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**Does Power Help or Hurt? The Moderating Role of Self–Other Focus on Power and Perspective-Taking in Romantic Relationships**

Amie M. Gordon and Serena Chen

# Does Power Help or Hurt? The Moderating Role of Self–Other Focus on Power and Perspective-Taking in Romantic Relationships

## Amie M. Gordon[1] and Serena Chen[1]

### Abstract

Reconciling competing viewpoints suggesting that power helps and hurts perspective-taking in close relationships, in two experiments and two daily experience studies we tested the hypothesis that power's effect on perspective-taking depends on the extent to which people are relatively self- versus other-focused. In Study 1, recalling a time of high (vs. low) power over a romantic partner reduced inclinations to take the partner's perspective for relatively self-focused but not other-focused individuals. Studies 2 and 3 replicated Study 1 using daily variations in power and perspective-taking. In Study 4, being the "in-charge" partner during a conflict conversation reduced empathic accuracy for more self-focused individuals. Self–other focus was assessed with measures of gratitude, relational self-construal, and social value orientation. The current findings provide evidence that, particularly for the more self-focused, relationship power influences people's inclinations to take their romantic partner's perspective in daily life as well as their empathic accuracy during conflict.

### Keywords

power, perspective-taking, empathic accuracy, romantic relationships, self–other focus

Perspective-taking is a fundamental social skill required for forming healthy social attachments (Mead, 1934; Piaget, 1932). Nonetheless, not everyone is able or motivated to perspective-take, particularly in their close relationships (Kenny & Acitelli, 2001; Long, 1993; Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Murphy, 1984). In the current research, our goal was to uncover factors that affect perspective-taking in close relationships—namely, the impact of social power on whether and how people take the perspective of close others.

Social power, widely defined as having control over the outcomes of others and being the decision maker in relationships (e.g., Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), affects how one perceives the world and interacts with others. Power differentials are prevalent in close relationships (Felmlee, 1994; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997) and have been linked to positive and negative relationship cognitions and behaviors. For example, powerful people respond more constructively to rejection (Kuehn, Chen, & Gordon, 2013) and are more forgiving of a close other's transgressions (Karremans & Smith, 2010), but having power in a close relationship also leads to more cynical attributions for a partner's kind acts (Inesi, Gruenfeld, & Galinsky, 2012).

How might having power over a relationship partner influence perspective-taking within close relationships?

Disparate theory and research suggest that power may hurt (e.g., Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006; Thomas, Franks, & Calonico, 1972) and help (e.g., Karremans & Smith, 2010; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) perspective-taking of relationship partners. Below, we review the literature on these competing hypotheses and attempt to reconcile them by suggesting that power hurts perspective-taking of relationship partners when people are more self-focused, but promotes it when people are more other-focused.

## Are Power and Perspective-Taking at Odds?

Some scholars have posited that power and perspective-taking are at odds (Galinsky et al., 2006; Thomas et al., 1972; Tjosvold & Sagaria, 1978). Power is characterized by self-interest, whereas perspective-taking stems from a desire to

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understand others. Power is associated with feeling in control of one's environment, whereas perspective-taking is a strategy used to gauge the actions of those who determine one's outcomes (Tjosvold & Sagaria, 1978). Indeed, more powerful family members are less likely to step into other family members' shoes (Barber, 1984), and women with more decision-making power in their families are less likely to perspective-take relative to women with less decision-making power (Thomas et al., 1972). More generally, people who are more dependent on relationship partners engage in cognitions and behaviors, such as perspective-taking, that are aimed at maintaining the relationship; in contrast, less-dependent partners are less likely to engage in relationship maintenance (Van Lange, Rusbult, et al., 1997; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). These various strands of research suggest a dynamic in which power is negatively associated with perspective-taking. However, other research suggests that within the context of close relationships, power may actually promote perspective-taking.

## Does Power Promote Perspective-Taking in Close Relationships?

According to interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), preservation of cherished relationships requires a long-term focus on maintaining the relationship. This focus may require undergoing a transformation of motivation—that is, setting aside immediate selfish concerns and engaging instead in cognitions and behaviors that will help maintain the relationship. When people are focused on relationship maintenance, they may incur costs for the good of the relationship.

How does power fit into this interdependence analysis of close relationships? Power heightens goal pursuit (Guinote, 2007). Within close relationships, then, power should heighten pursuit of relationship-maintenance goals. More concretely, power should amplify cognitions and behaviors that promote relationship well-being. Supporting this, Karremans and Smith (2010) found that power was positively associated with forgiveness of another's transgressions, particularly among people who were strongly committed to their relationships. Perspective-taking helps people engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998), thus the powerful may be particularly inclined to take the perspective of their relationship partners.

## Reconciling Competing Viewpoints on Power and Perspective-Taking

How do we reconcile these competing views on power and perspective-taking in close relationships? We propose that power's effect on perspective-taking of a close other may hinge on the extent to which one is relatively self- versus other-focused. People who are more other-focused prioritize the needs of their partners (Van Lange, 1999; Van Lange,

Agnew, Harinck, & Steemers, 1997), are willing to incur costs to help their partners, and experience pleasure when helping close others (Kogan et al., 2010). In contrast, people who are relatively self-focused are concerned with maximizing their own outcomes and are likely to incur costs for a close other only when it benefits them (Van Lange, Agnew, et al., 1997).

We hypothesized that power enhances perspective-taking among those who are more other-focused, but diminishes it among the more self-focused. Why? First, having power means making decisions, and being relatively self- versus other-focused should influence decision making. Other-focused people aim to make decisions that jointly benefit their partners and themselves (Van Lange, 1999). To do so, they need to take their partners' perspective so as to understand their wishes and desires. Thus, being the decision maker in a relationship should enhance perspective-taking among those who are relatively other-focused. In contrast, powerful people who are more self-focused are likely to be primarily concerned with making decisions that benefit themselves, thereby decreasing the need to perspective-take.

Second, self–other focus should influence which goals people prioritize. For other-focused individuals, meeting the needs of relationship partners is a primary goal (Mills & Clark, 1994; Van Lange, 1999). Power should increase pursuit of this goal and perspective-taking should facilitate meeting it. In contrast, enhanced goal pursuit should diminish perspective-taking among the more self-focused; these individuals are likely to be primarily focused on achieving their own goals, leaving them relatively unconcerned with the thoughts and feelings of their partners. Likewise, other-focused individuals prioritize relationship maintenance relative to self-focused individuals (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000; Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999), and perspective-taking aids maintenance (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998).

