



Power Values and Power Distance Moderate the Relationship Between Workplace Supervisory Power and Job Satisfaction

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Abstract. Person–job (or needs–supplies) discrepancy/fit theories posit that job satisfaction depends on work supplying what employees want and thus expect associations between having supervisory power and job satisfaction to be more positive in individuals who value power and in societies that endorse power values and power distance (e.g., respecting/obeying superiors). Using multilevel modeling on 30,683 European Social Survey respondents from 31 countries revealed that overseeing supervisees was positively associated with job satisfaction, and as hypothesized, this association was stronger among individuals with stronger power values and in nations with greater levels of power values or power distance. The results suggest that workplace power can have a meaningful impact on job satisfaction, especially over time in individuals or societies that esteem power.

Keywords: power, values, power distance, job satisfaction, person–job fit

A standard, popular definition of job satisfaction is “the pleasurable emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job as achieving or facilitating the achievement of one’s job values” (Locke, 1969). Essential to this definition – and to person–job fit or discrepancy models of job satisfaction more generally – is that job satisfaction arises from the fit (or lack of discrepancy) between what the individual wants and what the individual gets in their job situation. Indeed, studies have reliably found a positive association between job satisfaction and *complementary person–job needs–supplies fit* (i.e., how effectively work supplies what the employee needs; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005).

One experience that work can supply or deny is power, which is “having the discretion and the means to asymmetrically enforce one’s will over others” (Sturm & Antonakis, 2015). Greater status and power generally predict greater psychological and physical well-being, and people generally prefer more rather than less status and power (Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015; Sturm & Antonakis, 2015). However, because power can also have costs (e.g., provoking competition, dislike, or malicious envy), individuals vary in how much they feel desirous of rather than wary of power (Locke, 2018). The discrepancy/fit model of job satisfaction predicts that the value

individuals place on power moderates the impact of having workplace power on their job satisfaction.

Two studies have tested this hypothesis. Locke and Heller (2017, Study 7) assessed employees’ self-reported agentic values and workplace power (i.e., “to what extent do you control valuable resources, such as work assignments, purchases, or salaries?”). Having greater workplace power predicted greater job satisfaction for people who valued high agency (being dominant and decisive), but lower satisfaction for people who valued low agency (being compliant and conflict-avoidant). Brandstätter, Job, and Schulze (2016) assessed employees’ self-reported workplace power and implicit power motives. Greater discrepancy between desired and experienced power (i.e., desire without power or power without desire) predicted more self-reported physical symptoms, albeit not more job burnout; however, this study’s implicit measure of power motives may assess a construct that overlaps little with that assessed by the explicit measures used by Locke and Heller (2017) or the current study.

Bless and Granato (2018) examined the association between individuals’ workplace power and job satisfaction in data from the European Social Survey (ESS), which collects large representative samples from multiple European countries. They concluded the relation between

workplace power (operationalized as having supervisees or having a greater number of supervisees) and job satisfaction was “small and negligible.” However, the fit/discrepancy theory of job satisfaction would hypothesize that they found a “small and negligible” association because they averaged the association across all participants – both those who valued power and those who did not. Fortunately, the ESS includes a measure of *power values*, defined as concerns with attaining or preserving status, influence, or dominance over people and resources (Schwartz, 1992, 2003). Therefore, the current study extended Bless and Granato’s investigation by testing if power values moderated the association between supervisory power and job satisfaction in the ESS data.

Specifically, variation in power values was parsed into (a) variance between nations, averaging across individuals within each nation, and (b) variance between individuals within nations. Power-satisfaction associations were expected to be stronger (a) in nations whose citizens *generally* value power more than do citizens of other nations, because in those societies power is accorded greater social value (independent of power’s personal importance for the individual), and (b) in individuals who *distinctively* value power more than do their compatriots, as predicted by fit/discrepancy theory.

A related cultural dimension is *power distance* – the degree to which members of a society expect and accept power inequalities (G. Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). The association between workplace power and job satisfaction should also be stronger in high power distance cultures where there is stronger acceptance of unequal distributions of rewards, privileges, and control between supervisors and subordinates, and stronger expectations that supervisees trust, respect, and obey their supervisors. In sum, the current study tested the hypotheses that the generally weak positive association between workplace power and job satisfaction is stronger in individuals who esteem power and societies that endorse power values and power distance.

