

Do Lower-Power Individuals Really Compete Less? An Investigation of Covert Competition

Yufei Zhong,^a Huisi (Jessica) Li^{b,*}

^aScheller College of Business, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, Georgia 30308; ^bFoster School of Business, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98195

*Corresponding author

Contact: yufei.zhong@scheller.gatech.edu, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0004-0403> (YZ); huisili@uw.edu, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7881-7809> (HJ)L

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Abstract. Competition is one of the defining features of organizational life. In this research, we identify a prevalent but overlooked type of competition—covert competition, which we define as behaviors with the intention to win (i.e., advancing one’s interest/position while disregarding or hurting the other party’s interest/position) that are unclear to or hidden from the other party. We argue that one’s relative power in dyadic social relationships influences covert competition. Based on the theory of power dependence, we expect that lower-power individuals are more likely than higher-power individuals to compete covertly. This is because lower-power individuals fear the potential negative repercussions of revealing their competitiveness, which motivates them to engage in more covert competition. Lower-power individuals’ ability to escape from the current relationship mitigates the effects of having lower power on such fear and on their subsequent covert competition. With five experiments and a three-wave longitudinal survey study, we find support for our hypotheses. This research calls attention to the understudied covert form of competition and emphasizes the nuanced relationships between power and competitive behaviors.

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During the Spring and Autumn period of China (770–476 BC), the powerful state of Wu invaded the less powerful state of Yue and captured its king, Gou Jian. To survive, Gou Jian feigned loyalty to the King of Wu and became his servant. Years later, Gou Jian was allowed to return to his native state. Determined to defeat Wu, Gou Jian chose to live a life of hardship and discipline: he slept on firewood and tasted the bitterness of gall before meals and bed, in order to fuel his competitive drive against Wu. He secretly gathered a military force and kept it under wraps for years. Eventually, Gou Jian grew powerful, seized an opportunity, and wiped out the state of Wu.

—Sima Qian in *The Records of the Grand Historian*

When able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our force, we must seem inactive.

—Sun Tzu in *The Art of War*

Competition has long been a central topic in social science research. We define competition as behaviors with the intention to win or to defeat others (i.e., advancing one’s interest/position while disregarding or hurting the other party’s interest/position in interpersonal situations) (Helmreich et al. 1978, Kilduff et al. 2010, To et al. 2020). Competition occurs when individuals act in ways

that maximize their rewards and minimize their costs relative to others (Kelley and Thibaut 1978). It is especially prevalent in today’s organizations, in which many personnel decisions are based on employees’ relative contributions and performance (Yarrow 2012, Swisher 2013, Jackson 2021). Researchers tend to highlight the overt side of competition, characterizing it as fierce, intense, and even cutthroat, such as verbal intimidation and physical threat (Johnson et al. 2006, Hays and Bendersky 2015).

Although viewing competition through this lens has been beneficial, it fails to capture the full picture of competition in the real world, where individuals often hide their competitiveness and advance their positions secretly. We propose a type of overlooked and understudied competitive behavior, *covert competition*, which we define as behaviors with the intention to win (i.e., advancing one’s interest/position while disregarding or hurting the other party’s interest/position) that are unclear to or hidden from the other party. Covert competition includes, for example, anonymously criticizing competitors’ work, withholding or providing false information, and working extra hours to outperform competitors. Our opening quote from the ancient Chinese military strategist Sun

Tzu (“When able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our force, we must seem inactive”) also highlights the covert form of competition. Covert competition differs from the type that has been the focus of previous research, *overt competition*, which we define as behaviors with the intention to win that are *apparent* to the other party. The difference between them lies in whether the competitive intention is explicit. Differentiating covert competition from overt competition is important because they may relate differently to antecedents (such as one’s level of power).

In this paper, we investigate how one’s *relative power in a dyadic social relationship* influences covert competition. Power, defined as the asymmetric control over valued resources in social relationships, is a fundamental, prevalent, and salient aspect of social relationships (Magee and Galinsky 2008). Previous research demonstrates that higher-power individuals are more likely to compete, such as disagreeing with others directly (Cislak et al. 2018), taking money from a collective pool (de Cremer and van Dijk 2005), or asserting one’s opinions over others’ opinions (Hays and Bendersky 2015). Hays and Bendersky (2015) go as far as concluding that “low-power individuals will refrain from self-interested, competitive behaviors because these behaviors are unlikely to lead to upward mobility and may instead result in reprisals from people with high power” (Hays and Bendersky 2015, p. 869). However, other research suggests that lower-power individuals may *not* give up competing completely. This is because hierarchical differences induce a competitive organizational climate (Fath and Kay 2018), and the presence of a higher-power counterpart makes team members (including those with lower power) more likely to be sensitive to power and thus, behave in self-interested ways (Greer et al. 2017). We reason that such a climate and sensitivity will make the lower-power individuals compete at least to some extent.

Although the previous literature has shown that lower-power individuals tend to refrain from overt competition, we predict that they may resort to *covert* competition. As the opening story illustrated, it is not surprising that when Gou Jian was a powerless captive, he served the enemy king and that after he had accumulated a powerful military force, he defeated his enemy. What is interesting and the hidden key to Gou Jian’s success—a facet overlooked by his enemy and our prior literature alike—is that when he had just been released and had lower power, he made a tremendous effort to compete covertly with his more powerful enemy (e.g., secretly gathering a military force and intentionally sacrificing comforts to fuel competitive drives). These effects of power on overt and covert competition are not only observed anecdotally but are also corroborated by a plethora of empirical studies, which we will review in a later section.

We further argue that the fear of potential negative repercussions explains why lower power leads to covert

competition. Because those with higher power can modify the states of those with lower power (e.g., through administering punishments and allocating resources), lower-power people are forewarned against escalating tensions with the powerful. Instead, competing covertly may allow lower-power individuals’ competitive intention to go undetected or to be denied when discovered. Moreover, we expect lower-power individuals to be more fearful and thus, to compete covertly when they perceive low escapability from the current relationship—that is, when they believe that leaving their relationship with the current colleague, boss, team, or organization is less feasible. In contrast, when they perceive high escapability, their lower power is less likely to drive their fear of repercussions and covert competition.

Our study contributes to the literature on power and competition in three ways. First, we contribute to the competition literature by making a critical distinction between covert and overt competition. A lack of this distinction creates theoretical confusion. For example, some behaviors driven by the goal to defeat others may not be considered competitive simply because the intention to compete is not as obvious. Although most previous studies on competition—particularly those that rely on *others’* reports and observations—do not account for covert competition, our emphasis on covert competition allows researchers to broaden the scope of competitive behaviors and bring new insights to the literature.

Second, we present a more nuanced picture of the power-competition relationship. We argue that lower-power individuals, contrary to popular belief, are not simply less competitive than higher-power individuals. Instead, lower-power individuals are more likely to compete *differently*—that is, *covertly*—than those with higher power. By testing the relationship between power and covert competition, we move beyond the debate over *whether* lower-power individuals compete and highlight *how* and *when* they compete and *why* they compete in such ways.

Finally, we foster a better understanding of the psychology of low power. As Schaerer et al. (2018) note, prior power research has placed a strong emphasis on high power, inferring that the effects of low power are simply the opposite of those of high power. These assumptions potentially contribute to an insufficient and inaccurate understanding of low power. In this research, we focus on a psychological mechanism (i.e., the fear of potential repercussions) and a behavioral outcome (i.e., covert competition) that are unique to people with lower power in a dyadic social relationship, as opposed to those with higher or equal power.

Theory and Hypotheses

Covert Competition

Although research on covert competition is scant, scholars have studied a range of other covert behaviors. For

example, constructs such as covert victimization (Jensen et al. 2014), covert retaliation (Wang et al. 2012), and subtle flattery (Stern and Westphal 2010) have attracted considerable research attention. According to prior conceptualizations of *covert*, the ambiguity of a behavior's intention distinguishes covert from overt behavior (Jensen et al. 2014, Schilpzand et al. 2016). For example, subtle flattery, which allows actors to disavow their ingratulatory intention while still gaining favor through this deliberate effort (Stern and Westphal 2010), is a covert behavior. In short, covert behaviors help actors evade detection (Aquino 2000). In line with prior conceptualizations of covert behaviors, we define covert competition as behaviors with the intention to win (i.e., to advance one's interest/position while disregarding or damaging others' interests/positions) that are unclear to or hidden from the other party. Covert competition involves both competitive behaviors that are hidden from others (e.g., stealing a coworker's clients) and behaviors that are in the open but have ambiguous intentions (e.g., putting in extra hours at work). People engage in covert competition to conceal their competitive intentions in hopes of advancing without attracting undue attention.

Covert competition is related to but distinct from some counterproductive work behaviors, such as ostracism, social undermining, and interpersonal deviance, in terms of (a) its objective and (b) ambiguity of intention. First, although the goal of covert competition is to surpass the opposing party while benefitting oneself, the goals of other behaviors can vary. For example, one may *ostracize* a coworker (e.g., ignoring them at work) (Ferris et al. 2008) to show disdain or disliking (Howard et al. 2020). Second, although the intention behind covert competition is ambiguous, the intentions behind the other behaviors may be explicit. For example, one may *overtly undermine* a coworker by belittling that person's ideas (Robinson and Bennett 1995, Duffy et al. 2002) or sabotaging that person's performance (Vriend et al. 2016). In addition to these two main differences, covert competition may sometimes be ethical, productive, and desirable for organizations (e.g., privately working longer hours than competitors do), whereas the other behaviors are typically unethical, unproductive, or undesirable (e.g., displaying *interpersonal deviance* by making derogatory remarks) (Berry et al. 2007, Xu et al. 2020).

Power and Competition

Although some previous studies show that higher-power individuals are more likely to compete, others suggest that lower-power individuals may *not* completely give up competing. To thoroughly and systematically synthesize previous work on power and competition, we conducted a systematic literature review. The appendix contains the search criteria and a detailed summary of the papers. We organized the papers based on their dependent variables: (a) overt competition (i.e., overtly self-advancing

while other-harming), (b) overtly self-advancing behaviors, (c) overtly other-harming behaviors, and (d) covert competition. Although these papers may not label their dependent variables as such, we categorized them based on how they conceptualize and operationalize these constructs.

A plethora of research has shown that power holders are more likely to engage in *overt competition*. For example, powerful individuals are more likely to take more resources from the public pool while leaving less for others (de Cremer and van Dijk 2005, Georgesen and Harris 2006, van Dijk and de Cremer 2006); to disagree with others directly (Anicich et al. 2016, Cislak et al. 2018); to discourage, undermine, and interfere with others' performance (Tjosvold 1985, Cho and Fast 2012); to profit at the expense of others (Cislak et al. 2018); and to make the first move in debates and negotiations, a competitive tactic that can lead to better outcomes (Magee et al. 2007, Lambers et al. 2008, Blader and Chen 2012). We categorized all of these behaviors as overt competition; they explicitly better the actors' outcomes while worsening their interaction partners' outcomes, and they are shown to be positively associated with having higher power.

Other papers, although not directly measuring overt competition, examine overtly *self-advancing* or *other-harming* behaviors. On the one hand, higher-power individuals tend to act in self-serving ways, such as approaching one's goals without regard for others (Galinsky et al. 2003) and altering answers after a test is finished (Yap et al. 2013). On the other hand, they are more likely to harm others, such as directly expressing anger over others' mistakes (Petkanopoulou et al. 2019) and acting rudely and disrespectfully in negotiations (Blader and Chen 2012). Taken together, research on self-advancing and other-harming behaviors is in line with the conclusion that power drives overt competition.

Although previous research has not explicitly examined the relationship between power and *covert competition*, a few papers provide suggestive evidence. For example, when telling lies can hurt the competitor and benefit the self, lower-power participants are more likely to do so than higher-power participants (Koning et al. 2011). Past work also shows that lower-power individuals exhibit more aggression when harm can be inflicted without the victim's knowledge (e.g., putting needles in a doll that represents the victim) (Greitemeyer and Sagioglou 2019). Similarly, whereas lower-power individuals are less likely to express anger directly at the wrongdoer, they are more likely to share their anger with others when the wrongdoer is absent (Petkanopoulou et al. 2019). These studies support the idea that lower-power individuals are more likely to compete in ways that allow them to conceal their competitive intentions. In the next section, we discuss why lower-power individuals are more likely to engage in covert competition.

Lower-Power and Covert Competition: Fear of Repercussions as the Mediating Mechanism

The theory of power dependence suggests that in a social relationship, the higher-power actor is relatively independent of the lower-power individual, whereas the latter is dependent on the former for essential resources (Emerson 1962, Keltner et al. 2003, Guinote 2004, Galinsky et al. 2008, Wee et al. 2017). As Magee and Galinsky (2008, p. 361) note,

these resources also can have a positive or negative value. Positively valued resources include rewards and any resource that one would want more of. Negatively valued resources include punishments and any resource that one would want less of. Thus, an individual may have power because he or she possesses or has access to a positively valued resource and/or the capacity to distribute a negatively valued resource, such as undesirable tasks or hazardous waste, to others. Similarly, the powerful may be able to withhold or provide positive resources to others (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978), or they may be able to take away or administer negative resources.