Some research relevant to our key hypothesis exists: Chen, Lee-Chai, and Bargh (2001) showed that power magnifies dispositional tendencies such that people who were more communally oriented exhibited responses consistent with social responsibility goals under conditions of power, whereas people who were more exchange-oriented tended to respond in ways reflecting self-interest goals. Extending this notion to the domain of perspective-taking, Schmid Mast, Jonas, and Hall (2009) found that power enhances perspective-taking among more empathic leaders (i.e., leaders concerned with the well-being of their subordinates), but not among egoistic leaders (i.e., leaders concerned with the work output of their subordinates). Along related lines, Côté and colleagues (2011) found that the association between prosocial orientation and empathic accuracy was strongest among the powerful, suggesting that power amplifies the association between dispositional tendencies and perspective-taking with strangers. Although these recent findings did not focus on power and perspective-taking within a particular relationship, and

mainly examined general perspective-taking abilities (e.g., emotion decoding with photos of strangers), they fit our reasoning that self–other focus will influence whether power helps or hurts perspective-taking in close relationships.

## The Present Research

Across four studies, we examined whether self–other focus moderates the association between power and perspective-taking in romantic relationships. Power was defined as the extent to which one has control and influence over one's romantic partner and makes the decision in the relationships. We focused on romantic relationships because romantic partners tend to experience differential rather than equal power (Felmlee, 1994; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). Romantic partners also experience a high level of interdependence and commitment (Karremans & Smith, 2010; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), providing a context in which motivation to perspective-take should generally be high. In addition, perspective-taking is important for romantic relationship quality. Partners who engage in more perspective-taking are more satisfied in their relationships (e.g., Kilpatrick, Bisonnette, & Rusbult, 2002; Long & Andrews, 1990; Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009), think less about divorce (Long, 1993), and are more accommodating when confronted with a partner's bad behavior (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998).

We assessed power in multiple ways: In Study 1, we used an experiential priming paradigm to elicit feelings of having either a lot or little power in one's relationship. In Studies 2 and 3, participants completed measures assessing their perceived power in their romantic relationships on a nightly basis for 1- or 2-week periods. In Study 4, we used a role-based power manipulation in which one partner was "in charge" of a conversation about a source of conflict in the relationship, while the other partner was instructed to "follow the lead" of the in-charge partner. Across studies, we examined whether the effects of power on perspective-taking were moderated by the extent to which people were relatively self- versus other-focused.

We used several different measures of self–other focus, relationship-specific and general, to test the generalizability of our findings. In Study 1, we measured the extent to which participants were grateful toward their partners (Gordon, Impett, Kogan, Oveis, & Keltner, 2012). In Study 2, we measured the extent to which participants incorporated their relationship partners into their self-concept (Cross et al., 2000). In Studies 3 and 4, we assessed participants' social value orientation (Van Lange, 1999; Van Lange, Agnew, et al., 1997). These constructs, though distinct, share a common component in that they all assess the extent to which an individual is relatively aware of and focused on others versus singularly focused on the self. Specifically, they entail noticing and acknowledging a partner's value (i.e., gratitude), incorporating the other person into one's own identity so that the other's concerns become one's own concerns (i.e., relational self-construal), or making choices that maximize joint outcomes rather than focusing only on what would be best for oneself (i.e., social value orientation). By including these diverse measures, our aim was to demonstrate that power is moderated by a general distinction between self–other focus, and that this moderating effect is not confined to a particular measure.

Beyond extending the small literature on power and perspective-taking to close relationship contexts, the present research is novel in several key respects. First, as noted, research on power and perspective-taking has focused on taking the perspective of strangers with whom one has no interests at stake. Power may not exert the same influence on perspective-taking when there is a disincentive to perspective-take, such as during a conflict situation in which one's interests clash with those of a close other. In the current research, we examined this issue by assessing perspective-taking during a conversation about a source of conflict in the relationship, as well as general perspective-taking inclinations.

Second, in all four studies we manipulated or measured power and perspective-taking within the context of an ongoing romantic relationship. This is in contrast to previous work on power and perspective-taking which has focused on personal sense of power or role-based power among strangers. Power is largely a contextual experience, with one's sense of power varying from one relationship to another (Anderson, John, & Keltner, 2012), suggesting that power within one relationship may not have the same influence in a different relationship.

Third, prior research has focused on perspective-taking accuracy, leaving open questions about the roles of awareness and motivation in the association between power and perspective-taking. In the current research, we examined whether power influences people's self-reported attempts to perspective-take as well as their empathic accuracy. This inclusion of self-report measures allowed us to assess whether power influences people's reported inclinations to perspective-take as well as their perspective-taking accuracy. Assessing the link between power and self-reported perspective-taking is also important because research shows that self-reported understanding of a close other is more strongly associated with relationship well-being than is actual knowledge about the close other (Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009).

Finally, the present research extends the power literature by gathering data on natural variations in power in daily life. This method minimizes retrospective bias (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003), allows us to determine whether results from the laboratory extend to variations in power from one day to the next, and provides a new perspective on the experience of power in close relationships.

## Study 1

In Study 1, we examined the causal association between power and self-reported perspective-taking by asking participants to recall a time either when they had a lot of power or

little power in their romantic relationships. Self–other focus was operationalized as the extent to which participants felt more or less grateful toward their partners. Grateful people notice and acknowledge the value in their partners and their acts of kindness (Adler & Fagley, 2005). Moreover, a plethora of research has substantiated that grateful people are more prosocial (e.g., Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001) and more focused on maintaining their relationships (e.g., Kubacka, Finkenauer, Rusbult, & Keijsers, 2011). For example, one set of studies showed that gratitude toward a relationship partner promoted responsive behaviors toward that partner that reflect being other-focused (e.g., being a more active listener; Gordon et al., 2012). As such, we anticipated that power would promote self-reported perspective-taking among more grateful people, but diminish it among less-grateful people.

## Method

*Participants and procedure.* At the University of California, Berkeley, 72 undergraduates (50 women) who were currently in a romantic relationship participated in exchange for course credit. Two were removed from analyses for not completing the power manipulation, leaving 70 participants. The sample was 56% Asian/Asian American, 30% European/ European American, 10% Hispanic, 1% African/African American, and 3% of Other ethnicities. On average, participants were 21 years old ($SD$ = 2.84, range = 18-33) and had been in their relationships for one and a half years ($SD$ = 17.66, range = 1 month-7 years).

