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FlashReport

Power, defensive denigration, and the assuaging effect of gratitude expression

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the interactive effects of power, competency threats, and gratitude expression on the tendency to denigrate others. The results of two experiments indicate that (1) power holders whose competence has been threatened are more likely than others to denigrate interaction partners, and (2) receiving gratitude expression has self-affirming effects for insecure power holders. Experiment 1 demonstrated that high-power, but not low-power, individuals who received threatening feedback about their competence denigrated the competence of their partners. Importantly, this tendency was ameliorated when subordinates expressed gratitude for previous help provided from the power holder. Experiment 2 demonstrated that the ameliorating effect of gratitude expression on threatened power holders' tendency to denigrate subordinates is mediated by increased perceptions of social worth. Implications for research on power, gratitude expression, and the self are discussed.

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Introduction

When power holders mistreat subordinates, they hinder the subordinates' performance, diminish morale, and introduce relationship-harming stress (e.g., Aquino & Thau, 2009; Tepper, 2000, 2007). One subtle, but insidious, form of mistreatment involves the ongoing denigration of others' sense of worth and competence (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Georgesen & Harris, 1998). Although researchers have sought to identify the key determinants of such aggressive tendencies among the powerful (e.g., Bugental & Lewis, 1999; Fast & Chen, 2009; Georgesen & Harris, 2006), less is known about what subordinates may do to reduce these tendencies. Indeed, as noted by Aquino and Thau (2009), given what we currently know, the best advice we can offer is to simply try to avoid abusive power holders in the first place.

In the present article, we draw from recent findings in the power and gratitude expression literatures to illuminate the dynamic relationship between the powerless and the powerful. In particular, we examine whether gratitude expression may ameliorate the aggressive tendencies of insecure power holders by affirming their sense of social worth (Grant & Gino, 2010).

Power, insecurity, and denigration

Power has been shown to produce aggressive tendencies, including denigration (Georgesen & Harris, 1998, 2006), dominance (Kipnis, 1972; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), and negative stereotyping (Guinote, Willis, & Martellotta, 2010; Richeson & Ambady, 2003). More recently,

researchers have explored moderators of the relationship between power and aggressive tendencies. For example, Fast and Chen (2009) demonstrated that power holders who feel incompetent are more likely than others to display direct forms of aggression, a response driven largely by insecurity. Building on these findings, we hypothesize that threats to personal competence (e.g., Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008) lead the powerful to harm others indirectly as well, in the form of denigration. We base this on the notion that denigrating others is a common form of ego defensiveness (e.g., Baumeister, Dale, & Sommer, 1998) and that lacking competence is especially threatening to the powerful (Fast & Gruenfeld, 2012).

Avoiding denigration with gratitude expression

These points uncover a clue as to how subordinates might assuage harsh treatment from insecure power holders. Ironically, gratitude expression may provide an answer, as receiving gratitude produces feelings of social worth (Grant & Gino, 2010). Accordingly, we hypothesize that gratitude expression will serve to mitigate the aggressive tendencies of incompetent power holders and, moreover, will do so by increasing feelings of social worth.

Of course, a favorable response to gratitude expression – especially among insecure power holders – is not a given. Experiencing positive feelings toward others, such as gratitude, is often contingent on whether one feels competent enough to, at least in part, have brought about the desired outcome (Chow & Lowery, 2010). Additionally, power holders are often cynical of others' motives (Inesi et al., 2011) and, as a result, may discount gratitude expressions as attempts to garner favor. However, we maintain that gratitude expression will serve as a welcome affirmation of social worth (Grant & Gino, 2010) for

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the threatened power holder by indicating a positive evaluation of help received (see Flynn, 2006).

The present research

We conducted two experiments to test three main predictions: (a) power paired with competency threats will foster denigration of a partner, (b) gratitude expression by one's partner will reduce this effect, and (c) the ameliorating effect of gratitude expression will be mediated by increased perceptions of social worth.

Experiment 1

We first examined whether power paired with threatened competence would lead to denigration of a partner. Additionally, we tested whether gratitude expression by the partner would alleviate this tendency.

Method

Participants and design

Undergraduates ($N = 190$; 45.3% female; mean age = 20.47) participated for course credit in a 2 (power: high vs. low) \times 2 (competence feedback: high vs. low) \times 2 (gratitude expression: received vs. not received) between-subjects design. Seven participants were excluded for reporting suspicion, leaving a total of 183 participants.

After arriving at the laboratory, participants learned that they would work in two-member teams, communicate via notes with partners who were already in another room. The team's task was to write instructions for how to assemble parts of equipment clearly enough that someone without prior experience could assemble it. Participants received an initial draft of the instructions (pre-written, by the experimenter) ostensibly written by their partner. They were informed that their job was to read the instructions and provide feedback. They were also informed that their team would win \$50 if their team's set of instructions was selected as one of the top 3. Participants then handed their written feedback to the experimenter, ostensibly to deliver to their partners.