Methods

Data and Participants

The ESS is a biennial cross-sectional in-person interview survey administered to nationally representative samples in approximately 30 European countries per round. The current study used data from ESS Rounds 5 and 6 (collected in 2010 and 2012, respectively) because Rounds 5 and 6 each administered all the items used in the current analyses (whereas other rounds omitted at least one relevant item).

The data – along with exhaustive documentation about the questionnaire and sampling procedures – are available at www.europeansocialsurvey.org. Analyses included only respondents with complete data on all measures who (following Bless and Granato’s criteria) were employed and between 28 and 59 years old. After these exclusions, the final sample consisted of 30,683 respondents (49.7% female) from 31 countries, $M_{\text{age}} = 43.5$ years ($SD = 8.9$) and M years of full-time education = 14.0 ($SD = 3.6$).

Measures

Satisfaction

Respondents reported job satisfaction (“How satisfied are you in your main job?”) on an 11-point scale ranging from *extremely dissatisfied* to *extremely satisfied*. (For readers interested in examining the questionnaires or data themselves, job satisfaction was items G53 and F35 in ESS Rounds 5 and 6, respectively.)

Workplace Power

Respondents reported whether they had in their main job “responsibility for supervising the work of other employees,” with supervising defined as “both monitoring and being responsible for the work of others” (i.e., Round 5 item F53/Round 6 item F25). If the respondent answered *yes* – which 32% of the sample did – then they were asked “How many people are you responsible for?” in an open format (Round 5 item F54/Round 6 item F26). Of respondents who supervised at least one person, 66% supervised fewer than 10 employees, 31% supervised 10–99 employees, and 3% supervised 100–4,000 employees; because the number of supervisees was highly skewed, in the analyses below (as in Bless & Granato, 2018), this variable was log-transformed.

Individuals’ Power Values

Respondents completed the 21-item Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ; Schwartz, 2003). Each item described a gender-matched person holding a particular value, and respondents indicated their similarity to that person on 6-point (*not like me at all* to *very much like me*) scales. The PVQ *power values* scale contains two items: “It is important to him to get respect from others. He wants people to do what he says” and “Important to be rich, have

money and expensive things.” Following standard practice, each individual’s responses were centered around that individual’s PVQ mean (Schwartz, 2003, p 275).

Nations’ Power Values and Power Distance

National power values were computed as the average PVQ power value score of respondents from each nation. Nations’ power distance scores were obtained from <https://geerthofstede.com/research-and-vsm/dimension-data-matrix/>. (Because power distance estimates were not provided for Albania, Cyprus, Kosovo, and Ukraine, I used Serbia’s power distance value for Albania and Kosovo, Greece’s for Cyprus, and the average of Russia’s and Poland’s for Ukraine. These substitutions are imperfect – especially since each of these nations has been influenced by distinct and sometimes competing ethnic groups – but are preferable to omitting these countries from the analyses.) National power values and power distance were positively correlated, $r(29) = .40, p = .024$.

Analyses

The analyses were multilevel models, with persons (Level 1) nested within nations (Level 2). The outcome variable was always job satisfaction. The Level 1 effects of individuals’ workplace power and power values on job satisfaction were treated as random (i.e., allowed to vary across countries). Supervisory status was effect-coded (no supervisees = $-.5$, has supervisees = $+.5$). The Level 2

predictors (national power values and power distance) were standardized across countries; the remaining variables were standardized within countries.

Results

“Model 1” tested if, within countries, workplace power predicts job satisfaction by regressing satisfaction on respondents’ supervisory status or, in the subsample of respondents who were supervisors, regressing satisfaction on respondents’ number of supervisees. As Table 1 (line 1) shows, greater power predicted greater satisfaction: Job satisfaction was on average 0.23 *SD* greater for supervisors than nonsupervisors, and among supervisors, every 1 *SD* increase in the number of supervisees predicted a 0.06 *SD* increase in job satisfaction.

