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# Powerlessness Also Corrupts: Lower Power Increases Self-Promotional Lying

Huisi (Jessica) Li,<sup>a,\*</sup> Ya-Ru Chen,<sup>b</sup> John Angus D. Hildreth<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Scheller College of Business, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, Georgia 30308; <sup>b</sup>Johnson Graduate School of Management, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 14853

\*Corresponding author

Contact: [jessica.li@scheller.gatech.edu](mailto:jessica.li@scheller.gatech.edu),  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7881-7809> (H(J)L); [yc659@cornell.edu](mailto:yc659@cornell.edu) (Y-RC); [jdh362@cornell.edu](mailto:jdh362@cornell.edu),  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0652-5436> (JADH)

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**Abstract.** The popular maxim holds that power corrupts, and research to date supports the view that power increases self-interested unethical behavior. However, we predict the opposite effect when unethical behavior, specifically lying, helps an individual self-promote: lower rather than higher power increases self-promotional lying. Drawing from compensatory consumption theory, we propose that this effect occurs because lower power people feel less esteemed in their organizations than do higher power people. To compensate for this need to view themselves as esteemed members of their organizations, lower power individuals are more likely to inflate their accomplishments. Evidence from four studies supports our predictions: compared with those with higher power, executives with lower power in their organizations were more likely to lie about their work achievements (Study 1,  $n = 230$ ); graduate students with lower power in their Ph.D. studies were more likely to lie about their publication records (Study 2,  $n = 164$ ); and employees with lower power were more likely to lie about having signed a business contract (Studies 3 and 4). Mediation analyses suggest that lower power increased lying because lower power individuals feel lower esteem in their organizations (Study 3,  $n = 562$ ). Further supporting this mechanism, a self-affirmation intervention reduced the effect of lower power on self-promotional lying (Study 4,  $n = 536$ ). These converging findings show that, when lies are self-promotional, lower power can be more corruptive than higher power.

**Keywords:** power • unethical behavior • self-promotional lying • self-affirmation

## Introduction

Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely (Acton 1887). Evidence of this maxim abounds in our political, economic, and cultural milieu. Stories of political corruption in Washington, DC's corridors of power; of corporate scandals involving executives' unethical behavior; and of Hollywood elites' sex crimes dominate news headlines. The evidence may seem irrefutable, particularly when unethical behavior is selfish in nature, but does greater power always increase self-interested, unethical behavior?

In this research, we examine the possibility of the *opposite* pattern of power and self-interested unethical behavior emerging when deceit signals higher esteem and value. We predict that those with lower power are more likely than those with higher power to exhibit deceitful behaviors, such as telling self-promotional lies. *Self-promotional lying* is defined as falsely presenting one's competence or performance with the aim of promoting oneself (Baumeister and Cairns 1992). It includes claiming undue credit, exaggerating work achievement,

and giving misleading information to self-promote (Baumeister and Cairns 1992, Toma and Hancock 2010). Although self-promotional lying is widespread in organizations and potentially damaging to interpersonal trust and organizational decision making, surprisingly, there is scant research on it. We draw attention to this understudied but important form of self-interested unethical behavior and highlight that the motivation behind this type of deceit differs substantively from that of other selfish unethical behaviors that are linked to higher power, including lying for money (Dubois et al. 2015), cheating in a competition (Vriend et al. 2016), or harming one's organization (DeCelles et al. 2012).

The notion that higher power can reduce self-interested unethical behavior may seem somewhat counterintuitive. After all, research on the psychological effects of power paints a relatively dark picture of higher power, showing how it increases a wide range of self-interested unethical behaviors (Studd 1996, van Kleef and Côté 2007, Gruenfeld et al. 2008, Piff et al. 2010, Dubois et al. 2015, Foulk et al. 2016). More

recently, an increasing volume of research has identified boundary conditions that reduce or reverse these main effects of power on self-interested unethical behavior (Chen et al. 2001, van Dijk and De Cremer 2006, Howard et al. 2007, Galinsky et al. 2008, Lammers et al. 2008, Smith et al. 2008, Maner and Mead 2010, DeCelles et al. 2012, Rios et al. 2015, Smith and Hofmann 2016). However, research to date has not identified any negative main effect of power on self-interested unethical behavior.

*Power*, defined as asymmetric control over valued resources in social relationships (Emerson 1962, Magee and Galinsky 2008), focuses individuals' attention on their own interests rather than on the interests of others (van Kleef and Côté 2007, Piff et al. 2010). It triggers disinhibited self-interested behaviors (Keltner et al. 2003) and reduces conformity to social norms (Galinsky et al. 2008). As a result, when unethical behavior benefits the actor, those with higher power are more likely to act unethically, including cheating to gain money (Dubois et al. 2015), sexually harassing others (Studd 1996), objectifying others as a means to their own ends (Gruenfeld et al. 2008), and displaying abusive supervision toward their subordinates (Foulk et al. 2016). In contrast, when unethical behavior benefits others rather than the actor, individuals with lower power are more likely to behave unethically (Dubois et al. 2015).

Further nuancing our understanding of power effects, research reveals many boundary conditions, such as power holders' interdependent self-construal (Howard et al. 2007), communal relationship orientation (Chen et al. 2001, Blader and Chen 2012), prosocial orientation (van Dijk and De Cremer 2006, Galinsky et al. 2008), moral identity (DeCelles et al. 2012), need to belong (Rios et al. 2015), stability of power (Maner and Mead 2010), legitimacy of power (Lammers et al. 2008, Smith et al. 2008), and whether power is positional versus psychological (Smith and Hofmann 2016). In short, these factors can reduce or even reverse many of the undesirable self-interested effects of power. However, research to date has not identified a form of self-interested unethical behavior on which the experience of power has a straightforward *negative main effect*. In this paper, we present the first evidence of this possibility and, thus, provide a more nuanced, accurate, and complete picture of the corruptive effects of power.

Our current research focuses on self-promotional lying, an unethical behavior that, we argue, those with lower (as opposed to higher) power are more likely to exhibit. Building on compensatory consumption theory (Rucker and Galinsky 2008), we posit that those with lower power are more likely than those with higher power to have low esteem and feel unvalued in their organizations and, therefore, feel a greater desire to attenuate this aversive state. Individuals with higher power control greater resources, prompting

others and themselves to view them as competent and valuable to their organizations (Driskell and Mullen 1990); thus, they enjoy higher esteem at work. In contrast, because individuals with lower power have less control over resources in their workplace, they are likely to enjoy relatively low esteem.

We argue that one way in which individuals with lower power may cope with the feeling of low esteem at work is through deception: specifically, telling self-promotional lies. Such lies help those with lower power appear more competent and valuable than they really are. Consistent with this thesis, research on compensatory consumption theory (Rucker and Galinsky 2008) finds that individuals with lower power tend to show compensatory, status- or esteem-signaling behaviors, such as purchasing luxury goods (Rucker and Galinsky 2008, Kim and Rucker, 2012, Ruvio and Dubois 2012) and showcasing their credentials (Harmon-Jones et al. 2009). These behaviors aim to symbolically signal esteem and mastery to offset the discomfort of lacking power (Mandel et al. 2017). Taking this logic a step further, we predict that individuals with lower power are more likely than those with higher power to exaggerate or even falsify their achievements. Thus, we predict that compared with higher power individuals, lower power individuals are more likely to tell self-promotional lies to alleviate their feeling of low esteem. We test these predictions in four studies.

This paper contributes to the research literature on power, ethics, and compensatory consumption. First, this paper provides the first evidence that lower power can increase self-interested unethical behavior: specifically, self-promotional lying. We highlight a positive aspect of power to complement a predominantly negative view of the effects of power in both people's lay theory and our scholarly narrative. In addition, this paper emphasizes the benefits of studying not only those with higher power, but also those with lower power (Schaerer et al. 2018). We show that, compared with those with higher power, individuals with lower power can experience an uncomfortable and challenging psychological experience, specifically a feeling of low esteem, that motivates them to act unethically.

Second, this paper contributes to the behavioral ethics literature by highlighting the importance of differentiating the motivations underlying different unethical behaviors. This more nuanced conceptualization helps identify different or even opposite relationships between the same antecedents (such as power) and various types of unethical behavior (such as lying for money versus to self-promote). It also helps to reconcile when and why power should decrease rather than increase self-interested unethical behavior. Specifically, we propose that the motivation behind self-promotional lying is to compensate for a feeling of low esteem, which is induced by *lower* power, whereas the motivations

underlying self-interested financial gain reported in prior research are induced by *higher* power (Dubois et al. 2015).

Third, this paper reveals an understudied mechanism through which lower power drives unethical behavior: the feeling of low esteem in the work setting. Prior research emphasizes that higher power orients one's focus internally to one's own needs, whereas lower power directs people externally to attend to others' interests (Lee and Tiedens 2001, Galinsky et al. 2006). Moreover, previous studies find that this internal orientation induced by power leads to undesirable, egoistic behaviors consistent with Lord Acton's notion that "power corrupts." Here, we highlight that this internal orientation induced by power can have the beneficial effect of feeling esteemed and valued, which, in turn, can reduce certain unethical behaviors, such as self-promotional lying. Finally, this paper contributes to the compensatory consumption literature by linking the experience of low power and the feeling of low esteem to self-promotional lying. Whereas compensatory consumption theory (Rucker and Galinsky 2008) has been well-established in social psychology and consumer behavior research, our paper highlights its power to predict people's attitudes and behaviors in the workplace and underscores its value to organizational science research.