Interested participants were directed to a secure website which they could access from wherever they chose to log on. After completing demographics and background questionnaires, participants completed an experiential priming procedure in which they were randomly assigned to either a high- or low-power condition (adapted from Galinsky et al., 2006). In the *high-power condition*, participants were instructed to write about a time when they had a lot of power in their relationship. That is, a time when they had more control and influence in their relationships than their partners, such as when they were the ones making the decisions. In the *low-power condition*, they were instructed to write about a time when their partner had a lot of power over them in the relationship. This priming task reliably manipulates power and creates an experience similar to actually having power (e.g., Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). All participants were required to write for 3 min. Participants were then presented with a series of seemingly unrelated questions concerning their thoughts and feeling in their relationships, including their inclinations to take their partners' perspective. At the end of the study, they completed a measure of gratitude.

### Measures

*Self–other focus.* Self–other focus was measured as the extent to which people felt grateful toward their partners using the nine-item subscale of the Appreciation in Relationships

Scale (AIR; Gordon et al., 2012). Participants rated their agreement with items such as "I appreciate my partner" and "At times I take my partner for granted" (reverse scored) on 7-point scales (1 = *completely disagree* to 7 = *completely agree*). In this sample, alpha was .82. High- and low-power conditions did not differ in their ratings of gratitude toward their partners (high-power $M$ = 5.16; low-power $M$ = 5.12; $t$ < 1).

*Perspective-taking.* Participants responded to the question "Right now, how much do you think you try to take your partner's perspective on things?" on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *completely*).

*Manipulation check.* At the end of the study, participants answered the question "Earlier in the study you were asked to describe an experience of power in your relationship, how much power did you feel like you had during that experience?" on a 7-point scale (1 = *no power at all*, 4 = *equal power with my partner*, 7 = *complete power*).

## Results

*Manipulation check.* Participants in the high-power condition reported having significantly more power in the experiences they described ($M$ = 4.88) relative to those in the low-power condition ($M$ = 2.89), $t$(68) = 8.39, $p$ < .001.

*Analyses.* To assess whether and how power influenced self-reported perspective-taking, we regressed perspective-taking onto power condition (high power = .5, low power = −.5), standardized gratitude scores, and their interaction term. Gratitude was positively associated with perspective-taking, $\beta$ = .44, $t$(66) = 4.07, $p$ < .001. There was no effect of power, $\beta$ = −.03, $t$ < 1. Instead, as shown in Figure 1, the association between power and self-reported perspective-taking was significantly moderated by gratitude, $\beta$ = .23, $t$(66) = 2.27, $p$ < .03. Simple slopes analyses (Aiken & West, 1991) revealed that for *less*-grateful participants (−1 $SD$), there was a marginally significant negative association between power and perspective-taking, $\beta$ = −.28, $t$(66) = 1.84, $p$ = .07. In contrast, there was a nonsignificant positive association between power and perspective-taking for *more* grateful participants (+1 $SD$), $\beta$ = .22, $t$(66) = 1.39, $p$ = .17. Furthermore, in line with past research (Chen et al., 2001; Côté et al., 2011), power magnified the association between gratitude and perspective-taking such that the association was significant for those who recalled a time of high power, $\beta$ = .69, $t$(66) = 4.24, $p$ < .001, but not for those who recalled a time of low power, $\beta$ = .20, $t$(66) = 1.36, $p$ = .18.[1]

## Brief Discussion

In this study, the effects of power seemed to be driven by less-grateful participants reporting relatively worse perspective-taking when they recalled a time of high power. This is in contrast to research on power and perspective-taking
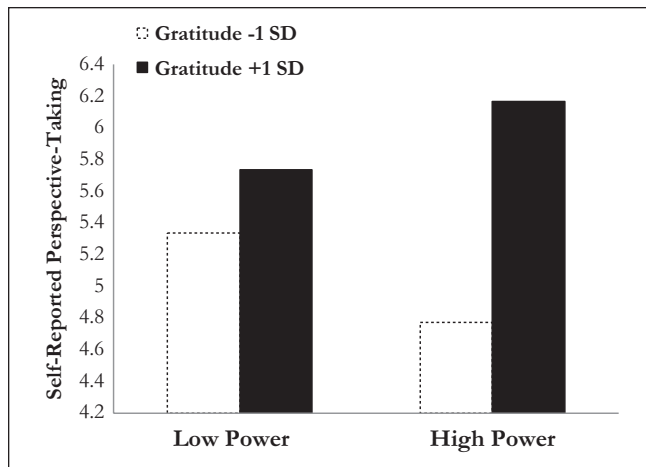
**Figure 1.** Gratitude moderates the association between experimentally induced power and self-reported perspective-taking in Study 1.

among strangers, in which the magnifying effects of power were mainly driven by other-focused individuals becoming even better perspective-takers (Côté et al., 2011, Studies 1 & 2; Schmid Mast et al., 2009, Studies 3 & 4). The lack of an effect among more grateful people in our study may be due to the fact that these people perceive themselves as inclined to perspective-take regardless of power. It may also reflect a ceiling effect given that the perspective-taking of more grateful participants in the high-power condition was estimated to be 6 on a 7-point scale.

In sum, Study 1 provides initial evidence that the effects of power on self-reported perspective-taking in romantic relationships are moderated by the degree to which people are relatively self- versus other-focused, consistent with but extending research on power and perspective-taking among strangers (Côté et al., 2011; Schmid Mast et al., 2009). This is also the first set of results to show that power influences self-reported attempts to perspective-take, suggesting that power influences not only people's ability to perspective-take but also their inclination to do so. One limitation of this study is that gratitude was assessed at the end of the study, which raises the possibility that it was influenced by the power manipulation. To address this limitation, we assess self–other focus prior to measuring power and perspective-taking in our remaining studies.

## Study 2

In Study 2, we examined whether our effects extended to natural variations in power. We surveyed people in romantic relationships each night for 2 weeks to examine the association between power and self-reported perspective-taking in daily life. In this study, self–other focus was measured using the Relational-Interdependent Self-Construal (RISC) Scale (Cross et al., 2000). Broadly speaking, people who score highly on this scale—that is, people who hold a relational

self-construal—are more other-focused. Their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are more colored by their close relationships than those of low scorers; for example, relative to low scorers, high scorers are more likely to consider the needs and opinions of relationship partners in their decision making (Cross et al., 2000), and are more apt to pursue goals related to their close relationships (Gore, Cross, & Kanagawa, 2009). We anticipated that among people who hold a more relational self-construal, power would be positively associated with self-reported perspective-taking, but among those who hold less of a relational self-construal, power would be negatively associated with self-reported perspective-taking.