“Model 2” tested if, within countries, power values moderated the association between workplace power and job satisfaction by adding to “Model 1” two person-level predictors: power values and the Workplace power \times Power values interaction. Table 1 (line 2) reports and Figure 1 graphs the key effect – that is, the Power \times Values interaction. (Table 1 reports only the relevant coefficient from each model; the other coefficients from each model are reported in Table E1 of the Electronic Supplementary Material, ESM 1.) Power values amplified the positive power–satisfaction slope: Every 1 *SD* increase in power values predicted a 0.05 *SD* wider satisfaction gap between supervisors and nonsupervisors, and every 1 *SD* increase in supervisors’ power values predicted a 0.04

Table 1. Effects of workplace power on job satisfaction as a function of power values and power distance

Model/predictor	Measure of workplace power					
	Supervisory status			Number of supervisees		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Analyses without control variables						
Model 1: workplace power	.235	.013	.000	.057	.010	.000
Model 2: Workplace power \times Person’s power values	.050	.012	.000	.037	.010	.000
Model 3: Workplace power \times Nation’s power values	.067	.013	.000	–.013	.010	.205
Model 4: Workplace power \times Nation’s power distance	.043	.012	.001	–.006	.010	.580
Analyses including control variables						
Model 1: workplace power	.178	.014	.000	.034	.011	.001
Model 2: Workplace power \times Person’s power values	.044	.012	.000	.037	.010	.000
Model 3: Workplace power \times Nation’s power values	.061	.013	.000	–.011	.011	.319
Model 4: Workplace power \times Nation’s power distance	.039	.013	.007	–.006	.011	.564

Note. *N* respondents = 30,683 (for effects of supervisory status) or 9,849 (for effects of the number of supervisees) nested within *N* = 31 countries. Control variables were age, gender, household income, work hours, and years of education. Nations’ power distance and values were standardized across countries; other measured variables were standardized within countries except supervisory status (coded: no supervisees = $-.5$, has supervisees = $+.5$).