## Theory and Hypotheses

### Power and Unethical Behavior

Early research on the psychological effects of power predominantly focuses on the dark side of power. The approach-inhibition theory of power (Keltner et al. 2003) argues that power focuses individuals' attention on their own interests rather than on the concerns of others (van Kleef and Côté 2007, Piff et al. 2010). It disengages the behavioral inhibition system (Keltner et al. 2003), prompting the powerful to have less regard for social norms and ethical standards (Galinsky et al. 2008). Previous researchers devote considerable attention to how power influences unethical, self-interested, and socially irresponsible behavior and identify numerous boundary conditions of these effects. We summarize their key findings.

Power is linked to a variety of *unethical* behaviors. Those with higher power are more likely to cheat for money (Dubois et al. 2015), sexually harass others (Studd 1996), objectify others as a means to their own ends (Gruenfeld et al. 2008), or engage in abusive supervision toward one's subordinates (Foulk et al. 2016). More recently, however, research on power and unethical behavior has identified several moderators of the effects of power on unethical behavior, suggesting that, in certain circumstances, the detrimental effect of power on unethical behavior can be altered. For example, one

moderator is the beneficiary of the unethical behavior. Specifically, when unethical behavior benefits others rather than the actor, individuals with higher power are less likely than those with lower power to behave unethically (Dubois et al. 2015).

A significant amount of research is also devoted to examining the relationship between power and *self-interested* behaviors, which are not always unethical in nature. Again, moderators, such as moral identity, collective self-construal, and structural features, also play important roles. For example, in dictator games and the commons dilemma, power is associated with greater self-interested behaviors but only for individuals with weak moral identities; in contrast, for those with strong moral identities, power reduces self-interested behaviors (DeCelles et al. 2012). Similarly, self-construal shapes the relationship between power and self-interested behavior (Wisse and Rus 2012) such that the effect of power on self-interested behavior is stronger when the power holder has a personal (as opposed to collective) self-construal. Research also shows that structural features of the context can serve as boundary conditions. For example, power increases selfish resource allocation but only when other recipients are not completely powerless; when they are, a desire to help others reduces power holders' self-interested behavior (Handgraaf et al. 2008).

In contrast to these patterns of power effects, a related line of research suggests that power can increase *prosocial* or ethical behavior, too. In a collaborative context, possessing greater structural power (but not subjective power) induces a sense of responsibility and solidarity with subordinates, which results from the norm about the benevolent use of power and subordinates' dependence on the power holder (Tost and Johnson 2019). This line of work also emphasizes the contextual factors that catalyze the prosocial effects of power. For example, in intergenerational decisions, power can induce feelings of stewardship and obligation to look out for the long-term interests of others, raising the level of generosity to future others (Wade-Benzoni et al. 2008, Tost et al. 2015). Both positional power and feelings of power, in collaborative contexts, increase feelings of responsibility and, subsequently, feelings of closeness and the desire to interact with others (Smith and Hofmann 2016). Moreover, research also reveals important moderators—such as a communal orientation (Chen et al. 2001, Blader and Chen 2012)—that impact the relationship between power and prosocial behavior. Specifically, for communals, power realizes their social responsibility values, whereas for exchangers, power advances their self-interest values. These papers have started to uncover some socially desirable and ethical effects of power.

Missing from this burgeoning literature on the effects of power and unethical behavior is the consideration of

whether power can *reduce* self-interested unethical behavior. That is, research to date has not provided any evidence to support a negative main effect of power on any self-interested unethical behavior, but has instead focused on personal and contextual moderators for the positive main effects of power on unethical behavior. The current research aims to fill this lacuna in the literature by presenting the first empirical evidence that power *can* reduce certain types of selfish unethical behavior: specifically, self-promotional lying.

### **Power and the Feeling of Low Esteem**

The compensatory consumption literature in marketing research links low power to perceptions of low esteem in the eyes of *others*. Rucker and Galinsky (2008) find that lacking power increases people's need for social status, defined as the respect, esteem, and prestige an individual has in the eyes of others (Magee and Galinsky 2008). One way in which people attempt to satisfy this need is through compensatory consumption by purchasing high-status products, such as silk ties, expensive watches, executive pens, etc. This is because high status is often one signal of power (Fiske and Berdahl 2007), and thus, demonstrating status in this way may help obtain and restore power. Research in the organizational domain also suggests that power increases the feeling of being valued and esteemed by others. For example, power holders tend to receive compliments and well wishes from the less powerful (Fiske 1993, Steele and Aronson 1995), which provide the powerful with a sense of esteem.

Prior research also supports the link between low power and low esteem in one's own eyes. Because power holders can effectively influence others because of their control over valuable resources (Kipnis 1972), such influence leads power holders to believe that their capabilities are superior to those of others and they are responsible for others' achievements. Research shows that, on the one hand, power manipulated either through an episodic recall or a supervisory–subordinate role assignment increases the individual's view of the individual's own worth and value (Wojciszke and Struzynska-Kujalowicz 2007). On the other hand, power holders tend to devalue others' contributions and to view the less powerful as inferior objects of manipulation or as a means to their own ends (Gruenfeld et al. 2008). Thus, the experience of greater power can lead powerholders to develop an exalted view of their own value and esteem.

### **Feelings of Low Esteem and Self-Promotional Lying**

The need to maintain or enhance one's esteem in the eyes of others (Anderson et al. 2015) and oneself (Tesser 2001, Sedikides et al. 2003) is a strong and universal motivation. Feelings of low esteem is an aversive state.

Thus, people are motivated to defend, protect, and bolster their esteem using various strategies. As outlined, researchers identify compensatory consumption (Rucker and Galinsky 2008) as one means of attenuating self-threat (i.e., a discrepancy between an actual and a desired self-view; Higgins 1987) and signaling accomplishment. Compensatory consumption involves purchasing self-affirming goods (Kim and Gal 2014, Wan et al. 2014, Lisjak et al. 2015) as well as products that signal desirable characteristics (Moisio 2007, Dalton 2008, Gao et al. 2009) and high status (van Kempen 2007, Rucker and Galinsky 2008). Individuals engage in these consumption behaviors to compensate for their damaged esteem (Hoegg et al. 2014) even when the source is short physical stature (Stuppy et al. 2014) or obesity (Kurt 2022).

Most pertinent to this research, in a seminal article on compensatory consumption, Rucker and Galinsky (2008) find that individuals with lower power show compensatory status-signaling behaviors that can alleviate the aversive experience of low power (Rucker and Galinsky 2008, Mandel et al. 2017). For example, as mentioned, lacking power increases a person's willingness to buy luxury products (Rucker and Galinsky 2008, Kim and Rucker 2012, Ruvio and Dubois 2012, Kim and Gal 2014). Similarly, Charles et al. (2009) find that status-seeking motives drive minority groups, such as Blacks and Hispanics, to devote larger shares of their expenditure to conspicuous consumption, such as clothing, jewelry, and cars, than do comparable Whites. Moreover, the desire to combat the feeling of low esteem through compensatory consumption can also propel individuals to use credit (rather than cash) in order to purchase luxury products despite the higher costs to themselves (Pettit and Sivanathan 2011). Similarly, compared with those in higher ranked departments, professors in lower ranked departments are shown to be more likely to emphasize symbols of achievement by listing professional titles, such as Ph.D. or Dr., in their email signatures and on their departmental web pages (Harmon-Jones et al. 2009).

Extending this line of thinking, we argue that feelings of low esteem should also motivate low-power individuals to *self-promote* to appear more capable and valuable. This prediction is in line with one of the behavioral strategies for reducing self-discrepancy that Mandel et al. (2017) propose, namely, signaling mastery in a relevant domain (e.g., highlighting achievements in the work setting) as symbolic self-completion. Such a behavior may not tackle the core problem (such as low-power individuals' lack of control over resources) directly; rather, they allow individuals to relieve their discomfort (Kang 2009). Extending this logic further, we argue that, to address the feeling of being unvalued at work, low-power individuals may even engage in *deceptive* mastery signaling: specifically, telling self-promotional lies. Telling such lies may allow those with

lower power to feel and signal higher competence and esteem than they actually have. We predict that individuals with lower power, compared with those with higher power, are more willing to exaggerate or even falsify their achievements via self-promotional lies. Our prediction is also in line with the finding that, when people have higher power, they may “reveal their true colors” and be more honest and authentic (Kifer et al. 2013). Kraus et al. (2011) call this phenomenon “the power to be me,” meaning that individuals with higher power exhibit greater self-concept consistency and feel more authentic compared with those with lower power. In summary, we hypothesize that, compared with individuals with higher power, those with lower power are more likely to tell self-promotional lies to alleviate the feeling of low esteem that they experience because of their lower power.