### Method

*Participants and procedure.* In exchange for course credit, 62 undergraduates (52 women) at the University of California, Berkeley, currently in a romantic relationship of 6 months or longer were recruited. The sample was 59.1% Asian/Asian American, 21.2% European/European American, 6.1% Hispanic, 4.5% African/African American, and 9.1% of Other ethnicities. On average, participants were 21 years old ($SD = 2.69$, range = 18-32) and had been in their relationships for 2 years ($SD = 23.14$ months; range = 6 months-12 years).

Interested participants were directed to a secure website which they could access from wherever they chose to log on. On this website, they completed demographics and background measures, including a measure of relational self-construal. They were then given a link to another secure website which housed a short survey to be completed nightly for 2 weeks. Every night, participants answered questions about their romantic relationship including their perceptions of power in their relationship that day and their self-reported perspective-taking that day. Three participants did not have an adequate number of diaries. The remaining participants completed 765 diaries on time, an average of 12 days per person. Among them, 35 (56%) completed all 14 diaries on time.

*Self–other focus.* Self–other focus was measured with the 11-item RISC scale (Cross et al., 2000), which was adapted to be about the participant's current romantic partner (see Linardatos & Lydon, 2011, for a similar scale). Participants rated their agreement with items such as "My romantic relationship is an important reflection of who I am" and "When I think of myself, I often think of my romantic partner also" on 7-point scales from (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Alpha in this sample was .84.

*Daily measures. Power.* Each day, participants rated the extent to which they had experienced power in their relationship by responding to two questions: "Who had more power in your relationship today?" and "Who made more of the decisions in your relationship today?" using 100-point sliding scales (1 = *my partner did*; 50 = *both of us equally*; 100 = *I did*). Average within-day alpha was .85.
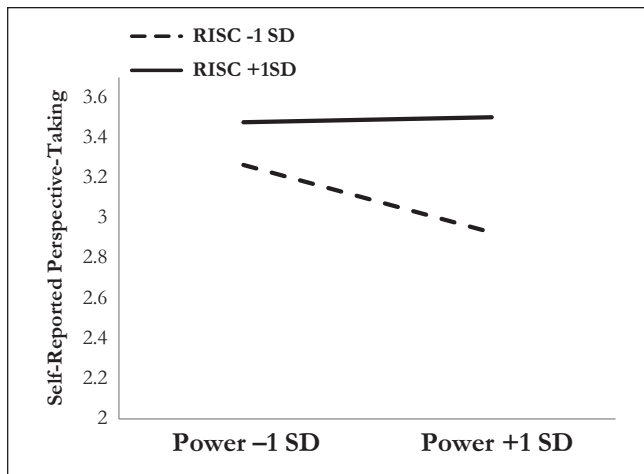
**Figure 2.** Relational self-construal (RISC) moderates the association between daily power and daily self-reported perspective-taking in Study 2.

*Self-reported perspective-taking.* Participants rated their agreement with the same item used in Study 1 but adapted to be about that day.

## Results

The data from the daily diaries consisted of up to 14 data points nested within each individual. Because these nested data violate assumptions of independence, we used a two-level Hierarchical Linear Model to conduct our regression analyses (HLMwin; Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, Congdon, & du Toit, 2004). Also, because the present study was, to the best of our knowledge, the first to examine the effects of daily power, we examined whether people did in fact vary in perceived power across the 14-day period. Participants used nearly the full range of the scale (17-100) with an average daily score of 52.93 (50 = *my partner and I have equal power*) and an average standard deviation of 13.02. Only five participants did not have any variability in their reported daily power.

*Analyses.* To test our main hypothesis, we regressed self-reported perspective-taking onto power (standardized), relational self-construal (standardized), and their interaction term. There was a marginally significant positive association between relational self-construal and perspective-taking, $B = .20$, $t(55) = 1.93$, $p < .06$. There was also a marginally significant negative association between power and perspective-taking, $B = -.08$, $t(657) = 1.70$, $p = .09$. However, as shown in Figure 2, these effects were qualified by a significant interaction between relational self-construal and power, $B = .09$, $t(657) = 1.98$, $p < .05$. Simple slopes analyses revealed that power was significantly negatively associated with perspective-taking for participants who were low in relational

self-construal ($-1$ *SD*), $B = -.17$, $t(657) = 2.50$, $p < .02$. That is, people who were lower in relational self-construal reported engaging in less perspective-taking on days when they felt more powerful in their relationships relative to days when they felt less powerful. There was no effect of power on perspective-taking among participants higher in relational self-construal ($+1$ *SD*), $B = .01$, $t < 1$. As in Study 1, these results fit the notion that power magnifies dispositional tendencies (Chen et al., 2001; Côté et al., 2011), with a significant effect of relational self-construal on perspective-taking on days when participants reported having more power in their relationships, $B = .29$, $t(657) = 2.57$, $p < .02$, but not on days when participants reported having less power, $B = .11$, $t < 1$.

### Brief Discussion

This study conceptually replicated our findings from Study 1 in a more naturalistic setting, providing evidence that daily variations in power are associated with self-reported perspective-taking of a romantic partner. As in Study 1, we found that power was negatively associated with perspective-taking for those who were more self-focused, but there was no association between power and perspective-taking for more other-focused participants. This pattern suggests that people who are more partner-focused (i.e., more grateful and more likely to incorporate their partners into their self-concept) may be motivated to perspective-take whether or not they have power. We return to this finding in the section "General Discussion."

## Study 3

In Studies 1 and 2, our measures capturing self–other focus were specific to participants' romantic relationships. In Study 3, we sought to replicate the daily experience findings of Study 2 using a more general measure of self–other focus. In particular, we examined people's social value orientation using the Social Value Orientation Scale (SVO; Messick & McClintock, 1968; Van Lange, Agnew, et al., 1997), which has the advantage of being less subject to social desirability bias and mood (e.g., Van Lange, Otten, De Bruin, & Joireman, 1997). The SVO Scale assesses how people divide up resources using deconstructed economic games—that is, whether people tend to maximize joint outcomes for themselves and their playing partner (i.e., be pro-*social*) or whether they tend to maximize their own outcomes (i.e., be pro*self*). In terms of self–other focus, then, social value orientation reflects whether one's general tendency is to notice and be concerned about others or to be more singularly focused on one's own needs. Research has shown that social value orientation influences how people behave in close relationships, with people who score as prosocial on the SVO Scale reporting being more willing to sacrifice for their partners (Van Lange, Agnew, et al., 1997; Study 1). Thus, we anticipated that power would be

negatively associated with self-reported perspective-taking among participants classified as proself, but positively associated with (or have no effect on) perspective-taking among participants classified as prosocial.

