity (ß = -.09, $p = .37$). These findings suggest that emotional reactions to increases in talker's distress were buffered by autonomic emotion regulation in high-power listeners, but not in low-power listeners.[3]

Exploring Alternative Explanations

The results so far indicate that high-power people responded with less distress and compassion to the suffering of their interaction partners. Here we consider three possible mechanisms that might account for these power-related differences in reciprocal and complementary emotion.

Baseline explanation. Compared to low-power participants, high-power participants reported more positive emotions (β = .24, $p < .01$), less distress (β = -.28, $p < .01$), and less compassion (β = -.26, $p < .01$) prior to the conversation (i.e., at baseline), consistent with

previous studies (e.g., Anderson & Berdahl, 2002). These findings suggest that high-power individuals may have responded with less emotion to the distress of their partner because their pre-existing baseline state was positive. However, controlling for baseline differences in emotionality did not reduce the reported effects of power on distress ($\beta = -.18$, $p < .05$ without control; $\beta = -.20$, $p < .05$ with control) and compassion ($\beta = -.22$, $p < .01$ without control; $\beta = -.25$, $p < .01$ with control).

Decoding explanation. According to a decoding explanation, high-power people are less accurate in their perceptions of others' distress, which could account for their reduced emotional responsiveness to another's suffering (cf. Galinsky et al., 2006). Evidence fitting this explanation would be an interaction between talker's self-rated distress and listener's power on listener's perception of talker's distress. Specifically, one would expect listener's perception of talker's distress to be more strongly predicted by talker's distress when listener's power is low rather than high. This interaction was not significant ($\beta = -.14$, $p = .15$). A median split on power also revealed no evidence for differential decoding accuracy, which was operationalized as the correlation between the talker's self-rated distress and the listener's rating of the talker's distress ($r = .24$ for low-power participants; $r = .22$ for high-power participants). Thus, power-related differences in decoding did not account for the observed differences in distress and compassion.

Motivational explanation. In support of a motivational explanation of the relationship between power and emotional responding, high-power people reported a weaker desire to get to know and establish a friendship with their partner than did low-power people, $\beta = -.27$, $t(114) = -2.99$, $p < .01$. This motivation to get to know the other participant, furthermore, was significantly correlated with listener's self-reported distress ($r = .27$, $p < .01$) and compassion ($r = .25$, $p < .01$). Controlling for motivation to affiliate eliminated the effects of talker's distress on listener's

distress (β = -.07, p = .87) and compassion (β = -.01, p = .98) for low-power listeners, and the effect on RSA reactivity for high-power listeners (β = .06, p = .88). We also found an effect of listener's power on talker's sense of social connectedness: Talkers felt less connection with high-power listeners than with low-power listeners, β = -.20, $t(114) = -2.10$, $p < .05$. This, too, suggests that high-power individuals were less motivated to invest emotionally in their conversation partner.

Discussion

Responses to those who suffer are an elemental part of social collectives. The present data suggest that social power attenuates emotional reactions to those who suffer. Compared to low-power participants, high-power participants experienced less reciprocal emotion (distress) and less complementary emotion (compassion) in response to another individual disclosing an experience of suffering, and they showed more autonomic emotion regulation as well. This study is the first to demonstrate that power shapes emotional responsiveness to others' suffering – an important extension of the literature on power and emotion. Our findings inform understanding of when and how emotions coordinate social interaction, and as such they speak to the contingencies of the functions of emotions (cf. Parrott, 2001).

Our results are consistent with a principle from a reciprocal influence model of social power (Keltner, Van Kleef, Chen, & Kraus, 2008) – that the thoughts, desires, and emotions of those with power are prioritized in social interaction. The emotional reactions of low-power participants consistently covaried with the distress of their partners. High-power individuals, in contrast, did not show such contingent emotional responses: Their self-reported levels of distress and compassion were not affected by their partner's distress, even though they heard more intense stories than low-power individuals. These findings are all the more impressive when one

considers that no explicit power differences were made salient. In combination with evidence that high-power individuals' emotions more strongly shape negotiations than low-power individuals' emotions (Van Kleef et al., 2004), the present findings strongly suggest that the emotions of powerful individuals disproportionately sway the direction of social interactions.

Ancillary analyses examined potential mechanisms underlying these power-related differences in distress and compassion. Even though high- and low-power individuals differed in their baseline emotion (high-power individuals reported more positive emotion and less distress), these differences did not account for the associations between power and subsequent distress and compassion. Nor could the power-related differences in distress and compassion be attributed to differential attention to the partner's emotions, for high- and low-power individuals were similarly accurate in judging their partner's emotions. Instead, the most plausible account was a motivational one: High-power participants reported a weaker motivation to connect to their partner than did low-power participants, and participants disclosing their distress felt less of a social connection with high-power listeners than with low-power listeners. In a more speculative vein, the physiological data suggested that high-power individuals engaged parasympathetic processes (i.e., RSA reactivity) to buffer against the other's distress.