Power

Participants were randomly assigned to be supervisor (high-power condition) or subordinate (low-power condition). In order to maintain consistency in the task while highlighting differences in power, high-power participants learned that their job was to 'evaluate' and provide feedback on the draft essay, whereas participants in low-power condition were informed that their job was to 'analyze' and provide their feedback. Moreover, all were informed that, should their team win the \$50, the supervisor could allocate the \$50 however he/she saw fit.

Competence

While the experimenter was gone to deliver their feedback, participants completed a 15-item bogus measure of general competence (see Fast et al., in press); false scores were provided to manipulate perceived competence. Participants in the high-competence condition received scores of 52 out of 60, labeled as "Excellent Competence." Participants in the low-competence condition received scores of 22 out of 60, labeled as "Fair Competence." Participants also read that "people who score high on the test are described as a strong fit for leadership roles," and that "low scores mean that the person may not be as competent as others."

We conducted a pretest to ensure that our manipulation was effective. In a between-subjects design, thirty-two undergraduate students were randomly assigned to the high- or low-competence feedback

conditions and indicated perceived competence (using a 7-point scale). Those in the high-competence condition indicated greater competence ($M = 6.21$, $SD = .58$) than those in the low-competence condition ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.03$), $F(1, 30) = 87.71$, $p < .001$.

Gratitude expression

The experimenter returned and delivered (pre-scripted) notes from the supposed partner. The notes contained the gratitude manipulation adapted from Grant and Gino (2010). In the no-gratitude expression condition, the message read: "Dear [name], I just wanted to let you know that I received your feedback on my draft." In the gratitude condition, participants received the same statement along with: "Thank you so much! I am really grateful."

Denigration

After viewing the partner's message, participants had the opportunity to denigrate their partner's competence by rating the degree to which their partner seemed: competent, intelligent, capable, incompetent (reverse-scored), unskilled (reverse-scored), likely to succeed, and likely to fail (reverse-scored). All items were rated on a 7-point scale ($\alpha = .92$). We reversed the mean so that higher scores represent greater denigration.

Manipulation checks at the end of the experiment assessed how powerful participants felt during the experiment and whether they perceived that their partners expressed gratitude.

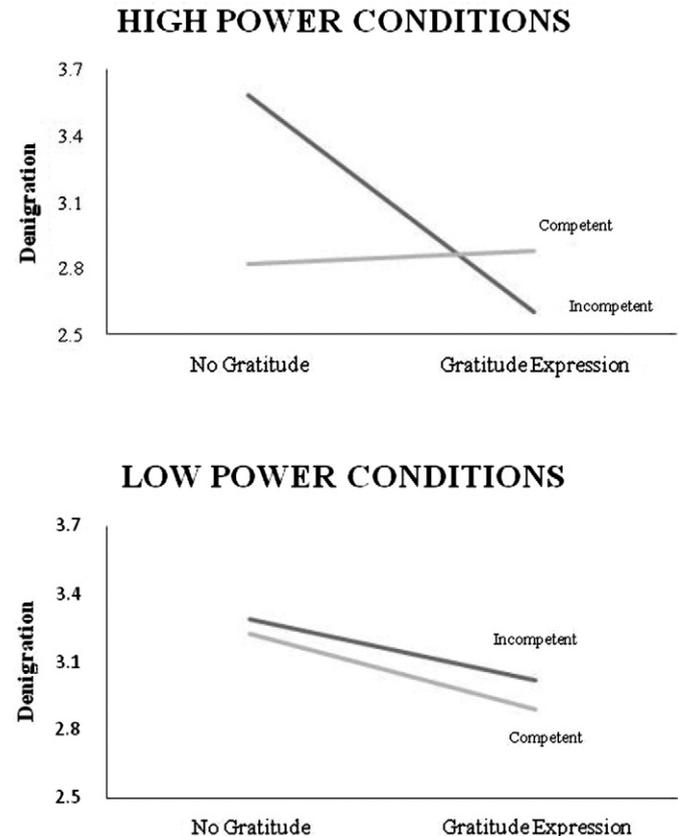


Fig. 1. Top panel: Effects of gratitude expression and competence on denigration among high power participants. Bottom panel: Effects of gratitude expression and competence on denigration among low power participants.

Table 1
Means and standard deviations on tendency to denigrate others (Experiment 1).