## Method

*Participants and procedure.* In exchange for course credit, 97 undergraduates (82 women) at the University of California, Berkeley, who were currently in a romantic relationship were recruited. The sample was 47.4% Asian/Asian American, 29.9% European/European American, 13.4% Hispanic, 1% African/African American, and 8.3% of Other ethnicities. On average, participants were 20 years old ($SD = 1.89$, range = 18-30) and had been in their relationships for 1 year and 8 months ($SD = 15.33$ months; range = 1 month-5 years).

Interested participants followed the same procedures from Study 2 except they only completed the daily surveys for 1 week. Two did not complete an adequate number of diaries. The remaining participants completed 581 diaries on time, an average of 6.12 (out of 7) days per person. Among them, 77% completed all 7 diaries on time.

*Self–other focus.* The nine-item SVO Scale presents participants with a series of decision scenarios which assess their preference for resource distribution between themselves and a hypothetical other. For each scenario, participants are given three choices: The *prosocial* choice, which maximizes the shared gain between themselves and the other person; the *individualistic* choice, which maximizes the participant's own gain independent of the gain of the other person; or the *competitive* choice, which maximizes the participant's own gain relative to the gain of the other person. Participants were classified into one of these orientations if they made at least six out of the nine choices consistent with that orientation (see Van Lange, Agnew, et al., 1997, for similar methods). Because we were interested in self–other focus and did not have hypotheses differentiating the individualistic and competitive choices, we created two groups of participants: those who were classified as prosocial (i.e., made at least six prosoical choices) and those who were classified as proself (i.e., made at least six individualistic or six competitive choices). Of these participants, 67 were classified as prosocial, 23 were classified as proself, and 7 were not classified.

*Daily measures.* *Power* was measured using the same two items from Study 2 as well as the item "Who had more control and influence over the other person in your relationship today?" measured on a 5-point scale (1 = *I did* to 5 = *my partner did*). This question was reverse scored and the three items were standardized and averaged (average within-day alpha was .81). *Self-reported perspective-taking* was measured with the same item used in Study 2.
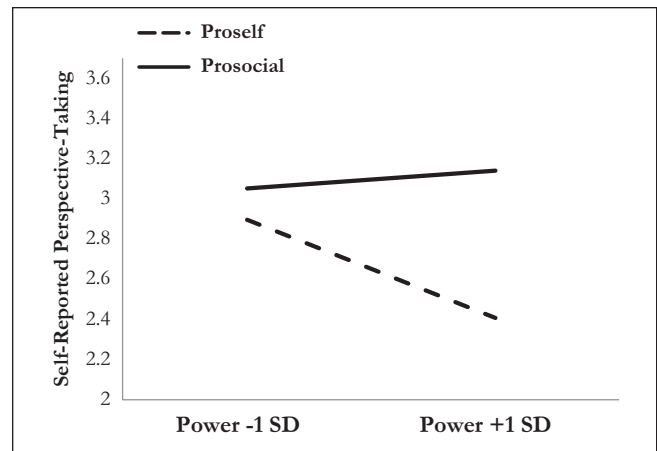


**Figure 3.** Social value orientation moderates the association between daily power and daily self-reported perspective-taking in Study 3.

## Results

We used the same data-analytic strategy described in Study 2. In terms of daily variations in power, each item was standardized prior to aggregation and scores ranged from −3.27 to 3.41 with an average daily score of −.01 (0 = *equal power*) and an average standard deviation of .89. Only six participants did not have any variability in their reported daily power.

*Analyses.* We regressed daily self-reported perspective-taking onto power (standardized), social value orientation (standardized), and their interaction term. Social value orientation was positively associated with perspective-taking, $B = .44$, $t(86) = 2.37$, $p < .02$ and power was negatively associated with perspective-taking, $B = −.10$, $t(531) = 2.00$, $p < .05$. As anticipated, however, these effects were qualified by a significant interaction between daily power and social value orientation, $B = .29$, $t(531) = 2.86$, $p < .01$. As shown in Figure 3 and replicating the pattern of our previous findings, power and perspective-taking were negatively associated for people who were proself, $B = −.24$, $t(531) = 3.00$, $p < .01$. In contrast, there was no effect of power on perspective-taking for those who were prosocial, $B = .04$, $t < 1$. As in the previous two studies, the association between social value orientation and perspective-taking was significant on days when people had more power in their relationships, $B = .73$, $t(86) = 3.29$, $p < .01$, but not on days when people had less power, $B = .15$, $t < 1$.

## Brief Discussion

These findings show that the influence of social value orientation is magnified by power within the context of close relationships, at least for those who are proself. That is, even in ongoing romantic relationships where communal expectations are high (Mills & Clark, 1994), people who are more

proself report engaging in less perspective-taking on days when they feel more powerful. The findings from our first three studies present a fairly consistent pattern of results; however, the focus so far has been on self-reported perspective-taking. These self-report findings suggest that within romantic relationships, power influences people's reported inclinations to perspective-take, but it is still important to know whether our effects extend to people's actual ability to take a romantic partner's perspective.

## Study 4

In Study 4, we brought both members of romantic couples into the laboratory to engage in a conversation about a source of conflict in their relationship. Conflicts occur when people have opposing opinions, making perspective-taking extremely important and difficult. This study also extends our previous studies by combining experimental and dyadic interaction methodology, allowing us to capture the dynamics of power as romantic partners interacted with each other. We manipulated power by randomly assigning one partner to be high power during the conversation (e.g., choosing the conversation topic, being assigned as the "discussion leader") and the other partner to be low power (e.g., being told to follow their partner's lead). After the conflict conversation, participants rated the extent to which they and their partners had experienced a variety of emotions during the conversation. By comparing participants' perceptions of their partner's emotions with their partner's actual emotion ratings, we were able to create an index of empathic accuracy, a measure of perspective-taking ability.