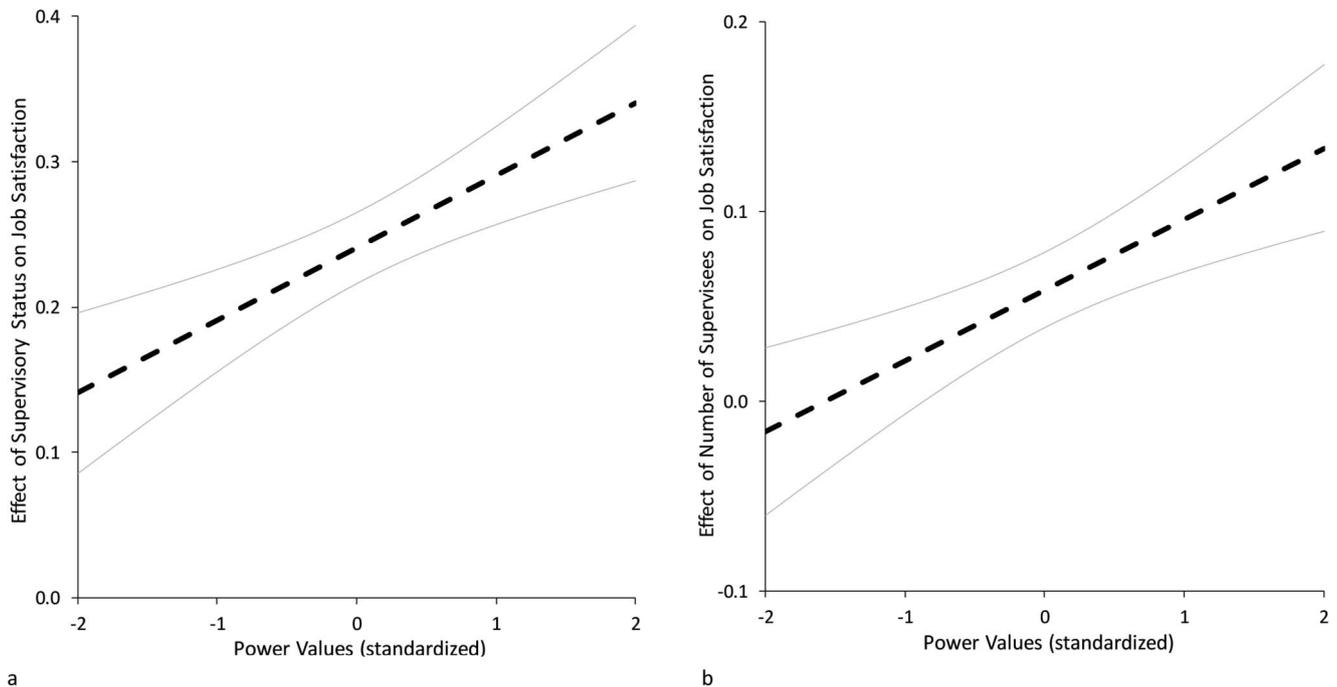


Figure 1. Association between job satisfaction and supervisory power (panel a) or the number of supervisees (panel b) as a function of power values. At each level of power values, the straight dashed line shows the estimated standardized coefficient of regression of job satisfaction on power, and the pale curved lines show the 95% confidence bands (continuously plotted confidence intervals) around those slopes.

greater effect on satisfaction of having 1 *SD* more supervisees.

“Model 3” tested if nation-level power values moderated the person-level power–satisfaction associations by adding to “Model 2” (a) nations’ average power values ($n = 31$) as a nation-level predictor and (b) Workplace power \times Nation-level power values as a cross-level interaction. “Model 4” was identical to “Model 3,” except that the nation-level predictor was *power distance* instead of *power values*. Nation-level power values and power distance did not moderate the association between the number of supervisees and satisfaction (see Table 1, lines 3–4, right side). However, greater nation-level power values or power distance did predict stronger positive associations between being a supervisor and satisfaction (see Table 1, lines 3–4, left side). Specifically, the satisfaction gap between supervisors and nonsupervisors was estimated to be 0.07 *SD* wider in countries 1 *SD* above average in power values and 0.04 *SD* wider in countries 1 *SD* above average in power distance, compared to an average country. Figure 2 shows the average effect of nation-level power values or power distance on the difference between supervisors’ and nonsupervisors’ satisfaction as well as the difference between supervisors’ and nonsupervisors’ satisfaction within each nation.

Complementary needs–supplies fit theories predict positive power–satisfaction associations to the degree that

power is personally and culturally valued but do not predict how personal and cultural values might interact. Accordingly, Models 3 and 4 simply treated person-level and nation-level values as independent additive predictors. However, *interactions* between culturally normative values and personal values do predict responses to some situations (i.e., “Culture \times Person \times Situation” interactions; Leung & Cohen, 2011). Therefore, it was requested that I conduct exploratory tests of whether Culture \times Person \times Situation interactions predict job satisfaction. To accomplish this, “Model 5” regressed job satisfaction on the three-way interaction of Nation-level power values \times Person-level power values \times Workplace power (along with all component lower-order terms). “Model 6” was identical to “Model 5,” except that the nation-level predictor was power distance. As detailed in ESM 1, Table E1, none of the three-way Culture \times Person \times Situation interactions predicted job satisfaction (all $ps > .15$). Thus, the simpler models in which personal and cultural values have separate additive effects fit the data better than the more complex models that included interactions between personal and cultural values.

Finally, to control for effects of demographic or lifestyle variables that could be confounded with supervisory power and job satisfaction, all the preceding analyses were repeated while controlling for the following: gender (ESS Item F2), age (Item F3), full-time education years