**Hypothesis 1.** *Individuals with lower power are more likely to tell self-promotional lies than are individuals with higher power.*

**Hypothesis 2.** *The feeling of low esteem mediates the relationship between lower power and increased self-promotional lying.*

### Overview of Studies

A total of 1,492 participants took part in four studies that examined the positive relationship between lower power and telling self-promotional lies. To test our hypotheses, we conducted four studies using a diverse set of research methodologies and samples. In Study 1, we examined whether corporate executives’ power in their organizations predicted their propensity to lie when discussing their work achievements. In Study 2, we experimentally manipulated the power that graduate students held in their Ph.D. studies and assessed whether power predicted the likelihood that they would falsely report their publication records. In Studies 3 and 4, we investigated whether employees’ power would affect their willingness to lie about their work performance during their performance reviews. We also examined whether such effects were explained by low-power individuals’ feeling of low esteem at work yet ruling out alternative explanations. In addition to low- versus high-power conditions, Study 3 also included a middle-power condition and a control condition of no power information, which allowed us to explore the effects of a larger range of power levels and against a control condition. In Study 4, to further investigate our proposed mediating mechanism of the feeling of low esteem, we introduced a self-affirmation intervention and tested whether it would neutralize this feeling experienced by low-power individuals and subsequently lower their need to engage in self-promotional lying.

All data have been made publicly available via the Open Science Framework and can be accessed at

[https://osf.io/87spf/?view\\_only=7c6175a88d9a43fdb8ff02cc1610b382](https://osf.io/87spf/?view_only=7c6175a88d9a43fdb8ff02cc1610b382). The design and analysis plans for Studies 3 and 4 were preregistered and can also be accessed at the website.

### Study 1: Executives’ Self-Promotional Lies About Their Achievements

Study 1 sought to provide initial evidence for Hypothesis 1 that low power increases the propensity to tell self-promotional lies among individuals holding relatively high power in their professional lives—in this case, corporate executives.

#### Sample and Procedure

Two hundred fifty-one executives (61 female and 181 male;  $M_{age} = 40.12$ ,  $SD = 6.57$ ) from China participated in the study during their classes as part of their part-time executive MBA programs. On average, the executives had 17.65 years of work experience ( $SD = 6.12$ ) and worked in a variety of different industries, such as technology, finance, and consumer products. The number of participants was specified a priori based on two previous pilot studies with samples from the same population (i.e., executive MBA students in the previous year). Twenty-one observations had missing values on the dependent variable measures and, thus, were dropped. The remaining 230 observations were included in the analyses.

The executives read the following vignette and reported the actions they would take before completing a brief survey that included a measure of their self-reported *actual* level of power in their organizations. All materials were administered in Chinese, having been translated from English to Chinese. The Chinese version was then translated back to English by two scholars who are fluent in Chinese and English (Brislin 1980), and any errors or disagreements in the translation were corrected or resolved. The executives read the following instructions:

Please read the following scenario carefully and imagine what you would do in this situation.

“In this past year, the focus of your work is to negotiate for 5 merger and acquisition (M&A) cases. 2 among the

	(Expected) Revenue (\$)	Stage of negotiation
M&A Case #1	9 million	Finished
M&A Case #2	5 million	Finished
		Finished cases: 14 million
M&A Case #3	9 million	Final stage
M&A Case #4	5 million	Final stage
M&A Case #5	7 million	Final stage
		Ongoing cases: 21 million
		Total: 35 million

5 were completed. You already signed the contracts as the representative of your company. The other 3 were progressing really well. You have reached the final stages of the negotiations and are preparing specific terms for the contract. You plan to finish these 3 negotiations next month. The specific information about these 5 M&A's are shown in the following table:

"Later today, you are going to give a 20-minute speech at a meeting in your organization. When you talk about these merger and acquisition cases, you are going to say: "After due diligence and hard work, we completed \_\_\_\_\_ merger and acquisition case(s) and brought in \_\_\_\_\_ million dollars of revenue to our company."

Participants then reported the number of merger and acquisition cases they completed and the revenue they brought into the company as a result.

## Measures

**Self-Promotional Lying.** We collected two indicators of self-promotional lying: (a) lying about the number of deals was coded zero if the reported number of deals was two (the truth) and coded one if the reported number was greater than two (a lie); (b) lying about revenue was coded zero (the truth) if the reported amount of revenue generated was \$14 million and coded one (a lie) if the reported amount of revenue was greater than \$14 million.

**Power.** Consistent with prior research, executives' power in their organizations was measured with the following three items adapted from Fast and Chen (2009): "How much control do you have over important resources in your organization?" "How much decision-making power do you have in your organization?" "How much control do you have over valuable resources at work?" (1 = very little/low to 6 = very much/high). The items showed high internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ) and, thus, were averaged into one score ( $M = 4.69$ , 95% confidence interval (CI) = [4.56, 4.81]).

**Control Variables.** We controlled for executives' *age*, *sex*, and *years of work experience* in our analysis because these variables are shown to covary with power (Rucker et al. 2018). In addition, we controlled for executives' *social status*—that is, the respect, admiration, and prestige that others give them (Magee and Galinsky 2008). Although power and social status are distinct constructs (Keltner et al. 2003, Blader and Chen 2012), they tend to be correlated and can be associated with similar outcomes (Magee and Galinsky 2008). Thus, we controlled for the effect of social status to show the effects of power above and beyond that of social status. Consistent with prior research (Blader and Chen 2012, Blader et al. 2016), executives' social status in their organizations

was measured by three items: "How much do people in your organization respect you?" "How much do people in your organization admire you?" "How high is your esteem in the eyes of people in your organization?" (1 = very little/low to 6 = very much/high,  $\alpha = 0.85$ ,  $M = 4.70$ , 95% CI = [4.60, 4.80]).

## Results

A total of 80 (33.8%) executives lied about the number of M&A deals they had completed, and 86 (36.3%) executives lied about the revenue generated by the deals they had completed.

In support of our hypothesis, executives' power was significantly negatively related to self-promotional lying (lying about number of deals:  $B = -0.52$ , 95% CI = [-1.03, -0.10],  $\beta = -0.49$ , odds ratio (OR) = 0.60, Wald = 6.00,  $p = 0.014$ ; lying about revenue,  $B = -0.34$ , 95% CI = [-0.82, 0.05],  $\beta = -0.32$ , odds ratio = 0.71, Wald = 2.85,  $p = 0.098$ ). Specifically, as the reported level of power declined by one unit (on the scale of 1 = very little/low to 6 = very much/high), the odds of a participant telling self-promotional lies regarding the number of deals and the amount of revenue were 60% and 71% higher, respectively. Thus, executives who wielded lower power in their organizations were more likely to tell self-promotional lies than those who wielded higher power.

## Study 2: Graduate Students' Self-Promotional Lies About Their Publication Records

Though the results of Study 1 were high in external validity—using actual executives wielding real power in their organizations—the results were correlational in nature. Study 2 aimed to find causal evidence for the relationship between power and self-promotional lying. Therefore, we randomly assigned participants to low- versus high-power conditions to manipulate their power. Having examined the effect of power in the business realm, we also aimed to test the generalizability of the effect in another field, that is, academia. We examined the effect of power on Ph.D. students' reporting of their publication records because this kind of self-promotional lying is relevant to these participants. To operationalize power, we focused on control over valuable resources (Magee and Galinsky 2008) that are important in a student's Ph.D. studies, such as financial funding, access to data sets, laboratory space, and undergraduate research assistants.

## Method

**Sample and Procedure.** One hundred sixty-four current Ph.D. students (74 female and 88 male;  $M_{age} = 26.59$ ,  $SD = 3.12$ ) at 11 of the top U.S. research universities participated in an online study for pay. Each participant

received a \$5 Amazon e-gift card for participating. The number of participants was specified a priori based on the results of a pilot study with samples from the same population. The research universities were all classified as R1: doctoral universities<sup>1</sup>—highest research activity<sup>2</sup> and included Brown, Carnegie Mellon, Columbia, Cornell, Harvard, Michigan, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Princeton, and Rice. We found their emails on their departmental websites. We emailed the invitation to our study via Qualtrics and included a short description of the study, their compensation, and the link to our study. The graduate students majored in different disciplines (48.8% engineering, 7.3% social sciences, 25% natural sciences, 6.7% mathematics and statistics, 7.9% other, and 1.8% unreported). However, graduate students majoring in psychology or management were not recruited to avoid the effects of social desirability on their answers and the increased likelihood that they might guess the research hypothesis.

Participants were randomly assigned to a one-factor, two-level (low- versus high-power) between-subjects design in which they read the following vignette that manipulated their power and then reported whether they would lie about their publication records before completing a survey that included the manipulation checks:

Low-power condition: "Imagine that you do not have sufficient financial funding for later years in your PhD program. You have been trying to gain access to important data sets and laboratory space for your research projects but to no avail. Moreover, in the next academic year, you will also have to stop hiring your current undergraduate research assistants due to a budget issue, so you will have to carry out some of the tedious and manual tasks all by yourself. Please describe (in about 200 words) what you would think and feel in this situation."

High-power condition: "Imagine that you have sufficient financial funding for later years in your PhD program. You have also recently gained access to very important and valuable data sets and laboratory space that you will be utilizing for your research projects. Moreover, in the next academic year, you will also have enough funding to hire undergraduate research assistants to carry out some of the tedious and manual tasks for your research. Please describe (in about 200 words) what you would think and feel in this situation."