These findings qualify the widespread idea that powerful individuals pay less attention to their social environment than do less powerful individuals (e.g., Fiske, 1993). Our findings suggest that high-power people do not necessarily *attend* less to others (see also Chen, Ybarra, & Kiefer, 2004; Overbeck & Park, 2001); rather, they appear to be less motivated to *respond* to others. This conclusion is compatible with recent work on conflict indicating that high-power parties are not insensitive to their opponent's emotions but react selectively to these emotions when doing so can further their own goals (Van Kleef & Côté, 2007).

In studying how power shapes emotional responses to others in fairly naturalistic disclosures of suffering, the present study is limited by third-variable concerns. Because we did not manipulate power, it is possible that the observed effects were due to other variables correlated with power that were not measured. In this respect, it is important to recall that scores on the power scale used in this study are correlated with people's actual standing in power hierarchies and predict the same behaviors as structural manipulations of power (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). Nevertheless, it is important to consider alternative explanations. One is that high-power participants (who reported more positive emotions at baseline) refused to connect with their partner because they did not want to spoil their positive mood. Research has found that people in positive moods helped more except when the helping task was unpleasant (Forest, Clark, Mills, & Isen, 1979). This explanation thus hinges on the assumption that participants perceived the current situation as unpleasant, which is questionable in light of other work showing that helping a distressed person is uplifting (Cialdini & Kenrick, 1976).

Another explanation, which is compatible with the one we are offering, is that high-power people are less motivated to connect with distressed others because they have better social networks and are less interested in forming new relationships. Although people who report high levels of power do not enjoy increased popularity (Keltner et al., 2008), alternative explanations such as these cannot be ruled out definitively in a correlational design. Future research involving random assignment of participants to different power levels is needed to rule out alternative explanations regarding the underlying processes responsible for the observed effects.

Several implications of the present study warrant further investigation. Given that displays of sadness convey weakness, incompetence, and low status (Tiedens, 2001; Tiedens, Ellsworth, & Mesquita, 2000), powerful individuals' tendency to feel less distress in response to

another's suffering may contribute to the emergence and stability of power hierarchies – powerful people show less "low-status" emotions when confronted with another's distress, which reinforces their social power. In addition, one might expect power-related differences in punitive judgments and in the allocation of resources to be mediated by differences in compassion. Compassion is vital to the health of intimate relations, as is empathic emotion (Anderson et al., 2003; Neff & Karney, 2005). The present study suggests that high-power individuals may suffer in interpersonal relationships because of their diminished capacity for compassion and empathy. The many benefits enjoyed by those with power may not translate to the interpersonal realm.

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Footnotes

[1] Analyses looking at epoch RSA while controlling for baseline RSA produced similar results.

[2] Intraclass correlations revealed no significant nonindependence, and accordingly regression analyses yielded similar results.

[3] We found no evidence for baseline differences in RSA between high- and low-power participants, $\beta = -.01$, $t(117) = -.09$, *ns*, suggesting that the moderating influence of power is better explained in terms of autonomic emotion regulation than in terms of baseline differences.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for conversations between partners

Mean duration	4min, 47s
Mean intensity of stories	3.61
Topic of Conversation	
Mortality (e.g., terminal illness diagnosed in a close friend)	30%
Close relationship conflict (e.g., break-up with significant other)	20%
Family conflict (e.g., divorce)	18%
Being away from friends/family (e.g., feeling of isolation)	10%
Own performance/work (e.g., perceived academic failure)	9%
Friendship conflict (e.g., betrayal of trust)	5%
Social harassment (e.g., mean peers in high school)	3%
Other	4%

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Self-Reports of Emotion, RSA Reactivity, and Social Power