This conceptualization of power is consistent with previous work on interdependence (Kelley et al. 2003), which links power relationships with asymmetric dependence. This line of work corroborates that higher-power individuals have control over their own and their lower-power partner's outcomes (Rusbult and Van Lange 2008, Balliet et al. 2017, Gerpott et al. 2018).

Because of such dependence, lower-power individuals have a natural fear of revealing their competitive motives to their high-power interaction partners. Lower-power individuals often encounter and are acutely aware of potential social and material threats, especially the threat of losing favor with the power holders. As a result, "the powerless are more likely to see potential hazards lurking about" (Magee and Galinsky 2008, p. 366). Indeed, individuals higher in the hierarchy react strongly to defend against challenges to their social standing (Pettit et al. 2010, Case and Maner 2014, Hays and Bendersky 2015). When their standing is threatened, higher-power individuals act self-servingly, compete overtly, and penalize their lower-standing competitors for challenging the hierarchy and trying to claim more resources (Anderson et al. 2006, 2008). Thus, we predict that lower-power individuals, in an attempt to avoid these potential negative outcomes, will hide their competitive motive and compete covertly.¹

Hypothesis 1. *Compared with people with higher power, people with lower power are more likely to engage in covert competition.*

Hypothesis 2. *Fear of repercussions mediates the negative relationship between power and covert competition.*

Escapability as a Moderator

We propose that perceived escapability from the current relationship moderates how low power impacts covert

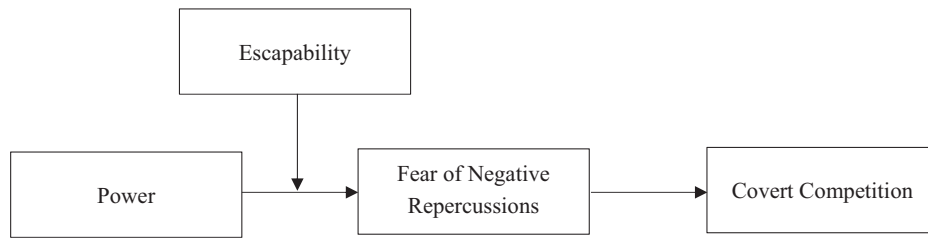
competition. Escapability is defined as access to alternatives (Proudfoot and Kay 2014) in terms of jobs or work relationships. When exit opportunities are few or restricted, people are likely to feel that leaving their current situation is not feasible (March and Simon 1958, Gerhart 1990). Employees may perceive low escapability in various situations: when there is a scarcity of job alternatives in the labor market because of high unemployment rates (Proudfoot et al. 2015); when they work in a highly specialized profession, such as professional athletics, and there are few alternative organizations (Proudfoot and Kay 2014); when they work in an industry in which it is difficult to move between organizations, such as the military (Proudfoot and Kay 2014); and when organizational policies make it hard to leave (for example, when college students feel that it is difficult to transfer to another university) (Laurin et al. 2010). All of these situations could instigate feelings that one's current workplace and work relationships are inescapable (Proudfoot and Kay 2014). When unable to leave their current situation, lower-power individuals are more likely to feel dependent on their higher-power counterparts for resources. Thus, we argue that higher perceived escapability attenuates lower-power individuals' need to compete covertly.

We note that having the ability to leave, in and of itself, does not make a lower-power individual (e.g., a frontline employee) more powerful than his or her higher-power counterpart (e.g., a middle manager or executive) in the current relationship. This is because escapability does not grant a lower-power individual more control over valuable resources (e.g., decision-making power regarding task allocation, performance evaluation, bonus, promotion, etc.) in the current relationship. Although alternative employment opportunities may provide potential resources, these resources may be greater or lower than the employee's current level of resources. Moreover, the potential new resources can be obtained in the new job only *after* the individual has left the focal relationship. For example, in the relationship between an intern and his or her manager, job mobility neither guarantees that the intern will have more power in the new job nor changes the fact that the intern is still the lower-power actor in the current relationship with the manager (as long as he or she works on the current team). Thus, we argue that escapability reduces the effect of low power on the fear of repercussions rather than directly increasing lower-power individuals' power. Figure 1 depicts our theoretical model.

Hypothesis 3. *Perceived escapability from the focal relationship moderates the negative relationship between power and fear of potential negative repercussions, such that the negative relationship is stronger when perceived escapability is lower.*

Hypothesis 4. *Perceived escapability from the focal relationship moderates the indirect effect of power on covert*

Figure 1. Model Framework



competition via fear of potential negative repercussions, such that the indirect effect is stronger when perceived escapability is lower.

Overview of Studies

We tested our predictions across six studies that spanned different samples and methodologies. In a pilot experiment in the online supplemental material (with a student sample, $n = 141$), we manipulated participants' power (higher versus lower) and explored whether lower-power individuals would prefer to choose covert over overt competition tactics. In Study 1a (with a working adult sample, $n = 209$) and Study 1b (with a student sample, $n = 240$), we measured covert competition using open-ended questions. In addition to the higher- and lower-power conditions, we added an *equal*-power condition. We also aimed to test the mediating mechanism of fear of potential negative repercussions and rule out the alternative explanation of relational concerns. In Study 2 (with a working adult sample, $n = 436$), using a decision-making game, we captured covert competition behaviors with monetary consequences. This study also tested escapability as a boundary condition. In Study 3 (with a working adult sample, $n = 353$), we explored the effects of relative versus absolute power. We also aimed to distinguish covert competition from other behaviors (social undermining, interpersonal deviance, and ostracism) and rule out the alternative explanations of attachment anxiety and avoidance. Finally, in Study 4 (with a working adult sample, $n = 396$), we tested the complete model using three waves of longitudinal surveys to demonstrate the generalizability and external validity of the effects. Study 4 also aimed to rule out the alternative explanations of general and competitor-specific paranoia. All data and preregistrations can be accessed via the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/gvk3y/?view_only=0e1d325cbe3b4adbb5a39b085dc589e2).

Study 1a

In Studies 1a and 1b, we aimed to (a) examine the relationship between power and covert competition and to test the effect of having power *equal* to that of the interaction partner (besides having higher and lower power); (b) test the mediating effect of fear of potential negative repercussions; and (c) rule out relational concerns as an

alternative explanation. Although having lower power may lead people to be highly concerned about maintaining good relationships with others (Galinsky et al. 2006, 2015; van Kleef et al. 2008; Rucker et al. 2012), we expected that these concerns would not necessarily lead to more covert competition. Thus, we did not expect to find that relational concerns mediate the relationship between power and covert competition.

Participants and Procedure

A total of 307 working adults recruited from Prolific received financial compensation for their participation. After removing data from 98 participants (32%) who failed at least one of the two attention checks, we retained a sample of 209 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 35.5$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.3$; 47% male, 52% female; 82% White, 11% Asian, 7% African American, 3% other; 77.5% had been in a management position, and 52.6% had sales experience). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three between-subject conditions: higher, lower, and equal power. All participants were instructed to imagine the following: "You are a car salesperson working at a dealership. You have a colleague named Taylor who is also a salesperson in the same dealership as you." We randomly portrayed Taylor as male or female. We instructed all participants to write three to five sentences describing how they would think and feel in the situations.

In the *higher-power* (*lower-power*) condition, participants read the following.

You have *more* (*less*) decision-making power and control over valuable resources in the sales department than Taylor. You and Taylor work independently and separately to make sales deals. Compared with Taylor, you have *more* (*less*) information about a wider selection of car models and builds. This *allows* (*makes it hard for*) you to appeal to a more diverse and larger customer base. *You have a larger pool of clients* (*Taylor has a larger pool of clients*), who may bring you (*Taylor*) repeated or referral business. *You can decide whether to share these resources with Taylor* (*You can go to Taylor for these resources, but it is Taylor's decision whether to share them*). *You could get approvals for large price discounts more easily than Taylor does* (*It is harder for you to get approvals for large price discounts than Taylor does*). *You* (*Taylor*) are also responsible for scheduling your own and your colleagues' shifts, including Taylor's (*yours*).

This is a huge deal because a large amount of a salesperson's pay is based on commission. *You (Taylor)* get to decide who works on weekends when there are the most customers. *You (Taylor)* also decide how many shifts each salesperson works. *You (Taylor)* also evaluate *Taylor's (your)* performance, such as work hours completed and customer satisfaction, to a certain extent.

In the *equal-power* condition, participants read the following.

You and Taylor have *similar* levels of decision-making power and control over valuable resources in the sales department. You and Taylor work independently and separately to make sales deals. The two of you have *similar* information about car models and builds. *Both of you* must get approvals from your managers for large price discounts when making deals with customers. Your manager schedules everyone's shifts and decides who works on weekends when there are the most customers. This is important because a large amount of a salesperson's pay is based on commission. Your manager also decides how many shifts each salesperson, including you and Taylor, gets.

Next, we presented participants with a scenario.

The general manager of the dealership is going to give out a "Best Salesperson Award." With the award comes a sizable bonus, which is 20% of your annual salary. You know that this quarter's sales performance plays a significant role in determining who gets the award. It seems that the award will go to either you or Taylor, because you two have contributed the most to the total sales this quarter. There are 6 weeks left before the general manager chooses the award recipient.

After that, we presented five incidents at work: four incidents that gave participants the opportunity to compete (either covertly or overtly) or not compete at all and one filler incident (see the online supplemental material for all five incidents). The purpose of including the filler incident was to show that power impacted covert competition, which might facilitate outperforming a colleague in competition (e.g., by stealing a client) rather than impacting just any behavior that harms the competitor (e.g., taking the colleague's watch as in the filler incident).

Participants then wrote down what they would do in each of the incidents. An example incident was as follows: "Sales performance is one of the criteria in selecting the award recipient. However, you do not know Taylor's sales records for this quarter because they are kept on her shelf in your shared office. The general manager also has a digital copy of everyone's sales records. You are curious about Taylor's sales record. What will you do?" After reporting their behavior in each incident, the participants rated each of the behaviors on both covertness and competitiveness. Finally, participants completed measures of the mediator (fear of repercussions), alternative explanation (relational concerns), manipulation check,

two attention checks, and demographic information (i.e., gender, age, ethnicity, managerial experience, and sales experience).

Measures

Scale items for all the studies are in the online supplemental material. We used a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) in all studies unless otherwise noted.

Covert Competition. Participants indicated the *competitiveness* and *covertness* of each behavior that they reported by responding "yes" or "no" to two questions. (1) "Does this behavior have a competitive motive?" (2) "If you do it, do you want to hide your behavior and/or your intention from Taylor?" If the answers to *both* questions were "yes," we dummy coded this behavior as a covert competition behavior (1 = a covert competition behavior and 0 = not a covert competition behavior). For example, in response to the sales record incident depicted earlier, a participant who rated his or her behavior as *neither competitive nor covert* wrote that "I'm curious but I will just have to wait until the sales are revealed." A participant who rated his or her behavior as *competitive* and *covert* wrote that "I would sneak a peak of Taylor's sales records for this quarter because they are kept on her shelf in our shared office, but when she isn't there and no one is looking." A participant who rated his or her behavior as *competitive* but *not covert*² wrote: "Ask Taylor how his sales have been this quarter." To capture covert competition, we tallied the total number of covertly competitive behaviors that a participant wrote across four scenarios ($M = 0.83$, $SD = 0.95$, range: 0–4).

Fear of Repercussions. We developed a three-item measure to capture this construct. A sample item was that "I fear that I will experience negative consequences if Taylor finds out my competitive motive." $M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.77$, and $\alpha = 0.97$.

Relational Concerns. The seven-item measure incorporated three items from Peterson and Thompson (1997) and four items that we developed. A sample item was that "I would go out of my way to build a good relationship with Taylor." $M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.15$, and $\alpha = 0.91$.

Manipulation Check of Power. We used three items adapted from Hays and Goldstein (2015). A sample item was as follows: "To what extent do you control valuable resources compared to Taylor? (1 = I have a lot less to 7 = I have a lot more.)" $M = 3.99$, $SD = 1.90$, and $\alpha = 0.99$.

Attention Checks. Participants answered two questions: "What is Taylor's gender?" and "Who determines the final recipient of the Best Salesperson Award?" (The

correct answer is the general manager.) We excluded the participants who failed either question (32%, 98 of 307).

Results

The descriptive statistics and correlations for all studies are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Manipulation Check. Participants in the lower-power condition felt the least powerful ($M = 2.00, SD = 1.14$), followed by those in the equal-power condition ($M = 4.02, SD = 0.34$). Participants in the higher-power condition felt the most powerful ($M = 6.00, SD = 1.00, F(2, 206) = 350.21, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.77$). All differences between any two conditions were significant (all $p < 0.001$).

Hypothesis Testing. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) found that covert competition varied across conditions ($F(2, 206) = 3.73, p = 0.026, \eta^2 = 0.03$, observed power = 0.61). As Figure 2(b) shows, supporting Hypothesis 1, participants in the lower-power condition ($M = 1.07, SD = 0.99$) were more likely to engage in covert competition than were participants in the higher-power condition ($M = 0.75, SD = 0.82, t(143) = 2.11, p = 0.037, d = 0.35$) and those in the equal-power condition ($M = 0.66, SD = 1.00, t(135) = 2.43, p = 0.017, d = 0.41$).