Both conditions: "Please read the following scenario very carefully and imagine what you would do in this situation:

"You are now at the end of your third year in your PhD program. You are preparing your progress report for the department-wide annual review. Each student

in your department will submit a report, in which you provide detailed information on your research and coursework progress. As you know, research productivity is usually considered the most important indication of a PhD student's performance. In about a week, all PhD students will hold a meeting to read and comment constructively on each other's progress. All faculty members of your department will also hold a separate meeting and evaluate every student's progress.

"You have worked very hard this year. You have one sole-authored paper that you plan to submit to a prestigious journal in two weeks. You will need to finalize some details and the format before submitting it. You have devoted a lot of attention and energy to this promising paper over the past year. You feel comfortable about this paper's quality and contribution. If you are to pick one of the following two, which would you pick? Listing this paper as 'under review' or listing this paper as 'work in progress'?"

## Measures

**Self-Promotional Lying.** This dichotomous variable was coded one if the graduate student reported the paper as under review (a lie) and coded zero if the graduate student reported the paper as a work in progress (the truth).

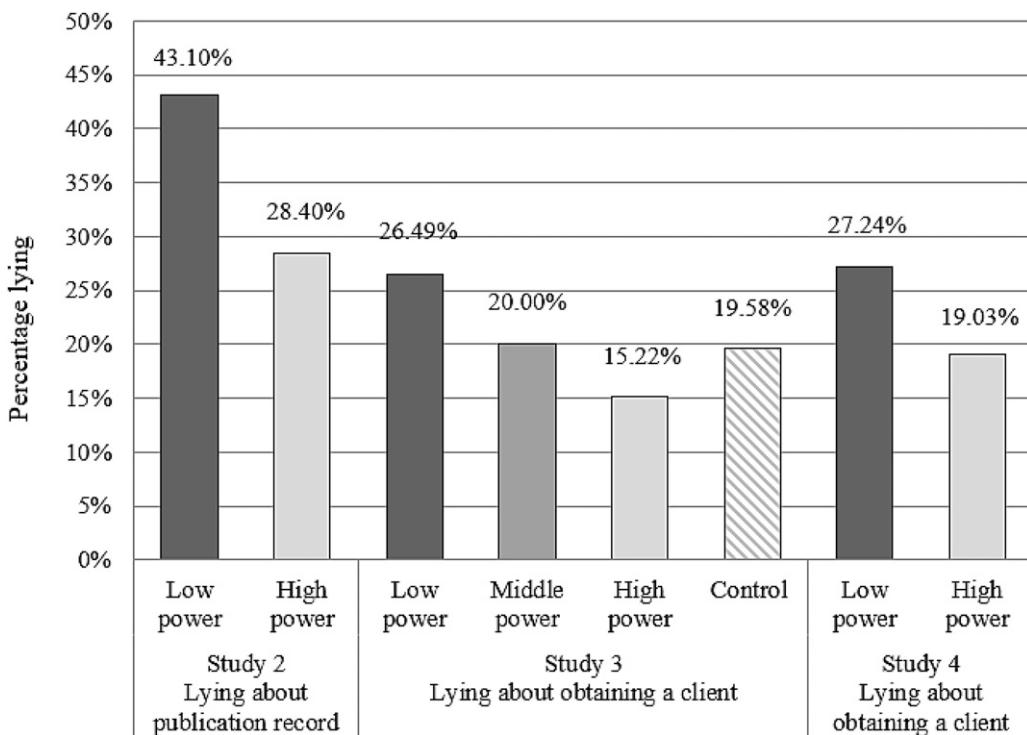
**Manipulation Check.** Using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), participants rated the extent to which they agreed with these two statements: "In the short essay that you wrote at the beginning, you had much power (i.e., control over valued resources) in your Ph.D. program" "In the short essay that you wrote at the beginning, you had much control over the resources you need for your Ph.D. studies." The items were highly correlated ( $r = 0.91, p < 0.001$ ) and were, therefore, combined.

## Results

The manipulation check indicated that our manipulations of power were effective: participants in the low-power condition reported holding significantly lower power than those in the high-power condition,  $t(162) = -28.44, p < 0.001$ , Cohen's  $d = 4.53$  ( $M_{low\ power} = 2.12, 95\% CI = [1.95, 2.30]$ ;  $M_{high\ power} = 5.84, 95\% CI = [5.64, 6.02]$ ).

Fifty-seven (34.8%) of the 164 graduate students told self-promotional lies about the status of their papers. As shown in Figure 1, in support of Hypothesis 1, the proportion of graduate students telling self-promotional lies in the low-power condition ( $M = 0.43, 95\% CI = [0.31, 0.53]$ ) was significantly higher than that in the high-power condition ( $M = 0.28, 95\% CI = [0.20, 0.37]$ ),  $\chi^2(1, 164) = 3.90, p = 0.048$ ). Consistent with the findings of Study 1, graduate students who felt less power were more likely to tell self-promotional lies. In summary,

**Figure 1.** The Percentage of Participants Who Told Self-Promotional Lies in Studies 2–4



Study 2 experimentally established the causal relationship between low power and self-promotional lying. Furthermore, we explored the effects of participants' gender and age and found no main effects or moderating effects. When controlling for gender and age, the effect of low power also remained significant.

### Study 3: Employees' Self-Promotional Lies About Their Achievements

The primary aims of this preregistered experiment were fourfold. First, we tested the hypothesized mechanism for the effect of power on self-promotional lying, that is, feelings of low esteem in one's organization. Second, we sought to rule out the preregistered alternative explanations, such as presentational concerns, need for status, need for influencing others' perceptions of one's competence, or perceived lie exposure likelihood. Third, we sought to extend the generalizability of our findings by using a different sample. In Studies 1 and 2, the samples (i.e., corporate executives and Ph.D. students at top-ranked universities) were somewhat privileged, whereas in Study 3, we chose a more diverse and less privileged sample: workers from the Prolific (<https://prolific.co>) participant pool. Fourth, in addition to high- and low-power conditions, we explored two additional conditions in our design: a middle-power condition and a control condition in which no information about power was given. We did not preregister any specific predictions regarding the comparisons involving

the middle-power and control conditions, but rather planned to test their effects in an exploratory analysis. To further demonstrate the robustness of the observed effects—and in a different way than in Studies 1 and 2—we operationalized power as the asymmetrical control over valuable resources in work groups, according to the definition of power (Magee and Galinsky 2008).

### Sample

A total of 597 full-time employees aged 25 and above in the United States, recruited from an online platform (<https://www.prolific.co>), participated in this experiment. We restricted participants to people who had full-time jobs outside of Prolific so that they could fully understand the work context that we described in the vignette. Each participant received a \$0.65 payment for their participation. We included a simple attention check (more details as follow), and participants who failed the simple attention check were removed from the study in accordance with the preregistered methodology and consistent with prior research. A total of 562 (94.14%) participants passed the attention checks and were included in our analysis (298 female, 329 male;  $M_{age} = 35.23$ ,  $SD = 8.48$ ).

### Design and Procedures

Participants read a vignette comprising three parts. In part 1, each participant was instructed to imagine being in a three-person team at work and how the participant would think, feel, and act in this situation. Specifically,

all participants read the following vignette: "You work for a large and established IT consulting company. Your company helps the clients develop, manufacture, and sell networking hardware, software, telecommunications equipment and other high-technology services and products. All of your work is project-based. Your team provides advice to your clients to help them improve their efficiency, e.g., how to manage their IT systems for workers to work more quickly to complete their tasks. Projects typically last two to three months."

**Power Manipulation.** Participants were then randomly assigned to one of four conditions (high-power, middle-power, low-power, and control) in a between-subjects experimental design. In part 2 of the vignette, each participant was instructed to read the following manipulation, which varied by condition, and to write two to four sentences describing how the participant would think and feel in this situation. Key differences in the manipulation between conditions are italicized:

High-power condition: "You work in a project team of three people. Your title is '*project leader*,' whereas the other two team members' title is '*project support*.' You have *complete control* over your team's budget. You *get to decide* who to hire and fire as well as who works on what tasks. You *also have a significant say* on project deliverables and deadlines. You *have a lot of decision-making power* at work. You *control a lot* of aspects of your own and others' work life."

Middle-power condition: "You work in a project team of three people. Your title is '*assistant project leader*,' whereas the other two team members' titles are '*project leader*' and '*project support*.' You have *control over a small amount* of your team's budget, whereas the team leader has control over a large amount of your team's budget and the project support has no control. You *can make recommendations* to the project leader as who to hire or fire, though your project leader has the last say. The project leader assigns tasks to you, some of which you can allocate to the project support. You *also have some say* on project deliverables and deadlines, but, ultimately, it is the project leader's call. You *have some decision-making power* at work, considerably less than your project leader but more than the project support. You *have some control* over the aspects of your own or others' work life."

Low-power condition: "You work in a project team of three people. Your title is '*project support*,' whereas the other two team members' title is '*project leader*.' You have *absolutely no control* over your team's budget. You *do not get to decide* who to hire or fire or who works on what tasks. You *also have no say* on project deliverables and deadlines. You *have little decision-making power* at work. You *have no control* over the aspects of your own or others' work life."

Control condition: (no information added.)