### Method

*Participants and procedure.* Seventy-two couples (71 heterosexual and 1 lesbian) were recruited through online advertisements, flyers posted through the University of California, Berkeley campus and community, and University of California, Berkeley Psychology courses. The sample was 40.3% Asian/Asian American, 36.1% European/European American, 9.0% Hispanic, 1.4% African/African American, and 13.2% Other ethnicities. On average, the participants were 22 years old ($SD$ = 5.40; range = 18-56) and had been involved in their relationships for 1 year and 9 months ($SD$ = 21.38 months; range = 1 month-8 years). Each partner was compensated with US$10 or course credits, and each couple was entered into a lottery for a chance to win US$75.

Interested couples scheduled a laboratory session through email. Two days before their session, each partner was sent an email directing them to a secure website with background measures, including the SVO Scale. During the laboratory session, couples filled out measures on the computer and participated in two videotaped conversations. The first conversation was a teamwork task designed to help the couples become comfortable with interacting in the laboratory. For this conversation, couples were given the Winter Survival Exercise (Johnson & Johnson, 2003). The second conversation was about a source of conflict in their relationship. The partner in the high-power role selected the topic and the couples were given 5 min to work toward a resolution. After the conflict conversation, the partners returned to their computers and completed questions pertaining to the conversation.

*Power manipulation.* One member of each couple was randomly assigned to the *high-power* role. Prior to the conflict conversation, high-power participants were instructed that they were going to take part in a conversation about a source of conflict in their relationship and that they had been picked to be "in charge." They were presented with three sources of conflict in their relationships that they had previously listed and were asked to pick one to discuss with their partner. After choosing the source of conflict, they alerted the experimenter who gave them a clipboard and asked them to write down the topic and to write their name as the "leader." During this time, participants assigned to the *low-power* role were instructed that they were going to have a conversation about a source of conflict in their relationship and that their partner had been selected to be in charge. They were instructed to sit and wait while their partner picked the topic to be discussed. The experimenter then took the clipboard back from the high-power partner and led the couple over to the conversation area.

Once the couple was seated, the experimenter explained that the couple would be working toward a resolution on a source of conflict in their relationship and that the researchers were interested in how couples resolve conflict when one partner is in charge. The experimenter handed the clipboard back to the high-power partner, emphasizing that he or she had chosen the topic, was in charge of the conversation, and could lead the conversation in any way he or she wanted. The experimenter also reminded the low-power partner that he or she should follow the other partner's lead. The experimenter then placed a sign labeled "Discussion Leader" in front of the high-power partner and left the room.

*Self–other focus.* Self–other focus was again measured with the SVO Scale. Of the participants, 71 were classified as prosocial, 22 were classified as proself, and 10 were unclassified.

*Empathic accuracy.* We assessed empathic accuracy by having participants report on their own and their partners' experiences during the conversation for a variety of different emotions (angry, anxious, appreciated, appreciative, ashamed, cared for, caring, confident, defensive, insecure, rejected, resentful, sad) on 5-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *a lot*). We were interested in participants' ability to accurately discern the extent to which partners were experiencing particular emotions (i.e., mean-level bias; Fletcher & Kerr, 2010) because this measure has been linked to relationship

quality (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010). To do so, we took the absolute value of the difference between participants' ratings of how much they thought their partners had experienced a particular emotion and their partners' actual self-reported experience of that emotion (see Côté et al., 2011 Study 1, for the same method). We averaged the accuracy scores for all of the emotions together ($\alpha = .72$) and multiplied them by $-1$ so that higher scores reflected greater empathic accuracy. Scores ranged from $-2.14$ (least accurate) to $-0.07$ (most accurate). The average score was $-.86$ ($SD = .42$).

*Manipulation check*. We had two manipulation checks: First, at the very end of the study, participants were asked to identify who was in charge during the conflict conversation ($1 = $ *my partner was*; $2 = $ *we both were*; $3 = $ *I was*). Second, embedded among the postconflict conversation questionnaires was the same three-item measure of power used in Study 3 with the items adapted to be about participants' experience of power during the conflict conversation (alpha = .89).

## Results

Because this study included both members of romantic couples, violating assumptions of independence, we analyzed the data using multilevel modeling with PASW 18.0 mixed models (IBM SPSS, 2009). For these analyses, we treated the dyads as distinguishable, with power role as the distinguishing variable.

*Manipulation check.* Four participants in the low-power condition identified themselves as "in charge" and one participant in the high-power condition identified their partner as "in charge." In addition, 34 participants (21 high power and 13 low power) reported that "we were both in charge." Because our focus was on the effects of power differences on perspective-taking, we eliminated participants who incorrectly identified which partner was in charge or reported equal power during the conversation.[2] An additional couple was removed because one partner did not follow instructions and completed the postconflict questionnaires prior to the conflict conversation. Of the remaining 103 participants, there were similar numbers of men and women in each condition (high power = 26 females, 23 males; low power = 26 females, 28 males) and people who were assigned to the high-power role reported feeling significantly more powerful ($M = .55$) relative to participants assigned to the low-power role ($M = -.54$), $F(1, 65) = 37.05$, $p < .001$.

*Analyses.* We conducted a 2 (high vs. low power) × 2 (prosocial vs. proself) analysis with empathic accuracy as the outcome variable. There was a significant main effect of power, $F(1, 55) = 4.53$, $p < .04$, but no effect of social value orientation, $F(1, 71) = 1.58$, $p > .21$. This main effect was qualified by the predicted significant interaction, $F(1, 64) = 9.25$, $p < .01$.[3] As
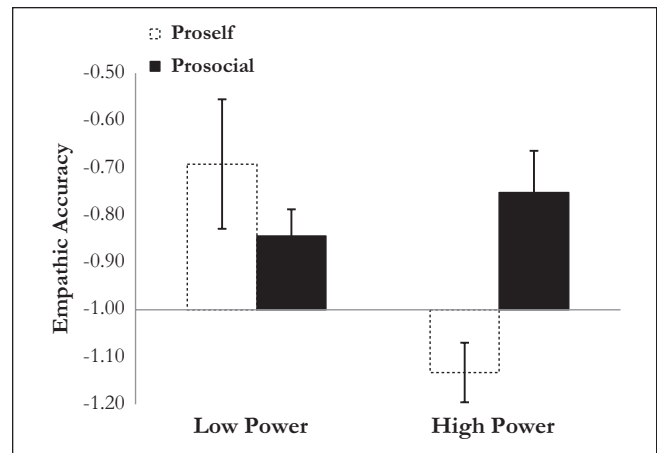


**Figure 4.** Social value orientation moderates the association between role-based power and empathic accuracy in Study 4.
*Note.* More positive scores are associated with greater empathic accuracy. Error bars represent standard errors.

shown in Figure 4, among those who were proself, being placed in the role as the discussion leader led to less empathic accuracy of the partner's emotions, $t(63) = 2.80$, $p < .01$. In contrast, for those who were more prosocial, having power had a nonsignificant positive effect on empathic accuracy, $t(39) = 1.42$, $p < .17$. Replicating the previous studies, the association between social value orientation and empathic accuracy was significant for high-power participants, $t(44) = 2.57$, $p < .02$, but not low-power participants, $t(46) = 1.50$, $p < .14$.