High power				Low power			
No gratitude		Gratitude expression		No gratitude		Gratitude expression	
Incompetent	Competent	Incompetent	Competent	Incompetent	Competent	Incompetent	Competent
3.58 _a (.99)	2.82 _b (1.08)	2.60 _b (.86)	2.88 _b (1.01)	3.29 _a (1.13)	3.22 _a (.92)	3.02 _a (1.00)	2.89 _a (1.09)

Note. Means with different subscripts differ at $p < .05$ within the same power-condition heading.

Results and discussion

Non-native English speakers were unevenly distributed across conditions, so we included this variable as a covariate. The power and gratitude manipulations were effective; participants in the high-power condition perceived more power ($M = 4.73$; $SD = 1.33$) than those in the low-power condition ($M = 2.99$; $SD = 1.41$), $F(1, 181) = 73.94$, $p < .001$. Those in the gratitude expression condition reported that their partners expressed more gratitude ($M = 6.34$; $SD = .96$) than those in the no-gratitude expression condition ($M = 3.38$; $SD = 1.84$), $F(1, 181) = 191.98$, $p < .001$.

There was a main effect of gratitude expression on the tendency to denigrate, $F(1, 181) = 191.98$, $p < .001$. However, this was qualified by the predicted three-way power \times competence \times gratitude expression interaction, $F(1, 174) = 3.79$, $p = .05$ (see Fig. 1). In the high-power condition, the hypothesized two-way interaction between competence and gratitude expression emerged, $F(1, 85) = 6.71$, $p = .01$. In the no gratitude condition, high-power participants whose competence was threatened denigrated their partners more than competent high-power participants, $F(1, 40) = 4.95$, $p = .03$ (see Table 1). A planned contrast demonstrated that they denigrated their partners more than the other three conditions, $t(88) = 3.39$, $p < .001$.

Also as predicted, gratitude expression eliminated the effect observed in the baseline condition. When high-power participants received gratitude expression, the difference in denigration between those in the incompetent/high-power condition and the competent/high-power condition disappeared, $F(1, 44) = 1.54$, $p = .22$.

Supporting our prediction, baseline high-power participants whose competence was threatened denigrated their subordinates. Importantly, this pattern disappeared when the subordinate expressed gratitude. Among low-power participants, there were no main effects of competence and gratitude expression, nor was there an interaction between competence and gratitude expression.

Experiment 2

We next assessed whether perceived social worth in the eyes of subordinates accounts for the ameliorating effects of gratitude expression on threatened power holders' tendency to denigrate others. All participants were placed in positions of power and randomly assigned to conditions that manipulated competence (high vs. low) and gratitude expression (received vs. not received). We then assessed denigration of others as well as perceived social worth.

Method

Participants and design

Undergraduate students ($N = 124$; 44.4% female; mean age = 20.45) participated for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. One participant was excluded for suspicion, leaving a total of 123 participants.

Procedures were similar to those used in Experiment 1. However, in Experiment 2, the team's task was to produce a written description of a picture realistic enough that someone reading it could recreate the picture without seeing it. Participants received an initial draft of the

description (pre-written, by the experimenter), ostensibly written by their subordinate. They were instructed to read the description, evaluate it, and provide feedback. They were also informed that their team would win \$50 if their team's description was selected as one of the top 3 and, as supervisor, they had the power to decide how much to keep and how much to give to their subordinates. They provided their written feedback to the experimenter so that the experimenter could deliver the feedback to their subordinates, who were ostensibly seated in another room.

Competence

While the experimenter was gone, participants completed the general competence measure used in Experiment 1.

Gratitude

The experimenter returned with a note from the supposed subordinate. As in Experiment 1, participants either received or did not receive gratitude from their partner.

Denigration

Participants then had the opportunity to denigrate the partner by rating the degree to which their partner seemed competent (competent, intelligent, capable, confident, incompetent—reverse-scored, unskilled—reverse-scored) and socially desirable (likable, unlikable—reverse-scored, desirable as a friend, and desirable to spend time with). The two subscales were strongly correlated ($r = .53$) so we created a single scale of overall denigration ($\alpha = .91$). We reversed the score so that higher scores represent greater denigration. We conducted separate analyses for the competence and social desirability items and found similar overall patterns.

Social worth

To assess power holder's social worth in the eyes of their subordinates, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they felt: valued by their subordinate, appreciated by their subordinate, and that they had made a positive difference in their subordinates' life (see Grant, 2008; Keyes, 1998). Each of the three items was assessed with a 7-point scale ($\alpha = .91$).

Participants also completed a manipulation check, rating the extent to which their partner expressed gratitude.

Table 2
Means and standard deviations on tendency to denigrate others (Experiment 2).

High power/No gratitude		High power/Gratitude expression	
Incompetent	Competent	Incompetent	Competent
3.27 _a (.90)	2.68 _b (.89)	2.60 _b (.76)	2.57 _b (.65)

Note. Means with different subscripts differ at $p < .05$.