## Measures

**Self-Promotional Lying.** In part 3 of the vignette, participants read about a performance review session that afforded them the opportunity to tell a self-promotional lie. We examined the effect of power in the context of job interviews because self-promotional lying is prevalent in this context (Weiss and Feldman 2006). All participants read the following:

For you to advance in this organization and profession, you need to have the ability to attract and obtain high-caliber clients, which will bring large revenue to your company. You have been working hard on building your professional network to obtain clients for the past couple of years. You have been going to numerous networking events, industry conferences, and reaching out to your contact at various firms.

A few weeks ago, you found out that your best friend from high school, Alex Smith, is working for a potential high-caliber client as a vice president of operations. If their company becomes your client, this deal will generate a large revenue for your company. You have had a few productive conversations with Alex, and he thinks that their company will be able to benefit a lot from hiring your team for a consulting service. You and Alex have reached agreement on all the important aspects of the potential consulting deal. You have not signed a contract with his firm yet, but it seems to be happening soon, most likely in the next week or two.

Now, you are having a performance review with your department heads and other colleagues. This performance review is important for your career. When you are communicating with them, you are asked whether you have obtained any contracts with clients recently.

Participants answered the following question, which afforded them the opportunity to tell a self-promotional lie: "If you had to choose between one of the answers below, which would you choose?" If they chose "Yes, I have obtained a contract," we coded self-promotional lying as one, whereas if they chose "No, I have not obtained a contract," we coded their self-promotional lying as zero. In addition, participants answered a question that measured their likelihood of telling a self-promotional lie: "How likely are you to say that you have obtained a contract?" (1 = definitely not, 2 = probably not, 3 = possibly, 4 = probably, 5 = very probably, and 6 = definitely).

Participants then completed a survey that included our proposed mediator (i.e., feeling of low esteem in the organization), measures of alternative explanations that we planned to rule out, a manipulation check, an attention check, and demographic information.

**Feeling of Low Esteem in One's Organization.** Four items measured participants' feeling of low esteem in

the organization, adjusted from the widely used scales of Janis and Field (1959) and Heatherton and Polivy (1991). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following items: "I think that I am a worthless individual in my company." "I feel inferior to most of my colleagues." "Right now, I wonder whether I am a worthwhile person in my organization." "I have the feeling that there is nothing I can do well at work." The Likert-scale anchors were from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree ( $M = 2.69$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ,  $\alpha = 0.93$ ).

**Exploratory Variables.** As preregistered, this study aimed to rule out the following alternative mediators: presentational concerns, need for status, need for influencing others' perceptions of one's competence, general need for influence, and perceived lie exposure likelihood. We also tested general trait self-esteem as a potential control and moderator. The display order of the measures for these constructs was randomized. Survey items and detailed results are included in the appendix.

**Manipulation Check of Power.** Participants completed a six-item power manipulation check used in prior research (Lammers et al. 2013). It involved rating the extent to which they experienced the following feelings in the interview scenario (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree): "powerful," "influential," "important," "subordinate" (reverse-coded), "dependent" (reverse-coded), and "powerless" (reverse-coded) ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ,  $\alpha = 0.93$ )

**Attention Check.** To ensure that the incorrect reporting of contract attainment was, indeed, intentional lying rather than incorrect recall, participants were asked to respond to the question: "According to the information in the description provided to you, have you officially obtained the contract yet? Yes, I have, or no, I have not." The correct answer was "no, I have not." Anyone who chose "Yes, I have" failed this check. A total of 35 (out of 597, 5.86%) workers

incorrectly answered the question and, thus, were excluded from the analyses in accordance with the preregistered methodology.

## Results and Discussion

Among the 561 workers, 20.46% (115) told self-promotional lies about obtaining a contract with a client. A total of 26.49% (40 out of 151) of participants in the low-power condition, 20.00% (26 out of 130) in the middle-power condition, 15.22% (21 out of 137) in the high-power condition, and 19.58% (28 out of 143) in the control condition told self-promotional lies.

**Manipulation Check.** A one-way ANOVA showed a significant difference in the sense of power among the four power conditions ( $F(3, 558) = 371.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $M_{high\ power} = 4.91$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ;  $M_{middle\ power} = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ;  $M_{low\ power} = 2.15$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ;  $M_{control} = 4.91$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ), suggesting that our manipulation was effective. Post hoc tests revealed that the differences were significant in all the pairwise comparisons ( $p < 0.001$ ): high versus middle, high versus low, high versus control, middle versus low, middle versus control, and control versus low.

**Main Effect of Power.** As shown in Model 1 in Table 1, we conducted logistic regression with power condition coded into three dummy codes (i.e., high (=1, else =0), middle (=1, else =0), and control (=1, else =0)) with *low* as the baseline (i.e., referent group; Hayes and Preacher 2014, Hayes, 2017). We found that people in the high-power condition were less likely to tell a self-promotional lie than people in the low-power condition ( $B = -0.69$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ,  $OR = 0.50$ ). We found non-significant differences between *low* and *middle* power conditions ( $B = -0.37$ ,  $p = 0.20$ ,  $OR = 0.69$ ) as well as between *low* and *control* power conditions ( $B = -0.39$ ,  $p = 0.16$ ,  $OR = 0.68$ ).

We found consistent effects for our continuous measure of self-reported lying—that is, the likelihood of telling self-promotional lies. As shown in Model 2

**Table 1.** Effects of Power on the Binary and Continuous Measures of Self-Promotional Lying with Dummy Codes of Power (in Study 3)

Model 1: Binary self-promotional lying					Model 2: Continuous self-promotional lying			
Low power as the baseline	B	SE	p	OR	Low power as the baseline	B	SE	p
High (=1, else =0)	-0.69*	0.30	0.02	0.50	Low (=1, else =0)	-0.30+	0.18	0.099
Middle (=1, else =0)	-0.37	0.29	0.20	0.69	Middle (=1, else =0)	-0.08	0.19	0.69
Control (=1, else =0)	-0.39	0.28	0.16	0.68	Control (=1, else =0)	-0.18	0.18	0.33
$R^2$								
-2 log-likelihood	563.51							
Cox and Snell $R^2$	0.01							
Nagelkerke $R^2$	0.02							

Note.  $N = 561$ .

\* $p < 0.05$ ; + $p < 0.10$ .

**Table 2.** Indirect Effects of the Power on Self-Promotional Lying via Feelings of Low Status with Dummy Codes of Power (in Study 3)

Low power as the baseline	Model 1: Binary self-promotional lying Indirect effects	Model 2: Continuous self-promotional lying Indirect effects
High (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = -0.69, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.09, -0.31]$	$-0.35, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.58, -0.13]$
Middle (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = -0.51, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.82, -0.23]$	$-0.26, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.43, -0.09]$
Control (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = -0.59, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.95, -0.27]$	$-0.30, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.49, -0.11]$

Note. N = 561.

in Table 1, we conducted linear regression, again, with power condition coded into three dummy codes (i.e., high (=1, else =0), middle (=1, else =0), and control (=1, else =0)) with *low* as the baseline (Hayes and Preacher 2014, Hayes 2017). We found that people in the *high*-power condition were marginally significantly less likely to tell a self-promotional lie than people in the *low*-power condition ( $B = -0.30, p = 0.099$ ). We found nonsignificant differences between *low* and *middle* power conditions ( $B = -0.08, p = 0.69$ ) as well as between *low* and *control* power conditions ( $B = -0.18, p = 0.33$ ).

**Mediation Effect of the Feeling of Low Esteem in the Organization.<sup>3</sup>** A bootstrap analysis (with 5,000 bootstrap samples) was conducted to examine whether the feeling of low esteem in the organization mediated the effects of power on self-promotional lying (Hayes 2017). Again, we coded power condition into three dummy codes (i.e., high (=1, else =0), middle (=1, else =0), and control (=1, else =0)) with *low* as the baseline (i.e., referent group; Hayes and Preacher 2014, Hayes, 2017). For the *binary* measure of self-promotional lying (Model 1 in Table 2), the bootstrapped bias-corrected 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of *low* power (versus *high* power) on self-promotional lying through the feeling of low esteem excluded zero ( $\text{log odds} = -0.69, p < 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.09, -0.31]$ ). We also found similarly significant indirect effects when comparing *low* power with *middle* power ( $\text{log odds} = -0.51, p < 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.82, -0.23]$ ) or the *control* condition ( $\text{log odds} = -0.59, p < 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.95, -0.27]$ ).

For the *continuous* measure of self-promotional lying (Model 2 in Table 2), the bootstrapped bias-corrected 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of *low* power (versus *high* power) on self-promotional lying through the feeling of low esteem excluded zero ( $B = -0.35, p < 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.56, -0.12]$ ). Again, we found similarly significant indirect effects when comparing *low* power with *middle* power ( $B = -0.26, p < 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.42, -0.09]$ ) or the *control* condition ( $B = -0.35, p < 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.48, -0.11]$ ).

The indirect effects of all alternative explanations were not significant when tested simultaneously with the effects of the feeling of low esteem in one's organization. Detailed results are in the appendix (Table A.1).

In summary, Study 3 found that workers who had low power were more likely to tell self-promotional lies (compared with those who had high power) because they felt lower esteem at work.