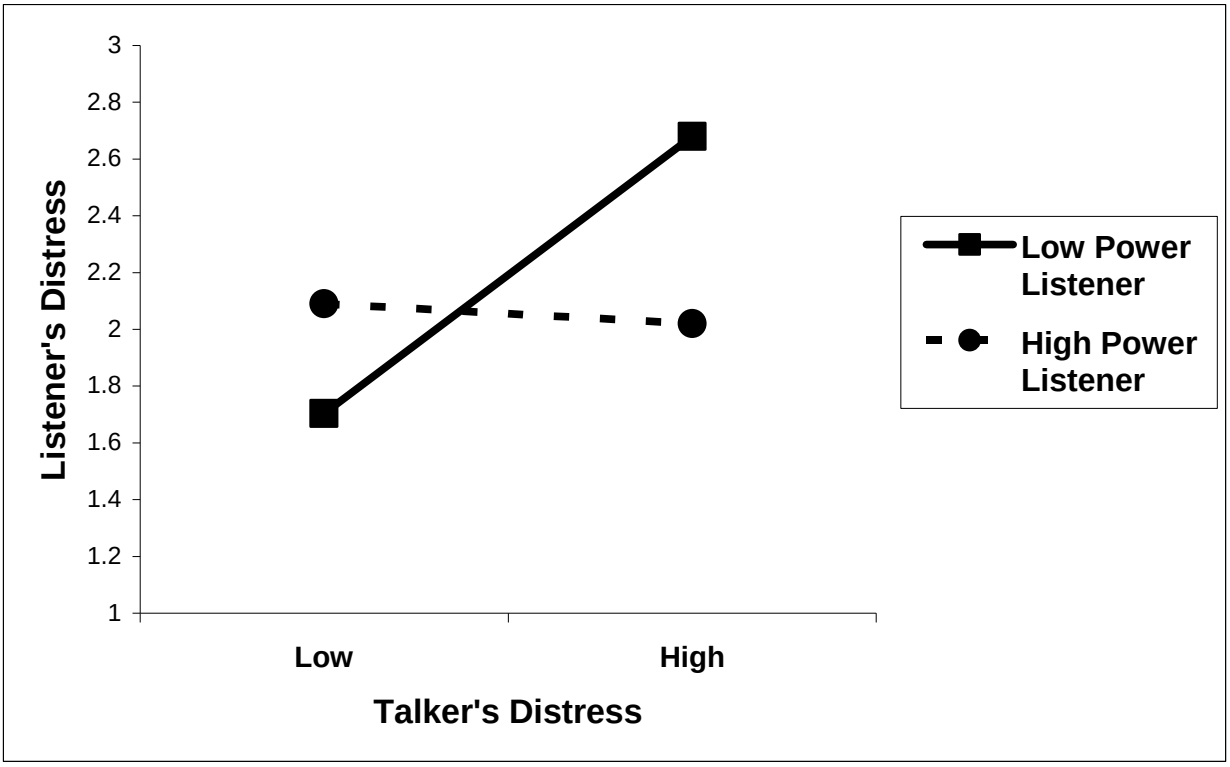
Variable	*M*	*SD*
Talker's Distress	3.45	1.47
Listener's Distress	2.75	1.35
Listener's Compassion	4.05	1.45
Listener's RSA reactivity	0.24	0.76
Listener's Power	5.19	0.93