In addition to our primary analysis, we conducted two additional analyses to rule out potential alternative explanations for our findings. One potential alternative explanation when using a mean-level bias measure of empathic accuracy is that we are capturing differences not in empathic accuracy but in the mean levels of emotions expressed. To rule out this possibility, we ran an additional analysis in which we used profile correlations as our measure of empathic accuracy. Profile correlations assess tracking accuracy (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010). That is, they measure the extent to which an individual accurately reports how much a target experienced an emotion relative to the other emotions that were measured. Because this measure assesses relative differences in emotions, it is not confounded by the mean levels of emotions expressed. When using profile correlations, we found a significant interaction of power and social value orientation, $F(1, 77) = 4.29$, $p < .05$, which replicated our main analysis such that among proself individuals, power decreased empathic accuracy, high-power $r = .03$, low-power $r = .34$; $t(72) = 2.03$, $p < .05$, but there was no effect of power on empathic accuracy among prosocial individuals (high-power $r = .38$, low-power $r = .33$; $t < 1$). The consistency of the results across these two different measures of empathic accuracy provides evidence that our findings reflect differences in empathic accuracy and are not specific to a particular type of measurement.

A second potential alternative explanation is that our effects are being influenced by the partners' level of self–other focus. People who are more prosocial are more engaging and expressive during interactions (e.g., Kogan et al., 2011), so it may be that the partner's level of social value orientation is influencing empathic accuracy. To rule out this possibility, we reran our analyses controlling for partner social value orientation, as well as the interaction between power and partner social value orientation. Even when taking into account the partner's social value orientation, the Power × Social value orientation interaction remained significant, $F(1, 57) = 6.77$, $p < .02$. In contrast, power did not modify the association between partner social value orientation and own empathic accuracy ($F < 1$).

### Brief Discussion

The results from this study replicate and extend our previous studies by showing that self–other focus moderates not just the association between power and self-reported perspective-taking in romantic relationships, but also between power and actual perspective-taking during a conflict conversation. However, in contrast to the previous studies, in this study, there was a trend among low-power participants such that proself participants were more accurate at predicting their partners' emotions (shown in Figure 4). Although this effect differs from our previous findings, it is consistent with the trend found by Côté and colleagues (2011; Study 1) using the same measure of empathic accuracy between strangers. More self-focused people tend to be more concerned with protecting their own outcomes; thus, when they are in a low-power position during a conflict, they may pay particularly close attention to their partners' emotions to protect their self-interests (Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, & White, 2008).

## General Discussion

Conflicting lines of research suggest that having power in one's relationship hurts (e.g., Galinsky et al., 2006; Thomas et al., 1972) and helps (e.g., Karremans & Smith, 2010; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) perspective-taking of close others. We attempted to reconcile these competing viewpoints by testing the hypothesis that power diminishes perspective-taking of relationship partners among those who are more self-focused, but promotes it among those who are more other-focused. Consistent with our hypothesis, four studies provided evidence that power diminishes perspective-taking among individuals who are more self-focused: In Study 1, recalling a time of high (vs. low) power diminished self-reported perspective-taking among those who were less grateful toward their romantic partners. In Study 2, people who tended not to define themselves in terms of their relationship partners reported being less likely to take their partners' perspective on days when they felt more powerful in their relationships relative to days when they felt less powerful.

Whereas Studies 1 and 2 used relationship-specific measures of self–other focus, the latter two studies relied on a social value orientation measure to capture a general tendency to be self- versus other-focused: Study 3 replicated Study 2 using this dispositional measure of prosocial orientation. Finally, in Study 4, people who were classified as proself were less empathically accurate when put in charge of a conflict conversation relative to their low-power counterparts. Taken together, our findings suggest that among more self-focused individuals, power can undermine self-reported and actual perspective-taking, which are vital to relationship functioning.

In contrast, we did not find a significant effect of power on perspective-taking among people who are more other-focused. That is, people who were more grateful for their partners, incorporated their partners more into their self-concept, and had a prosocial orientation toward others reported relatively high levels of perspective-taking regardless of whether they had power in their relationships. This is a point we return to below.

Across studies, we used three different measures to assess self–other focus, including relationship-specific and general measures. By finding consistent effects across these diverse measures, we have some evidence that the association between power and perspective-taking is not being moderated by a specific measure or personality trait. Instead, we argue that these diverse measures reflect a more general tendency to be relatively aware of and focused on others (both relationship partners and others more generally) rather than singularly concerned with oneself. Although it is possible that rather than tapping into the shared underlying construct of self–other focus, our studies show that a diverse set of constructs moderate the associations between power and perspective-taking, this would be a considerably less-parsimonious account of our findings. Of course, future research using other constructs associated with self–other focus would be useful.

### Extending Research on Power and Perspective-Taking

The current set of studies provides several theoretical and methodological advances to extant research on power and perspective-taking. First, our findings shed further light on the relative influence of power on perspective-taking for people who are more self- versus other-focused. In line with theorizing about the magnifying effect of power on dispositional tendencies (Chen et al., 2001), in all four studies, we found that the association between self–other focus and perspective-taking was only significant under conditions of power. However, we found that these magnifying effects were strongest for more self-focused individuals, whereas more other-focused individuals tended to report high levels of perspective-taking regardless of their power. These findings are in contrast to the prior work with strangers which has shown that the magnifying effects of power are largely

driven by the other-focused becoming better perspective-takers under conditions of power (Côté et al., 2011; Schmid Mast et al., 2009). One reason for this difference may be that, unlike interactions with strangers, romantic relationships are characterized by interdependence (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) and governed by communal norms (Mills & Clark, 1994). Romantic partners are expected to engage in relationship-maintenance cognitions and behaviors, such as perspective-taking. Thus, within stranger interactions where people are more self-protective, power may serve to amplify the good; but in close relationships where being other-focused is the norm, power may serve to unleash the antisocial tendencies of those people who are more self-focused. Given that this is the first set of studies to show such effects, more work is clearly needed to explore the possibility that power magnifies dispositional tendencies in unique ways for different types of relationships.