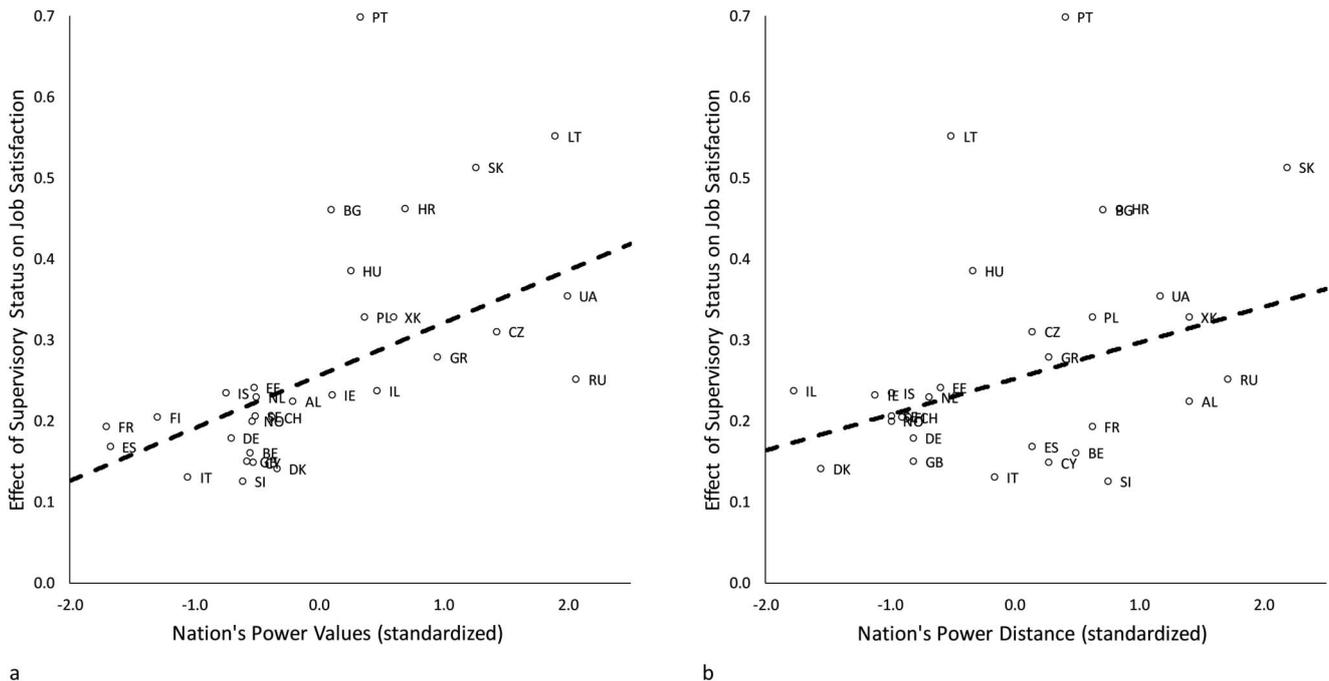


Figure 2. Association between job satisfaction and supervisory power as a function of nations' power values (panel a) or power distance (panel b). The dashed line shows the estimated difference between supervisors and nonsupervisors in nations with that level of power values or power distance (based on regressing job satisfaction on the cross-level interaction between supervisory power and either power values or power distance). Plotted points show the actual differences in the job satisfaction of supervisors versus nonsupervisors in each nation sampled: AL = Albania, BE = Belgium, BG = Bulgaria, CH = Switzerland, CY = Cyprus, CZ = Czechia, DE = Germany, DK = Denmark, EE = Estonia, ES = Spain, FI = Finland, FR = France, GB = UK, GR = Greece, HR = Croatia, HU = Hungary, IE = Ireland, IL = Israel, IS = Iceland, IT = Italy, LT = Lithuania, NL = Netherlands, NO = Norway, PL = Poland, PT = Portugal, RU = Russia, SE = Sweden, SI = Slovenia, SK = Slovakia, UA = Ukraine, XK = Kosovo.

completed (Item F16), average weekly work hours (Item F30), and household income (Item F41). As Table 1 (bottom half) shows, adding these control variables sometimes weakened but never eliminated the significant effects reported above.

Discussion

Do Power Values or Power Distance Moderate the Effect of Power on Job Satisfaction?

The current data suggest the answer is *yes*. In accord with needs-supplies fit models of job satisfaction (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), the positive association between workplace power (having supervisees or a greater number of supervisees) and job satisfaction was stronger among individuals with stronger power values. Power can have costs and benefits: Power holders may be perceived (and perceive themselves) as more capable, decisive, and effective but may also be more disliked, resented, envied, and burdened by responsibility (e.g., Fiske, 2018; Scholl

et al., 2018). Crucially, different people weigh these costs and benefits differently, though. Some people relish feeling important and empowered and are unperturbed by evaluations and competition from others; others dread interpersonal conflict and disapproval but are not bothered by being overseen or overlooked.

