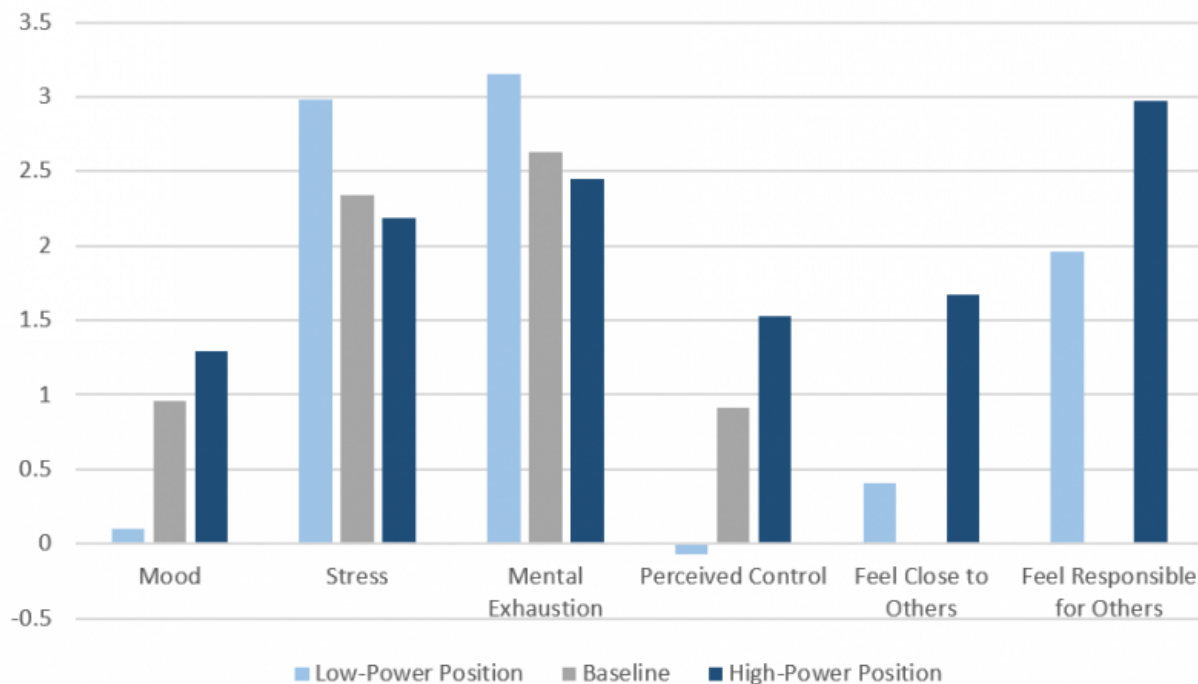


# How individuals experience the psychological effects of power and powerlessness

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Relation between holding low- and high-power positions and measures of mood, cognitive ability, and interpersonal relations, including power-irrelevant situations as comparison baseline. Mood, perceived control, and closeness were measured on -3 to +3 scales; stress and mental exhaustion were measured on 0 to 6 scales; and responsibility was measured on a 0 to 4 scale. The questions about feeling close to others and feeling responsible for others were not asked if participants were not in a low- or high-power position. Credit: University of California - San Diego

Quick: right now, do you feel powerful? Powerless? Somewhere in between?

Most of what we know about power comes from studies in artificial laboratory environments or business organizations. But this ignores the many other contexts in which power plays out in daily life. Innovative research exploring how people experience everyday power finds that power and powerlessness are commonly experienced in many facets of life outside the workplace.

Pamela K. Smith, an assistant professor of management at the Rady School of Management, University of California, San Diego, co-authored a paper, recently published in the prestigious journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, examining how individuals experience power in [everyday life](#).

"This research was inspired by the question, 'What does power look like in everyday life?'" Smith said.

For three days, 210 U.S. adults (aged 18-67) completed 5 surveys each day at random times. In each survey, they reported how powerless or powerful they felt, and whether they were currently in a position of power over someone, someone had power over them, or neither. They then answered questions about their situation. Altogether, the researchers studied 2502 moments in the lives of Americans. Uniquely, the researchers allowed [participants](#) to define power on their own terms.

## Key findings

Smith and her colleague found that power differences were a common experience. 83 percent of participants experienced either a position of power or someone having power over them at least once during the three days. Participants more often experienced someone having power over

them than having power themselves. However, positions of power were not limited to a select few: almost half of participants reported having power over someone at least once.

When participants reported others currently had power over them, they felt worse—worse mood, more stress, more mental exhaustion, more helplessness—compared to when they had power over others. In fact, these negative effects of lacking power were larger than the benefits that came with having power. However, when participants had power over others, they reported feeling closer to others and more responsible for them, which Smith mentioned carries its own burden.

Participants' feelings of power came more from the different situations they were in, than from stable personal characteristics. In fact, most of participants' demographic characteristics, such as their gender, education level, and race/ethnicity, were not consistently related to how much power they experienced. Age was the exception: Older participants reported experiencing more power. Participants also reported being in a variety of social roles when experiencing power or powerlessness, many outside the workplace.

From their findings, Smith and her colleague hope to shake up the perception of power.

"People in powerful positions are typically seen as cold, uncaring, and distant," Smith said. "But our findings show this is an oversimplification. Power exists in many forms, including between parents and children, and in romantic relationships. Power is embedded in our personal relationships."

One of the most important takeaways, Smith believes, is about how we perceive power daily.

"In this study, participants could define power as it related to all aspects of their lives. That allowed us to study a rich variety of powerful and powerless experiences. We found that participants' feelings of power came from more than just the position they held. In particular, even when participants reported that someone currently had [power](#) over them, they sometimes still reported feeling powerful. This is good news, since such powerless moments are more common than moments when we hold powerful positions."

**More information:** Pamela K. Smith et al. Power in everyday life, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2016). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1604820113](#)

Provided by University of California - San Diego

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