A second extension of the current research is the inclusion of self-report measures of perspective-taking in addition to a measure of empathic accuracy. Accurate perspective-taking is important for outcomes such as achieving social adjustment (Gleason, Jensen-Campbell, & Ickes, 2009), but cannot speak to the roles of motivation and awareness in perspective-taking. Theoretical accounts of power suggest that the effect of power on perspective-taking is a story of motivation (Guinote, 2007; Keltner et al., 2003), and the results from our studies provide further support for this proposition. In our first three studies, we found that more self-focused individuals reported *trying* less hard to take their partner's perspective when they had power. That is, power appeared to allow people who were more self-focused to shut off attempts at understanding their partners. The strongest evidence for this comes from our two daily experience studies in which self-reported attempts to perspective-take fluctuated from day to day as a function of people's perceived power in their relationship that day. These results also suggest the intriguing possibility that people may be aware of the influence of power on their perspective-taking, a possibility left unaddressed in prior work. Moreover, recent research suggests that self-reported perspective-taking may at times be more important for relationship quality than actual knowledge about others, particularly in close relationships (Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009); thus, it is imperative to uncover factors that influence self-reported perspective-taking as well as perspective-taking accuracy.

Finally, prior work has largely assessed perspective-taking when there is little disincentive to perspective-take (e.g., correctly identifying emotion in photographs of strangers). The current research examined whether power influences perspective-taking in a situation in which people may be motivated to disengage from perspective-taking—namely, during a conflict conversation. Conflict occurs when opinions clash, creating a disincentive to perspective-take. We found that even in a conflict situation, power influenced empathic accuracy.

## The Role of Power in Close Relationships

This research also provides methodological contributions to the close relationships literature. Research on power in romantic relationships has tended to focus on measured power, such as income disparities or perceived power (e.g., Felmlee, 1994; Inesi et al., 2012; Karremans & Smith, 2010). In Studies 1 and 4, we examined the effects of manipulated power on relationship outcomes. In the other two studies, we assessed daily variations in power within the relationship. In these studies, participants experienced variability in their perceived power from one day to the next. Together, these studies suggest that at least within young adult romantic relationships, power is not an established phenomenon and people may feel powerful and dependent within the same relationship. Future research should examine whether long-term couples experience the same variability in power.

Research on perspective-taking in close relationships has tended to focus on the benefits of perspective-taking for personal and relationship well-being (Kilpatrick et al., 2002; Long & Andrews, 1990; Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009). Less research has explored factors that influence perspective-taking. We uncovered two such factors: power and self–other focus. As a whole, our findings add to the literature on perspective-taking by demonstrating that situational and dispositional factors influence when and whether people will take the perspective of a close other. We urge researchers to consider other important factors that might influence self-reported and actual perspective-taking.

## Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, self-reported perspective-taking was assessed with a single item. The item was highly face valid and produced similar results across studies, but using a single-item measure does introduce a greater likelihood of measurement error than if we had used a multi-item measure. It is also important to note that Studies 1 and 2 relied heavily on a female population. However, we had nearly equal numbers of men and women in our final study and we did not find consistent gender differences in any of the studies, suggesting that our effects are similar across genders. Still, future research should examine the potential role of gender more systematically.

In addition, although we deliberately chose to focus on perspective-taking within romantic relationships, by doing so, we cannot say whether our findings would generalize to other types of close relationships. We speculate that in other types of close relationships, such as friend or parent–child relationships, we would see similar effects, with self–other focus moderating the association between power and perspective-taking. However, research is needed to test these speculations.

As noted, we focused mainly on romantic relationships between young adults. Expectations and norms change when

people get married and settle into long-term relationships. On one hand, people tend to engage in less perspective-taking over the course of a relationship (Kilpatrick et al., 2002). On the other hand, people's outcomes become even more entwined over time, making perspective-taking more critical. People also tend to become more other-focused as they get older (e.g., Carstensen, 1992; Terracciano, McCrae, Brant, & Costa, 2005), so people who were once more self-focused may become more other-focused over time. In this case, power may begin to increase perspective-taking among people who at one time were less likely to perspective-take under conditions of power. Again, future research is needed to test such possibilities.

## Concluding Comments

Across four studies, we found that whether power helps or hurts perspective-taking in romantic relationships depends on people's tendency to be relatively self- versus other-focused. These findings extend the literature on power and perspective-taking into the domain of close relationships and show that power influences self-reported and actual perspective-taking in the lab, in everyday life, and during times of conflict when perspective-taking can be especially unappealing and challenging.

### Notes

1.  Across studies, our effects remained significant when controlling for gender ($p$s < .05). Gender moderated only one effect: In Study 3, there was a marginally significant effect ($p$ = .09) such that the interaction held for women, but for men, there was only a negative association between power and perspective-taking. Given the small number of men in this sample and the lack of consistency across studies, we refrain from interpreting this finding.
2.  These participants did not differ in baseline power from participants who correctly identified the in-charge partner ($p$ > .21), nor did they differ in terms of relationship duration, age, or relationship satisfaction ($p$s > .44). In addition, there was no evidence that the people who failed the manipulation check

experienced a greater mismatch between their trait and state power than participants who did not fail the manipulation check ($p$ > .76). However, for those participants who incorrectly identified which partner was in charge, there were no significant differences between power conditions in reported power during the conflict conversation (high-power $M = -.05$, low-power $M = -.03$; $F < 1$), suggesting that they were not affected by the power manipulation.

3.  The degrees of freedom for our fixed effects were calculated using the Satterthwaite (1946) approximation. This method of approximation, recommended by Campbell and Kashy (2002), yields degrees of freedom for each predictor that are somewhere between the number of dyads and the number of individuals in the study.

    We reanalyzed our data including those 34 participants who had reported that both partners were in charge. The interaction between power and social value orientation remained significant, $F(1, 79) = 4.41$, $p < .05$, and the plotted interaction was the same pattern as with the restricted sample.

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