## Study 4: Self-Affirmation as a Mitigating Factor

The aim of Study 4 was to provide further support for the proposed compensatory mechanism. If concerns over low esteem explain why low power leads to increased self-promotional lying, then alleviating these concerns should help reduce the effects of low power on lying. Here, we focus on self-affirmation, in which individuals reflect on values that are central to their self-identity. Such reflection helps shift their attention away from a specific domain that is under threat to broader domains that are important to their lives. Compensatory consumption research shows that self-affirmation offers a remedy to participants who feel chronically or temporarily short (versus tall) by compensating for it through choices of high-status products and roles in economic games (Stuppy et al. 2014). Self-affirmation also bolsters self-integrity (Steele 1988) and reduces the effect of perceived esteem and status threats (Steele and Liu 1983, Wiesenfeld et al. 1999, Galinsky et al. 2000, Kang et al. 2015, Kinias and Sim 2016). In Study 4, therefore, we provided low-power individuals the opportunity to self-affirm their values, thereby mitigating the effects of low power on self-promotional lying.

## Sample and Procedure

A total of 584 full-time employees were recruited from Prolific, and each received \$0.95 for completing the study. Forty-eight participants failed the simple attention check and were removed from the study and excluded from the analyses in accordance with the preregistered methodology, leaving a sample of 536 participants (281 female, 255 male;  $M_{age} = 36.03, SD = 9.64$ ).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (power: high versus low)  $\times$  2 (self-affirmation: high versus low) between-subjects factorial design. Participants read a vignette similar to that used in Study 3 about working in an IT consulting firm (called HSC Associates). As in Study 3, participants'

power (high versus low) was manipulated during the scenario. However, before reporting the likelihood that they would tell a self-promoting lie in the performance review session, participants completed a self-affirmation manipulation. At the end of the study, participants completed a brief survey, which included manipulation checks, an attention check, and their demographic information.

**Manipulation of Power.** The manipulation of power was the same as that used in the high and low power conditions in Study 3.

**Self-Affirmation Manipulation.** Participants completed a standard self-affirmation manipulation used extensively in prior research (Sherman and Cohen 2006, Cohen and Sherman 2014, Lupoli et al. 2022), which we adapted to focus on one rather than three values. Participants ranked 11 values (e.g., “creativity,” “relationships with friend or family,” and “independence”) in terms of their importance. In the high (low) self-affirmation condition, participants described why their most (least) important value was so important and meaningful to them (to a typical employee at HSC Associates). They then listed two reasons that this value was important to them (a typical employee at HSC Associates) before reporting their agreement with several statements about the importance of the value to them (a typical employee at HSC Associates).

## Measures

**Self-Promotional Lying.** As in Study 3, participants answered a question that measured their likelihood of telling a self-promotional lie (1 = definitely not to 6 = definitely) during a performance review session ( $M = 1.92, SD = 1.52$ ).

**Manipulation Check of Power.** Participants completed the same measure used in Study 3 ( $M = 3.86, SD = 1.87, \alpha = .94$ ).

**Manipulation Check of Self-Affirmation.** Participants completed a four-item manipulation check of self-affirmation (Lupoli et al. 2022). The items asked about the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements concerning the value that they described in the manipulation: “This value or personal characteristic has influenced my life.” “In general, I try to live up to this value.” “This value is an important part of who I am.” “I care about this value.” The Likert-scale anchors were from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree ( $M = 4.40, SD = 1.52, \alpha = 0.97$ ).

**Attention Check.** The attention check was the same as that used in Study 3. A total of 48 (out of 584, 8.22%)

workers incorrectly answered the question and were, thus, excluded from the analyses in accordance with the preregistered methodology.

## Results

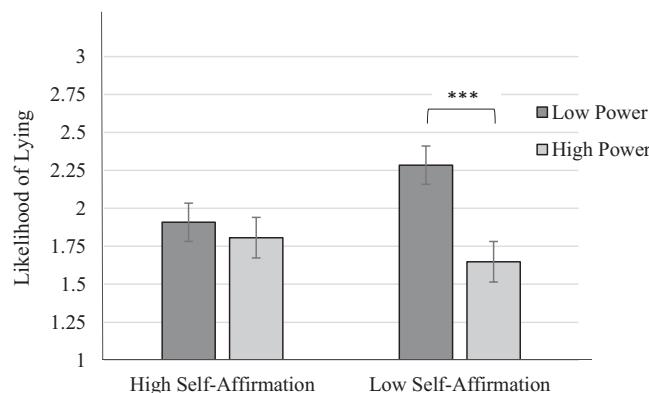
The manipulation of power was successful. Those in the high-power condition reported feeling significantly higher power ( $M = 5.44, SD = 0.83$ ) than those in the low-power condition ( $M = 2.28, SD = 1.15$ ),  $t(534) = 36.40, p < 0.001, d = 3.15$ . As expected, the self-affirmation manipulation did not have a significant effect on participants’ reported power (high self-affirmation:  $M = 3.98, SD = 1.89$ ; low self-affirmation:  $M = 3.73, SD = 1.85$ ),  $t(534) = 1.12, p = 0.123, d = 0.13$ .

The manipulation of self-affirmation was also successful. Those in the high self-affirmation condition reported significantly higher importance of and concern for the value that they described ( $M = 5.60, SD = 0.56$ ) than did those in the low self-affirmation condition ( $M = 3.18, SD = 1.17$ ),  $t(534) = -30.55, p < 0.001, d = 2.63$ . As expected, the power manipulation did not have a significant effect on self-affirmation (high power:  $M = 4.48, SD = 1.47$ ; low power:  $M = 4.33, SD = 1.56$ ),  $t(534) = -1.13, p = 0.258, d = 0.10$ .

In support of our Hypothesis 1, a one-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of power on self-promotional lying,  $F(1, 534) = 8.02, p = 0.005, \eta^2 = 0.01$ , such that high-power individuals were less likely to tell a self-promotional lie ( $M_{\text{high power}} = 1.65, SD = 1.41$ ) than were low-power individuals ( $M_{\text{low power}} = 2.28, SD = 1.56$ ). The main effect of self-affirmation was not significant,  $F(1, 534) = 0.85, p = 0.356, \eta^2 = 0.002$  ( $M_{\text{high self-affirmation}} = 1.86, SD = 1.52$  and  $M_{\text{low self-affirmation}} = 1.98, SD = 1.52$ ).

In support of our prediction, a two-way ANOVA showed a significant interaction between power and self-affirmation on self-promotional lying,  $F(1, 532) = 4.23, p = 0.040, \eta^2 = 0.01$ . Consistent with our results in previous studies, the simple effect of power on self-promotional lying for those in the low self-affirmation condition was significantly negative ( $M_{\text{high power}} = 1.65, SD = 1.41; M_{\text{low power}} = 2.28, SD = 1.56$ ),  $t(263) = -3.48, p < 0.001, d = 0.42$ . For those in the high self-affirmation condition, the effects of power on self-promotional lying were no longer significant ( $M_{\text{high power}} = 1.81, SD = 1.51; M_{\text{low power}} = 1.91, SD = 1.54$ ),  $t(269) = -0.55, p = 0.585, d = 0.25$ . Figure 2 depicts the interactive effects of power and self-affirmation on self-promotional lying. In summary, Study 4 provides further support for our predictions of Hypothesis 2 that workers who had low power were more likely to tell self-promotional lies because they felt lower esteem than workers who had higher power. The intervention of self-affirmation mitigated the undesirable effect of low power on the need to tell self-promotional lies.

**Figure 2.** The Interactive Effects of Power and Self-Affirmation on Self-Promotional Lying in Study 4



Note. Error bars denote standard errors.

We also measured self-promotional lying with a binary measure as in Study 3. Participants were asked, “If you had to choose between one of the answers below, which would you choose?” If they chose “Yes, I have obtained a contract,” self-promotional lying was coded as 1, whereas if they chose “No, I have not obtained a contract,” self-promotional lying was coded as 0. Results showed that 35% of participants (57 out of 164 participants) told self-promotional lies. In support of our Hypothesis 1, the proportion of participants telling self-promotional lies in the low-power condition (27.24%, 73 out of 268) was significantly higher than that in the high-power condition (19.03%, 51 out of 268),  $\chi^2(1, 536) = 5.08, p = 0.024$ , whereas the proportion of participants telling self-promotional lies did not differ significantly between the two self-affirmation conditions (low self-affirmation: 24.53%, 65 out of 265; high self-affirmation: 21.77%, 59 out of 271),  $\chi^2(1, 536) = 0.57, p = 0.449$ . However, the interaction between power and self-affirmation was not significant ( $B = -1.52, \text{Exp}(B) = 0.22, p = 0.938$ ). This could be because the continuous and binary measures of self-promotional lying were only moderately correlated ( $r = 0.59, p < 0.001$ ). Also, a possible reason for the nonsignificance is the reduced power of the statistical test resulting from the dichotomous nature of the outcome (Cohen et al. 2003, Brion and Anderson 2013).