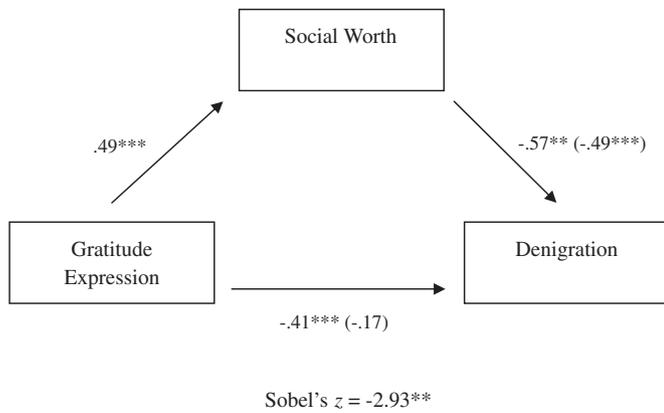


Fig. 2. Social worth as a mediator for the effect of gratitude expression on incompetent power holder's tendency to denigrate others (Experiment 2). $**p < .01$; $***p < .001$.

Results and discussion

Age was distributed unevenly across conditions and men denigrated their partners more than women, $t(121) = 2.67$, $p = .01$, so we controlled for these variables in our analyses.

The gratitude expression manipulation was effective; those in the gratitude expression condition reported that their partners were more grateful ($M = 6.29$, $SD = .92$) than those in the no-gratitude expression condition ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.59$), $F(1, 121) = 166.13$, $p < .001$. The competence manipulation did not affect gratitude perceptions.

Incompetence led to a marginal increase in the tendency to denigrate, $F(1, 117) = 3.33$, $p = .07$, and gratitude decreased the overall tendency to denigrate, $F(1, 117) = 9.09$, $p = .003$. However, these main effects were qualified by the predicted interaction between competence and gratitude expression, $F(1, 117) = 4.07$, $p = .046$. In the baseline (i.e., no-gratitude expression) condition, power holders whose competence was threatened denigrated their partners more than those in the high-competence condition, $F(1, 51) = 3.66$, $p = .03$ (see Table 2). Also as predicted, gratitude expression eliminated this effect; participants in the incompetent high-power condition were no longer more likely to denigrate their partners than those in the competent high-power condition, $F(1, 64) = .01$, $p = .94$.

Further analyses indicated that social worth mediated the alleviating effect of gratitude expression on the tendency of power holders whose competence was threatened to denigrate, Sobel $z = -2.93$, $p = .003$ (see Fig. 2). In addition, a bootstrap analysis (Preacher & Hayes, 2004) revealed that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero ($-.7964$, $-.1893$), indicating mediation.

In addition to bolstering the findings from Experiment 1, the present findings support the hypothesis that gratitude expression ameliorates aggressive tendencies of threatened power holders by increasing feelings of social worth in the eyes of one's subordinates.

General discussion

The present findings indicate that power holders whose competence has been threatened tend to denigrate others and that the act of expressing gratitude for help ameliorates this effect (Experiments 1–2). Furthermore, increased perceptions of social worth mediated the positive effect of gratitude expression (Experiment 2). Thus, gratitude appears to serve as an affirmation for insecure power holders and, as such, represents a strategy that can be employed by subordinates to reduce negative treatment.

These findings integrate the power and gratitude literatures to provide insight into the underpinnings of denigration of subordinates. In particular, power holders appear to denigrate subordinates primarily when they feel insecure about their capacity to demonstrate competence, similar to research on more direct forms of aggression (Fast & Chen, 2009). Additionally, perceived incompetence may foster feelings of illegitimacy and instability (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008; Rodriguez-Balio, Moya, & Yzerbyt, 2000; Willis, Guinote, & Rodriguez-Balio, 2010). Importantly, the present findings move beyond existing work to demonstrate what subordinates may do to overcome this problem—namely, offer gratitude for help received. More broadly, we demonstrate that the relationship between high- and low-power individuals can be influenced by both individuals. Future research on how subordinates influence the powerful would be valuable. Finally, we note that although gratitude expression may offer momentary relief, it is a far cry from a long-term solution. Rather, ongoing gratitude expression may serve to maintain the status quo by signaling inferiority and fostering system-justifying beliefs (e.g., Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005).

Conclusion

This research highlights a short-term strategy that subordinates may use to influence insecure power holders. We hope this research spurs additional work on the topic. However, we hasten to add that the ultimate problem of power abuse rests squarely on the shoulders of the power holders, themselves, as well as the decision-makers that allow them to maintain their positions of authority. Thus, it is our hope that research aimed at addressing the problem of power abuse at its roots will continue to flourish as well.

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