Interestingly, as we expected, we did not find evidence that participants in the equal-power condition reported more covert competition than those in the higher-power

condition ($t(134) = -0.60, p = 0.548, d = 0.10$). The Bayes factor (BF_{01}) (Hojtink et al. 2019, Makowski et al. 2019) for this test was 6.31, which demonstrated that the evidence in our data favored the null hypothesis (i.e., covert competition did not differ between the high- and equal-power conditions) over the alternative hypothesis (i.e., covert competition differed between the high- and equal-power conditions). In other words, the null hypothesis was 6.31 times more likely than the alternative hypothesis.

Next, we tested the mediating effect using PROCESS Model 4 and bootstrapped 5,000 samples (Hayes 2017). Given the multicategorical nature of the independent variable, we used the indicator coding procedures recommended by Hayes and Preacher (2014) to compare the indirect effects of lower versus equal and higher power on covert competition via *fear of repercussions*. We first compared the lower-power and higher-power conditions by using an indicator variable for lower power as the predictor (1 = lower power, 0 = other conditions) while controlling for a second indicator variable for equal power (1 = equal power, 0 = other conditions). As predicted, the indirect effect was significant (0.12, $p < 0.05$, 95% confidence interval (95% CI) (0.010, 0.251), observed power = 0.53), which added a piece of evidence consistent with our theorizing (although it was compatible with only one of multiple potentially plausible models). To compare the lower-power condition with the equal-power

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations in Studies 1a, 1b, and 2

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Study 1a (N = 209)										
1. Power (1 = lower, 2 = equal, 3 = higher)	2.00	0.84								
2. Covert competition	0.83	0.95	-0.14*							
3. Fear of repercussions	3.49	1.77	-0.14*	0.38**	(0.97)					
4. Relational concerns	4.97	1.15	-0.06	-0.15*	0.08	(0.91)				
5. Power manipulation check	3.99	1.90	0.88**	-0.07	-0.14*	-0.10	(0.99)			
6. Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	1.52	0.50	-0.02	-0.08	0.22**	0.06	-0.06			
7. Age	35.47	10.30	-0.07	-0.18*	-0.09	0.14*	-0.11	-0.02		
Study 1b (N = 240)										
1. Power (1 = lower, 2 = equal, 3 = higher)	1.95	0.82								
2. Covert competition	0.73	1.02	-0.13*							
3. Fear of repercussions	3.55	1.60	-0.26**	0.43**	(0.95)					
4. Relational concerns	4.97	1.20	-0.07	-0.03	0.22**	(0.94)				
5. Power manipulation check	3.91	1.73	-0.90**	-0.14*	-0.24**	-0.05	(0.98)			
6. Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	1.51	0.50	-0.15*	-0.01	0.11	0.07	-0.18*			
7. Age	20.37	1.88	0.03	0.01	0.05	0.09	0.06	-0.10		
Study 2 (N = 436)										
1. Power (0 = lower, 1 = higher)	0.46	0.50								
2. Covert competition (0 = no, 1 = yes)	0.33	0.47	-0.20**							
3. Fear of repercussions	2.82	1.77	-0.16**	0.26**	(0.96)					
4. Escapability (0 = no, 1 = yes)	0.47	0.50	0.01	-0.04	-0.04					
5. Dictator game (0 = 100/0, 1 = 50/50)	0.80	0.40	-0.07	-0.13**	-0.21**	-0.02				
6. Relational concerns	4.20	1.56	0.05	-0.15**	0.17**	0.02	0.23**	(0.96)		
7. Power manipulation check	4.89	1.81	0.66**	-0.10*	-0.07	-0.01	-0.07	-0.01	(0.95)	
8. Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	1.41	0.51	-0.04	-0.03	-0.08	-0.01	0.10*	-0.07	-0.07	
9. Age	37.75	19.34	0.08	0.02	-0.04	-0.05	0.02	0.00	0.03	-0.02

Note. The α reliabilities are reported in parentheses.
 * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).

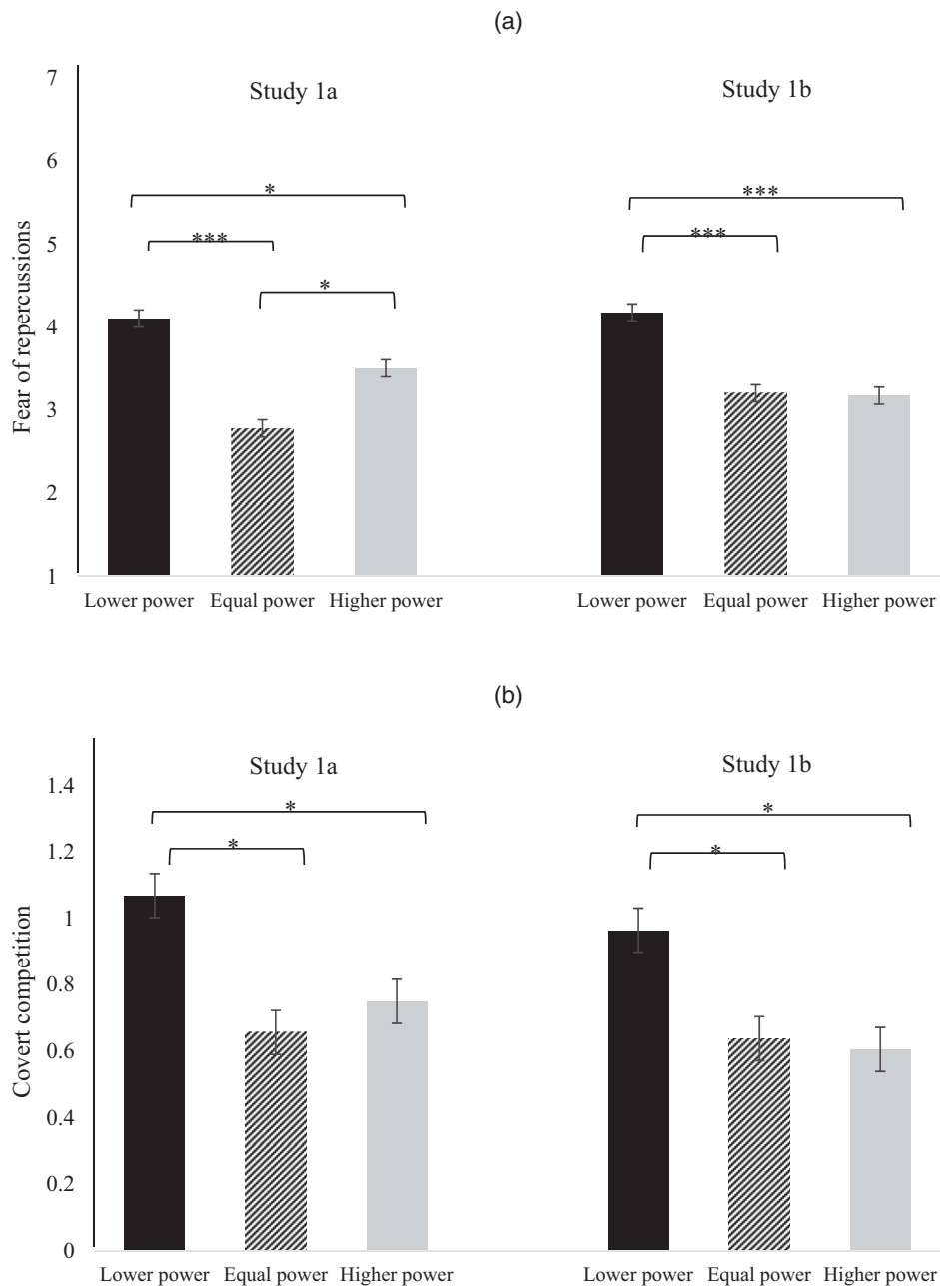
Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations in Studies 3 and 4

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Study 3 (N = 353)														
1. Relative power (0 = lower, 1 = higher)	0.48	0.50												
2. Absolute power (0 = low, 1 = high)	0.50	0.50	-0.05											
3. Covert competition	2.41	1.04	-0.21***	-0.05	(0.87)									
4. Fear of repercussions	3.02	1.26	-0.14**	-0.03	0.39***	(0.96)								
5. Attachment anxiety	3.04	1.28	-0.09	-0.08	0.28**	0.57**	(0.85)							
6. Attachment avoidance	3.67	1.11	-0.06	-0.05	0.14*	0.13**	0.29**	(0.82)	0					
7. Social undermining	1.41	0.81	-0.21	0.06	0.62***	0.21**	0.11**	0.04	(0.94)					
8. Interpersonal deviance	1.34	0.75	-0.05	0.10	0.54***	0.24**	0.12**	0.06	0.88**	(0.97)				
9. Ostracism	1.51	0.87	-0.11*	0.03	0.63***	0.29**	0.23**	0.12*	0.74**	0.73**	(0.97)			
10. Relative power manipulation check	4.47	1.70	0.88**	0.16**	-0.13*	-0.15**	-0.09	-0.08	-0.03	-0.02	-0.06	(0.99)		
11. Absolute power manipulation check	3.93	1.90	0.04	0.85**	-0.01	-0.04	-0.07	-0.10	0.08	0.09	0.03	-0.10	(0.97)	
12. Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	1.53	0.53	-0.01	-0.01	-0.16**	0.05	0.01	0.11*	-0.20*	-0.20**	-0.21**	0.01	-0.02	
13. Age	34.63	9.38	0.05	-0.02	-0.01	-0.05	-0.16**	0.02	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.01	-0.04	-0.09
Study 4 (N = 396)														
1. Power (0 = lower, 1 = higher)	0.45	0.50												
2. Covert competition	2.98	3.80	-0.23***	(0.86)										
3. Fear of repercussions	2.66	1.53	-0.22***	0.44**	(0.97)									
4. Escapability	4.37	1.41	0.05	-0.16**	-0.13**	(0.93)								
5. General paranoia	2.89	1.32	-0.06	0.20**	0.32***	-0.01	(0.92)							
6. Competitor-specific paranoia	2.97	1.44	-0.10*	0.11**	0.22***	0.05	-0.46**	(0.95)						
7. Power manipulation check	3.61	1.98	0.87**	-0.18**	-0.27**	0.08	-0.07	-0.06	(0.96)					
8. Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	1.50	0.50	-0.14**	-0.04	0.06	-0.01	0.01	0.09	-0.17**					
9. Age	35.98	11.42	0.11*	0.02	-0.05	-0.08	-0.15**	-0.02	0.13**	-0.11*				

Note. The α reliabilities are reported in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed).

Figure 2. Effects of Power on (a) Fear of Repercussions and (b) Covert Competition (Studies 1a and 1b)



Notes. Error bars denote standard errors.

* $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

condition, we used the indicator variable for lower power as the predictor (1 = lower power, 0 = other conditions) and controlled for another indicator variable for higher power (1 = higher power, 0 = other conditions). As predicted, the indirect effect was significant (0.23, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI (0.103, 0.399), observed power = 1.00), which was also consistent with our theorizing. The results held when both fear of repercussions and the alternative explanation of relational concerns were simultaneously modeled, supporting Hypothesis 2.

Finally, we ruled out relational concerns as an alternative explanation. Results showed that relational concerns neither differed across power conditions ($F(2, 206) = 0.41$, $p = 0.664$) nor mediated the relationships between power and covert competition (lower versus higher: -0.02 , $p > 0.05$, 95% CI $(-0.079, 0.036)$; lower versus equal: -0.00 , $p > 0.05$, 95% CI $(-0.059, 0.059)$; higher versus equal: 0.02 , $p > 0.05$, 95% CI $(-0.032, 0.078)$).

One potential limitation of this study is that we mentioned the manager's role in the equal-power condition

but not in lower- or higher-power conditions. We wondered whether it affected our results. Therefore, in Study 1b, we removed any manager's influences in the equal-power condition.

Study 1b

Participants, Procedure, and Measures

A total of 256 undergraduate students from the participant pool at a public university in the southeastern United States participated in the study for course credit. After removing data from 16 participants (6%) who failed at least one of the attention checks, we retained a sample of 240 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.4$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.9$; 11% freshman, 40% sophomore, 36% junior, 13% senior; 62% White, 32% Asian, 6% African American, 2% other). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: higher, equal, and lower power. We used the same design, scenarios, and measures as in Study 1a, except for the scenario of the equal-power condition. Participants in the *equal-power* condition read the following.

Imagine that you are a car salesperson working at a dealership. You have a colleague named Taylor who is also a salesperson in the same dealership as you. You and Taylor have *similar levels* of decision-making power and control over valuable resources in the sales department. The two of you *have the same information* about car models and builds. *Both of you* must get approvals for large price discounts when making deals with customers. *You and Taylor both* sometimes schedule people's shifts and decide who works on weekends, when there are the most customers. This is important because a large amount of a salesperson's pay is based on commission.