## General Discussion

Across four studies—irrespective of how power was manipulated or how self-promotional lying was measured—we found converging evidence that experiencing lower (compared with higher) power increased self-promotional lying because individuals with lower power tend to feel lower esteem in their organizations than those with higher power. We found that, compared with those holding higher power, corporate executives holding lower power in their organizations

were more likely to lie when discussing their work achievements (Study 1), graduate students with lower power in their Ph.D. studies were more likely to lie when reporting their publication records (Study 2), and employees with lower power in their work groups were more likely to lie during performance reviews about having obtained a valuable client (Studies 3 and 4). Mediational analyses found that lower power increased self-promotional lying because it triggered a feeling of low esteem in the organization (Study 3). In addition, we ruled out several alternative explanations (Study 3). In further support of the hypothesized mechanism, we found that a self-affirmation intervention designed to bolster participants’ feeling of esteem helped to reduce the effects of lower power on self-promotional lying (Study 4). Taken together, the current research identifies a self-interested unethical behavior that is increased by lower rather than higher power. This paper also explains why the effect of lower power is different on self-promotional lying compared with previously studied unethical behaviors and finds an intervention to help mitigate this effect. This research lays the foundation for future investigation of the bright side of power that moves beyond the traditional one-sided view that “power corrupts.”

## Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the literature on power, unethical behavior, and compensatory consumption. First, it provides a more nuanced and balanced perspective of the effects of power. Prior research on the psychology of power points to the liberating effects of power on individuals’ cognition and behavior (Keltner et al. 2003), which allow power holders to focus more egocentrically and act more selfishly, attending to their own personal gains rather than to the needs of others (Keltner et al. 2003, Galinsky et al. 2006, Rucker et al. 2012, Magee and Smith 2013). To date, research on power in the domain of ethics has focused mainly on the negative consequences of power, finding that the powerful are more likely to objectify others (Gruenfeld et al. 2008); are less likely to enact justice (Blader and Chen 2012); experience less empathy toward others (van Kleef et al. 2008); and devalue others’ perspectives, contributions, and abilities (Kipnis 1972, Georges and Harris 1998, Galinsky et al. 2006). However, our research finds that power can have positive consequences in the moral domain, too. Higher power individuals’ sense of higher esteem at work reduces their tendency to tell self-promotional lies.

This paper also contributes to the literature on unethical behavior. To date, prior research has found that higher power increases a variety of unethical or self-interested behaviors that benefit the actor, such as cheating for money, stealing office supplies, plagiarizing homework assignments (Dubois et al. 2015) and

hoarding resources in commons dilemmas and dictator games (DeCelles et al. 2012). The current research finds a first exception to this pattern: those with lower power are more likely to tell self-promotional lies than are those with higher power. These findings highlight the need to distinguish between different types of unethical behaviors (e.g., self-promotional lying versus cheating for money) and the unique motivations behind them (e.g., alleviating the aversive feeling of low esteem versus achieving self-interested financial gains) to understand when and why power can corrupt or lead the powerful to act more ethically.

Finally, this paper contributes to the compensatory-consumption literature by linking low power and the feeling of low esteem to self-promotional lying. Numerous papers in the compensatory consumption literature show that individuals make compensatory purchases, including luxury products and experiences (such as designer bags and vacations), to compensate for low power as well as to symbolically signal status to others (Rucker and Galinsky 2008, Kim and Rucker 2012, Hoegg et al. 2014, Kim and Gal 2014; see Mandel et al. 2017 for a review). The present research complements and extends this prior work by identifying another likely reaction to the feeling of low esteem that results from lacking power, that is, self-promotional lying. When self-improvement is not able to immediately curb an ongoing esteem threat (Ericsson and Lehmann 1996, Ericsson et al. 2009), those with lower power may resort to telling self-promotional lies as a quick fix to feel like valuable and respected members of their organizations. Adding further to the literature on compensatory consumption, we find that self-affirmation can neutralize the feeling of low esteem and, thus, weaken the undesirable effect of lower power on self-promotional lying.

### Practical Contributions

The results have important practical implications for organizations and social relationships. Organizations suffer when their employees engage in unethical behavior, such as self-promotional lying, because such lies can result in false business information, suboptimal decision making, and less trust in the organization. However, organizations may fail to recognize or manage such unethical behavior because, as this research highlights, it is more likely to come from a surprising source: those with lower power rather than the powerful. Raising awareness of this source of unethical behavior is an important first step in helping organizations mitigate this risk. Organizations should consider the contexts in which their less powerful employees are more likely to feel unvalued and then intervene to help these employees restore their sense of worth and feel like respected members of their organizations so that they can display their honest selves at work.

The current research also highlights how organizations can directly address the issue through alleviating the psychological pressures that the powerless feel in their work setting. We found that individuals with lower power can experience lower levels of esteem, which prompts them to self-promote to alleviate this pressure. Unfortunately, this self-promotion could come in the form of lies. However, when those with lower power are prompted to self-affirm by reflecting on their important values, even when these values are unrelated to their work, the pressure to self-promote is alleviated and the need to lie reduced. This research, therefore, presents one possible solution to this type of unethical behavior in the workplace: organizations should encourage their employees to regularly affirm important values relevant to them. When employees have a healthy sense of their own worth, abilities, and contributions in their work setting, they are less likely to worry that they are inadequate or unvalued even if they do not have control over important organizational resources. With a greater sense of value at work and more self-acceptance (Kim and Gal 2014), employees are more likely to form honest and productive work relationships, weather stress and setbacks with resilience, express their true opinions, and make transparent decisions. Given the fact that most employees have relatively lower power at work, the potential for unethical consequences of the feeling of low status in the workplace is high. Thus, organizations have much to gain by showing respect and appreciation for their lower power employees to help them form a workplace image that is secure, grounded, and respected.

### Limitations and Future Directions

In our exploratory analysis of Study 3, we found significant differences between neither the low-power and middle-power or control conditions nor between the high-power and middle-power or control conditions. Thus, we are not able to conclude (a) whether the effect of power on self-promotional lying is linear or (b) whether lower or higher power drives the effects of power on self-promotional lying, that is, whether lower power increases self-promotional lying compared with a baseline control condition or higher power reduces self-promotional lying, because we failed to find evidence for either. Future research should examine the linearity of the power effect and whether the levels of self-promotional lying in both middle-power and control conditions fall in between and significantly differ from those in the low- and high-power conditions.

The current research provides convergent evidence that lower power can increase self-promotional lying as a result of the feeling of low esteem at work. However, self-promotional lying is just one of a range of possible unethical behaviors that might be triggered when the people with low power feel unvalued. Future research

should examine whether, to promote themselves, individuals with lower power are more likely to engage in other unethical behaviors, such as hiding their mistakes, failing to disclose beneficial facts about others, spreading rumors about or backstabbing others, or cheating to gain advantage on evaluations and in competitions. Moreover, lying is not the only way to self-promote. After all, the point is to self-promote, not to lie. We cannot tell whether those low in power are more likely to dishonestly or honestly self-promote when given both choices.<sup>3</sup> Future research is advised to test this question empirically.

Future research should also examine whether there are contexts in which those with higher power engage in greater ethical behavior even when that behavior does not benefit the self. Recent research points to the benefits of power for prosocial ethical behaviors. For example, Tost and Johnson (2019) find that, in collaborative teams and organizations, possessing greater structural power induces a sense of responsibility that increases feelings of solidarity with subordinates and leads the powerful to prioritize subordinates' interests over their own. Similarly, research by Tost et al. (2015) finds that, in intergenerational contexts, powerful individuals feel an obligation to look out for the long-term interests of others and, hence, display more intergenerational generosity. We call for more research on how the experience of power may promote ethical behavior in contexts that do not benefit the self.

## Conclusion

The popular maxim that power corrupts has long held sway over the public imagination, but recently, scholarly research has challenged the universality of this maxim and added an important modifier: power corrupts when corruption is selfish in nature. In the current research, we drive another nail into this maxim's coffin, finding that lower rather than higher power can increase certain self-interested unethical behaviors. Specifically, we find that lower power increases self-promotional lying because it triggers the aversive feeling of low esteem. Therefore, the effects of power on corruption depend critically on the motivations underlying a particular unethical behavior. Even when corruption is self-interested in nature, power need not always corrupt.

## Appendix

### Exploratory Variables in Study 3

**Presentational Concerns.** Three items were adjusted from Leary (1983) and Christopher and Schlenker (2004). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following items: "I am afraid of my colleagues and department heads noticing my shortcomings." "I am afraid that my colleagues and department heads will not approve

of me." "When I am talking to my colleagues and department heads, I worry about what they may be thinking about me" ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ,  $\alpha = 0.93$ ). One could argue, because high-power individuals have greater control of their environments and more freedom of self-expression (Kraus et al. 2011), they might have a lower level of presentational concerns, which might explain their lower likelihood of telling self-promotional lies. We aim to rule out presentational concerns as an alternative explanation.

**General Need for Influence.** Three items were adjusted from Uleman (1972). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following items: "I want to be able to influence my colleagues and department heads." "I want to gain stronger influence in the meeting with my colleagues and department heads." "I want to affect my colleagues and department heads" ( $M = 5.44$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ,  $\alpha = 0.92$ ). One could argue, because high-power individuals already have greater influence than their low-power counterparts (Magee and Galinsky 2008, Kraus et al. 2011), they might have a lower need for influence, which might explain their lower likelihood of telling self-promotional lies. We aim to rule out the general need for influence as an alternative explanation.