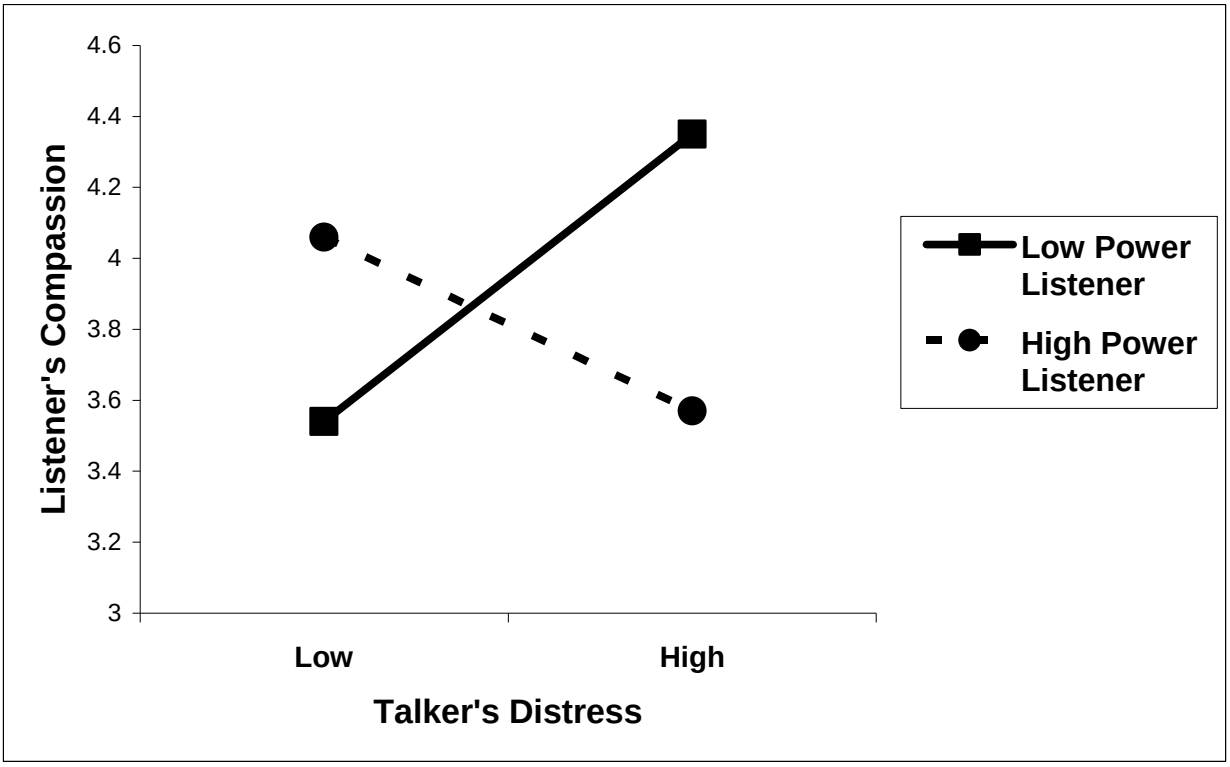
Figure Caption

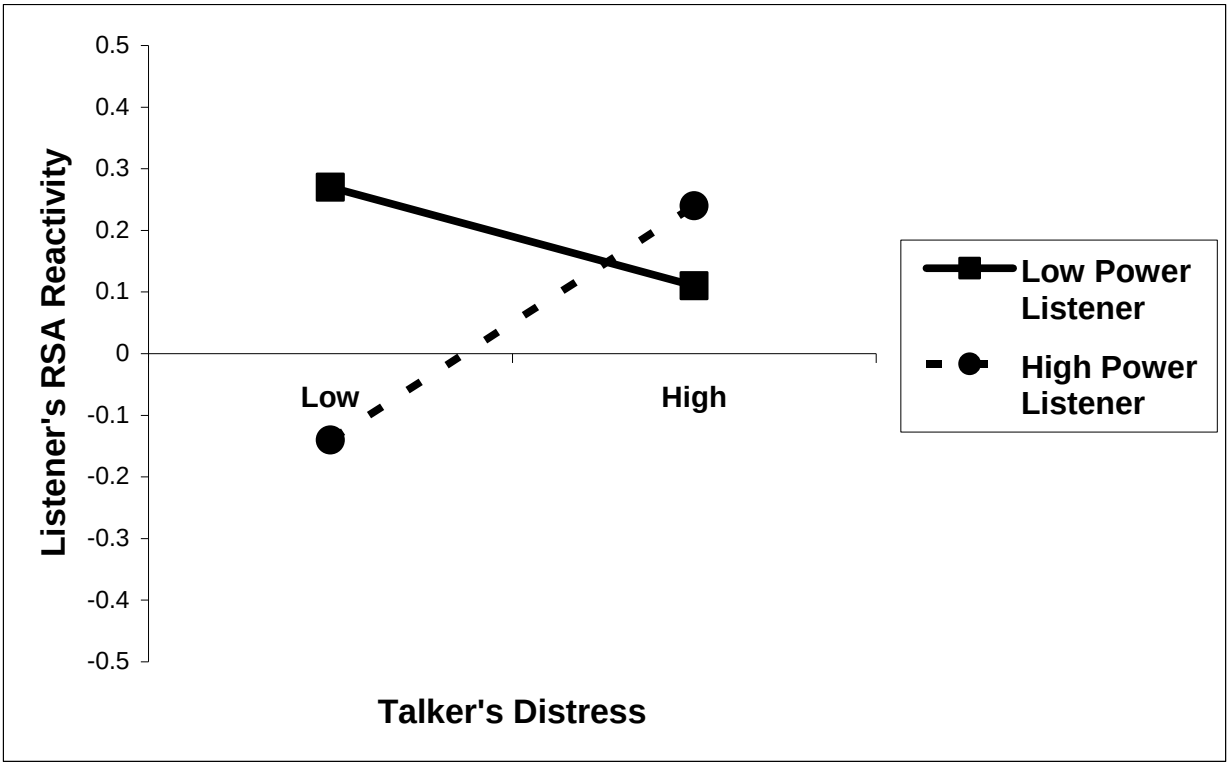
Figure 1. Listener's distress as a function of talker's distress and listener's power

Figure 2. Listener's compassion as a function of talker's distress and listener's power

Figure 3. Listener's RSA reactivity as a function of talker's distress and listener's power


3
2.8
2.6
2.4
2.2
2
1.8
1.6
1.4
1.2
1
Listener's Distress
Low
High
Talker's Distress
Low Power Listener
High Power Listener


4.6
4.4
4.2
4
3.8
3.6
3.4
3.2
3
Listener's Compassion
Low
High
Talker's Distress
Low Power Listener
High Power Listener


0.5
0.4
0.3
0.2
0.1
0
-0.1
-0.2
-0.3
-0.4
-0.5
Listener's RSA Reactivity
Low
High
Talker's Distress
Low Power Listener
High Power Listener