The current results roughly replicate those of Locke and Heller (2017, Study 7). However, among individuals very low in agentic/power values, the association between workplace power and job satisfaction was weakly positive in the current data but slightly negative in Locke and Heller's data. One reason may be that Locke and Heller tested for effects of workplace *status* (being an admired expert and role model). Closer examination of their data suggests that only power-*without-status* undermined the satisfaction of individuals low in agentic values.

The hypothesis that power would predict satisfaction more strongly in nations with greater average power values or power distance was supported when considering effects of having supervisees, but not when considering effects of having more-versus-fewer supervisees. One explanation is that having supervisees is a better measure of power than having more-versus-fewer supervisees. Another possibility

is that whereas *individual* differences in power values reflect power's relative importance to the individual (independent of its importance to others), *cultural* differences in power values/distance reflect power's general importance to others in the individual's society (independent of its importance to that individual), and whereas an individual's experience of workplace power may be sensitive both to *having* and to *having many* supervisees, others may be sensitive mainly to whether or not the individual has a supervisory role.

Is the Power–Satisfaction Association “Negligible”?

The current results suggest that Bless and Granato (2018) were premature in calling the relation between supervisory power and job satisfaction “negligible.” Compared to employees who were not supervisors, supervisors reported on average 0.23 *SD* greater job satisfaction (or 0.18 *SD* greater after controlling for age, sex, income, work hours, and education). Thus, we can predict that on average if we interview two random individuals – one with supervisory role and one without a supervisory role – the one with a supervisory role will report meaningfully greater job satisfaction, especially if both individuals have strong power needs. Moreover, as Figures 1 and 2 highlight, this satisfaction gap between supervisors and nonsupervisors can potentially double in size for individuals and cultures that prioritize power.

Another consideration when judging whether an effect is consequential is whether the effect “can be expected to cumulate” (Funder & Ozer, 2019). Although the effect of workplace power and power values on job satisfaction on any random day may be small, to the degree that individual differences in workplace power and power values are stable over time, they may keep exerting that small but consistent daily pressure on satisfaction over months or years. Aggregating over those time spans (and assuming many other determinants of daily job satisfaction are less stable), the impact of individual differences in workplace power and power values may no longer be small.

Limitations and Conclusions

The current study has various limitations. First, workplace power and job satisfaction were assessed by single items and power values by only two items, which could limit reliability. Second, cross-sectional survey data cannot support causal conclusions; for example, high job satisfaction may be both a cause and a consequence of being promoted into a supervisory role. Third, supervisory

status is just one of many factors that contribute to workplace power; for example, in large organizations, most supervisors operate within multiple layers of supervision and constraints on their resources and authority. Finally, while the study's large representative sample provides a good estimate of experiences of European employees, its generalizability may be limited to the degree that conceptualizations and consequences of power differ across different world regions (Torelli, Leslie, To, & Kim, 2020).

Nonetheless, at least in Europe, the current data do support three conclusions. First, supervisory power at work has a small but solid positive relationship with job satisfaction. Apparently for most people, the benefits of having more power at work outweigh the costs. Second, the positive association between supervisory status and job satisfaction is stronger in nations in which people tend to be more respectful and deferential toward supervisors (i.e., more strongly endorse power distance) and view achieving such status to be an important goal (i.e., more strongly endorse power values). Third, the positive association between workplace power and job satisfaction is stronger among individuals who value power more highly. As predicted by discrepancy models of job satisfaction, a person's job satisfaction depends on both what the job supplies and what the person wants.

Electronic Supplementary Material

The electronic supplementary material is available with the online version of the article at <https://doi.org/10.1027/1866-5888/a000257>

ESM 1. Expanded version of Table 1 reporting all regression coefficients from each analysis.

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Conflict of Interest

The author has no potential conflict of interest relating to this article.

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