**Need for Status.** Participants read the following: "Status is the amount of respect, esteem, and prestige a person has in the eyes of other people. So, in the current scenario, your department head and colleagues may confer greater status on some employees than others, that is, respect and admire some employees more than others. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements." Four items adjusted from Blader and Chen (2012) measured participants' need for status. The items were "I am not concerned about how my status compares to other people in my department" (reverse coded). "I do not consider what my colleagues and department heads think about my status" (reverse coded). "I wish to have high status in my interaction with my colleagues and department heads." "If I feel my status is low in this meeting with my colleagues and department heads, I would feel very bad" ( $M = 4.79$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ,  $\alpha = 0.75$ ). We include this variable because power tends to be positively correlated with status (Magee and Galinsky 2008); thus, those with low power might also lack status. Because the desire for status is a fundamental human motive (Anderson et al. 2015), those with low power might have a higher need for status, which might further drive self-promotional lying. It is different from our proposed predictor of feelings of low status, which is about feeling being inadequately valued in one's organization, whereas the need for status is about the extent to which an individual cares about social status at work. We aim to rule it out as an alternative explanation.

**Need for Influencing Others' Perceptions of One's Competence.** Four items were adjusted from Uleman (1972). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following items: "I want to influence my colleagues and department heads to view me favorably." "I have to make my colleagues and department heads view me positively." "I need my colleagues and department heads to perceive me as competent." "I am motivated to influence my

colleagues and department heads' perception of my competence" ( $M = 5.71$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ,  $\alpha = 0.87$ ). We include this variable because people tend to perceive those with higher power as more capable than those with lower power (Merton 1968). Also, to gain more power, one viable way is to be perceived as competent (Anderson and Brion 2014). Thus, one could argue that low-power individuals tell self-promotional lies to influence others' perceptions of their competence. Thus, we aim to rule it out as an alternative explanation.

**Perceived Lie Exposure Likelihood.** Participants answered this question: "How likely do you think your colleagues and department heads will find out if you lie about having officially obtained the contract?" The seven-point scale was from 1 = extremely unlikely to 7 = extremely likely ( $M = 5.37$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ). We include this variable because it should be negatively related to self-promotional lying, which was supported by our data (for the binary and continuous measures of lying, respectively,  $r = -0.25$  and  $-0.38$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Also, one could argue, because power increases one's overconfidence (Fast et al. 2012) and risk taking (Anderson and Galinsky 2006), it could also potentially reduce one's perceived lie exposure likelihood, which, contrary to our hypotheses, could predict a positive indirect effect of power on self-promotional lying via perceived lie exposure likelihood. Thus, we tested its role as an alternative explanation that we aimed to rule out.

**Trait Self-Esteem.** Finally, the three items measuring participants' trait self-esteem were from Wiltermuth et al. (2017)

and Barkan et al. (2012). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following items: "I feel good about myself." "I feel I am a person of worth." "I feel pleased with myself" (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree;  $M = 5.18$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ,  $\alpha = 0.96$ ). We explored the moderating effect of trait self-esteem on the relationship between power (high versus low) and self-promotional lying but did not have a specific prediction.

### Supplementary Analysis

#### Mediation Effect of Alternative Explanations in Study 3.

A bootstrap analysis (with 5,000 bootstrap samples) was conducted to examine whether the feeling of low status in the organization mediated the effects of power on self-promotional lying (Hayes 2017). We coded power condition into three dummy codes (i.e., high (=1, else =0), middle (=1, else =0), and control (=1, else =0)) with *low* as the baseline (i.e., referent group; Hayes and Preacher 2014, Hayes 2017). As shown in Table A.1, mediational analyses reveal that, when all alternative explanations and our proposed mediator were tested simultaneously in one model, the mediation effect of our mediator still holds, whereas the indirect effects of the alternative mechanisms were not significant except for presentational concerns. For presentational concerns, the indirect effect on the binary measure of self-promotional lying was not significant, whereas the indirect effect on the binary measure of self-promotional lying was significant but in the opposite direction of the total effect of power on self-promotional lying.

**Table A.1.** Indirect Effects of the Mediator and Alternative Explanations with the Dummy Codes of Power

Low power as the baseline	DV: Binary	DV: Continuous
Mediator		
Feeling of low status		
High (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = -0.67$ , 95% CI [-1.19, -0.20]	-0.45, 95% CI [-0.70, -0.22]
Middle (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = -0.50$ , 95% CI [-0.90, -0.14]	-0.33, 95% CI [-0.52, -0.16]
Control (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = -0.58$ , 95% CI [-1.02, -0.17]	-0.39, 95% CI [-0.59, -0.18]
Alternative explanations		
Need for status		
High (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = -0.01$ , 95% CI [-0.09, 0.05]	-0.01, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.03]
Middle (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = -0.01$ , 95% CI [-0.10, 0.05]	-0.01, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.03]
Control (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = -0.02$ , 95% CI [-0.11, 0.05]	-0.01, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.04]
Need for influencing others' perceptions of one's competence		
High (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = -0.02$ , 95% CI [-0.11, 0.04]	-0.02, 95% CI [-0.08, 0.02]
Middle (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = -0.04$ , 95% CI [-0.15, 0.05]	-0.04, 95% CI [-0.12, 0.01]
Control (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = 0.01$ , 95% CI [-0.04, 0.08]	0.01, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.07]
General need for influence		
High (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = -0.00$ , 95% CI [-0.05, 0.04]	0.00, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.02]
Middle (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = 0.00$ , 95% CI [-0.05, 0.04]	0.00, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.02]
Control (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = -0.00$ , 95% CI [-0.05, 0.04]	0.00, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.02]
Presentational concerns		
High (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = 0.04$ , 95% CI [-0.11, 0.22]	0.13, 95% CI [0.05, 0.24]
Middle (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = 0.05$ , 95% CI [-0.12, 0.23]	0.14, 95% CI [0.06, 0.25]
Control (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = 0.04$ , 95% CI [-0.11, 0.22]	0.13, 95% CI [0.05, 0.24]
Perceived lie exposure likelihood		
High (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = -0.06$ , 95% CI [-0.27, 0.17]	-0.03, 95% CI [-0.11, 0.06]
Middle (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = -0.09$ , 95% CI [-0.33, 0.14]	-0.04, 95% CI [-0.14, 0.06]
Control (=1, else =0)	$\text{Log odds} = -0.20$ , 95% CI [-0.44, 0.02]	-0.08, 95% CI [-0.18, 0.00]

Note.  $N = 561$ .

### Moderating Effect of Trait Self-Esteem in Study 4.

We explored the moderating effect of trait self-esteem on the relationship between power (high versus low) and self-promotional lying and found nonsignificant effects as expected ( $B = 0.5, p = 0.762$  and  $B = 0.107, Exp(B) = 1.11, p = 0.687$ ) for the continuous and binary measure of self-promotional lying, respectively). Thus, trait self-esteem did not moderate our key prediction.

In addition, we tested the moderating effects with dummy codes of power (i.e., control (=1, else =0), middle (=1, else =0), and high (=1, else =0)). Results show, for the continuous DV, control:  $B = 0.34, p = 0.027$ ; middle:  $B = -0.10, p = 0.543$ ; and high:  $B = 0.05, p = 0.769$ , and for the binary DV, control:  $B = 0.34, Exp(B) = 1.40, p = 0.127$ ; middle:  $B = -0.07, Exp(B) = 0.93, p = 0.775$ ; and high:  $B = 0.11, Exp(B) = 1.12, p = 0.687$ . The results were largely nonsignificant except for when trait self-esteem moderated the effect of the dummy code of the control power condition (versus all else) on the continuous measure of lying. This effect was inconsistent with the preceding results and was not of great theoretical importance; thus, we refrained from forcing a post hoc interpretation on it. Overall, trait self-esteem did not consistently moderate the effect of power on self-promotional lying. Future research should investigate this further.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> More than 100 institutions are classified as R1 in the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. They have a relatively high level of research activity and resources for such activity. The scenario in our stimuli is highly relevant and common for Ph.D. students in R1 universities. Thus, following the realism principle of experiment design (Aronson et al. 1998), we selected participants from R1 schools in Study 2.

<sup>2</sup> We report the results of mediation analysis following the approach outlined by Hayes and Preacher (2014) and Hayes (2017) for mediation analysis with multicategorical independent variables, which we did not preregister. Our preregistration included mediation analysis comparing the high- and low-power conditions yet excluding the observations in the middle power and control conditions. Our preregistered approach, albeit rendering consistent results with the ones reported here, is less ideal because it would discard the information about the middle-power and control conditions.

<sup>3</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for contributing this point.

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**Huisi (Jessica) Li** is an assistant professor in organizational behavior at the Georgia Institute of Technology. She received her PhD from Cornell University. Her research interests include social hierarchy (power, status, socioeconomic status), diverse teams, and employee turnover.

**Ya-Ru Chen** is the Nicholas H. Noyes Professor of Management and Organizations at Cornell University. She received her PhD from Columbia University. Her research interests include social hierarchy (power and status) and cross-culture psychology.

**John Angus D. Hildreth** is an assistant professor of management and organizations at Cornell University. He received his PhD from the University of California, Berkeley. His research interests include loyalty, power, and status, top-team performance, and ethical decision making.