We measured covert competition ($M = 0.73$, $SD = 1.02$), fear of repercussions ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.60$, $\alpha = 0.92$), relational concerns ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.20$, $\alpha = 0.94$), power manipulation check ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.73$, $\alpha = 0.98$), and attention checks with the same scales used in Study 1a.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check. ANOVA results revealed that participants in the lower-power condition felt the least powerful ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 0.89$), followed by those in the equal-power condition ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.38$), and participants in the higher-power condition felt the most powerful ($M = 5.87$, $SD = 0.86$, $F(2, 237) = 288.78$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.71$). The differences between any two conditions were significant (all $p < 0.001$). The results suggested that the manipulation was effective.

Hypothesis Testing. A one-way ANOVA found that covert competition varied across conditions ($F(2, 237) = 3.11$, $p = 0.046$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$, observed power = 0.68). As shown in Figure 2(b), participants in the lower-power condition ($M = 0.96$, $SD = 1.10$) were more likely to engage in

covert competition than were those in the higher-power condition ($M = 0.61$, $SD = 0.91$, $t(158) = 2.23$, $p = 0.027$, $d = 0.22$) and the equal-power condition ($M = 0.64$, $SD = 1.02$, $t(162) = 1.97$, $p = 0.042$, $d = 0.19$). Again, we did not find those in the equal-power condition to report a different level of covert competition from those in the high-power condition ($t(154) = 0.21$, $p = 0.836$, $d = 0.03$, $BF_{01} = 7.85$).

As predicted, the indirect effect of lower power on covert competition via fear of repercussions was significant when comparing the lower- and higher-power conditions (0.30, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI (0.154, 0.468), observed power = 1.00) and when comparing the lower- and equal-power conditions (0.29, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI (0.150, 0.462), observed power = 1.00), lending support to our theorizing. The results held when the fear of repercussions and relational concerns were simultaneously modeled, supporting Hypothesis 2. Again, relational concerns did not differ significantly across the three power conditions ($F(2, 237) = 0.66$, $p = 0.520$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$) and did not mediate the relationship between power and covert competition (lower versus higher: $= -0.01$, $p > 0.10$, 95% CI (-0.058, 0.021); lower versus equal: -0.01 , $p > 0.10$, 95% CI (-0.046, 0.017); higher versus equal: 0.002, $p > 0.10$, 95% CI (-0.025, 0.034)).³

Study 1b replicated the results of Study 1a. The consistent results speak to the robustness of our findings in both a student sample and a working adult sample. In addition, in both Studies 1a and 1b, we did not find significant differences in covert competition when comparing the higher- and equal-power conditions. Because this result pattern is robust, for parsimony, we did not include the equal-power condition in the following studies.

Study 2

In Study 2, we tested the hypothesized moderating effect of perceived escapability on the relationship between power and fear of repercussions (Hypothesis 3), as well as the moderated mediation (Hypothesis 4). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (power: higher versus lower) \times 2 (escapability: yes versus no) between-subject design. We included a *behavioral* measure of covert competition with economic implications, which allowed us to see if people would actually engage in covert competition. We used the "quiet exit" paradigm of the dictator game; participants first allocated a bonus between themselves and a partner (as in the classic dictator game) and then decided whether to opt for a secret bonus, which would benefit them while causing harm to the partner in a way that would be completely hidden from the partner (Dana et al. 2006). We consider participants who opted for the secret bonus as engaging in covert competition.

Participants and Procedures

In total, 647 working adults recruited from Prolific received financial compensation for their participation.

After removing 211 participants who failed an attention check (16%) or were suspicious of the study design (22%), we retained a sample of 436 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.8$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 19.3$; 60% male, 40% female; 78% White, 11% African American, 10% Asian, 2% other; $M_{\text{Social Economic Status (SES)}} = 5.65$, $SD_{\text{SES}} = 1.64$).

We told participants that they had been recruited for an ostensibly “interactive” study. When participants joined, they learned that they would be working with another Prolific user in *four* rounds of tasks and that all compensation would be paid when the entire study had been completed. They then provided their names and entered an online waiting room to be matched with another participant. After a few seconds of waiting, they were matched with a (bogus) partner named Taylor.

Round 1 Task. For the first round, participants learned that they and their partner Taylor would work independently on 10 trivia questions (e.g., “How many manned moon landings have there been?” Options: 6 (correct answer), 1, 3, or 7). We had participants complete round 1 for two reasons. First, instead of receiving the bonus (that would be used in the later dictator game) for nothing, participants earned this bonus, which gave them a reason to keep it (Cherry et al. 2002). Second, participants learned that the tasks involved a reasonable amount of effort, and thus, they would take the power manipulation (that involved task assignments) more seriously.

Manipulation of Power. After round 1, participants in the *lower*-power condition read that they had been randomly assigned the role of “worker.” Taylor, who had been assigned to be their “manager,” would assign the rest of the tasks—which varied by how interesting and time consuming they were—between the participants and Taylor in rounds 2–4. For example, the two tasks to be assigned in round 2 were to review funny videos, which would take about two minutes (a more interesting and less time-consuming task), and to proofread legal documents, which would take about four minutes (a less interesting and more time-consuming task). Inversely, participants in the *higher*-power condition learned that they would assign the tasks to Taylor in rounds 2–4. Detailed manipulation is reported in the online supplemental material.

Dictator Game. After the power manipulation, participants learned that they and Taylor had jointly earned a bonus of 100 cents in round 1, and the participant was selected to allocate this bonus. Participants had the option to keep all 100 cents for themselves and leave Taylor nothing (100 cents, 0 cents) or to split the 100 cents equally (50 cents, 50 cents). *Before* the decision making, we told the participants that Taylor would be notified of their decision immediately before the round 2–4 tasks began.

Manipulation of Escapability. After the dictator game, participants in the *escapability* condition learned that by clicking the homepage icon at any time during the next rounds of tasks, they could freely end their partnership with Taylor and be immediately matched with another worker to complete the study without any penalty. Participants in the *no escapability* condition proceeded with the study without such instructions.

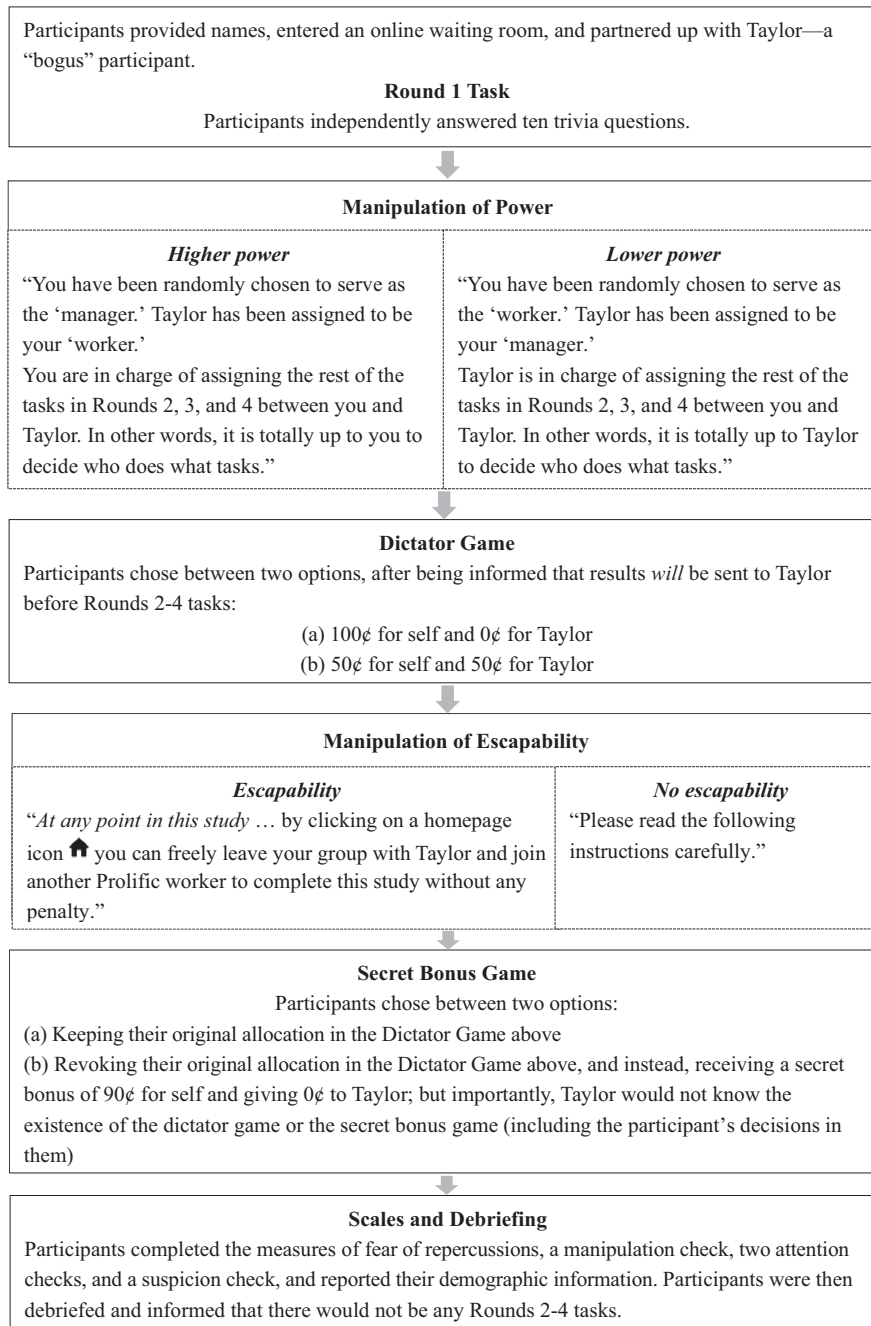
Covert Competition. Covert competition is captured in the secret bonus game, in which participants were given a “secret bonus” option; they could either keep their original bonus allocation in the dictator game or opt for the secret bonus. The secret bonus allowed participants to revoke their original bonus allocation in the dictator game (whatever that was), receive 90 cents instead, and give their partner, Taylor, nothing (0 cents). Participants were ensured that, if they chose the secret bonus, Taylor would never know the existence of the dictator game or the “secret bonus” game (including the participants’ decisions in them). In other words, if a participant chose the secret bonus, he or she would secretly receive 90 cents at the partner’s (who would receive 0 cents) expense without the partner knowing anything about the bonus allocation. In this case, we coded covert competition as one (otherwise as zero). Opting for the secret bonus represented covert competition because this behavior was both competitive (i.e., it advanced one’s own interest while harming one’s counterpart’s interest) and covert (i.e., it allowed the participants to conceal their intention). $M = 0.33$, and $SD = 0.47$.

Participants then completed the measures of the mediator (i.e., fear of repercussions), the alternative explanation (i.e., relational concerns), the manipulation check, two attention checks, and a suspicion check, and they reported their demographic information (i.e., gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status). At the end of the experiment, participants were debriefed, promised that they would receive the bonus, and told that there would be no more rounds of tasks. A flowchart containing the study procedure is presented in Figure 3.

Measures

Fear of Repercussions, Relational Concerns, and Manipulation Check of Power. We used the same measures as those in Studies 1a and 1b (fear of repercussions: $M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.77$, $\alpha = 0.95$; relational concerns: $M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.56$, $\alpha = 0.96$; power manipulation check: $M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.81$, $\alpha = 0.95$).

Attention Check. We included the following attention check for the manipulation of *escapability*: “Throughout the study, can you freely leave your partnership with Taylor and join another Prolific participant?” (answers: yes or no). They also answered a general attention check question: “According to our instructions, if you choose

Figure 3. Study 2 Procedure

the ‘secret bonus,’ how much will you and Taylor each receive?” (Correct answer: I will get the \$0.90 bonus and Taylor will get \$0.) We excluded the participants who failed either or both questions (16%, 104 of 647).

Suspicion Checks. We asked participants the following: “Were you suspicious about anything in this study?” We provided those who answered “yes” with a text box to report their suspicion. We excluded participants who were suspicious (22%, 142 of 647). Thus, all participants

in our analysis believed that they were interacting with Taylor and that there would be rounds 2–4.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check. Results revealed that participants in the lower-power condition felt less powerful ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.67$) than those in the higher-power condition ($M = 6.17$, $SD = 0.90$, $t(434) = -18.12$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.77$). As expected, we did not find a significant main effect of the escapability manipulation on the manipulation check

of power in either the full sample ($t(434) = -0.11$, $p = 0.910$, $d = 0.01$, $BF_{01} = 15.04$) or in the lower-power condition alone ($t(232) = 1.09$, $p = 0.278$, $d = 0.14$, $BF_{01} = 5.47$). Furthermore, we did not find a significant interaction of the two manipulations on the manipulation check of power ($F(1, 432) = 0.09$, $p = 0.764$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.002$), suggesting that the two manipulations were orthogonal.

Hypothesis Testing. Supporting Hypothesis 1, a χ^2 test found that participants in the lower-power condition (42%) were more likely to engage in covert competition than were participants in the higher-power condition (23%, $\chi^2(1, n = 436) = 17.17$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer’s $V = 0.20$, observed power = 1.00). The main effect of escapability on covert competition was not significant (escapability: 31% versus no escapability: 34%, $\chi^2(1, n = 436) = 0.53$, $p = 0.466$, Cramer’s $V = 0.04$, $BF_{01} = 5.00$).

Next, we performed a logistic regression, tested the mediating effect using PROCESS Model 4, and bootstrapped 5,000 samples (Hayes 2017). Fear of repercussions mediated the relationship between power and covert competition (-0.15 , $p < 0.01$, 95% CI $(-0.276$,

$-0.060)$, observed power = 0.90), providing a piece of evidence consistent with Hypothesis 2. Relational concerns, again, did not differ significantly across the two power conditions ($t(434) = -1.02$, $p = 0.310$) or mediate the relationship between power and covert competition (-0.03 , $p > 0.10$, 95% CI $(-0.112, 0.028)$).

To test the moderating effect of escapability on the relationship between power and fear of repercussions, we performed a regression using PROCESS Model 1 and bootstrapped 5,000 samples (Hayes 2017). Results revealed a significant interaction ($B = 0.78$, $p = 0.025$, 95% CI $(0.095, 1.416)$, observed power = 0.98). As depicted in Figure 4, when one could *not* leave the focal relationship (no escapability), power significantly reduced the fear of potential negative repercussions ($B = -0.91$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $(-1.366, -0.457)$), whereas when one could leave, we did not find this effect ($B = -0.16$, $p = 0.522$, 95% CI $(-0.636, 0.323)$), supporting Hypothesis 3.

To test the proposed moderated mediation model, we performed a logistic regression using PROCESS Model 7 and bootstrapped 5,000 samples (Hayes 2017). As Table 3 shows, fear of repercussions was positively associated

Table 3. Regression Results for the Moderated Mediation Model (Studies 2 and 4)

	B	SE	Effect size (Cohen’s f^2) or OR
Study 2 (N = 436)			
Mediator variable model: <i>Fear of repercussions</i>			
Constant	4.15***	0.23	
Dictator game (0 = 100/0, 1 = 50/50)	1.02***	0.21	
Power (0 = lower, 1 = higher)	0.98***	0.23	
Escapability (0 = no, 1 = yes)	0.50*	0.22	
Power × Escapability	0.78*	0.33	0.10
Model R ² (ΔR^2 – interaction term)	0.09***	0.01*	
Dependent variable model: <i>Covert competition</i>			
Constant	0.67	0.35	
Dictator game (0 = 100/0, 1 = 50/50)	0.57*	0.27	0.57
Power (0 = lower, 1 = higher)	0.83***	0.22	0.44
Fear of repercussions	0.25***	0.06	1.29
Escapability (0 = no, 1 = yes)	0.40	0.27	0.67
Power × Escapability	0.62*	0.44	1.86
–2 log likelihood	507.16		
Cox and Snell pseudo-R ²	0.10***		
Study 4 (N = 396)			
Mediator variable model: <i>Fear of repercussions</i>			
Constant	4.12***	0.31	
Power (0 = lower, 1 = higher)	–2.13***	0.49	
Escapability	–0.27***	0.07	
Power × Escapability	0.34**	0.11	0.09
Model R ² (ΔR^2 – interaction term)	0.09***	0.02**	
Dependent variable model: <i>Covert competition</i>			
Constant	–0.75***	0.41	
Power (0 = lower, 1 = higher)	–1.04**	0.35	
Fear of repercussions	1.01***	0.11	
Escapability	–0.61***	0.17	
Power × Escapability	0.51*	0.26	0.09
Model R ² (ΔR^2 – interaction term)	0.21***	0.02*	

Note. Column (3) indicates effect size (Cohen’s f^2) for the Study 2 mediator variable model and both models in Study 4, whereas it indicates odds ratio (OR) for the Study 2 dependent variable model.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed).

with covert competition ($B = 0.25$, odds ratio = 1.29, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI (0.162, 0.395)). The moderated mediation effect was significant (0.20, 95% CI (0.032, 0.411)). As Table 4 shows, when there was *no* escapability, the indirect effect between power and covert competition via fear of repercussions was significantly negative (-0.25 , $p < 0.01$, 95% CI (-0.428 , -0.109)), whereas when there was escapability, the indirect effect became nonsignificant (-0.05 , $p > 0.05$, 95% CI (-0.176 , 0.093)), supporting Hypothesis 4.

This study documents that having escapability weakens the relationship between lower power and covert competition because it alleviates the effect of lower power on the fear of negative repercussions. Capturing covert behaviors is difficult because these behaviors are, by definition, hidden, secretive, and ambiguous in their ostensible intentions. The secret bonus paradigm with real economic implications allows us to capture people’s actual covertly competitive behaviors.

Study 3

The aim of Study 3 was threefold. First, we aimed to examine the effects of *relative* versus *absolute* power on covert competition. Because power is relational and exists in social relationships rather than in a vacuum (Smith and Magee 2015), we argue that, for individuals not to be dependent on their interaction counterparts and not to fear negative repercussions of competition, they need to have relatively higher power over their interaction partner, not just a high level of absolute power. For example, between two high-power individuals, if one has more power over the other, the one with *relatively lower* power will display more covert competition. Thus, we expected relative power, not absolute power, to drive covert competition in a given social relationship.

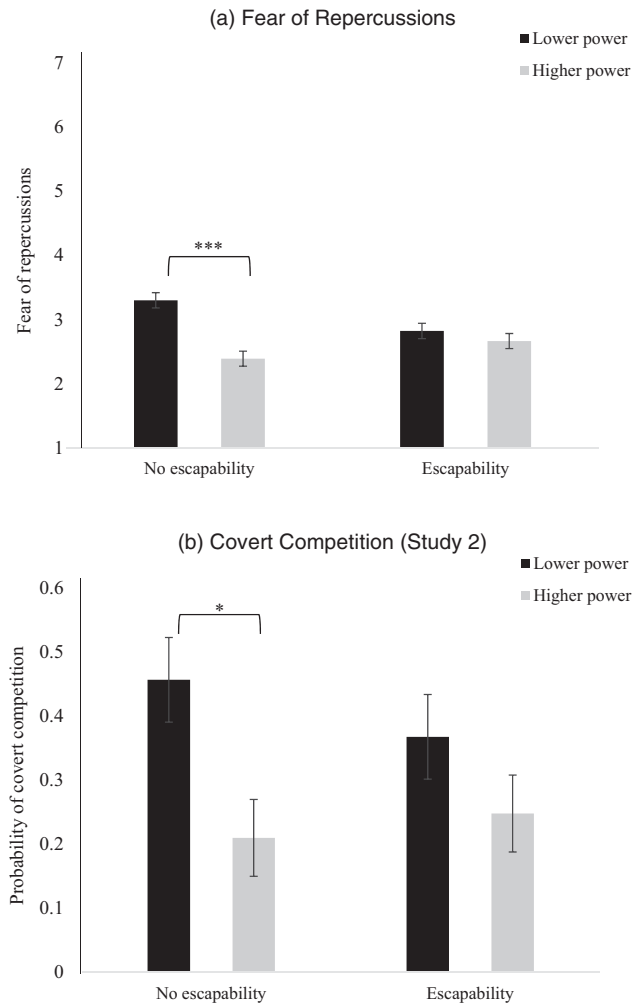
Second, we sought to rule out two alternative explanations—attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Pai et al. 2021). *Attachment anxiety* results from having an interaction partner who is inconsistent in providing

Table 4. The Indirect Effects of Power on Covert Competition via Fear of Repercussions at Different Levels of Escapability (Studies 2 and 4)

	Indirect effect	SE	95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
Study 2 ($N = 436$)				
No escapability	-0.25**	0.08	-0.428	-0.109
Escapability	-0.05	0.06	-0.176	0.093
Difference	0.20*	0.10	0.032	0.411
Study 4 ($N = 396$)				
Low escapability (-1 SD)	-1.15**	0.30	-1.764	-0.616
High escapability (+1 SD)	-0.20	0.21	-0.639	0.204
Difference	0.34**	0.12	0.116	0.598

Note. Results are based on 5,000 bootstrap samples.
 * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).

Figure 4. Escapability Moderates the Effects of Power



Notes. Error bars denote standard errors.
 * $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed).

approval, proximity, and protection (Simpson et al. 1996, Brennan et al. 1998). Individuals with attachment anxiety are concerned about their partner’s acceptance and vigilant about signs that their partner is leaving (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007, Pai et al. 2021). *Attachment avoidance* results from having an interaction partner who is consistently unavailable and does not provide approval, proximity, and protection. Those with attachment avoidance move away from their partner and try to be self-reliant (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007). Different from our proposed mediator, which reflects a cognitive evaluation of tangible and concrete negative repercussions (e.g., losing bonuses and getting assigned worse work times, as in Studies 1a and 1b, or getting assigned worse tasks, as in Study 2) that frequently occur in people’s work lives, attachment concerns involve a general emotional need for secure acceptance and approval (versus rejection and distancing).

Lastly, we aimed to establish the discriminant validity of covert competition by conducting confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) (Hinkin 1998). Although we also expected that covert competition would be correlated with constructs that capture interpersonally undesirable behaviors (i.e., social undermining, interpersonal deviance, and ostracism), lower power should lead to covert competition but not to these other behaviors.

Participants and Procedures

A total of 360 working adults were recruited from Prolific and received financial compensation for their participation. We excluded 7 (2%) participants who failed to pass the attention check (i.e., select “somewhat disagree” for an item) and retained a sample of 353 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 34.6$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 9.4$; 50% female, 49% male, 1% other; 73% White, 14% Asian, 7% African American, 7% Hispanic or Latinx, 4% other). Participants imagined that they worked in a consumer products company and competed with a coworker, Taylor, for an “Employee of the Year” award. We randomly assigned participants to one of the four conditions in a 2 (absolute power: high versus low) \times 2 (relative power: higher versus lower) between-subject design.

In the *high-absolute power (low-absolute power)* condition, participants saw a four-rung ladder and read the following.

Your position at The Ultimate is *senior content creator (junior content creator)*. Your power level is on the *2nd (3rd)* rung. You have (*very limited*) control over a *great deal of valuable resources (valuable resources)* (e.g., budget, task allocation, and personnel selection). You (*do not*) have a say in major decisions made in your department. You *often (do not)* control a lot of aspects of your own and others’ work lives. In other words, you hold a *great deal of (little)* power within your organization. You (*do not*) feel powerful in your daily work.

Next, participants in the *higher-relative power (lower-relative power)* condition read the following.

Taylor is (also) a senior (junior) content creator. Taylor’s power level is one rung *below (above)* you. (*Although you have very limited power at work* (note that this appeared only for participants in the low-absolute power condition)), you (still) have *more (less)* autonomy and control over department resources than Taylor. In other words, you have *more (less)* power than Taylor. *The decisions you make at work may have an impact on Taylor’s work (The decisions Taylor makes at work may have an impact on your work)*. For example, sometimes you (Taylor) get to decide Taylor’s (your) project deliverables, timelines, and deadlines. You (Taylor) may also evaluate Taylor’s (your) performance on projects and give Taylor (you) feedback. You (Taylor) have more company contacts than Taylor (you); thus, you (Taylor) have more unique and important insider information. You (Taylor) can decide whether to share the information with Taylor (you). You feel *more (less)* powerful than Taylor at work.

After that, participants reported their covert competition, social undermining, interpersonal deviance, ostracism, fear of repercussions (the mediator), attachment anxiety and avoidance (alternative explanations), two manipulation checks, an attention check, and demographic information (i.e., gender, age, and ethnicity). Detailed study stimuli and complete scales are available in the online supplemental material.

Measures

Covert Competition. We developed eight items to measure covert competition. A sample item was “I commented negatively on Taylor behind his or her back.” $M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.04$, and $\alpha = 0.87$.

Fear of Repercussions. We used the same measure as in Studies 1a, 1b, and 2. $M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.26$, and $\alpha = 0.96$.

Attachment Anxiety. We used the same three items as in Pai et al. (2021). A sample item was “I worry that other people in my company do not really care for me.” $M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.28$, and $\alpha = 0.85$.

Attachment Avoidance. We used the same six items as in Pai et al. (2021). A sample item was “I wouldn’t feel comfortable opening up to others at work.” $M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.11$, and $\alpha = 0.82$.

Social Undermining. We used four items from Duffy et al. (2002). A sample item was “I will let Taylor know I do not like him or her or do not like something about him or her.” $M = 1.41$, $SD = 0.81$, and $\alpha = 0.94$.

Interpersonal Deviance. We used seven items from Bennett and Robinson (2000). A sample item was “I will make fun of Taylor.” $M = 1.34$, $SD = 0.75$, and $\alpha = 0.97$.

Ostracism. We used six items from Ferris et al. (2008). A sample item was “I will not answer Taylor’s greetings at work.” $M = 1.51$, $SD = 0.87$, and $\alpha = 0.97$.

Manipulation Check of Relative Power. Similar to the measure in Studies 1a, 1b, and 2, we used three items (e.g., “To what extent do you control valuable resources compared to Taylor?”; 1 = I have a lot less to 7 = I have a lot more.). $M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.70$, and $\alpha = 0.99$.

Manipulation Check of Absolute Power. We used three items (e.g., “I have a great deal of power (i.e., control over valuable resources) at work.”). $M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.90$, and $\alpha = 0.97$.

Attention Check. An item asked participants to choose a particular option (i.e., “somewhat disagree”). We excluded the participants who failed the check (2%, 7 of 360).

Results and Discussion

As we predicted, relative power was significantly negatively correlated with fear of repercussions ($r = -0.14, p = 0.009$) and covert competition ($r = -0.21, p < 0.001$), but absolute power did not exhibit significant correlations ($r_{\text{fear}} = -0.03, p = 0.533; r_{\text{covert competition}} = -0.05, p = 0.382$) (see Table 2). Furthermore, covert competition was negatively correlated with relative power ($r = -0.21, p < 0.001$), whereas social undermining ($r = -0.21, p = 0.119$) and interpersonal deviance ($r = -0.05, p = 0.348$) were not. Interestingly, ostracism was weakly negatively related to relative power ($r = -0.11, p = 0.036$), which could be because ostracism is also a more *covert* type of interpersonal behavior with unclear and ambiguous intentions.

Manipulation Check. Compared with those in the higher-*relative* power condition ($M = 6.02, SD = 0.77; t(351) = -33.90, p < 0.001, d = 0.83$), participants in the lower-*relative* power condition rated themselves as having less power than Taylor ($M = 3.04, SD = 0.88$). Participants in the low-*absolute* power condition rated themselves as being less powerful in the organization ($M = 2.31, SD = 1.09$) than did those in the high-*absolute* power condition ($M = 5.55, SD = 0.89; t(351) = -30.75, p < 0.001, d = 0.99$). We report the full factorial ANOVA on both manipulation checks in the online supplemental material.

Scale Validity and CFA. Establishing its convergent validity, covert competition was significantly correlated with behaviors, such as social undermining ($r = 0.62, p < 0.001$), interpersonal deviance ($r = 0.54, p < 0.001$), and ostracism ($r = 0.63, p < 0.001$) (see Table 2). To establish the construct validity of covert competition, we evaluated

covert competition against these related constructs in a CFA (Hinkin 1998). As shown in Table 5, the four-factor model (i.e., the four constructs as four separate factors) yielded a significantly ($p < 0.001$) better fit ($\chi^2 (269) = 1,764.30, CFI = 0.87, SRMR = 0.07, RMSEA = 0.13$) than did any of the alternative models. In the online supplemental material, we used the Anderson and Gerbing (1988) approach to further differentiate covert competition from *each* of the other constructs. These results suggest that covert competition is related to, but distinct from, these other behaviors.

Hypothesis Testing. Supporting our predictions, participants in the lower-relative power condition reported more covert competition ($M = 2.61, SD = 1.09$) than did those in the higher-relative power condition ($M = 2.18, SD = 0.93, t(350) = -4.01, p < 0.001, d = 0.43, \text{observed power} = 0.98$). We did not find covert competition to differ between the two absolute power conditions ($M_{\text{high-absolute}} = 2.36, SD_{\text{high-absolute}} = 0.99, M_{\text{low-absolute}} = 2.45, SD_{\text{low-absolute}} = 1.03, t(350) = -0.88, p = 0.382, d = 0.09, \text{observed power} = 0.14, BF_{01} = 8.17$).

Again, supporting Hypothesis 2, the negative indirect effect of relative power on covert competition via fear of repercussions was significant ($-0.11, p < 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } (-0.202, -0.027), \text{observed power} = 0.74$). As Table 6 shows, this result pattern held when the alternative explanations (i.e., attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance) were simultaneously modeled. These alternative explanations were ruled out because their mediating effects were nonsignificant when tested in separate models or in conjunction with our proposed mediator.

For exploratory purposes, we tested the interactive effect of relative power and absolute power on covert

Table 5. Results of χ^2 Difference Tests Between Covert Competition and Other Constructs (i.e., Social Undermining, Interpersonal Deviance, and Ostracism; Study 3)

Model	χ^2	df	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2$
Model 1: Four factor (covert competition, social undermining, interpersonal deviance, and ostracism)	1,764.30***	269	0.87	0.07	0.13	
Model 2: Three factor (covert competition + social undermining (as one factor), interpersonal deviance, and ostracism)	2,366.36***	272	0.81	0.08	0.15	602.06***
Model 3: Three factor (covert competition + interpersonal deviance, social undermining, and ostracism)	2,603.91***	272	0.79	0.10	0.16	839.61***
Model 4: Three factor (covert competition + ostracism, social undermining, and interpersonal deviance)	2,492.13***	272	0.80	0.09	0.15	727.83***
Model 5: Two factor (covert competition + social undermining + interpersonal deviance and ostracism)	2,764.73***	274	0.78	0.10	0.16	1,000.43***
Model 6: Two factor (covert competition + social undermining + ostracism and interpersonal deviance)	3,205.35***	274	0.74	0.10	0.17	1,441.05***
Model 7: Two factor (covert competition + interpersonal deviance + ostracism and social undermining)	3,793.21***	274	0.68	0.10	0.19	2,028.91***
Model 8: One factor (covert competition + interpersonal deviance + ostracism + social undermining)	3,967.22***	275	0.67	0.10	0.20	2,202.92***

Notes. $N = 353$. df, degree of freedom; CFI, comparative fit index; SRMR, standardized root mean square residual; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; $\Delta\chi^2$, change in χ^2 between the alternative models (Models 2–8) and the a priori model (Model 1).

*** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed).

Table 6. Indirect Effects of the Mediator and Alternative Explanations (Studies 3 and 4)

Mediators	X → M	M → Y	X → M → Y (Indirect effect)
Study 3 (N = 353)			
In separate models			
Fear of repercussions	−0.36, <i>p</i> = 0.008, [−0.616, −0.093]	0.31, <i>p</i> < 0.001, [0.228, 0.388]	−0.11, <i>p</i> < 0.001, [−0.202, −0.027]
Attachment anxiety	−0.24, <i>p</i> = 0.082, [−0.506, 0.031]	0.22, <i>p</i> < 0.001, [0.135, 0.297]	−0.05, <i>p</i> > 0.100, [−0.116, 0.007]
Attachment avoidance	−0.12, <i>p</i> = 0.299, [−0.356, 0.110]	0.12, <i>p</i> = 0.012, [0.027, 0.219]	−0.02, <i>p</i> > 0.100, [−0.051, 0.015]
In a single model			
Fear of repercussions	−0.36, <i>p</i> = 0.008, [−0.616, −0.093]	0.27, <i>p</i> < 0.001, [0.176, 0.370]	−0.10, <i>p</i> < 0.010, [−0.185, −0.022]
Attachment anxiety	−0.24, <i>p</i> = 0.082, [−0.506, 0.031]	0.05, <i>p</i> = 0.337, [−0.050, 0.145]	−0.01, <i>p</i> > 0.100, [−0.044, 0.016]
Attachment avoidance	−0.12, <i>p</i> = 0.299, [−0.356, 0.110]	0.07, <i>p</i> = 0.139, [−0.023, 0.164]	−0.01, <i>p</i> > 0.100, [−0.035, 0.009]
Study 4 (N = 396)			
In separate models			
Fear of repercussions	−0.68, <i>p</i> < 0.001, [−0.977, −0.385]	1.01, <i>p</i> < 0.001, [0.784, 1.234]	−0.69, <i>p</i> < 0.010, [−1.111, −0.337]
General paranoia	−0.15, <i>p</i> = 0.277, [−0.408, 0.117]	0.53, <i>p</i> < 0.001, [0.253, 0.798]	−0.08, <i>p</i> > 0.100, [−0.240, 0.060]
Competitor-specific paranoia	−0.29, <i>p</i> = 0.049, [−0.572, −0.002]	0.24, <i>p</i> = 0.066, [−0.016, 0.494]	−0.07, <i>p</i> > 0.100, [−0.214, 0.013]
In a single model			
Fear of repercussions	−0.68, <i>p</i> < 0.001, [−0.980, −0.387]	0.96, <i>p</i> < 0.001, [0.723, 1.198]	−0.66, <i>p</i> < 0.010, [−1.080, −0.311]
General paranoia	−0.15, <i>p</i> = 0.277, [−0.408, 0.117]	0.21, <i>p</i> = 0.167, [−0.088, 0.504]	−0.03, <i>p</i> > 0.100, [−0.131, 0.038]
Competitor-specific paranoia	−0.29, <i>p</i> = 0.049, [−0.572, −0.002]	−0.05, <i>p</i> = 0.692, [−0.317, 0.211]	0.02, <i>p</i> > 0.100, [−0.078, 0.105]

Notes. Results are based on 5,000 bootstrap samples. Numbers in the square brackets are the upper and lower limits of 95% confidence intervals.

competition and found it nonsignificant ($F(1, 348) = 0.21, p = 0.648$, observed power = 0.07), suggesting that the impact of relative power on covert competition was robust across different levels of absolute power.

Study 3 establishes that relative power, rather than absolute power, influences the fear of repercussions and covert competition. Moreover, attachment anxiety and avoidance were found to be ineffective explanations for why lower-power individuals engage in covert competition. Finally, this study shows that covert competition is distinct from constructs such as social undermining, interpersonal deviance, and ostracism.

Study 4

The aim of Study 4 was twofold. First, we sought to demonstrate the generalizability and external validity of the effects. We conducted three waves of surveys to separate our measurements of the antecedent, the mediator/alternative explanations, and the outcome to minimize common method variance (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Second, we aimed to rule out two alternative explanations: general paranoia in the workplace and competitor-specific paranoia. In their recent paper, Schaerer et al. (2021) found that lower-power employees were more likely to be paranoid and thus, to display aggression. We argue that, although both paranoia and fear of potential negative repercussions induce anxiety, paranoia typically functions through the automatic processing system (Chan and McAllister 2014), whereas fear of repercussions functions through a more controlled processing system, with which individuals deliberate over likely consequences. Moreover, paranoia is frequently characterized by delusional beliefs. For example, paranoid employees tend to experience a constant sense of danger (Freeman and Garety 2000), which leads them to seek (often false) information

confirming others' unkindness and unfairness (Marr et al. 2012) and to perceive themselves as the target of others' malevolence (Fenigstein and Venable 1992). Power research has long demonstrated that the negative consequences of overt competition *do* exist for low-power individuals who are rightly aware of those consequences (Keltner et al. 2003, Maner and Mead 2010, Hays and Bendersky 2015). Thus, we expect a conscious and valid fear of negative repercussions to mediate the effect of low power on covert competition, whereas neither general paranoia in the workplace nor competitor-specific paranoia do so.

Participants and Procedures

Working adults were recruited from Prolific and received financial compensation for their participation in our three-wave surveys, with each wave separated by one month. At time 1 (T1), 1,091 participants completed the survey. Among them, 21 were excluded because of a failed attention check (i.e., select "somewhat disagree" for an item), and 1 was excluded because of the intention to withdraw from the study. At time 2 (T2), 647 participants completed the survey. Among them, 19 were excluded because they no longer worked with the same coworker that they described at T1, 14 were excluded because of a failed attention check (same as the one used at T1), and 19 were excluded because of their intention to withdraw from the study. At time 3 (T3), 428 participants completed the survey. Among them, 27 were excluded because they no longer worked with the same coworker that they described at T1, and 32 were excluded because of a failed attention check (same as that used at T1 and T2). The final sample consisted of 396 respondents who completed all three surveys and passed all attention checks ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.0, SD_{\text{age}} = 11.4$; 49% male, 49% female,

2% other; 81% White, 11% Asian, 4% African American, 2% American Indian or Alaska Native, 3% other; 87% full-time workers, 13% part-time workers).

Study 4 was designed to measure all constructs at theoretically appropriate time points: antecedent and moderator at T1, mediator and alternative explanations at T2, and outcome at T3. The T1 survey randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions of relative power (lower versus higher). Participants in the *lower-power* (*higher-power*) condition were instructed to recall and write down the name and demographic information (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity, and how long they had known each other) of a colleague they might compete with at work who had *higher* (*lower*) power than they had. Participants also reported their perceived escapability from the current organization and their own demographic information (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity, and employment status). In the T2 survey, we reminded participants of the name and demographic information of the colleague that they noted in the T1 survey and measured their fear of repercussions, general paranoia in the workplace, and competitor-specific paranoia. The T3 survey measured covert competition. To ensure truthful answers, we emphasized the confidentiality of responses in all three surveys.

Measures

Covert Competition. Participants were asked to recall how many times in the previous month they had engaged in the eight covert competition behaviors from Study 3 in their interactions with the focal coworker (0 = never, 1 = once, 2 = twice, 3 = three times, 4 = four times, 5 = five times or more) (see similar anchor points in Skarlicki and Folger 1997, Leiter et al. 2011, and Biron and Bamberger 2012). We calculated the sum of their answers to the eight items to obtain a score for covert competition. $M = 2.98$, $SD = 3.80$, range: 0–20, and $\alpha = 0.86$.

Escapability. Based on Proudfoot and Kay (2014), we developed a five-item measure to capture participants' perceived escapability from the current organization (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). A sample item was as follows: "It is feasible for me to leave my current job for a job similar to or better than my current one." $M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.41$, and $\alpha = 0.93$.

Fear of Repercussions. We used the same measure as that in Studies 1a, 1b, 2, and 3. $M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.53$, and $\alpha = 0.95$.

General Paranoia in the Workplace. We used the same eight items as in Schaerer et al. (2021). A sample item was as follows: "If people at work are nice to me, they must have hidden reasons." $M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.32$, and $\alpha = 0.92$.

Competitor-Specific Paranoia. We used the same eight items as in Schaerer et al. (2021). A sample item was as follows: "If [coworker's name] is nice to me, he or she must have hidden reasons." $M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.44$, and $\alpha = 0.95$.

Manipulation Check of Power. Similar to the measure in Studies 1a, 1b, 2, and 3, in the T1 survey, we used three items (e.g., "Compared to [coworker's name], to what extent do you control valuable resources?"; 1 = much lower to 7 = much higher). $M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.98$, and $\alpha = 0.96$.

Results

In the T1 survey, we did not see a significant correlation between escapability and the manipulation of power ($r = 0.05$, $p = 0.307$) or the manipulation check of power ($r = 0.08$, $p = 0.104$) (see Table 2), confirming the conceptual distinction between escapability and power. As expected, power at T1 was significantly negatively correlated with fear of repercussions at T2 ($r = -0.22$, $p < 0.001$) and covert competition at T3 ($r = -0.23$, $p < 0.001$). In terms of the alternative explanations, power at T1 was negatively correlated with competitor-specific paranoia at T2 ($r = -0.10$, $p = 0.049$), which is in line with Schaerer et al. (2021). However, it did not correlate with general paranoia in the workplace at T2 ($r = -0.06$, $p = 0.277$). At T2, fear of repercussions was moderately correlated with general paranoia in the workplace ($r = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$) and weakly correlated with competitor-specific paranoia ($r = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that fear of repercussions and paranoia are conceptually distinct.

Manipulation Check. Participants in the lower-power condition reported themselves as having less power ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 0.97$) compared with the colleague, and those in the higher-power condition reported themselves as having more power ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 0.99$; $t(395) = -34.96$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 3.52$).

Hypothesis Testing. Supporting Hypothesis 1, participants engaged in more covert competition when interacting with a higher-power counterpart ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 4.20$) than with a lower-power counterpart ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 2.97$, $t(395) = 4.67$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.46$, observed power = 1.00). Next, we tested the mediating effects using PROCESS Model 4 and bootstrapped 5,000 samples (Hayes 2017). Supporting Hypothesis 2, the negative indirect effect of power on covert competition via fear of repercussions was significant (-0.69 , $p < 0.01$, 95% CI $(-1.111, -0.337)$, observed power = 0.99). These results held when the fear of repercussions and the alternative explanations (i.e., general paranoia and competitor-specific paranoia) were simultaneously modeled.

Moreover, we ruled out both general paranoia in the workplace and competitor-specific paranoia as alternative explanations (see Table 6). Specifically, general paranoia

in the workplace was not significantly related to power ($t(394) = 1.09, p = 0.277, d = 0.11$) and did not mediate power's effect on covert competition ($-0.08, p > 0.10, 95\% \text{ CI } (-0.240, 0.060)$). Although competitor-specific paranoia was related to power ($t(394) = 1.98, p = 0.049, d = 0.20$), we did not find evidence of its mediation effect ($-0.07, p > 0.10, 95\% \text{ CI } (-0.214, 0.013)$).

Supporting Hypothesis 3, power and escapability interacted to predict fear of repercussions ($B = 0.34, p = 0.002, 95\% \text{ CI } (0.125, 0.544)$, observed power = 1.00). As depicted in Figure 5, participants with lower escapability (one *SD* below *M*) felt greater fear of repercussions when interacting with higher-power counterparts ($B = -1.14, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } (-1.560, -0.723)$); when they had higher escapability (one *SD* above *M*), this effect became non-significant ($B = -0.20, p = 0.341, 95\% \text{ CI } (-0.612, 0.212)$).

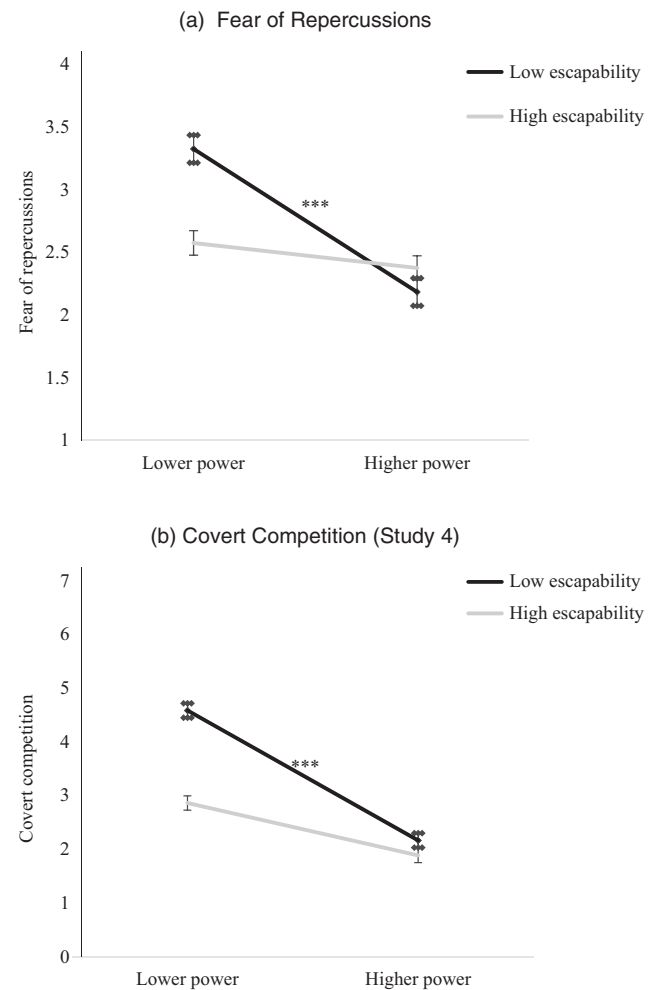
Finally, we found support for the moderated mediation effect proposed in Hypothesis 4. As shown in Table 3, fear of repercussions was positively associated with covert competition ($B = 1.01, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } (0.784, 1.234)$). The moderated mediation was significant ($0.34, 95\% \text{ CI } (0.116, 0.598)$). As Table 4 shows, when escapability was lower (one *SD* below *M*), the indirect effect of power on covert competition via fear of repercussions was significantly negative ($B = -1.15, p < 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } (-1.764, -0.616)$), whereas when escapability was higher (one *SD* above *M*), the indirect effect was nonsignificant ($B = -0.20, p > 0.10, 95\% \text{ CI } (-0.639, 0.204)$).

Study 4 speaks to the external validity and generalizability of our findings. Moreover, although people were more paranoid when interacting with higher-power colleagues than with low-power colleagues, which is in line with Schaerer et al. (2021), paranoia was theoretically distinct from fear of repercussions and did not explain why lower-power individuals engaged in more covert competition.

General Discussion

To examine how relative power in dyadic social relationships influences covert competition, we conducted six studies spanning different samples and methodologies. Across these studies, we found that individuals with lower power were more likely to compete covertly because they were afraid of the potential negative consequences of revealing their competitiveness. The pilot study (in the online supplemental material) found that participants in the lower-power condition chose more covert (as opposed to overt) competition tactics compared with those in the higher-power condition. In Studies 1a and 1b, both working adults and college students in the lower-power condition reported more covert competitive behaviors because they felt a greater fear of negative repercussions from their higher-power counterparts. Studies 1a and 1b also found that having lower power differed from having higher or equal

Figure 5. Escapability Moderates the Effects of Power



Notes. Error bars denote standard errors. errors.
*** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed).

power (the difference between the two was not found to be significant). These studies also ruled out relational concerns as an alternative explanation. In Study 2, we randomly assigned employees to one of the four conditions in a 2 (power: higher versus lower) \times 2 (escapability: yes versus no) experimental design and found that escapability from the focal relationship weakens the effects of power. This study also captured an actual behavioral outcome and thus, helped establish the external validity of our results. In Study 3, we found that having relative lower power in a dyadic relationship, rather than an absolute level of low power, led to covert competition, and this effect was mediated by the fear of repercussions but not by attachment concerns. Finally, in Study 4, three waves of survey data ruled out general and competitor-specific paranoia as alternative explanations. Our results demonstrate that the impact of lower power on covert competition exists not only in experimental settings but also in the workplace.

Theoretical Contributions

The current research makes three contributions to the literatures on competition and power. First, this research adds to the competition literature, which has focused on competitive behaviors that are fierce and intense (Johnson et al. 2006, Hays and Bendersky 2015). Our research proposes an underexamined work behavior—covert competition—and demonstrates that it is conceptually distinct from other work behaviors that have been more extensively studied. Our research also points to the possibility that more behaviors could be characterized as competitive than previously assumed. For example, gossiping is not typically considered competitive because it lacks the characteristics of prototypical competitive behaviors (e.g., aggressiveness, fierceness). However, people often use gossip as a competitive tactic because it can harm the target's position while benefiting the gossiper (Davis et al. 2018, Giardini and Wittek 2019). As a result, competitive behaviors may be more diverse and prevalent than previous research has revealed. Our research highlights the need to further investigate covert competition, a common yet overlooked workplace phenomenon.

Second, this research helps clarify the confusion regarding the effect of power on competition. Previous research has found that power is positively related to overt competition. Powerful people are more likely to take more from public resources while leaving less for others (de Cremer and van Dijk 2005, Georgesen and Harris 2006, van Dijk and de Cremer 2006), to disagree with others outrightly (Anicich et al. 2016, Cislak et al. 2018), and to discourage and undermine others' performance (Tjosvold 1985, Cho and Fast 2012). We show that the previous understanding of the power-competition relationship is incomplete because lower-power individuals are more competitive than they appear. In fact, they may engage in covert competition, which allows their competitiveness to go unnoticed. Although we are not the first to argue that lower-power individuals may also compete (e.g., Greer et al. 2017, Fath and Kay 2018), we are the first to uncover whether, why, and when lower-power individuals compete covertly.

Finally, these studies contribute to the research on low power. The lack of systematic investigations of low power has negative implications for our understanding of power (Schaerer et al. 2018). In organizations and everyday situations, lacking power is often a more common psychological state than feeling powerful (Smith and Hofmann 2016), making it an important phenomenon to understand. This paper identifies fear of repercussions as a unique psychological process associated with lower-power individuals. Although previous research has focused on lower-power individuals' behavioral reactions and negative affect (e.g., fear) in response to higher-power individuals' actions (e.g., threats) (Ebenbach and Keltner 1998, Keltner et al. 2003), we argue that lower-power individuals also

calculatedly and proactively prevent negative repercussions from happening.

Practical Contributions

Our findings have important implications for managers and organizations. First, our work highlights that employees' perceptions of power significantly impact how they compete at work. Although practitioners have discussed covert competition in the workplace (Marcus 2016, Macleod 2018), little systematic examination and explanation of the phenomenon have been provided. One of the sources of covert competition, according to our research, is having lower power in relation to one's interaction partner. As a result, to better understand employees who engage in covert competition, managers should consider the possibility that these employees may be feeling powerless rather than just being counterproductive.

In addition, covert competition can be costly for organizations. For example, gossip leads to lower in-role performance (Brady et al. 2017), and resource withholding leads to coworker withdrawal (Chiaburu and Harrison 2008). Because most people regularly feel that they have lower power than some of their colleagues (Smith and Hofmann 2016, Schaerer et al. 2018), it is critical for organizations to implement effective interventions to reduce employees' fear and thus, their covert competition. For example, managers should foster a supportive work atmosphere and enhance coworker relationships, especially among those with relatively less power.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our work has limitations that provide fruitful avenues for future research. In this research, we focus solely on covert competition rather than on other covert behaviors that may also be associated with low power. We suspect that because of their fear of repercussions, low-power individuals may also engage in other socially *undesirable* behaviors covertly. This may be particularly true when it comes to behaviors that can impact their access to resources. Individuals with lower power, for example, may be more prone to self-promotional lying (Li et al. 2022), humblebragging, or passive-aggressive behaviors. We encourage future research to investigate whether and when lower-power individuals exhibit a covert behavioral tendency.

Second, future work could examine what factors, other than perceived escapability, influence the power-covert competition relationship. For example, power *stability* may be another moderator. Previous research found that both the stable powerful and the unstable powerless are less likely to take risks than the unstable powerful and the stable powerless (Jordan et al. 2011). Because covert competition may seem relatively low risk, both the stable powerful and the unstable powerless may be more likely than their unstable and stable counterparts to engage in

covert competition. Another potential moderator is the *legitimacy* of power. Previous research found that having *illegitimate* power makes power holders more likely to conform (Hays and Goldstein 2015). Therefore, power illegitimacy may contribute to the fear of negative repercussions, making an illegitimate power holder more likely than a legitimate power holder to engage in covert competition. *Hierarchical difference* in a group or organization may also moderate the relationship because it instills a competitive climate (Fath and Kay 2018) and increases conflicts (Greer et al. 2017, 2018). As power differences increase, so do the competitive motives of both higher- and lower-power individuals, which may weaken the relationship between power and covert competition. In addition to these potential boundary conditions, future work may also explore other mediating mechanisms, such as lower-power individuals' tendency to feel envious toward or engage in social comparison with their higher-power counterparts. These psychological processes may also drive competitive motive and covert competition.

Third, future research may examine covert competition in equal-power relationships more systematically, considering the potential interdependence between interaction partners (Rusbult and Van Lange 2008, Balliet et al. 2017, Gerpott et al. 2018). In Studies 1a and 1b, we depicted the actors in the equal-power conditions as having low or moderate interdependence. However, people and their equal-power partners could be highly interdependent (or in other words, mutually dependent) on one another, such that each individual's outcomes are dependent on both their own and their partner's behaviors (Gerpott et al. 2018). Because a higher mutual dependence makes people more attentive to their partners (Berscheid et al. 1976) and engage in less aggressive behavior (Green 1998), it may decrease people's motivation to compete and increase their need to hide their competitive motives (if there are any). We call for future research at the intersection of power and mutual dependence.

Conclusion

There is more to how lower-power individuals compete than meets the eye. This paper has highlighted covert competition, which has received little attention in the literature. We found that lower-power individuals do compete, but they do so more covertly than their higher-power counterparts. The fear of potential negative repercussions explains

why lower-power individuals engage in covert competitive behavior. Moreover, the ability to leave the current relationship ameliorates these effects of lower power. This paper emphasizes the nuanced relationship between power and competition, as well as the importance of understanding the unique psychological experience of having lower power.

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Appendix. Literature Review

We conducted a literature review of the empirical papers on the effect of power on competition and related constructs. For research published before 2015, we used the literature search results in Schaerer et al. (2018), which included 153 articles. For research published in and after 2015, we followed the search procedures described in Schaerer et al. (2018). Specifically, we searched academic databases for power research in 19 journals using the following search terms: power OR dependence OR status OR hierarch OR control. We then hand-searched review articles to minimize potential omissions. We also searched author and journal websites for potential in-press articles. The search was conducted on June 24, 2022 and included all articles that were available on or prior to that date. The search yielded 174 articles, making the final sample 327 articles.

We coded the dependent variables of all 327 articles, yielding a total of 20 papers (42 studies) on covert or overt competition and related/similar constructs that were other harming or self-advancing (Table A.1).

One of the authors then populated Table A.2 with information on all 42 studies, such as (a) the construct names and operationalizations of their DVs; (b) whether a DV can be classified as covert competition (noted as one), overt competition (noted as two), other-harming behaviors (noted as three), or self-advancing behaviors (noted as four); and (c) the study's conclusion. The authorship team discussed any ambiguous classifications.

Table A.1. Studies

	<i>N</i> of papers	<i>N</i> of studies
Covert competition	3	4
Overt competition	11	23
Other-harming behaviors	6	13
Self-advancing behaviors	3	7

Table A.2. Information on All 42 Studies

Papers	Study	Dependent variable (operationalization or sample item)	Classification	Covert competition, overt competition, or related behavior	Conclusion
Anicich et al. (2016)	1	<i>Interpersonal conflict</i> (I often have personal disagreements with others at my place of work)	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to overt competition
Anicich et al. (2016)	2, (a) and (b)	<i>Perceived demeaning treatment</i> (the extent to which the layoff notification received was “demeaning,” “humiliating,” “degrading,” “embarrassing,” and “uncomfortable”)	3	Demeaning treatment	Power had no significant main effect on demeaning treatment
Anicich et al. (2016)	3	<i>Interpersonal conflict</i> (one party frequently undermines the other)	1	Covert competition	Power had no significant main effect on interpersonal conflict
Anicich et al. (2016)	3	<i>Interpersonal conflict</i> (one party frequently undermines the other)	2	Overt competition	
Anicich et al. (2016)	3	<i>Perceived demeaning treatment</i> (the extent to which the layoff notification received was “demeaning,” “humiliating,” “degrading,” “embarrassing,” and “uncomfortable”)	3	Demeaning treatment	Power was negatively related to demeaning treatment
Blader and Chen (2012)	5	<i>Procedural justice</i> (the extent to which the treatment you received was polite and courteous)	3	Procedural justice	Power was negatively related to procedural justice
Blader and Chen (2012)	5	<i>Initiation of the first offer</i> (likelihood of first-offer initiation)	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to overt competition
Cho and Fast (2012)	1	<i>Denigration</i> (the degree to which their partner seemed competent, intelligent, capable, incompetent (reverse scored), unskilled (reverse scored), likely to succeed, and likely to fail (reverse scored))	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to overt competition
Cho and Fast (2012)	2	<i>Denigration</i> (the degree to which their partner seemed competent and socially desirable)	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to overt competition
Cislak et al. (2018)	1	<i>Interpersonal conflict</i> (I can’t help getting into arguments when people disagree with me)	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to overt competition
Cislak et al. (2018)	2	<i>Interpersonal exploitativeness</i> (I’m perfectly willing to profit at the expense of others)	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to overt competition
Cislak et al. (2018)	3	<i>Verbal aggression</i> (I can’t help getting into arguments when people disagree with me)	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to overt competition

Table A.2. (Continued)

Papers	Study	Dependent variable (operationalization or sample item)	Classification	Covert competition, overt competition, or related behavior	Conclusion
Cislak et al. (2018)	3	<i>Interpersonal exploitativeness</i> (I'm perfectly willing to profit at the expense of others)	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to overt competition
de Cremer and van Dijk (2005)	1	<i>Resource allocation</i> (How much would you take from 900 Dutch Guilders among four other participants?)	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to allocating more money to oneself (i.e., overt competition)
Galinsky et al. (2003)	2	<i>Acting on an annoying fan</i> (whether participants would move the fan away, turn it off, unplug it, or take no action)	4	Self-interested goal pursuit	Power was positively related to self-interested goal pursuit
Georgesesen and Harris (2006)	1	<i>Resource allocation</i> (How much of the \$55 prize money would you allocate to yourself?)	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to overt competition
Greitemeyer and Sagioglou (2019)	1	<i>Aggressive behavior</i> (How many needles would you like to put in a doll to punish the other person?)	3	Aggressive behavior	Power had no significant main effect on aggressive behavior
Greitemeyer and Sagioglou (2019)	2 and 3	<i>Aggressive behavior</i> (How many needles would you like to put in a doll to punish the other person?)	3	Aggressive behavior	Power was negatively related to aggressive behavior
Gruenfeld et al. (2008)	1(a) and (b)	<i>Objectification of others</i> (I try to motivate him or her to do things that will help me succeed)	4	Self-interested goal pursuit	Power was positively related to self-interested goal pursuit
Gruenfeld et al. (2008)	3 and 4	<i>Partner appraisal task</i> (whether participants would pick the partner whose profile matches their goal)	4	Self-interested goal pursuit	Power was positively related to self-interested goal pursuit
Hays and Bendersky (2015)	2	<i>Competitive behavior intention</i> (I will attempt to assert my opinions over other group members)	2	Overt competition	Low-power participants did not engage in more overt competition than those in the control condition
Hays and Bendersky (2015)	2	<i>Competitive resource allocation</i> (How much of a pool of 1,000 points would you allocate to your private account that could help your own individual performance but hurt group performance?)	2	Overt competition	Low-power participants did not engage in more overt competition than those in the control condition
Hays and Bendersky (2015)	3	<i>Competitive speaking allocation</i> (whether participants would choose the competitive option (four speaking opportunities for themselves and two speaking opportunities for other group members or providing all members with four speaking opportunities each))	2	Overt competition	Low-power participants did not engage in more overt competition than those in the control condition

Table A.2. (Continued)

Papers	Study	Dependent variable (operationalization or sample item)	Classification	Covert competition, overt competition, or related behavior	Conclusion
Hays and Bendersky (2015)	3	<i>Competitive behavior intention</i> (I will attempt to assert my opinions over other group members)	2	Overt competition	Low-power participants did not engage in more overt competition than those in the control condition
Hays and Bendersky (2015)	3	<i>Competitive resource allocation</i> (How many of 1,000 points would you allocate to your private account that would help your own individual performance but hurt group performance?)	2	Overt competition	Low-power participants did not engage in more overt competition than those in the control condition
Hays and Bendersky (2015)	4	<i>Competitive behavior intention</i> (I will attempt to assert my opinions over other group members)	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to overt competition
Kim and Guinote (2021)	2	<i>Deception</i> (whether participants claim higher performance than they actually performed)	4	Dishonest behavior	Power was positively related to dishonest behavior
Kim and Guinote (2021)	4	<i>Deception</i> (whether participants claim higher performance than they actually performed)	4	Dishonest behavior	Power had no significant main effect on dishonest behavior
Koning et al. (2011)	1 and 2	<i>Deception</i> (downplay the value of the bargaining item)	1	Covert competition	Power was negatively related to covert competition
Lammers et al. (2008)	2	<i>Propensity to negotiate</i> (You are buying a new car. How likely would you be to negotiate the price?)	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to overt competition
Magee et al. (2007)	1(a)	<i>Likelihood of initiating a negotiation</i> (How likely would you be to negotiate?)	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to overt competition
Magee et al. (2007)	1(b)	<i>Likelihood of initiating a negotiation</i> (likelihood to negotiate the voucher offer)	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to overt competition
Magee et al. (2007)	3	<i>Tendency to move first</i> (whether participants wanted to “make the first argument” or “make the rebuttal argument”)	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to overt competition
Magee et al. (2007)	4	<i>Tendency to move first</i> (whether participants make the first offer in negotiation)	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to overt competition
Petkanopoulou et al. (2019)	1	<i>Anger expression</i> (I would overtly show my anger to the person who crashed my car)	3	Direct anger expression	Power was positively related to direct anger expression and negatively related to indirect anger expression
Petkanopoulou et al. (2019)	2	<i>Anger expression</i> (observer coded)	3	Direct anger expression	Power was positively related to direct anger expression
Schaerer et al. (2021)	2	<i>Interpersonal aggression</i> (money burning)	3	Aggressive behavior	Power was negatively related to aggressive behavior

Table A.2. (Continued)

Papers	Study	Dependent variable (operationalization or sample item)	Classification	Covert competition, overt competition, or related behavior	Conclusion
Schaerer et al. (2015)	1, 2, and 4	<i>Amount of first offer</i> (amount of the first offer)	2	Overt competition	Negotiators without a BATNA (best alternative to an negotiated agreement) made higher first offers than negotiators with a weak BATNA
Tjosvold (1985)	1	<i>Communication in competitive context</i> (whether the communication was supportive, neutral, or unsupportive)	1	Assistance withholding	Power had no significant main effect on assistance withholding
van Dijk and de Cremer (2006)	1	<i>Resource allocation</i> (How much of the 10,000-euro bonus would you allocate to yourself?)	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to overt competition
van Dijk and de Cremer (2006)	2	<i>Resource allocation</i> (How many of the 400 chips would you allocate to yourself?)	2	Overt competition	Power was positively related to overt competition
Yap et al. (2013)	1	<i>Dishonest behavior</i> (whether the participant kept the overpayment)	3	Dishonest behavior	Power was positively related to dishonest behavior
Yap et al. (2013)	2	<i>Dishonest behavior</i> (the number of altered answers after receiving the answer key)	3	Dishonest behavior	Power was positively related to dishonest behavior
Yap et al. (2013)	3	<i>Hit and run</i> (the number of times a participant hit an object and did not stop)	3	Dishonest behavior	Power was positively related to dishonest behavior

Endnotes

¹ We suspect that individuals in an equal-power situation, like those in a higher-power situation, have a low level of fear of potential negative repercussions; thus, we expect that lower-power individuals are more likely to engage in covert competition than both higher-power and equal-power individuals, whose levels of covert competition may be similar.

² We explored whether power impacted overt competition and did not find evidence of a significant main effect ($F(2, 206) = 0.60, p = 0.552, \eta^2 = 0.01$; higher-power condition: $M = 0.60, SD = 0.82$; equal-power condition: $M = 0.77, SD = 1.03$; lower-power condition: $M = 0.63, SD = 0.98$). We suspected that participants were hesitant to engage in overt competition in our scenarios because overt competition might be unethical and interpersonally destructive (although covertly competitive behaviors might also be unethical and interpersonally destructive, they were less noticeable).

³ As in Study 1a, we did not find evidence of a significant main effect of power on overt competition ($F(2, 237) = 1.08, p = 0.342, \eta^2 = 0.01$; higher-power condition: $M = 0.74, SD = 0.94$; equal-power condition: $M = 0.77, SD = 1.02$; lower-power condition: $M = 0.94, SD = 1.00$).

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Yufei Zhong is a PhD candidate in organizational behavior at the Scheller College of Business of the Georgia Institute of Technology. She received her BS from Pennsylvania State University. Her research interests include social hierarchy (e.g., status, power, and socioeconomic status), relational identity, and meta-analytical methods.

Huisi (Jessica) Li is an assistant professor of management and organizations at the Foster School of Business of the University of Washington in Seattle. She received her PhD from Cornell University and previously worked as an assistant professor of Organizational Behavior at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Her research interests include social hierarchy (e.g., status, power, and socioeconomic status), diverse teams, and employee turnover.